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**FATED
MATES**

AND

**WHERE TO
FIND THEM**

AJ SHERWOOD

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FATED MATES AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

Fated Mates 2

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CHAPTER 1

Zander was not one for these kinds of places, to be honest, but his client was hard to reach. The man had just come off a three-week business trip, wanted nothing more than to relax, and refused to meet Zander anywhere but here. Since Zander wanted that real estate contract sooner rather than later, here it was.

Even if ‘here’ was a blood auction house.

By the rules of human and vampire society, auction houses were perfectly legal. Humans could choose to sell themselves—with strict contracts outlining what their new owners could and could not do to them. The contracts ranged anywhere from one to five years.

Personally, Zander was not the type to pay for either blood or sex, thank you very much. Vampires who liked to buy their food treated their humans as just that—food and amusement. It left a bad taste in Zander’s mouth. Maybe because he was new to vampire culture, he had a more modern take.

He settled at the booth with Sakda and handed him the leather folio with the contract inside.

“What, not even a hello?” Sakda drawled, kicking back in the round booth with an amused smile. Sakda was from an older generation, turned in his forties or so from appearances, a hint of crow’s feet around his eyes.

“You made me chase you all the way here,” Zander retorted mildly. “Please sign the contract before I lose all patience.”

“All right, fair. I thought you might want to participate since you’re here.”

“No, thank you. I want to go home and lounge in front of a TV. I’ve earned it.”

“Your choice.” Shrugging, Sakda pulled the contract toward him and grabbed a pen from his pocket.

The stage at the front of the room lit up, calling the audience’s attention. Vampires at the myriad of small tables scattered around the main floor glanced up and, depending on their interest, either kept watching or went back to their conversations.

Zander almost ignored the stage as well, but as he readied to leave, he saw something from the corner of his eye that drew his attention back again.

Now that was a very beautiful man.

He was dressed in jeans and a white button-down, nothing sexy about his clothing. Truly a cute man, even with his posture so tense and stiff. His dark brown hair was casually swept back, framing dark brown eyes set in a too pale face. He stood tall under the stage lights, looking blindly ahead, expression blank. Zander tried to guess his age. Nineteen, perhaps? No more than twenty, surely.

The auctioneer started off in a smooth voice, rattling off facts. “Ladies, gentlemen, and gentlefolk, we have here a blood slave for auction—”

Tsk. Why must they use that antiquated term? It struck Zander all wrong.

“—who is offering a one-year contract, standard terms apply. Max is a nineteen-year-old architecture student, untouched by vampires. Who will start the bidding?”

He’s shaking, Zander realized. Max’s expression showed nothing, but his hands shook as he gripped them tightly. He was clearly scared and trying not to show it.

What the hell had forced Max’s hand to auction himself? Unlike most humans who sold themselves, he didn’t seem to

be doing it for a thrill, or a kink, or any pleasant reason. He was likely the type who fell into the second category: desperation.

The price was already at half a million and rising by the second. Zander watched Max's face and something in him stirred. Pity? Interest? He didn't know. He couldn't put a finger on it. All he knew was that he could not trust any other vampire with this human.

"Sakda." Zander didn't take his eyes off Max.

"What?"

"You got a bidding token?"

"Uh, yes."

"Registered to you?"

"Not yet, I wasn't sure if I was going to bid tonight."

"Let me have it."

Sakda snorted. "Didn't you just say you weren't into this kind of thing?"

"I'm not, but I won't leave here without him. Token, quickly."

Sakda was definitely laughing at him on some level as he handed over the token. Zander turned to the booth's tablet, entered his name and the token's ID, and then hit register. Fortunately, these things were instantaneous.

"One million three hundred thousand, do I have one million five? One million five?"

Zander wasn't interested in drawing this out. He entered five million and hit bid.

The auctioneer paused and looked at the screen on the podium, blinking. "Everyone, we have a bid at five million. Will anyone go above five million?"

A flurry of whispers, some chatter, people walking back and forth to talk.

“No bidders above five million? Then going, going, going, sold! I ask the winner to please meet us behind the stage to review the contract and collect your prize.”

Zander kept his eye on Max as he moved. Max looked wary at being bought for such a high price. Determined, yes, but fear still showed through his determination. Desperation had definitely driven him here.

“Too bad you lost,” Sakda said as he lifted his wine glass.

“I didn’t,” Zander corrected, standing.

Sakda choked on his wine, needing a second to pound a fist against his chest. “You paid five million for him?!”

Not interested in justifying himself, Zander left the table, taking his winning chip in case he needed it for verification.

The next human came up for auction but Zander had no further interest in tonight’s proceedings. He had his own bundle of trouble to deal with now. He moved past all the tables and through a discreet door to the left of the stage, held open by an employee. It led into a small room with only one table, six chairs, and not much else. In one chair was Max, still looking nervous but with a brave face.

He was even more enchanting up close. Oh dear. Zander had fragile willpower even on the best of days. Resisting this man would be a challenge.

An employee in a solid black dress and red pumps approached him with a professional smile. “May I see your token and identification?”

“Of course.” Zander handed both over, letting her check them, then accepted his ID back.

“Thank you. Are you familiar with how this works?”

“I have a surface-level understanding. I’ve never bought someone before. I understand there is a contract that he and I need to negotiate and sign.”

“Correct. The contract is enforced, with penalties on both sides if broken, so do keep that in mind. Mr. Vespertine, please sit next to Mr. Monroe and review the terms he’s set down.”

“Certainly.” Zander settled down next to his human—was it wrong to think of Max like that? Zander just couldn’t think of the man as a slave. That icked him out on so many levels.

Max looked wary but didn’t utter a single comment. Zander gave him a smile and leaned in, careful not to touch as he whispered in Max’s ear, “Relax. I will not hurt you.”

Max blinked, brow furrowed a bit as if he couldn’t fathom what Zander meant by that.

This might be more of an uphill battle than Zander had assumed, winning this one’s trust.

Well, let’s start. Zander accepted the contract, which had been filled in on Max’s page, and reviewed the terms.

First, blood donation was provided once every two weeks, more in an emergency.

Second, sex was allowed as part of feeding.

Third, the contractor must maintain the current level of care for Max’s father, with details on which hospital he was in.

Ah, as expected. Max was here out of desperation.

Zander lifted his head, asking Max directly, “What is your father’s condition?”

“Recovering. That’s the best way to put it. My father was in a serious car accident two weeks ago. It broke multiple bones, punctured a lung, and caused a severe concussion. He’s in a medically induced coma. It’s taken two surgeries to stabilize his condition; he’ll need three or four more surgeries over the next year, depending on how things go.”

Great Buddha, no wonder Max had felt overwhelmed. The medical bills would quickly rack up. “If he has all these surgeries and the correct care, will he recover completely?”

“Well enough, or so the doctors assure me. He’ll never be completely a hundred percent, but his quality of life should be okay.”

“Is he the only parent you have?”

Max gave a tight nod.

Zander mentally patted himself on the back. Good job, him. Good job listening to his instincts. Any other vampire in this place would have taken advantage, not given Max the help he so desperately needed.

Zander turned the page, expecting more conditions, only to be met with blank space. That was it? That was all Max demanded—help with his father’s medical bills?

Did this man not understand his worth?

“What of school?” Zander asked in confusion. “You are an architect student, are you not?”

“School can wait a year.”

No, it bloody well couldn’t. Zander pulled a pen from his pocket and wrote: *All school expenses covered for the next year.*

Max made a noise of protest. “What are you doing?”

“If I must negotiate for you, so be it.” There, much better. Oh, no, wait. He tacked on another condition: *All living expenses paid for.*

“I didn’t ask for that either!”

“Hush, you’ll thank me later.” Zander cheerfully flipped to the third page. Ah-ha, now they were at his part of the contract. The only things typed in for his terms were regular feeding and sex, which were standard.

He thought about it, then wrote in: *Max must live with me for the duration of our contract.* There. Now he was happy.

Max stared at the words and made a noise of dismay. “You want me to live with you?”

“Again, you’ll thank me later. All right, madam, are we set?”

“Only if Mr. Monroe agrees to terms and signs.” She gave Max a look that said, *Don’t be an idiot, sign that!*

Max was still bemused, looking at Zander like he wasn’t sure if he was in some kind of strange fever dream. He took

the pen when Zander offered it, signing the bottom of the page.

At least Max was smart enough to take advantage of Zander's offer, even if he was confused. Zander took the pen back, adding his own signature underneath.

"Gentlemen, if you'll give me a moment, I'll scan this in so you can both retain a copy. Just a moment." She stood, giving Zander a slender, black jewelry box before leaving the room.

Zander had an idea of what was in the box and when he opened it, sure enough, there was a slave's collar. Pretty, no doubt, with its black velvet collar and ruby in the center. He had no intention of making Max wear it. With a snap, Zander closed the lid, tucking the box into his suit pocket to dispose of later.

"You're, um, supposed to put that on me."

He looked at Max, this man he had just bought, and gave the gentlest smile he could. "You are contracted to me, but you are not my slave. I will not treat you as one. While we're on the subject, I can assure you of a few other things. First, you need never fear my fists nor my temper. I'm not abusive. Second, I will never feed from you or have sex with you without your full consent. Third, you don't need to worry about anything while in my care. Not your father, not school, not living expenses."

There was that damned caution again, like Max couldn't fully trust any word coming out of Zander's mouth. Zander had a bad feeling Max had been hurt before, hence he couldn't put faith in anything Zander said. Even with a written contract between them.

"Why are you being so generous with me? To a human you just met."

"I have a serious weakness for beautiful men who are both smart and loyal. You"—Zander lifted one of Max's hands, placing a gentle kiss on his knuckles before meeting his eyes levelly—"are my kryptonite."

“You”—Max returned in kind—“confuse the hell out of me.”

Oh? There was a spark of sass in this man. Good, Zander hated doormats. “Just wait until you get to know me.”

“The way you say that concerns me.”

It should. Zander had tried imposing limits on himself before, but...it proved both tedious and boring. For Max, he'd pull out all the stops.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, Max woke up with a breakfast tray on his new bed. What was wrong with this picture?

It would take a fucking list.

Max stared at the tray full of coffee, toast, scrambled eggs, and a rose—a damned red rose—and honestly wondered if he was in a really lucid dream. Maybe he'd been in the car with his dad and was now in a coma himself. Maybe that was it. A dream would make more sense than his current living situation.

Zander had made good on his word last night. He'd stopped by Max's apartment, packed all his essentials, and promised he'd send movers to pack and move the rest before the weekend. Then Zander had taken Max back to his house—otherwise known as a mansion—and settled Max into the bedroom across from his own.

The bedroom was the size of his apartment, by the way, and that didn't include the ensuite bathroom.

The vampire was not what he'd envisioned when coming up with this scheme. Zander looked like one of those made-to-order pretty boys found on romance covers. He was taller than Max by a few inches, standing at six feet, with thick black hair framing his face, and tanned skin that suggested he spent a good amount of time outdoors. (Didn't vampires avoid the sun? No?) He was stunning, like something sculpted from a wet dream, with those wicked dark brown eyes and full mouth.

Yes, he was exactly Max's type, thanks for asking. Just, unfortunately, a vampire.

When Max first came upon this idea of selling himself out for a year, he didn't expect it to be pretty. He just hadn't known what else to do. His dad's medical bills already totaled half a million and were climbing quickly. They didn't own anything worth that much. He could work three jobs and still not come out ahead. Contracting to be a vampire's blood-and-bed slave for a year was not something any sane person would do. But it was a sight better than Max's dad dying or being crippled the rest of his life because he didn't get the surgeries and care he needed.

So Max had sold himself.

He was supposed to have been fed from and ravaged last night. He was supposed to be in pain this morning.

He was not supposed to be served breakfast in bed with a damned rose on the tray.

Max didn't know what Zander's game was. It honestly unnerved him. The man wasn't enforcing his part of the deal so far, which suggested to Max that he might have gotten in over his head even more than he'd realized.

Feeding and having sex with a vampire...Max wouldn't be comfortable doing it, but he could. Apparently, Zander wanted something else and Max didn't know what—he wasn't sure if he wanted to give it, either. He didn't want to feel indebted to Zander. Sticking to the contract was the better bet.

He'd get the man to confess his true intentions. For now... breakfast, he guessed. Max was honestly hungry. Yesterday's nerves had left him unable to eat much of anything, and the food smelled excellent.

It tasted good, too. Zander probably had some chef or maid, but still, it was the thought that counted. Max ended up consuming every crumb and then, because it wasn't the rose's fault, refilled the glass and put the rose on his nightstand.

Now. Mission One: Get Zander to confess.

Max took a quick shower, got dressed, and gave himself a pep talk. His fear of vampires was better after intense therapy, but this was still nerve-wracking as hell. Max could last a year.

He could, for his father. He would be fine. It was in the contract that Zander couldn't physically hurt him or share him with other vampires; Max could survive anything else Zander threw at him. He'd be okay. As long as they both stuck to the contract, all would be fine.

All right, time to confront the vampire.

Shoulders back, chin up, Max marched out of the bedroom with the tray, heading downstairs. The main floor was an open concept—kitchen on the far-right wall, dining table in the middle, living room on the left side. The master of the house was in the kitchen, sipping on coffee and talking on the phone. Next to him was a stack of dishes, freshly washed and drying on a rack.

Not another soul was present.

Wait a fucking minute. Zander really had cooked for him? And done dishes afterward? What kind of filthy rich vampire did his own dishes?

If the man was trying to confuse Max, he'd done a fantastic job.

“—realize it's out of character for me, but you should see him,” Zander said to whomever he was talking to. He caught Max's entrance with a smile so instant, so genuine, Max almost smiled back. “Anyway, I need a few days to settle him in properly, there's a lot to do. You understand, right? Thanks, Dad. I'll introduce you to him soon. Love you, bye.”

Max settled the tray on the island and looked at Zander uncertainly. Was he turned recently enough that his family was still alive? “Your biological father?”

“Yeah. I work with him so was explaining why I needed to take a few days off.” Zander looked at the tray, nodding in approval. “You ate it all, good. I'm glad you slept in too; you looked like you needed it.”

Slept in? Max eyed the clock on the oven and mentally cursed. It was half past nine. He'd hoped to be at the hospital before ten, but he'd have to rush to make it.

“While you were sleeping, I had a few things prepared for you. First, hand me your wallet.”

Uhh...what? And why? Max reluctantly handed it over, not sure where this was going.

Zander flipped it open, then stopped as he spied the picture of Max with his father in the inner flap. “Is this your father?”

“Yes.”

“You look like him.” Zander shot him a quick smile before focusing on the other side, where the cards lay. “This looks like your main bank card and credit card. Anything else?”

“Just those two.”

“Okay. Those are not to be used from now on.” Zander took them out and tucked them behind the picture. Then he pulled an envelope closer to him and took out a black credit card. He held it up in the air, explaining in that soft, smooth voice, “This has no limit. You will use this from now on, okay? Also, I want you to carry cash on you at all times, just in case.”

Under Max’s incredulous eyes, Zander added the credit card to the wallet—and the most ridiculous stack of cash he had ever seen in his life. The wallet actually bulged, almost unwilling to shut, because of the stack. What the hell was he doing? Trying to play sugar daddy? This didn’t make any sense and Max felt himself instinctively putting on the brakes.

Zander tried to hand the wallet back but Max had hit his limit. He wasn’t taking a damned thing more until he had an explanation.

“Wait. Just wait. This is not what we agreed on.”

“Sure it is,” Zander countered easily. “Living expenses.”

“This is not what we agreed on,” Max maintained firmly. “The master making and giving me breakfast in bed is nowhere near what I agreed to. A wad of cash and a credit card is not what I agreed to. You won’t even tell me when to feed you, and that’s precisely why I’m here.”

Zander protested, blinking at him with Sad Face. “You didn’t like breakfast?”

“It was delicious, that is not the point. And why are you doing your own dishes?”

“I don’t like a lot of staff. A housekeeper and groundskeeper come by once a week to keep things tidy, but I manage the rest myself.”

Well, at least that explained why Max hadn’t seen anyone else.

Max could tell Zander had no interest in explaining further, so he pushed his point. “If you want to give me that insane amount of money, then feed from me first.”

“I told you, I won’t do so without your consent.”

Max resisted the urge to hit him. He was being deliberately obstinate. “You have my consent, in writing, with my signature on it, no less.”

“But I don’t have your enthusiasm.”

Come again?

Zander stood and crossed the two feet between them, eyes roving over Max’s face as he lifted a hand to his cheek. Max braced himself, holding his breath.

Zander’s touch was lighter than a butterfly’s wings. “I’m waiting for your enthusiasm,” the vampire said softly. “You don’t trust me. You don’t want me to touch you. Being obligated and desirous are two very, very different things. I will not confuse the two. Until you push me down and start ripping off clothes, I will not touch you.”

Hell might freeze over first. He did realize that, right?

“One day, you’ll explain who hurt you so badly that you can’t trust what I’m saying,” Zander continued, a hardness entering his voice, eyes narrowing. “I can’t wait to have their name. Until then, my darling Max, please trust I am a man of my word. Until you come to me, I will not ask anything of you.”

Max trusted vampires about as far as he could throw them. Zander's intentions sounded good, but Max was just waiting for the other shoe to drop. Situations like this were too good to be true.

“So wary.” Zander sighed, resigned. He took Max's hand and put the wallet in it. “For now, take what I give you, please. We need to leave soon. Today I want to straighten out school and your father's care.”

Should Max feel bad he'd put that look on Zander's face? He was being nice. Incredibly so. Max just didn't trust his intentions—he knew better than to think anything in this world came for free.

He let the thought go, for now, and went with his next question. “My father, I understand, but I told you I deferred a semester.”

“The fall semester started on Monday, right? You can catch up quickly enough if we straighten it out today. I don't want you missing time when you don't need to.”

Max tried again, though it felt futile. “My education isn't your responsibility—”

“Nonsense. I have it in the contract that I'm to pay for tuition, don't I?”

“The contract you're choosing to utterly ignore? That one?”

Zander chuckled as if Max was the best source of entertainment he'd had all month. “I do love how you don't give me any ground. Come, come, hospital first. I'll show you which cars you can drive as we head out. Most of them are fine for you to take, but not the superbikes; they're tuned for racing.”

Max had seen what was in the garage on the way in last night. Zander didn't own a single sensible vehicle, just sports cars and Ducati bikes. “I'm not driving any of those.”

Zander patted him on the head, smiling like Max was just the cutest thing. “If you say so.”

Why did he get the distinct impression he'd just lost this argument too?

CHAPTER 3

Max had more or less been living at the hospital since his father's accident, so reception knew him well. What he did not expect was for them to recognize Zander and start fawning over him.

"Mr. Zander, how are you?" The charge nurse, whom Max thought of as Atilla the Hun, was all smiles as she approached.

"Ms. Raquel, you look stunning. I love that new haircut."

Atilla the Hun blushed. It just about stopped Max in his tracks. The woman known to terrorize this entire floor was capable of blushing?

Max suspected vampire charm was at play here. Either that or he was in *The Twilight Zone*.

She glanced at Max curiously as she stopped in front of them, but her focus was on Zander. "Are you here to donate?"

Donate...what exactly? Max was so very lost.

"I can, if you need me to, but that's not my main purpose today." Zander rested a hand against the small of Max's back. "My Max's father is in intensive care. I'd like to arrange Mr. Monroe's care and settle his current hospital bill."

"Oh! I didn't realize the connection. Of course, please come with me." She addressed Max as they walked toward the room, dodging other patients and parked gurneys. "He's doing well this morning, no change from yesterday."

"Good." Max was relieved. He sometimes woke up in a cold sweat, dreaming the hospital had called to tell him his

father had unexpectedly passed during the night. Stress dreams were the worst.

“I’d like to transfer him to a private room so he can rest without noise and distraction.” Zander said this like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Oh, of course, we can do that,” Nurse Raquel assured him.

Max caught Zander’s arm and gave a minute shake of his head. No. This wasn’t what they agreed on. Zander was just supposed to maintain his father’s current care, not go overboard.

Zander gave him a smile. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” Max hissed, trying to keep his voice down. “This isn’t what I asked of you—”

“I don’t want you stressed and worried about him. Oh, Ms. Raquel, it’s fine if he has a nurse assigned to him ’round the clock, correct?”

“We can arrange that.”

Trying again, Max pulled Zander to a stop and shook his head firmly. He didn’t even want to know what this would cost him later. His father was fine where he was, he didn’t need any VIP treatment.

“Why are you so mad at me?” Zander whined.

“Because you’re going overboard,” Max replied, tone flat. “You’ve been going overboard all morning.”

“But I’m doing things that will take stress off you!”

“In the process, you’re stressing me out. Damn counterproductive if you ask me.”

“Just take it.” Zander winked before moving ahead with the nurse. “Ms. Raquel, I don’t mind donating—as I said—but can we do that while I fill out the necessary paperwork? I have another errand today.”

“Oh, of course. How much do you want to give today?”

“A pint, maybe? I think I can manage that.”

A pint of...? The only liquid Max could possibly think of was blood, which...surely not. Most vampires were cagey about sharing blood. They didn't do it unless the situation demanded it. Vampire blood could cure a lot—blood disorders, cancers, tumors, to name a few.

The hell?

Max followed them, avidly listening to every word of their conversation. He still couldn't quite wrap his head around this. Was Zander just generous by nature? Maybe his behavior toward Max wasn't anything out of the ordinary, if that was the case.

Bemused at this whole situation, Max watched as Zander was taken to the lab and set up for a blood draw. While blood flowed out of him and into a bag, he completed paperwork with his other hand, signing off on things and handing over his credit card to pay. He encouraged Max to come sign where necessary. Max did, mostly because he couldn't figure out how to stop this madman.

Nurse Raquel bustled off with all the paperwork, leaving Zander still hooked up and steadily pouring blood. Max looked at the blood bag, still puzzled. None of this behavior matched what he knew of vampires.

In the end, he had to ask. “You donate blood regularly here?”

“About once a month,” Zander confirmed. “It doesn't take much, either.”

“No,” the nurse who was monitoring the blood draw agreed. “It doesn't. A single syringe of vampire blood can cure most ailments. It's why him coming in is so lifesaving for our patients. We can cure dozens of people with a pint of vampire blood. The terminal patients, the ones modern medicine can't help, walk out of here healthy because of it.”

Then the nurse tacked on casually, “Mr. Zander's blood is more powerful than most, so it goes even further.”

Why was Zander's blood more powerful? Max knew vampires had their own ranking, their own structure in society, but he didn't know all the ins and outs. He just knew some were recognized as being above others. Max had assumed it was due to age, but that was just an assumption. Was Zander older? You couldn't look at a vampire and begin to guess age. They physically stopped aging once turned. Zander could be the twenty-five-year-old he looked, or five hundred. His dad being alive didn't help, because as far as Max knew, his father was a vampire too.

"There, that should do it." The nurse clamped the line, then put gauze against the needle and slid it free, stopping the blood flow. When she lifted the gauze, the small puncture wound had already healed. A vampire's healing factor was insanely fast.

"Thank you, Nurse." Zander rolled his sleeve back down to button it. To Max, he said, "It'll take them a few hours to move your father into his new room, situate things. Why don't we go to your school and straighten things out before coming back? I know you'll want to sit with him a while before visiting hours are over."

He did, yes. Max didn't feel right unless he checked in on his father at least once a day. That said, "What can I say to convince you that I don't need to be in school this semester?"

Zander stood and patted Max's hand, grinning down at him. "You're adorable."

Not a damned thing. Got it.

CHAPTER 4

Zander had picked up on a few things last night while helping Max move. One, Max liked plants. The seven house plants they'd moved out of his apartment were a good indication, but he'd also had two full boxes with books on horticulture. Not to mention the garden "Pinterest" board he'd taken off a wall.

After a taxing day it was obvious where their first official outing should be. He wanted to earn Max's trust while getting him to unwind, so an unofficial date seemed the best tactic.

The Rommani Garden spanned several acres of cultivated land, interspersed with a river, small waterfalls, shaded benches, and a million types of plants—all beautifully kept. It was open to the public and had an outdoor café toward the end of the walk for hungry tourists. Fifteen minutes of online research had told Zander this would be a good choice.

One look at Max's face upon arrival confirmed it. His cynical nineteen-year-old college student had disappeared somewhere upon arrival. In his stead was a five-year-old who had just been taken to the best candy shop ever.

Zander had a feeling he had just earned the ranking of best master/benefactor in the world.

The second they exited the car, Max gravitated toward the front entrance. "Zander. How did you know about this place? It's stunning and we're not even inside yet."

"Google." Zander smiled down at him. "Let's walk in. I assume you want to take pictures."

“All the pictures,” Max confirmed. Then practically raced inside.

Zander was along for the ride as they walked. Max oscillated between trying to act reserved to being only a step above a child hyped up on sugar. He bounced between one interesting plant and the next, pausing only to take pictures of absolutely everything. He’d fill up his phone’s memory at this rate.

Zander couldn’t throw stones at that glass house since he was busy taking pictures of the one taking pictures, so... In his defense, Max was unbearably cute just then. He was giddy. Who knew Max could be giddy?

He also looked strangely...satisfied? Content? Max carried himself with a certain amount of tension, like he was on guard. Not in here. Being in nature had disarmed the part of him that was wary of the world. Zander hadn’t even realized how bad that tension was until he saw its absence. Being here might be fun for Max, but he’d clearly needed it as well.

They weren’t even halfway through the garden when Zander made a decision: Max needed his own garden. At the very least, a large greenhouse.

It was a humid August day, and while the garden was shaded with all the trees, he worried Max might overheat at some point. Zander paused them at a bench shaded by a mesquite tree, wanting Max to sit and rest for a second.

Max sat but his eyes focused on the river flowing nearby. “It’s so incredibly peaceful here.”

“As much as you seem to love nature, I’m surprised you didn’t go into botany.”

“Mm, I thought about it, but the chemistry broke my brain. Besides, I’m marrying two loves right now. I really like the artistic aspect of architecture. This way I can design buildings and houses that fit into nature instead of taking it over.”

“Ahh, is that your goal?” It made total sense now. “When you’ve graduated, you’ll have to design yourself a house with a conservatory. It’ll be one of your happy places.”

“Why do my spider senses tingle when you say that?”

The man was sharp. “I can just install a garden for you.”

“Nowhere in the contract does it stipulate giving me a garden or indulging my hobbies.”

“But you like it,” Zander protested. He loved that Max felt comfortable enough to bicker with him. Truly, bringing him here was genius.

“You’re not doing it. Do you understand the upkeep on gardens are insane?”

“How about a nice greenhouse instead?”

Max looked sorely tempted for a moment. Ah-ha, he at least wanted the greenhouse. Zander started making mental plans.

Looking torn, Max shook his head. “Still too much upkeep. I couldn’t manage it while juggling school and my father.”

“I would get a gardener to do the bulk of the work. Your job would be to enjoy it.”

“Still a no.” Max’s mouth firmed in determination.

“What if I let you design the greenhouse?”

His determination visibly wavered. “Nice attempt, to throw extra temptation into the mix. Still a no.”

Well, instead of a large one, Zander would start off small. Something around a thousand square feet would be about right. No, on second thought, maybe two thousand square feet. He’d have to look into them.

“That is not your agreeing face, Zander.”

“You really have become a telepath, haven’t you?”

Max shook his head, exasperated. “Why are you like this? Instead of getting me a greenhouse, why don’t you just bring me here.”

“Or hiking?” Zander offered.

“Sure, I like to hike.”

“You do? We’ll do that next, then. I haven’t gone hiking in ages.” Zander held out a hand to Max. “Shall we continue? There’s a café somewhere up ahead.”

“I’m getting thirsty, so that sounds good.”

They got back on the paved walkway, then crossed a wooden bridge that went over the river Max had been admiring.

“You’re still not allowed to buy me a garden.”

“I’m sure we can negotiate this.”

“If you absolutely must buy me a gift, then I’ll take a few more house plants.”

Oh, so the greenhouse was fine to buy him after all? Good, good. They’d start there.

“No more than five, okay?” Max pointed a stern finger at him.

Zander smiled, helpless to do otherwise.

“That was not an agreement, Zander. Ugh, I shouldn’t have said anything. Now you’re going to go overboard.”

Overboard? Him? Surely not. Max just needed more plants, that was all. It was Zander’s duty and pleasure to provide. All those pictures of plants Max had taken along their route would tell him what to buy, too.

This really had been the best unofficial date location ever.



The problem with donating blood was that Zander had to replace it, somehow. Traditional food had no nutritional value for a vampire. Fun to eat, no question, but it didn’t do much to satisfy the body. He wouldn’t even consider feeding from Max. After they’d left the gardens, Max’s guard had shot back up. Not as bad as before, granted, but returning to the house had reinstated Wary Max. Zander had half expected this. He didn’t expect a single outing or twenty-four hours would

magically earn Max's trust, so he wasn't upset. It just left him in a bind. Since he (sadly) couldn't snack on Max, Zander had only one option left.

Blood bags.

Not his favorite thing to eat. For reasons.

Currently, he was feeling those reasons. Zander had his favorite blanket wrapped around him like a caveman huddled against a storm, ensconced on his couch, sucking on hot coffee like his life depended on it. So far, nothing helped to combat the chill literally coursing through his veins. Zander hated being cold more than anything, which was why he could only bring himself to donate blood once a month. One day a month being frozen half the night was enough, thanks.

Max came into the living room, taking Zander in from head to toe. Was it wistful thinking to imagine that for a moment he looked concerned?

“What's wrong with you?” Max demanded.

“Cold.” Zander did his best not to whine the word. Pretty sure he failed.

“Why are you cold?”

“Had to consume a blood bag to counter giving blood today,” he said, an errant shiver snaking its way up his spine. “Always makes me cold after.”

Max gave him quite the look. “In other words, you're the victim of your own generosity.”

“Why do you have to put it like that?”

Max pointed toward himself, expression speaking volumes. He showed no sympathy for Zander just then. “Here I am, a contracted snack you have free access to—and what do you do? Go consume something that will drop your body temperature. I have no tears to give you.”

He did have a point, sort of. Zander would rather freeze than force himself on Max, though. Wasn't even a question.

“You damn stubborn man.” Max sighed, pointing at the coffee. “Is that helping?”

“Not noticeably.”

“What does help?”

“Blankie.”

“How is the blanket supposed to help if you have no body temperature to heat the area with?” Max shook his head and padded toward the couch on bare feet. There was a determined set to his jaw, shoulders back like he was marching in against his better judgement. He took the cup from Zander’s hand and set it on the coffee table as he ordered, “Budge up.”

Huh? Oh, really?! Zander opened the blanket and Max came right in, sitting snuggly against his side, pulling the blanket back into place once he settled. Never in a million years would Zander have thought Max would come to him like this. For all that he distrusted Zander, he had still helped.

Aww, he was a sweetie after all. Zander’s instincts had been right on the money. He got an arm around Max’s waist, letting his head rest against his shoulder, happy. Even if he was still cold.

Max hissed in response. “Damn, you’re freezing. A cold bag of blood can drop your body temperature this fast?”

“Vampires run a little cold to begin with,” Zander said with a happy smile. “It’s why we traditionally live in warm places. It doesn’t take much to drop our body temperature.”

“Oh. So is drinking from a human like having a coffee or tea?”

“Temperature wise, yes.” Zander tilted his head up a little, inhaling deeply. Max smelled fucking fantastic. He’d love to nibble a little but he wasn’t about to ruin the moment. This was the first time Max had willingly come close. He’d behave himself to prove Max’s judgement wasn’t wrong.

After a moment, Max spoke. “Can I ask another question?”

“You can ask anything you’d like.”

“I don’t know a lot about vampires. Maybe as much as the average Joe. Parts of what happened this morning at the hospital either surprised or confused me. What the nurse said—about your blood being more powerful than most—I didn’t understand that.”

This embryonic curiosity, was this a sign of Max’s interest? Oh please, oh please let that be the case.

More than happy to answer, Zander broke it down into layman’s terms. “All right, so you’re aware there’s multiple generations of vampires?”

“Uh, yes. Although no one can agree on how many.”

“Thirty-two, currently. Your generation isn’t determined by when you were born, but by who your sire is.”

“Sire being...the vampire who turned you?”

“Right. You are the generation after your sire, whatever that is. So for example, if your sire was fourth generation, then you’d be fifth. Now, depending on how close you are to generation zero, the more powerful you are. The further away you get from the first of our kind, the weaker you are. You don’t have the same strength, healing factor, or abilities. The thirty-second generation of vampire is only a few steps away from being human. The only differences being that they heal a little faster and live longer.”

“Oh.” Max pondered for a moment, that quick mind of his turning over these new facts. “I assume it’s rude to ask what generation a vampire is.”

“It can be, depending on the situation. I don’t mind if you ask me, though.”

“So what generation are you?”

“One.”

Max startled, head twisting to look at Zander. “Wait, seriously?!”

His reaction wasn’t atypical, but it still amused Zander. Most humans were beyond startled to learn that about him. Supposedly because he looked so young. They had this idea

that generations zero and one should look ancient, for some reason.

“My sire is Fernando. He’s a very good man, one who took a strong liking to me. He turned me—hmmm, seven years ago now. I was twenty-three, just out of college. We met on the racing strip, actually. I had no idea who he was at the time and challenged him to a race.”

“Did you win?”

“Lost utterly, by a good length. He liked that I was gracious about the loss and invited me out to dinner. It was only after the race that I learned who he was. Kicked myself for being hotheaded enough to challenge someone I couldn’t put a name to.

But I went to the dinner. We got along so well, it was like speaking with a friend I hadn’t seen in a long time. There was a feeling of familiarity. He and I crossed paths several more times, racing each other, then he started asking me to come and test his bikes before the races. Within a year of knowing him, he offered to turn me.”

“Just like that?”

“It’s actually rare for him to do so. Fernando is old—very old, as one might imagine. In the entirety of his life, he’s only turned twenty-six people. Myself and one other are the most recent additions to his clan. He hadn’t turned anyone in two hundred years before us. Really, it was telling that he liked me so much he would want to keep me as a son.”

“It does say a lot. What about your biological family?”

“My parents chose not to be turned, although I did offer. My siblings took me up on it. I have two—a brother and a sister.”

“Which makes them second generation? I have that right?”

Max steadily relaxed as they talked, no longer as tense. Zander hid a smile, delighted. “Correct. There’s not a lot of differences between generations one and two, really. You can see the variations if you look hard, but they’re almost equal. It’s similar for most of the tiers. The differences are only

noticeable several generations apart. Between zero and four, for instance, is quite noticeable.”

Max gave a thoughtful hum but didn’t respond.

Zander was perfectly willing to let him think. It was a lot of information to take in. He liked how interested Max was in all of this, how he wasn’t asking just to make conversation.

“So you’re not actually that much older than I am.”

“No, I’m not,” Zander confirmed easily. “Did you think I was?”

“I didn’t want to even try and guess, honestly. You can’t tell age by looking at a vampire.”

“True enough. Even I don’t try it. Well, not by sight.”

“There’s another way?”

“Scent. A vampire’s nose is better than a dog’s. We can smell quite a bit.”

“I smell good to you, don’t I.” Max said it like he knew the answer. “You keep sniffing me.”

“You’re like the tastiest cinnamon roll to ever come out of an oven. You just smell delicious. Can’t help myself, sorry.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Such a tone of disbelief in your voice.”

“Yeah, funny how that’s there when I don’t believe you.” Max pressed a hand against Zander’s face, then his neck. “You’re feeling a lot warmer. I’ll just—”

The second he tried to leave, Zander hauled him back with a noise of protest. “No, don’t leave me!”

Max sighed the sigh of one who knew he was doomed. He hadn’t tensed up, though, which made Zander happy. “Now that I’m here, you’re going to latch on and not let go, aren’t you.”

“Don’t you want to watch a movie with me?”

“I’ll take that as a yes. I’m saying this right now. If you try to put a horror movie on to scare me, there will be

consequences.”

Damn, foiled again. Zander had hoped for a willing jump into his lap. Fine, he'd behave. “How about a bad monster movie?”

To his surprise, Max looked intrigued. His eyes cut to Zander, brow quirked. “How bad are we talking?”

“Dunno, I haven't seen it yet. I only have it rented. Critics gave it a twenty percent, though, so it's probably terrible.”

Max didn't even pause to think about it. “Fine. Put that on.”

How adorable. They had bad monster movies in common, of all things. Zander grinned even as he gave the command, “Alexa, turn TV on.”

Zander had a lot of bad monster movies in his library. If he kept Max distracted enough, maybe he could keep the man here until midnight. It was worth a shot.

CHAPTER 5

A week rolled by. Max was so busy going between school and hospital, he would not be surprised if he had passed himself at some point. With the weekend upon him, he wanted to just finally catch up on schoolwork so he could spend some time with his dad.

Not to mention finally, finally getting Zander to feed from him.

Zander seemed to exist to confuse Max. Seriously, what was his deal? All he did was try to pamper Max like a sugar daddy. Every time he got another gift from Zander, Max felt like he owed the man even more. The only thing he could give was blood, but Zander kept refusing. He had to wonder—why did this feel like trying to get a toddler to eat their vegetables? If he held Zander’s nose shut, and caught him when his mouth opened, could he get him to feed that way? Okay, the logistics didn’t work even in his head, but the temptation was still there.

Over the past week, Zander had insisted on doing any number of things to ‘take care of his Max,’ as he put it. Lunchboxes for school appeared, no matter what Max said about them. Breakfast still happened every morning—although thankfully not in bed. Movie nights occurred on the few nights Max took a break and let himself rest. The cash in his wallet magically stayed near the same amount, too.

Gee, wonder how that happened. Seriously, how did he get this man to stop?

Max had told Zander that he’d need to stay late at campus to work on all the assignments and get notes from friends, and

what Zander heard was not ‘I’ll be very busy until late at night’ but ‘My human must be properly fed during this time.’

That’s the only possible explanation for this lunchbox.

If you could even call it a lunchbox.

The damn thing had *eight tiers*. It was a lacquered box, too, something straight out of a period drama. Zander had dropped it off at the main office for Max to pick up, meaning he didn’t see the man, which also meant he couldn’t refuse it.

Just wait until he saw Zander again. There would be words. None of them would be clean.

Max put it on the table, glaring at it. This would just cause trouble. He could see it now.

Chase and Nikita walked toward him, and even from across the quad, he could see his friends’ eyes focus entirely on the box.

“Where did that come from?” Chase exclaimed, pointing at the box.

See? Causing trouble already. “From a certain person that will meet with my wrath later.”

Nikita looked it over with the sort of glee fangirls would have. “Your boyfriend gave this to you. Didn’t he?”

Did Max want to explain that Zander was most definitely not his boyfriend? No, not really. Boyfriend was easier to roll with than saying vampire master. “I told him not to.”

Chase plopped down right next to him, his attention now all on Max. “You have a boyfriend?”

“It’s a very, very recent thing.”

“I thought you were spending all your time with your dad?”

“I am, as much as I can. Zander’s helping me with that.” Max glared some more at the lunch box. “He just tends to go overboard. Like now. Seriously, what am I supposed to do with this thing the rest of the day? I don’t want to haul it around.”

“You can stick it in my car,” Chase offered. “It’ll be fine in there until you’re ready to go home.”

Now there was a good option. Bless Chase. “Thanks, man. I’ll do that.”

“How is your dad?” Nikita asked as she settled at the table across from him.

“They’ve got him in a medically induced coma at the moment, he’d be in too much pain if he was awake, but he’s healing good. He’s got great nurses”—thanks to Zander—

“and the whole staff goes out of their way to assure me of his condition.”

“That’s good. I know you said you weren’t going to do school this semester because of him, but he must be doing okay since you’re back.” Nikita beamed at him.

His desire to explain that Zander also demanded his return to school was...yeah, no, she didn’t need to know about that. “Help me eat this?”

“I’d love to, it smells amazing!”

Max undid each layer of the box, setting it out so they could all share it. Japanese was apparently the theme here. Rice, gyoza, tempura, spring rolls, sushi, hibachi chicken, salad, and cookies on the very bottom. Where the hell had Zander bought this, some five-star restaurant?

That actually wouldn’t surprise Max one little bit.

“Wow,” Chase commented even as he readied chopsticks. “That looks amazing. Your boyfriend spoils you.”

Max slapped a hand over his face. “If I can figure out how to get him to spoil me less, life would be better. Anyway, dig in.”

“With pleasure.” Nikita went straight for the gyoza.

Max would have a Long Talk with Zander about overdoing it.



Max had just come out of a night class, walking alongside Chase toward the parking lot since he still had his lunchbox.

Max's phone buzzed with an incoming message. He checked it automatically. Oh, it was Zander, he could answer later— Wait.

Wait.

Had that said car?

Max pulled the phone back to his face, opening it up and reading the message properly.

Zander: Bought you a car. I think I found something you'll feel comfortable driving. I'll give you keys later, ok?

WHAT THE HELL?!

Max stopped dead in his tracks, calling Zander immediately. Zander sounded delighted as he answered. “*My Max! How—*”

“You will not buy me a car.” Max put feeling into the sentence. He put firmness. His tone brooked no disagreement.

There was a digestive pause. “*What if I already purchased the car?*”

“For fuck's sake.” Max sank to the ground, head hanging. “Zander. At no point—at no single moment in time—did I even wish for a car.”

“*Well, but, you wouldn't use any of mine. You said you weren't comfortable driving them.*”

“How the hell did you interpret that to mean ‘I should buy something else for him,’ huh?”

“*But you're so busy going back and forth between hospital and school. Wouldn't it be better if you had your own transportation?*”

Zander was not going to budge on this point, clearly. “If I promise to take one of your cars from now on, will you give

that one back?"

"Can't, already driven off the lot."

Of course it was too late. That was how Max's luck rolled these days. "Zander, be honest with me. Are you trying to buy your way into my good graces?"

"If I thought bribery would have a prayer of working, I'd try it. No, this is just my love language, showering people with gifts. Besides, I feel better knowing you have what you need."

Max finally understood why he'd not won a single argument yet. Zander's intentions were pure. He wouldn't shift his stance. To him, he was in the right and didn't understand why Max was fighting him so hard.

Of course Max fought, though. This was nowhere near what he'd signed up for. Just what did Zander want from him, anyway? It was clearly not blood. The vampire refused to even consider feeding from him. Max felt utterly lost on where he stood with Zander most of the time, but on this one point he was growing ever more sure: Zander would not hurt him.

In fact, all Zander seemed to want was to spoil him rotten. Max made a last-ditch effort (because even he was sure this wouldn't work).

"I will only accept the car if you promise to feed from me tonight."

"Still full from the blood bag," Zander denied, voice cheerful. "Thanks for the offer. I'll take you up on it later. Gotta go, I'll deliver the car to you at school soon, so don't leave!"

He blew a kiss and hung up.

Max stared up at the clear night sky and blew out a long breath. He needed to install a rheostat in Zander and turn the man down a notch or two. Max suspected it was watching movies while hanging out on the couch the past week that had sent Zander over the edge.

Apparently, the formula went like this: Happy Zander equaled gifts. Lesson learned.

“Chase.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you ever have issues with your boyfriend spoiling you silly?”

“Eh, not really. I mean he does, in his own way. He’s not over the top like yours.”

Max sighed.

Chase bumped his shoulder into Max’s with a teasing smile. “You like it.”

“I do not. He’s driving me insane. I can’t even get him to slow down. If I wasn’t so busy visiting my dad and juggling classes, I would have taken a clue bat to him already.”

“If you were really mad about all this, you wouldn’t be eating the lunches or using the money he gave you.”

Damn. Chase had a good point there. By doing so, he was encouraging Zander to continue, wasn’t he? Why hadn’t he realized that before now? Maybe, on some level, he was thankful enough for the help that he couldn’t ignore the hand Zander offered. The lunchboxes, as outrageous as they were, meant he didn’t have to worry about finding food during his short break between classes. The car meant he wouldn’t be calling for a taxi or worrying about a storm catching him in transit.

“Did you seriously just realize this?”

Max ran a hand over his face. “Blaaaaaaah.”

“Blah, huh. That bad?” Chase snickered. “Your boyfriend must be really charming to get you to take all these gifts.”

“Charming is not the word. Persistent. Stubborn. He comes at me with these big puppy eyes and good intentions and I feel bad for saying no. Despite knowing on some level he’s manipulating me into taking all this.”

“Is it really manipulating?”

“I guess not. Since he’s not gaslighting or giving me consequences for not taking them. Manipulate is probably the

wrong word. I just don't know how to repay him.”

Max hitched the portfolio bag up on his shoulder a bit more. This stretch of sidewalk on campus was always eerily deserted this time of night. It always felt spooky to Max, but tonight especially felt like something was watching him from the shadows.

“What?” Chase looked around, frowning. “You look spooked.”

“It's just this area, I don't like it at night. It feels creepy, like something's going to pop out at—”

Two hands grabbed Max from behind, snatching him so hard his feet left pavement for a moment. Raw panic slammed into Max's chest, constricting his throat. He tried to fight, to get whoever had just grabbed him to let go, but he might as well have been a child struggling against a sumo wrestler. His captive held him with no effort. His bags clattered to the ground as he lost his hold on them.

Chase was in full voice. “Let go, you bastard! LET GO, DAMMIT. I am not playing, you fucking let go of me now!”

Max's panic doubled as he realized Chase must have been grabbed too, and he fought harder. Shit, he could really use some muscle right now.

“Stop squirming. I just want a little taste.”

The voice next to his ear was cold, jeering. Max translated the words with no effort: A vampire wanted to feed from him.

He'd been caught by a vampire—again.

The last incident, which he'd done his best to forget, slammed through his head and he almost threw up then and there.

Please, no.

Not that again.

His fear spiked, trembling his limbs, shortening his breath. Max could barely think around the fear clamoring through him.

“Max!” Chase sounded frantic. “Dammit, I so regret letting my bodyguards go. Don’t you fucking dare hurt my friend! What the hell do you even think you’re doing right now? Huh? You lived too long and now you’re wanting to die? ’Cause that can sooo be arranged.”

Max turned his head, looking for his friend, afraid for Chase as much as himself. He somehow had to at least get Chase out of here, away from the other vampire.

He found his voice, pushing the fear down. For Chase, he could do this. “I-I’ll feed you both. Just l-let him go.”

Those hands tightened on him. “You’re in no position to bargain. No one’s here to save you. You’re just a mere human.”

Shit, was there nothing he could say to save Chase? Nothing?

The vampire holding Chase abruptly lifted his head, staring at something just out of sight, further into the darkness. “Dude, we better go. I hear someone else coming.”

Max’s captor scoffed. “It’s not like a human can—”

The very air shook, a fine tremor as if winds were colliding. Max had never felt the like, couldn’t figure out where this weird pressure was coming from, only felt it push against his skin. In the next second, it grew stronger, then impossibly stronger still. A mother storm rushing at him might feel similar, except it came without sound—like death itself approaching.

“Fuck,” one of the vampires whimpered.

The hands holding Max’s arms loosened, but not enough for him to wrest free. He had no idea what was coming toward them, but it must be the angel of death itself. The two vampires looked beyond unnerved.

Zander melted out of the shadows, his all-black suit serving as camouflage until now, only a single light over the sidewalk illuminating him. He walked with a deliberate pace, each step sounding like a death knell. Despite his hands being

relaxed at his sides, he looked a second away from raw violence.

“Let go of them.” His words were soft, the threat in them unmistakable.

Max swallowed hard, eyes fixated on Zander. He didn’t know Zander could be like this—a terrifying, menacing creature that made two other vampires whine in fear.

As if bespelled, the hands holding him abruptly dropped. Max jerked away, toward Chase, wanting to pull his friend free if needed. It turned out to be unnecessary. The vampire holding Chase had also let go.

The fear on the vampire’s face was visceral. He was paler than a ghost, looking at Zander with this transfixed expression. If the man wet himself in the next second, Max wouldn’t have been surprised.

In that same soft, mesmerizing voice that promised pain, Zander issued another order. “Come here.”

Both vampires obeyed like puppets, no will of their own in their movements. They came to stand directly in front of Zander, still whining in fear.

“Kneel. Stay.”

They knelt so quickly it sounded like kneecaps broke. Max winced in sympathetic reaction.

Zander walked right past them as if they were insects beneath his notice, coming straight to Max. Max watched his approach and felt his racing heart calm down a notch.

“My Max.” Zander touched his shoulder gently, eyes roving over his body in concern. “Did they hurt you?”

Max managed to shake his head. No. No, Zander had arrived at exactly the right moment to rescue them.

With utmost gentleness, Zander lifted his arm and took a better look at it. His frown promised mayhem. “He bruised you.”

“I-I’m okay,” Max forced out. Zander was seriously unnerving him.

Zander lifted his head to kiss Max’s forehead, his lips light and soft. Max felt his eyes close at the gesture, the tenderness enough to wash away the last of his fear. How could he not feel anything but safe when Zander touched him so gently?

“A moment, my Max. I’ll deal with them and take you home. Your friend, as well. I’m sorry if I’m scaring you. I’m rather livid right now.”

Chase gave him a tight smile. “No, I get it, I’m okay.”

“Good. You—” Zander paused, nose flaring. “Ronan. You carry Ronan’s scent. Why is that?”

“Oh. He’s my boyfriend.”

Recognition flared in Zander’s eyes. “You’re Chase.”

“Uh, yes?” Chase clearly didn’t get why this man would know him. Max was confused as well.

“Ronan is my brother, we share a sire,” Zander explained, looking somewhere between upset and curiously taking Chase in. “I’ve heard of you, but we haven’t had a chance to meet. I’m Zander.”

“Oh!” Chase lit up with a smile. “I know you. Ronan’s told me lots of stories. Hi, Zander. Damn, your timing is amazing.”

“I’m glad for it. Well, now, these two apparently need to be in a shallow grave somewhere.” Zander turned his head to glare at the still kneeling vampires. “I would attend to this on my own, but Ronan will be upset if I do. A moment, please. Both of you, sit on the bench and rest.”

Sitting down sounded great to Max. His legs still felt shaky. Zander guided him to the bench, then walked back to the vampires ten or so feet away. Not such a distance that Max couldn’t hear the conversation as Zander called someone.

“Ronan. I’m on campus, you need to come now. Two vampires just tried to take off with our boys. No, I wish I was kidding. I’ve got them subdued, but I assume you want to

weigh in on this before taking Chase home. Good, I'll wait. I'll call Franklin as well."

Chase scooted in closer, hugging Max to him. "You could have told me your boyfriend was a vampire."

And spill the beans on everything going on? Yeah, no, Chase would be very upset with his recent choice to sell himself. Max would skip that lecture, thanks.

Chase's voice fell a little as he asked, "Would you really have let them both feed from you just to get me out of here?"

Zander's head snapped around, dark eyes snaring Max's. Shit. Chase hadn't said that softly enough. Zander had clearly heard him.

He'd deal with that in a moment. He turned his attention to Chase and answered, "Better me than you."

"Maaaaaax." Chase's head flopped back. "No. Not how that works, man."

"I can withstand it," Max maintained. "But the only person who's ever touched you is Ronan. I don't want bad memories tainting anything for you."

"You don't deserve them either!" Chase argued hotly. "And for the record, even if your plan had worked, I wouldn't have left you alone. No. No telling what they'd have done."

Max unfortunately knew. They would have drained him until gluttoned and then left him for dead. It was what had happened last time.

"Besides, your assumption is not entirely accurate. I've been attacked by a vampire before."

Max felt his jaw drop, head spinning with surprise. "What? You never told me that!"

Chase just shrugged, a grim smile pulling at his lips. "Ask me later. We don't have any alcohol handy to get into that story right now. But don't think I'm so innocent. I've had something of a rough road."

Max made a mental note to follow up on this later as he really, really wanted that story. But Chase was right—now wasn't the time. They had bad vampires to deal with.

Zander faced the vampires. Max couldn't help but catalogue that expression for future reference. This was what Zander looked like when utterly furious.

“What did you plan to do with them?” Zander asked, his quiet voice loud as thunder in the silence. “Answer me.”

The one who had held Max lifted his head, shaking uncontrollably. He was a large man, tall and well-muscled, but he shook like a newborn foal in front of Zander. Voice trembling, he answered, “W-we were g-going to haul them t-to the river, feed off them, maybe f-fuck them, then l-leave them there.”

“Max and Chase carry the scent of myself and my brother. You must have smelled us, known they belonged to other vampires. Why did you continue?”

The other vampire answered, almost crying now. “We—we didn't think it mattered. It never has b-before. What generation are you? I-I can't move. I want to move but c-can't.”

Zander lifted an eyebrow as he regarded the insects at his feet. “Me? I'm one.”

They were crying now, openly, fear pouring from their mouths.

“You,” Zander said in a clinical manner, “are likely twenty-six or twenty-seven. Just strong enough to give humans trouble. Not smart enough to realize how powerless you are in the face of most of vampire society. You made two mistakes tonight. First, you let a false sense of superiority fill you—thinking you could do whatever you liked to humans. Second, you laid hands on something that was not yours. If you think you'll survive the night after what you just attempted, you are very delusional.”

A motorcycle roared onto the scene, tires burning rubber. Chase popped up from the bench with a relieved smile.

“Ronan!”

Max watched as Ronan threw his helmet to the side and raced for his lover, catching Chase up in his arms, enough to lift his feet off the ground. Naked relief painted his face as he held Chase. That embrace looked tight enough to leave bruises, but Chase didn't protest it, just wrapped both arms around his boyfriend and held on.

“All right?”

Chase nodded against his boyfriend's shoulder. “Zander, he saved us. I'm okay.”

Ronan looked relieved, but not appeased, his anger nearly palpable. He lifted his head to look at Zander. “I owe you.”

“Anything of yours I'll protect. You know this.” Zander moved to rejoin them, this time coming to stand next to Max, his hand lightly landing on Max's shoulder. “Their plan was to take both Max and Chase to the river, feed from and rape them, then leave them for dead. They've apparently done this before.”

Ronan's expression turned dark as a thunderstorm. “Oh, did they. I don't think they're fit to stay in our society.”

“I quite agree. I spoke with Franklin. He assures me they'll be prosecuted to the fullest extent, and he's on his way to get them now. But I don't feel the need to give them any level of comfort.”

“I don't either.”

Ronan kissed the top of Chase's forehead before stalking toward the kneeling vampires. He paused in front of them, examining them both for a moment, anger a live thing in his body language. Without a single change in his expression, he struck both of them in succession, and Max winced at the sounds of bones breaking. Ronan had just broken both their jaws, hadn't he? Daaaaamn, he was certainly livid. Max would feel bad for the two, but his sympathy could currently be found in the dictionary somewhere between shit and syphilis.

“Stop breathing,” Ronan ordered in a voice as smooth as silk.

In seconds, they were choking, clawing at their own throats for air, unable to breathe. Max shivered at the sight. Mesmerized. Ronan had just Mesmerized them. Great Buddha, how powerful was this ability? His eyes went to Zander, the implications snowballing in his head. Could Zander have ordered Max to trust him? To stop being afraid of him? Was that within his ability?

He hadn't, though. He had chosen to win Max over in other, natural ways. Like bringing him food, taking him on outings, spending time with him—all in order to win his trust. Only when he was truly furious did he use his ability at all. Max now felt a little guilty he'd ever painted Zander with the same brush as the monster that had hurt him so many years ago. Clearly, Zander was not someone he should ever fear.

“Um.” Chase pointed at the kneeling vampires. “Are they going to die like that?”

“If they're lucky, Franklin will arrive before they do and lift the command.” Zander gave a bored shrug. “Traffic is bad tonight, though; I don't give that good odds. Do you want them to live?”

“Eh. I dunno. What happens if they do?”

Ronan returned to Chase, hands gentle as he brought his lover back into his embrace. “We have no tolerance in vampire society for this sort of thing. Their crime was compounded by hunting another vampire's lover. Cardinal rule: Do not touch what is not yours. Since they were too stupid or too arrogant to obey even basic rules, they'll be sentenced to immediate execution.”

“Then...let them breathe,” Chase decided. “I don't want their blood on your hands. Let the law take care of them.”

Ronan looked pained. “Must I?”

Smiling, Chase hugged him. “I love you.”

“And you keep saying *I* cheat,” Ronan grumbled as he pulled free, stomping back over to them.

Max was strangely relieved, although he wasn't sure why. He didn't want blood on Zander's hands, either. The vampires

deserved to be dealt with, but not like this.

A black van pulled up and a middle-aged man hopped out of the driver's side, striding toward them. He wore all black, from his suit to his shirt, and he moved with a powerful stride. Max took one look at him and thought *mafia*. He just had those vibes. The man took the situation in with one sweep of his eyes and then focused on Zander.

“They’re still alive?”

“Chase insisted. He didn’t want blood on Ronan’s hands.”

“Probably for the best. I told Mr. Fernando about this on the way over here—he’s already sharpening his sword. If you had denied him an execution, he’d have been upset.”

Was this Franklin? Max could only assume.

He stopped in front of Max, eyes evaluating him for a second before he smiled. The smile made him look marginally friendlier. Like painting a smiley face on a dagger. “Are you Max?”

Max nodded stiffly and managed a forced smile. “Yes, hello.”

“I’m Franklin. I’m sorry you were scared tonight. I promise you, these two will not see the light of day. Our sire is hopping mad that anyone dared touch you two.” Franklin aimed a dark look at the back of the vampires’ heads. “I can take it from here if you want to take him home, Zan.”

“Thanks, Franklin, I will.”

Max, for one, was more than ready to get out of there. On instinct, his hand found Zander’s and he latched on, feeling better for it. Zander gave him a smile in turn, holding on just as firmly.

“Come on. Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER 6

Zander paced his bedroom as he spoke to his sire, voice low to avoid waking Max, who was hopefully sleeping. Hopefully.

“—already executed both of them,” Fernando said in an angry rumble. *“I just called up their sire, too, to let him know what I’d done and why. He wasn’t surprised. Sad, because he said they weren’t like that before he turned them. The taste of power changed them.”*

It happened. The power and ability of a vampire had gone to their heads and made them abuse their strength over humans. Sad, but when that happened, there was nothing to do but put them down like rabid dogs.

“I don’t have much sympathy. Not considering what they wanted to do to my Max.”

“I understand. I’d be just as murderous if someone touched Noel. How is Max?”

“Shaken. Trying not to show it. I’ll keep him close to me tomorrow. I think that would be best.”

“I agree.”

“Also, he said something that hinted he’s survived such an attack before.”

The line went very quiet for a moment. *“Are you sure?”*

“I don’t know for sure. He doesn’t trust me enough right now to tell me.” Zander passed a hand through his hair, frustrated and feeling the long day in his bones. “He apparently tried to barter Chase’s safety. Said he’d feed both of

the vampires. When Chase asked him about it after, he said something to the effect of him being able to withstand it, not wanting Chase with that tainted memory.”

“Shit. That poor child. And he still put himself on an auction block?”

“You now understand why I’m so enamored with him. His loyalty and love for his father is incredible—I knew that from the start—but he’s just as loyal and protective of everyone else in his life. He would have sacrificed himself for Chase and considered the tradeoff worth it. If I could win this man’s heart...” Zander trailed off, caught by the inner vision of what that would be like. To have Max’s unwavering love and trust. Damn, he’d give a lot.

“My child, I hope you can. Is he opening up to you at all?”

“A little. He’ll come in close now, sure that I won’t physically hurt him. He’s still questioning my intentions, but I might have come on a bit too strong at first.”

Fernando laughed so hard he seemed to choke on air.

“Stop that.” Zander rolled his eyes in exasperation. “You know how I am when I latch on.”

“Poor Max,” Fernando managed, still laughing. *“You probably hit him with all the subtlety of a freight train.”*

Eh. More or less. Oops?

In Zander’s defense, Max’s cuteness short-circuited his common sense. That was his story and he was sticking to it.

“Well, assure him those scumbags are taken care of. If you need a signet ring for him, tell me. I doubt anyone else would be stupid enough to cross you by hurting him, but the signet ring will give him some reassurance.”

“Oooh. I like this idea very much. Let me have one.”

“Of course. I’ll arrange it. Bring him over for dinner soon. I want to meet this man. Franklin said he was very polite and cute.”

“He is. Let me know a good day and I’ll bring him.”

“Good. Go check on him now. He probably needs it.”

“All right. Good night, Sire.”

“Night, Child.”

Zander caught the sound of a door opening across the hall. Eh? Was Max still up, then? It was nearly two a.m., though. He should be dead to the world.

Unless he was too shaken by what had happened today to settle. That could well be it.

Zander left his room and followed Max down. From the stair’s landing, he saw Max scoop Zander’s favorite blanket off the couch, throw it around himself, and snuggle into the corner of the couch. He didn’t try to turn on a light, or the TV, or anything, just burrowed into the blanket.

Not a good sign.

Zander went down, deliberately making a little noise as he walked. “Max?”

He peeked at Zander from under the blanket’s edge. “Weren’t you asleep?”

“No, talking to my sire. He wanted to know how you are.” Zander padded closer, coming to sit next to him on the couch. “Can’t sleep?”

Max mutely shook his head, eyes on the floor.

He shouldn’t be left alone. Zander understood this instinctively. What could he offer that Max would accept? Ah. That might work.

“Wanna watch another bad monster movie? I found one I haven’t seen yet.”

Max didn’t have to think about it long. “Yeah, sure.”

“Okay. Let me in, I’m cold too.”

Max rearranged the blanket to cover them both, leaning in against Zander’s side, if just a little. Max accepting comfort may have gone to Zander’s head, briefly, but mostly it worried him. Max was far more shaken than he was letting on if he

was willing to cuddle without some sarcastic remark. Zander wisely didn't comment as he turned the TV on and cued up the movie. They didn't say a word to each other as it started. Half of Zander's attention was on the movie, the other half on the man next to him.

Not twenty minutes in, Max slumped against him heavily, head pillowed on Zander's shoulder.

Ten minutes later, he was breathing suspiciously hard enough to be a snore. Max was most definitely out for the count. Zander paused the movie and tilted his head to look at Max's face. Yeah, he was sound asleep. All he'd needed was the assurance of protection, the comfort of another person, for exhaustion to have a chance to suck him under.

He was even more beautiful while sleeping.

Zander was tempted to scoop him up and carry him off to the guest bed, but...that felt like the wrong choice. He didn't want to leave Max to wake up alone, but he didn't think putting Max waking up in Zander's bed was a good idea, either. Better to stay on the couch.

He carefully shifted so that Zander was flat on his back, Max tucked in against his side, blanket covering them both. Fortunately, the couch was wide enough to accommodate them both without it being uncomfortably tight. Zander turned his head to kiss that silky dark hair, then let himself settle, sleep creeping up on him.

Tomorrow, he'd tell Max there was nothing left to fear. He'd have the full protection of Zander's clan going forward—a very formidable thing indeed.

CHAPTER 7

Max woke up by degrees, sensations filtering in one at a time. Warmth, that was the first thing—a soft heat pressed up against his chest and legs. The heat moved up and down, a steady rhythm. Scent next, male skin and a certain cologne Max associated only with Zander. Birds singing somewhere outside the house, faint and barely detectable.

When Max's brain passed that last tipping point, taking him from half awake to fully conscious, his eyes snapped open.

Fuck a duck on a cracker, he was sleeping next to Zander!

How the hell— Wait, they were still in the living room. Max had no memory of how the movie ended, so he must have fallen asleep at some point. Had Zander arranged them like this? He must have. They were far too comfortably situated for this to be an accident.

His eyes went up to Zander's sleeping face, mind spinning madly—or trying to. It was hard to function without caffeine. Max was getting a lot of grinding noises as the gears failed to turn. Zander looked so innocent in sleep, somehow younger and not as mischievous. Tousled, thick black hair not held back with gel, full mouth slightly parted as he breathed. How was this man so effortlessly beautiful? His arms were lax around Max but even in sleep, he held him close.

Zander had come to Max when he'd needed him most last night. Not asking a single question, just giving him quiet comfort and support without demanding anything in return. Max was so thankful he felt his heart burn with the emotion.

Max hadn't come into this contract expecting to be cherished. Used and abused, yes. Cared for, protected, adored —no. He wasn't braced for this. Sometimes, he felt like he was free-falling, only to be told he had to change directions. He didn't know what he was supposed to do, how he was supposed to act, around a man who was the very thing he feared. Moments like these, where Zander held him close with such tender affection, only confused him further.

Coffee. He needed coffee for this morning, clearly.

Carefully, he got a leg over Zander and managed to climb over the man without either waking him up or tripping straight to the floor. Minor miracle, that. Max pulled the blanket back over Zander before tiptoeing over to the kitchen and starting the coffee maker. Watching it brew, he tried to organize the chaotic state of his mind. It felt like different thoughts were currently ping-ponging around in there at sonic speed.

The events of last night had faded into something tolerable, something he could handle. It was mostly the connection to his past that had so disturbed him. Now, in the light of day, he could think of those assholes from last night without flinching. He wanted confirmation they hadn't been let loose after what they'd tried to do.

Turning, he looked toward the couch, even though he couldn't see Zander from here through the back of it. What had he even been doing there? Max hadn't expected him on campus so soon. Whatever the reason, Max was thankful he had been there. Both he and Chase would have been dead if he'd arrived a few minutes later.

Terrifying as last night had been, it had crystalized a few things in Max's mind.

One, he had nothing to fear from his vampire. Even at the height of his anger, Zander had been careful to be gentle with Max. He'd not even raised his voice. That kind of control over his temper was damn impressive.

The other thing made obvious last night was that somehow, at some point in time, Max had decided Zander was

trustworthy. He had no idea when his brain had come to this conclusion, but there was no denying it.

He trusted Zander completely, which meant he had to trust what the man said to him too. Zander had been blatant in his affection toward Max.

Truth tell, Max kind of liked the attention.

He wasn't sure what to do with that feeling, either.

Coffee. Coffee was his only prayer of making sense of any of this.

Max poured coffee, threw in some cream and sugar, and the first sip promised processing power. Bless the magic beans that promoted life and goodness. Bless it.

The other obvious thing after last night was that Zander was powerful. Not just as a vampire—although what he was capable of felt awe-inspiring in a terrifying sort of way—but he had powerful connections. The way he disappeared two vampires with a single phone call was telling. Just who was his sire, anyway? The name Fernando meant nothing to Max, but he apparently needed to ask some questions.

Zander stirred on the couch, sitting up and stretching both arms over his head before looking around. The way he lit up upon seeing Max was so automatic, so genuine, it reminded Max of a golden retriever spying its favorite human. What was he supposed to do with this dangerous puppy, seriously?

“You're up.”

“How astute of you.”

Zander cackled at Max's sarcasm and bounced over to him, coming in close to card hair away from Max's forehead. Max refused to lean into his caress even though part of him wanted to. Zander's concern was heartwarming.

“How are you this morning?”

“Better than last night.” Max set his cup down on the island, meeting Zander's eyes levelly. “I've got questions for you.”

“I bet you do.” Zander’s smile faded and he seemed to find it hard to look at Max for a moment. “I’m sorry, I know I scared you last night—”

“At no point last night was I scared of you.”

Zander stopped mid-sentence, eyes snapping back to Max’s. “What?”

What was Max supposed to do with this empty head? “Zander. I fell asleep in your arms last night. You really think I could do that if I didn’t trust you?”

It clicked, and when it did, Zander’s expression was joy personified. He bounced once in place, so giddy he couldn’t seem to contain himself, then snatched Max up in a hug. Max hid a smile against his collarbone, wrapping both arms around those strong shoulders. It felt good, admitting that out loud. Like he’d been carrying around a heavy weight and was finally able to set it down. Keeping his guard up around this man had been too hard.

“You’re making me so happy this morning.” Zander squeezed once, then made a noise that suspiciously sounded like a purr.

Max pulled back just enough to see his face. It was hard to ask, but this felt like the right moment. “From the beginning, you’ve been trying to win my trust. Your methods have been both outrageous and consistent. What I’ve never understood is why. Even from the first night we met you were like this.”

“From the first night, I understood the quality of the man in front of me. You were terrified on that stage, literally shaking, but you stayed. All to save someone dear to you. Your courage, your loyalty, were breathtaking. The only thing I could think of when I looked at you was what it would take to become that to you. The person you cherished most.”

Max couldn’t think of a single word. Is that what Zander saw when he looked at Max? An incredible man he wanted? Most people looked at Max and saw damaged goods, or a snarky architecture student. Not...that.

“I’m not asking for you to return my feelings.” Zander’s smile turned a touch sad, wistful. “I just ask you give me the chance. I won’t hurt you, my Max. I’d cherish you the rest of our lives.”

Max didn’t have the words or courage to explain that Zander tempted him sorely. If he could entrust his heart to anyone, it would be this man, who had made Max his first and only priority. He wanted to respond to Zander in turn, take away the insecurity clouding the man’s eyes.

Zander was so focused on never hurting Max, but Max felt the same way about him. He didn’t want to return all of Zander’s generosity with ill grace. These feelings were just overwhelming. He needed to work through a few of them before he overloaded.

Max couldn’t keep looking at Zander—his heart was going to explode at this rate. He hugged Zander back to him, hiding his face against his collarbone. “You don’t need to walk on eggshells around me. I know I’m safe with you.”

“Is that a yes?”

“I still think you’re crazy, but do as you like.”

“That’s a yes.” Zander pulled him in tighter. Relief and joy were clear in his voice. “You truly do make me so happy.”

Drawing back a little, Zander looked at him with a half-serious, half-delighted expression. “I’m putting certain protections in place so you’re never in that kind of danger again. My sire has offered you a signet ring for protection. If anyone dares approach you again, the ring will tell them precisely which clan you belong to. They won’t dare hurt you.”

“That’s one of my questions. Who is Fernando?”

“One of the most powerful mafia bosses in North America,” Zander said bluntly.

Max hadn’t expected that answer. His jaw dropped, and he spluttered, “*Mafia*. Seriously?!”

“Yup.”

“But you’re not mafia.”

“No, I’m a legit businessman. Most of the clan are. We just have the other side of the clan that does the shady shit.”

Welp. That explained how Zander had disappeared two vampires last night. No further questions or explanations needed. “Those two...they’re dead, aren’t they?”

“Very dead. My sire was livid. He’s very protective of his children—and our lovers—so he handled them himself. You won’t need to worry about them ever again.”

“I kind of figured. Just based on what you guys were saying last night.” Max was not overly bothered. The world was safer without them in it.

“Speaking of things said last night...you said something.” Zander’s teeth tugged lightly at his bottom lip in an uncertain gesture. “Can I ask?”

Max wanted to talk about this as much as he wanted to streak through a mall naked. After everything Zander had done for him, he owed the man the truth, if nothing else. “You want to know why I said that to Chase, about feeding them both.”

“I do, but I won’t force you to talk about it.”

Max sucked in a breath. Blew it out. Didn’t feel any better for the motion but started talking anyway. “When I was fourteen, I almost died at a vampire’s hands.”

Zander went motionless, his eyes locked on Max. Funny, how he could be so still, yet give the impression of a volcano building toward eruption point.

It was hard to talk about even now, so Max stuck with the facts, the bones of it. “I was walking home from a friend’s house near sunset when someone grabbed me from behind. It happened so fast, I have no real memory of leaving the road. I was just in an alley all of a sudden, his fangs in my neck, and no matter how I struggled, he wouldn’t let go. He drained me to the point that I passed out. I was told later that a neighbor spotted me as she went to throw her trash out. He’d left me next to a bin. She called an ambulance, put pressure on the

wound, saved my life. It took far too many units of blood and a week in the hospital before I even got the strength to move.”

Max put a hand to the side of his neck. “He’d ravaged the area here so badly it took surgery to piece it back together. An anonymous donor heard my story and paid for plastic surgery so I wouldn’t be scarred for the rest of my life. Well, not physically.”

If Zander’d had a target handy, he would have murdered it with ruthless efficiency. The anger in his eyes was akin to last night. Still, his hands were gentle as he brought Max into his embrace.

Being hugged again felt like a balm on Max’s heart. So many people heard his story and either looked at him with pity or a kind of disgust, like he’d warranted the attack somehow.

Zander hadn’t reacted either way and Max was so glad.

“Was he ever found?” Zander asked with quiet menace. The words had chains and iron maidens and torture racks in them.

“No, sadly. I couldn’t even give a description of him. I never saw his face. He smelled foul, though, like a rotting grave.”

“If he gluttoned himself like that on you, he was likely in the habit of doing so. Overeating has a detrimental effect on a vampire’s physiology. It conversely rots the digestive track, unbalancing the system enough that it destroys the body from the inside out. It also makes the vampire even more hungry as he’s bleeding out nutrients instead of absorbing them. They become, in a sense, their own curse.”

“Could he have been triggered into that state?”

“There’s any number of explanations for it. Just like there’s any number of explanations for alcoholics, drug abusers, etcetera. It’s an addiction for vampires.”

“Oh.” So gluttoning was something the vampire had done to himself. Max just got to pay the price for it. No sympathy there, then. Max did, however, have one point of guilt to confess. “I told the auction house that I was untouched by a

vampire because they said I'd get better money for it. I'm sorry, I should never have said—”

“Shhh.” Zander put gentle fingers against his mouth, stilling him, expression warm and tender. “It doesn't matter. You surviving, that's what matters to me. You said fourteen, so this was five years ago?”

Max nodded mutely.

“Then odds are quite good he's dead. Unless someone intervened and forced him into rehab, he wouldn't have survived another year unchecked. It rots the body quickly. Gluttons—that's what we call them. Once they start that path, they're dead within two years.”

Relief. Absolute, pure relief cascaded through Max's system. He hadn't realized until this moment that he'd carried the fear of the vampire still being alive, of hunting him down once more. Hearing those words felt like a benediction.

Zander's eyes widened, dark brows beetling together. “Were you afraid of him coming back for you?”

It sounded a little foolish, spoken aloud, but the fear had been both insidious and a constant companion. Max didn't want to admit to that, just buried himself back into Zander's arms.

“Max,” Zander murmured into his hair, a hand soothing up and down his spine. “I won't let last night repeat. All right? You will never again be abused by anyone's hands. Vampire or human. Thank you, first, for your courage in telling me. I know how hard it must have been. Moving forward, I will do everything in my power to safeguard you.”

Max believed that, too, which lifted even more weight off his heart, freeing him. Max hadn't felt this kind of security since he was a young child, before the attack. It made him a little giddy, and he felt like teasing, for some reason. “You're not going to hire a bodyguard to follow me around, are you?”

“I might. Chase is probably being threatened with one, too, if that makes you feel better.”

“Two bodyguards are not better than one, Zan, keep up.”

“I like that nickname very much. Do keep using it.”

“This habit of yours, of focusing on something else to distract me in an argument, that doesn’t actually work. You know that, right?”

“It’s just that you’re really cute when you’re mad. I have a hard time focusing.”

Max groaned. “I think I already know the answer to this, but is there any time that I’m not cute to you?”

“Um...let me think.”

“Zan, seriously?”

“Wait, I’m still thinking.”

Max just glared. This man was incorrigible.

“While I’m thinking, a question. My sire wants to have dinner together so he can meet you. When’s a good day?”

“Why are you asking me complicated questions when I’ve only had three sips of coffee?”

“I can feed you first if that’ll help.”

Anything would help. Max wasn’t sure how he felt about having a casual dinner with a powerful vampire. It was like having dinner with the parents on steroids. No one sane looked forward to that. “Breakfast. Then I’ll look at my schedule.”

“Fair enough.”

CHAPTER 8

After what happened the night before, Zander was loathe to let Max out of his sight for long, but Max was adamant about visiting his father. Ergo, he drove Max to the hospital.

It was a pretty day, barely a cloud in the Max, the temperatures for once moderate. Zander had the sunroof open to enjoy some fresh air as they drove through the city.

“I haven’t had a chance to ask, why were you on campus last night?”

Zander had almost forgotten his original purpose. “I wanted to surprise you, take you to dinner in your new car.”

“So it was impulse?”

“Thankfully, I followed the impulse.” Zander refused to imagine what it would have been like if he hadn’t. The darker side of his mind tried to picture it anyway and he mentally shook it away. He tried to change the subject a little. “I do find it amusing that two best friends are dating two other best friends. Well, Ronan and I are brothers by sire, but we were friends first before Fernando turned us.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. We also met on the racing strip. Ronan’s one of the best mechanics out there and I asked him to tune up my bike. We hit it off pretty quickly. How did you and Chase meet?”

“Freshman orientation. He’s the type to introduce himself to everyone and get phone numbers. We also hit it off pretty quickly. I knew he was dating Ronan—he didn’t even try to

keep it secret from anyone. Was Ronan changed the same time you were?”

“More or less. I think we were three months apart? Ronan before me. He keeps trying to assert he’s the big brother because of that, the brat. I refuse to call him that.”

Max snickered. “Somehow, I can see this.”

It was good to hear him laugh. Zander could count on one hand the number of times he had heard it. It might be his favorite sound yet.

The nearer they got to the hospital, the more a question bubbled to mind. Zander had honestly expected Max to ask it well before now but he never had. Not once.

Finally, he couldn’t stand it any longer and put the question out there himself. “You’ve never asked me to donate blood to heal your father.”

“Zan,” Max answered with exaggerated patience, “if you *could* donate blood to my father, you would have done it already. You give me everything you can think of before I can even ask for it, of course you would have already done this if it was possible.”

This perfect faith Max had in him was both awe-inspiring and humbling. It made Zander ridiculously happy. He caught up Max’s hand and put a kiss on the back of the knuckles, then kept holding it. Just because he wanted to.

“The doctor did pull me aside recently and talked to me about that,” Max tacked on, staring at his hand as if resigned to not getting that back anytime soon. He was correct, he would not. “He said my father’s condition was too fragile, for one. Your blood’s powerful enough to send him straight into shock. He also said there were things not quite right inside Dad still, and they couldn’t risk having them heal wrong. It was better to wait until the last surgery was done before trying it.”

“Good, I’m glad someone explained. I did ask. I know you want him out of that hospital bed sooner rather than later. I can assure you that the original diagnosis is now incorrect. Once

he has my blood in his system, he'll heal fully. He won't have any lasting effects of the accident."

Max's fingers tightened around his as he made a noise of relief. "Really?"

"Yes. A vampire's blood is a powerful healing agent."

"Thank Buddha."

Of course he'd be relieved to hear this. Max had sacrificed a great deal to get his father back on his feet. Zander was pleased to be able to further the healing process along. Also giddy that Max trusted him to do it.

He looked right at Zander and warned, "You are not allowed to go buy me something outrageous because I made you happy."

"Why are you so mean?" Zander whined.

"I'm putting my foot down right now. This is a bad habit you're forming. There is not a single blessed thing I need. Behave yourself."

Zander was reasonably sure he could get around this somehow.

"I mean it, Zan."

"Dammit, when did you get to the point that you could read minds?"

"I don't need to. You're predictable."

Well. Not much Zander could say to that.



Zander peeked cautiously into Max's room, slithering one eye around the door. He didn't hear Max in here, but he wanted to make sure before he went in. Nope, coast was clear.

He quickly zipped over to the closet, opening it and riffling through clothes. He was just getting an idea of sizes. Zander could guess, but he wanted to be accurate. No matter what Max said, most of his clothes were worn out, which simply

wouldn't do. His Max was incredibly cute. It was Zander's job to put him in the best clothes possible to showcase the cuteness.

It was a duty, really.

All right, sizes figured out. Zander quickly left the room before he could get caught, already making mental notes of which tailor to call up to order things. The tailor would prefer actual measurements, of course, but if Zander tried to do that, Max would catch on. The tailor would just have to be flexible.

Speaking of, where was his Max? It had been quiet for the past hour. After they returned home from the hospital, Max had said something about homework to be done, and Zander had a contract to review before Monday, so they'd split ways in the living room. Was he still working on his homework?

Zander came down the stairs, spying something on the couch, although he couldn't see much more than a shoulder from this angle. He came all the way down and around, getting a better view of the couch, and immediately took ten points of HP damage.

On the couch, sound asleep, was Max. But he'd snagged Zander's hoodie from somewhere, and the sight of him snuggled into it made Zander clutch his heart and stagger. Oh god, the cuteness. The cuteness was overwhelming. Was it possible to die from cuteness?

No, wait, he had to take a picture of this first. Zander had his phone out of his pocket in record time. He wasn't content to take one picture, no, no. That would be sacrilege. He took fifteen in quick succession, grinning the whole time.

Zander was torn between getting Max to do this more often—because it was fucking adorable—and having respect for his heart. He was dangerously close to a heart attack as it was. Maybe once a week. Yeah, he could survive this once a week.

A hundred or so pictures later, his phone rang. Swearing mentally, Zander moved with vampiric speed into the next

room, answering as he moved to keep the ringtone from waking his Max.

“Ronan, why the hell are you calling me?” Zander demanded when he was safely in his home office.

“Uh, I can’t?”

“You almost woke up Max, dammit.”

“Ahh, that’s the issue. Well, if you bothered to check your messages, maybe I wouldn’t have to call, genius.”

Zander pulled the phone away from his ear to check. Oh, he had several texts. Oops. “All right, fine, to answer—I don’t know.”

“You don’t know if you’ll be at the race tomorrow, or you don’t know if Max will go with you?”

“Both. It depends on him. If he’s willing to go, I’ll take him. If he’s not willing, I’ll stay here with him.”

“He still shaken about last night, then?”

“Look, this stays in the family, all right? I prefer no one else know about this but me, you, and Fernando.” Zander was still mad just remembering the succinct version of the story he heard this morning. “Short version is, Max was almost killed by a Glutton five years ago.”

Ronan let out a vile curse.

“He finally told me that this morning. Last night just dredged up all the bad memories and right now, I don’t want to leave him alone for long periods.”

“That is completely understandable. I’d feel the same in your shoes. All right, then just let me know later after you talk it over with him. Chase was pestering me about Max coming, but I’ll tell him it hasn’t been decided yet. Wait, does Chase know about this?”

“No, I don’t think he does.”

“Okay. I’ll let Max decide whether to tell him or not.”

Zander agreed with this plan one hundred percent. “Probably for the best. I think Chase would just roll with it, but it’s Max’s call.”

“One more thing. Fernando has the ring ready for Max. I just picked up Chase’s. Even if you don’t see him at the race, make sure to swing by the house and grab it before Max goes back to school on Monday.”

“Trust me, I will. I’m hanging up now. I have to go take another hundred pictures or so of Max’s sleeping face.”

“You’re absolutely a lost cause, you understand that, right?”

Zander scoffed. “Like you’re any better with Chase.”

“Guilty as charged.” With a laugh, Ronan hung up.

Right, back to the important thing.

Max wouldn’t be super mad if Zander used a picture of him sleeping as his background, right?

CHAPTER 9

Max had hoped, after the storm they'd just weathered, that Zander might shift his stance a little on feeding. He'd even slept next to him again last night to prove he really did trust the vampire. (Okay, fine, he'd also liked the comfort of having Zander close. Sue him.) But when Max had offered to feed him this morning, Zander had lithely evaded the offer, kissed him on the forehead, and gone to make breakfast.

Not that Max doubted where he stood with Zander, or was hellbent on fulfilling the contract. It was almost a point of pride. Besides, he didn't want Zander feeding from a bag or someone else. Like hell did he want that. But if there was a magic phrase to get Zander to feed from him, he sure couldn't think of it.

They went out together that night before Max could come up with a plan.

It was Max's first time at the racing circuit, the place that had changed Zander's life. Zander had invited him out to see, no pressure, and Max had agreed out of pure curiosity despite it being a Sunday night. Besides, the signet ring was ready and he was told he could collect it tonight before the event started. Max looked around as he followed Zander in, taking in the people, the floodlights, the vendors selling beer and snacks, the row upon row of superbikes. It was quite the crowd.

"Are you going to race tonight?" Max wasn't sure how this worked. He hadn't seen a schedule posted anywhere showing who was supposed to race.

Zander quirked a brow at him. “Depends on if someone challenges me. Are you okay if I do?”

Telling Zander to stop hovering would just be a waste of breath. Max knew this for a fact, as he’d already tried it earlier. Zander had a very acute case of selective hearing. Max went with the answer that would get better results. “Sure. I want to see you in action.”

Pleased, Zander gave a happy nod. “Then I will. Oh, there’s Franklin.”

The formidable vampire seemed to melt from the crowd, heading for them. Max hadn’t said a word to him on Friday night, and he regretted that now. The man had dropped everything and come running to help. Max hadn’t even been properly introduced.

“You’re here.” Franklin gave them both a nod. “I’m glad. Mr. Fernando handed the ring over to me in case I saw you.”

“Yes, thanks for that. I’ll take it now.”

Max smiled. “Thank you, Franklin, for your help the other night. I’m sorry I didn’t say a better hello to you.”

Franklin smiled in return, his expression understanding. “It was a hectic night. I’m glad to meet you again under better circumstances. Our sire is very interested in meeting you personally. I believe he’ll be here later, he got held up. He’ll likely say hello to you then.”

“All right.” Warning taken.

“Are you sure he’ll make it?” Zander pointed skyward. “Because that’s rolling in fast.”

True, the storm overhead was coming in at a quick clip. There was grumbling in the sky, dark clouds making the night even darker. You could feel the humidity in the air, threatening rain.

“Radar says it won’t actually rain for another two hours,” Franklin assured him. “We should be able to make it.”

“Well, okay. If that’s the case, I’d better race soon.”

“Oh, you’re racing tonight?”

“If anyone will take me up on it. First, though...” Zander opened the box in his hand and turned, taking Max’s hand in his. Zander slid the signet ring on with all the solemnity of a proposal, even lifting Max’s hand to kiss the ring before giving him a pleased smile. “There.”

Max’s heart did a funny flip-flop at the gesture. Why did it feel like he’d just been proposed to? Zander had done no such thing. The cool weight of the ring on his finger felt heavy compared to what it actually was.

“If anyone tries to hassle you,” Zander said, “just lift the ring so they can see it and stare them down. If they have any sense of self-preservation, they’ll back away. Here especially, everyone recognizes Fernando’s crest.”

The stylized phoenix holding a sword in its claws was both cool and distinct. Max wasn’t blind to the implications of the ring. He expected to be nervous but instead the ring gave him a sense of...confidence? Security? It was hard to put a name to this feeling. The nervous tension riding in Max since Friday collapsed like its strings had been cut. Had he needed some physical reminder of the promises and protection Zander had already given him?

Apparently so.

Unable to stand there and only receive, Max lifted up on tiptoes and kissed Zander’s cheek before whispering into his ear, “Thank you.”

Zander gave his thousand-watt smile, the one that meant Max had just made him ridiculously happy. Max liked seeing it, liked making Zander happy after all the man had done for him. There was just one problem.

“I know I just made you happy, but whatever you have on your mental list to buy me—delete it. Now.”

“Maaaaaax.”

“Don’t whine at me. You don’t need to reward me every time I please you.”

“I’m sure we can negotiate this.”

“No.”

“Max, I just want to—”

“No.”

“Can you say something other than no?”

Zander had yet to figure out how to effectively argue against a no, so, “No.”

He pouted. It was an epic pout. Max strangely wanted to kiss it. He had no idea where the impulse came from, but he wasn’t doing it here, in the middle of a crowd.

“Interrupting the love birds for a second.” A man unknown to Max came strolling up with a racer at his elbow, whom he gestured toward. “Zander, this is Quinn. He’d like to race.”

“Excellent, I was looking for someone to compete with.” Zander’s frown flipped upside down in a split second. “Quinn, first time here?”

“Yup.” Quinn gave Zander an evaluating look. “I understand you’re the best racer here. I’d like to hold that title.”

Zander’s smile looked genteel on the surface, but it was all hungry shark underneath. “Well, only one way to earn it. Let’s go pick our bikes. Max, can you stay with Franklin?”

“Sure. Be careful, Zan.”

Max got a wink in return before those two headed off, already picking at each other, like two bandy roosters in the same hen yard.

Franklin gestured toward the mechanics’ trailer near the start line. “Chase is normally with the mechanics since Ronan is over there. Let’s join them.”

“Okay.”

Franklin fell into step with Max, asking as they walked, “Is he really that bad? That you have to rein him in on buying you something.”

“The man doesn’t have restraint in his dictionary.” Max rolled his eyes, exasperated just remembering recent purchases. “If he even suspects I might want or need something, he buys it. If I make him happy in any way, shape, or form—he buys a gift. I cannot get him to stop. I can’t even get him to slow down. I will bet you my left hand that our whole back-and-forth a moment ago will be useless. He’ll find a way to get me something.”

“Interesting. Fernando is the same with his lover, Noel. For that matter, Zander’s biological father is much like that with his mother.”

The implications hit. “You’re telling me both fathers in his life spoil their partners? Shit. I’m doomed.”

Franklin threw his head back on a laugh. “I’m glad you’re not one to take advantage. I always worried about that, to tell the truth.”

“I can see how you would be. The wrong partner for Zan could bankrupt him easily.”

“Yes, but he’s fortunately made the right choice.”

Well, that was flattering. Max wasn’t sure how true that was, but flattering nonetheless.

Chase saw their approach and gave a wave. “There you are. Come in, come in. They’re going to start in a second.”

Max had messaged Chase after the whole fallout of Friday night but had not seen him. Chase was as buoyant and carefree as ever, like nothing bad had happened. Max was relieved to see it. Then again, as scary as it had been, the experience likely hadn’t had the same impact on Chase. Max was the one who knew exactly what it meant to be at a vampire’s mercy.

With a smile, Chase greeted Franklin. “Hello. Where’s Fernando?”

“I expect him shortly.”

“Oh good.” To Max, Chase said, “Fernando’s the nicest man you’ll ever meet. Don’t be worried about meeting him. I was, the first time, but he’s really a great guy.”

The most terrifying vampire mafia boss in North America was nice...sure. Max could hear out of his left eye, too.

“Oh, they’re starting.”

Franklin was right. Engines were revving, the sound mingling with the thunder overhead. Max focused on Zander. He seemed utterly in his element, as comfortable on that bike as his living room couch. The helmet obscured his face but he still looked cocky. His...vampire? Not-quite-boyfriend? Whatever, Zan was off like a shot the second the lights turned green. People cheered as the racers burned rubber, engines loud as they tore down the strip. Max felt adrenaline race up his spine just watching their speed.

The other rider was nearly neck and neck with Zander. With the superbikes, one would think the human would still have a handicap. A vampire’s reflexes were better, their senses keener. Surely the human would be at a disadvantage?

The racers were only partway down the strip when the worst possible thing happened—rain.

Max almost thought he imagined the first raindrop hitting his face, but when he held out his hand, two more landed. The storm wasn’t going to hold off any longer. He’d barely registered the drops when it started coming down in sheets, covering everyone and everything, obscuring his sight from the bikes.

“Shit, this is bad.” Chase cast a worried glance at the sky. “If they hit even one oil slick out there, they’ll wipe out at these speeds. Franklin, can we call them back? Cancel the race?”

“No way to communicate while they’re out there.” Franklin did not look happy about this, running a stressed hand through his hair. “We can only hope they come back in safely. They’re almost halfway down now.”

Ronan came hustling toward them with an umbrella, which he snapped open and handed to Chase. “Both of you get under this.”

No sense getting more wet so Max obeyed the direction. His eyes, though, stayed focused on Zander.

Nothing about Zander's speed was sensible. Adrenaline, or his sense of competitiveness, pushed him forward when common sense should have slowed him down. His opponent was of the same mindset, as he kept right on Zander's tail, nearly catching up with him at moments before Zander put on more speed.

It all happened in a split second, but under Max's horrified eyes, it felt like slow motion. The human rider lost control of his bike. As he went down, his front wheel collided with Zander's back wheel, taking him down without any effort. Both riders were thrown free, skidding along the pavement and fetching up against the concrete barriers on either side.

Max's heart leapt into his throat. He was running before he even made the conscious decision, sprinting for all he was worth down the rain-slicked pavement.

Franklin beat him there, of course, vampire that he was. He knelt at Zander's motionless side, carefully removing his helmet.

Zander didn't move.

Zan, oh god, Zan. Max slammed to a halt near him, looking him over with anxious eyes. That right shoulder was definitely dislocated. Zander's racing jacket had ridden up, and his back and left hip were a shred of skinned flesh, bleeding freely. He looked so utterly still, barely breathing, that Max's heart clenched and trembled with fear.

"Why isn't he healing?" Franklin muttered in confusion.

Max's head snapped around. "What?"

"He should be healing that road rash already." Franklin looked both confused and worried as he met Max's eyes. "When was the last time you fed him?"

"I haven't. He's refused to feed from me. The last thing he had was a blood bag...almost two weeks ago, now."

Franklin's eyes closed in fatalistic understanding. "He's undernourished. Fuck. GET ME A STRETCHER OVER HERE!"

Undernourished? What the hell did that mean? Wait, had Zander starved himself rather than feed from Max? Had he put himself into such a state out of concern for Max? Please, someone tell him that wasn't the case.

Franklin's hand landed on Max's shoulder. "When he wakes up, you must feed him. I know this isn't the right location for it, but—"

Max threw up a hand. "I'll do it. Don't worry. He'll heal better if he's fed properly, right? Then I'll do it."

"Good. There's trailers standing by for medical emergencies. Let's get him into one, then you can feed him. Hopefully he's awake by then."

Two people with a stretcher clattered toward them. With help, all four lifted Zander carefully on, then carried him as quickly as feasible toward the trailers. Max noted in passing that another EMT team was already helping the human racer. Hopefully he was okay. Frankly, Max couldn't spare him any real attention. Zander took his full energy.

The trailer doors stood open for them, Ronan and Chase hovering as they loaded Zander inside. The EMTs smoothly shifted Zander over to one of the gurney beds smack up against the wall, and then stepped back once he was transferred, giving Max room to come in closer. Max did so but didn't know what to do at this point. Use a scalpel to open his wrist? Could he coax blood down Zander's throat that way? Even as he thought, he used a towel sitting nearby to dry Zander off as much as possible.

Ronan came in behind him, looking over Max's shoulder. "Why the hell isn't he healing?"

"He's undernourished," Franklin rapidly explained. "He hasn't fed from Max, and Max said he's only had a blood bag in the past two weeks or so."

"Shit."

Max made a mental note to get proper feeding instructions for his vampire later. For now, “What can I do? Coax blood down his throat somehow?”

“Forced feedings don’t normally go well—” Franklin cut himself off. “Oh, he’s waking.”

Zander’s eyes fluttered open, his expression pained. Max hated seeing it but wasn’t surprised. His entire body must be aflame with pain signals right now.

Well, fortunately, Max had the fix. He leaned in, hand cradling Zander’s face in preparation for lifting him up, wet hair cold against his skin. “Zan. Feed from me.”

Somehow, Zander managed a smile. “No, sweetheart, it’s okay. Just give me a few—”

“Zan.” Max had never felt closer to hitting a person in his life. “This is not up for debate; I’m not asking. Feed from me. *Now.*”

Zander paused, evaluating his expression. “You, um, look mad.”

“I am furious. I will explain exactly why—at length—later. For now, feed from me.”

“I’d not argue, bro,” Ronan drawled. “You don’t want to piss off your lover. And I don’t put much past your Max.”

“Um,” Zander started, but immediately winced. “Yeah, okay, fine. A little. Max, give me your wrist. That’s easier right now.”

Max didn’t care where Zander bit as long as he did it. He did mentally brace himself for the pain as he shucked his jacket and put his wrist against Zander’s mouth. This would hurt like a bitch, but if it got Zander back on his feet, it was worth it.

Zander didn’t just sink his fangs in like expected. He licked Max’s skin instead, which...weird. Strangely pleasant, like a tingle of warmth spreading over Max’s skin, but still weird. Zander made three passes with his tongue before delicately biting.

Which...didn't hurt. Huh?

Max wasn't so high on adrenaline that pain was meaningless, so what was going on here? He only registered pressure at his wrist. It didn't hurt one bit.

Franklin kept a careful eye on both of them. "Max, all right?"

"Yeah, I'm...fine." Max was still staring at his wrist, in Zander's mouth, with bemusement. "I expected it to hurt but it doesn't."

"At all?" Franklin blinked at him, then stared down at Max's wrist too.

"Not at all. I feel the pressure of the bite, and the sucking, but...no pain. Is that normal?"

Ronan was the one who answered, his tone ruminative. "Not exactly. Our saliva is supposed to act as a topical anesthetic, to make feedings bearable for humans, but some people react stronger to it than others."

Oh. So he was one of the lucky few? Strange, as that hadn't happened the last time. Then again, Zander had explained that a Glutton's entire physiology was messed up, so that could be it.

Zander drew back with a sigh, eyes closed in relief. Max retracted his wrist, applying pressure, but he had doubts. Had that been enough? Zander had only fed for maybe fifteen seconds. That was, like, six mouthfuls maybe. Which didn't sound right to Max. Unless the more powerful vampires didn't need to eat as much?

A wet sucking sound, like something popping back into place, filled the air and Zander flinched. "Shoulder. That was shoulder. [Owww.](#)"

Franklin had no sympathy. "Maybe next time you'll not be so neglectful of your own body. Or refuse to feed from Max. All right, how to get you home so you can recover better. Max, what did you drive in?"

"One of his sportscars."

“Not the best thing to put him into right now.”

Ronan lifted a hand. “I brought my Rover, let’s use that to get him home. Max, can you drive the car back?”

“I can, but...” Max’s eyes went to Zander. He was loath to separate from him right now for any reason.

“I can handle the car,” Franklin said. “Let me give the order to pack everything up. With this rain, we’re done for the night. Ronan, I’ll let you handle the logistics of getting Zander home from here.”

“Will do.”

CHAPTER 10

Despite the twenty-minute drive home, Zander still wasn't fully healed. Better, yes, but the road rash was still raw, hints of gravel in his skin. He moved like even breathing hurt. Max's worry was through the roof. He did not like seeing Zander hurt, not one little bit.

As Ronan pulled up to the front door, Max leaned forward to speak with him. "Help me get him upstairs. I want to put him in the shower, clean the wounds."

"Not a bad idea. Okay."

Ronan parked the Rover and came around to the side, helping Zander out. He was plenty strong enough to manhandle Zander, so Max went ahead of them, opening and holding the doors.

Once they reached Zander's bedroom, Max went into the bathroom to run the shower.

Ronan carefully eased Zander's jacket off, Zander hissing in pain as he worked it loose. Everything was wet and sticking to skin, which didn't help. For every time Zander flinched, Max felt his heart twinge in response. He also grew that much angrier. All of this could have been avoided if Zander had just fed from him the first dozen times Max had offered.

In the future, if Zander ever dared to refuse Max again? There would be hell to pay.

Max toed off his shoes and took off the damp shirt and jacket, tossing them to the side of the spacious bathroom. As he stripped, he tried to plan out the logistics of how to do this.

There was a built-in bench in the shower, so Zander could sit while Max washed him.

Ronan caught his intentions and asked, “Can you handle him?”

“Yes. Just help me get him back out again.”

“All right.”

Chase hovered inside the doorway, expression worried. “What can I do?”

Max pointed across the hall. “That’s my room. Grab pajamas and boxers for me, then get something dry for Zander.”

“Got it.” Chase was gone in a flash.

A shirtless Zander was quite the sight. He was powerfully built, and normally Max would enjoy the view, but right now he was so covered in gashes and blood it was painful to look at him. Zander eased into the shower with Max’s support, making little grunts of pain as he moved. Max was as gentle as possible as he settled Zander on the bench.

“Sorry about this.” Zander let his head rest against the tile, eyes closed. He was normally tan, but right now looked nearly white with pain. “I promise, next time we’re in a shower together, it’ll be a lot more fun.”

“Absolutely, that’s what I’m worried about right now,” Max drawled, picking up the shower head.

Zander opened one eye to look at him. “You’re really mad.”

“So astute of you to notice. Go on, keep dazzling me with your powers of observation.”

“Ouch, steaming mad. Oww [www](#).”

Max didn’t let up as he washed the grit out of Zander’s skin. He knew it hurt, but the wounds had to be cleaned. Road dirt trapped inside the skin would be the worst possible thing. He was thorough, doggedly persistent in getting all the blood and grit off, and was relieved when he was done. Getting an

arm under Zander's shoulder, he helped lift him back up and carried him to Ronan, who waited patiently outside the shower.

Ronan silently helped dry Zander off, pulling on dry boxers and nothing else. The rest of Zander was just too raw and tender for clothes.

"I got him," Ronan assured Max. "Get dry first, then join us."

"Okay."

The bedroom door opened, two male voices calling out a greeting, only one of which was familiar. Franklin and someone else.

Who else was here? Max pulled on boxers and threw a towel around his waist before opening the bathroom door, leaning out to see who had just come into the bedroom.

A tall man in a sharp black suit stood next to Zander's bed, speaking to him in a smooth tenor voice, concern obvious. He gave off the mafia vibe of all mafia vibes—blond hair slicked back with gel, with a chiseled facial structure. The hint of a tattoo on his neck and the gold earring in his ear cemented the impression. "You're still not healed, my child?"

"Not yet. Just need a bit more time, I'll be fine."

"No one of my blood should take this long to heal."

Fernando. This man must be Fernando.

Perfect. Max had a bone to pick with him.

Max stomped out of the bathroom, heading straight for Zander's sire, his anger rising with every step. Fernando turned to track his approach, eyebrow raised as he took Max in from head to toe.

"Fernando, right? I'm Max. Just how the hell did you raise your chosen son that he's so stubborn? Did you not teach him what a blood slave is actually for? I've tried multiple times to get him to feed from me—but, oh no, he'd rather spoil me rotten and ignore his own damn health until he's in this poor state."

Zander unwisely tried to interject. “Max, I’m fine—”

Rounding on him, Max growled, “Say that one more time. I fucking dare you. I have heard every single vampire in your clan ask why you haven’t healed yet, so clearly you are not fine. You won’t even properly feed from me in an emergency! Oh, don’t look shocked, I’m on to you. That fifteen-second feeding at the racetrack wasn’t anything more than a light snack. If it was a proper feeding, you’d be on your feet already.”

Zander winced and couldn’t quite manage to meet his eyes.

Nail on the head. Max wasn’t surprised. He turned back to Fernando. “I’m going to feed Zander—again—and this time you monitor him. If he tries to pull the same nonsense, I expect you to handle it.”

Fernando’s eyes danced with silent laughter but he gave a nod. “I will.”

“Good.” Max came around him to sit on the edge of Zander’s bed. He thrust out his wrist. “I am dangerously close to hurting your stubborn ass. A proper feeding this time or I will lose what’s left of my temper.”

Either Zander realized he wasn’t going to wiggle his way out of this, or he wasn’t willing to make Max even more upset with him. Whatever the reason, he accepted the wrist and started feeding.

It didn’t hurt, again. Max was relieved if for no other reason than because if he’d shown even a single indication of pain, Zander would have stopped immediately. Max was just as glad to skip another argument.

Fernando leaned around him to look. “You really feel no pain in a feeding.”

There was a question buried somewhere in his statement. Max shook his head. “No, I don’t. Surprised me too. Tell me, how long is a real feeding?”

“Hmm, hard to answer. If a vampire is eating steadily—like Zander is doing now—then two minutes or so. It takes a

pint to feed a vampire, and two minutes or less to drink that much.”

“Got it.” Max made mental notes. “How often?”

“Two weeks is best. That’s optimum for both vampire and human. Your body has enough time to replenish the red blood cells, he’ll need another meal by that point for the right nutrients. Blood bags do help in that sense, but something about freezing the blood has a detrimental effect on it. For us, at least. It’s like the difference between eating a cardboard pizza or fresh, organic vegetables. Which does your body get more nutrients from?”

“Fresh, of course.” It made sense to Max. Also, the next time Zander made any noise about eating a blood bag, he would immediately smack the man.

Fernando’s eyes narrowed on Zander. “From the state he’s in, I would say he’s not had a proper meal in well over a month.”

This was adding fuel to the fire, but Max was feeling evil just then. “He donated a pint of blood to the hospital almost two weeks ago, too.”

Fernando gave Zander that patented look parents gave their children when they had done something stupid.

From the foot of the bed, Ronan let out a low whistle. “And you raced in this condition? Bro, you trying to kill yourself?”

Zander lifted his mouth, swallowed, and protested, “I was fine!”

Max snapped his fingers in front of Zander’s face. “You are not done.”

Zander gave Ronan another dirty look before he resumed eating.

Fernando put a hand on Max’s shoulder. “Before I leave, I’ll exchange numbers with you. If he does this again, you may call me. I’ll handle it.”

Oooh, backup. Max liked powerful backup very much. “Thank you. I absolutely will.”

“Good. I don’t think it will be an issue, really.” Fernando’s eyes were dancing again as he looked down at Max. “You’re formidable in your own right.”

Max belatedly realized he had dared to issue orders to the most powerful mafia boss in North America. While wearing *a damn towel*.

Well, shit.

Fortunately, Fernando seemed more amused than offended. Max didn’t know what he would do otherwise.

Zander lifted his head with a sigh, eyes closed for a moment. “I feel so much better.”

He looked it, too. The pained lines around his eyes and mouth were gone. Even as Max watched, the red, angry patches all along his ribs and hip healed, leaving nothing but healthy skin behind. Still, because Max trusted Zander about as far as he could throw him, he had to ask.

“Fernando, was that enough?”

“It was,” Fernando assured him. “He’ll be perfectly healed within the next half hour, I would say. Now, Zan, what have we learned?”

“Don’t make Max mad,” Zander answered without a beat of hesitation.

“Not quite the takeaway I wanted to hear, but it’ll work. I’ll let you rest. I’ll be back in the morning to check on you.”

That had almost sounded like a threat. Max was perfectly okay if so.

Fernando had one more instruction to leave, this time to Max. “His body temperature will be low throughout the night, as he’ll expend energy healing. It’ll be best if you stay close to keep him warm. Give me your number before I go.”

Max did so, then ushered people out of the room, wanting Zander to rest. It took a few minutes for people to disperse,

and only then did Max go back into the bathroom to finish putting on pajamas. He also gave himself a second for a mini meltdown.

He'd told off a mafia boss. While wearing a towel. *A towel*. What the hell was wrong with him? Had his worry over Zander broken his brain? Thank fuck Fernando was easygoing enough to take that in stride. Or at least amused enough to laugh. This could have gotten messy otherwise. He'd have collapse into a mortified puddle, but he didn't have the time just then. Zander still needed him.

Max pulled on his Don't Care face before exiting the bathroom.

Zander was happy, of course, because he was getting cuddles from Max. He pulled the blanket back before patting his right side. "Right here."

Max climbed into the bed, pulling blankets back up around them both, before carefully settling in so that his head was pillowed on Zander's shoulder. Zander did feel a bit cool to the touch. Max came in even closer, lightly buffing Zander's arm with one hand, trying to get some warmth into him.

Zander made a sound of utter contentment. "I'm sorry I scared you."

"Zan, I already have one person in a hospital bed. I can't handle another. Please, please take better care of yourself. Think of it as the best gift you can give me."

There was a beat. "If you're trying to manipulate me into feeding from you more, it's working."

"Good."

Zander slid a hand over his waist, snuggling in a little more. "Stay with me tonight?"

"Trust me," Max whispered against his skin, "I am absolutely not moving."

It took no time at all for Zander to fall asleep. Max laid awake, examining that sleeping face, thoughts churning. His head felt chaotic, the mix of impressions from the day,

suspicious, and feelings all jumbled together like a rummage sale bin. He sorted thoughts out, one by one, all while his eyes traced every feature.

After all that had happened today, a few things were now crystal clear.

One, Zander would rather hurt himself than cause any harm to Max, which told him how much Zander cared for him.

Two, Max apparently was just as invested. The only thing he could think of when Zander was hurt was how to help him. It was time to face facts. Max was half in love with this crazy, sweet man already. It would take no effort on his part to fall the rest of the way.

Strangely enough, the thought didn't scare him. A smile teased up the corners of his mouth instead. His heart finally at peace, he closed his eyes and let sleep take him under.

CHAPTER 11

Morning light filtered through the curtains, acting as a natural alarm clock. Zander woke up with a warm body curled in his arms, Max's scent filling his head, and instantly became addicted. Could he have this every morning, please and thank you? Mornings were evil but if Max was cuddled up with him, they would be much more bearable.

At some point during the night, they'd turned. Max was now on his side, Zander spooning him. While this wasn't the first time he'd seen Max sleeping, it only reaffirmed his opinion: Max was the cutest thing ever. There should be a criminal code against cuteness like this.

Unable to help himself, he leaned in to kiss Max's temple. Max stirred a little, eyes fluttering open. "You are awake?"

"I thought you were sleeping."

"Dozing. I didn't want to move and wake you." Max turned his head enough to look up at him, dark brown eyes making his own evaluation of Zander. Whatever he saw, it made him relax into a smile. "You look better this morning."

Yes, well, he'd been a step above roadkill last night, so that left a large area for improvement. That smile, though, it tempted him to do very sinful things to Max. He didn't have permission to do any of them. Zander felt his willpower—admittedly fragile—stretch to the breaking point. Maybe try asking?

"Can I kiss you?"

For some reason, Max rolled his eyes. "What are you even saying?"

Was that a no...?

Max's hand came up and latched on to the back of his neck, bringing him down even as he lifted his lips. Zander had a full second of surprise before those soft lips touched his.

Perfection. Sweet, utter perfection. Nothing was shy about Max's kiss; he dove his lips hungrily onto Zander's. Warm lips, hot breath, a delicious moaning sound that rumbled in Max's throat—it all drove him to distraction. Zander kissed him back just as eagerly, hungry for every taste.

The kiss quickly escalated, their tongues invading each other's mouths, caressing and thrusting in a mimicry of sex. Zander slid on top of him, instinct driving him to thrust a little against Max, unable to help himself. He felt too good. Having this man under him felt too good.

Max's hands came up around his back, holding him in place, hands digging into Zander's bare skin. It only spurred Zander on further. He wanted this man. He had to have him. This was no longer a want, it was a need. Raw, aching need.

So of course that's when there was a knock at his bedroom door.

Zander pulled away from the kiss, looking down at Max's flushed face, and felt the urge to murder whoever was outside in the hallway. "One sec, sweetheart."

Turning his head, he got a good scent of who it was, and glared. "Ronan, you take one step in here, I will murder you."

Ronan laughed, the sound evil. "I'm not tempted, but stop and come down. Fernando's going to be here in about five minutes to check on you."

Shit. Why? Oh, wait, he had said that he'd stop by before leaving last night. Zander had utterly forgotten his sire's promise.

To be fair, Max was very distracting.

Max pushed at his shoulder. "Let me up."

"What? No!" Zander pouted even as Max pushed him off.

There was a hint of frustration on Max's face, but he leaned in and smacked a kiss against Zander's mouth. "You can kiss me more later."

Oh. Well, put like that, Zander wasn't nearly as mad about the interruption. Later sounded fantastic.

The instant everyone was out of his house, though, he was dragging Max right back up here. Now that he'd gotten permission, he was going to kiss Max at every possible opportunity.

Zander reluctantly let go of him, but only because Max insisted on wearing clothes. Zander also pulled on jeans and a T-shirt before heading down to the living room.

Right as the three settled, the front door opened and Fernando and his mate, Noel, strolled through. Noel was in a sharp, navy blue suit, his blond hair swept back from his heart-shaped face, looking every inch the young businessman that he was. He looked, in fact, like he was on his way to a meeting and only stopped in as a quick detour. Fernando was also in a suit, so they were likely on their way to the same meeting. Fernando's eyes swept the area and landed on Zander, face softening in relief.

"You look better this morning."

"Yes, well, I was roadkill last night, so I'd hope so."

Max put his coffee down on the side table and rose, giving Fernando a respectful smile. "Good morning. I'm sorry I was rude to you last night."

Fernando grinned, shaking his head in amusement, smile lifting his eyes. "Don't apologize. You were right to be upset with my child. Frankly, it's been a while since someone dared take me to task over anything. You, Max, have a spine of steel. You'll need it dealing with Zander, so don't apologize for it."

"I'm not that bad!" Why was everyone picking on him this morning?

"You bulldoze people," Fernando said bluntly. "With the best of intentions, but you're still a bulldozer."

Ronan muttered something that sounded like ‘got that right,’ so Zander could write off all help from that quarter.

Fernando ignored him and addressed Max. “I don’t believe you’ve met my mate, Noel?”

“No, I’ve only heard about him.” Max rose from the couch with an outstretched hand. “Hi, I’m Max.”

Noel accepted the handshake, looking Max over curiously. If Zander remembered correctly, there was only about a three-year’s difference in age, and Noel was likely very curious to meet someone like him. Who, you know, wasn’t Chase. Really, finding three mates so close together was mind-boggling to Zander.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Noel greeted in that soft manner of his. “I feel like we should get together soon, trade notes. I’m very curious about you, Max, and it’ll be nice to hang out with someone that Fernando isn’t wary of.”

Max seemed to like this invitation, although he did raise an eyebrow in question. “Wary of?”

“Vampires, in case you haven’t realized, are *very* possessive.” Noel sent Fernando a speaking look.

That expression made Zander think his sire had once again done something to irritate Noel, but was he going to ask? No, he preferred life.

“Oh, I’ve certainly picked up on that,” Max replied, shooting Zander the same pointed look.

Which was entirely unfair as Zander hadn’t done anything to deserve that! Er, recently. At least, today he hadn’t.

Fernando wasn’t at all bothered by his mate’s subtle dig, just chuckled. “We have good reason to be protective, my heart. We don’t want other vampires around our mates. Frankly, it gives us hives. And as a result of our nature, we don’t normally have social gatherings with other vampire clans. Therefore, the true mates and compatible lovers rarely have a chance to meet.”

“Which I think is a shame. We humans have a lot of information and stories to share about you overbearing brutes.” Noel pulled out his phone. “So, Max, you’ll understand if I ask for your number.”

“Done.” Max was more than happy to provide his number and gain a sympathetic ear.

“I still want to have dinner with you,” Fernando said to Max with a gentle smile. “I want to know you better.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Good. Before I go—Zander, a word?”

He was going to get yelled at, wasn’t he? Resigned, Zander followed his sire out of the house and down the driveway, out of earshot of most people.

Fernando gave him the patented You Were Stupid look he pulled out with all his children. “Step one in a relationship: Do not worry your lover.”

“I’ll be careful going forward, I promise.”

“I’d hope so. Max might smother you with a pillow yet.”

Zander knew the answer but wanted to hear the words. “You like him, don’t you.”

“I do. He has made a good impression. His priority was you, and he wasn’t shy about feeding you in front of an audience if that’s what you needed. Demanding my support was also well done of him. Amusing, too. I can’t remember the last time I was lectured like that.”

In retrospect, it had been funny, watching Max face off his sire while only in a towel. Hot, too.

Sassy Max did something to Zander, no question.

“I noticed something last night,” Fernando continued, blue eyes narrowing. “Coupled with something I heard, it makes me suspicious. You said that on the night of the almost kidnapping, you were at the height of your rage. You used both Mesmerize and Prestige, correct?”

“Right.” Zander had no idea where he was going with this.

“But you were able to approach Max? He didn’t fear you?”

“Uh, no. I approached him several times as I dealt with matters. He told me later he wasn’t afraid of me. He didn’t act or smell it, either. Why?”

“Hmm. I realize you weren’t in a condition to observe much last night, so you might not have caught the full implications. He’s showing both signs: an immunity to vampire powers—even when a vampire is being dominant—and a positive reaction to vampire saliva.”

Oh shit. Zander rocked back on his heels, stunned as he realized what Fernando was implying. “You think he’s...?”

“I think there’s a very good chance, yes. If nothing else, he’s highly compatible with vampires. Which is why I must ask you, my child, on behalf of the vampire society. Do you intend to let Max go at the end of your contract?”

The very question was both revolting and upsetting. “I will let go of Max over my cold, rotting corpse.”

Fernando gave him an approving nod. “Good answer. In your shoes, I wouldn’t let go, either. That said, do talk to him about this. He needs to know. I would also suggest speeding your courtship up a bit. You do not want to give another vampire an opening to him.”

He very much did not. “I do have a stumbling block there. Max’s father is still in a medically induced coma. I can’t get permission from him right now.”

“Hmm. We’ll tackle that later, as the need arises. Right now, you need to completely win over Max’s heart. From what I’ve seen,”—Fernando winked—“that shouldn’t take much more effort. He’s very protective of you.”

“I got to kiss him this morning. It was...” Zander trailed off on a happy sigh.

“Oh? Then you are making good progress. Keep at it. If you need more men to safeguard him, let me know. I don’t want to risk his safety. I know you don’t, either.”

“Thanks, Sire.” Zander didn’t think he’d need it, but... well, Max was oddly stubborn in some ways. Now, how to bring up his suspicions to Max?

CHAPTER 12

Max had no idea what was weighing on Zan's mind, but he wished the man would just spit it out.

After his talk with Fernando, Zander walked around with this absent look, like he was calculating something. Max had expected to be pounced on the second the house was clear, not...this.

Max had chosen to skip school that day, since he had no energy or motivation to pay attention in class. He'd waited a full three hours for Zander to address whatever it was locked in his head, which should have been sufficient time.

Max was out of patience now. He caught Zander by the waist, turned him, and sat him forcibly onto the living room couch. Zander blinked up at him as Max straddled his thighs. Not for one minute did Max think this trapped him in place—of course the vampire was strong enough to easily move him—but he also knew Zander wouldn't try.

“Yes, hi.” Zander slid his arms around Max, a smile lighting up his face. “If you want to pick up where we were so rudely interrupted this morning—”

“I'd love to,” Max agreed, smiling back. “Just tell me what Fernando said that's made you so pensive.”

“Um...”

“Riveting, darling, do keep going. I'm fascinated.”

Zander sighed, smile dropping. “I was going to tell you. Once I figured out how.”

“Start anywhere.”

“All right, um...” Zander’s brows drew together for a moment. “What do you know about vampire mates?”

What the hell was he on about? Max’s head cocked to the side in question. He didn’t see where this was going but was willing to answer. “Not a lot. I know they’re rare, for one. Maybe one in every five hundred thousand people. They have something unique about them that draws in vampires. I’ve heard news stories before where a human was picked up by a vampire, then married, like they were Cinderella. That’s about all I know, ignoring the really cheesy romance movies.”

“Yes, please ignore those rumors. They don’t have much right.” Zander’s hands slid a little further around Max’s waist, drawing him an inch closer. “Mates are rare, as you said. What makes a vampire’s mate special is that they are extremely compatible with our species. They possess unique features that make them impervious to our talents, so that it’s impossible to subdue or scare them, for one. Feedings for them are painless, for another, which is not the norm. Mates are also easily aroused during a feeding, which is something of a boon to us—bloodplay is a powerful aphrodisiac for a vampire. Having a spouse who can indulge in it with us makes life much more fun.

“Now, these are both traits and indicators of mates, but there’s another factor as well. The human’s body chemistry is uniquely compatible to a vampire’s blood, saliva, and venom. This means their DNA can be altered just enough to share the vampire’s healing ability and life span without needing to turn them completely. It’s a gift to us vampires because it means we can feed from our mate the rest of our lives. It’s rather like a blood pledge, or a marriage vow.”

Pieces of the puzzle were starting to swirl in Max’s mind, trying to fall into place, but he kept rejecting them. Mostly because it made no damned sense. He’d experienced some of that, but...surely it didn’t mean he was a vampire’s mate. Right?

Zander’s eyes locked onto his, speaking a language all on their own. “You were not susceptible when I used Mesmerize or Prestige.”

No, he hadn't been scared of Zander, either. Unnerved, definitely, but not scared.

"You have absolutely no pain during a feeding with me."

No, he hadn't felt that, either.

Max's mouth ran dry at the implications. "You're saying... I am potentially a vampire's mate?"

"I would bet everything I own you are. At the very least, you are extremely compatible with my kind, which is nothing to dismiss, either."

A vampire's mate. A vampire's mate? Max wanted to reject this out of hand because he wasn't that special. He'd never stood out in any way, shape, or form. But...he had the two indicators. There was no denying that.

Still...

Zander cupped his cheek, studying his expression. "I know it's a lot to take in."

"It's that and I don't...I don't know how to make sense of this. Are you sure?"

"Ninety percent sure. The only other test I can run on you is to feed when we're not in a desperate situation, see how you respond. I know you don't feel pain, but if you can feel arousal too, then you are definitely a mate."

Max wasn't sure what to make of this or even how to feel about it. Did he want to be a vampire's mate? Sounded like some fairytale-level shit to him. Also, there was a part of this Zander was not touching on.

"If I am...then doesn't that mean you have to introduce me to vampire society and let a bunch of people try to win me over?"

There was no humor in Zander's eyes as he answered. "If another vampire dares to approach you in that way, he will not live to see sunset."

Oh. Was it wrong to hear murderous words come out of Zander's mouth and be happy?

“Even if you are not,” Zander continued, manner softening again, “you are most definitely compatible with me. I’m not ignoring that.”

Sounded a lot like a good segue, so Max took the opportunity. Even if he felt strangely nervous saying it. “I don’t want you to ignore it.”

A slow smile took over Zander’s face. “Oh?”

Max leaned in and teased his mouth with a kiss, tasting that smile, his nerves falling away. “I want to give us a chance.”

“Please do,” Zander breathed before kissing him deeply.

Max hummed under the kiss. It was just as delightful as it had been this morning. Damn, kissing this man felt almost sinful.

He fully expected Zander to take them up to bed but instead he broke off, breathing a touch fast. “If you mean that, a few changes need to be made. First, I’m canceling our contract.”

Alarm shot through Max and he latched onto Zander’s shoulders. “What?! Why?”

“Because I won’t have that damn thing hanging over our heads. Don’t worry. I’ll maintain everything I’m doing for you, everything I’m paying for, but I’m courting you with clear intentions. I will not have you thinking that contract is the reason why I keep you with me.”

Court—courting?! “Wait. Zan. Slow down, you’re losing me. Courting me? As in—”

“As in I have every intention of marrying you, if you’ll have me.”

Due to unforeseen circumstances, Max’s brain has left the building. We do apologize for any inconvenience at this time. Please try again.

Zander chuckled. “You should see your face.”

Oh, he had no doubt his expression was a good one. He'd meant *dating* and here Zander was skipping right to marriage. "Zan, I'm a broke architecture student, you can't be ser—mhm."

Zander kissed him with intent, mouth holding Max's hostage without any interest in letting go. Kissing this man was a pleasure and Max lost both words and objection.

They broke apart only to breathe. Max's heart was beating fast, just from the kiss. Was Zander serious? He looked perfectly serious. Determined, even. It was all well and good for him to clear the air, but this was a very uneven playing field. Max didn't have a damn thing to offer in return except his snarky self. It felt unbalanced.

He swallowed hard, trying to find the words, even though the truth might destroy any real chance with this man. "Zan, feed from me?"

Zander's head jerked back. "Sweetheart, I just did that last night—"

"Please? I need to know. One way or another, I need your theory confirmed."

"Honey, it doesn't matter. I want you all the same—"

"Please."

Zander blew out a breath before nodding. "All right. Let's go upstairs, then. A bed is better for this, I think. As long as you understand, no matter what the verdict is, you're still mine. I am absolutely not letting go of you."

If there was one thing Max loved, it was how clear Zander's desire was for him. It blew away those pesky doubts that plagued him from time to time. Those words made him bold enough to duck in and whisper against Zander's ear, "After you bite me, can I bite you?"

"You wicked tease," Zander groaned. "If you don't bite me, I will be very upset with you, do you understand?"

Max's grin was pure evil. Well, no matter how this shook out, at least they'd have some fun in the process.

CHAPTER 13

Max was nervous and he honestly didn't understand why at first. Zander had assured him multiple times already that no matter the outcome, he wouldn't let go of Max. Max believed him.

When Zander's bedroom door came into view, though, the realization crystalized in his head. He wanted this to work. He wanted to be a vampire's mate in truth—for his own sake. Max wanted affirmation so he could stand at Zander's side and feel confident being there. He was nervous, especially since he'd fed a vampire three times and hadn't felt any kind of desire. For likely good reasons, but still. He was still nervous that this time it would be the same.

Zander drew him into the room, eyes soft as he looked back at Max. "Don't be nervous."

"Easier said than done."

Drawing him close, Zander kissed his forehead gently. "Shh. I told you, it doesn't matter to me."

Max nodded, choosing not to argue or explain. The next minute would tell, either way.

Zander tilted his head down, aiming for the side of Max's neck. He licked it, making Max's nerves dance and flutter, then licked it again before gently sinking fangs in. No pain. That was good, at least.

His eyes fluttered closed as Zander sucked, the sound noisy in the quiet of the room. Oh, that felt good. Max's hand travelled up, clenching into Zander's dark, gelled hair, head tilting instinctively to give Zander better access. Every pull of

Zander's mouth was somehow connected to Max's groin, a pulse that grew hotter, tighter, with every repetition. This almost felt like sex.

Zander lifted his head and Max whined in immediate protest. Zander pressed a kiss to his jaw, chin, hands roving strongly over his back and ass. It all felt good. Max had never been held like this before, with such strong desire. He melted into it, hands tightening on Zander. Zander switched to the other side of his neck, latching on and resuming his feeding. Whatever higher thought process Max still had decided to leave for the equator.

Definitely feeding this man again. Often.

Max was vaguely aware of the little noises that kept escaping his lips, but he couldn't care enough to stop them. They might embarrass him later but it was fine, they could join the long list of other embarrassing things he'd done. Right now, all he cared about was Zander never, ever stopping.

Zander lifted his head—seriously, what was wrong with this man? Why did he keep stopping? Bad Zan—his hands strongly grabbing Max's ass as he ground deliberately into him.

Okay, good Zan. Max took it all back. That thrust against him sent a live shudder of pleasure straight up his spine and down again.

“Let me have you.”

The gravelly undertone in Zander's request made Max shiver with anticipation. “Yes, please.”

It was the right answer. A hungry, predatory smile drew Zander's mouth up, and then they were moving with such speed Max's head spun. All Max registered was the bed, his back against the cool comforter.

Most of his attention was focused on Zander, crouched over him, who was somehow hungrier. Not for blood, though. No, his eyes spoke of a different hunger altogether.

Zander leaned in, capturing Max's mouth, lips moving insistently. Max got his arms back around Zander's shoulders,

trying to kiss back as good as he got. The faint taste of blood lingered in Zander's mouth, on his tongue, but it was strangely hot. Max liked having Zander's tongue in his mouth playing tussle with his, the hot, slick glide fucking in and out like a mimicry of sex. This man kissed like sin.

Max loved every second of it.

He was vaguely aware of seams ripping, his clothes being taken off him, the brief coolness he felt as air found overheated skin. He wanted Zander's clothes off so bad, helping as he could. Mostly, he wanted the button-down shirt and slacks off. Right now, clothes on this man were a crime. Max's hands were clumsy but determined wrestling off Zander's clothes.

Zander sucked kisses against his neck, moving down, hands groping and caressing in a way that made Max squirm. Those hands left sparks of pleasure wherever they touched but Max felt overloaded as it was, his nerves sensitive. He panted, breath shuddering in his lungs as Zander pulled boxers down, mouthing the base of his half-hard cock.

Oh—oh shit. That, that felt insanely good and Zander hadn't even—

A hot mouth found the tip of his cock and sucked it in, the suction strong, and Max just about jackknifed off the bed. His fingers clenched the comforter under him, honestly feeling that if he didn't hang on for dear life, he'd come completely unglued. If Zander didn't stop, he was going to explode.

Zander pulled off, but only for a second. Vampiric speed had him off the bed, to the nightstand, and back again, so quick he was a blur of motion. Somehow, in those two seconds, Max's socks and shoes had both disappeared too. He wasn't about to question it. He just needed Zander back on top of him now, please and thank you.

Need, need, need. That's all Max could think, the only word making any sense in his head. When Zander gathered him up close, resuming the kiss, Max latched on.

A slender fingertip slick with lube brushed against his hole and he groaned in relief. Yes, there. Touch him there. He needed the penetration like he needed air.

Zander fingered him with caution first, which drove Max wilder. He tried pushing back onto that single finger, only for Zander to haul him in tighter, not giving him room to wiggle. No, more, dammit! More than—yes, okay, second finger felt splendid. But that did not compare to the nice, hard cock Max felt pressed up against his and—

You know what, fuck this. He'd speed matters along with his own hand.

He dropped a hand down, slithering it between them—something of a trick with the way they were pressed tightly together—and got his hand around Zander's cock. The second he wrapped fingers around it, giving it a good stroke, Zander made this breathy little groan that became an instant ear worm in Max's ear. He'd need to hear that on repeat. Maybe another hundred times or so.

Nice size there, too, and so hot in his hand. Max needed this cock in him rather badly. He tried squirming against the fingers again. Still no? All right, two could play at this game. He lifted his head enough to get his teeth against the side of Zander's neck and bit down—hard.

Zander groaned again, the sound raw and hungry. A shiver racked his skin under Max's hands. The vampire liked to be bitten, who would have guessed. He pulled fingers out—yay!—pushed Max flat onto the bed again, and held his legs wide. Max latched onto his shoulders, trying to pull him into place faster. Now, now, now.

The first push of that hard cock inside him felt like bliss and burn rolled all into a delightful package. Max's head tilted back, breath caught in his throat as Zander pushed slowly in. Oh—oh fuck that was...so much more than Max had bargained for but in all the best ways and damn. Hot damn.

Then Zander retreated a bit so he could thrust back in and Max just about lost whatever was left of his mind. He saw nothing but stars for a moment, his breath utterly stolen by

how perfect that thrust had been, by the delight it sent zinging along his nerves. Then Zander did it again, and again, and Max became this mindless animal of pleasure. He couldn't think, only ride out this wave after wave of delight as Zander slammed into him over and over again.

He clutched at Zander's shoulders, trying desperately to get somehow closer to him. There wasn't even air between them now. His own cock was trapped between them, being rubbed in delicious ways as Zander's skin slid back and forth against it. Zander's breath was harsh against his ear, the slap of skin against skin mingling with Max's own cries of pleasure. It was the most erotic melody he'd ever heard.

He never wanted it to stop.

It had to stop. Max's body couldn't take much more of this. Human beings weren't meant to withstand this kind of pleasure for long. His entire body was humming, too overwhelmed, and he needed release from it all. Please, please, release—this was no longer a want. It was pure need.

Zander's head turned, found the spot where he'd fed earlier, and gave it one good, hard suck. It triggered Max immediately, throwing him over the edge without warning, and he screamed, arching as he came. Darkness ate at the edges of his vision as he shook, coming hard enough he damn near passed out.

It took long seconds, maybe a few years, for Max to realize he'd checked out entirely. He wasn't on his back anymore, but tucked in against Zander's side, cuddled tenderly, the man's hands sweeping up and down his side in a gentle caress.

"Back with me?" Zander asked softly against his forehead.

Max tried for words. Got a groan instead. Hmm, mouth wasn't responding. He gave it a mental reboot and tried again. "Yes."

Max managed to get his head to roll back a little (okay, call it what it was—a flop) so he could see Zander's face. Awww, he was adorable. Look at him, with that little furrow

between his brows. Max would have patted his cheek if he'd had the energy.

“Max?” Zander pressed, furrow deepening. “How are you?”

Max gave him a dreamy smile. “I am a vampire’s mate, aren’t I?”

Zander’s furrow disappeared and he smiled back. “Yes, sweetheart, you are. No question.”

Hearing that confirmation made him almost unbearably happy, but he was too exhausted to celebrate just then. Later. “Good. Let me sleep now, I’ve earned my nap.”

Max curled back in and promptly passed out.

CHAPTER 14

Zander was awoken by a very rude phone that insisted on buzzing noisily from...somewhere on the floor. Pants pocket, maybe? He groaned, glaring about the room. Ah, there.

Max was still dead asleep and Zander wasn't about to wake him. He slid carefully off the bed before padding quietly over to the phone, fishing it out, and looking at the screen. Ah, Fernando. Zander went into the bathroom before answering, closing the door behind him.

"Hello?"

"Child, you sound groggy."

"For a damned good reason."

"You also sound smug?"

"Also for a damned good reason." Zander couldn't contain his smile as he said, "We just tested the theory of Max being a vampire's mate. He is."

"Ahh," Fernando said knowingly. *"Did I interrupt a post-coital nap?"*

"You did. I hope this is important."

"It is and pertains to Max. You apparently sent over a notice to our lawyer that you want to break contract. Are you sure on this?"

"Why would I be unsure?"

"Well, I do see why you would want to, but you understand that so long as the contract is in place, no other vampire can

approach him. If it's lifted, they can, and when they find out he's a vampire's mate, he'll be inundated with interest."

Urk. Damn, Zander hadn't thought of it from that angle. "But if the contract is in place, I can't marry him until it ends. The contract forbids it."

"You're so sure he's your mate, then?"

"I was sure before we even did our little test. No one complements my soul better than he does. I refuse to let this man go."

"I'm pleased to hear it. I know you've been happier since you met him. I won't argue this choice, my child; it's yours to make. I just wanted you to be aware of the pros and cons."

"I realize I'll have some idiots to deal with if I go forward, but I just can't keep this thing hanging over our heads. It's too detrimental. I also don't want Max to think some of what I do for him is because of our contract."

"Hmm, yes, I do see your point there as well. I'll tell the lawyer to proceed. Fair warning, I will have to submit a report about Max to the VSB." Fernando said this last part apologetically.

The Vampire Society Bureau was a pain in the ass even on the best of days, but a necessary evil. Zander's lip lifted in a snarl of distaste even as he shrugged. "Yeah, I know. When Max wakes up, I'll fill him in on everything so he's braced for anyone approaching him."

"Wise of you. All right, I'll let you go."

"Bye." Zander hung up and glared at his phone. He wanted the VSB in his business about as much as he wanted all his teeth pulled, but needs must.

Exiting the bathroom, he did pause at the side of the bed, just drinking in the sight of Max. His dark brown hair was ruffled on the pillow, the afternoon light turning his fair skin into a dazzling display of creams and golds. He was such a beautiful man, and when asleep, he looked so innocent. Nothing like the wild creature that had almost driven Zander insane earlier. It had been the hottest sex of his life, no

question. Zander had clawed at control, barely keeping his strength in check to avoid hurting his lover. It had been a damn near thing at moments.

Having experienced lovemaking that intense, that raw, he could see why his kind sought after a mate so ardently. Anyone would want a lover like that for the rest of their lives. Zander himself was no exception.

If another vampire even dared step foot on Max's shadow, there would be a murder.

Being patient and letting Max take things at his own pace had clearly been the right tactic. It had been worth every second of effort waiting for the man to open his heart to him.

Max stirred, eyes fluttering open. His hand searched the covers, as if missing Zander already. The movement just about ended Zander right there. How cute was that?

He was quick to come and sit down next to Max, brushing a hand through his lover's tousled dark hair. "I'm here. How are you?"

"Good." Max smiled up at him with so much sweetness, a softness to his expression. "How are you?"

"Overwhelmed by you, honestly." Zander lifted Max's hand to put a kiss into his palm. "You ever surprise me."

"That's my line." Max sat up a little, frowning as he looked around the room. "How long did I sleep?"

"About two hours. I just woke up myself. Are you hungry?"

"Starving. It's what woke me up."

Max's body was no doubt trying to replace the blood he'd had taken. Zander knew he'd drank too much earlier, but Max's inarticulate noises had spurred him on. Something kind of red meat for his lover might be best. "Let's order something, then take a shower while we wait for it."

"Sounds good to me."

Zander lifted Max's chin, smacking a kiss against his sweet mouth.

Max lifted up enough to kiss him back. "Don't worry, okay? Any other vampire will take me from you over my cold, rotting corpse."

Zander thrilled at those words and couldn't hold back a smile as he kissed Max again. "You're a genius at making me happy."

"Just..." Max bit his lip uncertainly. "Zan, just tell me one thing. Will we have to tell other vampires about me?"

"Unfortunately, yes. The Vampire Society Bureau mandates the reporting of all known mates. If I could keep you all to myself without bringing trouble to my clan, I'd do so in a heartbeat."

This answer upset Max, a frown appearing on his face. "But I don't want anyone else. Although...what you've said got me thinking. That night those vampires tried to snatch us, it wasn't just me that wasn't affected by your abilities. Chase wasn't either. Is he also a vampire's mate?"

"Yes, he is," Zander confirmed easily. "He didn't tell you?"

"Chase doesn't always pass along information he should." Max shrugged, as if he was resigned to this, but his expression was still thoughtful. "So he's a vampire's mate. What are the odds of us knowing each other? Aren't we rare?"

"You are indeed, and the odds are incredibly low that two of you would know each other like this. A one in two million chance, would be my guess."

"So, how many known vampire's mates are in North America?"

"Including you? One hundred and nineteen have been identified."

Max stumbled to a halt, voice rising incredulously. "Out of a population of three hundred million?!"

“Remember, not every vampire’s mate has been found,” Zander explained, hand palm up in a shrug. “You have to be around a vampire for a length of time, and feed one, before it becomes clear you are one. Not every human has that kind of exposure. Really, the probability of one potential mate in every five hundred thousand humans is a statistical guess. We can’t really prove it.”

“Shit,” Max breathed, still floored by this information.

“You are very precious, my Max. More so than I think you’ve imagined. There’s many a vampire that would give up a prince’s ransom to just be introduced to you. The fact I stumbled across you on an auction block is nothing short of a miracle, in my opinion.”

Max didn’t seem to know what to say to this, just kept his hand tight on Zander’s. It was a bit much to take in all at once, so Zander let him think about it.

“Are we going to face trouble with the vampire bureau after they learn I exist? The way you talk about it makes me think so. You don’t actually want to tell them about me despite the potential repercussions.”

It was a valid question. Zander didn’t want to be dismissive of it. “Telling the bureau about you is essentially the equivalent of throwing a bone into a pack of wild dogs.”

“Geh.” Max’s expression looked perturbed. “Seriously?”

“Sadly, there’s not much dignified about the outcome. Mainly because of the money involved, to be honest. A successful match made by the bureau can easily bring in five million. They make a pretty penny from the commission.”

Max choked, eyes bulging. “Just for a matchmaking service?!”

“That’s how important and precious a true mate is amongst vampires. Just hosting a meet and greet can rake in almost a million dollars—even if the match is unsuccessful.” Zander grimaced at the memory. “We went through a lot of backlash when Chase’s status was reported. The bureau immediately responded, wanting to take Chase to a private house so they

could introduce potential matches to him. We had to argue back and forth for quite a while before they relented. They might well try again with you. But Max, as pushy as they can be, they can't force you into anything. Legally or morally, they have no authority over you. What you do, who you choose, is entirely your choice."

Max nodded slowly, taking this in. "So if they approach me and start making demands, stand my ground."

"Yes. Also call me. Or Fernando, either one. Well, call me anyway, I want to know what's going on. You're already in a committed relationship with me, they can't ignore that, try though they might."

"I will definitely make phone calls. I have allies and I am not afraid to use them."

"Good boy." Zander lifted Max's chin to smack a kiss against his sweet mouth.

Max lifted up enough to kiss him back. "Don't worry, okay? You're the only one I want."

Max was determined to give him an overdose of cute today, apparently. It was a genuine protest, though, and Zander treated it accordingly. He grazed the lightest of kisses against Max's mouth before pulling away. "My Max, if any other vampire dares to think he can court you, he will not survive to see the next sunrise. Rest easy on this."

Max gave him quite the speaking look. "I don't want you to kill them for it."

"Whether or not they live is entirely up to them. Now, what would you like to eat?"

"You cannot distract me with food."

Max's stomach rumbled in petulant protest.

"You sure about that?" Zander jerked his chin to indicate the stomach in question.

"Fine, we can shelve this until after I eat and have the energy to argue with you. Korean?"

“You can have whatever you want, my heart.” Zander handed his phone over so Max could make his own selections.

Food ordered, they left the bed and headed into the shower. Showering with Max was a pleasure in and of itself, one he planned to indulge in often. A wet Max was a distinctly perfect view. Zander hummed a little, pleased to get his hands back on his lover. He paid particular attention to Max’s neck, making sure the puncture wounds were already healing, which they were. With the healing properties in a vampire’s saliva, by tomorrow the marks should be gone entirely.

Max’s eyes were closed as Zander washed his hair, the way his lips curved showing his obvious enjoyment.

“Zan?”

“Yes, love?”

“When you said you wanted to properly court me—does that mean something different for vampires? Or is it like human dating?”

“Much like human dating, but we have a few quirks. For instance, when I propose, I will have to get permission from your nearest relative, but more or less like human dating.”

Max let that roll around in his head for a moment before asking, “You’ve already showered me with gifts, so I’m a little afraid to ask this, but...you’re going to kick it up a notch now that we’re dating, aren’t you?”

Zander pulled on his best innocent face, putting real effort into it. He didn’t want Max to learn about the greenhouse yet. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Max closed his eyes again, resigned. “I’m going to become utterly spoiled at this rate.”

It appeared his innocent face needed work. “Instead of seeing it as me spoiling you, think of it as me competitively compensating you for the delight you provide.”

Max laughed softly. “Competitively compensated, huh? Sure, Mr. Businessman, sure.”

See? Max didn’t actually mind the spoiling at all.

CHAPTER 15

Chase was openly snickering. “So you ended up saying yes to the greenhouse after all?”

“Look.” Max blew out a breath, aggravated all over again. “The man’s utterly shameless. Despite me catching him in the act of ordering one, he didn’t back down. Just got all excited because now I could give him an opinion.”

Chase pushed the facility’s door open, holding it so Max could go through before joining him outside. “He’s gotten good at maneuvering around you.”

“I will figure out how to get the upper hand or die trying,” Max swore. He was one week into dating Zander and hadn’t figured it out yet, but give him time. Zander had to have a weakness somewhere. “If it wasn’t for the fact he’s filthy rich, he would have bankrupted himself already spoiling me. Was his limiter broken when he was turned? Was that what happened, the thing that enabled him to make sensible choices is now defunct?”

“Pretty sure it doesn’t work like that.” Chase patted him on the back in solidarity. “I grant you, Ronan doesn’t spoil me in the same way, but he does spoil me. The amount that man caters to and indulges me is almost criminal. I think what it really is, they’re just *that* overjoyed to have us. You know how rare a vampire’s mate is. We can literally pick anyone but we chose them. It went straight to their heads.”

Max had to admit that was probably a factor. “Zan was spoiling me like this before we figured it out, though. He’s just gotten worse since.”

“Then that’s just how he rolls. No helping it. Besides, it’s just the gifts, right?”

Max shook his head, shoulders slumping.

“Not just the gifts?” Chase hazarded. “Okay, so...are you guys arguing?”

“No, no,” Max denied with a perish-the-thought gesture. “Zan’s way of arguing with me over a gift is to try and sweet talk me into it. When that fails, he tries to seduce me. I get amazing sex out of saying no to him.”

“Bro,” Chase said with admiration, “you’re evil.”

Max smirked. “This system is working out well for me so far.”

“But you said yes to the greenhouse,” Chase pointed out.

“He used my weakness against me. Besides, I said no to something else, so I said yes to the greenhouse. It’s a balancing act.”

“Uh-huh. That’s your story and you’re sticking to it.”

Max shrugged. If it worked, it worked. Besides, saying no to Zander was good for him. Healthy, even.

“You two are so obviously in love it’s cute,” Chase stated, grinning like this amused him. “If I didn’t have Ronan, I might be jealous.”

Max nearly tripped over thin air. Wait. Wait a hot second. Was he in love with Zander?

“Bro, you didn’t just realize this, did you?”

“I...” Max stared at his best friend and honestly was at a loss for words. He may have?

“Seriously?” Chase stopped dead too, eyes wide with incredulity.

“In my defense, I’ve never been in love before, okay?”

“I know, but even I figured it out pretty quickly.”

How had he not realized, though? When he literally spent every free second with Zander. When he worried about the

man so much he was willing to put himself in harm's way to help. How had he missed the obvious?

"I...shit. I need to tell him."

"He'll be over the moon when you do." Chase slapped him on the shoulder. "What are you waiting for? Go! Or, wait," Chase paused at his car and gestured. "I know you parked across campus, want me to give you a lift over there?"

It was damn hot today so that actually appealed quite a bit. "Yeah please, that way I can get to Zander faster—"

"Mr. Monroe?"

He didn't recognize the voice and turned automatically to face the speaker.

A smartly dressed woman in a black business suit, blonde hair pulled up in a bun, approached him. There was a hulking man in a matching black suit right at her side.

Max took one look at them and felt the distinct urge to run in the other direction. At his side, he heard Chase let out a groan. Um, what?

"Good afternoon, I'm Vanessa," she introduced herself with a professional smile. "I'm from the Vampire Society Bureau—"

Oh shit. Max's nerves jangled at her introduction, and he now understood Chase's reaction. The bureau had sought him out much faster than he'd anticipated. It had only been five days since they'd figured out he was a vampire's mate to begin with. And it looked like she'd brought Mr. Muscle with her in case he spooked. This was so not good.

Chase came to stand solidly at his side, already irate. "You again. When will you fucking quit? We're not interested in some kind of blind dating game, all right? I know Fernando made that clear last time."

Her bright red lips pursed in aggravation as her eyes switched to Chase. "I may have failed to convince you to pursue other suitors, Mr. Huntington, but Mr. Monroe was

bought as a blood slave. His situation is far different from yours.”

“No, it’s really not,” Max negated with a slash of his hand. “My interest in meeting other vampires is nil.”

She looked at him with pity, which rankled. “Mr. Monroe, I don’t think you understand the unique position you’re in—”

Max snorted inelegantly. “I’m one of a hundred and nineteen known vampire mates throughout the entirety of North America. People would pay a small fortune just to be introduced to me. I could literally have my pick of available bachelors, all at the snap of my fingers. Does that adequately sum up my situation, miss?”

Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Someone certainly filled you in. Who?”

“Zander. He wanted to make sure I understood what position I held in vampire society.”

“The very one who’s holding onto you?”

“Holding onto me? What a weird way to phrase it. The person who adores and protects me, the man who is my boyfriend—yes. That person.”

Chase took a step back, looking poised for some reason. Max caught his eye, silently asking, *Help?* Chase gave him a small nod in response. Good, he’d let Chase handle reinforcements. Somehow. Max just had to stall for time. Or make her give up, one of the two. He eyed Mr. Muscles warily. If he had to outrun the man—who was likely a vampire—his odds of succeeding were not good.

She pressed on, growing more determined. “I realize you have a good opinion of your contracted master. And of course, he’d have treated you well once he recognized your status as a potential mate—”

Max’s patience with this conversation was dwindling fast. “First off, lady, Zander has never once referred to himself as my master. In fact, I was precious in his eyes before we even figured out I was a potential mate. Your point is moot.”

Apparently, her patience was also running thin as she snapped back, “There are other, far more deserving matches who would treat you significantly better. Much better than that newly turned *child* could ever hope to.”

Max couldn't let that insult stand. He got right in her face, words ringing with cold finality. “A vampire damn near tore my throat out and left me for dead five years ago. It's *only* because of Zander that I am willing to be a vampire's mate. There is no one, on the face of this planet, who is a better partner than him. If you dare suggest otherwise one more time, I will put a boot up your ass. You're also worlds too late. I love that man to pieces. I will not separate from him willingly. Let's be clear on this, the only reason why you're pushing so hard to separate me from him is because of the matchmaking commission you'd get. I'm worth, what? Five or six million? I bet it burned when you couldn't get that fee from Chase, but I'm not your next meal ticket, lady.”

Chase also looked done with her shit. Max was ready to try drastic measures to escape, when Chase abruptly threw a hand into the air. What...? Then Max sensed it, the abrupt feeling of displaced air, before a person was suddenly *there* at his side.

“I do not suggest pressing the matter,” a familiar voice drawled.

Oh thank fuck. Franklin was here. That must've been a signal from Chase for backup. If anyone could settle this standoff, it was Fernando's right-hand man, who was formidable in his own right.

Vanessa clearly recognized the newcomer, her teeth grinding together audibly. “Fernando's watch dog. Why are you here?”

“Two of my young masters go to school here,” Franklin returned mildly. “I'm here to aid them in pest control.” He came to stand in front of Max, forcing Vanessa back a step. “Whatever the VSB's opinion on this matter, you can't force either Max or Chase to go with you. Their choice of spouse will be entirely that—their choice. Max has made himself very clear in his decision. His choice is Zander. You either respect

that, or I will make sure trouble comes your way. You're already on thin ice with the VSB headquarters after the stunt you pulled trying to take Chase away from a bonded mate. Being director of this city's branch only gives you so much power and immunity."

She was outnumbered, knew it, and wasn't the least bit happy about the outcome. A frown marred her face and she was quite clearly cursing up a storm in her head. From her purse, she drew out a business card and offered it to Max. "Take this, Mr. Monroe. If you change your mind, all you have to do is call. I'll come get you immediately."

Max put his hands behind his back, adamantly refusing to take the card. "If any other vampire aside from Zan tries to put hands on me, I'll murder them myself. You're not tempting me, lady."

"Leave," Franklin commanded. "While I'm still asking nicely."

Unable to do anything but glare, she jammed the business card back into her purse, pivoted sharply, and marched off, the lackey following her.

Only when she was out of earshot did Max dare to draw a full breath. "Franklin, your timing is amazing."

"I was fortunately patrolling nearby when Chase gave the old signal." Franklin regarded Max with a canted head, expression thoughtful. "Did I hear that right? A Glutton attacked you when you were younger?"

Max was surprised he hadn't already been informed. "You heard right, but that's in the past now. Chase, take me to my car. I need to see Zander."

Franklin held up a hand. "I think, all things considered, I better take you to your car. And then escort you to Zan. He's going to come right out of his skin when he hears about this stunt."

Erk. Yeah, pretty good assessment. After this, Zander might not let him out of the house unless they were attached at the hip. And wouldn't that just be a joy and pleasure. Well, it

would, but deucedly inconvenient during class and business hours. Dammit, Max still wanted to tell Zander that he loved him, but how was he supposed to set the mood when he now had to explain getting ambushed on campus?

Max now understood why no one liked the Vampire Society Bureau. Was there a club for this? He would like a jacket.

CHAPTER 16

Zander could feel his blood pressure rising with every word from Max's mouth. If not for the fact his lover was right there in front of him, obviously safe and sound, there might well have been a murder. To be specific, Vanessa's.

Franklin, fortunately, had brought Max directly to Zander's office. It gave them room to talk, although it wasn't quite the privacy Zander needed to reassure Max in all the ways he wanted. For that matter, Zander was also in need of reassurance. He tamped down the fierce urge to hold Max close and just breathe in his lover's scent.

He could see how angry Max was, the emotion understandable, but what bothered Zander most was something else—the fear in Max's eyes. Max's dark brown eyes were expressive, and they spoke a language all on their own. If one paid attention, you could see the nuances in Max's emotions, and Zander definitely was paying attention now.

His Max was afraid and trying not to show it.

To hell with that.

Zander cupped Max's face with both hands, locking eyes with him. "No one can force you to leave me. You understand that, right?"

Max nodded, but it was shallow, as if there was no real conviction behind his response. "Franklin and Chase said the same thing. It's just...she wasn't alone. She had this hulking guy with her. I think, if she'd failed to sweet talk me into following her, her plan was to just grab me and go."

Ice flooded Zander's veins at the mental picture. He could, unfortunately, see it all play out too easily. Max wasn't a fighter, he just wasn't built that way, and even if he was, he didn't have the strength to overpower two vampires.

Franklin cleared his throat from where he sat on the office couch, leaned forward. "Zan, it looked that way to me, too. The guy didn't say a word the entire time we were there. He just stood by and watched, as if waiting for orders. He was maybe twenty-ninth or thirty-first generation."

Strong enough to give Max trouble, low enough in rank to obey another's orders without question. Zander did the math without trouble. "Franklin, you already spoke to our sire about this?"

"On the drive over. Fernando's doubling security around the campus. Also lodging an official complaint against VSB. It's only going to go so far, though. It would help if you could officially declare your courtship with Max."

"I'm aware, but..." Zander's eyes went back to Max's. "His father is still in a coma. They won't bring him out of it for another week."

"At least," Max confirmed bleakly. "Do you really have to have my father's permission?"

"It's an antiquated rule," Zander acknowledged, making a face. "From olden times, where you had to have the permission of at least one parent."

Franklin rose from the couch. "Zan, let me know what I can do to help. I want to get back to campus, keep an eye on things there."

Zander gave him a nod, dropping his hands so he could put an arm around Max's waist and draw him closer. "Thanks, Franklin."

"No problem."

Franklin left, closing the door behind him, giving Zander the privacy to focus on Max. Zander hated the fear he saw in Max's eyes, even more so that he had no immediate way to alleviate it. Which made everything worse. Dammit, and Max

had made such great strides in conquering his fear around other vampires. Zander was afraid this would regress all that progress.

He smoothed hair back from Max's face, trying to give his lover a smile. It felt forced, but he was still too angry to fully commit to the expression. "I'll make this right, my Max. One way or another."

Max's eyes searched his. "They really can't force my hand, right?"

"They really can't. They must have your consent, freely given." Even as Zander said the words, both he and Max understood that people could be forced, bought, manipulated, and threatened into doing things they wouldn't choose otherwise.

Max closed in, hugging Zander tightly, forehead resting on his shoulder. The tension radiated throughout his body. "I told her what happened to me as a kid, that I was attacked by a Glutton. Made sure she understood that if it weren't you, I wouldn't choose a vampire as my spouse at all. If I can't have you, I won't have anyone. I will always choose you."

What...did he just say? Zander's thoughts skittered to a stop, heart speeding up. He tilted his face down, needing to see Max's expression just then. "You mean that?"

Lifting his head, Max regarded him quizzically. "You know this."

The fuck he did.

"I wouldn't have cared if I was a vampire's mate or not if not for you. It would have been a moot point. Being a mate just meant I could stand side by side with you and no one could question my right to be there. That's the only reason I wanted to know, so I could have the confidence to be with you."

He looked at Max, this gorgeous, sweet man who honestly thought it took being a vampire's mate to somehow be worthy of Zander. That wasn't the case—at all—but Max had believed

it. He'd believed it so firmly that he'd tested the theory immediately—all because he wanted to stay with Zander.

Zander was loved this much?

Max hugged him again, holding him close. “Didn’t you understand why I tested your theory?”

Zander hugged him back, filled with relief so acute it felt like his heart twisted under the feeling. He was past words for several seconds, lost in the relief that he'd somehow, at some point, won this man's heart. “I drive you crazy, though.”

“I hope you continue to drive me crazy for a few hundred years more. I won't accept anything less.”

It was such a Max-like declaration of love. “I love you too.”

“You're good at translating me. I fell so quickly for you, my head's still spinning. Never again doubt my love, okay?”

Zander beamed, giving Max a squeeze, so giddy it felt like he'd vibrate out of his skin. “Okay.”

Max kissed his way up Zander's neck, lips soft, each caress provoking Zander. He turned his head to meet that sweet mouth, each press of their lips stronger, deeper, his need for this man rising by the second.

Pulling back, Max panted a little. “Take me home? I want you to bite me.”

Great Buddha above, this man was trying to ruin him. Zander didn't have a lot of willpower to begin with. “Sweetheart, I'd love to, but doing it any sooner than a two-week span is hard on your health—”

Max blinked imploring eyes up at him, all wide-eyed and—well, not innocent. Definitely not that. “Just a little nibble?”

RIP willpower.

CHAPTER 17

Max spent the next two weeks on tenterhooks. He was in limbo until his father woke up. Bodyguards basically surrounded campus and the house, following him wherever he went. Nice guys. Really, all of them were super nice, but it was still cumbersome. Max felt like he was walking around with extra appendages.

When the day dawned that Max's father could finally be taken out of the coma, he felt like weeping tears of relief. Finally, finally he could talk to his dad. So much had happened since the accident, nearly two months of events he had to catch his father up on. The fact that his entire world had changed in such a short time still made Max's head spin. He anticipated his father was going to need a second to wrap his mind around it all.

The doctors brought him gradually out of the coma so by the time Max was allowed into the room, his father's eyes were open.

Karson took one look at his only child, a smile lifting his eyes. "Max."

Max damn near started crying right there, so relieved it felt like his heart would burst. He went to his father's side, sitting on the edge of the bed to give him a hug, careful to avoid jostling anything. His father was weak after two months but hugged him back, neither letting go for a long moment.

Max drew back to look him over. "Dad. How do you feel?"

"Like a Mack truck hit me. What happened?"

“Well...it wasn't a Mack truck, but you were in a very bad car accident. A drunk driver plowed into you from the side. I don't think you even saw him coming. Idiot was doing over ninety, or so the police said. The car could only protect you so much.”

Karson took this in with a troubled frown. “I have no memory of this.”

“It's okay, the doctors said you might not. You had a severe concussion because of the accident. Apparently, it's normal not to remember the trauma that inflicted it.”

“Oh.”

His father did look better. The bruising and swelling on his face were gone, his arms didn't look like he'd gotten into a fight with a machete and lost, and the gash on his forehead had healed. He still wore full casts on both legs, but at least he was healing in the right direction.

Karson Monroe was never one to be slow on the uptake, so when he looked around the hospital room, clearly VIP, his confusion showed. He was the only patient in the room. Big picture windows displayed a view over the city, and an ensuite bathroom with a jetted pool was visible through the open door—this obviously wasn't a typical hospital room.

“Max,” Karson said uncertainly, “why am I in a room this fancy?”

“A lot has happened while you've been asleep. I'm not even sure where to begin.”

“Start anywhere,” his father suggested, eyes locked on his son.

Max started at the place he knew his father wouldn't like—the auction. Karson was unhappy with the choice Max had made, but he visibly bit the reproach back as Max kept talking, explaining how his worst fears were never realized, and all because of Zander. How carefully he'd been protected and cared for since that day, how they had discovered Max was a vampire's mate, and Max's gradual realization that he was in love with the man who technically owned him.

Putting up a hand to stay him, his father begged, “Wait. Wait. The vampire who bought you, he really never did anything to you?”

“Refused, even when I told him he could. He’s the gentlest soul you’ll ever meet, Dad. He bought me solely to get me out of there. It took a racing accident, where he was very hurt, to get him to feed from me.”

“I’m going to church and praying a full day when I get off this damn bed,” Karson swore. “You dodged a bullet there, Max. All right, so you fell in love with this man. Does he love you?”

“Ardently. If you ask him, I am the entire reason there is a sun in the sky. You wondered why you were in this VIP room, right? This is just one of the many, many things he’s done for my sake. He made sure you have the best of care. He spoils me terribly. I can’t even recount how much he’s bought for me.”

“He must be very rich.”

“Filthy rich I believe is the right term.” Max took his father’s hand in his, needing to impart all of this and have his father understand. “He revoked our contract so I could freely choose to stay with him or not.”

Karson nodded slowly, brows furrowed. “But a vampire’s mate is rare, right? Like one in a million? Letting you go like that, wasn’t he risking you?”

“It wasn’t a risk at that point, for either of us. Our hearts were already committed to each other. But he didn’t want that contract hanging over our heads, so he broke it. That’s the quality of the man I love. You’ll see for yourself when you meet him.”

“This is a lot to take in. Tell me what happens next. Will you quit school?”

“No, he’s quite adamant I keep going. He’s even paid all my expenses for it.”

His father hadn’t expected that answer, eyes going wide with surprise. “Really? I thought a vampire’s mate was more like a trophy wife.”

“Yeah, me too, but he knows I want to be an architect. He won’t stand in the way of anything I want to do.”

Karson looked relieved and sank into his pillow a touch more. “When can I meet him?”

“Very soon. He’s almost here to meet and talk with you.”

“Good, I want to meet him. To thank him, too. He’s done a lot for our family.”

Max liked this attitude. He had hoped his father would respond like this. “Dad, I think—

The door slid open with a voice saying audibly, “Knock, knock, am I intruding?”

Max turned and gave his lover a smile. “Not at all, come in.”

Zander stepped inside. He was in the burgundy suit that was so sharp on him, the one Max always wanted to rip back off. (He would, too, later.)

Rising, Max brought him in closer, wanting to do proper introductions. “Dad, this is Zander. Zan, my father, Karson.”

Zander offered a smile and a handshake, with Karson returning both. “I’m very glad to meet you, Mr. Monroe. I’ve been anxiously waiting for you to wake up.”

“I’m glad to be awake, although my son’s sent my head spinning with the story of all that’s happened. Please, Zander, sit. Talk to me.”

“I’d love to.”

“First,” Karson started, his sincerity shining through, “thank you. For protecting Max, for helping both of us. I know you went above and beyond what was asked of you.”

“It was entirely my pleasure,” Zander assured him with a gentle smile at Max. “I will do this and more if it takes the stress off his shoulders.”

“What happens now?” Karson asked. “Max said something about the Vampire Society Bureau hassling him? I don’t understand that.”

“Ah, well, there’s a few reasons for that.” Zander sat back in his chair, making a sour face. “As you likely know, vampire’s mates are very rare. The VSB is technically in charge of safeguarding one when they are found, and will introduce them to possible vampire spouses. It’s a lucrative business, which is partially why they’re trying to interfere. The second reason is more petty. You see, in my clan, we now have three mates.”

Zander continued, still maintaining that sour expression. “The VSB do not like that so many mates are all in one clan. They consider it hoarding, really. They don’t dare bother Noel—a smart survival instinct on their part—but that’s why they keep trying to talk either Chase or Max into going with them. Well, they actually seem to have finally given up on Chase. That was a whole thing in and of itself.”

Max answered the question he could see brewing in his father’s eyes. It was the one thing he hadn’t yet explained to his father. “Dad, it’s part of the reason why I’m so glad you’re awake. Vampires have this rule about marrying. They can’t do it without a guardian’s permission.”

“At least under a certain age,” Zander said. “With anyone under the age of twenty-one, we must have a parent or guardian’s approval.”

Wait, an age limit? “Zan, you didn’t tell me that. I thought I just had to have permission, period.”

“Oh. Well, no. Technically we could wait two years and be able to marry. I just don’t want to wait two years.”

Fair. Max didn’t either.

“Well, I’m not going to stop you if this is the man you love. I just have one question I need answered first.” Karson turned to Zander, his eyes weighing and evaluating the vampire carefully. “Max has told me how much you’ve done, how much you’ve supported his aspirations. I can’t find fault with that. But do you want him solely because he’s a coveted vampire’s mate?”

Max just about came out of his chair. What?! How could his father think that!

“Perish the thought.” Zander shook his head firmly. “I was determined to marry him before we even put it together, what his nature was. Knowing he’s a vampire’s mate is only an added bonus. Like finding a treasure trove only to discover there’s another room beyond it.”

This man, seriously. As if Max was a treasure. He rolled his eyes and fought down a blush. Zander was so over the top.

“Then I’m relieved.” Karson reached out to give Max’s hand a squeeze. “I don’t know if you need something more formal, but you have my permission.”

Max leaned in to carefully hug his father, happy beyond measure. He’d known that when his father met Zander, he’d see why Max had fallen so hard for him.

“Thank you.” Zander gave them both a smile. “That said, since I’ll marry into the family, may I call you Dad?”

“Feel free,” Karson encouraged. “Ha, I get another son. Not often that happens to a man my age.”

“It means I now have three fathers, which is something else.” Zander chuckled, eyes twinkling. “I by no means am complaining. Well, Dad, I’ve got two questions for you. Feel free to sit on both of them and think them over before replying. First, I’ve set it up so we can take you home.”

“Take me...home?” Karson repeated like he didn’t quite understand what this meant.

“We converted one of the downstairs rooms at the house over into a room you can use,” Max explained, beyond happy with the idea of having his father nearby, “Zan’s got nurses lined up to do ’round-the-clock care. You can come stay with us while you recuperate.”

“I won’t need to stay in the hospital?” Karson smiled in relief. “I wasn’t going to ask. I didn’t want to burden you with taking care of me, Max. But if Zander’s got nurses to help me, then yes. Please take me home.”

“I thought that would be your answer.” Zander sat forward a little, expression more intense. “Now, this question you might need to think about. I have promised Max that the second it’s feasible, I’ll gift you some of my blood. It’ll heal you completely, so you won’t have lingering side effects of this accident. I sadly can’t do it right now—you need three more surgeries to correct things and your body is frail enough that my blood would send you straight into shock. The doctors say another two, three months, and I can do it.

“I’ll heal completely though?” Karson blew out a breath, stunned. “Well. You must be very powerful, Zander. To have blood that potent.”

“I am, yes. I’m first generation.”

Karson let out a low whistle. “Shit. When my son meets an eligible bachelor, he does it with style.”

“I consider myself the lucky one, thank you.” Zander shot Max a wink before sobering once more. “That said, I know how badly Max has missed you. I feel it would be remiss of me not to offer this. Do you want me to turn you? Again, you do not need to answer me immediately.”

Karson spluttered for a long second. “You’d be willing to?”

“Of course. I’ll turn anyone in my family if they wish for it.”

For a moment, Karson sat there, looking like someone had just taken a chair to his back. Then he blew out a breath. “

I think I want to sleep on this. My first inclination is—yes. I’ve never seriously entertained the idea, but...with the offer in front of me, it’s damn tempting. For one, I wouldn’t have to leave my son without a parent for the rest of his life.”

Max wanted his father to stay with him for a long time so encouraged this line of thinking. “I’d miss you terribly.”

“I know you would, Son. Honestly, if I’m going to live for hundreds of years more—there’s so many things I wanted to do in life that I never got the opportunity for.” Karson spoke to Zander, voice firming with each word. “I want to sleep on this,

but I think my answer will be yes. You'll need to wait until I'm healed, right?"

"It's better on your body if we do, yes."

"Then we'll discuss it later. Zander, I just have one question. Your parents, how do they feel about all of this?"

"Oh, they adore Max." Zander got that mischievous grin, the one that spelled trouble. For Max. "My sire especially likes him, says he's got a spine of steel, which is high praise from Fernando. Let me tell you the story of how those two met—"

Max tried to interject because the memory still had him kicking himself. "No, he doesn't need to know that story—"

"What are you saying? People are still laughing about it. I'm still laughing. So, Dad, did Max tell you how I was in a bad racing accident? He did? Oh, good, well it was that very night—"

Zander was on a roll now. There was no stopping him. Max, resigned, just sat back and listened. At least his dad would get a good laugh out of it.

Max had a feeling he'd never live the towel incident down.

CHAPTER 18

After two weeks of proving stable, Max's father was cleared for the first surgery, meaning they were back at the hospital. This one was supposed to be an outpatient surgery, so if all went well, his father would only be staying a few hours for observation before being released.

Still, Max was feeling little nervous. He couldn't help it. Everyone had heard of operations taking a turn, of people dying when they shouldn't, and he'd just had too many things go wrong unexpectedly in his life to trust in good luck. Hence why he lurked in the white, sterile waiting room of the hospital while his father's procedure was underway. Thankfully he was on fall break right now, so he was free to lurk and not have to miss classes on top of it all.

Zander was the ultimate support during this time, having taken off from work. He stayed at Max's side, distracting him and offering him silent comfort in turns. Max appreciated it so, so much. He needed Zander right then, more than words could express, and he vowed to himself several times to find a way to repay the man who always gave him everything.

Which, really, shouldn't be hard. Zander was incredibly easy to please.

Halfway through the surgery, Max felt the need for a bathroom break and maybe a snack. He stood, telling Zander as he moved, "I'm going to grab something from the vending machine, hit up the bathroom. You want anything?"

Zander hesitated for a moment but eventually said, "Nothing, I'm fine. Come right back, pretty please?"

Max couldn't help but smile at Zander's words. "Don't worry, I'll be back in a minute."

It was a mark of growth on Zander's part that he let Max walk away without two bodyguards trailing him. Vanessa and her lackeys hadn't shown their faces in almost a month, and Franklin felt they'd finally backed off, likely an order from the higher ups. Max was also reasonably sure they'd given up at this point. He still had bodyguards for shopping or when he was on campus, which he didn't mind as they were very discreet. But since Zander was with him today, they had given the bodyguards the day off.

The waiting area for surgery was small and quiet, just a dozen chairs and a TV screen showing patient numbers and the status of their surgery. Max had to leave that area and go down the hall, almost midway, before finding the bathroom. After using the restroom, he headed for the vending machines, which were even further, next to the elevators. Honestly, the short stroll did him good, helping him walk off some of his anxiety. Max was tempted to make a lap around the whole floor before returning to Zander, just to get some of the wiggles out. Just a few minutes wouldn't hurt; he didn't want to worry Zander by being gone too long.

Hmm, what to get? Water sounded good, he was rather parched, maybe some crackers? He didn't want sugar, he wanted salt.

The vending machines actually had a good selection, and there were several things he liked, so Max took his time and pondered. Hmm, maybe some cheesy crackers and—

Two sets of hands landed hard on his shoulders, yanking him back, and before he could make more than a wordless protest, a weird smelling handkerchief was placed over his nose. Max instinctively tried to fight against the attackers, panic surging through him. It was like fighting against steel bars, trying to budge them. There was no way to win.

Despair filtered through his panic. Vampires. Vampires had hold of him. He could feel his senses shutting down, his mind checking out as the drug on the handkerchief coursed through

his system. He forced his eyes open, wanting to at least see their faces. The two vampires holding him were unfamiliar—tall, beefy men with the personalities of rebar, but the woman with them—that witch, Max knew all too well.

“Vanessa,” he slurred. “You stupid bitch.”

“You’ll be thanking me later,” she said, completely unconcerned as she hit the button for the elevator. “I know men who are far wealthier than your master. How about meeting a prince, to start with?”

Fuck her. Max wanted to ream her out, and scream bloody murder, but he’d lost all control of his muscles at that point and unconsciousness was eating at his vision. He had seconds, and that wasn’t enough.

He had one last, truly coherent thought before unconsciousness swept over him—

Zander was going to level the city to find him.

And Max couldn’t wait for the fallout.



The car ride to wherever was decidedly unpleasant. Max woke up in a post-chloroform fog, only to be greeted with the sight of goons. They could have at least offered him some water, dammit. The aftertaste in the back of his mouth was that of an animal that had crawled in and died, messily.

He had no idea how long he’d been out, but it couldn’t have been too long as he still recognized landmarks within the city. Bare minutes later, they arrived at the ritzy side of town before pulling behind an aged, three-story brick building that looked vaguely familiar. After a moment, it clicked—they’d taken him to the city’s VSB branch.

Through the car window, he could see Vanessa waving off people who had gathered at the back door, like she was a queen in her own domain. Which showed him what she really thought of everyone around her—they were all pawns.

Without ceremony, he was roughly escorted out of the van and straight inside. Max thought about resisting, but logically, he was a true vampire's mate. They needed him alive—and hopefully in one piece—for their underhanded matchmaking. Jarred from his musings, he was led through a back hallway, still feeling like parts of his body were rubber.

That didn't keep him from shooting his mouth off.

“Fuck you guys, are you seriously this dense? You think kidnapping me is somehow going to pan out well? I guarantee you when Zander gets here, he'll level this building.”

Goon One scoffed. “He's strong, but not strong enough to take us all on.”

“Why the hell you think he'll come alone is another question. His clan is very tight-knit; I guarantee you they will all descend on this place. You really want to take on all of Fernando's clan? A single mate cannot be worth so much trouble.”

Goon Two smirked down at him. “Well, good thing there's not just one of you, isn't there?”

That comment made no sense until Max was led into a small room on the main floor. Then he spied a redhead leaning against the only window, looking out, but he straightened up at their entrance. Another man, who had strong Asian features and a tall, powerful build, was sitting on the couch, looking like he contemplated mayhem. Both of their expressions turned wary at Max's entrance.

For that matter, Max was wary. He had no idea who these guys were or what the VSB was playing at.

The door slammed shut behind them and he heard the lock turn. That sound had a very heavy weight to it. He would bet anything it was a steel-lined door. In other words, human proof.

“Who are you?” the redhead demanded. “If you say you want a bite, there will be hell to pay. I told them point blank I'm not interested.”

“Oh. Uh, no.” Max waved a hand in denial. “I'm human.”

“Human?” Redhead blinked at him, a light dawning in his eyes. “Vampire’s mate? Is that what you are?”

Max slowly nodded in confirmation. “Right. Why?”

“Us too. Aw, damn, the bureau must be beside themselves. Three rare prizes all at once. No wonder the greed went to their heads.” Redhead slumped against the window.

Max looked at the Asian guy who gave him a grim smile. Might as well start with introductions? “My name is Max.”

Redhead nodded in return. “Hi, I’m Dante. Sorry you’re locked in with us. That’s Jin. He was grabbed shortly before me. We’ve only been here a few hours.”

“Nice to meet you, Jin.” Max regarded Jin steadily. Why did the man give him security guard vibes? Was it the black suit, or the muscles he could see lurking under the fitted material?

Jin gave him a nod in return. “Hi.”

Dante tacked on, “I hope you know more about what’s going on than we do. Jin was heading into work when he was grabbed; I was on a coffee run. No one’s told us jack. Knowing the bureau, though, I assume they grabbed us to do some kind of underhanded shit.”

Unfortunately, he did know. Max heaved out a sigh and decided to level with them because why not? They were all in the same boat. “Due to our rarity as potential mates, the VSB are likely hyperventilating to have us all under their thumb like this. Their main goal is to match us up with suitable bachelors—or bachelorettes, depending on your preference—and get an exorbitant matching making fee in the process.”

Absolutely dismayed, Dante protested, “But that’s...I don’t want that.”

“None of us do. Why they think this will work is beyond me.” Max raised his voice to yell at the door, “I already have a vampire boyfriend, assholes! I’m not interested in cheating on him!”

“You do?” Dante looked wistful.

“Hell yeah. Aren’t most of us found because we feed a vampire or have exposure over long periods, or so I understand...” Max trailed off. “Uh, wait, isn’t that how you guys figured out you were a potential mate?”

“Yeah. What about you, Jin?”

Jin sighed heavily. “Same, it was a feeding that tipped my partner off. Then I proved immune to Mesmerize, which sealed the deal. I’m...sort of dating said vampire. Honestly, the whole relationship is complicated.”

“Yeah, same here. I’m under contract with mine to be a blood slave, but we’re also dating...ugh, there’s no easy way to explain this in five sentences or less.” Dante’s expression screwed up in a grimace. “I’d love to sit and compare notes with you both, but let’s see if we can get out of here first.”

“Gotta say, I’ve already been in this room five hours, so let me save you both some time.” Jin started ticking things off on his fingers. “Door is reinforced, with some serious deadbolt action, and two guards stationed just outside. Only possible exit is the window. Window leads to a nice courtyard, so we might be able to exit that way, but I need a tool or something to dislodge the window from its frame.”

The way he phrased that made Max think he had a plan. “Dislodge? Can’t we just break it?”

“I’d rather not shatter glass. It’ll give the game away.”

“Ah.”

Jin added, “Most of the lackeys here are somewhere around the twenty-eighth generation, so they’re senses won’t be quite as heightened, but still. If we tip them off to our escape, it’s not going to end well for us.”

Max went to the window to get a good look at it. He could understand why Jin wanted to sneak out, because frankly, they’d be quickly overpowered if anyone heard glass shattering. But he had a hunch that getting out through the window might not be the hardest thing. Just because of the age of the building.

A five-second examination of the window, mostly the frame itself, proved him right. Bingo.

“Here’s the thing.” Max tapped lightly on the window frame. “This is a really old building. Hundred years old, give or take, that’s my guess. Which means all the original windows aren’t quite set right in the frames anymore, not after so much settling over the years. I can tell they’ve had to reseal it numerous times to help with insulation. This tells me that if we can undo the caulk, we can just pop the whole window out and be gone in seconds. I just don’t have anything that can cut through the caulk.”

Dante looked from window to Max. “You’re sure about that theory?”

“Architecture student.” Max gave him a sassy grin. “Trust me.”

Jin promptly bent down and retrieved a three-inch blade strapped to his ankle.

“You’re still armed?” Dante asked in disbelief.

“They did a piss-poor job of searching me,” Jin returned dryly. “I think they believe all vampire mates are delicate little flowers. Never occurred to them I’d carry more than a gun.”

Max beamed at him. “You and I totally need to be friends. Okay, Jin, let’s pop some sealant off and see what we have to work with.”

The knife’s blade was sharp enough to do the job, and with all the caulk removed, it didn’t take more than a glance to verify Max’s theory was spot on. The window had settled a bit crooked in the frame, and there were spots where a ridiculous amount of caulk had been applied to keep it in place and sealed. Max attacked the caulk with gusto, grinning as it started easily coming apart. The nails that had held it in place were so twisted and rusted they were easy to deal with. He pried them out without much trouble at all. This might actually work. No, it was working, as he felt a draft of the cold air seeping in.

“You got anyone coming for you?” Dante asked them both.

Max didn't look away from his work as he answered, "Probably, why?"

"If they don't come in time, just come with me, okay? Ayan—the sorta boyfriend I mentioned—his clan is crazy powerful. We can take refuge with them, and I'll make sure you guys get home okay."

It was a very kind offer and Max wasn't interested in refusing him. "I guarantee you my boyfriend will tear this city apart looking for me, but it might take a while for him to figure out where I am. If he doesn't show up soon, I'll go with you and then call him."

"Cool. Oooh, I think you've got it."

Max was almost all the way around the frame. He got to the last corner and then gently pushed the top of the frame out, catching it before it could fall completely.

Jin caught the other side, and between them, they lowered it carefully to the ground. There, perfect, and not a sound to give them away, either.

Even more important, all three men could fit through the opening. Max ducked his head out first, looking the courtyard over carefully from all angles. He didn't see or sense anyone about. Alright, good. He carefully maneuvered through the opening, lowering himself the few feet it took to reach the ground. Turning, he offered a helping hand to Dante, who landed lightly on his feet beside Max, with Jin pulling up the rear.

If they could just get to the street, find a taxi, they'd be halfway home.

A commotion came from inside the small room, drawing Max's attention back to it.

"Why is the window missing?! THE HUMANS HAVE ESCAPED!"

Aw shit. They'd found out way too quickly. Max pushed a hand against the other two's shoulders and urged them forward. "Go, go!"

Of course, even the newer generation of vampires were much faster, and none of the three humans had that kind of speed to them. They'd managed a whole ten feet towards the gate when vampire thugs seemed to descend from every direction. Jin paused, then moved both Max and Dante behind him, falling into a defensive stance. Which pretty much confirmed it for Max, Jin was definitely in security somehow.

Max didn't know what to do. He really didn't. This was such a shitty situation. He was also scared what they might try next. Drug him again, take him out of the country completely to where Zander would never find him? Hurt him worse than the Glutton had? He really, really couldn't put anything past these guys and the uncertainty of it churned his stomach.

Vanessa stalked through the gate, eyes snapping fire. "I can't believe you three! How can you try to escape like this and make it look like we're doing you a disservice—"

Max stepped halfway around Jin, in full voice as he snapped back, "I already have my mate, dammit! Listen to what I'm saying! I don't want anyone else. You're the one breaking your own rules by taking a vampire's mate away from his chosen person! Is a five-million-dollar pay day worth your life? I guarantee you, if you don't give me back, Zander's going to murder you in cold blood."

Jin drawled, "For that matter, Dante is under contract with his vampire, and removing him forcibly is a gross breach of the law. You're about to be in a lot of trouble, lady. Do you really think your actions will be sanctioned by the bureau?"

She held up a hand and visibly summoned patience. "I can introduce you to people who are affluent and charming, who will pamper and spoil you throughout your days—"

"I already have one of those, and you're keeping me from him!" Max snapped back.

The screech of tires and roar of engines piqued Max's attention, the noise overlapping with several car doors all opening and slamming. It sounded like a lot of vehicles had just converged on this location. This could be good or bad, depending on who'd just arrived.

A tall, slender man with his hair tied up burst onto the scene. One of the thugs tried to check him, bar his entrance, but he wasn't to be stopped. He crushed the thug's windpipe in a decisive blow before shouldering past, leaving the vampire choking for air on the ground.

Oh, who was this? Max shifted onto his toes, ready to take the guy if necessary. Vampire or not, the eyeballs could be taken out with two fingers, and he was not above trying.

Dante blew right past him and Jin. "Ayan!"

Ah. The sorta boyfriend. Well, he'd made good time.

Ayan caught Dante up in a fierce, protective embrace, and the naked relief on his face couldn't be caged with words. No wonder Dante had been so certain he'd come. Also, sort of dating but complicated? Like hell. Ayan's emotions were written all over his face, there was nothing uncertain in that fierce expression.

Ayan wasn't alone, either. Several others accompanied him, and—ooh. Lots more vampires. A good thirty had just poured into the courtyard.

Jin murmured, "The plot thickens. That's Jeong-Hun, head of *the* Korean mafia family. Shit, no wonder Dante was sure we could take refuge with his clan. No one sane messes with Jeong-Hun."

Another mafia boss was a vampire? Talk about a small world.

Actually, what the hell had the VSB been thinking, taking a family member of Jeong-Hun's? Had they lived too long, was that the problem?

"Dante," Jeong-Hun came in close as he spoke, brows furrowed in a dark expression. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm good," Dante assured him, lifting his head just enough to talk. "Master Jeong-Hun, you have to help Max and Jin, too, please? They helped me escape. They're also true mates and don't want to be here, either."

Jeong-Hun's dark eyes flashed over to them. Man was intimidating as fuck, no lie, he looked like he'd survived three wars and could spit out bullets. At least Max wasn't in a towel this time when facing down a mafia boss? Silver linings. Max gave him his best smile. "Sir."

"These three are not going anywhere!" Vanessa stomped forward. "This is outrageous, there are protocols to be followed, you can't just—"

There was a blur behind her, and a hand materialized, grabbing her by the hair and yanking her right off her feet. The motion was so fast Max almost missed it, and then Vanessa crashed through the patio table in a shower of glass.

"You cunt of a bitch," Zander snarled, hands still twitching as if throwing her hadn't satisfied him at all. "You *dare* take what is mine."

Zander. Max blew out a breath in relief, so happy to see him he felt his eyes burn with the emotion.

Vanessa lay gasping for air, bleeding from multiple cuts, but Zander was apparently done with her for the time being. He came straight for Max and for the first time, Max met him halfway. His trembling hands found Zander's waist, moving in close to rest his head on that familiar shoulder. He just needed a second. One second to properly take in this feeling of safety. Breathing Zander in settled Max's nerves as nothing else could, the scent of warm male skin filling his head.

Two strong arms enveloped him, with Zander murmuring near his ear, "Hurt?"

Max gave a minute shake of his head. He still felt weird from the chloroform but was otherwise unharmed. "My dad?"

"He's out and doing just fine."

That was such a relief. Max had been too preoccupied to keep track of time since being taken from the hospital.

"You take tally on who did this?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll exact revenge later, then."

Of course he would. It was so Zander to have his priorities in that order.

Zander turned his head. “Jin, Nikhil is—”

“Right here,” the one named Nikhil completed, stalking inside, and oh dear. He sounded pissed, his smooth tenor rough with anger.

Max lifted his head to observe the newcomer. Oh? Was this Jin’s vampire? It was rather beautiful, really, the joy and relief on Jin’s face. The way he instantly went to Nikhil and was welcomed into the other’s arms, with no room to be found between them. From Max’s perspective, Jin might have been willing to let go of Nikhil sometime next year, but not before. Nikhil looked only marginally appeased at having Jin back in his arms. Knowing vampires, he probably wouldn’t be satisfied until he joined Zander for the revenge part of the program. For the record, Max wanted in on it, too.

How Zander knew Jin and Nikhil was one of Max’s many questions. Questions best asked later, when they could relax and unwind. Now was definitely not the right time.

For a moment, the newcomers just looked around, taking stock. Vanessa and her lackeys were now outnumbered three to one. Between Zander’s clan cramming into the courtyard, and Jeong-Hun’s people, it made for a lot of bodyguards. And upset vampires.

Not wanting trouble between the innocent parties, Max was quick to address Zander and set the record straight. “The redhead is Dante, also a true mate, and he was taken from Jeong-Hun’s family. Same for Jin.”

Jin tipped his head toward Max. “It was thanks to your mate that we were able to escape the room we were confined to.”

Zander dipped his head, acknowledging this, and turned to look at Jeong-Hun. “My clan has no quarrel with yours right now. Truce?”

“I think a mutual enemy calls for a temporary truce, yes.” Jeong-Hun frowned at the rumpled Vanessa. “We have a foe to

contend with, not that she should be one much longer.”

As if summoned by those words, Fernando strolled into the courtyard, looking quite ready to behead someone. Literally, he had a sword in one hand and his expression said plainly he was ready to use it. Picture a blond Viking/mafia/god in a suit, geared for battle, and that was exactly the image he portrayed. “Vanessa, what the hell were you thinking? You’ve gone too far this time!”

Vanessa pulled herself up with the help of one of her goons, wincing as she did so, blood dripping off her. She did not look the pristine businesswoman from earlier, and her suit wasn’t salvageable after all the damage from the glass. From her snarl, the suit was the least of her worries just then.

“It’s *you* who have gone too far, Fernando!” She shook a finger at the clan head, limping towards him, although her stride improved vastly from one step to the next. Max wished she had suffered from her wounds just a taaaad longer. “First, you claim Noel and won’t even let us interview him; then you try to hide Chase from us and undermine our laws; and now, you’re hoarding Max. You’re setting such a precedent that other clans will think they can do the same!”

“For the record,” Nikhil drawled, sounding both furious and deadpan at the same time (which was a neat trick), “I had no idea other mates were recently found. So no, Fernando’s clan didn’t corrupt me and mine. I just happen to be very attached to this man. As is natural.”

Max couldn’t help but compare Nikhil to the other vampire masters, as he didn’t give off mafia vibes. He was very well-spoken, dressed in a suit that was clearly tailormade for him. Compared to Fernanda and Jeong-Hun, he gave off more of an aristocratic vibe. Did vampires even have aristocrats? Max really, really wished he could ask questions just then.

But seriously, what had she been thinking, taking mates from three powerful families? Max doubted it was her loyalty to the VSB and its archaic rules. The commission for a match must be astounding to drive the bitch this crazy.

Zander hadn't eased up on his grip whatsoever, Max still firmly in his arms. He locked eyes with Vanessa, the protective rage in him almost visceral. "Understand this. You have tested me for the last time. I'd already warned you once, and now, you are out of chances."

"I'll help him," Max promised, still hopping mad. "And when people say they have a mate, *listen!*" Seriously. Max knew maybe a thimble full of facts about the VSB, but today's experience alone made him hate them.

Vanessa appealed to the humans directly, tone pleading, "You don't even know your own worth—"

Max tuned out the rest of what she was saying, deeming it as unimportant.

Jeong-Hun cleared his throat. "As entertaining as all this drama is, I want to take my children home. Nikhil, Fernando, I trust there's no issue with leveling this place?"

Max liked the idea of 'leveling' very much. Whoever said that violence solves nothing clearly had never had to deal with the VSB or this bitch before.

"You can't just take them and leave!" Vanessa screeched. "And you can't touch us, you wouldn't dare!"

Nikhil utterly ignored her, inclining his head in agreement to Jeong-Hun. "Absolutely."

Vanessa lost all color in her face as she realized that several major vampire heads were dead serious about this. She started backpedaling frantically, already reaching for a phone, like she intended to call in help.

Faster than the eye could track, Fernando closed the distance between them, stopping with his unsheathed blade at Vanessa's throat. Max even jumped at his speed, and he wasn't anywhere near the man.

Vanessa froze, eyes pleading. "Y-you can't. Please, you can't—"

"You've messed with my children too many times." Fernando's voice had no mercy in it, no remorse.

“Sire, I trust you to deal with this?” Zander slid his hand into Max’s before leading him forward. “Max’s father is out of surgery, and I want to get back to the hospital quickly.”

Fernando didn’t look away from Vanessa as he gave his child a reassuring nod. “I’ll deal with this. Go, be with family.”

“Thank you.”

Max thought about arguing. Decided, naw. Vanessa from the house of Fuck Around had not so cordially invited Max in for tea at the house of Find Out. If that tea was poisonous to her, so be it. Besides, she’d almost ruined lives for greed, the woman and her goons couldn’t be trusted.

He left with Zander, hearing the sounds of carnage behind him in the courtyard. Screams of pain, cries for mercy, the impact of bodies hitting something hard—likely the brick walls of the building. If the VSB branch was still standing at the end of the day, he’d be very surprised.

All Max wanted was Zander, a hot shower, and a truly decadent Sundae with all the toppings. In that order.

Zander opened the passenger door for him, warning as he did so, “You’re not leaving my side for a long while. So best call me glue.”

He’d probably expected a protest, but honestly? After the day Max had just had? Sounded perfect. He knew better than to say that, though, because if you gave Zander an inch, he’d take ten miles. “Just don’t actively hover, okay?”

Zander lit up in a smile and leaned in to kiss him. “Aww, you do love me after all.”

He’d just taken ten miles anyway, hadn’t he? Dammit.

EPILOGUE

Three Months Later

Max woke up in degrees, eyes fluttering open as sensations started pouring in. The heat from the open windows, the softness of the mattress under him, Zander's happy singing in the shower.

Seemed like his husband was in a good mood.

A smile lifted his face as he sat up, stretching. His body was pleasantly sore after having hot sex with his new husband all night. Max rather relished the feeling.

It had taken almost three months to get to the point they could hold a wedding ceremony. Max had adamantly refused to hold a ceremony until his father was well enough to attend, which took over two months between all the surgeries. His father was now completely healed—and a vampire, as Zander had made good on his promise and turned him.

Then they'd had all the paperwork to submit to put notice in that Max would marry Zander, with permission from a guardian, which had taken a fucking moon's age to push through. The VSB headquarters had fought it every way they could. They hadn't liked what had happened with Vanessa, to start with, or having the city's branch demolished. Apparently, while they agreed Vanessa had violated serious vampire law, they'd insisted it would have been better for them to deal with her in-house. In the end, though, they'd conceded that the clan heads were within their right to deal with the threat to their

children's mates. There might have been a threat or two from Fernando, but you couldn't get the mafia boss to admit it.

Their wedding yesterday had been beautiful. Not ostentatious, as Max just couldn't do pomp and ceremony, but close friends and family had all attended and that was what mattered to him. He'd officially become part of the Vespertine family now, and Max honestly hadn't expected how satisfied that would make him feel. How secure he would feel, knowing no one could try and separate him from Zander. It was like he'd been carrying millstones around his neck and was finally able to set them down. It freed him, no question.

Max threw the covers back and sauntered into the ensuite bathroom of their hotel room. They had a two-week honeymoon stretched out in front of them, Zander having chosen the best hotel on Jeju Island for them to start the trip. Max was ecstatic about it, honestly, as it was the first time he'd been outside of the United States.

Right now, though, he had a man in the shower who took priority.

Max paused in the doorway. Zander wet and naked was quite the view. Max doubted he'd ever get tired of looking. All that sleek, powerful muscle casually on display, water highlighting sun-kissed skin as it trailed down.

Despite the three very satisfying rounds of sex last night, Max felt his interest stir. He absolutely had to get his hands on that.

Zander heard him as he opened the shower door, turning his head to give Max a smile. "Well hello. I thought you were still sound asleep."

"Your singing woke me up." Hugging Zander from behind, Max gave the bare shoulder in front of him a kiss.

"I was going to wake you in a bit. I have a few things I thought we could do today. There's a restaurant within walking distance from here that's famous in Korea—"

While that did sound interesting, Max's focus was on something else entirely. He slid a hand down, confidently

finding a warm cock and giving it a light squeeze.

Zander broke off with a grunt, head tilting back a little. “I get the feeling the restaurant will have to wait.”

“You have your agenda,” Max murmured, working his hand up and down the quickly stiffening staff. “I have mine.”

“I like your agenda better.”

“I thought you would.”

Zander abruptly turned in his arms, drawing Max up against him, mouth fervent and hungry. Max wrapped both arms around Zander’s shoulders, happily kissing him back. Married sex was somehow even better. Who knew? Max hadn’t, but damn was he capitalizing on the realization.

They’d manage to pull themselves out of the hotel room. Eventually.

Thanks for reading *Fated Mates and Where to Find Them*. Guess what? There's going to be a prequel about how Ronan and Chase got together! I don't yet have a pre-order link but I'll be releasing it on my website Dec 4, then on Amazon Dec 8th, so be on the lookout for *Fated Mates and How to Woo Them*!

I also did a thing with author Devon Vesper, featuring vampires, reincarnated husbands, and sentient libraries. You'll only be able to read it on my Patreon [HERE](#) or Ream [HERE](#), so if you're interested, head on over! (The content and rewards I post are the same on both, so you don't need both.)

Desire more vampire romance? Check out my short story *How To Keep an Author (Alive)* [HERE](#)

Need more vampires and supernatural creatures? Humor and shenanigans? Check out *The Tribulations of Ross Young, Supernat PA* [HERE](#)!

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Jon and Mack's Terrifying Tree Troubles

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Brandon's Very Merry Haunted Christmas

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Mack's Rousing Ghoulis Highland Adventure

R'iyah Family Archives

A Mage's Guide to Human Familiars

A Mage's Guide to Aussie Terrors

A Mage's Guide to Wicky

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AUTHOR

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Thank you for all of your support. See you in the next book!



AJ's mind is the sort that refuses to let her write one project at a time. Or even just one book a year. She normally writes fantasy under a different pen name, but her aforementioned mind couldn't help but want to write in the LGBTQIA+ genre. Fortunately, her editor is completely on board with this plan.

In her spare time, AJ loves to devour books, eat way too much chocolate, and take regular trips. She's only been outside of the United States once, to Japan, and loved the experience so much that she firmly intends to see more of the world as

soon as possible. Until then, she'll just research via Google Earth and write about the worlds in her own head.

If you'd like to join her newsletter to be notified when books are released, and get behind-the-scenes information about upcoming books, you can join her [NEWSLETTER](#) here, or email her directly at sherwoodwrites@gmail.com and you'll be added to the mailing list. You'll also receive a free copy of her book *Fourth Point of Contact*! If you'd like to interact with AJ more directly, you can socialize with her on various sites and join her [Facebook group: AJ's Gentlemen](#) and her [Patreon](#) or her [Ream](#) account! (The content on both are the same.)