



GRAVE

throbbing

EDIE MONTREUX

Grave Throbbing

M/M Vampire Standalone Romance

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Content Warnings:

This vampire romance contains two consenting versatile male vampires in a love relationship and description of vampire on vampire violence resulting in death and dismemberment. While this world has some crossover with Uncertain Future, it is unnecessary to read it first (though I would be eternally grateful if you did).

To Ro. This title? All you. No takesies backsies.

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Chapter 1

Ciarán

November 2, 1901, New York City

Ciarán supposed he should feel honored. Every vampire in the tri-state area had gathered in the Hotel Chelsea's ballroom for a party in his honor. By morning, he would be dead, his sire would be slapped on the wrist by Queen Marcella, and the rest would drink their fill of the humans corralled in the lobby for their pleasure and probably never think of him again.

Queen Marcella stood behind a podium, facing him and the vampires-only crowd behind him. She addressed them with the occasional hand gesture in his direction, but he didn't hear her. He struggled to concentrate on anything beyond the pounding of his own heart. She'd given him just enough fresh blood to make him bleed but not enough to make him a threat to the centuries-old vampires in the room.

She was the oldest vampire he'd ever met, and a powerful psychic. He was unable to focus on her physical appearance beyond her fangs and the silver sword in her hand. As she spoke, she twirled the sword around her gloved finger on its rounded guard. Every so often, she would jerk it into her grip and press the tip to the front of Key's double-breasted jacket, right over his heart. He did his best to hold still, but he couldn't control the pounding muscle about to be skewered.

He thought of his sister, only eight. Who would take care of her now? He'd tucked her away in the little broom cupboard just off the coal shoot in the basement he rented for pennies a week. He stayed there with her on the nights he could escape his sire, which wasn't often enough for either of their liking.

Now, he hated leaving her alone. He'd kept her a secret from his sire, at least. She would be spared the horror of becoming a child vampire. He hoped she would grow up, and

eventually grow old, without him. He'd left all his coin for the washer woman who would find her in the morning, and a note begging her to take Margaret somewhere safe.

"What is your gift, little one?" Queen Marcella's voice in his head was the most terrifying sound he'd ever heard. She called them gifts, but his had been nothing but a hindrance so far. Ciarán, or Key as his little sister called him, had only been immortal for the last six months, and already he'd started a worldwide commotion in the vampire community with his unusual bite.

"You are the reason I am here in this disgusting New York hotel instead of enjoying the culture, history, and scrumptious tourists of Rome." She accentuated each grievance as though it were his fault.

She glanced behind him, and he heard the rustle of fabric before his sire was jostled against his arm and forced to her knees beside him.

"What have we here?" Queen Marcella had studied Key like he was the most interesting bug pinned to the board, but she frowned at his sire as though she were a cockroach smashed beneath her stiletto heel. "You have not been honest with me. Not only did you sire a vampire without permission, but you also didn't have his consent to do so."

He felt the queen flipping through his memories, trailing a claw across them the way his uncle used to scan the row of library books on a shelf. She watched his memory of the night he became a vampire, forcing him to relive it. Her frown turned to a moue of disgust. "I apologize. We need to delay the party a few minutes. Everyone out. Guards, stay."

The room cleared in seconds, thanks to the vampires' extraordinary speed.

"Stand," she said once they were alone with her guards.

They stood. Key tried his best to remain still even though his very nerves trembled at the queen's proximity.

“Hold her.” Queen Marcella pointed to his sire. “If anything happens to me, kill her.”

His sire’s silk skirts hissed across the floor as she was dragged away. She didn’t make a sound, which disturbed Key even more. He’d expected her to plead for her life.

Queen Marcella released the silver cuffs binding Key’s hands behind his back. She gave him another sip of blood from the chalice she’d nestled inside the boxy speaker’s podium. Most of it ran down his chin.

“Defend yourself.” She bared her teeth at him in what might have passed for a smile under different circumstances. “I’ll do my best to be slow about it, but you’re young, so—”

He sprang, not trusting her to give him a head start. He grabbed onto her sword hand and pulled it toward him, yanking her off balance and pulling the weapon up and over his shoulder. He angled her wrist and shoved her glove out of the way with his nose. He bit down, letting his saliva and the venom coating his fangs do its job, inflicting a full dose of paralysis.

Her guards were on him before the venom truly set. He heard his sire’s heart beat as another guard ripped it from her chest. Then she screamed, a wet sound in her throat that faded as the muscle weakened and died, along with her hold over him, when one of the guards slashed a silver blade into it.

Queen Marcella stood motionless. Even her eyes seemed frozen in her face, but he still couldn’t focus on any detail. He risked a glance at his sire, instead, as the other guard grabbed him and pulled him backward. He couldn’t help the way his lips twisted upward as he observed the cascade of red marring the blue silk of her dress. She deserved her end after everything she’d stolen from him.

Queen Marcella blinked and dropped her sword arm to her side. She swallowed hard and met his gaze. Then, the side of his face blossomed with pain before he heard the crack of his orbital and jaw bones. He thought the initial pain would be the worst of it, but it only hurt more as the bones began to knit

themselves back together. He hadn't drunk enough blood to heal fast, and the slow ache was agony.

"That's what your sire wanted to hide from me," Queen Marcella said. "It almost worked. She had someone erase the memory of your bite from her own head, but she didn't remove it from yours."

"I did what you asked," Key said.

She snorted in agreement. "Your gift is rare. I would hate to eliminate it from the world." She leaned in, and her words whispered through his mind. "*You have a sister who could be just as powerful. I would love to know what gifts she would bring us.*"

Key had hoped to keep his sister out of it, to prevent her from becoming a vampire, but if it would keep them both alive long enough for her to grow up, Key would do whatever it took.

"*Yes. You'll turn her when she's ready.*" She motioned with a hand, and the guard released him.

"What about his inability to hunt, Your Majesty?"

Queen Marcella leaned back, and Key felt her in his mind once more. She found his most embarrassing moments from when he'd tried and failed to enthrall humans. His bite only worked on vampires.

She closed her eyes. A moment later, there was a soft knock at the door.

"Let him in."

The guard who had killed Key's sire ushered in another vampire. He was at least a century older than Key, though far younger than Queen Marcella and her guards. Still, he had an air of power about him until his hands flitted nervously to the lace cravat at his neck. He didn't speak, but from the way he and the queen locked gazes, they held a conversation to which Key and the guards weren't privy.

"Ciarán." The older vampire's voice was surprisingly strong as he met Key's gaze. "Come with me. I'll teach you

how to enthrall a human without using your bite.”

Key didn't feel the usual pull of command, and a thrill went up his spine. His sire was dead. He could disobey the older vampire if he chose. Instead, he took two steps toward him.

“The humans mustn't know we exist,” Queen Marcella's voice echoed inside his head. *“If you and yours break that confidence, I'll have no choice but to destroy you.”*

Key understood the implied threat, *“you and yours.”* Queen Marcella would kill both Key and his sister if he failed.

Outside the ballroom, the vampire assigned to help him stopped by the hotel desk to request maid service in the ballroom. Then, he addressed the vampires waiting in the lobby using only his mind. Key shuddered. He hated it when the queen had spoken to him in his head. He wondered how many vampires had the skill.

The vampire motioned Key to the shoeshine station outside the ballroom door. A young man with rich brown skin waited with a brush and a towel. Key was surprised to see coins pass between them. His sire had always tricked the humans into believing she'd paid when she'd handed them a sliver of wood or lint from her pocket.

“How rude of me,” the vampire said when they were both seated. “Allow me to introduce myself. Henry Harcourt at your service.” He winced, either at the formality of the words or the words themselves. “Ahem. But please call me Harley. Henry is boring, Harcourt was my mother's surname, and I've since made a name of my own.”

Key held his tongue, lest he insult the vampire tasked to help him by calling him a crust, one of the upper-class Brits who had subjugated the Irish for centuries. He tried a simple introduction, instead. “I'm —”

“Ciarán O'Shea!” Harley seemed overjoyed at the news. Key had expected his usual distrust to manifest, but this vampire was far too sweet and candid to draw his usual ire. “You're newly acquitted of the crime of being sired without

council permission.” Harley gave him a slight bow from his seat. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

As the man worked to shine Harley’s shoes, Key took the opportunity to observe Harley while he wasn’t being watched in return. He was the pale white of the landed English and had the accent to match. His hair had been greased back behind his ears and then flowed past his shoulders in waves glistening with ambergris pomade. The scent was distinct, and not one Key particularly liked. Still, there was something appealing about his new mentor, especially when he studied Key with his eyes so dark brown they almost vanished into the pupils.

While he seemed to be every bit a crust, this vampire didn’t have the same stillness most ancients displayed. He seemed very much alive, and Key’s heart ached. He’d only been around his sire and her few friends since he was turned, but already he yearned for his old human life. Harley wasn’t human, but he was the closest to it in vampire form, the closest Key had met, anyway.

A quick glance around the lobby showed vampires in various states of disinterest. They blended into the background with their boredom and inactivity. Key couldn’t imagine spending an eternity pretending to be furniture, all so he could feed off an unsuspecting human.

When the man finished Harley’s shoes, Harley paid him another coin and directed him to shine Key’s shoes, too. Key was struck by his kindness. Key couldn’t afford such a service, and the man made several unhappy sounds about how scuffed and dirty Key’s shoes were.

Then, Harley led him back to the ballroom door. “Queen Marcella’s cleared up the confusion over your sire’s death. We should be safe to return.”

The celebration was well in swing as they entered the ballroom. Harley directed him through the crowd of vampires and oblivious humans. Fortunately, no one noticed them.

“The party is in your honor, after all,” Harley said as he pulled Key onto the dance floor. “We should enjoy it while

we can.”

Harley had brought them to the heart of the dance floor. Queen Marcella twirled with one of her guards not even two feet away. When Key tried to catch her attention, she turned so that her back was to them, and she and her partner faded into the crowd.

“She hates me,” Key said.

“If she hated you, you’d be dead.”

Harley was a much better dancer than Key expected. He knew all the moves, from traditional dances to the newer styles. When Key worried he wouldn’t be able to follow the dance moves discontinued far before his time, Harley led him with gentle touches on his hips and movements of his chin or arm. The hours melted away while they danced. Key couldn’t remember the last time he’d had so much fun. The rest of the room melted away, even as humans bled and died around them on the dance floor.

It was after two when Harley led him outside to the dark and mostly deserted street. The night was cold enough to see breath rising from the humans and any vampires who’d supped already. Harley’s rushed out of him in a vapor cloud. Key’s was weak, but no one would assume he was undead.

“It’s a lovely night!” Harley greeted every human who approached them on the street. Key listened to their heartbeats for signs of agitation, and he assumed Harley did the same. They stopped to talk to a woman who didn’t seem too excited or worried to see them.

“Hello there, boys. What are you doing out on such a cold night?”

“*Listen carefully.*” Harley’s voice was in his head, the same way Queen Marcella’s had been. “*Her heart rate is calm. Her breath steady. She isn’t afraid.*”

Key had already noticed all that, but he didn’t want to argue. What happened next astounded him.

“May I scent your beautiful wrist, my lady?”

Harley had to be daft, or maybe he wanted to get backhanded across the face with the woman's purse.

"Of course! I'm wearing a new scent from the fragrance vendor on first avenue. Isn't it grand?"

"If they're wearing perfume, ask to smell it. If they're not, ask them about their scarves, gloves, whatever will clear your way. And then ..."

Instead of kissing the woman's offered wrist, Harley bit into it. Astoundingly, the woman let him. Why in eternal damnation did she let him?

When Harley had taken his fill, he and the woman parted ways with a wave. She'd barely acknowledged Key at all. Two steps later, and her thoughts returned to meeting up with a young man two streets over. She'd forgotten all about them!

"How did you do that?" Key asked.

"I made her see what she wanted to see."

"Your gift allows you to do that?"

Harley shook his head. "No. All vampires can do it, but most never learn. Their bite fills the human with euphoria and enough neurotoxin to make them forget, so they become complacent."

"Not you?" Key asked.

"Sadly, yes." Harley removed a spot of blood at the corner of his mouth with his tongue. "I, too, had become lackadaisical when selecting my human targets. Since I refuse to kill humans, my sire sent me to Rome. Queen Marcella insisted I learn how to communicate and enthrall using my mind." Harley's fingers returned to playing with the lace at his neck. "I suspect that's why she asked me to teach you. She granted me permission to communicate with you mind-to-mind as she does, but only for tonight. You must learn well and quickly." Harley grinned. "I have faith in you."

The praise warmed Key from the inside out and made his chest feel light. Still, this was a trick unlike any Key had

tried. Harley first taught him to listen in on the humans' minds, and then to convince them they wanted to be bitten. Once it was over, he convinced them to forget. It took him the rest of the night to learn, but he'd completely healed his face and had gorged himself on blood when he felt the dawn approaching.

"It's almost time to return to the hotel," Harley said. "Queen Marcella will want a demonstration of your skill before we sleep for the day."

Key couldn't help it. The thought of trusting his vulnerable sleeping body around centuries-older vampires who stayed awake longer and then woke before he did made his skin crawl with paranoia. It would be better to return to Hell's Kitchen, bed down in the little coal cupboard for the day, and flee with his sister once his soul returned at dusk.

"I've had a lovely time tonight," Harley said as they approached the intersection Key needed to take to return to his sister.

"As did I." Key meant it. He'd expected to die that night. He hadn't planned to live more in twelve hours than he had in the last six months, maybe in his entire life.

Still, he had responsibilities, and Harley worked for Queen Marcella as her liaison in the states. Their disparate duties would clash sooner or later. Key wanted to remember this night for what it was, a sweet promise of what vampire life had to offer. This wasn't goodbye forever, he told himself, only until Margaret was older.

He pulled Harley to a halt at the street corner. He thought they would shake hands and say goodbye, but he was surprised when Harley draped his arms around his shoulders and pulled him in, chest to chest.

Key had forgotten how good it felt to be close to someone. The dance floor was fun, but this seemed more intimate, though they were on a public street.

"Thank you for teaching me to enthrall humans," Key said.

“The pleasure was all mine.”

The words drew Key in, and he brushed his lips over Harley’s. Then, the older vampire took charge, sweeping his tongue over Key’s lips. Key opened and tilted his head to get even closer.

The feel of the sun just below the horizon spiked Key’s fear. He had to get back to his sister. With that fear pulsing through his system, he bit down on Harley’s bottom lip, giving him more than the simple paralysis he’d given their queen. This bite contained his own fear of the sun, yes, but also his euphoria from the wonderful evening with a gorgeous vampire and the desire to do more than kiss him. If only they had more time.

“Your gaze is so captivating, and your curls ... doll-like.”

Harley’s voice in Key’s head startled him to action. He left Harley unblinking and standing on the corner of West 39th and 10th Avenue mere moments before the sun rose. The paralysis would last less than a minute. Harley would have plenty of time to return to the Hotel Chelsea before a single ray of sunlight could touch him.

Chapter 2

Harley

Present Day, Boston, Massachusetts

Above Empress Marcella's generic signature, the email read, *"I will arrive at the private airstrip outside Boston at 4 a.m. on October 30. Hire a V.A.M.P. limo to meet me. Tell no one on the council. You may wish to celebrate your life before I arrive."*

It seemed innocuous enough, until the final sentences. The last time Harley had received a similar message, a telegraph had sent him to New York City at the turn of the twentieth century. Harley had hired an overnight carriage from Boston, the seat of power for the eastern half of the United States.

Now, the country was split into five regions with five separate vampire councils, and Harley held the coveted position of liaison to Empress Marcella for the two eastern regions. His counterpart, George Blackwing, was the empress's liaison for the three western regions.

On the earlier trip to New York, then Queen, now Empress Marcella had killed a vampire for siring another against his and the council's will. Two more were beheaded when that vampire's progeny had escaped her detection and skipped town. The young vampire, Ciarán, had immobilized Harley and slipped from his custody. Harley had been lucky enough to return home with head and heart intact.

Well, head, anyway. He'd liked Ciarán, and then Ciarán had paralyzed him with a bite that shouldn't have worked on another vampire. He'd run off toward the rising sun, leaving Harley barely enough time to return to Hotel Chelsea before sunrise. By that evening, all trace of the young vampire was gone.

Empress Marcella had been uncharacteristically lenient with Harley when he'd returned empty-handed. She'd been

certain Ciarán would return, but Harley was still waiting.

He always thought of Ciarán in autumn, though the weather was less and less autumnal. Tonight, he was too frazzled to stay in his apartment on a rare vacation night off. He was a block away from a nightclub, sniffing at a familiar scent on the breeze. There were plenty of other vampires in Boston, but none who smelled as distinctly of cloves and mint. He caught a hint of brown curls and hazel eyes before the vampire ducked inside a nondescript employee entrance.

That's how Harley found himself in line for a vampire night club's haunted house party. He wondered how any of the humans around him still doubted climate change was real. He remembered celebrating Samhain in freezing fog and sleet when he was alive.

Today, the humans would still mistake him for a young man. His sire turned him at age 23, but that had been two centuries ago.

He wasn't the only vampire in line, but most skipped it. The bouncer in charge of the velvet rope let them pass through without scrutiny. Meanwhile, they drew the humans' attention and ire. Harley liked copacetic food. Angry humans tasted spicy, and Harley had a sensitive palate.

Not that he needed to eat tonight, not really. Thanks to synthetic blood, vampires no longer had to hide their existence from humans. Harley counted on the bland stuff in his refrigerator to keep him alive.

Tonight, he needed a different rush. He had three days to prepare for Empress Marcella's visit. He could read between the lines of her email announcing her secret visit to Boston. She suspected wrongdoing among the council, heads would roll, and his job as liaison wouldn't save him from scrutiny.

Harley hadn't seen Empress Marcella in person since that fateful visit to New York, when she'd asked him to help Ciarán learn to enthrall humans using his mind. She specialized in mind tricks, her vampire gift, though enthralling humans was something any vampire could do with enough

patience and practice. Harley had perfected the technique when he'd been the empress's guest in Rome. She had asked him to teach the method to Ciarán, and he had. The young vampire had taken to it quickly and then disappeared.

Harley was desperate if he was seeing and smelling a phantom on the wind. Ciarán's scent and familiar countenance slipping through the back entrance were the only reasons Harley waited on queue at Fanglory, the trendiest vampire club in Boston.

Fifteen minutes later, he'd searched the bar front to back with no sign or smell of Ciarán. There was a locked door beneath an unlit neon sign. Why the club thought they needed a neon sign to advertise a storage room was beyond Harley, but he'd seen many inexplicable things in his long life.

He'd found no sign of Ciarán. He must have been mistaken, which was unfortunate. They'd had an interesting evening together before Ciarán had skipped town. Sure, he'd been angry when the young vampire had disappeared, but now he wished Ciarán well. Tonight, he'd followed to see ... he didn't know what.

Harley glanced at the drink menu written in neon ink on a massive blackboard above the bar. Fanglory carried three different types of synthetic blood, along with the humans' usual alcoholic drinks. He ordered one infused with gin from the bartender. He didn't need blood for the night, but it would keep his hands busy while he continued to scan the room. His hands drifted to his neck when he was nervous. After two centuries, he had yet to master the stillness of the undead in social situations. Too often, he'd flagged down strangers by accidentally waving at them.

The bartender set an eight-ounce tumbler of what looked like tomato juice on the counter and dropped a little paper umbrella into it. Harley would never get used to the strange tint of the synthetic stuff. Actual blood was darker, but he supposed it was best to blend in with the humans if it looked like he was drinking a bloody mary, and not Mary's blood. At home, he preferred to drink it straight from the black plastic bottles so he wouldn't have to look at it.

“Need change?” the bartender asked when he handed them a twenty.

“No, thanks.” He could afford to tip big when this would be the only drink he bought. There was a second floor he still needed to explore, but if Ciarán wasn’t there, Harley would end his night early.

He reached for the glass tumbler to take a sip, but another vampire slid onto the bar stool next to his and blocked his hand. There was something familiar about her, and yet, not. She had Ciarán’s same hazel eyes in a delicate, heart-shaped face. Where Ciarán had brown curls, her black hair was stick straight.

“For me?” she asked. “Thanks.” She tipped her head back and drained it in one go, letting it slide down her throat and swallowing several times until the glass was empty, save for a ring of red at the bottom.

She licked the remainder off her lips and placed the lipstick-stained glass on the bar, giving a nod to the bartender. Then, she studied him out of the corner of her eye. “Nice henna.”

Without his prop to stop him, his hands fluttered to his neck, putting the henna tattoo sleeves on full display. They were the best part of his Halloween costume. His neighbor, a tattoo artist branching out into temporary ink, had been trying to get him under her needle for years, but vampires metabolized tattoo ink too quickly. The henna would last longer since his skin didn’t slough off as quickly as a human’s.

“I said nice tattoos.” The vampire nudged his boot with hers.

Harley had dressed as an 80s rocker, and they wore similar outfits. He’d laced up his boots over sparkling Lycra pants and pulled on a cut-off sleeveless t-shirt depicting some band from the 1980s.

In contrast, she wore boots over fishnets and a tight leather bustier instead of a t-shirt. She didn’t have any markings on her bare white arms, though it was hard to tell

with bangle bracelets ringing them from wrist to elbow. Her exposed midriff accentuated the barbell in her navel, but she had no tattoos. Her stick straight hair stuck out from her high ponytail at odd angles and stank of heat treatment. He couldn't tell her vampire age, exactly, but he sensed she was far younger than he was.

She seemed harmless enough, so he ventured an answer. "My neighbor is a tattoo artist. She's learning henna and might give you a good deal."

"He talks!" She met his gaze and held out her hand. "Name's Greed. You're Harley."

He blinked as he shook her hand. He'd remember someone named after a deadly sin. The only person she remotely resembled was Ciarán, and only because Harley had him on the brain in the first place.

"I'm going to make your night." She pointed to the unlit neon sign he'd noticed earlier and glanced at her phone. "I've got twenty-five minutes left in my break." She turned to study him, taking in his kohl and stubble with a smirk before examining the bulge in his Lycra pants.

He didn't know what she wanted, but he was, "Not interested."

"It's not for me," she said. "Lucifer." The name had a distinct Irish lilt to it. "When Key said you'd be a hard sell, he wasn't kidding."

Now, Harley was triply confused. Did she mean Lucifer, the prince of hell, or Lucifer, another person? It wasn't a common name among humans, but Harley knew at least three vampires who had changed their names to sound more devilish. And who was Key? Did he dare hope it was a nickname for Ciarán?

Greed shook her head, and her ponytail brushed her cheek. "We now have twenty-four minutes. You coming?" She chuckled, like her question had a double meaning.

Key sounded enough like Ciarán to intrigue him. Before he could ask more questions, Greed sauntered off

through the crowd. The humans reflexively shifted away from her, leaving a window of opportunity for Harley to follow. He almost missed it but soon found himself on her heels moving toward the sign for “All Hallows Glory Hole.”

At the door beneath the sign, Greed narrowed her eyes at the long line of men waiting along the wall. If Harley didn't know better, he'd think they were waiting for the restroom. The fact that most were vampires overruled that assumption.

“Why do they want to see your storage room?” Harley asked when Greed had shooed them away and shut them both inside the dark room.

“Storage room?”

“Glory hole. It's an informal term for an untidy storage place. My ma called my room a glory hole when I was a child, especially when she showed the house to her guests.”

“Key was right,” Greed muttered. “You are a fucking crust.” She flipped the light switch with one hand and coughed into the other. It sounded much like a laugh with an Irish curse thrown in for good measure. “This room is not for storage, but that's a cute story about your ma. I bet she'd be appalled to learn what it means now.”

Harley opened his mouth to argue. He was not a member of the upper class growing up, the “crust,” as she so eloquently quipped. His family had been lower middle class at best.

He forgot what he was saying as he took in the garish mixture of black and red befitting a vampire bordello. Peekaboo black lace curtains hung over blood red walls. Brass candelabras full of unlit wax candles melted for ambiance lined the red carpet leading to the display at the back of the room.

Greed motioned toward the main attraction, a set of wooden risers leading to a table running the length of the back wall with “Grave Throbbing” written in red paint so thin it had dripped down the wall like blood. A black-lacquered sedan of a coffin sat atop the table. It was almost as wide as the table

and high enough to fit two bodies stacked on top of each other. There was a hole the size of a basketball in the middle of the lid.

Harley frowned. “That won’t do for daytime.”

“This coffin isn’t for sleeping.”

Harley would have pegged Greed at least a century old, but the way she rolled her eyes reminded him of the over-exaggerating teenagers on late-night reruns.

“This is a first.” She brought her hand to her mouth again, but this time, it was definitely laughter. “I’ve never had to explain how to use a glory hole before. You get on top of the coffin. You stick your dick in the hole, and the vampire inside will make you feel fantastic.”

Harley tried to swallow and almost choked. Others liked this sort of thing? It seemed so impersonal.

“If you like what you feel, I’m going to give you an address for a little diner where you can wait for us until we get off work.”

“Could we skip,” Harley motioned at the coffin, “and start at the diner?”

Greed shook her head. “Not a chance. He’s shy. Needs to taste you first.”

Taste. Harley felt a little more at ease. He wouldn’t be fucking the person in the coffin. An impersonal blowjob was a little easier to handle, though it looked like the person in the coffin would be cramped and uncomfortable after a few minutes.

“Why are you doing this for him?” Harley asked.

“Key needs a keeper.”

There was the nickname again. Key. It could be short for Ciarán. Harley would have a hard time getting the image of the sexy vampire out of his head. If it wasn’t him, this was going to be a mindfuck from which Harley might never recover.

He closed his eyes, trying to calm his pounding heart. His cock was on board, straining the tensile strength of his tight Lycra pants. Still, Harley didn't do casual sex, and this seemed about as casual as one could get without a physical description of the person on the other side of the hole.

His cock was only on board when he imagined it was Ciarán. They'd spent one magical night together, and Harley hadn't danced with anyone since.

"You saved our lives once," Greed said. "He thinks he owes you."

The plural made no sense. Harley would remember if he'd met Greed. He had an eidetic memory.

"I can see you're interested," she said to draw him from his reverie. "What are you waiting for? If you're not finished in ..." she looked at her watch, "twenty-one minutes and twenty seconds, I will open the door and let everyone watch. You don't strike me as an exhibitionist." She gave him another once-over.

"Stop teasing him, Greed!"

The voice from the coffin was barely a whisper. Harley wouldn't have heard it without the aid of his vampire-enhanced hearing. For a moment, he thought he'd imagined it, but Greed smirked and crossed her arms over her chest. She tilted her head and widened her eyes, daring him to hop onto the coffin.

"All right, all right."

"We also have a bet on how long you can last. I don't think you'll make it five minutes. Key said fifteen. What's your bet?"

Harley frowned. "You're making me bet on my own body?"

"Who knows? Maybe he sucks, and not in the good way?" Greed's smirk widened.

"I'll split the difference. Ten." It was the strangest wager he'd ever bet in his life, not that he placed many bets.

As Empress Marcella's liaison, he avoided the seedier vampire establishments, especially the ones with underground cage matches pitting vampires against armed humans. It made it easier to enforce the empress's laws when he wasn't breaking them himself.

Greed nodded. "I'll time from outside. Now get up there and tell me when you feel his mouth on you."

Harley glanced down at his pants.

"I recommend taking those off, for now. That way, they won't get all stretched out."

He frowned.

"What? It's a big coffin. You're going to want to spread your legs a little to hold on. I've watched plenty of folks use this thing."

"With Key?" Harley asked.

She rolled her eyes again. "Are you the jealous type?"

He had no reason to be jealous. He didn't know why she and the mysterious Key were so fixated on this strange attraction.

An inhuman growl rose from the coffin.

"Fine, fine," she said. "This is my job. A vampire named Santa is my usual male counterpart, not Key." Greed gave him an apologetic shrug. "Santa has the night off, and Key's supposed to be upstairs running a chainsaw for the haunted house. He took his lunch break early for you, and you're wasting our time! Get up there."

Harley wished he'd bought the boots with the fake lacing and side zippers. Instead, he unlaced them one rung at a time before tossing them in the corner Greed indicated for his clothes. When it came time for him to remove his pants, she slipped out the door. He could still hear the clink of her bangles as she crossed and uncrossed her arms on the other side.

He was grateful for the bit of modesty, though it still seemed like she was in the room with them. All that separated

him from the human and supernatural public was a flimsy lock on a particleboard door.

He was as puritan as his time despite the very skimpy outfit his neighbor had picked to display the henna tattoos she'd given him. He already felt naked, so he balked at shedding all his clothes. He kept the crop top but shucked off his skimpy thong underwear with the pants all in one go. In haste, he left the socks on his feet. The vampire in the coffin wouldn't be able to see his mid-calf tube socks, anyway.

Using his vampire speed, he leaped onto the coffin and received an eyeful for his efforts. The naked vampire in the coffin had fed. His thick cock was on display in the spotlight shining through the large hole in the lid. The vampire's skin was as white as Greed's, and it was a nice cock, but that was all Harley could tell about him.

Harley wished he'd seen Ciarán's cock for comparison. Instead, they'd danced, then talked, and ended the night with a brilliant kiss that lit Harley's world like sunlight. Then, Ciarán had bitten Harley's bottom lip and left him stranded and alone.

Harley was stalling. He liked to take his beaus on at least three dates before anything remotely close to this level of intimacy. Instead, he was about to "stick his dick" into a hole in a coffin, and the unseen face attached to this gorgeous cock was going to ... what, exactly?

"Can you feel his mouth yet?" Greed's voice was barely a whisper, but it sounded like a squall bell through the door.

"Not quite." Harley didn't need to breathe, but the motion of taking a deep breath through his nose and exhaling through his mouth helped to calm his nerves. As he exhaled, he draped himself over the coffin, positioning his cock and balls so they rested in the middle of the open space. It felt so strange on his upper thighs and on his belly where he scraped against hard wood edges. This was the strangest thing he'd ever done in his life, and he'd been to vampire orgies and a few BDSM clubs.

Those places rarely turned him on. Here and now, his cock wanted a piece of the action, even though his head was convinced this was a bad idea. His cock stubbornly insisted the vampire inside the coffin was Ciarán. If Harley concentrated, he could smell sweet cloves and mint in the surrounding air. Ciarán had tasted of them when they'd kissed.

Key's hands were rough as they gripped Harley. Hard callouses along the top of his palm felt so good as they dragged over Harley's sensitive skin. Blunted fingernails trailed through the nest of hair above his cock, then circled his balls. Key teased and stretched Harley, taking in the full length and breadth of him. Another low rumble escaped the coffin.

"You have twenty minutes," Greed whispered. "Get a move on. I'm starting the timer."

It was Harley's turn to growl when Key's wet tongue circled his cockhead and slipped inside his foreskin sheath to tease him. It felt divine. Harley couldn't keep his mind from connecting his desires with the physical act. He imagined Ciarán crouched at the bottom of the coffin so he could reach Harley's cock. Ciarán making those needy slurping noises. Ciarán taking him to the back of his throat and swallowing around him. Ciarán of the hazel eyes and the curly brown hair, looking up at him and begging him not to come yet.

Right. The bet.

"Time check?" Harley croaked as Key swallowed around his cock again before slipping a finger into his mouth with Harley.

"Already?" Greed stifled a laugh outside the door. "It's only been two minutes."

"Two?" He was already barreling toward his plateau in two minutes. With Key's expert moves on his cock, he was certain he wouldn't stay there long without desperate measures, such as remembering how badly the sun would burn his skin if he stayed out too late in the morning, or how easily his life could be snuffed by fire while he slept or a silver stake to the heart.

Key distracted him by fondling his balls while his wet mouth still worked Harley's cock. He could do this. He would make it past Greed's five-minute mark, at least.

"Damn," she huffed when he outlasted her bet.

Key slipped off Harley's cock with a pop before delving wet fingers inside his foreskin again. The burn of too-tight skin brought him back down from being too close, but he didn't stay there. The longer Key stretched his foreskin and circled his cockhead that way, the more the pressure built in his balls. He was going to come too soon!

Key removed his fingers and kissed the tip of Harley's cock, and the urge subsided. Key seemed to know exactly what Harley needed. He inserted his tongue in the groove and circled at a much slower pace as he rolled Harley's balls in the palm of his hand. It felt extraordinary, but they were nearing the ten-minute mark, and he was nowhere near coming.

"Ten," Greed called. "Looks like this game is Key's to lose." Her voice had dulled with disappointment when she lost, but Key's pending win filled her tone with glee.

Key inserted his fingers into his mouth alongside Harley's cock again before leaving a wet trail down his shaft to his taint. Oh God. Key was going for the kill shot, the move that would send Harley flying over the edge in no time at all. Key circled his rim with his wet finger before rubbing it across his hole. He pressed inside to the first digit, and Harley almost lost his hold on his sanity.

"Not yet," Key whispered. Instead of sucking Harley's cock back into his mouth, Key kissed along his shaft to the base and then took first one, then the other of Harley's balls in his mouth. Just when Harley didn't think he could stand another moment of almost enough friction on his hole, Key shoved his finger inside and pierced the soft flesh of Harley's testicles with his incisors.

Fuck. Harley had only experienced one other vampire bite since he'd been turned. This one filled him with euphoria and made him see whole galaxies behind his eyelids as he pressed his forehead to the wood. He wasn't coming, not yet,

but he was close, all from the rush of vampire saliva in his system, a sensation so blissful it had allowed Ciarán to run off into the night, so far and so fast that Harley couldn't even scent the right direction to follow once he'd recovered.

This had to be Ciarán. The bite felt so right, the same as it had that night. It hit Harley like a drug. It was the same reason Harley had never been able to get Ciarán out of his head.

Key released the bite and once again popped Harley's cock into his mouth. He inserted another finger and twisted the two together until they found Harley's prostate. The pull of suction and the push against his greatest pleasure sent him spilling over the edge and down Key's throat. He barely recognized his own satisfied moan.

"Just under fifteen," Greed muttered through the door. "I am so glad you're my brother. I don't even want to know what you do to people."

"Brother?" Harley and Ciarán had talked for hours the night they'd met, but he'd never mentioned siblings. Perhaps they were vampire relations. Some progeny of the same sire called each other siblings. Or maybe Key wasn't Ciarán after all, only a device Harley had used to feel better about casual sex with random strangers.

"The sooner you're out of there, the sooner we can get back to work," Greed said. "Some of us work for tips." She made a rude comment under her breath, just loud enough for him to hear her. "Fucking crust."

Harley was surprised to find his legs clammy with sweat. The vampire virus suppressed most human bodily functions, but he could produce semen when he drank enough synthetic blood to make his cock swell in the first place. He generated sweat on far rarer occasions. He'd dressed with the expectation that he most certainly would not sweat, however, and now found himself wishing for a towel. He removed his t-shirt, instead.

"Are you taking off more clothes?" Greed asked at the sound. "Use the black towels like the humans do."

Harley found the neat stack of towels near the table's edge. They were scratchy, but at least he wouldn't completely ruin his costume.

Five minutes later, per Greed's phone, he was back in his getup and back in the main bar, headed toward the door. The crowded bar was now overwhelming to his senses. He needed to get outside so he could hear himself think.

He found Greed waiting for him at the door. She followed him outside and grabbed his elbow before he stepped into the street.

"Do you want to meet him?" she asked.

Harley swallowed. What the hell was he doing? If it wasn't Ciarán, if it was just some stranger, would he be able to live with himself? Could he walk away without knowing?

He was almost certain it was Ciarán, from his scent to the sweet noises he made. Harley's curiosity won, and he nodded.

"Here's the address. We'll meet you there after two." She smirked. "What you do in the meantime is up to you."

He took the card from her hand. He had just over three hours to change his mind.

Chapter 3

Key

“Why did you say two?” Key grumped as Greed worked her magic on the platinum blond wig he’d grabbed from the prop cupboard. It was already a quarter after.

“You didn’t see his face.” She pulled the eyepatch back into place over the wig, careful to keep it from snapping back against his face. She loved him, after all. Some days, like today, made him wonder. The bet had been her idea.

“Your boy Harley is a runner.” She puckered her lips at him until he did the same. “He’ll wait for you if you’re late, but even a half-hour more and he would have run home for the night.” She applied a hint of gloss to his lips. “I understand why you left him standing on a street corner.”

“I was the one who ran. I did it for you.”

Key and Greed had grown up hard and fast on the streets of New York, and then they’d jumped on the Jersey City ferry the night after he’d escaped Harley and Queen Marcella and never looked back. While he’d been elated to be welcomed into the vampire community, he couldn’t risk anyone knowing his little sister’s location. They’d moved around the tri-state area, and Key worked odd jobs and took night shifts until Greed came of age.

“There,” Greed said. “You look like a dragon-rider.”

“Should I have gone for pirate?” he asked, giving himself a once-over in the mirror. The combination of the wig’s long, straight hair and the black eyepatch made him look rakish. Not that his brown curls made him more reputable. Harley had declared his curls “doll-like,” an ill-timed reminder of Key’s sister at home waiting for him to return.

She was no longer his hero-worshiping little sister. She was his conscience more often than not. Since he’d told her

about Harley and the potential relationship he'd sacrificed for her, she'd berated him daily for not trying harder to find him.

Only after she turned eighteen did he seek out the midwestern vampire council for permission to turn her, since they'd traveled Minnesota for Greed's teenage years. Key knew better than to take matters into his own hands, thanks to his sire. After two years, the Midwest council consented to accept Greed as a vampire with Key as her sire.

Key had been naïve about the sire bond and the wrench it would throw into his plans. He'd hoped he wouldn't have a bond with Greed, since she was his sister and his sire had rarely been able to control him. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

Greed studied his Halloween outfit, shaking her head. Thanks to the empress's help, Greed's will was once more her own. With their sire bond broken, she could make decisions without his influence.

“I think you should go as yourself, but that's me.”

“You know I can't.”

She nodded and braced her hands on his shoulders. “You're sure you don't want me to come with you?”

They usually did everything together. They even went on double dates when Key convinced himself to date.

“I'm sure.” He'd met Harley before he'd turned Greed. It didn't seem fair to drop the entire story on him while the reason for his rude behavior sat on the opposite side of the table sucking down a cup of blood. “I'll be home before dawn.”

“I hope you're not.” She tapped her index finger on the end of his nose. “I won't wait up.”

“Be careful.”

She knew as well as he did, he would be home before dawn. They had a contingency plan with the humans in their building if either of their coffins were empty past sunrise, after the last time Greed hadn't come home.

“I always am.” She winked as she pulled a yellow HAZMAT suit on over her hot teacher Halloween costume.

The costumes had become a necessity of late. They always left the bar in different getups than the ones in which they’d arrived. They needed to lie low until Empress Marcella arrived. At least Key had finally gotten a response. The empress would arrive in three days to cleanse the eastern seaboard of the vampire filth that had tried to hurt Greed a month ago. The council’s response had been less than nothing, so Key had called on the only other resource he had: the empress herself.

Granted, anyone close and familiar enough would recognize their scents, but so far, they’d kept to random entrances, exits, and routes home. The costumes had been enough for the moment. Still, Key worried as he exited the building alone. As her big brother, he would always worry.

Blood Drive wasn’t a diner. It was an all-hours coffee shop for vampires, except instead of coffee, they served fresh warmed blood drawn during the day while the vampires slept. They had all kinds of willing donors and animals kept as pampered pets, from werewolf to otter. They also infused the blood with all manners of seasonings listed on the wall-to-wall dry-erase board behind the cashier. It was Key’s greatest guilty pleasure, and within walking distance of Fanglory and their apartment. He’d even applied for a job there before Greed had given him a positive reference at the club.

While he walked, he tried to come up with a way to explain to Harley why he’d waited so long to make contact again. It had taken over a century, but Key’s life finally had some semblance of normalcy. He knew what it meant to be a vampire now. He’d had some excellent teachers, like Harley, and some hard knocks, like the sire bond with his sister.

Breaking that bond had been essential. If he was still tied to Greed that way, he would never be able to pursue a relationship, with Harley or anyone else.

Was that his goal, a relationship? After over a century, he was lucky he’d run into Harley again at all.

Well. Key had been thinking about Harley when the council broke his sire bond.

Empress Marcella had made contact in the spring of 1970, asking them to fly from New York to Wisconsin. They'd killed some of the empress's enemies during the Earth Day Massacre. In return, a Lakota two-spirit elder prepared a poultice and performed a ritual to remove the bond.

For the ritual, they'd said some words, covered Key and Greed in ambergris and frankincense, and doused them with myrrh while they embraced. Ancient ingredients powered the ancient spell. It was almost dawn, so they sent Key and Greed to their separate coffins for the day. When they woke, the sire bond was broken, and Greed was once again the strong-willed and passionate little sister he remembered from their youth.

He'd asked about Harley then, but Empress Marcella denied any knowledge of his whereabouts. It took almost fifty years for the empress to reward him with answers. He'd helped her council find a vampire missing in downtown Manhattan in 2019. His bonus had been a thumb drive with Harley's information, antiquated even then, but he still had a USB converter for his laptop and plugged it into his computer as soon as he returned home.

The information on the thumb drive led him from the streets of New York to Boston's North End, of all places. Key never thought he'd like it there with all the crusts, but he and Greed lived rent-free in a three-bedroom apartment on the ground floor of a building owned by vampires and monitored by sympathetic humans. Their only monthly bills were utilities and their shared phone plan.

Key had spent the last few years job hopping whenever he got bored. Greed had been at Fanglory for most of that time, starting as a bartender before working their seasonal tourist traps like the glory hole. After Halloween, she would probably return to the bar until the next gimmick they devised to get people in the door.

Key had a hard time keeping a job. He had good intentions, but then he wandered off each time he thought he saw Harley. Tonight, he'd caught a whiff of him. The tang of synthetic blood was new, but beneath it, the old scent of ambergris pomade identified him as unique among the body-spray crowd. Key hadn't been so faithful to his hair products. Today's gels and oils worked much better to hold his unruly curls in place.

From habit, he reached up to check for any out of place strands as he approached the door. He forgot they were pinned beneath the platinum wig and held in place by the eyepatch, which he snagged with his pinkie finger. He almost yanked the entire costume off his head. Thank goodness for vampire reflexes.

Even when he was trying to keep a low profile, smooth was not Key's middle name. It was Baoth, meaning vain or reckless. Vain because he was dressed as the sexiest villain on television. Reckless because most people would walk up to their century-old crush and say hello, but Key had chosen to blow him anonymously in a coffin glory hole instead.

Harley sat at a table in the middle of the wide front window with his back to the door. The position screamed "vulnerable," but it had taken Key trial and error to discover what Harley seemed to know on instinct. From his seat, Harley could watch the street and the entire room through reflections in the glass or the mirror over the cash register. Key felt Harley's eyes on him the moment he walked through the door and met his gaze in the reflection in the mirror.

Harley hadn't changed from the rockstar t-shirt, Lycra pants, and lace-up boots he'd worn to the club. He had one foot up on the bottom rung of his bistro chair, the other braced against the floor. His curls had been slicked back with grease the first time they'd met. If Key had to guess, he still wore it that way most of the time, from the scent of ambergris in the air, but he'd styled it loose and flowing to his shoulders tonight.

Key almost laughed at himself when he reached the cash register. If he could smell Harley, Harley could smell

him. Hell, he had bitten Harley and swallowed his cum. Harley could probably pick up hints of himself all over Key's face, since he hadn't even rinsed off. He resisted the urge to look over his shoulder as he ordered and paid for his drink, a twenty-ounce were-panther with a hint of otter. The vampire cashier glanced at Harley, sniffed at him, and winked. "Eventful evening."

He nodded. "So far, so good."

"No dragon blood for you?" Harley asked as he sat down.

Key grinned. "Fitting, but no." Dragons were a myth left to fantasy television, or so Key hoped. With the existence of vampires and were-creatures already common knowledge, Key doubted Empress Marcella would have kept them a secret.

"I like your costume." Harley gave him another appreciative look before taking a sip from his cup.

So, it was like that. No questions, just casual conversation with the vampire Key had been aching to find all these years.

"Thank you. You, too." A lot of folks had purchased the same eighties-style t-shirt popular on a streaming series, but Harley's looked like it belonged in the eighties.

Harley dropped his shoulders and his whole body seemed to relax with the gesture. "I'm so glad it's you, Ciarán."

"You really didn't know?" Greed owed him another ten bucks. She'd bet Harley knew who he was the whole time, but he'd heard the hesitation in Harley's movements before he committed to taking his clothes off.

"I'd hoped." Harley's tone was full of longing.

Key forgot all about bets as he fell into the depths of Harley's gaze. "Yeah?"

The cashier interrupted him by whispering his name and dropping his cup on top of his receipt on the counter. The

whisper sounded like a shout to his vampire hearing in the otherwise empty store. He was back in a flash, the first sip of warm blood on his tongue as he sank into his seat. He'd already supped on plain human blood back at the club, but he needed more energy for this conversation. Besides, were-panther was heaven, and the otter added just a hint of gamey spice.

“Tell me about Key.”

Key assumed he meant the obvious, where he'd gotten the nickname, but he also sensed more to the question, as though Harley wanted to know where he'd been all this time.

He started simply. “It's a nickname. My little sister gave it to me.”

“Greed?”

Key nodded. “Shortened from Margaret, plus she is a greedy little wench. It's fitting, believe me.”

He took another sip of the drink to hide the heat in his cheeks. He was thankful for the eyepatch hiding some of his face. “That's not fair. I blamed her for what happened, but it's not her fault. I'm the idiot who ran.”

“From me?” Harley tilted his head to the side with the question.

“Yeah. You, the empress, the council, everything.” Key studied his cup, fingering the seam.

In minutes, he covered the last century for Harley, taking him from the night of the party through the ritual in Madison, where the two-spirited vampire severed his sire bond with his sister. He left out the most important part, though. They'd talk about his bite once he was convinced Harley wouldn't run.

“I found the courage to tell Greed about you three years ago,” he said instead. “That's when we moved here.”

“Three years.” Harley took a long drink from his cup before he continued. “You knew I worked for the council. Why didn't you come to the courthouse?”

—” “I thought if we met again under normal circumstances

Harley almost choked as he burst out laughing.

“Tonight was not normal circumstances,” Key amended. “You caught me off guard, so I improvised.”

A dribble of blood escaped Harley’s mouth. Key leaned forward like the predator he was, and Harley stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. Harley met his gaze as he slowly licked his lip.

“Do you live nearby?” Key asked, knowing full well Harley lived in the neighborhood. They were two blocks from the courthouse, a historical building owned by the vampire council since colonial days. Harley lived a block beyond that in another historical building reserved for council employees. They’d lived within blocks of each other for three years, and yet, Key had struggled to bridge the century-long gap he’d created by running.

“If I take you home with me,” Harley asked, “do you promise to stay?”

Key’s smile widened past his fangs. “Yes.”

Chapter 4

Harley

Harley looked down at the round pressed wood bistro table between them to regain his sanity. Key still smelled like sex, along with two unusual blood aromas. Was that otter? It was overwhelming at a time when Harley needed to think clearly. He needed to focus, so he wouldn't do something stupid. Taking Key home was a bad idea with Empress Marcella arriving in a little over forty-eight hours.

"I can't," he said. "I'm not," he held his hands up, gesturing to his costume, his tattoos, all of it, "this guy. And I don't think you're the type of guy who wants to be stuck with someone like me."

"I'm not always this rash, I swear." Key grinned, pushing the eyepatch up on his cheek.

The wig was wrong. Harley wanted to remove it and the scrap of black fabric that hid Key's other hazel eye.

"I'm not this guy either." Key gestured at his outfit. He tugged a lock of the wig's hair, so it pulled the eyepatch into place. "Thank fuck for that. He's an asshole."

Key's accent twisted to a hint of Irish when he swore, and Harley's cock perked up again. This had been easier when it had been a disinterested party.

"Did the empress's file tell you about my past relationships?" Harley wondered aloud. His sire had been furious when he hadn't been interested in her, and again when he'd refused to kill humans. She'd sent him to Italy to be rid of him. By the time he reached Rome, she was dead, and he was the empress's special guest.

Key frowned. "There were none listed."

"You didn't wonder why?"

“I’d hoped it was because you were pining away for me, the way I’ve been for you.”

Gods, that smile, even with the wig that clashed with Harley’s memory and screamed, “wrong” with every strand and the asymmetrical eyepatch. He wanted to rip the facade from Key’s head and display the real Ciarán underneath. He tamped down the urge to deface Key’s Halloween costume and considered Key’s words instead.

Harley hadn’t been pining, exactly. He hadn’t been much of anything. Since the invention of email, he’d worked from home and rarely left his apartment building. He kept to himself. His neighbor across the alley liked to keep her windows open all hours of the night and kept a whiteboard by her window to write him messages. The first time she’d written, he’d pointed to the alley, and they’d leaned against their buildings and talked until Ithande couldn’t keep her eyes open anymore. She’d retreated upstairs, accusing him of being a night owl. A week later, she’d asked him if he was a vampire like her first cousin, and he’d admitted the truth. They’d been friends ever since, and she had restored his faith in others. She was the only person Harley considered a friend, especially now that the council was under the empress’s scrutiny.

“I needed to taste you again,” Key said, drawing him out of his thoughts. “To remind myself why I’ve been waiting so long for you. I’ll have the council send you my file, too, if it will help. I’m not always like this.”

Harley could relate. He was never like this.

Key released his cardboard cup to bury his face in his hands, putting his vampire grace on full display as he avoided knocking any part of his costume out of place.

“Tonight, I was desperate. I couldn’t let you leave, but I also didn’t want you to see me if it didn’t work. I couldn’t bear it.”

“If what didn’t work?” Harley asked.

“My bite.” Key dropped his hand from his uncovered eye and rested his other elbow on the table, holding his head

up. “You’ve been with the vampire council long enough to know the usual sentence for creating a vampire against the council’s will.”

Harley nodded. He’d been called in as an executioner on two cases where vampires had “accidentally” turned their lovers. How anyone could pretend it was an accident was beyond Harley. The vampire had to practically drain the human and then feed them back their own blood. Only a newly made vampire with no control would make such a mistake, and these had both been vampires his own age. Their only accident had been in failing to obtain the council’s permission beforehand.

“Didn’t you ever wonder why the empress kept me and killed my sire instead?”

No, Harley hadn’t wondered. Yes, the act went against precedent, but Empress Marcella did whatever she wanted. Ciarán’s sire had been a drain on council resources, and he’d figured Empress Marcella had grown tired of it.

“Vampire bites don’t affect other vampires the way they do humans,” Key said, “except ... mine are backwards. I needed your help to enthrall humans because my bite didn’t cause them euphoria. But when I bit Marcella—”

“You bit Empress Marcella?” Harley emphasized the title because not saying it had resulted in at least one vampire’s death in the last decade.

“Empress Marcella,” Key paused and flashed a grin at the name, “was going to kill me!” He looked every bit as righteous and indignant as his costume character as he leaned forward, both hands pressed against the table. “Thankfully, she thought my bite might be useful someday, if we ever needed to subdue vampires.”

“It can cause paralysis,” Harley clarified, “like the first time you bit me.”

Key nodded. “I’m sorry. I had to. I could have driven you to overwhelming fear and made you forget me, as well,

but I chose not to.” He sighed. “I wanted you to remember me.”

“I looked for you.” Harley stared at the cup in his hands. The store walls seemed to close in around him. “I know we still have a few hours, but I need more time to process ...” He didn’t have the right words. He needed to process the blowjob, the bite, all the information Key had just shared. “... Everything.”

“How much time?” Key sounded resigned, but the hope in his one-eyed gaze was unmistakable.

“A day, at least.”

“One day.” Key placed his hands over Harley’s, still in a death grip around his cooling cardboard cup. “I’ve never forgotten the night we spent together. We talked for hours. I learned so much about the world, and about you. Oh, and how we danced!” The joy on Key’s face mirrored Harley’s own fond recollection. “The memory of that night has kept me alive on more than one occasion, and no, not because you taught me to enthrall humans.”

No wonder Key was holding out hope. “If you’re having thoughts of meeting the dawn, I can give you the number for the vampire suicide hotline.”

Key pulled his hands back to his own cup and Harley watched as he swallowed down the contents, his Adam’s apple bobbing. Damn. Harley wanted to kiss him there, to drag his fangs across his flesh before claiming his lips.

Where had that thought come from? Harley had never wanted to kiss anyone this much in all his life.

Key licked his bottom lip as he set his empty cup on the table. “I don’t plan to meet the dawn any time soon, not when I’ve found you.” He leaned forward and ran his index finger down Harley’s knuckles, still gripping his cup.

“I’ve missed you.” Key sounded sincere. “I know, it was one night, but I still want to get to know you better. I work in a bar that closes at two-thirty, which leaves too much time to think. You could do me a favor and keep me company.”

Favor. The hair at Harley's nape stood on end. He worried his greatest dream was about to turn into his worst nightmare, where Key only needed him to resolve some vampire council bullshit.

"I'm listening," Harley said, unable to shake the uncanny feeling he was being set up.

"Tomorrow," Key said. "I'll be here after closing. Care to meet me again?"

Harley had to work, too, but he could bring his laptop to Blood Drive. "I'll be here."

"I'd like that very much."

"Will you be in costume again?" Harley asked.

"I thought you liked it." Key smoothed his hands down the thin fabric of his black tunic, drawing attention to the gaps between the laces across his sternum and the smooth white skin beneath them. Harley remembered wearing that style the first time around.

"I'd rather see you," he mumbled when he caught himself staring.

"I guess Greed doesn't owe me any money, then." Key chuckled. "She said as much." He rose from the table and tossed his cup in the recycle bin near the door. "Unfortunately, the costume is part of my work uniform. I'll be wearing a different one when I see you again."

Key was gone in a flash, faster than the video cameras on the street could capture.

Alone, Harley sipped his tasteless cold blood. It was still hours before dawn. He usually didn't worry about time on his days off, but he felt Empress Marcella's looming presence like an icy wind. He wanted his reacquaintance with Key to be a happy accident, but in Harley's life, nothing had ever been a coincidence.

Chapter 5

Harley

The next night, Harley waited until his lunch break to return his washed and folded Halloween costume to Ithande's mail slot. Then, he packed up his laptop essentials, checked himself in the mirror a few hundred times, and even changed his clothes twice. He still managed to arrive at Blood Drive early. It was five minutes to two, the tail end of his lunch hour. Outside the storefront windows, the night sky was black with storm clouds. They lit up from below with the occasional flash of lightning. Tiny droplets of condensation had formed on the windows, but the awning above kept off most of the rain.

For the second night in a row, the tables were empty. Harley chose the one nearest the door and waited. He had just enough time to boot up his computer, log on, and check his emails before Key arrived.

Instead of an umbrella, Key had worn an oversized raincoat. He draped it over the chair opposite Harley with a dejected half-wave before heading for the counter. This time, his wig was attached to a grizzled beard instead of an eyepatch. With the raincoat, he looked like a salty seaman. Underneath, he was the same scared vampire Harley had met in New York, now sporting a pair of ripped designer jeans and a white t-shirt.

They were the only customers in the shop, but a line of cars streamed past the east windows. As far as Harley could tell from observing the last two nights, the drive-through provided most of their business, hence the name.

Key waited at the counter for his cup. When it was ready, he took it back to the table. Harley was surprised he'd tried a different blood concoction this time, werewolf with a hint of jasmine. He pulled off the grizzled wig/beard combo and slipped it into the raincoat's pocket before taking his first sip.

Harley drank him in. Even with the ripple at his hairline and the lines across his cheeks from the elastic, Key looked just as gorgeous as Harley remembered.

“Rough night?”

Key took another large gulp of blood before he answered. “The haunted hay rack ride down the street was canceled due to lightning.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and his chin on his hands. “Teenagers, Harley. I had to deal with teenagers.”

“At a vampire club?”

“The haunted house is an extra cover. They opened the second ticket counter for the night, up the stairs in the back. My manager had me on inside door duty, checking wrist bands. Three youngsters tried to enter the bar through my door. I had to show my fangs.”

Key flashed his fangs at Harley. He looked bored and menacing at the same time. He was adorable.

“Did you think over what I said last night?” Key asked.

Right to it, then. Harley had hoped for more pleasantries. “You said many things.”

“Spending time together.” The light danced in Key’s hazel eyes as he took another sip from his cup. “Getting to know each other, since I bailed on you last time.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

Key frowned at him, looking even more adorable.

Harley grinned and took another sip. His was human blood, no additives, and it was going straight to his groin the longer Key stared at him. “Are we going to spend every night of our lives in this place?”

“If that’s what it takes.” Key shrugged, and his curls bounced with the motion of his shoulders. “I’ll spend every night here if that means I get to be with you.” He glanced around. “I applied for a job here, before Fanglory was hiring. I don’t have the best references, though.”

“I know.” Harley’s first email of the day had been from Rome with an attached PDF dossier on Ciarán and Greed. “You didn’t have to forward me your file.”

“I wanted you to know as much about me as I already know about you.” Key stared at his cup. “It’s the least I could do after ... I’m sorry about last night.”

“Why? I’m not. First time I got laid in ages.” Harley laughed to hide the true weight of his words.

“I wanted to be more than that to you.” Key glanced at him, and then down at the table. His cheeks darkened with a hint of blush, thanks to the blood he’d already drunk. “I wanted to be special.”

“You are special,” Harley insisted. “You’re so special, I followed you to your place of employment on a wish.”

Harley had questions about Key’s bite, but he wanted more privacy before he asked. Thankfully, the lightning had moved off to the south. A few stars sparkled above the line of waiting cars to the east. “Care to go for a walk?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be working?” Key asked.

Harley glanced down at his laptop. No new messages. Nothing in the work queue from the council. He was on call, but so far, nothing. “It’ll be fine for the next thirty minutes.”

He turned his phone ringer on just in case, put everything else into his backpack, and grabbed his still-warm cup.

As before, Key finished his blood before leaving. He dropped the cup in the recycled paper bin on their way out.

Harley held the door for him, a habit since he’d worked for Empress Marcella for a year in Rome. The outside air was still damp, but they walked east toward a little playground area with benches, a sand pit, and a swing set.

Harley gestured to a bench. Instead of sitting, Key removed his rain jacket again and laid it inside out over the wet surface.

Harley sat at the edge of the jacket, expecting Key to take the other side, but he draped his arm over Harley's shoulder and sat beside him, so close their thighs touched.

Key leaned in and sniffed his hair above his ear. "No ambergris tonight?"

"I don't use it anymore."

"You did last night."

Harley's face heated at being called out. Vampire sense of smell would catch him every time. "Ithande said rock stars had greasy hair, so I improvised."

"Ithande?"

"My neighbor across the alley, the tattoo artist."

"The henna." Key gave his shoulders a squeeze, and Harley wished he would never let go. "Thank you. Greed wanted me to get her name. She'll be dropping by to see her soon."

"Can I trust her not to bite?"

Key scoffed. "Greed hates feeding off humans. Why do you think we've become regulars at this place? It's a luxury to some, but a necessity for us."

Harley couldn't argue with that. He'd been buying the synthetic stuff so long he'd forgotten what real blood tasted like. Blood Drive's fare was delicious and supercharged his libido.

"You identified me from the ambergris?" Harley studied the way water trickled down the trunk of a tree beside the bench, doing his best not to look in Key's direction.

Key shifted beside him. "That, and the way your hands fluttered to your throat when Greed stole your drink."

"You were watching?" Harley asked. "I couldn't find you."

"The bar's security feed goes to the guard room just off the glory hole."

“I’ll never have vampire stillness in a crowd.” Harley remembered how nervous he’d been at the possibility of seeing Key again. Now that Key was sitting beside him, he felt calm.

“I’m glad,” Key said. “Vampires who stand as still as the dead creep me out.”

“I have a question.” Harley turned his head, intent on asking, but his nose brushed the tip of Key’s.

“God, sorry.” Key pulled away, gripping Harley’s neck instead of his shoulder and then sliding across the bench for the full reach of his arm. Still close, but not that close. “You were saying?”

“Your bite.” Harley’s gaze dropped to Key’s lips. “I found little about it in your file. Why did you need to bite me, exactly?”

“One, I love how you taste.”

Harley grunted. The admission turned him on even more.

“Two, I needed to prove to myself I could control it, if I want.”

“Control what, exactly?”

“The first time I bit you, I was scared. I didn’t want you to follow me, worried you’d find Greed and take her away from me. I pushed my fear into you, the same way I did Mar—Empress Marcella. It left you paralyzed.”

“And last night?”

“Last night, I wanted you to feel good.” Key was back in Harley’s space again, the scent of werewolf blood pooling around him. Key cupped Harley’s cheek and grinned. “Did you?”

“Why me?”

“It’s not enough to say I’ve wanted you since the night we met?”

Harley shook his head. “Why now?”

Key's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "I'm in a spot of trouble with the vampire council, and I was hoping you could help."

Fuck. Harley knew it. Fairytales didn't swoop in and give hidden blowjobs for no reason. "Your file didn't mention any trouble."

Key nodded. "It's fairly recent. Greed had a nasty client, an older vampire with a pain fetish. He ... you don't want to know what he did to her, what he's done to other vampires, all because we regenerate from most anything." Silver to the heart or through the brainstem were the only means to kill a vampire, besides leaving them in the sun or an open flame until they burned to ash.

"You killed him?"

"No! He's on the council! When I found her, I paralyzed him with a bite and liberated Greed and several others." Key cleared his throat and lowered his voice. "He's too afraid of my bite to come after us without a plan, but as soon as he has one, he'll do more than torture both of us."

"On the council ..." Harley tried to drop his gaze, but Key held him fast with his knuckles under his chin. "Dobbins."

"You're aware of his reputation." Key's gaze narrowed.

"I've heard the rumors. Nothing substantiated. The council doesn't condone his behavior, so they choose to look away. As Empress Marcella's liaison, I don't interact with their daily affairs. It's been easier for me to ignore."

"He's come to the bar looking for me. I wear a different costume every night to throw him off by sight, but he'll know my scent if he gets close enough." He grinned. "The way you did."

"What do you need from me?"

"Your accounting of events, when Mar—Empress Marcella arrives." Harley had almost forgotten Key's hand at the back of his neck, but Key reminded him by rubbing circles

into his flesh. His fingers were warm with the blood he'd finished.

Harley took another long drink from his cup. He needed time to think as much as he wanted to rejuvenate his own metabolism to match Key's. Empress Marcella's email had said nothing about Dobbins, nor had she mentioned Ciarán. "*You may wish to celebrate your life before I arrive,*" had been her only warning.

"You really want me to tell our empress that you bit me in the balls, and I wasn't paralyzed?" Though Harley had enjoyed the encounter, was it enough to say he was celebrating his life? He could already imagine the empress's frown. He hoped she would rifle through his thoughts so he wouldn't have to say it out loud.

Key laughed. "I'd leave that part out. Maybe ... I was hoping to experiment more, get more feedback from you, if you're willing."

Harley wasn't ready to answer Key's unspoken question. "I'd like to talk to Greed, for her account on Dobbins."

"She went to the courthouse and gave her statement, but ..."

"He erased the records." The tightness in Harley's chest eased as the story finally made sense. "No wonder Empress Marcella is on her way here."

Key's phone beeped with a notification. He pulled it out of his pocket before the message across his lock screen disappeared, and Harley read it.

Greed: *Don't come home.*

"Shit." Key unlocked the phone and dashed a quick text back to her.

Harley missed the comfort of the hand at his neck and arm resting on his shoulder. When he pulled away, Key held his phone out so Harley could read the text screen, too.

Key: *Are you all right?*

Greed: *Someone's in our apartment. I went to the market to grab toothpaste and came home to find the lights on. What should I do?*

“You can stay with me,” Harley said. He rattled off his address and Key typed it into his phone.

“Not quite how I expected to get you to take me home with you.” Key slumped back against the bench, and then hissed when moisture instantly seeped through his shirt from the wet wooden slats.

Harley couldn't help but laugh. He stood and pulled Key to his feet. “We'll have more chances to experiment before the empress arrives.”

“Yeah?” Key's eyes danced with the light of a nearby streetlamp.

Oh yes, Harley wanted more of Key and his bite.

Chapter 6

Key

Key had moped outside Harley's building several times, but he'd never been inside. The doorman always told him he needed an invitation from a council member, and he wasn't on the guest list.

Well, he was now. Harley added both Key and Greed to the list, and then they waited in the lobby for Greed to arrive. She did, looking shaken and disheveled from sprinting at vampire speed in her miniskirt and platform heels. One of the suspenders from her school uniform costume had come loose and she'd lost the bottom button off her too-short white blouse.

"You put us on the list?" Her tone suggested that was the worst thing Harley could have done.

"It's good to have it on record, if anyone asks," Harley said. "Dobbins is the only council member who doesn't live in the building. I've also told the footman to let me know if he shows up looking for you. I can't stop him from entering the building, but at least we'll put the rooms on lock-down and receive warning if he does."

Greed nodded. "Thank you."

"I'm on the sixteenth floor." Harley disappeared so quickly, Key wasn't sure which way he'd gone at first. Greed pointed to the double doors to their right, one of which was still swinging. Greed kept her human pace until she saw the wide staircase with a thick banister leading up. Then, she disappeared.

They left Key no choice. He raced after them, up fifteen flights of stairs. He didn't even have a chance to grumble about not knowing which room because there was only one door on the landing, made of solid oak, and it stood ajar.

As soon as Key stepped inside, the door snapped shut behind him. Harley darted everywhere in the room, picking up loose synthetic blood bottles, tidying the newspapers in their holder, dropping the shutters and turning off the lights to show no ambient light could seep through. Then, he disappeared into the bedroom and reappeared with sheets and a blanket for the pull-out couch.

“I’ll sleep here tonight,” he said.

Greed walked to the door he’d exited, looked inside, and shook her head. “I haven’t shared a bed with my brother since we moved to this country. I won’t share one now.”

Harley frowned at her. “I could stay in a hotel, I suppose. I’ll—”

“No,” Key said. “I won’t kick you out of your apartment. I’ll go. Greed’s the one who needs to stay safe, not me.”

“You’re both being ridiculous!” Greed’s pitch reached the one where glass would shatter, and Harley froze in place. “He sucked you off in a public place just over twenty-four hours ago. The least you could do is share a bed while you’re both dead for the day. It’s not like anything can happen.”

Harley blinked, his first movement. Then he seemed to be able to move the rest of his body, too, and he crossed his arms over his chest. “I could say the same to you.”

She frowned at Key and shrugged. “I tried. He’s clueless. Or hopeless. I’m not sure which.”

“How so?” Harley asked.

Greed waved her arms in the air like it should be obvious. “Key has been in lo—”

“That’s enough, little sister,” Key shut her up with a warning glare. He no longer lorded over her with his sire bond, but he was still her older brother. “I’ll go.”

He turned, but Harley was already between him and the door, hand on the knob, flipping the lock into place. He then slid a silver screen door along its track and clamped it

over the sill. Key shivered. The screen was almost invisible. A vampire in a hurry could attempt to run right through it and find themselves nothing but mist on the other side.

“Stay.” The lust in Harley’s gaze almost overwhelmed him. “She’s right. We’re being silly. I’ve wanted you in my bed for over a century.”

In the time it had taken Harley to lock them inside, Greed had made her makeshift bed and was already curled under a blanket reading something on her phone.

“Come with me to my office.”

Not the words Key had expected after Harley’s admission, but he would take an invitation to any room if it meant they were together.

Harley passed close enough for him to feel the brush of his pinkie finger along the outer seam of his jeans, but then he was gone, vanished through another doorway Key hadn’t noticed while watching Harley clean the place.

Key had worked for a few companies with CEO offices atop tall buildings. Harley’s office was bigger than all three put together. Key had never seen so many books in one place outside a library, and Harley’s desk was as big as some dining tables. It was even more impressive when Harley took his laptop from his backpack and hooked it into a docking station that lit up five monitor displays, three showing other council headquarters around the world. He waved to a Native American man in a navy blazer before he pulled on a headset and spoke to him in a language Key didn’t understand.

The man nodded, and a moment later, the screen went dark. Key thought the screen was no longer in use, but it had flashed to another poorly lit location. Fuck. Was that Empress Marcella herself? This time, Key recognized the language, at least. Latin. When people called Latin a dead language, they didn’t understand how right they were. It was the language of the vampire world, at least, those with ties to the empress and her councils. The language of the undead.

Empress Marcella paid him no attention as she spoke to Harley. Her orders could make or break his sister, but Key couldn't understand them, even if he tried to listen and retain long enough to translate with his phone. He trusted Harley to keep him in the loop.

From the moment he first saw Harley lose his hold on his vampire nerves and let his hands flutter to his throat, Key knew this was a vampire he could trust. It was probably the most childish and foolhardy decision Key had ever made, but it still felt right.

Empress Marcella trusted him, too, or so Key hoped. If not, he was grateful to be spending his last days with the man he'd wanted since they'd met. If Empress Marcella took Dobbins's word over his, he would die happier than he had been, at least.

The screen went completely dark.

"Empress Marcella said to take the rest of my shift off." Harley swiveled his chair to face Key and stood. He was too close now, in Key's space, but Key didn't back away. This is where he'd wanted Harley all night. He'd been forward with Harley on the park bench, but he didn't want to overstep in Harley's home.

Harley came to him this time, placing his hands on Key's shoulders and gazing at him. They were almost the same height, shorter than the average human by today's standards. Key didn't have time to think about the benefits of the food pyramid and balanced meals before Harley's lips brushed his and Harley's body pressed against him.

"I want to keep you safe," Harley said. "I couldn't stand to lose you again."

Key took charge, then, cradling the back of Harley's head and holding him there for a deeper kiss, an exploration of his mouth. Harley tasted of human blood and a hint of mint before he groaned and pulled back.

"Damn." Harley wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "What are you doing to me?"

“Whatever you’ll let me.” He didn’t want to push Harley away by moving too fast.

He didn’t need to worry. Harley shoved him against the nearest bookshelf and kissed him back, his hands at Key’s waistband, rucking his shirt from his jeans and running warm fingers over his skin. They’d both had plenty of blood, thanks to the stop at Blood Drive. Now, Key wanted to put it to good use, if Harley was willing.

Harley’s kiss had been on Key’s mind for over a century. It was even better than he’d remembered. Harley’s body guided him, the same way he’d done on the dance floor all those years ago.

Key ground his cock against Harley’s thigh for more friction and found Harley as hard as he was. Harley pulled away, but Key saw none of the earlier trepidation in his gaze.

“Follow me.”

Greed was still scrolling on her phone. She ignored them, even though she could smell their desire from that distance.

Harvey cleared his throat, but she continued to stare at the device in her hand.

“Empress Marcella will arrive before dawn tomorrow morning, as planned.” That got Greed’s attention. “She will hear your case at the courthouse the following dusk.” Key wasn’t surprised they’d said all that with the Latin they’d exchanged.

“Do we have to miss work tonight?” Greed asked.

“We have an on-call temporary service at V.A.M.P.,” Harley countered.

“For a sex worker?” Greed shook her head.

“V.A.M.P. caters to all professions.”

V.A.M.P. also provided the blood donors to Blood Drive. Key had asked his interviewer if he could be the taste-tester for the different types of blood. No wonder they hadn’t invited him back for a second interview.

Greed huffed a long-suffering sigh. “An escort to and from work would be better.”

So far, Harley was handling Key’s annoying little sister’s antics with a respect she hadn’t earned. Key wanted to send her to bed without dessert the way he had when she was a bratty little child. Harley disappeared into his office and emerged a moment later. “It’s done.”

“Thank you.” She grinned. “I like my job. I don’t want to lose it.”

“And me?” Key asked.

“Pirate!” Greed clapped her hands. “It’s time for the pirate costume we’ve been working on.”

Harley looked like he wanted to argue. Instead, he stepped into his office, asked for another security detail for Key, and returned to the living room. “I’m going with you,” he said. “I know some of Dobbins’s muscle. I can help the security team.”

Key was still turned on, but something new crept into his chest. Harley cared about them. He was taking the situation with Dobbins seriously, whereas the staff at the courthouse had been apathetic at best. Key assumed they’d played a more sinister role in Dobbins’s plans, but he wouldn’t know for sure until Empress Marcella arrived.

Key didn’t want to think about Dobbins, the empress, or any of it any longer. He followed Harley across the room to another door.

Harley’s bedroom was immaculate. Harley had run around his place acting like it was a mess when they’d arrived, but Key had difficulty believing Harley left anything out of place.

“Clean freak.” Key smirked.

“Did you see all those synthetic blood containers?” Harley reached for the door, as though he was going to run back through the living room to grab his recycle bin and prove it to him.

“I only see you.” Key didn’t care if he sounded like a sap. He’d wasted too much time to let Harley run off to find garbage, of all things.

The groan Harley gave him was worth it. Harley tossed Key onto the bed as though he weighed nothing and was on him in an instant with vampire speed. Key had wanted to remove his shirt and jeans before he got this far. He was trapped beneath Harley as his mouth ravaged Key’s and his hands sought purchase everywhere, even tweaking his sensitive nipples. Key didn’t mind. He couldn’t imagine being anywhere else.

Harley rocked back and kneeled over him. Key stilled at his gaze, aware of Harley’s sheer strength. The older vampire could rip his heart out of his chest in an instant. He didn’t have the look of a predator, though. Harley did his best to fit in with the humans, but Key had seen through him when he’d watched him scout the club on Fanglory’s security feed. He was the most dangerous vampire there that night.

Harley studied him. Key wondered what he saw, and if he liked it. Harley wasn’t as still as the dead, but his face was sometimes unreadable, even with a mask of desire tinging his cheeks pink and almost eclipsing his irises with black.

“The first one naked gets a reward,” Harley said.

Key liked the sound of that. As soon as Harley was off him, he hopped to his feet, tore out of his clothes, and leaped back on it.

Harley was faster. He would always be faster, thanks to the century he had on Key. Harley landed in the middle of his bed with his hands behind his head while Key was still tugging at his socks.

Still, Key wanted to provide whatever Harley wanted, since he’d dared to ask. “What may I do for your reward?”

Harley tossed a bottle of lubrication he had stashed under a pillow and lay back, spreading his legs. “I want you inside me.”

Key couldn't argue. "That sounds like a reward for both of us." Still, he would ask for consent every step of the way. Harley didn't do hookups or casual sex. He'd said as much a century before, and the lack of names beneath "known accomplices" in the empress's file proved it. Key had been foolish to think Harley would jump on top of the coffin the night before. Now, he was extremely grateful.

Harley trusted Key with his body, and Key would do everything in his power to honor that trust.

He slicked his fingers while Harley propped himself up on his pillows. Harley nearly levitated off the bed when Key's finger circled his tight hole.

"Do you want this fast or slow?"

Harley's brows furrowed. "The faster you go, the sooner you'll be inside me. You can't hurt me, Ciarán."

His given name on Harley's tongue sent shivers down his spine. It reminded him how much he owed Harley. His training had kept Key alive to support Greed. His encouragement had given Key hope for the future. Key didn't deserve this second chance, but he would make it special for Harley.

He smoothed his other hand down Harley's pale freckled skin, diverting to his hip to hold him in place as he slid one slick finger inside. Harley writhed against him, trying to maneuver so some part of Key touched his cock.

Key couldn't resist. He inserted another finger with the first as he bent down and took the head of Harley's hard cock into his mouth. From his pile of pillows, Harley watched him with half-lidded eyes. "So nice to see you this time."

Key pulled off him with a pop. "You should be out of your mind with pleasure right now. Why are you still talking?"

Harley laughed at him. "Do better."

"So that's how it's going to be." Key twisted his fingers until he found the spot of heaven he was looking for, the spongy node that dropped Harley's eyelids all the way closed and had him grabbing the soft duvet top by the fistful.

“Better,” Harley muttered.

Key licked a stripe up his shaft from root to tip, stopping to collect the bit of precome leaking there. He swallowed it down before swirling his tongue inside Harley’s foreskin. Harley shuddered beneath his hand, and the muscle around his fingers flexed involuntarily. Gods, Harley felt so hot and tight, and the way he responded to Key’s every move made Key’s breath hitch, though he didn’t need to breathe.

He added a third finger, loosening Harley even further. “You really said you want me inside you, yes? I didn’t make that up?”

“Sometime before dawn, yes.” Harley spoke through clenched teeth as he bared down on Key’s fingers.

“Now?” Key rose on his knees, still with his fingers inside Harley, loosening him further.

Harley spread his legs wide and curved his back up to meet him. Key smeared the remaining lubrication over his cock and added a little more for good measure while Harley waited.

He was beautiful like that, spread out before Key, waiting to be fucked. Harley was old enough to snap Key in two without a second thought, but he waited patiently as Key lined up and entered him.

As soon as Key was fully seated inside, Harley took control of their rhythm, rocking his body in time with Key’s thrusts and arching his back to seek his own pleasure.

“Please. Need you.” Harley pulled Key on top of him, changing their angle enough that Harley’s cock was trapped between them.

“More,” Harley pleaded.

Key couldn’t resist. He worked his slick hand between their bodies and pulled on Harley’s cock, making him moan with need. Key loved that sound.

Only a few strokes more, and Harley tensed as he shot ropes of cum over his abdomen and Key’s. The sight of Harley

completely undone beneath him brought Key to the edge. He'd imagined this sight so many times, but having Harley beneath him was so much better than his paltry fantasies.

The squeeze of Harley's channel as his body shook in ecstasy sent Key over the precipice of his own orgasm. He let go, emptying himself into Harley and collapsing on top of him, boneless in his pleasure. Already, he knew it wouldn't be enough. He needed Harley every night if Harley would have him.

Key wanted to bite down, to bring Harley even more pleasure as their libidos cooled. He wouldn't, not yet. He needed Harley's consent, and soon. Empress Marcella could just as soon kill him as talk to him when she arrived.

Chapter 7

Harley

Harley felt completely sated and relaxed. It had been a long while since he'd felt so at ease. It helped that they were in his bed, not at the club.

Key cuddled up to his side, taking his nipple into his mouth and grazing it with a hint of fang. Harley didn't recognize the sound that came out of his own mouth, but it was more feline than human.

Key dropped his nipple and circled the pebbled flesh around it with his tongue.

"You didn't bite me." Harley had wanted it, waited for the added layer of pleasure.

"I wanted to talk about it first."

"If we talk about it in bed, I'm going to want a repeat of what we just did, plus a bite."

Key grinned. "Fair." He was out of bed and dressed in a flash.

Despite his disappointment, Harley had no choice but to follow his lead. He stopped Key at the door, holding it shut for the briefest moment so he could steal another kiss.

"You taste so good," Key said. "If you're not careful, I'll bite your lip again."

"Who says I want to be careful?"

"Fair enough. I like this daring side of you."

It was Harley's job as liaison to Empress Marcella to be precise and methodical in his research, but he wanted the freedom to be reckless with Key, as reckless as jumping on a giant coffin with a hole in the middle of it. Why stop there? Still, Key wanted to experiment with his bite, so Harley ushered him back to the living room.

Greed checked the time on her phone and flashed a wry grin. “Finished already?”

“Not quite.” Key laughed. “We’re moving from sexual to scientific experimentation.”

“We have a few hours before sunrise,” Greed said. “Might as well make the most of them, though I expected you to go at least two rounds first.”

“This is foreplay.” Key winked at Harley.

Harley’s knees felt weak as he approached the door to his study.

“It might help to have a more neutral location,” Key said. “I don’t want you to break anything valuable.”

“There’s not much to break in the dining room,” he suggested, “unless we toss the China cabinet.”

Key flashed another devilish grin. “As long as you don’t have the table set, the dishes will be fine.”

Key took the seat at the foot of the heirloom oak table, closest to the kitchen, and Harley moved a chair to sit near Key’s corner, so close their knees touched. Greed wandered over, too, sitting opposite Harley. He’d found her a pair of his old pajamas, the kind with a house coat over trousers long out of style. In them, she resembled a small child as she pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. The shirt was large enough she could have pulled it over her knees, and she’d rolled the pant legs.

Harley had been the only child of a widow, but he understood the familial bond between sister and brother. When Harley had left home to take his first job as a clerk, his uncle had given his mother room and board. He’d also defended Harley’s dear mother from his wife’s countless attacks.

Harley had never fully understood his auntie’s problem with his mother then, and he really couldn’t comprehend it now. Key loved his sister, and Harley knew he would never break that bond, nor did he desire to do so.

Greed was blunt and aggressive, but she seemed fiercely loyal to her brother. Granted, that was more in what Key had relayed about her than anything Harley had experienced, but he understood. Here he was, encroaching on her territory. She'd never had to share her brother with anyone before, and she probably hated him for it.

Now wasn't the time to wonder about family ties. This was an experiment, not a confessional. Greed was here to offer moral support, and Key looked like he needed it. His brow glistened with sweat as he took Harley's hand.

"First, I'm going to bite you without any toxin."

"Would you please take notes?" Harley asked Greed.

She held up her cell phone. "I'm recording and taking dictation. If you speak, we'll have it on record."

"Thank you."

She grinned and nodded. Harley was grateful for cell phones and every little application that prevented what had once taken hours and hours of work.

"Ready?" Key asked. He looked even more nervous after the interruption.

"Ready."

Key took Harley's left hand and bit down on the knuckle of his pinkie finger. Tiny drops of blood pooled when Key released his fangs. They dried immediately and healed before Harley said, "No effect."

Key grinned. "Good. Next, I'll give you the paralyzing bite. I'll try to keep it minimal, but you shouldn't be able to move for about thirty seconds."

"I'll time," Greed said.

Once the stopwatch application was ready, Key bit down on his ring finger this time, leaving the same tiny fang marks in his skin. Harley only knew that because he watched Key remove his fangs, helpless to do anything about it, even blink. This was different than the first bite Key had given him,

which had been full of both euphoria and fear. This bite had transferred no emotion, only paralyzing toxin.

The moment he could move his lips, he croaked, “It’s over.”

“Twenty-eight seconds,” Greed said. “That’s close.”

“You’ve been practicing this on other vampires?” Harley asked.

“No. I’ve been practicing on myself.” Key shrugged. “Greed’s immune, and Empress Marcella said she would kill me if she ever heard I was running around biting other vampires.”

Harley shivered. He had no way to keep Empress Marcella from knowing about these experiments. Key knew what he was doing, Harley tried to reassure himself. Still, he worried the empress would use his memories against Key.

“Next is the fear,” Greed said to break the prolonged silence.

Harley swallowed hard, trying to tamp down his very real, non-bite-inspired fear.

“This time, the fear and paralysis last two minutes, or so he says.” Greed shrugged. “Don’t wet yourself, okay?”

“I’ll be fine.” Harley tried to sound confident and failed. “This is what you did to me in New York.”

Key didn’t meet Harley’s gaze. “Not quite.”

Harley remembered what Key had said before. He hadn’t used his full force in New York. He’d wanted Harley to remember him.

Key bit his middle finger this time. Harley sensed his throat was dry, but he couldn’t move a muscle to swallow. The walls seemed to close in on him as they sat. He couldn’t move his head to see either sibling, but he was certain if he did, their sinister gazes would show they were plotting to end his life. He could no longer feel Key’s touch on his hand, and he wondered if Key had disappeared into his apartment to search for a silver weapon. There were several in his office, hidden

among the bookcases. He'd attached his favorite rapier to the bottom of his desk with Velcro. If Key found it and removed it from its sheath, Harley would be dead within seconds.

Finally, Harley could move his toes. He swallowed. "Time."

Greed nodded. "Just under two minutes. You didn't account for his age."

"You're older than Dobbins?" Key asked.

"Only by a decade or so."

"Why aren't you leading the council?" Greed leaned over the table with a dark scowl.

"Head Councilor Chloe is far older than I am, and my power lends itself to support, not leadership." He shrugged. "I'm Empress Marcella's liaison to the world council. That's enough for me."

"Dobbins isn't doing the tri-state area any favors with his side hustle," Key said.

"The empress found evidence he's deleted more than your witness statement," Harley shared. "I wish I'd heard more than rumors. I may not be the best person to protect you when the time comes, since I didn't know more about it."

"We'll tell her the truth," Key said, bringing Harley's hand to his chest and rubbing life back into the finger he bit. "That's all we can do." Harley jumped as Key's foot nudged his. "What do you remember about the bite?"

Harley tried to swallow the panic rising in his throat. He remembered Key's fangs sinking into his middle finger and the overwhelming sense of fear, but then, "Nothing." A feeling of dread washed over him. "I remember every moment I've been a vampire," he whispered. "How can you make me forget almost two minutes?"

"It gives us time to run away," Key said.

Harley couldn't shake the disconcerting feeling. He should remember everything.

“Don’t you have one more bite?” Greed asked.

Key’s eyelids slid shut and his thick eyelashes brushed his cheeks. When he opened his eyes again, they were dark with desire. “Do I have your consent to bring you pleasure?”

Harley scoffed to hide his inner turmoil. Memory loss did not sit well with him, if only for two minutes.

“Your sister was listening in when you last bit me,” he boasted. “How could this be any worse than that?”

Greed shook her head. “That wasn’t full potency. This is a bite, not a blowjob.”

Harley swallowed as he realized her meaning. Key’s bite might bring him to climax with no other contact while sitting at his dining room table. He didn’t think it was possible, but he also understood the importance of consent. Key was about to enthrall him with his bite.

“I consent.”

Key looked rapturous as he brought Harley’s index finger to his mouth. He kissed the knuckle before biting into it. The pleasure was instant, and everywhere. The bite had a direct line to Harley’s cock. It filled to achingly hard immediately, straining at the fabric of his dress pants and making him squirm. Fuck. All he needed was a little bit more friction, and he would—

A new sensation caught him as his nipples hardened against the fabric of his undershirt, the soft cotton brushing against them as he swayed in his chair. He could come from Key’s bite alone.

“Don’t fight it,” Key whispered. “We need an accurate time for an unsuspecting vampire.”

Harley roared as he came, his cock pulsing in his small clothes, his skin clammy with a sheen of sweat.

“Fifteen seconds.”

Fifteen seconds, and he’d been fighting it.

“You lasted longer than I did,” Key whispered. “The first time I did it, I came in five.”

Harley rested his head on top of his folded arms on the table. Fifteen seconds, and now he felt like he’d stepped in front of a tractor trailer. “I should get cleaned up before dawn.”

“Are you all right?” Greed asked. “I told him that one’s a bit much for a relative stranger, even though you’ve been bitten before.”

Harley didn’t know what he was. His memory had returned to perfect working order, though. He wouldn’t forget that bite as long as he lived.

“I’m so sorry.” Key stood and pulled Harley to his feet, wrapping an arm around his waist and ignoring the dark spot on his gray slacks.

Harley had the presence of mind to turn back to Greed once they were past the door, in the living room. “There’s another bathroom off the kitchen if you need to tidy up.”

“Thank you.” He’d expected her to scoff or sneer, but instead she met his gaze with newfound respect. He wasn’t sure he deserved it after failing the experiment so badly, but he would take it.

Key helped him to the ensuite bathroom. “Imagine if we’d started with that.”

Harley didn’t want to imagine. He wanted to lie down and sleep, and it was still an hour before dawn. A vampire his age should be able to stay up past sunrise, but now he wasn’t sure he would last until then.

Key was gentle with him, helping him out of his soiled clothes and setting the shower stream to an acceptable temperature before guiding Harley inside the stall. Harley still had enough energy to clean himself, but he felt drained in a way he hadn’t since he’d first been turned into a vampire.

“That bite is more devastating than the paralysis,” he said once he and Key were lying next to each other on the bed. The blackout shutters were permanently closed in his

bedroom. He'd always preferred a bed to a coffin. Maybe he was a crust, after all. He liked some human luxuries, like his king-sized bed and his high-definition television hanging on the opposite wall.

"If I overstepped when I bit you last night," Key whispered, "I'm sorry."

"It wasn't the same." Harley didn't know how to explain it. "Last night, you enhanced my own desires. This was more like forcing your desire into me, and it felt wrong."

"I'm so sorry." Key tucked against his side again, hand on his chest, head on his shoulder. "I'll never do that again."

Harley didn't have the heart to ask Key if he meant he wouldn't use his erotic bite on anyone else, or he'd only avoid it with him.

The next night, he woke from the dead before Key and Greed. By the time he extricated himself from the bed and wandered into the dining room, Greed stirred on the couch. Thankfully, he found the website he wanted on his phone with a single quick search.

"What do you and Ciarán usually order from Blood Drive?" he asked.

"I love anything infused with lavender." Once again, she reminded him of a child in oversized pajamas with her knees pulled up to her chest. "Key tries something new every night, so it's hard to say what he'd want. You can't go wrong with their daily specials, though."

The daily special was were-jaguar with a butterscotch infusion. He ordered one of those for Key and confirmed were-jaguar and lavender would work for Greed before placing his own order for human blood infused with cinnamon, his first attempt at something decadent.

"Thank you for letting us stay here," Greed whispered from her spot on the couch. Her voice was almost too low for him to hear her, but he caught her staring at him with wistful intent.

“The pleasure is all mine,” he said. “I’d never forgive myself if something had happened to you during the day while I could have prevented it.”

“Could he have trusted you with his secret back then?” she asked. “With me?”

Harley didn’t know how to answer that question. “Things were different back then. Humans didn’t know vampires existed, and we still needed to feed off them, willing or not. If Key would have told me about you, I would have tried to protect you.”

“You care about him.”

“Absolutely.” He caught the subtle downturn of her mouth. “I care about both of you. I didn’t know about you then, but I will do everything in my power to keep you together now.”

She snorted. “You don’t even know me.”

“I know him,” Harley said. “That’s enough.”

Her eyes brightened as much as they could without blood in her system, and she sniffled. “You’ll be good to him, won’t you?”

“As good as he’ll let me.”

She nodded. “This is my fault, but he never told me about you. He always wanted to protect me, when all I wanted was for him to be happy.”

“He hasn’t been happy?”

“He hasn’t been much of anything since the day his sire found him.” She met his gaze and smirked. “I remember the night we left New York, though. He was scared, yes, but he couldn’t stop humming. He’s been humming again, too.”

Harley wondered if they’d been humming the same song all these years, their last dance before they went into the New York night to enthrall humans.

“You make him happy,” she whispered. “I only wish he’d found you sooner.”

“It’s never too late.” He gave her what he hoped was his most reassuring smile, even as the knock at the door startled him half out of his wits. He raised his hands to protect his neck on instinct, though it was only the doorman with their delivered blood.

Chapter 8

Key

Key woke from his sleep of the dead in a strange bed, surrounded by cold blankets and pillows. In his own coffin, he slept with a heated and weighted blanket on a timer set to warm five minutes before dusk. It was ridiculous, yes, and Greed was certain he was going to start a fire, but she let him have his one luxury.

Harley whisked through the door a moment later with two steaming to-go cups that smelled divine. “Did you know Blood Drive delivers?” Harley handed him a cup of were-jaguar with a hint of butterscotch flavor.

“I did.” Greed had pointed to the sign when they’d first gone through the drive-through. “*Why wait for your first cup of the day? We deliver.*” They both had balked at the price hike, though, and decided they could wait and walk to get their fix on their way to work.

Now, it was a welcome surprise, as was the kiss Harley gave him when he handed him his cup.

“Thank you.”

“I didn’t want you to go to work without blood. You’ll need your strength if Dobbins shows up.”

Key propped a couple of Harley’s pillows behind his back and slid up to hunch over his cup of warm blood. Harley disappeared again, and Key didn’t wait for him to return. The blood enhanced his super speed. He dressed in the shirt and jeans he’d worn to work but dug a pair of Harley’s tight briefs from his dresser to replace his crusty boxers. He’d gotten a little too hot under the collar when he’d bitten Harley the last time. His bite didn’t have the same effect on him as it did on the recipient, but he had to be aroused to give it in the first place. Harley turned him on like no one else, which was probably why he’d been so thoroughly debauched in a matter of moments.

Harley's briefs were tight on Key. Coupled with the fact that they belonged to Harley, he was already semi-hard when he pulled on his jeans and walked to Harley's office, where he and Greed were studying an itinerary laid out on the middle computer screen.

"They can't have security in the haunted house." Greed pointed a lacquered nail at the notes section. "You and Harley will have to watch the back door."

"Who's watching the front?" Key asked.

"Someone I trust." Harley glanced at him over his shoulder. "Thornton. He's no friend of Dobbins's, at least."

"Good." Key took another long drink of blood, trying to drain his cup as fast as possible. He liked the mixture, but tonight wasn't about savoring his meal. They needed to move as fast as possible, so they could scope the alleys and exits before anyone else had a chance.

Key was surprised to find the deep purple light still in the sky. That meant he'd awakened the moment the sun went down. He wasn't a morning, or evening, person, so that was rare.

Greed scouted Fanglory's perimeter before they went in. Harley was older, but he admitted he was a bureaucrat, not a fighter. If they needed him to wield a pen for them, it would be mightier than the sword, but Greed's silver daggers in her boot sheathes had cut plenty of vampires down to size. She'd never killed, though. The punishment for killing another vampire was death.

The punishment for Key biting another vampire was also death. Empress Marcella's favorite sentence was yanking a vampire's heart out through their chest and stabbing it to ash with silver. There were so many ways the night could end badly for all three of them.

Key had to try, though. He had used his paralyzing bite on Dobbins to get Greed away from him. If he stopped trying, Dobbins would cage Greed for the next decade and take Key's paralyzing bite from her hide one cut at a time. Would she

have any mind left after that kind of agony, night after night? Key didn't want to find out. If they all ended up dead, it was a better punishment than what Dobbins had promised.

Inside, the club was thumping with bass from the huge subwoofers in every corner. The music was holiday themed, with songs like "Monster Mash," and "Bring me to Life," mixed in with the theme songs to *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family*. Greed already had a line halfway down the inner wall to the glory hole room. Not that they were late. Harley had gotten them to work a few minutes early, even with their extra security checks.

Key led Harley to the night's assignment boards. Instead of leading one of the attractions, Key was the night's inner door guard. That put him in the hallway from the haunted house exit to the bar. Instead of a pirate, the position required him to dress like stereotypical Dracula in a high-collar cape with red lining and wearing a tuxedo shirt and bowtie beneath it. He led Harley to the dressing room where most of the others had already donned their costumes and were putting finishing touches on their makeup.

"They're all human?" Harley asked.

"Seasonal workers usually are," Key replied. "The vampires work downstairs."

"You're a vampire." Harley's bemused frown melted Key's heart. He politely turned his back for the second it took Key to don his costume.

"I don't have the best job record," Key said when he was fully dressed and seated at the makeup counter. "Until I prove I'm dependable, I work up here. They only hired me because Greed gave me a good reference. This is a great place for vampires to work, if they'll keep me on."

Harley frowned and opened his mouth to argue, but Key's boss appeared out of nowhere. "You're with the council?" she asked Harley.

"I am."

“You can’t be here. We had an agreement. No security inside.”

“Do I look like security?” Harley scoffed.

“You look like trouble,” she said, giving him a once-over. “You’ll stay with Key?”

“Yes.”

“If I see you downstairs, you’ll be escorted out.”

“Understood.” Harley dropped his head in a slight bow.

Her expression softened as she met Key’s gaze in the mirror. “I put Key upstairs to keep him safe. I would have tucked Greed away, too, if she’d let me. Every vampire in Boston is here tonight. It’s too hard to keep track of everyone.” She patted Key’s shoulder. “Good luck.”

Key focused on his makeup to calm his nerves. He layered on the foundation that looked like whitewash and then applied thick black mascara and eyeliner to emphasize his eyes. Harley couldn’t look away when he was finished. Too bad the effect would be lost in the dimly lit hallway.

“This is it?” Harley asked when they arrived. The only light was the red exit sign above them. A large sign on the door they’d come through read, “No entrance unless you are over twenty-one and already have a wristband.”

Key assumed his usual position, standing off to the side of the podium and resting his elbow on the slanted wood top.

“Is that thing hollow?” Harley’s wicked grin was amplified by the red light.

“So?”

“We could have some fun while we wait.”

Key was surprised to find Harley on his knees, searching the inside of the podium. He dusted a few spiderwebs from its depths with his pocket handkerchief, because of course he had a pocket handkerchief. Then, he slid inside, facing out.

“What are you waiting for?”

“You can’t be serious,” Key said.

“I haven’t tasted you yet.”

The thought of Harley’s mouth on him while anyone could walk up and present a wristband had Key aching in his borrowed briefs.

Key stepped in front of the podium as though he was giving a speech to the vacant hallway. Harley fumbled at his waistband, at last finding the button and pulling down his zipper.

Harley inhaled and uttered a rapturous sigh. “You’re wearing my underwear.”

“I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Not at all, though I must ask, who’s doing the seducing here, me or you?”

Key’s laugh turned into a moan as Harley licked a stripe up the gland along the underside of his cock. “You don’t need to seduce me.”

Harley hollowed his cheeks and slid over Key’s cock. Thanks to the blood he’d drunk earlier, the inside of his mouth was warm and wet. Harley’s throat clenched around him, and Key grabbed onto the podium with a whine. He didn’t want something so heavenly to end too soon.

Harley twirled his tongue around Key’s cock and then pulled off it with enough suction to make a popping sound. “Do you want me as much as I want you?” His voice was gruff with need, and Key smelled his desire wafting from the tiny enclosure.

Gods, yes, Key wanted, but he couldn’t find words.

Harley returned to his cock, and a loud cacophony filled the hallway. It sounded like teenagers. Thankfully, they pushed on the outside exit door without looking Key’s direction. The noise subsided until the door shut behind them, leaving them in silence except for Harley’s slurping sounds.

When Key was certain no one else would walk in on them, he relaxed into the feel of Harley's mouth and the gentle pressure of fingers massaging his balls. Before he knew it, he was coming, shooting his spend down Harley's throat, giving him the bit of essence his body still made after so many years of being undead.

"Delicious." Harley kissed the tip of his cock before tucking him carefully inside and zipping and buttoning his pants.

"Thank you." Key's voice was hoarse as he backed up against the wall, giving Harley enough room to crawl from beneath the podium. He crushed their mouths together and turned them so he could pin Harley against the wall. Harley still tasted like Key mixed with human blood and cinnamon. Key found Harley's preference for human blood charming.

"Harley, come in." From their proximity and supernatural hearing, they both heard the tinny voice through Harley's earpiece.

He tapped his ear. "I'm here."

"There's been an incident." Key recognized Thornton's voice from the briefing they'd received outside the club. "Greed went outside for a smoke break, and we lost sight of her."

"Greed doesn't smoke." Fear lanced through Key's gut. Had they missed a chance to stop Dobbins while they'd been fooling around?

No. He couldn't think like that. His manager had been ready to kick Harley out of the club if he ventured downstairs, and Greed hadn't come upstairs before undertaking her foolhardy plan, whatever it was.

"Who was she with?" Harley asked.

"We didn't see anyone."

"Someone could have approached her inside, maybe threatened your life," Harley whispered to Key. "Which direction did they go?"

“I think we all know where they’re headed.” There was some clicking through the earpiece, and then Harley’s cell phone pinged with a notification. “I sent you the address. Dobbins owns a warehouse on the Harbor.”

Harley touched his earpiece again. Then, he searched for the address on his map application.

“I’ve been there,” Key said. “That’s where he took her before.” He hoped they found her alive. After everything he’d done to protect Greed, he couldn’t lose her now.

Key ventured out the door to the catwalk above the bar, but his manager caught his attention from the dance floor and motioned him back the way he’d come. He hoped her pantomime of shooing meant he was free to leave, not that he should go back to his station. Thankfully, Greed’s friend Karol headed up the stairway to them.

“I’m to take your place. Go get her.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ve had enough of Dobbins around here, no offense councilor.”

“None taken,” Harley said. There was a hint of worry in his gaze when he glanced at Key.

Key had no time to reassure him. He rushed down the hallway and to the street below in record time, not caring if there were humans on the stairs. Thankfully, the only human in the alley was passed out beside the dumpster.

At the curb, a large windowless van waited for them. A vampire dressed in full tactical gear opened the sliding door for them and Harley jumped in. Key was a little hesitant to follow, but he recognized Missy, another of the victims he’d freed when he’d rescued Greed from Dobbins’s warehouse. In Kevlar and resting a crossbow on her knee, she looked much more prepared for this meeting with Dobbins.

“Good to see you,” Key said to her as he took a seat beside Harley.

“I’m sorry Greed slipped away on us,” she said. “She led him away on purpose, probably saving every person in Fanglory tonight. I love her for that.”

Key wished he had the same faith. Sometimes, Greed was foolhardy and a little too independent. He hoped she was still alive when they found her. He also wished he didn’t freeze with fear every time he considered the possibility she might be dead.

Chapter 9

Harley

The warehouse was everything Harley had expected from the location on the map. They were in an old section of the harbor, and if the building was two centuries old, it was probably closer to three.

Key and Missy shared their knowledge of the building with the tactical team on the ride there. Instead of pulling up to the front, they skirted the building through an alley and parked by a walk-in door that had recently been kicked in. It had been boarded up from the inside, but a vampire could easily kick it in again, if it wasn't reinforced with something more solid on the other side. A tactical soldier measured it using advanced echolocation, his vampire gift, and determined there was nothing on the other side. Another soldier kicked in the door, and they darted through the opening.

On the van ride to the docks, Harley had savored the taste of Key's spend on his lips, along with the lovely taste of his were-jaguar kisses. He immediately regretted it as the smell of vampire blood overwhelmed him.

The scent permeated from every surface, even the ones that looked clean. Automotive tools lay discarded on the floor, immobile without their air hoses. Some had been dipped in gore so thoroughly they must have clogged and stopped working.

Key followed the haphazard casting of tools, nose to the air as though searching for his sister's scent.

Harley caught a hint of it, though old, probably from when Key had rescued her the first time. Harley couldn't believe Dobbins was foolish enough to bring her here a second time. He must have known by now that Empress Marcella was on her way. The gig was up.

Harley knew little about Dobbins, though. His primary contact with the council was their leader, a vampire who only

went by her first name, Chloe. Dobbins was younger than Harley, and they'd traveled in different social circles. For the most part, Dobbins kept to himself during council meetings. He lived somewhere near the docks, while Harley and the other council members lived in the same building near the courthouse.

Harley recognized Chloe's scent, fresh and bright, when he stepped further into the shadows. She'd claimed ignorance when he'd asked her about Dobbins, but Harley shivered and the hairs at his nape stood on end as he reconsidered the lie. Was she in on his torture operation? Her scent was everywhere in the building, from the tools to the benches.

Harley was startled from his thoughts about the council's involvement when Key called him over to a mess of innards and a very dead vampire corpse. "Do you recognize her?"

"Head Councilor Chloe." Harley sighed. He'd let his thoughts of conspiracy cloud the fact that the most prominent smell in the room was fresh vampire blood. "That changes things a bit."

"With her gone, who's in charge?" Key asked.

"No one until Empress Marcella arrives."

Key snorted. "You all don't have a chain of command for emergencies?"

"Don't be alarmed, little pet."

Key shuddered, even as he pushed Harley behind him. He'd put himself between Harley and danger, though Harley was older and better able to deal with the predator.

"I am in charge here." Dobbins's raspy tenor was unmistakable. "That was never in question. Councilor Chloe tried to bring me in for questioning, but that bitch Marcella can come get me if she wants me so badly."

"Empress Marcella knows we're here," Key challenged. "It's only a matter of getting her off her plane and into a limousine."

“That won’t save your sister, though, pet.”

Key took a step back and bumped into Harley. He was shaking. “I’ll trade,” he said. “Her for me.”

Dobbins stepped into the halo of the building’s reserve lighting, a single bulb high overhead. His face looked wan and more sunken than usual. He looked like a vampire in need of the night’s fresh blood, but he held Greed tight to his chest despite her struggling, which indicated he’d had some kind of sustenance. He shoved her before him like a rag doll.

“I want you both,” Dobbins said. “You’ve had a taste of me. Now I want to taste you, to see if your power would transfer to me.”

“Leech.” Key said the word like a swear.

“You have your gifts, and I have mine.”

Leeches could steal power from other vampires. They woke from their first death with only the natural speed, strength, and senses of a predator, but they could drink the blood of another vampire and gain their special ability, like Harley’s eidetic memory or Key’s paralyzing bite. Greed’s must have been enhanced healing. The way she struggled should have pulled both of her shoulders out of their sockets by now, but she looked no worse for wear, other than a few strands of hair out of place.

“If you don’t come willingly, I’ll start hurting her. I know how well you handle it when I hurt her.”

“I have an idea,” Key whispered. “Don’t move.”

Harley stood glued to the spot, unable to leave even if he’d wanted to. Perhaps Dobbins had some extra power of his own. He’d reduced Harley to a puddle of fear in his own skin. He was grateful he’d only had part of his twenty-ounce drink before they’d left for the club. If he’d had more, it might have run down his leg under such horrific circumstances.

“I’m coming to you, okay? Let Greed go.”

“You know I can’t do that. I can let the empress’s scum run away if he wants.” Dobbins pointed at Harley. “See him?”

He wants. I'm holding him glued to that spot right now. Do you see what's above him, my pet?"

Harley had just enough range of motion in his neck to look up. Fuck. He stood in the shadow of a shipping container suspended from the building's ceiling by chains. Even if it was empty, the container and gravity would be enough to flatten him like a pancake.

"One wrong move from you, and oops, Harley won't be participating in tonight's festivities. Or you can give me your blood like a good pet, and I'll let him go."

"Let him go." Key said the words through clenched teeth.

"I knew you would be reasonable." Key was close enough for Dobbins to touch him, so he did, caressing his cheek and pulling him in to his side. He bit into Key's neck, and his eyes slid closed, releasing Harley from his prison.

Harley ran as far and as fast as he could. Though he wanted to turn back toward Key, Dobbins's compulsion pushed him out into the night.

Chapter 10

Key

“Your blood is almost as intoxicating as your sister’s,” Dobbins said. “She’s become a bothersome pain in my arse. It will be nice to be able to control her with your paralysis.”

Key met Greed’s gaze and gave a slight nod. He hoped she understood.

Dobbins bit into her neck, and she went limp in his arms. She did so well, Key almost thought Dobbins had paralyzed her, until she brought her hands up to his jaw and snapped his neck. The action ripped two long cuts in her jugular, but they would heal.

Key had to catch up with Harley. He gathered Greed in a fireman’s carry and ran, skirting around the shipping container as it crashed to the ground. Now out of sight behind the crumpled container, Dobbins groaned. Usually, a vampire would be out for a few minutes after a neck break like that, but he had Greed’s blood in his system. She healed everything in half the time it took Key. Even now, her jugular had completely healed over like she’d never been bitten.

They reached the outside door, but it was like hitting a physical wall. Key had felt that presence before, shutting down his internal thoughts as fingers seemed to rifle through file folders inside his head. The presence found and watched select memories from the past thirty days.

One moment, Key could have sworn he was standing at the door, staring at the empty concrete parking lot and the dark water beyond. The next moment, he was backed up against the crumpled shipping container in almost the same spot where he and Harley had first confronted Dobbins. Harley lay motionless on the ground beside him, and Greed stood with one hand resting on the container, the other rubbing the back of her neck.

“He’ll be all right in a moment.” Empress Marcella’s voice seemed to fill his head and the entire room. *“I broke his neck to remove the fear gaze this one put on him. If I hadn’t, he’d have run until he met the sun or the ocean. He’d been headed west, and Harley is not strong enough to outrun the dawn, even with a two-hour head start.”*

“Thank you,” Key mumbled.

“Do not thank me yet.” Empress Marcella’s sharp tone made his ears ring, even though it had come from inside his head.

She wore the same tactical gear as the local council’s guards. Key had never seen her in anything other than evening wear. This made her look scarier by far. She could already kill in a flash. Now, she could kill from a distance, with all the projectile silver strapped to her body.

Thankfully, she’d turned her withering gaze on Dobbins. “You dared to hurt my Harley.”

“I didn’t hurt him. I merely made a fear suggestion.” Dobbins’s excuses sounded like those from a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Harley spent a year with me in Rome.” She paused and stared at him with unblinking eyes until he flinched. “He is very special to me.”

Key hadn’t known Harley was “special” to the empress. He supposed he should have guessed, since he was her liaison to the eastern regions, but he’d assumed that was due to Harley’s vampire gift. Harley didn’t seem the type to be the empress’s pet.

“Who I declare special is none of your business.” Once again, her voice drowned out all other noise.

“We heard it was a punishment.” Dobbins stumbled over the word, repeating consonants. Either from the way Dobbins spoke or the residual ringing in his head, Key found it hard to understand him.

Empress Marcella laughed, and there wasn’t a hint of joy in it. She had the cruelest laugh Key had heard in his life.

He was glad it wasn't directed at him this time. "If I'd wanted to punish him, he would still be there."

She moved faster than Key could see. One moment she stood in front of Dobbins, and the next she was behind him, her hands at his throat. She didn't snap his neck the way Greed had. She merely held him there, her nose to his jugular as though she could smell the affliction that made him torture his own kind.

"You've drunk a lot of vampire blood tonight. You stole the fear essence from your head councilor, and then you killed her. You've also tasted Ciarán's blood," she seemed to gaze through him, and he felt her in his thoughts again. He offered up the memory she wanted, of when Dobbins bit Greed. "He is the only one who can wield it." She spoke his thought aloud.

Her voice echoed in his head. *"I will need your full report after I kill this disgrace."*

Empress Marcella walked back around Dobbins, keeping a hand on his neck. Key wondered if the physical touch enhanced her mind control over him. He was no longer sniveling. He stood as still as the dead, his eyes staring at nothing but the shipping container.

"For the crime of killing my head councilor, endangering my liaison, torturing countless vampires in your community, and drinking vampire blood to enhance your own abilities, I sentence you to death. Does anyone here object?"

Greed hugged her arms to her chest and looked down at the warehouse floor. Harley stared up at Key, unblinking. He was better than before but not quite himself. Key didn't know if Empress Marcella was holding him in stasis or if he hadn't recovered from Dobbins's attack yet.

Key returned his gaze to Empress Marcella, who seemed to wait for his objection. He dared her to read his thoughts again. He absolutely did not care what happened to Dobbins, so long as he never hurt Greed or Harley again.

She nodded. “We are all in agreement. You have betrayed your own kind.”

Before she’d stopped speaking, she had already punched through Dobbins’s chest cavity and pulled out his heart. She held it up to his face while he was still standing, and she released whatever hold she had on his mind to let him scream in fear and agony.

Key wasn’t sure which dagger she’d pulled from her arsenal. It materialized in her hand as though it had always been there, and then she stabbed it through the heart muscle. After she’d destroyed it, she held the silver blade to flesh until it smoked and caught fire. Then, she dropped it to the floor where it flared like paper, incinerated the meat, and burned out. Dobbins’s body fell dead at her feet.

Empress Marcella crushed the ash beneath the toe of her combat boot. “Harley, it’s time to wake up. I need you.”

He rose as if on strings, one moment lying on the ground at Key’s feet, the next standing on his own, his back to Key as he stiff legged his way to Empress Marcella.

“Where can we stay for the day?” she asked.

“There is a guest suite at our building, Empress.”

“Fabulous. Ciarán and Margaret, I’ve spoken to your supervisors at,” Key felt the shuffling through his mind again, “Fanglory. They are aware that Margaret was abducted tonight and will need a few nights off to recover if she returns at all. Ciarán, your trial begins after sundown tomorrow evening at the courthouse.”

“Wait. My what?”

“You didn’t think you could bite my liaison and get away with it, did you?” She smiled at him, but it didn’t reach her dead eyes. Every time Key tried to commit her physical appearance to memory, the thought slipped away in a whisp of color. Sharp fangs and dead eyes were all he could see.

“You also bit Dobbins,” she said. “I’m giving you a chance to explain yourself, which is honestly more than you deserve. You disobeyed my direct order.”

Greed bowed her head to Empress Marcella. She still looked terrified, but as they cleared the room, she kicked Dobbins's dead body hard enough to leave a sizable dent in the side of the shipping container.

The empress looked back over her shoulder and grinned. "I like your spunk, little one. Walk with me."

Greed caught up to her. If Key knew anything about his little sister, he knew she could hold her own with the empress.

Key turned to find Harley by his side. They had to step aside as more vampires dressed as paramedics rushed into the room with a body bag and a stretcher. The morning news would report a stabbing at the warehouse overnight with one fatality to cover their tracks in case anyone saw something suspicious. By the time the evening news rolled around, the story would be long forgotten.

Key didn't care what Empress Marcella's people said about Dobbins's death. He was far more invested in surviving his own trial.

Chapter 11

Harley

It was almost dawn when they finally returned to Harley's apartment. Greed zipped into and out of the guest bathroom so fast Harley had to wonder if the water he'd heard running for a split second made contact with her body before she shut it off again. He handed Key another pair of pajama pants to put on while he took his own pair to the master bathroom to change and brush his teeth.

When he returned to the bedroom, Key was already sprawled across the top of the comforter on his back. He stared up at the ceiling as though it held the answer to his question, if only he could find it hidden in the popcorn stucco bumps.

Harley lay on his side of the bed and stared up. Instead of finding answers, he noticed some dusty cobwebs.

"This could be the last night we spend together, and it's already dawn." Key yawned to accentuate how tired he was.

They both were. Being mind-fucked, first by Dobbins and then by Empress Marcella, had resulted in the worst headache Harley had experienced since he'd left Rome. He'd been wrong to imagine Empress Marcella could no longer infiltrate his mind. She'd dropped her claim to him as her servant, but she didn't need his permission to rifle through his thoughts. At first, she'd sought evidence against Dobbins, but then she'd found Harley's new feelings for Key, and she'd refused to let go.

"Empress Marcella is fair." If Harley told himself that lie enough times, he might believe it. She was fickle at best, and sometimes she was a complete bitch for no other reason than she couldn't have what she wanted. She'd desired her sire's other progeny, a vampire named Flavius, but he'd refused her marriage proposal. Flavius still lived, and they had called a truce after the Earth Day Massacre, but if Harley

knew anything about Empress Marcella, it was that she could carry a grudge.

“She wants you.” Key wore a pair of Harley’s sleep pants, white with black slices of pizza, a food that Harley wished was around when he was still human. Harley wore a similar pair, his black with white triangles. He thought it a fitting representation of who they were to each other, opposites in some ways while similar in others.

“She wants both of us,” Harley said. “She can already control me with her mind and our shared time together. If you allow her to control your bite, you will cease to be a threat to her.”

“And if I don’t want her in my head or using me to bite her enemies?”

“She will kill you so no one else can have you.”

It was as simple as that, but it sounded so much worse when spoken aloud. Harley’s feelings, the ones Empress Marcella had been stirring and poking in his mind, rose to the surface and his heart seized in his chest. He needed Key to live. It was too early to call those feelings love, but he didn’t want to return to being hopelessly alone, certain he would never find a companion besides Ithande, his lovely neighbor who spent most of the night asleep.

He didn’t yet know how much he and Key had in common besides Empress Marcella’s interest, but he wanted to learn their similarities and differences by his own trial and error, not from the empress’s narrative.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Key asked. He’d been on his back when Harley had last noticed, but now he lay on his side with his head propped up on his elbow, studying Harley with concern.

“Thinking about tonight. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t.” Key sighed. “I don’t like the idea of anyone controlling me, but she’s the most powerful vampire in the world. If she controls you, she can have me, as long as we

can be together. You are loyal to her, and I would do anything for you.”

As much as Harley wanted to hear those words from Key’s mouth, he despised being the cause of Key’s loyalty to Empress Marcella. He still wondered if he would have made the same decision, had he been given his own free will before the empress had sapped it from him.

He didn’t want to speak on it, not when they were both tired. Instead, he drew Key’s head to his shoulder and enjoyed his presence, even after Key’s soul fled with the dawn and his skin cooled. Harley took comfort in knowing their souls would return that night, and they would still be together.

If only they could survive Empress Marcella’s trial intact.

Chapter 12

Key

Key woke alone in Harley's bed again. The older vampire was already up and dressed, with a suit laid out at the bottom of his bed. It looked like it had been made to fit Key, much like the new suit Harley wore when he returned.

"The empress sent them." Harley completed his look with a touch of gel to slick his hair back over his ears. "Greed's already dressed. Are you coming?"

After a quick shower, Key slipped into the new clothes and met them in the living room. He'd never worn a bespoke suit before. It chafed and made him feel completely naked at the same time. Greed looked equally uncomfortable in a dress with a V-neck that dipped almost to her waist. She tried crossing her arms over her chest and almost popped out of it.

Harley tossed him a roll of double-sided tape. "Help your sister. Blood Drive called and said our order was ready for pickup."

More of Empress Marcella's doing, Key was certain.

Harley left Key and Greed alone in his apartment with the strict orders to stay until he returned, but Empress Marcella herself arrived shortly after he left. Even Harley would understand their need to obey when she demanded they ride with her to the courthouse in a bulletproof SUV. The speed-walk down the stairs was almost as quick as the ride to the building. They pulled up to the front doors within a minute. Even the wait for the security detail to surround them took longer than the car ride.

This was Key's second trip to Boston's vampire courthouse. He hadn't made it past the front desk when he'd filed his complaint against Dobbins. Now, he got a closer look as Empress Marcella's security guards checked every alcove and potted plant before allowing her to take a step.

To the outside world, it was a nondescript historical building in the colonial brick style, but inside, it was all marble floors, wood paneling, high ceilings, and modern art. Key didn't know the first thing about the paintings and sculptures scattered around the building's first and second floors. The more confusing it looked, the more expensive it probably was, and these pieces were all very confusing.

They filed into a courtroom on the second floor. Unlike the giant halls they passed on the first floor, this one had a smaller judge's bench and only three rows of ten seats for the audience. Key didn't recognize anyone in the first row of seats, but he guessed they were council members.

The second row was empty, but when Key tried to take a seat there, Empress Marcella shoved him toward the defendant's bench. "You need to answer for your actions. I'm not saying it's a crime. Yet."

She stepped toward the prosecutor's bench and motioned for Greed to join him. His sister gave him a slight shrug and took the seat next to him. She didn't know what was happening, either. Fortunately, they'd figured out the tape, so her dress stayed firmly in place with all her slouching and shrugging.

"What are we being accused of, exactly?" Key asked.

"We'll begin when Harley arrives. We all need blood for this."

"Is Harley on trial, too?"

"He's here." Empress Marcella rose from her seat at the prosecutor's bench and turned toward the back of the room, as did everyone seated behind them. Key stood, too, and turned his body. It all seemed surreal, as though they were all at a vampire wedding, waiting for the bride to appear.

Key couldn't shake the feeling of marital bliss. As soon as Harley stepped into view, Key's heart lifted, and he grinned so wide his lips ached. He hadn't yet had blood for the evening, so his body was parched and freezing. Thankfully, that meant no accidental boners, either.

That was all about to change, though. Harley had two carafes of to-go blood from Blood Drive and handed out paper cups to any who wanted some. When he reached Key and Greed, Empress Marcella frowned until they both not only took a cup but also downed half the contents.

Satisfied, she turned to Harley. “Sit with me, won’t you?” She motioned to the seat remaining at her table.

Harley met his gaze and gave him an encouraging nod from across the aisle.

Empress Marcella remained standing and moved to the center of the room before the judge’s bench. “It’s the head councilor’s job to oversee these proceedings, but Boston’s head councilor was murdered last night. Our first order of business is to vote on a new leader. If you think of the leader you’d prefer, I will read your minds and tally the votes.”

Key almost laughed out loud at the creepiness factor. For once, he was grateful he wasn’t higher up the vampire food chain. He and Greed didn’t get a vote, which meant Empress Marcella kept her claws out of their brains.

“Councilor Adelaide Newton, you will be my head representative in Boston, overseeing the northeastern quadrant of the United States. Please come forward and take your seat at the judge’s bench.”

A dark-skinned vampire wearing a maroon suit with a pencil skirt and a double-breasted jacket over a cream silk blouse, daring even in the age of to-go blood cups, stepped up to the judge’s seat behind the bench. In a blur, the empress approached the bench, said some words, and skated back to take her seat.

The new head councilor cleared her throat. “We are here tonight to discuss the right of the vampire siblings Ciarán and Margaret O’Shea to live on their own without council supervision in Boston.”

“What?” Greed started to rise from her seat, but Key shoved her back into it.

“Our first witness is our Empress Marcella.” The high councilor started rattling off titles, but the empress silenced her with a head shake, and possibly an inner monologue.

Empress Marcella took the stand. Key wanted to argue that this was a farce, but he kept his mouth shut. He wouldn't know the full brunt of the case against them until she spoke.

“I will relay the facts as I see them,” she said as she stared at Key. “Ciarán came to our attention when he bit his sire and fled her Midtown Manhattan residence in the early nineteen hundreds. He was less than a year turned and already able to flee a century-old vampire.”

She shifted her gaze to Harley. “I sailed to New York. I'd never been, and the vampires in the new world had a reputation for being unruly, even after I trained Harley and sent him to Boston.”

She sighed. “I wanted to change that. I intended to kill Ciarán myself, since he was sired without permission, but he bit me the same way he'd bitten his sire, and ...” She paused so long the vampires behind Key began to fidget. “I don't remember what happened after that. When my thoughts returned, I was still on my feet, and Ciarán was between two of my guards. They held him and waited for my response on what to do with him.”

She frowned, and her eyes narrowed to slits. “I still don't know what to do with him. I told him never to bite another vampire, but then I learned he's been conducting experiments on Harley, my liaison. I feared he would be able to pass his gift to one like Dobbins, who could steal other vampires' powers, but that doesn't appear to be the case. Harley also shared Ciarán can control his bite so that it doesn't always paralyze in fear. It can also bring ... pleasure.”

Her eyes seemed to bore holes through Key's heart as it hammered in his throat. “Did you beguile my liaison against his will?”

“Empress Marcella, that's absurd!” Harley was fully out of his seat before the guard behind him pushed him down by his shoulders.

“Is it?” Her gaze never left Key’s. “You asked about Harley when last we met. I helped you break your sire bond over your sister, and this is how you repay me?”

“It wasn’t like that,” Key said.

“How was it, then?”

“You introduced Harley to me in New York, before I turned Greed. I liked him then, but I knew we couldn’t be together. He’d learn about my sister, or she’d find out about him, and I didn’t want that added secrecy. Her life was hard enough.”

He glanced at Greed, and she grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

“You’d thrown me to the wolves with that celebration. You said I would either learn to enthrall humans without a seductive bite or I would starve. I couldn’t starve, because that meant Greed would starve, so I persevered.”

“I knew you would,” Empress Marcella said. “That’s why I didn’t kill you outright when you begged permission to turn her.”

“I didn’t know turning her would ... I didn’t know about the sire bond.”

“Your sister’s bite isn’t like yours,” Empress Marcella said, more for the court than for Key’s or Greed’s sake.

“She’s got the usual vampire bite that gives humans bliss and makes them forget all about us, yes.”

“You hunt together?”

“We did. We don’t hunt any more. We buy blood in paper cups from a drive-through chain.”

Empress Marcella nodded. “As do we all. The benefits of modern technology.”

Tell me why you bit Harley and I will end this farce of a trial. She was inside his head again, digging through his recent memories, back to the night he’d smelled Harley on the wind and led him to Fanglory.

“I bit Harley because I needed to taste him again. I bit him in New York and left him on a street corner at dawn. I wanted him to know my bite didn’t always bring fear. I can give him pleasure without the fear.” He swallowed around the lump in his throat. “It’s not enough to overcome what I did then, and I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make up for it. I want to spend more time with him, if he’ll have me.” Thanks to the fresh blood Key had drunk, beads of sweat formed on his forehead.

“Interesting.” Empress Marcella shifted her gaze to Harley. She then turned to Key and said the words he’d never wanted to hear. “Bite him again. Show me you can control it.”

“I promised him I wouldn’t, not without his consent.”

Before Empress Marcella could open her mouth to rebuke him, Harley said, “I give it.”

“You know what she’s asking,” Key said. “In front of all of them.”

Harley nodded. “I’d still give it, if it means I can take you home at the end of the day.”

Empress Marcella grinned. “Perfect. Let’s take a five-minute recess, and then we can begin.”

They were the longest five minutes of Key’s life. He watched as Harley traded places with the empress and took the stand beside the new head councilor.

“I call this court to order,” Empress Marcella said when the five minutes were up. “Ciarán, you may bite him.”

Key rose from his seat. Every step was agony as he neared the tall box from which Harley peered down at him. He climbed the stairs to the witness platform as though he were on his way to the hangman’s noose.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered as he kneeled by Harley’s side and brought his hand to his lips.

“That’s enough.” The empress’s voice boomed off the walls in the small room.

Key hopped to his feet and turned to stare at her.

She put her hands together in a slow clap and raised her hands for the rest of the courtroom to clap, too.

“Ciarán O’Shea is acquitted of all charges.”

Key slumped forward in relief with his head in Harley’s lap.

“What charges, exactly?” Greed asked. “You never said.”

Key’s head snapped back up at his sister’s challenging tone.

Empress Marcella motioned for him and Harley to return to their seats with a smile that displayed her fangs.

In a heartbeat, Key sank back into the uncomfortable slatted chair beside Greed. Instead of sitting across the aisle, Harley stood behind him with both hands on his shoulders.

“I was unable to find suitable answers in Ciarán’s memory as to whether he could bewitch a vampire with his bite. He has bitten me, after all. Perhaps he could still control me after all this time.” She snorted. “I admit, I was intrigued enough to come to Boston, which seemed highly out of character. I questioned my own autonomy on the matter.”

Oh, fuck. Key had made Empress Marcella think he could beguile her into acting on his behalf. If only he could, but that hadn’t been his experience.

“I know that now, thanks to your overwhelming anxiety for Harley.” This time, she didn’t show as much fang and looked more human when she smiled.

She resumed her speech to the rest of the council. “I had to know if he could keep me from those memories by force, or perhaps they didn’t exist. It seems they didn’t exist. Ciarán’s bite is a formidable weapon when we need to subdue other vampires, but it only works in the moment. There are no lasting effects.”

“Correct,” Key felt compelled to add, thanks to Empress Marcella’s overwhelming force in his head. “I am

unable to influence another vampire beyond the initial effects of the bite.”

“And Greed?” Harley asked.

“Margaret’s bite is unlike Ciarán’s, as I mentioned. She is also free to go.”

“It’s a good thing they’re on our side,” Head Councilor Newton said. She swept a gavel off the judge’s bench and banged it twice. “Court dismissed.”

Chapter 13

Harley

“What just happened?” Harley asked Empress Marcella as the rest of the council vanished at high speed as though the room was on fire.

She grinned at him. “Ciarán’s bite can’t coerce vampires to do his bidding after the fact,” she said. “That was the purpose of this trial.”

“This was all a test?” Harley was angrier than he’d ever thought possible at his empress.

“Ciarán bit me in New York,” she explained. “If he had the power to coerce or control after the fact, he may have been able to control me now. For instance, if he were worried about his own life, he might have coerced you to harm me. Instead, his every thought was begging you to forgive him. He didn’t want to bite you again, but he did nothing to save himself, or you.”

She turned to Key. “Still, you have a unique gift, and we would like to keep it close to our council. That was my purpose for including them in our discussion. Some might still fear you, but I agree with Councilor Newton, it is good to have you on our side.”

Councilor Newton approached them with a bow of her head. “We have some new positions available. Two recently vacated seats on the council. Are you interested?”

“Me?” Key looked like he’d rather be anywhere else, discussing anything else.

“You, and Margaret,” Empress Marcella said. “Once you’ve been trained, there’s not much to the job. Harley watches four screens of reality television while claiming to do his work.”

Harley hoped he looked outraged, but he said nothing. She wasn’t wrong.

“Did you think we didn’t monitor your activity?” She arched an eyebrow at him and shook her head. “Dobbins did absolutely nothing except look for new victims, and Chloe helped him cover it up. She also kept it from you, Harley.”

She glanced at Key and then met Greed’s gaze. “I trust you’ll search for any like-minded vampires in the area and deal with them the way I dealt with Dobbins, yes?”

“I would love to.” Greed hopped over the defense’s table and offered her hand to Empress Marcella. “I remember their scents and faces. I’ll track them down for you.”

“Thank you.” Empress Marcella looked to Key again. “Ciarán?”

Key met Harley’s gaze for a moment, and Harley hoped Key recognized his desire. They would be able to spend more time together, if not in the same apartment, at least in the same building as they got to know each other better.

“Yes,” Key said. “I’ll help Greed bring them to justice, and Harley can keep us abreast of additional issues in the area.”

The heat in Key’s gaze burned through Harley, making him feel flushed with the fresh blood in his system. They were too far apart. Harley wanted to kiss him, but now was not the time.

Empress Marcella clapped her hands twice, drawing their attention back to her. “Fantastic news. I feel much better leaving this part of the US in your capable hands. I’ll be returning to the airport immediately. The jet can make it to London before sunrise.”

“You’re leaving already?” Councilor Newton asked.

“I will check in with Harley once I return home,” Empress Marcella said. “We’ll have the other apartments cleared for you as soon as possible. Head Councilor Newton, you’re responsible for the clean-up.”

Councilor Newton nodded.

“Until then, you all have the night off. Enjoy yourselves.”

Harley knew what he wanted to do with the rest of the night. He only hoped Key was as willing.

They chose to walk back to the apartment building, which turned into a race between Key and Greed to see who was faster. Harley beat them both by several feet and swore they both touched his outstretched hands at the same time. They rushed to the stairwell the moment Harley let them through the door.

Harley took an extra moment to sign them in on the guest list and explained to the guard they would move in shortly. Head Councilor Newton had already made the guard aware. Harley looked forward to having her in charge. He'd been responsible for much of the day-to-day management of the apartment building, thanks to Chloe's delegation. Councilor Newton's sudden interest was refreshing. If he had only his own duties to complete from now on, he would have more time to spend with Key.

The siblings waited for him at the top of the stairs, both looking like he'd caught them whispering. He'd been too preoccupied with his own thoughts to catch any words, so they had nothing to fear. He unlocked the door and ushered them both into his apartment.

“Where are the open apartments?” Greed asked as she plopped down on the couch, still a makeshift bed draped with his spare sheets.

“Head Councilor Newton will probably take the floor above mine,” Harley said. “Her apartment is on the ground floor now.”

“Ooh,” Greed said. “I love people-watching! I'll move in once she moves out. And the other?”

“The other is the floor below mine.” The apartment had been vacant for years, since Dobbins had never moved in. The council sometimes used it to house guests, but only when they brought their own coffins. It was empty, otherwise.

“What would you do if you had two floors to yourselves?” Greed flashed him a knowing smirk.

“I don’t need more room,” Harley said. He needed little beyond his study while he was awake. He had all the books, streaming services, and knowledge at his fingertips. He had a giant dining room he hadn’t used for years before Key sat him down at the table to run his experiments. He didn’t need a gym or indoor garden, so what could he possibly do with two floors?

“A movie theater,” Key said. “Huge screen taking up all of one wall. We could invite everyone in the building and call in an order from Blood Drive. It would be perfect.”

Harley grinned. “I like that idea.”

“Maybe with a pull-out couch for when we’re alone?” Key took a step closer to Harley and grabbed his hand, placing it on his chest.

Greed cleared her throat. “I’m calling Blood Drive now. I think we deserve a second round to celebrate. What do you all want?”

Fifteen minutes later, they had their drinks and Greed disappeared into the guest bathroom to enjoy a hot bath and hotter drink.

To give Key a neutral setting, as neutral as they could get in his own home, Harley motioned him to sit at the dining table. Instead of taking the seat at the head, Harley took the corner seat closest to the wall.

Key sat opposite him and wrapped his hands around his cup. This one was were-elephant with a hint of lion, according to the drink order he’d given Greed. Key opened his mouth like he wanted to say something but brought his cup to his lips for a deep drink instead.

Harley watched, mesmerized by the rippling of Key’s throat as he drank. Harley wasn’t compelled or coerced by Key, that was certain, but he was drawn to him, the same way he’d been drawn to Fanglory on a wish.

“How do you feel about moving here?” Harley hoped the question was innocuous enough when all he really wanted to do was ask Key to move in with him.

“It’s close to where we’ll be working.” He pointed out the window to the north, where the courthouse was lit up plain as day. “I like short commutes.”

“It’s close enough for Blood Drive to deliver.” Harley took a small sip of his drink to hide the fact that he was desperate for more pros beyond the location.

“I don’t mind the walk, if I have someone to walk with me.” Key’s furtive glance filled Harley with hope before he hid behind his cup again.

“I’m addicted to these new flavors,” Harley said. He’d branched out to his first were-animal with a simple werewolf and cider concoction Blood Drive was offering as their daily special. The cider infusion made him feel almost human again. “If I didn’t have someone, I would go alone.”

Key scoffed. “The first time you walk to get blood without me, I’ll ...” He shook his head and chuckled. “My standing bet with Greed when she’s going to do something I don’t want her to do is that I will drink an alley cat dry. Greed loves cats, and I’d never hurt her like that, but I say it to show her how disappointed I’d be if she did whatever we’d bet on.” Key sat up straighter in his chair. “What about you? What’s something you wouldn’t want me to do?”

Harley’s heart hammered in his throat. “I wouldn’t want you to bite another vampire. Unless you had to, of course. For self-defense.”

“For self-defense.” Key smiled, displaying a hint of fang. “I like that. Harley, if you walk to Blood Drive without me, I will bite another vampire and make you watch.”

Harley laughed. “I have a feeling Empress Marcella would return to kill us both if you bit anyone without provocation.”

Key shrugged. “It’s all on your shoulders. If you order in or walk with me, we’ll never find out.”

Harley lifted his cup to take another drink and found it empty. It was now or never. “I want you to have a place of your own, where you feel comfortable. I don’t want you to think I’m pushing for anything beyond—”

“I want to wake up in your bed each night,” Key interrupted. “And I want to be the one that puts you there each morning before you sleep like the dead.” Key blurted the words so fast Harley wasn’t sure what he heard.

He didn’t need to know what Key had said. He pushed his chair back from the table and opened his arms.

Key rushed him. He was around the table and in his lap so quickly Harley didn’t know what to do. He was lost in Key’s body, his warmth, and the scent of blood on his lips.

Harley tilted his head up, and his mouth collided with Key’s. The kiss was unlike any they’d shared before, full of desire, hope, and ... something more. Harley wanted to define it, but it seemed too soon.

Key broke the kiss, panting in Harley’s ear. “Take me to bed. I want you inside me.”

Harley reached for his throat, his fingers shaking. “Are you sure?”

“Don’t make me bite you.”

Harley laughed. “I don’t think that will be necessary.” His erection was already straining at the front placket of his suit pants.

“Hey.” Key grabbed his chin. “It’s okay. We’ll go slow. Do you trust me?”

Harley grinned. “Completely.”

“Then take me to bed with you. I can worry about moving tomorrow.”

Key’s phone pinged in his pocket, and it vibrated against Harley’s thigh.

“Even so, you’d better check that.”

Key removed it, read the text, and shoved it back in his pocket. “Text from Newton. Tomorrow’s our moving night. They need the daytime cleaners to box up Chloe’s old place and donate what they can.” He pressed against Harley and kissed him. “The night is still young.”

“It’s after midnight. That means it’s November first.”

Key gave him a mischievous smile and took his phone from his pocket again. He dashed off a text, received a return notification, and his smile turned into one of pure joy before he crushed his lips to Harley’s.

“Tomorrow, we’ll need to stop off at Fanglory to pick up a few things for the move.” He wrapped his arms around Harley’s neck and pulled him in for another kiss. It was slow and sweet at first but built with each movement. Soon, Harley’s heart pounded in his chest.

Harley loved the gentle pull of Key’s hands in his hair and the weight of Key’s body pressing him against the chair back. Key’s cock dragged against his through their clothes, and he moaned. He was already hard, and in a few moments, he would be leaking if they didn’t move to a more appropriate venue.

“Come to bed with me.”

Key hopped off him and disappeared into the bedroom. Harley picked up Key’s cup and found it empty. He tossed both their empty cups in the recycle bin before making his way to the bedroom.

Along the way, he imagined all the fun things he and Key could do together, things he’d watched at clubs but had been too insecure to try. He trusted Key with his body and with his heart. It seemed too soon to love this vampire who left him in the street over a century ago, but he’d always had feelings for him. Now, those feelings were solidifying into something tangible, something that could last longer than a few nights.

“Good night!” Greed waved at him from the couch. A YouTube video sat paused on his big screen television.

“Good night.” Harley’s face burned. His bedroom was not soundproof, especially not for vampire hearing.

Greed shooed him away with the back of her hand. “I’ll be watching my show and ignoring you,” she said. “Go!”

Harley looked forward to helping Greed move into her new place, too. If she didn’t have a big screen of her own, he would buy her one as a housewarming gift. He had money saved and no one to spend it on. He was already thinking of them as his family. He didn’t know how to act around family, though. He was still standing at his bedroom door staring at her. She stuck her tongue out at him. His face burned as he yanked the door open, sped through it, and closed it between them.

“Finally,” Key growled.

“I’m here.”

“Get naked.”

Harley forgot all about Greed on the other side of the door as he laughed. “Pushy, pushy.”

Key was already naked and sprawled across his bed, facing the large mirror over Harley’s double-wide dresser. Harley caught Key’s heated gaze in the mirror and his cock twitched. He’d never had sex facing the reflective monstrosity before. It ran the full length of the bed and the wooden frame ended only inches from the ceiling.

“I suppose we’re lucky these mirrors don’t have silver backing, so we can see ourselves in them,” Harley teased.

“Hurry up!” Key snapped the lid off the bottle of lubrication Harley kept under his pillow and poured a liberal amount of it into his hand.

Harley peeled out of his clothes, trying to give Key as good a show as the one he was getting. He couldn’t look away as Key rolled the fingers of his opposite hand through the slickness and used them to work himself open.

Harley couldn’t believe his good fortune. He’d followed Key on a whim and now he was going to fuck Key

doggy-style in front of his mirror and watch Key come undone for him. The thought of it was erotic enough to pique his cock all on its own, but the fact that it was Key, his Ciarán, finally here in his arms, made it so much better.

It was too soon to say it, but he hoped Key would stay forever.

Once he was naked, Key motioned him over with his hand still laden with lube. He coated Harley's cock with it and then used the rest of it on himself, working in another finger and coating his entrance so it shone in the low light of the lamp by the headboard.

"Are you ready for me?" Harley asked.

"It feels like I've been waiting for you my entire life." Key sighed as he withdrew his fingers. Harley handed him the towel he kept in his nightstand.

"You're stalling," Key accused.

"I'm ... nervous."

"I make you nervous?" Key watched him in the mirror as he got into position behind him and coated his cock.

"No."

Key frowned at him.

"Okay, yes. I've never done this, like this." He wanted it to be perfect.

Key looked at him over his shoulder this time. He glanced down at Harley's cock, still straining toward the sky, and grinned. "I think we're ready to try."

Harley nodded and lined up with Key's entrance. At his first push inside, Key arched his back and moaned, taking him in until their bodies met, and his cock was engulfed by Key's blood-warmed channel. Key felt so good around him, so right.

He focused on Key, their gaze meeting in the mirror again as they fucked at a rhythm only vampires could handle, too fast and rough for mortal humans. Key's eyes drifted

closed. His needy groans and grunts as they moved together only increased Harley's need to satisfy Key before he fell over the edge of his own pleasure into bliss.

He pulled Key against his chest, and Key opened his eyes. His gaze reassured Harley that Key was just as moved by their reconnection as he was. Their movements slowed as they neared the precipice.

Harley kissed his way down Key's neck. Key shivered and moaned with each tiny flutter of lips against delicate skin. With one hand, Harley braced Key's hip against his. With the other, he danced over Key's chest, finding first one nipple, then the other and pinching them as Key moaned. Then, he trailed down to his taut abdomen, circling his belly button once before dipping lower, following the thin wisp of a treasure trail to the nest of curls surrounding his groin. He pulled lightly on them, earning him a pleading grunt. Key thrust so hard toward his hand, Harley almost fell out of him.

"Shh. I've got you." Harley circled his fingers around Key's shaft and Key arched back against him, further exposing his neck for Harley's questing tongue. He sucked on the tender flesh as Key's cock thickened in his hand with each stroke. At the height of his pleasure, Harley sank his fangs into the spot where Key's neck met his shoulder muscle. Key shouted his name as he came, the thick white ropes coating Harley's hand and his comforter.

The way Key tightened around him brought him over the edge so quickly the room around them swam. He didn't dare close his eyes, lest he miss a single moment of Key's joy. He looked so beautiful with his eyes half-lidded and his mouth open in a silent O as his cock continued to pulse. Key twitched and tightened around Harley with each stroke on his cock.

Gently, Harley retracted his fangs. Key's supernatural healing took over, sealing the wounds as though they were never there. His bite was nothing like Key's, but it felt so right to leave his mark, even if it was temporary.

"You could touch me like that forever." Key turned his head, so his lips were flush with Harley's neck.

“You’d let me?”

“I would.”

Forever. The thought was humbling. They quite possibly had forever, if Empress Marcella stayed away and the humans didn’t destroy their planet. Forever was a long time to wait to say what Harley already felt deep within. He had fallen hard for Key over a century ago, and his feelings had only solidified. He loved Key.

Chapter 14

Key

That night, Key met the movers at Fanglory first. They wanted to move a certain piece of furniture from the room that would soon become Santa's Naughty List with its own neon sign and holiday flare. There would be no glory hole for Santa's favorite holiday. He liked to unbutton the oversized flap in the front of his jolly red suit and let it all hang out. With an unlimited supply of blood, he could keep going all night, too.

Key and Greed both envied the young vampire who called himself Santa. This would be his second year fulfilling the role. They would miss their friend, but neither of them would miss working at the club now that they had new jobs.

Santa was also the bar's fabricator, and he showed Key the modifications he'd made to the coffin before they moved it from the VIP room. "How much wall space do you have?"

"I'm sure it's plenty," Key said, thinking of the dimensions of Harley's rooms. None of them were as cramped as the club's VIP room.

"I built a little ramp leading up to a second hole in the lid, and I added memory foam to the inside now that you won't need to scrunch down to blow him."

"Wait ..." Key looked at the two holes, now closed with their sliding wooden doors. "Sixty-nine?"

Santa grinned. "I tried it out last night. It's magical, as long as you two are around the same height."

"He's a little taller than I am, but not much."

Santa nodded toward Greed, who stood against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest, waiting for them to give her the green light to grab the side of the giant coffin. "I saw him with her a few nights ago, yeah?"

Key nodded.

“You can always do some extra tinkering if needed. Remember to sand the edges before you touch up the paint. You don’t want to get any splinters.” He winked. Key would never be able to wink and make it look natural, not even with his vampire reflexes. “Oh, and there’s an extra pillow with a little surprise in the middle if you want to use it for anal.”

“Thanks.” At first, Key didn’t want to know, but then he wanted to see it. Unfortunately, they were pressed for time.

Once he and Greed carried the coffin to the truck and secured it to the back wall with ratchet straps, he patted the top of the coffin and hopped out of the truck, pulling the door shut behind him.

Santa pulled him in for a hug. “You can thank me by inviting me over to your swanky new place to meet your fancy new boyfriend.”

Key nodded. “You bet.”

“And look the other way if Fanglory is ever in trouble with the council.”

“That might be a little harder to do.” Key didn’t yet know all the ins and outs of working for the council, but he had a feeling they would be a little tougher on vampire crime now that Empress Marcella had set a precedent with Dobbins’s execution.

They said their goodbyes and made the short trip to their old apartment. They spent less time there than they had at Fanglory. They didn’t have many belongings, nor did they know many people in the building, even after three years. Besides, everyone who might recognize them was already asleep.

Key drove the truck back to the apartment building and the guard at the desk gave them the key to the service elevator in the alley. Key had never lived in a building with a guard, let alone a service elevator.

“If it doesn’t fit on the elevator,” the guard said, “it won’t fit in your apartment.”

That statement had worried Key until he saw the size of the elevator. Two huge sectional couches could have fit in it facing each other corner to corner and left room for a gigantic coffee table in the middle. As it was, they had nothing larger than the double-wide coffin prop that looked out of place and ridiculous in Key's new apartment, especially since the only other furniture in the room was his own coffin, miniature by comparison.

"Harley's going to flip when he sees this thing," Greed said. "What time is he off work?"

"Four, I think."

Greed laughed. "We'll find out soon enough. I'm going to people-watch for the next few hours. You would not believe the number of people who walk by this building in the middle of the night! Oh, and I'm going to have a chat with Ithande. Harley forgot to mention—his tattoo artist girlie is hot!"

Key wanted to issue a warning about hurting Harley's friends, but he knew his sister. Greed would only hurt a human if they begged her.

"Don't forget to close the storm shutters!" he said instead.

"They're on a timer. They close five minutes before dawn every day, if they're open."

"All of them?"

Greed huffed another laugh at him. "Someone didn't read his texts from Head Councilor Newton last night. If you had, you would know this and tons of other vampire-friendly accommodations the council has made for its employees. We actually have benefits here. And I could get a cat if I wanted!"

Key leaned against the wall beside her and bumped her shoulder. "We did all right for ourselves this time, didn't we?"

"Took you long enough," she said. "He's been waiting for you as long as you've been waiting for him."

"Yeah, but the timing wasn't right."

She shook her head. “Timing is an excuse for cowards.”

Key couldn’t deny it. He’d been a coward for far too long. At least now, he was going to make it right.

When Harley joined him in his new apartment after work, Key led him directly to the bare minimum bedroom.

“What is that thing?”

“You don’t recognize it?”

Harley gasped. “Why is the glory hole coffin in your apartment?”

“Fanglory didn’t need it anymore. They’re going for a more hands-on approach next Halloween, something called skeleton bone.” Key shook his head. “Don’t ask.”

“Sounds ... kinky.”

“Kinkier than a coffin glory hole?”

“What’s this?” Harley tapped the wood covering the new hole toward the top of the coffin. “I would have remembered if there was a second hole up here.”

“It’s new. Our fabricator made it for me.” Key grinned. “Don’t laugh. We call him Santa, and he made it in his workshop.”

Harley grinned. “Will you take me to meet Santa sometime? I think I’m going to want to thank him for,” he motioned to the large prop, “all this.”

“He asked me to invite him over. When is our next night off?”

“Fridays and Saturdays.” Harley sidled closer and put his arm around Key’s waist. “Want to try it now?”

Key reached down between Harley’s legs and smoothed his hand over his semi-hard cock through the soft fabric of his tailored slacks. “Yes.”

Harley watched as Key opened the coffin lid, his eyes wide. “I feel like I should look away. Do I want to know how

the magic trick works?”

Key laughed. “It’s not magic! Santa included a memory foam mattress, too. If you ever kick me out of your bed, I can sleep in here and be comfortable.”

“I would never kick you out of bed!” Harley scoffed. “If we go to bed mad, we only go as far as the opposite side of the bed.”

“My ma said you should never go to bed mad.” Key hadn’t thought about her advice since he’d still been alive. He’d allowed himself to dream of love on the ship from London, but by the time their ship landed in port, all his dreams were dashed. Both of his parents and his uncle were dead, and then his sire turned him the first time he’d tried to fill Greed’s belly with something other than the cockroaches in their tenement house.

“Your mother wasn’t a vampire.” Harley patted his shoulder, his eyes kind, as though he’d followed Key’s trip down memory lane by watching the emotions cross his face. “It’s unavoidable if we’re still arguing when the dawn catches us.”

“I suppose,” Key said. “I can’t imagine fighting with you for that long, though. We’d resolve our problems sooner than that.”

Harley grinned. “I’d like to think so, too.”

“I’d like to fall asleep inside you,” Key said, voicing his most outlandish fantasy. “I want to wake up fucking you, too.”

“That’s not how that works!” Harley frowned. “We’d need to drink blood the moment we woke up, and even then, we lose our erections the moment we die for the day.”

Key grinned. “It would be fun to try, though.”

Finally, Harley understood his jest and smirked. “It would. But first, we should give this a go.” He tapped his fist against the lacquered coffin lid.

“It’s only fair that we use it my first night in the apartment,” Key agreed, “since it’s how we came back together in the first place.”

Instead of stripping, Key turned to Harley and laced his fingers together behind Harley’s neck, reeling him in for the kiss he’d desperately wanted but was too shy to take that night at Fanglory. They kissed until they were both drooling around their fangs, and Harley was fully hard and rutting against his leg.

“Here goes nothing.” Key peeled off his clothes, climbed into the coffin, and closed the lid.

The memory foam beneath him was instantly more comfortable than the hard wooden planks. He’d forgotten to open the top hatch, but Harley slid it back before climbing on top of it.

“You’re supposed to face the other way now,” Key chided.

Harley leaned into the hole and kissed him. “In a minute.”

Key groaned as his cock, which was angled so it popped out of the hole in the coffin thanks to Santa’s diabolical design, brushed against something silky and warm.

“Wow. This is wild,” Harley said.

Key didn’t have as far to reach now to grab Harley’s cock and give it a stroke, either.

Harley rested his forehead against Key’s and hummed. “No more of that. Let me turn around.”

Now he was talking.

The coffin rumbled as Harley crab-crawled into position above him. Harley’s cock hovered just out of reach of Key’s mouth as Harley nuzzled Key’s pubic hair. Then, the inside of the coffin went dark as Harley covered both holes. Key had to shift to the side a little bit and use both hands to move Harley into a comfortable position. Then, he felt like it was a competition all over again to see who would come first.

Instead of racing the clock, he was racing against his own body. He already felt the need to come building in his balls, enhanced by Harley's slurpy moans of delight and the suction as he swallowed around Key's cock.

Key returned the favor and hollowed his cheeks, letting Harley fuck his mouth with the same rhythm he used on Key's cock. Key hummed as Harley's tongue found a particularly sensitive spot.

Then, Harley's mouth was gone, replaced by cool air on Key's sensitive tip. "Bite me."

"Mmm?" Surely, Key hadn't heard correctly.

"Bite me, like you did at Fanglory. I want to feel it again. Show me how much you want me."

Key released Harley's cock with a wet pop. He didn't have to think about it. He was already overwhelmed with desire, and so much more. This could easily be love, when he was ready to put a label on feelings too fragile to name. He bit into the soft flesh of Harley's ball sack between his testicles and let that feeling seep through his bite into Harley.

Harley returned to his cock with a vengeance, his incisors down but not scraping against Key's flesh by some miracle.

Key closed the bite mark with his tongue and resumed his attention to Harley, retracting his fangs and sucking him down to swallow around as much of Harley's cock as he could take.

Harley came, his body spasming as he filled Key's mouth. He lifted his head off Key's cock and roared the most animalistic sound Key had ever heard from a vampire. Harley continued to work Key's erection with his hand, but Key needed more. He whimpered when Harley licked the tip of his cock and twirled his tongue around the head. Then, Harley swallowed him down in one smooth motion while moving his hand to cup his balls.

Key came hard, banging his forehead on the lid of the coffin as he spilled into Harley's mouth. Harley laughed

around him, and he couldn't help but join in.

They laughed even harder when they were back in Harley's bed for the morning with Harley's arms around him. Key felt safe and cherished in Harley's care, same as he'd always dreamed. This was where he'd wanted to be for the last century, and now he could enjoy it.

"This is more comfortable," Harley said.

"The coffin is a novelty item," Key said. He'd found the pillow Santa made with a flesh light stuffed in the middle. He was already looking forward to using it. "We could use it on our days off until it gets old. Or maybe on the anniversary of our reconnection, if you'd like?"

Harley grinned at him. "Whatever would make you happy."

Key cuddled closer to Harley beneath his weighted blanket and kissed the soft skin above his slowing heart. "You make me happy. I'm so glad I found you again."

"So am I," Harley whispered. "I love you."

Key grinned against Harley's neck as the world faded. Maybe his feelings weren't so fragile and new, after all. "I love you, too. Always have. I'm sorry it took this long to find you again and show you."

His words sounded sluggish as the world faded around them. For once, Key wasn't filled with dread of the dawn. He looked forward to spending that night, and all future nights, with Harley.

The End

Thank you!

Thank you so much for reading Key and Harley's happily ever after!

If you loved *Grave Throbbing*, [please leave a review](#) so other readers can find it and love it, too!

If you want to know what's coming next, let me entertain you via email twice a month (or 3 if you read mpreg)! Subscribe on my [website](#) or [follow the direct link](#) - there's a free story in it for you!

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About The Author

Edie Montreux (She/They)

I am nonbinary, demisexual, and an ally for all aspects of the LGBTQIA+ rainbow. I love my partner, Queen, dogs, and video games. I write full time, except when walking the dogs or protecting imaginary worlds from fantasy creatures.

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