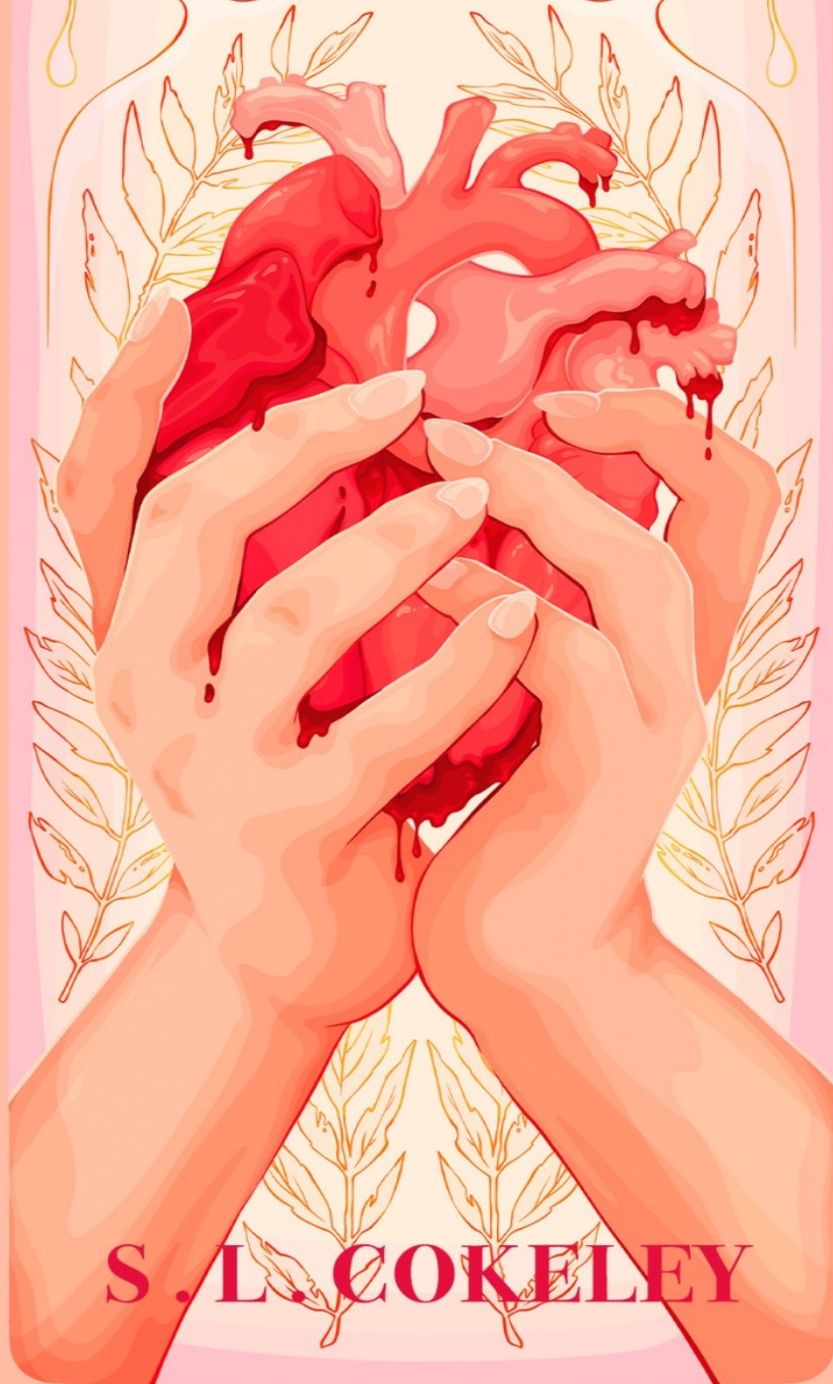


THIS
BLOOD
THAT BURNS
US



S. L. COKELEY

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Scan for more!

All song recommendations are solely for inspiring readers' imaginations when reading and sharing the love of music.



This is for the dormant dreamers.

*For the ones who are waiting in the dark, with unlit candles
in their hands.*

The fire is already within you, waiting to burn.

But until you find it, take some of mine.

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Prologue

???

I hated everything about them. Their twin theology—*and* physiology, for that matter. The lowly, filthy clothes they were always roaming around in. That ignorant smirk Zach wore with pride, and the way his brother Luke walked around with his chest thrust out like he hadn't a care in the world. Disgusting, overrated scum. Yet I could not treat them as such. They were *special*. Special to Her.

I walked along the corridor with my hands tucked in my pockets, and my boots were silent with each step. Ornate rugs gave color to an otherwise lifeless, dusty hallway. The warmth of the bricks wasn't enough to keep out the winter chill or the breeze that came from the ocean. I was told our home had stood there in Manhattan for more than a hundred years. No one ever ventured close. They knew the stories and heeded the warnings. We were criminals, but not peasants on the street killing each other over nothing more than pieces of paper or chemical compounds. No, we were more than that. Infinitely

superior. Doing the work that needed to be done to keep Her safe, secure, and comfortable. We built a life to serve Her every need.

“Hey, Connery. Come here,” Akira called.

“Yes, sir.” I bowed, though he preferred a less official presence. He was one of the highest-ranking members in our family. One of The Guard. Showing him respect was imperative, even if he didn’t rejoice in it. When he accepted my bow, I straightened myself and pulled my blazer collar taut. All-black attire, including dress shirts and slacks, were required for all members. We had a reputation and a standard to uphold every time we ventured out into the city.

“You’re coming with me.” He leaned against the wall with his sleeves rolled up and lit a cigarette. “I’m gonna need you to be on your best behavior.”

I inhaled in surprise. Never had he asked me to accompany him.

He blew the smoke slowly in my face. “Hello? Is this fucking thing on? Answer me when I speak to you.”

“Who is we?”

“The Guard, Zach, Luke ... Her.”

The mention of Her sent my skin ablaze, and the hairs on my arms stood on end. “S-She’ll be there?”

“Yep.” Akira took another long drag. “I know you have some choice feelings for the twins, but I mean it when I say I need you to stay in fucking line.” His voice was deadly serious

as he stared into my eyes, but he remained leaning against the wall.

“Why are we all going?”

“Well, I actually asked to take you along.” He nudged my shoulder.

I tightened my fist to shield myself from the disappointment. She didn't ask me to be there. Which meant She didn't care if I was there. But She wanted *them* there— Her precious Zach and Luke.

“Oh, lighten up. Just be happy you're coming along. You're the only one I've asked because I trust you.”

I beamed with pride under my mask of stoicism. Akira was my mentor, and he had been for more than a century. I hadn't been worthy enough ... until now.

“But that fucking mouth gets you into trouble.” He laughed, coughing out smoke. He motioned for me, and we walked toward the basements.

“I'll be on my best behavior, sir. I mean it.” I was jittery inside, though annoyed with having to see them with Her. I knew the jealousy would remain, but at least I'd be in Her presence. Being in the same room was a gift, and I wanted to sprint there.

“Good.” He took one last drag of his cigarette, then put it out on his skin. He didn't even flinch as the ashes smeared onto the black ink of his tattoos.

We walked in silence down the corridor until we reached the steps that led down. As we passed several other members, they all stopped to bow as Akira walked past.

Akira spoke again. “You know ... it’s not everything to be the favorite.”

I took a second to decipher his words. “What?”

“I know you think you want to be Her favorite, but there are better things to be.”

It seemed blasphemous, but I knew a member of The Guard would never speak ill of the one they were sworn by blood to protect. Especially not Akira. He was Her most loyal companion and had been with Her almost the entirety of Her time here on Earth. She was the reason for The Guard’s existence. For mine.

“You’ll learn.” He winked at me as we turned the corner leading toward a wide set of double doors. They were thick dark mahogany carved with Gothic embellishments. We stopped in front, and he pulled me against the door and held me by the shoulders. “Don’t embarrass me here. Do as I say. Only speak *if* you’re spoken to. Am I crystal fucking clear?”

It wasn’t usual for Akira to be so serious. I squirmed under his grip. “Yes, sir.”

A smile stretched across his face, and he relaxed again before opening the door.

I didn’t know what I expected. Perhaps the twins being doted on with Her hands twisted up in their hair while She

beamed at them like they were the brightest things to ever walk the damned Earth. That seemed pretty on par with my experience with them thus far.

My expectations were shattered as I took in the scene. Zach and Luke sat against the far side of the room with their backs pressed against the concrete wall. Each with a bite mark on their necks and black blood smudged on their cheeks. They had bled onto their street clothes and were filthy as always.

Then fear penetrated my body, but it wasn't mine. One ordinary-looking girl with long mousy-brown hair, stood shivering in the center of the room. She was wearing pajamas, which made me wonder if she'd been pulled from her bed in the night. Sirius, another member of The Guard, had firm watch on her. There was no scent of blood. Her crying was the only sound in the underground room. I didn't feel pity for her, only the undying urge to end her suffering. The pulse in her neck reverberated through my body. The basement was a place for sparring and training. This human wouldn't be leaving alive—that much I knew.

Akira and I took a spot on the opposite wall where we could see it all. I realized then I was only meant as a witness—to watch what was about to unfold. It was a few minutes before the door opened and I saw Her. Our queen.

I only glimpsed Her white hair before I fell to my knees in a bow. My body buzzed from Her proximity. As we all stood, I tried to remember every detail of Her. The way Her long white hair fell on Her shoulders in soft bouncy waves, or the slight

tinge of red on Her lips, and Her pale cheeks. Her fingers were slender and perfect. Two ethereal legs peeked between the slit in Her long white dress, and I was certain my knees would give out if I watched Her any longer. She was beautiful, amazing, perfect—the greatest thing I had or would ever see in my long lifetime.

Her bare feet made no sound as She walked along the concrete to kneel before Zach and Luke. She caressed their faces and ran Her hands through their hair. One at a time, they awoke, groggy and disoriented.

“W-what the fuck?” Zach was the first to speak. After blinking a few times, he tried lifting away from the wall, only to find himself too weak to move. He jerked his head to the side. “Luke!?”

His sigh of relief when he felt his brother next to him was short-lived. Their little friend came into view, and their eyes grew wide.

“Sarah ...?” Luke said, and I relished the betrayal and sadness in his eyes. Zach’s attitude made him intolerable, but Luke was the one I wanted to see fall to his knees in anguish. Maybe then he’d break and be out of here and away from Her.

“Why is she here? What are you doing?!” Zach’s voice wasn’t as strong as it usually was. He was scared, and I liked that.

“Please don’t do this.” Luke tried to move from the wall, but his limbs were immobile.

The queen put Her hand up to silence him. “I’ll be doing the speaking, my love.” Her words were a knife to the heart. She loved calling him that. “I’ve brought you a familiar face. One...lover.”

Her words spun with venom on the last word, and chills ran through my body.

“She’s not. She doesn’t have anything to do with this. Please just let her go.” Luke’s voice was soft as he pleaded. The way he talked to Her filled me with silent rage. It differed from the fury I had when Zach spoke. Luke talked to Her as if he knew Her. As if they were ... close somehow. That couldn’t be true. It wasn’t, and yet the look he was giving Her through red eyes said otherwise.

“I can’t do that. It hurts me to punish you both ... but it must be done. You have committed an unthinkable crime against your family.”

Finally, they were being punished for something.

They glanced at each other. Guilty, of course.

“We didn’t—”

“Don’t lie. You’ve already hurt me enough.” Her voice was colder now.

Luke spoke again. “That wasn’t what we were trying to do. We don’t want to leave you. We just wanted to keep our family safe.”

“*We* are your family.” Her eyes lingered on him. “And you want to leave ...”

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. They wanted to leave? The favorites wanted to run away. How could they have chosen such a foolish plan? No one leaves The Family. There was no need to. Everything they could ever want was here.

“I hope this helps you understand the importance of your family a little more.” With those words, She grabbed a long dagger sheathed to Her leg and held it to the girl’s throat. She used it to make a tiny cut, and the twins let out a cry of desperation.

“Stop! What are you doing?” Zach said.

“Please don’t do this. We’ll do whatever you want. We’ll stay. Just stop,” Luke pleaded.

“Like hell we will! We don’t owe you anything! You crazy bitch!”

Zach’s words echoed throughout the halls. It wasn’t forbidden to speak such words to Her, but no one had ever done so. My foot moved forward, ready to make him hurt for ever uttering something so foul in Her direction, but Akira grabbed my shoulder and raised an eyebrow at me.

She smirked at Zach, unfazed by his words, and pulled the girl by the arm closer to Zach.

“Zach, what is this?” The girl known as Sarah spoke between muffled sobs.

“I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. It’s going to be okay. We can fix this.” Zach shook with rage, but fear leaked into his voice.

“Sarah.” The queen spoke close to the girl’s ear. “What’s the name of your friend? Ashley, is it? Maybe I should have brought her along for the reunion.”

“N-No. Stay away from her.” The girl said, with no hesitation. She had guts. I’d give her that.

The queen smiled, while shifting Her attention to Zach. “Fine. Should we play a game? You kill her now or I’ll bring your lover next.”

“Fuck. You.” Zach spat.

She moved toward Zach, put Her hands on his face and leaned in close to his neck, whispering where even I could not hear. He squirmed away from Her grasp, but it was futile. Without a word, She walked back a few steps, and Her tight lips stretched into a smile.

“Zach?” Sarah called to her once-dear friend, and I waited for the show.

Zach’s eyes were replaced with black puddles. He lunged forward as the girl scrambled backward.

“Stop! Please stop.” Luke was forced to sit and watch.

The queen held up Her hand stopping him just before the attack. She grabbed Zach by his face, and pulled it close to Hers. “This is connection. Never forget you’re *mine*.” She pushed him to the ground, and he fell back in to unconsciousness. Her gaze veered back to Luke.

The girl’s muffled crying was the only noise left in the room. I didn’t like the sound of women crying; something

about it made me nauseous. But She had a plan for this girl, and I was eager to see it.

“Now, for you.” The queen circled the girl like a viper cornering a mouse.

“Why would you do this to me? Why? I’ve given you everything. How is it not enough?” Luke sobbed while shaking uncontrollably.

The queen frowned at his words with real sadness in Her eyes, and I felt sick again.

“It will never be enough.”

She walked up to the girl, pulled her by her hair, and stood in front of him. He was still too weak to stand. Too weak to do anything.

“I never wanted this to happen. I-I ...” Luke stammered.

The girl spoke, her eyes red from crying, but she smiled. “It’s okay. I know this isn’t your fault. I know everything. You don’t need to say it. Luke, I lo—”

The queen slit her throat with Her teeth before she could finish. Blood sprayed everywhere, and Luke was frozen. All sobbing ceased as he stared down at the blood splatter covering his hands.

She walked up to him, the blood gloriously complementing Her white dress. The crimson only enhanced Her elegant beauty. At the touch of Her hand to his face, he crumpled to the floor, unconscious once again, with his arm outstretched to his dead lover, and hers to his. The girl’s blood pooled on the

floor, and I shifted from foot to foot. Partly because it was reaching my time to feed again, but the other was more unexpected. It didn't feel as good as I thought it would to see them tossed from their throne. I hated them. We didn't agree on a single thing. I envied them and wanted to be desired like they were, but seeing them broken on the floor wasn't something I would soon forget.

She scanned the room, making eye contact with The Guard. "Clean this up." Ezra wasn't there yet, but if I had to guess, he'd be there in a few seconds to collect the twins.

She left while licking Her lips, and Her gown trailed behind Her.

As the doors shut, I followed Akira's lead. One question lingered in my mind.

"Go ahead. Ask your questions," Akira said.

"Will they remember this?"

"No."

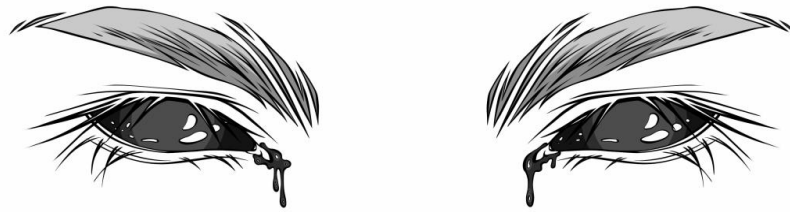
"Why do all this to make them forget?" I surveyed the carnage that lay before us.

"They will forget until She *wants* them to remember." Akira stopped dragging the girl's body to look at me.

And that's when I finally understood what it meant to be Her favorite.

One

AARON



I'd never been a big believer in destiny. I hated movies where the hero was doomed by the fates above, but meeting Kimberly Burns felt a lot like fate. The good kind, where there was one person in the world you were meant to meet, and everything had to go right for your paths to cross at the perfect time. I wished I could change the circumstances of that encounter, but I was thankful, nonetheless.

The true significance of meeting her may have forever been out of my reach, but as I stood in the middle of our fraternity mixer, I wondered if I'd still be right here if I hadn't.

Something in the pit of my stomach told me life would be shitty if I hadn't met her. I probably wouldn't be slightly tipsy at a college party enjoying my Saturday night like a normal college student. Maybe The Legion would have killed us in that church ... or maybe The Family would have already found us. I'd never know. But as I caught sight of her across the backyard, all the fears I'd had about the future disappeared. She saw me and smiled with rosy cheeks, and my heart kicked my ribs. She was magic like that.

The mist on the mountain sent a chill into the air. The dusk was upon us, and the light warmed her features. The scattering of trees around, painted in hues of orange and yellow, gave way to the most beautiful fall I'd ever seen. Brooklyn couldn't hold a candle to the beauty here. I could see why she never wanted to leave. Trading these views and these smells for concrete slabs and high-rises seemed criminal.

"Come on, let's go over there!" Presley said while he dragged me in the opposite direction, past the steaming pool. I groaned my reply, cursing the fact that our hands were zip tied. The sun disappeared over the horizon, casting an orange glow on the pine trees that surrounded the backyard of the OBA frat house.

We passed our fellow fraternity members, mostly comprised of The Legion's plants that rushed at the start of the fall semester. They, too, were subjected to our current mixer with the Sigma Sigma Xi sorority. Which required each guy to be zip tied to a girl until they both drank a fifth of alcohol, but Presley thought it would be hilarious to have me linked with

him all night. It was annoying, but I was a little thankful. The one girl I wanted to be linked with wasn't part of the sorority, but she was here. If only I could get to her.

We passed William scowling in our direction. He was linked to a blonde talking his ear off, and I guessed it would be a matter of minutes before he compelled her to think they'd met their requirements. Drinking parties were prohibited at William's request at the first of the semester. I suspected it had something to do with his disdain for drunk college students' untidiness and messing with his precious plants he'd filled the house with. But since we were required to participate in school events and mingle with sororities, he didn't always get what he wanted. Presley had put in extra effort to pull some strings with the sorority president to ensure the theme.

The Legion's quiet occupation of our frat house over the summer was part of a bigger plan. OBA was always a smaller fraternity and paled in comparison to some of the larger ones on campus. With more than half of our members graduating last year, it made The Legion's invasion easier. Especially with Kilian's connections in the big wide world of academia. He wasn't very forthcoming with details, but I'd heard he knew a guy who knew a guy that could ensure any dealings in the fraternity were met without trouble. It also helped that the elected president of the fraternity transferred schools, leaving his spot open for a revote. Luke was able to get on the executive board, considering on his fake transcript he was technically a junior, and he was elected president. He took his job very seriously.

I'd finally understood what William meant about a new chapter. OBA would never be the same after their occupation, at least not the chapter in Blackheart.

Presley brought us to a group of girls who had been unlinked, and I couldn't help but stare off into space while remembering the first of the summer.

It was the day right after the night in the church. Due to the blood loss, I'd spent most of my time in bed sleeping, but I never got any good rest since I was constantly waking up because of nightmares. I'd desperately wanted to see Kimberly, but it wasn't safe for her to be around me until I'd gotten my thirst under control. It was torture.

"You want us to stay in Blackheart?" Zach had said.

I'd rubbed my tired eyes and tried to keep myself upright while we'd had a meeting with Kilian in the study. The tension in the air could be cut with a knife. Luke's foot tapped relentlessly as Kilian sat at his desk across from us, and we were forced on the velvet couches. I felt like I was back in grade school being scolded by the principal.

"I mean. I don't wanna leave, but ... if The Family knows where we are, shouldn't we get out of here?" Presley said.

My heart sank. I couldn't leave Blackheart. I couldn't leave her.

"They don't know where we are. We'll know when they do. Trust me," Luke said, leaning back and pushing his hands through his hair.

“You really trust that Ezra won’t tell them where ya are by now?” William said as he paced behind Kilian. He was always with Kilian, clinging to him like a lap dog.

“He wouldn’t.” Luke shook his head. “He could have easily prevented us from leaving, and he didn’t.”

Kilian spoke with strength in his voice. “Running puts you more at risk. They have the numbers. If they want to find you, there’s nowhere on this Earth you can run.”

“So, we’re fucked.” Zach groaned. “You want to wait here for them to find us?”

“No. We can’t outrun them. But we can outsmart them. They will come for you, and we need to be ready when they do. They will not march armies and drag you. The Family must adhere to human laws just like us.”

“I don’t get it. If they’re ultra powerful, can’t they just overthrow the government or something? Take control of stuff. Why would they need to worry about laws?” Presley squirmed next to me.

“The Family has no interest in that. Each coven is different, and the only thing they care about is their queen. Some live quite peacefully within their communities, only killing a few locals a couple times a year. They may outnumber us ... but they’ve learned from experience that creating unlimited amounts of members only brings them grief. The more bodies vying for Her attention, the more they fight. It always ends in bloodshed and the annihilation of Her coven.”

“What’s your plan?” Luke squared his shoulders and furrowed his brows.

“There will be three phases. One, the set up. Two, integration. Three, defense. You will stay here, and we will integrate into the fraternity. Here, you are surrounded by witnesses, and you will be safe to continue your education. Next, you will learn our ways while we teach you what we know. We will put all our resources into defending you ... I can make some calls and get some people to help.”

“Why?” It was the only question I had. The most important one. Why would they go through the trouble? What angle was he playing? There had to be more he wasn’t saying.

“Because, figuring out why you are so important to them is the most vital thing. For years, we’ve been waiting for a way to bring down the North American coven, and it looks like you might be the key.”

I didn’t much like being a key. Something about being referred to as an object didn’t inspire confidence. What use was a key once the door was unlocked?

There were other issues. A major crux of his plan hinged on me and my brothers adhering to The Legion’s rules and learning how to blend into the world. But over the summer, I’d found it mostly meant they wanted us to listen as they bossed us around. I was thankful for their help, but the events in the church were still fresh in my mind. Trusting them had been out of the question, but my older brothers were oddly on board with Kilian’s half-baked plan, and I hadn’t complained

because there was one beautiful redhead I hadn't been ready to say goodbye to.

"Aaron." Presley waved his hand in my face. "Uh, dude. She asked you a question." Presley motioned to the girls in front of me.

"Uh ..."

"She wanted to know what your major is." Presley took a sip of our drink as he watched me squirm.

"General Studies." When we arrived at OBU, I stared at the list of majors for over an hour and had to choose something. So, I picked the only one that meant I didn't have to actually make a decision. There was still time to change it, but my career choice was the last thing I was concerned with.

Presley finally got the hint after I tugged on his wrist for five minutes, and we retreated into the crowd.

"Are you okay? You sure you don't need to ... you know ... feed?"

He said it almost like a joke, but I knew he was being serious. I had to feed more often, and it wasn't something I wanted to discuss with him in the middle of the party.

"I'm fine."

"You're doing that head-in-the-clouds thing again. I wanted to make sure." He pulled up his hands which pulled up my left arm, and I sighed. "I know what you want."

He handed me our bottle. I took a drink, wanting to get out of my predicament with Presley as soon as possible.

He turned toward the house where two fraternity members were mingling by the sliding glass doors. There weren't many humans left in our frat, but there were a few, including tank-top guy, who I'd discovered was named Jackson. He'd been in our pledge class in the spring, and I was surprised he'd survived his time on academic probation.

"You see that? He's eyeing your girl." Presley wiggled his eyebrows at me, and I tried to hide the heat that built in my chest when he said it.

"She's not my girl," I said, watching him study *my* girl. And he was way too drunk to be looking at her like that. I could see why, though. She wore her BFU sweater paired with these cool plaid pants that hugged her hips and legs. She made everything look good.

I tried not to let it bother me. If she wanted someone, she should pursue them. I wasn't her best option. Why shouldn't she be with a normal guy?

There might still be a way for her to have some sense of normalcy, but not with Jackson. Anyone but him.

Kimberly sat with Chelsea, who had been unlinked, across the yard. Earlier, she bribed Zach to drink some of their bottle when her date wasn't looking because she couldn't stand him.

I couldn't hear what the girls were saying over the music, but it seemed like Kim was trying to force some water on her.

“Why not? All you gotta do is ask.”

He said it as if that were simple. As if I hadn't hurt her more than once. As if I wasn't immortal. As if it were truly that easy.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Presley dragged me across the yard before I could say anything. I wanted to snap that little zip tie and be rid of him for the night, but he hauled me to the one place I wanted to go.

“Kim, Aaron isn't feeling good.” Presley slung me toward her, and I steadied myself with my hand on her shoulder.

She stared up at me with her brows drawn together while clinging to my shirt. “What's wrong?”

“His stomach hurts,” Presley said before chugging more of our fifth.

Her nose crinkled, and her eyes narrowed. “Oh, really? And when did this start?”

“Couple of minutes ago, actually.”

“Well, Aaron's a big boy. Maybe he just needs some Tums.” Chelsea snickered, and I flashed her a fake smile. Despite her friendship with Kim, she still hated my guts, and I didn't blame her.

“I don't know. He looks pretty sick to me. I think we better take him inside the house before he starts puking everywhere.”

“I'll take him,” Kimberly said, grabbing my hand and sending a shiver down my spine, which felt weird while being

tethered to my little brother. She let Chelsea know she'd be right back, and I shot Chelsea a weak smile, and she replied with a middle finger. Okay, maybe she had warmed to me a little.

She guided us through the crowd of people on the lawn and through the open glass door where Jackson got an unobstructed view. I finally understood Presley's plan all along, and I couldn't help but smile at the pinched expression on Jackson's face. She led us to the kitchen where Zach and Luke were still cuffed to their dates, making them laugh so loud it echoed through the house.

"My party people!" Presley said, pulling our hands up in the air.

"Hey, losers." Zach smirked, and he waved his free hand while his other pinned his blushing date to the wall. He was tipsy enough to be having a good time.

Luke was playing cards with his date, and from the wide smile he gave her, I'd have guessed he was losing. He loved a challenge. When he saw us, he chuckled. "Who told you guys you could link together?"

"Come on, Aaron's my buddy. My pal. What would a night of drinking be without him?" Presley passed me our bottle, and I swallowed a few gulps.

"What about that *thing* tomorrow?" Luke said, furrowing his brow.

And I pressed my finger to my lips.

Kimberly grabbed my forearm and whispered into my ear, “You didn’t tell them?”

“We ... have not mentioned it. Tomorrow is all about you,” I said, and she squeezed my arm. “Don’t worry about it.”

A worry line settled between her brows before disappearing with the most adorable nose scrunch. She stayed pressed to me, her fingers grazing my arm, and I inhaled her rose perfume. After our near-death experience in the church, her hand found mine more often when we were walking on the street. She’d rub my back when I got too stressed out and clung to my arm when we watched scary movies. It was easy. Simple. Like breathing. Back when I used to have to do that.

Though we hadn’t mentioned anything more since that yellow bench in the park, something about our relationship had changed. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t happy about it.

“Assholes,” William said as he burst into the kitchen. “Pool. Now.”

“Can’t, officer, I’m a little tied up.” Zach lifted his hand still zip tied to his date.

“Yeah, my hands are tied.” Luke chuckled.

“Fine. You three”—William pointed to Kim, Presley, and me—“pool. Now.”

We followed him, and I led Kimberly with my free hand. As we opened the door to the backyard, foam filled the yard and pool.

“What the hell is that?” William said as he flicked the foam that had settled on his sleeve.

“Uh, looks like a foam machine, sir.” Presley smiled.

“No shit. Which one of you stole the money for that?”

“We didn’t!” Presley and I protested.

“The sorority girls rented it,” Kimberly said. “They wanted to surprise the boys.”

“Jeez, we get in trouble for stealing one time, and now you think we’re criminals.” Presley folded his arms in a pout.

At the beginning of the semester, Kimberly had been a little short on money for her textbooks. We talked about it briefly, not expecting my older brothers to show up the next day with five hundred dollars cash for her. She’d tried to refuse it, but Luke convinced her to keep it, stating he would figure out what book it was and buy it if he needed to.

Gradually, over the summer, their guard came down. They’d started to show little parts of themselves I’d never seen before. Suddenly, the small crimes William accused them of seemed much easier to understand.

“You are criminals,” William growled before heading around the growing pile of foam in front of us.

Presley bounced up and down, and I knew it was only a matter of time before he pulled me headfirst into the foam.

Things were changing, and nothing with The Legion was easy, but Zach and Luke were determined this was where we

needed to be. And wherever Kimberly was, I wanted to be there too. But like the weight of Presley on my arm, we were chained to The Legion, and I wondered how long I could stand the pain in my hand as we pulled each other in the opposite direction.

One thing I knew was that if they hated us today, then tomorrow they really wouldn't be happy.

Two

KIMBERLY



When I imagined running the marathon a year ago, I imagined I'd awaken in my dorm with the sun still waiting to greet me. I might have had a hot shower and given myself enough time to dry my hair and read a few pages of a book. I'd watch the soft light come up as I bit into a piece of buttery toast and listened to the bird song coming from my window. It would be a peaceful day for me. But that's not what happened.

Instead, my morning started with a loud knock on my dorm room door. Early. My RA begged me to get up and answer my phone before the boys woke everyone from the lobby. Thankfully, my RAs were used to the boys showing up. The Calem brothers being extra charming and handsome helped their rapport with them. The boys brought me breakfast, made special by Luke and Aaron. Which I ate while Presley and Zach used red face paint and colored hair spray to paint themselves and then destroyed my room in the process. I prayed their laughter didn't wake my neighbors.

The morning of the marathon wasn't what I'd imagined. It was better.

The four-hour long car ride with the Calem brothers was spent listening to everyone fight for the AUX cord, and Luke gave me many pointers for how to prepare myself mentally for the twenty-seven-mile run.

And I remembered his words of encouragement when I reached the final moments of the race. After rounding the corner, I finally saw the bright-yellow finish line in the distance. My feet were hot and throbbing with each step on the asphalt. Fire burned in my lungs with every inhale. I'd never been in so much pain all at once. I'd have taken the vampire bite again if it meant I could stop running.

"Come on! You're almost there! God, you're impressive." Aaron jogged in step with me, unfazed and practically skipping. I loved the glowing smile on his face when I asked

him if he wanted to join the marathon with me. I knew he wanted to come, and I had to admit he was a good cheerleader.

“You’re ... not ... blending.” I mocked Aaron with the words he most hated to hear. Keeping my eyes ahead, I wiped the sweat from my brows. The roar of the crowd echoed through the tall trees around. The views were beautiful, and I’d seen more of the ocean in a few hours than I had in my entire life. But I was over admiring the scenery. I’d stopped caring at least fifteen miles ago. I wanted to stop the burning in my legs and the pressure in my toes that made me think my toenails might pop off any second.

Aaron laughed. “Come on. Blending is what we do. Look!” I followed Aaron’s point to a bright-red speck in front of us. The red face paint was hard to miss. Aaron waved his arms, and his brothers yelled louder. It was a nice distraction from the exhaustion.

I coughed at the phlegm building in my throat, and Aaron returned to his cheerleading. Distraction was useless. The only relief would come from stepping over the finish line.

“Come on, Burns. This is nothing for you! You’re doing amazing!” He checked the time on his phone. “You’re making great time! But you gotta keep going if you want to hit your goal.”

I had a reasonable goal for the marathon. Beat my best running time. I never cared much for placing in anything. I didn’t even want a medal. I just wanted to finish. His words pushed me harder, and I picked up my pace. The burning rose

in my chest until I was certain I'd die any second. The shouts from the crowd were loud in my ears. My little speck of red was now fully visible.

Zach, Luke, and Presley were all adorned in their "Go Kimberly" shirts. Presley's idea. Zach had black shades pulled over his eyes, and his hands stuffed in his pockets. While Luke had Presley's camera near the gate, fighting for the best angle to take a picture. Their cheering got louder as we passed them. It pushed me toward the finish line. Their motivation was the final push I needed.

"Go, Kimberly!"

"Go! Go! Go!"

Once one chant ended, they'd pick up another one.

Once my feet passed the finish line, I came to a halt. My legs gave out beneath me, but Aaron's arms were fast around me.

"You did it! You beat your time!" He held me in an embrace and helped me to my feet. Blood rushed through my veins, and a smile crossed my lips. He pulled away, but I didn't let go, and my hand lingered on his arm for support. I was happy, unbelievably so, but not just because I reached my goal, also because Aaron's touch was warm and it made my skin buzz with excitement.

"Dude! You did it!" Luke scooped me up in a bear hug. The boys proceeded with their chanting, and to my surprise, the crowd around us didn't mind.

Zach stayed cool and collected with his hands in his pockets. “Now all we need is some Gatorade.”

“Come on. Let’s go celebrate. I’m thinking ... dive bar?” Presley said, red paint still smeared across this face.

“We can’t get in, remember?” Aaron laughed.

“Oh, I have my ways,” Presley said.

My legs were like Jell-O as Aaron propped me up. I leaned into him, letting him do most of the work. The tall trees greeted us with a scenic beauty, and we walked in ecstasy at being in each other’s company. My days of being alone were long gone, and as I listened to their chatter, I knew I didn’t miss the quiet. Not even a little.

To my surprise, Chelsea was making her way through the crowd. The backs of my ankles were raw, and my feet were still throbbing, but that didn’t stop me from limping toward her.

“God, you were like superwoman out there,” she said, embracing me in a brief hug.

“You drove all the way here? I told you not to!”

Chelsea had been busy at a sorority event all day, and I didn’t want to burden her with the driving it required to see me at the finish line. Over the summer, Chelsea and I had only grown closer. A few thrift store trips turned into constant texting and phone calls. A lot of her closer friends had graduated last year, and she’d needed company. I did too.

Aaron and his brothers were great, but sometimes I needed girl time.

“Please, it’s nothing. I arranged to meet some close friends nearby, anyway.” Chelsea smiled and handed me a bottle of water before turning back toward the boys. “None of you brought her water, I see.”

“We were thinking of Gatorade.” Presley chuckled.

“Well, I’m glad you made it.” I smiled and leaned back into Aaron to get some pressure off my feet.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” She winked at me while narrowing her eyes at the boys. “I hope Aaron will take good care of you tonight and help you ice your feet.”

She said it with such a flat tone the other boys snickered. Chelsea still wasn’t a fan of Aaron, but she tolerated him for me, and I appreciated that. I expected him to banter back, but he was still staring at me with bright, glossy eyes. My cheeks flushed.

“Chels, you still coming to the house tomorrow to help me make some stuff for the charity event?” Presley put his arm around her, and she rolled her eyes.

“Yes, I’ll be there. Can’t believe I got roped into being a sweetheart for the killjoy fraternity. OBA used to be fun.”

Zach leaned forward to whisper in her ear, “There will be alcohol.”

“Suddenly, I’m excited again,” Chelsea said, perking up.

We soon said our goodbyes, and she left to meet her friends, and we made our way to the parking lot. I stared up at the trees and drank in the wilderness. The faint scent of bark and cedar filled my senses. The summer brought on a drought for almost the entirety of California. The oak tree leaves had been scorched on the ends, and the dirt underneath our feet was a dry powder. But that didn't stop the colors of fall from painting the leaves.

Aaron's gaze was heavy on my face. "How are you feeling? Do you want me to carry you?"

I smiled with a nod and climbed onto his back. I nestled my chin on his shoulder, enjoying my new view and the feel of his clean cotton shirt. It was our group's first moment alone in months. Something about it felt right, like the world was in perfect harmony when the five of us were together.

A dark shadow in front of us leaned against the trees, and we came to a halt. Like a singular rain cloud on a perfect sunny day, William and two other Legion members appeared from the trees.

"Uh-oh. The fun police are here," Presley joked.

"Do you know how long we had to look for you? You all had your GPS turned off." William's jaw clenched as he approached our group. "Not to mention the drive alone to get to you."

Kilian assigned us all our own respective "bodyguards," and William oversaw Zach and Luke. A task that turned out to be his own personal hell, as far as I could tell.

That was all Zach needed to square his shoulders and get in his face. “Come on, we’ve been talking about this for weeks. You knew where we were.”

“Why must you always make it more difficult than it needs to be?” William sighed, his gaze landing on me, then Luke and then Aaron. “I expected more from you.”

A pang of guilt fluttered in my stomach. It wasn’t my responsibility to make sure the boys followed the rules, but I needed to encourage them in the right direction. The Legion weren’t my favorite people, but they were protecting the boys, and that was the only thing that helped me sleep at night. If there was one thing I could count on them for, it was their obsession over keeping the Calem brothers in their sight. Which Aaron and Presley resented, but I was a little thankful for. The Family was out there somewhere, and the boys had all been marked with the queen’s blood. The Legion, though a little unconventional and uptight, was our best hope.

“Maybe we wanted to hang out ... alone. You know, just the fam. One day without randoms breathing down our necks.” Presley still had a smile plastered on his face.

“Do you think I like following you all around? Nothing would please me more than to see you all wiped from the Earth because of your own misfortunes, and yet, here I am. Stuck watching over all of you.”

Presley fake yawned and Zach spoke. “No one asked you to. You can fuck off, for all I care.”

It had been months, but the tension between us lingered. It was hard to trust someone who once tried to kill you. I remembered the firm grip on the collar of my shirt and the hate in his eyes when William slung me up against the altar in the church. Proximity didn't make that go away. I squeezed tighter around Aaron's neck at the thought.

Sparing their lives in the church didn't come with no strings attached. They were tethered to The Legion, which unfortunately meant I was too.

"Alright. That's enough. We're sorry. Won't happen again," Luke said. He was mostly the voice of reason, but he'd had his moments with The Legion too. He picked his battles more carefully than Zach did.

"Why do I feel like that's a lie too?" William groaned but turned toward the parking lot, and the other members of The Legion followed without a word. "We can split you up between cars. Thane, you're with me. Dom, can you ride with the others on the way home?"

He nodded. Dom was tall, taller than Luke even, and the most stoic man I'd ever encountered. He had short stick-straight black hair and green eyes. The best dressed in all The Legion, and no matter the occasion, he loved to wear beige slacks and tops that accented his copper skin.

I'd heard him say little since being assigned as Presley's guard over the summer, and the most expression I'd seen from him was the side-eye he'd give Presley when he wouldn't shut up.

“We can’t even drive ourselves home now?” Zach said.

“So, you can run off and take Kimberly out to eat and get drunk? No.”

“Damn, he’s good.” Aaron looked back at me with a smile. “Don’t worry, we’ve got food at the house. And I ... might have packed a few snacks in case you needed it.”

My chest warmed at the sentiment. Aaron thought of me in ways I wasn’t prepared for.

Zach pulled white-knuckled hands through his dark hair, and his shades reflected in the sun. “God, you guys are such a fucking buzzkill.”

“And you’re all petulant children. Now get your asses in the car.” William motioned to the cars in the parking lot.

“Fuck, I’m not going anywhere with you. Luke and I will ride with Dom.”

“Fine,” William said.

“Good.” Zach always wanted the last word. He and Luke averted course toward their car while Presley, Aaron, and I sauntered toward William and Thane.

“Come on, guys, a little road trip will be fun.” Thane’s smile was radiant. His dimples barely showed under his groomed beard and medium-brown skin.

Thane oversaw Aaron, and his personality had won him over quickly. He was one of the only members of The Legion

who didn't look like he hated being around us. In fact, he blended in well as a college student.

We stuffed ourselves into their black SUV that smelled of thick cologne.

"Which one of you was it today, gentlemen?" Presley hopped in the very back while William and Thane piled into the front seat.

Thane turned with a shy smile, his straight dark hair brushing past his shoulders. "What do you mean?"

"Which one of you bathed in the cologne?" Presley chuckled to himself in the back seat. "I'm not knocking it. I like it. I'm just curious as to why my eyes are always on fire when I sit back here."

Thane didn't seem at all phased. "Hey, it's my signature scent."

"Presley, let's not make the car ride home awkward. Please, just this once." Aaron sighed.

"Fine. Fine. I can't believe it's the only day we are all off work, and we're being forced to go sit at home."

The summer brought a host of changes we weren't expecting. We all became broke. My scholarship money dwindled, and Aaron's brother's stack of cash they had saved had gone faster than they thought possible. Aaron and I believed it was due to Presley's addiction to gambling, but he denied it. Instead of everyone getting separate jobs and The Legion being spread thin, we all worked at the same place. In

the summer, that wasn't an issue. The water park's busy season was in full swing and had numerous openings. Since college students were their main customers, getting a job there was easy. Chelsea even snagged a job there too.

I worked in the gift shop with Presley and Chelsea, while Zach and Luke got stuck with the concession stand, and Aaron got the best job of the group being the person who greeted everyone at the front and told them where to go. While we slaved away at our respective jobs, Aaron talked to people all day long, and he enjoyed every second of it.

It was a great job, and we could have kept working on the weekends during school if it wasn't for Zach making a scene and getting us all escorted out. I couldn't help but recall that memory and the very event that led us all to being fired on the spot.

I had held a stack of shirts, preparing to refold the entirety of the clothing rack for the fifth time that day when I had heard something coming from outside. "What's that noise?"

I had turned to the back of the store where an open archway led outside to the courtyard. The roar of a crowd had pulsed in my head and rivaled the pop music that gave me a headache almost daily.

"Oh, shit. Come on!" Presley grabbed my arm, and we tore off through the clothing racks.

"We'll be right back!" I said to Chelsea, who was manning the register.

“Where are you going?” she called as we reached the archway.

Looking back, I was glad she didn’t follow us. It wasn’t planned she’d end up with the same summer job, but more like fate. And it aided in growing our friendship.

Presley and I went through the back section of the store and ran past Aaron’s post next to a sign and a map that explained every route in the park. He had the best view of us all and could see the mountain ridges encircling us, but he was already at the food bar across the courtyard. Even without super vision or hearing, I could hear and see a crowd forming.

“I told you that wasn’t what I ordered.” A man who looked to be our age held up the line in front of the food stand Zach and Luke were managing.

“And I told you that’s exactly what you fuckin’ ordered. You’re just being a dick. So, fuck off.” Zach’s eyes were set to kill, and he motioned for the next person in line.

“No. Like I said, you’re here to serve me.” The man put both of his hands on the bar, and his friends backed him up with laughter.

“Fuck. Off,” Zach growled.

A spray of soda soaked Zach, and he took one inhale to wipe the liquid from his eyes and hair out of his face before jumping across the counter and punching the man in the face.

“Uh-oh,” Presley said, pushing me behind him as chaos broke out in front of us. Luke slid over the counter, only

looking disappointed for a split second before he went into backing up Zach. There was a wildness in his eyes like he was having fun catching the punches of anyone who thought they'd be able to land one on him. Presley and Aaron had joined in to stop the fight. Even with Zach holding back, it had earned the guy two black eyes and a bloody nose. As we got escorted, Zach had chuckled and licked the blood from his knuckles—way too pleased with himself.

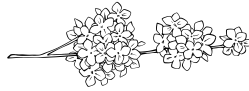
I'd been disappointed at first, but working at the movie theater in town was closer and all around a better job. Our summer bled quickly into the new school year. It turned out when you had to work almost every day, the days flew by.

I groaned, leaning into Aaron. My feet were still hot in my running shoes, and I didn't want to imagine the week ahead at work. I couldn't imagine standing.

“Hey, tomorrow is Monday!” Aaron exclaimed. “Hell yeah.”

I smiled, and a heat flushed my cheeks. There was one good thing about Mondays. Aaron and I closed together at the movie theater. He'd practically bribed our manager to make our schedules coordinate on certain days. It was fun to stay after hours and take our time cleaning and locking up. Our only true alone time together.

William and Thane went on talking back and forth in the front seat like we weren't there, and a restlessness had me shifting in my seat. How long would we be stuck under their thumb? And when—if ever—would The Family find us.



The smell of burning popcorn and butter stuck in my nostrils. I scooped another bucket and passed it to a customer. My aching feet were still at the forefront of my mind. The fluffy socks I'd slipped on did little to help.

One of the best places of entertainment on the mountain was the theater, which meant it was often busy. Monday nights were easy and slow, and I enjoyed the peace from the weekend rush. The theater was a place I could get out of my head. It felt safe to be among the public, in addition to The Legion waiting outside for our shifts to end.

In the center of town, our theater was moderately sized and had decent upkeep. New fixtures and red velvet carpets made it seem more upscale than it was. But I was thankful it didn't smell of musk and dirt like the old bowling alley in town.

"Wow, you make that look easy," Aaron whispered close, and I jumped.

Aaron leaned against his broom. He loved to pull his collar up on our all-black uniform shirts to make me laugh. It wasn't a color that suited Aaron, but he didn't look bad in it either. The best sweeper in the whole dang theater.

"How's the shift going?" I said, grabbing a rag to wipe the counters to look busy.

"Great! I found a watch in theater three."

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I held it under the counter.

Chris. He was back to being interested in my life again. At one time, that might have brought me joy, but now it brought me guilt. Chris and I could never be friends like we once were—for many reasons, but the biggest one being I could never tell him about the Calem brothers and what they were.

“Anything you want to share with the class?” He leaned on his broom while fluttering his lashes at me.

“Chris wants to come next month. The second to the last week of October.”

“That’s great.” Aaron’s voice went up an octave. “He can come to the Halloween party.”

“What Halloween party?”

“You know, the one we’re inevitably going to throw. The biggest one on campus in years. It’s gonna be crazy.”

“And who will let you have this party?” I said, knowing it was easier said than done.

“We’re working on it.”

I sighed, returning my phone to my pocket. “Well, I think Chris is worried.”

“Smart man.”

“Is right now a good time, though?”

The nagging thought of danger lingered. There was no indication The Family knew our location, but I couldn’t shake

the gnawing fear it might be inevitable.

“What better time than the present?”

Aaron’s smile deterred that negative line of thinking. I couldn’t think like that. My two worlds meshing left my head spinning. Chris was tucked safely away in New York, and that thought made me feel better. He needed to stay away from me and whatever was going on in my life. Yet I couldn’t drop everything because of a bad feeling.

Our manager eyed Aaron, and without a word, signaled for him to go back to his post. Aaron and I shared a look, and I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. We’d gotten a warning already for Aaron’s “excessive trips to the concession.” Aaron saluted her and gave me a wink before leaving to sweep the main auditorium.

“Excuse me.” A soft voice caught my attention at the edge of the counter. A woman around my age stood with a heavy aura.

I walked over, and she placed a sheet of paper before me. It was a missing person’s flier. A boy with soft features and a rounded nose. His brown hair was cut off at his shoulders, and he looked young. Old enough to go to BFU, but not anyone I recognized.

“Do you have a bulletin board I can hang these up on?” She, too, had the same soft-brown hair and similar nose. Siblings, I ventured to guess.

“Of course.” I motioned over to the board at the left side of the lobby. Mostly filled with local ads and fliers, but one stood out stark white among the rest. Another missing person from earlier that summer, still not found.

They’d found strong evidence she may have been fleeing a dangerous situation at home. That was the story, anyway. Our town had only had one other missing person in my lifetime—a six-year-old girl found safe a few hours after a domestic dispute.

When she left, I read the bottom of the poster. He was last seen two days ago around 9:00 p.m. at a local bar. The missing girl had disappeared in broad daylight after lunch with her friends. *There wasn’t a connection*, I told myself, but my heart would never believe it. There was no evidence to suggest anything. Yet I knew something most didn’t, vampires were real, and they could be here right under our noses.

Three

KIMBERLY



It took a week before I was able to walk correctly. I'd limped to class for the better half of the week. Now that the marathon was over, I'd need to find something else to keep me busy.

Keeping myself occupied stopped the black cloud of worry from settling over me. It was harder and harder to imagine my life before I'd had worry as a companion. Back when the only thing I cared about was graduating college. Something about

being lonely was easier in that regard. Worrying was easier to handle when it was just myself. Caring about someone else walking around in the world, unable to protect them, was worse. At any moment, things could be taken from me. How could anyone stand it?

I'd promised Chelsea I'd spend the day with her on Saturday. It was my first Saturday off in weeks, and she had a way of keeping me out of my head and in the present. We met in my dorm in the morning, and I hadn't changed a single thing about my room since last semester. Other than it was less kept because I spent less time there.

"Tell me on a scale of one to kill me now how bad is calculus this semester. I'm already getting stress wrinkles, and I don't think I can take the anticipation." She paced my room while looking at the photos I'd added to my mini fridge—a couple polaroids Presley had taken of us over the summer. The calculus professor had a reputation for being a brute, and I could attest to that fact with the mountain of homework I still needed to complete.

"It's ... fine."

"Kimberly, the scale. Use the scale."

"Probably somewhere between 'holy crap, I hate this' and 'this isn't so bad.'"

She perked up. "Oh, alright, doable. You're smart, though, not sure how well that bodes for me."

“Are you kidding? You’re going to be the most badass lawyer there ever was.” It was easy to compliment Chelsea. She was good at everything. Naturally talented and charismatic in a way I looked up to.

Her smile let me know she didn’t need to be told. She already knew.

“God, let’s do something fun today.” She plopped down on my bed and shielded her eyes from the sun peeking through my window.

“We’re not going to a club,” I warned.

Chelsea would love nothing more than to dress me in the skimpiest dress she owned and drag me out onto a dance floor.

“No, I’m feeling something athletic. Rock climbing?”

My mind wandered about as my attention panned back to the polaroids on the fridge, and I thought of the boys. Things had been tense with The Legion since their stunt last weekend. The ones who weren’t working were undoubtedly stuck in the frat house, and with no events or games this weekend, they were probably restless. If only there was something I could do to bridge the gap between the boys and The Legion. If they got along, things might run smoother. Maybe we could all work together to get out of our mess. Maybe then the constant worry in the pit of my stomach would cease.

A rogue idea sparked in my mind, and I perked up.

“Do you mind if I invite someone?”

“Aaron can’t come.”

“No, not Aaron. Someone else ... someone I think you might get along with.”

“Hm. Fine. As long as they’re fun.”

I didn’t know yet if this person was fun. I, too, had someone assigned from The Legion to protect me—Skylar. I’d scarcely put in the effort to build a relationship with her. I didn’t even know her last name or where she was from. She often stayed out of sight, but I’d seen her from across the campus yard watching me in case there was trouble. But like the changing leaves outside, there was a shift in the air. I needed to trust them. That might be the only way forward, and if so, I’d have to be the one to make the first move.



We pulled into the parking lot of the rock-climbing gym. A tall building stacked with warm wood at the entrance and black stone. It resided on the edge of Blackheart. I’d been alone a couple times, but it could be expensive, so it was something I considered a treat. It was as good a day as any to celebrate.

“I didn’t know if you’d be into it since you’ve been such a busy bee lately. The marathon, the job, the boy ...” She rolled her eyes, and I knew it wasn’t an invitation to talk about Aaron. She never would forgive him, but since we’d become good friends, she tolerated him, and that was enough for me. It was no issue for her to pretend he wasn’t there.

I side-eyed her, and she smiled. “I just mean, I bet you’re ... tired.”

My cheeks turned red, and I gave her a look for another reason entirely.

“Please do not tell me another story about how you guys are just friends. You’re not fooling anyone but yourselves. Now, come on.” She wrapped her arm in mine while carrying a gym bag on her other arm.

Living in a mountain town resulted in having one of the largest climbing gyms in the state. The ceilings were at least forty feet high, and inside, the walls were ivory concrete splashed with assortments of color all the way to the ceiling. Chelsea ushered us in like she owned the place, and gave an affectionate wave to the receptionist before smacking down her debit card and membership on the wooden counter.

Before I could protest, Chelsea cut me off. “I got it, hun. My treat today.”

“What do you do again?” I joked, knowing full well Chelsea talked nonstop about day trading. She was hooked and promised I’d never find her doing retail ever again.

The door opening caught my eye, and Skylar walked in with a gym bag in tow that looked like it could topple her over. Her straight white hair that grazed her shoulders was pulled up into a half ponytail with a few pieces framing her porcelain skin, and she was dressed for working out. I wasn’t sure what to expect from her, and I was surprised when she agreed to come. Especially at such short notice.

“Chelsea, this is Skylar. Skylar, Chelsea.”

Skylar reached her hand out to Chelsea, her cool-gray eyes sparkling with unbridled joy. “Oh my God, I love that bracelet.”

Skylar motioned to the bracelet on Chelsea’s arm. A thin delicate charm bracelet Chelsea never took off. Her mom had given it to her, whom I could tell was her best friend in the whole world.

Chelsea arched a brow with an approving smile, and I relaxed a little. Inducting her into our friend group might be easier than I planned.

“Come on! Let’s go.” Skylar scanned her membership ID and linked arms with me.

“You have a membership?” I said.

“To one of the best climbing gyms in the country? Duh!”

I balked at the words coming out of her mouth and the ease with which she’d said them. I’d never heard Skylar speak more than a few words, and I’d guessed she was as stoic as her brother, Dom, Presley’s guard.

She led us to the belay area where we suited up in our harnesses and got on our shoes.

“Where’d you meet Kim? She tells me about her whole day, including what she has for lunch.”

“That was one time!” I said, stepping into my climbing harness.

“We met at OBA.” Skylar didn’t skip a beat.

“I take it you’re dating one of the boys, then?”

“I’d rather die.” Skylar smiled as she tucked her hair behind her ear. Her eyes panned to me for the briefest of seconds.

Chelsea laughed. “Oh, I love her already.”

Skylar and Chelsea continued their chit chat while we took turns going up the wall and repelling down. Skylar matched Chelsea’s energy, and I was thankful I didn’t have to do much to keep our conversation flowing. I had no idea Skylar was so impressive. Why hadn’t I thought of this ingenious plan sooner?

After an hour, we switched gears, and I picked Skylar’s brain while Chelsea was in the bathroom.

“I didn’t know rock climbing was one of your hobbies.”

Skylar’s voice was like dark velvet. “It’s not. But it is for Chelsea.”

I stared at her in disbelief. “Wait, you did that for show?”

She smiled at me, but not the same smile she had before. This was more reserved, a nontooth variety. “She pegged me as the type that might take better to a bubblier personality. Looks like my assessment was correct.”

“Assessment? Have you been spying on us or something?”

“No. Just observing. It’s my job to keep you safe, and it’s easier when I know everything about everyone you interact with. I was happy to take this opportunity to get to know her

better, and you. The more I know, the easier it is for me to move around and adapt to what's needed."

I didn't know whether to be freaked out or impressed, but something about her held a sense of calm. She handed me a water bottle, motioning for me to drink. I was still slightly scared of the power she held over me. *Who is this woman?*

"Don't worry. It's all harmless. I'm not stalking you guys. Chelsea's bracelet was a good guess."

I steadied myself and took another sip of the water bottle. "Is Skylar even your real name?"

"It's the name I go by, and have for at least twenty years now. I like it. I think I'll keep it for a while."

I wondered if this was a terrible idea. I didn't know Skylar. She could be anyone. I had no idea the things she had done in the past or even if she was truly a good person I could trust, and yet I'd invited her straight into the lives of people I cared about. I was suddenly aware of all The Legion surrounding the Calem brothers. How far had they dug into their lives? For all I knew, they were building case files on each of them, noting their strengths ... and weaknesses.

"Are you okay?" Skylar watched me with her head tilted and brows drawn together, and I hadn't noticed my heart leaping out of my chest.

Chelsea emerged from the bathroom just in time, and I took the opportunity to get a little space.

“I think I’m going to go to the bouldering wall. I’ll catch up with you guys in a little bit.”

I left them behind, hoping neither of them would follow me. With each stride separating me from them, my shoulders relaxed. I counted my steps on the way to the wall, savoring the distraction. Chelsea would be safe with Skylar for a couple minutes. There was no reason for me to believe The Legion would have a reason to hurt her.

I stared up at the wall, placed my hands on the colored grips, and took a deep breath before pulling myself up. The world fell away, and it was just me and that rock.

Was it naive to think the Calem boys could get along with The Legion when there were things we still didn’t know? Their relationship was transactional and relied on the boys giving The Legion exactly what they wanted. But who were they?

I moved up the wall, taking my time to think and move.

There were a few things I knew. The Legion liked to keep the boys occupied. They’d insisted on the jobs. On the surface, there could be an angle, but the most obvious one was the boys were broke, and The Legion weren’t exactly swimming in money. I also knew they spent a lot of energy and manpower to protect us. They weren’t doing it for no reason. Their reason was obvious. The real question was what did I know about them? Truly know.

The muscles burned in my wrists as I walked up another step and then another. I placed my hand into the silky chalk on

my hip. I focused on a notch on a slight overhang.

With a deep breath, I leaped, and my hand reached its target destination. Both hands gripped the notches, but my foot slipped. I hadn't accounted for my momentum and fell backward. Way backward.

I inhaled on the way down. All the lights in the building were dim, and I fought slow weight pulling me down onto the floor. My back slammed against the mat, and pain radiated in my skull. When I breathed in, every ounce of air was gone. A feeling of dread and uncertainty threatened to overtake me, so I counted the movements in my chest. After a few seconds, every breath didn't feel out of reach. I didn't know how long I lay in darkness, but it only felt like seconds before I heard a voice beside me.

"Kim! Don't move." Chelsea's voice was far away, but her pointed acrylics dug into my palm. A few more ragged breaths later, the lights came into view.

"Where am I?" Nothing close felt familiar, especially not the scent of sweat lingering in the air.

"You're at the climbing gym. You're safe." The voice sounded slightly familiar and then I caught sight of the white hair swaying above my head. Skylar was there. She squeezed my free hand.

"What happened? My head ... Why are these mats so hard?" I got feeling in my limbs again and tried to reach up to my head, but someone held me in place.

“You fell between the mats, but you’re going to be fine. Someone already called 911, and the ambulance is on the way.” Her voice soothed me as she stroked my arm.

Chelsea’s voice was harsh as she guarded me. “Hey, no, unless you’re a doctor, back the hell up. Do not move her.”

“It’s okay, Chelsea.” I held up my hand to calm the fear in her voice. “Please, no ambulances. I’m fine.”

“You’re bleeding. It’s nothing to panic about, but I don’t think we should move you in case something happened to your neck.” Skylar was letting down her guard, and her bubbly persona dissolved.

Normally, I’d protest more, but since she’d brought notice to it, all my attention rushed to the throbbing in my head. My eyelids still felt heavy. Skylar kept one of her hands on my head, applying a firm pressure. I worked my way through each body part. First, I moved my feet and then squirmed to make sure I could still feel my legs and nothing was broken. There was some soreness, but nothing felt fractured.

“Noted.”

“I already called Aaron. We’ll meet them at the hospital,” Skylar said.

“Oh no. They’re probably freaking out.”

Chelsea stopped me. “They’ll be fine.”

I mumbled in agreement, and the more my consciousness came back, the more my head hurt.

She directed her words toward Skylar. “We have to keep her conscious.”

“Alright Kimberly, tell me—”

“No, you tell me something. Tell me a story.”

Skylar blinked. “A story?”

“I’m a shit storyteller, Kim,” Chelsea said. “You got any ideas?”

“Anything.” I wondered if Skylar heard my heartbeat still throbbing against my ribs. I didn’t want to think about my head. Or the fact I could be bleeding internally. Instead, I focused on the lights above and the rising and falling of my chest.

“Well ... did you know that Dom is my adoptive brother? My family, we used to foster.”

We were more alike than I thought. I couldn’t be shocked with the amount of adrenaline already pouring through my veins, but it made sense. They looked nothing alike.

She continued. “We didn’t get along at first. But one day, when I was a little girl, I snuck out in the pouring rain because I wanted to see this building in town. It was tall and beautiful, but it lit up at night, and our mom was strict, so she never let me go anywhere. Especially not at night. I thought I was so smart and climbed up onto the rafters of some construction in the city, but I slipped—”

“This is the story you chose?” I wasn’t looking at Chelsea, but I could feel her side-eyeing Skylar.

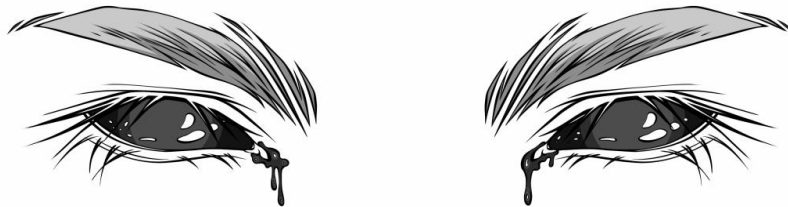
Skylar sounded unfazed. “Let me finish. I slipped and remembered thinking I was alone and I was going to fall and no one would be there to help me. But my brother was there, he had followed me, and he caught me before I hit the ground. We landed in this puddle, and he just said, ‘Next time, ask me to come.’ And that was that. He didn’t bring it up again. Point of the story being, I was okay, and you will be too. Because we won’t leave your side.”

“Okay, yes, what the Disney princess said.” Chelsea’s grip on my arm tightened.

I laughed, and that made my head throb. Her story seemed genuine, and I could work with that.

Four

AARON



“Can you drive faster!?” I pressed an invisible gas pedal, willing the car forward.

“I’m at a stoplight,” William said through gritted teeth as he white knuckled the steering wheel.

“We’re almost there. She’ll be okay, Aaron.” Luke’s usual calm wasn’t helping the anxiety swirling in my chest.

“Plus, Skylar is with her, and she said she’s stayed conscious, which is a good thing, right?” Presley rubbed my back.

“Yeah, unless she’s got bleeding or something on the brain,” Zach said.

“Not helping,” I spat.

“For what it’s worth, she’s in good hands. Of everyone, I’d trust Skylar the most to take care of her,” William said.

“Ouch,” Thane said from the passenger seat.

Rock climbing. Of all the things Kimberly could have gotten hurt doing, rock climbing wasn’t on my list of worries. It didn’t even make the top ten. None of it was fair.

A shift happened when I’d realized my brothers and I were immortal. Half of the things I used to worry about in life meant nothing anymore. I’d never have to worry about my brothers dying or getting hurt. I used to be extra cautious when driving in high school. After one of our classmates died in a car accident, it kick-started the thought in my teenage brain that we weren’t invincible and guaranteed a long life. One of us could get some deadly disease or die in some freak accident. It was a weight I never knew I carried until it was gone. All of that flew out the window once I met Kimberly, and the weight was like a boulder.

William skidded into the parking lot. “We’re here!”

My brothers and I tore out of the car and into the emergency room lobby, leaving William and Thane to park. I spied Skylar through the window, sitting and reading a magazine.

“Our friend was in an accident. Kimberly. Kimberly Burns.” My voice shook.

“Okay, I can give you a visitor badge, but only one of you can go back right now. You’ll have to switch out.”

“We’ll figure it out. Go.” Luke didn’t wait for me to reply before ushering me forward.

I walked the empty halls. Monitors beeping and the stench of blood hung heavy in the air. The familiar smell of antiseptic brought me back to Brooklyn and visiting my mom occasionally on her lunch breaks. It was a rare occurrence, but I remembered them clearly. I’d always given her a hard time about the smell and joked about how she’d bathed in cleaner. But now it was a comfort. My mom would have taken great care of Kimberly ...

I pushed away the thought and the longing to turn the corner and see my mom in her colorful scrubs. I didn’t need to add to my inner turmoil.

I found her room on the corner. I took it all in quickly. Chelsea was draped over her bedside and then I glimpsed her face. Kimberly was laughing. Relief washed over me.

I composed myself, waiting by the doorframe, before I knocked. “I’ve come for the girl.”

Chelsea rolled her eyes. “Fine.” She turned to Kimberly and whispered, “I’m going to be outside. But I’ll be close if you need me to kick any of them out.” It was funny how she didn’t think I could hear her.

She smiled. “Thank you ... really.”

Chelsea stared daggers at me and bumped me on the shoulder on the way out.

“Well, well, well, someone’s had quite the adventure today.” I walked over to her and took her hand without another thought. I wanted to feel the warmth in her skin and the blood pumping underneath its surface to double-check she was alive. There was a bandage over her head, and I could smell the faintest scent of dried blood.

She smiled while eyeing me up and down.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Wait, who are you again? Starts with an A, I think ... talks *a lot*.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m Anthony. We met in class and have been friends ever since. Nothing bad has ever happened, and you’re trying not to fall in love with me. Just a normal guy with normal issues.”

I contemplated those words, and I wanted them to be true. She deserved normal issues.

Kimberly giggled. “Shut up.”

I didn’t let go of her hand, and she never pulled away. Instead, I pulled up a chair and watched her tired eyes as she traced the veins on my hand.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m glad you’re alive.”

There was a long silence between us, and I didn’t need superpowers to know what she was thinking because I thought the same thing since I got the call. This had turned out fine,

but she wasn't safe. She would never be safe as a human, which meant our time together would be short. Short in comparison to the eternal life I faced.

"Does your head hurt?" I moved the hair from her face. My fingers lingered on her ear before grazing her cheek. Her heart jumped.

"No, they have good drugs. They said I can go home if the results from my scans come back okay."

"You're definitely coming home with me, then."

"I'm not sure how The Legion would feel about me spending the night in your dorm."

"I *really* don't care," I said, pulling away from her hand, but she held onto my arm, not letting me move away. "Come on. It would be fun. I make a great concussion buddy because I don't sleep."

"Do you ever wash your sheets?"

"Uh, yes?" I laughed. "Back to the important stuff, you're saying you want to sleep in my bed?"

She huffed. "Are you going to make a brain-injured girl sleep on the floor?"

"Of course not. But, then, where am I going to sleep?"

"You don't sleep."

"Yeah, but I lounge."

"Fine. We can lounge together, then."

I perked up. "You want to ... share a bed?"

Her cheeks pinked. “I mean ... we could ... lounge and watch movies. That sounds fun, right?”

I studied her face, trying harder and harder to get the image of us lying in bed together out of my head. She didn’t look away from my gaze, and the world dissipated. My attention landed on her soft pink lips, and I thought back to our camping trip together in the spring. I wanted to kiss her. More than anything, I wanted to lean in and take hold of her heart, but I couldn’t because once our lips touched, I’d be done for. I’d never be able to pull myself away from her without it destroying me. The string pulling our hearts would tie us together forever. So I stopped. For me, but mostly for her.

Now I wasn’t sure I could stop. All I could think about was her hand on mine and the way her breathing had changed. Nothing else in the world mattered than the beating of her heart and the life in her features.

“Ding dong!” Presley jumped in. “Oh, wait, are we interrupting?”

Zach walked in with his hands in his pockets. “We’re definitely interrupting.”

Kimberly and I pulled away, and I cleared my throat. “No, you’re not.”

God. I’m so weak.

“Well, scoot over. You’ve had your time.” Presley pulled up a chair next to me and moved me over a few inches, and the screeching of the chair legs broke our awkward silence.

Luke came in last and shut the door behind him.

“What are you doing? We can’t all be in here at the same time,” I said.

Presley leaned back in his chair. “I think we’re fine. We snuck in.”

“Please don’t tell me you did something that will get you arrested,” Kim said with a sly smile. She was way too used to us.

“No,” Luke said. “I mean, probably not. We snuck past the security, nothing major.”

Luke stood behind me with his arm on my shoulder, and Zach leaned against the wall on the other side of the room. The room was small, and we crowded Kimberly’s bed, but she didn’t look uncomfortable, even with us all staring at her.

“Dude, you look like shit,” Zach said with a smile on his face.

“He’s right. How far did you fall?” Presley’s eyes widened. “Did you go to that place on Walker Street? Totem? I love that place!”

Luke surveyed the whole room. “Got any broken bones?”

“Yeah, it was supposed to be a fun girl’s day. I was on the bouldering wall and fell at least fifteen feet, between the mats, but no broken bones.” Kimberly raised her forearm and flexed her fingers. “Just have to make sure I don’t have any internal bleeding.”

“Sick,” Presley said.

“You know Luke and I had a pretty severe concussion once —” Zach started.

“Please don’t tell us about the time you voluntarily got the shit kicked out of you to join a blood cult,” I grumbled.

Presley leaned onto Kim’s bed. “You should have seen Luke’s eye. It was bloody for weeks.”

“I think what Zach is trying to say is ... you shouldn’t worry,” Luke said with a confidence that put a natural ease into the air. “But it sucked. I got really nauseous, threw up everywhere.”

“Sounds fun to look forward to,” Kimberly said, watching them all closely. She scanned the room every couple minutes. Her jaw was set in an unreadable expression.

“Are they annoying you? I’ll tell them to leave.”

“Tell me?” Zach arched a brow at me, practically begging for a fight. We hadn’t bickered in weeks. Probably because he had William as his new torture buddy. But Zach had been at work all day, and I was overdue.

“No!” she said. “Really. I was thinking ... I’m happy you all came to visit me. This is nice.”

We all felt the weight of her words. I realized that this was the closest hospital to Blackheart, and this wasn’t her first trip. She’d been in this hospital before, only completely alone. I pressed into her and put my hand on her leg to comfort her. That wasn’t even the worst part. She’d been hurt because of

me. I'd begged her to let me help her pay off her medical bills, and she'd only said, "Maybe." Absolutely no elaboration. Two syllables. She was so stubborn ... It was cute most of the time.

A brief silence threatened the room but then Presley said what none of us would dare say aloud, "So, like why don't you just become a vampire so we don't have to worry about you anymore?"

I hit him. "Presley!"

"What?! Come on. This sucks. And we have an obvious solution."

Zach leaned against the wall with a sigh. "He's got a point. Less work for me. I'm for it."

"What!? You're not serious," I said.

"Just one less thing for me to worry about, honestly. The sooner she's less fragile, the easier it will be to protect her if anything happens."

He *would* say that. I hadn't received an exact answer from my older brothers, but I was almost certain the idea to change Presley and me came directly from Zach. It seemed like he would be the one to have the idea.

"You guys are serious?" Kimberly spoke slowly.

"Luke?" I turned, looking for a sensible perspective.

He didn't respond right away; he looked to me and then back to Kimberly. "That's completely up to you. If that was something you wanted ... hell yeah, we'd do it."

I opened my mouth but stopped when I saw Kimberly's face. In that moment, I had forgotten the most important part. Kimberly's choice. It wasn't mine to make. And I wanted desperately not to ever say goodbye, but the thought of her becoming like me was a foreign concept. I'd daydreamed about it a few times, sure, but I never thought the option was even on the table. The guilt of knowing I was truly the one who took her away from having anything resembling a normal life made my stomach turn.

"Wow." She eyed the cotton linens on her bed. "That's a huge decision."

The click of the hospital door had us all shuffling out of the way.

"Kimberly, long time no see." A muscular man with brown skin and tight curls entered the room. He wore way too tight of a white coat, and he matched Luke's height and stature.

Kimberly's eyes were void of recollection, and I wasn't sure if it was because she didn't remember him or she wasn't able to focus due to our conversation.

"I see you've got a lot of family here. Are these your brothers?"

"Totally," Presley said. "You must be the top doctor. Tell us, is she dying?"

Presley's tone was too nonchalant. I didn't have to be a mind reader to know what he was thinking. If she was, no

problem. We'd change her. Simple. Only, he didn't realize how complicated it was.

"Far from it." The doctor spoke directly to Kimberly this time. "Your scans look great, no broken bones. You do have a mild concussion, though. That will take some time to heal, but overall, with how well your body took that fall, you're going to be fine."

I squeezed her. We got lucky this time, and I was thankful Skylar had been there to help her—and even William for breaking his rigid rules and speeding toward the hospital.

"Tough as nails." Luke looked at Kimberly. "When can she go home?"

"Today. I'll get everything settled in with the nurses, and you guys can take her. You'll have to go wait in the lobby, I'm afraid. I don't mind a crowd, but these nurses will bust ya."

"No problem." Luke gave Kimberly a fist bump before heading toward the door.

Zach and Presley left too, and Presley whispered his excitement about our conversation we'd just had all the way down the hall.

I hesitated by her bedside. "Are you totally freaked?"

She chewed her lip for a moment. "Kinda."

"Same."

"I've thought about it, but I never thought your brothers would ever offer ..."

“Don’t feel any pressure. This is your life.”

“I know ... I just ... I need time to think about everything. Giving up my mortality is a lot.”

Time. She needed the one thing I wasn’t sure we had. I had no clue how long we’d be able to stay in Blackheart. And when we finally left, would she come with us? Would it ever be safe enough for her to stay?

Now everything was even more confusing.

“Do you need me to ... back off a little and leave you alone?”

“No.” She gripped my arm. “That’s not what I meant. Just turning into a vampire wasn’t exactly in my five-year plan.”

“Me either. That’s why I’m glad you’re going to think about it. I’ll be here regardless of what you choose. I’m not going anywhere.”

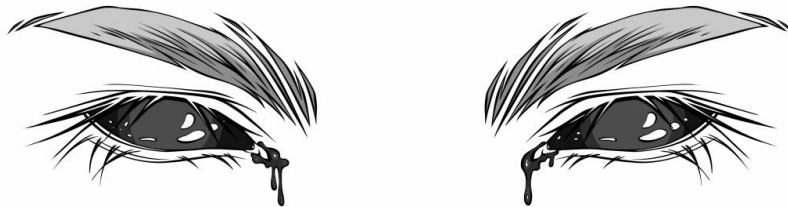
She relaxed and the smile returned. The smile I was always after. I had to do whatever it took to make sure she’d never set foot in this hospital again. I needed to step up and protect her, but I couldn’t be with her at all times. That meant I’d have to trust The Legion to keep her safe when I wasn’t around. I didn’t like that option, but I had to try.

“Alright. I better go before one of these scary hulk nurses comes to throw me out of here.”

She giggled at my goofy-ass joke, and it gave me hope despite the feeling that was becoming apparent. Things would change whether I wanted them to.

Five

AARON



After another hour, Kimberly was free to come home, and surprisingly, William didn't give me much trouble regarding her staying over. I hated getting his permission for things, but with Kilian only being around occasionally, The Legion needed a leader. William seemed to fill that role with pleasure. He never smiled unless he got to boss us around.

It was late by the time we got home, and I let Kim use my room to get changed after we'd picked up her things.

"What ... are you wearing?" I said, stopping dead in my tracks.

Kimberly was posted up in the doorway to my bedroom with her head still bandaged, and she clutched her toiletries. “What?”

My gaze lingered on her legs covered only partly by her knee-high socks. She wore an oversized T-shirt tucked into her checkered night shorts. It was the hottest thing I’d ever seen.

God was torturing me again. I had the prettiest girl in the world in my room. The only one who was purely off-limits and I could never touch.

I averted my gaze. “Whoa, Burns. Are you trying to flash the whole frat house? Put some clothes on, will ya?”

She pulled her hair to one side and rolled her eyes. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“Okay, Knee Socks. Have it your way. I ... I’m gonna let you get settled into bed. Relax. Have alone time. Rest your head, and I’ll go ... go talk to everyone downstairs for a bit. You know, check in with the guys.”

She smirked. “Fine.”

I practically sprinted out the door and down the stairs. I had to get far away and think about anything other than her being in my room in those shorts.

“What’s up?” Thane peered around the corner in the foyer.

“Nothing. Nothing. I’m good. Everything is good.”

“How’s Kimberly?”

“I think she’ll be okay ... thanks for asking.”

Thane wasn't someone I'd trust with my deepest, darkest secrets, but he tried to get to know me, and I appreciated that.

He smiled. "No problem. You want to join? We're playing poker."

"N—" It wouldn't hurt me to build a relationship with some of them. It may make them more willing to actually protect us. "Sure, I've got a few minutes."

"Did I hear someone say poker?" Presley was next to me in seconds. That was one good thing about The Legion moving in. We had more freedom. The vampire-to-human ratio was balanced in our favor. Plus, it was Saturday night and, though I wasn't one hundred percent sure, most left on the weekends. Either to stay with their girlfriends or travel home.

"You guys play?" Thane said.

"Just a little." Presley winked at me when Thane had his back turned.

"Great, come on! We've got plenty of room." Thane ushered us through the kitchen and into the hallway. In the back of the house, next to the library, was the pool room. It was the official living place of the pool table, but during parties, we usually moved it to the living room or kitchen. A group of four Legion members were already playing. Their scowls as we entered told me we weren't welcome. The thing about The Legion was despite having to protect us, none liked doing so. Except Thane ... and maybe Skylar.

Thane pulled up two chairs, and the screeching on the hardwood broke the silence.

“Man, you know what would make this better? Beer.” Presley ran to the kitchen and plopped down with a freshly cracked can and another next to it for when he chugged that one. “Ah, better. Want any?”

The death glares ensued. Seeing as how The Legion were opposed to anything fun, alcohol was off the table.

“I’ll deal,” I said. I found it was a good way to observe other players. See if I could identify their tells, but more important, I could stack the deck. Presley sat across from me beaming. We played poker a lot growing up. Only, we played it the Calem way. We all cheated in any way we could.

“Sweet.” Thane kept his cheerful demeanor while eyeing Felix.

“Are we really gonna play with them?” Felix’s voice was deep. He sat back in his chair, and his muscles bulged out of his shirt. Felix and Halina were fraternal twins. Their only similarities were their pinkish pale skin and blonde hair. That’s about all I knew about them, other than they were from Russia and had a particular dislike for my older brothers. It was easy to steer clear of the ones who didn’t like us. I guessed they were ordered by Kilian to play nice, but I had to wonder what was in it for them? If they were miserable, why did they agree to stay?

“Come on. It’s your chance to completely obliterate them in poker.” Thane winked at me, and I dealt cards after peeking at

them while shuffling.

“Yeah, I’m sure he wants to beat us in something.” Presley laughed as he chugged the rest of his first beer. The one and only time we’d gotten Felix to interact with us was at our frat recruitment when we’d hosted a Smash Bros. contest. Presley and I dominated with no cheating required. Poker would be the distraction I needed, and hopefully I could get a better read on some of The Legion members.

The Legion weren’t watching me too closely, and I guessed they were amateurs. Thane explained the chip amounts before we started, and we agreed. Not that I had a lot of money to gamble away, but I didn’t plan on losing much. Skylar and Dom were to my left and started the bids.

“How is Kimberly?” Skylar asked, and her eyes softened when they met mine.

“She seems okay ... thanks for taking care of her, by the way. It helped knowing she had you.”

A dimple appeared on her chin as she eyed her cards. “I did nothing. You shouldn’t be thanking me.”

She said it in a flat tone, as if I’d offended her somehow.

“Come on, Sky, you can’t be everywhere at once.” Thane sighed, and his brows wrinkled.

“Yeah, what were you going to do? Catch her mid free fall from across the room?” Felix said, already folding.

Skylar tucked her hair behind her ear. “You underestimate me.”

Thane smiled before relaxing back into his chair. “Wouldn’t dream of it. I know how you are, but you can’t blame yourself forever.”

Dom cracked a smile. “Sure she can.”

Hearing Skylar felt bad for not being there made me feel a little bad for cheating at our poker game. But Zach and Luke taught me it wasn’t personal. I looked to Presley, waiting for him to raise.

As kids, Presley and I spent many late nights researching how to stack cards. We practiced repeatedly in the dim glow of my TV into the early morning hours. It was a skill we used to cure our boredom, but also to beat Zach and Luke, who always won at everything. I’d learned sleight of hand from videos, and I was somewhat better at it, but the vampire advantage made it that much easier. Hence Presley’s newfound love of gambling.

Felix eyed me while tapping his finger on the table. *Did he already suspect me?*

Presley slammed his hands on the table in a fit of laughter with Thane, dividing their attentions for a millisecond. I kept my attention on the cards and noticed Felix moving his hands from his cards to his lap and then back to his deck. I smiled. A game of cheater against cheater was a lot more challenging.

We played for more than an hour, and I’d been able to signal to Presley about Felix. We tried to remain inconspicuous, but as the pot grew higher, Presley couldn’t help but to claim his

victory despite already having a winning hand the last time. I fought the urge to kick him under the table.

“I don’t play with cheaters.” Felix smacked his hands on the table and stood.

I smirked. “What’s your problem? Mad you lost at your own game ... cheater?”

Thane threw his cards on the table. “Felix! I knew there had to be a reason you were always taking all my money.”

He ignored him, his eyes ablaze and honed in on me. “No, I’m thinking we should have killed you when we had the chance. Saved us the trouble.”

Thane frowned while taking his feet off the table. “Come on. Let’s all be friends.”

“Friends?” Halina ran her fingers through her hair, nudging Dom, who stayed stoic. “What do you think about that?”

“Nothing,” Dom said.

Skylar tossed her cards on the table. “Don’t be so dramatic, Felix. It’s just a game.”

“Oh, come on, Sky. You can’t love them that much.”

“Don’t engage,” Dom said, standing up and leading his sister toward the door.

Felix pushed his hands through his hair. “Whatever. I’m sure his little human girl will be dead soon, anyway. Save us all the trouble of looking after a human who is doomed to die.”

My body went rigid, and my attempts to help clean up the table stopped.

“What?” The word came out so low I didn’t recognize my own voice.

“Is that a threat?” Presley said.

“Whoa, no, it isn’t. Let’s take it down a few notches.” Thane’s voice felt far away.

But my body wouldn’t still. Anger bubbled in my chest and moved into fingers. My hands tensed, and my face warmed.

“You know as well as I do, Thane, that humans don’t last in our world. Especially not ones with a target on their back from The Family.” Felix’s voice was soft when addressing Thane, but it cut like a knife when he turned to me. “A bump on the head is the least of your worries. Might as well start planning the funeral.”

“Felix.” Skylar clenched her jaw and stopped by the doorframe.

“You know I’m right, Sky. You just won’t admit it to yourself.”

“Let’s let them kill each other in peace.” Dom whispered to Skylar.

I gripped the table, and the wood splintered under my fingers.

You’re in control. You get the final say in what you let shake you.

I tried to recall every pep talk Luke had given me, but it wasn't working. I couldn't tell what was getting to me more: the threat in his voice or the truth behind his words.

"Pres, come on, let's get Aaron back upstairs." Thane's hand on my arm felt more like a breeze on my sleeve with how the blood surged through my body.

"No way! Kick his ass, Aaron!"

"Yeah, try to kick my ass. Too bad you can't. You're just a child. You have no idea what you're up against, but I do." Felix smirked, no doubt enjoying every minute of watching me squirm. "Since you won't be able to protect her, maybe I should show mercy ... put her out of her misery now."

I lunged. No longer feeling anything other than rage in my body. I was numb and only saw red.

I didn't get more than an inch or two before a set of strong arms pulled me back into my chair and held me down.

"What the hell is going on here?" William emerged, bringing the scent of cigarettes into the room. "I left you in charge and someone breaks the fuckin' furniture."

"Hey, I kept them from killing each other. That was my job." Thane rubbed the back of his neck.

"Barely," Skylar said as she and Dom sauntered out of the room. Her eyes flickered to me, and I detected a hint of sadness there. My head felt like it split in half, and with each beat of my heart, my head pulsated.

Luke, Zach, and William all looked worn. I'd wondered where they were, but they were all standing with their arms crossed watching me and Felix like disappointed dads.

"Can't leave you fuckers for two seconds," Zach said, and William nodded in agreement.

The divide between us was bigger than I thought, yet, if I didn't know any better, it looked like my older brothers were getting along with William. It was a miracle.

"What was this about?" William said.

"We just got into an argument ... about cheating." Felix was watching me from across the room.

Presley waited for me to speak. Now that the anger had passed through my body and I had the worst headache ever, I realized I had given Felix exactly what he wanted. He was a dick, but I got his message loud and clear, and he was partly right. I didn't know what we were up against. Not really. I'd never personally dealt with the horrors of The Family. Everything I knew was secondhand, and even though I still missed Sarah, it wasn't the same as being there and watching her die.

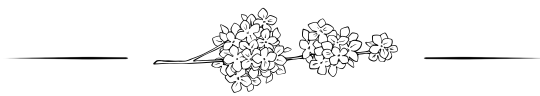
I had no idea what the members of The Legion had endured at the hands of The Family. I didn't know their pasts and the things they experienced or the things they lost. To them I was a kid playing a dangerous game, and they knew the odds better than I did.

“Yeah, cheating. Presley and I got caught cheating,” I said, standing, and the wood splinters crunched under my feet.

Luke’s eyes were boring a hole in the side of my face.

“Why am I not surprised?” William sighed.

“Yeah, wonder where they got an idea like that.” Zach smirked and nudged Luke.



It was after midnight when I opened the door to my room. Me, Presley, and Felix had to clean up the broken table and put it in the dumpster outside. We didn’t say much, but Felix thanked me for not mentioning to William the things he’d said before we went our separate ways in the house, and I took that as we were cool.

I expected Kimberly to be asleep. Instead, she lifted her head with a sleepy smile to look at me. And just like that, the distraction was useless because there she was in my bed.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” she said with sleep in her voice.

I thought about telling her about my run-in with Felix but resolved to tell her in the morning. Her eyes might shut any minute, and I wanted her to rest.

“Do you still feel okay? Do you need any water? More pillows ... Shoulder to sleep on?”

I knew I shouldn't say it, but it was Kimberly, and she was in my bed.

She sat up, lifted the cover, and revealed a set of my sleep pants. "Movie buddy?"

Seeing her in my pants was worse than the shorts. So much worse. I didn't say a word as I took her up on her offer. I slid under the comforter of my twin bed that was already toasty warm. I expected Kimberly to scoot over to her side of the bed, but she didn't. She stayed close and snuggled into my arm. I was thankful she couldn't hear my heartbeat, because it was bursting out of my chest.

Her heartbeat was a soft, comforting pattern. She was relaxed.

"Uh, what should we watch?" I said as I scrolled the streaming service I bummed off one of the guys in the house.

"I don't know, master of the cinema, you tell me."

"How about this one?" I moved the cursor over a western because I knew that was the one type of movie she hated. There had been a resurgence of women adoring men with gray beards and cowboy hats after a western had played in the theaters for six weeks straight and hit box office records. I think she was tired of college boys in town calling her "little lady" when she served them popcorn at the concession stand.

"Oh, with Ryan Gosling?"

She said that about every movie.

I looked at her to see if she was serious, and she smirked. “You’re a real comedian, Burns. You know that.”

“Mhmm, hm.” She pulled herself snug to me and closed her eyes on a sigh.

My arm and chest were burning where she rested her hands, and I tried to keep my attention on the TV. I’d picked some random romantic comedy. She loved those.

Only fifteen minutes into the movie, she spoke again. “Do you think your brothers were serious about what they said?”

I hesitated, but I knew the answer. “Yeah. I do. They don’t normally lie about that kind of stuff.”

Her eyes opened, and I turned my head to face her.

“Why do I feel like ... you’re disappointed? Like ... you didn’t want them to ask me.”

“I’m not. It’s not that.”

“Do you ... not want me to be part of your family? I mean, I know that’s kind of a lot to ask.”

“What?! No. That’s all I want. It’s just, after everything that went down a few months ago, I know how hard it is to have a demon in your head and having to hunt. You have to attack people, Kim. You know better than anyone what that feels like ... and there’s no way around it. I still hate it. I don’t want you to go through that.”

Her breath was hot on my face, and it smelled like bubblegum toothpaste. This girl would be the death of me.

She sighed. “That’s why I don’t know if I want to ... that, and should I choose to be immortal at twenty years old? Seems like a huge life-altering choice I can’t take back.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, talk about committing yourself to a lifetime of dead-end jobs where you can never move up the ladder.”

“Or ... there’s a never-ending list of things to learn and do. I love the idea of that. Or places to go see.” Her eyes shone with optimism before darkening again. “But I don’t want to hurt people. I don’t want to choose to do this at the expense of others. That seems ... selfish.”

My fingers found their way to her cheek, and I moved a piece of hair from her eyes. “I wish my brothers had been so ... self-aware.”

I loved this side of her. Her opening up to me was the greatest gift I’d ever been given. Unknown to the rest of the world, Kimberly Burns had soft skin under that armor she put on every day. She tried to hide it, but when she was this close, she didn’t hold back those inner fears. Instead, she relied on me for comfort, and I knew that wasn’t a privilege many got from her.

She spoke again. “On the other hand, you guys are the closest thing I’ve ever had to family, and I don’t know where this business with The Legion will take you. What if me choosing not to become a vampire was the only thing that kept you from taking me with you? Or even worse, what if me becoming one was the only reason for you to take me along.”

I was still shocked and reeling by her words when tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

“Hey, hey, hey. What are you talking about? I want you with me every day. Vampire or not. I’m not going anywhere. I promise. And if you want to stay human, who cares. That doesn’t change anything. You’re still family.” I relaxed my palms on her cheeks. “You can grow old, get married, and have kids, and do all those things, and I’ll still be here. We can be those weird uncles who stay mysteriously young and handsome. I’ll watch you fall in love, grow old, and ... die if that’s what you want. And it would be the most horrible, heart-wrenching thing I’d ever do, but I’d do it for you. I don’t want you to choose this life because you feel like if you don’t, you’ll be alone.”

I could imagine it all. After a couple years had gone by and college was over, Kimberly would work in whatever exciting career she chose. She’d be a CEO or a scientist, something astounding because she was amazing and hardworking. There, she’d probably meet a guy. We’d be introduced, and I’d struggle to like him, but she had good instincts, and we’d become good friends eventually. As time went on and they got married, he’d have questions, but she’d vouch for us. Maybe we’d all get along well enough and we could tell him. They might have kids and we’d be the cool, fun uncles that never aged. But she would. From an athletic twenty-year-old, to a very spritely ninety-year-old who would probably still do pool exercises. And then we’d have to watch her die and live with the fact that we’d have to continue on without her, with only

her family left behind as a piece of her memory. The whole thing would be weird. It would be horrible. But I'd do it in a heartbeat for her.

Her gaze was heavy on mine. I had been consumed by my own thoughts, so I didn't notice the shift in her breathing and heart rate. She leaned forward, and her lips, like a magnet, pulled me closer.

I knew if I allowed myself to kiss her, everything I'd done to build the wall between us would crumble. One kiss and it would be over for me.

I hesitated one moment longer before our lips touched. A bolt of electricity jolted me forward, and I grabbed her face and pulled her closer. Of all the times I'd imagined it, the real thing was *so* much better. Her lips tasted like bubblegum, and the scent of her shampoo was everywhere. She was everywhere.

She tugged at my hair and invited me to move closer. I let her pull me till I leaned over her. I was careful not to grab her like I ached to. Partly because she was concussed, and the other, much more prominent, reason was because I felt the need to hold her so forcefully against my body and I was certain I couldn't do it without hurting her. Every kiss left me hungrier, and the ounce of logic still lingering in my brain held on for dear life. Our tongues entangled, and with every motion, my body burned hotter. Her breath was hot in my throat. I wanted her. All of her.

Finally.

I pulled away, stilling the dark voice in my head. I hadn't heard it in days, and I couldn't take any chances. I needed to hunt.

As that guilt set in, another stronger feeling took its place at the image of Kimberly's bloody arm and the terror in her eyes when I'd bitten her in the forest. What was I doing? I kissed the one person I shouldn't. Because I was immortal, and she was not. I hurt her. Her life would be better without me in it.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that," I said.

Her eyes met mine again as she leaned back, letting out a soft breath. "Aaron, I kissed you ..."

"Right."

I couldn't take my eyes off her. My body yearned for her and her perfectly pink lips swollen from kissing.

"But we probably shouldn't ..." she said. Her gaze held firmly on my lips.

"You're right ... we shouldn't. You're concussed. Confused."

"Right. It never happened." She shook her head, as if it would shake away the evidence like an Etch A Sketch. But I still felt her on my lips.

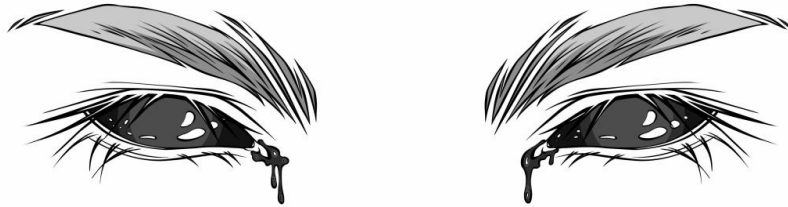
"Agreed. You should sleep. That would be great ... for your head. I think I should go—"

"No, please stay. I-I still need my movie buddy."

Her big blue irises were really convincing. Going was smarter. It was nobler. I should have gotten up and walked out and pretended that kiss never happened, but I promised I wasn't leaving, and as her grip tightened on my arm, I knew it was pointless for me to try. It was already done. I'd kissed her, and there wasn't a rewind button. I hooked myself into a ride with no exit, and I was certain I didn't want to get off. But as I nestled myself back into bed with her, I couldn't think of anything other than how I would never be able to go back to being just friends after a kiss like that.

Six

AARON



One thing I liked about hunting with The Legion was the complete silence.

William and Thane could walk in silence without uttering a single word to each other. As if it was something to be done in reverence, not a casual stroll in the park. A skill I hadn't yet learned.

It was three in the morning before I wrestled myself from Kimberly's grasp and left her sleeping peacefully in my bed. And for those hours, I'd fought with the voice in my head and the feel of Kimberly's warmth. I'd exclaimed in the foyer I needed to hunt immediately, or I would go crazy. Which prompted Luke to come to my aide, but to move toward

goodwill with The Legion, I decided it might be a good idea to go with them alone. I just hoped it wouldn't be Felix because I still wasn't sure I could trust him not to kill me.

Thane, William, and I walked along the outskirts of a nearby town farther down the mountain. It was far enough away from Blackheart where I wasn't worried about running into anyone I knew. We walked next to a road with tall redwoods shielding us on either side, and the stars above covered almost every inch of the obsidian sky. It probably would have looked like we were up to no good if it weren't for how well dressed William and Thane were.

"Why do you dress like that?" I literally couldn't stop myself from saying the words.

William chuckled. "I could ask ya the same thing? You're always runnin' around looking like a bum."

"Yeah, we're *stylish* and comfortable. The ladies...and some men dig it." Thane ran his fingers through his hair.

"Can you guys even date? Seems like Kilian would be strict about that kind of thing," I said while dodging a trash can.

"Kilian doesn't enforce any rules relating to our personal lives." William lit a cigarette and snapped his lighter shut, and the smoke trailed up into the night.

"But, I mean we're always moving around. Not like we can date anyone, really. Shoot, I haven't dated anyone for at least a hundred years ... though I've met a few people I really wished I could have settled down with ... it never really works."

I sighed, thinking again of Kimberly just when the cold pine air was finally taking me far away from my room and the memory of us in my warm bed.

Thane must have read my mind because he backpedaled. “Maybe, it could have, though ... Will keeps me busy. You know, fighting the good fight and all. We’ve been traveling since the day we met. This is the first time we’ve been in one place for longer than a week in years.”

It was hard to believe Thane was a century old. He blended in well with everyone at college, even in the way he spoke. From day one, he was there participating in our frat events and doing it with a smile.

“How did you guys meet?”

“We met at a pub, and he was plastered,” William said.

“I had troubles to drink away.” Thane winked at me before putting his hands behind his head casually. “Good ole Will here stopped some big oaf from killin’ me.”

I noted Thane’s slight accent, probably picked up from William in their many years together. Or maybe he was from Ireland too?

“You two aren’t like the others, then? You’ve been together a long time?”

William rolled his eyes and took another puff of his cigarette. “You really can’t stop talkin’, can ya?”

“Nope. It’s a curse.”

“We’ve been together ever since that day. The Legion ... Will ... they pulled me off my ass. The Legion is the best lot I’ve ever had in life, and everyone I’ve met ... may not be the easiest to get along with, but they’re good people through and through,” Thane said with a smile.

I smiled, knowing exactly what he meant. He trusted them and saw the best in them. Just as I did with my brothers. Something in me shifted when I thought of them all. Maybe we all could get along? They could get what they wanted, and we could get what we needed. Our freedom. That’s why we were all here. We had common interests. We just needed to work together.

William stopped me with a hand on my chest. “There. That’s perfect.”

A lone silhouette of a man sat at a wooden picnic table off in the distance. The large park was dimly lit with only three lights placed at the very edge of the tree line. A familiar fear traveled up my limbs, and I shivered.

William stood in front of me. The smoke from his cigarette swirled in my face. “Alright, I’ll go in, knock the guy out, and then you feed. It will be quick.”

My heart started beating in my ears, and my hands got sweaty. Two seconds in and I was ready to run back the way we came.

“But we won’t let you kill anyone.” Thane shoved his hands into his trouser pockets. “I swear it.”

I nodded to them and started what felt like an eternity to close the distance. The man was sat on the bench, scrolling his phone, not paying attention or seeming to care about the late hour. But he was huge, he probably didn't think he had to worry.

Kill, kill, kill.

The voice was a sad mockery in my ears, but I was getting better and better at tuning it out. The more fed I was, the less scared I felt. The less scared I felt, the more control I had. But as we got closer, I stopped. The voice in my head swirled around too fast, and the panic set in.

“Aaron ...” Thane's brows furrowed. “It will be okay. You can trust me.”

I believed him, and his words were enough to keep me walking. I wished Luke were there with his added optimism and strength in case they couldn't pull me off this guy.

William shot behind him in a second, and with the cigarette still on his lips, he touched the guy's cheek from behind, and he slumped forward.

Stay calm, I told myself. My hands shook at my sides.

Kill him. Kill him now.

I stopped again on the other side of the table. They stared at me, but I froze, this time because the stability in me shifted. A surge of something primal ran through my body, and I feared if I kept walking, I might tear out the guy's throat. It hadn't been

that long since I'd fed, but suddenly it felt like it'd been weeks.

"I can't do it," I whispered. My attention locked on his neck where I imagined the blood pumping beneath his skin.

"You can." Thane was next to me. "Remember, you're in control every step of the way. Try to think of the person you're biting. Imagine their life and who you think they are ... what they do for a living ... the people that want them to come home. Anything that makes you remember to keep them safe."

That sounded great in theory but implementing it when I felt only wildness coursing through my brain was the challenge.

"We don't have all day." William motioned to the guy again, but my feet were unwilling to let me move.

Seconds passed, and William grabbed the man's wrist and bit down, leaving blood stringing from his lips. I focused on the red blending in the moonlight. That was enough to make my feet move and take the guy's wrist from William. His heartbeat was steady under my fingertips. Finally, I gave in.

Blood filled my mouth, and I was gone again. Purely in a world of my own. But I knew I couldn't stay there. I had to move away. I had to stop ... eventually. I wanted to linger there in the warmth.

No, I didn't. *It* did. This guy probably had a family like I did. He had to be messaging someone. Someone who knew him and loved him. I had to stop. Stop before he couldn't return to them.

I pulled away. It felt like only a few seconds, but I wasn't one hundred percent sure. My muscles were mine to use again. The man was still out cold, lying oddly peacefully at my feet, but his heart still beat steadily in his chest. Harder now, but not like Kimberly's had been that night in the forest.

I did it.

Thane and William picked him up and laid his head across the bench and then dusted off the dirt of their clothes.

"You did good," William said.

He smiled at me the way Luke did, and I felt a pang of sadness. I couldn't wait to tell him about tonight.

"We should get out of here. I think they're going to bring their search party in this area." William motioned to the road, and I followed.

"Wait, search party?" I said.

"Yeah, for that missing guy. They've found evidence to believe that he's dead. They're trying to find his body."

My blood ran cold. "Well, what about that guy? Should we be leaving him there?"

"He'll wake up in five. Don't worry," William reassured me.

"But—"

"Don't worry, Aaron." Thane was beside me. "We're keeping an eye on it."

He was scary good at reading me.

“But what about The Family ...” I instantly regretted saying the name out loud, as if they would pop up out of the trees at the mere mention of them.

“You don’t need to be thinkin’ about that. What’s that little song and dance Luke always tells you? Really inspirational stuff,” William said.

I couldn’t tell if he was mocking me or not, but I answered, “He says he doesn’t want us to always be running.”

Among other things, like focusing on school, so when everything was over, Presley and I could finish our degrees and maybe even use them. He loved talking about building memories and enjoying the here and now. He was basically a certified life coach at this point.

Luke made it clear he wanted us to keep our eyes on the future and leave all the worrying to him. Something about it never sat right with me, though.

I let William and Thane take me away from the scene, thankful they were keeping an eye on things in Blackheart. I didn’t know what to think of the missing people popping up, but I knew what I feared. We weren’t alone, and I started to believe that no matter what was coming, we could face it.

Seven

KIMBERLY



It was a long crawl down the mountain. A blanket of red and orange leaves peppered the tree line. The scent of pine drifted in my car window as I let my fingers dangle in the air. My whole world disappeared in my rearview just when I thought I'd never know the sound of silence again.

Chris needed me to pick him up from the airport. Only, driving two hours away was not permitted by anyone, including The Legion, but since I'd be in the car the entire

journey and had Skylar protecting me, I'd been able to argue my way into going alone. Aaron wanted to come, but I decided easing Chris into the boys was best. Especially since it had been so long since I'd seen him.

Our last interaction had ended in the same place—a hug at the airport with me holding back tears that begged to stream down my face as he left. I swallowed at that old, familiar ache of sadness in my chest that I hadn't felt in a long time.

Gripping the steering wheel, I followed the curve of the road. Skylar was in my rearview, driving the SUV and looking stoic as ever. I wondered what type of music she liked to listen to. I'd offered her a ride in my car, but she preferred to be “more available.” I didn't argue. It had been like pulling teeth to get any real information out of her. But since the rock-climbing incident, she seemed ... softer.

It didn't take long being out of town before I saw traces of smoke in the air. Wildfires burning hundreds of miles away. The summer drought continued into fall, and fires were popping up everywhere. Thankfully, Blackheart had not yet had any scares. I couldn't think of my beloved hometown being evacuated and turned to ash. I'd been lucky to never live through any. Every fire that ever got close was snuffed out just in time.

I rolled my window up and set my focus on Chris. How was he going to function in my world? My future and the past were at odds and there was no middle ground. I just needed to survive the weekend long enough to show him he didn't need

to worry about me and then he could go back to New York and forget my existence. Is that what I wanted? To lose my childhood friend? To never see him again?

I wasn't sure what I wanted, but I knew the facts. Bringing Chris near the Calem boys was bound to cause trouble, for more than one reason.

It had been a little more than two weeks since Aaron and I kissed. Or rather I kissed Aaron. Thankfully, he hadn't made anything awkward. He didn't even tease me about my impulsive decision. A decision I should have regretted, and I *did* regret that now every time I saw him my stomach swarmed with butterflies, and when he smiled, I remembered how soft his lips were.

All because of one reckless decision. When had I ever done something without thinking it through? Even when I'd confronted the vampire problem, I'd had a plan. But in the dim light of Aaron's TV, I didn't even second-guess it. I just kissed him. Because he was sweet. Because he was a little too attractive when his hair fell into his eyes. Because he was shining so brightly I couldn't look away.

Because I wanted to.

It changed nothing that mattered. Aaron and I couldn't be together, and any future in which we ended up together was bound to end in disaster. I couldn't just let go of everything I'd planned on doing and run off and become a vampire. No. I needed to dig my heels deep into my reality and stay at school. And when the business with The Family was done, The

Legion would leave and we could all move on. I'd graduate college and age. That's the way it was supposed to be.

My two-hour drive was made in solemn silence. Each passing mile had my stomach turning, and it was made worse with each gnaw of hunger. But meeting up with Chris felt like a move in the right direction, something normal.

I circled the airport pickup lanes and awaited a text from Chris with his flight and gate number.

I spied him across the way with his sunglasses tucked in his mousy-brown hair. He wore slacks and a blazer, and I wondered if he'd gone to the airport straight from a meeting. I greeted him with a hug, and we made quick work of getting his things in the car. My nerves were a mess.

There were the normal exchanges, at first. The catch up. It had been more than a year since I saw him last, and he'd grown in stature and confidence. I hadn't thought that was possible, but he talked like the world was already in the palm of his hand. Chris was driven—like me. We both longed for something more than we had. Maybe that's why we became best friends.

Everything was coming back, and after picking up a bite to eat, I finally loosened my grip on the steering wheel.

“So, frat boys, huh?” He turned his whole body to look at me this time.

“Don't start. They're nice. You'll like them,” I said while trying to push back the image of Zach flying off the handle

and causing another scene. The image of him licking the blood from his knuckles at the water park stayed at the forefront of my mind.

Chris wasn't afraid to say what he thought, and while that didn't bother me, I wasn't sure all the Calem boys would cope the same.

"If you say so. I just think it's a little weird you're hanging out with all these guys all of a sudden. You never did before."

"I didn't hang out with anyone."

"There's nothing you aren't telling me? Are you ... involved with one of them or ... all of them."

I hit the break a little too hard. The traffic on the highway had crawled to a standstill. Skylar was unfazed in her shades as we made eye contact in my rearview mirror.

"No! I mean ... yes, I am. But just one and we haven't decided on what we are just yet."

I knew immediately what he would think. I sighed, wishing I could have just lied.

"Oh?" His brow lowered. "Can't wait to meet him, then. Make sure he's up to par."

At one time, I'd welcomed his protectiveness. Chris looked at me like I was his thing to watch over. Lost and alone. But I wasn't her anymore, and I hadn't been for a long time.

I adjusted the vents as my neck dampened at the thought.

“Whoa, what’s that?” Chris eyed my wrist. The scar from Aaron was an eyesore, to say the least.

“Oh, I got bit by a dog.” I hurried and covered it with my sleeve. I didn’t like anyone staring at it too long because it was an obvious indentation of human teeth.

“You never told me about that.”

“Well, you didn’t ask,” I said matter-of-fact and gripped the steering wheel tighter. The traffic jam in front of us dissipated, and my lungs felt lighter.

“I’m sorry.” He sighed. “I’ve been distant. But that’s why I wanted to come see you. I missed you ...”

His gaze softened and his lips pressed in a tight line, making me nervous. There was a time when I’d wanted nothing more than for him to look at me like that. But now, everything was different. I thought back to the bus stop when I’d talked to him. How different things would have been if he had reacted differently. I’d spent the better part of my youth trying to get him to stop seeing me like a little girl, and now that I wasn’t anymore, I wasn’t sure where that left us.

“Didn’t you miss me?” He smiled, his perfectly straight teeth on display.

“Yeah, of course I did.”

“Good, because ... you know I was thinking about next year and how cool it could be if you came to New York and transferred.”

Spit caught in my throat. “W-what?”

“Well, I was going to wait to ask you later this weekend to surprise you, but now seems like as good a time as any.”

“You know I can’t afford to go to your university.”

“Yeah, but what if I said there were better scholarship opportunities and I could help pay your rent.”

I couldn’t believe what I heard. The Chris that lectured me about being my own person and making my own way was asking me to give up everything I worked for and let him take care of me.

“Why are you doing this suddenly? I don’t get it ...” I kept my voice neutral and eyes on the road.

“Because I’m worried about you here ... alone. I make enough money that I can help you. And what’s here for you, anyway?”

So many things. So much I couldn’t say. I didn’t know how to respond, but I wanted the cars in front of me to move faster. The only thing coming to mind was the warmth of Aaron’s smile and the thought of saying goodbye. I imagined it all. His smile fading brought a wave of sadness I’d never felt before.

“Well, we can talk about it more this weekend. We have plenty of time.” He said it with finality, and I could have sworn I’d seen him pull up his calendar on his phone and pencil me in.



We exited the elevator, having shared it with a few girls and their parents. The campus was crawling with people all dressed in dark green. Even I had taken to the game-day spirit and wore the school colors.

Chris trailed behind me with the phone pressed to his ear on a work call. I walked ahead without him, resolving to make sure everything was spick-and-span before he came in.

My plan was to show him my dorm first and give the guys some time to prepare.

I opened the door and wondered why the light was on, then Aaron lying on my bed gave me my answer.

He waited for me, legs crossed, enthralled by one of the squishy plushies from my desk.

“What are you doing here?!”

“You said to meet you here at twelve!”

“Not here in my room! Chris will be here any second.” I spun around to survey the hall. Chris would be up the stairs any minute.

“I’m sorry! This is our usual meeting spot.” Aaron jumped up and closed the distance between us. “Are you afraid of what Chris is going to think about you having a boy in your room?”

Aaron wiggled his eyebrows.

“I-I ... Because I want him to like you.”

Aaron leaned closer, our faces a few inches apart. “Why do you care what he thinks of me?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“We’re just friends. Right? No pressure.”

“Right,” I said breathless. I leaned out of the doorway, and Chris rounded the corner from the stairwell. I quickly shut off the light.

“Then there’s nothing to worry about.” Aaron adjusted his shirt and squared his shoulders.

“Hey, Kim, slow down!” Chris said.

Aaron opened his mouth, but I covered it with my hand and pushed him toward the wall next to my door. He beamed as he stood quietly, just out of sight.

“All that running is really paying off for you.”

“I changed my mind. I forgot my room is dirty, and I need to clean it first.” I said everything too fast.

Aaron placed his hand over mine, and his fingers caressed the skin on the back of my hand and then slowly down my forearm. I gasped.

“What?” Chris said, his eyes narrowed.

My hand muffled the chuckling from Aaron’s lips.

“Nothing. Let’s go straight to OBA, and we can check out my room later.”

The wrinkle between his brown deepened. “Come on, we’re right here.”

“I know, but the guys are ready for us, anyway. They just texted me.”

He shrugged. “Whatever you want, I guess.”

“You walk ahead, I gotta grab something.”

Chris narrowed his eyes at me. “Alright. I will meet you at the car.”

I waited for him to round the corner before disappearing into my room and closing the door. Without a word, I crossed my arms and waited for Aaron’s explanation.

“Sorry. I really couldn’t help myself that time.” Aaron plopped down on my bed, and I tried not to think about how handsome he looked in his football jersey and backward ball cap. I’d never seen him in a hat before.

The room was dark still. The only light coming through my window.

“I really want this weekend to go well. I want everyone to get along.”

“We will! That’s what my brothers and I are good at.”

“Yeah, I know, but ...”

I stopped just short of the glaring elephant in the room. Aaron looked up at me through his lashes and smirked, and heat rushed to my cheeks.

“But ...?” Aaron popped up and practically skipped next to me.

My foot faltered at his proximity, and I kicked one of my potted plants. I needed to focus. I couldn't be caught up in what was happening between us, but all I could think about was the smell of Aaron's new cologne and the shiver that ran up my spine when he'd touched my hand.

"This is complicated ... I don't know how Chris is going to react. He's very protective."

"Like I don't have experience with that." Aaron smiled.

My body hummed with his proximity. "You need to hurry and get back to OBA, and please tell Zach to behave."

"On it."

With one hand, he reached for the door, simultaneously pinning me closer to his chest. I stumbled back, but he steadied me.

"You should be careful." He softly touched the cut on my head that was healing nicely and twirled a strand of hair in his fingers.

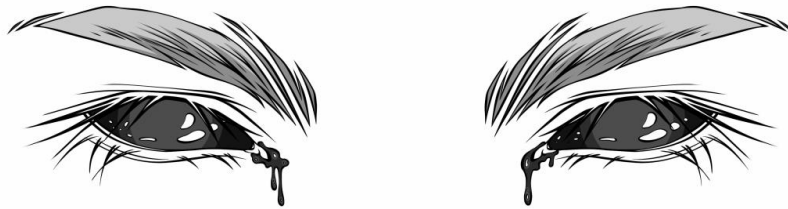
My breath hitched as he leaned for the doorknob while staring down at me. He could hear my heart beating. He had to know what I was thinking. I hadn't been able to think of anything but his lips on mine. The feeling was maddening.

He leaned in close to my ear. "I'll be good. I swear."

The door opened and he winked, leaving me breathless.

Eight

AARON



I'd wrangled my brothers to the front lawn being overtaken by the tailgating party spilling in from the road. A sea of dark green filled every bit of free space. It was good for our cover, but The Legion wouldn't be too happy about the hordes of drunk college students fluttering on and off the lawn.

"Are you all drunk!?" I eyed the lineup before me.

Zach, Luke, and Presley dressed in their BFU jerseys. Luke had a backward baseball cap on and a forty in his hand that he tried to hide behind his back. Zach was in his final drunken state—Giggly Zach. He'd never been able to hide his late-night parties from our mom because of that. When he came home after prom, he'd laughed his way into being grounded

for a week. Luke was generally better at keeping a straight face. He'd actually convinced Mom he was sober.

But Presley ... he was dancing in place. Which meant he was also very drunk. *Fuck.*

“No, no, no. I told you guys Kimberly’s friend would be meeting us all today! He’s going to be here any minute.”

“Who is it again?” Presley said as he continued to dance in place.

“His name is Chris,” I said, growing increasingly worried by the minute. I spun around, peering through the sea of people, hoping I wouldn’t spot them. “And Kimberly specifically told us to be on our best behavior. Especially you.”

I pointed at Zach, and a wide smile spread across his face. He tried to stifle his laughter with a hand over his mouth. It didn’t work.

Luke took off his hat to smooth down his hair and compose himself. I guessed he was bolstering himself to do most of the talking. “Okay, where is he? I’m ready.”

“This is important. Don’t fuck this up for her.”

“We won’t!” they said simultaneously.

“Is this her boyfriend in New York she never told you about?” Presley said while Zach snickered.

“See, those are the topics I don’t want you to bring up while he’s around ... and he’s not her boyfriend.”

“Right, that’s you? Oh, wait, you’re too chicken to ask her,” Zach said.

“We’re really not getting into that right now.” I took another nervous glance behind me. I had a new mission. Get my brothers off the front lawn so they could sober up a bit before Kimberly got here. How had they gotten so drunk in the first place?

I grabbed their drinks from their hands and threw them on the lawn.

“Hey, you’re littering!” Presley said.

Luke crossed his arms, making an attempt to appear sober, but it didn’t stop him from swaying. “I say bring him here. We’ll give him the warmest welcome BFU has ever seen.”

“Yeah!” Zach and Presley cheered in unison. I’d had enough. I scanned the lawn for the closest Legion member. Luckily, William crossed the lawn with a clenched jaw and narrowed eyes as he dodged college students. At least he attempted to blend in with his too-small university T-shirt.

“I’m going to start making you guys wear flashing collars or something,” William said.

“You’re supposed to be watching them. Look at them! They’re plastered!”

William pointed his finger at me. I knew my tone would not get my desired outcome. “I’m not a fuckin’ babysitter.”

William’s good-boy routine was long gone. He cursed as much as Zach most days.

“Sure look like one to me!” Presley chuckled.

“Hey! Don’t point fingers at my brother,” Zach said.

Only he got to do things like that.

I didn’t see anyone else from The Legion and hoped they were just so good at blending in they were all hidden, or hopefully there was a good reason they were out of sight. Maybe they knew more than they were letting on. I didn’t have time to worry about it.

“Yeah, what are you going to do about it?” William smirked.

I stepped between them; I couldn’t spare a second for their bickering. “Can you take them inside and dunk them in the pool or something? Literally anything to sober them up?”

“I’m supposed to make sure they don’t get killed. Your college-boy drama isn’t my problem,” William said.

“Well, what if it suddenly becomes your problem when an inebriated Zach takes a swing at a civilian for looking at him funny?”

“Hey!” Zach protested.

When William didn’t say anything, I was forced to beg. “Please? I promise this is saving you more trouble in the long run.”

I grabbed his sweater, and he shrugged me off. “Fine. Just quit grabbing me.”

With a fluttering of his hands, William shooed my brothers back into the frat house, and I finally relaxed.

The noonday sun was warm amid the cold breeze blowing in. Living in Blackheart was quite the change from living in Brooklyn. The number of trees and the lush earth consistently littered with pine cones instead of concrete never seemed to surprise me. It was a nice change, but what I loved most was the sense of quiet. That even when the town and college would fill to the brim with college students, the air still had a sense of peace.

Kimberly made her way through the crowd. A man at her side looked to be about my height. And muscular. Shit, he was cool. A little orange from what seemed to be a fake tan but cool.

Kimberly was radiant with her hair pulled into a high ponytail that showcased the warmth and softness of her cheeks. As it got colder, she'd opted for sweaters more often and always paired them with skirts that, even when covered by leggings, accentuated her goddesslike legs. It was torture in the best way. As I stared at her a little too long, I realized I'd lied. My favorite thing about Blackheart was her.

When she spotted me, her eyes lit up and her nose crinkled with the perfect smile. Kimberly was my friend. Never mind that we kissed, or that less than thirty minutes ago I was in her bedroom and had been close to locking the door and kissing her again. I had to keep my shit together and be her friend. That's what she needed. We agreed the kiss never happened.

“Hi!” Kimberly greeted me. “This is Chris. Chris, this is Aaron.”

She didn't say friend. That much I noted.

Chris reached out to me in the way businessmen in movies usually did. A strong squaring of the shoulders and a firm look in the eyes as he squeezed my hand unreasonably hard. “Hello, Chris Anderson. Nice to meet you.”

I responded with a little extra squeeze to ensure he'd be feeling it a few minutes after. Handshakes made an impression on the mind, right?

“Hi! I'm Aaron Coleman. Kimberly's told me lots about you.” We hadn't talked about him much at all since last semester, and he hadn't called her much over the summer. My feelings about Chris were twisted. On one hand, I needed this guy to like me, but he wasn't exactly the nicest person to Kimberly all the time, so I didn't care if he liked me or not. This trip would determine which hill I wanted to die on.

He smiled, and he opened and closed the hand I had shaken, as if to relieve a little of the pain I'd inflicted. *Mission accomplished.*

“I have to say Kimmy hasn't really told me much about you, or her time in college. But, then again, she doesn't tell me much nowadays.”

Great, they had pet names.

Kimberly's cheeks reddened, and she stole another glance in my direction. Her eyes told me she needed me to be nice no

matter what he said.

“Well, here it is in all its glory, good ole BFU. Did you ever tour with Kimberly before you left for New York?”

He shook his head. “No, I knew I wanted to get on the first plane out of here, and I took off right after I graduated.”

The first plane out, huh? I imagined that was hard for Kim. Her only source of family and connection not just deserting her but in a hurry to leave.

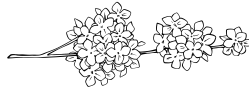
“Make yourself at home. As you can see, it’s game day, so it’s a little more rowdy than usual. Especially here at OBA.”

“Right, you’re in a fraternity. Kimberly was telling me about that. I never really felt a draw to Greek life.” He looked back toward Kimberly. “I never pegged her to be someone who would be friends with frat guys either. This is all new territory for me.”

I expected her to say something, to stand up for herself or assert her typical sense of dominance. Instead, she averted her eyes to her feet, folding under the pressure of Chris’s remarks—only, I didn’t understand why.

I decided I’d have to be the one to take the lead here. “Alright, well if you want to come inside, I can have you meet my brothers. We’re all good friends.”

He smiled. “Yeah, somewhere a little quieter would be great.”



I tried buying time by showing Chris the house. Thanks to The Legion, the house was in great condition. Normally on game day, we'd have had an all-out rager in our foyer. That wasn't an option anymore. I had to carefully lead them through the wall of leaves that were William's houseplants in the entry hall. He brought at least twenty house plants with him, and that wasn't counting the ones in his room. Presley had been helping him tend to them for a while until he accidentally killed one by watering it too much. The fight lasted days.

We passed by Dom and Thane in the kitchen, deep in conversation, and they gave friendly enough greetings. I didn't see her, but I could feel Skylar lurking. Her very distinct perfume smelled like luxury. It'd always signaled when she was close. I assumed she remained close for Kim's sake but was staying out of the meet and greet with Chris. I couldn't blame her.

We rounded the corner of the kitchen into the hallway and passed Kilian's haunt, when he was in—which wasn't often. The door was closed, and I was thankful we didn't have to go over that situation, until I spotted William and Kilian coming from the study at the end of the hallway. It was too late to go back, we were trapped. I'd have to grin my way through the awkwardness.

Kilian was a tall, slender guy. He had the same dated look that the other members of The Legion wore. Brown high-waisted trousers with those damn suspenders. He always looked otherworldly and smart. His obsession with the library told me he loved to read, and it was confirmed over and over again during my nightly roam arounds in which he'd pace from one end of the frat house to the other with his head in a book.

He stopped, taking in the three of us blocking his way. William sighed. Probably bored and inconvenienced by my presence.

“Uh, Chris, this is Kilian and Will.”

“William,” he said, wearing a scowl I tried to ignore.

Chris extended his hand and greeted them with his name and another set of firm handshakes. Kimberly and I shared a tentative look. As the mood had lifted, the wet blanket crew came to smother it with their stoic gazes.

“Kilian is ... William's dad.” I slowly pieced together a believable story as to why this old pair was in a place where there should be a flourishing of frat guys with SOLO cups in their hands.

Kilian lifted his eyebrow with a slight smirk on his face. It was the most emotion I'd seen cross his face since that day in the church, but I tried my best to avoid him at all costs. His eyes felt like little lasers searing into the deepest parts of my soul. I couldn't help but get the sense he wanted something from me during every conversation, as if he was waiting for

me to reveal something about myself. Something he could use, but for what, I didn't know.

"It's a pleasure. Truly." Kilian nodded while gazing at me.

"He's visiting from New York for the Halloween party."

To my surprise, Kilian laughed. "I see."

Chris eyed them from head to toe.

"Is this ... William ... the guy you went to the formal with?" Chris said.

Kimberly nodded, and her cheeks flushed as we shared another look.

William gave me a sideways glance. "Right, we had such a great time. Didn't we, Kim? You should have seen her. She got wild—a complete drunken mess."

Chris cleared his throat. "Wild? Kim?"

"Oh yeah. Then she ditched me, and this guy stole my date." William winked at me.

I steered the conversation before Kimberly melted William with her eyes. "Have you seen my brothers?"

"They're out by the pool. Waiting for you guys, I think." William tilted his head with a stupid cocky smile perched on his face.

I led us to the patio, not sparing a moment for anyone to get another word in. What used to be one of my favorite spots, when it was filled with girls and parties that would go on till the morning, had now become the equivalent of an abandoned

wasteland, especially since it was getting colder outside. But there they were—my brothers—shirtless but wearing their regular pants while sitting in the pool. William took my pool comment literally.

“Hey!” they exclaimed as we walked closer to the water’s edge, and I waited to see if they had at least sobered up a touch.

They filtered out of the pool one by one, soaking wet with their pants clinging to their hips. I pinched the bridge of my nose to hide my embarrassment as Luke, with his large muscular body, went in for a bear hug after extending a handshake. The brief exchange left Chris’s feet soaked and his shirt speckled with water droplets.

“How did you guys meet Kimberly?” Chris said, bunching his thick eyebrows together, and his posture was more rigid as he leaned in closer to Kimberly.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Presley was too fast.

“It was Aaron! He introduced us earlier in the year, and we’ve all been good friends ever since.”

“Gotcha, well, I hope you guys are taking good care of her while I’m away.”

Fire erupted in my belly.

“Oh, we protect her, all right. You don’t need to worry about that.” Zach had that wild look in his eye. He was sizing Chris up, and I knew I needed to step in before letting him talk too much. Making friends wasn’t Zach’s thing. He had a few in

grade school, but they were just people who found him cool and knitted their way into his circle.

“Sure do. But Kim doesn’t really need our protection. She’s tough,” I added.

Kim smiled but didn’t say a word. What was with her? Had I messed this up so bad she was mad? Or was she embarrassed to be seen with us?

“Well, that part is true,” Chris agreed, turning to Luke, who, despite his wide smile, looked the most intimidating due to his size. “Aren’t you cold?”

“Nah, we do this type of thing all the time!” Luke said as he slapped Chris’s shoulder, but it didn’t budge that pinching in Chris’s brow.

“Cold plunges are great for you. Zach and Luke do martial arts. It’s supposed to help with muscle recovery.” I pulled that bit of remembered information so far out of my ass I forgot it was there. “They’re great teachers if you’re ever interested. They’ve taught Kim a few times.”

Zach shook his head, signaling he would not be teaching Chris anything. I needed to dial back the friendliness a notch or two.

Presley shook the water out of his hair. “Yeah, but not since she went to the hospital.”

“Wait, you went to the hospital?” Chris said.

“I was going to tell you, but it wasn’t a big deal ... I fell while rock climbing. I got a minor concussion, but I’m doing

better.”

“That’s two hospital visits in less than a year, and that’s not counting the dog attack.”

Chris sounded sincere, and for that, I was thankful.

“Dog attack?” Presley yelled. I signaled for him to shut up, and he nodded. “Oh, right. The dog attack.”

“Well, I’m fine. So, we can drop it.” Kimberly looked at me again, her eyes wide.

“Right. No need to worry. She wasn’t alone.” I motioned to my brothers. “Good thing she’s got a lot of people who care about her.”

Chris nodded with his mouth settling into a frown. I had to save this somehow and end our meeting on a good note.

“Luke, how’s that haunted house plan coming along?” I asked.

Luke came up with the idea to earn money for the frat. I think that’s why William agreed to the party, but I still had trouble believing that was the only reason.

“It’s going to be sick.” Luke beamed, and he wrapped his arm around Zach. “Chris, you’re coming, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll definitely be there.”



The roar of the stadium echoed in the night air. The drumline played, and the stadium lights illuminated the night sky. It burned out any proof of the stars. Kimberly and I sat on the roof of the OBA—our safe haven. Somehow it became a habit. Kimberly in the frat house late at night turned into us disappearing into my room and stealing a blanket to sit on the roof and watch the stars.

She looked up at the sky, and pieces of her red hair fell on her cheek while her hands fidgeted in her lap.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?” I asked.

She turned to face me. “Do I give the impression that something is wrong?”

“Well, yeah ... you’re quiet. But not in your contemplative peaceful way ...”

She turned to look back up at the sky for a moment, and I let her gather her thoughts. “Something about Chris makes me feel like ... like I’m competing for his attention. Or I’m trying to impress him all the time. Like if I’m not interesting enough, then he’ll just get tired of me.”

“How could anyone get tired of being with you?” The words slipped out.

Her cheeks reddened as our hands intertwined. It was effortless, and I didn’t argue. Friends could hold hands.

“I didn’t think I cared anymore but when I saw him, it just brought everything back.” She paused, but I could tell she would keep going. “It’s like a small piece of me is still

clinging to the person I used to be. I can't tell if it's good or bad. He asked me ... he wants me to transfer to New York with him next semester."

I swallowed. "And is that what you want to do?"

She hesitated. Her silence answered my question.

"New York ... could be nice." I forced out the words.

"You want me to go?"

"No, of course not. I'm just saying it's up to you. I want you to have a choice."

"You always say that."

I smiled. "I'm smart sometimes."

Her eyes sparkled, and she took a moment before speaking again. "I-I used to want that. I had the biggest crush on Chris growing up, and I'd dreamed he'd whisk me away like a princess. Protect me. But I was a child then. I don't need him to do that, and I ... don't want him to. There's nothing for me there. Everything I have is here."

I hid my relief. I knew a thing or two about clinging to the past. I'd spent my first months at BFU doing only that. Thinking, meditating, and even scheming on how to get back to Brooklyn, as if I could have just returned to my old house and life and nothing would have changed.

I squeezed her fingers. She was close with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

“Sometimes I think about the past and if I could go back and be who I was in Brooklyn again. Go to college ... still live at home. It seems like my answer should be obvious. Even if I completely remove you from the equation, I always hesitate. Everything that’s happened here has made me better ... mostly. I don’t really want to go back to the person I was before.”

“Me neither.” She smiled at me, and her gaze lingered on my face a few seconds too long. “But I’m still not sure if letting go is always the way forward ... I keep thinking about what it would mean to become a vampire and all the things I’d have to give up. Things that you had to give up.”

I sat up straighter. “You’re still thinking about that?”

“Of course, I haven’t been able to think of anything else. Did you think I’d already made my mind up?”

The butterflies in my stomach were back, but I pushed them away with a quick clearing of my throat. “It’s just ... I prepared myself for you to say no. I never thought you might actually consider it.”

Saying it out loud, I realized how ridiculous it was. Of course she’d consider it. She always weighed every option carefully before deciding. It was a skill I didn’t think any of my brothers had. Including Luke, who was the brains, but he was still marked with the same impulsiveness we all were. Just less.

“Do you want me to consider it?”

I hesitated. The words I most wanted to say, I kept to myself. How could she ask me that? Everything I said would be a betrayal. A friend would say no. But a lover would say yes.

“As a friend ...?”

“As ... everything. For a minute, let’s pretend there is no vampire cult, and there is no Legion. We both make it out of this alive. It’s just you and me and the possibility of ... whatever this is. Would you want me to consider it? I mean ... have you even imagined life beyond all this?”

Laughter escaped my lips, and I threw my head back at the absurdity of her question.

“What’s funny?” She crossed her arms.

I reached in my pocket. “I have something to show you.”

“Are you saying this so you don’t have to answer the question?”

“No, just wait. I think you’ll like it.”

She nodded, and I loved the fresh excitement building in her eyes.

I pulled out a wad of cash held together by a rubber band. It was only about two hundred and fifty dollars, but it’s all I’d been able to save.

“Don’t tell me you stole it,” she said, smiling.

“Nope. This is all hard earned, it’s our stash. I’ve been putting back whatever I can ... for you and me.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

And there it was. That giddy excitement she usually concealed well behind her eyes. I’d do anything to put that look on her face every day.

“Yeah, I thought it would be nice to save some money that was just ours.”

“Well, what would we use it for?”

“Whatever we want! A trip somewhere far away where no one can find us, like Fiji or Indonesia. And we can do whatever we want, whenever we want. I figure after The Legion get what they want from us, and they take down The Family, we’ll be free and then possibilities are endless.”

I stopped myself from saying more. As crazy and selfish as it was, when I looked to the future, I saw her, and sometimes, she wore a white dress, and I was in a tux waiting for her at the altar. An unbelievably selfish daydream, but it was my favorite one. I’d always thought the men in the movies were overexaggerating when they’d bought the girl a ring the day they met them because they knew they were the one.

But I’d never been more certain of something in my life.

I’d never be able to tell her that without scaring her off. Not to mention we’re still strictly in friend mode and the likelihood of us ever being together hinged on her giving up her mortality. But I could still dream and maybe save a few dollars, just in case.

She leaned into me and rested her head on my chest as we sat staring at the stadium lights. I took that as a signal to wrap my arm around her to keep her warm.

“I love that idea.” Her voice was soft and light. I laid my head on hers and savored her warmth in the night and the sound of her heartbeat.

“Does that answer your question?” I whispered close to her ear.

“Yeah, I think it does.”

Nine

KIMBERLY



Chelsea hacked away at a large tangle in her blonde hair with her rhinestone hairbrush while standing in front of my floor-length mirror. I was convinced she loved sparkle almost as much as she loved the color black. Luckily, she didn't mind being crammed into my tiny dorm room. I watched in complete silence, locked away in my own head, as she wrapped one of her thick strands of hair around her curling wand.

It felt like a fifty-pound weight had been placed on my chest as I replayed my night with Aaron repeatedly in my head. What was I supposed to do? Was I supposed to keep pretending I was just friends with Aaron or talk about it? It was getting hard to hide.

“Come over here, let me curl your hair,” Chelsea demanded.

I obliged. My skin was crawling with the need to get up and move. Some of it was nerves, but the other was the itchy fabric of my Halloween costume and pinching of my platform leather boots. Chelsea and I had raided the thrift stores for the perfect outfits for our Daphne and Velma costumes. We nailed it.

“How’s your head doing? Has Aaron been treating you like a queen while you recover?”

Under different circumstances, I’d have laughed at her choice of words, but I’d sworn off using the Q-word.

I straightened my shoulders. “He does. I dealt with a headache for a while, but I feel fine now. It was nothing.”

I couldn’t think of my concussion without thinking about that night. Aaron’s lips on mine ...

“You seem distracted.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Come on. Don’t treat me like some two-bit stranger. Spill.”

I didn’t know how she would react, but I trusted her to listen just as I had listened to her dramas over the summer. Finally, I had something interesting to contribute.

There was a brief silence as I struggled to find the words.
“Aaron and I kissed.”

I left out the part about it almost happening again. I was afraid the kiss would have made things awkward, but it didn't. It deepened everything. Like it connected us in this new way.

She stopped curling. “Holy shit. It's about damn time.”

“I'm kind of freaking about it ... internally.”

“Why? I honestly thought you guys were already a thing and you just hated labels.”

“No. No. That's not it.”

“Okay, spit it out. I'm not judging. You know I hate Aaron, but he obviously treats you well, so I'm for it.”

“It's just complicated ... because ...” I turned to look at her face. I wanted to scream. I wanted to tell her. Keeping these secrets was hard. “Because I don't want to lose him as a friend, and things in his life are just ... complicated.”

“You keep using that word.”

“Well, it is!”

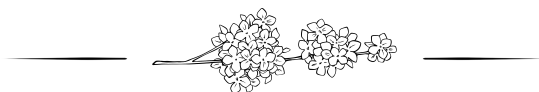
Chelsea put her hands on my shoulders and shoved me in front of the mirror. “It's not. You guys have been making lovey-dovey eyes since you met. Don't think so much. Have your smooches.”

We watched our reflections. Chelsea wore a very short red leather skirt paired with knee-high orange socks, and an equally as orange long sleeve shirt. She opted not to wear a

wig, but she got the glasses. I'd found the perfect purple dress and painted one of my headbands to match.

“Now, come on. Let's go get drunk.”

I smiled. It was my first night drinking, and I was ready. All the criteria I had for keeping myself safe were met. I'd be with a trusted group of friends who had superhuman strength, hearing, and speed if anything went wrong. I was ready to let loose. Everything in my life was up in the air. The Legion kept most of their known information under lock and key, and I was tired of lying in wait for what was to come. I didn't want to think about the future anymore, only enjoy the night with the people I cared most about in the world all in the same place.



When they said the party would be huge, they weren't kidding. I'd never seen so many cars littering the campus streets. People were parking blocks away and walking down to the house. The autumn leaves danced in the night breeze, and laughter echoed in the air. As we reached the sidewalk that led to OBA, the crowd that overflowed the lawn drew us in toward the door like a siphon. The Legion would have their hands full tonight, but they got what they wanted. There wasn't a safer place for us to be than there in front of at least a hundred witnesses.

The bodies packed in tightly, but most seemed oblivious to the autumn chill in their assortment of costumes ranging from

short to shirtless and everything between. A string of jack-o'-lanterns lit our way to the door. I recognized the ones Aaron and I made. Mine had long and hollow eyes with its mouth already drooping, while Aaron's cat face still looked pristine.

“Just remember who spent the majority of their day making sure this place looked like a damn horror movie.” Chelsea signaled to the purple and black spider webs laced around the front columns.

I smiled, knowing there was no way I could forget listening to her complain about how the boys could never survive in a world without her. Also, how they were terrible at following her instructions. Aaron shot me a few “kill me now” texts throughout the day.

The door sat wide open, and we slipped inside. I texted Aaron to let him know we were here and that we'd be waiting by the stairs. Chris let me know he'd be here soon.

I gasped. An orange glow from the ceiling string lights was the only light in the foyer. It was held up by a blanket of webbing. Somehow I knew the boys had a great time hanging all of that on the ceiling along with the bats that covered the wall and made their way up the stairs. Under the stairs was a chalkboard sign held by a skeleton with a red SOLO cup taped to his hand, and in neon words, it signaled to the entrance of the haunted house in the backyard. It was occupied by a long draping of fabric and fake candles. An ominous purple glow signaled the way outdoors, and fog rolled in from outside.

“I think Monica is going to be here.” Chelsea adjusted her bra and scratched at the skin on her neck.

“Oh, right ... there she is!” I waited for my vision to adjust before pointing to the empty entryway.

She spun around and grabbed my forearm before sighing in relief. “Those boys are wearing off on you.”

“Why are you nervous? You guys have a lot of chemistry,” I said. Nervous was not a word I thought could even be in Chelsea’s vocabulary, but there she was, carefully watching every entryway and exit as her eyes sparkled with anticipation.

“Duh. I know, but she’s cool. Really cool.” Her rhinestone black talons fiddled with the rings on her fingers.

“*You’re* cool,” I said, knowing she didn’t need the reminder.

Monica might be the sweetest person I’d ever met, and it amplified her soft, sweet voice. We hadn’t had the opportunity to hang out a ton, but we all loved fashion, and that created a bond between us quickly. Monica had a nineties-inspired style that leaned a little on the grunge side, and I was jealous of her shoe collection. Chelsea had been obsessed with her since they met in one of her classes.

Skylar walked across the kitchen and waved at us, back to her bubbly persona for the night.

A flash of red caught my eye at the top of the stairs. “Oh. My. God.”

“What!? You see her?”

“No ... I see them.”

Aaron and his brothers descended the stairs. They'd told me their costumes were a surprise, and that they were. All were dressed up as vampires. Luke's outfit was the most prestigious and well thought-out, with his cape and dated-period wear. Zach took another approach. He too had a cape on, but it was red, and he wore his normal clothes with a big “Hello, I'm a vampire” sticker taped to his chest. Presley dressed in a baseball uniform with his curly hair slicked back, and I instantly knew he was Carlisle Cullen. Aaron wore a dated white long sleeve shirt with a deep V and black pants, and it took me a minute to guess, but with the added attempt to put curls in his hair, I knew he was Lestat de Lioncourt.

My pulse rose at the sight of him and his bare chest. He looked like a cutout of a male love interest in a period drama—only fifty times more adorable. I hadn't prepared myself for that. Why did he have to be so ... attractive?

They joined Chelsea and I at the bottom of the stairs, and the crowd grew wilder at their presence. Five seconds in, they were already turning heads.

“Well, if it isn't the women of the hour!” Presley said as he ambled down the stairs. He stopped in front of Chelsea to bow. “And our Lord and Savior, Chelsea. What would we have done without her?”

She shooed him away and rolled her eyes. But I think she secretly enjoyed the acknowledgment. Aaron greeted Chelsea with a close-lipped smile, awaiting her beratement.

Zach came off the last step with less flourish. He stopped and stared at me before saying, “I promised Luke I’d wear this cape for *one* picture and then it’s coming off.”

Luke grabbed him by his shoulders for a squeeze. “And what a great picture it will be!”

I could feel Aaron watching me, and when I turned, he was staring at my legs.

I cleared my throat. “You guys just couldn’t blend in, could you?”

“Never!” Presley, who was clearly eavesdropping, said.

“Not really our style.” Aaron beamed with a brilliant smile that glowed in the black lights.

Presley yelled, “Come on, let’s get a picture!”

He ushered us to a photo booth area with a gradient of orange-to-purple lights and tinsel. A camera with a thick lens wobbled in his hand. He’d shown it to me for the first time over the summer when we’d all gone on a hiking trip and visited Greenridge Lake. It was a gift from his mom and the only thing he’d found important enough to take with when they left Brooklyn. I’d never seen him take such good care of anything.

“Do you want me to take the picture so you can all get in?” William’s dark eyes settled on us as he leaned against the wall. He wasn’t dressed up, but his dark-academia style blended in like it was a costume. Something about him just looked older. Dated.

“Oh, the stalker,” Chelsea whispered in my ear, and I smiled, knowing William could hear her. She disliked William even more than Aaron. I hadn’t thought that was possible.

“That’s ... nice of you.” Aaron eyed him with furrowed brows.

“Where’s Thane and Dom?” I asked out of pure curiosity. I wouldn’t be able to find anyone in there with all the people, and I was curious how The Legion was faring during such an occasion.

“Manning the haunted house.” William clicked his tongue, but he hid a smile. Probably just happy he never had to be roped into something like that; a perk of being a leader.

He moved his attention back to the boys. “Do you want me to take the damn picture or not?”

“Sure, but you have to be careful with it.” Presley placed his camera in William’s hands but stopped. “Wait, you’re not gonna break it to get back at me because of the dead plant, are you? Because I already apologized for that a thousand times! It was an accident.”

William sighed. “Keep talking and the answer is yes.”

Luke grabbed Presley by the collar and huddled next to him and Zach. “Come on, Chelsea, you can get in too!”

“Absolutely not. I don’t want anyone to know I was ever associated with any of you.” She smiled at me, signaling she didn’t include me in that.

Luke was in the middle with his arms around Presley and Zach. He scooted over to accommodate Aaron and me. I hesitated only for a moment before I grabbed onto Aaron's arm and pulled him close to lay my head on his chest. The flash blinded us, and I blinked to get my bearings.

"Alright. Drinks table. Now!" Presley led the charge to the kitchen.

"Kimberly's never had a drink before. We gotta make this good," Aaron said, putting his arm around me and motioning to William. "You should come to."

Zach groaned while he snapped the cape off his shoulders and left it on the floor.

Chelsea's gripped my arm. "There she is!"

Monica had entered the building with a flourish of beautiful fairy wings and glitter around her eyes. Her tight dark-brown curls rested on her shoulders, and her dress was floor length, a light sage that contrasted her dark skin.

I was still being pulled in two directions. "Invite her to come with us."

"The more, the merrier!" Luke was now the one eavesdropping. Unsurprisingly, Luke was Chelsea's favorite. He was never fazed by her insults. And she was rarely snippy with Luke since he made one of their housemates kiss her shoes for giving her attitude.

After Chelsea greeted her, we moved into the pool room. It, too, was decorated to the nines with spiderwebs and orange

string lights everywhere—only, this room had a noticeable ghost theme. Presley pushed piles of empty SOLO cups onto the ground. We all pulled in chairs, and the boys placed various types of liquor on the table.

“Alright. We’re making all our favorite drinks and letting Kimberly try them and rate them out of ten.”

I groaned. Something about having everyone make a big deal of my first night of still underage drinking wasn’t something I was proud of. But the boys were excited, and that somehow made me excited too.

They took turns preparing their drinks, making one for them and one for me, while everyone who already knew what they wanted to sip on for the night had one in their hand. Chelsea and Monica shared a chair—a little intimately, I might add—and I anticipated it wouldn’t be long before she disappeared with her into the bustling crowd.

“Try mine first! Jack and Coke. Classic.” Presley shoved a plastic cup in my hand.

I took a sip, the carbonation hit before I could taste the whiskey sliding down my throat.

“I didn’t make it too strong, don’t worry.”

“I like it!”

“Hell yeah! Five points for me.”

“Pres, we’re not having a competition, what are you talking about?” Aaron rolled his eyes.

“Me next.” Zach laid out two large shot glasses full of whiskey. “A double on me, baby.”

Aaron grinned, watching my face. “This is going to get interesting.”

“Pour us one too.” Chelsea winked at me, and all four of us brought our glasses into the air at the middle of the table. The haunting Halloween music played in the background, a mix of EDM and a church organ was the perfect backdrop to our night.

We threw our shots back, and my throat caught fire. The liquid burned a path to my stomach.

“Bleh.” I shook my head to stifle the burn.

“You didn’t even let her have a chaser!” Presley said. I had no idea what that meant.

“Alright, me next.” William stood and headed to our makeshift bar.

Zach’s brows knit together. “I thought you were too good to drink.”

William shrugged. “Maybe some of us are more rebellious than you think.”

Zach shrugged, but his smile lingered.

Luke had a bright smile on his face that said he knew he was cool all along. “Hell yeah!”

William pulled out vodka and cold tonic water and poured it into two glasses.

“I want one!” Presley said, leaning over the table with his hand out. William must have been in a good mood because he made him one too.

I grabbed the glass garnished with a lemon and took a quick sip and swished it around in my mouth. “Eh. Kinda gross.”

William seemed to like that answer. “Good. More for me, then.” He took my glass and downed both.

“Alright. Alright. Back it up, because I know exactly what she’s going to like best.” Luke pulled two cold beer bottles from under the table.

Zach rolled his eyes. “You and that damn beer.”

“She’s gonna hate it,” Aaron said.

“What? It brings back memories of simpler times.” He cracked both open with the edge of the table and handed me one. “Cheers!”

We drank and the sour taste filled my mouth, but I didn’t hate it. I wanted to keep drinking it. I drank and drank and drank until I popped the empty bottle on the table. And that’s when I realized I might be getting a little tipsy.

“That’s really good! I think I want another.”

The group exploded in laughter.

“We’ve created a monster.” Zach leaned back with his feet on the table.

Presley was up on his feet now, bouncing. “Move over to the dark side, muhahaha.”

“I’ll get the guest of honor her next beverage.” Luke sauntered off.

“What did you bring her, Aaron?” Presley said.

“I’m not drinking tonight.”

“Why not The Le—the other guys are keeping an eye on things. We can relax.”

“Unlike you, I don’t need to drink to have fun,” Aaron said.

Presley flipped him the finger before downing the rest of his drink.

“You just didn’t want her to know your favorite drink.” Zach snickered as he poured himself another drink.

Monica smiled, and the glitter on her face glistened from the orange glow around us. “Go on, tell us. Now you’ve got to say it.”

“I really like ... piña coladas, okay? Sue me.”

“You’re not gonna tell her the whole story!? He doesn’t like them. He *loves* them. I’ve seen him drink five in the span of an hour,” Presley said.

“It was fun until I threw them all up on my mom’s couch.” Aaron’s ears grew red at the mention of it. “She made me clean it up.”

“Your friends are fun.” Monica leaned into Chelsea, and I was grateful she was having as much fun as I was.

“Friends is a loose term for the boys.” Chelsea smirked.

“Wanna go dance?” Monica’s arms wrapped around Chelsea’s neck and pulled her closer.

“Thought you’d never ask ... Kimberly, wanna come?”

“No, you guys go ahead. I’ll catch up in a little bit.”

Their absence reminded me to check my phone. I hadn’t received a text from Chris yet. I wasn’t surprised. I was never surprised by that anymore. He could show up or he couldn’t. It wouldn’t matter. Nothing would ruin my night.

“So, William, what made you want to be rebellious all of sudden?” Zach’s gaze was turned down now with his elbows on the table.

“I thought you hated us,” Presley said.

“Well, I had a revelation. You’re all ... soft.”

“Soft?” Zach spat.

“Yeah, you’re all harmless. Members of The Family are typically ... motivated in other areas. They’re ruthless. Smart. Now, what I’m doing, just feels like I’m supervising toddlers who do nothing but drink and pick fights.” William said it with spite and a dash of humor.

Zach looked like he was about to hit him, but the worry I’d had was gone, as if it never actually existed. They could throw punches in front of me, and I was confident it would be fine.

“You’re such a cocky bastard. Let’s test it. You and me. Let’s spar.”

William smirked. “You’re that confident, huh?”

“I’m that confident I’m strong enough to kick your ass.”

“Not here, I hope,” I said.

Zach relaxed his shoulders and leaned back in his chair.

“Not right now. But soon.”

“You think you can best me? I’ve got more than a hundred years on ya.”

Zach knocked back his drink, and a darkness glazed his eyes. “You don’t know what I’m capable of.”

Presley jumped out of his chair and sprinted to the door. “I think Thane needs some help in the back! I’ll catch up later.”

I liked how close Presley and Thane seemed. All I’d wanted this whole time was for us all to get along, and now it felt like that wish was coming true. The weight of that emotion hit me harder than I’d anticipated, and I had the strongest urge to tell everyone about it, but Luke spoke first.

“Have you given more thought to our offer, Kim?” Luke’s voice cut my concentration. A cold bottle of beer found its way into my hand, and I was pleased to see he’d already opened it.

“Uh.” My brain felt slow all of a sudden. Like I needed to think harder to get words out.

“What offer?” William raised a brow.

“We offered to change her.”

“Ah.” William chuckled. “I can’t say that I’m shocked.”

“I’m sure you have an opinion on it. And I’m sure you’ll tell us.” I snickered. The words poured out of me more easily. Like a dam breaking, all my hidden thoughts were released. I couldn’t stop it, or maybe I didn’t want to.

William sucked on his lip. “You know, I already told your boyfriend over there this would happen. Either you’d end up dead or turned. There’s not much alternative. Humans who hang around our kind don’t tend to live very long lives. Especially the ones you hang around with.”

Aaron and I shared a look. His hair uncurled and fell into his eyes again, and I had to tear my gaze away from his bare chest.

“We’re not dating ...”

We should be. I wanted to be. Wait ... did I mean that? I did. If he wasn’t a vampire, we would be together. If he was a normal guy, everything would be much easier.

Zach rolled his eyes. “Bullshit.”

“It might be easier to keep her safe if she’s like us.” William shrugged. And I remembered that look of rage in his eyes from when I’d left him in the church. That had to be the one and only time he’d cared about my fate. I was a lost cause in his eyes now. Not that I cared for his opinion.

“Either way, the queen will want her dead.” Zach said it as if it were absolute. This time he watched me like he was trying to solve an impossible puzzle.

Luke narrowed his eyes at him. “Now *you’re* being the buzzkill.”

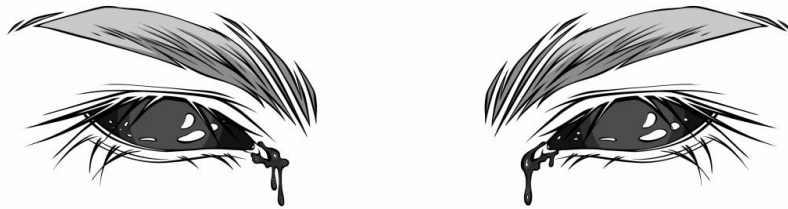
“Let’s do more shots.” Luke patted me on the back, drawing me out of my trance, and wrapped a big thick arm around my shoulders. “You don’t have to worry about that stuff.”

I let his presence hug me like the warmest, fluffiest blanket. In a place like that, what did I have to worry about?

After another shot, my body felt numb. In that fuzzy world, there was no pressure. No vampire cult. No vampire problems of any kind, really. It blended away into the background, like a beautiful milky sunset over the ridge on a foggy morning. And I was happy to enjoy my little slice of paradise for once as a normal college girl.

Ten

AARON



Butterflies filled my stomach, and not in a good way. Chris's entrance was met with an excited, tipsy hug from Kim where she stood on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and his hands dropped way too low on her waist. I had to look away and pretend to be interested in one of William's plants currently struggling under the weight of pumpkin lights. Two seconds passed before I glanced again. He noticed and waved. The guy was friendly enough, and I didn't have a reason not to like him. Though, he wasn't in costume, which wasn't a good sign. He could be a fun hater like Zach, and Kimberly loved fun.

He danced near Kim in the flashing black lights in the living room. Our projector painted them in orange and purple dots. It wasn't their proximity but the way he looked at her. His eyes lingered on her too long as he took in every twist and twirl while she danced next to Chelsea and Monica. He'd shown up an hour later than he said he would, and that didn't sit right with me either.

What was wrong with me? Shouldn't she be talking to a normal guy? Shouldn't she be with him tonight instead of me? He was the guy she was supposed to be with. Last night, I had to sit through way too many stories of just how perfect for her he was when he'd stayed for dinner. The guy was going to be loaded. Heck, maybe he already was. He'd made Presley ooh and aah with all his stories of the people he'd met in New York—a few celebs and even a CEO of a popular tech app. Chris was a guy with connections. A guy who could give her everything she'd ever wanted. Plus, he knew her. He'd grown up with her. He had all the best stories from her childhood. Lots I hadn't had the chance to hear from her yet.

She laughed loud enough for me to hear over the music, and I was already picturing their wedding day. It would be in the city, and she'd hate that, but she'd have everything else she'd wanted like a big beautiful dress and her hair fixed in a long veil. He'd get her all of it. The huge rock on her hand, the caterer, any flower she dreamed of. I imagined that's what she'd like the most. I hoped she'd tell him about the peonies and have a huge bouquet of the freshest things you could buy.

He'd wanted to stay in the city, but she'd convince him to take her to the mountains, eventually. Hopefully he'd buy her the house she'd always dreamed of as a kid. She wouldn't be alone. He would take care of her, and that's all I needed to know. She needed to go to New York and leave me and all the problems behind.

"Checking out the competition?" Zach appeared out of nowhere to my left, surprisingly still sober. He joined me in my quiet corner. The only place where there weren't people standing around.

"Chris is a pretty cool guy. He may give you a run for your money." Presley was now on my right.

I gripped my stomach and keeled over. "Go away. I'm not in the mood."

"Aw, it's no fun if you're actually sad." Presley nudged me with the annoying plastic baseball bat he'd been carrying around.

"Don't you have someone else to annoy?"

"Come on, you know I'm riding solo right now." Presley frowned, obviously pissed I'd brought it up.

I think Presley had liked his formal date, Ellis, a little more than he'd let on. He'd moped about him graduating all summer.

He'd say, "*He just got me, you know.*" After every. Single. Story. I couldn't complain, though. I wasn't any better, and I felt bad for him. Especially when he got really attached to the

girl he'd rebounded with and then she cheated on him. They both worked in the gift shop. It was an awkward summer.

Zach placed his arm around me and gave me a firm squeeze, which almost never happened. He explicitly saved his hugs for special occasions, like my dog dying in second grade. "What's actually getting you down, little brother? You can tell me anything."

There was a lot of sarcasm mixed in there, and I wondered if he was more drunk than I thought.

"Why do I feel like this? It physically feels like I'm dying," I said, having almost died before.

"You're in love." Zach said it like it was the easiest answer in the world.

"I thought I cared before, and I was jealous then, but this ... this hurts."

"You're at the point of no return. You liked her before, you're in love with her now."

I covered my face and groaned. "How can I get it to stop? I can't watch them over there together."

Presley leaned next to us with our backs against the wall, watching everyone else dance in the living room. "What's that guy have that you don't?"

"Oh, I don't know. Money. Muscles. He's known her forever. Should I go on?"

“So, you haven’t seen the way she looks at you. She’s head over heels for you, dude,” Presley said.

“According to Chris, they kissed in like fifth grade,” I said.

That damned story. He loved telling it too. There was an extra pep in his voice when he said it.

Presley busted out laughing. “Ooh, he really got you there. Who cares about fifth grade?”

“Pres is right, plus Luke and I scoped him out yesterday. Definitely not her type,” Zach said.

I scoffed. “Really, what’s her type, then, geniuses?”

Zach smiled. “Uh, looks like it’s scrawny, soft boys who reek of innocence and sunshine.”

“Hey!” I protested.

Presley’s eyes got huge. “You should go over there. I’ll start karaoke!”

“Wait!” I started, but Presley was already up and across the room whisking her away from Chris and toward the corner where we had the karaoke machine hooked up. A deep-red glow lit up a tiny rug, and the dry ice added to the stage effect. Chelsea really did a great job with the decorations. I tried to tell her, but she yelled at me to get back to work midsentence.

“What should we sing?” Presley asked as he hooked in another microphone.

“The ‘Monster Mash’!” Luke yelled from across the room while pumping his fist. I hadn’t even noticed he was in there,

probably chatting up the whole house and doing his job as the head of our house.

“Ooh, I love that one!” Kimberly practically jumped for joy in her drunken stupor and white platform boots. It was adorable.

Before the singing started, I spotted Zach whispering into the neck of some girl before leading her upstairs. I hoped he might be finally moving on a little since Ashley. He never brought it up, but he didn’t have to. If he felt anything like what I felt for Kimberly—I knew he did—then I knew he missed her.

Presley and Kimberly drunkenly sang the “Monster Mash” in different keys, then inevitably moved into a few Taylor Swift songs. Some of which caused me to have to put my fingers over my ears, but it was fun to watch. Kim twirled around in her costume without a care in the world, and I cheered her on from the sidelines. The night felt like it belonged to her, and she deserved it.

Once they were done, Kimberly pranced into my arms, having me hold her up. “That was fun! Where is Chelsea?”

She turned around frantically, whipping me with her hair at every turn. I had to readjust her headband slipping off her head.

“Will you go look upstairs? I have to talk to her, it’s important.”

I agreed despite knowing I was the last person Chelsea wanted to see coming for her up the stairs. I started up, only to see Zach rushing down.

“What’s wrong?”

His body went rigid. “Hey ... uh ... I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

With a pat on the shoulder on the way down, he left, and I continued my search, not entirely convinced. Thankfully, I saw no signs of Chelsea, so I made a quick trip to my bedroom to change into a hoodie and sweats. I wasn’t sure how Luke went around with his chest exposed all the time. Too drafty.

I turned to go back and find Kimberly but stopped when I heard two girls conversing in one of the empty rooms about Zach.

“That’s so sad.”

“I know ... he was shaking. He kept apologizing. I told him I completely understood ... and we didn’t have to do anything. We agreed to just go back to the party.”

My brain broke into a fog as I descended the stairs and tried to process what I’d heard. The house and the people were suddenly suffocating. I didn’t completely understand, but I could guess if I had long enough to think about it. I hadn’t thought it was possible for anything to puncture the safety of our party, but that thick lead feeling was back, eating a hole in my stomach. My immediate instinct was to find Luke and ask him, knowing Zach wouldn’t ever tell me anything personal about himself.

Bickering between Kimberly and Chris caught my attention. I'd gotten better at tuning out the loudness of music and pinpointing something specific when I wanted to, and I was always listening for her. The crowd parted for me as I moved toward her sounds of distress.

"You need water." Chris's voice was firm and easier to detect.

I reached them in enough time to see Chris's hand around Kimberly's wrist.

She pulled away and adjusted her dress. "I told you, I'm fine."

It took everything I had not to push him through the wall.

"Hey, is everything okay?" I only looked at Kimberly, fearing I might punch Chris in his perfect face if I glanced in his direction. I didn't want to be my brother. This was Kimberly's supposed oldest friend, and I needed to be cool. I grabbed my hand to still the slight tremor.

She let out a sigh, and her whole body slackened. "He keeps trying to get me to drink water. He won't leave me alone."

"Because you're acting like a child," Chris said.

"Well, you're being mean." She huffed and crossed her arms.

In the next few seconds, Luke and Presley gathered behind me. They, too, had been listening for her, and for that, I was thankful. Skylar watched from a few feet away, and looked ready to jump on Chris's back if he took a step closer.

“What’s going on?” Luke said in an eerily nice-guy kind of way, but the muscle in his jaw flexed, and his shoulders were pulled back. That was his ass-kicking look.

“She’s just freaking out for no reason,” Chris said.

“I can take her to go get water,” I said.

Chris’s jaw clenched. “No, I’ll take her.”

“Why don’t we ask Kim who she wants to take her?” Presley’s tone was light. “Kim?”

Kimberly wasn’t paying attention to our conversation. She was gawking at me. Her blue eyes sparkled in the lights and examined me from head to toe.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You ... just look *really* good in hoodies.”

I couldn’t stop the smile that came to my face or the flush of heat in my cheeks. My brothers chuckled.

She put her arms around me, hugging me close. “I want Aaron to take me.”

Presley laughed when he said, “That settles it, then!”

“We’ll keep Chris company, don’t worry!” Luke called as I steered Kimberly away.

Kimberly leaned into me as we walked. We neared the kitchen and her hands slipped beneath my shirt to touch my skin. She didn’t shy away from the touch either. Her palms brushed my abs, as if it was normal ... or allowed.

I grabbed her hand softly. “Hey, hands off the merchandise, Burns. You’ll have to buy me a drink first.”

She giggled and eyed me as I reached in the ice chest and handed her a water bottle.

She sat down on one of the coolers, and I kneeled in front of her. “You should definitely drink this before you have any more beer.”

Without a word, she grabbed the bottle and chugged it.
What a woman.

“Technically, you could probably use two.” I laughed. “How many beers have you drank?”

“Lost count.” She said it without a care in the world. I loved that for her.

“Have you been coming in here and getting them yourself?” I asked.

“No, Luke’s been bringing me some. Different kinds too!”

I bit back a laugh. “Of course he did. He’s a good big brother like that.”

When we rejoined the others, Chris looked like he had cooled off, though he still gave me a death glare. Luke had even gotten him to drink a beer with him. He was good at diffusing. He got a lot of practice from being Zach’s twin.

Kimberly finally found Chelsea, and they banded together with Monica for another dance in the living room. Thane stopped by a few times to get me to go to the haunted house,

but I didn't feel like being haunted today. I'd had enough of that to last a lifetime.

I'd normally retreat to my room for some quiet or video games, but I didn't want to go too far where I couldn't be near if Chris started to be a jerk to her again. So, I stayed in the living room and pretended to look busy. There was still no sign of Zach, and the feeling in the pit of my stomach was still there. Dark. Brooding. Waiting.

"Why are you being weird?" Presley caught the Ping-Pong ball I bounced on one of the end tables.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I saw that in the kitchen, by the way, Kimberly had her hands all over you."

"We're just friends," I said, like a knee-jerk reaction.

"Why are you stuck on that? It gets tiring watching you look at her like a helpless puppy and her look at you like you're the coolest guy in the world. Which we all know isn't true." Presley plopped down on the couch next to me.

When I didn't answer, he kept talking. *Typical.*

"You never answered, why are you being weird?"

Luke came up behind us and leaned into our conversation. "I think I know the answer."

"Oh, you know the answer?" I rolled my eyes.

They couldn't just let me sulk on the couch.

"Yeah. You and Kimberly kissed."

I spun around, and Presley's eyes were wide, and his jaw had dropped to the floor.

“How did you know that!? There's no possible way you could know that,” I said.

“Brother, I've been taking care of you since you were in diapers. I know everything about you. You both have been dancing around each other all day.”

“I don't get it. Isn't this exactly what needs to happen? Why is this still such a weird thing?” Presley was still way too excited. I had to put my hand on his leg to stop him from bouncing.

“Oh, I don't know, maybe it's because I didn't meet her in the hallway like we love to tell everyone. I met her in the forest when I almost killed her, and that wasn't even the only time.”

Presley groaned and leaned his head back on the couch. “It's almost been an entire year. She doesn't care. We're all past it. Why can't you let it go?”

“Because it's not something you just get past and let go of. You're acting like I'm not the reason she had to take physical therapy so she could use her hand again. That was because of me.”

I didn't think I could ever forgive myself for that.

“But none of those things matter if she becomes like us. Don't you want that?”

Presley was always shortsighted. There was anticipation in his eyes. A world of possibilities. He didn't see obstacles. Ever. He lived in a different world than the rest of us. One where he could ignore the check engine light on the car by covering it up with a piece of paper.

“Of course I want that, but what is best for her? Is that what she wants? I don't want you guys pressuring her into anything. I know how you are.”

“We don't pressure,” they said simultaneously.

“Yes, you do. Let her make her own decision, and we'll just have to live with whatever it is. I promised her no matter what the decision was we'd be here for her.”

“We will. She's family through and through.” Luke hit me on the back, and I almost fell over.

“Have you seen Zach?” I asked before he left.

“Yeah, he's with Will in the library right now. Why?”

I wondered if I'd missed the memo that said we were calling William ‘Will’ now. He still bit my head off when I tried to say it.

Before I could ask, Presley's voice broke our conversation. “Uh-oh.”

Chris and Kim were arguing again in the corner of the living room. I glanced over for a second to scope out the situation. Kimberly had the karaoke microphone in one hand. Next to her, Monica had the other, and Chelsea plugged in another.

Chris had pulled Kimberly to the side and whispered back and forth with her.

“Why do you keep wanting to leave early? I’m having fun.”

“A little too much if you ask me.”

I’d already turned back around, but I could feel his eyes on the back of my head.

I shouldn’t listen to their conversation, but he’d passed a boundary before, and I needed to make sure he kept his hands off her. I’d listen until I knew he was calm.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kimberly huffed. She’d sobered up a bit since the water, but I could still hear it in her voice.

“You’ve done nothing but drink and dance around with a bunch of frat guys all night.”

“They’re my friends.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I don’t like what you’re implying. I have friends now. Why does that bother you? You’re acting like such a jerk.”

“*I’m* the jerk? I came all the way out here for you to ignore me and then run off and get drunk, and I’m the bad guy?”

“You were supposed to come multiple times before this and never did. This is the first time I’ve seen you since graduation.”

“Kim, I have a real job. I can’t come down here every time you feel lonely. I have a life! A good one.”

My whole body burned with rage. I swallowed the lump in my throat and the urge to rip his head off. She could handle it, but my hands were shaking again.

Kill him.

The voice was back too. *Shit.*

I steadied myself and dug my fingers into the fabric of the couch. I needed to let her fight her own battles. She could. But God, did I want to go over there.

“The problem isn’t your awesome job or your great life. The problem is you make promises you can’t keep.” Her voice had lowered in pitch.

“I already apologized for that!”

I stole another glance. His nostrils flared, and he raised his voice enough for Chelsea to look over too. Kimberly stared at the floor. He hurt her. I wanted to go over there. To hold her. To kiss her, but I couldn’t.

He sighed. “I just don’t know who you are anymore.”

“A lot can happen when you’re not answering texts.”

“I’m sorry, okay? Do you want me to say I’m the bad guy? I guess I’m the bad guy. Can we just drop this? I’m tired of arguing. Come on ... we’re leaving.” Chris had Kim’s purse in his hand and motioned for the door.

“I don’t want to go.”

My immediate reaction was to go help, but Kimberly wasn’t alone. She had Chelsea and Monica on either side of her, plus

Skylar waiting undetected in the hallway. They were all within ass-kicking distance, and they looked ready to do it.

“We’ll talk about it on the way back to your dorm.”

“No, I don’t want to go anywhere with you.” Kimberly planted her feet.

Chelsea and Monica were beside her now asking her if everything was okay and if she needed help. They appeared to be at a complete stalemate in the middle of the foyer. Chelsea and Chris bickered back and forth for a moment, but he wasn’t giving up.

“I’ll diffuse!” Presley said.

I tried to protest, but he’d already hopped the couch and was halfway across the room. Luke and I shared a collective “this should be good” raise of the eyebrows, and I followed close behind, just in case.

“Dude, we can take her home. It’s not a big deal.” Presley came up beside Kim and put his arm around her. She spotted me behind him, and her eyes softened.

“Okay, dude-bro. I didn’t ask your opinion on it.”

“Don’t talk to him like that.” The fire was back in Kimberly’s eyes now. I hadn’t seen it all weekend.

“He’s a big boy. He can handle it.” Chris scoffed.

“It’s okay, Kim.” Presley patted her back and turned back to Chris. “I’m not trying to get in the middle of whatever this is, I’m just trying to help.”

“No.” She crossed her arms. “You don’t get to talk to him like that. I think you should leave.”

“You’re embarrassing yourself. Come. On.” Chris reached for her arm again, but Presley pulled her back a step.

This time, Chelsea stepped in while Monica flanked her. “Don’t fucking touch her.”

There was a crowd now, and people turned at the volume of Chelsea’s voice.

I stepped in next to Chris. “I think you should cool down. She said she wants to stay.”

Chris studied me, and for a minute I thought he might try to punch me, but he didn’t.

He turned around and left without a word.

Presley steadied Kim, who swayed on her feet. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Despite the crowd watching her, she smiled. “No one’s allowed to be mean to you on my watch.”

Chelsea caught my attention and motioned to Kimberly like it was supposed to be obvious what she meant. When I didn’t immediately get it, she motioned to the stairs and rolled her eyes.

“Come on, Kim. Let’s get you upstairs.” Without waiting for her to respond, I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder. “Say good night to Chelsea and Monica.”

“Good night! Call me!” Then she erupted into a fit of laughter as we made our way upstairs.

“How drunk are you?” I laughed as she jumped onto my bed.

“Probably not as drunk as I should’ve been to be able to do that, but damn, it felt good.”

“You’re quite the rebel.”

“Yeah, I don’t really care what he thinks ... only what you think.”

There was a long silence, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. She scanned me up and down without a word passing through her soft lips. Just like before in the kitchen.

“Tell me what’s on your mind, Burns.”

She giggled again. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, you’re thinking about something, you just don’t want to tell me.”

“Maybe ...” She gave me a playful smile, and her eyes lingered on mine for far too long, and my heart rate picked up, and almost instinctively, hers did too.

“You need to go to bed.” I forced a laugh. I went into my closet and threw out some clean clothes. “You can sleep here tonight if you want. I’m gonna go back downstairs and try to enjoy what may be the last party of my life.”

I didn't want to go back down, but I needed to. It was nonnegotiable at this point.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” She lay back on my bed with a sigh, still giving me that damned look. My blood ran cold, and I let myself take in the length of her perfect legs—just one second. Maybe two.

I cleared my throat and rubbed the back of my neck. “Yeah, I'm sure. You need to get some sleep. But I'll see you tomorrow morning.”

She sighed softly and grabbed the clothes on the bed. “Okay. And Aaron ... Thanks for taking care of me.”

There she went again. Thanking me for things she should never have to.

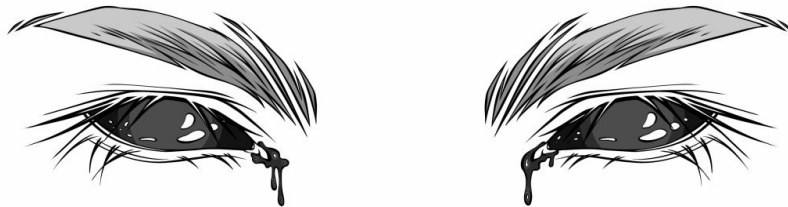
I ran across the room in a flash, and she didn't flinch when I appeared in front of her. “You never have to thank me for that.”

I leaned down and kissed her forehead. The pink rolled to her cheeks, and before she could say anything, I bolted for the door and shut it behind me.

Friends kiss each other's foreheads sometimes, right?

Eleven

AARON



The night wound down slowly, and unlike our previous parties where we'd let anyone stay for as long as they wanted, we shoved people out the door around 3:00 a.m. The plan was for us all to have an after party with The Legion, and the deal was no one started cleaning up till tomorrow, but we did all change back into more comfortable clothes. All the human members had either left or crashed for the night.

“Well, that was a crazy night,” Presley said as we all gathered in the kitchen. “We’re definitely gonna have to do that again.”

William ran his fingers through his hair while plopping down on one of the wooden chairs. “That’s unlikely.”

“Why? Nobody got hurt, there was only one small fight, nothing big.”

“We’ll see.”

“Well, Dom and I had a great time scaring people in the haunted house. Didn’t we, Dom?” Thane was next to Presley, smiling ear to ear.

“Most fun I’ve had in weeks.” Dom still wasn’t smiling though.

Conversation broke out, and we shared stories of the night. Thane had the best stories from the haunted house, and we made more money than we’d anticipated. We were starting to feel like a unit now. How much time did we waste by fighting each other all summer?

Just as the night threatened to escape us completely, the lights went out.

My first thought was a power surge. They happened sometimes in Brooklyn, but we’d never had one here. Noise faded until there was only dead silence and darkness. The only light coming from a few real candles laying around lit the room. Most were fake and the batteries had died.

“What the hell?” Zach sounded more annoyed than anything.

“Do you think it’s Sigma Nu getting back at us for dying their pool pink?” Presley said.

William was already up to his feet with Thane. “Everyone stay close.”

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“Shut up.”

Zach and Luke were instantly there, pressed up next to Presley and me, completing a weird circular huddle. There wasn’t any more talking. Just complete silence.

“There’s someone outside.” Skylar’s voice startled me when she came into the room. She peeked out the window to confirm. “Just one.”

“You’re sure?”

“Felix is double-checking the perimeter.”

The shrill ring of the doorbell cut through the air. I froze from being way more scared than I should have been. I think it was solar.

We didn’t move an inch. Zach and Luke were pressing Presley and me tightly together. We were practically on top of each other.

Presley opened his mouth to speak, and I covered it with my hand.

The door clicked and crept open. A set of footsteps I hadn’t recognized were coming toward us. I hoped to see a drunk classmate begging for a ride home. Or to see our foyer ambushed by a fraternity and confirming this was just some Halloween prank.

Instead, we saw a pale man dressed in a black blazer and a black button-down. His brown hair was slicked back and

perfectly combed. He looked like royalty. Not in the expensive way, but he was put together and wearing sunglasses inside. When he made his way into the darkness, he removed them.

“Connery?” Luke and Zach said at the same time.

That’s when I realized who this must be; he was part of The Family. The Family was here.

In Blackheart. In my house.

We were at a disadvantage. Many of The Legion members were off giving rides. Other than the core four: William, Thane, Dom, and Skylar. Instinctively, I went for the stairs to protect Kimberly. My body just moved, but Luke grabbed my forearm to steady me. He’d read me in an instant.

I’d gotten the message. This guy wasn’t here for her. He was here for us.

“There you are. My brothers.” Connery’s voice sounded odd. Like nothing I’d ever heard before. Not because of an accent but an odd faraway softness. Like he was a walking corpse—only his heart rate beat against his rib cage like the blades of a helicopter.

His eyes were black, and he eyed Zach and Luke like they were presents under the tree on Christmas morning. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“What ... happened to you?” Zach said.

“She finally accepted me. S-She cares about me. She really cares about me.” He stepped forward with an unsteadiness in

his legs. “She sent me to find you. To bring you home where you belong.”

“No,” Luke said.

“I know that you feel it too. Our family doesn’t exist without you. Y-you’re important. You must come back. She wants you to come back.”

“We’re not coming back,” Zach spat.

“I’m sorry for hating you both. I get it now. I’ve seen the light, and I understand ... the connection.”

“What did She do to you?” Luke said.

“I’ve come as a gift, and I have a message for you. We will all be together again. Soon. Drink in Her splendor. Dream of Her.”

He pulled out a long silver dagger from underneath his blazer, and in a split second, he shoved the knife deep into his chest until only the handle was visible. I gasped. It shouldn’t have done anything to his skin, but he dug the blade in a diagonal slice across his body. Black blood spilled to the floor, and his clothes became drenched in the black tarlike substance. My brain didn’t catch up with what happened. I could do nothing but hold on to Presley.

The twins were gone in an instant, running toward the body on the floor. William reached out to touch Zach, and he went limp and fell to the floor.

It took me too long to figure it out. Was it the body? No. It was the blood. He was headed for the blood.

Luke lunged forward, and William and Thane grabbed him from behind, but Luke flipped them over his shoulder and dropped them to the hardwood below.

That's when I noticed Luke's warm-brown eyes were gone and now they were solid black. He barreled toward the blood, and the remaining Legion scrambled to stop him. Presley and I were frozen in our spots.

I snapped out of my trance and ran in front of Luke, pushing on his chest to stop his momentum, but he was solid and fast. In less than a second, he pushed me to the side and covered his hands in the black blood and poured it into his mouth.

I ran full speed at him and used his lack of attention to my advantage. We fell into the wall, and he snarled and turned on me like he was about to tear me apart, but he stopped.

"Aaron don't." William's voice was far away. "It's not safe."

"He won't hurt me," I said. I placed my hands on Luke's shoulders, pushed him back, and looked into his eyes, praying he could still hear me in there.

"Luke, you have to stop."

His eyes stayed trained on the blood seeping into the cracks in the floor. He tried to pull away from me, and I dug my fingers into his skin to keep him in front of me.

"Let go." His words were ice cold. The dark pools of ink stared back at me.

“No.” I forced my feet into the ground, refusing to move. I didn’t understand what was happening, but I knew I couldn’t allow Luke to reach the blood on the floor. He couldn’t drink any more.

“A little help here.” I jumped on Luke’s back from behind to keep him in place.

When someone else came to help secure Luke, I expected my brother to return, but he didn’t. It took all four to wrestle him to the ground. And even then, he tried to crawl to Connery’s body, and the blood stained the floor in a mess of what looked like oil and spiderwebs. William finally put him under after a few minutes of trying.

“What’s wrong with him?”

William was on his feet, working like a well-oiled machine. “We need to take him to Kilian. Now. You guys need to pick up Zach and put him in the back of the car and follow us.” He pointed to someone behind me, but I didn’t look. “Secure the humans upstairs and make sure they stay in their rooms until we clean up this mess.”

“Someone needs to stay with Kimberly. If they know where we are, there might be more,” I said. I was shaking again, but this time it was fear.

“I don’t think so. They could have sent more. They didn’t. Skylar, maybe you can wake her up and take her somewhere ... public. Safe. Everyone else here should be fine.”

“I’ll stay too.” Presley squeezed my arm. It was a relief. I trusted Presley more than I trusted The Legion, but it still made me uneasy to leave her. But Luke wasn’t staying under from the power of William’s compelling. He jerked around like any second he might wake, and Zach was still out cold. He needed me there.

“Okay, let’s go.”



Kilian wasn’t far away. I half expected us to go back to the old church. Instead, we pulled into a rural area at the end of campus, down a back road that led deep into the tree line. A small A-frame cabin looked well-kept despite the leaves piled in the yard. In different circumstances, I might have even been comforted by the warmth it gave off. It was like the nice ones Kimberly liked to point out to me as we drove around in the summer, but I had to think of my squirming older brother in the back seat.

Thane drove so William could be close to Luke to keep him under, but he’d whimpered and groaned, sometimes even opening his eyes completely. His eyes were still black as coal. I wanted Zach to wake up. This was something Zach was cut out for. I wasn’t ready.

We pulled my brothers from the truck. Zach was still and easy to pull up the wooden porch stairs, but William and I were having a hard time keeping Luke stationary and secured

as we entered the house. The inside was warm and covered in lush ornate rugs. The walls were lined with logs from floor to ceiling, and cedar burned in the fireplace. Kilian was at the door waiting and quickly ushered us into what appeared to be a guest bedroom.

“Did he drink any of the blood?” Kilian asked while we laid Luke down on the bed.

Luke stirred again; this time awakening. William and Thane took his feet, and Kilian and I took his arms.

“I need it. I need it,” Luke mumbled over and over with trembling lips.

“A little. I tried to stop him but ... he’s been like this,” I said.

“He won’t stay down,” William said.

Kilian placed a hand on Luke’s forehead like he was some sick child. “Because he’s suffering. Locked away in his own head. This addiction runs deep.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

I was lost. Nothing he said ever made any sense.

“It means that it’s worse than I thought. I didn’t realize how far things had gone for Luke. His blood needs to be cleansed.”

“What do you think, Aaron?” William looked at me like I knew what that meant. Like I was the one calling the shots.

“I have no idea what that means!”

Luke lurched forward, almost knocking us to the floor,

“You need to ask Zach. You need to wake him up!”

I motioned to my brother still out cold and lying on the pleated armchair that sat in the corner of the room. I wasn't prepared to make decisions like this. I couldn't advocate for Luke. I was just his brother. Zach was his twin. More than that ... I was alone—a feeling I'd only encountered once before, and it didn't end well for any of us.

“I don't need him flying off the handle and making this entire situation much more dangerous than it needs to be,” William said.

“He won't. If Luke is hurt, he'll be calm. I promise.”

“Fine. Hold him down.” William was gone in an instant and then appeared next to Zach.

With the softest touch across his skin, Zach awoke gasping and frightened. In those short few seconds, a weight lifted, as if I saw the responsibility fall back on my brother's shoulders.

Before he was even on his feet, he asked, “Where is Luke?”

William motioned him forward to the bed where we were still struggling to keep Luke down.

“Please. Help me. I *need* it.” He lurched forward again.

Zach placed a hand on Luke's chest. “How bad is it?”

“His blood needs to be cleansed.” Kilian said that thing again. I still didn't understand.

“How am I supposed to trust you?” Zach's jaw was set and serious.

“Luke is hurting. The thing I want the most right now is to relieve that suffering.” Kilian’s eyes softened. It didn’t suit the hardlines in his face. “Surely you can trust that truth.”

“Fine, do it.”

“Someone needs to drain the tainted blood from his body. It cannot be me. My blood must remain pure of Her blood.”

“I’ll do it.” Zach stepped forward.

Kilian placed a hand on his chest. “No. His blood is tainted with Hers. You may suffer the same fate.”

“I-I can do it.” I cleared my throat. I hadn’t realized I stood in the corner until I noticed the distance between us. I couldn’t pull my eyes off Luke as he writhed on the bed, muttering and clawing to get up. I’d do anything to make him better.

“Absolutely fucking not. That’s the last thing I need,” Zach growled.

I opened my mouth to protest, but Thane spoke up. “I’ll do it.”

There was a pleading in his voice, like he wanted William’s permission.

“No,” William said. “It’s better if it’s me. I’m older. I can handle it.”

“You’ve already tasted their blood before ... it could be risky.” Kilian’s attention flickered to me, and his iron brow furrowed.

“You can trust me.” William talked only to Zach now.

He scanned William like he was inspecting for any cracks in his armor, but William was dressed in confidence.

“Alright, hold him down.” William stripped his coat and walked to the head of the bed.

I grabbed Luke’s hand, forcing his fingers to bend in my grasp.

“It’s gonna be okay.” I don’t know who I was trying to soothe more, myself or Luke, but I knew my brother couldn’t hear me. He was lost in darkness.

William sunk his teeth into Luke’s neck and drank. All my senses were on high alert as the threat neared Luke. I could hear everything. The scuffs on the floor, the bed creaking, the fire cracking. The strength in Luke’s body waned, and his squirming slowed. Every tick from the antique clock on the wall felt like a year.

Kilian nodded to Thane, and he disappeared to the kitchen. When he returned, he had at least five blood bags.

Kilian watched me. “They were for you, just in case.”

I nodded. Thankful I hadn’t needed them since the start of the summer.

William pulled away, and Kilian pierced a bag with his teeth. Red droplets peppered onto the white sheets. He held the bags up for Luke, and after the fourth one, Luke’s eyes opened and his brown irises glowed from the light of the fire. I sighed in relief. My brother was back.

Luke pulled away, smudging the sheets in a deep red in the process.

My mouth watered. *Shit*. I hadn't realized watching Luke drink that much blood would make me thirsty. I sucked in a breath and held it, refusing to make myself a problem.

"W-what happened?" Luke grabbed the bed as he took in the unfamiliar surroundings.

I squeezed his hand again. "It's okay. It's safe here. Everyone we care about is safe."

Luke looked straight through me at first, like I was a stranger, but the recollection flickered on his face, and he leaned back against the headboard still holding on to me.

"A member of The Family became Her vessel to lure you. It appears they had been allowed to drink Her blood. Lots of it in order to expose you to that blood ... probably to coax you to them."

"She's here ..." Luke shot up again, with panic breaking his voice, but Zach was there to help him lay back.

"No, She's not here. I promise. I'd know if She was ... I'd feel it."

"They know where we are, though. We need to get away from here, right?" I said.

The fear was getting to me. Everything that had been laid out before me was now uncertain. The thin illusion of safety shattered. For Kimberly. For my brothers. For me.

“I do not think that’s the best course of action,” Kilian said.

“Why the fuck not?” A rare vein popped in Zach’s forehead while he comforted Luke.

“Because, even if they know where you are, we are well established here. You are safer here surrounded by our well-laid systems and procedures. If we flee now, we risk being overwhelmed and losing what little leverage we have. This has been the plan all along.” He leaned in. “The Family may be powerful, but they must still adhere to rules. They will not expose themselves in public.”

“You’re saying we just need to go about our business?” I asked. “And, what? Go to class?!”

This was always the plan, but now when it was thrown in my face, I could see how ridiculous it was, and dangerous. How was I supposed to go to class and return to OBA like someone hadn’t killed themselves in the foyer? And how was I supposed to protect Kim ...

“Yes. During the day. That will be when you will be the safest. It’s at night when the public is asleep that things will be harder. We must figure out the full extent of what is happening here.” Kilian’s eyes shifted to Zach and Luke. “They have crossed the country to find you and to bring you back with them. That shows how valuable you are. This is the closest we’ve ever been to bringing this coven down. Thanks to your invaluable insights, we know how many of them there are, therefore, we can plan what we think their next move will be. This changes nothing. The plan stays the same.”

Kilian and Zach shared a moment that was completely their own.

“Fine. Almighty leader, how are you going to make sure my brothers’ safety is the highest priority?” Zach said through clenched teeth.

“You are all going to be accompanied by at least two members at a time. You will be shuttled together when possible.”

“What about Kim?” I said. “She gets protection too, right?”

Luke squeezed my hand.

Kilian straightened the jacket on his corduroy blazer. “I may be able to pull some strings and get her lodgings changed. She will be safer staying in the house where security will not need to be spread thin.”

“She needs to be a priority,” I said.

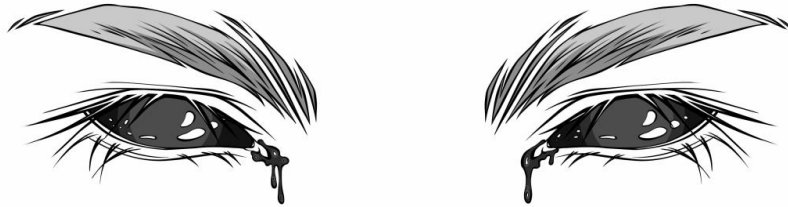
“She will be.” Luke was back to reassuring me again, even though he still looked to be on death’s door.

“I promise.” Kilian nodded.

I thought seeing Luke back to normal would give me relief, but I knew this was the start of something bigger. We were no longer hiding. We’d been found.

Twelve

AARON



“I can’t believe I’m having this conversation at an IHOFT.” Zach pushed his hair back as he leaned into the squeaky blue booth.

IHOFT used to be one of my favorite places to go eat. As the International House of French Toast, they could make some mean French toast. It was one of the only places open twenty-four hours in Blackheart.

The smell of syrup and the sound of sizzling bacon brought me back to those rare Sunday mornings as a kid. Since my mom had four boys that could each eat their weight in French toast and pancakes, it was more of a treat. The last time we’d all gone was on my mom’s birthday. I remembered it all

vividly, and I half expected to look over and see her sitting there at the table. My heart ached to hear her comforting words and for her to tell me everything would be okay. I wanted to drown in the blueberry syrup sitting in front of me.

I squeezed Kimberly's hand under the table. Not allowed, but I didn't care. Neither did she. She pressed up against my shoulder in the booth, so close her breath warmed my neck. I think we both needed comfort, and my brothers didn't comment on it. All our eyes were still on Luke, who leaned his head back on the wall with Zach's shades on. Every couple minutes his head would fall and he'd reawaken. He looked ridiculous in Kilian's spare clothes because they were way too long for his body, but the arms were snug around his biceps. I was certain the waitress thought he was plastered because she'd offered him water three times. I think he'd much rather have been.

"It's the safest place until we can secure every area and return to campus. It shouldn't take long." Kilian was with us in the largest booth in the restaurant. The early morning darkness greeted us from the window that overlooked the parking lot. Thane, Skylar, and Dom took a booth by the door. They'd all ordered pancakes they would not eat.

"Now, tell me ... why didn't you mention anything about Luke's condition?"

"Wait!" Presley interjected. "I want to order food before we get into that."

“You’re just gonna waste it.” I peeked around Kimberly to glare at him.

“No, I need something to do with my hands so I can focus!”

I turned to Kimberly. “Are you going to get anything? You should probably eat.”

I felt especially bad for Kim, as I anticipated the hangover she was having. She had to be wiped, but her eyes were wide as she picked at the skin on her lip. I was thankful to have her close again, as the fearful loneliness I’d felt earlier in the night was long gone.

She groaned in protest. “I might throw up if I do.”

“Come on, it will make you feel better.”

After more coaxing and arguing, Kimberly and Presley got their pancakes. The waitress set them down on the table, and the sweet, sugary scent overloaded my senses.

Zach sighed, finally ready with his answer. “It’s complicated. I thought ... he was better. I didn’t think he could be triggered like that.”

“I don’t get it. What happened to Luke, what made him like this?” I said, more eager this time.

I was tired of being out of the loop. We were out of time. How many secrets and stories did they have buried?

Zach looked down and fiddled with some sugar packets. “You know, you weren’t the only one who had a hard time

with the change. Luke and I got into this huge fight when we realized we made a mistake and were ... different.”

Zach and Luke hadn't had many fights growing up, but the ones they'd had were marked in red in my mind. They were long sullen days when neither of them would speak to each other. It affected everyone in the house, but they were so rare we named them according to the offense. My least favorite was the “Great Fist Fight of Year Ten” when they got into a fist fight at school. To this day, they won't tell us what it was about.

“We both dealt with it differently. Luke ... went to Her. I didn't realize there was even a problem until I visited home and realized Luke hadn't been picking up Aaron and Pres from school, because we didn't talk for almost two weeks.”

“Wait, that's why? I thought that was because you guys were settling into your new place,” Presley said while cutting his pancakes into little pieces and stacking them.

I did too. I'd told myself Luke just got busy after graduation, but I think even then I knew it wasn't true. Luke never forgot.

“When I found him with Her, he was different. Acting strange and ... jittery. I tried to get him to get in the car with me, and he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't leave Her side. That's when I knew something was wrong. I went to Ezra for help ... he's the one that helped me get Luke back to normal. Luke and I made up, and I realized I could never leave him alone with Her again.”

“For clarity, Luke was allowed to drink the queen’s blood, *and* Ezra—a member of The Guard sworn to protect Her and Her will—helped you cleanse his blood?” Kilian’s brows knit together.

“I know it sounds like bullshit. But that’s how it happened, alright?”

Presley raised his hand in the air. “Is this a sexual thing?”

“What?” Zach said.

“I’m not judging. I’m just trying to get the whole picture. It sounds like it could be kinda sexual.”

William leaned in front of Presley and the mess he made on the table. “Why would a member of The Guard help you? Especially if this was something She did on purpose and it sounds like She did.”

Luke stirred, and we all grew silent. He groaned and buried his head in his arms on the table. Kimberly had barely touched her food, and I encouraged her with a little extra syrup on her pancakes.

Kilian leaned back, lost in thought for a moment. “Maybe the conditions weren’t right. Or maybe he saw that Luke was getting too far gone and needed to intervene.”

“What does that mean?” Kimberly was finally perking up a little more after her second cup of coffee. “Too far gone?”

“Queens use their blood as a tool to manipulate their followers. But it’s not used often, and if used too much, it can have dire consequences. Too much blood and they can’t exist

without Her. They can't stand to not be in the same room. There are stories of that happening to other covens. She gave them too much blood ... and they devoured Her."

Kimberly dropped her fork and took my hand again.

"Shit." Zach looked to be two seconds away from lighting up a cigarette in the booth.

Luke had had too much of Her blood and it made him obsessed. There must be residual effects from it. It explained why he talked about the queen the way he did and why he missed Her. There was still something I didn't understand. Something I needed to know, and having Zach cornered in an IHOF might be the only way to ever get that information out of him.

"Why did you stay when you realized they turned you and what She did to Luke? Why didn't you leave?"

Zach sighed. "We tried, Aaron. More than once. The first time ... that's when they took Sarah. But the queen made us forget everything. Sarah's death. All the horrible shit they did. We weren't acting ... we had no idea where Sarah went. We even helped her family look. Until ... She gave us our memories back when we tried to leave for the second time. To punish us. Again."

He held a butter knife and dug holes in a napkin as he spoke. Each jab was a little harder, and I was sure he was leaving marks on the table. The familiar ache of hearing Sarah's name almost made me stop asking questions, but I needed more. I needed the full story.

“How did you figure it out again? What happened that made you send Mom away and take us with you?”

Zach groaned and pressed his palms into his eyes. There was something he didn't want to say, but that's exactly why I needed him to say it.

“Come on now, we don't have all day to hear your sob story. Out with it.” William sighed.

For once, I was thankful for his impatience.

Zach sucked in a breath through gritted teeth. “She started offering us Her blood regularly, and it became harder and harder to resist, and one night, we just couldn't resist anymore. Things got very weird after.”

“I knew it was sexual,” Presley said before he stuffed a whole forkful of pancakes in his mouth and then immediately spit them out on his plate. “Eh, still gross.”

“What the hell are you doing?” William's eyes were wide and horrified.

“They looked so good! I wanted to make sure they still tasted like dirt.”

“It's not sexual,” Zach snarled. “I mean ... not really. It's complicated. I can't even explain it to you. It's like an addiction. It's totally different from drinking human blood ... and being around Her ... I can't describe it.”

I scanned the restaurant to make sure no nearby waitresses were eavesdropping on our blood-drinking conversation. Other than us, there were only one or two other tables being served.

Luke stirred again.

Kilian's eyes grew wider, and he leaned over his cold coffee. "She allowed this?"

"Yeah, She baited us. It started with Luke ... again." Zach turned to me, Presley, and Kimberly. "The queen doesn't drink human blood. She has to have the blood of the lower members to survive. Donating to Her is considered a great privilege. Everyone and their dog wants to fucking do it, but it's on rotation. No one gets picked multiple times in a row—you're lucky to be picked every couple months—but Luke did because She was fucking obsessed with him. She kept picking him, and I got fucking sick of it. So I volunteered. She knew I would. Pretty soon, Luke and I were sucked into donating to Her every week. Somewhere in there ... us donating turned into Her donating to us."

Kilian's eyes sparkled, like he'd been told the greatest story of his life, and I could almost see the wheels turning in his head. "This case is truly fascinating. I've never heard anything like it."

"How did you stop? How did you get away from Her?" Kimberly had stopped eating and was alert in the conversation.

"I only drank Her blood one time. And I knew I couldn't ever again, or I'd never be able to come back. Luke couldn't take anymore. When we tried to leave again, that's when She made us remember everything." Zach shuddered. "She thought it would break us, but it strengthened our resolve. We knew what they were, and we thought our family was next. There

weren't any other choices but to escape and leave Brooklyn. Ezra caught us, but he ended up helping us. I don't know if it was fucking genuine, but we would have never been able to get this far if he hadn't."

I leaned back into the booth. This was what we were up against. All the pieces of the puzzle had started to make the picture on the box—Mom loved puzzles. No wonder The Family never stopped looking for my brothers. I might have been slower at understanding the point nine times out of ten, but this flashed at me in big white letters like the IHOF sign outside. The Family would never give up on finding us because there was something they wanted from my brothers, and possibly from me. Something big. I was taught blood was the only thing that mattered. Not that I ever agreed with it, but that lesson had taken on a new meaning. Her blood was powerful, maybe even more powerful than the blood I shared with my brothers.

When I looked at my brothers again, I saw them in a different light. Like I finally understood. After the church, I thought I did but sitting in that booth, everything changed. Instead of me begging for them to save me, I wanted to save them. I wanted to be the one to save them from their fate and from everything they'd ever run from. Especially from that place. Guilt washed over me like a fresh rain when I remembered all the times I froze. All the times they needed to come and save me. Not anymore. I could save them from this.

I caressed Kimberly's knuckles with my thumb. I could save everyone.

Thirteen

KIMBERLY



The bathroom of an IHOF was where I expected to have my first mental breakdown, but I was sweating and needed to be anywhere but that hot leather booth that smelled of the gobs of butter Presley left on his mutilated pancakes.

How did Luke and Zach manage it? How? How did they ever stay so ... normal? No wonder they never wanted to talk about it. We were in deep, and now this invisible darkness

wasn't miles away like I wanted to believe. They were here in Blackheart. The safest place I'd ever known.

I pulled out some paper towels, wetted them in the cold water, and retreated to a stall to place them on my neck and gather my thoughts.

My head was pounding, my stomach was turning, and I couldn't tell if it was the panic attack or the hangover. Probably both. The urge to count the blue tiles on the bathroom floor crowded my brain. If I did, maybe I'd feel better. If I counted just enough, then maybe everything would be fine. I could prevent the tragedy that felt inevitable. The Family barging in and taking everything away from me. *No*.

I breathed into the cool air hitting my neck. I'd gone to therapy for that exact reason. I didn't have the money to continue, but I still had the skills. I needed to feel my way through this. Even if it was all new and terrifying and felt like uncertainty of it would eat me alive.

There was a certain beautiful fog of ignorance I had when I'd met Aaron and learned about vampires. I had no idea what that meant. All I knew was a handsome blonde boy with beautiful eyes wanted to make up for his mistakes. That was different. He also had that same ignorance that prevented us from freaking out. Like there was this certain time in the universe that was meant for us. Our own hiding place. Our own spring.

Ignorance was better. Now we couldn't hide. We were exposed in every sense of the word.

I receded from my hiding place and went to the sink to splash my face. My pulse slowed, and the room wasn't foggy anymore. *Get it together, Burns.*

Funny enough, I never referred to myself by my last name until Aaron came along. He was the reason for the exposed nature of my heart. For this worry. That stupid, beautiful boy.

I used a wet paper towel to clean up the remnants of makeup melting down my face. My muted chuckle echoed in the bathroom as I remembered the night and how everything had seemed so important. My fight with Chris was the least of my worries now. It was better that he was mad at me. That meant he'd stay away from me. He wouldn't call, and The Family could never touch that part of my life.

When I was finally done cleaning myself up, I sighed and attempted to make my hair look like anything but a tangled mess.

The Family was here for the people I cared about most in the world. How the Calem brothers became the most important people in my life, I didn't know. I was too invested. I cared far too much to run away to New York and leave them here to deal with this fate. How was I—a human girl—ever going to help? I could think of one thing, but I wasn't ready to add that to my list of possibilities yet.

I left my shelter in the bathroom and returned to the booth where they appeared to be waiting for me. It looked like Presley had been filling the void with random questions Zach was less inclined to answer than the ones before.

“You’re back! Did you throw up? You’ll feel a lot better if you throw up,” Presley said.

Aaron got up to let me into the booth, and I scooted between them. He gave me that look again. Like he was waiting for me to say enough was enough.

“I ... didn’t throw up.”

William rolled his eyes and laid his head back on the booth. He was the one who trapped himself in the back, not me. Kilian didn’t look to be paying attention to us at all anymore. He rubbed his beard while staring at the napkin rack in the middle of the table. I wished I could peek into his mind to uncover whatever new thoughts Zach’s story had recalled, but it didn’t look like he cared to share.

I nuzzled into Aaron and wrapped my arm around his. I cared little what it looked like or what anyone thought. Aaron was warm. Holding onto him felt like someone coated me in the finest steel, and no one could touch me there. He was safe.

“What are we going to do?” I broke the silence this time. “How is this going to work?”

I’d already been told about my pending living situation. I couldn’t say I minded. Being in OBA would help me get better sleep, anyway. I’d become a light sleeper, where every sound in the hallway would wake me up. Like my body knew I had some target on my back.

William spoke this time. “Well, for starters, we need the boys to be a lot more helpful. No more going off and making

annoying plans behind our backs.”

“Hey, we’ve been good lately! The mixer was a one-time thing,” Presley said.

“You all will need to be at one of three places only. Class. Work. Or home. That’s it. No midnight strolls. No day trips. Unless we’re all going, you’re not going. The theater often gives you shifts together, so that shouldn’t be a huge problem.”

Presley placed his head on the table. “No, I forgot I have to work today.”

“Luke’s on the schedule today too,” William said before sighing as Luke groaned again in his sleep.

Zach leaned back, barely listening to us. “I’ll cover him.”

“No. I’ll do it. You stay with Luke,” Aaron said.

“What else?” I leaned forward, trying to catch Kilian’s eyeline. “This keeps them safe for now, but what else is there? How does this help us take down the covenant?”

I was tired of that faraway look in Kilian’s eyes. There had to be more to the plan than being shuffled around like precious cargo. Kilian was unknown in my book. Some mythical figure who said nothing but knew everything. I wasn’t sure why the Zach and Luke trusted him, but I didn’t like the way he regarded them. Especially Aaron.

He raised a brow at me and straightened himself. “We integrate them into our systems. We have the knowledge. We

have the resources.” He met the eyes of all the Calem boys.
“We can teach you how to fight.”

“I know how to fight,” Zach said.

“That’s what this all leads to ... one big fight?” I said.

Aaron rubbed my arm. I hadn’t realized I’d been squeezing his.

“Yes.” Kilian’s jaw hardened. “And you know how to fight ... but not how we fight. There are many things we can teach you.”

“When do we start?” Aaron asked with an eager light in his eyes.

My stomach sank. *No*. I couldn’t imagine Aaron fighting. I didn’t want to. Or Presley, for that matter. And Zach and Luke couldn’t take anymore.

“This week.”

Aaron was the only one who appeared to be excited about that. Presley was tearing up a napkin with a firm line between his brows, and Zach looked tired. Unbelievably tired.

Luke awoke gasping and nearly took out the salt and pepper shakers. It was loud enough to startle everyone in the restaurant. Even Skylar and Thane turned around.

“Are you okay?” I asked. Luke was directly across from me.

He scanned everyone at the table. The seconds ticked by, and the panic drained from his face, the only hint of it left was in the way he pulled his hands through his hair.

“I’m okay.” His voice shook, and he placed both hands on the table. “I need some air.”

“That’s my cue.” Zach followed Luke out the front door, and they stayed out of sight from the window.



Soon after the sun was up, we returned to OBA. It was trashed with SOLO cups and spiderwebs cluttering the floor, but there was no longer blood in the hallway. Skylar had tried to shield me from it on our way out the door, but I think it was still stuck to the bottom of my shoes.

I felt obligated to help clean the remaining decorations, but I was dead on my feet. Luckily, the humans lingering in the house most likely wouldn’t be up for hours. I followed Aaron, Zach, and William as they helped Luke to his room to get some rest. He’d fallen back to sleep in the car without saying a word.

As we turned to descend the hall, Zach’s voice echoed.

“William, hold on a minute.”

I turned around in time to see Zach pushing William up against the wall.

The tremor shook the painting and then it landed on the floor with a crack. William wasn’t cowering. He let Zach hold him to the wall by the collar of his shirt.

Zach's voice was sharp and low. "Do not put me under like that again. Ever."

A chill rushed down my spine. He didn't threaten him, but it was implied. Zach never implied.

He pushed him away and walked past us on his way down the stairs without glancing in our direction.

William straightened his collar and wiped his vest. "Here I thought he was starting to warm to me."

"It's not your fault." Aaron motioned toward the door to Luke's room. "Zach always blames himself when Luke gets hurt."

William raised his eyebrow, like he wondered if he wanted the whole story. "Do tell."

"Just ... every time Luke's gotten badly hurt. A broken arm ... A fight. Zach wasn't there. Whether it was because he was sick or they were fighting, it doesn't matter. He just thinks it's his fault."

To my surprise, William didn't scoff or roll his eyes. He nodded and descended the stairs.

Aaron led me to his room, and we collapsed on his bed. The smell of fresh laundry and his mint shampoo lulled me further into the sheets.

He rolled over to face me. "You should sleep. I've got a day full of cleaning, and working, apparently. Will you be okay?"

“I’m fine. Seriously, with everything going on, please don’t worry about me.”

“I’ll always worry about you.”

I stole a glance at his lips as he did mine.

It just kept happening. I’d be a liar if I said I hadn’t kept thinking about that night in his room despite my best efforts. Why was he inevitable? Why were his lips something I’d never be able to fight? No matter what, we always ended up in the same place.

I inched closer to him. Our hearts drew like magnets in our chests.

He sighed while still looking at my lips. “I should go.”

“Probably,” I said, closing my eyes and wishing he’d stay. Sharing a bed with him when I had my concussion was the best sleep I’d had in months.

His hand grazed my cheek. “I’ll protect you.”

“I don’t need you to.”

“I know.”

Something stirred in my mind, and I had to ask before the moment was gone. “Do you trust Kilian? Really, truly trust him?”

“I trust my brothers. And they trust him ... so yeah, I guess.”

“I just want you to be careful.”

Aaron was too good for them. Trusting and kind. I was trusting The Legion more with things like ensuring we weren't all murdered in broad daylight. I didn't trust them with that light of optimism in Aaron's eyes.

“Always.”

His lips were close to mine again, and all my worries floated away. It was just us in his room. A place we'd been many times before, but now things were different.

There was a brief silence and then he spoke again. “I think I messed up your timeline. Like you were supposed to be doing something else right now but met me instead.”

“Or maybe I messed up yours.”

He shook his head. “Impossible. I'm pretty sure, in every reality, I'm the one that comes crashing into you.”

I smiled at that thought. Vampire or not, Aaron Calem would always find a way to crash into my life. I imagined all the people he could have been and all the ways he'd find me. I bet I always had a choice, because Aaron always gave me one. And maybe I chose wrong every time, and a choice to stay with Aaron Calem was always my downfall.

Aaron pulled away first and left me to sleep in his bed.

If this was the wrong choice and I was supposed to be doing something else, why did it feel like my heart was swelling twice its size when he was near? And why did I want him to stay?

Fourteen

KIMBERLY



Had I become a complete coward? I'd confronted a vampire and threatened him. I'd run headfirst into a dark room of a creepy church to have a chance at saving Aaron. I'd started to accept my death to a vampire cult might very well be on the horizon. So why was I imagining what would happen if I shoved all the Calem boys into my car and just drove away?

If we just kept driving, how would anyone ever find us? We'd only have to stop for gas and food for me sometimes. The boys were immortal. They could literally drive forever or until my car gave out. My car had over 150,000 miles on it, so scratch that—maybe we could take someone else's car.

Presley would be the easiest to convince. I could lure him into the car with Taylor Swift music and the promise of fun. Aaron too. Zach and Luke ... that would be a hard sell. Especially since they'd tried that exact thing and still ended up here. Trapped. I couldn't help but think if I just thought about it long enough, I'd be able to find the solution we needed.

As I poured another fountain drink for a customer, I thought the scenario over one more time to see if I could think of something better.

“And then he was like ‘You will be mine, body and soul,’ and he plunged the dagger in his chest.” Presley told me the story from the Halloween party for the fiftieth time today, but he'd had to start and stop between customers.

“That's not what he said. What did we say about being overly dramatic?” Aaron rolled his eyes. He sat on the counter now that the crowd for the last movie had disappeared into the theater. He tired of Presley's storytelling quickly, but I didn't. I wanted to analyze it from start to finish, as if thinking on it over and over would be helpful. I had to find some way to be *something* useful.

Presley sighed. “Try to keep it to Tuesdays and Thursdays only.”

Being the fifth wheel to the Calem brothers' life-changing events bothered me. Maybe it shouldn't, but the very real knot in my stomach told me it did. How come I was always involved but never actually helpful?

Mondays were our night to close with our manager present, but Presley had taken an extra shift to fulfill The Legion's wishes to be together as much as possible. I think Aaron was more upset about it than I was.

Things were different, but life around us moved on the same. The theater was bare except for Skylar sitting on the bench by the double doors. She was on her second book today. Another romance novel. I'd never seen someone read that much, but she had a lot of time to kill. Thane and Dom were outside doing most of the surveilling.

Presley banged his fist repeatedly on the counter, shaking the cardboard movie displays.

"Presley ..."

"I can't help it! This is boring. Why is the reaction to the killer cult finding us to work?"

"Because it keeps us out of trouble," I said.

"And because it's what Luke wants," Aaron added while he plopped down from the counter and pretended to sweep the lobby.

I covered a cough with the sleeve of my uniform and then popped another cough drop. Someone at the Halloween party got me sick.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Aaron asked. He’d run out to get me medicine as soon as he heard an inkling of a cough.

“It’s just a cold. I’m fine.”

“I see why The Legion hates us now. They have to do all the unexciting stuff with us. They’re probably used to doing all sorts of fun stuff like traveling to Puerto Rico.” Presley’s voice was muffled as he rested his elbows on the counter and held his face in his hands.

“I don’t think they get to choose where they go, Pres. It’s not like vacation. They’re working,” Aaron said.

“Doing?”

“I don’t know. Kicking ass and taking names.” Aaron winked at me, and we shared one of our first smiles since Halloween night.

Aaron had been gone most of the day Sunday, and the rest of the night we’d spent moving some of my stuff from my dorm to the frat house and taking care of Luke. He was still shaken and couldn’t sit still. We’d helped steer him away from another panic attack by pure distraction.

“Do you think they kill people? I bet they have. At least by accident.”

“Presley,” I warned while stealing a glance at Skylar, who was engrossed in her book until Thane came in to talk with her. It looked to be a complete social endeavor.

“Do you think they’re a thing?” Presley wiggled his brows, not even trying to hide his snooping.

I, at least, pretended to be disinfecting the register.

“Is this really the most important thing right now?” Aaron asked.

I gave Presley a look that said he should do some digging and give me details later.

He smiled and went onto another topic. “What do you think members of The Family will look like, anyway? Will we be able to tell? That one guy was wearing a suit.”

“Doubt they’d dress in suits on a college campus,” Aaron said.

“What about that guy over there? He looks suspicious.” Presley motioned to a guy our age walking to the men’s restroom.

“Now you’re just trying to make trouble.” Aaron smirked.

“Well, we gotta be able to pick out who is who. How do we know a member of The Legion isn’t secretly working for The Family?”

“That’s not possible,” Aaron said. Of course he’d think that.

I added it to my list of possibilities I could mull over in my head while I lay in bed.

“Could be!” Presley was clicking our register pen repeatedly, and Aaron slapped it away from his hand.

I already evaluated every relationship I had in fear of them being targeted. I’d wanted to invite Chelsea to study sometime this week but thought better of it when I realized it may not be

a good idea to be seen with her too much. It was hard enough trying to explain to her why I was moving into one of the campus apartments midsemester. Even more difficult when I wouldn't let her help me move. I couldn't hide from her with the theater being a prime place for entertainment in Blackheart because students got good discounts. She'd seen me earlier when she came in with Monica, and I tried to be busy in the back so Presley could get her snacks instead. Lying was hard.

“What are you guys doing?” Thane's shadow loomed in front of us, and we all jumped.

“Nothing,” we said simultaneously.

“They've got cameras in here, dude. You should be careful,” Presley said.

“Please, give me a little credit.” Thane leaned over the counter like he didn't have a care in the world. “You know we can hear you, right?”

“We knew that ... maybe you shouldn't eavesdrop, it isn't nice.” Presley pretended to go back to cleaning the popcorn off the ground.

“I like it. You're like your own little Scooby gang! Like a brain trust.”

“You say that like we're kids or something.” I crossed my arms.

“I'm more than a century old. You're all kids to me.” Thane laughed but kept his tone light. “I was just talking with Sky about something, and she loathes texts.”

“Anything that would cure our boredom and satisfy our curiosity?” Presley said.

“Just ... work stuff.”

We all perked up, listening more intently. We were “work stuff.” Our seemingly mundane college lives had become their encumbrance.

“I’m not supposed to say anything.”

“Now you gotta say it,” Aaron said.

Thane opened his mouth to say more, but Chelsea came walking down the hall with what I guessed was her empty drink in hand. I poured him a small drink, and he left for Skylar’s side.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” My voice croaked.

“Are you sick?” Chelsea passed me her drink, and I could tell by the color she wanted more fruit punch. Her favorite.

“Just a cold.”

“Well, you’d think one of these gentlemen here would have offered to close for you.”

They did. Aaron did twice, but I couldn’t. I needed something to do to get my mind off things.

Presley opened his mouth, probably to argue, but Chelsea cut him off.

“I’m not in the mood today. Did you hear what happened?”

We shook our heads.

“Mrs. Henry went missing. She never came home Saturday night.”

Blood ran from my face. “From Sociology?”

“Yeah, I just saw it on the news.”

I put the straw in her drink and passed it back to her. “She’s the one with that tutoring program you’ve been going to, right?”

“Yeah, she’s amazing. I’ve been there every week this semester.”

I swallowed the spit caught in my throat. “Well, I’m sure it’s nothing. She’ll be okay.”

I’m not sure who I was trying to convince more—me or her.

Presley, Aaron, and I added little to the conversation. I think we were all dazed and processing that information. Blackheart wasn’t safe anymore. Not just for us, but maybe other people too. Innocent people.

When Chelsea left, we pounced on Thane.

“Dude, that’s what you were hiding!?! You have to tell us stuff like that,” Presley said.

“That’s it, then? They’re killing people in town on purpose?” I said.

Thane’s eyes softened. “Please don’t worry until we have a little more information. Not everything means something.

More importantly ... this is not your problem. It's ours. You don't have any control over what they do."

"You sound like my brothers," Aaron grumbled.

"Well, they're pretty damn smart. Panicking and assuming get us nowhere. That's something you learn the older you get. You have to stay calm."

Thane tried to be reassuring, but it still felt patronizing. I gave him a pass for sincerity.

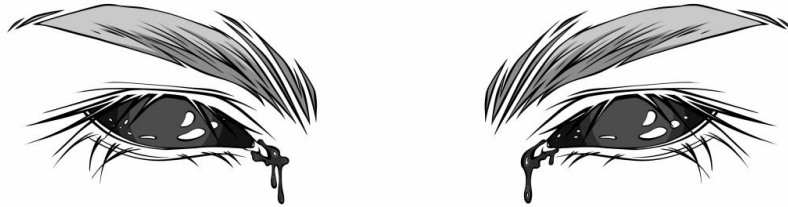
"I get it ... you're still learning to trust us. But you can lean on us. We all want the same things."

Maybe Thane was right. Trusting The Legion and their word was crucial in this scenario. We *needed* their protection. They knew more about The Family than maybe even Luke and Zach. Shoving us all in a car wouldn't make our problems go away, but working with The Legion might. It could solve our problem.

We all shared a look. Worry, fear, but there was hope swirling in there too. I hoped that maybe Thane was right and we were worried for nothing, but hope would not help me sleep at night.

Fifteen

AARON



Kilian hadn't claimed a room. Instead, he could be found in the small library on the first floor of the OBA frat house. Since the Halloween party, he'd been there every day that week. I would have to get used to prying eyes.

Kilian was extremely old. He never told me how old, but I guessed it had to be centuries older than William. He just acted differently than everyone else. Even though his body was perfectly primed and ready for anything, his motions were slow. His talk was slow, and even the way he read books in his study seemed slow. I didn't like the feeling I got around him. Like I would become as old and slow as he was someday. Guilt punched my gut at that thought, and I wondered if I

would even make it a fraction of the time he had on this Earth. With The Family still out there, the jury was still out.

Zach and I walked into the study—a warm room that looked way too modern to be housing someone like Kilian—but he was there sitting next to a pile of books in a leather armchair, whispering something to Luke. William loomed in the corner of the room giving us a nod as we entered.

Luke had started a few “sessions” with Kilian since the incident. He said he rarely talked during. It was more exposure therapy, where Kilian would help Luke work through hard memories. Still too early to tell if it helped. From my view, it had only made things worse, but Kim told me it would probably get worse before it got better. I wished she’d come, but it wasn’t a group event. Zach had only invited me. What fell under their umbrella of secrecy was now being offered to me. I took it as a good step forward.

The grandfather clock chimed. It was just after two in the morning, and I was getting used to the weird silence that lingered in the house after hours. Tonight was exposure therapy of a different kind. That’s all I was told. I think Zach liked being cryptic to piss me off, though. This had Luke’s idea written all over it.

We took a seat next to Luke on a long sofa nestled by an open fireplace. Last year it was never touched, but now the fire stayed lit and carried the smell around the house.

“I’m glad you guys are here. Let’s begin.”

One thing I liked about Kilian was he was swift and to the point. The man didn't mince words or waste time. It was a nice contrast to my brothers, especially Presley who could tell me a story for thirty minutes and still not arrive at the conclusion.

“What do we need to do?” Zach tapped his foot.

“Just being here for support is enough. We're going to start slow.” Kilian reached into a wooden box and pulled out a vial filled with black liquid. Both of them shifted their weight on the couch.

“Is that ...?” Luke's eyes were locked with the vial.

“Yes, it's Her blood. We saved a sample from Halloween night.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?” Zach said.

“For reasons just like this one. After seeing Luke's and *your* reaction to the blood, we thought it might be good to save it.”

Zach sat up straight. “I would have been fine. I was just caught off guard is all.”

William scoffed. “You didn't see your face.”

“Well, this will be good practice for you both.” Kilian placed his hands on the top of the vial, it had a rubber seal that made it airtight. “I'm going to open this. Luke, I need you to try to hold your breath and then take a very small inhale.”

My whole body was alert now, ready to hold Luke back if needed. *Is that why he asked me to be here?*

The bottle opened, and Luke shifted forward and then Zach pushed him back to the couch. Luke's entire body was rigid. He hadn't taken a breath, yet his body moved forward as if some invisible force pushed him out of his seat.

"Release him. Try to make him do this on his own," Kilian said.

"I don't fuckin' like this." Zach let go and clenched and unclenched his hands.

"Stay focused." Kilian kept the bottle grasped between his bony fingers.

Luke squeezed his hands so tight I imagined he could bend thick steel. He keeled over, pushing into the couch, and a crack of wood split the air, and his side of the couch caved in a few inches, pushing me and Zach closer.

He shook his head, and the black returned to his eyes. "I can't do it. I need it."

I didn't like the sound of desperation in Luke's voice. In my eyes, there was nothing my brother couldn't do, and yet this tiny bottle of blood threatened to overtake him.

That's when I realized why he wanted me to come.

"Come on, Luke. I know you can do it," I mumbled. "It's just a small thing. Nothing you can't handle."

A thing Mom used to say to all of us. There was no way he wouldn't remember. She said it for every cut and scrape. For every trivial disappointment and argument. This was much bigger than any of that, but it worked the same.

His eyes locked with mine, and the darkness in his eyes faded. Luke buried his head in his hands, and a low groan filled his throat. William was alert and staring a hole in the back of Luke's head.

"Take a breath. Prove to yourself She doesn't have power over you," Kilian said.

"Luke?" Zach's voice was desperate too. He unraveled watching Luke suffer his invisible battle.

Luke stopped moving, and I watched his back carefully. His posture stilled and his breathing moved his chest.

He lunged forward and was caught by Zach on his left and William on the right, but he didn't advance farther. He shrugged them off while still staring at the bottle.

"That's enough! Please. Enough," Zach said. It was rare to hear desperation in his voice.

Kilian closed the bottle, and the room quieted, besides the crackling of wood.

"You did well, Luke, you kept your composure. For the most part. It's a good start."

Luke nodded. His eyes settled on me, and he slumped into the couch. I gave him a reassuring thumbs-up, and his face twitched into a small smile for a second. I took it as a win.

"Zach? You good?" William hit him on the shoulder.

"Fine." Zach shared that same faraway glare Luke did for a moment before he shut his eyes and shook his head.

“Good, now fuckin’ sit down before ya fall over.”

To my surprise, he did and didn’t complain about it.

I never thought I’d see anyone who could deal with my older brothers, but William got the hang of it in his own way. And I might have been wrong, but it looked like he might care about them.

Zach flipped him off as he fell back into the couch, and William did the same.

Maybe not.

Kilian placed the vial back in the box and set it on his desk. It stood at the center of the room, capturing all our attention without making a noise. That lingering curse between us that bound us all together.

I was constantly looking over my shoulder, pretending I was ready for whatever was coming. Last year, I wanted to be Aaron Coleman. Just a normal college guy. I chatted up all my desk mates. We studied together. I’d even pretended to eat food in the cafeteria a few times with some guys from OBA.

Now, I couldn’t walk down the hall without checking over my shoulder. Everyone was a threat. I’d stopped trying to talk to my classmates. My brothers and I were the poison leaking into the campus grounds and infecting everything with the things that followed us.

That’s why Mrs. Henry was missing.

“What is The Family waiting for?” I asked.

I hadn't seen or heard anything suspicious. It was maddening. I couldn't do anything without wondering what lingered in the shadows.

All eyes were on me again.

"They have all the time in the world to wait."

"We're just going to let them keep taking people?"

"No one's doing that," Zach said.

"Patience. We will be ready for whatever comes."

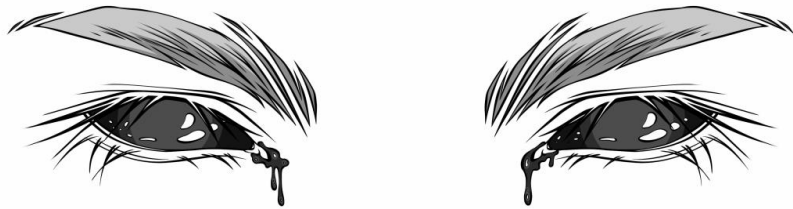
I could see why The Family had used Her blood as a weapon.

I didn't know exactly how I felt about any of it.

But I knew one thing—I didn't want to suffer the same fate as my brothers.

Sixteen

AARON



“**A**gain!” Zach yelled through clenched teeth. It echoed into the rafters of the old gym.

The Legion may not have been loaded, but they had a few tricks under their sleeves. And that included an old boxing gym that smelled of sweaty feet and mildew. From my limited knowledge from movies, it looked like it used to be an old butcher shop. The metallic smell of animal blood was embedded in the caulking in the tile. It reeked. And I hated the way it stayed on the bottom of my shoes. The dirty white walls were saturated with peeling paint and large water spots that signaled a severe leaking issue. I was surprised the fluorescent lights overhead were still working.

Zach and William had been sparring for hours, both in their spandex long sleeved shirts and fighting shorts. Their bare feet were black from the dust. I had come less prepared in my simple slouchy T-shirt and sweatpants I wore as my pajamas. The rink was dirty and bathed in dim blue lighting. I could hardly keep up with their movements. I had seen Zach spar with Luke many times, but this was way different. There wasn't an ounce of hesitation in Zach. He wasn't holding back, and with no humans around, he didn't need to be careful.

Zach's punch narrowly missed William, and with the lightest touch by William to his shoulder, Zach collapsed to the floor. He was at the disadvantage of William's psychic ability. In less than five seconds, Zach was on his feet again and bouncing from foot to foot.

"Again." Zach's iron eyes never left William.

"I can knock you on your ass all day long." William grinned, holding out his palm and motioning him forward for another round. He'd been looking for any opportunity to knock Zach down a peg.

Presley was next to me rubbing his eyes. "Ugh. I'd rather be at work."

I had to admit I would too. It was the end of the week, and Kimberly finished out her school day and then got stuck covering a shift at the theater. Friday was the day my classes ended early and I got to spend the rest of the day bugging Kimberly and trying to get her to skip her last class. She never did. That's why I loved the challenge.

Luke was still recovering from his encounter with the blood, but he seemed to be getting better. He'd skipped his classes all week, but Presley and I were expected to start our first training session. The Family would come for us, and we were deadweight. We needed to learn to fight. I didn't hate the idea. I'd be excited if Zach wasn't my teacher.

Zach was great at teaching martial arts. I wouldn't be surprised if he ever opened his own gym. I'd told him plenty of times it might be the only job in this world he'd actually enjoy. He taught some of his friends at our house back in high school, and even Ashley, his high school sweetheart, but he was horrible at being *my* teacher. He'd attempted to help me learn to ride a bike in kindergarten, and it left me with tears and a broken bike. We maintained the same power struggle when we played baseball as kids and he tried to teach me how to swing.

"Come on, guys, it will be fun!" Thane hit my shoulder and walked onto the gym mats as his long hair brushed past his shoulders. I was thankful for Thane's can-do attitude. Presley and I were notoriously lazy and needed someone to light the fire under us.

Presley followed first. "Alright. Teach me to be cool."

Thane chuckled and the fluorescents gleamed in his brown eyes. "Well, first you need to loosen up. You can control almost every muscle in your body with extreme precision."

Thane ran straight toward the wall and used his momentum to rise a few feet and do a backflip that knocked Presley to the

floor. He slid across the ground and tripped me in the process. It was parkour but faster.

He popped up, leaning over me with a smirk. “Cool, huh?”

I’d never put a lot of thought into moving my body in that way. I’d given up sports after freshman year of high school, and I’d been a couch potato ever since.

“Teach me. Teach me,” Presley said, rising to his feet before I could get a word in.

“Alright, try it. Use your body to the fullest extent and then push harder. Don’t let gravity move you. You move gravity,” Thane said. He’d trained people before. I wondered what kind of training was required to be a member of The Legion, if any.

Despite me still being confused, Presley understood his language. He was off, jumping from wall to wall and bouncing back to his feet. He ran full force up the wall—the ceiling was about twenty feet high—and did a backflip.

I finally realized how much we’d had to keep hidden. There was never a day we were able to go wild and feel every bit of our new bodies. Since we left home, we’d been in a constant state of hiding, concealing, and running. No wonder I’d never even considered it.

Of course Presley was a natural, and once his feet were on the ground, Thane went after him.

“Whatever you do, don’t let my hand touch you,” Thane warned.

They were a steady blur as they shot across the room, running past the rink and on top of shelves. The room had plenty of things to jump on: tables, chairs, old lockers. It didn't look like The Legion minded any mess here. Thane never went for the obvious course. He used his environment to give him an edge over Presley. When Thane would catch him, Presley would be knocked unconscious, fall to the floor, and awaken seconds later and start again.

“It's your turn.” Zach motioned to me while he wiped his chin, obviously still aggravated from his sparring with William. William ducked out of the ring with a smirk still painted on his face.

I moved into the ring without a word, wondering why Presley had gotten the much easier first assignment.

“Aren't you going to teach me to loosen up?” I held my hands in the air, awaiting the hell sure to follow.

Zach smirked. “I'm going to teach you to toughen, sure.”

I groaned and was on the ground. The scent of sweat overpowered my senses, and a layer of dust clouded around me.

“Lesson one, keep your hands up and your eyes open.”

I jumped up, swallowing the anger already moving up my throat.

“There. Now you're a little angry. Hit me.” Zach bounced on his feet, and his hands stayed covering his face, casually waiting. I was convinced Zach liked seeing me struggle.

“What do you mean?” Any attempt to punch Zach would land me on my ass again. Was he going to teach me anything or just use me as his punching bag?

I contemplated how to position my body. I thought back to my first childhood lesson from Luke about throwing a punch. Power comes from the back leg, use your whole body—

Zach pushed me to the ground again. “Fucking hit me!”

This time when I got back to my feet, I lunged forward, but Zach countered and pushed my face into the mat. “Now we’re getting somewhere. You gotta learn how to get angry and throw a hit.”

I flung him off and took a swing, Zach dodged me and kicked me to the ground. It didn’t hurt anything other than my sliver of pride being held on by a thread.

“See, you’re not teaching me. You’re just pissing me off.” As if I expected anything else from the brother who most easily got under my skin—and he always had. He was notoriously hard on me in a way he wasn’t with Presley. Presley always got the free pass if he didn’t understand something or didn’t want to learn, but not me. Zach would make me stay until I was red in the face and shaking from anger.

“You need to get pissed off,” he said, his eyes following me as I struggled to my feet once again.

“No, I don’t, I need to learn to fight.” I spoke through gritted teeth.

“That’s how you learn!”

“Not everyone is angry all the time,” I said. Anger had never helped me. Not one moment in my life was better because I got angry, especially when I changed into a vampire.

“Okay, Your Royal Highness, stop being such a baby and hit me,” Zach said, growing more bored by the second. He continued to circle me like an animal in the ring.

William and Dom were in the corner talking in barely a whisper. Dom had come from outside, probably wondering what took so long. I didn’t blame him. He’d often taken to shifts that involved being outside and staring out into the woods. I couldn’t imagine the torture of discipline. Maybe that’s why he hated us.

I caught them in a laugh directed at us. They loved watching us unravel. It fueled the anger overflowing. I wanted to sock my brother in the face, but more than that, I didn’t want to play into his game.

“No, this is why I don’t let you teach me anything. I’m not doing this.” I moved toward the edge of the ring, about to duck under the rope, when the door opened.

“I’ll teach him.” Luke appeared with a glowing smile despite the dark circles around his eyes. His hair was more unkempt, but he came dressed and ready. He stalked over to join me in the ring.

His smile enveloped me. I knew then he came for me. He knew I needed him.

The worry was back in Zach's eyes, and he clenched his jaw as he spoke. "You're supposed to be resting."

Luke shrugged him off and cracked his knuckles. "And miss the family fun? Not happening."

Zach's previous anger melted, and he left me and Luke in the ring, but not before he bumped my shoulder on the way out. *Asshole.*

Luke smiled. "Everyone fights for different reasons. You have to figure out what fuels you ... for me ... I've had someone to protect since birth. When you have people that depend on you, it changes things. It fuels you. There's no such thing as giving up and throwing in the towel. People like you and me can't afford to lose."

We can't afford to lose.

I nodded and let his words wash over me. I had a lot of people I wanted to protect. I was sure I'd never be as strong as Zach and Luke, but I wanted to be even an ounce of how strong they were.

"Okay, let's do it." A new fire had started under my feet.

Luke laughed. "That's the fighting spirit!"

His words pulled me into a memory. Luke's laughter carried through our tiny house. I was around eight when he suggested we wrestle in the house while Mom was at work. Though he was the most responsible of us now, when we were younger, he had his moments. We'd loved spending the evenings

watching wrestling on the TV, and sometimes we'd makeshift our own wrestling pad with couch cushions and blankets.

We'd spent the entire day trying to copy our favorite wrestlers, but one flip over Zach's shoulder had me careening into the coffee table and onto the hardwood floor. The impact left unexpected tears in my eyes.

"I don't want to play anymore," I said, rubbing the ache in my shoulder.

"Don't be a baby. Come on." Zach held out his hand to me.

"I'm not a baby." I remember his word choice hurting more than my shoulder.

"If you're going to cry about it, then you can't wrestle with us anymore. Come on, Pres."

Presley jumped on a cushion—his blond curls were much brighter back then. "Ding. Ding. Ding!"

And they ran at each other.

I remembered the feeling of lead in my stomach when I slammed the door to my room. I thought of all the ways I could get back at Zach later that evening, then Luke came in and sat on the edge of the bed.

"He's lying, you know. You can still wrestle with us." He nudged me, and I didn't respond. "Is your shoulder okay?"

"It's fine." I groaned, inspecting the floor in my very dirty room.

My grumpiness didn't make him falter. "Come on. What do I have to do to get you back in there with us?"

There was a brief silence before I answered, "Why is he so hard on me?"

Luke moved the long pieces of his hair from his face. His hair was always wild back then, never styled. "Because ... you're an older brother like us. He wants you to be tough."

I was soft. I knew it. Softer than Zach and Luke, at least.

"I'll never be like you guys."

Luke fell back on the bed with a wide smile, looking as carefree as ever. "Sure you will. You're already tough."

"You think so?" I asked, even though I knew Luke never lied.

"Yes, now come on!" He'd hopped off the bed and dragged me back to the living room.

We used to have fun together. It was a side of him I wondered if I'd ever see again. A form of him that didn't exist anymore. But the memory was still there as vivid as before. It lived on in his smile and laughter. I wasn't sure if he even remembered what it was like before The Family, and I was confident he could never go back after what happened to Sarah.

An unthinkable tragedy, yet he carried it far better than I ever could. How he ever smiled again, I'd never know.

Sparring with Luke was easy. He taught me where to focus my attention and everything I needed to be aware of. We then shifted to proper form and how to land a punch. I needed the recap. Hours passed as we danced around the ring, and even though I was nowhere near Luke's level, I felt stronger. I felt ... tough.

The sun would set soon. I didn't run out of breath, and my body didn't hurt. There was no reason to take a break. I could have kept going, but I wanted to check my phone. Kimberly was probably on her way back to the frat house by now.

Me: How was work??

Kimberly: Way too busy and feel like I'm sweating the popcorn butter. I'm gonna get in the shower right when I get home, will you guys be long?

Me: No, I think we're wrapping up. Skylar with you?

Kimberly: Of course. Don't worry.

I couldn't wait to get home and tell her all about my time with Luke. There was something about going home to her that made me giddy. I had to remind myself constantly it was only temporary and for safety purposes.

"Let's go again." Zach ducked back under the ropes and into the ring.

"No, I'm tired from kickin' your ass all day." William leaned against the wall, picking at his fingernails.

Zach scoffed. "Oh yeah? What if I make it interesting? We fight the way I was taught to fight. No mind control."

William sighed and pushed off the wall. “This should be good.”

“Zach,” Luke cautioned him. He had a darkness in his eyes I hadn’t seen before. He was more tired than he’d led on.

“He can handle it. Right, Will?” Zach said.

“What exactly do I need to handle?” William joined him in the ring, rolling his shoulders.

Zach smirked and brought his lips to his wrist and bit down. Black blood gushed to the floor, and he spit blood on the ground. Despite it contrasting with the white floor, the dirt helped it blend in.

Presley and Thane stood by Luke and me, and even Dom looked intrigued.

“Uh-oh. Looks violent.” Presley’s eyes lit up, waiting for the carnage.

Luke’s jaw was set and serious as he watched Zach and William pace around the ring.

“We’ll see how strong you are without that power,” Zach said.

William smirked, accepting the challenge by biting his own wrist. Minutes passed and their blood littered the floor. Blood loss was how they were taught to fight? How would that help anything?

Black voids of ink leaked into the torn padding in the ring. I remembered my own experience with losing blood. I was

instantly weaker and then I lost control of my limbs. I was slow. Everything hurt. It was like being human again.

Zach didn't look fazed; he was calm, exhilarated even. He circled William as they waited for their blood levels to lower.

“This is how we were taught to fight. Fight when you're at your weakest. This is where it really comes down to how well you can fight. Life or death. It makes you fight your hardest.”

It sounded sadistic, but I was intrigued. Zach hopped on the balls of his feet while bringing his hands up to cover his face, and in one breath, he was still—completely focused and ready for a fight. I shouldn't have been surprised. The more I learned about The Family, the more real my terror became. Of course they would battle in blood.

Zach and William lunged forward at the same time, only Zach was faster. Much faster. He dodged William's advance, moving away from his outreached hand and directing him into the ground. Black blood smeared beneath him, and he wasted no time pulling himself up. This time, he wasn't smiling.

William advanced again, but Zach was a millisecond ahead and bent his arm behind his back and kicked him in the leg. It was just enough time for him to lock William in a chokehold and bite his neck.

My chest tightened, and I looked to Thane beside me. He, too, was unusually serious. William grabbed Zach's arm and flung him over his shoulder, but Zach had more strength in his limbs. He planted his feet and threw William on the ground.

“Come on. Fight harder.” Zach kicked him in the back, but William was up again sparring, blow for blow. William fought harder, but it wasn’t enough. Zach was calm despite the blood loss. William’s movements were sloppy.

Zach grabbed William’s arms and bent them behind his back before taking another bite of his neck. “Submit.”

More blood littered the floor around them and soaked their clothes. William said nothing but strained to get up off the ground. Zach kept a firm hold of his arms. I wasn’t sure if it was possible to break our bones, but ripping limbs off was definitely on the table, and Zach looked like he was trying to tear off William’s.

“Submit!” Zach said with a crazed look in his eye.

“Will, come on!” Thane said, his voice unnaturally strained.

“Stop,” William said through gritted teeth.

William screamed in pain, and Zach let go and pushed him to the floor. “You may have more than a hundred years on me, but I can still kill you.”

It was a threat. Leaving a stale dark aura lingering in the air. I wanted to be mad at Zach, but I couldn’t deny this was something he’d been taught to do. It was bred into his very being. I wasn’t mad at him. I was mad at The Family for making him hard. How old was he when they started teaching him to fight? And once they were made into vampires, how often did they train? From the looks of it, my guess was every day. Everyday training to kill your opponent and bring them

within an inch of their lives. Maybe those fights weren't as tame ... maybe not submitting meant losing one of your precious limbs. I gulped.

Zach's eyes met Luke's, and his body softened. Sparing a moment for their twin telepathy, he seemed to come back to his senses. Luke had to have known this would happen. That's why he cautioned Zach. They were trained to kill. Even Luke. Looking at William sitting in a puddle of his own blood, I wondered if he, too, had been through the same training. My answer came when I saw his expression. His eyes were full of pain.

William dug his fingers into his palm, clenching them into a fist, and black blood oozed from his wounds. He used his elbows to hoist himself up. Zach offered his hand, but William waved him off. William wasn't my favorite person, but I got the sickest feeling in my stomach watching him.

The Legion underestimated them. It was written in the blood on the floor. Something told me bloody fights were not something The Legion normally witnessed. How long had it been since they battled anyone or anything?

When he finally made it to his feet, his dark eyes settled on Zach. "Well, it looks like we've both got something to learn from each other."

Zach smiled. Loving that answer.

Seventeen

KIMBERLY



It was late when I rested my head on my hand and the sleepiness settled into my body. At least I tried to study. My classes that semester weren't challenging, but focusing was nearly impossible. I looked over at the vanity mirror on the corner of my desk I used for makeup. A permanent stress line had formed at the corner of my brow, and I sighed. My desk in my dorm had been meticulous, but every day since I'd been in the frat house was chaotic. Only a week and half here

and I'd rarely gotten a moment alone. If it wasn't Presley coming in my room every second to tell me stories about his day, it was other things like keeping Zach from killing William because he wouldn't let him turn down the thermostat. I couldn't blame him. There was a weird smell when the heater was on.

I put my book away and hopped into bed. The frat house was oddly quiet for a Friday. As I laid my head on the pillow and my eyes grew heavy, my heart leaped into my throat when a knock sounded on my bedroom window.

Aaron stood on the balcony with a grin spread across his face and a bouquet of peonies in his hand.

I opened the window, and he thrust the fluffy bouquet in my hands, and the sweet scent filled the room in a flash. I quickly went to work throwing out the old withered bouquet on my desk and replacing it with the new. Peonies were no longer in season, and it wasn't as easy as getting them in the school garden anymore.

"Where did you get these?"

"Doesn't matter. And no, before you ask, I didn't steal them."

"Aaron, peonies are expensive."

He shrugged. "What's a couple extra dollars? You deserve nice things."

I knew exactly what he could use that money on. Including their collective family pot. Presley called it "The Calem Cash

Stash.” It was a secret they kept from The Legion for emergencies. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d already mentioned it to Thane.

I buried my face in the velvet petals and took in the smell. They were lovely. He was lovely.

“And what are you doing outside my window?” I couldn’t hide the giddiness I felt despite the late hour. “You could have used the door, you know?”

“Coulda,” Aaron said right before he shot in front of me, getting close enough for our chests to touch. He leaned down to whisper, “But then I couldn’t come and steal you away.”

I wiggled my eyebrows while keeping my voice low. “You have that look on your face like you’re about to say something that’s going to get me in trouble.”

“No. Never. I just want to take you somewhere ... alone.”

“You want to sneak out?”

He nodded as his gaze panned to my lips. Which made my whole body heat up. We hadn’t had a real moment alone since before the Halloween party, and something in me was craving the adventure in his eyes, but it was too risky.

“Have we not learned from our past mistakes? We shouldn’t be sneaking around alone. Especially now that The Family knows where you live.”

Aaron tilted his head. “True. But what if I told you I had learned from my past mistakes, and I already got ... sort of permission? I told Thane where I’d be during a certain

timeframe, and he agreed not to tell the others. Except Skylar. I had to tell her. I don't think I'd be able to sneak you out of here without a specialized SWAT team with her around."

"That's still sneaking."

"Yes, but they'll be close by. Plus, the place we're going is right on campus. Not far at all."

I crossed my arms, contemplating why I'd considered another reckless decision. Aaron was still close. His smile pulled me in. He knew I'd inevitably say yes.

"I know how stressed you are. I'm feeling it too ... Come away with me. Let's be reckless just one more time."

I doubted it would be the last, but I dropped my hands.

"Okay, let's go."

"Yes!" Aaron exclaimed, still whispering. He walked to the window and held out his hand to help me out.

"Wait, I have to change first," I said.

He eyed my pajama shorts and T-shirt. "No, I think that will work. You don't even really need shoes. I'll carry you."

I ignored him, putting on my fuzzy cat slippers and slinging a jacket over my shoulders before I followed him.

We stepped out onto the balcony together. The sky burned with too many stars to count. One of my favorite things about Blackheart was how secluded it was. The night sky was always filled, though the lights of the campus dulled them more than anywhere else in town. There was a chill in the

autumn air. As we moved into November, I couldn't ignore the cold wind blowing on the mountain. That was typically when we'd get our first snow, but I guessed it would come late with the drought.

Aaron crouched down, signaling for me to jump on his back. I obliged, snuggling into his warmth and taking the backpack he'd brought and placing it over my shoulders.

On my next inhale, we were off. Being on Aaron's back when he ran felt like teleporting. It was too fast for my eyes to see and made me dizzy. My hands tightened around Aaron's neck and, in less than a minute, we were there, staring at the gym in the moonlight.

"You want to hang out in the gym?" I grumbled as my slippers hit the grass, and my teeth chattered due to my lack of pants.

"You'll see." Aaron grabbed my hand and guided me to a small window on the side of the building. It had privacy glass, which made it impossible to see what was inside. He bent down in front of it and pulled on the bottom of the window.

I grabbed his arm. "Are we breaking and entering right now? What if it has an alarm ... or cameras?"

"No cameras on this side of the building. I already scoped it out. And there's no alarm ... I think."

"You think?" I said, my stomach turning. I wasn't looking to add vandal to my college transcript, but I trusted Aaron. He

knew how important school was to me, and he'd never do anything to jeopardize it.

The window opened, and Aaron dropped inside first. I looked down into the dimly lit room.

"I'll catch you. Jump." Aaron's voice echoed.

My chest heaved at the height, but I leaped anyway. Aaron caught me, squeezing me to his chest and erasing all the tension I held.

His master plan came into view as I stared at the dimly lit pool. A cool wash of blue against the warmer tiled walls. I hadn't been here since our encounter with William earlier in the year. Steam lifted from the cold into the air, and the smell of chlorine hit me like a freight train.

"We have a pool," I teased.

"Yeah, but this is secluded." Aaron stood over me—close enough to smell his mint shampoo. In the blink of an eye, he ran around the pool. "No cameras here either."

He stared at me with that big goofy grin I loved and peeled off his shirt. "You don't have to swim if you don't want to. But I'm in need of a cooldown."

He said it casually while unbuttoning his pants, and they fell to the floor, leaving him in nothing but his donut boxers. I couldn't help admiring him for a second. Aaron trained with The Legion every night that he wasn't working. He'd been gone all night, and I saw evidence of his hard work in the veins in his forearms and added width from the swollen

muscles in his shoulders and chest. I swallowed, and my whole face got hot.

“Admiring the view, Burns?”

I bit the inside of my lip, contemplating. It was absurd to be sneaking away and swimming at a time like this. But if I let go of that little snippet of logic for a few hours, what would it really hurt?

“I did bring you some extra clothes if you wanted to—”

I pulled off my top. If I was going to be reckless, I wasn't going to chicken out halfway. If we were breaking and entering into the school pool, I would go all the way.

“W-what are you doing?” Aaron's mouth hung agape.

“Going swimming,” I said matter-of-factly, fighting the warmth in my ears at Aaron's gaze.

“Right.” Aaron coughed as I pulled off my pajama pants and revealed my matching pink underwear.

I didn't need to hear his heartbeat to know it was beating as fast as mine. He was the nervous one now, and I liked that. I flung my clothes to the end of the pool, and Aaron's eyes sparkled from the glowing pool lights.

“What's wrong? Never seen a girl in her underwear before?”

He opened his mouth to speak but stopped. I never thought I'd see Aaron Calem speechless. I placed both hands on his chest, and as the anticipation caught in his breath, I pushed

him into the water. I dove headfirst toward the deep end. The water washed away every bit of doubt and fear I had and awoke my tired body. When I emerged at the top, Aaron was there with that smile I loved.

He splashed me. “You think you’re so funny, huh?”

I moved my hands through my hair, feeling as light as a feather, and I glided through the water. “Don’t act like you weren’t going to push me in first, given the chance.”

His eyes narrowed, and he disappeared under the water. There was no way it was fair; he didn’t need to come up for breath. His shadow came closer, and I shrieked when he grabbed my legs and lifted me up out of the water. Our laughter echoed to the ceiling and lingered in the air.

“Isn’t it great? We can be as loud as we want.” Aaron winked at me through wet lashes. He’d released me, but I still felt him on my skin. Every place his hands had been.

The chill of the night air was long gone in the heated pool. The condensation built on the foggy windows.

“Meet me at the bottom of the pool,” Aaron said before his head disappeared beneath the water.

I followed him farther and farther down, opening my eyes to the slight sting of chlorine before they adjusted to the pool lights, then I let out a steady stream of air to sink to the bottom.

Aaron held up his finger, prompting me to wait. Then he opened his mouth and let out a yell that got crushed under the

pressure of the water. A genius idea.

He rolled his hands forward to signal my turn.

I squared my shoulders and thought of everything I'd been holding in, and I screamed it into the water. The string of bubbles took the last of my oxygen to the surface and my worries along with it. When we surfaced, peace lingered in the air. We'd finally found a place for just us. Ours. No Legion. No vampire cult. And even though I loved them dearly, none of Aaron's brothers.

Aaron peeked up at me from under the water, and we moved closer together. He had his arms on my elbows, helping to keep me afloat. I was an okay swimmer, and I didn't need the help, but I was drawn to every touch of his skin on mine.

The sounds of my breathing and dripping of water from my hair was the only noise. That invisible tether tightened that connected Aaron and me, and I pulled my arms around his neck at the same time his arms wrapped around my waist.

"Do you wanna do something else a little reckless?" He leaned in close to my lips, and I closed my eyes, enjoying the rising heat as his lips almost touched mine. "I'll warn you, it's probably a bad idea ... and you should definitely say no."

I smiled and nodded, taking that challenge.

"Can I kiss you?"

His warm-brown eyes took me in again. Only, this time, he was perfectly and blissfully happy, and so was I. I'd never dreamed someone would look at me the way Aaron was.

“Yes.”

My head spun when his lips met mine. Every kiss from him left me lightheaded as we fell into the water. I didn't care about sinking. Our kisses didn't stop until Aaron pulled me up for air. I held onto his shoulders and let him drag me to the shallow end. This time when he pulled me in for a kiss, it was slower. He gingerly pulled the pieces of wet hair from my face and lifted my chin to meet his.

I wasn't used to the care in which he held me. I'd never felt something so strong yet so fragile. His hands were sure as they moved over my face and tangled in my hair. Now I was scared. Held captive by one internally optimistic man that kissed me like everything in the world would turn out okay. I was enamored by that light, and with every kiss, I believed it too.

Friends don't kiss, I reminded myself yet again. If they did, it wasn't like this. With tongue and heat, and a longing blistering and threatening to overtake me. Aaron moved to my cheek, kissing across my jawline. I was only briefly aware of my abnormal breathing when he kissed down my neck and to my shoulder. My bra strap had fallen. Any other day, I'd be irritated by it, but not today.

He pulled me tighter to his body and kissed my collarbone, slowly making his way lower. My brain was off, and I liked it that way. I leaned back and threaded my hands in his hair, inviting him closer—ready to open myself up to him further.

He must have gained back the sense I'd given up because he stopped. His lips found mine again and he kissed me one more time.

“For the record, this isn't why I brought you here.” He held my face tenderly as water dripped from his hair, and I drank in the sight of him. Pure radiant sunlight.

“Oh, it was definitely your master plan to get me here in my underwear.”

“No, I brought you extra clothes! You're the one who wanted to strip.”

I smiled to relieve him of the guilt gathering in the lines of his forehead. “Don't worry. Let the record show I made my own choices with no coercion.”

He laughed. “I wanted to take you away from everything for a night. It was truly supposed to be a friend thing, but I ... I needed to see something.”

“You wanted to see if the kiss in your room was a fluke?”

I knew the answer because I'd asked myself the same thing every night since as I lay in bed and remembered the feeling of his lips on mine. He'd kissed me like he meant it, but he pulled away—like he had before.

“I needed to see if this is ... real or if I've just made it up in my head. I probably shouldn't have asked you to kiss me, though.”

“Since when do we ever do what we're supposed to be doing?”

He smiled and kissed me again. Long and slow, and my head was up in the clouds again. I savored every taste of him.

One thought lingered on the tip of my tongue. “I was worried you might ... not like me like that at all, and you never wanted to kiss me. That maybe I embarrassed myself over and over again by wanting to kiss you.”

I never thought I’d tell him that. Not in a building where our breaths echoed.

A line settled between his brows. I hated it. He pulled me closer and kissed me again. This time deeper than before. He was everywhere at once, and he felt like mine. When he pulled away, his lips stayed grazing mine, and our chests were pressed together. I placed a hand there to steady myself. His heartbeat was smooth and steady underneath my palm.

“Does that answer your question?”

“Definitely,” I said, still breathless.

“I can’t kiss you like this and just be friends,” he said before kissing me again and pulling away a few seconds later. “And you’re my best friend. That’s why I’ve been trying to actively avoid it. Or stop it. I can’t lose you.”

His best friend. He couldn’t lose me ...

I tried to process the words, but I was still reeling from his kiss. From the moment we’d met, I’d felt drawn to him. Something unexplainable. Unavoidable. Inevitable.

“Maybe we don’t have to be just friends tonight ... just for a night.”

What was I saying? The words tumbled out. I just didn't want it to end. For one night, I wanted Aaron to be mine, and I could be his.

He smiled from ear to ear and playfully kissed my neck again and again, making me giggle.

“You have the best ideas.”

“I know,” I chimed.

It was a bad idea. I knew that. But I cared less and less about bad decisions and more about what I wanted to do. And oh, how I'd wanted this. I didn't think I'd even realized how much I did until his lips were on mine again.

He released me and took my face in his hands. “Then tonight I can finally tell you how beautiful you are. So unbelievably beautiful.”

“Tell me more.” My cheeks were hurting from smiling.

He moved his hands to my waist, but they were lower than ever before, placed just under my hips. “Should I tell you ... how long I've wanted to do this?”

His fingers were cool against the heat of my skin when he brushed my hair to the side and kissed my shoulder. “Or maybe ... I could tell you you're the bravest person I know ...”

He spoke in a whisper along my skin between each soft touch of his lips. “Or how incredibly brilliant you are.”

I felt drunk again. Wobbly and free. Only, the poison was Aaron Calem shirtless and wet with his puppy dog eyes.

His kisses didn't stop till he was at my neck again. "You're funny ... compassionate ... warm."

Every word that poured from his lips felt like honey sticking to my skin. Aaron was flirting with me. Like, *really* flirting with me. I'd asked for it, but I wasn't ready. Where did this man come from?

"You're ... quite the ... gentleman." I could barely talk.

"This isn't the half of it. I could make you so happy, Burns." He exhaled on my neck and brought his lips to my ear. "I'll be so good to you."

I giggled as goose bumps raised on my arms, and then splashed him with water. "You've been holding back on me."

I wasn't sure what surprised me more. That Aaron Calem was a huge flirt or that it was overcoming me in a matter of minutes. My uneven breathing made me lightheaded and, compounded with the steam rising from the pool, I had to pull away before my resolve melted completely.

"Of course I have. You don't know how hard it is not to flirt with you."

"But you do flirt with me."

"Yeah, but you've basically given me free rein now. And I'm pulling out all the stops."

Aaron was solid. A lifeboat in my sea of uncertainty. He was sure. I'd never been able to turn my brain off and let someone else take the reins, but here I wanted to. And I knew if I did, I'd be just fine. Mind, body, and soul; Aaron wouldn't let me drown.

We'd floated over to the side of the pool, and my back rested against the ladder.

"Are you okay?" His wet hair fell in his eyes.

I smiled and licked my lips. "I don't think I've ever been happier."

That made his eyes light up again, and he grabbed my hips and placed me on one of the steps. With both hands on the ladder rails, he stepped between my legs, and my heart fluttered. I cursed myself for how easily I fell at his mercy and radiant smile.

"You're really good at this. You must have seduced a lot of girls."

"No, just you. Always you."



"I can't keep kissing you, Burns. I feel like I'm going to murder a small village if I keep going."

He laid his hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling, and I joined him, lying beside him and scooting a little closer for warmth. There was peaceful silence between us as we

worked through what lingered in the air. I found Aaron's hand and grasped it.

After another half hour of playing around, swimming, and kissing—lots of kissing, we wrapped ourselves in two big fluffy towels from the locker room. Aaron brought some from home to lay on the heated tiles, but the ones the swim team used were way better.

Without the blanket of the water settling all our worries, they started to pop up again.

“I have to go hunting with Zach tonight.” Aaron wrinkled his nose. His eyes were faraway.

“Is that why you ran away with me instead?”

He turned back to me, perking up. “It might have been one reason.”

His gaze returned to my lips, and the heat returned to my face. Despite being as vulnerable as I'd ever been with someone—almost naked and wrapped in a towel—I'd never felt so exhilarated. Like nothing could touch us in the cover of the night.

“What's it like ...? With that Thing in your head.”

His thumb caressed the back of my hand, and a minute passed before he spoke. “It feels like someone in my head that's constantly bugging me. Telling me how much easier things would be if I just gave into it. It's been better but when I kiss you, it gets loud. I feel ... crazed. Like I can't tell what's me and what's It.”

I turned to face him and he turned too. He was a sight to behold with the blue pool lights glowing in his brown eyes.

He continued. "It's like It knows how important you are to me."

This time Aaron didn't smile, the line in his forehead signaled something much larger on his mind.

The burden of his inner demons was always there. He'd struggled for the better half of the summer, and only now did it seem like he had a good routine with hunting. He was touchy on the subject, though.

If I chose to be a vampire, I'd also have the same thing in my head taunting me. Could I handle it? That same thing had threatened Aaron's very being. I almost lost him, and now it was a constant battle. His smile was a miracle after what he'd endured. Something came to mind that I was almost too afraid to speak.

I pushed past my hesitation despite the tightening in my chest. "Can I ask you something? It's something I've been wondering about for a long time, but I wanted to wait till the right moment to ask you."

"Okay ..."

"I know I wasn't the first ... the first person you bit. What happened your first time?"

I never asked Aaron about hunting. He always brushed over it in conversation, preferring to talk about anything and all

else, but as we drew together, I wanted him to know I could be his safe place too. He didn't need to be afraid.

He moved to turn away from me, and I stopped him with a reassuring squeeze of his hand.

“The first time was somewhere in Wyoming on our road trip here. But it wasn't like the fun kind of road trips ... I wouldn't talk to any of them. I was so angry. My older brothers took me and Presley to this small town, and we parked next to a pub. I just remember how cold it was ...”

He chewed his lip, and I nodded for him to continue. Worry built in his eyes. “I don't want you to think differently of me.”

“I know you ... it's okay.”

He nodded. “We waited in an alley by the pub. It was snowing. Presley went first. He made it look easy. When it was my turn, I didn't even think. I just grabbed this guy and bit him. He was drunk, of course, but I lost it completely when I tasted blood for the first time. I don't know how long I drank, but I remember all three of them hauling me off him. Before I could say anything, they dragged me away. Someone was coming down the alleyway, and we couldn't be caught. I didn't check for his heartbeat. I still remember his face ... I don't know if he survived.”

I rubbed the back of his hand. I couldn't imagine that cold dark place in comparison to where we lay now.

“I ran away that night and went to the only place that was open ... a church. Catholic, I think. I would have confessed to

anyone within arm's distance but it was just me in there. My brothers found me. They always do." He half smiled, but he still refused to look at me.

I placed my hand on his face, and his shoulders settled. "I'm sorry."

"That's why I don't want you to rush into anything. Don't let my brothers pressure you. I know what turning really means. It's hard. It's really hard."

Aaron's cautionary tale made my stomach turn. He was right. Turning meant much more than giving up my old age. It meant agreeing to harbor something dark inside me. Something that was hungry for blood.

But that was the price of having this night last forever.

We sat up, our hands still intertwined. It was effortless. So normal.

Aaron's chocolate eyes twinkled in the pool lighting. "And it makes this harder ... because I don't want to sway your decision. I want you to get a choice. One I didn't have."

He was right. I knew he was right.

A creaking of the window broke our conversation.

"Shit," Aaron said as he stood to gather our things. William stepped through the double doors, catching us off guard.

Aaron wrapped his towel around me to further shield me while fumbling for the extra clothes in his bag.

“Oh, God.” William averted his gaze while Aaron helped me to dress.

“It’s not what it looks like.” Aaron chuckled as he pulled his T-shirt over me, and I couldn’t help but laugh with him.

“Enlighten me.” William lifted his brow in amusement.

“Swimming.”

Aaron’s radiant smile was back, and I bit my lip, trying to fight the laughter that kept coming.

Thane plopped through the window. His boots echoed through the room. “Sorry, Aaron. I tried.”

“I can’t believe you’re making me come back to this place,” William grumbled. “Isn’t it bad enough I had to join the swim team last year to keep tabs on you?”

“Guy hates water in his ears,” Thane joked, but his smile faded when William didn’t laugh.

“You’re still being reckless, I see.” William spoke to Aaron this time.

“It was just a little fun. You should try it some time,” I said.

As soon as the words left my mouth, I wondered what came over me, but we deserved a moment alone, and Aaron shouldn’t take all the blame.

William’s eyes darkened. “They’re rubbing off on you, Kim. I liked you better when you were quiet.”

I rolled my eyes. “And I liked you better before you tried to kill us.”

He cracked a smile before moving farther into the room. He surveyed the whole building with disdain.

I'd given up on William and me having a friendly relationship. He seemed to hate me the most out of everyone. Even Zach. At least he talked to Zach and looked like he'd jump in front of a bus for him. He was indifferent toward me.

Aaron grabbed my hand, and his gaze darted to the door. I knew a plan brewing when I saw one. I squeezed his hand as an acceptance to his invitation.

"She's got a point. At least you used to be dark and mysterious. You've lost your element of surprise. Without being menacing, you're just a dick."

"Well, maybe if I didn't have to babysit a bunch of children who do nothing but cause trouble, I'd be a little nicer." He leaned up against the wall, pulling out his lighter and cigarettes.

"Don't worry, we'll get out of your hair. Meet you back at the house."

And we were off. Aaron threw me on his back, and we zipped through the gym lobby the way William had come. A few dizzying seconds later, we were on the steps of the frat house. Both of us grinning ear to ear.

"That was worth it." Aaron laughed.

That night was exactly what I didn't know I needed.

Within seconds, William and Thane were next to us. William grumbled and shoved us through the front door.

“Made me waste a cigarette.”

Skylar also appeared. She must have been waiting outside.
“Glad you’re all right ... both of you.”

She inspected us before nodding and retreating into the house. I thought I detected a little smile on the way in, but I could be wrong.

“Luke! Deal with your brother,” William yelled in the foyer and left toward the kitchen. Thane followed but not before giving us an apologetic look.

Luke strolled down the stairs, and Aaron and I waited. Dark circles stood out on his normal radiant face. He took us in at once. Wet hair, damp clothes, and guilty expressions on both of our faces.

Luke crossed his arms and stepped to tower over Aaron.
“Did you have fun?”

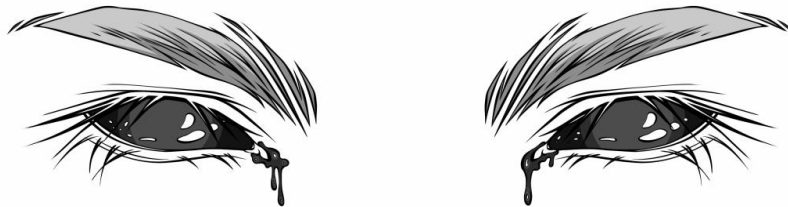
Aaron nodded and his smile beamed.

Luke grinned and nodded toward the stairs. He winked at me and shook his head. It was nice to see him smile again.

Aaron and I held each other’s hands up the stairs until we had to part in the hallway. Neither of us wanted to let go but knew we had to.

Eighteen

AARON



I should have kissed her one more time in the hallway. I didn't think I'd ever been so happy. Ever. This night was one of those nights you'd remember for the rest of your life, and since I was immortal, that meant forever. Well, if I lived that long. I replayed it over and over. Everything I'd wanted. I checked the time and sighed. It was past midnight. Our night as more than friends was over. I wanted just one more kiss.

"You look happy," Zach said as we walked through the night.

I was over the moon. Actually, in orbit in outer space, and didn't know if I'd ever come down from the high.

I shrugged. Happy to keep it all to myself.

Hunting at night was scarier when I thought someone might pop up out of the trees like a scary sheet ghost and try to recruit me into a cult. But Zach had the collar of his jacket up and was smoking a cigarette, like he'd challenge anyone and anything that got within a few yards of him. He hadn't said many words. He just chain-smoked on our way down the mountain. It was still very much a group endeavor, but our group followed us in a car down the road. Which now consisted of Felix and two others, in addition to Thane and William. It looked like we were about to be abducted, so maybe that would make our actual pursuers stay away.

This time we'd picked one of the trails in a park. It was normal for people to go up and get drunk at all hours of the night. I snuck another glance at Zach.

When I didn't answer, he spoke again. "Luke told me that you got caught with Kimberly at the pool today."

My focus shifted. "It's not what it sounds like. We were just swimming."

The smoke fell into the air as he laughed. "We have a pool."

I sighed. The last thing I wanted to talk to Zach about was Kimberly. He wasn't good at talking about girls. At least with me. He was bad at empathy. He used to make fun of me for picking out the perfect Valentine's Day card for my crushes at school. Imagine my surprise when I found out he wrote Ashley poems in high school.

I decided changing the subject was better. “How was Luke today?”

“He’s getting better. I think work helps.”

Luke was a ticket taker at the theater and got to stand all day greeting people and scanning their movie tickets. I think it got his mind off things. He preferred busy shifts with lots of people, and he’d traded all his night shifts with Zach because he couldn’t sit still. Luckily, he wasn’t taking many classes. Technically he was a part-time student. Zach too. When Presley asked if he could be a part-time student, Zach threw a popcorn bucket at his head—we were all on a late shift.

“It’s my responsibility to worry about Luke. Not yours.” He watched me closely. “He’ll be okay.”

I should have protested, but I was thankful. Luke was my constant. I probably relied on him way too much, but something deep in me quaked when Luke wasn’t well, like I, too, might break if Luke ever did. I shivered at the thought. I had too much to worry about already.

We walked along, and I could smell a campfire ahead despite everywhere near us being on a burn ban. Something about the fall air was quiet. Zach and I weren’t often alone, and now that we were, I remembered I’d wanted to ask him about the Halloween party. Only, I was sure I was going to chicken out.

“What?” He took a long drag of his cigarette, somehow detecting my gaze in his peripheral vision.

“Can’t a brother just hang out with his older brother?”

“You want to ask me something. Tell me what it is.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you struggled with drinking blood at first?” I chose a slightly easier question first.

“Honest?”

“Yeah, be honest.”

“I just ... didn’t know what I was doing. I was so focused on keeping you fuckers alive I just did anything I could to make that happen. Being a good brother and making sure you guys liked me and felt happy about the whole thing was the last thing on my mind.”

“It was your idea ... to change us?”

He huffed. “Yeah. That was my golden-ticket idea. There just wasn’t a better way. At least immortal, we could hide you. No need for food. Water. Now you know who you can blame for the worst parts of your life.”

He said it with a smile, like he’d already accepted that fate.

Only it wasn’t. Maybe most parts, but not all.

“There is one other thing ...”

I tried to summon the courage, knowing I was about to get my head bit off. “Did the queen ... do ... something to you?”

Zach didn’t answer right away, then his brow furrowed. “Why are you asking me that?”

“Because I overheard something I wasn’t supposed to at the Halloween party, and I was too scared to ask you at the time. I

guess it's none of my business, but I'm trying to put the pieces together and get a clear picture of who She is."

Zach nodded, looking out into the night and taking another drag of his cigarette. "She's an evil lying bitch."

"I've gathered that." I waited, wondering if that was the end of our conversation or if he would tell me more. Personally, I was shocked I'd gotten that far. "I need to know what we're up against here. Tell me something."

"Remember that story I told you about the queen picking Luke to be Her donor over and over again?"

I nodded and forced my mouth shut. I didn't want to ruin a once in a lifetime chance to get Zach to open up by asking something that would set him off.

"Well, when I volunteered in Luke's place and told Her what I thought about it, She showed me exactly who was in charge."

I frowned, wondering what he meant.

"I woke up with no clothes and these bite marks all over me. I could barely walk from the blood loss. Ezra said he'd never seen Her so ... possessive."

"Oh."

The pieces snapped together, and I felt the weight of his words.

"She just wanted to teach me a lesson ... Bitch." He exhaled his cigarette smoke into the night.

“You and Luke talk about Her so differently ...”

“It’s not his fault, he’s had too much of Her blood. He can’t help it. Hence why I got pissed when She was trying to make him Her permanent little blood bag. She does it just to mess with his head ... and mine.”

“I’m sorry ... I’m sorry that happened.”

I braced for Zach’s wrath. He hated pity more than anything else. Small or big. He didn’t want it. But I had to say something because I wanted him to know how sorry I was for everything he ever went through.

To my surprise, he scoffed and took another long drag. “Now do you see why I don’t want Her near you or Pres?”

I nodded.

That was all he said, and somehow it was enough. Zach was our protector, and he always had been, but he needed me to be stronger. I got the message loud and clear. I had to get stronger to endure whatever was needed of me. That way I, too, could protect the people I love.

“I think it’s good. You and Kim.” His lighter tone caught me off guard.

“Really?”

“Yeah, she’s a keeper ... you’d make her happy. I know that for sure. She’s good for you. You’re good for her.”

I stopped walking, fear kicking me in the ribs. “Are you dying or something?”

“No. Can I not be nice?” He stopped and rolled his eyes like I was the outrageous one.

“Not to me. You’re only nice when something is wrong.”

“This is exactly why, because you worry too much.”

My shoulders relaxed. “That ... might be true.”

The sound of laughter came from behind a thin covering of trees. We’d found our targets, now we’d need to wait out the evening. We stumbled upon pieces of cut wood and sat down.

The silence between us continued.

“Listen, about the gym thing—”

I shook my head. “No, I get it. You were right. I was being too soft.”

He watched my face and his brow lowered. “Nah, not too soft.”

My cell phone ringer cut the air like a knife.

Zach and I cursed, and the humans at the campsite shrieked. Zach grabbed my jacket and pulled me back the way we came. He flung me against a tree out of walking distance from anyone at the campsite.

“Really?”

“Sorry,” I said as I checked my missed call. It was Kimberly. I redialed immediately. Kimberly knew where I was, and she should have long been asleep. “It was Kim. I think something is wrong.”

My heart hammered as I waited for the ring. I bolted back toward the car without anyone else's permission. Luke and Kilian were there when we left. She was probably fine, but I still felt sick.

"Aaron?" Kimberly answered. Her voice was laced with urgency and concern.

"What's wrong?"

"They found her. Mrs. Henry. She'd dead. Chelsea just called me crying. They're going to announce everything tomorrow ... they think she was murdered."

"Oh, God."

Zach looked away from me and into the trees with gritted teeth. He'd heard.

"Can you come home? Please."

I hated the fear in her voice. I was already in the car where William was on the phone with someone. I knew then we'd all received the news at the same time. Our worst fears were confirmed.

"I'm coming."

Nineteen

KIMBERLY



“**W**e’d like to take a moment of silence for a treasured member of our staff. Jessica Henry was with our university for more than twenty years. She was a kindhearted person who brought a smile to everyone she met. Her memory lives on in her children, husband, and the students she dedicated her life to. Jessica believed in a world where everyone should have the opportunity to forge their own paths and see a bright future ahead of them. No matter the

circumstances, she fought for her students. She will truly be missed, and we hope the police will soon be able to shed some light on the investigation.”

The intercom squealed behind us, and we all cringed. Nothing said in plain sight more than at the top of the bleachers in front of the announcer’s box. The Legion wanted us all together and very public. The Saturday BFU football game was the next best alternative to locking us all in a cage.

Chelsea sat beside me. Her perfume gave me a headache, and her long nails were leaving an impression on my arm.

Aaron was on my other side. I fought the urge to hold his hand. Not that I’d adhered well to our friends-only rule when I’d all but begged him to skip hunting and come lie in my bed with me. He did it. Of course he did. He held me all night, and that was the only way I was able to sleep. I’d feel more guilty about that if it wasn’t for the wall of guilt I’d run straight into over our missing professor.

After the moment of silence was over, a dull roar of whispers ran through the bleachers in waves. Mrs. Henry was all anyone talked about. In the frat house. At the ticket gate.

“I still can’t believe this is happening.” Chelsea was abnormally quiet. “This is supposed to be a safe place.”

It used to be. Chelsea had told me one reason she and her mom chose this university was because of the low crime rate on and off campus.

According to The Legion, we were the victims, but it didn't feel like that. It felt like I'd handed the weapon over to the killers of Mrs. Henry. Surely, I could have prevented this somehow?

Aaron leaned into me. He took it hard. Though, there was no confirmation it had been The Family. The Legion had been milking their sources for any information on the investigation. The only thing revealed was foul play and blood loss.

I coughed. The slight tingle in my throat lingered and the cold air made it worse.

“Are you still sick?”

“Barely.”

“I'll get you a hot chocolate.” Aaron stood, and Thane and Skylar looked over. They were only a few seats away along with Dom. It wasn't just them; other members were spread throughout bleachers. Even Kilian had come to the game, though he remained to be seen. Something happened behind the scenes. I could feel it. He knew something. We'd been instructed to call out of our work shifts, and I awaited word that we would all get written up for it.

I grabbed Aaron's hand, not wanting him out of my sight.

“I'll do it!” Presley jumped up. He'd been fidgeting all morning, looking for any excuse to move. “Zach, Luke ... wanna come? Chels, you want any food? I'll bring snacks.”

“Sure,” Chelsea replied without a snide comment, and my guilt deepened.

They left with William and a few others. William didn't grumble, but I imagined the look on his face. If it were up to him, I was sure he'd have preferred the cage.

Our mascot was walking through the bleachers trying to get the excitement back in the crowd. A white dog with big, animated eyes and a dark-green Black Forest University shirt on. He wasn't nearly as popular as our live dog mascot, Pretzel.

It was almost criminal to see someone having fun on such a somber day, but life went on, and at the sound of the whistle, any talk of Mrs. Henry seemed to fade away. Our pom squad and cheerleaders were peppy as ever, and the crowd got lost in the game.

Chelsea didn't take her eyes off Monica, who was front and center on the pom squad. The mascot danced to the beat of his own drum around them to what looked like a completely different song.

"How are you and Monica?" I wanted to lighten the mood, and Monica was her favorite subject. I suspected Chelsea was still angry at me about moving, but she didn't bring it up once. I think she was lonely.

"She wants to meet my mom at Thanksgiving."

"That's huge."

"Yeah, I know. But oddly enough, I'm not scared. I think my mom will love her. It's kind of soon, but I feel good about it, you know?"

“Yeah, sometimes you just know ...” I knew Aaron could still hear us, but he was trying to make himself look busy and engrossed in the football game.

“I just want to get out of here. Thanksgiving can’t get here soon enough. I feel like I’m suffocating. After everything that’s happened, it’s like there’s a black cloud hanging over Blackheart.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said, and my attention returned to the sky. It was cloudy and faintly smelled of smoke. Because of the wind, the wildfires felt a little closer than normal.

“I hate mascots,” Chelsea said as our mascot danced next to Monica.

He wasn’t close enough to hear, but I swear he did because once he was done dancing, he walked up the bleacher steps.

“Oh, God, he’s coming up here.”

And she was right. Like he had a radar, he’d walked up the stairs right to where we were sitting. He sat next to Chelsea and pretended to yawn and put his arm around her.

“Okay, very smooth. I’m not in the mood,” Chelsea grumbled.

He peeked around her and looked straight at me, and I froze. I could not take the embarrassment. He stood and motioned for Chelsea to scoot over, which she protested, but our mascot didn’t take no for an answer.

I looked over at Aaron for help, hoping he wouldn’t let me get dragged down to the field or something. He grabbed my

hand and winked.

The mascot put his arm around Chelsea and me and tried to get us to stand up and follow him despite our protests.

But Aaron was up on his feet too. “I don’t think they want to go, dude.”

The mascot turned to face him with us under his arms and cocked his head. He released us and pretended to wipe dust off his shirt and then he brought his hands up in a boxing stance. Aaron took his challenge and put his hands up, and I finally saw the carefree smile return to his face. They pretended to fight for a few seconds until the mascot stopped and bowed to Aaron.

“Hey!” Presley was back with hot chocolate and hotdogs. His eyes went wide as he took in the sight of the big fluffy mascot. “You’re the coolest, man! Good work!”

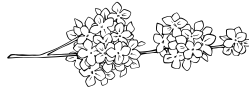
The mascot high-fived him and turned back to me, placed a small stuffed dog in my hand, and patted me on the head. He saluted us and danced his way back down the stairs.

“Dang it! Why did I always miss all the fun?” Presley frowned.

“I never thought I’d say I was thankful for Aaron Coleman being here but thank God,” Chelsea said as she smoothed her hair.

“He looked handsy,” Zach grumbled.

Luke agreed and then plopped next to Aaron. “Did we miss anything with the game?”



At the end of the third quarter, I think we were all over the game. Even Luke seemed distracted. Aaron and Zach were arguing about random things, and Presley kept standing up every few minutes. Chelsea left at halftime because she was too cold, and the hot chocolates only helped a little. It was the sitting around that was killer. The constant stewing in my thoughts made me restless, and I think I could say the same for them too.

The bleachers were still full of a sea of dark green, white, and black, but it had thinned as the game went on and the air got colder.

“What do we do after this? Please, there’s got to be something better than holing up in OBA.” Presley stood again. “I know we’re all sad, but I feel like I’m going to explode if I have to sit here anymore. We should do something. Something active.”

“What do you suggest?” William’s Irish accent was peeking through a lot today.

“Why don’t we play a game? Right, Luke? Maybe we could play football or something?” Presley was laying the puppy dog eyes on thick.

“I don’t know, Pres,” Luke said.

“You know ... I do know a place. There’s an old, abandoned football field not too far from here,” Thane said.

“There is. The university built this one only a few years ago,” I said. It was easy to remember facts like that in a small town.

“I was instructed to keep everyone together and in sight,” William said. Enough people had cleared the bleachers for him to stretch his legs.

Presley said before the crowd behind him roared. “How is it any different from OBA right now? It’s completely dead. Plus, if we all go, it’s like the same thing.”

“He’s kinda right. I mean, it’s not that far. You can see the old goal posts from here,” I said, not knowing why I was encouraging Presley, but I didn’t want to go back to OBA either. It felt like a prison.

“You really want to go?” Aaron said.

“It’s better than sitting here and thinking about everything even more than I already have.”

He nodded in agreement.

“Luke? Please?” Presley frowned like a sad clown.

Luke sat up with his bright smile and ran his fingers through his hair. “It might be nice to get some distance for a little bit, especially while the sun is up.”

Presley erupted into cheers that got muffled in the crowd. It took a little more convincing to get Skylar and Dom on board,

but they came around eventually when Thane promised to do their laundry for a week. We all headed for the field that was almost entirely encased by the tree line.

“Aren’t you going to call Kilian?” Zach nudged William as we walked.

“Thirty minutes won’t kill him. I can’t sit through more of the fuckin’ football game with everyone screamin’ every five seconds.”

“Doubt Kilian would approve. Aren’t you all sworn to be all eternally holy or some shit like that?” Zach pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, and William took one too.

“Uh, Kilian isn’t as religious as you think, and neither are a lot of us,” Thane chimed.

Zach scoffed. “You’re kidding? What the fuck was all that in the church?”

“Only for trial when the fates of others are being decided. He still likes to pray ... he just doesn’t know who or what he’s praying to.” William blew the smoke from his cigarette into the cool air. “Then he seals it with water blessed by his own hands.”

“And you all go along with it?” Presley said.

The crunching of leaves sounded as we walked from the sidewalk and headed for the trees. The colors of fall were fixed in with the evergreen leaves.

“If it pleases him, yes. I do not know or care where they go when they die. If it takes a little longer to bring him peace, I’ll

do it,” Skylar said with Dom towering next to her and nodding in agreement.

Something in her tone caught my attention. She spoke about Kilian with respect. I hadn’t seen a lot of their interactions, but it made sense. She’d come at his call, on a job that was dangerous and more than a little annoying.

“You guys gotta remember that we came from all around the country to see you die. Might as well make it interesting.” Thane tousled Presley’s hair. “Glad we didn’t have to, though.”

It was a weird dynamic. Going from nearly killing us to protecting us like we were the most important people on the planet.

“What about the creepy robes?” Aaron said as he pulled off his hoodie to give to me.

I’d worn a warm sweater, but as the sun fell lower, it had gotten at least a degree lower every hour. I thanked him and put it on, savoring the warmth it gave me.

“Oh, those are just because of the blood.” William grinned at Zach’s unamused face. “Didn’t want to stain our clothes.”

I leaned a little harder into Aaron’s shoulder, and he rubbed my back. I’d tried hard to get the image of Aaron covered in blood out of my head.

“Sorry to disappoint you, assholes.” Zach scoffed and exhaled a puff of his cigarette next to William. “Will, you

seem to be his little pet. Tell us more. Where does the dude come from?”

William gave Zach a death glare, but answered, “Kilian was alive when the first queens were made. He used to be Roman Catholic ... but from the things we’ve seen, there’s no book or scroll that explains any of it. He’s seen too much to believe in God anymore, but ... he still prays.”

Hope. Kilian hoped. He was a mystery to me, but I wanted to know the things he’d seen and the places he’d been. Maybe he wasn’t as bad as I had thought. The Legion had followed his requests to be here. They believed in his purpose.

The fact that we were able to sit here and talk about it like a distant memory spoke volumes for how far they’d come in trusting in each other.

We reached the field covered in dead grass and tree limbs. The rusted goal posts stood on either end, along with a few abandoned brick buildings. The old bleachers were gone, and a large dirt patch sat in its place. An overcast sky made everything seem gray and muted.

Presley ran in front of everyone, tossing the football he stole from the sidelines. “Come on! Let’s all play V-ball.”

“V-ball?” Thane said.

“Yeah, vampire football!”

“I would, but you’d just be disappointed when I wipe the floor with ya,” William said, crossing his arms.

Presley threw the ball to Luke, and he caught it with one hand.

“I don’t think you could take me or Zach in a football game.” Luke smiled and dusted off the football.

“We’ve got centuries on you. We can.” William raised a brow. “What do you think, Thane?”

I was shocked to see William being so lax. He had as much pressure, if not more, on his shoulders from Kilian. Playing a game might be what they needed. I know the pool with Aaron was what I needed. Even if it made everything else harder.

“I think I haven’t played a lot of football, but it can’t be that hard.” Thane smirked. “As long as the other Calem boys play fair.”

“We won’t cheat! Promise.” Presley burned energy by running around on the abandoned field.

“Not like you do at poker?” Skylar smiled and stood next to me.

I nudged Aaron with my elbow. “You should play.”

He’d been quiet all day, and it was making me nervous.

He smiled. “Might be time for me to impress you with my physically fit prowess.”

“We’ll see if he can keep up.” William pushed Aaron to the center of the field.

“Skylar and Dom, are you in or out?”

“Do I have to?” Skylar sighed before scanning me. “This wasn’t part of the job description.”

“It’s not a job, it’s called *fun*.” Thane laughed.

Skylar looked up at Dom and shrugged, and he nodded in confirmation.

“Fine, we’re in.”

They all gathered in the middle of the field. The Legion in one huddle, and the Calem boys in the other. The Calem boys buzzed with energy while the huddle of Legion members kept their heads down in quiet mumbles. Luke had found a large stump and placed it on the edge of the field for me to sit on.

“Wooo! Let’s Go!” Luke clapped and took the position of quarterback, and Zach was center.

Aaron and Presley stayed on the outer edges, and I wondered how their game would work with The Legion having a combined more than a century of age on them.

Zach hiked the ball, and bodies were instantly on Luke, but he’d already thrown it across the field to Presley, who was swarmed again. He spun and threw the ball to Aaron, but it was intercepted by William. It was fast, and sometimes I’d blink and miss things.

I watched their back-and-forth. The constant movement made it hard for my eyes to keep up. It made me tired just watching, but neither their muscles nor their energy ever faltered. I realized that this may be the first time I saw them laughing together.

Our time with The Legion was often painful. A constant strain, but at this moment, everything was still. They weren't pulling against each other in a battle. They were working together against a common goal. To beat each other.

I thought of Mrs. Henry again, and how she'd probably have loved the boys if she'd met them. She could see what I saw. A future of hope.

Luke made the first touchdown, and the boys erupted in overexaggerated cheers. Zach picked Luke up and spun him around. I remembered Aaron telling me this was Luke's element. He was a natural in high school, and I saw how. There was an extra spring in his step as he bounded across the field. I wondered what younger Luke had been like before he had to be this Luke.

Luke did a touchdown dance, and I laughed. Thane found it hilarious along with the Calem brothers, but William did not.

The game proceeded, and I hugged myself as the wind blew through the trees. My eyes always returned to Aaron. I admired the cute look of determination and the funny way his hair bounced as he took a pass. His wall from earlier was down, and the light from the sun reflected in his smile.

It didn't take me long to discover Skylar was the second-best player on the field, and I wondered when she learned to play.

"Whoa, Sky," Presley said. "You're good. Maybe you should teach Dom how to throw a pass."

Dom wrinkled his nose before he grabbed the ball from Skylar and threw it to the other side of the field where William caught it and made a touchdown. I bit my lip to hold back my laughter.

“Come on!” Aaron flung Presley back into the chaos.

After about thirty minutes, my toes started to go numb and my teeth chattered. My arms were warm, but the cold seeped into my jeans and my boots.

There was a brief intermission in which Luke came to sit by me. He had his brothers running drills in his absence, considering they didn’t need the rest.

“Here.” He pulled off his jersey, revealing a tight shirt underneath. “I know you gotta be cold.”

I thanked him and wasted no time pulling it over me and let the soft warmth thaw my ice-cold legs.

“Play it again!” Luke yelled and then looked at me and smiled. It had been a while since I’d seen that smile on him. “Run it through without me.”

“They’ll get killed out there without you,” I said. After thirty minutes of watching them play, it was apparent how much they all listened to Luke. It was a constant back-and-forth of questions and reassurance.

“Now, if I just told them everything, they’d never understand the plays.”

“What do you mean?”

“They need to work together alone. If they’re always looking at me, they’ll never see where they need to go. I teach them the play and then let them work it out.”

“Won’t The Legion see your plays, though?”

“No, you’ll see.”

Luke admired them with a proud smile. I wondered what he saw when he watched his brothers. Chaotic children who desperately needed guidance? Something told me he loved nothing more than to be their guide. But I wondered what Luke would be doing if he wasn’t here now. If he wasn’t the oldest and had been allowed to do anything he wanted. I could think of at least five professions at the top of my head he’d excel in. He had that natural gift and talent everyone wished they were born with.

He moved his hand to his cheek, almost as if to wipe a tear, and his brows knitted in worry, but there were no tears. His gaze lingered on his clean hand.

“Are you okay?” I said.

His head snapped up at my comment, and the smile was back as easily as it had left. He pushed himself up to his feet. “Never better.”

The game didn’t drag on much longer because the Calem brothers got their act together. Luke was right. All they needed to do was to work together. They worked like a well-oiled machine while The Legion had brief intervals where things got moving only for a wrench to be thrown in the cogs a few plays

later. The game ended with the Calem boys scoring the final touchdown and jumping up and down as they celebrated by running the field.

Aaron spotted me from across the field, and within seconds, he was back in front of me.

“Hey, let’s go warm you up,” Aaron said before backtracking. “You know ... like hot chocolate or something.”

My heart fluttered, betraying me again.

“Right.” I wasted no time grabbing his arm, craving his warmth, and he happily obliged.

“Say it.” Presley fluttered around William as they walked from the field.

“No.”

“Say we win. Or I’ll pour bleach in one of your bonsais.”

William scowled at Presley. “You wouldn’t.”

“Could be an accident. You know, cleaning the windows and then *bam*.”

“Fine. You win.” William pinched the bridge of his nose, but Thane patted him on the back.

“Losers have to stay behind and clean up!”

“Someone needs to walk with them,” Skylar warned.

William lifted his hand in the air as tribute.

We looked back at the tattered old field. It looked like a tornado had come through. Their game left the goal posts bent,

and some of the old buildings now had holes in their roofs. We headed back to the original football field with the cold wind blowing us forward. The crowd in the distance cheered, signaling the end of the BFU game. I gave Aaron his hoodie back, and he put his arm around me. I took that as an opportunity to press my face into his side and enjoy his touch. That got me a few smiles from his brothers.

“Great choice with the hoodie today, Aaron. You just look so good in hoodies.” Presley snickered, and I was sure I missed an inside joke.

“Doesn’t he just look *so* good in hoodies, Zach?” Luke nudged Zach.

Zach smiled too. “Totally. The man should live in hoodies.”

Aaron sighed with a smile. “Shut up.”

Twenty

KIMBERLY



The breeze was soft as we waded through the tall pine trees. A few yards ahead I saw an opening in the brush, and I thought about how we would all spend the evening with much less stress on our shoulders than before. Everything felt okay again. Not great but bearable because we were all together.

A twig snapped overhead, and the twins quit moving, causing the rest of us to run into each other. The breeze

stopped.

Zach and Luke were frozen, staring at a shadowed figure in the trees.

Above us, sitting with his legs dangling over the branch of a tree, was a man with slicked-back black hair. He wore a long coat with rolled up sleeves, and dark tattoos covered his pale forearms.

“Didja miss me?” He smirked like a kid who’d found his favorite toy.

I blinked and then he was there in the dirt in front of us, landing with ease. The dirt swirled round him, and he cocked his head to the side. I couldn’t see Luke’s expression, but I could see Zach’s wide unblinking eyes.

“Long time no see, boys.”

“Who are you?” Presley blurted. He was to my left, huddling into my shoulder.

“The second highest-ranking member of The Guard ... Her guard,” Luke said.

He said it like a warning to show us how serious this was, but I could already feel it in my tiny fragile human body. It was nothing compared to the feeling of blood lust radiating off Aaron and William at the campsite. This was different. Immense power radiated from him. The way he spoke and carried himself made the spit catch in my throat.

“Name’s Akira.” His dark eyes settled on Presley. “Ah! Littlest brother! The afterlife suits you. Tell me, how are you

liking it? How's it been?"

"I've been better ..."

"And, Aaron! Glad to see you teaming with life. We're all connected now. You're practically my brother too."

Aaron scoffed and put his hand on my forearm like he might try to bolt with me any second.

"Let's see, who else do we have ... the boy scout." He scanned William. "Who cares about you, and oh! Kimmy is here. Aaron, you really are a lucky guy."

I was frozen. My blood pumped with adrenaline. It told me to run, but there was nowhere to go, as we were surrounded by trees. I squeezed my palms, trying to dethaw from my body's freeze response. We were in trouble.

"Kimmy, I've heard you've made quite the addition. It's a shame I'll have to kill you."

Aaron's hand tightened on my arm. "You won't."

"Did you just come to bore us to death with your pleasantries?" William said as he rolled his shoulders. I didn't have to see his face to know he was ready for a fight.

"Altar boy. Please. I'm talking." Akira rolled his eyes. "I can't believe you guys decided to work with The Legion. It just makes everything so ... complicated. Because of you and your little friends poking around, we had to relocate."

Akira's eyes burned into William's. "Pity, isn't it? You thought it might be easier to find Her but just like always

you're one step behind."

The vein in William's forehead was about to burst.

"Anyway, Kimmy, tell me ... how did you meet the boys?" Akira was back to focusing on me for reasons I didn't understand.

"You don't have to answer that," Aaron said.

"It's fine." I cleared my throat. "Aaron and I met when he bit me in the forest while I was camping."

That story lacked the fairytale of our hallway story, but despite my stomach doing somersaults, my gut told me telling the truth was a better option.

"No shit? All is good now, and you just love hanging with the vamps, huh? Let me guess. They were going to turn you." Akira smirked again.

"I was still deciding," I said.

"Well, that's a good thing. Don't want Her blood mixing with yours. That would be a trip."

"What do you mean?"

"Kim—" Aaron started to say.

"No, I want to know."

"She wouldn't want it. Only Her chosen. It has nothing to do with you, I assure you. It has everything to do with them. Particularly those two, I might add."

He pointed to Zach and Luke. "I guess I can tell you guys now. Even with my added audience of two since I'll kill you

both anyway. Zach and Luke—”

I flew backward toward the clearing, with a hand firmly wrapped around my waist. As quick as it started, it stopped, and Aaron dropped me.

Akira stood at the edge of the clearing. “Come on. You’re not taking the girl anywhere. She dies here. But that doesn’t mean we can’t all have a little more fun. This is a family reunion, after all.”

“You call this fun?” William said.

“Altar boy! Shut up before I come over there and kill you right now. Killing tends to make everyone a little angry and then no one will want to talk to me. So, I’d appreciate it if you shut the fuck up before I lose my temper.”

Akira ran both hands through his hair. “Where were we? Oh, right! Big bro and bigger bro. Your favorite twins. I bet you’re wondering why ... why would we care? Why haven’t we killed you for your disloyalty yet? Why would we come all the way over here to fetch you *alive*, I might add. It’s all because of a little ... prophecy. You see. The Guard. We last for centuries. But all good things must come to an end. Our time serving the queen is ending, and I’ve got four vampire boys here that would be perfect for the role.”

“Wait. What?!” Presley said.

“Zach and Luke have been destined to fulfill that role. She’s seen them coming for at least fifty years now. The other two are ... practice. She sees a great amount of potential.”

“She can see the future?” I whispered.

“Yes! She can. And guess what? She’s seen every single one of these boys wrapped around Her little finger. I’m sure you thought they were all innocent little snowflakes.”

“You’re lying ...”

“Nope. Not even a little bit.” Akira appeared in front of Luke and Zach, and his speed was effortless. “Why do you think She’s been obsessed with you two? Since Ezra found you both on the side of the road, we knew. That’s why we’ve been taking care of you and waiting for the day when you’d be ready. It’s time to come home. Let’s stop this madness. Let’s get to the good part.”

Akira’s eyes darkened. “Hey, maybe I’ll take the girl as a snack, and we can all feed on her for fun on the way home!”

Zach and Luke rushed him while William grabbed the rest of us, and we headed for the trees.

For the second time, Akira stood in front of us. Blocking the way. He was way too fast.

“You know ... I was mad at first when Sirius told me he’d found you guys and you were using *them* for protection but then I realized it just shows me how desperate you really are. The Legion are nothing compared to us, and I’m sure you’ve figured that out by now.”

Akira advanced on us, inching forward with a little shuffling of his feet while we stepped backward into our huddle. He turned his attention back to Zach and Luke.

“Did you really think they were going to save you and your brothers? I don’t really get what all this running away was for. Your brothers will live on with us. We don’t even care about your mom. We let that go too. We can provide you with the protection you need. The safety you crave. The thing you’ve always wanted most in the world. To keep your brothers safe.”

There was a sincerity in his voice and a glistening in his eye as he spoke. Every second he peeled back the layers, the years of practice in manipulating came shining through. He was good.

Akira walked back slowly into the middle of the clearing with his coat flaring at his turn. He carried extreme confidence, and for all I knew, he had a reason to. My fingers hurt from clenching my fist, and my forearm ached from Aaron pulling at my arm. I couldn’t tell if the shaking in my muscles was from me or from him.

“Now your little brothers are family too. Which means their protection will span the ages. Centuries. Isn’t that what this is all about? The Legion can’t give that to you. I can.”

Neither Luke nor Zach were moving. They were frozen and held captive by Akira’s words. I wanted them to say something ... to say anything.

“Don’t listen to him.” I forced the words out, hoping it would thaw them from their shock.

“Kimmy, you gotta stop it, or I’m gonna fall in love with you.” Akira looked at me longingly with pieces of straight black hair falling into his eyes.

“You love listening to yourself talk, don’t you?” I faked a smile.

“Of course! God, you’re the most interesting addition of all. We didn’t see you coming. You’re lucky it was one of the little brothers you fell for, or She’d want your head on a platter.”

“She sounds lovely,” I said.

I had to keep him talking. The Legion weren’t far off. They’d be there any minute, and we’d have the numbers. And that would be relatively easy to do since he had been monologuing since he got there.

“Oh. She is. As a human, you can’t imagine the bond that blood gives you.”

He was right. I turned my attention to Aaron, who still held my forearm in a death grip. His brown eyes were hazy with a darkness creeping into his irises, and his brows lowered. He was the one shaking.

“Cut the shit, Akira,” Zach warned, stepping forward.

Akira smirked. “I will if you will. What’s so radical about what I’m saying? You’re looking at me like I’m the bad guy here. When I’ve done nothing but keep you safe your whole life.”

Akira turned back to me and threw his hands in the air. “He forgets! Who was the one who came to Luke’s aid when he was shot and lying bloody in the street? Who made sure he didn’t die before the ambulance arrived and rode with him on

the way to the hospital? Oh, right. That was me. Where were you?”

Zach’s shoulders dropped as Akira circled closer to him.

“Who was the one who stood in the operating room making sure that brainless on-call surgeon didn’t kill him on the operating table? Oh, I remember now. That was me too. And that’s not even the tip of the iceberg here. The reason you’re alive and didn’t starve in that little shitty house in Brooklyn was us. Your real family.”

I waited for Luke or Zach to challenge him. For any sign what Akira said wasn’t true, but their silence confirmed what I think I already knew. The claim The Family had over them was larger than I’d ever thought possible. They were deeply interwoven and twisted in something much bigger than themselves.

“There’s only one way this can end. Their futures have already been written. They come with me. And unfortunately, Kimmy, that means I must kill you. And no name over there.”

There was a brief glint of sadness in Akira’s eyes, and for a moment, I almost believed his words.

In a blink, Akira was in front of me, his hands inches from my face before Zach and Luke tackled him from the side. My human eyes couldn’t keep up with their movements. Each swing and kick were a mix of tumbling and jumping. They had complete control of every muscle, which made their movements something out of the action movies Aaron made me watch. But nothing landed. Every single blow, he dodged.

Akira was too fast. William joined the fray, and Akira's eyes grew wild. He simultaneously pushed the twins into the dirt while getting his hands around William's head.

“God, I could crush your head like a grape right now.”

Presley ran to help get him off, and Aaron followed, but not before Akira sunk his teeth into William's neck.

He pulled away with black blood staining his mouth, and spit it on the ground. “Disgusting.”

They all rushed him again, but with one push, they flew off him and landed in the dirt and leaves, muddying their clothes. This time he was more serious and calculated.

“We're only a minute in and you guys are already losing. That must be so embarrassing for you.” Akira's laughter echoed in the trees.

Zach groaned and rushed forward, nearly knocking Akira to the ground. Akira must have been thinking a step ahead because he pinned him under his arm without flinching. “You used to be able to spar with me, now you can't even keep up. You haven't been training.”

Luke went in next, and Akira used his momentum to push the two together. Their heads collided, and they fell into the dirt.

“Not nearly hard enough.” Akira pushed William into the ground with his foot. “Did you think you could just come and live a normal life here? You're getting weaker by the day.”

Akira grabbed Presley by the collar and sunk his teeth into his neck, and a shriek left my throat. I couldn't help. I couldn't move.

“See? You've left him here all helpless.”

He handled them all simultaneously, swatting them away like flies. He flung Luke into a tree, and Zach flew back into the brush where I couldn't see.

Aaron rushed forward, but Akira grabbed William by the neck and flung them both to the ground.

Nothing stood between Akira and me any longer.

“Aaron, take Kim and run!” Luke yelled. But he was too far. He wouldn't make it in time.

“Alright, Kimmy. I think this is your final stop.”

Akira was in front of me again, reaching toward me. This time his expression was void of any humor. I braced myself for whatever pain followed.

But then Aaron was there.

Standing between us.

He'd moved swiftly. I hadn't felt myself shift back a few inches.

Aaron stopped Akira's hand with a death grip on his wrist.

Excitement grew in Akira's eyes. “Ooh. Aaron, you've gotten interesting. If I'm honest, you used to be my least favorite brother.”

Aaron's knuckles were white. His back was rigid, and everything went eerily still.

"Damn, you're hurting my arm a little bit. It feels good to have power, doesn't it? It's too bad what you're doing rots your brain. But I know how you can get real power. Come with me, and I'll show you real power you can control."

Aaron pushed him with one arm, and Akira careened into a pine tree a few feet in front of us. The branches cracked and splintered, leaving a few falling from the sky.

Akira popped up on his feet and wiped off his coat. "Finally, a challenge."

Everyone watched as Akira rushed Aaron, and he countered, ducking as Akira swung above his head. Akira was the better fighter. But Aaron was as fast and strong.

Akira grabbed Aaron in a headlock, and Aaron took out his footing and slammed him into the ground.

Akira's crazed laughter sent chills down my spine. He rolled in the dirt, holding his stomach like he'd heard the funniest joke. This time when he got to his feet, his brow lowered, fear shot through my chest. I couldn't let him hurt Aaron.

"That's enough." Kilian's voice cut the air. Alongside him were the other members, and they'd dispersed to the twins, who were already up on their feet.

"Well, well, well. Kilian himself is gracing me with his presence. Come to wrought me of my sins?" Akira's voice had hardened, and the smile slipped from his mouth.

“Akira, nice to see you’re doing well. You’re much more trained since we last met.” Kilian walked in next to me, dressed in his routine blazer and slacks. Next to Akira, he wasn’t intimidating but as he moved closer, his height made up for it.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Akira said.

“Aaron, you can come back.” Kilian placed a hand on Aaron’s shoulder.

Aaron said nothing. He watched Akira with his fists clenched at his sides.

“He won’t. Aaron’s one step into the void.” Akira stared Aaron down. “Don’t worry. You’ll have all the blood you need with me. What are they teaching you? To suppress it? You can use it. Feel it. Let it fuel you. You can have all the power without any of the risk.”

Kilian pulled Aaron away from Akira, and the rest of The Legion members surrounded him.

Akira flipped up the collar on his jacket and smoothed his hair. “This has been ... enlightening. Be careful, brothers. Feel free to come crying to me when Kil tosses you to the curb. It’s only a matter of time.”

He walked backward toward the trees before pivoting on his heels and disappearing into the forest. “I’ll be around.”

The Legion rushed in. Skylar was the first to my side, surveying me from head to toe.

“I’m sorry. I should have been here.”

I shook my head. "I'm fine."

I wasn't. I couldn't feel anything and wasn't even sure I was still breathing. But I couldn't stop staring at the back of Aaron's head a few feet away from me. I reached for him, but Skylar stopped me.

"Aaron ..."

Kilian was in front of Aaron, who was soon followed by Luke. "He needs blood. Now."

I tried walking closer to see his face, but Zach and Presley were next to me, pulling me backward. They forced Aaron to his knees on the forest floor. Pools of black ink filled the whites of his eyes. That Thing had taken over and wasn't letting up.

A few seconds passed and then a guttural surging of pain escaped his lips. Slowly he unraveled, and his humanity dissipated. He became more rigid and defensive, pushing off anyone who tried to still him. His fingers dug into the soil as he tried to crawl out of their grasp. One minute he was looking at me like I was the thing he was trying to get to, and the next, his hands were in his hair pulling and straining with his chin tucked to his chest.

Blood flooded my cheeks when I peered up at the surrounding vampires all gawking back at me. Their faces said what I already knew was true. I was the only available donor.

"How bad is it?" Luke said through gritted teeth.

Kilian was straining to keep Aaron on the ground. “He can’t wait for the house.”

“I want to help.”

Aaron made his way to his feet again and grabbed Dom by the throat and flung him to the dirt despite being half his size. Dom struggled beneath his death grip, but Aaron was crazed and strong. When members of The Legion tried to drag him off, Aaron had no trouble flinging them with a vicious snarl.

Luke tackled him from behind and with pure willpower, muscled Aaron’s arms behind his back. William, Dom, and Kilian all came to his aid, but it was barely enough to counter Aaron’s violent thrashing. Like a petulant child, he kicked the earth, leaving deep indentions in the dirt. His face twisted into a mixture of rage and pain.

“Let me help!” I tried to push Zach out of my way, but his body was stone.

“Hell no!” Zach grabbed my shoulder, and I shrugged him off.

Presley had his hands over his ears, and his fingers were shaking. “He’s right! You can’t. He’s going to take your arm off.”

“No, he won’t. He’s stopped before. He’ll stop again.”

“I’m not taking that risk,” Zach said.

“It’s not your decision.” The words poured out, and I squared my shoulders.

“The fuck it isn’t. He’s my brother.”

“Exactly, and he needs help! I’m helping.”

“And what if he kills you!? Who’s going to take the blame for that, then? Oh, right, that’s fucking me.” Zach’s words echoed Akira’s. He wasn’t going to budge.

“Guys. Please stop fighting,” Presley said while he swayed. Black blood stained his neck and the front of his shirt. Despite his hands still covering his ears, he jumped every time Aaron let out another bloodcurdling scream.

“I can make sure he doesn’t kill her. I’ll put him under if it comes to that, but I can’t guarantee much else. Broken bones are possible.” Kilian was on Aaron’s left with his hands pressed firmly into Aaron’s shoulder.

“Can you just put him under now?” Zach snarled.

“No. Aaron is fighting for control. Locking him in his head will do the opposite of what we need. We need him to gain control again.”

“We don’t have any other options.” I rolled up the sleeve of my sweatshirt, revealing my scarred wrist. The same wrist Aaron bit not even a year ago. My body surged with adrenaline, readying itself for the pain.

“I can help with the pain. Come over here and grab him.” William motioned to Skylar, and she took his place. Aaron shifted and almost pulled her off the ground.

William eyed Zach and me. “We doin’ this?”

I stood in front of Zach. “Yes, it’s my choice. No one else’s.”

Zach peered over to Luke, who was still busy trying to keep Aaron on the ground, but he gave me a reassuring nod.

“Fuck it. It’s your funeral. Literally.”

A nervous laughter left my lips as I held my arm out for William, and my heart kicked my ribs. He’d done it before. In the church, my arm didn’t hurt.

William’s eyes were set and serious. “This won’t hurt. But if he breaks your arm, it won’t be enough to help.”

I nodded in agreement, and William brought my wrist to his lips and bit down. It didn’t hurt. Not even a little.

Aaron pulled himself to his feet at the smell of my blood, nearly knocking everyone else over, but they wrangled him back to his knees.

“Any day now!” Thane yelled.

I crouched in the dirt, and all feeling was gone in my wrist. There was no moving my fingers. At the proximity of my bloody wrist, Aaron pulled away and crawled back toward Luke, but there was nowhere for him to go. He was still in there. Fighting.

I moved my wrist to his lips, and his eyes met mine. I longed for the burning amber to come back.

“It’s okay. You won’t hurt me.”

He bit down with more force than I'd anticipated. William was right. The numbness, though seemingly impenetrable, wouldn't save me from the pressure in my wrist. I exhaled in an attempt to breathe through the pain.

The numbness crept from my wrist and into my arm. My entire body was on fire. Zach and William both had a hand on my shoulder, ready to pull me back at whatever cost. I didn't want to think of what that could be.

After three seconds, Aaron's shoulders dropped and the muscles in his face loosened.

My pulse pounded in my head, but my attention was on him, hoping it would work and every second of pain was worth it.

I probably should have been scared or disgusted. Perhaps all the above, but I wanted to help him, and I wanted it to always be me—his lifeline in the dark.

I shivered. My head felt heavier and heavier, and my fingers were cold.

Aaron pulled away, and when his eyes opened, they were beautiful pools of honey.

He groaned, blinking a few times to get his bearings.

"Aaron!" I cried out, then grabbed his face to make sure it was really him.

His head shot up, and his eyes softened. "It worked ... you're okay."

“You chose to do that?” I was still breathless.

“Well ... kind of. I had to do something, and now I see what a bad idea it was because it was hard as hell to get back.”

His arms were freed, and he wiped the blood from his lips. He moved slowly until he spotted my bloody wrist.

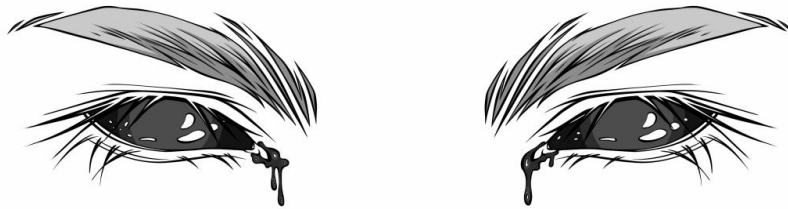
“Wait, did I hurt you?”

Luke had torn a piece of his shirt and wrapped my wrist in the most pristine bandaging I’d ever seen.

“No.” I shook my head. “You saved me.”

Twenty-One

AARON



“**A**aron. You risk yourself every time you allow that thing to take over.” Kilian’s voice amplified the ringing in my ears.

I squeezed out the rest of the blood in what had to be my tenth blood bag and flung it on the ground. A pile of bloody plastic crinkled at my feet, and I wiped my mouth while resting my elbows on my knees. Which was useless because I was covered in blood. Thick, dried blood was caked under my nails, and my chest was sticky.

We were all in my room, and I leaned over in my computer chair. That’s all I knew. All my brain would let me

comprehend. It felt like I'd been hit by a semi and then promptly backed over for good measure.

“He did what he had to.” Zach had his arms crossed and propped himself against the windowsill. “Because of him, Kimberly is alive.”

I dared to make eye contact with Kim across the room. Not wanting to face the fact I'd turned feral and downed at least five of those blood bags with no memory.

She was quiet again, sitting on my bed and holding her bandaged arm. I was sure I felt guilty about that, but all my remaining brain cells were trying to keep my eyes open.

It lasted two seconds before I closed them and let the voices in the room fill the space. I wasn't even sure who was in my room or who was speaking. I wanted them to leave so I could lie across my bed, and maybe see if Kimberly would rub my head.

“What are we going to do now?”

“Did he mention how he found you?”

“Does it matter?!”

“He said it was Sirius. He never mentioned Ezra.”

“Ezra kept his word to you, then ... interesting.”

“Fuck Ezra, what's your plan? Akira is too strong.”

I fell forward and a firm grip on my shoulder stopped me from falling out of the chair. It was Luke.

He smiled halfheartedly. “You okay?”

I nodded in agreement and leaned my head back on the chair.

“He needs to rest for his body to heal ... and his mind.” Kilian stroked the salt-and-pepper stubble on his chin.

“Question. What did he mean about all that prophecy stuff? Is that even real?” Presley’s voice grated on my eardrums. He had to be close.

“Many believe it to be. Yes. But historically, it’s hard to confirm or deny. You didn’t know about the prophecy?” Kilian’s voice lowered.

I didn’t care about prophecies. I needed to sleep and then I might care.

“Of course we didn’t know,” Luke said. “Why would we be here if we knew that?”

“Why the hell did you not tell us you knew Akira? What the fuck was that about?” Zach spat while glaring at Kilian.

“It wasn’t pertinent to our situation at the time. I’ve been alive for centuries. I’ve had a few run-ins with the coven before. Nothing that would concern you. Akira’s arrival was unexpected, but it doesn’t change things. Our course of action is still the same as it was.”

“That’s not for you to fucking decide,” Zach said.

Presley spoke again. “Wait, I want to go back to the prophecy thing. Who’s going to be a part of The Guard, and what exactly does that mean?”

“No one is going to. That’s not happening.” Luke’s firmness made me turn to him. The room went quiet. “Kilian, can we talk to you downstairs? Alone. Everyone else. Out.”

Luke wasn’t asking. He walked to the door and motioned everyone through the door. His tight-lipped expression made even me want to get up, but his eyes softened when he saw me.

“Kimberly, will you help Aaron get to bed?”

She stood. “I’m on it.”

No one else said anything. Presley didn’t even make a joke. Luke could be downright scary when he needed to be. Even scarier than Zach. When he lost his cool, it was for a good reason.

I was thankful for the silence when the door shut behind them.

Kimberly came up beside me to put her arm around me and walk me to the bed.

I sighed. “I think I wanted to hear that.”

I’m sure I did. Maybe they would tape it for me or give me the cliff-notes version after my long nap.

“Me too.” She sat me on the bed and leaned in front of me. “But this is good too.”

My eyes were threatening to close again. Betraying me. But she was still there watching me with those cool-blue eyes. I couldn’t sleep yet.

“God, you’re beautiful, Burns. Did you know that?”

“You might have told me.” The corners of her lips tugged but fell just as fast. “You really need a shower.”

“The only way I’m getting in the shower is if you’re coming with me.”

Most of my brain cells were already asleep, and the only ones left awake wanted to flirt with Kimberly. *Or did all my brain cells want to flirt with her?*

Her cheeks pinked. “I think you’re delirious.”

“Deliriously in love with you.”

I said it like a fool, covered in blood. Because I was a fool covered in blood.

She blinked slowly and sucked in a breath.

Oh no. It wasn’t how I wanted to tell her. I wasn’t sure I even wanted to tell her.

I shook my head. “It’s nothing for you to worry about. Can we just ignore me? Do I get a pass for being the hero?”

She laughed at that, and I relaxed.

I wanted to know what she was thinking. To understand why her heart was beating so hard. To know if that glimmer in her eye was longing for me or just fear.

“Stay here.”

She disappeared, and my eyes closed again. What only felt like seconds passed and then she was there again, shutting the door behind her and scooting close with a rag in her hand.

“Here.” She grabbed my hands and started toweling them off with the wet rag.

“No shower, then?”

She laughed that bright beautiful laugh. “Hush. Let me take care of you.”

This woman. This brilliant, extraordinary woman. It felt like a sin to have her helping me, with that bandage on her arm.

“Lift your arms.”

I did.

She pulled my shirt off and threw it in the carnage on the floor. Her hands warmed my chest, and she moved the towel to wipe the blood from my neck. Thank God I had black towels.

I rested my hand on her neck and stroked her cheek with my thumb. Her pulse raced at my touch.

Kimberly grabbed my hand and placed it in my lap. “No touching.”

This time her smile widened, and she moved the rag to my cheek.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Dishes clashed and the sound of yelling followed. I was too tired to check.

Kim stopped to watch the door. “Should I go down and spy?”

“I wish you’d stay.”

She did. And I tried to keep my eyes open by staring at her face. Her long lashes. The little beauty mark by her eyebrow.

“Your pants need to come off too.”

“Are you going to take them off me?”

She shook her head. “Off. Now.”

I groaned as I peeled them off and threw them on the floor, and she motioned for me to lie down. I hadn't realized how much she had held me up till she let go and I fell into the blankets.

The weight that settled in my chest pulled me under and my eyelids closed.

“Burns, you can boss me around anytime. When are you free next?”

The bed shifted, and her lips touched my cheek. I felt warm. So warm.

“Go to sleep.”

Her fingers raked through my hair.

She didn't leave. *Thank God.*

Twenty-Two

KIMBERLY



I awoke alone in the night. The soft pitter-patter of rain knocked on my windowsill. Not enough to satisfy our drought, but maybe enough to keep the fires at bay. A sharp pain traveled down my arm when I moved my fingers. One glance at the clock told me it was hours before it was time for me to wake, but my body stayed fully alert. I concluded it was too much adrenaline for one day.

After taking some pain pills, I made my way down the stairs. The house was quiet, and every step I took creaked the hardwood. A lamp glowed in the middle of the living room, but no one was there. The Legion must be at every exit.

By the time Aaron fell asleep, everyone had dispersed downstairs, and Presley hadn't been able to get any more information. My fix-it mode could wait until the sun came up and I wasn't groggy and alone.

I rounded the corner and met Zach, who sat with his legs propped on the dining table, nursing a drink.

“Couldn't sleep?” Zach asked without looking up at me. He was in his sparring uniform, and I wondered if he'd already gone for the night or was waiting to go.

I shook my head and grabbed a chair at the edge of the table. Zach was deep in thought. His mind seemingly elsewhere.

There were a lot of things I could ask him. I could demand to know what they talked about with Kilian. Or ask a million questions about Akira and the prophecy. I could even argue with him about what happened in the forest with Aaron.

Instead, I asked, “How's Luke?”

Zach's eyes met mine. “He's all right. He's supposed to be taking some time to rest in his room. I doubt that's what he's doing in there.”

Zach seemed less confident than before, as his fingers traced the rim of his glass. They'd both been quiet when Akira

appeared, but they didn't need to say anything for me to see the fear and burden that came crashing into them at that moment. We were supposed to be safe but may never be, and I still hadn't fully processed that.

“He'll be okay. He's got you guys, after all.”

He smiled and then after a few seconds of silence, he spoke again. “You know you remind me a lot of Sarah.”

There was a brief silence as the autumn air settled around us.

“Shit. Sorry, I just meant that ... you're kind like she was. She was also very smart, and she loved Luke. Really truly loved him for who he was. I can tell you care about Aaron the same.”

This time I didn't protest, something about the witching hour made it clear it was time to be honest.

“I do. I never thought I'd ever care about a person as much as I do him ... it's scary.”

Zach smiled. “Love is scary.”

“Can I ask you something kinda personal?”

“I'll allow it.” Zach took a deep breath, awaiting my heavy question.

The house was still. No music. No TV.

“Why Sarah? Why just her? If the queen is obsessed with you both. Why not kill Ashley?”

I'd silently been racking my brain trying to find the code. Was Zach not worried about Ashley? Would they come for her like they did Sarah?

“Because of Luke ... because he's good and innocent and She gets jealous ... because She wants his innocence. Don't get me wrong, I worry about Ash, but I warned her, and she's got the family means to stay safe. Sarah didn't. The queen just wants Luke. She wants him all to herself. Luke is everything good in the world, and She needs him ... his humanity. Not people like me.”

I couldn't help but imagine Aaron. He was the spitting image of Luke at heart. Only Luke had grown up much different. He was harder. Tougher. More responsible. Aaron had never seen the pain Luke had. The thought was normally a comfort, but this time it was a knife twisting in my belly. What would the queen think of Aaron? His soul overflowed with pure light. Would She see the same thing She saw in Luke?

“People like you?” I pressed in, resting my elbows on the table.

“There are people like Luke who are meant to be good. So much so that it literally tears them apart to be anything but.”

“Like Aaron.”

He nodded. “Yeah, exactly. They have always been good and then there are people like me who have always been bad. It doesn't hurt me to be bad and to do bad things. It doesn't matter to me as long as my family is safe.”

“You mean, to protect them, right?”

His dark eyes beamed through me. “Kim, if you knew half the things I think every day ... what I thought of you the first time I met you. I’m confident you wouldn’t like me very much.”

I let that threat settle. I hadn’t thought highly of them when I met them either. I was still unsure if they would freak out and kill me at the time.

“I can take it. Tell me.” It was a rare occasion to get to pick Zach’s brain, and something told me if I passed up the opportunity to ask, I’d lose my chance forever.

He placed his drink down, staring past me for a moment before speaking. “I thought ... who is this annoying, naive girl coming to make my life harder? I could tell just by the way Aaron was looking at you that he was head over heels.”

Butterflies circled my stomach at the thought. At the time, I’d scarcely thought of Aaron more than someone that could help me out of my poor situation. I never noticed.

He continued. “I was already thinking of what I could say to make him forget about you or ... where I could bury your body if he slipped up and killed you. I wanted you gone before you could cause us any more trouble.”

I remembered Zach breaking Presley’s chair, and now I understood the anger behind that kick and what had been brewing beneath his dark eyes. His jaw tightened as he waited for me to reply.

“I’m surprised you weren’t meaner to me, then.”

He grabbed his drink again, downing the rest. “I’m not really into making girls feel like shit. Even if they’re going to end up fucking up my life.”

“And what made you change your mind?” I kept my tone soft, though nothing Zach said had hurt my feelings. I’d always known how protective he was of his brothers.

“You don’t utter a word of this to anyone.” He pointed at me.

“You know I can keep a secret.”

“You didn’t see him before. For those two months after we changed them, Presley seemed completely fine, but Aaron just had this look on his face. He smiled but it wasn’t him. I was convinced I’d really fucked him up. Truly. I know I’ve done a shit job at being a good role model, but I’d prefer not to fuck up my brothers and their lives. But when you left the house that day, Aaron wouldn’t fucking shut up. I’d barely gotten him to speak to me and suddenly all he wanted to do was talk. Talk about you ... school ... everything. He was his old self again. He smiled again.”

I hadn’t expected to be surprised. Partly by Zach’s vulnerability but also by his words. My heart ached to go back upstairs. I’d always known I’d been the wrench in Aaron’s life, but I hadn’t realized the good. The parts that weren’t him being forced to protect me out of guilt. Even from the beginning, there was good too.

He shrugged. “I still wasn’t convinced I liked you until I realized you didn’t rat on me and my brothers.”

I knew there was a hidden compliment in there somewhere.

“You do what you have to, to protect everyone. I think I can understand that.”

“That’s what makes people like me incredibly dangerous. We’re selfish. I love my brothers, but it’s different from Luke’s love. His is ... better.”

And that’s when I finally understood the way Zach saw himself. In his eyes, he’d never be a good person like he imagined Luke was. Almost as if he had to be one or the other.

“So, which type of person are you? That’s the real question.” Zach poured himself another glass of whiskey.

“I ... don’t know yet.”

I didn’t. Could I consider myself good like Luke and Aaron if I considered becoming a vampire? They were both changed against their will. A choice to turn was a choice to harm and potentially kill people. Then how could I ever be considering it? How could that be the way my heart was leaning? A life with Aaron was selfish.

But there was one thing I knew about Zach—he was the opposite of selfish. Presley came to mind next. He too might be considered a selfish person. His only real meaningful relationships were with his family members, everyone else was disposable to a certain degree.

There was a clear line in the sand between the Calem boys, and I wasn't sure what side I fell on in terms of morality.

I walked up the hardwood steps and stopped at my door. Tonight of all nights, I didn't want to be alone.

I turned my brain off and found myself standing back in Aaron's room. The glow of the TV was the only light.

He'd already turned and covered the corner of the bed. I moved in, pushing him over just enough for me to slip in.

As I reached up to pull the covers over me, his arm gripped me by the waist and hauled me close to him, cradling me from behind. Our bodies fit together effortlessly.

With his sweet, tired voice, he said, "Is this okay?"

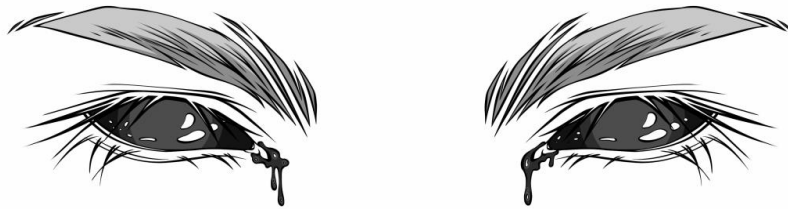
I blushed under the cover of the dark. "Yeah."

His warmth covered every ache in my body, including my wrist. There, in the dim light, heart to heart, I knew I'd found it. The thing I had always been searching for. In Aaron's arms, I'd felt the safest I ever had. I didn't know how I'd be able to sleep with my heart beating out of my chest, but I didn't care. I wanted to savor it.

There was no more hiding. I was in love with Aaron Calem.

Twenty-Three

AARON



She was everywhere. She was everything. She was mine. All mine. Her pulse synced with mine. Her blood was my blood, and what was mine was hers. She was mine. All mine. Mine. Mine. Mine.

My lips touched the sensitive skin on her neck, and she sighed. How long had I waited for this? How long had I wanted her? Her skin on my skin.

I pulled away to see her. Kimberly. My best friend. Her red hair sprawled across my sheets. But there was no red. No life. No smile.

Just Her. White eyes, void of any hope, staring at me with strands of snow-white hair laying on my pillow. Black blood stained Her mouth as She smiled. Her hands caught in my hair, and She beckoned me closer. Her lips were soft. They were everything. She was everything.

But why did I feel sick? Why did I feel so cold? Why was my heart not beating?

Why? Why? Why?

This wasn't right.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

I woke up gasping. The birds chirping outside and the light cascading in my window brought me back to reality. A dull ache pulsed behind my eyes. *Damned nightmares.*

Sleeping as a vampire wasn't as great as I remember as a human. Human me would wake up and stretch, light as a feather. Waking up now felt heavy, not just my body but my mind. I didn't remember my dream, but I felt as if I had lived a thousand lifetimes wherever I was.

All of it hit me at once. Akira. The prophecy. Biting Kim ... Telling Kim I was in love with her. *Oh, God.*

I moved my hand to touch the other side of the bed. She was gone. Her scent still filled the room. Roses. How could I ever let this go if I kept finding myself in the same bed with her? I had to let her go now, didn't I?

I stared up at the little crack of paint where I'd thrown my tennis ball way too many times late at night while I listened to Luke pacing in his room. I replayed yesterday's events in my head. The fear of seeing Akira. The feeling of losing control of my body to save Kimberly. The voice in my head wasn't hard to convince.

I was right. I couldn't believe I was right. The Family would never stop searching for my brothers because they believed we were meant to live in some weird fantasy world where we were ... bodyguards of a vampire queen? That sentence couldn't be real. As if the vampire thing wasn't a trip, now there was someone claiming prophecies about my brothers. It didn't feel real, but my splitting headache said otherwise.

I shot up, and my body was slow and groggy. My hands tamed my hair, and I tugged on a pair of new sweatpants and a clean shirt before heading into the hallway. The carnage I'd expected to be on the floor of my room was gone. Kimberly had cleaned it in my sleep. I sighed. More guilt.

"Aaron, how are you feeling!?" Thane came out of Presley's room holding a gaming controller. The battle music coming from the TV blasted through the hall. Presley was hot on his heels.

"I'm okay ... groggy."

"Well, Kilian wants to see you." Thane snuck a glance at Presley.

"Is it a lecture?"

Thane scrunched his nose and held up his fingers an inch away from each other. “A teeny, tiny bit.”

Presley watched me with a wide smile, not saying a word.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I shifted, fighting the annoyance of my headache coming back. “Spit it out.”

“You just smell good. What is that ... floral scent wafting off you and your bedroom?”

My eyes narrowed. “I’ll go see Kilian in a second.”

Presley motioned toward the hallway. “She’s in her room.”

I knocked on the doorframe and greeted Kimberly, who sat on her bed next to the window. She wore that checkered dress I loved with the long sleeves and stockings. It never ceased to amaze me how she made the place look like home. It was larger than her previous dorm room, and she’d made up the difference with various colored rugs. I admired the way she made it feel special, and asked her to help me with mine.

Since her arrival, she’d helped me get pictures on my peg board. She also convinced me to buy my first ever desk calendar to help me remember my assignments. And to get a huge BFU wall banner to sit above my bed. She said to remind myself of anything that made me happy. And it did. I was finally letting go of the past. It wasn’t about replacing the old ones of my mom and our childhood home. It was about making new ones, even in the worst circumstances.

She turned, and my eyes went to her wrist wrapped tightly in gauze. The sinking feeling in my stomach was back. How could we be back here?

Suddenly, I was angry. Angry at the one person I could blame. Me.

She smiled at me and moved over for me to sit. The silence grew while indie music played in the background.

“Are you okay?” The only words I could think of tumbled out of my mouth.

“Yeah, it doesn’t really hurt. I’ve been taking some painkillers. I did need stitches, though. Luke did them.”

Mom taught Luke to do stitches at a young age. Mostly because he wanted to learn, but I think she knew he’d need it someday. He had good practice with all of us growing up.

“Can I see?”

She hesitated. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Are you afraid I’ll freak out?” I leaned on the bed.

“No ... I just know you, and I know what you’re going to say.”

I cracked a smile I wasn’t expecting. She knew me, and it felt great to be known.

“You don’t want to hear me being a broody mess for the month? Is that what you’re saying?”

Her eyes softened. “You told me you were sorry every day for weeks.” She grabbed my hands in hers, and my heart

responded.

My fingers caressed the softness of her hand. She watched me more closely than usual. Her heartbeat elevated as I ran my fingers across her warm skin to find the edge of her bandages. The gauze was rough, and I fiddled with the tape for a few seconds. Her eyes flickered from me, and she bit her lip, only watching my hands. Was she nervous? Fear took the front seat, and it gave me the answer. She feared me. Afraid I might snap.

I peeled back the bandages to reveal her bruised skin. The faintest dark spots rested next to the stitches where my teeth had ripped her flesh. It was still red and irritated, and I guessed the worst coloring of bruising was yet to come.

Saliva filled my mouth, and I swallowed. *It* remembered the taste of her blood. I was freshly full and yet, the Thing in my head was still reminiscing under the surface. Though I couldn't hear its distinct voice, I could feel it. Waiting in the back of my head. Wanting more.

“This was my choice. I know I didn't have to, but I wanted to. You saved me. I saved you. That's how it should be.”

I tried to hold her gaze but the weight of it was too much. This Thing in my head was getting stronger. And my feelings for her along with it. Our proximity had the hairs on my arms raised. Every time she glanced at me, I was one step closer to kissing her. She was everything I wanted, but I couldn't have her.

“Kim, we can't do this anymore. Your blood has to be off-limits to me at all times. You're already in enough danger. We

don't need to add me to the list.”

“What if it's to save your life?”

“Not even then. If this Thing in my head thinks for a second there's a chance I'm going to taste your blood again ... It's going to take it. And maybe I won't be able to stop It. So, no more blood.”

She'd taken too many risks for me. Every day a piece of the girl I'd met was changing. I felt like Peter Pan dragging Wendy into the darkness of Neverland. She was never supposed to be here, but I brought her here, and like Peter, I didn't want to let go. I wanted her to stay forever.

I rewrapped the bandage tenderly over her skin.

“And we probably shouldn't ... be kissing either. It's just making this harder and it's risky. I don't want you to choose anything because of me, and if we keep doing this, then we're just going to be doomed to repeat history over and over. I kiss you, and I can't control myself. And I can't stay away from you.”

Her eyes glistened, and I wondered if I hurt her. Our argument in the forest came to mind. The words she said had punched me through the chest, even then when everything was new. Only now I knew why she'd said them. Sometimes being together made things harder. I clouded her judgment, and I wanted her head to be clear about all of it. We were already repeating the past.

“You should go to New York.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“You shouldn’t be here, Kim. This is only getting worse, and maybe if you go with Chris, then you can get out of this, and leave me and my brothers to deal with this ourselves.”

She pulled her hand away. “You said you wouldn’t leave.”

“Technically, I’m not leaving. You are ... or should.”

She stared past me. “Chris is furious. He won’t even talk to me.”

“He would if you told him that we got you drunk on purpose, and you need him to come get you. I bet he’d get you the first plane out.”

“I’m not doing that.” She shook her head, and her pulse hammered under her skin.

I wanted to kiss her and see the smile return to her face. Kissing her always did that. But every word I said pushed her away and felt like having to pull my own heart out of my chest. But I had to. Ventricle by ventricle. Because I might be doomed ... and I refused to let her go down with me.

Her nostrils flared. “I fail to see how me running off with Chris would make me safer than being here with you.”

“Because Akira wants *us*. My brothers and me. He’s not going to follow you. This might be the last chance I have to get you out. You saw how strong he was ... it’s nearly impossible for me to keep you safe. But Chris, I know he could look after you. Maybe I can even convince Kilian to have Skylar go with you.”

If I asked my brothers for help on hiding Kimberly, they would help me. No matter what.

“Well, you can’t tell me what to do.” She shook her head when she said it. Her hurt was tangible.

I moved a piece of hair from her face, and everything in my chest still hurt. “I wouldn’t dream of telling you what to do. I made you two promises I intend to keep. I promised I wouldn’t leave you, and I meant it. I’m not going anywhere ... but I also promised to protect you. I’m trying to keep my promise.”

Her breath hitched in her throat as my hands grazed her cheeks and then fell into my lap. It was time to let go. No touching.

She sat up a little straighter. “Okay ... I’ll think about it.”

She left me there on the bed while she straightened up her desk. The peonies in her vase were wilted, and she chucked them in the trash bin before continuing with wrappers and old papers. With my hand on the doorframe as I left, I wondered if that was the last bouquet I’d ever get to buy her.



Kilian waited at his desk, a book in one hand and supporting his head with the other. He barely looked up to acknowledge my presence as I sat down. He reminded me of my high school

principal waiting in his chair to tell me I had detention. Which was an unfortunate curse that plagued all the Calem brothers.

This would be interesting.

I was never alone with Kilian, and that was something I did on purpose. I liked to bring a buffer, usually Zach or Luke, but I didn't pass either of them on my way to the library and wasn't in the mood to deal with Presley's carefree attitude.

"Aaron, how are you feeling?"

"Fine."

He studied me, as if trying to read my mind, and his steel-gray eyes bored into me. "Tell me what's on your mind."

"Uh, what's on my mind is that you wanted to talk to me, and I'm here waiting for you to talk to me."

His stone gaze softened. "I'm in your corner, you know? I understand you have a ... drinking problem that caused your current plight, and I thought you might benefit in talking to someone who has ... experience."

Was this therapy? I was *not* in the mood for that. But I answered.

"I've been doing everything I'm supposed to be doing."

"Hm," he said, closing his book for a moment and inspecting the spine.

What was his deal? I was starting to understand why Zach didn't like him.

"Has this been made easier with our help?"

“Uh, yeah, I guess ...” I fought the urge to bolt for the door. “Can you just lecture me for a few minutes so I can go?”

This time he smiled. “You and your brothers share that same restless spirit. I wanted to express my concerns to you but also let you know I’m here to help. I don’t want to further push the subject ... but I must caution you. If you keep letting It take over, you will not be able to find your way back. I’ve seen many brave, honorable men fall prey to the same trap in my lifetime. I do not want the same thing to happen to you.”

I was stunned by the conviction in his voice and averted my attention to the floor. “I know. I just didn’t have a choice. And I felt ... strong.”

“The strength It lends you comes with a price that you are already paying for each time It seeks out your weakness, looking for the thing It wants most.” The flames of the fire flickered in his eyes. “It wants you to believe It is the strong one. But It is the one that needs you. It wants what you have.”

I thought back to the power I felt surging in my body when I held Akira back. Darkness pooled in my gut and the voice in my head told me everything I wanted to hear. I could keep them all safe if I just gave into It.

But the thing I remembered most wasn’t that strength—it was fear. I’d been afraid I wouldn’t be able to force my way out once It took control of my mind. It felt like sitting in a dark room with a TV at the far end. I knew what was happening, but my hands were tied. Nothing would budge. I screamed into the void until I heard it—her heartbeat. The soft thrum pulled

me from the back of my mind and into the driver seat. It wasn't just her blood sacrificed to that Thing inside me, it was her. Her heartbeat awoke something in me that pulled me back into our best memories and reminded me how much I cared about her. That I'd do anything to keep her with me. I needed to make it back to her.

No wonder that voice in my head never shut up when I was around her.

“I want to get stronger. I have to.”

It was the only way to save her and them. If using that Thing wasn't an option, then I'd need to try harder. To do whatever it took.

This time Kilian smiled, actually smiled. “You know ... a boy once sat across from me and told me that exact thing.”

I thought for a minute. “William?”

He nodded. “Yes, he was quite the ambitious one. He was a bright child who went through a tragedy. I'll leave the details for him to disclose, but he was just a child when he wanted to grow strong, just like you. I told him if he waited till he was old enough, I'd show him, and he's become stronger than I'd ever hoped.”

He talked like a proud dad, his eyes faraway, as if he were reminiscing on his favorite memory. I imagined a young William pleading for Kilian's help. What kind of childhood did he have?

“You can be strong all on your own, Aaron. We’ll help show you.”

“How long does it take?”

Kilian shut his book and gave me his full attention. “What makes you think you are out of time?”

“Akira being here kinda speeds things along ... That’s what you were arguing with my brothers about, isn’t it?”

“It was unexpected that a member of The Guard would expose themselves in such a manner. I’ll admit I didn’t account for it. That led to some disagreements, but it does not change what we are doing. This new development puts us at a greater advantage. Understanding the why behind it changes everything. We know how valuable you are.”

“Let me guess ... you’re not going to elaborate.”

I couldn’t tell if he was talking in circles, giving me just enough information to stop me from asking questions but not enough to tell me anything. It felt a lot like all the times I’d tried talking to my older brothers.

“I’ve got time. Ask me. Whatever you want.”

I leaned back in my chair and let the fire warm my back. “What can you tell me about the coven? The Guard? All of it. I want to know all of it.”

“You’re talking to the world’s leading expert on the matter. I’m one of the last alive who has any information on the remaining covens.”

He pointed to his book, a half-written page of that fancy writing I'd bet they used to write the Declaration of Independence. He'd been transcribing. The writing on the spines of the books stood out to me. All labeled with various dates.

“Of the few covens left, I've been studying this one for more than three hundred years. The queen, as you know Her, was the daughter of a Chieftain in Northern Ireland more than five hundred years ago. She took over his rein after he died and was loved by many. She married shortly after. Only, She was said to have died just three years later of an unknown illness, according to Her death certificate.” He leaned back in his chair, and it creaked. “There isn't much written about Her other than Her marriage and Her untimely death. Cecily Dooley was Her name. Any mention of Her disappears after that, but it's likely She was moved to a monastery to hide Her identity. I believe She inspired a few stories in Irish mythology. Tales of a woman so beautiful that young poets and musicians became enthralled with Her and they no longer cared about eating or sleeping. Their yearning for Her would bring them to an early grave.”

“This is a person?”

“All of the queens were people at one time. Some believe their souls are still trapped inside their bodies, and they're just a vessel for the demon. But it's only a theory.”

“If She's from Ireland, how did She end up here?”

“The first were created in Europe, but the ritual and the information spread. Once created, the queens were often smuggled from country to country for various reasons—war, shifts in power. It was not always a stable environment. Without a fully formed Guard, their dynamics become volatile. I believe She was moved sometime in the late 1800s, and they were able to interweave themselves into the fabric of New York City. Thanks to some information your brothers gave us, we were able to gain a better understanding of how they work internally. They’re able to work closely with crime families as underwriters for their crimes, providing them confidence, occasional funding, and influence to carry out their criminal activities. Not that they’re spotless in manner, but it explains how they’ve eluded detection. Their main objective is to guard Her. They do that by ensuring Her protection.”

“So ... The Guard ... it’s important to them.”

“The Guard is the most important component that makes up these families. Queens don’t pick just anyone. They’ll wait centuries for their chosen to be born. Someone who is compatible with their covenant.”

Chosen. My older brothers were chosen before they were even born. Maybe before my mom was. What did they have that couldn’t be found for centuries? What did *we* have?

“W-what about Presley and me? Akira said we were ... practice.”

“Some roles only certain people can fill. Others have more leeway. It doesn’t mean you are any less important to them.

Sometimes they just need ... to feel that connection. Your relationship with your brothers is special. She felt that when She touched you.”

A fact I liked to forget. That memory still didn't feel like mine. I liked to imagine it had been a dream. No way I met Her. I was still trying to convince myself She was real. She was; my brothers knew Her. Yet I couldn't wrap my head around Her being real. She might as well be a fictitious cartoon villain because, other than the impression She left on my brothers, I had no evidence of my own of Her existence. Only the blood in my veins that turned me into a monster.

He continued. “Queens will wait centuries for their Guard, and when that balance is disrupted ... one dies, for instance, it leaves a hole. Sometimes the new can't forge with the old, and the old Guard will ... pass away.”

He clenched his jaw as he spoke. I guessed he wasn't talking about them peacefully falling asleep.

“Why? Why do they go willingly?”

“All for Her. Because when their Guard is solidified, it's nearly impossible to find them or take them down.”

Kilian's voice sped up when he talked about The Family. Like there was nothing in this world he'd rather talk about. A strange excitement in his eyes reminded me of the way Presley looked when he talked about winning poker games last year—back when they let him play.

The door opened and Luke peeked in. His hair was disheveled, and he had a bandage on his wrist. They'd been sparring. He glanced between the two of us.

"I was told I could find you here. Come on." He motioned me toward the door, and I followed.

"Don't worry. I'm here whenever you want to know more."

I nodded and prepared myself for the real lecture I was sure Luke would give me.

He led me outside where the pool had seen better days. No matter how much we cleaned it, the leaves blew in there, and whoever was supposed to be putting the chemicals in had stopped.

Luke towered over me. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh ... uh. Okay. I think. I had shit dreams, but I'm okay."

He wrapped me in a hug, and I froze. His muscles constricted, and after the shock dissolved, I melted into his shoulder and patted him a few times on the back.

I managed a muffled, "I'm okay. Really."

When he pulled away, he smiled. "I know. I ... I'm sorry—"

"Don't do it."

"Just let me say it."

"No. I got to save you for once. We're still not anywhere close to even from all the times you've saved my ass. Can we just leave it at that?"

He crossed his arms and let out the biggest dad sigh I'd ever heard. "Fine."

Akira came to mind when I least wanted him to. My brother was meant to be a member of The Guard. Destined. He didn't fit the mold. He was too kind. Too good. What did they want with him? Why him?

"What did Kilian tell you?"

"We just talked about ... The Guard. Just histories and stuff."

That was enough to make the joy leak from his features. "I know you're curious and I won't tell you not to be, but you don't need to be learning that stuff. I don't want you to worry about any of this."

"I know."

I nodded, but doubt had settled in for permanent residence. I needed to know more. I needed to be ready.

Twenty-Four

KIMBERLY



Think about it. He wanted me to think about it. It was a horrible idea to split up. That's what I thought. Go to New York and do what? Go to college. Let them all get recruited into the vampire cult and get themselves killed? And I would just go on pretending they didn't exist.

No. Absolutely not.

Smoke lingered in the musty car air because of Zach's cigarettes and the wildfire smoke sneaking its way into our

cozy town. The fire was too far away for me to worry about, but a strong wind had set in, making it impossible to ignore. It was Friday, which meant there was a traffic jam of cars in town.

Two weeks. Two weeks with no sign of Akira or anyone else from The Family. Two weeks of me agonizing over my life's decisions. Two weeks of silence between Aaron and me.

I wanted to give myself an authentic experience of what it would be like if he wasn't in my life anymore. Only, it was impossible when every waking moment I was forced up next to him. Aaron, Presley, and I were in the back seat. This time I made Presley sit in the middle. I welcomed his warmth in contrast to the cool fall breeze outside. It was a rare occasion that we were allowed to ride in the car together.

Akira's appearance changed everything. I became aware of how naive I had been earlier in the year. The Legion weren't a threat. The danger we were in back then was nothing compared to what was happening now. The "hiding in plain sight" was much harder than it sounded. Kilian had called in more recruitments to shuffle us around and watch us from the background. If Luke was a king and Zach a knight, that meant Aaron, Presley, and I were all pawns. We all served our time on the chess board.

Everyone was training. Zach's days of sweeping floors at the theater were over. The day after Akira showed up, the twins quit. Zach was constantly there, which meant Luke needed to be there too so William didn't need to split his time.

Luke still trained for resistance to Her blood. He was weaker and worn out most days, but he kept training Aaron. Even Presley was being more cooperative than usual and complained a lot less about splitting his time between the gym and the movie theater.

And then there was me. The biggest cliché. I was doomed to be the victim. I couldn't protect my newfound family. Though I had convinced Skylar to give me lessons, I just wanted to do something to make myself seem useful. My mind was never at ease. Always pulling me in two directions.

One held on to the present, to Kimberly Burns, the college girl. The orphan who would single-handedly pull herself up by her bootstraps and graduate college. All with a newfound skill of popcorn making. The girl who had finally made some good friends she'd happily carry through life with. In the last two weeks, I'd tried to find her again. I locked myself in my room at night and did all the things I used to do. I watched the same movies and read the same books. I'd pulled my hiking backpack out of the closet to pack for New York and even typed a text to Chris, but the bag went back in the closet, and I deleted the text.

The other side of me screamed and gnawed under the surface. Someone who barely thought of her schoolwork and was instead focused on what was next—beyond the brick of BFU. And that girl needed the Calem boys to be okay. It kept her up at night staring at the ceiling. Thinking. Calculating what The Family's next move might be and what she could do to help.

I wasn't sure which girl was winning the game of tug-of-war in my mind.

"I'm surprised William agreed to separate cars this time. He's usually attached to you guys at the hip." Presley's voice cut my concentration.

"He said they'd already be there by the time we got there," Luke said, lying back in the passenger seat, but his foot was tapping. It was always tapping.

"Don't get me wrong, I like having the guy around. He's not bad to look at either."

Zach drove which meant nineties rock blared from the radio.

He spoke over the music. "Presley ... don't start with that shit right now."

"What!? Come on. I have eyes. Kim, back me up. William is hot, right?"

My cheeks went hot, and I tried not to look at Aaron leaning forward and staring daggers at Presley. William was attractive. That was a fact, but I honestly hadn't given it another thought since we'd suspected him a vampire in the spring.

"Well ... uh ... yeah, I guess so."

I felt guilty for admitting it. Though, I had no reason to. Aaron and I weren't together, and he'd made it very clear we should go our separate ways.

“Sorry, Pres, he’s way too old for you ... and for Kim, for that matter,” Luke said matter-of-factly but with a softness in his voice.

“I’m right here, guys,” Aaron said.

This time Zach turned to Luke. “Uh, yeah ... too old, and, I don’t know ... he tried to kill us all, and he’s Legion. What are we even talking about right now?”

Luke held up his hands. “I’m just saying, I don’t approve.”

Zach one-handed the steering wheel while he pulled a cigarette and lighter from his pocket. In a flash, the lighter clicked and he pulled in a long drag. It was his second cigarette in ten minutes.

Presley snickered in the back seat as the back-and-forth continued. He nudged, which confirmed my suspicion that he wanted to get a rise out of everyone and lighten the mood.

“You’re right. Sorry, Aaron, I wasn’t being a bro. Say, I’ve been meaning to ask, how does the whole vampire-human thing work for you and Kim? There’s got to be some interesting kinky biting action going on there.”

I sucked in a breath before the chaos ran loose, knowing I didn’t need to say a single word because the boys would do enough talking.

“Presley!” Luke and Aaron said at virtually the same time.

“Right, right, I forgot you guys have that totally platonic thing going on right now. Maybe you wouldn’t care if she

dates someone else, then? Maybe I should tell Will she's free game? Or, hey, maybe I'll steal her."

Presley winked at me. I'd told him everything. He'd come in my room to check on me when I skipped dinner, and to my own disdain, I couldn't hold back the tears when I told him what Aaron said. I didn't want to cry. I didn't even know why I did. I knew the day would come. I should be thankful Aaron was smart enough to say what needed to be said. To do the thing I knew needed to be done. It should have been a relief. But I kept crying about it, and that made me mad. Who replaced all the logic in my brain and left me with all these ... feelings?

Aaron shook Luke's seat from behind. "Luke, make him stop."

Luke turned, still serene and calm like he'd done it a million times. "What did I say about making girls feel uncomfortable?"

"You're right. Sorry, Kim." Presley batted his eyelashes at me.

"What about me!?" Aaron said.

"Oops, I missed one. Sorry, Aaron." Presley snickered and turned his attention back to Zach. "Hey, can I paint your nails?"

"Does it look like this is a good time, Pres? I'm driving."

Presley leaned over the armrest. "Come on, you said I could, and I brought it with me."

“Paint Luke’s nails.”

Luke smiled, holding up his hand with black nail polish.
“Already done.”

“Aaron, then.”

“No way. We’ve got beef right now.”

“No,” Zach said.

“But you promised.”

“Will you shut up if I do?”

“For at least five minutes.”

“Fine.” Zach swerved the car while he steered with his cigarette hand and moved the other behind the seat. “You get one hand.”

I marveled at Presley’s ability to wrangle his brothers. On the surface, it was purely unhinged behavior, but he knew his brothers well and exactly how to help them with their stress levels. Except for maybe Aaron.

It wasn’t long after Presley finished painting Zach’s nails and filling the car up with the stench of nail polish that Zach turned into the gym parking lot. There was no warning and I fell into Presley, pushing him into Aaron.

“Everyone out of the fucking car.”

Before I could open my door, Presley had crawled out the other side and was at my door.

He opened it with a cunning grin. “For you, my lady.”

I accepted and straightened the oversized T-shirt I wore over my leggings. He grabbed my hand and kissed it and then wrapped his arm snugly around my shoulder. I was thankful I'd chosen my sneakers because of the height difference.

Zach shook his head and rolled his eyes before throwing his cigarette in the dirt. "You're all giving me a fucking headache."

The laughter that fluttered in my chest surprised me. The first laugh I'd had in those two weeks. Presley was trying to make Aaron jealous. And judging from the scowl on Aaron's face, it worked. I'd be lying if I'd said that didn't make me a little happy.



Aaron was getting good. An unending determination radiated from him as he dodged Luke's swing and shuffled his feet. He grinned, enjoying the challenge. Long gone was the nervous, unsure boy who followed every whim. No, Aaron had matured, that much I could see. With that maturity came a confidence that only made his steps more solid.

Everything he learned brought me comfort. And he looked pretty good in the tight shirt and basketball shorts.

Heat rose in my cheeks as he danced around Luke with a smile plastered on his face. With one motion, he ducked around Luke's punch and landed his own across Luke's jaw.

He jumped up. "I finally got you!"

Hair in his eyes, Aaron spotted me watching him from across the room, and Luke tackled him to the ground. They laughed as Luke pulled him back to his feet.

"Distracted?"

"Yeah, sorry."

"Alright, I think that's it for me, anyway. I've got a meeting with Kilian." Luke ran his hands through his hair.

"Did you say home? Because I want to go too. I'm over this." Presley hung upside down from the pullup bar; he'd been done sparring with Thane for thirty minutes and was having trouble entertaining himself. I'd occupied most of my time with homework.

"Alright, fine." Zach pulled away from William and left the ring.

"I think I want to stay for a little bit ... if that's okay, Thane?" Aaron said.

"Hell yeah, let's do some drills!" Thane was naturally full of energy and swaying on his feet at the mention of more training. Aaron, Presley, and Thane had become their own little club. They were always together talking about training or places Thane had been.

It all felt right. Everything was falling in line for them. I'd heard whispers about the future. Kilian had made plans that spanned twenty years at a time. Blackheart was just temporary, and every day they took one step out the door, and I felt ...

alone—a side quest on their bigger story. I didn't belong in their world.

As everyone packed up to leave, Aaron took a seat next to me.

“You should stay.”

He meant the gym. But it still made the butterflies flutter in my stomach.

“No, I've got stuff to do.”

“Stuff sounds important.” He smiled, knowing it would make me smile.

I'd made a fatal mistake. Aaron Calem was my kryptonite. He'd found an undeniable way around my cold shoulder—bugging me until I cracked a smile.

Couldn't he just let me be miserable?

“So important.”

“What if I told you ... staying would be infinitely more fun than being at the house?”

He didn't need to convince me, I already knew that.

“Let me guess, because you'll be here?” I kept my eyes on the crisp pages of my textbook.

“Totally. And maybe we can get you some ice cream on the way home? Your favorite ... orange sherbet?”

Food must have been the way to his heart when he was human because he'd offered to cook me everything under the

sun. Which I replied by thanking him and declining. I did miss his grilled cheese sandwiches, though.

“Ignore him, Kim. I can get you that sherbet, and you can eat it in my room. I’ve got a sweet bedspread that’s way comfier than Aaron’s.”

Aaron gritted his teeth, and I swear I heard him growl. “You’re pushin’ it, Pres.”

He put his hands in the air and patted Aaron’s shoulder on the way out. “Love you, brother!”

I stayed, but it didn’t have anything to do with Aaron in his tight shirt or the fact he wanted me there. No. It was quiet and perfect for studying. I had a big test coming up and it gave me time to make flash cards. After all, that’s what I should have been focusing on. If I was going to be college-girl Kimberly, that meant refocusing.

Skylar sat next to me, with her hair pinned up at her ears by the sparkly barrette I let her borrow, while I ate my dinner. A cold-cut sandwich from the deli in town.

“Thanks for the sandwich. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I did. You need to eat.” She watched Thane and Aaron spar as closely as I did.

Skylar’s calm demeanor had become my new favorite thing. She was sure of everything. When asked if she wanted to go or to stay, she’d replied immediately.

I tuned into the boys’ conversation. “Now, what to be careful of ... not only do you need to be in control of their

arms, your main objective in a fight is to keep them from grabbing and biting you. Only the venom in our teeth will pierce skin. Once your opponent loses blood, you will be able to pierce their skin with other objects. Our bones stay solid, but our skin can be torn.” He tapped Aaron in the chest. “Always protect your head, but more importantly ... your heart. You must have blood in your heart.”

Aaron nodded, and I was thankful. That’s the information I wanted him to know. He had all the right people to guide him. Thane would protect him. I trusted that.

I tried to focus again on my book and ignore the ache in my chest as they continued sparring.

After another half hour passed, and Thane’s voice echoed in the empty building. “Kim, do you want to learn anything?”

Thane vibrated with energy despite having been pinned to the ground by Aaron.

Skylar shook her head. “Thane. Don’t. Her wrist is still recovering.”

“What? I’ll be careful. I’ve heard you know some moves, let’s see them.” He grabbed striking pads.

“No, Skylar’s right. You shouldn’t.” Aaron looked at me like a lost child with nothing but pity and worry.

Suddenly, I was hot all over. I didn’t want to hear that word ever again.

I slammed my book shut. “No, I think that sounds great, actually.”

I moved into the ring and flexed my hand. I'd just had my stitches taken out and was way too sore to hit the bag, but I could go through the motions and move through his instructions.

Skylar and Aaron stayed at the edge of the ring while Thane ran me through a few moves. Most I had forgotten, but his teaching jogged my memory of my classes at the W. It was like riding a bike. All the muscle memory was still there. We danced around each other playfully for a few minutes.

Just when I was starting to loosen up and get into a rhythm, Thane moved around me too fast, and my head careened into his shoulder. The pain rocked me back to my heels, and I covered my eye from the sharp pain.

A string of cuss words followed, not by me.

But Aaron was there before I could move, with his arm protectively around my waist, and his soft scent wrapped me in comfort. His warm-sunlight eyes greeted me, and he touched my face with urgency. "Are you okay?"

Before I could answer, the darkness pooled into his irises. The tension building in his shoulders was directed at Thane.

"Aaron, it's okay. It was an accident," I said as I wiped away what I thought was my nose running, but a small smudge of blood stained my hand.

Thane was next to us, checking on me. Too close.

"I'm so sorry. I just slipped."

But Aaron was gone.

He grabbed Thane by his shirt and took him to the ground hard enough to crack the beams underneath us, and Skylar held me up and pulled me away from their scuffle.

“Sorry isn’t good enough.”

Aaron pinned one of Thane’s arms under his leg and used his hands to immobilize Thane with ease. His fingers dug deep into his skin. He went for Thane’s neck, spewing black blood over the floor.

Skylar and I rushed over to pull him off.

“Stop! I’m okay.” I tried prying Aaron’s stone arms from Thane’s neck.

“He could have given you another concussion.” He stopped, his eyes still hungry with rage and destruction.

“I’m okay.” I leaned in, rubbing his back. I probably should have felt more scared than I did.

No matter which way Thane thrashed for leverage, Aaron was stronger.

Aaron leaned closer, with his thumb and pointer finger nestled under Thane’s jaw. “There better not be a next time.”

“Come on.” Skylar grabbed Aaron, using all her strength to get him to his feet. Then she went to work helping Thane recover. It was the first time I’d seen her even slightly frazzled. She used her jacket to cover Thane’s neck while he comforted her like she was an overbearing mother and he was a child who’d just gotten a papercut.

I steadied Aaron with both hands. As soon as the warmth returned to his eyes, he stumbled into me.

I called for Skylar, unable to hold him up on my own. I must have appeared terrified because she soothed me.

“He’ll be fine. We just need to get him home. Both of them.”

Thane immediately took up Aaron’s other side as he became deadweight.

“No, Thane. I can help.”

He shook his head and smiled. “Nah, I got him. He’s kind of the ball to my chain.”

“What did I just do?” Aaron rubbed his eyes, still not registering the black blood smeared on his clothes.

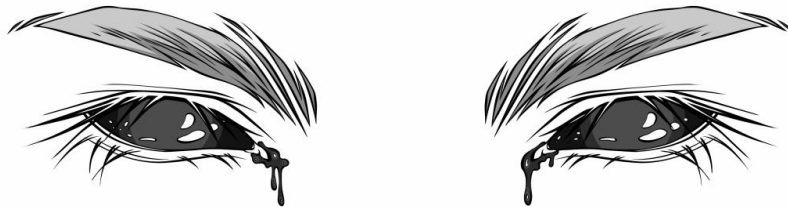
“Don’t worry about it, brother, it’s all right,” Thane said.

He mouthed his apologies to me as they headed for the door.

I nodded in acceptance, but my face felt hot where I’d been hit. It would bruise. For reasons I didn’t understand, Chelsea came to mind. She’d worry. How was I going to explain yet another injury to her? I couldn’t tell her the real reason. Being a human in a vampire’s world was dangerous, and it didn’t matter how protected I was. Somehow, I always ended up in the crossfire.

Twenty-Five

AARON



“**Y**ou should take Kimberly to homecoming,” Luke said. Before last night, I’d been enthused by the idea. I was willing to try anything to get her to talk to me again. Only, now she was injured again, and I’d gone feral in front of her. Not great topics.

I’d explicitly gone out of my way to prevent Zach from finding out what happened at the gym last night. He was in a shit mood, and I didn’t want to be the thing that pushed him over the edge. Luke, I told right away, and Presley ... Presley was just good at finding out things he wasn’t supposed to. I was surprised when he didn’t blackmail me to keep the secret.

He'd mentioned taking care of Kim in his room, and I had to have Luke put an end to his fake flirting before I accidentally killed him in a fit of rage. Ever since that day with Akira, I couldn't trust myself anymore. That Thing was too close to the front of my mind, and now I had to evaluate if I'd kill my little brother if he took one of his jokes a little far. I knew he was joking, and even though it was annoying as hell—okay, I was a little jealous—the real me would never let that stuff get under my skin. But the monster in me was prepared to rip someone's heart out for touching her.

I'd profusely apologized to Thane when it all came rushing back. It was an accident. He took it like a champ and told me to forget about it.

I wish I could.

I'd tried to apologize to Kimberly too but like every night since Akira, she'd cut me off by shutting her bedroom door in my face. Of all the things happening in my life, her not talking to me was bothering me the most. I was a complete ass for admitting it, but Luke was constantly telling me to focus on school and the future when I brought up anything to do with The Family.

He'd say, "Think about five years from now. What do you want to be doing?"

And I'd say, "I just want to not be dead ..."

And then I'd think for another minute and add, "I want us all to not be dead."

He'd just sigh and tell me to think of more things.

Homecoming could now be scratched off the list. The whole stadium was painted in deep green and white. Every inch of the bleachers was filled for home and away. We were safe. For the first time in weeks, we weren't sandwiched between my older brothers.

Presley busied himself by being my buffer, sitting between Kim and me, talking nonstop.

First, it was his thousandth mascot story. Then, it was a tangent about how he thought the fraternities and sororities needed to have some huge festival in the spring. He had all these ridiculous ideas, but she listened to all of them with steady enthusiasm, laughing and giggling. Proving the fact *I* was the third wheel and, once again, I was in danger of killing my little brother.

If I had a moment alone with her, maybe she'd talk with me. We were still friends, right? Or did she hate me and never want to talk to me again? I couldn't figure it out no matter how many nights I spent staring up at the ceiling. I couldn't let things end like this.

Presley slurped his monstrosity of a cocktail he'd snuck into the game. His BFU jersey swallowed him, and he'd stolen one of Luke's hats and put it on backward.

"Pres, did you down that entire thing?" I asked.

"Possibly. Maybe. No, wait. Yes."

He was drunk, and I wanted to be too, but I needed to be alert, just in case. I think Presley was having party withdrawals. We were the only frat that didn't put up a tent for homecoming. Zach and Luke had to make their rounds to all the tailgating parties to save face.

“Do you guys ever think there are other universes out there where we are allowed to just be ourselves and do whatever we want?” Presley said, wrapping Kimberly and me in his arms. “I'd want us to all be together.”

“We're together now,” Kimberly said.

“I know. I know. I just want this to last forever.” Presley turned and rubbed his face on mine. “I love you, man. Even if I'm still mad at you for trying to break up our happy family.”

“Jeez.” I pulled away and pulled the cup out of his hands. “I love you too, but no more drinks for you.”

“Halftime is about to start! Zach wants me to meet up with them over by the entrance. I'll be right back.” Presley shot to his feet. “Don't worry, I'll be fine.”

“Skylar, can you go with him? Please?” Kimberly was watching him with worried eyes.

She agreed despite the hesitation and followed Presley with a sigh. I guessed she was probably cursing Dom under her breath for offering himself up for extra protection detail for the twins due to the crowds.

“You have the coolest hair! Do you do it yourself? You have to teach me. Start right now from start to finish. Tell me every

single step,” Presley said as they descended the stairs.

I whistled to Thane who was a few seats away. They preferred to stay by the exits. He gave me a thumbs-up. Presley was really drunk, and I needed someone who knew how to handle him from point A to B.

I stole a glance at her. Her red hair stood out in the cloudy November sky. Half of it was pulled up and a few tendrils framed her face. Her lips were flushed with a vivid red. The space between us felt hollow. I could live with being friends. That was better than being nothing. Minutes passed as I struggled to string a sentence together. Every second that passed, she felt farther and farther away. Maybe that’s what I was supposed to do ... let her go.

“And you say I talk a lot.” Akira’s voice was next to me. He leaned against the bleachers with popcorn in his hands. He chomped a few pieces while the crowd cheered around us and I wondered how he was able to do that without throwing up. “I thought he’d never leave.”

Every muscle tightened, and I gripped Kim’s wrist.

“Where are you gonna go?” Akira smiled. “No one’s looking at us right now.”

He was right. The crowd thinned in anticipation for halftime, and my brothers were across the field. Of course, I sent our last bit of help away.

“Kimberly, go,” I said.

“No.”

I knew she wouldn't.

“Yeah, Kimberly, stay.” Akira's arm was around my shoulder with his hand inches from Kimberly. “I doubt you could flinch before I'm able to drop you. Plus ... it's game day. Woo!!”

Akira threw a few pieces of popcorn in the air as our team scored a touchdown.

“I see this isn't some casual fling. You really care about this girl.” Akira squeezed my shoulder. His breath was too close to my ear. “Maybe, I'll even let her live.”

I blinked and then he was next to her. Had he used his mind control? We were in trouble.

He grabbed her hand. “Such beautiful delicate hands. Hm, I've seen better.”

She yelped as he squeezed her fingers. A second was all it took for me to see red. Red everywhere. I stood up. Ready for a fight. Guard be damned. As for the people in the bleachers around us, I wasn't opposed to a show.

He leaned over, put his hand on my knee, then I was sitting—not my doing.

“I forgot you were the crazy one. My bad. Look, she's fine.” Akira kissed her hand, and she yanked it away.

“What do you want?” I said through clenched teeth.

“I need you to come with me. Alone. I can't risk Kilian seeing me here.” Akira surveyed the crowd. “Say, Kimmy, did

you like my gift I gave you last time we were here?”

The color drained from her cheeks. “You ... you were the mascot.”

“Yep. What a blast! You college kids really know how to party.”

This was bad. He had the upper hand and likely some plan.

Kimberly tried to wriggle his hand off her knee. “He’s not going. Right, Aaron?”

I shouldn’t, but if I had the opportunity to get him to take his hand off her, I needed to take it.

He sighed. “You’re going to make me do the thing? Fine. If you don’t, I’ll snap her neck. Okay, now will you come with me?”

“Kim, stay here.” I stood, and she grabbed my arm.

“Aaron. No. Don’t.”

The desperation in her voice was like a sedative shot into my vein. It hit with enough force to knock me right on my ass. But it was her or me. So, it had to be me.

“I’ll be right back. I promise.”

“Don’t go for help. Or, you know. Death,” Akira said while he gripped my arm and pulled me down the bleachers. Everything was a blur. He had all the control. He led me to a gate underneath the bleachers—he’d already broken the lock—then he shut us inside.

“You gonna kill me ... or are you going to talk me to death like last time?”

Maybe he wanted to after last time.

I waited as he sauntered toward me. He could pass as a student with the clothes he had on. Baggy black jeans and a leather jacket.

“Let me guess what they told you ... we’re all liars ... manipulators.” He pushed his hand into one of the steel beams, and the metal creaked and tore in his grasp. “But how could that be true? I’m strong enough to take all of you home right now ... but I won’t because I want to wait till you’re ready to come home.”

Home. The way he said it tickled my spine. He truly believed—in his own twisted way—we were family.

He grabbed me by the collar and pushed me against the beam. Everything was still blurry.

“What about your older brothers? All we were doing was protecting them. We helped them so they never had to experience any of the hurt of our world. We shielded them.”

“To manipulate them,” I spat.

“No. No. Because they’re family. They are special. Just like you.” He leaned in closer to my face. “You of all people know how important family is, don’t you?”

I said nothing. My body stayed firmly pressed against the beam. The way he carried himself mirrored Zach’s cold stare,

and the desperation was an echo of Luke. That look on his face in the church. The way he talked about Her ...

“Loyalty and family values. That’s what you’ll find. What does The Legion value except our demise ... revenge? Most Legion members are filled with hate. That’s all they know. But you see it ... the holes in their armor. They want what we have. They’re weak because they cannot fully work together like ... family.”

He grabbed my hand and held it to his chest with a wild fierceness in his eyes. “But we’re already bonded. Can’t you feel it? It’s Her.”

I pulled away, but his fingers dug into the flesh in my palm. “It’s all love for Her, and when you meet Her, you’ll finally understand.”

“Stop.”

“Don’t push it away. Tell me you don’t feel it even now? The connection between you and me ... The Family ... Her.”

I swallowed. I wanted to punch him, but another part of me knew exactly what he was talking about. It was a feeling that couldn’t be explained in any human capacity. It felt like a strong rope tied to my heart, pulling at every mention of Her. I should have hated him. But I didn’t. He felt like someone I knew—a long-lost relative.

He craned his ear to the side with a chuckle. “She didn’t listen. She went for help.”

“Yeah, she does that.”

He released me and straightened his jacket. “You can’t trust them. You know I’m right.”

In the blink of an eye, Akira was on the ground, and Luke towered over him.

“There you are. Finally, I can get in a word with just the three of us.”

“What did he say to you?” Luke growled. He was a hulking mass compared to Akira.

I was taken aback by the anger in Luke’s features. A stark contrast to the faraway state of shock when we’d first met Akira in the forest.

Akira popped up and dusted off his jacket. “Oh, you know, just family stuff.”

“I’m going to kill you.” Luke moved forward.

“You and I both know that’s not true.” Akira rolled his eyes. “Luke, you’re tired. I can tell how run down you are. You need rest. We can help.”

Luke stepped back. There was real fear filling the air between us.

The sounds of drumming and tubas echoed in the mountain air. Another world rested beyond the bleachers.

“Don’t worry, I’m not here to mess with your memories. Just deliver a loving message ... She misses you.”

Luke’s body stilled and his jaw clenched.

“She’s devastated without you.”

“Don’t.”

“Luke, I know how you feel about Her. You think you’re the only one that’s had a taste of Her blood? I’ve had just a fraction of what you’ve had. I can only imagine how you feel being away from Her. Actually, I don’t need to imagine. I can feel it. Your pain has been tormenting me every day since you left. I don’t know how you stand it ... but I guess it affects us all differently.”

Luke didn’t deny it. His chest heaved.

He put his hands on Luke’s shoulders. “This place has nothing for you. You know it. I know it. This isn’t where you’re meant to be. Why do you think no matter how hard you try, you can’t escape that feeling? Because you’re working toward something impossible.”

We were fucked.

I grabbed Luke’s arm. “Luke, come on.”

“Yeah, come on. Let’s go back. Right now. We can leave the others here. She just wants you home.” Akira pulled a plastic bag from his pocket. It was a blood bag filled with black blood.

He moved it in front of Luke’s face. “You can have this right now ... just come with me.”

“Luke! He’s lying!”

My words fell on deaf ears; like a dog with a ball, his eyes were trained on the bag, watching every splash of the black liquid.

“This is your chance to be the best big brother. Save your family. Do that sacrificial martyr shit you love ... and still get exactly what you want. What your body is craving.”

There was a shuffling of feet and voices coming toward us. Help was on the way, but with the crowd, it was slower than I wanted.

I squeezed Luke’s shoulder. “Think about all the training you did. Don’t let it be for nothing. You’re not Hers ... you’re my brother.”

Luke turned, and I finally saw it. The mirror. Not in size or looks but in every other way possible, we were the same. Only his inner demons were stronger than mine.

Akira’s gaze poured through me. “You’re going to love Her ... one day soon you’ll understand. You’ll never want anyone else ... or anything.”

“No. He’s never going to meet Her. And I’m not going with you.” Luke’s voice was stronger this time.

The boredom returned to Akira’s face, and he frowned. “You guys are starting to piss me off. I’m trying everything to make this easy for you. I’ve been nice. I can’t guarantee it will continue to be that way.”

Akira’s threat sunk into my stomach like a stone.

Luke didn’t budge. “I’m ready when you are.”

A wicked smile snuck onto Akira’s lips, and he grabbed the back of Luke’s neck to whisper in his ear, and I couldn’t make out the words.

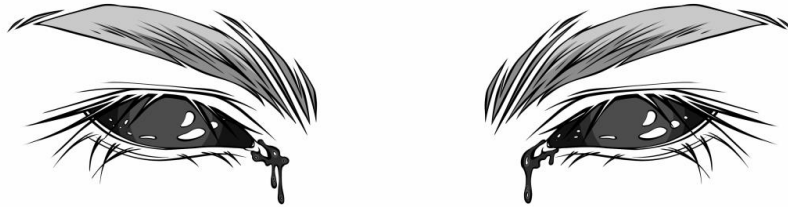
Akira pushed him away, and in a second, he disappeared into the crowd.

“What was that? What did he say?”

His stare hardened while locked on the place Akira left. There was a give in his voice, and his eyes glistened. “Nothing.”

Twenty-Six

AARON



“**S**he’s not going to be able to hide that shiner for long,” Presley said, with his legs dangling over the counter as we watched Kimberly disappear to get the mop and bucket for the restrooms. I tried not to curse at his lack of help with closing duties. “Zach is going to flip his shit. Please, I want to be there when he sees it.”

“What can I do to help? Kimberly won’t let me apologize to her any more,” Thane said, standing next to us in the lobby.

“You don’t have to do anything. It was an accident,” I reassured him.

“I don’t know. Maybe you should grovel at her feet some more. She’s been having a rough time.” Presley snickered.

He wasn’t wrong.

In less than a year, she’d gained a black eye, at least four bite marks, stitches, and a concussion. If she wasn’t injured, she was sick. Sick from the party I threw and made her come to. The common denominator in these issues was me.

The scattering of popcorn and stale candy across the floor paled in comparison to the cataclysm of my life. The twins were freaked. Zach was back to being protective of Luke and refused to go anywhere without him. And The Legion reeled from their lack of defense. Their explanation was shit, and tensions were high. Work brought me little relief. The only good thing I had going was fall recess was later this week, and I had only one class today. Work and home were the only places I felt safe ... the only places I could keep her safe. But Kimberly was still mad at me. Why else was she still not saying anything?

We’d spoken briefly when the others reached us under the bleachers, but that was days ago. Her not wanting me to die didn’t mean much of anything. Akira was closing in, and I didn’t know how much time I had with her.

“I can do that! I’ll clean the bathrooms.” My voice echoed in the empty theater.

Our manager loved Kimberly, and I was pretty sure that was the only reason we could close together.

“No, I got it.” Kimberly pushed the bucket and broom through the door to the men’s restroom. Like I was some random coworker she’d never cared about. Some random person she’d never kissed. Her bandages were gone, but I knew her wrist still had to hurt.

“She’s pissed at you, dude.” Presley was lying on the counter, and I pushed him off.

“I’ve gathered that, Pres.”

“She told me everything you said. It was pretty harsh.”

“She told you everything?”

“Uh, yeah, Kim and I are besties.”

I hung my head. “How do I fix it? I can’t take the silent treatment anymore. Two weeks is way too long.”

I needed something to happen. Closure, pain, whatever awaited me. It was a special kind of hell having been close to her, only to watch her shut me out of her life like it was nothing. It was justified. I’d hurt her in more ways than one.

“Yeah, well sending her to New York would feel a lot worse than that.”

“I just said it was a good option!”

“You basically friend-zoned her and told her to get as far away from you as possible.”

“Is that what she thinks?!”

He shrugged.

“Help me!” I grabbed his shoulders and shook him.

“Why don’t you guys catch a movie together? What’s her favorite one?” Thane sounded eager.

I thought for a minute. “Well, she loves *The Princess Bride*.”

“Perfect. I can convince Sky to watch a movie with me and Presley.” Thane smiled.

Presley hit his hands on the counter. “On it! You just got to get her to agree to stay here in the same theater with you for a few hours.”

Alone time with Kimberly could work. Surely I could get something out of her.

Like a creep, I walked into the bathroom while she cleaned. The psychedelic tile patterns always hurt my brain, and the smell of bleach was enough to take down a horse.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” She kept her eyes on her task, but she struggled to move the broom with her nondominant hand.

“I’m begging you to let me clean the floor.”

“I can do it.”

“Kim.” I grabbed the broom handle, and she stopped. “Please talk to me before I implode.”

She smiled, but it did nothing to dissolve the worry lines in her forehead. “Aaron. I’m trying to make this easier for the both of us.”

I stepped closer to her. “I know, but I don’t want easy. And you’re obviously way better at staying away from me than I am of you. I’m sorry ... for so many things.”

She stared at the floor. “I was just trying to ... make this hurt less.”

It was worse than I thought. She pitied me. I was sure of it. She’d only stayed around these last two weeks because I wouldn’t stop bugging her.

I stepped in closer and put my hand on the wall above her head. “I think this is going to rip my heart out full and proper. Whether that’s today or tomorrow, you’re gonna leave a scar, Burns. But I need you to go ahead and get it over with because I can’t take it anymore.”

Her eyes glistened, and the redness that gathered in the whites made the blue brighter.

I loved her. I had to make this easier for her. How?

“Kim, I’m the entire reason all this horrible stuff has happened to you. Maybe you need to hate me ... because I’m the person who ruined your life.”

That day I saw her in the cafeteria, I could have just let her get her food. I’d seen her. She was alive. But it wasn’t enough for me because seeing her was the hope I needed. Only now was I able to finally understand how selfish I’d been. Because now that I loved her, I could see the burden I’d placed on her from the beginning. The hard choices I made her make, and the ones she still had to make because of me.

She shook her head and leaned back into the wall. “You didn’t ruin my life.

“I did, and you should hate me for it.”

Her eyes hardened. “I should, shouldn’t I? Seems like there’s a lot of things I should and shouldn’t be doing. Go ahead. Tell me what it is you want me to say here.”

I’d broken through the wall. She was finally fighting with me.

“Say you hate me. Tell me all the ways I messed up.”

“I’m not doing that.”

Why was she still trying to spare me?

“You have to. I need you to tell me.”

“Why?”

“Because. I want to hear you say it.”

“You ... want me to ...”

“Yes.”

I couldn’t tell what emotion flashed across her face. Her ironclad wall worked overtime on keeping me out and hiding her feelings.

“Fine. We were never supposed to meet. I was never supposed to be a part of your life. You shouldn’t have talked to me. We shouldn’t have been friends. We shouldn’t have been in that church together, and we definitely shouldn’t have kissed. Without you, I would have the highest grade point

average. I would be safe and sound in my bed, and no one would be trying to kill me.”

“Good. Now, come on. Just say you hate me and tell me to leave you alone. Break my heart, right here.” I moved in closer.

I needed her to say it. Then I could stop thinking about her and put her on that plane and never look back. I couldn’t wait any longer for the inevitable pain and disappointment of losing her. Not when I loved her like this.

“No.”

Was she going to make me beg and make a bigger fool of myself than I already had?

I towered over her, and she moved her chin up to meet my eyeline.

“Why not?”

“I-I can’t ... I can’t hate you, Aaron.”

“Why?”

I expected her to argue with me again, but instead, she let out a breath. A long slow breath that raised the hairs on my arm. Her lips were perfectly plump and covered in gloss.

Oh.

She blinked a few times and squared her shoulders. She was definitely looking at mine too. And for a split second, I wondered ... did she love me too?

Neither of us were moving, and I should, but she was staring at me. Her pulse grew louder until I could practically hear it echoing in the bathroom.

She couldn't. There was no way.

“Uh, am I interrupting?”

Presley was leaning up against the wall with a bottle of cleaner and a rag in hand.

I wanted to scream, *Yes you fuckin' are!*

“No. Nothing.” Kimberly huffed and moved under my arm and back toward the lobby.

I had to resist the urge to shake him much harder this time. “I'm going to kill you for that.”

“I could hear you guys arguing!”

“We were working it out.”

“Don't worry. I'll fix it. I'll finish cleaning. I already set up your guys' movie ... in the VIP room. Can we be even now?”

He was trying, and he wouldn't be if he didn't care.

I sighed. “Fine.”



Finally, alone. Thane, Skylar, and Presley were in the theater with the longest run time, hoping they'd get the hint. Skylar

reluctantly agreed to the plan despite it interrupting her time at home reading.

Kimberly chewed another piece of sour candy. Her hair was pulled into a messy ponytail, and despite being at school all day and then working, her eyeliner was untouched. She leaned into the red velvet recliner that we shared. The only good thing about working at the theater was getting an all-access pass to the VIP room. The only place with spacious recliners and a foldable table. It was a smaller theater with only ten tables, and we had the whole room to ourselves.

She'd agreed to stay for a movie, but only after Presley assured her it was worth it and Skylar said she needed some relaxation. Our fallout from the bathroom lingered in the air.

“What are we watching?”

“Oh, only your favorite. *The Princess Bride*.”

“What?! No way.” Her eyes lit up in that way I loved, but it was muted compared to its usual brilliance.

“Yep. Made it happen just for you.”

“And it's not even my birthday.”

I admired her long lashes and the warmth in her cheeks.

She couldn't love me ... but what if she did?

I'd never seen it as a real possibility. Sure, I'd imagined, but I imagined a lot of things. Like how beautiful she'd look in a wedding dress with my ring on her finger. Or all the ways I could burn up the time in eternity to make her eyes light up

and see her smile. Those were things I never thought would come true. Only things I wanted.

She did kiss me—more than once—but wanting to kiss me didn't mean she loved me.

Kimberly side-eyed me. “You're doing it again. You're giving me that look.”

“Can you blame me? You're nice to look at.”

Why was I flirting? It was like a reflex.

A smile caught in the corner of her mouth. *Noted.*

“Are you going to tell me what to do some more, or are you just trying to seduce me?”

She was flirting. Flirting didn't mean love, but combined with everything else in our situation, it might. The possibility struck a match and lit up everything I'd hidden away and refused to let myself believe could happen.

I raised a brow, taunting her. “Seducing you? Never. I'm a gentleman.”

“Right ... sure.” She crossed her arms and chewed her bottom lip.

I tried to refocus, but we were watching a love story, and they were kissing.

It was a dangerous game. I'd been wrong before.

“You know everything now, Burns?”

“Definitely.” She said it so matter-of-factly.

Maybe she did love me, and if she did, I had to know, and there was only one way to ask her.

“You know ... I do need you to tell me one more thing and then we can drop this.”

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and raised her brows. “Oh? What’s that?”

In the glow of the theater screen, I held out my heart to her, hoping and fearing the words.

But I had to know.

“Do you love me?”

Her heart skipped, and her lips parted. “What?”

Our shoulders were touching. Burning. She leaned into me. Despite being in the theater with the best surround sound in the county, all I could hear was the sound of her heartbeat steadily kicking her ribs, made worse with every twitch. A minute passed, and yet her heart still hammered. She hadn’t said yes. She could have run, said no, but she didn’t.

Did she want me to make a move?

The thought made my whole body warm. I never thought I’d see the Kimberly Burns I knew appear shy, yet there she was trying not to look at me and doing a poor job of it.

I admired the flush in her cheeks. “Your heart is beating really fast ...”

Her blue eyes met mine and froze me.

I focused on the rise and fall of her chest. Every breath was shallow and fast. Heat flushed my body from head to toe.

Her innocent doe eyes begged me to kiss her. *I couldn't touch her*, I told myself as I trailed my fingers up her arm. Her body responded with goose bumps that sent a chill up my spine. A breath hitched in her chest.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No ...”

I shouldn't kiss her, yet there I was leaning closer to her lips. The heat of her body against mine was intoxicating. Everything fell away, and all that was left was the smell of her perfume clouding my judgment. Those damn roses.

She shuddered as our lips touched.

“Do you love me?” I asked one more time. There were a million reasons not to.

She should say no. She should run. She should break my heart.

“Yes,” she whispered as she gripped the collar of my shirt to pull me into her.

At the taste of her, every bit of control I had flew out the window. I grabbed her all over. Her face, her hair, her arms. Anything to have her closer. The way she tasted ...

Shit.

No part of me wanted to stop kissing her. Ever. It was intoxicating. She loved me.

What happened at the pool was all happiness. Light. Freeing. Every kiss now felt deeper than that. All the hurt and pain we'd endured burned with each touch of our lips. This was need. Fast and ravenous. More than the lust. Though, I felt that too when my fingers wrapped themselves in her hair and she whispered my name. I'd do just about anything to have her keep saying my name like that.

All the pain and frustration from the last two weeks melted away in our urgency. There was no more longing, not with those three little words hanging on her lips.

And there was no way I would be able to stop.

The table was gone in seconds, and I pulled her under me. Our lips effortlessly found each other, and every sound she made felt like a demand to give her more. More pressure. More touch. More everything.

"Tell me." My lips grazed her ear.

A fluttering laughter escaped her. "I love you."

I groaned into her neck and continued kissing under her chin. Now I was laughing too.

"Tell me." Her delicate hands pulled my face to hers.

"I am madly in love with you, Kimberly Burns."

I think I could die happy. I didn't know what could top this in my five-year plan.

She pulled at my shirt and then my hair. I begged for some sense of control, but the taste of her on my tongue made my

brain turn to mush. All I wanted was her and everything she would give me. My hips pressed deeper into hers, and our kisses slowed. I'd wanted it for so long. The night in the pool only scratched the surface of what I wanted. I *needed* to devour her.

Her fingernails scraped along my back. I obliged by kissing her jaw and then her ear and neck. I hung on her every breath, savoring the desire in her sighs. My hands moved down her body, hesitating at her chest and then moving to her outer thigh. I hooked her leg around me, lifting the side of her skirt just enough to where the tips of my fingers grazed her bare skin.

I didn't notice when I tuned into the sound of the blood pumping beneath her skin right beneath my lips.

It remembered the taste of her blood and the warmth coursing through my veins.

Ours.

For once, the voice agreed with me. I felt my resolve slipping. I was giving into it.

The desire for her danced around with the need for her blood until it melded into nothing but red. Deep red. The blood pumping next to my lips left me salivating and eager, and I imagined what it might feel like to bite her for just a second. My teeth at the edge of her skin and the feeling of her pulse radiating in my veins. Red. Everything was red.

The room was a blur when she pulled away.

“Aaron, you’re shaking.”

The sound of her voice pulled me back into the theater.

She was right. Another thing I hadn’t noticed. My palms were shaking, and I willed myself to stay glued to my seat.

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

I pressed my palms to my eyes, shielding myself from her. I had to go before I hurt her. I couldn’t trust myself to keep her safe like this.

“It’s okay.” There was no fear in her voice.

She grabbed one of my trembling hands and placed it on her chest, just over her heart. I tried turning away, guilt filling up like bile in my throat, but her soft hand grazed my face, and she smiled sweetly.

“You’re in control.”

Her heart drummed in a steady rhythm beneath my fingertips. That beautiful symphony. I’d never loved a sound so much, and I loved nothing like I loved her.

The movement of her chest grounded me, and after a few minutes, the shaking in my palms stilled and then it was just me and her, with my hand on her chest and the realization of what we had just done.

I pulled my hand away, still lost in her blue eyes. “You ... this ... was ...”

She shook her head. “We didn’t ... we just ...”

There was no denying it. Every touch and kiss were still there, urging us to fall back into their natural rhythm.

“Okay, okay. Let’s think about this. If you love me, and I love you ... then that just leaves us with one real problem. I’m immortal and you’re not.”

She nodded. “You’re right. That is a problem.”

“And the last thing I want is to have you choose between actually living and being with me.”

“Right.”

“We can’t do this ...”

“Right ... it doesn’t change anything,” she said, watching my lips, and I stared at hers.

“It’s settled ... we have to stop this ...” I moved closer to her.

She gave me that look again, waiting for me to kiss her. “For sure ...”

The heat built in my chest, and I knew if I kissed her, I wouldn’t be able to stop this time. Therefore, I did the one thing I could do.

My coward ass started picking up all the snacks and trash we left in the chair.

“I think it’s time to go home.”

Kim was already heading for the door, pulling her hair back up and smoothing her clothes to appear presentable. “Agreed.”

Thane and Skylar would be pleased, but Kim and I were nowhere near satisfied.

The ride home was mostly in silence. Well, other than Presley. No one asked about our decision to leave early. I was thankful for their lack of care in my personal life. Kimberly offered to drive and made small talk with Skylar on the way home.

I stared out the window as my mind replayed the night over and over again. My hands in her hair. The warmth of her body. Her lips pressed against mine. There was no denying what I wanted. Not now that I'd had it for a few minutes.

I felt like some lovestruck teenager, unable to think past anyone other than myself and my wants. I did what I always did when I thought about Kimberly too much, I thought about my impending doom and possible death instead. Here I was imagining kissing Kimberly while my older brothers were probably training or doing something helpful. They were preparing.

Luke's words came to mind. *"I don't want you to always be running. I don't want that life for you. We never wanted that."*

I'd have to tell him the new additions to my five-year plan.

When we arrived, Kimberly and I said our good nights in front of her door. She hugged me, then I was floating again.

"You're not going to stop talking to me again, are you?"

She smiled and reached up to kiss my cheek. "No."

I walked to my room with that relief and flipped on the light.

Presley knocked on my doorframe seconds after. “Okay, spill.”

He creeped into my room holding a silver can and slightly closed the door before popping the top.

“Well, it—”

Zach peeked his head in the door. “Did I hear beer?”

“You fuckin’ alcoholic.” Presley chuckled while handing him a beer he had stored in his pocket, for some reason.

“Not like it even matters for us.”

“We don’t technically know that. It could still morph our brains or something,” Presley said.

They shrugged and took a sip.

Presley smiled wider. “Anyway, how was your totally platonic movie date?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “It was good ... great.”

Zach and Presley shared a glance.

“Came back a little early, didn’t ya?” Presley said.

“Yeah ... uh, Kim was feeling sick, so we thought it would be good to come home.”

“Right. Right.” Presley was still snickering and sharing that shit-eating grin with Zach.

I huffed. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Zach took a large sip. “You got a little ...”

He pointed to the side of my face where Kimberly’s pink lip gloss was smeared on my cheek.

“I ...”

They waited for me to speak while batting their eyelashes.

“You know, I think I’m turning in for the night. Get out of my room.”

Assholes.

Twenty-Seven

KIMBERLY



I needed to clear my head, and like many times before I found myself in my sacred space ... with Skylar. I needed to run. Like really run, run till my toenails felt like they would peel off and my chest was sore. Run till I felt like I would die and then go one more mile.

My wrist throbbed for the first hour but then it was numb compared to the pain of everything else. Skylar ran alongside me as we made another lap around the town square. We were

challenged with elevation, so we stayed on sidewalks to avoid stopping at crosswalks. She didn't complain. Not even once, and she didn't ask me what was wrong.

The night before was on repeat in my head. It was everything I'd longed for, but I couldn't fully enjoy it. Aaron had made a promise to protect me. But they couldn't protect me. Not like this. I'm the only human in this scenario, and I was starting to understand William's words and the rage behind them. You either die young or you turn. There was no in-between. I had to choose.

This I would miss—the feeling of my blood pumping in my head. The runner's high and absolute euphoria. The sense of accomplishment every time I hit another goal. If I turned, I'd never have this feeling again. My most tried-and-true hobby would be nothing but a memory. Where else would I go to vent my frustrations and wonders?

We passed a family in a stroller, and I ran harder, willing every aching muscle to give me more energy and more power. I'd never thought about kids. I knew it wasn't something I cared about now, but how would things change in a few years? Would I feel differently? I wasn't convinced either way, but what I knew was I had mom issues, and growing up, it made me never want to consider kids until I was at least in my thirties.

Still, I had a choice to make. I didn't have to make that choice right away, but I had to choose someday. And that choice meant the difference of the relationship Aaron and I

could have. How long could I hold out in Aaron's presence while loving him? Could I go years watching him and separating myself from him? My heart ached at the thought. I never imagined what love would feel like, but I never thought it would be painful.

I never imagined I would be in love with a vampire either.

I knew what I wanted, what my heart was telling me, but my brain wasn't convinced. I wasn't convinced of anything anymore. Not with The Family or The Legion.

There hadn't been a sighting of Akira since the football game, and everything was on high alert. I had to practically beg on my hands and knees to get out of the house. I had nightmares of Akira's dark soulless eyes. I was confident I never wanted to know the things he had seen.

We had rounded the corner to the main street when Skylar passed me a water bottle.

"I think you should rehydrate and take a break."

My wobbly feet stuttered to a stop, and I took small sips of water between rapid breaths. My ears were ice cold. The morning air on the mountain was cold, and the sunlight peeking over the building was barely enough to kiss my face.

We walked side by side. The cool air was getting to me as my body slowly cooled. She peeled off her coat and handed it to me. A strong, expensive perfume rushed my senses in the cold misty air.

"Just take it."

I did, and the faux-fur collar warmed my cold ears.

Skylar had this way of saying things that made me soften and listen despite her seriousness. Despite her appearance and how young she looked, something about her was motherly like a big sister would be. We weren't that close, but I trusted her to protect me more than the other members of The Legion.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She kept her eyes ahead, and her expression was relaxed.

"Am I a fool? Seriously, I need you to tell me if I'm being ridiculous for even considering becoming like you. Am I just being a naive girl or something? Am I being selfish?" The words kept flowing. "I feel like I'm being so irrational about everything. I can't decide what I want to do."

"I think you'll know what to do when the time is right. You can trust your own opinions. You may be young but you're smart."

I eyed her, not saying a word. I let her words wash over me for a moment.

Skylar sighed. "You know ... I wasn't much older than you when I turned."

I stopped walking. We'd reached the town square where a fountain sat in the cobblestone. There weren't many people around. "Wait, really?"

"My brother, Dom, was recruited by the same coven more than forty years ago. Only, he was a new lower rank. Lower members never meet the queens.

I gasped, sitting on the cold fountain. “And he got out?”

“Yes, my brother was manipulated just like the Calem brothers had been. They killed my mom ... our mom. They probably would have killed me too, but since I wasn't blood and I was out of the house by then, I guess I didn't make the cut.”

It was all starting to make sense. Why Skylar was the only one who seemed to tolerate the boys except William. Why she'd put up with this madness.

“When I found out what my brother was and what he was up against, I took matters into my own hands. I confronted Dom and made him change me, and together ... we fled. We met Kilian soon after. He'd been lying in wait. That led us to the life we live now. It is not the greatest, but I have no regrets about my young woman's decision. I'd do it again.”

My eyes were wide. “You escaped ... that means it's possible. I'm sorry I never asked you all this before.”

“It didn't need to be said then. When a queen's Guard is complete and they grow old together, they become almost impenetrable ... that's why the boys are important. This may be our only chance to kill Her. And I want a shot at it.”

It was official, Skylar was the coolest person I'd ever met. Her eyes spoke of many lifetimes that were far away. For the first time, I felt hope. Hope that The Family wasn't this all-powerful force we'd never be able to fight. Skylar defied the odds. She saved the people she cared about the most.

“Why? Why wouldn’t you just want to run away and live somewhere tropical where no one will find you? I mean ... you guys can do anything. You’re free.”

Free. That word caught in my throat.

She smiled without teeth. “I detest the sun. And ... we aren’t free. Not until she’s dead. My mom ... she was a hard woman, but she deserves justice. As do the Calem brothers. This coven has ruined the lives of many, all for the sake of their own agenda. That blood is poison that bleeds into the fabric of the world and corrupts good people. I want Her dead, and I won’t settle for anything less.”

“And Dom feels the same?”

“I think Dom would much rather be doing anything else than living in a frat house.” Her laugh was light and fluttery. “But ... he’s the one who convinced me to join The Legion. He’s always believed in the work we do.”

She stood, her white hair mirroring the snowcapped mountains. “There’s your answer. You can trust in whatever choice you make. Because it’s yours.”

I wanted to hug her, but she’d hate that.

“Kim!” Chelsea’s voice cut the mountain air.

I gasped and pulled the sunglasses I had resting on my head over my still very-bruised eye and prayed the makeup would be enough to cover up what was still visible.

Chelsea was bundled in a puffy mauve jacket and thick-soled ankle boots, and on her arm was someone with their

hand draped over her shoulder.

Akira.

I sucked in a breath, fighting the urge to bolt. He nuzzled his head into her neck, and she giggled. I didn't think I'd ever heard her laugh like that.

Akira was adorned in all black. A shorter coat this time but still long and a few sizes too big. The rings on his hand were all silver with black and green stones.

He couldn't have been much older than thirty when he changed.

“What are you doing here?” I spoke only to Akira.

Chelsea seemed unharmed and oddly far happier and less stressed than I'd seen her in weeks.

Chelsea spoke slowly. “You know him? Isn't he great?”

“Tell her where we met,” Akira whispered to her.

“We met at school. Right outside OBA, actually.”

“We're leaving.” Skylar grabbed my arm, but I stayed planted on the cement.

“Calm down, Sky. We're just chatting.” Akira hung his head to the side like a bored child.

I swallowed. Fear was my first instinct. It was the only thing I felt coursing through my veins, and it made me shiver, but his fingers were wrapped around my best friend's hair. There was no way I could leave her there.

“What do you want, Akira?”

His eyes sparkled. “You’re cute when you’re angry, Kimmy. I just wanted to let you know I’ve done my part of making this relationship work. I’ve learned all about you. Your friends. Your favorite places.”

Chelsea wasn’t paying attention, just watching the water trickle in a steady stream from the fountain.

“You’re threatening me.”

“No way, if I wanted to be threatening, I could have killed your friend here and left her dead, decaying body on your doorstep for you to find, and I promise that would have been a lot more fun than following you around town. No ... this is me being nice.”

“By not killing my friends ...?”

“Exactly.” Akira tapped on the crinkly material of Chelsea’s coat.

“And you’re hoping this will make the boys come with you or something?”

He flashed his teeth in a harmonious smile. “Maybe, truly I just wanted to have a girls’ day with you. Maybe we can get our nails done?”

Skylar and I shared a horrified glance.

“You want to go to the nail salon ...?”

“What better way for us to chat? Come on.” He hugged Chelsea close. “If you humor me, I won’t take a drink of your friend. And she smells *really* good.”

We weren't the only people by the fountain. I could scream. Alert someone. Anyone.

“If you're thinking of screaming, I wouldn't. Her neck would be so easy to snap. Sky, go ahead and tell your two little friends watching us over in that car to send in the troops if that makes you feel better. With the traffic, we'll be done with our conversation before then. Why do you think I met you in public?” He looked right through me. “I won't hurt you.”

Alone with Akira in a nail salon wasn't what I would have imagined in a million years, but we submitted.

Akira kept his arm firmly around Chelsea, whispering in her ear as we walked up to the town square to the only nail salon in town. A little shop that was bear themed with bear chairs for kids and old wooden floors that creaked under the scattering of rugs. I'd only come on special occasions, except for when one of my foster moms brought us every week so she could hide from her husband.

It was packed, but Akira leaned over the counter and greeted the front woman with ... charm?

I watched his hands. One stroked the back of Chelsea's head, and the other brushed over the cashier's. The blood pumping in my ears was deafening. I had to focus on the revolving fan hooked on the desk. Methacrylate was the only thing I could smell, and it would be the death of me. I was going to throw up. My knees wobbled, and Skylar's iron grip steadied me.

He couldn't beat me here.

My jaw hit the floor as the cashier stood on her chair—a woman too old to be standing on a wobbly chair—and yelled for everyone to get out. After the horror registered, the guests complied, and as they passed, Akira touched each of them on their way out. He was showing me his power. How capable he was of getting exactly what he wanted. Clearing a room full of people was nothing for him.

He instructed the ladies to pull their tables together, while the other nail techs stayed in wait. Any protesting was silenced by Akira's soft voice and touch.

“You paying?” Skylar snarled.

She was more prepared for this sort of thing than I was. She wasn't even shaking.

“Yep, this one's on me, ladies. What color nails does your friend like?”

“Black.”

“Oh, me too.” Akira smiled. “Kimmy, I wanted to get you alone. But I knew that wouldn't be possible without a crowd. So, I'll settle for this.”

The nail technician came up to me and placed a bottle of red polish on the table.

“Did you tell her I wanted red?”

“It suits you,” he said.

“I want French tips, please.” I wanted any semblance of control I could get. She went to get the white, and Skylar

chose the red.

When she placed the polish on the table, her hands were shaking.

I placed my hand on her arm. “It’s going to be okay.”

I glared at Akira, which he thought was hilarious.

“You act like I’ve slaughtered a town. No one is going to die here! She’ll make enough in these ten minutes to cover this shop’s pay for the entire week so everyone can go home early.” He pulled his hands through his long black hair. “Humans are hard to please. Your unfailing love for all of humanity. I’m always surprised how loyal humans can be even to strangers ... it’s what I love most, really. I once let a man live for defending some random girl I wanted to sink my teeth into. He had a wife ... kids. And he was still ready to fight me to the death to keep me from killing someone he didn’t know.”

I didn’t know what to say. There had to be a reason he told me that, but I didn’t know if I could trust anything he said.

“I see that in you, Kimberly. Unfailing loyalty. I like that.”

Almost nothing about Akira was soft. Not his edgy haircut, or the tattoos that went to his wrists. But his eyes were. Much softer than when I’d stared into William’s eyes, where only anger stared back at me, but with Akira, there was something gooey and warm.

“How would you know anything about me?”

“I know lots, babe. I know that you were an orphan. You got in trouble a lot as a kid too—”

“How? How do you know that?”

“Anything I can’t coerce out of people, I can steal.”

Talking to Akira differed from William. Akira was straight forward. Direct.

“Why would you need to know anything about me?”

“Because I need to see what type of relationship you have with the boys. I’ve been watching you for a while. Good job on finishing that marathon, by the way, but ... sorry about that tumble you took.” He watched Skylar. “I quite enjoyed that little story. Cute.”

Skylar’s eyes could kill, but I grabbed her arm. *Keep it together.*

“What I really loved was your reckless little sneak-off to that pool. You and Aaron must be close.”

I straightened my hands as the girl painted my nails, and willed them to remain steady. He watched my every twitch and breath. Akira said he liked me, and I only had a few guesses as to why that might be.

He’d been watching us the whole time. Waiting to pull the rug. The more shock value, the better. He wanted theatrics. Tears. Well, he would not get it from me.

“We are.”

“Just Aaron?” Akira blew on the nails of one of his hands. One coat of black was enough.

“What are you implying?”

He leaned forward. “I’ll be honest. Your answer determines when and how I kill you.”

I clenched my jaw. “It’s just Aaron.”

“Would you show me?” He reached out to me, revealing his palm.

That was the last thing I wanted to do. But what choice did I have? Him taking my hand would not make him any more likely to kill me than sitting across from him. If he wanted me dead right now, I’d be dead.

“Fine.”

Skylar’s chair squeaked. I placed my hand on his palm, and he wrapped his fingers around my hands and wrists. He was cold.

I expected the pain Aaron told me about. The forcing into my head with gnawing intrusion, but Akira didn’t push. He waited for me. He wanted my most recent memories of each of them, and I showed him. My face was hot when I came to Aaron and relived our time in the theater with an intruder. The memory was so real. I could feel everything. Breath, lips, tongue.

He let out a slow whistle and pulled away. “Wow, what a show.”

I squeezed some of the hand sanitizer in my hands. I wanted no feeling of Akira left on me. Our most intimate moments weren’t safe from them.

“You and Aaron are forbidden lovers. It’s kind of poetic. Something for the storybooks.”

The nail technicians finished their finishing touches on Skylar’s and my nails, and I wondered how long we’d be there. There was no clock in sight, and I couldn’t glance at my phone. We were trapped in a timeless void with Akira, and I didn’t know how long I could keep up my act.

“Kimmy, I’m going to give it to you like it is. I’ve been ordered to kill you.”

“By who?”

“The queen, of course.”

The queen knew about me? My blood was turning hot. This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be real.

I could barely force out the words. “And you’re sitting here getting your nails done with me because ...”

If that’s what She wanted, why was I still alive, why the hesitation?

“Because, personally, I don’t think killing people is the best way to get things done. It just creates unnecessary drama. Bodies start dropping and then everyone is shaking like a little deer, screaming, running. It’s annoying.”

“That didn’t stop you from killing Mrs. Henry.”

I threw out my accusation, hoping it would pick up something.

“The teacher? Okay, the teacher was an accident. I mean, they’re all kind of accidents. Controlling everyone in the group isn’t my specialty. Leadership is a shit gig. Ezra is much better at that than I am. The boys get ... restless. Sometimes they get drunk or ravenous and kill people. It happens.”

He wasn’t alone. Rage. Pure rage took over. I sat back in my chair to glare at him.

“Then why haven’t you killed me?”

“Because. I have another option I think everyone here would prefer. You leave. Go ... I don’t care where. But you leave. We won’t follow you. I won’t mess with you. Just like the boys’ mom. You can live.”

I was missing something. Something crucial.

“What about the prophecy?”

“The boys will be Hers. You’re not changing it.” His brow lowered, and pieces of his hair fell into his face. “You can’t save him. I’m sorry, babe. Best take this last train ticket out of town. You’re young and beautiful. I’m sure you’ll find someone normal to grow old with. Next time, stay away from the ones who bite.”

Our girls’ day was over, and I didn’t leave unscathed.

You can’t save him.

He’d found the chip in my armor. My Achilles’ heel. Those four words would be the nail in my coffin. I felt it as soon as he said them.

After tending to the nail technicians, he walked us back toward the fountain, and Chelsea was still silent and tucked under his arm. I think I was numb. Everything in me shifted from self-preservation to self-destruction.

When we reached the fountain, he spun on his heels to face me. “Well, I truly hope I won’t be seeing you again, Kimmy. If I do, I’ll finish what we started in the forest.”

He winked and then he was gone, disappearing into the bustle of people in the town square. I stayed frozen. Maybe I was supposed to die in that forest when I met Aaron. I was never supposed to be here. Akira was right. I couldn’t save him. I couldn’t save any of them.

Chelsea was the only thing to shake me from that dark place. I pulled my sunglasses back on and grabbed her shoulders, checking her for any marks. “Chelsea ... are you okay?”

I had no idea what she’d remember from any of it. My guess was very little. With Akira constantly whispering in her ear and touching her arm, I assumed he’d kept a firm grasp on her version of the story.

She blinked a few times before her eyes settled on the ground. At least that’s what I thought she was focusing on, but she grabbed my wrist and held it up.

“Uh, what the hell is this? This is the same hand you hurt before! What happened?” She looked at me with a furrowed brow.

I stared at her, curious as to why her first thought after being mindwiped by a vampire was to be worried about me.

“Hello? Answer me,” she said, waving her hand in my face.

“Yeah, uh ... I got bit by a ... dog. It was like a week or ago on my run. It will heal quickly.”

She sighed, dropping my hand and fluffing her hair. “Well, I’m surprised you still wanted to come get your nails done with me today.”

That’s what the story was going to be. Skylar shot me a tentative glance.

“I’m glad I did. It was nice to hang out.” My mind was still going a million miles per minute and small talk was useless.

“Yeah, well, it would be *nice* if you’d let me come see your new apartment. I can’t believe you haven’t invited me over.” She eyed Skylar, and I knew exactly what she thought.

I’d replaced her with another friend. We’d scarcely talked since I moved out.

I wanted to say something—anything encouraging to let her know I hadn’t—but what could I say? She needed to stay away from me, and this was the strongest warning I’d ever been given. Akira surveyed my every move. She was lucky to be alive.

“I’m sorry. I’ve just been busy. It’s not that I don’t want you there. I’m just getting it put together first.” I coughed out a barely acceptable answer.

“Right.” She sighed but held her head up as she pulled her purse over her shoulder. “Well, I’m just saying. You’re missing out because I’m great at interior design.”

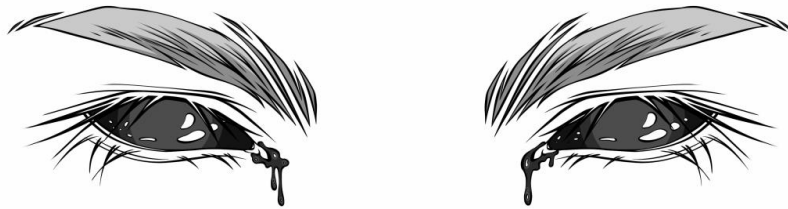
She was. I remembered how perfectly she’d put her room together. We’d thrifted together, and she’d picked out things and transformed them in ways I’d never thought about. She had a distinctive dark-academia style I admired. I thought about all the things I wished I could say and then let them go. They turned to dust in the cold, mountain air tainted with the faintest scent of smoke.

“I know. But I’ll see you at school?”

She nodded and then got in her car and drove away. The dread Akira left behind lingered.

Twenty-Eight

AARON



Zach stopped the car in the middle of the road.
My brothers and I jolted forward, and I gripped the headrest in front of me. A list of expletives filled the car, along with the sound of screeching tires.

“Get the fuck out.”

I’d have protested more, but I saw her. A flashing of red hair among the few lingering autumn leaves. Skylar pulled over next to the tree line, and Kimberly found me instantly. I closed the distance between us.

For a second, nothing mattered besides the floral scent of her skin and that steady beat in her chest. She buried her head

into my shirt, and I wrapped my hands around her like it was the last time.

I kissed her head before pulling away and moving her sunglasses so I could see her eyes. Bright blue and burning amid the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks.

I should have been there.

“You’re okay,” I said.

I couldn’t stop myself from kissing her forehead, the bruising by her eye, her lips.

“I’m okay,” she said in a breath. She encircled her hand in mine and stayed glued to my side.

When everything came back into focus, I realized we were in some type of standoff. On a backroad surrounded by trees except for one lone street sign. I’d been here before when we’d taken Luke to Kilian’s cabin.

A large SUV stopped in front of our car, and Kilian, Thane, William, and Dom poured out and were followed by another car driven by Felix and filled with more Legion.

They looked pissed—well, except for Thane. He made direct eye contact with me. His unflinching jaw told me that we’d fucked up, and it was only partly justified. When Skylar sent out the SOS text, we argued all of five seconds before we grabbed the keys to get Kimberly. The Legion wanted to think, plan, talk. We wanted to go get her, so we did.

Luke was the first person Skylar called and told she was on her way to Kilian. Which made me feel safer standing next to

her.

Kimberly, Skylar, and I stayed on the side of the road while my brothers stayed near our car. I held Kimberly closer. I would not let her out of my sight. Not again.

Zach barreled toward Kilian with fists clenched. “You’re supposed to be fucking protecting her.”

Kimberly’s grip tightened on my hand.

“You’re supposed to follow orders. You jeopardized everything by leaving.” Kilian’s nostrils flared and veins were popping in his forehead and arms, but he was still eerily calm.

“Fuck you. She could be dead.”

Luke stepped next to Zach. “The deal is you protect them. If you don’t, we will.”

“This is the second fucking time, Kilian.” Zach’s anger was boiling over and threatening to spill over onto the road, and I didn’t want to be there when it did. “How many times are you going to let this fucker through your supposed ironclad defense before I start finding body parts of my family on the front lawn?”

Jesus. What did he know? What things had my brother seen?

But Luke was calm and firm. “He’s right. You haven’t kept your end of the deal.”

“There was a breach of protocol. She shouldn’t have been allowed in town without proper protection. We’ll double up.

We'll—”

“Not fucking good enough!” Zach’s voice echoed in the trees.

Luke crossed his arms. There was no smile. He was all business.

“He never should have been able to get to her or to Aaron at homecoming. Something has to change.”

“What did he say to you?” Zach pivoted to Kimberly, and his jaw was clenched. “Wait, what the fuck happened to your face?”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Thane was studying the back of Kilian’s head, avoiding any eye contact with Zach. “It was an accident. I was teaching Kim some stuff when we were sparring, and she bumped into me.”

“She bumped into you?! What the fuck does that even mean?” Zach stepped forward, shoulders back. I’d seen that look before. That shadow that passed over my brother’s face, leaving everything around him dull. My brother was a tornado when he was angry. All hell was about to break loose, and Zach would be the center of the calamity.

William and Dom stepped in front of Thane.

“Dom, please don’t,” Skylar said, still hovering next to us.

“He said it was an accident,” William said. I knew he’d back up Thane no matter the circumstance.

“Hide behind your little groupies like a coward. It won’t help.”

An eye for an eye. Zach’s only true moral compass. There wasn’t room for accidents.

William stepped forward and rolled up his sleeves. “You won’t fuckin’ touch him.”

“Choose your words wisely, Will,” Zach spat. “Do we need to have a replay of what happened back at the gym?”

“Will, stop. It’s fine. It’s my fault,” Thane pleaded.

Dom followed, and the others closed in. “Skylar get over here.”

“No.” Skylar said.

“I wouldn’t.” Luke stepped close to Zach.

Luke would never let Zach fight alone. I spotted Presley hovering beside the car, and I prepared myself to grab Kim and get us all in the car.

“Do not engage,” Kilian said, but it did nothing to stall the resentment in their eyes.

His colder outer exterior had cracked.

“Yeah, listen to your master like the little puppets you are. If you had half a brain, you’d leave this asshole behind before he gets you all killed.”

I didn’t want this. We weren’t supposed to be fighting. There was power in numbers, and we were seconds away from chipping away at that body count.

“He said I needed to leave ... and if I go, he wouldn’t kill me,” Kimberly yelled. They stopped.

“He confirmed that he wasn’t alone ... he brought some guys with him and that they’re behind the missing people around town.”

That got everyone’s attention. All eyes shifted to her.

“He ... looked in my head. He wanted to see the relationships I had with the boys ... our last interactions. I think he was fishing for information on the twins.”

My blood ran cold. No way he touched her. No way he pushed himself into her head—

She peered up at me, anticipating my question. “I’m fine. It was brief, and I agreed to it.”

Their voices ran together in a steady blur, but I was only thinking of her. Their previous quarrel moved to the back burner. Now they were talking among themselves and making more plans. Where they thought she should go and more arguing, whether it was worth the hassle, and it most definitely was. All I was thinking about was how much safer she felt next to me. How much longer I had ... days ... minutes.

My chest hurt. It wasn’t time. How was I going to say goodbye?

“I’m not going.” Kimberly let go of my hand and stepped in front of me. All their arguing stopped.

“Told you, she has a death wish.” William’s jaw hardened.

Kilian walked in closer. “We have people up North ... Skylar can go with you.”

“No. I’m not going. I’ve made up my mind.”

“I wouldn’t advise it.”

“I don’t care what you advise.” Kimberly’s voice was firm and unwavering. “Nothing you say will change my mind.”

Damn. I could do nothing but stare at the back of her head and admire her. Her bravery. Her sureness.

She turned to Luke. “I know it’s a lot to ask ... but will you guys protect me?”

Luke beamed with confidence. “Hell yeah, we will. You don’t have to ask.”

He turned to face the rest of them. “It’s settled, then. Kimberly is staying. No else’s opinion matters. We’re going back to OBA. Kim ... Aaron. Get in our car. Everyone else feel free to follow us back to the house. We can hash out the rest there.”

“You need to follow protocol.” Kilian’s voice burned with something new. Impatience.

“No, I don’t. You need us. From now on, we choose where we go and when. I’m not waiting around to have your approval. I suggest you stick close by unless you want Akira picking you off one by one.”

There was silence when the doors of the car slammed shut and we were all inside.

Presley was the only one smiling. “Holy shit, Luke, you’re kinda badass.”

“What do we do now?” I said after making sure Kimberly was buckled in.

“We’re leaving.” Luke stuck the key in the ignition and the engine started with a sputtering. The car was stolen and running on fumes.

“Fucking finally!” Zach said while he rummaged through his pants for his lighter.

“Now!? Like today?” My stomach turned at that thought.

“No. They’d never let us go. We have to be smarter than that. This time, when we disappear, we’re disappearing for good.”

“Are you sure ... because they said they have more people. Maybe once things cool down—” Presley started.

Luke’s foot tapped again, and it shook the car. “I know. I know what they said and what I said, but ... they can’t stop them. They aren’t going to stop looking for us.”

“So, what ... we just run forever?” I said.

“However long it takes.” Luke met my gaze in the rearview mirror. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I wanted it to work. I wanted ... them to protect you, but it’s just not working. I can’t risk Akira having access to you guys.”

Kimberly squeezed my hand, and I leaned into her shoulder. I desperately wanted to know what she was thinking.

“What about school?” Presley said.

“Fuck school,” Luke snapped, and we all recoiled and sank into our seats.

The hum of the car was the only lingering sound, and the green fuzzy dice Presley bought blew around from the hot air coming from the air vent.

Luke pinched his nose, and his eyes softened. “I’m sorry, Pres. I know I’ve done nothing but tell you where to go and what to do. One last time ... I need you to trust me. We’ll start this all over if we have to, but I promise I’ll make sure you guys are safe.”

Presley nodded, and I squeezed his shoulder.

“What about Kim ...?” I asked.

Luke turned to address Kim. “I wish I could say you had a choice ... but I don’t think you do. You’re not safe staying or going. Even if you want to stay—”

“I’m going.” Kimberly leaned forward. “Wherever you guys go, I’m coming.”

I wanted to savor the relief in my stomach, but I couldn’t. She wasn’t safe. Not by a long shot. None of us were. But at least she’d be next to me.

Zach’s lighter clicked, and he took his first drag of a new cigarette. “How are we going to do it?”

Luke kept his eyes on the road. “It’s not going to be easy. It will likely lead to a fight.”

“Then we’ll fight,” Zach said.

“We’re not going to hurt them, are we?”

“A little pain won’t kill them, Pres,” Zach said.

Presley and I shared a look. We liked them. Thane especially. He was our friend now. Many of our late nights were spent playing video games or listening while Thane told us random stories about his life before becoming a vampire. He kept them light, only mentioning happy memories. Mostly his mistakes. Things he wished he’d done differently.

“We’ll have to ditch the bodyguards,” Luke said.

“That’s four people ... four vampires, at least. If they don’t send more,” I said. “Maybe I could convince Thane to step aside. Or maybe I could convince him to be elsewhere on the night we go.”

“Yeah, maybe it won’t have to lead to a fight. It’s possible Skylar would let us leave ... and Dom would listen to her,” Kimberly said.

“That only leaves Will. That’s doable.” Zach had rolled down the window, but his smoke was blowing back into the car. I hoped they’d find another car to steal if we were going to be traveling again. Preferably from someone with another who wouldn’t miss it too much.

We were stuck in the wake of my brothers’ problems all along. A fact I knew but now realized was futile to get out of the waves. It kept taking us further and further out. And it

didn't matter how close we appeared to shore, we'd always get pulled back under.

Where would we go? Where wouldn't The Family find us? I didn't know if that place existed.

"What about money? We don't exactly have a stack of cash to go gallivanting around the country," Presley said.

"He's right. We'll need gas. Kimberly needs food." Zach took another drag of his cigarette. "We've got some that we siphoned off the haunted house, and a little in our fund, but it's not going to get us that far. We need more. Quickly."

"Ooh! Oh! Pick me! I have an idea!"

"Just say it," Zach grumbled.

"What if we did a car wash ... a shirtless car wash?" Presley leaned forward, shaking the seats in front of him. "A guy I know in Sigma Nu told me they did one last year and it was a huge success. They raised like five thousand dollars ... only, technically, they did it for charity."

"That could work, what if we said we were donating to a local animal shelter? Girls love that shit," Zach said.

"That's so fucked up." I didn't hide my disgust. "No living things. It's bad enough we'd be stealing the money."

Zach put his hands up in the air to mock me.

"Aaron's right." Luke's knuckles were white as he gripped the steering wheel. "It's got to be something that won't have a

lot of impact. That way if the money goes missing, it's not something they couldn't replace."

"What if it's something that everyone on campus loved? Particularly the other fraternities and sororities ..." Kimberly was deep in thought and then her eyes lit up. "The Spring Break thing! The festival you were going on about, Presley. What if OBA offers to host it for start-up funds? We could frame it in town as a revenue for them in the spring ... maybe get extra support."

"I like that. They'll probably end up doing it anyway, even if we bail," I said.

Some of the bigger fraternities were loaded compared to ours, and they had the bodies to make something like that happen.

Presley sat back in his seat. "Well, I don't like that because it's going to be the best party of the century and I won't be here."

"Perfect. Now, how are we going to plan it without The Legion poking around and asking questions?" Zach sighed.

"We could make it exclusive? Or ... frame it that way. Start it with a secret text chain. More people will show up if they think it's cool. Chelsea is good at that kind of thing. Plus, if we have it for one day only ... Sunday, the day after everyone is back from break, we could catch some parents too," Kimberly said, and I sat in awe of her brain.

There was a collective silence, and I think my brothers and I were all thinking the same thing.

“Kim, where the hell have you been all our lives!? You’re a genius.” Presley was excited again.

Yep. Bingo.

With the five of us, things felt complete. Like it was finally right.

“Luke doesn’t have to be the only smart one. We finally have some more brain power,” I said.

“There may be hope for us after all.” Zach smiled and nudged Luke, which made him smile.

“It’s settled. Sunday night. We’re leaving with whatever cash we have,” Luke said.

My fingers found Kimberly’s on the seat beside me, and she wrapped hers around mine. Everything was changing, but I had *them*. All the most important people in my life were safe. That’s all that mattered.

If leaving Blackheart would save us all, I’d try anything, yet I couldn’t help but think back to The Legion. All our time together had to mean something.

I’d spent all that time trying to bond with them, hoping it would be our salvation. In a way, they were. They’d allowed us more time and put their lives on the line for us. Leaving them and leaving their mission felt wrong in a way, but sometimes being selfish was required for survival. At least that’s what my brothers would say.

That's all we were doing—surviving and protecting what was ours. I waited for that thought to bring me relief, but as we continued to drive and plan our escape, it never came.

Our relationship was transactional, and we learned everything we needed to. That's all this was ever supposed to be. Maybe if I repeated it enough, I'd believe it.

Twenty-Nine

KIMBERLY



*I*t was pitch black. Dark pools of ink overtook my vision. Leaves crunched as something was dragged across the forest floor.

The clearing in the trees was familiar. No noteworthy trees or interesting bark formations, but my blood scattered on dead leaves and dry branches. I was back in the forest where Aaron had left me. The darkness pressed in around me, and a shiver ran up my spine. I wasn't alone.

In the clearing, a long white draping of hair and soft fabric appeared. Delicate hands with long dainty fingers grabbed the flaking bark of a redwood with long pale nails. A woman appeared. One look into her eyes and I knew who it was. The queen.

A scream curdled in my throat, and a strong set of hands gripped my neck. I struggled to swallow.

“Quiet now.” Akira’s breath was hot on my ear.

As the queen appeared and stood in the middle of the clearing, Her eyes bore into mine. Despite Her white eyes, they were void of any light. The hands on my neck tightened, and tears streamed down my cheeks. I was alone.

Aaron rushed through the tree line and fell to his knees. “Please, don’t hurt her.”

I froze. Any movement only tightened Akira’s grip on my neck. Aaron’s dirty-blond hair brought me relief, but the comfort was short-lived.

The queen walked closer to him, and Her thin fingers brushed through his hair. My chest lit with rage. I didn’t like the way She was gazing at him, touching him as if he was a long-lost lover.

Aaron spoke again, “Please, I’ll do anything. Just don’t kill her.”

My heart sank as a smile curled on Her pale lips. With long, pale fingers She tilted his chin to look up at Her. “You’d do anything?”

Aaron nodded. His body shook.

She brought Her wrist to Her lips and bit down. Streams of black blood dripped onto the ground below. Akira's grip slipped. His whole body shifted forward, nearly knocking me off my feet.

"Drink."

Aaron hesitated.

"Commit yourself to me. To us." Her voice was laced with venom.

I wanted to scream, but all I felt was a small hum in my throat. Aaron grabbed Her wrist and brought it to his lips. His touch was soft at first but turned forceful as he drank. Leaning forward, his sneakers smeared the blood in the dirt. When he pulled away, his shoulders were drawn back, and he was alert. The queen whispered something too low for me to hear.

Aaron turned around, his eyes black and filled with malice.

This time when I screamed, it ripped through me.

I awoke in my room. The soft mutterings of *The Princess Bride* were still playing on my TV. My chest was tight, and with each shallow breath, I melted back into my sheets and grabbed my phone. Aaron had been out hunting with Zach, and I hoped he was home.

Me: Hey, are you back home?

Aaron: Yeah, what's up? Everything okay?

Me: Maybe ... why do you ask?

Aaron: Um, because it's like 2am and you're the most grandma person I know. You lay in bed when the sun is out.

Me: Yeah ... I just can't sleep.

Aaron: Okay, how can I help?

Me: Wanna come to my room?

Aaron: Yeah! Give me like two minutes.

His two minutes felt like an eternity. Aaron softly knocked on my door and let himself in, towing a glass of milk and cookies. My heart melted. The fear lingering in the air dissipated with his ear-to-ear grin.

“Thought you could use a pick-me-up. My mom used to bring me warm cookies and milk when I couldn't sleep. Only, hers were homemade.”

His hair was a disheveled mess like he'd also been lying down, and he was dressed in baggy pajama pants and a baby-blue cotton T-shirt.

Without a word, I raised the blankets, signaling for him to join me. There was a tinge of hesitation in his eyes. He barely laid the plate on my nightstand before I fell into his chest. I wanted his comfort and warmth to stop the creeping darkness from taking over. I needed him to save me.

“Whoa, hey. Are you okay?” Aaron's voice was more worried now.

He pulled his arms around me and held me on his chest. His gentle heartbeat calmed my nerves.

“I just had a bad dream.”

The scene replayed in my head. The feeling of strong hands crushing my windpipe. The queen manipulating Aaron, determined to take every bit of innocence left in him and turn him into something he was never meant to be. The rage turned into sorrow. I'd had bad dreams before but none that felt real. A part of me wondered if it could be prophetic. That maybe everything we were doing was futile, and soon, Aaron would have to choose, and I knew he'd save me.

But that meant losing him. Every good thing about him. He'd be tethered to The Family and forced to do God knows what. He'd never bring me cookies again, and I'd never have my sunlight. It would be dark forever, not just because he wasn't near but because I was confident if he gave in and drank Her blood ... he'd never come back to me.

Tears filled my eyes, and I buried my head into his chest, savoring his smell. His arms tightened around me, and he held me for a minute.

“It's okay. I'm right here. It's just a dream.” He rubbed my back and buried his head into my hair.

That only made me cry more. I couldn't lose Aaron to those monsters. I couldn't let him become a shell of himself. He was supposed to be in the world. He was meant to give other people the sunshine he'd given me. His reassuring smile. His never-ending optimism.

“Hey.” Aaron tilted my face to meet his gaze. “What is it? What can I do? Please stop crying.”

Through the dim light and tears, I met his amber eyes. Soft. Worried. One hand grazed my face while the other held my head. And I kissed him.

He didn't pull away. For a moment, we melted into one another. Two pieces finally melded together. We didn't hold back. I savored the way his hands felt tangled in my hair. His lips parted between mine, and every movement lit my body on fire.

He was freshly fed, but with the way he grabbed and tasted me, I'd have called him a liar. I wasn't a want to him, but something so deeply needed it threatened to kill us both. When we were that close, I had a hard time caring about anything other than never letting his skin leave mine. Everything was hard and fast, yet gentle. He wasn't taking anything from me other than my breath. Giving me all he had.

It wasn't enough.

I pulled his shirt off and threw it on the floor. I wanted to memorize every plane of his chest with my lips and engrave the pulse in his neck onto my tongue. He gave me more. More tongue. More pressure.

When I struggled to catch my breath, he slowed down. Taking his time kissing my neck and mirroring my exhales with hot breath across my skin. My body tingled when his fingers teased their way up my stomach and along the thin material covering my breasts.

I whispered his name. My best attempt at a quiet invitation for more of him. For all of him.

He pulled away, leaving me cold again. His muscles trembled.

“Stay ...” I said in silent desperation.

Stay now. Stay tomorrow. Stay forever.

His eyes darkened, and he rolled on top of me, forcefully but carefully. It was the right amount of everything. Strength and gentleness playing tug-of-war. His forearms were still quivering when he pressed his hips into mine and guided me where I needed to go. I bit back a moan as he peeled off my T-shirt, leaving me in only my bra and underwear.

Still not enough. Not nearly enough.

With a fist full of his hair, I pulled his lower lip into my mouth and bit down. He growled, sucking my lower lip between his teeth. A metallic taste lingered on my tongue, tainting the taste of him.

He pulled back, but I tightened my legs around him. I wasn't afraid. It didn't hurt. At least not in a way that made me want to stop.

“Are you okay?” He said it with his hips still pressed into mine. In the dim light, I could see his eyes. Careful. Thoughtful.

“Never better.”

My breaths deepened when his fingers grazed my lips to open my mouth. I complied, and he traced the inside of my bottom lip with his ring and middle finger.

Everything inside me turned scorching hot.

There was darkness in his eyes when he licked my blood from his fingers one by one, but it was equal to the light. Burning and blending.

I stroked that worry line between his brow, waiting for him, until the shaking stopped.

He kissed my fingers, my hand, down to my wrist. Every touch was softer when he reached the sensitive skin still healing, confirming what I already knew was true—I was safe with him.

When his lips met mine again, the kiss was stronger. A gentle suction on my lower lip made my head spin, and with his tongue, he circled the edge of my lips, cleaning the blood.

“You have no idea how good you taste,” he said against my collarbone.

I arched my neck, giving him greater access.

Heat gathered in my core as a groan tore through his throat, and he used his teeth to play at the straps of my bralette.

He burned me, filling me with the most radiant aura anywhere he touched. The sunlight that encapsulated his soul left fingerprints scorched onto my skin. He wasn't the sun. He was brighter. So much brighter. A star in the darkness that threatened to overtake him.

“Aaron,” I moaned.

“We’re in a house full of vampires, you have to be quiet.”

He nestled his head into my neck and caressed me like I was the most important thing in the world. And when he looked at me like that, I believed him. He beamed. Enjoying how much I wanted this. “Can you be quiet for me?”

The words caught in my throat as his fingers trailed down my chest. Tickling. Teasing.

“Or ... should I stop ...” He removed his hand, just before reaching my underwear, and talked achingly slowly.

“No—” He touched me again, and I spoke in a strangled whisper, “I’ll be quiet.”

“You’re such a bad liar, Burns.”

I gasped when he pinned me down by my forearms. The light flutter of his lips followed the middle of my breastbone and went lower, stopping just below my belly button. My body vibrated and squirmed with every second that passed. I needed him like I’d needed nothing before.

I’d been able to keep quiet until he tugged at the edges of my underwear and tossed them to floor.

I couldn’t hold in the whimper when his kisses went lower. My stomach. My hip. My knee.

Now I was shaking.

There was a soft pressure on my inner thigh, followed by teeth. He bit down, not enough to hurt and not enough to break

the skin. I didn't care either way. The need to have him closer fluttered in my stomach.

His mouth reached the apex between my thighs, and my breath hitched. I didn't know what I was doing. A million thoughts ran through my mind at the same time. Too many to keep track of. But he was there. Soft and gentle. I trusted him with my life. My body. Everything. So I let go.

Aaron knew exactly what I needed. The right pressure. The right speed. The right place to touch. I couldn't stop saying his name.

This was all uncharted territory, but my hand was in his, and the other was wrapped in his golden hair. We navigated it together. Through every wave of pleasure that threatened to leave my mouth. Through every stroke of his tongue that sent me to places I never thought I'd go. I'd never *felt* so much. So much pleasure, so much love. So much of absolutely everything everywhere all at once, and I wondered if it would destroy me.

I welcomed it with open arms.

Gilded tears gathered in the corners of my eyes with each slow and pulsing movement that got faster and faster until everything in me shattered and came alive again.

He made his way back up to my chest, teasing me on my collarbone, my jaw, then my ear. A soft kiss turned into a light suction that made my breath falter. But there was no pain and no bite, just euphoria. I gasped.

Aaron was alive. So very alive. And I'd never been. Not really. Not till now.

"Aaron," I said with a sigh, still reeling from the pleasure that ripped through me.

A soft laughter accompanied his touch on my face. His eyes met mine with a wide grin.

"What's funny?" I said, waiting for my breathing to slow.

"I like it when you say my name like that."

My body hummed, and my face was still red-hot.

"At least you're not crying anymore." With one thumb, he wiped the wetness from my eyes. For a moment, we stayed tangled up in my blankets. He was on top of me, but that wasn't why I was having trouble breathing. "We gotta stop meeting like this. I'm trying to be good."

A giggle escaped my lips. "I know. I know."

I hadn't told him yet. That I was tired of running. I'd been fighting his gravity for almost an entire year, and I was ready to lay down my weapons. No more war. No more bloodshed.

All I wanted were barefoot nights by the fire while curled up in his arms. Ones where we never had to say goodbye. I imagined us arm and arm in a flower field enjoying spring. Every spring.

He thought he was the problem. A boy that ruined everything with his gilded touch. But it was me who'd made every choice. At every turn, I'd reached out to him.

I think I always knew I was the problem. Standing in the way of my own happiness. I saw him like a single star in the night. Burning. I couldn't look away. From that moment, my fate was sealed. I would be searching, reaching, and clawing my way toward it until it was mine. Beating and pulsing in my hands.

Aaron's heart beat steadily under my fingertips. I wanted to feel it forever.

"I promised myself I wouldn't ask you this ... But I feel like it would be my greatest regret if I don't, just once." His golden eyes softened in the glow of the TV, and he pulled me in tighter.

"Ask me what?"

His fingers traced my face slowly. "Will you stay with me ... forever? I'll build you the most perfect A-frame cabin you've ever seen, with one of those huge wraparound decks. We can travel whenever you want. Get like a million degrees ___"

"Do you know how to build a cabin?" I teased.

"No, but I bet there's a degree out there that will teach me something like that." His nose nearly touched mine, and I wondered if I'd die if he stopped touching me. "After all this is over, we can do whatever we want. And I want to do it all with you. I don't know what the world will be like in a hundred years, but I can guarantee you I'll find something for us to do. I can make you happy. I know you don't need me ... but it would be a mistake if I never told you how badly I want you."

He actually thought there was a world in which I wouldn't say yes. I could see it in the way worry hung in brows. He wasn't asking for a day. Or a lifetime. Something more. Something I didn't think either of us could fully imagine. And I wanted it. To whatever end. For however long, I would hold on to him with everything I had. I savored that final moment. The last moment I had any semblance of control.

I grabbed his face with both of my hands. "Aaron ... you don't get it. You're the only thing I've ever fully chosen for myself. I *do* need you. More than anything. Of course I'll stay with you."

Excitement flashed in his eyes, and he kissed me. Everywhere. Tickling and light. Absolute euphoria enveloped me. Aaron was mine.

Everything he'd given me, I gave back to him. This time, I kissed him. First his neck and then his chest. His hips pressed into me, and I moaned, pulling his earlobe between my teeth.

He pulled away, his muscles quivering, but the smile was still wide on his face.

"You gotta stop biting me."

I reached up to playfully bite him on the shoulder. "Why is that?"

He pinned down my forearms. "Because I'm going to bite you much harder, and I won't be able to stop."

"I don't think you'd hurt me ..." I ran my fingers down his chest, cherishing the warmth and the feeling of having him all

to myself. My own ray of sunlight. I couldn't bottle it up and keep it in my pocket, but I could have him. Forever.

His thumb grazed my lips as each staggered breath escaped me. The need in his eyes grew larger with each passing second. A dark intoxication. Greed.

"I gotta stop, Kim. Or I'm going to hurt you. I can feel it." He chuckled. "A slight problem for the time being. But I'll work on it. I promise."

I wanted to protest, but the hunger in his gaze told me his words were probably correct.

He grabbed my hands and kissed them. "Slow down, Burns. We have forever, right?"

"Forever," I said, my heart bursting and bruising my ribs with its rhythm.

He smiled from ear to ear, and his cheeks became flushed. I'd never imagined a lifetime with anyone, but I couldn't imagine another minute without him.

I laid my head on his chest, marinating in his warmth and smell.

"Do you *want* to tell me about your dream?"

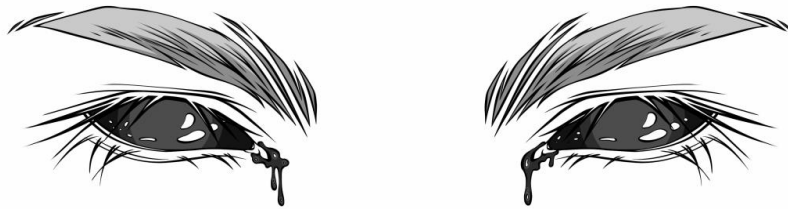
I considered it for a moment, but the thought of bringing The Family into the safety of my room again wasn't appealing. In the sheltered room of the frat house, protected by The Legion, it felt like our safe space.

“I’d rather just eat one of those delicious cookies you warmed up for me.”

Aaron grabbed one off the plate and held it in front of my face. “Anything for you.”

Thirty

AARON



“**Y**eah, I think you’ll probably have to go with the turtleneck.” I brushed her hair back over her shoulder to hide the huge red mark I’d left on her neck.

I thought I was being gentle, but a clear bruise from a bite mark on her inner thigh said otherwise.

The bright morning sun poured into her room, casting everything in a haze. A perfect idealistic world that nothing and nobody else could touch, and it was new and undiscovered.

I rubbed her bottom lip before I kissed the top of her head.
“Are you sure you’re okay?”

She was glowing. Her skin, her hair—she said it was too messy, and I respectfully disagreed. That content smile widened when she peered up at me. “I’m a big girl, Aaron. I can handle it.”

I laughed, remembering exactly where she’d told me that before. Oh, how different things were. Back then, I’d never thought I’d be here in her room, and I’d never believed something like last night would ever be possible. But there she was walking over to my closet, still in her red bra from last night. She turned toward the closet and shredded it for another, then pulled on her shirt and a sweater to cover it.

I could get used to this.

She threw me my shirt that was still crumpled on the floor. “You should wear this one today. I like the way it looks on you.”

She’d never told me anything like that before. Other than the hoodie thing, and since I’d heard those words, I’d worn one every chance I could get.

“Oh, really? Do tell.”

“It’s the color. It compliments you. Blue is the opposite of yellow on the color wheel.”

“Yellow?”

“Yeah, you’re ... yellow. Your smile. Your hair. You’re bright ... like the sun.”

“Is that because I’m sitting directly in front of the window?”

I smiled. If I was the sun, then she was the moon. My anchor that tethered me to the best parts of myself, and she was never afraid of the dark. Kimberly was fiercely brave, and I needed to be too.

She kissed me. I'd happily be the sun for her. Any day, for the rest of forever.

We walked down the stairs and awaited the barrage from my brothers. They promised to be cool, but I knew better.

In the night, I'd gotten up to get Kimberly a glass of water. That was my first mistake.

They were all gathered at the dining room table, and they quieted as I came in. Presley shielded himself from me to hide what I guessed was a bombardment of questions. He was squirming, bursting at the seams to ask me something.

They'd heard. There was no way they couldn't.

I sighed. "Just say it."

"We didn't hear anything." Luke scratched the stubble on his face to hide his smile.

Zach didn't hide his wide grin. "Not a peep."

Presley kept his lips firmly shut and shook his head.

Of course they did. I'd tried to keep things quiet ... but it kind of became less of a priority as things progressed.

"You guys better not say anything."

"It's official!?" Presley sprinted in front of me. "Tell me it is and I don't have to keep watching you both suffer."

“Yeah, it is.” I couldn’t stop smiling. It was like I was back in kindergarten telling them I talked to my crush.

They all shouted with their congratulations and mentioned for the thousandth time it was about time.

“But you have to be cool, okay? No weird comments. Presley, let her bring it up. Luke, give it a minute before you tell her welcome to the family. And Zach, keep it PG ...”

“That falls under no weird comments,” Zach corrected me.

“I know! But there can be no record of this. You guys heard nothing. You know nothing.”

“That five-year plan is looking pretty good right about now.” Luke winked at me, and I resolved to tell him my additions later. He didn’t make fun of things like that. Not like Presley and Zach.

Zach snickered. “I guess now we know your secret.”

“It’s the cookies.” Luke chuckled.

“What the hell did you put in those things?” Zach had said.

“Definitely the cookies,” Presley had said. “You’ll have to tell me what your secret recipe is.”

“I hate you all.”

I had no choice but to hope for the best. Presley came skipping out of the living room and was waiting for us by the time my foot hit the bottom step. He nearly took out one of William’s prized monstera from its pedestal.

“Wait ... something is different here.”

Subtle. I fought the urge to roll my eyes, and Kimberly narrowed her eyes at me.

She cleared her throat. “We’re dating.”

“Holy shit! It’s official!” Presley picked her up and spun her around. “Tell me you guys heard that!”

“Hell yeah! Welcome to the Calem club,” Luke said, smiling from ear to ear.

“It’s about fuckin’ time,” Zach grumbled, but there was a smile on his face as he leaned against the wall.

I wanted to burn this moment in my brain forever. I never thought I’d get to see it. I was afraid to even think about it. Wherever she went, I’d follow. I kissed her hand, and I knew she was all mine.

“We need to celebrate! Let’s have a party. Kim, what do you normally do for Thanksgiving?” Presley said.

“I don’t really do Thanksgiving.”

“What do you mean you don’t do Thanksgiving?” I said.

“I mean ... as sad as it sounds, I just get one of those little frozen dinners and call it a day.”

My mom would have had a meltdown if she’d heard that. She’d told us every Thanksgiving to invite anyone we wanted and then she’d cook for them. Even if she had to work on the actual day, she planned for it every year.

“Wait ... what?! No, no, no. We need to do Thanksgiving! We can make a big meal with all the old recipes.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Kimberly said.

Zach frowned. “I mean, not to be the asshole here, but we have bigger fucking things going on right now.”

He had a great point, but I liked the idea of us all at the table together. There were many things I wanted to share with her.

“No, it’s perfect timing,” Luke blurted, sharing that twin telepathy I loved so much, “Thanksgiving is in, what? Three or four days? We can make Kim some of Mom’s favorite recipes. Show her a real Calem holiday.”

“You and your sentimental shit.” Zach shook his head.

“Some things need to be celebrated. Regardless of circumstances.” Luke grabbed my shoulder. “Plus, it’s a nice distraction.”

We all circled together as William, Thane, Skylar, and Dom entered the living room.

Zach was staring daggers at Thane.

I gave Thane a sorry expression. I felt bad for him. I’d had my share of accidents as a vampire too.

“We come in peace, asshole.” William licked his teeth. “We need to talk.”

Skylar walked forward. “We know that things are strained, and your faith in Kilian is faltering, but we are committed to you. Whether you believe that is up to you.

Dom nodded. “We will see it through.”

“We don’t need you around. We’ll figure out our own protection.”

“We’d still be around.” Thane rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve been hashing it out with Aaron, and honestly, no matter what you say, I’m committed to protecting him. I made a promise to myself that day after the church. We all did.”

“So, you’re all saying you want to be invited to Thanksgiving?” Presley said.

“Oh, fuck. I don’t want to be lumped into that.” William ran his hands through his hair, and Skylar elbowed him. “But, yes. We will be there protecting you asshats because ... we want to. Not because we have to.”

“Did Kilian put you up to this?” Luke said.

“No, Kilian ... is very ... unnerved by recent events. We just know you’re all bound to do something dangerous.”

“Well, the more, the merrier. You can help us get groceries.” Luke winked at me before grabbing a pen and paper to make the grocery list.

The mood lifted. We might salvage things if we could keep Zach from killing Thane.

“I’ll steal some money so we can splurge on a turkey,” Presley said before getting a death stare from William.

“Maybe we can all cook her something? Our favorite foods?” I said, nudging Thane.

“What a brilliant idea. I think we could probably swing it, right, guys?” Thane said, “Skylar?”

“Yes, me and Dom can prepare a dish.”

William sighed. “I feel like this will be a total waste of time, but yes, I will make a dish. Something classic from Ireland you’ve surely never tried before.”

“It’s settled, then. We’re giving Kim the best Thanksgiving she’s ever had,” Luke said.

Thirty-One

KIMBERLY



The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it!” Presley almost knocked me over, and a flurry of flour and dough flew from his apron.

Luke was very particular. Presley could make the pie and only the pie. I think it had something to do with not trusting him with the open flame on the stove. My only job was to supervise Presley and help him cut apples. Zach clinked glasses with William in the corner, and I smiled at the

lingering hope for their friendship. Aaron was busy helping Luke, and his hair fell into his eyes as steam poured from the boiling pot that smelled of starchy potatoes. A sly smirk rested at the corner of his lips, and I tried not to stare at the veins in his forearms as he grabbed the skillet and tossed the onions. That didn't stop me from imagining the feel of his lips on my neck again.

“Oh, hey, Chelsea's here!”

I inhaled. My sense of calm shattered as I bolted toward the front door. The frat house was one place I didn't want her. Not with Akira watching our every move. I hoped a week wasn't too long for him to wait for my answer. The firm 'no' would undoubtedly end with him coming to kill me.

She was dressed in an all-black sweater dress, and the first thing I noticed was her freshly done manicure. Black acrylics replaced the uneven paint.

Her smile faded when she saw my black eye I forgot to cover.

“Holy shit, what the hell, Kim?!” Chelsea said with a mixture of horror and shock in her voice.

“I'm fine.” I grabbed her shirt to pull her in the door, but she had other plans. She grabbed me by the sweater and pulled me out the front door.

“Okay, what is going on?”

I stared at her, trying to gather my thoughts, and trying to construct a lie that would make sense to her.

“I was ... sparring in the gym, and my partner hit me pretty good, it’s not a big deal. It was an accident.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What are you not saying? You can tell me. I didn’t peg Aaron as the type, but if he’s hurt you—”

“No way! That’s not it. I promise. I would tell you. This was an accident. Really.”

She let out a long breath. “You’ve had a lot of accidents this year. I’m starting to get concerned you won’t make it to graduation.”

Her tone was lighter, but she was still surveying me with a fine-tooth comb. She didn’t believe me.

I needed to shift the conversation. “And miss what might be the greatest day of our lives? Never.”

I used to believe that. That graduating would somehow bring me all the happiness I’d ever wanted. I had no plans for after, as if life ceased to exist. Now everything was different. It was still something I wanted, but it wasn’t the end all for my hopes and dreams. Maybe my path there would look a little different, but I’d get there.

“Exactly. Anyway, come on. Let’s go get something to eat. I’m going home to see my parents for break, and I’m trying to enjoy the silence for a few more hours.” She wrapped her arm in mine and pulled me toward the stairs, but I stopped.

“I-I can’t. I’m sorry. I’ve got plans.”

Internally I cringed at my inability to think of any better excuses on the spot.

“Oh. That’s fine.” She let go of me and brushed off her dress. If she had any disappointment, she didn’t allow me to see.

“I did bring you something, though.” She picked up an insulated bag on the step. “I have no doubt the boys will do something over-the-top, make you some measly Thanksgiving dinner and make a huge mess in their mancave, but I wanted to bring you some from our sorority dinner, just in case. I made the mashed potatoes.”

Without another word, I embraced her. I didn’t deserve her kindness. I longed to linger with her in a world that was no longer mine. I’d hoped for a friend like her all last year. If I had met her even a few months earlier, things might have been different. I imagined it as clear as day. Waking up alone in the hospital bed but this time with someone to call. Someone who would have never let me near Aaron. I might have been less inclined to hear Aaron’s words and more willing to turn him in to the police. Then who knows what would have happened to them and their family. I shivered at the thought.

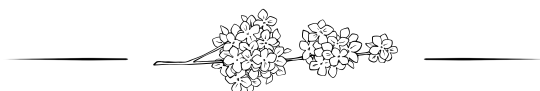
But I would have still been here. Still striving for the one thing I had always been missing.

“Thank you. This is really sweet.” I took the bag. The smell of sour cream and cheese wafted in the air.

“You’re welcome. Now, don’t let any of those boys have any. This is for you only. They can make their own.”

I laughed, and we said our goodbyes. I watched her disappear, this time with peace.

The time for faltering between the two sides was over. There was no would've or should've anymore. I'd chosen what I wanted. On my own terms.



The sun was almost gone when we found ourselves at the firepits in the square. String lights were interwoven in the branches above our heads. There were a few other groups of students at the pits, and I relaxed. A semipublic area and our closest Legion members helped. I longed for a day with no running, but as I searched the faces of the Calem brothers, I knew my journey was just beginning. My race had just started, but they'd already been around the track a few times. Yet, they smiled. Every. Single. One.

Aaron put his arm around my shoulder. "Hope you're hungry."

"This feels weird being the only human here. You guys made way too much food."

"Oh, don't worry about that. We'll bring it over to the other housemates. Someone will eat it."

I had already texted Chelsea, who would be back in just two days, that I had some food waiting for her. I didn't have the guts to ask her to help me assemble the car wash yet. I was blissfully holding that bomb until after tonight. Nothing had registered yet.

I wouldn't be coming back. Nothing would ever be the same when I stepped out of Blackheart, and Presley started preparing me for how little I'd be able to take with me.

But it could all wait for one more night. Tonight was for celebrating.

I tried to take it all in. The sheer amount of people, the warmth of the fire. A peach and lavender sky filled with stars while the tastiest-looking Thanksgiving meal was set on my lap. A plate filled to the brim and smelled of turkey breast and thyme.

This time last year, I was eating my lukewarm Thanksgiving meal from the freezer and watching every Thanksgiving episode from my favorite TV shows. I never felt sad, or at least I didn't notice it if I had. It was just what I did on holidays. I didn't decorate, and I didn't accept invitations to go anywhere. I told myself it was because I liked my routine. But staring at the group, my heart felt like it might burst, and I realized it was just a mask. One of the many I'd shed. Here in the light of the fire, I was fully exposed.

"Are you okay?" Aaron stared at me with his warm-honey eyes. He was a little too good at reading the sound of my heart beating in my chest.

"Yeah, I'm just really excited to eat all this food."

We all moved around the fire. The licks of the flames teased the cool autumn air, and I scooted a few inches closer to Aaron. His hand rested on my leg.

The Legion sat on one side, and we sat on the other. Skylar was bundled in a sherpa hoodie and pulled her legs up in the chair while she shared a quiet conversation with Dom. She laid a plaid blanket over his legs, and I swore he cracked a smile.

William and Thane were sharing drinks with the rest of the boys. I'd declined one. Tonight, I wanted to remember every single second. Despite me being the only one eating, everyone was full of smiles and laughter.

"Let's tell scary stories," Presley said, warming his hands.

Aaron and Zach booed while Luke egged him on.

"I've found real life is much more terrifying." William held his glass up, and Zach clinked the necks of the bottles together in agreement.

"Why don't you tell a good story, then?" Skylar laid her head back on the chair. "You can't possibly be gloomy all the time."

"She's right, Will. Crack open that shell," Thane said.

William sighed. "I'm not drunk enough for that."

"Oh, got it." Luke passed down a bottle of liquor and shot glass.

"We're all really fucked up, huh?" William snickered as he poured liquor into what was the biggest shot glass I'd ever seen.

"Yep," the twins said in unison, and they all took a shot at the same time.

Aaron put his arms around me while I shoveled the best food I'd ever had in my mouth.

“Fine. I’ll tell one fuckin’ story. But ’tis not that interesting.” William’s accent came through with each drop of alcohol. His fake persona at BFU involved him growing up in California, so he always had to hide it.

“In my country, there was a ghost story of an abandoned house on a hill. Tales of banshees that lived in hills and screamed in the night. My sister and I ... we always played together, and we’d play there in the yard. She wasn’t afraid of things like that ... ghosts and spirits. But I was. She was younger but much braver.”

We all listened in silent attentiveness.

“It was her idea to spend the night there. She wanted to sneak out in the night, unbeknownst to my mother, and look it in the face and see if it was true. She was hard to convince once her mind was set on something.”

Aaron nudged me, and I wrapped my arm around him.

“We went, and I was fuckin’ terrified. Every creak. Every blow of the wind. I was shakin’ like a leaf. But I couldn’t back down. I was supposed to be the strong big brother. The night came and went and there was nothing. No banshees. No cold chills. It was just a house.”

I never believed in ghost stories growing up, but I imagined if I had a little sibling, I might do the same. Help them conquer their fear.

“It would be a few more years before I learned there was far more to fear than made-up ghost stories and haunted houses. Life is that ghost. But even more terrifying.”

Silence accompanied the cool breeze rustling through the trees.

“What was your sister’s name?” I said.

I didn’t even know if he’d answer, but he’d told me about losing his sister once. He didn’t have to tell me the truth then. He could have told me any story.

“Eilean.” William’s eyes softened in the light of the fire.

“You’ve never told me that,” Thane said.

“You never asked.” William poured himself another shot and downed it.

The others continued with a few stories. Thane told the story of his drunken stupor in an Irish pub that led him to William and Kilian. Skylar shared her and Dom’s first time meeting Kilian, which involved her trying to kill him for tracking them down a few years after their escape. I wasn’t surprised by any of it.

They were knit together, but in a much different way than the Calem brothers. Not quite a family but close. Caring. Thoughtful. Individuals coming together for a common cause that just happened to like each other’s company.

I would miss them. Even William. They’d undeniably kept their word in keeping us safe. A part of me felt sad for what awaited our newfound friend group.

But that one night under the starlight, we were all family.

As everyone prepared to go home, The Legion started picking up and walking to the house, which was visible from the firepit. I drifted back toward the fire.

“You and Aaron made it official, I hear.” William’s cigarette smoke wafted into my face.

“Yeah. Come to tell me some obscure insult?” I said, crossing my arms.

He laughed. “No, love. Actually ... you two are good together.”

I turned to him. That was the first nice thing he’d said in months.

“See, I can be nice. Bit of advice, though ...”

“Here it comes.” I waited. I never cared for unsolicited advice, especially from him.

“Turn. As soon as you can. They’re gonna tell you to wait till you’re ready. All that shit. No. You need to turn soon, or guaranteed ... they’ll be burying you before spring.”

My stomach knotted. It sounded almost like a threat. But the muscles in his face were relaxed. He was being sincere.

“Thanks ... I’ll keep that in mind.”

He clicked his tongue. “Until then, I guess sunglasses and turtlenecks will be your new best friends. At least they’re fashionable.”

He walked away and joined Thane. There was a story there, and I wondered if I'd ever know what it was.

“Did you have fun?” Luke was next to me, and Zach followed behind him.

“Yeah ... it felt nice to be a part of something.” It was a more vulnerable thing to say, but I embraced the discomfort.

Zach and Luke shared a look. That “telepathy” Aaron swore was actual magic.

“Uh-oh.” Aaron was behind me with a smile. “I know that look.”

“I think it’s about time we officially inducted Kimberly to the Calem family.”

The fire illuminated all our faces, and Zach pulled a pocketknife from his joggers.

“A blood pact,” Zach said with a toothy smile.

“Only if she wants to,” Aaron said.

“Finally.” Presley was beside us instantly.

“Wait, what exactly am I agreeing to?”

“It’s just a pact Luke and I made with Pres and Aaron when they were younger. Talk is cheap but blood is forever. You’re one of us now. Let’s make it official,” Zach said.

“Aw. Someone does have a heart,” Presley said before Zach pushed him.

“What? I can be sentimental sometimes. What do you say, Kim? It’s just a little blood. Not like you’ll turn or anything.”

“Speaking of, when are we doing the thing?” Presley asked.

William’s words were seared on the back of my skull.

“I-I ...”

“Kim will tell us when she’s ready,” Aaron said.

“Let’s give her more than a few days to decide,” Luke said.

The Calem boys all stared back at me, and their eyes were heavy with anticipation. I didn’t have words. It wasn’t a question I expected being asked. My whole body felt hot from excitement. I hadn’t realized how much I wanted to be included, to be considered one of their own.

“Well, in the meantime. Let’s make another life-altering commitment.” Zach smiled.

“What do I have to do?”

Zach brought his thumb to his lip and bit down. A small dot of black blood appeared. He handed me the knife. “Just a little pinprick.”

Aaron’s arm grazed my shoulder, and I gave him a reassuring smile.

“I can handle a little blood,” Aaron said tentatively.

I pressed the blade into my thumb, the pain stopped me from making more than an indentation in my skin.

Aaron placed his hand in mine, steadying the blade. “Are you sure?”

I knew what he was asking me. Something much more serious deep down. To be a Calem, marked with their blood,

was to be family. To be their family meant being marked for death, but it also meant being greatly loved and protected. This was the final seal. Their final promise to me, and in return, my promise to them.

“I’m sure.”

My mind flashed back to the old church and the crack of thunder. William’s proposition to forget. I’d already made my mind up long ago.

“You’re the only other person who’s been inducted. This is special stuff.” Presley’s eyes glistened in the fire. “Sarah and Ashley were going to ... until ... Sarah went missing.”

Zach’s hand raked through his hair. “Ash didn’t want to do it without her.”

I expected to see a solemn Luke, but when he finally tore his gaze away from the fire, he smiled that million-dollar smile that told thousands of stories all at once. The kind where the heroes always get back up no matter how beaten and bruised.

“Alright, let’s do this.” He clapped and stood.

The smile lingered when he bit down on his thumb, and Presley followed suit.

Aaron’s warmth was blazing hot in the cool of night. With his hand on mine, we pressed the blade into my skin, a small dot of red appeared on my forefinger. His eyes drank me in as he bit his thumb. Fear and hope smoldered together and floated into the night like the crackling embers.

“Repeat after me.” Luke pulled his shoulders back. “With earnest, I swear to ... protect, to love, and to fight for this family. Until my last day.”

The words hummed in my throat after I said them. A secret song.

We placed our hands over the fire, joining our thumbs under the light of the moon. Our blood meshed as one. They belonged to me, and I belonged to them.

My heart surged with pride and love. A vow to my new family. Forever.

A strange feeling tickled my spine, and I scanned the darkness hidden in the trees. If Akira didn't know then, he knew now. I wasn't running.

Thirty-Two

KIMBERLY



On the grassy lawn of OBA, the morning breeze rushed through the trees. The redwoods stayed evergreen while the maples had long shed their leaves, and only a few oak trees held their fall leaves. I grabbed a large, thick black marker and wrote “Car wash” on a piece of poster board Chelsea had stored under her bed.

“Have you lost your mind?” were the first words out of her mouth when I asked her to help me organize a frat car wash in

just a few days. I was reluctant to have her help, but I desperately needed it, and she had connections. Not just in her sorority, in which I knew she could guarantee every single one of them would attend, but even up to the school board. Over the summer, she had told me about how she'd made great friends with the woman in the dean's office. Black Forest University loved their fraternities and sororities because they brought in the most traffic.

Chelsea was next to me using her marker like a magic wand, and every sign looked like a professionally printed sign. She sighed and flung her marker down, making that our tenth sign. We still needed to put them up all over town.

“Can you pass me the glitter?” I said, contemplating every life choice I'd ever made.

She flung it to me, and it rolled to my knee. “First you blow me off and then you come pleading on my doorstep asking me to help you put this huge event together in one day—”

“I haven't been blowing you off! I promise ... I've been busy.”

I was being a horrible friend. If only I could come clean. If only she could see I was probably saving her from getting killed by a cult.

She glared at me, then her brow softened. “I know. I know. You're in love. But the Coleman boys are not that interesting. I don't get how or why you want to hang around them all the time.”

“They’re fun.”

“They’re cavemen, but I digress.” She held up a pink glitter sign, and little piles of loose glitter fell into the grass. “You’re lucky just about every girl on this campus will be clawing their way over here to see the Coleman boys shirtless ... Aaron included.”

My stomach turned. Envy was a dear friend, but jealousy was new.

Chelsea smiled from ear to ear as she pulled her hair back into a high ponytail.

“You’re happy about my pain, aren’t you?”

Chelsea held up her fingers close together. “Just a tiny bit.”

I could not believe we’d once been at each other’s throats over Aaron.

We walked arm in arm toward the door of the frat house, where William had clearly figured out the plan for the car wash, considering there were already people piled on the lawn. Even the other fraternities wanted to come and support. Probably to drink too. Our secret text went out the night of Thanksgiving, and as expected, the sororities and fraternities went wild.

“I’ll be right back. Then me and Skylar will help put signs around town.”

I hadn’t asked Skylar yet, but I assumed she’d protect me.

Chelsea turned to leave, but I stopped her. “Chelsea ... thank you. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

I’d never be able to fully thank her for her friendship. I was going to disappear, and I’d just be a memory to her. I hoped she would forgive me after a few years. Maybe time would heal my abandonment, but I knew that feeling well. Time helped, but the scar never went away.

She smiled and rolled her eyes.

I couldn’t believe I would probably lose one of my first friends at college because I was too busy running around keeping vampire secrets.

Behind William, the Calem boys came strolling out of the house, all shirtless and wearing swim shorts. Except Zach who had voted for compression shorts. They were laying it on thick. My attention lingered on Aaron. His chest. His arms. That smile. The sun warming his skin made everything about him light up. When he ran his hands through his fluffy hair, I imagined those hands. The lines. The strength. The way they felt on my skin. All the places they touched ...

William pointed to the steps and motioned for them to sit. They all did. I walked in slowly behind, hoping I could avoid the wrath, but Presley spotted me and waved.

“Oh, perfect. You’re all here,” William said with flared nostrils. “Do any of you want to tell me what the hell you’re doing?”

Presley raised his hand. “It’s a car wash.”

“Yep. Gathered that. Now, why the hell are you having a car wash on our lawn?”

“We wanted to make money for the spring block party,” Luke said.

“Really? *You’re* so concerned with the spring block party, then?”

“Totally.” Luke smiled from ear to ear. “What else could I possibly be concerned with right now?”

“Bullshit. You fuckin’ bastards.” William paced in front of them. “I know you now. You’re up to something. I can smell it.”

“We just want to flaunt our bodies. Honest.” Presley snickered.

Zach and Aaron nodded.

“You wanted us to make money in an honest way,” Luke said.

“Yeah, that’s why you had fuckin’ jobs! You’re tellin’ me none of ya are scheduled to work today?”

“We moved everything around so we could do this!” Presley said.

William turned, only now noticing the glittery sign still in my hand. “That fuckin’ poster. You’re all in on this?”

I hid it behind my back as if it would help.

“Cool poster, Kim!” Presley gave me a thumbs-up while the other boys snickered.

“You all think is fuckin’ hilarious, don’t ya? How do you think Kilian is going to feel about a shirtless car wash in front of the fuckin’ house!?”

The mental image of Kilian sauntering to the front lawn to see the boys wet and topless was enough to make us all squirm and hold our tongue to keep from laughing. The boys all stared down at their feet, not saying a word until Zach broke his composure and threw a hand over his mouth to smother his laughter.

“Maybe he could join us.” Aaron bit his lip, still fighting a smile.

“Oh. I know you’re up to something. I’m going to figure out what it is. Fuck.”

He turned around, still talking to himself, and threw his hands in the air. “I’m tired of fuckin’ babysitting.”

“Wow, he is pissed.” Presley laughed as he left.

Zach stood up and patted Luke on the back. “I like this plan more and more.”

I’m not sure it had set in for any of us yet that tomorrow night would be our last night on campus. I think we were all savoring it. Soaking in our last moments as regular college kids. Luke and Zach said they never planned on going to college. But even though they struggled through the classes, as they walked next to each other, I couldn’t help but think how happy they were together. Almost like it was what they were meant for. Connection.

They grabbed their buckets and sponges and headed toward the road. Presley worked the sorority girls, playfully grabbing their hands and beckoning them to grab their friends. To my surprise, Zach and Luke were doing the same thing. Usually both very coy, they were flirting, subtly flexing, and playing every bit of the charming frat-boy persona they could.

Aaron nudged me. “Think you’ll be jealous when the ladies are eyeing me?”

I smiled. “Nope.”

Aaron pinched my chin and tilted my face. “You’re sure?”

I stuttered, my breath stopping in my throat. “Mhm.”

He put his hand above me, our stolen moment just out of sight, while his chest pinned me to the porch pillar. Soft lips grazed over my ear, and I shivered.

“I kinda love this,” he said, his breath still hot on my neck while his fingers grazed my breastbone. “That little kick in your heart every time I get close to you ...”

I swallowed. My mind blanked for a second, and I forgot where we were.

“You’re just teasing me now.”

He smirked. “A little.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Are you sure?” He leaned in to kiss my cheek and whispered in my ear, “Your heartbeat says otherwise”

It did. I pulled away and tried to regain my composure.

“After the hold you’ve had on me from the moment you walked away from me in the courtyard, it’s nice to have some ... control.” He laughed.

But I wasn’t ready for him to move away from me. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

He seemed surprised by my question at first, then his chest pressed into mine. The light danced in his irises.

“You couldn’t handle what I’m thinking right now.” A shadow cast over Aaron’s eyes and warmth flashed in my core.

He was probably right. It was the same look he gave me when he’d had me pinned down in my bed, but there was a part of me ... a part I wasn’t ready to admit to yet, that wondered what exactly that might be.

I straightened myself, determined not to bend. “Oh, really? Because you’re the one who’s blushing.”

He sucked in a breath, losing his composure, and the smile returned. “Am not.”

But he was a mess of blushed cheeks and blond hair, and I savored that shy smile that appeared when I said it. I didn’t know where we were going next, but I’d be next to him and that made me feel okay.

“Okay, love birds. Come on. Aaron, we have our bodies to sell for money.” Presley appeared next to us.

“What the hell, Pres?” Aaron grumbled.

“Sorry, as your little brother, it’s a core part of my life’s mission to be a cockblock. I don’t make the rules.”

We followed him toward the road, weaving between the growing number of students.

“Kimberly, feel free to join if you wanna put on a bikini,” Presley said.

It was way too cold for that.

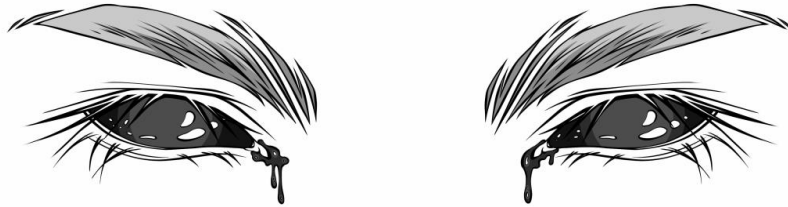
“I’m okay.”

“Just wanted to ask in case you felt left out.”

I’d always been scared to leave Blackheart. There was something holding me back, but with the Calem brothers, there was freedom. It lingered on the horizon, and for the first time, I wondered what else was out there. I was ready.

Thirty-Three

AARON



There wasn't much packing to be done. All my belongings fit into my school bag. Only a few sets of clothes, but I'd made sure to put in the rock Kimberly gave me. I stood at the foot of my bed and faced the wall. My Black Forest University flag stared back at me.

I couldn't believe this was the end of our journey at BFU. I'd started to like it here. I remembered the first time I'd set foot in my dorm room. Lifeless and dull. I'd sat on the edge of the bed, full of anger and resentment for my brothers.

But everything was different now. I didn't want to leave, not when we'd set up such a good lie. Even I had believed for a second that I could be Aaron Coleman. A guy who gets the

girl, parties with his brothers on the weekends, and has a normal future. Someone who only has to worry about school and his family. I liked being him, even if it was only for a little while.

I made my way to my headboard and decided the flag needed to come with. BFU would be a nice memory.

As I stared at some polaroids, Presley's camera came to mind. He'd taken one singular object with him when we left home—Mom's camera. She loved taking our picture and always had her head buried in that old scrapbook. A thought I usually tried to push away, but this time I kept it close, savoring the sadness. She was still out there. I didn't know where we were going, but it might take us even farther from her. I was happy she was safe, but I missed seeing her in our photos.

A knock on the door startled me, and I kicked my bag under the bed.

Luke appeared with a towel in his hand as he dabbed his hair dry. "Don't worry. Just me. I wanted to check in on you. The Legion are all on the other side of the house right now talking with Kilian."

I didn't want to think if that was good or bad news. My guess was they were discussing the events of this afternoon. We'd earned about four grand, which was enough to get us started on our journey tomorrow night.

Luke sat on the edge of my bed while I took down the flag. His gaze burned a hole in the floor.

“You’re checking on me ... has anyone asked you how you’re doing?”

His head popped up, and his automatic response kicked in. “Don’t worry about me.”

Luke would never tell me how he felt. The only thing that ever brought me comfort concerning that was knowing he’d probably told Zach.

I plopped down next to him, bouncing for a moment. “You don’t have to do that, you know? I know you’re not all right.”

“You seem sure of that.” He watched me for a moment before changing the subject. “How was Kim with everything?”

I got up, scanning the room and picking up some old towels and readying them for the laundry. I didn’t want to leave too much for anyone to do in our absence.

“She seemed okay. I think she’s just as good as any of us right now. Maybe a little worse ... this is her home. I think she’s sad. More than she lets on.”

I knew that feeling. She was about to leave her home as I had mine. I wished it didn’t have to be that way.

“I guess she’s like you in that way ...” I rummaged through the papers on my desk, double-checking it wasn’t anything I’d need.

I let the silence between us settle. Something nagged at me. I was finally ready to ask him.

“How’d you do it ... keep going after ... Sarah. I mean, you knew you loved her since you guys were in kindergarten. I’ve known Kimberly less than a year, and I can’t imagine losing her, let alone losing her the way you lost Sarah.”

Luke frowned. “Why are you asking me this now?”

“I just ... I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to her. I promised I’d protect her.”

She chose to stay with me, and that meant keeping her safe. I was ready for it, but I wasn’t Luke—someone who made carrying his burdens look easy.

His eyes softened, and he patted the bed next to him. “Nothing’s going to happen to Kimberly. I’m sure of it.”

I joined him. “How can you say that?”

“Because I have a feeling.”

“And with Sarah you didn’t?”

“With Sarah ... I had a lot of warnings I didn’t listen to. Sarah was never meant to be in my life. I don’t think I can say the same thing for Kim. I think she was meant to find us. Maybe not in the way it happened, but she’s a missing piece or something. I just couldn’t let Sarah go. That’s what it comes down to.”

It was still achingly close to my relationship with Kimberly, but I agreed. Things with Kimberly felt right. Like a scratch you finally get to itch.

I let in the pain of hearing Sarah's name. Though my pain was nothing compared to Luke's. I couldn't imagine it—living in a world where Kimberly wasn't. Even worse, a world where I'd be directly involved in her death.

“How do you ... deal?”

Luke's shoulders were hunched as he leaned onto his knees. “I never had the choice not to. I keep living and suffering ... that's my punishment.”

I didn't like that answer. Luke didn't deserve to suffer or be punished. Would he ever forgive himself? I wouldn't if it were me, but I still wanted that for him.

“Aaron ... she'll be okay. She's got us.”

A sick feeling washed over me, and I got up and continued to pack, only faster this time. Something brewed under the surface of our little charade. I wanted to believe Luke's words. But I couldn't. Not until we were on the road, and even then, I wasn't sure if the feeling would go away.

“I just ... worry about you, and I don't want you to have to go back. You're always protecting us but who's protecting you?”

He wasn't the brother of my childhood. Luke was the fun one. Even more than Presley. He got us up off the couch to play sports in the street. I never remember him frowning. Not once.

Luke smiled unexpectedly and laughter escaped his lips. “You've always been the sensitive one.”

“Uh, I’m not!”

“You are ... it’s not a bad thing but not something I’ve ever had to worry about with Presley. That’s a good thing.”

I still failed to see how it could be a good thing. If Zach was here, he’d be commenting on it.

“It means you’re a good leader. You understand the emotions of others.”

I let go of a breath. “Oh.”

I never considered myself the leader type. I paled in comparison to Luke. His cool attitude in times of trouble. His ability to always make me feel like I could do anything. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever be able to give that kind of hope to anyone. How could I ever fill the big shoes of my older brothers?

“I have something for you.” Luke handed me a small piece of paper. “I want you to memorize that. Know it forward and backward. Okay? Starting now. Memorize it, then burn it.”

It was a bunch of numbers and symbols written in pencil.

“What is it?”

“Just memorize it.”

“Now?” I said, still skeptical and wondering how good my memorizing skills were.

He nodded and headed for the door. The weight on his shoulders seemed a bit lighter.

“And you’re not gonna tell me why, are you?”

He smiled. “Nope. Just trust me.”

I did. With my life. With her life. Like always.

Thirty-Four

KIMBERLY



“Are you sure you’re okay?” Skylar said as we pulled into the movie theater parking lot. Dom turned down the music so I could reply.

My palms were sweaty, and my heart was pounding against my ribs.

Presley put his arm over me to silence me. “We’ll be quick.”

On my last shift, I’d stashed some of our bags in the lockers in the employee break room. It was the perfect excuse to get

some of us out of the house and split up our security. It also prevented suspicion. It was my plan. A good one, but I still felt dirty about the whole thing.

Skylar put the car in park and leaned over the seat. "I'm coming in with you."

"It's okay. We won't be long," I said, trying not to avert my eyes.

"I know, but just in case." She opened the door, there was no reasoning with her.

Presley shook his head, signaling me to not reply. I promised to let him do the talking.

"Thanks again, buddy." Presley patted Dom's arm as he left.

Dom only replied with a grunt. He had a weird way of showing it, but I think Presley had grown on him.

It was only thirty minutes to close, and the staff was light. One was our manager, and the other was a twenty-two-year-old guy fresh out of college. We almost never had shifts together.

Cary, the manager, spotted us beelining for the back. "Just what are you two up to?"

"We just forgot some stuff in our lockers, and we need it for school."

"Uh-huh. Come here. I have a bone to pick with you." She pointed a finger at Presley and signaled him over.

Presley didn't show up for his shift today, for obvious reasons, and was likely in for a tongue lashing.

Skylar and I shifted from foot to foot in the lobby as we waited. Christmas music played in a soft cadence. *I wouldn't miss that.*

"Are you going to go and get your stuff?"

"Uh, I think I'll wait for Presley." My heart hammered again.

"You know, you can tell me if something is wrong," Skylar whispered. "Maybe I can help."

The guilt was like liquid sloshing around in my stomach when I drank too much water on a run.

How was I going to tell her? *"This is it. This is our last few minutes together because we're leaving Blackheart."*

All the time she put in would be for nothing. She wasn't any closer to the queen than when she started if we left, but she'd understand why we had to go. Or maybe she'd hate me for it.

"I know ... you've helped me so much. I'll never be able to repay you for it. Thank you."

She frowned. *Uh-oh.*

I was blowing it. She was catching on.

"Come on, Kim!" Presley wrapped his arm in mine and skipped me to the staff room.

"Did Cary just fire you?"

"Nope, she's in love with me, I think."

We entered the breakroom. The only employee room that didn't smell like stale popcorn. I never spent my breaks there. I'd go sit on the bench outside and talk with Skylar, or Aaron would talk my ear off in the hallway. I would miss this. This tiny moment in my life was almost at a close, and I wasn't sure I was ready to say goodbye.

"We have to stall for a few more minutes. I just got a message saying they're delayed a little bit at the house." Presley typed in his code for his locker. "Can you keep it together?"

"Yeah, I'm just ... sad all of a sudden."

Presley pulled out our bags. "This is the hard part. Like standing in line for a roller coaster for two hours. But it's worth it in the end. This will be worth it."

Presley's soft smile brimmed with optimism. Nothing could penetrate that unbreakable wall.

"Were you sad to leave Brooklyn?"

He stopped and handed me my bag. "Yeah, I was ... but every time I thought about being sad, I just remembered I had everything I needed and that made me feel better."

His story differed from what I'd heard from Aaron and Zach. To them, he'd remained completely unfazed, but he didn't look undaunted to me. He knew exactly what we were up against. He chose happiness.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Aaron sent me a message.

Aaron: I'll be there soon. I miss you already ... good thing we'll be crushed together in a car for who knows how long.

Aaron: I love you.

I smiled. This was the right choice. My choice. I had everything I needed.

We walked toward the lobby, and I prepared myself for what I would say to Skylar. I'd practiced at least twenty times in my bedroom mirror. I'd prepared for the good and the bad, but as I walked, none of it was coming to mind. It would all have to come from the heart, then. I'd tell her a proper thank you for everything. How I would have never been here without her, and how she'd inspired me to finally choose my own path.

"Wait, where did everyone go?" Presley's voice echoed in the hall.

The lobby was empty, but I could hear the last movie playing in the theater down the hall.

Where was Skylar? The parking lot outside was bare with only the streetlights, and there was no sign of the headlights of Dom's car.

We went up to the door and pulled. It was locked.

"Kim ... I smell blood."

I turned around to see a paralyzed Presley staring at a dark figure sitting on the counter.

Akira sat with his hands dangling over the front counter. Blood stained his hands and the countertop as he jumped to his

feet.

“You both seem surprised to see me. What’d you think? This is a little too public for ya? You see ... you underestimated the body count I was prepared to make in this place. Your little ticket booth friends are already dusted and in the dumpster.” I wanted it to be a bad joke, but he was more serious than he had ever been. His eyes were black under the glow of the neon lights overhead. “Along with the straggling customers in the theater one.”

“You’re ... joking ... right?” Presley spoke slowly.

“No, I’m really not, not this time. Sure, I could have compelled them to leave early, but I was feeling a bit pissed off. Someone didn’t listen, and I’m tired of waiting.”

Presley grabbed me by the arm, and we walked backward. “What the hell are we going to do?”

“What *are* you going to do? You can’t outrun me. You can’t fight me,” Akira said.

I was confident it didn’t matter how fast we ran, we weren’t making it. My first instinct was to protect Presley, but he wasn’t the one Akira was here to kill.

“Presley, whatever you do, you need to tell the others,” I said. “They need to know this is happening right now.”

“Yeah, Kim, I gathered that. What do you mean?”

“I have a plan. Don’t follow me.” I took off toward the showrooms. I had one shot—not to escape or outrun him—to

buy myself enough time to figure out how to get him to not kill me. He wouldn't kill Presley. That I knew.

“What!?” Presley's voice echoed as I ran closer to the theater hall.

“Trust me!” I called to him, pushing faster.

“Oh! I was hoping you'd run.” His soft snickers turned into an echoing of laughter that threatened to immobilize me.

My body was numb as I tore through the lobby. The classical Christmas music meshed with my footsteps in the empty building. There was no use going for the door. I had to make time. A quick glance behind me, and Akira was gone. I turned down the theater hall and was met with the plush red carpet and then I stopped.

A muffled sound came toward me, but it wasn't behind me. It was directly on top of me. Something or someone was rummaging through the ceiling. As I went to run, one of the tiles crashed to the floor along with a blur of white and black.

My throat went dry. It was Skylar. Her skin was translucent and pale, and her eyes were black, and little streams of black blood trailed onto her cheeks. *She's dead.*

I couldn't scream or feel as tears blurred my vision.

Akira's muffled laughter resounded again. I couldn't outrun him, and I couldn't fight him. I was going to die like Skylar. I'd never felt such terror or hopelessness. Not even that night in the forest with Aaron. I always found a way to fight. But in the cold theater, I was alone again.

I quieted my sobs and made a turn toward the back storage room. A room permanently stained with the smell of popcorn. While stifling sobs with one hand, I steadied myself on the floor with my other.

What would happen to Aaron if he found out I had been killed this way? Would he be able to move on? Would they all be? My life would be a mist on this Earth to them in the grand scheme of their long lives. Would it even matter?

My body shook with each new surge of adrenaline. Nothing other than the music playing in the lobby could be heard. Akira was toying with me. Whatever spectacular display I could give him, would no doubt be what he wanted. He wanted me to feel like a cornered animal all alone.

I dared to think of Aaron again. Of us alone in his room safe from this place. I may never see Aaron again. The fear washed over me, almost turning me into a weeping mess on the floor. A blur in the corner of the room caught my attention. I willed myself to stand, but before I could, a hand was placed over my mouth and a strong arm held me to the floor.

It was Dom crouched next to me.

He motioned for me to be quiet and removed his hand. Staring into his eyes brought a wave of pain. I knew then I had to tell him.

I kept my voice in barely a whisper. “Skylar ... she’s ... she’s—”

“I know,” Dom said too matter-of-factly, but his body told a different story, it was cold and unwavering, but I could see the desperation and fear streaming from his eyes.

“Why are you here, then? You don’t like us.”

“I made a promise to protect you.” He pulled me to my feet. “So, I’m going to make sure you get saved.”

Skylar had given her life for this and Dom was too. Not necessarily for me, but for what they believed in. I couldn’t give up. No matter what, I had to make it out of this theater. Her death couldn’t be for nothing.

Hopefully I bought Presley enough time to reach his brothers. I wasn’t naive enough to think he got to escape.

“Let’s go.” He led me out of the storage room into the hall that faced an exit door.

“I can’t leave without Presley.”

“Let me worry about him.”

Before I could protest, the lights flickered off, the music stopped, and everything was eerily silent. The only sound was my ragged breath. The generator kicked on, leaving a few overhang lights on. The dim-lit hallway suddenly seemed a few inches colder.

“Kim, run toward the front.”

As I went to round the corner toward the front door, I ran right into Akira’s chest.

“No, babe. You’re going to want to stay.”

Our eyes met for the briefest of seconds. His bloodlust bolted my feet to the floor. His cologne engulfed all my senses, and he went to brush my cheek.

Dom pulled me from behind and shielded me.

Akira sighed. “Sorry about your sister. She wasn’t exactly reasonable. But you ... it took me some time, but I remember you.”

Dom said nothing, but backed me up until I touched the wall.

“You were one of us. Connected. I can’t imagine how you must feel now. Alone. No little sister to protect. You feel it ... the void returning to you.”

“You don’t know me.”

“Of course I do! I was you till I found Her. Till I discovered the true meaning in life. Your journey was snuffed out long before it could truly begin. I could help you. You could join me, and I can take that pain away forever.”

I gripped Dom’s arm.

“I don’t want that life anymore.”

“Ask yourself, what would you do if I wasn’t going to kill you right now? Would you go back to them? What do they have for you there? Nothing. They don’t give you anything of value. All they do is take. With us ... your family, we never take. Only provide.” Akira stalked closer.

Dom's shoulders stiffened, and he pushed me backward into the hall. "I'd rather die."

Akira peered up at him with a furrowed brow. "That can be arranged."

They slammed together. Akira grabbed Dom in a choke hold, but he wiggled free.

"Run!" Dom called, his voice echoing with the sound of his struggles.

All the front exits were closed, the only other option I had was the auditorium. I ran as fast as I could. My mind reeled. There was no guarantee. These could be my last moments on Earth. My last breath would be here. In some old movie theater that smelled of stale popcorn. I didn't run outside. If I made it out, I doubted I'd be able to scream for help, or worse, someone would try to help and he'd kill them too. We were caught.

Think. Think. Think. Why did he tell me to leave? Why is he here now?

One glance behind me, and Akira was there, skipping down the hallway with black blood drenching his shirt. He stayed close behind me, pausing to watch me run and snicker in silent delight. It was as I suspected—he liked the game of cat and mouse. I ascended the stairs to the projector room of our largest auditorium.

I wondered if my heart would burst from my chest, and I forced myself to focus.

This all had to do with the boys and that ridiculous prophecy. Aaron. He wasn't part of this until that day. That day She touched him.

I pulled open the hidden door to the projector room. The pattern of the door blended in perfectly to the wall, where no one thought it existed.

The projector room was frigid and dark. Only with the sounds of the last projector rolling.

I pushed everything I could find against the door. The desk, the chairs, everything the last bit of adrenaline would buy me, and as I stared at the empty auditorium below, I remembered Aaron's and my moment together, and I found my answer.

Touch.

Akira broke the door in seconds and slammed into me from behind. It knocked the wind from my lungs and sent me to my knees. I gasped for air as he spun me around and pinned me to the floor with his body. He pushed his hips into mine, ensuring I couldn't squirm away, and his fingers tore into my skin, and I squealed.

He smelled of thick leather and sandalwood cologne. The little front pieces of his hair dangled above me. "That was fun, Kimmy."

I tried to look anywhere but his face, but his darkness overtook me. I had one opportunity. One last resort.

His hands trailed along my skin. "You're shaking like a frightened animal. Don't worry. A promise is a promise. It will

be quick. No pain, barely any pressure. It won't hurt like when Aaron bit you. I'm well practiced."

I took a deep breath in and let it out slowly. "I have a question."

"Yes?" He pressed into me more firmly and brushed a piece of hair from my face.

"You said ... She can see the future. She saw them as Her Guard. But She has to touch them to know their future."

"Still yes."

"How do you know the future hasn't changed in the last half year?"

"What are you driving at?"

"I think you know that you can't go around killing people close to the boys, or it ruins your plans. You didn't stop pursuing their mom out of the kindness of your heart. You did it because you *need* them, and they aren't committed to you. That perfect future She saw can change. That's why you wanted me to leave, because you saw and knew the truth. I'm their family now. Not you. If you kill me now, I promise you they won't go with you no matter what you do."

I hoped it was enough—it was the only card I had left to play. A single match lit in the dark.

"Oh, you know that for a fact, huh? I think you're just trying to stall. It was nice meeting you, Kimmy." He leaned in farther, and his breath was hot on my neck.

“Then why don’t you take me to Her!? Because once I’m dead, it’s over. And I know you’d hate for Her Royal Highness to be pissed off with you. Plus, wouldn’t it be more fun to take me along? I’m sure She’d love torturing me, even if She couldn’t kill me.”

He sat back up, his eyes searching mine. He waited for me to break. To cry. To show any sign of weakness. But with every ounce of energy I had left, I refused.

He picked me up off the floor. “Stay here.”

In the time it took me to catch my breath, he brought Presley beside me. Everything was a blur. He was weak and covered in black blood, and I was shaking so hard I could barely stand.

“Kim! I’ve never been so happy to see someone in my entire life.” He wrapped me in a weak hug. “I’m getting my blood all over you, and I don’t even care. Also, sidenote, I’m never setting foot in this place again. Total nightmare fuel now.”

Somewhere in his arms, the dam broke, and tears streamed down my face. I clutched him closer, wanting to bottle up all his innocence and keep it forever. His bloody shirt was the only semblance of comfort I had in that dark space, and I clung to it.

“Kim, you can’t cry.” Presley whined, and a stark frown appeared on his face. “I’m the only one in the family allowed to cry because I have the youngest privileges. It’s not your fault ... I haven’t given you all the rules yet.”

His voice broke, and we fell to the floor in tears.

“Get up you two sorry saps.” Akira watched from the stairwell with a bored expression. “You’re both coming with me.”

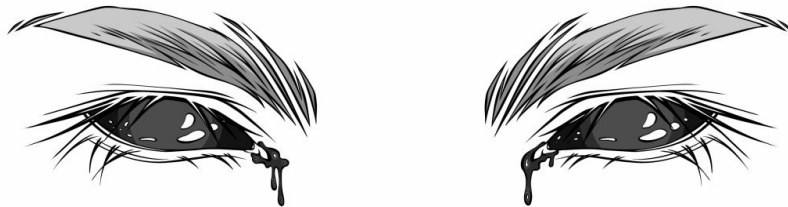
Presley and I helped each other up with a death grip on each other’s clothes.

Akira stopped me. “I wouldn’t get too excited about your life extension. I was doing you a kindness of a painless, swift death. I promise She won’t be as kind.”

Presley and I walked arm in arm following him while Akira’s words danced in my head.

Thirty-Five

AARON



The nausea came in waves but, I kept myself from freaking out by pacing the library. The wood in the fireplace wasn't burning. Everything was cold and way too quiet.

Zach buried his head in his hands. Luke's eyes were void of feeling as he watched the video footage on his phone. Blackheart was burning. The movie theater was up in flames, and the local news station covered it. The monotone drone of the news anchor was the only sound. I'd been glued to the footage, but when I saw the flames grow higher and higher, the nausea got too intense. My mind was at war between feeling way too much at once and then nothing at all.

I wasn't even sure I was awake. No, just stuck in one of my horrible dreams.

Kilian would come back any minute and help. It would fix everything. They weren't dead. No. They—

Kilian entered the room. Everything was dark.

“Presley and Kimberly were taken. Dom is the only survivor and says he saw Akira take them. It appears Akira killed everyone left in the theater, including Skylar, and then set it on fire to cover his tracks. Due to how fast the fire engulfed the building, it seems to have been planned.”

The lights came back on. I could think again. I could stop moving.

A halfhearted relief hit me first, followed by anger. At myself. Akira. Kilian.

Then sadness. For Skylar. For everyone that cared about her. For the people's lives shattered tonight, and the more that were watching it go up in flames.

Kimberly and Presley were alive. That was something.

“Holy fuck.” Zach was up on his feet closing the distance between us.

Luke wiped his face, regaining composure and moving next to me. “What can we do?”

“Yeah, how do we track them?” Zach said.

Presley's and Kimberly's location on their phones was off. Whether Akira was smart enough to turn it off or their phones

were burning, I didn't know.

“They're calling for an evacuation of the school any minute now. We won't be able to track them. The amount of people moving off the mountain means, even if we wanted to—”

“We fucking want to! I'm not listening to this shit again.” Zach moved toward the door.

Kilian squared his shoulders. There was no emotion in his features, just blank numbness.

“Akira is baiting us. He's baiting you. Giving in and looking for him is exactly what he desires. *You*. We've come too far to give in now.”

“You don't care about us ... you only care about your mission,” Zach spat.

“Zach, please. There is a far grander story at play here. We have the potential to stop the suffering of many. All the people this coven has hurt. Those lives mean something too. Just as much as your family.”

There was sincerity in Kilian's voice which made me angrier. How could he say that? How could he expect us to listen to him?

“Debatable.”

My hands were shaking. The lines drawn in the sand were blurring. Kilian was blocking the door.

“Move.” Luke's voice was the only thing anchoring me.

Red. Everything was turning red again and pulling me out of the room.

Why was Kilian blocking the door?

“I’m sorry, I can’t let you do that.”

I couldn’t go berserk here. I had to find Kimberly and Presley. I had to get out of the room, but Kilian was in my way and I could move him.

I went for the door, but Kilian’s arm was immediately on mine, pulling me away from the door and pushing me up against the wall. Hard.

Let me help.

The voice in my head was loud. Like It was real. Like It was in the room with me.

No, not like this. Losing control here meant I’d never make it out of the library.

I was being pulled in all directions. There was a shuffling about the room, and I was trapped between the wall and Kilian’s hand on my throat.

“I’m sorry.”

The red was gone, and everything turned black.



I was jolted from the darkness. She was the first thing that popped into my brain. Her smile. That distinct laugh when I

said something that really wasn't that funny.

Kimberly could be hurt.

He could be torturing her and my brother.

I had to get out of this room.

Luke and Zach were sitting across from me. I couldn't move. A firm hand was placed on the back of my neck. Judging by the pressure, it was William, and Thane was next to him. I could hear his distinct squeaky shoes tapping the floor beside me.

Luke must have seen the panic on my face because he said, "Aaron. It's okay. It's just been a few minutes."

The grandfather clock in the study chimed, signaling midnight. Minutes. It was too long. They could be anywhere. Akira could do anything to them.

I tried to stand, and the hand tightened on my throat.

"Don't move," William warned.

The worst type of Déjà vu was resurfacing. We were repeating history yet again.

Only, I thought we'd been a step ahead this time, but we never were. If we were a step behind Kilian, that meant we were two steps behind Akira. There wasn't time to argue.

I moved again, and my vision blurred.

"Don't. I promised I wouldn't mess with your memories. I'd hate to have to go against my word."

My brothers weren't restrained, but they wouldn't move. Not with William's fingers digging into my flesh.

Sirens sounded outside along with the sounds of frantic movement and talking. Everyone was evacuating except for us. We were still trapped in our eternal prison while the world was burning.

"Kilian will be back with our travel arrangements shortly."

"You don't want to do this. Come on. We're wasting time." I groaned.

William kept his tone neutral to any feeling. "This isn't a democracy."

"He's been lying to you. He doesn't care about any of you. The only thing he cares about is getting to them." Zach had no soft approach. He was hard all over, with his arms crossed and death glare.

"Did he tell you about our deal?" Luke was more delicate and calculated. "Has he told you anything?"

"You guys won't let me have a moment of peace, will you?" William said.

Thane spoke up quietly, "You made a deal ... with Kilian?"

William sighed.

"Maybe ... we should hear what they have to say?"

I knew Thane cared. Everything we went through couldn't be for nothing.

"Fine. What deal?" William said.

Luke looked at me this time. “Me and Zach were going to go back to The Family. That’s been the plan we agreed upon with Kilian the night of the church. He told us he would protect us until the time was right. We were going to try to take them down from the inside. We traded information and our compliance for the protection for Aaron, Presley, and Kimberly. It was all done in secret.”

I felt like he’d punched me in the face. That would have hurt less. They were doing it again. They couldn’t go back to that place. Back to Her.

“And why would he make a deal and not tell me?” William didn’t sound convinced, but I knew Luke wasn’t lying.

“Because I don’t think he ever intended on keeping his end of the deal. Everything changed when we learned about the prophecy. We lost all the leverage because we all became more valuable.”

“No. We did everything we could. All of us were instructed to protect you with our lives. Kilian is an honorable man. He doesn’t do back door, shady deals with ... with kids. Criminals.”

“Oh, fuck this.” Zach threw his head back. “He told you anything to keep you busy and to keep you from asking questions. His *security* never worked. He just wanted to use us as bait to draw them out, and he used all of you to keep us here like prisoners. We knew what was happening, but we couldn’t do anything. Every time Akira came out of the woodworks,

Kilian was waiting for it to happen. This has always been his plan. He fucked you over. Get over it.”

William’s grip tightened on my neck, and I signaled for Luke.

“He wants to take down the coven ... and we were willing to help. We still are, if that’s what it takes. But right now, we need to get our brother and Kimberly ... and Kilian is never going to let us leave here.” Luke’s eyes were pleading.

I couldn’t sit in the chair anymore. Everything was taking too long.

“I don’t know why he wouldn’t just tell me ...” There was finally a hint of something in William’s voice that might get us somewhere.

“I’ve known Kilian for a long time ... And I’ve never seen him react the way I saw him react when he finally got you all in that church. He was entranced. It kinda makes sense,” Thane spoke slowly.

“You believe this bullshit?” William spat.

“I’m just saying when have you ever seen Kilian invested in anyone with The Family. He’d have killed Dom and Skylar when he tracked them down if it wasn’t for you.”

Zach sat up straighter, his tone more controlled this time. “Think about it, Will. How else was he able to get into the games? Almost kidnap Kim in broad daylight? He wanted him to take one of them. He’s the only one who can even match

Akira in strength, and he's never around. He was constantly sending Skylar, Dom, and Thane on suicide missions."

The realization hit me harder than I expected. Skylar should be alive right now. There was never a bigger mission or picture. Just us sitting in Kilian's perfectly plotted scheme, and when Akira threw his wrench in, he put his money on Zach and Luke.

"He's always with you, and he put you with us. It's obvious he cares about you. Maybe he was trying to protect you too." Luke turned his attention back to me. "Maybe he just didn't know how to tell you."

I wanted to be mad at him for keeping secrets again, but it would have to wait.

I squirmed. "We don't have time for this. We have to go."

"Sit." William's fingers dug into my neck.

"Use that big fucking head of yours, you asshole. He did everything he could to ensure we were never alone because he wanted to control us. Skylar would be alive right now if it wasn't for Kilian."

Thane's voice lowered an octave. "I didn't agree to this. Skylar deserved better. She trusted us ... she trusted me."

"Fuck. Just let me think for a second," William said. He was almost drowned out by the siren going off outside.

"We don't have a second." I didn't care how desperate I sounded. "Please. You have to let us go save them. You don't even have to help, just let us go."

He was our deciding factor. The only thing left standing between me and that door. Every minute felt like an eternity.

Kilian walked into the room, and we all quieted. “Dom has arrived. He’s in poor condition. We’ll tend to his wounds and then we are moving. Will you two be able to secure them for travel?”

He didn’t look like some villain. There was pity in his steel eyes, and I wondered if he cared. If maybe this was what he needed for his own survival.

“Yeah,” William said. “I’ll keep them quiet.”

William let go of me to lock the door behind them, and slowly turned. The air in the room went stale.

As I contemplated my next move and how I would have to wrestle him to the ground despite him being hundreds of years more experienced than me, he brought a finger up to his lips and pointed to the door.

We all stood speechless for a moment. He held up a hand and cautioned us, listening for the footsteps in the hall.

“Me helping you now means nothing. We get them. That’s all I’m helping with.”

I was instantly on my feet and spared only a moment for relief. Thane was beaming. Finally, we agreed on something.

He motioned for the door, and I stopped. “Shit. My bag. It’s got all our money in there.”

Either my bag was going to get toasted by the impending fire or we wouldn't be able to come back, and it was the only money we had to escape. We had to get it.

“Bag? Money? You plan a trip or somethin’?” William cocked a crooked brow.

I was face-to-face with him at the door.

“Uh, I don't think I want to answer that.”

“We'll tell you later. Let's just fuckin' go.” Zach was pushing toward the door.

“Wait, I can get it. Aaron, it's in your room?” Thane said.

I nodded.

William shook his head, but Thane smiled. “I can do it. Don't worry. I'll meet up with you.”

William agreed, and after a few minutes, he signaled us to move. We followed him close behind and made quick work of sneaking out through the hallway and to the side door by the pool. The humans were long gone, and The Legion seemed to be pooled in the living room. The only thing I could make out was a few urgent words and a muffled sobbing.

We were silent until we were in the street. We blended into the chaos of students running around us. The midnight air was cold and smelled of bonfire. The light coming from the fire lit up the night sky behind the stadium.

I pulled out my phone to check again if Presley's or Kim's location was on. Emergency notifications buzzed for my

attention, and I pushed them away.

I gasped. “It’s on! I know where they are! It looks like a ... farm? It’s down the mountain a couple miles, and there’s traffic the whole way.”

“Then we’ll go on foot,” Luke said.

I hoped they’d be together. There was only a little bubble on Kimberly’s face. A picture I’d taken of her eating ice cream over the summer ...

The nausea was back. “What’s the plan?”

Zach was right on my heels. “We’ll think of one on the way there.”

For once, I agreed with him.

My phone rang—barely registerable amid the noise and yelling surrounding us.

Kimberly’s picture flashed across the screen, and I answered.

“Aaron!” Kimberly shouted on the other line and then muffled clamoring.

“Hi, Aaron. There’s your proof of life for your little girlfriend.” Akira’s voice was giddy and high-pitched. “I’m sure you were awaiting my call. Hopefully you got my ... what’s it called? Location. Location what? Pin. Location pin I just sent you.”

“Where’s my brother?”

“Oh. Right!”

There was more shuffling and then I heard Presley's voice clear as day. "Hurry, this guy is really weird."

I pushed down the emotions fighting for my attention. Kimberly wouldn't let her emotions overcome her. She'd followed me into the altar room without a second thought. This time I would save her and my brother.

"You better get here quick before I tap a vein on this little redhead. Let's get the whole family together for one last time."

He hung up before I could speak. My ears were ringing, and my muscles were quivering.

I'm going to kill him.

"Let's go." I barreled toward the tree line.

"Wait." Zach stopped in the middle of the road, and the streetlights cast a shadow over his face. "Before we go anywhere with you, I need to know why."

"Does it matter?" I said, eager to find the others.

"Yeah, it matters. I need to know if I can trust you." Zach's eyes were locked on William. "Tell me why you're helping us."

William turned to face us all, and I saw a softness in him I'd never seen before. "Because I was a big brother once ..."

His little sister. Only, he lost her somehow. He was a big brother too, and that meant we understood we had responsibilities others didn't have.

“Still are. Once a brother, always a brother.” Luke patted him on the back, and we wasted no more time disappearing into the night.

Thirty-Six

KIMBERLY



“**W**e’re not going to die, are we?” Presley had pulled his knees to his chest, shielding most of the blood on his shirt, but there were still black smudges all along his jaw and cheeks.

My body shivered as I counted the drips from the broken air conditioner hanging over our heads. Presley had mangled it enough to stop blowing cold air despite his condition. We were in a freezer. White buckets lined steel shelves filled to the brim

with various produce. Apples, vegetables, even some flowers. It smelled of dirt, and every breath brought more cold into my lungs.

Akira was trying to kill me, or, at the very least, make it so I wished I was dead.

The only sound was the chattering of my teeth in the dimly lit room. I'd found a cardboard box to sit on, and we huddled together in a corner. It all helped, but my body still quivered despite it only being ten minutes since we were locked inside. Any minute, Akira could walk through that door and kill me.

"Kim, you haven't said anything in like five minutes." Presley rocked back and forth with his hands on his knees, knocking into me every time.

He told me he'd been mauled back at the theater. According to his story, a group of no less than fifteen guys in black suits wrestled him to the ground. He'd almost defeated them all but the last one was "like Superman on steroids" and that was the reason he'd been unable to escape.

He was probably trying to get me to talk.

I couldn't take my eyes off the shelf in front of me. My body was numb, but my brain was going a million miles a minute. I had to find a solution. Anything.

Presley shook me. "Hey, you're scaring me."

The way Presley stared at me brought me back to our car ride after the church. His hands were shaking so I offered to drive. Back then, he was the oddly quiet one, and I was trying

to get him to talk. I had come up with a plan A, B, and C, and steadily working over the details of D—provided we weren't able to get out of the state. I'd made a silent promise to myself then that no matter what happened I'd make sure he was safe.

And as I looked upon his curly blond hair, all I could think about was how loved he was since birth. Every single hair on his head was marked in the love of his mother and brothers. I loved him like that. Their love for him was powerful. I felt it back then, and I felt it now, burning inside me and calling me to protect him as if he were my own blood.

I turned to him. "I'm here. I'm sorry. I'm just trying to think about how to not get killed and for you not to get taken back to a mind-controlling vampire queen."

Nervous laughter escaped his lips. "Okay, let me help. Maybe ... maybe I can catch him by surprise and ... and hit him ... over the head with something?"

I stared at him till my eyes dried out and I had to blink.

"Or ... I can ... distract him with my ultra-charming jokes. I don't know, Kim! What do we do!? Truthfully, I was kinda waiting on my brothers to come and save us."

I shook my head. "No, if we do that, you and all of your brothers are going to be captured and taken away, and I will be killed before you even make it there."

Presley leaned his head back against one of the steel shelves, and it shifted under his weight. "You're saying we're screwed?"

I closed my eyes to focus my concentration. There had to be something else I could do. I had bought us some time, and now I had to follow through. Aaron and his brothers would know where we were taken by now and would be searching for us. They would find us. I knew that for sure. Presley and I were outnumbered and outgunned. But on second thought, I hadn't heard anyone else in our current location. Only Akira.

“Pres, can you listen to see if we're alone? Have you been keeping tabs on what is going on in the building?”

“Uh, kinda. I just hear him clambering around in his boots. But I can't hear him now, I don't know where he is.”

“But he's not talking to anyone?”

He had people with him, but they weren't here. I didn't know why that might be, but I took it as a win.

“I don't think so. I think this building is pretty big. He keeps walking out of range and then coming back.”

There was one thing I hadn't thought of. Something that kept popping up into my brain like a little gnat bidding for my attention.

I thought it over for just another few seconds. I didn't have time to meander back and forth between two decisions. I had to choose. There would never be certainty. I could think of every possible good and bad scenario, but no amount of planning or thinking would give me a perfect answer.

I needed to choose.

“I have an idea.”

Excitement sparked in Presley's eyes. "Yes! I knew you were the smart one. Hit me."

"I need you to change me."

I waited for it to settle in. There was a brief silence as Presley contemplated my words.

It was the only card we had that made any sense. The element of surprise.

"Uh ... what?"

"You're going to turn me into a vampire. That's the one thing he isn't expecting. Why else would he put us in here together? He doesn't think you'd change me. If you turn me, then maybe we can give your brothers a chance. Small, but it's better than nothing."

"Whoa, are you crazy?! He'll just smell the blood."

He had a point. I scanned my body and found a scrape on my leg from where Akira tackled me in the projector room. With the edge of my shirt, I started rubbing. With my cold skin, I barely felt it.

"Whoa, stop! You're freaking me out." Presley scooted away from me like I was an axe murderer.

"If I'm already bleeding and he's somewhere else, we'll have a small window, but it could work."

"No way am I doing that! I don't know if my blood is even strong enough to change you. I have to drain your blood and

basically kill you, and what if I feed you my blood and it doesn't work?"

"Then ... I won't be any worse off."

"Kim! I can't risk killing you. If I killed you, I'd never be able to forgive myself."

"You bite people all the time!"

"Yeah, *people*. You're not people. You're family. Not to mention, Aaron would kill me. Do you even want to be a vampire? What about all the stuff Aaron's always going on about?"

"Presley. I'm ready to make my own decision. Whether it's the right one, I don't know, but I do know if I don't at least try to do this, all of us are as good as dead. If you guys get taken to The Family, they're going to turn you guys into the queen's guards, and who knows what that really means, but to me, it means that none of you will be yourselves again, and I won't allow that to happen. I just won't."

Presley stared at me with wide eyes.

I held out my wrist. "We don't have a lot of options here. This is our best bet. How long does the transformation take?"

"I don't remember! I was passed out for half of it, and you would be too. What am I supposed to do if he comes back?"

"Maybe ... try to convince him I'm asleep."

He tried to scoot back again but the shelf behind him prevented it. "Kim, I can't do this! What if I kill you!? And

he's going to come back, and I don't know what to do! I can't. I won't."

For some reason, I thought of Luke and his sureness. It was all hope hidden under the disguise of his confidence. All the boys had it in their own way.

Then I thought of Skylar and how all her decisions, good or bad, led her to a place. And even if that place wasn't what I wanted or what she'd imagined, she chose every step of it with sure decisiveness.

I wanted to be both. Confident and hopeful.

"Come on, Pres, think about your brothers and every time they've ever stuck out their neck for you. This is us doing the same for them. Do it for them. Be brave."

I could barely grab his hand; my fingers were stiff.

Presley buried his head in his hands and groaned. He was silent for a minute, and I imagined our window closing. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but one thing I knew for certain was that it was the right move. It was our only move.

"Fine. I'll do it. But you better not die or I'm going to be pissed at you."

I chuckled, holding out my wrist. "I won't die. Promise."

The air around us grew still, and Presley concentrated hard on my wrist. "This is gonna hurt."

I squeezed my eyes shut and waited for the pressure and the pain. Presley tore into my wrist, and I dug my fingernails into my palm. It wasn't nearly as painful as my run-in with Aaron in the spring but still felt like being stabbed in the wrist.

Truthfully, I'm not sure what I expected for my turning into a vampire. I thought it might be a few years, or at least until I was of legal drinking age. But that's not what life had planned for me.

I imagined the boys would make a big deal of it, probably throw me some party. Luke would bake a cake. Something over-the-top, knowing them. It would be a fun night and then my turning would be something to celebrate. A long-awaited venture.

As my body grew weaker, my head got heavier, and my death got closer, I realized all my struggling and trying to be logical and planned about it was futile. It was always going to turn out this way. I would never wait and do the logical thing. I would never choose the other path to grow old, have kids, and turn into a little old grandma. Not because I didn't want those things, it was too early for me to tell, but because they weren't logical or calculated. The Calem brothers just lived. And now they were my family.

A group of people I'd never want to part with, and one I'd follow even into death.

Aaron came crashing into me. But I chose this, and that was enough for me.

My body shook from the shock, and my eyes were slowly closing. I'd never felt so cold.

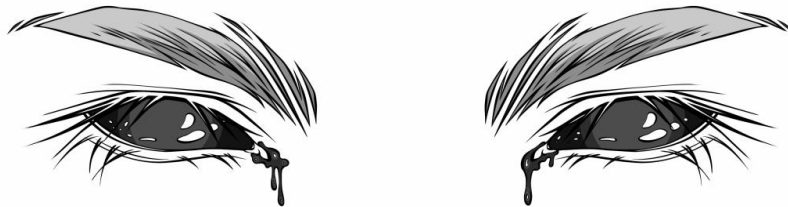
“Kim, okay. Here.” Presley set my hands up like a cup and poured a tiny bit of his blood into my hands. “Please, let this work. Please.”

And I touched my lips to the blood. It tasted of iron, and a wave of nausea ran over me. It didn't stop the curtain of black from suffocating me and shutting my eyes for good.

I hoped it would save him. I hoped it would somehow save them all.

Thirty-Seven

AARON



“This is a suicide mission if I’ve ever seen one.”
William was staring at the same building I was with the exact same expression.

Dark and dim, a large industrial building sat in a large field of dirt between rolling hills and redwood trees, a farm in the moonlight. But there were no animals from what I could see or smell, just dirt and rows of apple trees. I scanned for any footsteps lingering.

“Okay, let’s talk this out.” Luke gathered us all in a circle. “Here’s how this is going to work. We aren’t strong enough to beat Akira outright, but if we play our cards right, we might be able to get the jump on him. All we need is an opening.”

“Can’t William put him under or something?” I said.

William was our greatest advantage. The oldest and more experienced. I wouldn’t dare say that in front of Zach, though.

“No. Akira is ancient compared to me. I’m not going to be strong enough to hold him under.”

Of course, there was a limit, and it always happened at the most inconvenient times.

“We’ll need to weaken him. Somehow, we have to bite him at least once,” Luke said.

Zach stood in front of us, arms crossed. “So, one of us will need to drink his blood?”

“Right ...” Luke’s eyes glossed over, as if he was entranced in thought.

“I’ll do it.” William clenched his jaw. “None of you should be drinking Her blood. Too risky. And don’t fuckin’ argue.”

“But you did it last time,” I said.

“And I’m fine. You might not be as lucky. End of discussion.” William dug his heels into the dirt.

“Fine. Will bites him. Is that the crux of our plan?” Zach said.

A shit plan. I focused on the building, listening for her heartbeat. I couldn’t hear it. I couldn’t hear anything. Everything was taking too long.

“Maybe I could do the thing again ... seemed to work pretty well the last time,” I said.

“No,” they all said.

“Let’s not think about it or anything.”

But they were already ignoring me, talking about ways we might be able to play on Akira’s weaknesses. From what I’d seen, Akira had no weaknesses. Even with their extra training of a few months, it would never compare to the years Akira had.

“We could use ourselves as bargaining chips,” Luke suggested.

“No, I’m tired of that always being the plan,” I said.

Zach crossed his arms. “We’re the only important thing that we have and they want.”

“This would be different from last time.” Luke nodded like he was agreeing with his own plan. “We can act like we’re making some type of decision ... maybe one of us pretends to go with him.”

“Okay, I’ll do it,” Zach said.

“No, it should be me. He’ll believe it more if it’s me.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

A scream echoed off the side of the mountain, muffled by the aluminum building in front of me.

Kimberly.

My feet were already moving under me at the sound of her cries. Panic. Pure fear and panic pumped into my veins.

The door slammed open and echoed through the tall ceiling. Dirt and old leaves scattered on the concrete floor.

Akira stood with one hand wrapped around Kimberly's neck, and the other knotted in her hair. She looked pale, sick. Weak. Presley stood with his back pressed against the wall, soaked in his own blood. His eyes widened when he saw me.

"I knew if one squealed, you'd come running." His lips grazed the skin at her neck.

Kill him.

It had the right idea. Everything was bathed in crimson, and I had to clench my fists to gain composure. One wrong move and she was ...

I couldn't even think it.

The others gathered at my sides, and I stepped forward. I didn't want to listen to another long monologue from Akira. Everything he said was confusing. And I think he did it on purpose. Saying just enough to make sense, but not enough for it to be the truth.

Akira's fingers pressed farther into Kimberly's neck. We all froze. Her heartbeat soared in her chest. She watched me, her chest heaving unevenly.

"Uh-uh-uh. Poor Kimberly's vertebrae might snap out of place if you take another step."

"You don't have to do that," Luke said, and I mimicked his movements. The alert shoulders, the set jaw.

His lips pulled into a smile. “I don’t get you all. Why for this girl? She’s just this weak, little human girl.”

I needed to be beside her. The urge to snatch her from his fingers was all I could think about. I was back in the same spot I was before—helpless while Kimberly was dangled over me like bait. Only, things were different now. I was ready for whatever fate awaited me. My knees weren’t shaking, and I wasn’t scared. This time I would fight.

“She’s stronger than you give her credit for,” I said.

Luke took a step forward. “Let’s end this now. I’ll take you up on that offer. I’ll come with you.”

That wasn’t happening. I wasn’t letting him go back, but I didn’t protest.

Akira’s eyes sparked in the fluorescents. “Really? Are you hurting that bad you’re finally willing to leave your little brothers behind?”

“He’s not going. I am.” Zach stepped forward.

“No, you’re not.” Luke stepped next to him.

“Would you just shut up and let me do this?” Zach said.

Akira’s laugh echoed. “Having you guys back home is going to be a blast. Watching you tear each other limb from limb for Her attention will truly be the highlight of my three hundred years.”

He sighed with joyful anticipation and then it all melted away.

“Too bad that option isn’t on the table anymore. I want the whole set”—his fingers moved to Kimberly’s chin—“including the little redhead.”

“I don’t get to be included?” William said with a dry laugh. “I’m disappointed.”

“Sorry, I forgot you existed.” Akira’s eyes darkened. “Where’s your great mentor now? I’m a little surprised he didn’t come with.”

William said nothing. The dripping from an air conditioner was a slow clock that filled the silence between us.

Akira tightened his grip on Kimberly, covering her mouth. “Oh, didn’t he tell you? Too hellbent on his own revenge to be a leader. To make ... a family that really means anything.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Kilian has a secret. The reason he is *enthralled* with all of you.” Akira put his face next to Kimberly and whispered, “Because we killed his little brother.”

“What?” William’s voice was softer, unguarded.

“In our defense, they attacked first and he took a member of our Guard with him.” Akira’s dark eyes burned with intensity. He liked inflicting that pain. “I’m surprised he never told you. I tried to warn you. The only thing he cares about is his own vendetta.”

William said nothing.

“He didn’t tell you that ... did he?” The corners of Akira’s mouth grew wider. “I get it. It’s hard to learn that everything you know is a lie. You’ve been playing on the wrong side of the field this whole time. Kilian has been using your hatred to fuel his own desires. Filling your head with all these tales and lies about who we are and what we do. We survive. That’s it. We don’t want the world. We have everything we need. It’s *you* that’s lacking.”

“Good thing I’ve got enough hatred for you lot. I don’t need his. I never did.”

“Oh, interesting. What happened? We kill someone you know? That’s always what it is. Don’t worry, I’m sure it was quick.”

William stepped forward. We needed an opening, or it would be an easy fight for Akira. I surveyed the room, but we couldn’t wait for something. I had to be proactive this time. No waiting for someone to save me, I needed to be the one doing the saving.

The tighter his grip on her neck, the stronger my resolve became. I could see the whites of his knuckles. How was she breathing?

“It’s settled. I kill you, and we finally go home, right? Or are we thinking we take the redhead as a little snack?”

I could be that opening.

Yes.

The voice in my head answered me. I knew the risks, but I would take them. Even if it meant not coming back. The trembling was already starting in my hands. I was stronger now but not strong enough, but that didn't mean I was useless. I would save her this time.

I'm ready when you are, the voice mocked me, and I prepared myself for the complete loss of control.

To lose myself and the chance of ever seeing her again ... and my brothers.

I was ready to give them everything they'd given me.

To love them completely in my sacrifice in the way my brothers always did for me.

And then it happened.

The one thing I'd never contemplated for even a second.

Kimberly bit into his wrist.

Her teeth turned to fangs, and she bit him.

A stream of black blood littered the floor and then there was a collective pause among us. All our faces mirrored the same confusion, then spark of hope.

She was our opening.

Luke's smile got my feet moving, and we sprang into action.

Akira cursed as he threw Kimberly to the floor and put her to sleep. Her body was lifeless and unmoving. I had so many questions, but for now, she was safe and unharmed.

He hadn't expected it. She did it. She surprised him.

Luke and Zach went for his arms while I slid on the floor to grab his legs, and Presley joined me by wrapping his arms around Akira's waist to immobilize him.

Avoid the hands, I repeated to myself. Akira's body was strong, but one bite was all it took to give us an edge. An opening just large enough for William to come up behind him and bite him on the neck.

It was a bloody scene as William used every bit of his power and strength to stay locked onto Akira.

Akira's muscles tightened, and with one large push, we all fell to the floor. He grabbed William's collar from behind and threw him over his shoulder. His body colliding with the ground cracked the concrete under our feet.

As he went in to bite him, we all rushed again. Our momentum was enough to knock Akira from his feet.

Akira laughed. "Are we playing football or something? You guys are hilarious."

He wasn't going for any of us. He knew we were protecting William, and that's where all his focus was.

Despite his loss of blood, Akira kept up with our speed. Zach grabbed Akira from behind, attempting to put him in some kind of bear hold for William.

"Still not good enough."

Akira slammed Zach into the concrete. Hard enough to leave a small cloud of dust. But every second the exposed wound on his neck was dripping and filling the floor in a wash of gray and black.

He was holding back. I didn't know why. He could have put us under like Kimberly, but he wasn't. He joined us in an endless dance of knocking us back and continuing his advances for William.

In one fluid motion, Akira grabbed William from behind and sunk his teeth into his neck.

I was there trying to pry Akira's grip from William. Clawing, pulling, grunting.

Nothing would budge his iron grip as he drained William. His struggling was slowing, and his eyes were closing.

"Shit, he's going to kill him!" I screamed for Luke. "What do we do?!"

Luke went straight for Akira's neck.

"Luke! No!"

His advance worked. William dropped to the floor.

"You're going to have to try harder than that to kill me." Akira pushed Luke off him, but Zach grabbed him from behind and bit into his neck.

He was weaker now. It was working. We could do this.

Presley and I shared a glance and ran toward him.

I pried Akira's stiff hands from Zach's collar and bit down.

Mistake. I knew as soon as the first bit of his blood touched my tongue.

I was gone.

His blood seared through my veins and filled every aching part of me. Something inconceivably gaping I'd never known was there. Every gulp pulled me further into an inferno of longing.

Everything I ever wanted was there in his blood. It satisfied in a way human blood could never.

How could I ever stop?

Why would I ever stop?

Somewhere in the haze, we were all there, pulling and yearning for more. More blood. Once Akira was drained, I'd have to find a way to get more. Somehow I—

No. Her heartbeat. Find her heartbeat.

I searched, finding it next to me. So close. I pulled away.

My hands trembled, this time from the euphoria. I knew then my brothers felt it too.

Luke's eyes were black again, and Presley was still drunk with desire, pulling at Akira's arm along with Zach who still had him by the neck. Akira was growing weaker and weaker. Unable to push us off now. Only seconds had passed, but it felt longer.

I grabbed Luke by the shoulder and tried to force him off, but his muscles were stone.

“Zach!” I screamed, my panic growing.

Zach responded to my cries, and even in his dazed state, without me saying anything, he knew what he had to do. He grabbed Luke by the neck and pried him off while I yanked Presley by the collar, and Akira’s faint laughter echoed.

“Yes, drink and dream of Her ... we can only hope to be reunited in Her presence once again. Surely, we will all be brothers in the next life and be with Her.” Akira smiled as his limp body crumbled to the floor.

Neither Presley nor Luke were speaking, just wobbling around lost in the same euphoria. This was Her blood.

Akira’s hands curled into his body as he grew more lifeless and cold by the minute. A pool of black blood stained the concrete under my feet.

Zach helped William to his feet. His black pupils enlarged as he leaned over Akira’s body.

He grabbed Zach’s arm. “You know the bond we have transcribes blood. It’s forever. Farewell my brothers. I can think of no more perfect fate ... because all four of you have seen the light and tasted Her splendor. She waits for you.”

A dull aching reverberated in my chest. I clutched my shirt, and tears threatened to form in my eyes. A stranger, yet I couldn’t shake the odd sense of familiarity or grief as he withered away. It was stronger now. The connection we shared. That thread under the bleachers was so faint I

wondered if it was even there, but there was no denying it now.

“Mox cum ipsa eris.” That was the last thing Akira said.

Zach grabbed Akira’s head and twisted it from his body with an upheaval of anger. I had to turn away.

Luke’s eyes were returning to normal, and he moved to his feet to check on Presley.

They were still them.

My entire body was still buzzing. His blood made me feel faint and sick, yet the best I’d ever felt in my entire life. Rejuvenated. Exhilarated.

I followed that trail of blood dripping from Akira’s arm. When would I ever get this chance again for more?

The black was blending into something red. *Kimberly.*

I snapped out of the trance and ran to her. Her hair was soiled with spills of black ink.

Her skin still felt the same, her heart still sounded the same. She was still her.

I pulled her into my arms and moved the hair from her face. “Hey, Burns. You gotta wake up. It’s over.”

Her eyes opened, revealing the most beautiful pools of blue I’d ever seen. I kissed her face. My eyes welled with relief. A few of my tears fell onto her cheek, and I wiped them.

“Aaron.” Her hands found my chest first and then my face. “Did we win?”

A chuckle escaped my lips. “Yeah, we won. Everyone’s okay.”

I memorized every detail of her face, took in the sweet scent of her skin, and listened for the best sound. The rhythm of her heartbeat.

Finally, It was silent. No voice in my head taunting me about the smell of her skin or the taste of her blood. Her blood was like mine.

Finally, it was only her and me.

She was having trouble keeping her eyes open. Her body was still transforming. I couldn’t wait to get her out of here. Off the dirty, cold floor and into a warm bed.

William helped Zach prepare to burn Akira’s body while they argued with Luke on whether to burn the whole building with it.

Her eyes glistened. “It wasn’t how I imagined it ... but it was the best I could think of.”

“It was perfect. You’re perfect.”

And mine. Mine to protect. My love.

“Do I feel ... different?” Her voice gave way to the emotion clouding her eyes.

Like maybe she was afraid after everything that I didn’t love her. Like there was a possibility I’d reject her. But my heart was fastened securely with hers. It would actually kill me to ever leave her.

She still didn't understand ... I'd always crash into her.

From the moment I met her, my fate was sealed. I didn't know how many other universes there were out there, but if there were more, I'd bet I tried to make her mine every time.

I didn't believe in fate.

But I believed in this. The love pouring out of my heart for her.

"I just feel you." I kissed her forehead.

She smiled. "Forever."

I took her face in my hands and lifted her chin. "Forever."

When our lips touched, every bit of fear and despair that had threatened to swallow me a few minutes before didn't exist anymore. I didn't care about where we were or the blood. I was lost in her.

"Jeez, get a room," Presley said with a sheepish smile.

Luke walked in next to him and placed his arm around him. They were propping each other up for support.

"How are you feeling?"

Kimberly sat up. "Tired and nauseous. I don't think I have any of the cool stuff yet."

"Hey, fangs are pretty cool," Presley said.

How Presley had seen a dismembered person and had almost seen us all die and still found a way to summon all that energy, I would never understand.

I rubbed her hand. “It goes away quickly. I promise.”

“Yeah, we’ll get you somewhere you can get some rest. Help you ride out the rest of it,” Luke said.

I felt alone when I changed. I wouldn’t let my brothers help me. Therefore, everything was terrifying. Especially when my hearing changed and I was pulling a door off its hinges without trying.

She wouldn’t have to do it alone. She had us. We could ease the hard parts.

I helped her to her feet. The trail of black blood still stained the concrete beneath us where Zach and William had dragged Akira’s body. He laid it on the wooden pallets and found some gasoline to pour over him.

I couldn’t believe it. It was over. We’d done the impossible thing.

Presley came up to me still covered in blood. “You’re not mad at me? Kim made me do it. I didn’t want to, I—”

I grabbed the sides of Presley’s head and pulled him close to kiss him on the forehead. “Always listen to Kim. She’s always right.”

I was proud of him, but I wouldn’t tell him that, not at that moment, anyway.

He wiped it off. “Jeez, okay. I get it. You love me.”

“What now?” Kimberly relied on me to hold her up. A job I’d happily do forever.

“We keep running ... together,” Luke said.

“I’ll do the honors.” William popped a cigarette in his mouth and handed one to Zach before lighting them both and tossing the lighter.

Thirty-Eight

KIMBERLY



***D**ear Chelsea,
I shouldn't be writing you this letter, but I tend to not do things I should do. I didn't want you to worry about me.*

Please know I'm okay. Don't look for me ... you won't find me. I heard they're going to have a funeral or a vigil of some kind for everyone at the theater. You should go, but don't use it as an excuse to buy another black dress. You have plenty.

I'm sorry I couldn't be the friend I wanted. I could never replace you. You were the best friend I've ever had. There were so many things I couldn't tell you. I'm sorry we couldn't graduate together.

For what it's worth. I'm happy. Finally.

Give Monica a hug for me.

With love,

K. B.

The letter was tucked safely in the backpack sitting on my shoulders. Sunshine broke through the heavy canopy of the giant redwoods, and the early morning mist was dissipating.

I took it all in.

Everything was brighter. Even the far away streams were clear enough for me to see the colored stones underneath. The ache in my calves was nonexistent as we walked together in the wilderness. Every step was smooth like gliding through water. No gasping for breath.

This was the beginning of immortality.

Last night, we'd broken into someone's vacation cabin so I could rest for a few hours. It wasn't enough, but we had to keep moving. A strange gnawing bore a hole in my stomach. Almost like hunger, but the thought of eating anything made me gag. I was stuck between being human and fully being a vampire. Aaron had to carry me most of the way while we ran North, away from Blackheart.

A strange anxiousness settled onto my shoulders thinking about what came next, but I kept my eyes firmly on what was ahead.

Zach and Luke were in front of me talking back and forth with William while Presley walked backward trying to butt into their conversation. William was adamant on only escorting us far enough past the wildfires and then he was done because he couldn't wait to wash his hands of the whole thing. But he could have left us back at the farm ... or at the cabin.

Aaron walked steadily beside me. His golden hair shined brighter in the sun, and he put his arm around me, hugging me close to his chest. Now, I could hear the steady beating in his chest. A soft flutter that was soothing and hypnotic enough to be its own lullaby.

“Wow, look at that view!” Presley hopped a little too close to the edge. We all stopped and took in the scene in front of us.

An expansion of trees blanketed the snowcapped mountains in the distance, and smoke rolled into the blue sky, making a milky haze. The fire I was afraid would reach us, burned across thousands of acres. The original was long gone, but smaller ones popped up around it. It was a relief it would never reach my former home, but I might as well have held the match that made my town go up in flames. I didn't have my phone anymore. My room. My objects.

But I had them.

They'd each given up a crucial part of themselves to be here. Luke and Zach left behind every dream they ever had for themselves. Presley left behind his childhood and a little of that innocence his brothers fought hard to protect. And Aaron ... he'd probably say he lost a piece of his humanity. Though I wouldn't agree with that statement.

And me ... I left behind my home.

But we still had those things. They were never really gone. We'd make new dreams and new memories. Find a new home. We'd tell stories. The same ones over and over again, hopefully by the light of a campfire, until they were knitted into the fabric of our brains forever. Nothing could take away our humanity. Even if we could never be guiltless again.

"I've got places to be." William swayed on his feet.

"Why? Thane can't go a day without you?" Zach chuckled. "I thought you were supposed to be a good mentor."

"I don't want to be stuck with you all for another second of my life. You've wasted enough of my time." William's tone didn't match the softness in his features. "Plus, he's too much like you. Tends to get in trouble when I leave him too long."

Thane met us back at the farm shortly before we left. He was delayed in the evacuation, but luckily the fire was contained before it reached the school.

"What's Kilian going to do to you? That guy's got to have a dungeon or something where he ... never mind." Presley was

still peering over the edge of the cliff with his feet halfway hanging over.

To my surprise, William laughed. “Ha. No dungeons ... you don’t know him like I do. He won’t do anything to me. Maybe argue about it for a few days, but he’ll get over it.”

“Aren’t you mad he lied to you?” Aaron said.

“Yeah, but ... that’s why I need to go and talk to him. I knew he had a brother that died, but I didn’t know it was the coven. Maybe I should have been smart enough to figure it out, I don’t know. Kilian isn’t a bad person. He’s done a lot of good ... but he’s flawed.”

“We’ll take your word for it on this one.” Luke patted William’s shoulder.

They smiled like actual friends.

William shook off the smile as quickly as it came. “Come on, assholes. You’re slowing us up.”

“We can’t have one moment to take this in? Wait, hold on.” Presley rummaged through his bag and pulled out his camera. “That’s perfect.”

He snapped a couple candid pictures of us. Zach was scowling. He disappeared behind us for a moment, and I grabbed Aaron’s hand.

“Aw. Cute.” Presley patted Aaron on the shoulder.

“Do I hear wedding bells in the five-year plan?” Luke nudged in closer to Aaron.

“Five-year plan, huh?” I cocked an eyebrow.

Presley spun around while simultaneously stuffing his camera back in his bag. “I want to be the officiant! Please, please, please.”

“As long as I get to be the best man,” Zach said.

“Oh, that’s my job.” Luke put his arm around Zach’s shoulder. “We could share and become a super best man.”

“Stop. You guys are going to freak her out.” Aaron pulled his hands through his hair. “Sorry. That’s too much. They’re being too much. Don’t feel—”

“I think you’d have to try a lot harder than that to scare me away.” This time I enjoyed that worry line between his brows.

Aaron’s cheeks reddened, and he let out a long breath before smothering me in another embrace. I couldn’t feel the chill in the air, just warmth. Being with them felt like being eternally in the heat of summer.

If only Skylar could see us now. I wished I’d told her everything. Now I knew she’d have understood. She would have let me go because she understood me, even if we had different ideas of freedom. A lump formed in my throat. There would be time to mourn, just not yet. Not till we were safe.

“Hold on.” William stopped and craned his ear to the row of trees on his left.

I searched for the same sound but only heard the steady chirping of birds. Every hour that passed, I could hear more and more. Birds, bugs, twigs snapping close by.

“Shit,” Zach said before a figure appeared in the trees in front of us.

A man with gray peeking through his sideburns walked through the trees, and my every muscle froze. He held the same presence as Akira, but something about him screamed power. Everything was clean-cut. His hair. His brow. The beard.

A trickling of fifteen men followed him in black suits. Their eyes were locked on the Calem boys, and their faces were expressionless.

“Ezra?” Luke spoke in a strangled whisper.

“There’s no way. The only person that knows where we are is ...” William said under his breath.

Thane walked out from behind the trees. His mouth poised in a smirk.

“What the fuck is going on?” Zach spat.

“Sorry guys.” Thane waved. “Akira showed me the light ... he showed me what things could be like if I met ... Her.”

William shook his head. “No. Fuck. This. When?”

“Does it matter?” Thane still appeared the person I knew. Polite dimpled cheeks. Soft eyes.

“It matters.”

“The night after we escorted Aaron and Kimberly back from the pool. I had surveillance duty and ... it just happened.”

My heart sank. Thane was working with The Family. Questions mounted in my head, one on top of the other. But more importantly, why?

“But, Will, it’s going to be okay. We’re all going to Her. They promised not to hurt you.” Thane was still smiling, his eyes filled with hopeful anticipation.

“What about all our training? All the times we talked about this ...” William took a step forward. I couldn’t see his face anymore, but there was real hurt in his voice.

“It doesn’t matter anymore. I’ve felt it. Something you could never understand. She’s the most important thing. I have to go to Her. I have to see Her. Come with me.” Thane looked at him expectantly.

Luke pushed Presley back, and Zach blocked us from the other side. My heartbeat was in my ears. It would not be enough. There were too many of them.

Luke and I shared a brief glance, but somehow, I understood completely. Get ready.

Ezra sucked his teeth. “No more running. This ends now.”

They pressed in from every side, creeping toward us.

“I’m very disappointed in you both. You killed a member of The Guard.”

“Uh, he tried to kill us,” Presley said before Aaron threw a hand over his mouth.

Between a small gap next to Luke's shoulder, Ezra's blue eyes found me. Two sapphire orbs against ivory skin stared back at me.

"You ... changed her?" Ezra ran his hands through his hair and spat on the ground, and I wondered how he knew. Akira had been wild and unhinged, but Ezra reminded me of a pissed off dad whose kids ran his car into a tree. "This is such a mess."

Aaron squeezed my hand.

"We're going home, and she can't come. But you and your brothers—"

"No," Luke said. "We're not going anywhere with you."

"Yeah. Fuck off," Zach added.

A spark reflected in Luke's eyes, and I followed his line of sight to a small opening in the tree line still unprotected by the men. It would be tight, and we'd have to go fast, but maybe just maybe we could make it. It was closest to me.

I'd need to lead the charge, but I wasn't sure my legs even worked like that yet.

"No, you listen!" Ezra's voice echoed in the canyon, and Luke and Zach stood straighter. "This isn't up for discussion. You've already made this harder than it was supposed to be. I mean, forming an alliance with The Legion? What were you thinking?"

"What were *you* thinking, you fucking asshole?! You told us nothing and sent us here. Why did you come back for us?"

Zach shook with anger.

Ezra gritted his teeth. “It was always the plan to come back for you. You had to know that. I didn’t think you’d screw it up so badly. You were supposed to get your brothers settled. You had time ... and now you’re out.”

I grabbed Aaron’s hand and motioned to Presley. Our opening was coming. I could feel it in my gut.

Ezra’s eyes softened as he turned to Luke. “She misses you. She wants you to come home. No strings attached.”

“I know what you’re doing. Stop messing with my head.” Luke pulled his shoulders back.

“I’ve only ever done what’s best for you. You know now that you have a destiny. You can’t get out of this.”

“We’re not going back to Her. I’d rather die.”

Luke seemed sure this time. He said it with finality that ended any argument.

“Well, if I can’t change your mind ...” He motioned behind him. “I can make this harder for you.”

Two men grabbed Thane from behind and restrained him.

Things were moving faster now. They were stirring, readying themselves for a fight.

While holding one arm, they bent Thane’s other arm back behind him and bit into his neck.

William moved forward, and Luke stopped him. “Wait.”

The wind picked up in a gust strong enough to hide the first crack of my footsteps, and in a split second, I was already in the trees, gripping Aaron's hand, and Presley's footsteps were right behind ours. My feet moved on their own. Faster than I even imagined possible.

The thick scent of smoke billowed in the air, and I pushed forward toward the source. It was the only sense of direction I had. The men in suits were pushing into my peripheral vision. Little black dots grew larger and larger.

"Keep running! Don't turn back, no matter what!" Luke was somewhere behind.

That was enough to keep us moving. I pushed harder. Every muscle in my body came alive, as if all my previous years I'd only been using a portion of what I was capable of.

A strong set of hands grabbed my shoulders and sent me flying sideways through the trees. My body smacked against a tree and knifelike pain ran up my spine. That would have killed me. It still hurt, but I stood and faced my attacker. A burly man with a crooked jaw and two other guys on his side. None looked much older than me.

I readied myself for a fight I couldn't win, but in seconds, Aaron and Zach burst through the branches. Aaron tackled one while Zach took down two. It was fast, but I could see it. I could finally see it. Every twitch of muscle and determined scowl.

Zach pinned one against a tree and bit into his neck. "Go!"

We took off again. This time I paid more careful attention to my dodging. Every duck between the trees pushed us closer to the wildfire ahead. The ashes fell into my eyes, but it didn't slow me.

My legs weren't tiring. My lungs weren't burning. I was doing it. I was running faster than I ever had before, and it was invigorating.

I could get us out. I *would* get us out.

With a quick glance behind, I realized no one was following. I stopped and retraced my steps in enough time to see Presley trying to pull one hulking guy off Aaron. Fire ignited in my veins, and I barreled forward. Everything snapped into place. The guy went flying like I'd slammed into him with a car.

I spared only a minute for shock at my new body.

We were surrounded by another barrage. At least five more. How many were there?

“What part of ‘don't stop’ don't you get?” William came in fast, and pieces of his shirt were torn and muddy. “Move!”

Presley ducked, avoiding an attack from behind. When they came at us again, we scrambled. All we could do was dodge. They sparred with William blow for blow, never losing steam. One of them grabbed my arm, and Aaron went rigid. He took the guy to the ground and wrapped his hands around his neck.

“Aaron!” My panic grew. If he lost control, I didn't know if I was enough to bring him back.

The twins broke through the clearing and evened the playing field, but as the seconds ticked by, more came from the trees.

“I’ll hold them. Go.” William flipped one guy over his shoulder and absorbed the punch of another.

Luke shook his head. “No way.”

“Just fuckin’ go. Please.” William’s eyes flashed with anger and then desperation.

With a push from behind, all three of us disappeared into the trees again. Faster this time.

“Will!” Zach’s voice echoed in the trees behind us, but we were already running again.

A never-ending series of branches snagged my sweater, and debris hit my face. None of it could hurt me. I thought firmly on what Skylar would do. Keep looking forward and—

“Shit!” Aaron was covering me this time, trying to stop my momentum before we came to a halt.

Ezra stood in the clearing. Unlike Akira, he said nothing before he lunged forward. His fingers missed Aaron’s forehead by only centimeters. We stumbled into Presley and huddled together. We were fast, but he was faster. He lunged again, and we scrambled, barely avoiding his touch. If one of us went down, we’d all go down.

Zach appeared and grabbed Ezra from behind. I didn’t register the scream leaving my throat when Ezra pulled him to the ground and went for his throat.

Black blood stained the warm dirt beneath our feet.

“You can’t beat me.” Ezra kept Zach pinned.

“Good thing I don’t need to.” Zach smiled, not moving an inch.

A crack sounded in the air. Loud enough to be thunder but there were no clouds in the sky. Leaves and branches fell overhead.

Aaron pulled me before I even knew what was happening.

A large tree fell into the clearing. The vibration radiated into the soles of my shoes. I grabbed Aaron and motioned to Presley to follow.

“No, wait!” Aaron was frantically searching the clearing for them.

Luke stumbled out of the trees and put his hands on Aaron’s shoulders. “Go.”

“No, I—”

Luke leaned forward to look Aaron directly in the eyes. “You’re ready. Trust me.”

“Be good, Pres.” Luke patted him on the head to silence any talking.

His eyes shifted to me, and he nodded.

I instantly felt heavier. He was leaving it up to me. The task of making sure they didn’t plant their feet there in the dirt. We had to keep running. I grabbed Aaron, and Presley begged them to run with me. When they protested, I pushed them

forward until we were running again and zipping through the trees.

“Don’t look back!” Luke’s voice echoed.

My eyes burned. We were getting closer to the smell of ignited wood. Everything around me turned hazy and orange.

I snuck a look behind, and there were still a couple of men following us, but no Luke or Zach.

“Come on!” I yelled.

We’d reached the edge of the tree line, and the heat coming off the fire in front of us was intense. There was only one way to lose them.

I ran through the trees. The heat from the fire singed the hairs on my arm. I didn’t care. I kept pushing. Harder and harder. We couldn’t stop. The heat was harsh on my skin, but there was no sting like when I was human.

It was hot, but it didn’t burn.

The boys were nipping at my heels as we peeled through cascading logs of fire. The air was sweltering and void of oxygen. Thankfully, I didn’t need it.

We were going fast enough to keep our clothes from catching fire, swiftly dodging trees. The soles of my hiking boots were melting, but we couldn’t stop.

Keep going. Keep pushing.

I didn’t know how far we’d run, but it didn’t matter. I’d run forever—until we were safe.

The sound of the helicopter was music to my ears. That was our way out.

I followed it. Only glancing behind me to make sure Aaron and Presley were still there.

Finally, we made it to a clearing. The helicopter circled overhead, and all three of us collapsed to the ground.

“They’re gone,” Aaron said, his voice breaking.

“We have to go back.” Presley’s voice was lost in the roar.

“We can’t ...”

Presley pushed past him, and Aaron tackled him to the ground. “Let go! We have to go back. We can’t just ... just let them take them!”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Aaron hugged Presley tight to him to stop him from bolting back into the flames.

There was no one left to protect us. The Legion was gone. The twins were ...

As the ash filled the air and embers landed my skin, I sucked in a breath. The two remaining Calem boys were falling apart in front of my eyes, and I struggled to keep my composure. My body screamed for any safety or certainty. The helicopter made another pass. We’d been seen.

Safety was looming, but it was a hollow victory. Behind us in the blaze, nothing but ash and burning wood followed us.

I laid a hand on my chest to still my ragged breath and the tears threatening to fall. My brain wouldn’t accept what I

knew to be true. It wasn't the ash filling my lungs that made it feel like I wasn't breathing. It was the nagging pain of knowing the truth.

We made it, but they didn't. Zach and Luke were going back to The Family, and William with them.

We were on our own.

Epilogue

ZACH



***H**ello, Hell, you've been expecting me.*
I always knew it was coming.

Blackheart was our purgatory. The in-between. Moving farther into hell was part of my destiny apparently. Limbo would never be my final destination.

The loud hum of the jet engine and the frantic buzz of the hair clippers filled the silence between Luke and me. There

were no more restraints as we sat in the front of the plane. Black velvet seats hid the falling pieces of my hair.

Mine blended in perfectly, but Luke's blonde hair stood out. I couldn't look at him.

If it was Hell, then Luke would never have been there.

The buzzing was close to my ear, blissfully filling my head with a strange numbness. According to Ezra, Luke and I looked unpresentable. She liked Luke's hair short and his face shaved. Of all the fucking things they thought to do when they finally had us, a haircut was apparently right at the top of that list. My hair had always been long, and I didn't think She even cared what I looked like, but some goon in a suit started cutting, and I'd let him. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore.

I guessed I didn't want Luke to be alone.

We endured our haircuts without a word. They made us change immediately. Our dingy hiking clothes were shed for pressed silk suits—all black from head to toe.

Luke hadn't spoken a word since we were captured. I spoke a lot.

I could still hear the echo of Ezra's words to us as we stepped onto their jet plane. It was waiting for us at a rural airport not far away. I didn't think it was theirs. Something borrowed or stolen, probably.

None of it was surprising. A meteor could crash into the ground and a crazy ass alien could pop out and shake hands

with me, and none of it would budge the muscles in my face.

“Things are going to be different now. You had responsibility before, but now you’re someone. You killed a member of The Guard. You’ll train to take his spot.” Ezra’s eyes looked like they might pop out of his head. The thought usually made me crack a smile.

The gray in Ezra’s hair was from Luke and me.

“Aren’t you going to torture us for treason?” I said it so he could feel the loathing in my voice.

Ezra pushed me against the wall of the plane. “Trust me. You’ll both suffer the consequences of working with The Legion. Including the torture of your little friends in there. She’s got plenty of plans for them.”

Fucker. William and Thane were stashed in the back of the plane. Thane was still on my shit list, but, Will ... I couldn’t get to him if I wanted to. I hadn’t figured out how to help him or even keep him alive. But he sacrificed himself for my brothers, which meant he was now under my list of responsibilities. I was pissed at him for that. Hell was my thing. No one was supposed to follow me.

“And what about you? Now that everyone here knows that you helped us escape.”

He slammed me harder into the wall. “Listen to me. That, along with your transgressions, never leaves this plane. Do you understand?”

“You gonna hit me, *sir*? Don’t you need to be welcoming me like the prodigy I am? Haven’t you heard? We’ve been foretold.”

If only sarcasm could kill.

His grip tightened on my collar. “If you want us to stop hunting your brothers, then you need to take your role next to Her. No more running. Time to be a man.”

Ezra released the grip on my shirt with a pained look on his face. I felt it too. The dull ache pulsing in my chest. Akira was his brother, by Her blood. They’d had hundreds of years together. It wasn’t enough to make me feel sorry for the bastard.

He stared at Luke, who was near catatonic. The one who trusted Ezra to teach him growing up. The one that followed him around, ready for knowledge. He was the reason Luke was suffering. Fuck Ezra and any version of me that ever trusted him.

“You both need to be ready by the time we arrive. You will be regarded like a member of The Guard.” Ezra grabbed the collar of some random guy standing next to me and kicked him in the shins. “Show some respect. You will bow in their presence from now on.”

“Yes, sir.” The boy shielded his eyes from me.

Ezra had spoke again. “Everyone on this plane knows you were working with The Legion, and they will be taking that secret to the grave with them. They are indebted to you

forever. It's your job to protect them and lead them, so we can protect Her. Got it?"

Neither of us had said a word.

"Good. Now sit down and get your haircuts. You're going to want to rest before we arrive."

I jolted myself from the memory. The sound of the razor had stilled, and Luke was ready, wearing that same military cut he had once loved, but he didn't look like my brother.

"That's fucking short enough." I ripped off my cape and left it in tatters on the floor. To my surprise, the guy listened to my demand. He left me with a drastic undercut; the top was still a few inches long.

"Leave."

He disappeared through the curtain behind us, and I went to crouch down in front of Luke.

I shook him gently. "You gotta say something. Anything. Tell me the fuckin' sky is blue or some shit. Just please talk to me."

Luke's eyes met mine, and the stone in my chest turned into a boulder.

"I know what it means to be a member of The Guard. I know what they do. Who you have to become ... I can't do it. I won't."

"What's our other option?"

“I meant what I said ...” Luke’s eyes softened. “I’d rather be dead than do the things they want me to do ... than go back to Her. I won’t be able to stay away from Her.”

“Don’t say that.” I gritted my teeth.

I hated when he said shit like that. Even if it was true.

“I can’t. I’m sorry.” Luke’s voice leaped with desperation, and he leaned forward to hug me. It nearly knocked me over.

I shook my head, fighting the lump in my throat. “No. No. No. You promised me not to give up.”

Luke pulled away. “We were kids.”

We’d made a pact a long time ago. Neither of us could pass on without the other. We were two humans made with the same blood. It made sense that we’d go together. Even younger me understood that concept clearly.

“Yeah, but you promised you would never leave me here alone. I-I can’t do this without you. We have to keep going.”

The cries of William filled the cabin, and Luke buried his head in his hands.

There was no peace in death or life for us. We were in hell. And I had to get him out somehow.

“We can do this. We can save him, and if we do what they want, then Pres, Kim, Aaron, Mom, they’ll all be okay.” I pulled my hands through my freshly cut hair, desperation leaked in my voice with the lingering of William’s cries. “We have to try. Please. Try with me.”

I knew it wasn't true. I was a selfish asshole for asking him while knowing exactly what awaited us. Luke didn't need me. I needed him.

Tears gathered in Luke's eyes. "How? I don't know how I can do it."

"I'll do it. Anything too hard, too much that you can't do. I'll do it for you. I can be your right hand. I'll get my hands dirty. Whatever it takes."

I'd ruin myself for my brother in a heartbeat. I was pretty far gone, anyway.

Luke shook his head. "No. I can't let you do that for me."

He always believed in me for reasons I'd never understood. I'd never given him a reason to. He got all the good parts in the womb. Like whatever the fuck was in the sky thought he needed it more than me or something. He gave him the hope, the optimism, the *good*.

At a young age, he cared about everything. Literally everything from the bugs on the ground to the neighbor's dog. I'd watch in awe as he'd give his toys to others, and I wondered if he thought they'd magically reappear to him or something. I'd even spy on him playing, thinking maybe some fucking gnomes or some shit were rewarding him with more. It wasn't till I was older that I understood he expected nothing back. He just gave ... with a smile.

I never cared about anything. Only things that were mine.

My brothers were *my* brothers. My family was mine. My stuff was mine. Why would I care about anyone else's anything? That was their problem. Their responsibility.

"It's easy for me. Just don't leave me here to do this alone. Promise me. Again."

Luke sighed and held out his hand. "I promise."

Maybe that's why I'd always felt the need to protect Luke. Because he was good, and good needed to be protected.

My younger brothers all tumbled out with the same goodness I saw in Luke. With Aaron, the world was ending if he had to do anything even a little questionable. I used to find it annoying. The pranks Luke and I pulled didn't sit right with him, and he'd run and tattle on us. I finally realized there might be someone in this world filled with even more good than Luke. How was that fucking possible? Wasn't Luke the epitome?

I related to Luke despite our differences, but I couldn't see myself in Aaron. He was the golden boy ... and kind of a dick. It's like he saw through me. Like he knew I was dirt compared to him. That there was nothing good in me. It was in that horrible look he'd give me when I had to protect what was mine. Luke never gave me that look.

If it wasn't for Presley, I'd have never believed there was hope for me. He was good too, but in a different way. Sure, he freaked the fuck out if I hurt his precious Earth, but he was the only one who ever understood my obsession with what was mine.

I think that's why we stayed as long as we did and listened to Kilian's nonsensical plan. Why I let Luke convince me outside the IHOF to keep going with the plan ...

We wanted more time there with them. And Luke was better. Not fixed but a lot better. We were all together, and for a moment, even I believed it might stay that way.

Past tense. I would never see them again.

And with that last thought, I let go.

Of my brothers.

Of what was mine.

Of my family.

Maybe God gave me all the bad parts to punish me. *Yeah, sounds about right.*

Bonus Chapter

BAD DECISIONS
AND NEW
BEGINNINGS

The flash of a camera marked the end of an era, and a flurry of red caps painted the sky with their golden tassels. The tiny strings blended into the colorful flurry of confetti and silly string. Zach and Luke, the undeniable rocks of the Calem family, embraced each other. The wide smiles on their faces overshadowed the cuts and bruises tainting their skin.

One of Luke's brown eyes was tinged red with blood. His lip was busted, and every breath hurt his broken ribs. Zach sported two shiners and a bandage over the healing gash on his nose. None of this stopped them from celebrating the greatest day of their lives. The day they'd been waiting for, for years.

"Ah, okay, Mom. Please, no more pictures," Luke said as he shut his eyes, shielding them from another swift flashing.

“Yeah, that fucking flash is giving me a headache,” Zach groaned.

“Language.”

A swift hand slapped the back of Zach’s *very* sore shoulder, and he cried out, “Jeez, Mom.”

“Just one more. Both of you get together, put your arm around each other.” Vera smiled. She had waited for the day her eldest sons would graduate high school. Long nights were spent worrying if they would even make it past eighteen—but there they were, finally graduated.

She knew raising four children alone would be hard, but she’d never anticipated the worry that had seeped into every cell in her body since she first held Luke in her arms. A worry that had only grown with the age of her two eldest sons. She watched them change. One eternally happy boy and the other soft and sensitive had become rough around the edges.

Though she had asked, they refused to mention the person or persons that hurt them, and the guilt felt so tangible she convinced herself it might as well have been her that caused it. But standing before her, they seemed happy.

Zach and Luke rested their arms on each other’s shoulders for the picture. Their red gowns trailed the freshly mowed lawn of the football field. The stadium lights clicked on as the sun faded from the sky and the moon slowly took its place. Luke had played many games on that field. Countless practices of blood, sweat, and tears were spent in that very

spot. His heart yearned for those days again. If only for a day to relive the sound of the crowd.

Zach could be found under the bleachers. He didn't care to look back at the field. Unlike Luke, he had never been emotionally attached to high school. It was something to do, and he was happy he'd never have to do it again.

Zach squeezed his eyes shut and threw up his index finger and pinky while Luke gave his mom his best smile and held his fist in the air. The camera flashed again. Graduation caps had fallen and littered the ground, creating the perfect backdrop underneath the glow of stadium lights.

Presley ran up behind them, followed by Aaron, who had his head buried in his cell phone.

"Wow, you guys made it. Gotta say, I'm surprised Zach isn't dead in a ditch somewhere. You know he does cocaine, right, Mom?" Presley's eyes glistened.

Zach stuck his middle finger up in the air with a grin still spread across his face. "You little asshole."

"If it's true, I don't want to know." Vera sighed, pulling a hand through her salt-and-pepper hair. Her natural long dark hair had been speckled with gray earlier than most. She attributed the stress of being a mom to four boys and her late-night shifts as an ER nurse.

"It's not!" Zach grabbed Presley in a headlock.

Luke eyed the high beams overhead. His mind drifted back to his days playing football. Just two years ago, he played on

that field. He wondered how different his life would be if he had stayed on the team. He could have had more time on the field, more time with ... her.

The long, warm-brown hair of Sarah Garanger broke Luke's train of thought. Her skin was freshly tanned and freckled by the sun since her trip over spring break.

Luke realized he'd never see her cheering him on from the sidelines again with red-and-gold pom poms pressed firmly in the air. Sarah had earned her popularity as "The Most Likely to Succeed" not only by being insanely brilliant but also from being kind. From the moment they shared a PB&J sandwich on their first day of kindergarten, they were inseparable.

"Sarah's looking for you, you know." Aaron nudged his older brother with a smirk.

Sarah wrapped her arms around her dad's neck. He was a short man with strong bushy brows. Her father always wrapped Luke in a strong hug when he saw him. At first it caught him off guard, but it was now Luke's favorite thing about him. Sarah's family was large. Her cousins chattered around her in a flurry of excitement.

A pang of guilt punched Luke in the gut, and a strange sense of worry glued his feet in place. "Yeah ... but I don't want to ___"

"Go on. Go talk to her." Aaron pushed Luke forward, and Luke took a step with his head down.

Sarah's green eyes lit up when her eyes met Luke's. "There you are!" Her hands lingered on his broad shoulders as she pulled away, and she moved one hand to graze his brow. "That eye is looking better."

"What's all this fuss about me? Look at you!"

Her eyes sparkled, and her warmth melted him where he stood. "You're too sweet to me."

He smiled. "Impossible." His eyes trained again on the crowd and a frown twisted on his lips. "Where's Marco?"

Marco was Sarah's boyfriend. He was a year older than her and rarely visited from his college upstate.

"Oh, I think he said he was going out with his friends tonight." Her confident voice faltered for a split second before returning to normal. "But it doesn't matter. We can party the night away."

Their conversation was interrupted by loud insidious laughter.

Ashley Park, Zach's long-term girlfriend, ran full speed into Zach's arms. They embraced in one long kiss as he spun her around. Ashley was a petite girl; her larger dark eyes complemented her short brown hair that grazed her shoulders. Like Sarah, she was also popular, but instead voted "Most Creative" in their senior class. She had painted the brightest mural in town on the side of their high school.

"We did it!" Ashley giggled as Zach finally dropped her onto the grass. He could feel Ashley's dad's gaze heavy on the

back of his head. He didn't dare look at the only man he might actually be afraid of.

"Ashley!" Sarah grabbed Luke's arm and pulled them into the group.

"Oh my God!" Ashley said as she squeezed Sarah as tight as she could. "Can you believe it? The four of us made it out of this hell hole."

Her eyes darted to her father to make sure he was out of hearing distance.

"I tried to find you so we could sit together!" Sarah wrapped her arms around Ashley and admired her electric-blue eyeliner.

"Vera, I'm not sure who I should be congratulating more tonight. Your boys or you for getting them to graduation." Sarah's dad appeared and wrapped Vera in a hug.

"Keith. Thank you." Vera's hands rested on his shoulders as she pulled away.

Sarah and Luke shared a look. Their single parents had a lot in common. Keith reminded Vera of her father, and since they moved to Brooklyn and her mother died, every time she buried her head in one of Keith's hugs, she felt at home.

Keith smiled, his firm gaze landing on Luke and Zach. "Glad to see you're both doing better. Didn't know if you were gonna make it."

Luke met Keith's eyeline but couldn't hold it. His gaze fell to his feet, and he moved the grass off his sneakers. Zach

nodded with his eyes averted. Keith's eyes held a mirror that they weren't ready to face.

"Hopefully that'll be the last time I have to worry about y'all getting into a ... freak accident." Keith placed a hand on Luke's shoulder on his way back to his family. Luke's body went rigid. Their freak accident was no accident, and despite the twins' refusal to speak about what happened that night, everyone knew.

"Alright, Dad." Sarah's hand replaced Keith's on Luke's shoulder. "I'll be back over in a second."

"So, what are we doing tonight?" Ashley held onto Zach as she reached into his gown to wrap him in another hug.

"Party!" Presley yelled.

"I was going to go over to Enrique's," Aaron said, his attention was back to his phone. "But if you guys are gonna be home, I won't go."

"I could pick up some pizzas! We've got plenty of room at the house." Vera looked up at them expectantly.

"Mom, I told you. We have somewhere to be." Zach pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pants and went to light up.

Vera snatched the cigarette from his mouth. "You may be old enough to make your own choices. But you know better than to smoke in front of me."

"Come on. Can't you reschedule?" Sarah was still smiling, glowing. "For the first time ever, everyone's schedules line up. It's fate."

Ashley smiled. “She’s right. How often do we get to be graced by all four Calem boys and their beautiful mom.”

“Oh, now you’re just sucking up.” Zach scoffed.

“It’s okay. Mom reacts well to that type of behavior. That’s how I became the favorite.” Presley puffed out his chest.

“What are you talking about? I’m clearly her favorite,” Aaron said.

Everything was as it should be. The people they most cared about in the world were together and happy.

“Are you sure you guys have to go tonight?” Vera pleaded. She didn’t know exactly where they were going but her intuition told her everything she needed to know.

They shared a glance. Every bone in their bruised body was begging to stay, but tonight was special for more than one reason.

They had gone through every initiation. The Family. And tonight, they could finally join them. Securing a good life for their family. The fresh tattoos on their skin burned with the spring air.

The determination resounded in their eyes, and they spoke as one. “Yeah, we’re sure.”



Luke pulled the car into a gravel road near the harbor. It was dark, and the ships in the water moved slowly in the night. He turned down the dial on the radio blasting nineties rock.

“I can’t believe we’re finally doing this shit.” Zach smiled from ear to ear. Pride filled his chest. This was the one thing he finally got right. Something he’d done that would protect his family indefinitely. He could be proud of that. They’d never have to worry about money again, and his family would be safe.

Luke put the car in park and took a deep breath. He looked down at his wrist and felt the crushing weight of responsibility. If there was ever a time he could turn back and choose another path, that day was long gone. Unlike Zach, Luke wasn’t as sure of his choices. He thought long and hard about what the future could have been like if he’d never met Ezra.

Tonight, he would have been at that party with Sarah. Better yet, he would have asked her to be his girlfriend years ago. He still wanted that dream. The harbor lights loomed in the pitch-black night. But he was finally ready to give it up.

He would give this everything he had. He had to think bigger than his own desires. To be in The Family was to think ahead. To be a part of something more important.

“I think I’m ready.”

The boys pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. It had been delivered to them that day and was scribbled in red ink. Only a location and a time along with the word “faith” scribbled at the top. It was their last test. Their brush with “strength” is what

led them to the hospital. A night that started the same way. A note and a dark place followed by a barrage of fists and weapons.

They walked into an open garage with the only light in the harbor. The night was cold, and since they came straight from the football field, they hadn't even bothered taking off their gowns. Both felt the uneasy turning of their empty stomachs, but they kept quiet in search of whatever was coming.

There was no one in sight and no sound other than the soft movement of the ocean and the buzzing fluorescent light. In the middle of the garage, stood a singular barrel and two silver goblets lay in wait.

Their last trial. The goblets were filled with a red liquid to the brim.

Zach picked up a goblet and smelled it. The sickly-sweet scent of cherry filled his nostrils. "Maybe it's poison."

"I don't think they'd bring us this far to kill us," Luke said.

Zach shrugged, not caring either way. "Together?"

Luke picked up his goblet and wrapped his arm around Zach's for a toast.

Luke started. "To new beginnings."

"And possibly more bad decisions." Zach finished.

Their smiles lingered, and with the clink of their goblets, they downed their drinks.

“Fuck.” Zach threw his glass on the ground, and it tumbled with a loud crash on the concrete floor.

“Disgusting.” Luke’s lips were numb when they left the glass.

“I’m gonna be sick.” Zach lurched forward, holding his stomach. Luke went to reach for him but found himself on the dusty concrete floor.

Their tongues were numb and could no longer form sentences. Within minutes, they gave way to their weak knees. Their consciousness waned in brief intervals. The world around them disintegrated into an endless spinning until they were surrounded.

Dark silhouettes pulled them from the cold floor. A woven sack scratched their faces as their world went black. Their feet fumbled around as they were thrown into the back of a van.

Zach couldn’t keep his eyes open, but he willed himself to move his heavy arms to find Luke. Once he felt Luke next to him in the van, he relaxed, letting the car take them to whatever destination. Luke was more trusting. He couldn’t see but he could hear a familiar set of voices, and that was enough to ease his fears.

There was no sense of time in the van. Every wild jerk reminded the boys that they were vulnerable. The van smelled of leather and sandalwood and radiated with a flurry of voices.

The vehicle stopped, and the door opened and then they were filed out one by one. Their feet barely moved as they

were ushered into a red brick building. Laced within the brick laid gritted stone. Pure white that stretched to the night sky until it ended in point. Stone cherubs hid in the darkest corner, overlooking the scene, aged many years by the sun and the rain, but this was no church.

They were lifted over the stone steps and into a dimly lit basement that led into a common area. No sound was detected in the entire four-story building, only the scuttling of their feet against a hardwood floor. The smell was oddly familiar to them.

Once in the middle of the common area, their hoods were ripped off, and Zach and Luke found themselves face-to-face. Their pupils were dilated, and they could barely see. The warmth of the hearth fireplace beside them and the crackling of the logs did little to warm the monstrous building. Their world lagged like a video game, and they found another set of hands tugging on their clothes and pulling them off. The muscles in their faces were too weak to protest.

Firm hands pushed them to their knees in only their boxers. A Persian rug, made of pure wool, padded their fall but was little comfort to their growing nerves.

“It’s time.” The boys recognized the voice of their immediate superior and relaxed a little. Ezra was there, and if Ezra was there, that meant they were safe. This is what they had wanted. This was what they’d been waiting for.

Again, they were pulled from their knees and onto their feet. This time, the journey would be much harder. A spiral

staircase lined with a dark-wood banister was thick and black ornate metal lined the railing. It contrasted with the red brick that greeted them with every step. The journey, seemingly impossible for two men who couldn't feel their legs, was made easier by three sets of arms carrying them up to the top.

The three guard members stood arm in arm with the boys until they reached the top. A strange silence filled the building. Despite being in central Manhattan, not a car could be heard outside. Everything was quiet as they waited.

With a strong push, two large wooden doors opened to the altar room. A room with concrete floors that still didn't lose its charm. A balcony window in the back of the room was covered with thick white drapes for the occasion. Candles lined the floor, shining on the faces of The Family. A group of no more than twenty men on bended knee waiting for Her arrival.

Zach and Luke were forced to kneel, this time, on red velvet pillows. As their knees hit the pillows, their heads swirled from dizziness. Luke caught himself before falling into the concrete. As he picked up his heavy head, his gaze landed on a stream of white.

A woman with pure white hair and skin walked to the altar in front of them. Every eye in the room was on her, but Luke couldn't understand why. He turned his head slowly, observing the unblinking crowd as they followed her every move. He had never seen anything like it.

Zach casually eyed the woman through hazy eyes. She was nothing special, but she was pretty, he guessed.

Her eyes met Luke, and he froze.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you ... Luke.” Her voice sung the song of someone who yearned for him, but he’d never known she existed.

He tried to clear his throat to speak, but a groan was all that came out.

“Don’t strain yourself. I only wish to speak directly to you both. To tell you how long awaited your arrival has been. I’m so happy to see you both home.”

Zach’s stomach stirred, something felt odd. There was never mention of any girl. Why would they keep her a secret? And why did she want to see them so badly?

“Valiantly. You have both shown your loyalty to our ... family. In the secrets you’ve kept, the assignments you’ve completed, and by the final trials you’ve endured. Your bruised bodies will soon be made stronger. Our gift to you.”

Nothing she said made any sense to the boys, and every word hung in the air like an echo. Whatever drug they took worked; there was no use in fighting anything. They weren’t going anywhere.

Ezra and Akira stood at either shoulder, and at the nod of her head, they sunk their teeth into the neck of their twin. A pressure surged in their necks. It was deep and intense as teeth tore through their skin and into muscles. It didn’t hurt, but

when their blood was nearly drained, they were too weak to sit up. The faint sight of red blood littered the floor in droplets beside them.

“It’s time,” the woman said.

The room went dead silent.

Zach was aware of every breath in his chest. The woman grabbed his face and brought it toward hers. “Welcome home.”

She bit her wrist and black blood poured down in front of him. As soon as the blood hit his lips, he was gone. His muscles seized, and he fell back against the concrete floor. Not in pain, in pure bliss.

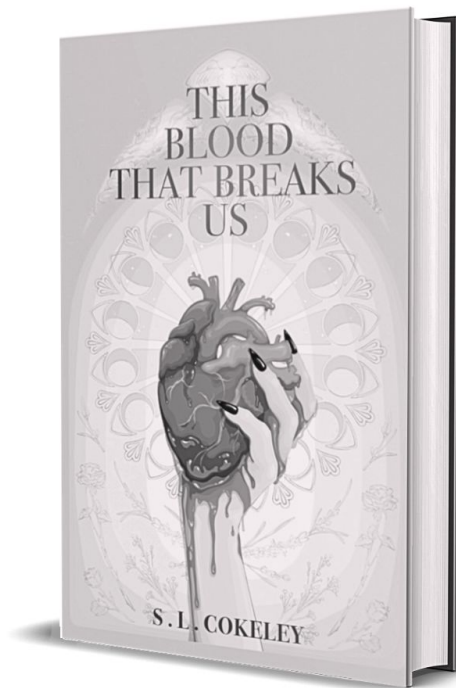
The woman wove her hands in Luke’s hair and whispered in his ear, “I’ve long waited for you” before feeding him a few drops of her blood. Luke’s eyes went wide.

The room disappeared, and in that moment, She was the only thing that mattered to them.

Everything about Her was magnificent. Her hair, Her skin, Her nails. Everything She was, they wanted to be. Her blood coursed through their veins, leaving scars. And though they couldn’t feel any of their muscles, their bodies were alive. Alive with a new feeling of belonging. Life was worth living if She was there. From that moment, they’d be forever tethered to Her. All fear they had was long gone.

They were exactly where they wanted to be. With Her.

Winter awaits...



"All good things must come to an end."

THIS BLOOD THAT BREAKS US

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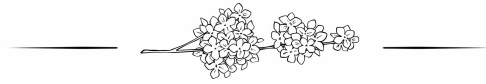
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