

Darkest

CLAIM

VAMPIRE'S FATE

LEIGH KELSEY

DARKEST CLAIM: VAMPIRE'S FATE

BOOK ONE

LEIGH KELSEY

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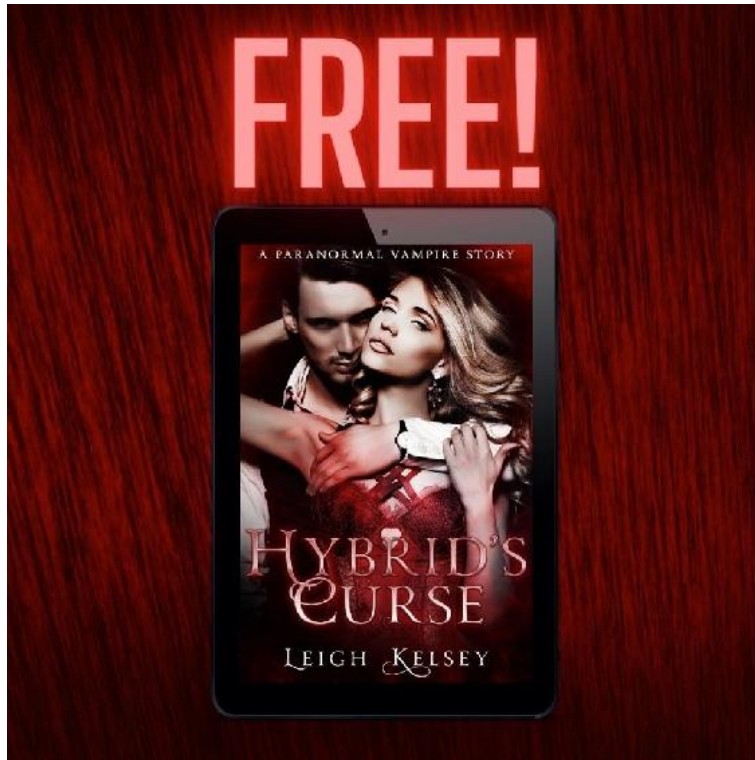
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BLURB

I was supposed to choose one vampire suitor.

But I'm falling for them all.

As a rare vampire—born, not made—I'm a curiosity to the ruling families who oversee all vampires. The families are eager to find out what I'll become when I'm bitten. And eager to marry my power into their family lines.

I've always known I needed to choose a suitor, but now three vampire men are coming to court me, and in fourteen days I'll have to choose one man to marry.

Unless I don't choose. Unless I keep them all.

Darkest Claim is a paranormal romance series of short, spicy books with three sweet, psycho, alphahole vampires, one woman for them to share, and a happily ever after.

ROXIE'S
CLAN
BOOK 1

VAMPIRE'S
GATE

LEIGH KELSEY

ONE



“Oh hell,” I breathed, pacing up and down the plush rug in the hallway. I nearly said the dreaded G word in my panic—God was anathema to vampires like my family. “Do you *have* to leave? Can’t you just stay?”

“And cramp your style?” Dad asked with a laugh, straightening his bowtie as he assessed the collection of bags and belongings my parents were taking with them, nodding in satisfaction when he found everything in order for their two weeks away. “We’d only get in the way, Roxie.”

“We’ll be fine in the hotel, love,” Mum said, smiling as she squeezed my shoulder. I’d inherited my pale blonde waves from her, and my blue eyes—though hers were red now. From dad, I got his shortness and his smirking mouth, his quick humour too.

I wished I could be more like Mum, who was effortless in her glamour. My glamour took three hours and copious amounts of setting spray.

“You’ll be fine here, Roxie,” she went on, her eyes glittering. “You don’t want your old mum and dad getting in the way of you and your suitors.”

When she said *old* mum and dad, she meant it—they were both nearly four hundred years old.

“But what if I don’t *like* them?” I asked, growing more desperate as she pulled on her long, burgundy coat, buttoning it up before grabbing her anti-UV parasol off the hook by the

door. She looked like an old Hollywood actress, not even out of place among our manor house's opulent decor.

What I really wanted to ask was what if they don't like *me*? Not only was I the odd one out in our long-lived family, with siblings who'd been alive—well, undead—for a hundred years or longer, I was the only born vampire in the family. The only born vampire in the *country*, hence the suitors currently travelling to our house via horse, train, and car. I was a rarity, and people were curious. The ruling families wanted to know what I was capable of—which wasn't much—and wanted to marry any power I might have into their family lines.

Mum and Dad had stalled them as long as they could, giving me twenty-seven years without the families shoving their sharp fangs into my life, but time had run out. And as my parents kept reminding me, I was old enough to be searching for my mate—my love match—and certainly old enough to continue the family line.

It had never been a burden—the expectation that I'd marry, have children, and all that ancient gender role stuff. Mostly because I knew I'd always have my parents' support, and if I ever point-blank refused to follow the vampire way of life, they'd make damn sure I could set myself up *outside* vampire society, away from the families' rules and judgement.

Plus, it was the twenty-first century—I could have children *and* an awesome job.

But born or made, I was a vampire. Even if I didn't have fangs, or drink blood, and even if I slept through the night and could go out in the sun without protection ... I was still my parents' daughter. I was still a vampire, deep down in my DNA, no matter how human I looked—or smelled. I *wanted* to be part of this world, this life.

“If you don't like them, new suitors will be found for you,” Mum replied, giving me a smile that steadied me the slightest bit. No matter what happened, I could call them at the hotel and they'd come straight home. I knew they would.

But while Mum and Dad would be there, ordering room service and watching TV in a ritzy king-sized bed, I'd be here,

in our big manor house ... alone with three men I'd never met before. Their scents filling the high-ceilinged rooms of my home, their voices echoing off the dark walls, their presence clinging like a spectre to chandeliers and sofas and long, glittering mirrors.

I swallowed, forcing my hands down to my sides after a brief, squishing hug I wanted to cling to.

"You can afford to be choosy," Dad said with a crooked smile brightening his Ruby eyes. "You're the only born vampire in a century; you'll have men lining up for years for your hand."

I rolled my eyes, ignoring my blush. It wasn't that I didn't *want* men lining up just for a chance to meet me, to make me swoon and smile and laugh—because who *wouldn't*?—but I couldn't get past the crushing fear that I'd embarrass myself, or they'd be disappointed that I was *normal*. The last thing I wanted was to let the entire Calvert vampire line down.

Mum smiled, beaming with the excitement she'd *barely* been holding back. "Remember, if you run out of conversation topics, I left you a list in—"

"The drawer under the mirror in the sitting room. I know," I finished, amused. She'd told me at least six times just this morning.

"Why don't you go get the car started, dear?" Dad suggested to Mum, his smile gentle and mischievous. That was Dad through and through; his cherubic appearance made him look sweet and soft, but he had a wicked side of inherited too. "You know you're a far better driver than I'll ever be."

Mum's low laugh set me at ease faster than her hug had. "Damn right, I am."

She took the keys from the solid oak sideboard and gave my shoulder one last squeeze before she skipped down the steps to the car, more eager for today than I'd ever been. And *she* wasn't even the one being inundated with adoring men.

Dad craned his neck to make sure she'd gone and then leant close, a determined gleam in his sharp red eyes. He'd

been turned at twenty-two years old, but there was no mistaking that he was a father when he looked at me like that—light and serious all at once.

“I know you’re a modern woman, Roxie, and I know you don’t follow the same social rules that your mum and I did. So there’s a box of condoms in your bedside drawer.”

I groaned, backing down the hall with my hands lifted to ward off his words, light catching on the beading of my red sleeves like a deadly solar flare. “That’s not necessary, Dad. Really.”

“I just want you to be safe, Roxie. And I’m not too ancient a relic to not realise that people are having sex before marriage these days.”

My face went even redder, making me the epitome of a blushing virgin. “I don’t—have any plans—”

“Well, just in case.” He crossed the hall and pressed a kiss to my temple, drawing back after a second to catch my eyes. “Don’t let them boss you around, and don’t hesitate to speak up when the moment calls for it.” He smiled, his eyes crinkling, face soft with affection. “I know you’ll make us proud. You always have.”

I withheld a groan as he poked at my insecurity without realising it. “What if I mess up like Piers?”

Dad sighed, his whole face darkening with sadness. “You won’t be. You’re completely different people, you and your brother.”

Piers had only been twenty years older than me when I was born, the closest to me in age, so he was the sibling I knew the most. He was a free spirit, reckless, and probably too wild sometimes, but he had a good heart. Despite that good heart, he’d made a laughing stock of the Calvert family five years ago at a ball where *all* the ruling families had been in attendance. He’d tried to woo a woman who had zero interest in him—not that he’d known that—and she’d viciously rejected him before turning her sharp tongue on our family,

too. She'd quickly and efficiently dissected us until every family in attendance looked at us with scorn or pity.

We'd only *just* started to recover our social status, and that was mostly because people were curious about me now I was taking suitors.

"If I screw this up—" I started.

"You won't," Dad cut off gently, pulling me into a swift hug that was all gangly limbs and sharp elbows. "And even if something *does* go badly wrong, if any of these men speak to you the way Sofia spoke to Piers, it won't change your place in this family."

But they'd be disappointed, I knew. They wanted the fairy tale happily ever after for me, and they'd be gutted if this played out differently.

"You don't think ... we sent him away?" Dad asked suddenly, peering into my face with aching grief as my face heated. "Roxie, Piers left because he didn't want to face the families. We never made him go."

"I know," I sighed, and then pasted on a smile, as much for myself as my dad. "I'm sure you're right; I'll be okay."

He didn't look convinced, but he stepped back and picked up the bags. Mum beeped the horn outside, and we both laughed. Her impatience was legendary. "Call us if you need us."

"I will," I promised. I kept up my smile until he'd left, until the door was shut behind him, and then let it fall. I swore dad took all the light from the house when he left, and now I stood in gloomy shadows.

I knew Piers had never been forced out, but he hadn't felt like this was his home anymore. He'd felt unwanted, and that happening to me was what I dreaded the most.

I had to make a good impression on these suitors.

I *had* to.

TWO



There were only so many times I could fluff a cushion, but that didn't stop me taking another sweep of the sitting room where I'd receive my guests. I'd had a cup of chamomile tea in an attempt to settle my nerves, but it hadn't had any effect, and I was still terrified, my stomach in knots and my hands trembling as I adjusted the positioning of a tassel on the curtain tie-backs.

"Oh hell," I breathed at the soft crunch of tires on gravel outside. Here—one of them was *here*. And I had to receive them. Right now. I had to pull myself together, stop shaking, and charm them until they liked me.

Or at least not make a total fool of myself. A lower bar was probably a good idea.

"Alright, Roxie," I breathed, brushing creases from my long red dress, "you've got this. Just don't go on any long rants about random history that no one wants to know about. No bookish talk. And don't think about the box of condoms."

They were XXL—I'd checked after Mum and Dad had driven off. Did all vampires have huge cocks, or had Dad erred on the side of caution?

I resisted looking out of the windows I passed on the way to the front door, brushing my hands through my blonde waves until they were more artful than messy.

Don't rush to them, I heard Mum's voice counsel me. We'd gone through this whole process—minus the need for XXL

condoms—these few weeks. I'd insisted on going over every minute detail in a bid to lessen my anxiety.

It hadn't worked.

A car door shut, and I jumped, a squeak escaping before I could muffle it.

"Stay cool, Roxie, you're a dignified lady of the Calvert family line," I whispered, twisting my fingers together as I headed into the dim hall. "Dignified ladies do not have panic attacks in their own hallways."

Except this dignified lady had a hundred pound weight on her chest compressing her lungs, her head was starting to feel woozy from a lack of oxygen, and her knees were trembling.

The knock on the door only made it worse, and I jumped half a mile. "Calm," I breathed. "*Calm.*"

The handle was a cool, grounding touch against my palm as I opened the door, but I couldn't drag a breath in.

"Roxana Calvert?" a warm, raspy voice asked.

I stared at the short-haired man standing on the wide steps at the front of the house. He was nothing like I'd expected. Instead of coattails and stuffy shirts, a navy blue T-shirt clung to his biceps and pecs, and grey sweatpants hung low on his hips. He was far more casual than I'd expected, and that was before I saw the way his eyes crinkled, his mouth split in a friendly smile.

Not stuffy or cold at all, but welcoming, open.

"I'm River Corwin," he said, meeting my gaze with deep crimson eyes lit with curiosity. "From the Corwin family."

I meant to open my mouth and say *nice to meet you*, but instead what came out was an embarrassing, desperate gasp for air—and then my breathing was gone, wild and uncatchable.

"Roxana?" River asked, the smile falling from his face as he hurried up the last step. "Are you alright? You look pale. And coming from a vampire, that's really saying something," he added with a laugh, maybe as nervous as I was.

“I’m—fine,” I choked out, desperate for air, my chest so compressed that it hurt.

“Well, you’re clearly not,” he replied mildly, reaching me and—and stunning me into stillness by sweeping me into his arms. One hand ran up and down my spine, the other pressing into the back of my neck.

My first instinct was to recoil from this stranger who thought he could grab me, but the comfort of his embrace hit and I sagged, my lungs allowing a trickle of air in. My knees still felt like they’d give out at any moment, but I leant on River, the suitor I was supposed to be charming, winning over, and maybe marrying, and who I was making a total embarrassment of myself in front of.

“Your breathing’s all...” he trailed off.

“Fucked,” I croaked. “I know.”

He laughed, sounding amused at my language rather than offended. He mustn’t have been from a traditionalist family—there was no way he could be. “I’m not sure I’d be able to breathe if my whole family had left me to the mercy of three vampires I’d never met before, either.”

River gave me a squeeze, my breath coming a little more under my control with each soothing touch. “Sorry if I was too forward,” he said, the smile gone from his voice. “If you want me to let go, just give me a shove. My mum says I’m far too touchy feely, but it just comes naturally to me.”

He was tactile, I realised, and maybe ... maybe he was used to being kind? The Corwin family matriarch was exceptionally old, I knew from my obsessive research, and though River wouldn’t be her direct descendant, he was probably her grandson. Maybe he was used to caring for her.

I was leaping to conclusions, but it made me feel easier about both the hug and the meeting. Not to mention sharing my house with this man.

“You’re fine,” I said, my voice a little more normal. “Sorry for completely losing it before I could even say hello.”

“Nah,” River replied, squeezing me again. “Nothing to be sorry for. Am I the first one to get here?”

I nodded, wondering if he planned to let go of me. He didn’t seem inclined to.

“Well, thank fuck for that,” he said, making me laugh. “Claude’s a mad, old bastard,” he added, although with clear affection, “I doubt he’d have known what to do with a panicking woman. And Silas ... you don’t want him anywhere near when you’re freaking out.”

I drew back, wincing as I met River’s eyes—deep crimson but flecked with a hazel colour that hinted at their previous hue. “Is he horrible?”

“Foul,” River agreed, but he stroked down my arm, reassuring me. “He’s a vampire through and through, and if I were you, I’d pick either me or Claude. Or both,” he added with a wink, making my face flush red.

Choose two? Marry *two* men?

“If it’s good enough for Matriarch Alberson,” River added with a mischievous grin, squeezing my waist once more before letting go.

Yes, but *she* was the head of a ruling family and could get away with anything. Me marrying two men would only win me scorn, not the acceptance I wanted for my family.

“But—surely you wouldn’t be okay with ... sharing a woman?” River’s eyebrows rose into his hairline. “*Not like that!*” I hurried out. “I meant romantically. Making a life together, with an extra man ... how would that even work?”

River shrugged, leaning against the doorframe and watching me. His skin was nowhere near as pale as my parents’, as if he’d been deeply tanned when he was alive, and it was dotted with faint freckles. “You’d have two people to yell at when we don’t put our plates in the sink? Two men on your arm at every function and ball? Two men to kill bugs for you?”

“Hey,” I huffed, feeling more myself with every minute. “I kill my own bugs, I’ll have you know.”

“Oh, thank hell,” River breathed, looking genuinely relieved. “Please marry me, I need a woman like you.”

I laughed, and the sound of it surprised me. I hadn’t expected to feel comfortable enough to laugh, and especially not on the first day. “You’re afraid of them?”

“Deathly,” he confirmed, his eyes wide. “Tell me you don’t keep them as pets like some weirdos.”

“No,” I assured him, gesturing for him to enter the house and closing the door behind us, leading him not into the pristine sitting room as I’d planned but into the kitchen where my family and I usually gathered, casual and homely. “I did have a pet chihuahua when I was six, but my brother drank it dry.”

River had the decency to wince, running a hand over his head.

“Would you like a drink?” I asked, remembering the script I’d meticulously written these past few days. “Our fridge is stocked, or we have blood and wine at room temperature if you’d prefer.”

River shook his head, hopping onto a seat at the kitchen island. “I’m good, but thank you. Do you drink blood?”

An innocent, casual question, not the sharp demands I was usually met with, or the cold questions that made me feel like a bug in amber. For his tone alone, I answered it.

“No.” I shook my head, curls bouncing against my shoulders, and leant against the counter opposite. “I don’t need blood to survive. Once I’ve transitioned, I will. My parents think I’ll still be partly human when I *am* made, but I’ll need to feed on blood.”

River nodded, open curiosity in his eyes as he watched me. No judgement. “You’re not what I was expecting.”

My stomach flip-flopped. But I pasted a polite smile on my face to hide the dread and disappointment twisting inside me.

“No, I mean you’re way better,” River added quickly, his hands fluttering with panic. “I thought you’d be all superior

and full of yourself, and you'd have every right to be—you're the only born vampire in a century. But you're ... normal. Nice."

I hid a wince.

"*And* I'm digging an even deeper hole," River groaned, pulling a face. "What I *mean* to say is I'd expected to marry for my family, and grow to tolerate my wife. But with you ... I think I'd actually like you. I think I'd like you a lot. Honestly, I already do."

His freckled face was again set in that open, curious expression. "So it's *good* that I'm not what you expected?"

"Definitely," he agreed, nodding fast. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm pretty easy going. Powerful women—and men—tend to take advantage of that. I was expecting a life full of obeying orders. I don't think it'd be that way with you, though, would it?"

"No," I agreed, frowning. I knew exactly what kind of vampires he spoke about—the haughty and high ranking, who thought the world was owed to them because they'd lived so long or had been born to a ruling family. "Why would *I* be like that? I'm from a middle ranking family, and I'm ... only part vampire."

River's smile was sudden and stunning, and my breath caught. "Roxana—"

"Roxie," I corrected.

"Roxie," he went on, his eyes glinting, "you're rare. *So* fucking rare. Like I said before, you have every right to feel like you're better than the rest of us. You *are*, not that Silas will ever admit that. There are hundreds of *us*, and only five of you in known existence."

"Yeah." I agreed. Another thing that made me feel like a black sheep.

River was quiet for so long that I had to look at him to judge his expression, running through a dozen topics we could talk about. But before I could, he said, "You just want to fit in, don't you? You want to be a regular vampire."

That was scarily astute.

I crossed my arms over my chest, not liking that he'd found a vulnerable spot in my chest and poked at it so soon. "Maybe."

"That's like a unicorn wanting to be a horse," he said, but sympathy shone from his crimson eyes. "I get it, though. Well, obviously I don't *get* it, because I'm not a massively rare, stunningly beautiful vampire—just a run of the mill vamp—but you get what I mean."

Stunningly beautiful?

That was what I stuck on—*stunningly beautiful*.

Sure, I'd spent a lot of time on my appearance, making my hair exactly as I wanted it to be, applying make up, and wearing one of my nicest dresses, but ... stunningly beautiful? Those were words for models and queens. Not quiet, bookish women like me.

"Sorry," River said with a wince. "I'm being overzealous again."

"I like it," I replied quickly, honestly. "And you're not what I was expecting from a suitor, either. In a good way."

His smile was massive, and took him from handsome to drop dead gorgeous.

The moment was interrupted by the door slamming open.

No knock, just—*slam!*

My heart shot into my throat as footsteps sounded in the hall.

My second suitor was here.

THREE



“Ah, shit,” River said, jumping off his stool. “That’ll be Claude, he never does knock.”

Tight panic gripped my chest again, but River added, “He’s a little mad, but he’s a good egg,” and the bizarreness of that statement startled me out of the terror with a laugh.

River couldn’t be as old as I’d expected. There was no way a hundred year old vampire would use the phrase *good egg*. No way.

“Roxana?” a rushed, manic voice called from the hall, somewhere between a whisper and a growl.

“Hi,” I said, rushing from the kitchen into the entryway to meet my second suitor—and blinking fast. It was the only sign of surprise I allowed myself to give.

The man rushing down my hall more fit my mental image of a vampire suitor than River, with chin-length silver hair swept back from his high forehead, his tall, wiry body clad in a moth-eaten jacket and black trousers, and a frilly shirt peeking out the top along with a cravat. The scent of violets clung to him, filling my senses.

But it was his face, the expression on it, that made me jolt inside. He was beautiful, and even more so for the slight lines around his eyes, signs of his age, his irises so dark a red they were practically black. Blood—this man drank a *lot* of blood to have eyes that dark. His features were set in such a fearsome, menacing expression that my heart almost stopped,

but the second he laid eyes on me, it split into a huge grin, his dark eyes alight as he rushed towards me with deadly fast movements.

A little mad, River had said.

A little.

“There you are,” Claude rushed out, sounding as panicked as I felt. He fell to his knees before me, knees thudding the rug, and I jumped in surprise.

I stared, frozen, as Claude took my hand, pressing a surprisingly gentle kiss to my knuckles.

“My lady.”

What ... the hell? “Um. You’re Claude?”

“Claude Angelo,” he introduced himself quickly, his voice raspy and faint but urgent. “It is beyond an honour to meet you, Roxana.”

“Roxie,” I corrected. “I—I go by Roxie.”

“Roxie,” Claude breathed ardently, staring up at me with dark eyes as if I’d given him a gift and not just my name.

He pressed another lingering kiss to my knuckles, and heat shivered through my body, waking up certain areas I’d have preferred to stay sleeping.

“My Roxie. Yes, I like the sound of it,” he murmured.

I swallowed, wondering if it was rude to tell him I was probably going to pick River, who was gentle and warm and didn’t set my heart stuttering like this man did. But there was such adoration on Claude’s face that I felt bad letting him down.

He rose as swiftly as he’d sank to his knees, and I gasped, jumping back a step at the blurring movement.

“Careful, Claudey,” River said warmly, strolling down the hall with his hands in the pockets of his sweats. “You’re spooking her.”

Claude's face fell, such anguish on his face that my heart panged. Whatever emotion showed on his face, it was always to the extreme, as if he felt everything more severely than everyone else.

"I'm sorry, my Roxie," he breathed miserably.

"No, you're fine," I replied, my smile brighter than before. It was sympathy that made me gentle. "You didn't mean to scare me."

"Yet, I did scare you," he countered, so sad it made my heart hurt worse. "I'll leave," he said hurriedly, taking two steps backward—slower this time. "You won't choose me, anyway."

"No, wait," I called as he turned, halfway down the hall before I'd even blinked. "Claude, *stay*."

He paused by the door, looking back at me, forlorn. I couldn't explain what it was, but something about him called to me, squeezed my heart tight. I didn't want him to leave before I'd even gotten to know him. He was my suitor, and now I'd met him, I found I didn't want to let him go.

I still thought I'd choose River, but Claude was supposed to stay for three days. I wanted him to stay. His sad, dark eyes would haunt me forever if he left.

"Don't give up already, Claudey," River urged, coming to stand beside me, his presence a comfort. "Come have a drink, at least."

He seemed to know exactly what to say to get Claude to take his hand off the door and approach us, more slowly this time.

"I'll have one drink," he agreed in a low, husky voice that made me shivery, his dark eyes bouncing from one side of the hall to the other, from the floor to the ceiling to the door to the sitting room. Vigilant—so vigilant that there had to be a story there.

I gave him my softest smile and held out my hand to guide him into the kitchen. Instead, he threaded his fingers through mine, his expression awed and gentle.

I felt like crap for my initial freaked out reaction, but even now I was painfully aware of how dangerous he was compared to me. I'd been taking self defence classes for years, and I knew how to handle myself—and how to handle a knife—but I was *nothing* compared to a vampire old enough to show signs of age. He was as old as my parents, if not older. And every bit as deadly.

And yet his hand was gentle around mine, not crushing, and I didn't think River would let Claude hurt me.

I let go of Claude's hand when we were in the kitchen, opening the fridge and settling into my hostess role. "What would you like?" I asked.

Claude was close behind me, his nearness making my back tingle and his temperature icy cold. "All of it," he breathed, staring at the bottles of blood on the top shelf. "All of it."

"You don't need to drink it all now, Claudey," River said, his eyes crinkled. "It's not going anywhere."

"It's supposed to last three days," I said, chewing my lip. Mum and Dad had stocked the fridge with enough blood for all three of my suitors for their whole stay. If it all went today ... well, I'd figure it out.

"Here," River said, giving Claude a smile as he stepped close to us, his arm brushing mine as he reached into the fridge. I couldn't explain why my skin tingled. "How about this one?"

Claude accepted the bottle River passed him, staring down at it in contemplation, but then he nodded slowly. It was strange, seeing him do anything slow. "Yes, this will be good."

I tried not to stare as he unscrewed the cap and downed the whole thing in one go, already eyeing the rest of the fridge's supply. "It's not going anywhere," he said to himself, echoing River's words.

"Are you okay?" I asked softly as I closed the fridge door, unable to hold in the question any longer.

"Starved," he replied in that hushed voice of his, his fingers smoothing silver hair back from his beautiful face.

“Oh, well you can have—”

“I *was* starved,” he interrupted, louder. He shook his head fast, his expression shifting to curiosity. Not just morphing gradually into curiosity—there was no sign of his previous haunted emotion at all. I blinked, and he was across the kitchen, retreating from us. “A microwave. I haven’t seen one of these since the eighties. Do they still do that jaunty little ding?”

“Uh,” I replied, dumbfounded, still processing what he’d said—he’d been *starved*. “Yeah. Still dings.”

“Brilliant,” he declared, grinning as he pressed the button to open the door, clapping his hands together in joy.

No wonder he was so eccentric and frantic. How long had he been starved for? I had a sister I’d never met who’d been starved for several weeks long before I was born, and she’d never recovered her trust in people. She’d almost desiccated—nearly turned to ash.

“Who did—” I began, but I cut off the question at River’s subtle head shake. He knew, and knew enough about Claude’s moods to advise me when not to press him for answers.

“Hmm?” Claude asked urgently, his eyes wide and interested.

“Who did you say the third suitor was again?” I asked River, thinking fast.

“Silas Abraham,” Claude hissed sourly, answering instead of River. “Vicious man.”

My eyes widened, my heart quickening again. I leaned against the fridge, needing it for stability, very aware that I was alone in a house with two dangerous strangers. “He won’t ... hurt me, right?”

“We’d never allow him, my Roxie,” Claude swore, his dark eyes full of—devotion. Something I hadn’t expected to see. “*Never*.”

River nodded, leaning against the small metal table in the centre of the room. “Silas wouldn’t hurt you, though. That’s

not his style. He'd just intimidate you, and be a generally unfriendly bastard."

"Speak of the devil," Claude said in a rushed breath, crossing the kitchen in a blink. "He's still driving unreasonably expensive cars judging by that engine."

My breath went short, and I flattened creases from my dress, running my hands over my hair, my knees weak once more.

"Don't give him power over you, Rox," River murmured.

When I looked at him, he was watching me with a gentle expression, his hands tucked in the pockets of his sweatpants. He might not have been as old as Claude, but he was wise. I nodded. He was right. If Silas was going to be a bastard, he was going to be a bastard. Getting worked up wouldn't change that.

I left them in the kitchen and waited in the hall for Silas to knock, refusing to open the door first when he was here to court *me*. In *my* house, no less. I jumped at the four swift raps, but I didn't spiral this time, so I was composed and welcoming as I opened the door, all my emotions hidden beneath congeniality.

"Roxana Calvert," I said before I'd even taken a good look at him. "You must be Silas."

"Mr Abraham," a crisp voice replied. I looked up at the man and wished he was hideous, wished he wasn't sinfully attractive with his long black hair brushed tidily out of his face, his ruby eyes glowing and his face carved with aquiline features that only made him more striking. Unlike River, he wore an expensive black suit, probably Armani, and his shoes were so shiny I could see my face reflected in them when I glanced down.

Something about him triggered not my defensiveness, but my stubborn pride, and I replied, "Well, since you're here to court me, and we're going to become friendly if not *friends*, I think I'll call you Silas. You may call me Roxana." Not Roxie. Not for him.

His mouth thinned with clear displeasure, but he nodded. “As you wish.” He took a step, but then remembered his manners, waiting for me to invite him in.

I smiled slowly, almost pleased with the power I had over him in this moment, etiquette putting him at my mercy. “Come in. The others are already here.”

“Wonderful,” Silas replied in a neutral tone, but I could sense the sarcasm and derision coming off him in waves. “Who will bring my bags in?”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. “If you’re expecting servants, you won’t find them here. We do things for ourselves in this family.” I shot him a wry look, pushing aside the twist of doubt that gripped my stomach. It didn’t matter if I impressed Silas Abraham—I’d choose either River or Claude, who seemed to actually like me. “You know where the door is if you don’t like that.”

For a second, I thought he was going to leave, but instead Silas followed me into the kitchen with an expression shifting from neutral to unimpressed. Fuck him. I didn’t need him; I had two men I preferred.

“River,” Silas said, pausing in the doorway with obvious surprise. “The Corwin family sent their youngest?”

“And best looking,” River replied with an easy grin. “I see the Abraham family went with experience before beauty.”

Silas’s expression darkened, and I could *really* have done without River putting Silas in a worse mood. But I reminded myself it didn’t matter, I wouldn’t choose him anyway.

“Better than that mad old bastard,” Silas muttered, sliding a glance at Claude who was turning the tap on and off with delight.

“*Hey*,” I hissed—and wilted when Silas swung his heavy glare at me. But I didn’t back down. “You don’t get to insult anyone in my house.”

“It’s your parents’ house,” he threw back coolly, his upper lip curled back from his fangs.

“Yeah, well right now they’re in a Hilton in Lancaster, so this is *my* house for the week. And you’ll follow my rules.”

Claude beamed, his dark eyes gleaming as he turned from the sink. “Ferocious *and* beautiful. Isn’t she marvellous, River?”

“Yeah, Claudey,” River replied with a soft laugh. “She really is.”

My face warmed, but I couldn’t help laughing, too. “Compliments already? You don’t waste time.”

River huffed, rolling his eyes. “It’s just the truth, Rox, not a play for your hand.”

Well, I didn’t believe that for a second, but that was the reason we were all here—marriage—and I didn’t mind.

Silas scoffed. “He’s lying.”

I slid a flat look at him. “Yes, thank you. I couldn’t figure that out for myself because I’m so unworldly and naïve.”

Silas blinked in surprise, and then scowled, his chin jutting out. “I’d like to be shown to my rooms. I’ll retrieve my luggage. And then I’ll see you later. Eight, shall we say?”

“Nine,” I countered, just to be a pain in the ass.

He nodded curtly. I exchanged a parting smile with Claude and River, and went to show Silas where he was staying.

Weirdly, I was starting to feel optimistic about the courtship.

FOUR



The day had been ... okay, actually. Nowhere near as bad as I'd been dreading. Silas cloistered himself in his room, and River and Claude went off to explore the manor, giving me space to breathe. Maybe sensing that I needed it.

It was strange, knowing there were three unfamiliar vampires in my house right now, but as I tipped a pan of fresh pasta into a colander, I could almost trick myself into thinking I was alone. I couldn't hear them, there was no sense of danger warning me they were close, no doors banging or heavy footsteps. I didn't expect it to last, but I was grateful for the little time to myself as I poured sauce on the pasta and heaped it into a bowl.

I managed to eat half the bowl before Claude made me jump and cry out in surprise. I almost choked on my bite as he appeared suddenly in front of me, sitting at the other end of the kitchen island with a deeply curious look on his face.

"I can't remember what food tastes like, you know," he said with no preamble. His silver hair hung into his face, his eyes somehow even darker than they'd been earlier. "It's been so long since I've had anything but blood, my memory of food has upped and gone."

I swallowed and smiled awkwardly, trying not to show how nervous I was to be alone with such an old vampire.

But Claude was here to court me, and part of that meant time alone together.

“What was your favourite? Before you became a vampire? Do you remember?”

He tapped a long finger on his bottom lip as he considered the question, so fast it blurred. “My father used to make a stew with oxtail and mutton. I think that was my favourite.” He smiled suddenly, his lips stretched wide across his face, and I caught my breath, uneasy at the abrupt change. “You asked something about me. That’s very sweet of you, my Roxie.”

And now I felt like shit for being unsettled by him.

“Tell me something else, then,” I encouraged, eating more pasta and ignoring the way he watched, like the process was fascinating. The temperature in the kitchen had dropped with his presence, but I was used to that with my family.

“A cheetah can run as fast as a hundred and thirty miles per hour,” he said excitedly, and it took me a moment to realise he was fulfilling my request.

“Something else about *you*,” I clarified with a smile, my nerves starting to settle. He wasn’t exactly harmless, but he wasn’t threatening and I’d take what I could get.

Claude’s head jerked towards the window when the branches of a tree outside clattered the glass, a hiss in his throat, but when he saw it wasn’t a threat, he turned back to me with a blinding smile. He was stunningly attractive, even with the danger he presented, even with how unpredictable he was.

“I’m very fond of velvet,” he said after a moment, thinking his response through. He brushed a hand down the jacket he wore, a deep burgundy velvet, and his shoulders relaxed just slightly. Something about the feeling of the fabric settled him?

“Now, if I understand this game correctly,” he went on, his face bright with affection and—and something like hope that made my heart break. How many women had he courted over the years, hoping to make his family proud the way I did? How many had turned him down for his oddities? “It is now *your* turn to answer one of *my* questions,” he finished.

“Alright,” I agreed, buying myself time to think as I finished my meal.

“Why were you so nervous to meet your suitors?”

I frowned, thinking I’d calmed quite admirably by the time Claude arrived, but he said, “I saw you pacing, and adjusting the furnishings in the sitting room. I didn’t mean to watch,” he added quickly,” but I glimpsed you as I neared the house and I—I was struck by you. Your beauty and grace and panic.”

I laughed softly, both embarrassed and touched. “I’ve never heard that kind of compliment before.”

“It’s merely the truth,” he said seriously, his gaze open and beseeching. He gave me his full attention and my stomach fluttered in response. “I meant to introduce myself, to knock on the door as River did, but I couldn’t take my eyes off you. Your hands ... they didn’t stop moving, didn’t stop fixing the cushions or your dress or your hair or the curtains or—” He cut himself off abruptly, and smiled, the gentlest one he’d given me yet. He tapped on the counter as he leant closer, a rapid rhythm that blurred his pale fingers. “I thought you might be full of madness like me.”

I winced, edging back. “Um. We call it mental illness now, and ... yeah, kinda. I’m prone to anxiety and panic attacks so...” I shrugged, not wanting to get into it right now, especially with a man I’d met this afternoon. But if he’d been struck by watching me panic earlier, I was struck now by the beaming smile he gave me, so full of affection and adoration.

“I, too, am prone to attacks,” he said, and propped his chin on his hand, gazing at me. That was the only word for it—gazing. My cheeks turned hot, self consciousness making me fidget. I spun my fork around my empty bowl and seized onto the distraction of putting both in the sink.

When I turned back, a gasp tore up my throat and my skin prickled with awareness. Claude was immediately in front of me, that same awed expression on his face and his hands curling and uncurling at his sides, less a show of anger than ... perpetual motion. Like he couldn’t stop, or didn’t know how to.

Or maybe ... maybe after being starved, the little movements reassured him that he still *could* move, that he wasn't desiccated and weak.

"Space," I gasped out, the word sudden and without explanation. "Please."

Claude read my face and took three steps back, not stopping until he bumped into the marble island. The expression on his beautiful face was measuring, understanding.

I wrapped my arms around my middle, swallowing hard, my heart still hammering my ribs.

I took a raspy breath and explained, "I know I'm a vampire, but I'm basically human. I don't move as fast, I don't hear as well as you, and I don't have the same senses. I don't know when you're close behind me. So ... space. Or give me some warning that you're coming near."

I chewed my bottom lip, not sure why I bothered to explain, to *ask*, but I hoped he'd listen. And I supposed this was the first test of our courtship. If Claude failed this, if he ignored my wishes, there was no future for him and I.

"Space," he agreed, with a tentative smile mostly eclipsed by the acute worry creasing his eyes. "I can do that. But..." He blew out a sudden breath. "My Roxie, I would like to be close to you."

I watched him, watched the expressions flitting across his face, ephemeral and intense. "How close?"

Claude took a step, measured my expression, and then took another. "This, I can live with." He took another step, hope and awe returning to his face. "This is better. But I'd like to be closer."

I watched him, gripping the counter at my back, my heart beating fast but no longer out of fear. There was something about Claude that drew me in, called me toward him. "Why?"

"Lots of reasons," he replied, his head tilted as he looked at me, his tongue darting out to wet his bottom lip. "Your scent calls to me, and your blood, but that's the least pressing

reason. You're gentle, and I find I like that. I like *you*. Who you are, not your blood," he clarified, and took a tiny step closer, never looking away from me. "I want to know what these hands feel like against your body, what these lips feel like against yours. But I would ... I would hold your hand now. Just that."

My heart melted as all his frantic energy distilled into that one declaration. *I would hold your hand now, just that.*

All the things he could have pressed for as my suitor—the XXL condoms came to mind—and he just wanted to hold my hand?

I held Claude's dark gaze and lifted my hand, holding it there as an offer.

Claude moved so fast he blurred, and I jumped with a yelp, but it was more shock than fear that hit this time. His fingers were smooth and cool as they wove between mine, holding gently, carefully, as if he was every bit as aware that he could crush my fingers as I was. His head silver bowed, a hard breath punching from his lungs.

"I'm sorry," he rushed out, giving me a sad puppy look through long eyelashes, like he was waiting for punishment. "I was too eager to move slowly. I tried."

"It's alright," I replied, ducking my head so I could meet his eyes. So dark, so pained. And tight with dread, like he expected me to rip my fingers from his at any moment. "Are you okay?"

His silver head lifted, and he smiled, soft and happy when he realised I wasn't tearing away.

"Beyond okay, my Roxie."

I smiled back at him, surprised when he lifted our joined hands and brushed a kiss to the back of my hand. And even more surprised when a cool tongue brushed over the inside of my wrist. Claude groaned in the back of his throat, an involuntary sound, maybe an involuntary action, too.

My breath caught as his tongue made slow circles across my pulse, a rush of tingles going through my body, and for a

moment I forgot to be scared of his age, his unpredictability. Stupid and reckless, definitely, but I couldn't help the shudder that rocked my body, my teeth buried in my bottom lip.

"I can feel it," Claude said huskily, drawing back sharply, like he physically dragged himself. "I can feel your blood against my tongue through your skin. You're divine," he breathed and met my eyes, his pupils barely distinguishable from his dark red irises as he gave me a hooded stare.

"I would only—only let my betrothed bite me," I choked out, slowly recovering my wits. But my voice was still faint, and I was a little woozy.

"I won't bite you, my Roxie," Claude promised, gravely serious. "Not until you ask, no matter how good you smell."

I shivered, and I wasn't sure if I was scared or turned on. Maybe both. I was saved by the old cuckoo clock on the wall chiming the hour.

"I need to go," I said shakily. "I'm meeting Silas."

Claude stepped back and bowed—bowed! His eyes were still smoky with heat and sensuality, and I gulped.

"I don't hold much hope that you'll choose me, but just so you're aware, I'd be honoured to be your husband. Until tomorrow, my Roxie," he murmured, and skimmed my cheek with the very edge of his fingertips. Between one blink and the next, while I stood there stunned, he vanished.

I lifted my hand to my face where he'd last touched me, feeling warm and confused and very, very aroused.

And now I had to go endure Silas Abraham.

I groaned.

FIVE



Silas was already waiting for me in the library where we'd agreed to meet, the green lamps casting his handsome face in sharp angles. His cheekbones were cut marble, his nose perfectly straight, and his lips—nope, I wasn't looking at his lips. I'd had enough frustration for one night, and I wasn't letting myself be attracted to a man whose personality was as foul as Silas's.

"You're late," he commented, giving me a dark look across the table as I dropped into a seat. I gave the books in front of him a cursory look, and jolted when I realised they were on vampire legends and the family lines, my favourite things to study.

No. *Nope*. Not even going to mention it.

"By a *minute*," I huffed at the miserable bastard, shivering at the cold temperature—vampires never switched a heater on. "You can forgive me for that."

His red eyes narrowed, a glowing ruby colour framed by silver. They distinctly said that no, he couldn't forgive me for that.

"I value punctuality," he replied tightly, his mouth pursed. I no longer wanted to kiss it, thank hell. He might have been drop dead gorgeous and had pretty hair, all glossy and black, but he was a hideous person.

"I value forgiveness," I told him, my smile sharp.

I refused to let my eyes drift to where he'd rolled up his shirt sleeves, exposing pale arms corded with thick veins and

muscle. He was a total bastard; I *wouldn't* let his looks sway me. I needed more than that with a potential partner—I needed chemistry and respect and affection. Something told me I'd find none of those with Silas Abraham.

“You reek of fear and arousal,” he remarked, giving me a look down his nose, snide and superior. “Claude’s doing, I presume.”

I folded my arms across my chest, not particularly liking that he could scent my emotions in my blood. Only the most powerful vampires could do it—it took complete control over their hunger, total mastery of the thirst.

“That’s none of your business,” I replied coolly, matching his coldness and ignoring the goosebumps rippling down my arms. I hadn’t been raised to think I was better than everyone else, to value composure over warmth like some families had, but I’d been part of vampire society for years and I knew how to play the part. He’d never see my nervousness in my expression.

“What did you want to talk about? You asked for this meeting,” I reminded him, lacing my fingers together on top of the table.

“I planned to get to know you. To see if we’re compatible. But I think I already have my answer to that.”

“Like I told you before,” I said with a little smile, resisting the urge to break something—a book, a lamp, his nose.

How dare he come into my house and look at me like I was ... like I was *nothing*?

“You know where the door is,” I finished, polite enough that it was a huge *fuck you*.

But Silas didn’t budge from his chair, merely closed the book in front of him and watched me with an expression full of judgement.

“You need this match, don’t you?” I guessed, my smile genuine this time. The knowledge pleased me, and unlocked a tiny truth from Silas, whether he meant to give me it or not. “You *need* me to choose you—why?”

“That’s none of your business,” he replied, echoing my earlier words but far more aloof. He folded his pale hands together on the table across from mine, all courtly composure in his black suit and perfectly groomed hair. But I could sense he wasn’t happy I’d figured him out so fast.

A spiteful part of me wanted to see that composure crack. He’d lost his power over me; I wasn’t as intimidated by him now that I knew this little tidbit.

“You’re not making much of an effort to woo me,” I noted, sitting back in my seat and watching him like he watched me—critically, missing nothing. “For someone who needs a marriage so badly, you’re not making a very good impression, Silas. I’m barely tolerating you right now.”

“A marriage would be advantageous to me,” he agreed, measuring each word, his ruby eyes narrowed on me as if daring me to do ... something. I couldn’t work out what. “But that doesn’t mean I want to marry, and especially not someone like you.”

I clenched my jaw, a sick twist in my stomach. “*Excuse me?*” I asked with as much composure as I could summon. “Someone like me?”

Silas sneered, his handsome face made ugly. I wanted to smack the look off his face, and I didn’t know what had gotten into me. I never got violent urges like these. Well, not unless an author killed off my favourite character.

“Sweet and peaceful,” he said derisively. “Vapid and completely ordinary. If I wanted *that*, I’d have married any of the women I’ve met over the years.”

I exhaled hard through my nose, hating the way he’d just filetted my self esteem.

I stood from the table, fighting a flinch as the squeak of its legs on the hardwood floor. My face burned with embarrassment, but rage pounded in my blood as I glared at the superior bastard.

“You have *no* right to judge me, and no base for your insults. You don’t even know me, Silas Abraham, and you’re

never going to. I want you out of my house, I reject your courtship.”

He stood suddenly, sneering at me from across the table. I *refused* to show him how small he made me feel, even if my stomach splashed with acidic humiliation and he could probably scent it in my blood.

“I’m owed forty-eight hours,” he argued, a vein bulging on his pale throat. “You can’t make me leave before that time’s up.”

I gnashed my teeth, and cursed vampire society rules.

“Fine,” I spat. “Then you can stay in your damn room. As long as I never have to look at you again, I’ll be happy.”

Silas laughed, a low, dark sound full of scorn. “Are you ever *not* happy? Do you ever stop *smiling*, or being sweet and kind and *soft*?”

He made every word sound like an insult.

I blinked, honestly stunned.

“Wait, you don’t like me because I’m *nice* to people?”

I made a derisive sound in my throat, a laugh twisting the end of it as I turned away from the asshole vampire.

“That explains why you’re like *this*,” I laughed. “Clearly no one has ever been nice to you in your entire miserable existence.”

Silas stalked after me, working his jaw, his ruby eyes blazing. But he scoffed instead of replying, and shoved past me to storm from the library.

I was surprised he didn’t slam the door behind him in a tantrum. He was definitely the sort of man used to clicking his fingers and getting whatever he wanted. Well, hell would freeze over before I married him.

I exhaled a long sigh, the atmosphere ten shades lighter with him gone, and slumped back into my chair. I felt less self-conscious alone in the quiet, but my hands shook as adrenaline still thumped through my system.

I needed to work off this energy, this deep, burning offense that made me want to cry and scream and punch Silas fucking Abraham in his smug face.

I shoved out of the chair and left the library for the training room, needing to exercise my body to exhaustion.

Halfway there, I paused, my attention snagged by an out-of-place white slip of paper hanging halfway out of the letter box in the front door.

Weird. We never got post at this time of night, not even a takeaway menu or a flyer for a new window cleaning service

“What now?” I sighed, stomping down the hallway to the door and ripping the paper out.

The adrenaline pounded faster through my blood as I unfolded the paper and read the words there, scrawled in thick, black pen.

PICK RIVER CORWIN, OR YOU DIE. YOU HAVE UNTIL SUNSET.

SIX



I had until sunset *when?* Tomorrow? *Tonight?* It was already dark outside, but the note could have been in the letter box for hours. I was so distracted by nerves over my suitors, I might not have noticed it. My breath went faint, but the adrenaline-fuelled shakiness in my bones only intensified.

Maybe the first thing I should have done was go to River and show him the note. He seemed genuine and caring, and he'd probably be horrified to find the threat. But maybe ... maybe he'd put it there himself?

I hated the doubt, but I couldn't be stupid enough to fully trust someone I'd met this afternoon.

So instead of telling him, I fled down the hall to the manor's wide, airy training room and flicked on the lights. I pulled every curtain shut with trembling hands, and scanned the room to be sure I was truly alone before exhaling in relief.

Safe—I was safe. Nobody was getting inside the house, even if they'd put a threatening note through the letterbox. The door was secure.

But there were three strangers locked in this house with me, and chances were high that it was one of them who'd threatened me. Maybe River was trying to push me towards him. Maybe it was one of the others making sure I'd keep my distance from River, a reverse psychology thing. Probably Silas, that cold bastard.

I let out a scream of frustration through my teeth, folded the note up small, and shoved it into my pocket.

I didn't know what to do about the threat, but I knew I needed to be calm and level headed. Which meant getting rid of this panic, and pummelling a punch bag until I was exhausted.

I unleashed myself upon the bag in the corner, not even bothering to wrap my hands. I hit and punched and kicked until the adrenaline burned out, until I was gasping and weak and scared. So fucking scared.

With bloody hands, I took my phone out of my pocket and did the only thing I could think of. I called Mum and Dad.

"You're calling already?" Mum asked in a rush of excitement. "That's either a very good thing or a very bad thing."

"Mum, I—"

"So, what are they like? Have you met anyone you're taken with? Are they giving you hassle? You know we'll come home if any of them are being too forward."

Claude brushing his tongue over my pulse flashed in my mind, but I pushed it away, too shaky over the letter's threat to hold onto the memory.

A muffled voice sounded across the phone, and then Mum laughed. "I'm putting you on speakerphone so we can both talk to you."

"Well?" Dad pressed. "Have any of them made a move on you? Your mum's right, we'll come straight home."

"I—they ... haven't made a move," I said uselessly. How did I explain a threat? A *death* threat! I'd never had anyone threaten me in my life, and now six hours into a courtship, someone had sworn to kill me.

"Oh, don't sound so worried," Mum said brightly. "I'm sure they don't want to overwhelm you. They'll be completely charmed by you, Roxie, they won't be able to help falling for you. Just give it time."

I chewed my lip, my stomach twisted with dread. How could I burst her excited bubble by telling her about the threat?

The paper burned in my back pocket, a deadly secret. I *needed* to tell someone, and I fiercely wished I knew how to contact my brother Piers. I had numbers for my other brothers and sisters, but what I didn't have was a guarantee they'd give a crap. We hadn't grown up together, and were only tentatively family—they turned and me born. I didn't have friends—my parents were my best friends, as sad as that sounded. I'd never felt the lack before.

"I-I'm sure you're right," I breathed, feeling alone, afraid.

"Are you alright, Roxie?" Dad asked. "You don't sound okay."

"Daunted by the decision ahead of her, I'm sure," Mum said with amusement. "I know it'll be hard for you to choose only one of them. I hear they're all very handsome."

"Yeah," I agreed weakly. "They're definitely ... handsome."

"Tell me everything," Mum breathed, and I could practically see the grin on her face. I felt a bit of my dread slip away at the image, and I smiled.

"One of them is a no-go. Mean and unfriendly and not my type. But the other two are ... nice. I think I could like them, maybe a lot."

"Oh, that's wonderful, Roxie," Mum gushed. "Just make sure you choose someone patient and kind, *as well* as terribly good looking."

I huffed a laugh, ignoring the note in my pocket. "I will, Mum. I'll choose a good son-in-law for you both, I promise."

"Good," Dad replied with a laugh. "I have high expectations."

So did I, but it wouldn't matter how patient my husband was if I didn't survive the week.

SEVEN



I jumped at every shadow from the training room to my bedroom. It felt like it took an hour, not the usual two minutes.

A low moan filtered into the hallway and I stopped dead, my breath caught in my throat as I spun around, searching for the source. A wraith? A ghost? A hungry vampire looking for a late night snack? The latter was the most likely, but I was so freaked out that I'd be relieved to see even Silas right now.

"Just the wind," I whispered to myself, forcing myself to start walking again. My heart slammed into my ribs, faster with every beat. "Just the wind."

But it came again a moment later, and I ignored my shaking hands as I crept close to the door it had come from—a spare bedroom I knew none of my suitors were staying in because it hadn't been aired out for months, the door always shut. Now, the door was cracked open, letting a sliver of soft amber light spill into the hallway.

I lifted my fists into a defensive position as I edged closer, waiting for the sound again, ready to fight whatever monster thought it could break into my house and threaten me. The moan came again, but it was more human—or vampire—than ghostly, and I exhaled in relief. I edged closer, peering through the crack in the door and—

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

Okay. That was ... unexpected.

I meant to walk away, but I froze there, watching through the crack in the door as River and Claude writhed together, their naked bodies so close they could have been fused together, Claude's legs splayed wide. His silver head snapped up from below, his fangs burying in River's shoulder.

My body flashed hot and cold, embarrassment and arousal clamouring inside me as I stood there and watched. *Walk away*, I screamed at myself, but my body wouldn't budge, shock freezing me in place.

The moan came again, and now I knew it was River's voice, River's *moan* as his hips slammed into Claude's ass. He bowed over the older vampire, his short brown hair mussed and the muscles in his back shifting with every thrust.

I must have made a small sound because they both went deadly still, both heads turning towards the door. My breath caught, my heartbeat drumming fast in my throat. Oh, fuck. They knew I was there. Watching their live porn show like a perv.

I hadn't meant to spy on them in such a private moment, hadn't even realised they were together. But then River's words came back to me.

If I were you, I'd pick either me or Claude. Or both.

Both, because they were intimate with each other. I didn't know how to process this sudden shift. Were they courting me separately or did they want to share me? My head spun. I needed air badly.

I turned away, meaning to escape into the garden, but my heart leapt into my throat and I froze when Claude called out, "Please. Please, my Roxie."

EIGHT



My whole body erupted in tingles at the sound of my name on Claude's lips. I froze in the shadows of the corridor, staring through the crack in the door as the ancient vampire writhed. When he trembled, a matching shiver moved through me.

This felt wrong. Sinful. Dirty.

So why wasn't I walking away?

Move, Roxie! I yelled at myself.

"You're welcome to watch, Rox," River said from within the room, his voice a caress that made my breath skip, "but I can hear your heart pounding in your chest, and every one of your rapid breaths makes my cock throb."

Oh, fuck.

Each word coaxed heat from my lower belly, and my clit throbbed. But I hesitated, mortifyingly afraid of what he offered. My cheeks inflamed, and now I really was a blushing virgin.

"Roxie," Claude pleaded, his voice hoarse. "My Roxie. Your blood is singing to me, calling me to you. I am under your spell, and yours to command. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," I whispered, but I was. Claude was ancient, and River was clearly experienced, and I was ... me. Ugh. Doubts clamoured in my head until I missed Claude's whining noise of complaint.

If I'd heard that noise, I might have wondered why, might have focused on the bedroom instead of inward, and seen River withdraw his cock from Claude and get to his feet. But I didn't register the movement until cool fingertips brushed my cheek.

I jolted, my stare snapping first to River's handsome face, his steady, worried gaze, and then dropping, completely without my permission, to his cock. There was a sheen of slickness coating it, hugging the vein that curled along his length, and I might have been inexperienced, but even I knew it was lube that slicked his cock.

His cock, which I was *staring* at. I snapped my stare back up to his face and my mouth went dry at the hunger tightening his rugged features.

"River," I breathed, my heart slamming against my ribs. I licked my bottom lip, at a loss for more words.

He opened his mouth to speak, but we both froze when wet, smacking sounds came from inside the room, and we stared at Claude on the bed as he stroked his cock with a frantic grip, his gaze pinned to both of us.

"I need you," he panted, his breathing rapid and spiralling even faster. "Both of you."

"I—wouldn't be much help," I said haltingly, and jumped when River skimmed my jaw with a knuckle, turning my face to his.

The kiss caught me off guard, and so did the deep pool of heat that formed between my legs, that made me tighten and throb and *ache*.

River's hands slid into my hair, curling around the back of my head in a way that made my heart soften. His touch was a strange mix of cool and warm, like his fingers had already absorbed the heat of my skin. I arched into him with a soft sound of encouragement.

When the kiss became ravenous, and River's fangs grazed my bottom lip, I couldn't hold back a gasp. I felt like such a damn virgin, gasping at the first tease of a bite, my

temperature high and heart beating out of my chest at a mere kiss. But then River's tongue met mine, and he kissed me with a rough sound deep in his throat, part hiss, part growl, and this was no mere kiss.

I forgot all about my self-consciousness as he kissed me, his movements at once careful and dominating. Far from the tentativeness I expected from him. I groaned, pressing my warm body to his cold one, refusing to let his mouth leave mine.

For a moment, I forgot about everything else, but I crashed back to reality with a gasp when the sound of Claude stroking his cock increased, his low moan of pleasure escaping the room. Fuck, that sound was so hot.

"You smell delicious," Claude rasped, not taking his eyes off me even when River gathered my hair and pulled it off my shoulder, sending a rush of shivers through me by trailing kisses down the column of my throat. "I want all of you. Come here so I can taste you."

"You're not drinking her blood," River warned, never removing his lips from my skin as he reached my collar bone.

"I wasn't talking about her blood, River."

I shivered again at the huskiness of his voice. I couldn't take my eyes off where he touched himself.

"Tell me you don't want this, Rox, and we'll back off," River murmured, cool fingers tracing the edge of my shirt, like he wanted to pull it off me. Heat flushed my chest at the thought.

Did I want them to back off? I swallowed, a deep pulse going through my clit. Answering honestly took nerve, but I breathed, "I want this. I don't want to stop. But—can we take it slowly?"

"We'll do anything and everything you tell us to, my Roxie," Claude panted, ripping his hand away from his straining erection and getting to his feet so fast he blurred. I gasped, recoiling automatically when he appeared beside me in a blink. "What do you want us to do, beautiful girl?"

I licked my lips, liking that name. A lot.

Before my tongue could flick back inside my mouth, Claude surged closer and caught it in his lips. My thoughts eddied away when his tongue met mine, stroking swirling patterns that made my hips buck forward, entirely out of my control.

“Tell me what you like, my Roxie,” he rasped, his eyes gleaming with hunger and obsession when he drew back.

I was a breathless, panting mess. And they’d done this with *kisses*.

“I don’t know,” I replied, brave enough to admit it with my head muddled by kisses. “I never—with anyone.”

River kissed my shoulder, his arms sliding around me from behind. “Neither had I before Claude.” He kissed my other shoulder.

“I can be gentle,” Claude promised, cold fingers travelling up my cheek and into my hair. “But I’m not patient. I need you *now*. Please, beautiful girl. Our beautiful girl.”

Warmth filled my chest, overflowing as I surged forward and kissed Claude, cutting off his frantic words. A groan shook my throat, vibrating along his lips as he kissed me with a far deeper desperation, his lips urgent and tongue devouring. Holy *fuck* could Claude kiss. My head spun; I gasped between every press of his lips against mine, clutching at his body, my hands sliding over icy skin that made mine burn even hotter.

When Claude sank his other hand into my hair, angling my head for a deeper, thorough kiss, I caught fire. Need blazed through me and would not be denied. I wanted them, both of them. Badly.

River’s touch trailed up my stomach to cover my breasts with cool, delicious sensation, and I arched into it, needy and demanding in a way I’d never been before.

“I need—” I gasped, breathless. I wasn’t sure what exactly I needed, but I needed it *now*.

“You want to taste our girl, Claude?”

“Fuck, yes,” Claude hissed, dragging his mouth from mine and staring at me with pure, unadulterated hunger. Goosebumps covered my skin; I curled my fingers, pressing the tips into his bare skin, holding him to me.

“On the bed, Rox,” River ordered, his voice calm, a strange blend of silk and steel. “Lay on your back near the cushions.”

My heart skipped. Demanding heat throbbed between my legs. I nodded, my head hazy with lust but not enough to cloud my judgement. I wanted this, wanted them. It didn’t have to be complicated, didn’t have to mean I was choosing them.

But I would choose them. Over arrogant Silas, or someone I hadn’t met, other suitors who could be even worse—I would choose them.

So I peeled myself off Claude, a shiver running down my spine when he hissed in displeasure, his handsome face tight with dangerous, deadly need. He could kill me. Easily. And how well did I really know him, or River?

“Your heart’s beating so fast, my Roxie,” Claude breathed, skating his cold fingertips across my chest, only thin fabric between his fingers and bare skin. “Are you afraid?”

I swallowed. Nodded.

He shocked me by saying, “So am I.”

My brow furrowed. “Scared of what?”

“You.” His throat bobbed, naked hunger in his red eyes. But there was something else there, a shadow I hadn’t seen until I was looking for it. “It’s been a day and I’m fatally, irreversibly attached to you, Roxanna Calvert. You can decide you don’t want me at any moment, and I will break.”

River let out an aching sigh, carding his fingers through Claude’s silver hair. “What are you afraid of?” he asked me.

I glanced away. “I barely know you. I don’t know if I’d be stupid to sleep with you, or stupid not to. I don’t want to waste chances. Especially when I’m going to be married soon but—”

“I’d rather die than hurt you,” Claude breathed, his heart on his sleeve as he stared at me. Like he really was attached to me already.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, believing him, trusting him this far at least—to not intentionally hurt me. I didn’t let myself think about what would happen if he accidentally lost control.

I reached for him again and drew him into a kiss so hot we risked the whole manor catching fire. And then before I could second guess my decision I backed up to the bed, laid against the cushions and shimmied my pants down my legs.

For better or worse, I wasn’t walking away. And maybe the carnal hunger in their eyes and the pleasure they offered would be worth every risk.

NINE



Never, in any dream or fantasy, would I have believed this was real if I'd known about it this morning. Hell, even this evening. But there was no denying that this was happening and very, very real as Claude's mouth met the heat of my pussy, his lips so cold they burned, making every place he kissed even more sensitive.

"Oh," I gasped, not sure what to do with my hands; they fluttered when Claude licked a broad stroke from my entrance to my clit, teasing my swollen bud with a brief kiss.

"Here, Rox," River said in a bedroom-soft voice as he knelt on the bed beside me. His knees brushed my bare thighs as he reached across me, covering my hands with his. Goosebumps swept down my whole body when he guided my hands to Claude's head, curling my fingers in his hair. "If he does something you like, pull his mouth closer to your pussy. The good thing about vampires is we can't suffocate," he added with a smirk that made my breath catch.

I wanted to kiss him immediately, and desire poured through me like liquid fire. "Kiss me," I pleaded, melting when River answered my plea without a moment's hesitation.

As Claude warned me, he had no patience at all; he ate me like a man possessed, and between the stimulation of his tongue and the way River kissed me like he wanted to consume me, I couldn't take it. Watching them fuck had already made me so damn horny; this fanned those flames until I *burned*.

I squirmed, rolling my hips against Claude's mouth, my body in full control, my mind silenced.

River took advantage of a gasp to kiss me deeper, his tongue stroking mine with brutal finesse, demanding my submission. When I gave it, my mouth his to command, River's low sound of satisfaction caressed my tongue, tasting like blood and sweetness.

I tore my lips away from his to gasp, "Fuck," when Claude's stimulation increased to unbearable levels.

I did exactly as River told me and tightened my grip in Claude's hair, keeping his tongue on my clit and sinking my teeth into my bottom lip at how fucking good it felt. Too good. Far, far too good. Yet I demanded more.

"Just like that," River praised and kissed the side of my head before he moved away, climbing off the bed before—before he knelt behind Claude. I got shivers when he took a firm hold of Claude's ass, pulling it up to meet his hips.

My heart slammed into my ribs. Holy shit. Was he going to fuck Claude while he ate my pussy? My hips kicked up, a long moan leaving me and not just because of Claude's incredible tongue swirling over my clit.

"Who's gonna come first, I wonder?" River mused, showing even more dominance as he gripped his cock, giving it a single stroke as he looked over both of us, like he was surveying his kingdom. Like he owned us.

I couldn't breathe. I wanted them both so badly I couldn't think.

"Will it be you, beautiful? Will you come all over his tongue? Or will *your* needy ass come on my cock first, Claude?"

"Fuck," the older vampire grunted against my pussy, cold hands travelling up my thighs to grip my hips. "Oh, fuck, fuck, I need—"

"I know what you need," River replied in a voice that sent chills down my spine.

I knew the moment his cock entered Claude because he hissed against my clit, his fingernails biting into my thighs as his whole body arched. I stroked my fingers through his hair, wanting to ground him.

“Control,” River warned, gripping the back of Claude’s neck, his fingers overlapping mine. “You don’t bite our girl until she tells you to.”

“I know,” Claude said, but his voice was gravelly and hoarse. “I know. I won’t ever hurt her.”

I was so turned on that I didn’t care if he bit me, but I didn’t say that.

“Eat her pussy,” River ordered, his crimson eyes hard, “and keep your fangs in.”

Claude lifted his head to reply, but his mouth fell open on a cry. I watched his eyes flare when River began fucking him in earnest, reigniting the fire I’d interrupted when I spied on them.

“Good?” I whispered, stroking down Claude’s cold cheek, running my thumb across his sharp features.

His eyes rolled back and he pressed his face into my touch, something desperate in the movement.

“Didn’t I give you an order, Claude?” River asked, fucking him with fast movements that pushed Claude into me with every one, the sound of skin slapping skin driving my need higher.

“Oh, *fuck*,” Claude groaned, turning his face to press a kiss to my palm before he tore away and buried his face in my pussy, lapping up every drop of arousal like he’d die without another taste.

Pleasure shocked my nerve endings and I threw my head back with a groan, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip when he took my clit into his mouth and flicked with his tongue, like he could sense how close he’d already pushed me and wanted to see me fall over that edge.

Claude choked off a moan, vibrations echoing around my pussy, and River angled himself so he could hold Claude's ass with one hand and stroke over my breast with another. When he rolled my nipple, my hips bucked and Claude let out another moan. Louder. The vibrations stronger.

"Shit," I gasped, sinking my fingers back into his hair and gripping tight as tension wound up in my body.

"Faster, Claude," River instructed, and followed his own advice by driving his hips into Claude's ass over and over, drawing a strangled moan from him and a cry from me.

"There," I gasped when Claude lashed my nerves with pleasure, so fast he had to be using vampire speed. "Oh hell, fuck, there, don't stop."

Claude's low sound seemed to be a promise to never stop. Whatever he was trying to tell me was consumed by a sudden wave of pleasure that made me cry out, my body spasming, slamming me against the coolness of his skin with every jolt and rush.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous," River groaned. "Your climax is a beautiful sight, Rox. Claude, you better be close because our girl just pushed me right to the edge with that sexy sound she just made."

Every word, every praise made more sparks dance across my vision, and my next throb was so powerful that I arched, my mouth hanging open.

"Yes," Claude hissed, his tongue lashing my clit with even more stimulation. I tightened my grip on his hair, pleasure surging relentlessly. "River—"

"Come for me," River urged, his voice deeper, rougher. "Come for *us*."

Claude pressed his fingernails into my thighs, desperately holding onto me as his stomach hollowed and his eyes slammed shut, pleasure wracking him with shudders.

Fuck, it was hot watching Claude come, and even hotter when River let out a long, sexy groan and thrust deep into Claude, finding his own release.

I had a moment of wondering what the hell I'd just gotten myself into, but then Claude brushed a kiss against my clit, and those thoughts were eclipsed by more heat.

TEN



I was doing the walk of shame in my own damn house. I knew for a fact River and Claude both felt me slip out of the bed at some time past three, and they likely heard me pad down the carpeted hall towards the balcony on the second floor, but they let me flee. I exhaled a long sigh when I pushed open the balcony doors, shivering as sharp night air cut through my clothes and into my skin. My still very heated skin.

Fuck, I really ... we really ... fucked. And I *loved* it. Wanted to do it all over again, even if I was worried they wouldn't want a repeat. They were so secure in their relationship, and here I was getting between them.

Hence, I needed fresh air to get my head straight.

There was a small stone staircase from this balcony down into the walled gardens at the back of the manor, the only entrance into the gardens—a leftover protection from Mum's youth when one of the suitors didn't take her rejection well and stalked her over a period of three years.

I shuddered at the thought of that happening to me, too, but as obsessive as Claude was, I trusted my instinct that, as dangerous as he was, he'd never intentionally hurt me. River had never once given me creepy vibes. And Silas would have to give a shit to stalk me.

“And thank fuck for that,” I breathed, taking the steps two at a time and gulping down air to clear my sex-fuzzy head.

I didn't know how to predict Claude's or River's motives now. I didn't know why they wanted me when they had each other.

When Claude had licked my wrist earlier, had he been picturing River instead? If I chose River, would I be choosing both of them? How would it even work—marrying *both* of them? I didn't know, didn't have the answers, and I *hated* not having answers.

I disappeared into the garden's hedges and apple trees, my mind racing at a mile a minute, my lungs filled with short bursts of fresh air. What would they do if I only chose one of them? Would they make me marry both? And why was I so panicked by that thought? Claude and River were the two suitors I actually liked. This should be a good thing.

My body still remembered how good they'd made me feel in exquisite detail, and I didn't want that to be the only time we slept together. But maybe they'd only come here to court me so they could rendezvous without the watchful eyes of their families to stop them. Maybe they didn't want me at all, like Silas didn't.

If I fucked this up, I'd be just another disappointment of the Calvert family line. Worse, I'd let down my mum and dad.

I'd have to marry Silas fucking Abraham.

Okay, so maybe I was spiralling.

I turned a corner in the hedge, aiming for the marble bench framed by an ornate arch of willow branches, but rough fingers snapped around my forearm before I could take another step.

I cried out in surprise when I was yanked away from the bench, fingers biting into my arms so deep and cruelly they'd leave bruises.

“Silas...?”

When he didn't answer, the fierce grip of panic tightened, pressing on my chest like a lead weight. Hairs rose on the back of my neck. I didn't think this was Silas.

I drew breath to scream, exactly as I'd been taught by my self defence tutors—most attackers preferred silent, submissive prey, and fled from women who were too much trouble—but a rough hand slammed over my mouth before I could utter a sound.

Oh, hell.

My breathing went haywire, short and tight and down to wisps within seconds—but my training kicked in, throwing a cool blanket over my anxiety. It was second nature to slam my elbow back into their gut.

My attacker made an *oof* of surprise but didn't let go. Their other arm locked around my waist, making any other defensive moves impossible. Shit.

I struggled, but even driving another elbow into their ribs didn't lessen the painful hold. Sharp fingernails bit into my cheeks when they shoved their hand harder over my mouth. My breathing grew choppy.

“You should have listened to the threat,” a smooth, beautiful voice said against my ear.

My attacker was a man, and a vampire judging by the melodic quality of his voice. An old one, too. None of my suitors—someone else, someone *new*.

This was bad. Epically bad.

I started to shake, all my training falling apart. *Remember*, I hissed at myself. *You took self-defence lessons for this*. But what was I supposed to do? Fuck, I couldn't think straight. I shook harder.

The garden started to blur around me as terror closed off my airways. I needed to stay calm, needed to *think*.

“My matriarch offered you a chance to make the right decision, Calvert. You were a fool to ignore it.”

His matriarch? The threat came from *a matriarch*? I was so, so dead. They were the most powerful of all vampires, and not just because they were older and far faster; it was the

status they wielded, the complete control over every other vampire.

If a matriarch wanted me dead, I was dead.

But Mum and Dad's voices repeated through my head, their excitement for me to meet someone, their unwavering support. I didn't want to leave them. I didn't want to die.

So fight.

Elbowing him was doing nothing, but I couldn't give up. Adrenaline pumped through my system, making blood rush through my ears. *Fight.*

I lifted my foot high and slammed it down on his instep, opening my jaw as wide as it would go before I gnashed my teeth into his fingers. I didn't have sharp vampire fangs, but any bite could draw blood with enough force.

My attacker snarled, his arm dropping from around me, giving me enough freedom to twist away. Pain seared my cheek in four sharp slices as I spun out of his grip. He'd cut me with his nails, and *fuck* it stung. But I was free.

Panting, I assessed the man's medium build, average height body with a critical eye, looking for weaknesses, cataloguing the way he moved when he—when he drew a knife from a sheath at his hip.

That was why he'd released my middle. He let me go, so he could stab me.

Fight, I snarled at myself when panic made my head blurry. I threw out a sharp kick, landing it on his knee but failing in dropping him to the floor like I hoped.

Okay. That was okay, I could still do this.

I shrieked when he launched at me, so fast that even spinning away didn't spare me from a deep slice in my side. Blood soaked through my shirt and trickled down my pants, and I inhaled a sharp gasp when my attacker dropped the knife and dove at me, knocking me to the unyielding garden path so hard the breath was forced from my lungs.

I shouted in pain, trying to breathe again, my vision swimming as my brain rattled inside my skull at the impact. My leg was *on fire*, pain throbbing so viciously it was an effort to think.

The ground was wet from rain earlier in the day; it soaked into my clothes, chilling me to the bone as the vampire pinned me flat on my back. Fear cut off all my air. I blinked rapidly, wanting to burn his face into my retinas, this bastard who would kill me, but not daring to look at his face. One moment of eye contact and I could be compelled. Under his control. I'd rather die than be his obedient puppet.

I screwed my eyes shut, but I slammed a fist into his hard face, refusing to make it easy for him. Cold breath met my throat, and I knew I was seconds away from being drained dry. Murdered in the middle of my garden, all because a matriarch had failed to threaten me into marrying into her family. All because I was born, not made. Being this way was a damned curse.

I cast my hand out at my side, feeling along the wet ground, my heart hammering against my ribs. Where the fuck was it? He dropped the knife when he launched at me; it had to be here. It had to be.

A sob bubbled up when fangs punched into my skin. My whole body trembled.

I scabbled along the ground, frantically stretching my fingers, desperate to feel the cold slide of metal and—there!

Another sob bruised its way up my throat, my head spinning as the vampire took a long pull of my blood, enough that I knew I didn't have much time. He'd kill me in minutes.

I didn't hesitate, even dizzy, even terrified and shaky. I brought my heavy arm up in a sharp slash, hating how weak I already was, and drove the knife into his throat.

The vampire didn't hiss in irritation this time; he yelled in pain, and hope filled my chest until it was all I could feel.

Please, please...

When he wavered on top of me, I ripped the knife out and stabbed him again, over and over and over.

Blood covered me in a deluge, cold and hot all at once. It was all I could smell, all I could taste, the squelch of it all I could hear. It had invaded every sense.

“Shit,” a male voice breathed, and I opened my eyes a slit, shaking hard with dizzying relief when Silas sprinted out of the shadows of a hedge, looking menacing and deadly, his eyes glowing even in the dark.

Not alone—I wasn’t alone.

Silas was here. Silas who was old and powerful and better able to handle this vampire than I was. All my strength fled me and I shook, my teeth rattling.

“He’s dead, vicious girl,” Silas said softly, bending down to catch my hand. I was still stabbing him. “Or as close to it as you can get with a blade. Give the knife to me, and I’ll behead him.”

It was a strange thing to say, and even stranger that it was comforting. When Silas pulled the man off my body, I scrambled woozily to my feet, surprised when he straightened in a blur to catch me.

“You’re alright now. You’re safe with me.”

Was I? Silas hated me. Was I really safe with him? I couldn’t stop shaking, unsteady and terrified now the initial relief of not being alone had worn off.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Roxana,” he said as if he could hear my thoughts. I froze when a cold kiss brushed my temple. What the fuck was happening? He hated me, or worse—was *apathetic* towards me.

“Who is he?” he demanded, kneeling when I was steady and hacking off the vampire’s head as promised. I froze, watching Silas behead a man with swift, brutal movements. What air I’d managed to inhale froze in my lungs.

He threw a sharp look at me. “Ana. Who is he?”

I swallowed my panic. “He mentioned a matriarch. River’s family is threatening me, forcing me to choose him.”

“Hmm,” Silas replied, wiping the blood from the knife on my attacker’s trousers.

That was all he said—just *hmm*.

Vampire removed of his head, Silas rose in a honed, powerful motion. His cool hand found my waist again, steadying me when I wavered.

I didn’t know why he was touching me, or why it filled me with a terrifying mix of panic and relief.

“The house isn’t safe,” I said, my voice thick as I pointed out the obvious. I wasn’t having a panic attack, mostly because Silas was here with me, but one wasn’t far off. “The garden is completely secure, but he got inside—through the house. He had to have come *through the house*. He’ll come back for me.”

Silas glanced down at me with deep red eyes, graveness etched into his cold, aquiline face.

“We’ll make the manor safe,” he said finally. And then without prompting, he added, “I thought you were meeting a secret lover. I heard you sneak out, and I jumped to conclusions. I was almost hoping you were breaching the courting agreement, so I could reject you and move onto another engagement, but now I’ve seen you kill...”

“What?” I whispered, blood pounding through my ears and—through my neck, because fuck, that guy *bit me*.

Silas tilted his head, watching me, every bit as aware of the blood running from my body as I was. It soaked my pants too, leaving the vicious, throbbing wound in my middle.

“And now the thought of you meeting anyone else makes me murderous. One little kill and you’ve got me enraptured, Roxana. My Ana.”

“Uhhh...”

My Ana? What the fuck? And what was with the bright gleam of obsession in his crimson eyes, and the way he

refused to let go of me?

“Why did you behead him? You don’t even like me—why did you help?”

Silas’s jaw clenched, his shoulders thrown back and something proud, offended, in his posture. “Letting an innocent woman be harmed goes against everything I believe in.”

That ... was unexpected. I tried to hide my surprise but didn’t quite mask it. “I might have misjudged you,” I said quietly.

“I might have done the same to you,” he replied. His mouth quirked at the corner. “You are a magnificent murderess. Watching you take his life was *beautiful*. Truce?”

Um. “Truce,” I agreed, my head spinning. His attention was flattering, and so were his words, but I blamed it on blood loss.

We both tensed at pounding footsteps along the path. Silas pushed me behind him, a threatening hiss in his throat, but it was Claude who burst through the rose bushes and flowers, his silver hair in disarray and his dark eyes wild.

“My Roxie,” he breathed when his frantic eyes found me. He completely ignored Silas, blurring with vampire speed until he was in front of me, cupping my scratched face in gentle hands. He pressed his lips to my temple in a long kiss, a hard breath punching out of him. “You snuck out, and then we found a threatening note and—you’re alive,” he said with a shuddering exhale, mostly to himself. “You’re alive.”

“I’m fine,” I agreed, a bit thrown by his distress. He cared about me this much, this soon? My chest warmed. “I’m okay, Claude. Promise.”

He pulled away, his expression deadly in its intensity, and my heart skipped—before it softened when he lifted his hand, his pinky finger extended. “Promise properly.”

I smiled, unable to stop its spread across my face when I locked pinky fingers with the ancient vampire. “I’m really okay, I promise.”

Claude exhaled all his breath and pulled me into his arms. “Thank *hell*. River’s searching the house for you, he’ll be so relieved you’re alright. I’ll give you space in a second, I just ... I need to tell myself you’re fine.”

“For now,” Silas said ominously. I shot him a look, but his expression didn’t soften. “River’s matriarch tried to force a marriage between him and Roxana. She sent a man here to compel our fiancée, or kill her if she resisted. We need to talk.”

Um. Fiancee? When the fuck did that happen?

Claude pulled me closer, protective as a hiss formed in his throat. I swallowed a grunt as pain erupted through my gut. “Nobody hurts my Roxie.”

My head spun. This was definitely blood loss. I needed to lay down.

“Well, someone *did* hurt her,” Silas replied coolly, his eyes drifting to my throat where blood trickled, to my bloodsoaked clothes, and the four scratches on my cheek, cataloguing each injury. “And next time they will kill her unless we do something about it.”

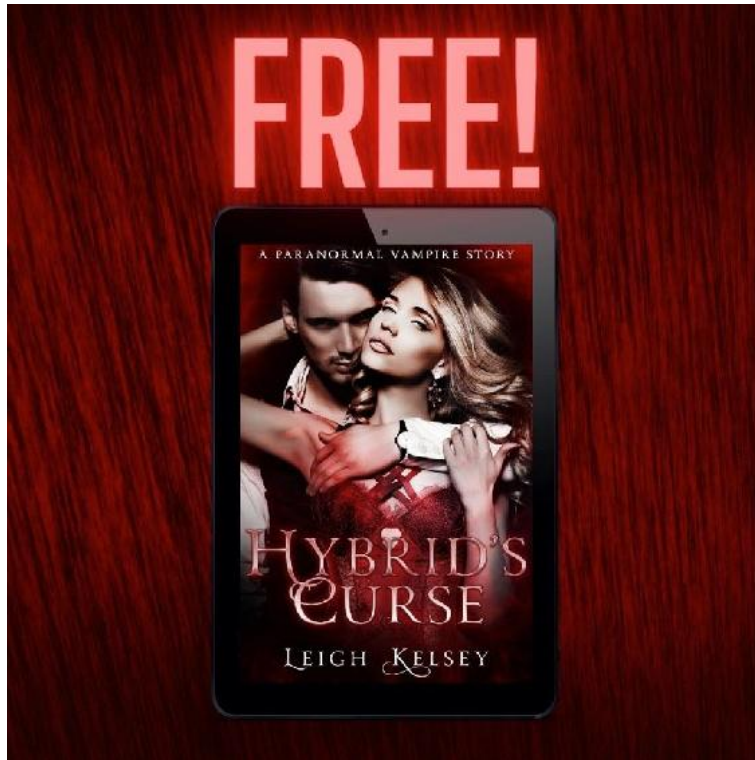
I HOPE you enjoyed the beginning of Roxie’s story! Thank you so much for reading this new series, I have plenty more vampire drama and steam coming your way. **Darkest Claim will continue in Vampire’s Mates** which will be available for preorder very soon!

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[Crazed Candy](#)

[Sweet Violence](#)

[Sugar Rush](#)

Kissed By Brimstone series

(Twisted Paranormal Demon RH)

[Hellborn Angel](#)

[Midnight Descent](#)

[Eternal Night](#)

[Cursed Dawn](#)

Shadow Fall: Part One

Shadow Fall: Part Two

Vampire Game series

(Complete RH Vampire Romance series)

[Complete Series Box Set](#)

[Start with Vampire Game](#)

Moonlight Inn series

(Complete Wolf Shifter RH series)

[Complete Series Box Set](#)

[Start with Mated](#)

Rebels and Psychos Duet

(Complete Twisted Paranormal RH)

[Complete Series Box Set](#)

[Killer Crescent](#)

Blood Wolf

Sick and Twisted series

(Twisted Death Gods RH)

All Hallows Night

Broken Alphas series

(Complete Rejected Mates Dark Paranormal RH)

The Omega's Wolves

The Omega's Mates

Shadowfire Mates/Blacktower Prison series

(Complete Dragon Shifter Romance series)

Complete Series Box Set

Start with Prison of Embers

Lili Kazana series

(Complete RH Angel/Demon Romance series)

Complete Series Box Set

Start with Cast From Heaven