

ROXIE RAY LINDSEY DEVIN



RUTHLESS
PRINCE

A STORY FROM
VAMPIRES OF BATON ROUGE

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VAMPIRES OF BATON ROUGE: BOOK 1

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SEBASTIAN

Nic certainly enjoyed life with all the trappings. His jet was very comfortable, and I relaxed against the soft leather of the seats after we took off. Glancing around, I remembered the time I'd ridden in this airplane and been part of the team. I could still see Nic's most trusted guys taking up the other seats.

Damn it all. *I'd* been among the most trusted too.

Now I was in exile. Sent away. *Banished*.

And it was all my own fault.

Unbidden, my thoughts strayed to Leia, and I waited for the usual twinge of pain. But that pain had been lessening with each day, and this time it was barely there at all. Perhaps I'd ruined my life for a damn schoolboy crush. I laughed bitterly at myself as I traced one of my fingers inside a shallow crease in the leather-covered arm.

Apparently, although I'd gotten older, my actions still remained those of an immature juvenile.

But I'd thought I loved her, wanted her as my own. Hell, I'd *deserved* her. Surely, I'd deserved her, right? But perhaps being second was my destiny. Second in line. Turned, not born like Nic.

He would forever be the better one—the true son...The king.

Of course, he'd taken the perfect mate as well.

I closed my eyes and tried to erase the bitter thoughts of leaving Baton Rouge. This was my fresh start. At least, that was what Nic had said when he told me he was sending me away from my true home. It hadn't been a suggestion; it was an order. I was pretty sure the forced distance was the only

thing that had kept him from killing me. Well, that...and Mother.

The smirk curling one corner of my lips almost hurt. Interference from *Mother*. Yep, still a juvenile, then.

“Mr. Dupont?”

I cracked an eye open and studied the nervous flight attendant wringing her hands in front of me.

“Would you like a drink?”

I never used to make women nervous. Word of what I’d done to Leia must have already spread, although that didn’t make a whole lot of sense. Leia had *asked* me to turn her.

I hadn’t forced myself on her. I wasn’t that guy and never would be.

Still, my conscience nagged at me. I wasn’t exactly a good guy, either. Leia hadn’t belonged to me, and turning her hadn’t been my right. That much was clear now.

Hell, yes, I needed a drink—even though I could only pretend it would erase the memories of my stupidity. Some days, I thought I’d give just about anything for an actual drunken stupor and the chance to forget past sins for a few hours.

The flight attendant’s cheeks turned pink as I continued to stare at her while my thoughts played out. “Mr. Dupont?” she prompted.

I waved carelessly. “Bourbon. On the rocks.” I paused, my lack of manners shaming me too late, then added, “Please,” as I turned to look out into the darkness. We were nearly ready to begin our descent.

The cabin behind me was reflected in the window, but I peered out at the lights illuminating New Orleans below. I swallowed the bile that rose in my throat. Nic had recently claimed this city as his, and now he’d sent me to regain order. *Fucking fantastic*.

I wasn’t sure if I was a member of his staff or of his family. Little more than an errand boy or his representative.

My thoughts slowed as I struggled to bring them back under control, to brush away my overactive sense of pride. This was my penance and a chance to prove myself, to regain his good favor...but damn, it was a tight leash. I was still almost within spitting distance of him, and my task wouldn’t be an easy one.

Émile hadn’t been a popular king, and Francois hadn’t exactly been a powerful prince, but Émile’s demise and Francois’s absence had left a power vacuum. One that Nic expected me to fill. We didn’t even know how much of

the population was still loyal to the Ricards.

God alone knew when they'd last done a census of their population. I had no idea how many vampires I was about to encounter or even how many other supernatural creatures existed in New Orleans.

The flight attendant set a crystal tumbler in front of me, and I downed it in one gulp, forgetting to savor it as I sought to drown my bitterness.

The alcohol burned its way down my throat, but the liquid fire helped. I could do this shit. I could sort out this mess and sit pretty as the Prince of New Orleans. The tumbler thumped back onto the table as I lowered it too fast. My resolution to bring New Orleans back under control would allow me to redeem myself. I could make Nic forget my transgressions.

I hesitated. Okay, so maybe not *forget*. But he'd forgive me.

Again.

He always forgave me eventually; after all, that was what older brothers did for their younger ones.

And now, this younger brother needed to prove himself.

I swung wildly between bitterness for my situation and resolve, as I had since this whole mess had started. Since I'd set this entire chain of events in motion...or whatever had happened. Surely, I wasn't *entirely* to blame?

As the plane angled downward, determination flooded me once more. I would prove myself again. Hopefully, this time would be the *last* time.

The plane touched down gently—hopefully a sign of what was to come. A gentle introduction to my new life in New Orleans sounded pretty fucking awesome.

I disembarked slowly. I had no reason to rush. But suddenly a figure waved, and I squinted into the darkness shrouding him.

“Kyle?”

“Good to see you, Sebastian,” he called back, and I winced as I searched for any duplicity in his tone. It was rare for him to string more than two words together at one time.

He much preferred silence.

Was it *really* good to see me? How could it be? I was a disgraced prince. *The* disgraced prince. Everyone knew about me, about what I'd done. Once again, I could taste the bitterness of my failure again.

But I pushed those thoughts away. I was still Sebastian Dupont, the Baton Rouge prince and now the king's representative in New Orleans.

“Kyle.” I held my hand out as I approached him, and he clasped it. “I

didn't expect you to be here."

He shrugged, the movement easy and casual. He appeared disinterested as he glanced around the surrounding area like he was checking for potential threats—typical Kyle. The guy never relaxed. And I was much more used to this, his silent persona, rather than the one who called out pleasantries.

Then he ruined it by speaking again. "I'm taking you straight to the house so you can get yourself set up before you tackle the business," he said. "Decided you might like to get your thoughts in order."

I nodded and swallowed my groan. I'd never owned or managed a business before—only been on Nic's support team, and even then, I was fairly far down the pecking order instead of being actual support. Nic's go-to guy for anything business related had always been Ben—the guy who worked magic at turning businesses around and knowing what to do or who to contact. He also got shit done *fast*.

I shuddered at the idea that Nic expected me to be anywhere near Ben's league when it came refurbishing or recreating a business venture. He'd done incredible things with Leia's family bar in Baton Rouge. I couldn't possibly hope to follow his star act, but I needed this to work out.

As I followed slightly behind Kyle, his footsteps so silent he could have been a ghost or a ninja of some sort, I glanced around me. New Orleans smelled different than Baton Rouge, and now this was my home.

I could do this, though. I'd learn everything I could about the business and the role Nic needed me to fill for him. I'd give him a properly ordered New Orleans with people who respected his rule and reign.

I owed him that much.

Kyle led me to a car, and I raised an eyebrow.

"No bike?"

The corner of Kyle's lip curled, "You want to ride behind me and wrap your arms around my waist while we go around the corners? No, dude."

I chuckled. "Good point."

I got into the passenger seat, and soon we were driving away from the airport. The only thing I'd brought was a small suitcase so I had some clothes with me, but honestly, I'd buy whatever else I needed.

"Nic put you close to The Neutral Zone."

The Neutral Zone. Damn. If we were trying to remove the Ricards from the place, was I supposed to rename the bar right away? I mean, it did what it said on the sign, right? Vampires from all over could discuss business there

without fear of attack... but it also held memories of Francois and Émile, and those were the kinds of memories I needed to eradicate from the minds of the locals.

Plus, had it ever really been neutral? There was no way to know. Had Francois been working his own little agenda like a giant puppet master from the second floor of the bar this entire time?

Maybe I did need to come up with a new name. A new name that would exude power and order. And be one hundred percent Dupont.

I shuffled the thought to tomorrow's to-do list. I didn't need to make any big decisions tonight, and it was probably wise to observe the lay of the New Orleans land first, making sure I understood what had been happening and what needed to happen to make this transition successful. I didn't want to make any fast decisions I might come to regret.

I also didn't need to give Nic reason to doubt that I had this under control. Not on day fucking zero, anyway.

After a mostly silent ride, Kyle swung the car toward a closed gate. He flipped down his sun visor and pressed a button on a small device clipped to it, and the gates swung open before he pulled forward into a parking space big enough for two cars. Kyle's bike seemed to be taking up the rest of the space, though, parked at its usual obnoxious angle. He gave it a wide berth, cutting the engine as a security light came on and bathed the entire area in harsh illumination.

I blinked. "Trying to blind people?"

He cut me a quick glance. "Only if they're where they're not supposed to be."

I nodded. That made sense because no one should be back here but me or one of Nic's other guys. I swept my gaze up the side of the house. I'd expected something small—a hole in the wall—but this was...almost palatial.

"What was Nic thinking?" I murmured.

Kyle shrugged, the movement visible in my peripheral vision. "That he's the king?"

I nodded. Well, yeah. That made sense too.

The house was huge. It had a painted red exterior, and there was a balcony on the second story at the front, the pretty filigree wrought iron almost framing the upper floor-to-ceiling windows.

And although the house was narrow, it stretched a long way back, and a bridge from the second story led over a courtyard just visible through a

second, decorative gate—more wrought iron.

“Where does that go?” I pointed to the bridge, a feature I hadn’t expected to see.

“Guest rooms.” Kyle’s reply was nearly lost as he opened his door and climbed from the car. He popped the trunk and lifted out my small suitcase as I joined him.

Warm, damp air surrounded me, pressing against my skin like an overenthusiastic hug.

“The Neutral Zone is just down there.” He indicated back out of the gate before I returned my scrutiny to the house.

It stood alone, the largest on the street, although it was nothing like the home Francois and his father had shared on the very outskirts of the city during their reign here.

The mere thought of them sent the whisper of a shiver straight down my spine, and I gave in to the answering shudder as I took my case from Kyle.

“Someone step on your grave?” For the first time in a long time, Kyle lifted an amused eyebrow.

I grinned in response. “Something like that, although I don’t intend to make New Orleans my grave.”

His answering silence was almost ominous as he walked toward the house. Behind us, the gate rolled shut, obliterating the view of the street, and caging us in, the filigree decoration much denser and more secure on the outer gate, like it was a prettiness designed to give only the air of frivolity when it was actually all business.

“Okay,” Kyle said as he stepped into the kitchen of the house. Everywhere smelled of fresh paint. “Nic had it decorated for you, and the furnishings are new. I’ve got some crap in one of the guestrooms, but you can choose where you sleep. I suggest the main house. There’s a big master wing if you turn left at the top of the stairs.”

If I knew Kyle, he only had the barest of essentials with him, and he would have chosen the most basic room. I glanced around, missing my home in Baton Rouge. Hell, I missed Nic’s home in Baton Rouge, his club La Petite Mort, and I even missed the damn cell where Nic had taken me before he gave me this reprieve.

Homesickness gnawed a small pit in my stomach, but then a loud jangling echoed through the home.

“What the hell was that?”

Again, Kyle's face registered faint amusement. "Doorbell, dude, and we ain't got no Baldwin to answer it yet."

I glanced at him when he mentioned Nic's butler and shrugged. "You expecting anyone?"

But he was already busy, opening the fridge to peruse the bags of blood inside. I shrugged again and walked in the direction where I expected to find the front door, and the jangling noise sounded a second time.

"All right, all right. I'm coming," I muttered. I'd only just arrived and had more pressing matters for my attention than an impatient unwanted guest.

I swung the door open to find Jason standing on the front step, grinning. The homesickness that had been creeping over me immediately began to wane.

"Sebastian," Jason said. "Got any extra rooms? I could have stayed with the wolves, but the smell of wet dog gets a bit stifling after a while." He grinned wider, and I stepped back to allow him in.

"How are things going with the wolves and the power share?" I asked. Nic had explained a little of the deal he'd made with Conri, but Jason was his man for keeping the peace between the wolves and the vampires in New Orleans due to his friendship with Conri's beta, Simon. "Anything I need to know?"

Jason shook his head. "Just the usual teething crap, you know? They're all pups, really. Too excitable when they have something new. I have no idea how Conri keeps them all in line. Bet he's watching me trying to wrangle the liaison shit and laughing. He's busy concentrating on the business angle of his and Nic's deal." His smile faded to a grimace before returning. He glanced up at where the stairs led to the second floor. "What do you think of the place? Nic thought you needed a base close to the club and also something befitting someone of your family."

I nodded. "Yeah, I haven't really looked around yet, but it seems pretty nice."

But really, the house was the lowest priority item on my agenda. I'd been to The Neutral Zone, and I agreed with Nic's description of it. It was like stepping directly into a whore's rotting pussy. God alone knew what Francois had been thinking with all the red and black decoration—although perhaps his madness at the hands of his dead man's blood addiction probably had a lot to do with that. More than any of us actually knew.

The restaurant and club needed to be a space people wanted to come to.

Somewhere modern. Somewhere genuinely sought after, where membership meant something. Exclusivity, perhaps. As I considered the possibilities, unexpected excitement fizzed in my chest. I'd always wanted to be successful, to prove myself...

This just might have been the opportunity I'd been waiting for.

"Come on." I turned to Jason. "I was just about to take my shit upstairs and find a bedroom. You might as well do the same."



THE MORNING SUN came streaming in, rudely waking me as I groaned and rolled over, burying my face in the soft pillow. That was different—the softness rather than lumpiness and the smell of new paint that I could taste in the back of my throat. Then I huffed and flung myself onto my back, throwing my arm over my face to cover my eyes against the sunlight I hadn't managed to prevent from streaming through the windows with the dainty little curtains.

"Sebastian!" My name rang through the hallway outside like Kyle had forgotten which one of us was the prince.

I shook my head—there was no way in hell he even cared which of us was royal.

"We need to get to the club."

Huffing again, I clambered from my bed. "Coming. Give me ten." Before joining him downstairs, I introduced myself to the shower and dressed.

He handed me some sort of foil-wrapped breakfast blood bag. Food in disguise...Perfect. "Let's go. We're walking so you can get a better knowledge of your local area."

I nodded. "Okay."

The walk was quite scenic, but I was glad when it ended. It was as if I'd just stepped out of the shower all over again as a mixture of sweat and humidity clung to me.

We reached the club and I looked up at the exterior. It was on a busy street, but nothing called for customers to come in. The sight before me was quite unwelcoming, It was as neglected as Francois's home, with the paintwork chipped and peeling. Decay was evident even here. The Ricard rule had clearly been on its knees for a long time before Nic made his move.

“We need to close it,” I said, certainty tinged in my tone. “For a proper renovation job, we need the building quiet and empty.” I couldn’t half-ass this. It needed to be done correctly.

Kyle nodded without argument and slipped his phone from his pocket before wandering away to have his conversation. After he slid his phone away again, he returned to me. “Contractors are on their way.”

“Do you have anything else you’d rather be doing? Or that you need to do?” I all but made a shooing motion with my hand. It wasn’t that I wasn’t grateful for his help and ability to handle the situation, but...Hell, I wasn’t fucking grateful at all. I wanted to do it myself, without any reliance on anyone else at all.

I didn’t need Kyle liaising with contractors on my behalf. They needed to know I was the new prince in town and that I’d be the one making the decisions.

He looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, his eyes narrowed. Then he nodded. “Yeah, I try to check in with Jason and Temple fairly regularly. See what the general feeling is among the New Orleans vampires and the wolf shifters. Maybe I’ll go do that.”

I nodded too. “Let me know what they say.”

Kyle was already gone before I even finished my statement, his silent feet carrying him down the busy street and away from me. I barely saw him as he wove himself into the crowd then disappeared from view entirely.

I drew a deep breath and looked over the front of The Neutral Zone again. The Z hung crooked, almost tempting me to reach up and rip it off entirely, but I could discuss all the changes with the contractors when they arrived.



“SO, A MONTH, THEN?” Shit, that was a long time. I’d wanted to steam in here and fix things so fast that Nic would wonder why he hadn’t sent me earlier.

The man nodded and made another note in his book. “Yeah, I’d say so.”

If anyone else had used that tone, I wouldn’t have believed him, but I recognized these guys as the ones Ben always contracted. Their work was impeccable, and I’d never known them to run late on any of the projects he’d managed for Nic.

I appreciated Ben sending them my way—it gave me an instant advantage

in impressing my brother, if nothing else. Even if my ultimate plans would be delayed by a month.

“And you said you’d begin tomorrow?” I confirmed.

The foreman opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, the front door burst open, and a young brunette woman rushed inside.

I stepped forward to tell her we were closed, but she narrowed her eyes and settled her hands onto her hips, the fire in her gaze stealing my words.

“What the hell is going on?” she spat. She glanced around. “Fuck. Where are all the customers?”

Wild brown curls and ringlets cascaded over her shoulders and down her back like she was some sort of gorgon come to turn me to stone under her gaze—and I had no doubt she could harden at least one part of me to stone very quickly. Her deep brown eyes were like pools of liquid chocolate. Maybe I’d drown in them.

Her posture emphasized her willowy figure, but she looked strong as she stood before me, like she had a steel inner core and wouldn’t be intimidated by anyone. Maybe that was just a byproduct of living in New Orleans.

Still, something about her made me want to play, to tease, to make her even more fucking angry to see more sparks.

Whatever happened, I had to be careful; this woman could be my end.

My beginning and my end, and I didn’t want it any other way.

I stepped closer to her. I probably couldn’t get close enough. The desire to hold her to me, to feel her body pressed against mine, crashed over me, and I swallowed. She was a whirlwind, fierce and dangerous... So dangerous. Could I control this whirlwind? Hell, could I control my own damn self around her?

For fuck’s sake, I needed to. It shouldn’t even have been a question.

Except she was determined and thrilling... things I craved as mine.

But I’d been down this dark road before.

“And who...who are you?” Even with halting speech, I sounded imperious and snooty, and the fire in her eyes blazed harder.

“I’m the singer. Booked to sing here today. Who the hell are *you*?”

Ah, a question I could do something with. I reached into my back pocket and extracted a business card.

“Sebastian Dupont,” I said. “Representative of the new king of New Orleans, and I’m now the owner here.”

Her mouth fell open. “*You* own The Neutral Zone now?”

I grimaced. “It’s called *Allécher* now.” I wanted something that both spoke to our French roots and followed Nic’s conventions for naming his businesses. Plus, I wanted to give customers a heads-up about the seduction and enticement they could find within these doors.

Allécher...It meant to tempt or to entice.

The woman in front of me wrinkled her nose. “You gave it some new fancy French name?” She shook her head. “Good luck with *that* being enough to improve the place.”

I chuckled. “That won’t be the only change now that Francois’s gone.”

“He’s *gone*?” Her words were a whisper, and she lifted her hand so her fingers clawed briefly at the base of her throat before she seemed to make a conscious effort to lower her hand to her side again. “Francois is dead? What about Émile?”

I shook my head. “Francois isn’t dead, but he’s no longer in power. Émile, however, is very dead indeed.”

She closed her eyes briefly and blew out a sigh then seemed to recover herself and focused back on me, her gaze steely again.

“Who are you?” I shouldn’t have cared. She was just a club singer—someone Francois paid to entertain his customers.

There was no guarantee she was even any good. But I held my hand out anyway, wanting to feel hers clasped in mine.

She hesitated, but I willed her forward, almost holding my breath as I waited to touch her skin.

“Kayla McKenna,” she murmured as I finally curved my fingers over the back of her hand.

“Kayla.” I smiled. I couldn’t help it. Her name brought me inexplicable joy even as she continued to view me with suspicion and actual animosity.

She still clutched my business card in her other hand, and she turned it over to read the print on the back. Then she grimaced doubtfully, and I wanted to smooth the expression from her face.

“So do I still have a job or what?” She was pretty abrupt, and I almost laughed but part of me didn’t dare to disrespect her indignant anger like that. “I mean,” she continued. “I only went on...” She paused and squinted, just the smallest twitch around her eyes, really. “*Vacation* for a week, and it was all agreed officially that I could take the time.” She lifted her head and looked around, taking in the busy men who were already scattered around the space, measuring things and making notes. “But now everything’s changed.” Then

she returned her attention to me, a hard glint in her eyes.

She clearly wasn't happy.

"Everything's changed," I agreed.

She tugged her hand from mine like she'd only just realized I still had hold of it. "So?" She raised an eyebrow.

I let my hand drop to my side and flexed my fingers briefly, already missing her touch. "So...what?" Holy hell, I really was dumb around this woman.

She blew out a rapid breath. "My *job*. Do I still have one?" She left the *you fucking idiot* at the end of her sentence unsaid.

"Oh. I... I..." I didn't even fully know what Allécher was going to be yet, aside from exclusive and desirable.

Invite-only exclusive, probably. I wanted people to want to be here, to aspire to it. But I wasn't sure what that meant for any sort of lounge singing vibe. That was too much to explain on the fly, though—especially if I kept stuttering out all of my words and I was about to unexpectedly fire someone.

"Well?" She all but started tapping her foot.

I nodded at the business card in her hand and forced myself to be far more flippant than I felt. I had a business to run, after all—and I had a whole host of bad behavior in Baton Rouge to live down. I couldn't move to New Orleans and start more of the same.

And holy fuck, she looked young. Young but self-assured. Like she'd already lived a life. And what the hell did I know these days? All the women looked young. I was old. Bordering on ancient.

But I knew this. She was something *other*—human but *more*. Something I wanted to explore. Something I needed to avoid.

I deliberately averted my gaze, returning my attention to something not all pressing as I sought to dismiss her. "Give me a call in a month when we're ready to reopen. I'll know more then."

KAYLA

I walked away from the new vampire, head held high, not even a backward glance.

Fucking blood-sucking freak.

I kept everything cool and calm and casual and carefree until I closed the front door of the club behind me. Then I spilled out into the street and raced away from The Neutral Zone—or whatever fancy name the new guy was about to call it.

The new fucking guy.

I shuddered as I thought of him. Well. Not really a shudder, damn it. It was a shiver of delicious anticipation, but it needed to contain its own damn self. I'd never been swayed by a pretty man before, and I wasn't about to start now.

We weren't about to be friends, me and this... this... *king's representative*. I scoffed, wanting to dismiss him from my mind entirely.

But there was just something about those blue eyes and carefully tousled brown hair, because it was *absolutely* carefully tousled. There was no way this guy had any insecurities about his own attractiveness. And his hair had in no way ended up so temptingly touchable by mistake. Just the way he'd held himself had screamed *look at me! look at me!*

What an actual asshole.

A rich, arrogant asshole. Just what New Orleans needed.

I shook my head. Ugh. I needed to get away. Far away.

Maybe losing my job was a *good* thing if that guy proved to be too much of a distraction. Huh, I scoffed. Like I'd actually call him in a month. I wasn't

up for begging to sing. There were plenty of places that would want me.

I hoped, anyway.

It wasn't like I was unknown in New Orleans, and I had my own cohort of loyal fans. A small cohort, but fans just the same. And if most of them were drunks and followed the cheapest happy hours...well, they were loyal to that much, at least.

Francois was gone. Émile was dead. I had no loyalty to the House of Ricard.

The king was dead.

Hope welled inside me—the first hope I'd felt for a very long time. No king, no contract. I wouldn't have to conduct increasingly dangerous magic on behalf of anyone anymore. I was free.

I hesitated, my steps faltering. Surely, I was free, right?

But I couldn't remember. I'd signed a contract binding myself to the Ricard royals a very long time ago. And I'd been desperate. And I hadn't read it properly. I'd just signed the damn thing. A threat to my livelihood and my life would have gotten me to sign anything.

They'd been my last shot to stay safe. I'd burned my way through every coven in the city. No one wanted me or what I could do. I was too dangerous. Too dark. I hadn't even fucking meant to be a dark witch. Not really. I could just do those spells.

Only Lettie had understood. Lettie and then Francois. Or at least, I'd thought he'd understood. He'd been seductive at first. Like I mattered. I'd have signed anything he told me to, quite honestly. Even without the threats—and that knowledge seared me with shame.

But vampires were tricky. I knew that now.

I'd realized that too late. And no way in hell was I falling for that same old, same old with this new guy.

Lettie had protected me from far worse with her spell to hide my virginity all these years. It was no secret that Francois had a veritable garden full of failed attempts to find his virgin vampire mate.

I would have literally been pushing up the daisies by now, if not for Lettie and her spell...which was about due for renewal. Although maybe that didn't matter if I was free?

Only...what if I wasn't free now? What if this new vampire in town... I fumbled for the business card he'd handed me, and my traitorous stomach flipped over as I read his name, stylish in silver print on the thick, black card.

Sebastian Dupont.

It always served me to know the names of my enemies... there was a lot I could do with a name and the right ingredients. My time serving Émile and Francois Ricard had taught me that at least.

My morals were way more flexible now, anyway. And I was happier with darker shades of gray than I'd ever expected to be.

What if he thought he owned my contract now? I shook my head, deliberately dismissing the idea. No way. Contracts didn't transfer between separate families like that...right? It would be a pretty shit state of affairs if they did. And there was no way that kind of crap was even legal. I was an employee, not an indentured servant attached to the building.

So... I was pretty much one hundred percent sure I was free. Probably? Hopefully? I dragged the strap of my purse more securely onto my shoulder and powered forward through the tourists wandering between small shops and places to eat.

Definitely ninety-five percent sure, anyway. Well, maybe ninety. Or even...eighty percent was good odds, right? I could get behind a solid eighty percent shot at freedom.

I sighed as I dodged a particularly enthusiastic tourist who seemed to think he was the only one with anywhere to go. I had places to go now, too. People to see. I was going to use my unexpectedly free day to job hunt — except first I was going to find Lettie.

She knew everything about the Ricards and their contracts. She was the oldest witch in the area, and if she didn't know something, it wasn't worth knowing. She'd probably forgotten more useless information over the years than any useful shit I'd even picked up. I also needed to discuss renewing the spell. Just because it was like my security blanket more than anything else. It took the brightly blazing beacon signal to all vampires in the area off my head.

Besides, whenever anything went wrong, I wanted Lettie. She'd calmed me down during many a crisis before, and she always watched out for me. That wasn't to say she didn't let me make my own mistakes. Hell, if there were mistakes to be made, I made them. And I kept fucking making them. I'd made a lot in twenty-two short years of life, quite honestly. But Lettie was always there. My one constant in this shitty town. I smiled again as I thought of her — she was as close to a grandma as I'd ever had.

I walked quickly to the small crystal shop she owned where she provided

spells and other services—charms and the occasional curse—out of the back. For the most part, the Ricards turned a blind eye to her extracurricular activities because she'd served them well over the years. Her position here in New Orleans was probably the safest of any of us.

The usual amethyst geode was front and center in the window. It was huge and probably older than God, and for some reason, Lettie refused every offer from potential customers to buy it. She'd always maintained that it had been around long before the shop opened and would be around long after it closed but until that time, it would live in her window.

It was probably the biggest draw for new customers, the impressively sized crystal acting as a beacon and pulling people into the shop. Maybe she'd charmed the damn thing.

I grinned at the thought. I wouldn't put it past her to use a little influential magic like that. The power of persuasion wasn't just a phrase in our world.

The jewelry was always the second thing I noticed when I looked through the tiny square panes and into the window display, delicate and geared toward tourist purchases—trinkets with no real power. But occasionally Lettie displayed something with actual muscle and oomph, something designed to appeal to someone from the local witch community.

And today, there it was. Hidden among the other pendants and bracelets was a charm bracelet containing six crystals of protection, and if I needed that any day, I needed it now.

Something about the vampire I'd just met suggested I needed protection from him.

Lettie never priced her items in the window — she wanted people in the shop so she could sell to them directly. I laughed at her technique. For such a prickly witch, she sure sold a lot of crystals.

I smiled again as I thought of her—she was as close to a grandma as I'd ever had. It was good to be back from vacation, back with my people — the few I had — although I tended to consider the entirety of New Orleans as *my people*. I just didn't like most of them. I pressed down on the handle to let myself in the shop but nothing happened. The handle didn't budge, and door was locked. I peered through the window again, looking beyond the display now as I cupped my hands around my face to peer into the dim interior. Opening time had been hours ago...the shop should be open. Maybe Lettie was out on official business?

Although what official business? The Ricards were *out* of business.

Well, maybe she already had something new shaking.

Except that didn't really sound right either. There wouldn't be any sort of official business before New Orleans had even settled into a new power regime or structure. And Lettie was in no way stupid enough to waste her time working for people without power or influence.

I tried the door again, even murmuring an unlocking incantation to myself, but Lettie's magic would always trump mine, and the lock held fast as her wards buzzed to life at my cheeky attempt at intrusion.

Rather than attracting the attention of curious tourists who might call the cops if they thought I was attempting a break-in, I stepped away from the door and turned my attention to the narrow, dark alley that led to the back of the store and access to Lettie's upstairs apartment. Perhaps she was at home today, preparing more spells or doing her accounts.

She never took an actual day off, so she'd be around here somewhere. Or she could have been out on delivery, but I'd leave a note to let her know I'd been by.

I climbed the rickety old steps. Rust joined the wrought iron to the wall more than any bolts that might have been used originally, and I was careful not to rest too much weight on anything.

Lettie's small balcony seemed in as bad condition as the staircase, and I tapped on her apartment door, ready to be let inside and off this levitating deathtrap. It was probably only held up by Lettie's sheer force of will and magic. There was no reply, and I bent to the small window next to the door, cupping my hands around my face again as I looked through the glass.

Everything looked...strangely abandoned. Certainly not like Lettie had just popped out for a moment or was in another room. There was an air of emptiness, something I couldn't quite pinpoint. But the tiny space no longer looked lived in. I tucked my hair behind my ear, fed up with the unruly curls that wouldn't stay out of my face for five New York seconds, never mind a full minute, before knocking again, desperately pushing away my gnawing instinct that something was wrong.

When she still didn't answer, I walked carefully back down the steps and surveyed the apartment from the ground. Nothing moved. Not even a shadow crossed the window. It wasn't like Lettie just wasn't home — it really was as if she was *gone*.

I reached for my cell phone, dislodging Sebastian Dupont's business card from my pocket at the same time. It fluttered to the ground then lay flat and

still like it was staring back at me. I picked it up and shoved it away again, uncaring that at least one of the perfect corners crumpled under the force of my impatience.

I scrolled through my contacts until I found Naomi. After hitting the button to call her, I propped my phone against my ear with my shoulder as I searched through my purse for some gum.

“Kayla,” Naomi greeted me. “When did you get back?”

I waved my hand in a gesture of dismissal that she couldn’t see. My “trip” was the furthest thing from my mind right now. I’d been lying low after hearing rumors of trouble brewing between the Duponts and Ricards, but now I’d arrived back to a new fucking shitstorm of a mess right here on my doorstep, it felt like.

“Where’s Lettie?” I fired a question right back. “I’m at her place and there’s no one here. I need to see her because a) I just got back from a trip and I have a...a medical need for a spell, and b) I also have a couple of questions for her about the power change.” I listed my reasons for seeing Lettie, except where she’d gone was now more pressing than any of my own problems.

Naomi yawned. “Yeah, I’m running a bit late today. I was supposed to get the shop open a while ago.” She paused. “But actually, why don’t you come over here to my place? There’s a lot we need to talk about.”

“Like what?” I didn’t have time for side tours around the city.

I wanted to find Lettie. Plus I needed to find a way to earn some fast cash, seeing as my job appeared to have dropped off a Sebastian Dupont-shaped cliff.

Naomi yawned again. “Just come over. There’s a lot of shit you probably need to know. I’ll get dressed.” Then she hung up before I could say anything else, and I stared at my phone for a moment before sliding it back into my pocket.

Well, shit. The Neutral Zone under new ownership, no job, no Lettie, Lettie’s spell about to run out in a city of vampires, a summons from Naomi... something was *definitely* wrong in New Orleans. I shivered as a sense of foreboding rolled over me before I made my way back through the short, narrow passage and out into a sun-soaked street full of milling, oblivious tourists.

Naomi’s place was really only a short walk away, tucked up a side street. She’d glamoured it not to be noticed by most people — they’d walk right by

— but I stopped to smell the soft scent of the pretty little flowers in her window box before knocking on her door. She opened it almost immediately as if she'd been waiting just behind it.

She practically dragged me inside then pulled me into a hug. “Look at you,” she said. “You look so...” She stopped and eyed me critically, drawing her brow down. “You look so *rested*.”

I laughed. “Yeah, maybe until I got back and my fucking life fell apart. I don't think I've even got a job anymore.”

She grimaced. “The new guys?”

“*Guys*? I only met one *guy*. Another fucking bloodsucker.” I slipped my shoes off and left them and my purse in her small hallway before wandering barefoot to her sofa.

“Which one did you meet?” She joined me and handed me one of the glasses of water she had ready on a nearby table.

I made a show of dragging the business card from my pocket, even though his name was practically seared onto my brain. *Sebastian Dupont*. I didn't say it right away, though. Instead, I squinted at the card like I needed to read it and let his name roll through my head like a wave on a tranquil sea. Something about it calmed me.

“Says his name's Sebastian.” I handed her the card so she could verify that information for herself.

She took it by one of the uncrushed corners and her lips formed a small ‘o.’ After a moment, she glanced up at me then back down to the card, like even the vampire's damn *name* held the power of enchantment or compulsion. “That's the new king's brother.”

“The king of Baton Rouge?” I didn't know a whole lot about him, but I was aware enough of the tensions that had simmered between his royal line and the Ricards for generations.

Naomi nodded. “Yeah. And he's sent his brother, this guy—to get everything in order.” She waved the business card briefly as she curled her lip. “Or something like that.”

“Really.” It wasn't a question, but I raised my eyebrow anyway. Some Baton Rouge prince had been sent to New Orleans to establish order? They obviously didn't know a great deal about how feral we all were over here.

And we fucking liked it that way. This wouldn't go down well. Establishing any kind of order, *imposing it*, wouldn't happen without a fight. Not if I knew New Orleans. I shrugged at my own thoughts. Still, it wasn't

any of my damn business. My association with the new guy was precisely nothing.

Or eighty percent nothing I was pretty sure, anyway.

“They’re working with the wolves.” Naomi almost whispered this piece of news.

“Really?” This time it *was* a question, and my surprise was on full display.

Vampires never worked well with anyone. Usually not even other vampires.

She nodded. “Émile will be rolling in his grave.”

I didn’t comment, liking the idea of Émile being in his final grave too much. We sat in silence for a moment, and I sipped my ice water as I tried to marshal my thoughts. It really had been a doozy of a day so far.

“No job.” I dropped my head back against the cushion behind me. “Still can’t believe it.” I side-eyed her. “And why are you in charge of opening Lettie’s shop?”

Lettie ordinarily wouldn’t leave Naomi in charge of opening a box of cookies.

Naomi shrugged, the movement expansive but equally vague. “She’s not here.”

I rolled my eyes at the obvious part about her not being here but... “For how long?” That she would go away for any length of time was unheard of. Lettie was an actual fixture in our community — it wasn’t just me who loved her. “You can’t just say *she’s not here*. Where the fuck is she?”

Naomi shrugged again. “Well.” She leaned closer. “Rumor is that she was helping the king or his son and she just didn’t come back. No one has heard from her since.”

“What?” That seemed to be the only appropriate word for right now. It expressed everything — from my disbelief to my righteous indignation. “So no one has heard from her and no one’s thought to check where she is or even if she’s okay? Or if she was actually helping Émile and Francois? Really?” That just sounded so...so *unlikely*.

Sure, Lettie would do them enough favors to keep them on her side but never anything with enough danger that I’d need to worry about her.

Naomi lifted her shoulders like she might shrug again before letting them drop, the movement incomplete.

My mind went to the darkest places first. “What if she was taken prisoner

or even killed?” I mean, I often took trips until the dust settled when I did something that had annoyed one of the covens on behalf of the Ricards, but I’d never known Lettie to leave New Orleans, and I was pretty damn sure it wasn’t something she’d do of her own free will.

“Do you really think so?” Naomi wrinkled her nose, her doubt plain to see. “Lettie is...” She stopped. “She’s *old*.”

Naomi had said *old*, but I knew what she really meant was powerful. Everlasting. Fucking *invincible*. It was unthinkable that Lettie wasn’t here right now, running her shop and overseeing the witchy underbelly of New Orleans.

Frustration forced my next words out. “Well, what do *you* think might have happened? You’re looking after her shop, but do you know how long for? Has she sent any sort of word to you at all? Have you heard any damn thing from her? An instruction? A direction? A command?” Lettie would have never just left her shop in Naomi’s hands without some degree of micromanagement taking place. It just wouldn’t have happened.

Lettie trusted no one but Lettie, and that philosophy had served her well all of these years.

The gears in Naomi’s head seemed slow to turn, and I sat back and watched, able to see nearly every thought as she processed it.

“I haven’t heard a thing from her,” she said finally, like this was some sort of new revelation.

“And?” I prompted. “Would Lettie usually leave you to do your own thing with no input at all?”

“God, no.” Naomi laughed. “She doesn’t usually let me change a light bulb unsupervised.”

“And what have you been doing in the shop while you haven’t heard from her?”

“Everything,” Naomi whispered. When she turned to me, her eyes were wide, her fear palpable. “Where’s Lettie?”

I sighed. “I have no idea.” I rubbed my hands over my cheeks, my fingertips scrabbling at my forehead like I could claw some sense into myself. “Maybe I should go back to the club and find out if they know anything.”

The club. I couldn’t bring myself to call it The Neutral Zone because the specter of Francois loomed there, but neither could I give it Sebastian’s fancy new name, because that man was just as scary—in many very different ways.

Something inside me that I was trying to ignore tugged toward him, and I didn't want to go back to tempt myself. I almost didn't dare.

And after all, I could be sitting in Naomi's house a free woman now—why the hell would I voluntarily return to a place where I'd been under contract to the previous owners? I'd been pretty much *owned*. Forget the *pretty much*. The Ricards had owned me lock, stock, and barrel, regardless of how little power the contract legally gave them.

"I'll just open up the shop tomorrow." Naomi's thoughts hadn't strayed much beyond her own situation, and I raised an eyebrow in her general direction as she refocused on me. "So, are you going to head back to The Neutral Zone?"

I waited a moment while I considered her question carefully, examining my feelings, and finding myself to be too tempted and untrustworthy to make that decision. Honestly, if I didn't think about the consequences, I'd go back there in a heartbeat. Skip through the fucking front door, most likely, to see those blue eyes and tousled hair again.

And then regret it. Big time regret it.

As much about Sebastian Dupont both attracted and repelled me.

And danger lay in that direction.

The fact that he was another vampire helped to ward off some of the attraction. I was done with them. Especially the powerful ones.

Out here, I was definitely my own person. They couldn't see me, they couldn't catch me.

In there, all bets were off.

That was why I'd wanted to find Lettie in the first place, so I could ensure my freedom wasn't simply imagined.

"I don't think I'll go back," I said, my words slow and deliberate. It didn't matter that an insistent part of me really wanted to.

Naomi frowned. "I've heard pretty good things about the new king."

I shrugged. "But Sebastian Dupont isn't the new king, is he? He's only a prince. Besides, you know how...compelling vampires can be. How *tricky*."

She nodded and her lips pulled into a flat line of agreement. "Ain't that the truth. So, what *are* you going to do?"

"Well, I need a job."

"Sooo...?" she prompted.

"So, I'll find something." I waved the question off, my movement deliberately casual, even though unexpectedly being without a job had put a

major crimp in my plans. Everything about the power exchange had impeded my plans, as well as Lettie being missing. I hadn't even really considered the bigger picture yet. I hated being owned, but the Ricards had also protected me from other vampires and supernaturals. I was without that protection now. Especially without Lettie and her spell to keep me hidden as a prospective mate.

"I guess." Naomi sounded doubtful.

"Look, this is New Orleans. It's not like we have a shortage of bars and restaurants. I can be waitstaff." I just needed to find somewhere with as much clout as The Neutral Zone, where it would be known that no one would be able to mess with me without suffering the consequences.

She snorted. "You, Kayla McKenna, *serve* people?"

"Hey now! It could happen." But I only made a half-hearted protest as my mind wandered around my new problem, poking at it to see if I could shake a better solution loose.

My new freedom came with a potential downside, too. It wouldn't take the local covens and magical movers and shakers long to see my newly acquired vulnerability.

She flattened her mouth again. "If you say so. But usually, you're just... You're just..."

"Just what?"

She flapped her hands toward me. "Just way too *look at me* to want to fade into the background. It's why you sing, right?"

I huffed then reconsidered. "Maybe. But right now, I think I'd prefer fading. Just think —no more vampires, no more contracts, no more being beholden. I can fade for those terms." Maybe I could even leave town once and for all? It would put paid to all my fucking problems in one fell swoop.

I just had to find Lettie first. Sort out this spell thing and make sure she was okay.

Naomi nodded. "Couldn't we all fade on those terms, though?"

I looked her. "You aren't contracted, right?"

She shook her head. "Nope, but I can imagine. Lettie doesn't seem a whole lot like she ever enjoyed it, either."

At the new mention of our friend, worry gnawed at me stronger again. "I hope she's okay," I said because there just weren't any other words.

"Yeah, me too. I hope I don't have to be in charge of the shop for too long. It's a lot of responsibility." Naomi flipped her hair and sighed, and I

shook my head.

“I think the shop might be the least of our worries.” Lettie was missing and my freedom and safety were in doubt—or if not in doubt, there was a fragility around it. I had to rebuild my whole life to try to stay under the radar of the new king’s representative and any witch who might like to choose now to seek retribution for my past sins when I’d been under instruction from Francois.

I tapped my pocket, where Sebastian’s business card felt like it might spontaneously combust.

Avoiding the overwhelming draw to run back to the new club just to see him was going to be a challenge.

I wasn’t sure which of my tasks sounded hardest.

SEBASTIAN

I surveyed the club a week after Ben's men had started their work. Like hell this was going to take a month. They looked nearly done already. They'd done major structural renovations like I'd asked them to change a lightbulb or flip a switch. All of their work had been quick and efficient.

Leaning on a new silver railing, I looked down into what would be my club. It was black and chrome for the most part, with tiny lights dotted through the ceiling and upper walls, creating a virtual starscape. The effect was both magical and expensive looking, which would help justify the prices I'd be charging my customers. Now, though, the main lights were on and shutters were open so the whole place was flooded with light and the men could work and see what they were doing.

Soon Allécher would be a club people would seek to be members of. I could already see the dancers taking up the floor, milling crowds, regulars at the bar, and the line of people wanting to get in stretching down the block. It would be exclusive and expensive, and it would ensure the Dupont royal name was front and center in New Orleans.

That was what I really wanted—to secure proper representation for Nic, and for him to approve of what I was doing here.

I hurried down the steps into the main space. We'd converted one of the first rooms upstairs overlooking the club into my office. Quite a bit of inspiration for the décor and design came from Nic's office at La Petite Mort. He seemed to have established his control by always being able to see, and as I planned to allow vampires to bring their *pets* with them to Allécher, I didn't want anything getting out of hand. That meant eyes on the situation all the

time.

Allowing blood drinking on the premises was potentially a risky move, but it would make a big splash with the locals. It would put us on the map from the very first day.

As would allowing the wolf shifters access—although, that would maybe have a more negative reception as vampires and wolves had never been particularly friendly. But Nic had forged an alliance with Conri, and I intended to see that through and do my part to strengthen it.

That said, access to the club would still be by my invitation only, and I wanted those to be coveted—like the illustrious golden ticket.

Kyle stood on the other side of the room; head bowed as he discussed something with the foreman. We were both of the same mind when it came to the club, and I trusted him to handle any of the same details I'd be asked about, especially now that work was underway. It was dumb to think I needed to do it all alone for it to hold value with Nic. He preferred teamwork, and I needed to be seen to be playing nice rather than going off alone again. Jason wasn't here, but he was likely off liaising with the pack, and he'd report in later.

So far, everything was pretty much in hand. My conversations with Nic were short, basic and filled with good news rather than issues, and we were both happier for it. I was probably talking to Nic more often than ever before, and perhaps that was the way he wanted it —especially if he'd decided he needed to keep his friends and family close and me closest of all.

I waved to get Kyle's attention. Nic had mentioned something about Kyle putting together a list of people of interest for us to use when he first spoke about sending me to New Orleans, and it was probably about time that I checked out the names on that list.

But first... There was a certain singer who'd been wandering around inside my head since she's made her sharp exit from the club when we had no work for her. I couldn't afford for her to be in my head. Leia had managed to be there and look how that had turned out.

Kyle nodded in greeting as he walked toward me, but he didn't immediately say anything.

“Hey, Kyle,” I opened the conversation and received a second curt nod.

He'd never believed in wasting words, and it was good to see him back to his usual self.

“Nic said you were compiling a list of people of interest?”

He merely nodded.

“Is there an employee list as well?” If I’d tried to sound casual, I failed, because his right eyebrow lifted an almost imperceptible amount at my eager tone.

I tightened my fingers into a fist at my side and tried again. “I think I should review that list to find out if any of the staff should be brought back.”

“Okay.” Kyle shrugged and started to walk back up the stairs to the offices. We had quite a grand descent from them — the chrome banister framed black glass steps, and the eye was automatically drawn upwards to the mirrored glass of my office, and the soft lights illuminating the walkway that led farther into the staff area.

I’d considered having designated feeding rooms up here, but in the end, it had made more sense to limit client access to the downstairs space.

Kyle led the way into the office he’d been working from. Where mine matched the black and chrome color scheme from the rest of the club, his looked as though he’d purchased items from the nearest thrift shop—and probably had. Boxes were piled neatly in a corner, but a worn, wooden desk sat empty except for a pen and notepad on the other side of the room. A basic chair was behind it, and I wrinkled my nose at a slightly stale odor.

“It might be time for a furniture upgrade,” I muttered.

Kyle shrugged. “Makes no difference. I’m only working in here.” He gestured toward the boxes. “Those are Francois’s employee records. They don’t seem to be in any particular order, and I’m currently sorting through them to figure out the current employees. I’m working up a master list that has all of them so we can cross-reference.”

I nodded. “I’m looking for one in a particular, a singer who came in last week. Kayla something.”

I knew her last name. McKenna. It was pretty much tattooed onto the inside of my head. But just blurting it out would look very odd indeed. Better to seem disinterested or careless rather than signaling I felt exactly the opposite. Kyle also reported events back to Nic, and I didn’t need him reporting that.

“Yeah. I think I ran across her file last night.” He dragged the box closest to us over to the desk. “It should be in here.”

I resisted hovering at his side as he flipped through the paperwork.

“I definitely saw a singer,” he murmured, almost like he was talking to himself. “If I recall correctly, she’s been working for the Ricards for about

five years.” He grabbed a file and lifted it out of the box. “Oh, but that’s not the most interesting part.” He handed me the paperwork, and I skimmed it.

“Oh.” I lifted my gaze to meet Kyle’s. “She’s a witch?” Now hell, that was interesting.

Nic had told me we needed witches, so taking a more detailed interest in Kayla wouldn’t be untoward at all. It would be encouraged...*Expected*, in fact.

And we already had a PR problem in New Orleans as far as the witches were concerned — or a potential one. My thoughts strayed to the old witch who’d helped Nic and the violent end she’d come to at Francois’s hands.

If any of the witches here knew about that, they’d probably already be giving us a wide berth — or maybe even planning some revenge.

Jason had done a little extra research into Lettie, and beyond being powerful, she was a lynchpin in the witch community here. Nic had ordered me to keep her death as quiet as possible while we established ourselves.

We hadn’t killed the witch, but her involvement with our actions against the House of Ricard had been enough to bring about her death. Francois had seen to that. We probably wouldn’t be the flavor of the month with any of her friends when they found out—hence the secrecy. We’d be met with suspicion at the very least, and I needed to get ahead of any information leaks if I could, to secure us as a good option for the remaining witches to ally with.

Hopefully, even work with. Starting with Kayla McKenna.

But the idea of concealing such a big event as the death of their matriarch sat uneasily inside me.

Perching my ass against the edge of Kyle’s desk, I flipped through the paperwork, pausing as a page with signatures caught my eye.

“A witch with a contract?”

“Yep.” Kyle’s reply was lazy. “Looks like she’s been under contract to the Ricard family as long as she’s worked at The Neutral Zone. She’s one of their in-house witches.”

The employee file confirmed Kyle’s words, and the first flutters of excitement beat their wings in my chest. “A bound witch. I think Nic was looking for exactly this situation.”

Kyle nodded, but his face retained his usual tense expression, the line of his jaw tight and harsh.

I closed the file and held it at my side for closer perusal later. I wanted to learn everything there was to know about Kayla McKenna — even more so

now that she aligned so closely with my commitments to Nic.

“So.” Again, I aimed for somewhat casual, but that really no longer mattered. “Any idea whether the contract carries over to Nic? Does she—or any of the Ricard witches—have to fulfil their contracts under successive rules?”

A lot hinged on Kyle’s answer, and disappointment filled me as he shrugged. “I haven’t gotten that far into the paperwork and understanding the contracts the various employees signed.” He curled his lip. “I’m not sure Francois standardized anything. He was very...” He seemed to cast around for the right words. “*Laissez-faire.*”

And that was probably a kind way of putting it. Francois was actually as mad as a box of frogs. Completely crazy, although he’d probably started his recovery from the dead man’s blood he was addicted to by now. Nic had that side of things under control, hopefully. I didn’t want to waste my time thinking about Francois — I had enough to contend with, looking at the messes he’d left in New Orleans and the way the supernatural community behaved here.

I flipped the file open again. “Maybe it says in here somewhere.” I tried not to linger over a picture of Kayla someone had helpfully paperclipped to the front of the papers.

Kyle glanced over my shoulder and ran his finger down the blank space at the side of the text. “Well, it says very plainly here that this woman...” He paused.

“Kayla,” I supplied quickly.

Maybe too quickly because he gave me a considering look. “*Witch,*” he said, his voice firm. “Is in service to the *king* of New Orleans.”

I flipped the page. “So, if it doesn’t name Émile or Francois directly, the contract could be interpreted as being in service to Nic...” I lowered my voice. “Or indeed his regent.”

“Indeed,” Kyle agreed, his tone dry.

I scanned the rest of the information. “It doesn’t say anywhere that her contract becomes null and void if there’s a change in the reigning king.”

“Then her contract is still in force.” Kyle lifted the lid to set back on the box and reached to take the file from me.

I moved it out of his way. “I’ll keep this for a little while longer so I can report to Nic.” I glanced down at it like I needed to verify something, but really, I’d committed nearly every word to memory already. “Neither does it

say her contract *is* still in force under a successor, so I should read it carefully to be sure we can interpret it the way we need to. It needs to be cast iron and enforceable.”

Kyle shrugged, clearly already bored with this conversation. “I think we can safely assume it is. We can run it past Nic’s lawyers, but I think they’ll say the same. Contract law is very specific and this contract...” He looked at the file briefly. “Is not specific at all. Looks like Francois did us a service and his employees a disservice.” He shrugged again. “Nic might be in luck here.”

I straightened from the desk. “I’ll go look over this properly then give Nic a call and update him. He’s specifically been looking for a witch.”

Kyle nodded as he carried the box back to the pile. “We might find a few more by the time we’ve sorted everything out and categorized all of the employees, too.”

His words weren’t an invitation to stay and do any work, though. He didn’t even speak to me over his shoulder, so I forewent any pleasantries and slipped from the room, taking several quick strides back to my own office.

Once I stepped inside the door, I relaxed. The dark colors, tasteful lighting, and expensive finishes spoke to the vainest parts of me. They spoke of my time with the Dupont family and my royal heritage. There was luxury and decadence here that served to remind me who I was and that I intended to stay.

I sank into my leather chair, feeling the welcome of the soft material, and opened Kayla’s file flat in front of me. I just wanted to check the details one last time before I called Nic and told him anything. I needed to verify the things I was about to say were correct.

But at least things made a little more sense now about my unusual instant connection to the woman. The supernatural side to her obviously called to my vampire nature — even though the Dupont family history with witches wasn’t a particularly good one. They were simply a necessary evil to Nic.

And Kayla... Well, maybe she wasn’t evil at all. I’d enjoy finding out, anyway.

If I could gain her trust, get her on my side, I’d have an advantage against any supernatural already in New Orleans or who’d come here particularly to test the new reigning power.

I grabbed my cell and dialed Nic.

He answered straight away. “Sebastian.” Just my name. Nothing further.

“Nic, just a quick update. I thought you’d like to know right away that I

might have found you a witch — and she seems to still be under contract, despite the change in leadership.”

My brother was quiet for a moment, his soft breathing the only indication our call was still connected. “I think you need to stay vigilant, Seb. Our experience with witches in Baton Rouge hasn’t always been good... Their loyalty is fickle. And we know nothing about the political structure of witches in New Orleans or how they behave. I think we need to remember the fate of Lettie, too. The others might be starting to discover what happened with her and harbor some resentment toward us because of it.”

“That wasn’t our fault. She knew the risks of acting against Francois,” I protested, even though I shared his reservations.

Nic sighed. “Yes, I think she probably did. But it won’t make her death any easier for her friends to accept. Now, it’s good that we might have a witch, but tread carefully with this. I don’t know enough about my new territory yet to be able to advise you further.”

“I won’t go charging in—I’ll be cautious, but I really think this could be a good thing. Kayla could be an asset. A witch in our pocket will be an advantage in establishing your power.”

Nic sighed again. “Just be careful.”

His tone made me feel just like all the years he’d simply tolerated me as a younger brother. Those times were always present in our conversations. And I didn’t believe I’d ever shake my position as merely being tolerated in the family.

“I’ll do everything I can to keep the peace here,” I assured him.

I intended to do a good job, to spend my time in New Orleans making Nic proud and regaining my status in the family. I wanted to be welcome in Baton Rouge again—sometime this century, hopefully.

“I’ll watch out for anything magical and try not to upset any political situations.”

Nic chuckled again, this time dryly. “I’m sure your presence there has been enough to upset plenty. You’re a Dupont and I’m the new king. Many won’t want us anywhere near their city.”

“I think you’re right about that. I already have to get the witch back on our side—she was one of Francois’s singers in The Neutral Zone, and I wasn’t sure we needed a singer going forward.” I traced my finger around her face in her photograph as I spoke.

“Well, if you want my opinion, I think we’re definitely in need of a

singer,” Nic said. “This particular singer.”

“I agree.” I finished my call with him with a couple of small updates on the refurb then hung up.

I promised Nic I’d tread carefully with Kayla, and I intended to keep my promise, but it wouldn’t be easy. I wanted to see Kayla again, and now I just needed a good excuse. She was supposed to call in three weeks about work, but somehow, I wasn’t expecting to hear from her.

I’d need to contact her.

Which worked out well for me, because I couldn’t seem to get her out of my head.

KAYLA

I glanced around my apartment. It wasn't a lot, but it was my home; and for the most part, I'd been happy here. Sure, my curtains were a little thin, my rugs a little threadbare, but I was making it on my own. I was living my life, singing and... Well, I was perfectly happy to ignore the other crap the Ricard royals had asked of me.

After all, they were gone now. I no longer needed to think about them or the things they'd requested—especially when those requests extended to raising the dead. Even I drew the line at necromancy.

If only they'd simply been requests without merit or the ability to become very real nightmares. Although the power had leapt through me, I'd resisted. Usually. There had been that one time I'd... I shook my head. That one time didn't matter. I hadn't done it again, and what the covens thought of me now didn't matter either.

I shivered as I remembered the garden of their mansion, where the scent of death hung in the air like Spanish moss over the tree branches and the old king had lain in his increasingly frequent state of stasis.

I'd grown used to thinking of Émile as the old king, but that was simply due to his age and the fact he seemed to be living on increasingly borrowed time. Now, he was truly the old king, replaced by a brand-new king, Nicolas Dupont.

My thoughts strayed to his representative—the man with the intelligent blue eyes that almost made me want to follow him straight to his bed to see if his brown hair could be that tousled by natural means. Sebastian Dupont.

Naomi had said he was the king's brother, so that made him a prince. As

far as I was concerned, all royalty was dangerous. Royal vampires were especially powerful. It was how their bloodlines retained control over the various territories for so long.

Usually, that was a good thing—stability could be maintained for centuries. Occasionally, the system went wrong, as in the case of the House of Ricard, where rot had set in and not let go.

That had been strange, though. The rumor had always been that Émile was very ancient, very powerful. It made me wonder what had changed for him, because something had certainly brought about his weakening grip on his rule. Not that it mattered anymore.

He was dead. Gone. No more.

And now, as much as I wanted to return to the club and catch another glimpse of the regent, self-preservation demanded I stay away. I had no reason to see him again, anyway. No need — if I ignored the fierce, *burning* need he seemed to have ignited low in my belly.

And that just made no sense.

The man could be very dangerous for me. After all, vampires had never been good news in my life, and I really didn't want to get mixed up with any more royal ones.

Pushing the man from my thoughts, I focused instead on thoughts of Lettie as I removed another folded pile of clothes from a drawer and transferred them to the open suitcase on my patchwork bedspread.

I still hadn't heard from her, and although I'd asked around, no one else had heard from her either — not since before the great battle that seemed to have occurred while I was on my vacation.

No one was worried, though. After all, Lettie was old and wily. There was rarely a situation she couldn't work to her advantage or at least a situation she couldn't manipulate to assure she escaped unscathed. Émile and Francois had asked a lot of her over the years, and she'd always managed to both serve them and do as she pleased in all other areas of her life.

Perhaps as a final act, they'd released her from her contract.

That small thought gave me hope. Hope that Lettie was out there somewhere and doing okay. More than okay...truly well. Then there might be hope that I might meet that same resolution. Freedom. *Certain* freedom.

If Lettie had been officially released from her age-old contract with the Ricards, I couldn't imagine anything that would have made her stay in New Orleans. She could take care of herself, after all. I couldn't exactly imagine

her sipping a piña colada beneath a palm tree, but wherever she was, she'd probably carved a very nice life for herself already. I just missed her. I couldn't help that. She'd offered me so much wisdom and safety. A selfish part of me wanted to find her just so I could renew that safety one last time.

It was shit to not know what had actually happened to her, but if she was actually free, she'd leave town without a backward glance. Hell, I only halfway suspected I was free, and look at me — I was packing like a demon on speed in an effort to get the hell out of Dodge. There were safer places than New Orleans for me.

A series of sharp knocks sounded from my front door, similar to the rat-atat-tat of machine gun fire. Whoever was out there meant business, and I walked over to look through the peephole. I wasn't expecting anyone, and I hadn't mentioned to any friends that I was leaving town, so no one would have just dropped by to wish me well. Not that I had a huge number of friends left after the covens all considered I'd strayed from the good path.

Really only Naomi and Lettie.

Possibly only Naomi now that Lettie appeared to be missing or to have found her freedom.

A guy stood in the hallway outside, his hair cropped close to his head, a thick scar on display on his scalp, looking a hell of a lot like some kind of trouble.

"Hello?" I spoke through the door. I didn't believe in inviting trouble inside my home. "Can I help you?"

He looked at the door as he replied. "I'm Kyle. I'm a representative of the king. I'm here about your contract."

My breath caught and my chest hollowed, a chill filtering through me. Damn it. I glanced back at my bedroom door, my half-packed suitcase just visible on the bed.

I'd been so close.

"May I come in?" His voice was muted but loud enough neighbors might start paying attention if I continued to let him talk to me from outside in the hallway.

The last thing I needed was even more gossip and whispering behind my back — or even directly to my face from some of the bolder people. With reluctance, I clicked the locks open and opened the door.

I poured as much scorn as I could into my expression. But I'd barely moved aside before he walked into my home, his gaze darting left and right

like he was taking inventory of my possessions or silently judging me. I folded my arms, almost daring him to give voice to his thoughts.

He walked by my bookshelf, pausing for a moment as if he noticed the dust-free spots where I'd taken some of the trinkets and already put them into my case.

Then he glanced into my bedroom. "Going somewhere?"

I shrugged. "Always planning my next vacation." But my voice came out thin and uncertain rather than casual and carefree.

I wanted to be more assertive around this man, but something about him sucked all of the air out of the room and left it hard for me to even draw breath, let alone think clearly. He was very... intense. Each of his movements had something of a predator about them.

Another vampire, then...But this one seemed less tame, less cultured, than Sebastian Dupont.

He crossed to my small table, one that was usually strewn with books and mail but was suspiciously clear this evening, and laid out some paperwork. Then he turned and beckoned to me with a simple crook of one finger. From anyone else, it would have been a definite *come hither*. From this guy, it was a command I didn't dare disobey.

"What is it?" I asked the question to stall for time. But I didn't need to ask anything at all. I knew what it was — a new contract. The word *contract* at the top of the page made that much perfectly clear.

He shrugged, and even that movement had an element of something dark and heavy, something *dangerous*, about it. And why the hell did danger always wear a leather jacket?

"It's a formality."

I barked out a laugh—one I couldn't prevent—forced out by the bubble of horror quickly rising through my chest. "Signing a brand-new contract plunging me into service with a whole new royal family is just a *formality* to you?"

He looked at me, his gaze empty. Like his soul was missing. "It is a formality. Your old contract was chaotic and imprecise, but it was very clear that you remain in service to the royal family presiding over New Orleans — something not limited to the Ricards. This just updates your previous contract to something fair. I think you'll find the terms are better." He gestured toward the paperwork and produced a pen from the back pocket of his jeans. "Sebastian Dupont now owns your services."

“The hell he does!” Fuck, I’d been so close to escaping. I shouldn’t have hung around. I shouldn’t have searched for Lettie. She was okay. She was *always* okay. She’d never needed me to worry about her before, so why had I started now?

I forgot about self-preservation. We lived in a dog-eat-dog world, and I’d lulled myself into a false sense of safety.

“No one owns me.” Anger strengthened my tone, and when I pointed to the front door, I didn’t even tremble. “I’d like you to leave now.”

But he didn’t move. “You need to sign the contract.” He didn’t speak through gritted teeth, but he might as well have.

We were both about to be stubborn.

I shook my head. “I don’t need to do anything. I don’t know you; I don’t know the man at the club. And when Francois Ricard was overthrown, my service ended. I no longer work for vampires.” It felt so good to say those words. Fuck, yes. It felt good to stand up for myself.

But the man in my space didn’t move so much as a muscle. He stood perfectly still, like I’d petrified him with a spell.

“Kyle?” I used the name he’d given me, and it seemed to galvanize him into action.

He reached inside his leather jacket and drew out even more paperwork — this time, more wadded than folded. I almost groaned when I recognized that mess. It was my old contract. He smoothed it out in front of me and traced his finger under the line of text as he read out the portion stating that I was in service to the royal family of New Orleans.

“It doesn’t specify which family,” he said.

I scoffed. “That’s what you’re hanging all of this on? Really? I signed a contract *in good faith* with Francois. Of course the royal family concerned is the Ricard family.” My hope was thinning, but it wasn’t entirely gone.

The small print didn’t look good for me, but both of us in this room knew what I thought I’d signed. Surely that counted for something?

But his next words whisked away the last of my hope.

“Contract law doesn’t allow for *goodwill* in my experience. You shouldn’t have left loopholes in yours.” He shrugged like my plight meant nothing to him at all.

Nausea churned in my stomach, and I had nothing left but my stubbornness. “I’m not signing it.”

“Well.” Normal people would have drawn a long-suffering sigh here, but

this guy acted like he didn't even *need* to breathe. "This would have been the easy way." He narrowed his eyes slightly. "But I guess this means we do it the hard way. I'll just take you up to the club to see Sebastian, and the two of you can work it out between yourselves." Everything about the way he held himself declared he didn't have time for this.

A whisper of excitement teased through me at the idea of seeing Sebastian again, but I chased it away. I was safe in my house. I wasn't safe anywhere else. I had to get rid of Kyle, and then I could leave as I'd planned.

This wasn't what I'd envisioned. I wanted to pack my bags and waltz out of my door, hit the city limits, and be gone. But I had to get rid of the vampire who'd come to call so I could still see those city limits before the night was over.

"I'm not going anywhere with you." And I even meant it.

He didn't say anything, just leveled me with a look that dared me to try to resist. Maybe he had a point. I swept my gaze over him, calculating the odds as quickly as I could. But there were no odds even remotely on my side. There was no way I'd ever be stronger than this vampire. He was way more powerful.

Being a witch still meant being human. I was no match for superhuman strength or speed. I was lucky he was behaving like a normal guy. He probably could have lifted me over his shoulder and speed-walked to his car by now if I'd really pissed him off.

I could possibly stun him. Maybe. There might even have been a spell that could buy me enough time to leave and run away if it knocked him out... But my magic didn't usually work like that. I didn't have knock-out spells committed to memory and those kinds of incantations ready to trip off my tongue. I would have also needed to prepare the right ingredients, and nothing would raise his suspicions like me taking thirty minutes out of our chat to go stand in my kitchen and ritually prepare a spell.

He grabbed my jacket from where I'd hung it over the back of a chair and offered it to me.

I flinched away. "What are you doing?"

"I told you we're going out." His face was grim, tense.

I was sure I was pushing his buttons now, nudging at boundaries.

I glanced at the jacket, still in his hand. "It's New Orleans. It's not cold outside."

He shrugged. "I keep the AC freezing in the car." Then he didn't move,

but his insistent gaze made my skin prickle.

Heaving a sigh, I began to reconsider. Perhaps this was the only way I'd get free—to see Sebastian Dupont and plead my case directly. He was the boss, after all, and he'd certainly seemed like he could be charming.

“Okay.” I huffed the word as I took my jacket from him and rolled it into an awkward ball before grabbing my keys. “Let's get this over with.”

I followed him down the concrete steps that smelled faintly of weed in the sun and more strongly of piss when it rained, and we approached a sleek car.

I barely contained my whistle. Holy hell. I could almost guarantee there weren't many of those in New Orleans—maybe not in the whole of the state.

“I brought Sebastian's car in case I needed to take you to him. Didn't think you'd appreciate my bike.”

His words surprised me. He didn't seem like the chatty type.

I tossed my hair back, the universal gesture for *not impressed* and forced a bored-sounding, “Oh.”

I slid into the passenger seat and goosebumps broke out on my arms as we drove away. He hadn't been joking about the air conditioning, but I wasn't so weak as to prove him right by putting my jacket on.

He studied me on and off throughout the drive — I caught sight of his head turned toward mine in my peripheral vision, but I didn't look back at him. He didn't say anything else, and I didn't want to engage at all. This was all just horse crap.

I was in a car with a vampire, going to visit another vampire, when my vampire employer had just died. I didn't need anything else in my life but to get rid of the fucking vampires. I didn't have a whole lot of hope of making nice with the covens again, though, so it was definitely a new city, fresh start situation — if I could get out of this. Releasing a quiet sigh, I turned my attention out of the window and watched the streets of New Orleans as we drove down them.

We soon arrived at a house close to the club. Walking distance anyway. I didn't know what I'd expected—maybe another big, out-of-town mansion like Francois had lived in. Something old, that smelled of family money, but was burdened by too much history and general decay.

Still, the Duponts were new. They probably didn't *have* any New Orleans history.

That thought brought me some relief. I knew this town. Sazerac cocktails, our city's drink, flowed through my veins almost like blood, and I breathed

the smells of the swamp and French Quarter sewers like they were oxygen. Maybe I had the upper hand here after all.

Gates rolled out of the way to allow us access to a private parking space, and it took a lot of effort to keep my jaw clamped together. I had no intention of letting myself look unduly impressed with the Duponts' grandiose house. It was just showing off, as far as I was concerned. Trying too hard.

Nothing about the Dupont royals had impressed me so far, and I wasn't about to start letting them now.

I ignored the tiny voice trying to tell me that Sebastian was definitely a little bit impressive.

The gates rolled shut behind us and Kyle turned the engine off after he parked. He got out of the car first then came to stand at the passenger side and waited for me. He didn't open the door. He just stood and waited like he had all the time in the world—and he probably did.

He'd live for fucking forever. Waiting days or weeks for me to finally get out of the car was nothing compared to that lifespan.

I could either stay in the car and grow increasingly sweaty, or I could leave, throwing myself directly into the lion's den.

And all these lions definitely had teeth.

It wasn't like I had a lot of choices.

I opened the door and got out, but Kyle had reverted to not speaking at all, and he simply turned and led the way to a door that took us directly into a kitchen. I glanced around, wondering if they brought all of their guests through the tradesman's entrance.

We walked through an almost silent house, where the only sound was the ticking of a large clock somewhere nearby, but I couldn't even see it down one of the corridors.

If this house had looked large from the outside, it was a goddamn vortex on the inside. And pure luxury living.

"The parlor," Kyle suddenly announced, like he was the world's most unlikely butler. Then he turned and left as Sebastian stood smoothly from an uncomfortable-looking chair.

He made the item of furniture seem impossibly delicate like the narrow legs shouldn't have supported his weight at all.

Sebastian smiled as I met his gaze, and the merest hint of fang grazed his lower lip.

I should have recoiled from the overt display of dominance, but

something inside me tugged toward him instead. I put my hands out like I could grab a physical object and steady myself, but I grasped air.

“Sebastian Dupont.” He reached for me, clasping my hand warmly as he needlessly introduced himself again.

I’d read his name on his business card, running my gaze over the delicate script like it was some sort of secret code, more often than I’d admit to anyone.

“I’m very pleased to finally meet one of my witches.” He gestured to a sofa that didn’t look any more substantial than the chair he’d risen from when I entered the room.

I shook my head and pasted what I hoped was a sweet smile across my face. I aimed for apologetic but probably didn’t make it that far. “*Not* one of your witches, I’m afraid. I don’t belong to anyone. My servitude died with King Émile.” I rarely gave that man his title, but perhaps it would help in this situation.

Except Sebastian’s eyes narrowed, so maybe not.

“Whatever contract I previously had is now null and void. I’ll be leaving New Orleans as soon as I finish packing and make the appropriate arrangements.” There they were then. All my cards on the table.

His gaze lost some of its friendly welcome, but his tone remained light when he spoke. “That’s not going to happen.” Light, but with an edge of steel. “You are very much my witch, and if you try to leave the city, I’ll imprison you for breach of contract.” He met my eyes directly, and his determination was clear to see.

He was focused and serious — he meant every word he’d just said.

“But why?” I blurted out the question before I even thought it.

He lifted an eyebrow.

I scrambled to clarify myself. “I mean, why me? I’m not special. We’re in New Orleans.” I lifted my hands like I could encompass the whole city. “Witches here are a dime a dozen.” Well, wannabe witches, anyway, but he didn’t need to know that part.

His eyes had flared when I said the word *special*, but he was just watching me with his usual clear blue gaze now. He tilted his head like he was considering his response. “I need someone familiar with how Francois ran things with his employees and his club. Someone who worked on the inside, if you like. You were both a club employee *and* a family employee, so yes, perhaps that does make you special.” Light flared briefly through his

eyes again bringing the merest touch of red to the color.

My knees weakened, but I tensed all my muscles to remain standing. Well, shit. *Not* being special had been my whole argument.

He gestured to the sofa again like he'd seen my brief wobble, and—again—I ignored him. Stubborn, remember?

“I thought we could start easy,” Sebastian said. “Perhaps you could tell me a little about what the New Orleans witches...”

I drew a startled breath. He'd referred to us as *New Orleans* witches—not Ricard witches, as I'd always believed myself to be. That was... different. And not entirely unwelcome. But I wasn't one of the New Orleans witches. They'd never acknowledged me as such, anyway. Still, Sebastian's assertion warmed me.

Part of me still wanted to belong, even though everything inside me indicated I really didn't. After all, here I was mixed up with vampires again. Shit like this kept happening, whether I wanted it to or not.

When I returned my attention to him, he was no longer speaking. Instead, he was watching me. “Are you okay, Ms. McKenna?”

“Kayla.” The correction was automatic but even as I cursed myself internally, a grin captured his lips as if I'd pleased him.

“All right.” He inclined his head in acknowledgment. “Kayla, can I get you something to drink while we have our discussion?”

I shook my head and finally sank to the sofa. If we were to have an entire discussion, I really should sit down, after all.

“As I was saying.” Sebastian drew the chair he'd been sitting in previously a little closer. “I'd like to know what the New Orleans witches have been doing and the types of spells you created for Émile and Francois.”

I swallowed, fighting the urge to leap from the sofa and run. But even if I got out of the house, I had nowhere to go. I hadn't been able to locate Lettie, so she couldn't protect me, and Naomi wasn't exactly skilled in battle magic. Plus, I couldn't take trouble to my friends' doors. I wouldn't do that to anyone.

I'd burned my bridges with the local covens as soon as I'd started doing black magic for King Émile and his crazy son, and they wouldn't exactly welcome me back now that I was tied up with the newest royal family. I was definitely *persona non grata* all over the city for me, and I had only myself to blame for that.

I glanced at Sebastian again, and his gaze hadn't wavered from me while

he waited for me to start talking, like I was just going to spill my guts and tell him everything I knew. As if that was going to happen. If the covens hated me now, they'd hate me even more if I started using their secrets as currency for my freedom from a vampire.

I looked at the doorway a second time. For all I knew, Kyle was still lurking around out there. Or maybe Sebastian had an entire staff of vampires just waiting to ensure I didn't leave before I'd told him the things he wanted to hear.

Spreading my hands on my lap, I studied my fingers and counted my breaths, calming myself as I bought time. I didn't know what to say or what to tell him.

I couldn't stay here and have this conversation.

But I couldn't leave, either.

I was well and truly stuck.

SEBASTIAN

She was enchanting. Her skin almost seemed to glow, her vitality shining from her. Right now, she was also nervous, but she had no reason to be scared around me.

I'd always protect her.

Wait, what? That *protection* thought had been...unexpected. But protecting my *interests* sounded about right, and Kayla certainly offered the opportunity to do that, as well as increasing my status and standing with Nic. I could be a success in New Orleans, and having inside knowledge about the witches should fast-track that.

So, yeah. I needed this woman. No wonder she brought out protective instincts in me.

As well as being beautiful...and enchanting...and alluring.

Guilt nudged at my conscience—when the hell did I grow one of those?—for bringing Kayla here under her current contract when really, I could probably have forgiven it as easily as enforced it.

Goddamn it. Maybe I'd never learn. I was still making fucking mistakes with women, even after Leia. Something a little bit dark twisted briefly in my soul as I thought again of the events that had led up to me being here at all, but the shadow was fleeting as I refocused my attention on the woman in front of me.

Kayla still seemed to glow, despite the guilt I now felt about bringing her in front of me like this. Except I really *did* need Kayla to help me out. A family witch in our service was definitely the key to getting me on the right path to establishing Dupont rule in New Orleans.

Only...

Shit. I stood and walked to the small drink cabinet. I needed something stronger than water or soda. Something that would burn my throat as it went down and remind me I was alive — or at least hadn't reached my final death yet.

“Drink?” I tilted a crystal tumbler toward Kayla, and she raised an eyebrow.

“You drink?”

I chuckled. “I can.” I rarely enjoyed it and it would never make me drunk again. It was a distraction more than anything—and damn, around Kayla, I *needed* to be distracted.

She was too easy to focus on completely, as if I were a boy with an infatuation.

My offer of a drink went unanswered, but I poured two double shots of Louisiana rum anyway and held one out toward her. She accepted it, but merely wrapped both hands around the glass and held it.

I watched her fingers, imagining them wrapped around me...the most intimate parts of me...before I wrenched my gaze away.

I cleared my throat, and she glanced at me—the merest flick of her eyes, really. Like I made her nervous. I didn't want Kayla McKenna scared of me. Well, not outside of some light role play, anyway. My gums ached and I took a moment longer to bring myself under control before I spoke, moderating my tone.

“I asked Kyle to bring you here if you proved difficult for him to convince.” I paused and smiled at her, but she scowled in return. “Kyle finds very few things difficult... What made him bring you in?”

For a moment, it felt like she might not answer, but I was a vampire. Being so long-lived brought patience. I could wait — I had the time. There was *always* time. Empires would rise and fall while I waited. That was just the way things were.

I settled back in my seat and channeled the stillness that usually unnerved humans, but Kayla seemed equally as still.

“I know what you're doing,” she murmured.

“Oh?” I raised an eyebrow.

She shrugged, the movement small. “You're waiting me out. Francois used to do it.”

Rage burned a fire beneath my skin. I wasn't comparable to Francois. He

was a monster, a crazy man. My gaze strayed to the stack of books I'd brought home from Allécher—books Francois seemed to have updated almost daily that I still had to go through. Journals, judging from the spidery scrawl that had covered the lined pages when I'd glanced through. Not financial records, anyway.

I moved, though, shifting my position, deliberately trying to distance myself from his memory. Then I stood and walked several paces before returning uselessly to my chair.

“Why are you here, Kayla?” I asked the question softly, and she met my gaze, more fire burning in her eyes than had ripped through me moments before.

“Because I won't sign your fucking contract, and I'm leaving town as soon as you're finished with your questions. I could have saved you the time and effort, but your goon, Kyle, wouldn't take no for an answer.” She snapped her mouth shut, punctuating the end of her angry burst of speech.

I pretended to think for a moment before replying. “Hmm. Leaving town? Where do you plan to go?”

She glared harder. Then barked out a laugh, the sound harsh in our almost-silence. “Why the hell would I tell you?”

The scent of her fear had an acrid tang, but I tried to ignore it. She didn't want me to know she was afraid. Not when she was acting like she had this situation completely under control.

“In case I need to get hold of you? For more questions?” I feigned ignorance that her question had been genuine.

She snorted a laugh. Or a huff of derision. It was like she couldn't decide which she meant the sound to be. “No offense, but you won't get my forwarding address. I'm done with vampires and being beholden to them.”

I nodded like I understood, but really, I was just nodding because she'd cleared quite a few things up for me. The witch sitting in front of me was a flight risk. She'd turn around and leave New Orleans as soon as I returned her home. Sooner, if she could find a way out of my house.

But that was okay. I had a contingency plan for just this occasion. “Kyle.” I barely raised my voice above the conversational tone I'd been using with Kayla, and she looked at me sharply as Kyle appeared in the doorway.

“You guys are freaky,” she said, her tone hard, but a fresh wave of fear pulsed from her, and it scented the whole room.

I directed my attention to Kyle, completely ignoring what Kayla had said.

It made me a little proud, anyway. I'd always basked a bit in my freakishness and my ability to scare humans with a mere tilt of my head or a glance. "Can you show Ms. McKenna to one of the guest bedrooms?"

There was plenty of space in this house after all, and what better way to keep her from leaving the city than keeping her by my side, under my direct watch?

Kayla made a slightly strangled sound, and I swung my attention to her. "You'll want for nothing, I assure you. The rooms here are very comfortable, and our amenities are... perfectly adequate." The bathrooms were downright luxurious, but I could save that surprise for later.

She shook her head. "You really *are* freaky. No way can I stay here. I didn't bring anything with me." She stopped talking, but her mouth continued to open and close like she still had more words trapped inside her.

"Is there something you require?"

She leveled a look at me that rested somewhere between *duh* and *ya think?* Then started ticking a list off on her fingers. "Aside from my fucking freedom, you mean? Well, clean clothes would be nice, a book or two to read, my soap and toothbrush..." She trailed off as I lifted my hand to stop her flow of words.

"All of those things can be provided for you." It would be my pleasure to dress her.

But she shook her head. "No. I want my own things."

Curiously, she wasn't fighting the fact I wanted her to stay, and I hadn't used even the smallest amount of compulsion. Perhaps Francois just had her so well trained that she'd learned not to argue. Except... not arguing didn't seem exactly in her nature. She'd already proven that she wasn't afraid to put up a verbal fight against both me and Kyle...

Whatever the reason, I didn't need to argue with her, anyway, or certainly, I didn't need to give her anything to argue against if she was essentially agreeing to stay but for these mild issues. I told myself that having her as an... enforced guest... was mere convenience, but something inside me yearned to keep her close.

"Kyle," I said again.

He stepped farther inside the room and waited for my next instruction. His eyes told me he thought I was a fool, but I could live with that judgment.

"Take Ms. McKenna home first to gather a few things, then return her here where she may select a bedroom."

Kyle nodded without a word and left the room, turning back just outside the doorway as he waited for Kayla to catch up to him.

But she remained exactly where she was, like a statue sitting on the sofa. “I don’t think I want to do this.” Her speech was slow but definite as she swung her gaze between the two of us. “I’ve been pushed around by vampires for long enough that I’m not about to let the two of you waltz in here and start doing the same.”

Well, there went the compliance I’d been so grateful for.

“And you’re both insane if you think you can just decide to imprison me in this house and no one will even wonder where I’ve gone,” she continued. Her eyes darted away for a moment, and I could almost taste her lie in the air.

There was no one who would worry about her, no one to care? That fact almost made this situation more perfect.

Except, a tiny flicker of sadness flared inside me at the fact she truly had no one. No wonder the Ricards had been able to exert so much control over her, and no wonder she was chafing at my attempt now.

But I didn’t have time for that.

I had to test her. I leaned back in the uncomfortable chair I’d chosen to sit in, trying to make the act look casual rather than awkward, “Okay.” I said, and her eyes widened. “If you don’t want to be a guest here, you have a choice.”

She nodded her head, though her eyes widened almost imperceptibly. “Good. So you *are* prepared to be reasonable.”

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “I think you’ll find I’m always reasonable.” I kept my voice soft, my words almost silky. “And you do have a choice. You can remain here as a guest, enjoying all of those things that the title confers. Or you can essentially be held against your will, as a prisoner.”

I stopped talking, watching her, hoping she didn’t call my bluff and choose the latter. Explaining to Nic why I’d just imprisoned the witch I wanted to help us wouldn’t be the easiest task in the world.

“There are cells at the club.” I spoke thoughtfully, like the idea was only just occurring to me. “I think Francois might have had them installed. Are you familiar with them?”

Kayla blanched. My inquiry had hit home.

She stood and walked stiffly to the door then paused and spoke over her shoulder, not meeting my eyes. “I’m not staying here long.”

I listened to Kayla and Kyle walk away, able to make out Kayla's human footsteps far more easily than Kyle's much quieter ones. That man moved more like a ghost than a vampire, and our kind were pretty stealthy as it was.

Glancing at Francois's books again, most of them leather-bound journals, I sighed. I'd been putting off going through them since I glanced at the first one and found only ranting that seemed to grow more insane and less legible by the day. Hopefully, the earlier volumes could be useful.

After all, he hadn't always been hooked on dead man's blood, so it stood to reason that the later stuff was more likely to be nonsense while the earlier tomes would be written in a sounder voice.

Really, I could have gotten Jason or Kyle to go through these and distill the information for me. However, part of me was still standing on the point of pride that I wanted Nic to know *I'd* done it, that *I'd* created his success in New Orleans, just like he'd tasked me with.

Part of that involved knowing what had gone before, what we'd actually inherited from Émile and Francois.

Standing, I downed the last of my rum then picked up Kayla's untouched glass and downed that, too. There was no sense in wasting it, and it wasn't like it would prevent me from doing the work I needed to do now. If only I could find such a fucking daze from time to time.

I sat on the strange little chair in front of the desk, barely even daring to move in case shifting my weight broke something. We needed some more substantial furniture in here. The first few journals I opened were all the same: random streams of consciousness that looked like Francois had spent all his later days committing every half-thought that crossed his mind to paper. And they really were only half thoughts. Sometimes only half-words, as if his attention had wandered while he was writing.

After piling those books to one side, I pulled some older ones toward me, and this was more like it. The handwriting was neater, each of the sentences with more structure, and I could read most of the stylized antique French handwriting. I studied it for a moment. Francois had once been very precise. His mind had been sharp.

I only knew him as chaotic, flamboyant and eccentric, but I didn't know how much of that was due to the blood he'd become addicted to.

I'd never seen a dead man's blood addiction — only ever heard stories from the dim and distant past. And I'd never been sure how much I believed in what I heard about the madness and the delusions, but now I was pretty

sure I believed everything. It was almost as if Francois had been completely hijacked, and I didn't envy Nic's task if he thought he could bring the man back from the monster he'd truly become.

I didn't envy Leia, either. If she could forgive Francois for all that he'd done, she was a better person than I could ever hope to be. I would have killed Francois for her in a heartbeat, though, and I couldn't figure out who that reflected worse on—Nic for not doing it or me for thinking I could overstep like that.

Nic was certainly the more merciful of the two of us, though, and the fact Francois had gotten a second chance added to my hope that I would be welcome in the family again soon.

In the next book I opened, Francois had carefully completed a table of all of the supernaturals present in New Orleans. My lips parted as I read over the different categories—at some point, Francois had counted vampires, shifters, witches, demons, pixies, and even fae as part of his city.

Each categorization was listed alongside the name of an individual, a brief physical description of that person, a definition of any abilities, and—often—random acerbic notes that actually made me chuckle at Francois's sense of humor.

Then there was a final column where he detailed whether each of the people he'd included in this roll call was for or against the Ricard crown.

I doubted if any of the information in this book was even accurate anymore, particularly as people must have lost faith in Francois and his abilities to act in his father's stead as he'd continued his descent into madness. And surely Émile's prolonged bouts of stasis hadn't endeared the two of them to anyone they were trying to rule. A sleeping king and a crazy prince didn't present the most stable power.

So, this was no real indication of how many of the people had supported Émile at the end, but he'd never been a man to waste time waiting around for people's support. He would have commanded it or ended their life, most likely.

Certainly, the decrepit king I'd met wouldn't have allowed anyone who hadn't pledged their loyalty to him to remain in his territory. He'd been regathering his strength and would have ruled by force far more than mutual respect.

In fact, some of Francois's comments later in the book detailed the violent methods the Ricards had used to bring traitors and suspected traitors

back in line. Always violent, always bloody. Sometimes death would have been a blessing for these people.

I could see why Kayla wasn't in a hurry to sign a new contract. If this was even a taste of the fear she'd lived with under the old regime, why would she even consider working under a new one? Hopefully, spending some time with me would fix that, and she'd be happy to be associated with a Dupont rule. Unexpected excitement lodged in my chest at the idea of being so close to Kayla and the prospect of being able to change her mind about vampires.

But I was trying to make other plans to move us forward too. I grabbed a pen and jotted some notes down for how to move forward. At the very least, I'd need to meet with the local shifters and witch covens to determine the accuracy of what I was reading in Francois' accounts. Which brought my thoughts back to Kayla—she could probably help me with that last line item.

I turned the page of the journal, where Francois's lists continued, his reach now extending out into the swamps and bayous, the categorizations of the supernaturals becoming increasingly strange and rare. Some of these, I'd only ever heard of. Never encountered in all my years.

And really, searching all of these beings out probably wasn't something I was ready to take on just yet. But at least Francois had done the groundwork for me. His records would be a great help in establishing support for Nic's rule at some point in the future.

Before then, though, I already had enough trouble tackling those who lived and worked closest. I'd started working up a basic list based on those who were coming forward to either make their support known or create a little mayhem. It seemed Francois and Émile had certainly divided the city.

I didn't need to go looking for any more problems.

Kyle reentered the parlor, and I looked up. Had I really been studying the books for that long?

"Hello," I greeted him, but he didn't say a word as he crossed the room and dropped onto the couch so hard the wood groaned in protest.

He didn't stay seated long, though, getting up and helping himself to a drink before resuming his original position and watching me, his eyes hard.

I sighed at his silence, not entirely sure what he was being so surly about this time. "I know this isn't ideal." I offered the platitude to try to smooth his obviously ruffled feelings.

He looked as blank and grim as ever, but he was projecting his displeasure loud and clear, nonetheless. He sat in silence for a moment

longer, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. “I’m not the witch’s errand boy,” he finally ground out.

Oh, so that was it. “I know,” I said. “I just needed some help keeping her here. She’s a flight risk, and she’s more useful to us in New Orleans than she is lost somewhere else in the country.”

Kyle nodded curtly, making it very clear he understood but he didn’t have to like it. I didn’t want to spend time soothing Kyle’s hurt pride, but to allow for smoothing of relations and because I actually liked him, I’d do it.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to relegate your role here to that of an errand boy for me. Nic has got big plans involving all of us—you and me, but also Jason, and possibly even Temple. Maybe it extends to more than that, but I’m not quite in a place where he tells me everything, yet.”

The smile capturing my lips felt rueful. I still had a way to go before my brother would trust me with all of his thoughts.

Kyle nodded like that was logical and took a surprisingly delicate sip of his drink.

I cleared my throat. “That said, I do need to ask you another favor.”

He glared, and I narrowed my eyes back. Regardless of how important we all were, I was still the one Nic had entrusted with running New Orleans, and I had to ensure that my dominance was respected.

I debated against asking after Kayla, but that would probably just rub him the wrong way. Instead, I threw in a little praise. “Are you or Jason able to set up a meeting with the wolves for me? You’re better placed to know if I should be talking to Conri’s beta or dealing with Conri directly.”

Nothing too effusive, but there was never anything wrong with letting someone know their importance. It seemed to work. Kyle set his glass down then seemed to think better of it and grabbed it again, his huge hand almost making it disappear from sight. His grasp was nothing like Kayla’s delicate hold had been. He returned to the bottle of rum and reached out for my glass, too.

I passed it to him. “That bad?”

He nodded. “Yeah.” He poured the measures more carefully than when I’d done it earlier for Kayla and myself. “I’ve been here a while now, and it’s not like Baton Rouge.”

I nodded as I accepted my drink from him. “Are we going to have a tough time in New Orleans?”

I’d hoped any difficulties would be eased at least a little bit by the

upgrade to the club, but this sounded more serious than simply giving the locals something new to be excited about. He sipped his rum again then pressed his lips together for a moment.

“We might,” he conceded when he finally spoke. “The supernaturals here have their own world, which they seem to run to suit themselves. I’m not sure how much actual ruling Francois did the last time Émile was in stasis, but if Émile awoke expecting to find order and structure in his kingdom, he would have been disappointed.”

I threw back my rum. “Okay. So, what are your most recent observations?”

The renovation of the club had been my biggest initial priority. I’d been happy to let Kyle do the information gathering, although now it seemed Kyle’s project was about to come home to roost—and I was maybe about to get absolutely shit on by not paying enough attention to the structure here in New Orleans before now.

“Okay.” He leaned forward, holding the rim of his glass between his thumb and forefinger as he rested his forearm over his knee. He always seemed to glower, like his face didn’t know any other position. “The witches generally seem to do as they please. They answer to no one, and they make up spells for anyone who will pay them. Their inter-coven allegiances are fragile, and they seem to have no loyalty to any of the royal families in the state or farther afield.”

Well, that didn’t sound so bad. I just needed to bring them back onside.

“But the wolves,” Kyle continued, “are a whole different story in terms of not being quite so self-enclosed and operating within their own bubble. You can definitely trust Conri because he made the original deal with Nic and he’s been an ally in the past, but all bets are off for any of the others. Tread carefully.” He suddenly slipped his phone from his pocket and glanced at the screen. “Oh, Temple’s outside. I’ll go let him in.”

I chuckled. “Temple not know how to use a doorbell?”

But Kyle was already making his way down the corridor and didn’t deign to answer.

When Temple entered the parlor moments later, he headed straight to the couch and downed the rest of Kyle’s drink before making a face. “Ugh. Rum?” He wiped his mouth.

“Hello, Temple,” I said dryly. “It’s always a pleasure to see you, too.”

“Won’t be today,” he replied, as he stretched his legs out and crossed his

feet at the ankles, his hands resting on the back of his head. “Had to put a few vampires down for ya.”

“Oh?” I lifted an eyebrow then stared into my empty glass. I thought that maybe drinking in times of stress was a leftover habit from my human life, but I couldn’t be sure. “What happened?”

Temple shrugged, the movement ungainly like he’d never quite learned how to control all of his limbs before he was turned. “They were loyal to House Ricard.”

For a moment, I thought he might spit on the hardwood floor beneath his feet, but then he seemed to reconsider the action.

“A few of them are... resistant to Nic’s rule.” His mouth stretched into a grimace, and he stared sullenly into his empty rum glass. “Got a decent drink?” Fatigue seemed to linger around him, and some of his usual level of disrespect was definitely tempered by uncharacteristic moodiness.

This wasn’t the first time he’d come to us with news of vampire slaughter, though. I gazed at the empty fireplace and strode to put my glass on the mantle. Slaughter wasn’t my preferred way forward by any stretch, and after what I’d just read in Francois’s journals, I didn’t want the residents here to think the new king was the same as the old king.

But... there was always a *but*.

Maybe we couldn’t do it without bloodshed. Nic would hate it, but maybe it was truly the only way to enforce his rule in some areas. I had to trust Temple to know the best way forward. New Orleans had always been his city and he knew these people best out of any of us. I couldn’t let my nervousness at starting off on the wrong foot mean that Nic would look weak.

“Is this how Émile ruled?” My tone gave away that I’d hoped to establish Nic’s rule as different right away, and Temple raised an amused eyebrow—perhaps at the thought I’d expected anything different than a violent beginning. “How long will this have to continue?” I pursued. “All this killing in the name of the king.”

My question wasn’t really for anyone in particular, and no one answered. I wasn’t even sure there was an answer.

If I got the initial part of establishing his rule wrong, that would leave Nic wide open to power challenges, himself. Vampires would come crawling out of the woodwork from all over the state and possibly the whole country for a chance to control New Orleans, and I couldn’t allow any of them to get that sort of chance.

I'd certainly never find my forgiveness then.

KAYLA

When I woke up, nothing smelled the same. Before I even opened my eyes, I knew that much. I waited as memories began to filter through my head from the previous day. *Sebastian Dupont*. He was my first thought.

Fucking Sebastian Dupont.

He was also my second thought because I was currently only one step up from being a prisoner in his house. The title of guest didn't really do much to alleviate the fact I didn't have any right to leave. He'd made that much perfectly clear, anyway.

And certainly not to leave town like I'd planned.

I lay in bed, stewing on what my life had turned into overnight until the tantalizing aroma of coffee trailed in on the warm breeze from outside my window.

With effort, I pushed myself from the admittedly comfortable bed to use the luxurious hotel-like bathroom before putting on my clothes and following the smell of an early morning wake-up call through the house.

Everything here was of the highest quality. It *smelled* of money. The hardwood floors gleamed, and the soft furnishings were truly soft and luxurious, made with fabrics that called out to be touched and admired.

I walked into a large and strangely modern kitchen. It didn't fit the rest of the house at all, with beautiful black granite countertops, polished white cupboards, chrome fittings, and a gray tiled floor. I half expected to see a chef in position at the stove, but instead, Sebastian was sitting on a bar stool as he studied a newspaper.

He looked up as I walked farther into the room. “Good morning.” His smile was so wide and genuine that it was disarming, and I paused for a moment.

He looked truly happy to see me. And he probably damn well was—after all, he’d successfully prevented me from leaving New Orleans.

“Did you sleep well?” he continued.

I nodded, the admission grudging. It pained me to know I’d slept the best I had in months. The room had been quiet, the perfect temperature, and the bed had almost cocooned me all night long.

When I didn’t answer, though, Sebastian gestured at some beignets on the counter. “I’ve borrowed Chef from Nic because you’re here. Would you like to sample one or more of his beignets? I have it on good authority that they’re delicious.” His ten-thousand-watt smile faltered for a millisecond before it continued on full beam.

But this time I shook my head. Trying any other beignet just felt wrong after I’d already eaten perfection. Nothing else would ever come close. “Lettie’s beignets are the only ones I eat.”

Sebastian’s eyes crinkled slightly as his brow drew down just a fraction and he chuckled. “A bold statement indeed when you haven’t tried these.” Then he tilted his head. “Is Lettie a friend of yours?”

Telling Sebastian about her after she’d escaped probably wouldn’t put her in harm’s way, right? It could be a good way to give him a little information to show some compliance with this ridiculous situation, and maybe convince him to allow me to leave quicker.

I nodded. “Yeah, she’s my friend. A witch who used to work for Francois. I think he released her from her contract because no one has seen her for weeks. I know I’d get *my* ass out of this hell hole of a city,” I finished pointedly.

For a moment, his eyes went a little wider, and if vampires ever felt panic, I’d have said Sebastian Dupont was right on the verge of that. But then he nodded and his expression smoothed out, becoming almost business-like as he lost his smile. He closed his newspaper and folded it with a snap. Who the hell still read newspapers, anyway?

Sebastian cleared his throat. “I wondered if you could tell me about the work you used to do for Francois and Émile? The sorts of spells did you did for them?”

I watched his face as he spoke, but he seemed to be asking a genuine

question, which meant he didn't know anything specific. Good. I could keep this simple. I shrugged, casually lifting one shoulder higher than the other. "Just a hex or two and a couple of summonings, really."

"And you can offer the same service for the new king?" His tone remained all business.

I shrugged again. "I could. But I'd need my grimoire and some of my supplies. Those are back at my apartment." I hadn't thought to pack them the previous night. Or rather, I had, but I hadn't wanted to believe I'd need them. I'd still clung to the hope that I'd be able to leave, grab my stuff, and escape the city.

"If you let me know what and where, I can send Kyle." He narrowed his eyes a little like he expected me to refuse or like he thought I was just jerking him around.

But I didn't refuse, and as much I wanted to jerk him around, this stupid situation would all be over much faster if I just went along with it. "The grimoire is under my bed, and my supplies are in the back of the closet in the bedroom."

"I'll tell Kyle now." He turned away, but my next words stopped him.

"Wait, *just* Kyle? I'm not going with him to my own fucking apartment? This is just bullshit, you know." Sudden anger blazed through me. I didn't want that weird-ass emotionless guy pawing through my things without supervision. "Just let me go home. I won't fucking leave New Orleans. I'll stay. You don't need to keep sending your henchman to my place to get yet more stuff. And even if I did find some way to leave, it's not like I'm so important. You can easily find another witch like me. I wasn't the only one contracted to the family."

Sebastian sighed and tapped the tip of his forefinger softly against his folded newspaper on the counter. "It's a time of turmoil in New Orleans, no matter how I wish otherwise. As a witch who worked under the House of Ricard and now someone who can be seen as aligning yourself with Nicolas Dupont—regardless of your feelings about it—you could be a target. I want to ensure you aren't in any danger. Kyle goes, you stay," he said as he left the room.

I turned my attention to the full pot of coffee and mug sitting beside it, my head still buzzing with furious energy. The coffee wouldn't help calm my nerves, but it might taste good.

Sebastian hadn't been telling me the real reason I couldn't leave, I was

pretty sure of that, but I couldn't exactly call after a vampire, the king's regent especially, and accuse him of lying.

Sighing, I poured my cup of coffee and turned to face the kitchen again.

"Sweet Jesus." Coffee droplets splashed from the mug as I jumped. "I didn't hear you come back in."

Sebastian smiled disarmingly, always that same smile, like there hadn't even been a break in our earlier conversation, and shrugged from where he'd been sitting earlier. "Kyle's gone, but he won't be long. In any case, I needed to ask you something else."

He dropped his voice a little as if this was going to be a private conversation. I wasn't sure I wanted one of those with him. Something about him drew me in, even though I had no desire to get entangled with a vampire royal.

"It's business," he said like he could read my mind.

"Okay." I perched on the other bar stool and sipped my drink, trying not to react as the smoothest coffee I'd ever had slid down my throat.

"Kayla." He somehow managed to turn my name into a caress, and I steeled against a shiver. His blue gaze bored into mine and held me captive, although not due to compulsion. I simply didn't want to escape. "There might come a time soon when Nic is in need of a black magic witch to help him establish his reign or secure territory. Is that something you're ready for?"

I started to shake my head. Black magic was really bad... or it *could* be really bad. But shit. A little part of me loved the dark. Maybe not all-out *black*, but I'd studied the art as long as I could remember, even if I didn't allow myself to practice it often. Even if it was what had closed the covens to me.

Apparently, self-study of anything remotely dark was completely frowned upon in the established covens, and practicing was a huge fuck, no. But I couldn't help it. I had an affinity for it. The power had liked me.

I'd only objected to performing the spells for the Ricard king and prince because I didn't agree with their objectives. The spells and incantations themselves were exciting and the rush of power they brought me was heady and addictive. But that was also why I couldn't do too much of it—the power was so great it could consume me. So, my talent wasn't accepted in the local covens. They were all *An' it harm none, do what ye will* – which definitely didn't include some of the things Émile and Francois had asked me to do.

Things I'd done.

At first, several fellow witches had tried to *save me* and quoted the law of threefold return at me. From time to time I did wonder what might return to bite me in the ass, but I mostly tried to act in line with my conscience, weighing up the bad against the worse.

So, I couldn't tell Sebastian no right away. I stopped my head shaking. There was no point lying to him right now. Not when the power of the dark arts was so seductive. However, I didn't exactly have to say yes, either. I could just leave his question completely unanswered. In fact, that seemed the safest thing to do.

I crossed my arms and lifted my chin. "So, you want me to do your black spells and endanger myself in the process?"

Sebastian shifted a little. Good. He deserved to be uncomfortable.

"What the hell am I supposed to do all day every day? Just sit around on my ass and wait for a call from your bat phone? I'm not dial-a-witch, you know." Seriously, if this guy expected me to operate on some sort of rental contract, he needed to think again. I'd had an actual job before and been able to make my living.

Until Sebastian had come along and fucked that up, too, at his new, weird club where I was no longer a singer.

He chuckled, and the sound was smooth like caramel being poured. "You'll be working at the club as the headliner, of course. Everything will be new — new look, new image, new atmosphere. I think you'll like it."

I waited for irritation to flow through my body at his very obvious attempt at manipulation. Of course, he was offering me something I wanted now, when he was starting to want and need things from me. But it didn't happen. Not even a prickle. Instead of annoyance, a familiar buzz of excitement claimed me. I'd get to sing...*Really* sing again.

Granted, it was on the same shitty terms Francois had always offered me — essentially selling myself out by doing his bidding so I could have the one thing I really wanted. At least Sebastian wasn't also threatening to rip my vocal cords out if I refused.

Plus, I could hear the applause and just the idea of standing under the lights again appealed to me. I forgot everything when I sang. It was just me and the music. Me and the words, like everything else ceased to be important. Ceased to exist.

If I could have lived any dream, I would have been a singer. At least singing for these fucking vampires allowed me to have part of my dream.

Headlining at the club, even a new incarnation of it, didn't seem like such a bad deal.

Hell, it was a *great* deal if I didn't consider the servitude part of it. The price had to be right, of course. I still needed money to live.

I tilted my head like I was considering the idea. Sebastian appeared to think the bargaining was done, but I needed to buy myself some time to negotiate a good deal. Maybe even a better one than I'd had with Francois. After all, Sebastian was pretty well in the dark regarding how things had been set up for me before, or he seemed to be. He didn't know a whole lot about how the Ricard royals conducted their business in town or how Francois had run The Neutral Zone.

Either that, or he was bluffing. Well, I guessed that would remain to be seen when we started my pay negotiations.

Francois hadn't paid me the going rate for my singing at all, although I hadn't researched that shit until *after* I'd signed his ridiculous contract. Wasn't like I'd had a lot of choice about that, though. I quite liked my vocal cords where they were, and when he'd upped the stakes and made working for him the difference between living my life to a natural end or meeting my maker prematurely, I'd fucking signed on the dotted line.

But this conversation with Sebastian didn't seem like quite the same kind of deal. I could use that.

"We need to discuss my salary," I said. Then, "*Both* salaries," I amended.

Sebastian sat back in his seat and lifted one eyebrow a fraction, a small smirk on his lips. "Ah, negotiation. Sounds like it's time to play."

I laughed at his unexpected comment, and he grinned.

"Come at me, Ms. McKenna. What have you got?"

I hesitated. Shit. What the hell *did* I have? Probably not even a decent sense of self-worth, but I could fake it for a few minutes. "I know the salaries club singers make, and I'm not prepared to accept less than seventy-five thousand," I started.

His eyebrow lifted higher. "I think you'll find the general max salary is sixty-five thousand," he countered. "And starting is more like forty-five."

I shrugged. I knew. I'd pitched high on purpose. "I'm not just starting, though, am I?" I kept my voice light. "Depends upon what I'm worth to you, I guess. There are other clubs..."

I deliberately let my voice trail off as I looked over my shoulder like I could actually *see* the other clubs that might employ me.

“And for the magic?”

“Five thousand,” I spoke quickly. Francois had never paid me extra. Sebastian opened his mouth, starting to nod his head.

“*Per spell,*” I added, almost crossing my fingers as I spoke.

I would never have dreamed of saying anything like this to Francois.

Sebastian’s eyes widened, but he chuckled. “Five thousand dollars *per spell?*”

I nodded sharply. “Yes, and I decide what constitutes a spell. So, if I do three incantations in a session, I’ll charge for all three. Black magic doesn’t come without cost.”

He scratched his chin. “But you’re not the only dark witch in New Orleans.”

“I’m the only one currently sitting in your kitchen.” I almost bit off my tongue when I realized what I’d said. That had possibly been a little too snarky. I was challenging a vampire, after all.

Even if he was one who made my insides a little fizzy.

But he only laughed louder. “Touché.”

I didn’t really have anything further to add on the matter, so I pressed my lips together to keep from speaking just to fill the silence. At this rate, I’d talk myself both into and out of any money at all. Sebastian wouldn’t get a chance to join me in the negotiations because the anxiety I was trying to conceal would handle everything for both of us.

“Okay, Kayla. Yes, I agree to your terms. I like your self-confidence and the way you’ve taken control of your salary expectations,” he said finally. “Would you like to come to the club with me later this evening to see the remodel so far? We could grab some dinner after.”

Well, that was weird. Dinner with a vampire. But he’d just agreed to my borderline outrageous salary demand, and I wasn’t averse to scoring a meal from him as well, so I nodded. Besides, I might as well celebrate this windfall, even if it wasn’t exactly the freedom I’d hoped for.

“Sure.” I nodded. “That sounds...” What should I say? Great was too enthusiastic, good was maybe a little unprofessional considering our negotiations. “Acceptable.”

I held out my hand to seal the deal, and tingling raced up my arm as his fingers touched mine. I sucked in a sudden breath that lodged in my chest and met his gaze for a moment, an hour, a day. The world spun away and all I saw was blue. Just his eyes. Just Sebastian, right to his soul, which glowed

for me.

Then the room rushed back. Sebastian's kitchen. I was dealing with a vampire. Our skin was touching. I yanked my hand away, and he narrowed his eyes a little as he watched me. Then he stood.

"I need to go to the club now and check on things. I'll make reservations and either Kyle or I will be back for you at seven." He didn't look at me as he spoke, but his voice was gruffer.

I nodded, and Sebastian left without another word. Finishing my coffee in silence, I looked out of the window into the small courtyard that contained a bistro table and chairs and a fountain. French doors led outside, and when I tried the handle, they opened easily.

The courtyard was entirely contained by security fencing, but enough flowers and plants grew in the space that it didn't feel at all like a prison yard, despite it being my own personal jail.

I lifted my face to the sun and closed my eyes, letting the rays warm me, as I drew the scent of the angel's trumpets into my chest. The courtyard was a tiny oasis of freedom in this gilded cage of a house.

I finished my coffee while I sat at the little table and gazed around. But despite the incredible day, it was impossible to remain sitting all morning, I was too antsy.

The house loomed above me as I glanced up, taking in the small bridge that led from the main house to the guest wing. I'd crossed that bridge last night and again this morning. The tantalizing fragrance of coffee that I'd followed must have drifted through this courtyard.

But beyond the parlor and a hallway or two, I hadn't explored the main house. Sebastian was out now, so it was a good time to poke around. Probably Kyle was also out, but I couldn't guarantee it. I shuddered as a sudden image of the scarier vampire floated through my mind.

Still, if I had to live here, it made sense to know my way around, especially given the heightened risks of vampire politics right now. That was what I'd tell anyone who asked what I was doing, anyway.

I carried my coffee mug back into the kitchen and opened various cupboards and drawers until one of them turned out to be the dishwasher. It was pristine inside and still smelled new—probably never been used—so I washed out my mug by hand and left it on the draining board.

Then I walked down the silent hallways of the main house, peering into rooms as I passed by. I lingered in the doorway of a billiards room. I hadn't

even realized houses had them anymore. Only in *Clue*, and that never seemed to end well for at least one houseguest.

The biggest surprise was the pool. Well, aside from the fact the pool was in a basement that shouldn't even have existed. A witch had already been here, and a good one at that. Made me even more curious why my services were required.

I found a movie room, and I perused shelf after shelf of DVDs. Hadn't these guys ever heard of streaming services? Although I assumed it was difficult to keep up with the latest technology when decades and centuries formed a lifetime instead of weeks and years.

It was tempting to just plop myself onto one of the oh-so-comfortable-looking oversized chairs and dim the lights, but there was still so much more house to see. And I had time to kill before I needed to get ready for dinner.

I walked up the staircase to the first floor and headed away from the guest wing access. This felt a little forbidden. Surely, I was near Sebastian's private quarters, now? That was definitely a place I had no business exploring. Oh, but it was so tempting.

A door stood open to my right, and I glanced in as I crept by—I had no idea who I thought might overhear me walking around. I hadn't bumped into another soul all morning. Vampires could probably hear my tiptoeing, anyway, so looking like a mime on a bad day was really doing me no favors.

I'd passed by the room then I did a double take and nearly gave myself whiplash when I spun back around to take another look into it a second time.

It was a library. A gorgeous, gothic, dark hardwood shelved library, with spooky corners lined with shadows, and lots of wrought iron details. There were books kept in actual cupboards behind more intricate metal work, like they might escape and attack someone.

Such old books. The room smelled of ink and paper and something else. Leather? I wasn't sure. Sebastian's sea-salt scent lingered here, too, but I couldn't imagine him curled up with a book.

Before I'd made a conscious decision, I was inside the room, standing in front of one of the tall bookcases, and I ran my finger gently over some of the cracked spines. So much wisdom in one room. Perhaps there was even a witchcraft section.

I wandered among the shelves, glancing at all the titles and authors until I spotted the name of a well-known witch. She'd been at the forefront of early witchcraft and her methods were still well-respected today.

Well, certainly well-respected by the covens who refused to have anything to do with witches like me. I mentally added the book to my TBR list as I perused the rows on either side. I glanced up then dragged a chair closer so I could reach the top shelf. If only this library had ladders—but perhaps that was a dream too far.

I climbed up and faced a set of... Holy shit. Actual grimoires. Vintage, antique, ancient. Hell, I didn't know. Just really, really old. So old, they didn't even look like they'd been printed on paper. And from the looks of some of the symbols on them, not all of these had been owned by strictly good witches.

Sebastian was definitely becoming more of a mystery to me. He didn't seem like the kind of guy who would be into witchcraft or its history, but perhaps I was underestimating him. He'd had a lot of years to fill, after all. Either way, I wasn't going to complain about having access to these types of resources.

I grabbed the heftiest tome and carried it to the closest comfy-looking chair. I flipped the delicate pages as my gaze scanned spidery writing, where the ink was so faded in parts that I finally switched on the Tiffany lamp to my left so I could read it, careful to keep the pages out from the direct glow.

Some of these spells were so dark, there was no way I'd attempt them. They'd leave a permanent stain on anyone's soul. But some of them looked useful. I could update my own grimoire from here. Maybe living in Sebastian's house would have a benefit after all.

More benefit than associating with Francois or Émile had ever offered, anyway. Except that I valued my life, and they'd let me keep that at least.

I pored over the pages, my mind wandering around the spells as I half thought about Lettie and how much wisdom she already carried in her mind, how much she knew. She'd just always known the spell she usually performed on me. Perhaps I could find something in here or in one of these other books. Or maybe it was in one of Lettie's grimoires. And I knew a witch, right?

I mean, granted, that witch was Naomi, and her skillset usually ended at fairly simple charms and incantations, but Lettie had always made it seem important that someone else had to perform this spell on me, so what could I lose by trying?

I only had one witch in New Orleans still talking to me, so that made Naomi my *it* by default.

I dialed her number on my cell.

“Nay?” I said when she answered. “You like a challenge, right?”

She laughed, but she didn’t seem at all like a person who enjoyed a challenge.

“I need you to find a spell in one of Lettie’s books.”

Naomi groaned. “Really? Do you have any idea how many books she has here?”

“It’s a protection spell for me, Nay.” I kept my voice quiet, reasonable.

“I can do that.” She sounded unnaturally perky, and I could imagine her casting her eye over Lettie’s shelves of books.

On the face of it, it did seem like I’d just given her an impossible task.

“What kind of spell?”

I cleared my throat. “It’s...uh...” This shouldn’t be hard to say. I wasn’t ashamed of what I was. “It’s to hide my virginity from the vampires so they don’t...you know.”

Naomi whistled softly. “Say no more. I get it. I always wondered how you worked so close to the mad prince without him claiming you. I guess I just assumed you... well, I thought it wasn’t a problem.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, and Lettie made sure it wasn’t. But the spell’s up for renewal and I need a witch to perform it and you’re...”

“I’m your understudy?” Naomi laughed.

I laughed too, unable to deny her place as my second choice. “First place loser,” I guess.

“I’ll see what I can find. Are you coming over to the shop?”

I checked the time. “Nah, I need to be somewhere later, I wouldn’t have time for both. How about you come here?”

She made a small squeaking noise. “To the regent’s house?”

“Sure. No one’s here but me right now as far as I know, and this was always pretty quick.”

“Okay. I’ll see if I can find what we need and gather up any of the ingredients and I’ll call you when I’m outside.”

My cellphone chimed with a message not too much later. That was faster than I expected, almost like she’d flipped to the right spell straight away and she’d prepacked anything she needed. Maybe Lettie kept the things on hand in the shop. I’d find out soon enough, anyway.

I closed the grimoire I’d been studying, returned it to the shelf, and promised it I would be back with a pen and my own grimoire at some point to

copy some of the most interesting things into.

Then I figured out how to let Naomi through the foot gate, and she left her car parked outside at the curb.

“Come up to my room,” I said. “We should have enough privacy up there.”

“I thought you said no one else was in?” She glanced around, her eyes wide, anxiety on show.

“They’re not. Just in case anyone comes home, I guess.”

She nodded and followed behind me, her footsteps hesitant. She slowed even more as we passed over the bridge to the guest quarters, overlooking the gardens. “You get to live here?”

I laughed. “That’s one way of putting it, I guess.” Living here, imprisoned here... It was kind of the same thing.

And really the main reason why I needed to ensure I had the continued protection of Lettie’s spell.

When we reached my room, Naomi gestured to the bed. “Lie down.” She looked at me. “Wait. Lettie made you lie down, right?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Lettie pretty much just looked at me, but you gotta do this your way or it won’t work, right? Intent, remember?”

She swallowed and nodded, her face suddenly tight. “Right. I brought some herbs to burn, and I found the spell in here.”

She let a large book fall noisily onto the bare dresser before flipping through the pages. “This is the spell.” She lifted the book and flashed the page briefly in my direction. “Close your eyes.”

I withheld a sigh but closed my eyes anyway. Lettie never did all these theatrics.

“I just don’t want you watching me while I do this... thing with your virginity.” Naomi sounded almost annoyed, but I laughed.

“You’re not doing anything with my virginity. Relax.” I consciously breathed out and released any tension left in my muscles. I needed to take my own advice here.

“Okay... I’m doing it.”

I didn’t laugh this time, but Lettie had certainly never announced her spells like that.

The smell of herbs filled my room alongside the deep sound of Naomi chanting unfamiliar Latin words. I fought to keep my eyes closed. The words were unfamiliar—maybe she needed to know. Or hell, perhaps she’d just

found an alternative spell. She was my friend and I trusted her. I forced myself to relax again.

Warmth spread through my abdomen. This was new too, but it tingled, and I kind of liked it. "This is different," I murmured.

Her chanting cut off. "Huh?"

I cracked one eye open as she hurried back to the spell book. "Everything okay?"

But she stood silently for a second just flipping a page back and forth.

"Naomi?" I prompted.

"Shit. Oh, shit. Shit, shit... Kayla. Shit What have I done?"

I sat up, my movements slow. I still felt pretty good after the spell. "I don't know. What did you do?"

"It's the wrong spell." She paled as she faced me and brought her hand to cover her mouth.

I shrugged. "I feel fine. And I'm sure there are lots of different spells that do exactly what Lettie's did."

"No. You don't understand." Her eyes glistened. "I mean, I found Lettie's spell. The one I did is different."

"Ye-es..." I looked at her, willing to go on as my relaxation started to dissipate.

"I did the reversal spell." She whispered the words in a rush, so it sounded like a gust of wind direct from her lungs.

"You did *what* now?" I held up my hand when it looked like she might repeat herself. "Don't worry. I got it. Well, just do the right spell."

"I can't." Her eyes were still wide. "I've burned all the herbs already. It won't work now!"

I groaned as I let my head fall back against the pillow. "Well, go get some more. I'll wait." But just as I finished speaking a clock in the hallway outside chimed the hour, and I subconsciously counted the notes. Shit. It was nearly time to go to dinner, and I wasn't even close to ready.

Worse, I was a virgin. An *obvious* one. And I currently lived in a house of vampires.

"It's too late," I said. "Sebastian is expecting me."

"Maybe you can wear lots of perfume?" Naomi suggested, and I nodded rather than tell her how dumb that sounded.

"It was an accident, Nay. A mistake. You can fix it for me tomorrow." I only had to get through one evening, after all. How hard could it be?

She closed the grimoire and pressed it tightly to her chest. “I’ll come back tomorrow,” she murmured, sounding like a very faint echo. “I’ll fix it tomorrow.”

Honestly, Naomi was about ten years older than me, but sometimes I felt more like she looked to me for guidance and reassurance—which I always seemed to manage to provide.

I showed her to the door then hurried back to my room to get ready, unexpected excitement lurching in my chest.

As much as a part of me never wanted to see Sebastian again—especially after this afternoon’s turn of events—another part of me couldn’t wait.

SEBASTIAN

I was practically pacing in the foyer of the house. I'd waited for enough dates in my day, but this one seemed different. Perhaps the biggest difference was that I hadn't truly asked Kayla on a *date*. I couldn't shake the anticipation that was exactly what was happening. Maybe I hadn't really asked her at all. More told her. That thought gnawed at me slightly as I strode back and forth.

The smell of the furniture polish in the foyer tickled my nose. It was like almonds, and my stomach grumbled in response to the sweet fragrance, an old biological reflex. There was a housekeeper here somewhere, although I hadn't met her yet. Next on my list of staff to add to the household was a butler.

Opening the front door all the time was for the birds, and Temple had started just letting himself in, which needed to be nipped in the bud.

Chef was also here somewhere, having made himself at home after he heard there was another human to cook for. He was less than happy about my taking her out tonight, but it likely meant that Kayla's breakfast would be a banquet fit for a queen.

Or, in this case, a princess.

I was only a prince after all.

But I shook away my fanciful thoughts. Kayla was the house witch, hopefully. Just as Nic would want. Nothing more.

I studied the hardwood floor briefly, the intricate pattern of the parquet blocks almost mesmerizing. I had no idea how Nic had picked up this house at such short notice, but it was perfect for access to the club and suited the

way I liked to live.

A noise from the top of the stairs drew my attention. I glanced up half expecting it to be the mysterious housekeeper or Kyle, and I was stunned completely still by what I saw. My gaze met Kayla's before I allowed it to travel the length of her body. She wore a deceptively plain black dress that left everything to the imagination but teased of all that lay beneath, and her dark hair tumbled in unruly curls over her shoulders and down her back. My fingers itched to tangle in that hair, to tug just a little so that she'd gasp.

"You look amazing," I spoke before I even thought about what to say, but the words were a simple truth.

She smiled in acknowledgment, a blush spreading across her cheeks and even onto her neck.

I wanted to trace that pink tint under her clothes to see how far it went, but she noticed me watching her, and the pulse in her neck kicked up, drawing my attention even more intensely. My gums ached as my fangs pressed against them, and I averted my gaze, not watching as Kayla descended the stairs.

My cock twitched in my pants. Damn it. My whole body seemed to have plans beyond business for this witch. There was something about her... something compelling.

Something... No, I didn't want to compare the way I was looking at Kayla now to the way I'd previously seen Leia. My infatuation with Nic's mate had been ill-advised—juvenile even. Dangerous and personally damaging. There had been a darkness there, something desperate, but with Kayla, I had none of those feelings.

She was pure, even in her spunkiness, and there was an innocence about her that I didn't understand. Something drew me toward her—no matter how far apart we were, something tugged inside me.

"Have you had a nice day?" I asked, offering a meaningless question while each of my muscles tensed, waiting for the moment when I'd turn to look at her again.

Her scent teased at my nose. Not the perfume it smelled like she'd bathed in but her natural, jasmine scent... and below that something provocative and wild. I wanted to heave a deep breath and draw that scent deep into my lungs, but I resisted.

"Yes, thank you." Her reply was perfectly pleasant, but the words gave nothing away about what she'd done all day.

I already knew she'd holed up in the library, though. The security in this place was pretty good, and her lingering scent in the room had given her away. But I didn't ask her about it. I didn't want her to think I was spying on her when she hadn't done anything wrong.

For some reason, it was important to me that she felt at home here. She wasn't a prisoner. Not really—even though she was a flight risk and I needed her to stay in New Orleans.

But I also *wanted* her to stay, and for that, I wanted her happy here rather than merely trapped.

"I thought we'd take the car," I said as I gestured toward the door.

"Oh?"

I met her gaze as her mouth pursed a little.

"But the club is just around the corner."

I glanced at her heels then back to her eyes. "Would you prefer to walk in those or sit in a car?"

Her lips relaxed into a grin. "Well, put like that..."

I automatically reached for her as she arrived at the bottom of the staircase, and she slipped her fingers into mine briefly as she stepped level with me, just inches from where I'd been waiting. Her cheeks pinked again, and she dropped her touch from mine, seeming to realize how close we were. Or maybe she felt that certain rush of *something* between us as well when our skin touched.

I walked ahead of her to the car I had waiting outside and opened the door for her to slide in.

The ride was silent and uncomfortable, the air between us thick somehow, the main scent emanating from her floral, like jasmine, but with an undertone of undeniable lust and that heavier, warm aroma. I tried not to look at her. It wouldn't do to lose control.

I *couldn't* fucking lose control again. That had been too dangerous with Leia. I'd thought I'd known what I was doing... Thought I was taking my chance when I'd just been ruining my life and creating this exile as my future. It was too risky to take the same chances with Kayla, to give in to greater urges and instincts. I was supposed to be using this time to prove to Nic that I knew better now.

And even though my gums ached and my cock had a fucking mind of its own every time I so much as thought of Kayla, I *did* know better. I really did.

I just didn't know if I could trust myself to *be* better.

But as we sat beside each other, we seemed to edge closer together like two magnets helplessly trapped. Our thighs brushing each other, sparking warmth through me every time one of us shifted to try to find additional space until we gave in and just sat pressed together, although neither of us acknowledged our position.

When the car drew up outside the club, I got out quickly, swallowing and rearranging my pants to hide my growing arousal. I helped Kayla from the car and led her to the new front doors, which were opened by the project manager, as if he'd been watching out for us.

I nodded at him, and he held the door open wider. "Things are coming along nicely," he murmured.

I nodded but didn't reply. I'd be the judge of how well the renovation was doing. Well, me... and Kayla. Suddenly, her opinion really mattered. But only because she was our new headliner, of course.

She followed me into the club, and I stopped abruptly when she gasped. *That* was the kind of reaction I was looking for. I grinned but hid it before I turned around to face her.

"What do you think?" I forced genuine curiosity into my tone. I didn't need her to know I found her so easy to read.

"It's beautiful," she whispered as she turned a slow circle. "But are you still calling it that dumbass French name?"

I nodded, surprise stealing my words for a moment. "Yes. Did you have anything better in mind?"

She grinned and it was like the sun coming out. "Give me a minute. Let me take a good look at this beautiful place."

I looked around and nodded. She was right. Ben's contractors had done a great job so far.

"Wow." She was still whispering as she pointed to the stage that stood in the center of the room. "Will I sing there?"

She wandered toward it, her steps slow and sexy like she was ready to perform right now. Something sultry, most likely. A crowd pleaser. My cock twitched again at the idea of her low voice filling in the room, her body swaying in time to the music.

That was a sight I wanted to see.

She stepped onto the stage and walked to the middle before doing a slow spin so she could see the space for the club members all around her. "Everyone will be watching me."

I silenced a growl of irritation at her words, at the idea that other people — other men — would watch Kayla as she stood on that stage.

I wanted her performances. All of them. Only for me.

“And just look at this place.” She turned again and held her hands to the ceiling where the tiny lights glittered. “It will be like the stars shining for me every night.” Her grin was radiant as she looked at me. “The entire place looks like the most perfect night.”

And she was right. The contractors had finished the bar now, and it gleamed like the milky way, the epoxy resin finish shimmering in the low light. The floor shone like a reflective black pool, the tiny stars showing even there. It was all perfect. The chrome, the black, the elements of space. It created the most perfect cocoon of night.

“You need to call it Nightfall,” she murmured.

I jerked my head toward her, the movement sharp. “Nightfall...” She was right. It worked on every level.

And every night would be the perfect date.

People would be hidden here.

Anonymous.

They could let themselves go and be what they wanted.

The new club would be exactly what I wanted it to be. It was *exactly* what we needed to establish Nic’s reign here in New Orleans.

“I really, really love it.” Kayla was more enthusiastic than I’d ever seen her. Excitement radiated from her. “I can’t wait to sing for everyone here.” She glanced around again. “Can I go take a look around at the rest of it?”

“Sure.” I gestured her forward. “The finishing touches aren’t all in yet but go see what we’ve got so far.”

She nodded and walked away.

The project manager returned to me and cleared his throat when I didn’t immediately stop watching the direction Kayla had disappeared in.

I fixed a neutral expression on my face and turned to him, setting my mind back on business. “It seems to be coming along well.”

“Oh, absolutely. Everything will be finished in the next week.” He consulted his clipboard, flipping a page then two, and finally returning to the front. “Yes, everything is perfectly on schedule, and there are no issues at all.”

I nodded like that was what I’d expected to hear from the contractor, and we discussed the final finishes for a few moments—detailed things that were

necessary to get the atmosphere exactly right, and he made a few suggestions as well as adding a few more notes to his clipboard. He grimaced a little when I mentioned the last-minute name change, but that was quickly concealed behind a professional smile.

By the time we'd finished talking and he moved away, his next set of guys had arrived for the overnight shift, and I checked my watch. Time to find Kayla if I wanted to make our dinner reservations on time.

Finding her wasn't difficult. Her scent teased me as I followed it up the steps toward my office. She was standing in front of my desk, looking at my chair when I entered, and flashes of skin were visible where her hair cascaded over the low back of her dress.

I drew a long, low breath. It was like viewing perfection, and my chest tightened. I reached toward her, wanting to touch her, to run my hand from her shoulder and down her arm, caressing her.

Her skin would be so soft, so smooth... I wanted to follow that hand with my mouth, my tongue. Worshiping her...

But I stopped myself.

Instead, I merely stepped closer, clasping my hands behind my back so I didn't accidentally pull her toward me, spin her, and plunder her mouth with mine, rigidly maintaining my control.

It was all I had left.

"You look amazing, Kayla." I whispered the words in her ear, and she jumped, but she didn't turn around.

Her breathing quickened as her heart rate increased. The little signs of human arousal were all visible to me, but still I held myself away. I had to.

"That's very forward behavior for my boss." Her light, casual words belied the tenseness with which she held herself, and I leaned a little closer, inhaling her soft scent.

She wore the strong perfume, but a soft soapy smell lingered beneath that, and farther down still was the natural aroma of her skin. It called to me like a siren.

"What if we want more than just an employee-boss relationship?" I kept my voice low, and she shivered slightly as I finished speaking.

She spun to face me, and I drew back, the movement quick. I didn't grin at her, though. I'd meant every word.

Even though I shouldn't have spoken them at all. But damn my control... It was no match for being in the same room as Kayla right now.

She laughed, the sound quick and sharp. “There’s no way in hell that would work, Mr. Dupont. I’m contracted to your family. It would be like you owned me. Shit—you *do*. I’d be a hooker.” She finished speaking and jutted her chin toward me defiantly.

“Don’t you ever say anything like that.” My words were tight and angry. “A *hooker*? What the hell are you thinking?” I whirled away and paced to the door before shutting it and pacing again. “The contract you referred to is simple business. All services are laid out professionally and you are compensated for each of those.”

She didn’t say anything, but she watched me, her eyes narrowing slightly as they met mine. There was uncertainty there. Uncertainty and challenge.

I reacted to the challenge right away, my irritation receding. “The contract is business,” I repeated softly. “Choosing to be with me would be all about your pleasure. Your decision.”

Her heart rate picked up again, the sound a soft melody to my ears. Her skin glistened a little, and she ran the tip of her tongue over her lower lip. The signs of her nervousness excited me, and suddenly I wasn’t sure if I saw her more as the object of my desire or as prey.

I blinked and stepped back, unsure when the two had overlapped in my head. How had this happened? I had to have this woman, to claim her as mine.

But I had time for the game, and I had patience.

After all, she wanted me as much as I wanted her. I didn’t need to push things tonight.

But then she took a tentative step toward me, barely even a movement. Only it was like she was offering herself directly to me. I saw her challenge and I raised it, closing the distance between us until my chest nearly pressed against her breasts, and our body heat mingled in the small gap between us.

She inhaled a sharp breath and her gaze met mine as I lowered my head. Our lips were almost touching. Just one taste... One. Only one. Surely that would be okay, right?

But no.

I had to control myself in this moment, even if I’d already given in to the decision of making her mine.

As I took a step back, air rushed from her. I could almost smell her disappointment and her relief as I offered her my hand.

“Dinner?” I asked.

KAYLA

I reached for Sebastian's hand, my movement automatic as I released the stealthiest breath of relief. I couldn't even look at him. Dear God, just knowing he'd been standing behind me, so close... And his lips... His mouth. That prickling awareness of him still hadn't faded. I wanted to touch my lower lip with my forefinger, but I closed my hand into a fist by my side instead.

Even now, he stood so close that I could imagine I was lost at sea, as his natural scent filled the room, bringing to mind a vast ocean and gusts of wind and spray. Perhaps that was why I'd been drawn to this room. Sebastian was a man I could absolutely drown in.

He was dangerous. He could sweep me away in his riptide, and I'd be a willing victim.

Hell, what had I just been about to do? Would I really have given myself to him?

I couldn't be sure.

When he'd spoken, I'd wanted his lips on mine—on my skin, on my neck. I lifted my hand there fleetingly, and his gaze followed the movement, his eyes darkening and the blue in them growing stormy like he could be a tempest.

I swallowed. "Dinner." I repeated his question as a statement as my fingers slipped into his.

He nodded and led me from his office, where I really had no right to be in the first place, and I caught my breath again at the view over the club from up here. It was like the most beautiful of starry nights. I'd never dreamed The

Neutral Zone could become something so beautiful.

I sneaked a glance at Sebastian. The way he'd designed the club surprised me. A lot about him surprised me. It made him alluring... which brought me back around to him being dangerous.

Guys my age always seemed so shallow. Even at twenty-two, I'd lived a full life. Being contracted to vampire royals had lent me a certain brand of street smarts not everyone—even in New Orleans—seemed to have. And I'd never been interested in older guys. Not the ones looking to be sugar daddies, anyway.

And no way in hell was I interested in actual vampires. Especially not ones who owned me because I'd signed the wrong dotted line.

So why did being with Sebastian wipe all of my principles out of damn existence? What about him made me want to make an offering of myself? I'd never offered myself to *anyone* before.

I scoffed under my breath. I didn't plan on offering myself to anyone now, either. This was just dinner with my employer.

Maybe if there *hadn't* been the issue of the contract, things might have been different.

I glanced at Sebastian again. Perhaps my contract was the only thing that had me in his orbit in the first place. I steeled myself against inconvenient feelings. I was definitely checking out real estate on the wrong side of the tracks. Sebastian Dupont was a vampire and totally unsuitable for a New Orleans witch.

Totally unsuitable for *me* in particular as his pet employee—thank fuck.

Because if that contract didn't exist, I wasn't sure I could trust myself around him. I would have responded to his proximity in his office, I would have wanted more, and I wouldn't have had any reason to stop myself.

In any other circumstances, I could see myself falling for him, and I couldn't allow that to happen. Because the circumstances were what they were, and despite how hard I'd tried, I couldn't seem to change them.

There would be no freedom. Not just yet anyway.

I had time but...my thoughts strayed back to Lettie. How long had she waited to achieve her own freedom? Did I want to be old and gray before I knew mine? That wouldn't work for me.

Maybe I just had to bide some time. Wait for the perfect moment. And until then, I had to resist the attraction of Sebastian Dupont, prince and regent of New Orleans. Especially as a virgin.

As I slid back inside his car, I pushed myself right up against the door on the other side so we wouldn't touch the way we had on the ride over. It had made me forget myself up there in his office. Going forward, the only contact between us should be business.

Our contact was our contract, and that was the way it needed to remain. I was that strong, at least.

I lifted my chin. I could be that strong.

The ride was short, and we moved quickly into a much more upmarket area—a place in the city I rarely visited because it was always so obvious I didn't have the money in my bank account to justify walking these streets. Plus, I'd never needed to come here. My whole life had been arranged around the Ricards and The Neutral Zone, and I rarely strayed from my routine.

When the car drew to a smooth stop at the curb, Sebastian climbed out and offered his hand to help me. I took it, because to do otherwise would have seemed churlish.

That was the only reason our fingers entwined again. Just my good manners.

There was something slightly intimidating about the marble steps that led up to a grand front door and the doorman outside who bowed his head respectfully as Sebastian passed by him. Even as I held his hand, I'd almost forgotten I was with the regent. In my head, Sebastian Dupont was becoming simply *Sebastian*.

"You okay?" His voice surprised me, but not more than the accompanying squeeze of his hand.

"Yeah." But my voice came out breathy as I looked around the restaurant.

Sweet Jesus. If Sebastian were an ocean, I was fast becoming out of my depth.

A fast-food joint or twenty-four-hour diner, this was not. White linen tablecloths graced every table and cutlery gleamed, even under the subdued lighting. The space was everything Francois had aimed for with The Neutral Zone—and everything he'd failed to achieve.

There was an element of classic French elegance, with beautifully understated furniture that could only have been expensive, a staff that was numerous but disarmingly unobtrusive, and guests who were quietly engaged in conversation while they ate.

"Right this way, Mr. Dupont." A maître d' appeared at Sebastian's left elbow, his voice low and discreet. "We've reserved the best table in the

house.”

Sebastian merely nodded like that was to be expected, and it probably was. He was likely used to people handing him things. He was a man who didn't have to ask for respect or power. He commanded it. I shivered a little as I walked at his side.

We sat down and without even glancing at the wine menu, Sebastian looked back at the man who'd brought us to our table. “Could we have a bottle of your Lafite Rothschild, please?”

“Certainly, sir. I shall send the sommelier to attend to you directly.” The server bowed his head and backed away a couple of steps before turning his back smartly and striding away across the restaurant—truly a man on a mission.

We'd only just sat down and already it was like being in a different world. I idly flicked my menu open and stopped. Everything was listed in French. While I got by speaking the local dialect with some of the old-timers, I didn't read or write in the language. And certainly not in textbook French, which this most likely was.

“Is everything to your satisfaction?” Sebastian was watching me, and heat rushed to my face.

Glancing at the menu again, I drew a breath. I could do this. I recognized enough of the words. But before I could reply, a second man appeared at Sebastian's side.

He held a bottle of wine and a tiny glass. “Sir, the wine you ordered.” He presented it to Sebastian, label first, and Sebastian nodded.

“Very good.”

Then the man wiped the top of the bottle with a cloth he produced from his pocket, opened it, and poured a mouthful into the tiny glass he'd brought.

When he took the first drink, I almost giggled, but Sebastian remained serious, and I squeezed my fingers into tight fists in my lap, desperate to quell my nerves.

Sebastian had the next taste and nodded again, satisfaction evident in the movement this time. “Just perfect,” he said.

“In that case, may I recommend...” The sommelier indicated several dishes on the menu.

“Just order for me,” I blurted, and Sebastian looked up at me, his eyes widening. “It's okay. Go ahead and order my food.” I'd only make a bigger fool of myself if I tried to do it myself. Seeming like a child requesting the

adult order for her was the lesser of the evils here.

My face heated again. I never usually let a man order, it went against most of my principles and habits of reclaiming my independence whenever I could, but I'd also never been so out of my depth in a situation.

I trusted Sebastian, though, which was unexpected, and I felt safe in his company.

How could I feel so safe with a man so dangerous? Yet there it was. The duality of my feelings. Sebastian Dupont was dangerous for me *precisely* because I could relax around him. He could do that to me, make me believe I didn't have to worry. Allow me the fantasy that everything would be okay if I just trusted him to make it so.

"All right." Sebastian looked up at the man and spoke in fluent French, the tone and timbre of his voice hypnotic and compelling. My hair fell in front of my face as I lowered my head to hide any blush that might have appeared, and I didn't even try to follow the words he was saying. He could have ordered me snails or frogs' legs or raw ground steak, and I would have let him if he always used those pretty words and that voice to do it.

The waiter didn't write anything down, instead, nodding and committing the order to memory. I rearranged my silverware, making the gap between each piece of cutlery perfect and aligned, tweaking them mere millimeters across the blindingly white linen table cloth — one that probably had a thread count higher than a luxury bed sheet.

"Is everything to your satisfaction?" Sebastian asked again. For a moment, he sounded like he worked here, as if his livelihood depended on my answer.

There was something eager to please in his tone, not a note I expected to hear from him.

"Yes, thank you." I kept my gaze averted from his in case the same need to please existed in his eyes.

I could resist him better if I didn't see such a human emotion in him. I needed to recreate him in my mind as the monster vampires had always been for me. We were natural enemies, after all. Vampires who experienced immortal life and witches who could command life.

Especially me. My affinity for the dark gave me more command than most.

It also seemed to give me an irresistible draw for vampires, or that had been the case with the House of Ricard. They'd kept me as their own. Used

me. I shivered, cold at the thoughts of the past, and Sebastian shifted, his movement so quick I heard rather than saw it.

Then his hand covered mine on the table and warmth seeped into my skin. I relaxed immediately.

“Are you cold, Kayla?”

I almost shivered again at the way he made my name sound. It was the softest of caresses, the most intimate of touches.

“I’m fine,” I whispered, and I didn’t move my hand, soaking in all that he offered.

By the time our food arrived, I’d composed myself again, and I grinned. “Coq au vin,” I murmured. It looked beautiful, and the aroma teased me. My stomach rumbled softly, and Sebastian grinned too.

Damn vampire hearing.

The first mouthful of food almost melted in my mouth. “Perfect,” I said, the word verging on a moan.

Sebastian’s eyes flared, his irises tinging with red, but he simply averted his gaze and nodded. “I’m glad you like it.”

I looked around. “Who wouldn’t like it here?” I tucked my hair behind my ear, suddenly self-conscious that I wasn’t dripping in diamonds and assorted multi-colored sparkly jewels like the other female diners. And my dress was my favorite little black dress, but it didn’t exactly match up to the gowns some of the women were wearing.

I wasn’t even sure when Kyle had picked it up and slipped it into my guestroom, because surely it had been Kyle, if anyone had been to my apartment again. He’d be my own personal concierge soon.

“You take my breath away.” Sebastian spoke to me in a lowered voice, and it was like he’d read my mind and all the insecurity swarming inside it. “Tell me about New Orleans. Did you grow up here?” He took a delicate bite from his fork after he asked the unexpected question.

The change of direction gave me pause for a moment but then I hurried to fill the silence as Sebastian chewed.

“I grew up here.” But that was all I said. There were truly so many other stories, so many other words. But I didn’t know which ones to voice. My history in this city was gnarled and tangled, often quite ugly.

“With your parents?” His tone was mild interest as he gently nudged me toward providing more information.

“They’re not part of the deal.” My voice wasn’t mild. It was tight and

tense.

Surprise registered in the quick quirk of his eyebrows. “Of course not, but human familial bonds fascinate me.”

It was probably the most supernatural thing he’d said, an admission that he was *other*, whether he meant to make it or not.

I nodded. Maybe I could give him just a little on this. “Yes. My life was very happy until my affinity for the darker side of magic showed itself. My parents tried to protect me, but gradually the covens closed their doors to us — all of us, even though my ability wasn’t their fault, and I was too young to properly control it. A much older witch has helped me for most of my life. Lettie. She’s always been there for me.” I paused and pushed sadness away at the thought I might never see her again. I forced a tight smile. “She saved me really, but now she’s free, and I couldn’t be happier for her.”

Sebastian was still for a beat longer than I expected before he spoke, like he was digesting the information I’d just told him. He didn’t meet my eyes when he asked his next question, focusing instead on cutting another bite of his food. “Are your parents still local?” Again, with the mild interest that was probably anything but.

I was starting to relax, though. These events could have become traumatic to recount, but these days I was simply telling a story. Like it had happened to someone else.

“They’re in Florida, actually.” I lifted the wine glass to my lips and took a small sip.

“Florida?”

“Yes. Quite a change but I’m glad they’re not here to see...to see...” I gestured uselessly between us, and his face fell. “This,” I finished.

My parents didn’t need to see my servitude. Lettie had picked up all of my pieces and helped put me back together when everything had fallen apart, and I’d managed to hide it all from Mom and Dad, leaving them in blissful ignorance over how bad things had gotten with the covens and the Ricards.

“This?” It was the most interested Sebastian had sounded, and he repeated my gesture indicating both of us.

“Well, the contract part.” Heat returned to my cheeks.

Mom would probably like Sebastian, and Dad would admire the changes he’d made to the club.

Sebastian nodded. “I see,” he murmured. Then he expertly changed the subject again. “So, speaking from your experience as a local, do you have

any restaurants you recommend in the city?”

I laughed. Now there was a question I could answer, but I couldn't imagine Sebastian in any of the places I liked to go to.

We chatted quietly back and forth about New Orleans as we ate, and I slowly began to relax. This fancy restaurant wasn't a natural fit for me, but Sebastian seemed to make being here okay. Maybe it was the best environment for him because he drew relatively little attention, even with his status in the city.

I ate as much of my meal as I could before pushing the plate a small distance away. I stopped short of dropping the linen napkin in the middle of it, but I couldn't have eaten another mouthful without being uncomfortable. Sebastian had picked a little and seemed to have artfully rearranged his plate to make it look as though he'd eaten far more than he really had.

This evening, I'd almost forgotten he was a vampire, whose existence relied on blood rather than food.

“Dessert?” He lifted an eyebrow and one corner of his mouth, and I laughed.

“I couldn't possibly. That was divine.” All I really wanted was to stretch like a contented cat and curl up somewhere warm and safe to sleep.

Sebastian called for the check and paid with the blackest, shiniest credit card I'd ever seen before standing and reaching for me again. We left the restaurant, my arm tucked securely in his.

The air was still warm outside, and I wanted to shake off the sluggish feeling the dinner had left me with.

I turned to him. “Can we walk back? It's really not too far, and the night's beautiful. Look at all the stars.” I gestured upward. It was almost like I was still in Sebastian's club.

Something felt like magic was in the air, and I didn't want to miss out on that.

He paused for a moment, appearing to consider my request before pulling his phone from his pocket. “Just let me text my driver. I'll let him know the route we'll take and tell him I'll call if we need a pickup.” He glanced at my heels, and I chuckled.

“I've walked farther in higher, I promise.”

He smiled in return, finished his text message, and slipped his phone away. We set off walking, merely strolling along the sidewalk. Sebastian's behavior was protective. He walked closest to the road, and he was very

aware of our surroundings, but he didn't try to touch me or hold my hand.

His presence and walking beside him was enough, though. He radiated strength and more of that safety I couldn't explain. I didn't want to investigate it too closely or discover what it meant about me or my feelings. But the instinct to trust him definitely existed, and tonight I could lean on that. I'd find my distance again tomorrow.

"When will the club open?" It was easier to start a conversation than stew in my own thoughts, and I was curious when I'd start work again. "Will I get the opportunity to practice? Is there a band?" I didn't know enough about how he was going to run it.

I liked to plan where I'd stand or even where the microphone would be and how I'd interact with the space and the audience. It wasn't always just enough to get up on a stage and just open my mouth. I liked to look polished, like I knew what I was doing up there. My job and professionalism were important to me, and they made me so much more than just a witch for hire.

He opened his mouth to reply, but then he stopped walking suddenly and looked around, a low growl rumbling through his chest. He pulled me closer, and backed us both against the wall, his posture stiffening to something defensive as he kept one arm protectively in front of me.

I glanced around, but there were too many shadows for me to see a threat. Then three large men walked out of the closest alley. I pressed myself tighter against Sebastian, and he wrapped his arm more securely around my waist in response.

Vampires.

Shit, they were local vampires, ones I recognized from Francois' club.

They'd been in The Neutral Zone all the time, causing trouble and generally being raucous, shouting over my singing, and spilling drinks. But they'd done anything Francois wanted without question, so he kept them around.

They'd formed part of his muscle, a persuasive group of men he sent out to solve any problems that cropped up, and they looked like they were still working on the dead king and imprisoned prince's behalf. If they'd gotten that particular memo, they hadn't been able to read it, apparently.

I shuddered to see them here tonight. My entire body screamed with the danger of the situation.

They stopped about ten feet away, but even that distance wasn't enough to make me relax, and Sebastian didn't relax, either. I'd never known him so

tense. He was like a tautly drawn bow.

Even his face was tight with the tension of the situation, his jaw set, but he didn't speak. He just looked at the men, his eyes burning like two fiery coals.

"We're looking for the new king." The one who spoke was gruff, his voice like stones scraping against each other.

"I'm regent for New Orleans in the king's stead. I'm his brother," Sebastian said in reply, his tone calm and confident, even if his stance didn't change from defensive. "If there's an issue in the city you need addressed or solved, you can make an appointment with my office, and we'll talk."

The danger didn't dissipate, despite Sebastian's reasonableness. The air was thick with malintent and threat, and my breaths were shallow. I tried not to move. I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself than was necessary.

I'd always been under Francois's protection before, but perhaps Sebastian's protection didn't mean the same to these guys. My humanity was a weakness I'd never had to consider before. Nevertheless, I was human, vulnerable here—even more so because of Naomi's failed spell—and that fact hadn't escaped me.

The one who'd spoken before laughed loudly. "New Orleans will never accept the Baton Rouge king. You have no position here, no power. Your brother needs to stop overreaching, and you need to go home."

Sebastian hissed quietly, and I flinched at the sudden sound, but his fingers found the hem of my dress, and he stroked against the back of my thigh softly. The touch was a calming one rather than an arousing one, and I relaxed against him a little, trusting him that I'd be all right.

One of the other vampires stepped forward. "Yeah. New Orleans should have a New Orleans king to lead us. Go home." He spat the last words.

But Sebastian merely chuckled. "You must be very young vampires to think in such a territorial fashion. The best vampire to be king is the one currently in the position."

He sounded both scathing and pitying, and I flinched. The tone wouldn't go over well.

"I'll discuss this further with you if you make an appointment," Sebastian continued. "Have a good evening, gentlemen."

His words were a clear dismissal, but the vampires didn't back away or turn around. Instead, they growled and the one who seemed to be the leader

launched forward. Their fingernails had become claws, and their faces were those of monsters. Sebastian acted fast, shoving me out of the way, to the side of him, and leaping forward to meet the attack.

My heart hammered against my ribs as I leaned against the brick wall, my fingernails gripping the rough edge behind me, and I couldn't draw a breath fast enough. The blurred movement was difficult to see in the dark, but there were two loud cracks followed by thuds, and two vampire bodies suddenly littered the ground in front of me. I craned my neck to see better, but I was suddenly whirled away, and the scent of decay and copper blood surrounded me, as arms gripped me across my chest like a vise, my back resting against a wall of muscle.

I squeaked my panic, and every spell I'd ever known rushed from my mind as fast as the breath left my lungs.

Sebastian turned around at the noise I made, and his eyes widened. He held his hands out placatingly. "Look, just let her go. You can have anything you want. I'm the regent. I can offer you property, money, power. A position in the new regime?" His tone was less reasonable now, and there was an edge of panic that hadn't been there before. He'd spoken fast, almost like his words were without thought.

The vampire holding me took a breath, but it was shaky. I glanced up at him, moving my head slowly until I could see him, and his eyes were wide and round, his lips slightly parted. I'd never seen a vampire be afraid, but his boss was dead on the floor in front of him, and the man talking to him could kill him as quickly as look at him.

Before I could take in any more about the situation, he shoved me roughly away, and I landed hard against the cement. He leapt over me, but before both of his boots hit the ground, he fell forward, his head rolling in a separate direction than his body.

An ache echoed through me from my knees to my elbows, and I groaned.

"Kayla." I was lifted quickly from the ground and cradled against Sebastian's chest as he brushed the hair back from my face and examined me with his gaze. "Are you hurt? Did he hurt you? Are you okay? I need to get you home."

Usually, his thoughts were more structured and ordered than this, but he asked rapid-fire questions and left no room for me to reply.

He lowered me slowly to the ground. "I need to call Kyle and Andrews to come pick us up. We need to get back to the house." He drew me against him

as he made his two phone calls, and my breathing steadied as my legs stopped shaking.

Kyle arrived first, seeming to detach from the shadows like they were part of him or he was part of them.

He surveyed the vampires on the ground. “What happened?”

“We were attacked.” Sebastian bit out the words.

“You didn’t come off worse, though.”

I almost laughed at Kyle’s casual tone. There was a note of disrespect in his voice, and it spoke of the relationship between him and Sebastian. Moments later, Sebastian’s car drew up at the curb and Sebastian took my hand to start leading me toward it. He glanced over his shoulder at Kyle.

“I need to get Kayla back to the house and safe. I know this is usually Jason’s territory, but can you handle clean-up then meet me later for a debrief?”

Kyle grunted acknowledgment, and I shuddered. *Clean-ups* were probably handled regularly on the New Orleans streets, but I never wanted to know any more than that. It certainly was never anything Francois had involved me in. I slipped into the back seat and shuffled over, and we rode back to the house in silence, our evening meal... No...our *date* ruined.

SEBASTIAN

I breathed a sigh of relief as the gates rolled closed between my car and the streets of New Orleans. I hadn't expected them to become so unfriendly. Not like this. There had been no warning that anything this blatant was brewing out there. Temple hadn't reported anything, anyway.

Touching my forehead, I tried to wipe the memories away. Kayla was only human, and when that vampire had pinned her against him... I closed my eyes briefly and steadied my heart rate, bringing myself back under control as I tamped down the fear that could quickly spiral into fury.

But I couldn't control it completely, and anger teased all of my senses, turning my vision a dull red, tensing my muscles and straining my voice.

"Go up to your room," I said tersely as soon as we were safely in the house. I needed Kayla safe and to simply obey me, and she didn't argue as she hurried up the stairs, rushing like she was still afraid.

We hadn't spoken at all in the car on the way back.

She hadn't so much as looked my way, as if I was suddenly the bad guy in her head, when all I'd done was protect her. But the fight had awakened my bloodlust, and I'd held myself away from her. She was safe with me... She'd always be safe, but she didn't need to meet the monster inside me when we'd just shared such a lovely evening.

All I'd really wanted was to take her into my arms, but I still couldn't fucking trust myself around her. Not completely. And especially not with that much adrenaline coursing through me.

I grabbed a blood bag from the fridge then stormed to my first-floor office and tried to shake off my lingering fear. I'd never felt like this. Not

even when Leia, Nic's mate, had been taken. Then, I'd been ready for action, primed for rescue, but on the street outside with Kayla in danger, I'd nearly frozen.

Fear had left me impotent to do anything but beg for her life. I'd made offers of things I'd never want to give in order to secure Kayla's safety.

I forced myself to take a deep breath in and release it. She was safe. The knowledge pounded through me like a second heartbeat, the total awareness of another being something I wasn't used to.

I slumped into my desk chair and cradled my head in my hands for a moment. Maybe this was it. Perhaps it was a true sign that Kayla was more to me than simply an attractive witch with usefulness in securing the crown and Nic's rule here.

Maybe she was destined to be more to me. But really? Could I be so lucky to find my mate? Someone equal to me in every way? A woman destined to be mine as surely as I was destined to be hers? Excitement began to replace the fear inside me, sending out little tendrils to jolt my senses. But could I risk being so impulsive again?

I was here to impress Nic, to please him by settling his new territory. Not to follow my own path or try to forge one.

Shit. I'd risked everything by chasing Leia, and I'd been wrong. So fucking wrong.

What if I was wrong this time? What if I let Nic down all over again... Let *myself* down?

I was trying to be sensible this time. Trying to put the brakes on, to take the steady course, to be certain.

For some reason, though, I couldn't get a proper read on Kayla besides scenting occasional emotions from her. I shrugged. I hadn't known many witches. It might have been that her magic blocked me from truly sensing her or from knowing all I wished to know about her. I couldn't even smell if she was a virgin or not... Or I hadn't so far—and that was usually something that would have driven me crazy in an attempt to possess her.

I stopped and took a breath, staring around my office, waiting for my heart rate to settle. I never got like this. *Never*. Not even with Leia. That had been forbidden and I'd taken leave of my senses, but it hadn't come with waves of absolute panic and fear.

Those were both unfamiliar and unwanted.

I needed to call Nic. Maybe if he even came out here, maybe he could tell

if Kayla was a virgin or not—maybe he'd be able to tell more about her than I could. There was something about her tonight... But it was new, and it was confusing, and I didn't damn well trust myself. Nic could help me out with this, right?

But no. A laugh forced itself from my throat. *Kayla* wasn't why I needed Nic here in New Orleans. No. I needed to talk to him about the divided vampires under his rule.

I dialed his number.

"It's late, Sebastian." Nic's opening gambit didn't put me in any mood to apologize.

"Thought you'd like to know about the three vampires that tried to take me out. Went for our witch too. They oppose your rule here, and they can't be the only ones." I was as belligerent as younger brothers ever got. Screw him and his attitude.

"Fuck." The word was curt and abrasive, and sheets rustled in the background as Nic moved. "Let me take this conversation to the office." His voice became muffled and his tone changed—probably covering the mic and telling Leia to go back to sleep.

I waited.

"So, rebels?" He was clear now, and I imagined him running his fingers through his hair as he spoke.

"Yeah, pockets of them anyway." I sounded far too cautious, and I cleared my throat. "I dealt with the ones tonight—they won't present a problem again."

"But do you foresee other..." He paused. "*Problems?*"

His question hung in the air between us. Did I? I'd called him after all—and not simply to tell him I'd killed three vampires in his new territory. Not even I believed confession was *that* good for the soul.

"I think assembling your council here would be a good idea. Call the local captains, bring them in, too. The rogue vampires need to see you have the bigger nests behind you. Present a united front."

"Dammit, Seb." Nic groaned, but his frustration didn't seem entirely aimed at me. Then he sighed. "I'll call and get the jet prepped. Now I have to break this to Leia." He ended the call, and I tossed my phone onto the small leather sofa in the corner of the room.

I stalked away angrily like I could turn my back on Nic by ignoring my phone.

I'd hoped for a more positive interaction than that, and frustration burned through me. "Well, shit."

"I'll say." Kyle walked into my office like he owned the space and took a seat next to my phone, propping his boot-clad feet on the glass-topped coffee table as he set a cardboard box on the floor. "Not sure it's a good idea for him to come out here, though."

I sat in the chair opposite Kyle. Vampire hearing was also a curse when the others in the house could overhear entire phone conversations.

"I think it's a good idea," I said. "It will show unity, reinforce that support for Nic exists here, and we'll build solidarity between Baton Rouge and New Orleans."

That was the plan, anyway.

"Temple was in contact with me while I finished that clean-up. He said there's really only a small faction of vampires like this—the rest seem to be on board with Nic's leadership."

"Maybe the important words there are *seem to be*. Having Nic here will prove how much support he has once and for all and maybe fix some of our issues." I pushed my hand through my hair. Damn, I was tired. "Can we discuss the clean-up tomorrow? I'm exhausted and I have something I need to do before I head to bed."

Kyle nodded, but unusual curiosity filled his gaze. I wasn't usually so vague, but I didn't think anyone else needed to know I had to apologize to Kayla for being short with her when I'd sent her to the safety of her room.

Some things were private, and my uninvestigated feelings for Kayla definitely fell under that definition. They were feelings I didn't feel equipped to explore, but I couldn't ignore how protective I felt...could I?

While the specter of Leia and the mess I'd made in Baton Rouge still lingered in my mind, I needed Nic to see a changed me. And I also needed to make things right with Kayla.

I glanced back at Kyle. "We'll talk more when Nic gets in, too." My words were a dismissal.

He nodded but didn't move right away so I started to leave. Maybe he just needed some time to decompress.

"Hey." As he spoke, I turned around.

He grabbed the box from down near his feet. "This came earlier for you. It's from Nic."

I glanced at it. I didn't have time for extra shit right now. "What the hell

is it?”

But I had a bad feeling about this. Something told me I really wasn't gonna like what was in the box. The last time Nic had received a box, it had a head in it, and oh... fuck.

Kyle shrugged in response to my question, the movement small like he couldn't even be bothered to do that. “I think it's that witch's ashes. Nic said he had them separated out or something and put them in an urn or some shit.” He shook his head. “I don't know. Sentimental bastard. All this for some old New Orleans witch.”

Dread trickled, cold, down my spine. “What was the witch's name?” My throat dried before I spoke the last word. I already goddamn knew her name, but I needed Kyle to confirm it.

Kyle scratched his head. “Nic said, Lettie. Wanted her to have a proper burial, I think. Thinks we can arrange that quietly here.” He looked perplexed.

We didn't usually observe human ceremonies, so Nic's request was certainly an odd one.

I looked at the package, and my chest hollowed. *Lettie was in there.* Lettie was in my house. Dead. Ashes. And Kayla thought she was still out there living some kind of perfect, free life. Fuck.

I hadn't even told Kayla I'd known all along that a New Orleans witch had died in the war with the Ricards, someone who I could name, someone she *absolutely knew*. She'd only just told me tonight how much the witch meant to her. But Nic had said to keep Lettie's death quiet to avoid actions against him from the larger witch population... So now what?

“What the fuck changed Nic's mind about keeping this quiet?” My question was explosive.

But Kyle looked blank. It was his usual expression, only even less interested in the answer.

“You know what?” My voice was stronger when I spoke again, and I nodded in agreement at myself for the decision I'd just made. “Screw my brother. Send the box somewhere else. Mail the ashes to the shop where Leia met her. They'll know better what to do with them than we do.”

And I didn't want to take the chance Kayla might just stumble across them lying around my house. She'd done her share of exploring already, and who knew where she'd go next? It was the fucking worst possible time. I couldn't let Kayla find this box. Not before I'd explained it. She'd never trust

me.

“If you’re sure.” Kyle lifted an eyebrow.

I nodded. “I am. I need to go see Kayla now, though. I don’t have time to think about any of this. Just deal with the ashes.” I waved a dismissive hand. Shit. This was all such a mess. “I just need to get them out of the house.” Out of the house and away from Kayla, like she might somehow sense them.

I walked quickly up the stairs then headed right to the door that led outside so I could cross the bridge to the guest wing. The air outside was still humid but it was taking on just a touch of bite... Something different that said fall was coming. Or trying to come, anyway. I’d be interested to see if New Orleans handled fall any differently than Baton Rouge and how the people partied.

I knocked on Kayla’s bedroom door. I hadn’t known which room she’d chosen, but her jasmine scent was centered here. Jasmine and that damn other fragrance that was playing with my mind and driving me mad. I waited a moment before she opened the door, appearing in front of me in pajama shorts and a strappy tank top. Her hair was even wilder than it had been when we went out, the curls coiling and tumbling over her shoulders, and her face was make-up free.

My cock jerked and I barely suppressed a growl of desire. “Kayla.” I could only manage her name, but it would do as a greeting.

Without even waiting for an invitation, I moved into her room, and she backed up, her eyes widening as her shoulder blades hit the wall behind her. Her cheeks pinked as her eyes brightened, and a different scent overtook the others.

Arousal. I breathed deeply and lust ripped through me. But once again, I had to control myself.

I pressed my palms to the wall on either side of her and leaned in.

“I’m really sorry about before. I never should have let those vampires get near you. And I’m sorry about the way I spoke to you when we got back.” My chest tightened. “I was just... I was afraid.” I stopped talking, unused to making such admissions.

“I forgive you.” Kayla’s voice was no more than a whisper, and she pressed a little closer, tilting her head as half of the distance between us disappeared.

I sucked in a quick breath but followed her lead, closing the remaining distance, and our lips met. Fire burned inside me, and awareness of Kayla

surged through each of my limbs and muscles, putting my entire body on alert as if she was the only important thing in the whole world.

Mate. It was the only word in my head. Not her name, not how beautiful she was. Simply *mate*. One thought to drown out all others. I pressed closer, intensifying the kiss, and her arm curved over my shoulders, drawing me to her body. I lifted her against me, and her legs wrapped around my waist.

I walked us to the bed before collapsing on it, cradling her from the impact and my weight. Our kiss was desperate at first. Hungry. I'd never been so aroused. My cock jutted against my pants, and I yearned to tear her clothes off and claim her with my bite... But I mentally pulled back.

I couldn't move too fast or too far. Kayla might not know the things I did... the things that I *needed* to do. I couldn't scare her.

I kissed her some more, caressing the inside of her mouth with my tongue, moving my lips against hers, worshiping her mouth with mine. Her pajamas stayed on, but I touched her skin everywhere I could reach—running my hands over her shoulders and the sliver of skin at her waistband. I cupped her ass under my palms, my fingers kneading into the soft skin there, and more deeply into the muscle, and she angled herself into my touch.

She sighed softly then moaned, and I moved against her, her sounds driving me a little crazy as I adjusted the angle of my rhythmic thrusting to touch against her in just the right place.

She moaned again, and I grinned against her mouth. Maybe if I moved like this a little longer, I could bring her to orgasm with nothing else. Fully clothed. I wanted to try. Softening my kisses a little, I intensified my movement, striking where she was hottest. And she was wet for me. I could tell.

I worked one hand under her top and pushed at her breast until she gasped. It was hard but not rough enough to bring her pain, and she opened one eye to meet my gaze. Lust burned there, and I pushed a little harder, forcing another gasp from her. I nodded my satisfaction, and she drew closer to me.

Her hips moved, answering my call, nudging against me again and again, until her movements became more rapid, a little jerkier, less controlled. Her breathing quickened, and I didn't let up on my rhythm, keeping it steady and just the same as her mouth moved from mine. She was totally using me, but I was very much on board with that. Man, this was almost a wet dream situation.

A beautiful woman in my arms, using me for her release, seeking her pleasure from me.

And not just any beautiful woman. This was Kayla.

Already, I thought of her as *my* Kayla.

Her legs clamped around my thighs like she was holding me in place as she gasped softly. I waited, my lips hovering over her neck as I breathed her in, torturing myself. I flicked my tongue gently over her pulse as she relaxed in my arms.

I drew back and studied her flushed face and bright eyes. Her eyes held a mix of satisfaction and awe, and knowledge settled deep inside me.

Kayla was a virgin. My virgin.

Her eyes started to close even before I'd disentangled our limbs, and I pressed a kiss to her forehead before standing and drawing the comforter over her to tuck her in.

Kayla

I WOKE WITH A START, still conscious of the wetness between my legs and the residual throbbing of my muscles. I pressed my thighs together, and an answering spike of desire burst through me.

Sebastian had made me feel things no other man had ever made me feel. Things were obviously different between us now — getting physical with a guy was always going to change a relationship—but it felt like more than that, like something inside me had shifted, and now I craved him. I needed to know him better, to understand him. And I didn't know what to make of that.

I'd said no more contracts, no more vampire royals... But now I didn't know if I could say no to this one.

He'd been so gentle with me. Giving me what I needed but not taking anything for himself. He hadn't asked for a thing.

I pressed my thighs together again, relishing the second sting of satisfaction-tinged desire.

I drew the comforter closer around myself—not because I was cold, but because it reminded me of my last awareness of Sebastian the night before. He'd tucked me in. A smile captured my lips at the memory. Hell, it had been

a long time since anyone had actively tucked me in. Maybe I'd been a kid the last time anyone cared that much. I couldn't remember. That tender touch had warmed my heart, and it buoyed me even now.

And that orgasm...I'd touched myself before, but I didn't think anyone else would ever be able to bring me such pleasure the way Sebastian had. His fingers hadn't even sought my flesh. He'd barely touched me at all, and I'd still fallen apart in his arms. My entire body heated at the memory of the noises I'd made as he held me and how I'd strained against him, wanton and waiting for more.

I laughed at myself—part amused, partly embarrassed, even in the privacy of my room. I'd had so many reservations about losing my virginity. Men I wouldn't even think about going near, circumstances where I wouldn't get naked, situations that just didn't feel right...

But I had no such reservations now. Perhaps this ancient vampire could show me everything I wanted to know about sex, including how to enjoy it. That thought excited me, where before the idea of sex had more usually been accompanied by apprehension and the hiding of my status.

And, maybe... Just *perhaps* it was a good deal for being made to stay here in the first place.

I climbed from bed and grabbed my thin robe as I headed out the door on the way to search for coffee. Pausing on the bridge, I inhaled the familiar rich scent emanating from the kitchen below.

Someone had already beaten me to it. Yesterday it was Sebastian... It could be him again. I hurried the rest of the way to the kitchen, stopping short when I burst through the door.

My scream pierced the air as two strange vampires turned to face me.

Shit. Oh, no. Oh, no. They'd accosted us on the street yesterday, and now they were here in his home. I backed away, pressing myself against the wall as I screamed again.

"Sebastian!" His name left my lips as I called out for the only man who could save me.

He was suddenly in front of me, seeming to blur out of thin air to catch me against him. I clung to his solid form, shaking.

"Kayla. Are you okay?" He studied my face, his eyebrows drawn down, his breathing rate elevated.

I lifted my hand and pointed behind him. "Vampires," I whispered.

Sebastian whipped around, his stance both defensive and poised to attack

as he kept me between his back and the wall. Then he chuckled. “Fuck you, Nic.”

There was an answering laugh. “Good morning, Sebastian. Still not the earliest riser, I see.”

“Leia.” Sebastian bowed his head even as he tensed while he spoke the name.

The voice that answered him was gentle and feminine. “Hi, Sebastian.”

I sagged a little in relief, grateful that no one else in the room could see me. Sebastian must have known I needed reassurance, though, because he reached behind himself to take my hand and draw me back to his side, where he kept me pressed against him.

“Let me get you some coffee,” he murmured as he led me to one of the remaining bar stools in the room.

The other male vampire in the room watched me closely, and my skin prickled under his scrutiny. There was something about him. I couldn’t... Who was he again? What had Sebastian called him? I’d panicked. I should have been listening.

“You’re the witch who worked for Émile and Francois?” He shifted in his seat, appearing to make himself comfortable.

Neither of the new vampires had a mug of coffee in front of them, which almost made me wonder why they’d brewed any at all. I cast a glance at Sebastian, curious how much he wanted me to say.

But I hadn’t answered before the vampire spoke again.

“Are you capable of warding and making places secure—by any means?”

I swallowed. The unspoken question was clearly how comfortable I was with darker magics. “I was contracted to the House of Ricard and now to the new king and...” I nodded at Sebastian. “And his regent.”

“*Contracted* to Sebastian? He’s tied you up in paperwork?” The man’s eyebrow lifted, and he glanced toward the woman in the seat next to him. “Well, well. Seems brothers are never too different after all. Right, Sebastian?”

A growl rumbled through Sebastian’s chest at the comment, but I seemed to have missed the point. He set my coffee down next to me as I fought to keep my mouth closed.

Nic? The name Sebastian had used came back to me now.

Brother?

Holy hell. I was in the presence of the new New Orleans king.

And I was wearing pajamas.

I reached for my coffee so I had something else to do that wasn't gaping as Sebastian began to speak. "It's not like that, Nic. I don't own her through someone else's debt."

His voice was light but with an undercurrent of steel, like something wasn't up for discussion. Nic twisted his lips in a way that suggested he didn't entirely believe his brother or he wasn't wholly happy with the direction the conversation had taken.

"All the best things start with a contract." The female vampire—the queen?—laughed after she spoke, and Sebastian growled softly again. She leaned around her husband and focused on me. "A contract is exactly how Nic got me to fall in love with him."

Nic shook his head but pressed a tender kiss to her cheek. Then he returned his focus to Sebastian. "So, what happened last night? Why the emergency phone call?"

"There are some vampires here in New Orleans who want to be ruled by a New Orleans vampire, that's all." Sebastian shrugged, and my stomach roiled.

That was all? We'd both been attacked and nearly killed because of a tiny territory dispute that Sebastian wasn't making a big deal out of even though his brother seemed to have made a trip out here over it?

I pushed my feelings aside. I had no place in vampire politics. I'd hated them before, and I couldn't see this royal family being any different. But I still clutched my mug tighter and raised it to my lips again. I needed the caffeine to get me through this impromptu breakfast meeting.

Nic nodded. "I made some calls on the way in. I've organized a meeting at the club on grand opening night. The captains of the larger nests, like you suggested."

"Okay. I'm holding a soft opening over the next few nights, while the final details are put in place so everything should be running smoothly by then. The new Dupont king will present himself very well."

Nic grinned, reaching for Leia's hand as he spoke. "I have no doubt." Then he switched his attention from his brother to me so abruptly that I nearly fell off the chair. "You'll be present at the meeting, too."

It wasn't even a question. It was pretty much a royal decree.

"Why?" I was still a nobody. Maybe questioning the king wasn't the most sensible thing I'd ever done, but I didn't understand, and I was still running

low on the caffeine front.

It didn't seem to bother him, though. "You're the Dupont witch now. I need everyone to know it." Then he stood. "Right. Which room are Leia and I in? We're going to lie down before I take her to see the sights. The last time we were here, the only thing I seemed to do was kill vampires. New Orleans must be the city for that."

"You're in the room farthest from mine," Sebastian said as I absorbed the vampire king's words.

I looked between him and his brother. These weren't ordinary men. They were ancient vampires, used to killing almost without impunity, used to taking out enemies who got in their way. What had I gotten myself into?

After Nic and Leia left the room, Leia full of smiles and promises to see me later, Sebastian made himself at home behind the kitchen counter, opening cupboards and drawers.

"Can I make you something to eat?" He glanced up before opening the fridge and shaking his head. Then he laughed. "Who am I kidding? Chef has made yet more beignets. I think he was secretly hoping Leia might want to sample one again." He produced a plate of perfect little pastries. "You won't let him down again today, will you?" He hesitated. "Of course, if you prefer something else, I'm sure he'd be glad to oblige by making anything that you'd like to eat."

Something in Sebastian's manner relaxed me, almost making me feel at home. And again, that thing that had shifted between us claimed my attention. But *what* had changed? A bit of dry humping shouldn't have connected us in any way. I wasn't a complete innocent. I'd certainly toured a couple of bases with other guys and walked away with no regrets and no lingering attachments.

It wasn't even sex after all. Just a really fucking good orgasm. I inhaled a sharp breath as the memory of it hit me all over again. Then I shook my head and breathed out slowly.

Before I'd even decided I was going to ask him, I was asking him. "Sebastian?"

"Yes?" He stopped what he was doing, giving me his full attention.

"I..." I hesitated then shook my head and plowed on. If I didn't ask, I wouldn't know. "I feel like something changed between us last night. Do you know what happened?"

He blinked and his expression smoothed out to one of complete

neutrality. “How about I get you those beignets? Don’t want you going hungry on top of the shock of finding vampires in the kitchen this morning.” He reached for a smaller plate and moved two of the golden creations onto it before setting it in front of me. “These really are the best around; Leia insists so.” He didn’t look at me, but words kept spilling from his mouth.

Words unrelated to the question I’d asked him.

“Sebastian.” Somehow, I made his name both a plea and a warning. I’d been brave enough to ask the question. I needed him to be brave enough to answer.

He rested his fists on the counter and bowed his head, his shoulders broad and tense in that posture. I watched him for a minute or more, but he’d gone still in that way only vampires could. Finally, I climbed off my stool and walked around the island to him.

“Sebastian.” I placed my hand on his arm and he turned to me before I pushed him against the counter. His eyes shone with lust as I positioned him where I wanted him and pressed both palms against his chest, moving against him. Of course, he’d allowed me to move him since I couldn’t have overpowered any vampire who didn’t want me to.

And speaking of want... I wanted this man, but I needed him to answer the question. He knew something I didn’t. Maybe it had been that way from the very beginning, when we first met at the club or when he decided I’d be the ideal house guest.

“Kayla.” He dropped his forehead to mine and my name sounded like it had been tortured from him.

“Just tell me,” I whispered. What the hell could be so bad even a vampire wouldn’t voice it?

“I... I can’t.” Uncharacteristic confusion made his eyes swirl darker blue, almost as if sadness was a physical condition.

“You can...” I was still wheedling, still trying to coax the answer out of him.

Whatever it was, I’d asked the right question, apparently, because something obviously *had* changed, and it had changed between us. It had shifted last night.

Last night after...Fuck. No. Naomi.

I backed away, no longer wanting the answer to my question. *Of course*, something had changed between us. Naomi had revealed my virginity to the vampire population at large, and Sebastian and I had been...really close.

Really *fucking* close. Unbidden, the feelings he'd created in me rose again, and I gasped at the intensity of them.

I took another step away, wanting to ram my question back down my throat, leaving it unasked and unanswered. I knew what had changed between us now. He knew I was a virgin, and I didn't want him to say it.

Then, with the worst timing, his eyes cleared, becoming serene, and his low voice was calm too. "You're my mate." The words dropped like stones into the silence of the kitchen.

I froze, my entire body turning cold like ice had filled me. If I moved, I'd crack and fall apart in a million shards.

It was worse than I'd feared. He didn't just know I was a virgin. He was delusional and thought I was his mate, which was obviously impossible.

But the word *mate* was stuck in my head, just echoing continuously, and I shook my head. No. Just no.

There was no fucking way that the first night my virginity was out there a vampire had claimed me. Lettie hadn't hidden me, protected me, for this long for me to ruin it all with one lust-filled encounter.

I fought the urge to run away from him. "What?" I still hadn't worked through the *no* but *what* was a close second. Really, there were no other words. Just... What? "How?" I tried again, finding another word. "No. No way." I reverted to my original response and wrapped my arms across my middle, holding myself together, holding my emotions in. "A human can't be a vampire's mate." And who the fuck knew if a witch could? I was nothing else but a witch. That part was what really mattered.

He was wrong. He had to be absolutely wrong, no question about it. Forget delusional, he was somewhere beyond that. Francois territory. I'd seen this shit before, and it wasn't something I was looking to return to.

Only he shook his head as his blue eyes became pools of sadness again. "But they are. Humans are vampire mates."

I shook my head too, denying his words. Lettie had always protected me from the vampires. She always told me that my virginity was a beacon to them, that they would be drawn to it, that it made me special; but never this.

She would have told me this.

Even so, Sebastian nodded. "It's true, Kayla. True vampire mates start out as human. Leia was human before Nic turned her."

Bile clawed at my throat, and I turned and ran, but it was too late. I'd already heard what he'd said, and I couldn't get the words out of my head.

They echoed louder and louder as I slammed my bedroom door closed and turned the key in the lock.

Lettie would have told me. She should have fucking told me. But instead, she'd let me hang around vampires, be contracted to them, owe them.

How had this happened?

Was this truly what had changed between Sebastian and me? Was this what I felt?

I pressed my hand to my chest as I sank to the floor, my back against my bedroom door.

No, not *my* bedroom door. *The* bedroom door of a guest room where I didn't belong.

Where another vampire owned me by contract and now worse—where he thought he'd own me forever.

Coming here had been a mistake.

A big fucking mistake.

SEBASTIAN

I stood at the railing outside my office and surveyed Nightfall's grand opening night. The floor below was a mass of bodies bumping and grinding. The sight of people so close reminded me of moving against Kayla and bringing her pleasure.

I'd barely seen her the past two days. After she rejected me and ran away from the kitchen, it had seemed... prudent to allow her some space. Even I knew humans liked to *process* these days. But I missed her.

What if she was pulling away? Worse, what if I lost her completely?

Now that I'd found my mate, would I survive without her?

Mate.

It was such a tiny word, but it meant so much. The woman I didn't want to be without. She couldn't reject me now—not when I'd just found her, just become certain of what had drawn me to her from that very first moment.

This was bigger than anything I'd thought about Leia. I didn't want to control myself now. I wanted to submit to instinct and claim Kayla as mine.

But we had an added complication.

She might even try to get out of her contract—the business part.

And that would be a big fucking mess to explain to Nic.

Drawing a deep breath, I looked out over the club again. Everything was perfect, the midnight decoration bringing the night of New Orleans inside — but at the same time, we'd stayed classy and relevant. The contractors had carried out a triumph of a reconstruction. This place wasn't recognizable at all as The Neutral Zone.

My gaze strayed to the empty stage, and my heart ached for the lack of

Kayla again. The music playing in the background was dreamy and bluesy, but it just wasn't the same as seeing Kayla, or hearing her sing. I had no doubt she had a beautiful voice.

I deliberately hadn't ridden with her in the car. I didn't watch any rehearsals and hadn't even waited nearby while she got herself ready in the dressing room downstairs. There was too great of a chance that having me so close would upset her all over again before she went up on stage, and I couldn't risk that.

The door opened, and I hurried down the stairs as Nic and Leia entered.

"Very nice." Leia looked around the newly remodeled nightclub and even managed an approving whistle.

She'd seen it when the place was The Neutral Zone, and by all accounts, her experience hadn't been entirely positive. Her approval tonight was important, especially since it would carry a lot of weight with Nic.

Nic clapped me on the shoulder. "Looks good."

His praise meant more than I could say but I shrugged it off in front of him, rather than let him see how proud his approval made me. Holding my arm out, I gestured toward the VIP balcony, which was one of the exclusive areas of the club, directly opposite my office.

"If you'll just come this way," I murmured.

I led the way up the stairs, which were exactly like the other set that led to the offices, to the tables where Aimée and Tomas were already waiting, along with Kyle, Jason, and Temple. The only person missing was Ben, and that was because Nic had him watching over The Pour House again.

That poor guy. He always seemed to be doing all the work and never getting to any of the gatherings to see us.

Aimée stood and approached our brother and Leia. She threw her arms around Leia, and I chuckled as she pretty much ignored Nic. Then again, vampire siblings were old news when we'd spent centuries together.

"Leia! You look so well." Aimée managed an almost squeal as she tugged Leia closer.

Leia nodded and surrendered to her hug. I'd nearly forgotten that Aimée had sat with Leia through her turning, and although Nic hadn't told me much about it—not that I could exactly blame him—I'd gathered it hadn't been pretty.

Leia had suffered. It had been a risky time for Nic's future.

Aimée tucked Leia's hand at the crook of her elbow and almost dragged

her to an empty seat. Nic chuckled and followed the two of them, and I cast my glance over everyone, checking whose drinks needed to be refilled and whether the VIP servers were doing their jobs properly.

Temple was hanging out at the back of the group by himself, but that was okay. He always did loiter more like a Victorian pickpocket than a deadly vampire. His home was the shadows, and we all knew that.

It was rare of him even to attend a group gathering like this since he didn't like too close of an association or affiliation with any one group. Not in public, anyway.

He had his finger in too many pies and he took too many risks to make a careless move or reveal a friendship where he shouldn't have had one.

I drew up a chair next to Nic. "What do you all think of the changes?" Okay, so I was mostly after an ego stroke. I was proud of the changes myself, but it always pleased me to hear that other people agreed.

Just as they started to nod and Nic parted his lips to reply, the lights in the club dimmed, and I all but flung myself to the railing to watch Kayla step onto the stage. It was a stage I'd created just for her so that all eyes would be on her when she performed, although now I regretted that slightly.

The only eyes I wanted on her were mine, the only gaze appreciating her. That was my right as her mate. I curled my hands into fists before relaxing them as I watched her.

She was perfect.

The crowd below fell silent, and I grew still, my focus solely on Kayla. She was like a beacon burning just for me.

She wore a silver gown, and it almost twinkled under the spotlights, as if all the starlight had gathered to wrap her in perfection. The dress hugged her, showcasing every one of her curves — the same curves I'd molded under my hands the other night. I almost palmed my cock, which made itself known as soon as my thoughts wandered over Kayla's body in place of my hands, and offered it an apology because now really wasn't the time for it to demand attention. So, I focused on Kayla again, determined to remember this moment.

When she turned to greet the people all around the stage, her back was bare, and I longed to touch the smooth skin there, to feel it under my fingertips. Her dark hair was crafted into wide curls but they were swept off to one side, exposing half of her neck, and her pulse beat wildly as she took several deep breaths.

My gums ached as my fangs descended, and I didn't dare look at Nic. He'd know each of my thoughts. I breathed deeply, mimicking Kayla's calming breaths. Her scent carried to me across the club, the allure of sweet-smelling jasmine washing over me like a wave. Ignoring my dick was no longer an option. I discreetly rearranged myself, hoping the shadowy interior of Nightfall provided enough cover, especially if all eyes were on Kayla.

Pride warred with jealousy over the fact that everyone was watching her and seeing the same beautiful woman as me. I wanted to leap to her and carry her away to a place where it would be just the two of us. Where she would only exist for me as I wanted to exist for her.

But then Kayla's music started, and she glanced down before taking one final breath and beginning to sing. Her voice soared through the club, warming the atmosphere, and capturing me as if she'd bewitched me.

I'd never heard her sing before, and now it was all I wanted to do. Well, besides touching her and bringing her pleasure again, perhaps.

"Incredible," I whispered as the music changed rhythm and couples switched to slow dancing instead of grinding frenziedly against each other, their lips meeting in soft kisses.

It wasn't the song we'd agreed on when she'd submitted her choice for my approval, but this felt more intimate. Kayla sang of home and the pain of not finding her place anymore. It was like another layer of her spell, like there was a message in her music meant just for me. I leaned against the railing, completely captivated by my mate and her song.

When the last note of her set died away, the end surprised me. The entire club erupted in applause, and Kayla sashayed from the stage to the sound of cheering and wolf whistles.

I exhaled a long breath as I watched her disappear through the black curtains that led to the dressing room. Then I jumped as Nic spoke just behind me.

"Looks like you have it bad for the singing witch, brother." His nostrils flared as he spoke, and a shiver of panic rolled through me.

Nic wasn't the only other vampire in this club, so he wasn't the only one who'd know Kayla's status.

But I played it cool, and I stayed exactly as I was, casually leaning against the railing, neither confirming nor denying his words.

He spoke again, amusement coloring his tone. "Maybe I should warn you, though, that the performance was quite the siren's song, and if you don't go

to her now, you almost certainly won't be the first in line."

I turned abruptly at his words, and he jerked his chin in the direction of the stairs.

"Go."

Behind him, Leia offered me a thumbs-up, her smile broad. "You've got this," she murmured.

I almost blurred down the stairs without another thought. I certainly didn't care to wait around for the opinions of the other guys in the VIP area. What they believed, or didn't believe, had no bearing on my behavior at all.

Then I stood in front of her dressing room, my hand poised to knock, and I almost second-guessed myself. What if she still didn't want to see me? What if this door remained locked to me, too? Not that a lock would ever truly stop me, but if it brought Kayla comfort to think it could keep me away from her, I was content to let her retain that belief.

I knocked softly, even though I wanted nothing more than to demand to be let in. I wanted to make Kayla mine. She was mine already, but I wanted everyone to know it.

When they knew, I could protect her and ensure her safety. I could love her and treat her exactly as she deserved to be treated. She'd be a princess, but she'd be *my* queen. The most important thing in my life.

The door opened just a fraction and Kayla peered out. It was like I was visiting her bedroom to apologize all over again, except this time she was wearing her gown of stars. I smiled at her, and her mouth relaxed in return. Then I gave the door a gentle push and her eyes widened like she hadn't actually intended to let me in. Or hadn't thought that far, anyway.

But she stepped back and I followed her into her dressing room, inhaling the scent of her perfume, and beneath that, the scent of her skin, and her status as my mate, and, yes...her arousal again. Her heart rate picked up as I brushed against her.

"Your singing was magical," I said. "You're going to be a hit once everyone hears about this performance."

All of New Orleans would hear. She'd left a lot of happy customers out there—people who'd return to hear her again, then tell enough of their friends that we'd be inundated with requests for membership.

She smiled uncertainly.

"You really were amazing," I assured her, my hand on her elbow.

I wanted to do so much more than talk about business, but I didn't want

to push her too hard. I wanted her to accept me in her space first.

“I...” She hesitated and pushed her mass of hair over her shoulder, to her back, loosening the ribbon that held it in place. “I hope it was okay that I changed the last song. That just felt right before I went on.”

I nodded, watching her. She hadn’t finished talking — there was more to this story.

“After we were...we were in the kitchen, I wrote it when I went to my room.” She met my gaze almost shyly. “I didn’t know what to think about all the...all the stuff you said.”

She twisted her fingers together.

“I get it.” I tucked one of her curls behind her ear. Couldn’t help myself. Needed to reach out and touch part of her. Any part of her, and her hair seemed the safest. “I shouldn’t have just blurted it out like that. It was unrefined of me.” And *unrefined* was an understatement. It was like I was a schoolboy with a crush all over again, desperate to tell a girl I liked her.

“I have no idea what it means,” she continued. “Like it’s not logical at all, right?”

She turned and paced farther into her dressing room, so I clicked the door closed behind me before twisting the lock into place and facing her once more. She spoke while gesturing with her hands, like she was merely thinking out loud rather than holding a conversation with me.

“None of it even makes sense. Like vampire... witch. No. Nope. Nuh-uh.” She shook her head vehemently then whirled to face me. “But after the other night... Shit. I can’t stop thinking about you.” Her cheeks reddened, a slow blush rising from her neck. “Your touch on my body, your lips on mine.” She pressed the tip of her forefinger fleetingly to her lower lip. “It’s like you’re the one forbidden thing I can’t actually live without.”

I was in front of her in a second, her chin between my thumb and forefinger as I lowered my mouth to hers. Her lips were soft and sweet, and she grinned against me as I flicked my tongue over them.

I maneuvered her toward the chaise lounge in the corner of her dressing room, and gently laid her down on it. Climbing over her, I placed my legs on either side of hers so as to keep my weight from pressing on her. I kissed her again, stroking her arms and her waist like I had the other night, then allowed my fingers to tease along her neckline and trace her delicate collarbone.

Then I dropped my hand right to the hem of her gown, where it had ridden up to the middle of her thigh and slipped my fingers beneath the

fabric, tracing upward over her stockings until I touched a garter.

I froze before pulling my lips from hers. My excitement had just reached a whole new level.

“Kayla,” I whispered as I nuzzled the side of her cheek with my nose. “Kayla, are you sure you want to continue?”

If she wanted to stop, we needed to stop now — and if she didn’t, I needed to hear she was okay with moving forward.

Kayla

HE KEPT TALKING, but it was like that adult voice in Charlie Brown. Just burbling I couldn’t understand. Hell, I didn’t want to understand it. I wanted his hands back on me, I wanted his lips on mine. I wanted his cock inside me. He was hard again. I could feel it against my thigh.

I’d done a lot of thinking in the past few days without him. and I’d been lonely without him near or where I couldn’t see him. It was still his house, and his presence was everywhere. It was almost like he resonated inside me sometimes, but I missed him. I’d wanted to hear him talk, see him smile.

Against my better sense, I longed for his company. I wanted him.

So now that we were in agreement—he wanted me and I wanted him—he was wasting time talking about moving forward. What the hell did I have to do? Roll out a red carpet? Get a welcome mat? Fucking issue a written invitation?

I pressed closer against him. “I’m ready.” Then I reconsidered. No. Not reconsidered. There was just some other stuff I should probably tell him. “I’ve never... I mean, I’ve done *stuff* but just never...” Shit. Now *I* was the one talking crap and delaying when I wanted to do all the things.

Of course, he knew I was a virgin—Naomi had reversed the spell. Probably every vampire and his dog knew. But I felt like I had to say the words. If Sebastian was asking for my consent, I owed it to him to tell him what this was for me.

He chuckled softly. “I know. I’ve known since the last time when we... were close.”

“I... thought you might.”

Sebastian's words had killed the last of my hope that maybe Naomi had been wrong about the spell. It really wasn't enough then that I wasn't experienced, but my vagina was actually and actively signaling its not-yet-used status.

Sebastian chuckled again and nuzzled the side of my neck, sending a thrill of longing through me. "It's a vampire thing. I could smell it on you as part of your scent."

"What?" I threaded my fingers into his hair. "I smelled like a virgin?" I wrinkled my nose as I considered that state of affairs. "Virgins have a *smell*?"

"Only to vampires." He ran a hand down my hip and his voice became smooth and silky. "And it's something I cherish very much." He stroked me again and I angled toward him, making an offering of myself. "It's an honor for me to be your first." He pressed his lips to my neck, punctuating his words with warm kisses that I was sure would leave the marks of his attention on my skin if I looked in a mirror. "And it means even more to me as your mate."

"Huh." I drew away from him a little, and he paused over me, no longer touching my skin but not moving away. "What exactly does being a mate mean? I've heard the term before, but I'm not sure I actually know what it means to me."

He shifted his weight to the side slightly and drew me closer to him, his hold like he was treasuring me. "It's..." He paused, and I watched him think. "It's a life bond."

"But...but vampires are immortal," I whispered. "That's a very long life." He nodded. "It's a very serious bond."

"And I'm human." That was the part I struggled with the most. The only vampire mates I'd ever heard of had been vampire pairs.

"As I said, Leia was also human." He made a slight choking sound over his next words. "It was Nic's honor to turn his true mate so that she could live eternally at his side."

"Turn her? Did she agree?" Turning was never a good thing in my experience. The people of New Orleans had feared becoming part of Émile's army or one of Francois's failed attempts to find his queen.

I knew that better than most. I'd met too many of those failed attempts. Both before and after their demises.

Sebastian nodded. "Not only did she agree, she advocated for it. She had her own reasons. An agenda that... It's not really my story to tell." He said

that last part in a rush. “But they’re very happy now. Almost sickeningly so.” He chuckled, the sound almost rueful as he made the acknowledgment. “But finally, I think I understand that.”

“But how does turning work? Leia just became a vampire because she and Nic... wanted it?” I did know some of how it worked, but I wanted Sebastian’s confirmation. And the information beyond that of rumor and horror story.

He pulled his mouth to one side as he seemed to think it over for a moment. “It’s a blood exchange. The exchange part is very important because — as you might have seen from the pets of some vampires, when a vampire only takes blood from a human without turning them, they become a thrall. They’re literally blood slaves and can become almost mindless in pursuit of that repeated high. They’re addicted to vampire venom.” He laughed softly again. “That sounds much more awful than it is, the venom part. But turning is a subject I’ve read a lot on recently, especially since Leia joined us and also since making decisions about Nightfall and what sort of behaviors to allow within its walls.”

“Do all mates have to turn?” Not that I was admitting I was even a mate, but it was a question I needed to know the answer to.

“Not at all. It’s a choice for the mated pair.” But pain flashed over his face, darkening his gaze to that visceral, limitless sadness for a moment. “That being said, sex will always strengthen a mate bond, but it won’t cement it. It won’t turn a mated pair into true mates.”

I turned my head, staring at the door. Sometimes it was easier to talk without him watching. Well, most of the time because he seemed to see right to my soul as if I was baring myself in front of him and had no secrets left at all. I wasn’t comfortable with that.

“I like the idea of sex.” I shrugged awkwardly, but there was no point in not being honest. I was lying half-underneath the man after all. It wasn’t exactly like I’d hidden any of my general desires or my singular desire for him. “But I need to think about the other things you’ve said.”

He stroked his finger down my cheek, redirecting my attention back to him. “It’s not something we’d do here anyway. It’s a special moment that takes time and shouldn’t be rushed. It’s about intimacy and dedication.” He sighed. “But our meeting with Nic and the other vampires is soon...”

“Oh...” I couldn’t keep the disappointment from the word. I’d thought maybe... I didn’t want to even finish my thought as it would probably result

in disappointment.

Sebastian grinned wickedly. “I didn’t say we didn’t have time to do *anything*.” He pushed my skirt up around my waist as he slid down my body, and I squeezed my eyes closed at the tearing sound of fabric.

Cool air circulated between my legs and over my clit as my panties disappeared.

“Sorry,” Sebastian murmured, but I didn’t care about that tiny scrap of cloth anymore.

I especially didn’t care when he pressed a kiss to the inside of my thigh and his tongue touched my skin.

I simply *wanted*.

Holy fuck, I wanted. It had never been like this, and I strained toward him, offering myself with increasingly wild abandon even now as I waited for him to touch me again. It wasn’t a long wait as he kissed up my thigh from my knee to where I wanted him most.

He rolled my clit gently under his thumb, sending sparks of desire through me. I closed my eyes, and color bloomed behind my eyelids as I lifted my hips from the chaise, seeking his touch. I wanted it harder, I wanted more.

I hadn’t ever been able to think about sex. Not really. Not with being an outcast and really only mixing with vampires. And I shouldn’t have been thinking about sex now. Especially not with a vampire, but my body was doing all of my thinking for me.

And the answer was very definitely yes.

Yes, to everything. Yes, to touches. Yes, to hands. Yes, to mouths.

All the yeses.

He rolled my clit again, and I pressed my top teeth into my lower lip to try to stifle my groan, but he chuckled when he heard me anyway.

“You like that.” He did it again, and I made the same noise. “Yeah, you like that.”

He continued for a little while, his ministrations unhurried, like he was exploring me, *enjoying* me, and I relaxed at his obvious pleasure.

My muscles began to contract, and my breathing quickened, but his touch slowed and became fainter. I groaned and pushed my hips forward again, seeking the same pressure before his breath skated over my skin and I froze.

He replaced his thumb with his tongue and licked against me. I moaned softly and writhed, caught between the chaise and Sebastian, my eyes still

closed as I focused on the sensation teasing heat through me. Then he sucked my clit into his mouth and I bucked against him, my hand finding his hair and making a fist around the soft strands.

I didn't know what I wanted. To keep him right there, maybe. Or to let him move and show me all the things he could do. I wanted all the things. I pressed my body closer to him as his finger nudged inside me, stroking over a sensitive place I didn't even know I had as his tongue and mouth continued the dedicated assault on my clit.

He was a magician. Not a vampire. Not a killer.

Just a magic man capable of conjuring inexplicable pleasure.

All of my nerve endings seemed to be gathered between my legs. I sighed and drew breath at the same time, gasping my pleasure as I relaxed under Sebastian's attention. His movements changed and he flicked his tongue against me, gently but insistently until my pleasure rolled into a wave ready to crash over me and sweep me away.

My thighs tensed and my hand tightened in his hair, as I sucked one last breath before everything hung motionless for a moment. I held that final breath in my chest, drawing that moment out as my body pulsed around the finger he still had buried inside me.

He pressed more soft kisses to me, easing me down after my orgasm, and I waited for my heart rate to settle.

No one had ever done that to me before, and when Sebastian looked at me, there was a glint of satisfaction in his gaze like he probably knew.

SEBASTIAN

Kayla consumed all my thoughts. I'd left her to change out of her gown and freshen up while I went to the underground room I'd discovered when I took over The Neutral Zone.

Émile had obviously used a powerful witch to install and ward it against the water level, but I'd transformed it into a bunker worthy of confidential business meetings, still with the signature Nightfall branding I wanted to project.

No expense had been spared down here, from the leather chairs around the chrome and glass meeting table to the technology fitted in the room. We had screens on the walls, or the table itself would show the same information if people wished to swipe through for themselves.

I was proud of what I'd created here, and of how the space represented Nic and his rule.

Nic was already in his seat, at the head of the table, Kyle at his right and Jason to his left. Temple had taken up a guard-like position in a shadowed corner, but he was probably happier overhearing information as much as reading it for himself. It seemed his usual way to collect it, anyway. As much as it suited him to fade away into the darkness for this meeting.

Kyle wrinkled his nose. "Wet dog," he murmured at the same time as there was a knock on the door.

"Now, now." Nic's tone was light amusement rather than reprimand. "Conri is an ally and only here as a courtesy, to show the wolves are with us."

Kyle only shook his head as he walked to answer the door, but no matter

his words, he'd behave. He had a lot of respect for Nic and the deals he'd brokered to keep Baton Rouge and now New Orleans safe.

Kyle would do almost anything Nic said, the only exception seeming to be if he decided Nic's instructions contradicted Nic's own safety.

He stepped aside to let Conri into the room, and Conri glanced at him as though he could read every single one of Kyle's thoughts. The door was soundproof, so he certainly hadn't heard the comment.

"Vampire," he said in cursory greeting as he passed Kyle by.

Kyle merely nodded an acknowledgment.

"Conri." Nic stood and offered his hand. "It's good to see you again. I trust things are satisfactory with our arrangement?"

Conri nodded. "Yes. The land is just what we needed." But he didn't expand.

I slid a look at Jason, he probably knew more about what the wolves had actually done with the land Nic had gifted them in return for their loyalty and continued alliance. He dealt with Conri's beta nearly daily as they worked out the finer details of wolves and vampires living and operating in such a small space.

And now we had witches in our mix, too. Things were growing more complicated by the day.

Conri sat at the table, choosing the seat next to Kyle, then averting his gaze and ginning a little when Kyle tensed next to him. "Is Leia well?" Conri directed his question at Nic.

He seemed to have taken a special interest in Leia since Nic first approached him for help to keep her safe from Francois. Nic had once told me that he believed Conri had a backstory that maybe even included a human of his own, but Nic had never probed further.

He just didn't want that much involvement with the wolves.

Vampires and wolves rarely did business. We were uneasy bedfellows at the best of times. The types of arrangements Nic had entered into when he brokered Leia's safety were almost unheard of. We coexisted alongside each other but rarely interacted. It was one of those *never the twain shall meet* situations, and generally we were all happy with that.

We encouraged it even.

Except Nic hadn't, and we were all still adjusting to that idea.

There was a second knock at the door, and I answered it this time. Kyle looked as though he wanted to stand up, but he was penned between Nic and

Conri now. Three vampire captains, representing the largest nests in the wider New Orleans area, filed into the room, and Temple shifted, drawing attention to his corner.

He growled, his fangs bared.

“Well, well, Temple. Fancy finding the traitor in our midst here of all places.” The first vampire who’d entered the room cut Temple a scathing glance and flashed his own fangs in response to seeing Temple’s.

Before Temple could respond, Nic stood again, welcoming the vampires to the meeting as he had Conri. Before I could close the door behind the last vampire, the delicate scent of jasmine filled the corridor and Kayla appeared.

“Am I on time?” she whispered.

“Always,” I replied and took her hand to draw her farther into the room.

Nic nodded his approval as I sat her next to me at the foot of the table, so Nic and I were now matching halves. The vampires who’d just joined us sat in the empty chairs, and the meeting began.

“Thank you all for coming, gentlemen.” Nic looked at each of the New Orleans area captains as he took control of his meeting. There could be no doubt he was king here. “This is merely a formality so we can get to know each other a little and you can start to understand how a Dupont reign might change things in New Orleans. As well as which things might stay essentially the same for each of you.” He offered that part with an almost reassuring smile.

The vampire who’d spoken to Temple scoffed. “There will be no changes, so I’m not worried.”

Nic lifted an eyebrow. “Oh, I think you might find me a very different sort of king than Émile.” He gestured toward me. “And Sebastian will certainly be a very different regent than Francois.”

A second vampire barked a harsh laugh. He gestured to himself and the other two captains. “We were never under the control of Francois, and we don’t intend to be under the control of Baton Rouge.”

The third vampire spoke then. “We operate as separate factions. Allied, but not the same. We do our own thing.”

Temple growled again then coughed, the word *bullshit* clearly underneath the noise.

Nic half turned, glancing at Temple over his shoulder as Temple moved from the shadows to take up a position directly behind Nic’s chair.

“Something you want to say, Temple?” Nic sounded only mildly

interested, but he had a lot of respect for Temple's local knowledge, even if it had been given grudgingly to start with.

"You bet there is." Temple's voice was part-muffled by his fangs, still, and Nic shot him a glance of caution.

My brother had already said he didn't want any trouble at this meeting. It was more about making additional allies and influencing people than it was about drawing battle lines. At least, that was the plan. I had no doubt we'd leave the meeting room three New Orleans captains fewer if they started anything, because they wouldn't start anything that Nic wouldn't finish. Permanently.

"I know exactly who these three are," Temple said as he pointed to each of the captains in turn. "Gabriel, Gian Luca, and Magnus. Three of Francois's hired hitmen, essentially. They might show no loyalty to Francois now, but they would never have bitten the hand that fed them."

"Really?" Nic raised his hand as the one Temple had called Magnus would have spoken, cutting Magnus off before he could utter a word. "Go on, Temple. What does a hired hitman for a vampire do?"

Nic had a point. It wasn't like vampires needed to hire anyone to do our dirty work. We were all killing machines.

Next to me, Kayla shivered, and I reached automatically for her hand, drawing it to my thigh under the table. She was the only human in here, and that made her vulnerable.

I hadn't appreciated everything Nic had felt for Leia before, all the worry he must have carried with him, but I did now. I didn't dare look at Kayla in case I gave away her importance and marked her as a target to these unknown vampires, but I needed her to be a lot less fragile, and soon. Especially with the way Temple was reacting to the guys we'd brought to the meeting.

Temple narrowed his eyes as he looked at the vampire captains. "They accepted contracts to destroy humans so they could feed openly. They took what they wanted then destroyed the humans who'd witnessed them. And it was usually someone who'd gotten in Francois's way or otherwise irritated the little prince." Temple scoffed out the last two words.

The captains began to shake their heads, issuing a loud chorus of disagreement, but Conri spoke over them.

"You know, I've heard about you." His mellow voice filled the space, although he still sounded pretty casual, his drawl unhurried. "Temple's right about who you are and what you do." But he didn't add any more to the

conversation—merely his support for Temple’s information—and Kayla squeezed my leg at the confirmation of what the men had done to humans.

“Please.” The one Temple had named as Gian Luca spread his arms, a placating grin on his face. “That’s not at all what we are.”

“Maybe at one point,” Gabriel interrupted, “but no longer. You understand how things can change, right?” He addressed Nic directly, but his smile was more sneaky than anything else.

“Yes, after all,” Magnus said, “Francois is gone. We no longer do his bidding.”

Nic leaned back in his chair. “So, gentlemen. You admit you did his bidding? You weren’t quite as *separate* as you would have liked me to believe when you first spoke?”

But it was a trap. Even I could see that, and the vampire captains exchanged nervous glances. Either they could admit to having been under the control of Francois, which Nic would now assume, or that they were loose cannons who ran around illegally killing and feeding on humans.

Nic watched them. He knew it was a question they couldn’t really answer. Conri watched them too, but he seemed more curious than manipulative. His position here was more useful than I’d expected. I needed to liaise with Jason more on the things the beta told him, because the wolves had obviously heard things I hadn’t.

“You have to believe—” Gian Luca started, but Nic shook his head.

“I believe only those loyal to me.” If a direct conflict arose, he’d back Temple and Conri before ever believing these foreign vampires. He owed them nothing. “But thank you for coming.” He stood, effectively dismissing them. “I’ll be in touch soon and we can make a plan for the way forward. In the meantime, I suggest none of you eat anyone else.” The pleasant smile he gave them didn’t override his words of warning.

And neither did it suggest they could stay. The meeting was over, Nic had learned what he had planned to learn, and we all knew where we stood—and that there was a continued need to be careful. Nic still had enemies out there or those who weren’t loyal to him and didn’t plan to be.

These captains had loyalty only to themselves.

And while I understood that, it wasn’t something we could allow to continue if we wanted to stabilize New Orleans. None of us had properly taken into account how poorly Francois had run his territory and it looked as though we were going to pay the price now.

I sighed as Jason opened the door for them to leave and led them away from the meeting room — hopefully right back up the stairs and out of my club before they tainted it with their presence. After they cleared the room and the door closed behind them, Kayla sighed with relief and I tugged her against me, wrapping my arm around her to hold her close.

“I didn’t know they were doing that here,” I muttered. But I should have known. To ensure the people of New Orleans were adequately protected, it was absolutely my job to know.

She shrugged. “Francois did a lot of things.”

The fact she didn’t follow that statement up told me how many things Francois had probably done and what kind—unspeakable things. Things everyone who lived here would probably rather forget.

Before I could reply, Nic spoke.

“Okay. Looks like we have a little more trouble here than our previous intel has discovered. Temple...”

Jason walked back into the room and made a face. “Well, *they* were delightful and unexpected.”

Nic waved him back to his seat. “As I was saying, Temple and Jason, I want you in charge of tracking those three. They’ve caused trouble in the past, they’re used to causing trouble, and they’re not going to stop just because I’m the new king or Sebastian has become regent. We don’t know how much danger they pose, though, and that’s what I need you to find out.”

I nodded. I should have been on top of this. I should have known about vampires in New Orleans who were killing humans. I glanced at Kayla. She could easily have been their prey and then I would never have met my mate.

“It’s not the last time we’ll see them,” Conri said as he eyed the door thoughtfully, and Temple nodded.

“I’ll get some of my best men on it. See if we can weed out the entire organization, so you can exert your power here for sure and we can put the lot of them down. A power display might be just what those who are having doubts about the change of leadership needs.” Temple slipped his phone from his pocket and seemed to melt effortlessly back into the shadows at the corner of the room.

Nic stood. “Okay, I think we’re done here for now. I’m going to head back to the house and fill Leia in on the meeting.”

He walked from the room, Kyle and Jason in his wake.

“Bye, then.” Conri offered them an antagonistically cheery wave before

turning to me. “If I can be of any more help, Sebastian, let me know. I don’t like the thought of those three stooges killing unrepentantly on our turf.”

I almost growled at the way he said *our* turf, but this was a deal Nic had brokered, and I couldn’t get territorial over a land divide that had helped us win the war against Francois. “Thanks.” I forced out the courteous word instead and held out my hand.

He shook it then left the room, and I turned to Kayla.

“You ready to go?”

She nodded. “Yeah. That was...something else.”

“Yeah. Come on, we’ll go the quiet way.” I called my driver and led Kayla out the back entrance up to the club, through the utility hallways and out of the plain door to the parking lot.

Nic had already gone, and Kyle’s bike was no longer there either, but my driver turned the corner into the parking lot as we stepped forward.

“Look, I know we could walk...”

But Kayla shook her head. “No, this fine.” Her stomach gurgled and she laughed quietly. “I’m kind of hungry, though. Maybe I’ll need a beignet when we get back.”

I opened the car door and gestured for her to climb in ahead of me. “I think I can do better than that. Beignets are really very small, after all.”

“I thought you’d have to stay and finish opening night.” She looked directly at me as she buckled up her seatbelt.

“It’s why I have staff.” I shrugged. “And the staff does what I say.”

To prove my point, I leaned forward a little. “Andrews?”

My driver half turned, his attention on me over his shoulder.

“Nearest twenty-four-hour diner, please.” I sat back, a little smug as I prepared to meet my mate’s need for food.

I didn’t know the name of any restaurants in New Orleans, yet—at least not the type I’d directed Andrews to find just now.

“Sir?” Andrews sounded confused. He probably didn’t know anywhere either.

I turned to Kayla. “Where do you like to go?” I withheld a sigh, though. I’d wanted to look in control here, like I knew what I was doing.

“Uhh...” She paused for a moment, her finger tapping her chin. “Probably Manny’s? I’m glad I changed, or we’d be way overdressed.”

I chuckled. Clothing was the last thing that mattered if I was meeting the basic needs of my mate. “Can you tell Andrews where that is?”

But Andrews had already programmed the address into the GPS and he pulled the car smoothly out of the parking lot.

The ride there was beautiful torture. It was a joy to have Kayla in the same small space as me again, but her scent filled my nose and my chest and I longed to take her and make her mine.

Andrews drew right up to the entrance, like we were some sort of VIP guests, before taking the car to find a parking spot. Kayla laughed as we entered, and the humans in there looked up at us before returning their disinterested faces to their meals. I was really no one in these circles, which suited me for tonight, when I wanted Kayla to have my full attention.

She ordered the greasiest items on the menu, and I followed suit. I'd been vampire long enough now that I could keep up appearances by picking at human food and drink.

Her face shone with an excitement I couldn't place.

"You look very happy." My statement was ill-concealed probing, really. "Is the food here that good?"

She laughed. "It's not bad," she conceded, tilting her head as she appeared to consider my question. "But I think I'm still buzzing from Nightfall, you know? That was... It was pretty wow. I've never had an audience react like that before." She shrugged and grinned. "Nerve-wracking, though. And I hope I can pull it off again."

"You definitely can." I didn't have one doubt at all. Kayla would be a huge draw for Nightfall.

She blushed, turning her face that pretty shade of pink and glanced down as the server put our plates in front of us.

We both waited for the server to retreat, but Kayla didn't speak again right away, and I wanted to hear her voice.

"When did you get into singing?" I gestured toward her with one of my cheese fries. It was a surprisingly palatable meal. Maybe I'd have to talk to Chef. Especially if we had any more human visitors.

She shrugged. "I almost don't remember." Then she stopped as the server dropped by the table and poured us some extra coffee.

Somewhere, a tinny radio played a song I couldn't identify, and cooks shouted back and forth in the kitchen. It was a quiet night in the diner, and the only server on duty had large shadows beneath her eyes.

"I don't think I really *got into* singing," Kayla said. "I just don't recall a time I haven't done it. My mom sang a lot too. When I was growing up, our

house was always full of music and song.” Her eyes took on a faraway look. “I miss her. I miss both of them.”

I reached and covered her hand with mine. “Would you like to tell me about your parents?”

She hesitated.

“Or we can just change the subject?” I still wasn’t great at reading human emotions. I’d failed spectacularly with Leia, after all.

“No...no, that would be nice. Talking about them, I mean. I don’t get to tell many people about them these days, and they seem so far away, now—especially as I can’t leave New Orleans.” Kayla offered me a smile.

“You can tell me.” I couldn’t offer her a ticket out of here, but I could listen, and I liked listening.

“Well, Mom and Dad are both witches.” She paused and laughed a little. “Better witches than me. More sensible, anyway. They were *good* and they didn’t sign any contracts that kept them here. Didn’t fall out with any covens, either.”

She looked down and played with one of her fries, swiping it back and forth through the cheese, loading it up. I watched its progress to her mouth, my entire body taut like a coiled spring, my focus on her lips as they parted. She bit down suddenly on her fry, and I shivered at the sight of her teeth.

I’d never wanted a human to bite me before, but I did now. A human who wanted me to turn her. My human.

My mate.

“Your parents are welcome to visit. I can assure their safe passage through the city.” I was surprised at how much urgency I’d put into my words.

I’d meant them as a genuine offer, but I really would do anything for Kayla. If I needed to offer her parents a permanent guard so they could visit, I’d do it in a heartbeat.

But Kayla waved her hand. “No.” Her voice was a quiet, almost a whisper. “They’ve had enough of other supernaturals, of this city, and they’re happy now.” She shrugged. “The politics here got really hard to deal with.”

I nodded. I could only imagine. Whatever Kayla had navigated had led to her signing Francois’s contract and dabbling ever deeper in darker arts. She offered me a tired smile as she popped a fry into her mouth, and I changed the subject away from something that seemed to make her a little sad.

“Who did you get your powers from?”

She tilted her head as she finished chewing. “Maybe both of them, I guess? I have an affinity for plants and herbs... any spells or incantations that include nature like that. That might be from Mom. But I definitely get my spell work ability from Dad. There’s something almost scientific about constructing a good spell. It’s the difference between cooking and baking, perhaps, and understanding the way the instructions and method matters. If magic is the art, the spell is the science, and I enjoy both sides. Even if it occasionally leads me in a darker direction than most of my peers would like. Maybe even darker than I’d like most days.”

She looked away and swallowed then peeked over her shoulder like she was checking that we were alone.

“I’ve tried to never push myself too far, though.” She shuddered. “I’ve seen other witches lose themselves completely in the shadows and I like my humanity too much. I stay in the gray area.” She chuckled softly. “At least I hope I do. It all comes back to consequences. Every action has one, right?”

My pause lasted a beat too long after she finished talking, but I’d been lost in the sound of her voice. “I... What did you do for Francois?” I fumbled the start of the question but smoothed it out and hoped she didn’t notice.

Around her, I was pretty much reduced to a schoolboy much of the time. I forgot all the sensible words in my head no matter how much I wanted to impress her.

She was quiet for longer this time, and I held my breath. Maybe that had been a question too far?

“I guess I can trust you, right?” She smiled wryly as she pushed her plate away and leaned back in the cracked vinyl booth that creaked when she moved. “Vampires are unlikely to kill anyone they think is their mate?”

My chest contracted at the brief uncertainty in her voice, and I took her hand in mine. “I will protect your life with my own. Always.” I nodded along with the words, trying to underscore how much I meant them.

She drew a deep breath and blew a shaky one out. “I did some necromancy for him to start with, but I don’t like to talk about that.” She shuddered and her face paled.

I didn’t push. We’d all seen Francois’s garden, and I could only imagine how much more Kayla had seen during her time serving him.

“Then I was supposed to be making the spells to cure the madness from the dead man’s blood.” She shook her head, her mouth a tight line of sudden fury. “But I wouldn’t have spat on Francois if he was on fire. I gave him

small doses of a potion that I'd created that helped alleviate the symptoms, but only slightly. So he didn't suspect I wasn't curing him, and he needed to keep me close to keep feeling better." She shrugged, the movement delicate. "Maybe it wasn't Francois's fault, but Émile killed my sister a long time ago. I don't even remember her. That's part of the reason my parents eventually left and why they won't return. They'd be horrified if they knew I signed a contract with the Ricards. I'm glad they didn't see it, but I... I made a mistake." She drew her fingertips across the table surface like she was finding patterns in the fake grain. "I thought I'd found understanding at first, but then understanding turned to threats and then I just needed protection, I guess." She choked the words out before looking at me, vulnerability bringing a fresh light to her eyes. "But I was fighting the system with the potion. It was all I could do."

"I... I was sent here as punishment." I blurted my confession before I even thought about saying the words, and her eyes widened. "Nic exiled me here because I betrayed him in one of the worst possible ways." This time, I was the one checking behind me for eavesdroppers before I continued. "There was a time when Leia asked me to turn her into a vampire."

I met Kayla's gaze so she understood this was the important part.

"And even though Leia was Nic's mate, I would have done it. I would have stolen that moment from my brother because I was blind to what it meant. It would have been a theft from both of them ultimately." I sucked in a breath. "But I know now. I've learned so much more now that I've found you. I can see all the mistakes I nearly made, the ones I did make, and I know why they're wrong. I know how I must have made Nic feel... How merciful my brother truly is.

"The thing is, my exile, the punishment I'm supposed to be enduring here so I can seek my redemption... It doesn't feel like a punishment anymore. I feel like everything was meant to be. I came to New Orleans, and I met you. My mate. I can't regret the events that led me here."

KAYLA

We'd finished the rest of our meal quietly before climbing back into Sebastian's car. I didn't feel as safe on the streets of New Orleans as I used to. Even when I was Francois and Émile's witch, I didn't feel like such a target as I did now, walking around with Sebastian when he was known in the vampire community as the new regent.

It made sense that some of those vampires were going to test him.

The power exchange, the new king, had destabilized things and revealed a side of New Orleans that I'd never seen before. I'd have preferred to live on in ignorance and not be aware of my human frailty. The memory of the vampires in the meeting flitted through my mind and I shuddered, turning away from the car window in case I saw too deeply into the shadows I'd been reminded existed.

As it had turned out, Sebastian had his own shadows. I turned his words over in my mind. I would never have guessed that he'd been sent here, to such an important position, in disgrace. Maybe the king of Baton Rouge really was merciful in ways that I'd never expected vampires to be.

Certainly Émile and Francois had never been one bit merciful. I'd seen flashes of something more in Francois, but even his humor had enjoyed a cruel streak. Never anything soft. Émile had almost been cloaked in darkness. He'd had something inside him, a power that spoke of something truly ancient. It made almost no sense that he'd been out here in New Orleans, enduring stasis, when he'd always exuded the potential for more. That was a power that had been seductive to me.

I returned my thoughts to Sebastian and his confession. He'd tried to turn

another woman. Misguidedly, perhaps, but why did that feel like something of a betrayal?

I all but scoffed at myself. Betrayal? After I hadn't even known what vampire mates really were and what that meant? While I still wasn't sure I even wanted to be one.

Except now it was like the word *mate* had burrowed under my skin and that was what I was. As if I'd never truly been anything else.

"You okay?" Sebastian rested his hand on my thigh, and I concentrated on the touch, drawing strength from it, glad of the distraction from my heavy thoughts.

"Yeah." I blew out a breath as we drove through the gate to Sebastian's house—to safety.

It was funny how quickly my prison had started to feel like the safest place I could be, and it was a relief when the gate rolled shut to keep the monsters of my city out. Technically, Sebastian was also one of those monsters, but I gazed at him and saw all he truly was. He really wasn't a monster at all. His blue eyes captured me and held me close. I longed to push my fingers through his hair, but I curled them into fists instead.

He said I was his mate, but he didn't feel like mine to touch so casually. Not yet anyway.

Although I loved his kisses and the way my body longed for him.

Sliding from the car felt almost like a dream, as if I was far away and distant. Sebastian held my hand as he led me through the house to the foot of the stairs. He turned to me and cupped my face between his palms then looked at me like he was studying every last detail.

His eyes darkened. "Kayla," he murmured.

My lips parted but I had nothing to say. I was helpless under his gaze. I only had desire for his touch, for his kiss.

His lips were soft when they touched mine. Gentle and not demanding at all. But I wanted. I longed for him, and I wound my arms around his neck, pressing closer. His hands rested on my hips, their presence scorching my skin through my jeans like he'd branded me. Like I'd only ever be his.

As if he heard my thoughts, he kissed me with greater longing, his tongue sweeping into my mouth as he claimed it as his own, and I responded, pushing my body against his as heat raced through me.

None of the men who'd kissed me in the past had ever made me feel this way. Sebastian moved his hands until one rested on the small of my back and

one rested on the curve of my ass, and I wanted to hook my leg over his hip in response. Shit, I wanted to climb the man like a tree right here in his hallway.

He chuckled against my mouth. “Would you like to take this upstairs?”

I hesitated. I knew what we’d do upstairs, behind closed doors, and as much as I wanted all of Sebastian, this was a decision I’d considered in the past and always selected *no* as my default answer.

But my head nodded like my body was suddenly in charge of all the decision-making rather than my brain, and Sebastian kissed me again, my body almost singing at a decision well made in response.

My heart beat wildly as we walked up the stairs side by side, and he tugged me gently to the left as we reached the top, toward his private quarters rather than the way to the guest rooms. I swallowed. We were really doing this. *I* was doing this. And yes, I knew I could say no at any time, and I couldn’t imagine Sebastian not respecting that, but I really didn’t want to. I wanted everything that was on offer to me. As much as anxiety trickled quietly through me at the thought of being in his bed.

But he only needed to look at me for my whole being to feel like it was on fire. Something in his gaze turned my insides molten. I itched with a kind of need I’d never known before, and I needed Sebastian to soothe that.

The anxiety bled away.

Everything was right in my world. More right than it had ever been.

Losing my virginity had always seemed like a big deal before. Like I was giving myself to someone. That was how I’d been brought up, anyway. As if it was some sort of huge honor for the guy, a special gift I could only give once. A gift I had never wanted anyone to take from me. I was glad Lettie had hidden it away, making it a secret that only I knew about. No one could want it then.

But it was different with Sebastian. It was right.

Maybe my virginity was a gift. One I wanted to give to this man.

He opened the third door we came to and revealed a beautiful room that could have been part of a photo shoot for a homes and garden magazine. Seriously, something about how the better half lived in Louisiana.

A four-poster bed stood against the far wall, and the sheer white drapes fastened neatly to each post would be perfect for creating the illusion of privacy or for billowing in a light breeze blowing through the balcony doors. The rest of the room was all clean lines and masculine in the kind of elegant

way that embodied Sebastian.

His scent hung in the air here, too. That sea salt, slightly wild aroma that tickled my nose and excited my senses.

I tried to look around and take everything in without being too nosy or curious, but the bed kept drawing my attention. It was perfectly made, but in my mind, the sheets and covers were already rumpled by our passion, and I shivered at the image.

Sebastian wrapped his arms around me. “Cold?”

I shook my head.

“Afraid?”

I shook my head again then reconsidered. “Little nervous, maybe?”

He pressed a kiss to the side of my neck, and I leaned away, granting him more access to my skin. His tongue flicked against me. “It’s normal to be nervous,” he whispered. “But I won’t hurt you, I promise. I’ll be gentle. I want to treasure you, Kayla.”

And I trusted him.

I swayed against him a little and steadied myself with my hands on his hips. He tugged my T-shirt from where it was partially tucked into my jeans and ran his fingers over my skin, sending another shiver of anticipation through me.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered against me, almost like I wasn’t supposed to hear those words, like they were just for him. Then he kissed my lips again before pulling back. “In all the years I’ve existed, I’ve never met anyone like you before. No one has ever evoked these feelings in me. You were made for me.”

His earnest words melted me, and I relaxed against him, eliminating all space between us as his touch roamed my back. Our kiss started off sweetly again, even though I was hungry for him, but I didn’t push, choosing to let him take the lead.

I wanted him to want me, to choose me. And I wanted him to show me that with the way he kissed me.

Without even lifting his head, he walked slowly backward, moving toward the bed, and drawing me with him like it was the most natural thing in the world. My lips clung to his as he lowered me to the sheets.

“You okay?” He checked in with me and I nodded.

“Yes.”

He kissed me again, this time a lazier, softer kiss, his tongue lightly

sweeping into my mouth as we breathed the same breath. It was all so gentle. I barely noticed as he inched my T-shirt up my torso, until his palm cupped my breast over my bra.

My breath hitched. I wanted his touch on me. All over me. He reached behind me and unhooked my bra in one smooth move.

“Must have been on the easy setting,” I murmured.

He chuckled. “Didn’t realize there were different levels of difficulty.” But then his attention wandered and my back arched as he played his tongue around my nipple before sucking it into this mouth.

His right thumb strummed my other nipple and I stretched into his ministrations, my movements languid and relaxed. I’d never been this comfortable with a man. He seemed to worship me, and my body issues melted away as his every touch and glance told me that he found me attractive.

The waistband of my jeans loosened as he flicked the button open. “Also on the easy setting, I see,” he whispered, and I grinned.

“Apparently so.”

He skimmed his palm from my breasts and across my abdomen, and I sucked in a breath as his touch tickled against my skin.

“Sorry.” He pressed a kiss close to my left hip. Then he trailed his tongue across me, and I squirmed a little at the heat he drew through my core.

He pushed at my jeans as he moved until he bared all of me to him. “Beautiful,” he murmured, and I squeezed my eyes shut before forcing myself to open them again.

The blankets rustled as he shifted, lying down between my thighs.

“What are you doing?” I sounded a little panicked, even as my hand flew to his head, my fingers tangling into his soft hair.

“This.” His voice was quiet and he dropped a kiss to my inner thigh.

“I remember this...” I spoke breathily and gasped a little as his mouth moved higher.

He probed gently at my opening.

“Sebastian,” I whispered. “I want to touch you too. This can’t be all about me.”

“We have plenty of time.” He shifted again and his mouth was on me, his tongue flicking over my clit, his fingertips pressing into my thighs as he held me in place.

I arched my back and gasped as I pressed closer to his lips. “Yes.” The

exclamation escaped me on the quietest of whispers, but Sebastian must have heard because he repeated the same action, and I moaned louder.

But this was wrong. “Not like this.”

He lifted his head. “Hm?”

“I want you inside me.”

He grinned. “This is all preparation.” He sucked on my clit again, and heat spiraled right through me, catching me by surprise.

I sucked in another breath as his tongue danced over me and my hips began to move, setting a rhythm for Sebastian to follow. He seemed to know exactly what I wanted, and he didn’t let up, instead continuing his velvet attack on my body.

My muscles contracted and an orgasm crashed over me, stealing all of my thoughts with its suddenness. A breath caught in my chest, and I struggled to draw a new one as my mouth opened, and I squeezed my eyes tighter shut, not wanting to know if he was looking at me while I was as vulnerable as I could possibly be in front of him.

This almost seemed too personal to share, and I squirmed as he made me gasp again. “Sebastian.” I breathed his name. “Oh, Sebastian. Please.”

He lifted his head and looked at me before quickly taking off his clothes and sliding up beside me, pressing his warm skin to mine.

I turned to him, my mouth already seeking his, and he answered my silent pleas, kissing me as he positioned his body above mine.

“Are you sure?”

Even now, he gave me the option like I could still change my mind and he would be just fine with that. But I didn’t want him to stop.

I nodded. “Please.” Then I blinked. “But no biting. Please don’t bite me.” I didn’t want my first sexual experience to become something about vampires.

But even then, after my plea, I kept turning my neck to him like I was offering myself. I was so conflicted. My body acted like it was following some sort of primal instinct, and that urge confused my mind.

Then I tensed as he nudged forward, and the head of his cock bumped gently against my entrance.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “I’ll go slow.”

He pressed gently inside me, and my body stretched to accommodate him. This was different than anything anyone had done before, and I sighed as he filled me. He drew out a little then pushed back in and I sighed again.

Each time he pushed back inside me, he went a little farther until he held completely still.

“More.” I pressed my palm to his cheek.

He sucked in a breath and nodded. “You feel incredible. I just needed a moment.” He turned his face from me before burying it against my neck. “You smell incredible too.” His soft breath fanned over my skin as he began to move in and out of me in a more regular rhythm.

I met each of his thrusts, pushing back as he pushed against me, my breath forced from me with each drive forward. Electricity sizzled through me, and I felt truly alive for the first time, like this man had woken me from a long sleep. Like I hadn’t even been present in my own life before.

He changed his angle and I moaned as he touched that same part of me no one had found before. He’d always known where it was. Then he did it again. And again. Until my thoughts spun away, and my insides all coiled tightly.

When everything released, I pulsed around him and he groaned as his cock twitched inside me, filling me with heat.

For a moment, he remained above me, his weight on his forearms before he leaned down and captured my lips again, the kiss this time soft and yearning rather than being demanding and passionate. Then he shifted to his side, gathering me against him as he did.

I snuggled against his warm skin, not the least bit self-conscious as he smoothed his hand over my shoulder and upper arm.

I’d never felt so cherished.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He shifted to look down at me. I couldn’t see him, and I didn’t look up but I could sense his gaze. “What are you thanking me for?”

I shrugged. “That. Thank you.”

He was quiet for a moment then sucked in a breath, but I didn’t let him say whatever he’d been about to. I just wanted him to let my appreciation stand.

“Was it hard not to bite me?” Even now, there was a degree of tension in his body, like he was holding himself under control, and I’d always connected vampires with biting. *Always*.

But Sebastian hadn’t done that. Even when he’d pressed his face right to my neck and both a sharp prick of fear and an equal amount of illicit excitement had darted through me, he hadn’t bitten.

“Yes.” His word was a quiet whisper. Almost a confession. “Not biting

you was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I wanted..." He stroked his hand over me again like the movement was a distraction from his thoughts. "I have an instinctive need to further our mate bond... when you're ready, I want to turn you."

I stilled. It was like someone saying they loved me when I still wasn't sure. I couldn't return the sentiment. What Sebastian spoke of was forever.

Only it was *really* forever. It was immortal... it was vampire...and it wouldn't end.

I loved the closeness between us. The bond was already something like I'd never felt. Both emotional and physical. I'd never been so close to another person before, never felt so connected.

It was almost otherworldly.

But I didn't say anything about that. Something about having too many feelings left me raw and exposed. Vulnerable in a way that didn't sit quite right.

I swallowed as my chest hollowed out. I didn't want to think about this right now. I couldn't. My vulnerability disturbed me in a way I hadn't expected. I was usually so self-assured and so strong, depending only on myself, but here I was actively seeking Sebastian's approval.

I wanted him to like me the way I liked him, regardless of what he said about all this mate stuff. I wanted his approval and his affection for more than some sort of biological imperative his kind followed.

It was all a bit too much. I couldn't process it right after...right after that incredible experience I'd just had with Sebastian. I needed something normal...Something from the rest of my life to balance me. And I'd been too self-absorbed since I moved into Sebastian's home and reclaimed my singing job at the club.

"I need to see my friend Naomi," I said as I shifted to a more comfortable position in Sebastian's hold. "Lettie is still missing, and I haven't checked in with Naomi in a while. I don't want her to think I'm missing too. It would probably be a good idea to go back to my apartment and collect a few more things." I looked up at him so I could see his profile.

His jaw was set, but he nodded. "I have a lot of meetings at the club tomorrow, but I don't think you should be walking around alone. Not right now, anyway. You should take Kyle with you."

Having protection with me didn't seem like any great hardship, and while Kyle wasn't exactly great company, I didn't doubt his ability to keep me safe.

He was a pretty scary guy. Definitely the strong, silent type, and he always looked like he might know his way around more than one type of weapon.

“I can agree to that.”

Sebastian shot me the kind of look that suggested Kyle would be my companion whether I agreed it or not, but all he said was, “Okay. I’ll talk to him in the morning.”

“Maybe when we’re both done for the day, we can have dinner together again?” I wanted him to know I wasn’t drawing away from him.

I just needed longer to get my head around the idea of *forever*. It was a foreign concept to me. Humans didn’t live forever. We lived moment to moment, and what Sebastian wanted was so big, so *vast* that I couldn’t even imagine it.

Not yet anyway.

KAYLA

Kyle was quiet in the car. He'd fought Sebastian on having the driver with us, but Sebastian had insisted. I'd pretended not to listen to their tense exchange, but averting my gaze probably hadn't fooled anyone.

Sebastian seemed to believe that having Andrews with us offered another layer of protection. Kyle had argued that he didn't need anyone else, that he could do his job just fine on his own.

I didn't care. I just wanted Sebastian and Kyle to stop whatever dick-measuring contest they were having because I had places to go and people to see, and they were slowing me down.

I believed in Kyle and his abilities, but I wasn't in a rush to argue against Sebastian on this.

"Well, gentlemen." I'd stood up, trying to make sure my smile was as syrupy as possible. "If you'll both excuse me, I still need to go out."

Kyle had moved then, striding silently through the door, and getting into the backseat of the car.

Sebastian dropped a kiss to my lips. "Be careful, please," he murmured.

I'd nodded and waved before I joined Kyle and we rolled out of Sebastian's gilded cage of a house, and here we now sat, the silence strained between us.

We pulled up outside Lettie's shop, almost shepherding milling tourists out of our way so we could get right to the spot Andrews apparently wanted to be. I turned to Kyle in time to see confusion or concern play across his features. Then he grimaced, pulling his mouth into a tight line, before the moment passed and he wore the same empty but hard expression as always.

Kyle had a face that didn't invite questions or really any kind of conversation, even if he'd managed the occasional smile, the scar that zig-zagged its way through his close-cropped hair would probably put off even the most curious and intrepid of conversationalists.

But any flash of emotion was so unexpected that I couldn't help myself. "Is something wrong?"

He didn't reply, choosing instead to open the car door and get out before walking around and waiting for me. Whatever he'd thought of, it clearly wasn't any sort of danger, otherwise he wouldn't be acting like nothing was wrong, so I followed him.

We walked into the shop, and Naomi turned from stocking one of the shelves.

I grinned. "Hey, I know it's been a while, but—"

Her face crumpled and her eyes filled with tears as she rushed to close the distance between us and threw herself into my arms. I held her for a moment until she raised her head and looked at Kyle, where he stood behind me, looming over both of us like a shadow.

She yanked away from me and her face twisted into something ugly as she pointed an accusatory finger at Kyle. "What the hell are you doing here? How dare you set foot inside this shop?"

"Whoa... Hey, slow down, Nay-Nay. What's going on?" I placed my hand on her cheek as I tried to get her to focus on me. "Calm down. I'm here now. What's wrong?"

She turned away from Kyle. "It's Lettie." She heaved a breath.

"What about Lettie? You know where she is?" I looked around like the old witch might step out from the back, a handful of crystals clutched to her chest.

"She's..." Naomi looked at me, her eyes wide and glazed with unshed tears. "She's dead, Kayla. Francois killed her as part of his war games with Nicolas Dupont." She pointed to an unassuming clay urn sitting on the counter. "The regent just sent her ashes over."

I stared at the urn, hardly processing anything Naomi had just said until one phrase filtered through my thoughts. *The regent*. "What? Sebastian, he... he knew?"

Sebastian had known this whole time that Lettie was dead, and he didn't tell me? I'd discussed Lettie with him. He's had ample opportunity to say something. How could he betray me like this? I'd thought there was a bond

between us but... maybe not. Maybe being a vampire mate was actually nothing special at all—it certainly didn't appear to extend to being completely open and honest. My chest hollowed and nausea crawled up my throat.

I swallowed against it and turned to Kyle.

He said nothing and looked over the top of my head, focusing right through the wall of the store, his whole being like a statue.

“How did Sebastian get Lettie's ashes?” My voice was tight and hard, controlled so I didn't cry. I wasn't about to look weak for that man.

“That's a question for Sebastian.” His face didn't give away even one hint of emotion, and disgust rolled through me as I looked away.

Fucking vampires.

“You stay here and guard the door.” I delivered the instruction with as much scathing disgust as I could before I swept both Naomi and myself through the store and toward the back, where we could talk without me having to look at a damn vampire. I didn't even want to breathe the same air as him. He was polluting my space.

Naomi grabbed the urn as we passed by and hugged it to her chest. I glanced at it before averting my gaze. Lettie hadn't escaped her contract after all.

Damn Francois.

Damn Sebastian.

I couldn't trust any of them.

Damn fucking contracts with vampires. Tears pricked at my eyes again and I blinked rapidly. I couldn't cry right now. There was still too much to be mad about without wasting my time being sad. That could come later.

And so could worry for my own situation. If Lettie hadn't escaped, maybe that meant that none of us could.

I pulled the curtain shut behind us and Naomi put the urn in the center of the table where Lettie had unpacked all of her deliveries. I'd watched her unpack deliveries more times than I could count, her movements always methodical and sure. I hadn't known a moment when Lettie wasn't in control — of this shop, of herself, of her destiny.

I glanced around the back room again. It was like an old-fashioned kitchen back here and herbs hung from hooks, their fragrances filling the room. I breathed deeply. My awareness of Lettie was strongest here. It was where she had created a lot of her spells, and it was as if that repeated use of

power had ingrained her within the very walls.

A sob lodged in my throat, but I swallowed it back down. I still didn't have time for emotion when there were practicalities to deal with.

"We should say a blessing for Lettie." I rested my hand on the urn, trying to feel her energy emanating from there, trying to find any sense of her at all in the clay pot. "I'm just so... so horrified. I don't understand."

Naomi shook her head. "It really doesn't make any sense." She drew up a stepstool to stand on and reached for one of the books from a wooden shelf that ran around the room.

The book was old and many of the pages weren't even fastened to the spine anymore.

"What sort of thing should we say?" When she flipped the cover open, dust filled the air, and we both coughed then softly laughed. Obviously, Lettie hadn't used this one in a while.

"I don't think we need a book, Nay," I said. Then I brought my hands together and bowed my head to the urn.

Naomi did the same.

"Namaste," I whispered before I started to recite the familiar words. "My soul honors your soul. I honor the place in you where the entire universe resides. I honor the light, love, truth, beauty and peace within you, because it is also within in me. In sharing these things, we are united, we are the same, we are one."

Naomi joined in and at the end we remained silent.

"Lettie would want to be in the bayou, I think." I touched the urn again, reverence and respect in my heart. "Her people were from there. I'll come back tomorrow and we can do a proper ceremony." It was the least I could do for her, for all the years she'd guided and protected me.

Naomi nodded. "Okay."

"Are you okay still managing the store?" I looked around and drew in a breath of the herb and patchouli smell that had always permeated the whole place. I couldn't imagine not visiting here anymore. What if Naomi said no to running things permanently now that we knew Lettie was truly gone? Maybe I could take it on. I didn't want Lettie's legacy and influence in New Orleans to simply fade away.

Naomi nodded like she couldn't imagine doing anything else. There wasn't even a moment of hesitation from her. I blew out a soft breath of relief as I collected some ingredients from Lettie's neatly labeled jars and also

grabbed one of my oldest grimoires from the shelf. I'd always kept it here with Lettie's but now it felt like I needed it home with me again.

I pressed a kiss to Naomi's cheek before drawing back and meeting her gaze. "I promise I'll be back in the morning, and we can drive out there together, okay?"

She nodded and I gave her upper arm a gentle squeeze.

"I'm so sorry, Naomi. I never imagined..." I stopped and gestured uselessly, but there wasn't anything more I could do or say so I slipped the book and herbs into my canvas shopping tote and returned to Kyle. "Let's go." I didn't meet his gaze, and I kept my words curt. I still didn't want to waste my time on him. I hadn't even thought about forgiving any of them yet.

As I led the way from the tiny shop and the bell above the door tinkled a familiar farewell, a second car drew to a stop outside and Sebastian climbed from the driver's side.

Of course he did. Because my day was already so fucking swell. He looked at me pleadingly, and I narrowed my eyes at him in response.

"You knew and you didn't tell me." I kept my voice low and serious. "You knew I was worried. I spoke about her disappearance with you, and you didn't say a word. Lettie was like a grandmother to every witch in New Orleans. And she meant so much more than that to me. We've lost someone who really mattered to our community, and I've lost the one person who protected me unconditionally." I stopped and took a couple of breaths, pushing back a wave of emotion. "I thought she'd escaped. You *knew* I thought she'd escaped. I thought she was free." The unfairness of it all rolled over me again.

I looked away because he didn't deserve to see the tears in my eyes. He'd lied to me.

"Kayla." Sebastian's voice was soft. "I am so sorry. So, so sorry. I didn't know how to tell you what Francois had done. I couldn't figure out how. Then the ashes came from Baton Rouge, and I was in too deep. I felt trapped. What could I say? I didn't want you to find out... I needed you to trust me. I... I failed you." The last part sounded like a personal epiphany.

I scoffed and pushed my hair over my shoulder. His words were meaningless. "You realize how that sounds, right? You needed me to trust you and you did that by perpetuating a lie? By not telling me the truth?"

He bowed his head before meeting my gaze again, his blue eyes pleading with me to... What? Change my tone? Listen? Understand?

“Being in too deep is a shitty reason, Sebastian, and if we are truly mates like you claim, you would have made me a priority over you just *feeling trapped*.”

He winced as I repeated his words, but I didn’t care. I was on a roll. I’d had enough of male vampires controlling my life and making my decisions for me. Émile, Francois, Sebastian... Maybe they were all the same. Just arrogant, selfish bastards.

Fucking vampires.

I looked at Kyle, and he fleetingly met my eyes, but whether that had been accidental or not, it was enough to know he was aware I was about to speak to him. “Can we go home now, please?” I gestured to the car where Andrews was still waiting to drive us away.

“I’ll take you home. Get in my car with me.” Sebastian spoke as Kyle pressed his lips together, although I couldn’t tell whether it was to hold words in or because he disagreed with Sebastian. Sometimes, disapproval was simply his usual expression.

“No.” I didn’t even look at Sebastian as I held my hand out in his direction like I could physically keep him away. “I don’t want to be around you right now. I don’t think I trust you anymore, and I need some time to figure things out.” I climbed into the car behind Andrews and waited for Kyle to get in beside me.

Hell, having a bodyguard was suddenly a huge inconvenience.

But when the other door opened, the person who slid into the seat was Sebastian. He looked at me but I didn’t say anything. What did this man not understand about *give me some fucking space*?

“You can be mad all you want.” He held his hands out, palms up. “But I’m going to stick with you until you want to talk.”

I turned away, facing the back of Andrews’s headrest as I ignored the man I’d felt so connected to only hours before. “My apartment please, Andrews.”

He nodded but didn’t speak as he shifted the car into drive, and we rolled smoothly away from Lettie’s shop.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, Kayla.”

I still didn’t look at Sebastian. Those were only words.

We sat in uncomfortable silence as we rode the short distance to my apartment. He watched me, but I didn’t even look at him. Neither one of us spoke, although he made a soft sighing noise every so often like he wanted

to.

Fuck. I'd actually trusted this guy. How stupid was I? I'd even lost my virginity to him and been happy to do it. I thought he deserved it, that all of the things about being mates and him cherishing me and never feeling this way about anyone before were true.

But he'd been lying to me the whole time. I tensed against the sorrow that threatened to constrict my breathing. I had way too much to do for Lettie to allow myself the indulgence of falling to pieces because one man had betrayed me.

Sebastian had known about Lettie the whole time. And he hadn't told me.

He'd lied by omission, and that wasn't okay. He'd actively hidden what he knew.

I had so much to say but it was all word salad scrambled together inside me. If I opened my mouth and started vomiting those words at Sebastian, maybe I'd never stop.

I was so damn angry. Angry that he'd lied, angry that Lettie was gone. The tightness in my chest grew.

Lettie was gone. Fucking gone. *My Lettie.*

And Sebastian had known, and he hadn't told me. The actual bastard.

I turned my face and stared out of the window at the passing places, all familiar, all strangely alien right now, like I couldn't truly recognize anything anymore. Like I didn't know this town.

Hell, maybe I didn't.

We arrived in front of my apartment building.

"Holy fuck."

I turned at Sebastian's exclamation.

"Sweet Jesus. What the hell happened?" I was out of the car and staring at the building I'd called home before I could even process moving from my seat.

Sebastian was immediately at my side, a restraining hand on my upper arm, preventing me from moving farther forward.

The building looked like a tornado of fire had blown right through, and the whole area was cordoned off with police tape.

My stuff. My *home.*

"My God," I breathed. "Just... *what?*" I shook my head as the noise of police chatter over radios filled the air.

Gradually, the throng of emergency vehicles and personnel started to find

a place in my awareness, and I turned to look at them.

“They’re just standing around.” I gestured toward the uniformed people. “Why aren’t they doing anything?”

Loss. It was more fucking loss. First Lettie, now my home. How much more did I need to see disappear? I glanced at Sebastian. Somehow, I’d even lost him. He wasn’t the man I’d thought he was.

“We should go find out what happened.” He reached out like he might touch me, but then he let his hand drop like he’d thought better of it, as if he knew he didn’t have that right anymore.

I nodded mutely. I still didn’t want to talk to him, but he was probably a useful guy to have around while I was trying to figure out what had happened to my home. Sebastian moved away, walking slower than usual as if he was trying to blend in and be human, and I scrambled to follow him. I didn’t want him finding stuff out about my apartment on his own. He might be the vampire regent here, but I was the one who’d just lost my home.

“Hello, officer.” Sebastian greeted the first cop he saw. He stuck his hand out. “Sebastian Dupont.” He looked at my building like he was assessing it. “What happened here?”

The cop bowed his head like he knew who Sebastian was, which made him part of our world. A normal human wouldn’t have responded at all to Sebastian’s name. It wouldn’t have meant anything.

He glanced behind him like he shouldn’t really share the information then leaned closer. “Apartment 2B was broken into. It looks like it was ransacked—belongings were scattered all over, and someone set a fire.”

I gasped. “Shit. My apartment.”

The policeman glanced at me, but Sebastian spoke.

“A fire?”

Immediately, the cop jerked his attention back to Sebastian. “The other residents of the building were evacuated while it was brought under control.” He bowed his head respectfully. “No casualties, Regent.”

“My apartment.” It was little more than a sound of mourning as I looked up at the blackened windows of where I used to live, and the cop tugged a notebook from a pocket over his chest.

“I should ask you a few questions. Do you have any idea who might have done this?”

“What? No. I... I... just don’t.” I shook my head. “I don’t think I...”

“Have you noticed anyone strange around the building recently?” His

tone had become rapid-fire. These were familiar questions to him, but I wasn't used to being on the receiving end of them.

I shook my head again. "I haven't been here much lately."

The cop lifted an eyebrow and opened his mouth to ask a follow-up question, but Sebastian spoke instead.

"I'm Kayla's boyfriend."

I huffed and rolled my eyes. That seemed such an insignificant thing to say right now. Especially when I was still so mad at him.

"She's been staying with me recently," Sebastian continued.

The cop nodded and made some notes. "Kayla...?"

"McKenna," I supplied.

"Can we go into the building?" Sebastian had already crooked a finger under the caution tape like he was going to lift it to allow us through anyway.

The cop shrugged his bulky shoulders and made a considering noise like he didn't recommend it. "You can, Regent. But there isn't a whole lot left in there worth seeing."

I led the way, pushing past Sebastian when he would have gone first. This was my space, not his. The hallways and staircases were blackened and an acrid, charred smell thickened the air until it was almost too heavy to breathe as I charged along the familiar route through the building.

But I faltered when I entered my home. The floors and walls were soaked, and soot covered most of the walls. Everything in my apartment was waterlogged and blackened, and the bitter smell of dirty smoke hung in the air.

"My things," I whispered, and Sebastian wound his arm around my waist.

I didn't want him here, but I leaned into him, unable to deny myself his support. The bastard. I still felt that connection, despite his lie.

I glanced at my walls, where photographs of my parents had melted in their frames.

"Oh, Kayla," Sebastian murmured, and he turned me in his arms until my cheek rested against his chest. He stroked my hair softly, just smoothing his palm lightly over it. "I've got you."

A tear slid down my cheek and I breathed deeply, trying to withhold a sob. I didn't want to fall apart right now, in front of him, but a second tear joined the first and then another until I couldn't count them and my cheeks were damp.

Sebastian continued to stroke my hair but mostly he just stood, solid

when I needed something solid and strong.

Everything I'd worked for was lost. Even when I'd been under contract to Francois and Émile, I'd had this. My space, my sanctuary, filled with my things that I'd chosen and bought.

And now that piece of me was gone.

Who was I without my things and my home? I was lost.

So much gone. Mom and Dad had moved away, Lettie had died, and now this.

I unwound my arms from Sebastian's waist before backing away. Nothing felt the same. I was barely thinking. I'd gone numb.

I walked into my bedroom and over to the bed. The mattress was flat, like all of the stuffing had been removed, but when I reached underneath, the floorboards were wet but otherwise undisturbed.

The incantation to release the lock left my lips automatically, and one of the boards shifted slightly. I moved it all the way aside and lifted out the box I kept hidden there before tugging it into my lap.

It was untouched by the fire and water. My protection spell had held, and I sighed in relief.

"What's that?" Sebastian's tone was curious.

I stood, clutching the box against me. I didn't need Sebastian's brand of comfort right now, or for him to be strong for me. I'd regained my own strength. I glared at him and stalked from my apartment, not even caring when his footsteps scuffed behind me in his hurry to catch up to me. When I reached the car, my back still straight, my cheeks dry again, I got in and positioned the box safely in my lap, still not sparing him any attention.

He climbed in beside me and I didn't even look at him as I spoke to anyone who'd listen. "Take me away from here."

I didn't belong here anymore, and that hurt my heart.

SEBASTIAN

Kayla had already gone upstairs, still ignoring me, still quiet and so much smaller than she usually was, all curled in on herself and pale.

I couldn't just leave things between us like that, though. I'd caused her initial unhappiness. I needed to fix it and I still wanted her close. Perhaps when I'd put my own wrong right, I could help with her apartment, too. The urge to comfort her was an instinct I couldn't deny. And the connection between us still existed, whether she acknowledged it or not. She'd always be my mate, no matter how she felt about me.

Her bedroom door clicked quietly shut, and it sounded so final — vampire hearing was both a blessing and a curse. The sound made my mind up for me, and I took the stairs two at a time, my steps silent on the carpeted treads.

Fear spiked through me that my mate might reject me completely. She was so angry...I'd fucking *made* her so angry. This could be more than her simply needing space while she figured things out. What if she never forgave me? What would I do if that happened? It would be worse than any exile. I'd be a mated vampire without my mate and I would eventually go crazy.

Hopefully, I could convince Kayla. I could bring her back to me. I'd made a terrible mistake but I could fix it. I snorted disgust at myself. After all my years of life, I should have learned not make so many mistakes...Only I just kept making worse and worse ones.

I arrived outside Kayla's door and paused. After lifting my hand, I paused again before I tapped haltingly on the door. What the hell was I doing? I didn't need to be hesitant in my own house, with my own *mate*.

I knocked louder, and Kayla sighed inside.

“Who is it?” She didn’t move and she didn’t open the door. She probably already knew it was me.

“Sebastian.” Speaking my own name wasn’t any sort of a win. I wanted to hear it on her lips, preferably as I pleased her and her fingers twined in my hair, but I could bear to say it if she’d just open the door.

“Go away, Sebastian.” She no longer sounded as angry. Simply resigned.

“Can I talk to you?” I kept my voice low. Nic and Leia were somewhere nearby, and they could probably hear everything, anyway, but I preferred the illusion that I wasn’t broadcasting my failure to the entire house.

“Not interested.” Kayla’s voice was curt, but something rustled as she moved, and I held my breath that she might open the door so I could see her.

But the door remained closed. I rested my fist against it before dropping my forehead against the wood, too. “Please, Kayla,” I whispered. “I fucked up. I know I did.” Regret laced my blood, filling me with its bitter whisper.

“I need some space to think about everything.” She sounded so sad, and I wanted to gather her into my arms and take all that sadness away.

I wanted to protect her from the world and all the things she’d learned and seen today. The truth I’d kept to myself was bad enough, but she was also dealing with the loss of her home, in what looked like a deliberate act. It was my duty as her mate to make her world safe and comfortable again. To provide her home. *I* was her home. Always me.

“Please, Sebastian.” Her small voice was right the other side of the door and my chest squeezed at her plea.

“Okay. Okay, I’ll go.” I stepped away. “But I really don’t want to leave you.”

She didn’t say anything else, though, so I returned downstairs. I hadn’t expected the highs and lows of having a mate. The things I’d convinced myself I felt for Leia paled to insignificance now. Every feeling I had regarding Kayla was magnified, and right now I was more miserable than I’d ever been.

I was also in the mood to kill and maim on her behalf. If she wouldn’t let me in, I could still take care of her in the way most familiar to vampires...

Stalking into my office, I was the very image of the caricature dark, brooding vampire. I could even imagine the black cloak swirling at my ankles. If I could have turned into a bat and escaped from a belfry window, I probably would have.

Kyle rarely seemed to sleep, but I had no idea where he was. I grabbed my cell phone and texted him to come to my office. He'd hate the summons, but he'd understand when he got here. As much as he feigned disinterest and lack of care, he liked Kayla, and he'd want to find whoever had trashed her home, too.

He was very good at making people pay. Made me glad we weren't on opposing sides.

When he arrived at my office, his face was tight with the annoyance I'd anticipated at my text.

"It's an emergency." I cut off his complaints before they started.

I knew he didn't just want to be an errand boy for me here in New Orleans, and he really wasn't, but this was too important to ignore, and it would take all of us working together to keep Kayla safe. A shudder ran through me. Her safety was my utmost concern—thank God she'd been at my home when hers was attacked.

Kayla's safety was even more important than Nic's good standing in New Orleans. I sobered slightly at that thought.

Kyle dropped onto the sofa and stretched his arms along the back, his legs out long in front of him and crossed at the ankles, taking up all the space. His entire posture told me it had better be an emergency, and I quashed my amusement at his predictability.

"Someone trashed Kayla's place. Trashed it and seemed to try to burn the evidence."

He sat up straight, becoming tense and watchful. "What?"

I nodded. Good. I needed him angry about this. Someone had targeted my mate, and I needed his help to fix whatever situation was brewing. "We need to find out who was at Kayla's apartment and if they were looking for something in particular."

It hadn't been immediately obvious from the mess they'd left the apartment in—they could have just been trying to scare her. But Kayla had headed straight for that hiding place under the bed, so maybe there was more to the break-in than just scaring or targeting my mate or trying to get to Nic and me. Maybe Kayla had enemies of her own in New Orleans, or perhaps she had items of value I wasn't aware of.

Kyle scratched the side of his chin. "Something's also going on with the vampire captains from Nic's meeting that I haven't quite gotten to the bottom of. Temple is feeding back as many updates as he can manage, but we

haven't learned what we need to yet."

"Hmm? You think the vampire captains would be interested in Kayla?" They hadn't seemed to pay a whole lot of attention to her at the meeting, but maybe they hadn't been interested *enough* in her.

Possibly I should have expected a few more curious stares and comments. She'd been the only human in the room, after all. They should have at least wondered about her. Had ignoring her been a deliberate ploy to put us at ease and misdirect us?

What if she was valuable to them in some way? She'd worked in New Orleans, for Francois, for a while. She had to be known here and within this vampire community. The desire to know burned in my gut. If she was valuable to them or if she had something they wanted, I had to find out.

Kayla grew more interesting the more I pondered the issue. She was clearly a woman with secrets, including a whole box full of them that she'd rescued and brought back here. I needed to know what they were.

Now that I knew Kyle was open to helping me, I sat in the chair opposite him, ready to discuss the best strategy for tracking down the culprits who'd attacked and destroyed Kayla's home. Between the two of us, we could come up with a plan to keep her safe. I had no doubt about that.



I STOOD at the foot of the stairs the next evening, having spent the day consciously allowing Kayla the space she'd requested. But now it was time for her to head to the club, and I didn't want her walking. Neither did I want Andrews driving her when I was right here, ready to do anything she asked of me.

Kyle was out gathering more intel on the vampire captains and their activities, and I wanted Kayla as close to me as possible while everything was still so unknown.

I cleared my throat and paced a little more, my head buzzing with too many thoughts as I tried to ignore the anxiety caused by waiting for Kayla and what her reaction to seeing me might be.

She appeared at the top of the stairs and huffed when she saw me, but her heart rate picked up, betraying her excitement, and I bit back a grin.

"You again." It wasn't even phrased as a question. She'd simply made a

dismissive statement.

This time, I allowed my grin to show. “Always me,” I agreed. “For hundreds of years, always me.”

“What do you want?” She hadn’t moved to start her descent to the hallway.

“To take you to Nightfall. I don’t want you walking there alone.” I lifted my gaze so it met hers.

Relief flitted across her features so quickly I might have missed it if I hadn’t been focused on her.

She shrugged. “Well, there’s Kyle or Andrews.”

“Not tonight.” I stepped closer to the stairs and held my hand out. “Tonight, the privilege of protecting my mate falls to me.”

She sighed again and began to walk toward me. “I could drive myself if I had a car.”

It was my turn to shrug. “And deprive me of your company?”

Her brief amusement hurriedly turned into a cough as she swept through the front door ahead of me.

We didn’t talk on the way to the club, but she at least sat beside me, and the silence wasn’t uncomfortable. When we arrived, the doormen immediately stood back, their heads bowed.

“Regent.” They didn’t even make eye contact, their subservience very clear.

I was used to it from being a Dupont in Baton Rouge but Kayla shrank against me a little as more staff stopped and bowed their heads as we walked by. I held her close as we moved through the crowd.

Servers materialized at our sides with drinks then quickly faded back into the crowd, smiles on their faces as we took what they offered.

“What’s everyone doing?” Kayla whispered her question after she took a small sip of the champagne she’d been handed.

I glanced at her as I stepped around a couple of vampires. “Serving you.”

“Yes, but...why?” She looked genuinely perplexed, her brows drawn down in the center.

I shrugged, pressing my mouth closer to her ear so I didn’t have to shout above the music already beating a steady pulse for people to dance to. “Because you’re Kayla McKenna, the headline act...and I’m me.”

“But I haven’t changed. I’m no different.” She glanced back into the club as we reached the curtain that led to the dressing rooms. “When I sang here

and it was The Neutral Zone, I was never anyone special. I was mostly background noise while people ate or met or chatted.”

“You don’t belong in anyone’s background.” I kissed her forehead before she had chance to draw away, and her lips flickered in a brief smile.

“I need to go get ready for my set. And we still need to talk, Sebastian.” Her voice was a little harder again, but her smile returned, soft and almost apologetic as I released her hand, then she slipped between the curtains and out of sight.

I turned and surveyed the club briefly, satisfaction welling in my chest at the sight of so many people enjoying the space. Nightfall was becoming everything I’d hoped — an exclusive meeting place for a mix of local supernaturals, and more importantly, somewhere I could keep an eye on those people. Hopefully, the more I listened, the more gossip I’d hear. Or the more gossip my trusted employees would hear, anyway.

I walked up the steps to my office and paused at the top, looking out over everyone’s heads. From here, the atmosphere was even more obvious. Every breath I drew was full of the scent of sexual tension and the sharp copper tang of the blood exchanges happening in the darker corners.

My gums ached for Kayla, but as I waited for her to appear on the stage below, Kyle came out of his office and beckoned to me.

His lips stretched into his usual line of disapproval, and he rubbed a hand over the back of his head, filling the air around us with the rasp of his close-cropped hair, and making the scar on the top of his head shift like it was alive. “I’ve got some information on who broke into Kayla’s place.”

I nodded and opened the door to my office, letting him walk in ahead of me before I closed the door behind us. “It was vampires from the nests of the three captains we met with. They’re working together now. Apparently, they see you and Nic as a pretty big threat if they’ve banded together like this.”

“Do we know their purpose?”

He drew a breath. “They went for Kayla.”

My chest tightened immediately, no breath moving in or out of my body at all.

“They wanted to use her as leverage. They must have seen or sensed her importance to you.” He stood in an at-ease posture, his legs apart, his hands clasped loosely behind his back as he spoke.

“As leverage? For what?” But I knew. Kayla could be leveraged against me, just as we’d once worried about Leia being used to manipulate Nic.

A mate was the most important thing in a vampire's life. Whole kingdoms would be forfeited and the lives of family gambled and lost for the safety of a mate.

"She's a liability, Seb."

Kyle rarely used my name, and certainly not the shortened version, and it refocused my attention on him when my head had been full of thoughts of Kayla and her safety.

"She's too close to you. We need to get rid of your association with her or move her somewhere far away, where New Orleans vampires won't chase her because the local vamps feel challenged by Nic and you establishing the Dupont rule."

I held up my hand to try to prevent him saying anything further. "No." I spoke with the full authority gifted to me by my position as Nic's brother, as the regent of New Orleans, as Sebastian fucking Dupont with endless years of entitlement behind me.

Kyle's eyes widened.

"Kayla's not going anywhere." My words were almost a growl now. "She'll remain by my side because that's where I want her. For now, just make sure the vampires you've identified pay for what they did."

He grimaced. "I'm not sure that's the way forward. Things are so finely balanced right now that if we piss off the wrong nest, we could be looking at an uprising."

"There's no other way." Certainly, the other way wasn't sending Kayla into some sort of exile. Not when I'd only just found her.

Her exile would be a punishment for both of us, and it would only send the message that we were willing to bend to these rogue nests. What did humans say? They didn't negotiate with terrorists? Well, neither the fuck did I. I simply removed heads or hearts.

His answering nod was reluctant. "All right. I'll talk to Temple and see how we can take care of things quietly."

The noise outside the office changed and the bass-beat faded away under a growing swell of clapping and crowd noise. Kayla was about to sing.

"Thanks, Kyle." I was a touch dismissive as I hurried from my office, but the prospect of seeing Kayla, or listening to her sing, was like a siren call I couldn't ignore.

She drew me to her simply by being mine.

I rested my forearms on the silver-colored railing as she took her position

on the stage. She wore another dress that clung to every curve, and my dick made a bulge in my pants as my fangs pressed against my gums. Her dress was a deep black with a sprinkling of sequins or diamantés that made it sparkle like the night sky—again, it was perfect for our theme.

Her voice was rich and throaty and an exercise in seduction, and more than once she glanced at my position at the railing. An answering jolt of desire shot through me every time our eyes met.

She really was like a siren, calling to me with every note. I relaxed into the sound of her singing, and it was like every word was meant only for me.

It seemed impossible to believe she hadn't entranced people like this before, that she'd only been a background singer.

Either Francois hadn't realized what he had in her, or he'd known completely, and kept her in her place and feeling unimportant. That wouldn't have surprised me in his madness.

Every now and then, I allowed my gaze to roam the crowd below, looking for anyone who might pose a threat to Kayla—especially now Kyle had said she'd been the target of the home invasion. That put an entirely different spin on things, and I'd have to bring Nic up to speed on it all ASAP. Maybe after Kyle and Temple had taken care of it, though.

I stood and watched over Kayla for each of her songs, but even as her last notes died away, I was already moving down the stairs to catch up to her. Nic had been right before. A line really would form outside her dressing room door, and I wanted to be at the start of it. The start of it and the end of it. Just me.

Me alone.

I wanted to be her everything.

I made a mental note to post bouncers on the inside of the curtain so no guests could get through to the back.

Possibly not everyone who wanted to visit Kayla's dressing room would be an admirer. Especially if she was now a target. It was my worst fear, and my heart went cold at the thought of her being in danger.

Still, I had a better chance of managing things at home or here. She really was safer at my side. I hurried to her dressing room door and knocked.

KAYLA

I walked inside my dressing room, adrenaline pumping through me, leaving me with a floating high. Sebastian's clients really liked to hear me sing. I could hardly believe it. After years of being literal background noise—not even *glorified* background noise—I was the main attraction. I fought the urge to pinch myself.

It just didn't feel real.

I'd missed singing in front of a live audience, though. Even the one in The Neutral Zone really hadn't given me any feedback at all.

The fact this audience reacted and responded...Well, that was all just so much extra. It left me almost jittery. I was buzzing on the atmosphere, still.

My smile was fixed in place.

I'd just reached around my back and begun to unzip my dress when there was a knock at my door. I hesitated. I knew that knock.

It was Sebastian.

As angry as I still was over him knowing about Lettie and not telling me, there was a dart of excitement at knowing I was about to see him. I couldn't even explain that traitorous dart. It was more like an instinct or an urge, like my subconscious knew Sebastian and recognized him as something more than just a guy who'd really gotten on my nerves, even though I was trying to maintain my annoyance so I could find the strength to deal with our issues properly.

"Just a minute." I rearranged my dress so it didn't gape at the front and wrapped an arm across my breasts to hold the fabric in place before I unlocked the door and opened it.

“You were amazing, again.” Sebastian’s words tumbled from him. “The crowd loves you.” His soft, blue-eyed gaze caressed me as he spoke, and his tumble of hair was so naturally mussed that it was hard not to reach out and muss it some more.

It was hard to see him in his dark suit and not give in to absurd urge to press myself against him, but... I resisted.

Even still, I couldn’t help the excitement that bubbled up inside me once more as I relived my final moments on the stage, soaking in the reaction of the watching supernaturals. “It *feels* amazing,” I gushed, before I stepped back to let him inside my dressing room.

Although, despite the thrill I had at seeing him, my logical self spoke up, and the fact he was here again galvanized my annoyance. I really did need some space. I needed to be alone to feel excited and not be confronted by the new vampire who owned my contract now — the new vampire who seemed to lie as easily as the old vampire.

But I’d never had feelings for Francois. Sebastian had complicated everything with feelings.

I was so torn every time I looked at him. I loved the singing job but not the idea that I was essentially on a leash to spell cast if those services were required. I also didn’t love that I lived in his home.

Although...perhaps living there had saved me from being injured when my own home was broken into.

I sighed. I just didn’t know anymore.

“Nothing about this is easy, is it, Sebastian?” I whispered as I turned from him and dragged my robe on over my dress.

“It can be,” he replied. “We can complete the mating bond and even turn you, and suddenly things will seem very easy indeed.” Desperation shone in his eyes, and I shook my head.

Maybe there was no time like right now to just lay everything out again for him. “Right. So you lied to me, and I forget all about that and just throw myself into some sort of ritual I don’t understand and don’t even know if I want. One that has the ability to magically fix everything?” I shook my head emphatically. “I don’t think so.”

“Kayla.” He had a way of making my name a plea.

But I shook my head. Regardless of my feelings for this man in front of me, I wasn’t about to let them roam free when he essentially owned me, and when I didn’t even know enough about being turned. How many vampire

witches existed? Did I even need to be turned? Would my own magic be enough?

Perhaps that kind of thing was mentioned in one of my grimoires.

It almost didn't matter, though. Even if Sebastian were the most perfect man in the world for me—and I wasn't even convinced that sort of fairytale guy existed—I needed more from him. It wasn't enough to simply tell me pretty things. The best lies were always pretty.

Sebastian had lied as soon as he chose to hide Lettie's death from me. He'd lied and betrayed me in one fell swoop because I'd chosen to trust him.

"I don't think you should be here, Sebastian." I tried to keep my voice neutral. Cold, even, but a hint of desperate plea crept into it as I almost mirrored his tone.

But he shook his head, his face serious as he closed my dressing room door. "I think this is exactly where I need to be." He took a seat on my chaise and patted the space next to him. "We should talk about this. Talk about what I did, how you feel, how I feel... How I'd do anything to change it."

I glanced at the velvet fabric — an ostentatious purple, but I loved it anyway — and images of what we'd done the last time we were on the chaise together invaded my mind. My cheeks heated and I grew wet just thinking of Sebastian's tongue on me.

My resolve kicked in, though, and I drew my robe tightly around myself and perched gingerly on the edge of the seat. I didn't want to be too close to him but at the same time there was an almost magnetic force pulling me toward him, like there was no point even trying to resist him.

I didn't look at him, though. I clasped my hands together and rested them on my lap so I didn't reach for him either, and I stared at the wall on the opposite side of the room. If I looked at him or touched him, I'd give in, and I couldn't do that.

Too much rested on this. It wasn't just a point of principle. It was about how I needed to be treated. It was about respect and my self-worth, and I'd spent far too long not demanding either.

"I'm so sorry, Kayla." He stopped for a moment. "I can't tell you how sorry. I've handled all of this really badly. There are things I should have told you when we first met or as we went along. Things I should have said and didn't. But there are things I'd like to share with you now."

I nodded. Just once, but it was permission enough for him to continue.

"I was scared, and I was desperate. I know it not an excuse." He sighed

and leaned back against the chaise then rubbed a hand over his face. “I was exiled here and then I met you and it was like it was meant to be, and I didn’t want to do or say anything that would drive you away. I was afraid if you thought I was a monster, you wouldn’t have stayed.”

I half-turned to him, my mouth open to tell him he never even gave me a chance to form any sort of opinion, but he continued to talk.

“I told you I was exiled here by Nic because I tried to turn Leia, but what I didn’t tell you was that I’d believed myself in love with Leia. But I wasn’t. My feelings for Leia were nothing compared to what I feel for you. My feelings for you consume me. They excite and scare me in equal parts. Initially, keeping the news about Lettie from you was a necessity. I couldn’t be that messenger. I didn’t want you to turn from me, and I’m so used to making those sorts of decisions on behalf of other people that I didn’t even think about it. It just felt... just felt *necessary*. Like I could protect both of us. I didn’t have to break the awful news to you, and you wouldn’t hate me for delivering the message.” He shrugged. “I’ve got no excuse. No good reason. But I regret it now. I can see how much I’ve hurt you, and I can see the damage I’ve caused. What I’ve done is unforgiveable... But I need to ask you to try. Please forgive me.”

I merely watched him, and he touched my cheek fleetingly. The moment the touch was gone, I missed it, and I closed my eyes, imagining it still there.

“I should have told you exactly what happened during the war with Francois and Émile, and I should have told you about my role in that. I can tell you now, if you’d like to listen?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think I need to hear all of that. It’s just a distraction from the things you really should have told me. No need for backstories or tales of sadness, Sebastian. I needed someone who would tell me the truth. Turns out, you’re not that guy.” I forced myself to shrug nonchalantly even as my knuckles whitened as I clasped my hands tighter together.

“Can I fix it?” He sounded a little bit broken, and my heart ached.

I wanted to kiss him, to make it better. Despite my harsh words, everything in me said that Sebastian *was* still the man for me, that I shouldn’t be this mad at him because he’d made a mistake.

I almost scoffed. Some *mistake*, though. It had been a huge breach of my trust.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I just...really don’t know.” What else

could I say? I couldn't exactly make promises.

"Please, Kayla? At least say you'll try?" His hand was warm when he covered mine, and the touch weakened me.

I was still so conflicted, but I didn't detect any dishonesty in him, and maybe he hadn't understood exactly how much Lettie meant to me. Perhaps I hadn't made him fully understand. I shook my head a little, not prepared to fully shoulder the blame for this.

Regardless of how much detail I'd gone into, he'd known I was worried about Lettie. But a second chance wasn't necessarily a bad thing...

I stood abruptly. "Let me get changed and we can go back to the house. There's something I want to show you." I shrugged my robe off and changed into my jeans and T-shirt as quickly and efficiently as I could, then wiped my make-up off with wide, hard strokes.



"YOUR PERFORMANCE WAS AMAZING AGAIN," Sebastian said as he drove us back to his house, his movements confident and competent at the wheel.

I wanted to purr contentedly at his praise, but instead I just nodded. "Thank you."

"Do you like the club?" He sounded genuinely curious.

"I think so." I liked my new status, but it seemed a little forward to confess that.

I didn't need to say anything further because we pulled through the gate and he cut the engine.

I got out before leaning back in so I could see his face. "Can you come up to my room?" Then I turned and ran through the house to the stairs and hurried to the guest wing.

Hopefully, he'd respond to that vague invitation.

Once there, I reached under the bed, right to the back because I didn't have a protection spell or anywhere to hide my treasures here, and grabbed my box before dragging it out. I sat cross-legged on the hardwood floor and pulled it into my lap. I always did that with it because something about the motion felt right, ritualistic, the weight of the box pleasing.

When Sebastian knocked and stepped inside my room, I beckoned him over.

“Come and sit with me. I want to show you this to see if it helps you understand everything. This is my memory box.” I opened the lid of the small chest-shaped container, my hand rubbing over the carvings smoothed by years of touch.

I drew out the photo from the top and passed it to Sebastian.

He looked at it before turning it over to read the writing on the back. “This is you and Lettie when you were a teenager?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I don’t know if you get quite how big a deal Lettie was in New Orleans. We don’t have one witch leading all the covens, or anything, but she was the closest thing to that one person we all looked to for guidance. She provided advice for all witches, regardless of coven. Even those without—like me. When I lost all of my status in the city, she was still there for me. She’s always been there for me.” I stopped talking as it hit me once more that Lettie would never be there for me again, and I pulled another picture out, then a second and a third. “This is me and Naomi, this is me after I’d just successfully cast my first circle. Mom and Dad…” I spoke as I placed each picture on the floor in front of us, talking about each of them in turn.

There were many more of Lettie and me at various stages of the last ten years. She cropped up more often after Mom and Dad left for Florida, too.

“She was like family to me, really,” I said. “More than family because she chose me.”

“I’m so very sorry,” Sebastian whispered, and I believed him.

“This box pretty much contains my whole life. If I’d lost this as well, I’d have lost everything. These pictures plot my journey so far. I’m showing you exactly who I am right now.” A tear rolled down my cheek.

I was so lucky the box had escaped the fire and all of the water damage. That no one had discovered it and mistaken it for something valuable. It held no value for anyone else, just sentimental value for me.

I breathed out in an effort to try to contain my tears, and Sebastian cupped my right cheek with his left hand. Closing my eyes, I leaned into his touch as he pressed a kiss to my temple, his lips soft and warm.

There was the snick of paper as he moved his hand and gathered the photographs back into a pile. “We need to keep these safe.”

I opened my eyes as he put them gently back into the box and closed the lid.

“We’ll find somewhere for them so you don’t have to worry, even if you have to create your very own hidey-hole somewhere here again. I’ll get

whatever you need so you can do that.” He was so very earnest, and it softened my heart even more.

“Thank you. That means a lot.” For now, I just pushed the box back under my bed and wrapped my arms around my knees.

I leaned against Sebastian, seeking solace and comfort. I just needed him close. He ran a hand over my shoulders, massaging softly as he went, and I turned to face him. There must have been something in my eyes, a question, a need...Perhaps even permission, because he leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine.

I responded right away, desire creating spirals of heat right through me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and tugged him closer. He intensified our kiss, nibbling a little on my lower lip and slipping his hand under the hem of my T-shirt to rest on my waist.

I wanted this man again. Something in him called to me, and I couldn't get close enough.

He tugged at my T-shirt and we broke apart briefly as he drew it over my torso and I raised my arms. Then he discarded it on the floor.

“We'd be more comfortable on the bed,” he murmured between placing delicate kisses along my jaw and down onto my neck.

I arched, tilting my head away to expose more of my neck, always offering more of myself. Always wanting to give him more.

For him to take more.

“Okay.” I rested a hand on his shoulder and stood. “The bed.”

But we didn't get that far. He stood and pulled me against him, cupping my ass as the hard bulge in his pants pressed against my hip. I sucked in a breath at the evidence of his desire and worked my hand between us to smooth over him.

He hissed a breath, and I moved my hand to his belt. I wanted to touch him, too, to hold him in my hand and feel that heat and that weight of him as he swelled in my grasp. I used both hands to work his belt loose then unfastened his button and zipper before pushing his pants down his thighs. They dropped the rest of the way to the hardwood with a satisfying clunk.

Sebastian hissed again when I teased the tips of my nails over the delicate skin just above his underwear, and he impatiently pushed his underwear down, too. But I quite liked teasing him. I trailed my fingers closer to where the head of his cock almost touched his abs then away again. Always promising, never quite delivering, until he groaned my name.

“Kayla. For the love of God, woman.” He pressed wet, open-mouthed kisses along my forehead and down my left cheek. “Please, just touch me.”

I wrapped my fingers around his hard shaft and gave him a long stroke upward before swirling my thumb over the tip of his cock, smearing the precum I found there over the head.

He gripped my ass again and yanked me against him as his mouth captured mine, something almost desperate and wild in his kiss. His tongue caressed the inside of my mouth, and I released a sigh of pleasure.

I stood on my tiptoes, flattening myself against him, and he walked me backward the couple of paces to the bed. Without warning, he shifted his weight, and we bounced against the soft mattress. I giggled before resuming our kiss, leaning into him, and tucking my leg over his.

He ran his hand over my back and paused briefly where my bra fastened.

He unhooked it effortlessly. “Easy setting again.” He chuckled and resumed our kiss, and I lost myself in him.

He unfastened my pants. “What are you doing?” I whispered against his lips.

“This,” he replied as he drew down my zipper.

I held his head as he kissed me some more, and I wriggled as he pushed at my jeans, working them downward.

“Off,” he demanded, and I giggled as I rolled away to give myself the space to pull the skinny jeans off properly.

Damn things looked great on but never wanted to come off.

He ran his palm up my thigh and danced it over the front of my panties. Then he slipped a finger between my thighs. I pressed myself closer to him as he ran his finger over the fabric, teasing me with his muffled touch.

“Tease,” I mumbled, calling him out.

“Turnabout is fair play.” He laughed again, but it was gentle.

We were in this together, and he wasn’t laughing *at* me.

I felt safe.

He pushed my underwear aside and drew his finger between my folds, finishing right at my clit, and I pressed my teeth into my lower lip and squeezed my eyes closed as he rolled it under his finger.

I breathed out a long sigh and he did it again.

“Right there?” He spoke against my temple, and I nodded.

“Yes.” It was an effort to force the word out because all I wanted to do was gasp and writhe against him, to encourage him to touch me again.

And he did.

His touch was slow and steady, and I sighed my pleasure as I pushed back against his hand. Slowly, each of my muscles began to tense and coil, and my breathing ramped up, until my own pleasure and what Sebastian was doing to me were the only things I was even aware of.

I could barely think as he pressed his lips against mine, consuming me and muffling my gasps. I grabbed his wrist as my body seemed to pause, hovering for a moment before each of my muscles let go and my body pulsed under his touch.

He didn't let up, though, and I tightened my grip on him. "Too sensitive," I whispered as another wave of pleasure ripped through me and I jerked.

He kissed the corner of my mouth, it was sweet and earnest and his touch slowed, becoming softer until he eased his hand away.

Then he positioned himself over me. "You sure?" He always checked in, and I appreciated it, but I was more than sure.

"I'm ready," I replied. "I want you."

The head of his cock nudged against me then he pushed a little way in before withdrawing and pushing in a little farther. I gasped each time he entered me. The sensation was almost too much as more waves of pleasure spread through me.

I'd never known I was so sensitive right there.

We were so close. His hands were on me, his skin was against me, he was inside me.

And everything felt right.

My body welcomed him, and I wanted more, so much more. I wanted faster, harder... But I also liked it like this, gentle and slow. Careful not to hurt me. Always so careful.

He breathed out and waited a moment as he pushed fully into me, and I wrapped a leg around his waist, my heel pressing against his ass. I wanted to hold him there, but I also wanted him to move, and I whimpered when he did, his withdrawal setting off a shower of sparks inside me.

He set a steady rhythm and I met him at each thrust, small moans escaping me as he pressed deeper inside me, like he was trying to know all of me. Cocooning me with his body and arms, he pressed over me.

I moaned for him without thought, my body whispering my pleasure on its own, the sounds quiet but unmistakable expressions of pleasure. Appreciation for all he was and all he was doing.

His breathing rate increased, until he suddenly didn't make a sound and stilled above me before he gave a few more gentle thrusts and held his weight off my body.

I looked up at him. "You okay?"

He laughed and leaned down to kiss me. "With you? Always."

SEBASTIAN

Nic and Leia were sitting in the airy kitchen when I entered, Nic's ridiculous comedy blood mug in front of him.

I nodded at it. "You take that thing everywhere?"

"I like to drink from it." He picked it up and took a deliberate swig.

I curled my lip. None of the rest of us liked Nic's old habit of drinking from warmed blood bags, but that was the way he'd always chosen to live. He probably preferred to drink direct from Leia, but their habits as true mates were none of my business.

"We're leaving this morning, Seb," Nic said. "But can we have a quick chat first?"

I nodded, but my heart sank. He sounded serious, and Nic sounding serious was usually bad news.

Leia stood. "I'm going to find Kayla to say goodbye. Any ideas where she might be? She seems sweet, Sebastian. I hope I'll see her again." She winked at me.

"If she's not in her room, she's usually in the library," I offered, glad to be having a conversation where I actually knew some of the answers.

"A girl after my own heart." Leia clasped her hands to her chest dramatically as she left the kitchen.

"Take a seat, Seb." Nic nodded at the bar stool Leia had vacated, and I drew it a little farther away from my brother before sitting down.

I figured he didn't want us sitting as thigh-touchingly close as he and his wife did.

"Everything okay?" My question sounded desperate rather than merely

curious, and. I hated that I'd reverted straight to type as the king's younger brother. Those usual family roles never really left us, though.

I'd always tried to be as good as Nic. Always failed, too. The only reason I was still alive after trying to turn his mate wasn't exactly brotherly love, either. Hell, no. It was *motherly* love because our mother had pleaded for my life.

And then there was the whole issue where Nic was a born vampire and I'd been turned. I couldn't measure up to him in any way at all.

It was probably about time I stopped trying but hell...old habits died hard, after all.

"I know we have some rogue vampires here in New Orleans, but I don't think it's wise for me to stay." He held up a hand to prevent me from interrupting him. "I think me being present undermines your authority as regent, and more importantly, I trust that you can clean this mess up. You don't *need* me hanging around, little brother." He grinned, and the muscles in my chest relaxed.

I drew a breath.

"I trust you, Seb," he repeated.

"Really?" I was so surprised at his words that I spoke without thinking. He trusted me? Did that mean I was forgiven too? I didn't dare ask.

"I can see all the strides you're making on behalf of the Dupont reign here. And you've made huge achievements since you left Baton Rouge. It looks like you're succeeding in leaving the past behind."

"I am," I assured him. "I've found a whole new life here."

He patted my shoulder. "And it looks good on you. When you get everything under control here, you'll have to come visit us and Mother in Baton Rouge — introduce her to Kayla."

He stood and my eyes pricked a little as I nodded. I swiped at them. Nic had forgiven me for Leia. He didn't have to say those exact words for me to know. His invitation was enough.

Leia reentered the kitchen. "I found Kayla, she was in the library like you thought. I've said our goodbyes, Nic." She stopped and leaned up to kiss her husband's cheek, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder for support.

Nic stood and offered me a brief hug, his hand patting my back to signal the end almost as soon as it started. "Keep in touch, okay? Let me know how things are progressing."

I nodded. "Always."

He grabbed their suitcases and they left to get in the car so Andrews could take them to the airport. Even as the door closed behind them, I was already holding my phone to my ear, calling my guys to tell them to meet me in my office so we could go over what to do about the rogue captains and their nests. Nic trusted me to get this situation taken care of, and I was going to fucking take care of it.

Breaking into Kayla's apartment was a declaration of active disobedience on Nic's territory—and if the vampire captains had realized Kayla was my mate, it was an act of actual war. My blood burned through my veins as I thought about how close they'd come to taking Kayla from me.

Kyle was already in my office by the time I arrived, and Jason strolled through the door just moments after me, bringing his new ever-present scent of wet dog with him.

Kyle started talking before I could even open my mouth. "We need to move fast on this."

Jason threw himself into one of the easy chairs and propped his feet on the coffee table. "Did Temple get some intel?"

"Yeah. It's not just a faction of pissed off vampires used to getting their own way under Francois. They're far more dangerous than that."

"Oh?" Jason crossed his arms.

"This is a whole network of organized crime."

"What? Francois was running some sort of crime circle in his own city? That's just fucked up." Jason shook his head.

"No." I shook my head. "I'm betting Francois didn't even know, right, Kyle?"

Kyle nodded. "Yep. Temple said it was all going on right under his nose but the dead man's blood kept him from figuring any of it out."

I shook my head again. That fucking drug had a lot to answer for. "Hell, if people didn't go up and make an actual verbal declaration to Francois, I bet he didn't even know if it was day or night. Even then, then he still wouldn't have remembered five minutes later. He wouldn't have had a clue what was going on in this city."

"Yeah, and he was kind of fixated on Leia there at the end, too," Jason pointed out.

"Shit." I raked my hand through my hair as I paced across the room. "Shit. We've taken over some sort of lawless city."

"It's a rogue vampire's wet dream," Jason agreed. "They've been allowed

to do whatever they've wanted here for far too long."

Kyle spoke again. "Temple said they're into everything. Gunrunning, drugs, even prostitution."

Jason raised an eyebrow. "Some of that is going to put them at odds with the wolves, you know? We should probably let Conri know about this before we get too much further in."

I raked my hair again. "Great. So, we've taken over a city full of organized crime and there's about to be a huge conflict with the new wolf allies?"

"There's a whole syndicate running here," Kyle said, and I sighed.

"Do we know who they are? We need more intel. Maybe even a man on the inside. Fuck. Depending on how long they've been operational, securing New Orleans for Nic might not be as easy as we've been planning."

Thinking of the club, I needed to get Kayla there soon because she wanted to take a little extra time getting ready.

I checked my watch. "Thanks for the update, guys."

Jason snorted. "Yeah, shame it wasn't a positive one, right?"

I shrugged. "We can only work with what we have. I'm going to grab Kayla and take her to Nightfall. Let me know as soon as Temple has any more info."

Kyle strode from the room first, and Jason stayed where he was as I left and hurried up the stairs to the library. Kayla had probably lost track of the time again. She did that often when she started reading the books in there.

My thoughts of her propelled me faster in her direction, although I stopped in the doorway, one hand on the wooden frame as I took her in. Her hair cascaded over her shoulder even though she'd made an effort to tie it out of the way, and she'd tucked her legs up on the chair, the enormous book spread over her lap making her look even more petite than usual.

I'd never seen a reason for the collection of grimoires, but maybe fate had mysterious ways.

"Kayla?"

She jerked her head up, confusion at being interrupted giving her scrunch marks at the top of her nose.

She smiled when she saw me, though, and put the book she'd been reading to one side. "Is it time?"

I checked my watch again even though I didn't need to. "Yep. Exactly that time."

She grabbed her purse from where it rested against the chair leg and came down the stairs with me without further comment. Outside, I opened the passenger door of my car for her.

“No Andrews?” She glanced around like she expected him to step from an invisible vehicle.

“He’s taken Nic and Leia to the airport.”

“Oh, okay.” She got into the car then buckled up as I shut the door and went around to the driver’s side.

When we arrived, the club was busy again, with the line three people deep down the block. I cast a glance at some of the waiting crowd. Some of these were just hoping to be allowed in, it looked like. Nightfall was still by invitation only, and I could guarantee a good percentage of the people hadn’t received those.

I walked Kayla through the front door and to the curtain where she’d slip from sight, and I kissed her lightly on the mouth.

She squeezed my forearm. “See you later, Sebastian.”

The way she said my name spoke of promise and heat zinged through each of my nerves. “See you soon,” I replied.

I watched her slip through the curtain and turned to head to my office. I could do some work while I waited for her to appear on the stage.

As I walked to the stairs, someone jostled my shoulder hard enough that I stopped walking and turned around. Rude guests weren’t welcome at Nightfall. Perhaps this one needed dealing with. I glanced around for security, and they were as unobtrusive as usual, my men in black lurking at the edges of the room, watching.

But the young vampire who’d bumped me held his hands out. “Hey, sorry man.” He paused and opened his mouth in mock shock. “Oh, the *regent*. Well, allow me to pay my respects instead of offering my apologies, *man*.” He swept into a low, caricature of a bow, one foot in front of the other as he almost doubled over and moved his arms expansively.

I scoffed at him. Rude but no real trouble. I had fucking shoes older than him. “Yeah, thanks.” Little asshat. But I left before he even stood up straight again, my mind already on work, and on Kayla, but not necessarily in that order. I really didn’t have time for a jumped-up little New Orleans vampire who thought the best way to meet me was to shoulder check me in my own club.

Chuckling a little, I rolled my eyes as I reached my office. I’d tackle the

lack-of-manners issue in this city once I'd sorted out the crime syndicate situation.

I shuffled paperwork for a while in my office, checking over our takings and looking at the guestlists, scanning for names that might be familiar or even useful in the future. Perhaps if we put Temple or one of his friends on our list, they could work the club to find out more. I rubbed the side of my cheek as I considered our options.

I hadn't planned on this large of a problem presenting myself and I was getting an actual headache over it. As the words on the page blurred in front of me a little, I checked the time. I didn't want to wait for the crowd to tell me Kayla had arrived on stage tonight. I wanted to be there for her, ready, waiting, watching.

As I took up my usual position against the railing, Jason came up the stairs toward me.

"You got a minute?" He looked at me expectantly then took in the view of everyone down below. "You just surveying your kingdom?"

I chuckled. "Something like that. I'm waiting for Kayla to sing. What can I do for you?"

He took the same pose as me, forearms resting against the railing, back slightly hunched, gaze focused on the stage. "I'd like to stay," he murmured.

"In the club? Sure. You need office space or just a drink?" I glanced at him and he grinned.

"I'd like to stay in New Orleans."

"Oh?" Jason was Nic's sireling, so this was unexpected from him. Especially now, when Nic had just started his reign.

Jason could have made himself really influential.

But he sighed a little. "Yeah. Things are quiet in Baton Rouge right now. The action is here right now." He glanced at me. "And I think I can help." He rocked forward a little bit like he was unsure of what my reply might be, but he needn't have worried.

"I'd love to have you stay. You're right. There's a lot to do here. The more men I can trust, the better." I drummed my fingertips against the railing.

Jason grinned wider. "Kay, great, because I already checked with Nic, and he's good with it, too."

I chuckled. "Welcome to New Orleans, Jason."

He bowed his head in mock deference. "Thank you, Regent."

With the way things were shaping up around here, I was going to need all

the help I could get, and I trusted Kyle and Jason—and even Temple these days—more than anyone. Jason was family, and Kyle was as well. He was totally loyal to Nic, and loyal to me, even after I’d screwed up so badly in Baton Rouge.

That meant a lot.

“I mean,” I added, “I guess it’ll be good to have the company if nothing else?”

Jason laughed. “I guess so. Plus, I can still liaise with the wolves and keep us current with anything they’re doing.” He looked away a moment before turning a sly gaze back to me. “So, do I actually I get an office?”

I gestured behind me. “Kyle has one. It has boxes in it. Knock yourself out choosing one for yourself. Hope you’re better at interior design than he is, though.”

Jason huffed a laugh and walked away. It would be good to have a loyal crew here. I’d talk to Nic and thank him during our next call. He didn’t need to have granted Jason’s request to stay here. It was just another show of my brother’s trust in me. He’d exiled me but not written me off completely. He’d never given up on me. That knowledge bloomed inside me, warming the inside of my chest, and satisfaction rose up, pricking my eyes uncomfortably.

I stretched a little, avoiding the temptation to swipe at my eyes, and blinking away the unexpected emotion instead. Everything was going to work out just fine. We’d done the hard work when Nic beat Francois. Everything else here in New Orleans just needed straightening out, and with the right men at my side, I could absolutely do that.

The curtains leading to the dressing rooms moved a little, and I straightened as Kayla appeared from between them. She commanded all of my attention. Her dress was stunning again. She’d confided that local designers were already approaching her and wanting her to wear dresses they’d created for her to wear while she sang.

Even without beautiful clothing, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt in my house each day, I couldn’t take my gaze off her. She was perfect. Even the way she moved was enticing. If I drew a deep enough breath, her jasmine scent flooded my chest. I only had to concentrate the tiniest amount to hear her pulse, too, the heartbeat that was only for me. Of that, I was certain.

She was my mate.

And I would protect her with my last breath.

Always.

She stepped onto the stage, her smile shy as she raised her gaze to meet mine briefly. She always checked for me here now. And I would always be here, watching over her.

The music started, and she swayed slowly, seductively, moving her body in a way that hardened me instantly as I recalled the way she moved beneath me. My fangs made my gums ache, but that was the effect watching Kayla always had on me.

She'd added to her set, making it longer by popular demand, and her singing seemed to cast a spell on the crowd below. They moved slower, their bodies entwined in slow dances full of love and lust. The scent of blood hung on the air again, and Kayla's voice soared.

As she reached the halfway point of her set, there was a blur of motion in the crowd and popping noises that didn't form part of the music.

Shit. Gunshots rang out. I was a blur of motion, racing down the stairs, needing to reach Kayla. Some asshole was shooting a gun in my club. Near my mate.

I roared with sudden rage and blurred forward. Nothing but made sense, and I pushed people aside as they got in my way.

Kayla was my mate. I needed to protect her. My club, my property.

These people would pay.

My fangs descended and my lips stretched tight over them.

Jason was close behind me, his gun already in his hand. "You get to Kayla. I'll find the shooter." His words were terse but unmistakable excitement danced in his eyes. "I knew there'd be more action in New Orleans than Baton Rouge."

His words floated over his shoulder as he hurried away, seeming to part the crowd in front of him by sheer force of will alone.

KAYLA

Lost in the music, I was literally singing with my eyes closed, but there was a muffled noise in the crowd, and my eyes sprang open just as unfamiliar sounds rang out.

No, not unfamiliar. I knew what gunshots sounded like. But these were definitely out of place.

I stopped almost mid-note as fear cut off my voice, and I clutched my throat as I dropped my microphone and dove off the stage. Every nerve in me was stretched taut and vibrated on a frequency I hadn't experienced since Francois had last given me orders. I hit the floor with a thump and winced before I crawled away.

I needed to get out of there, needed to move, but everything was moving in staccato jerks in front of me, people blurring in and out of my view as I heaved deep breaths to try to loosen my tight chest.

Grabbing a table leg, I used it to help pull myself under the table. I couldn't see much besides feet from down here, and hopefully I was also out of sight.

If I knew anything about Sebastian and his men, they'd already sprung into action to find whoever had started shooting a gun in their club. They wouldn't stand for that kind of behavior—the sort that threatened Nic Dupont's reign. They couldn't afford to look weak or to *be* weak, and this was a direct threat and act of violence too close to him.

They needed to defend against it.

The pull to help was fierce, but my magic wasn't battle magic. I was as likely to hinder their efforts as I was to be any help at all. I added that to the

list for future learning. My magic was already pretty dark. Actual battle magic wouldn't worsen that.

But for now, the best bet for me and for them, was for me to stay out of sight and safe so no one had to worry about me while they solved the bigger problem.

I spotted another table, farther away, the corner darker. That would be an even more suitable hiding spot. I began to inch my way slowly across the floor, the grit that wasn't usually obvious when I was walking scraping against my palms.

More shots rang out and a bullet whizzed past me, grazing my arm. Pain bloomed down to my fingers and through my chest, and I cried out.

Warm blood trickled over my skin, and when I clamped my hand over the wound, it seeped between my fingers.

Fuck. I was like a walking entrée now. I was hiding in a vampire club and bleeding. They'd circle me like sharks if they were hungry. The extra fear propelled me to the new hiding place, and I gritted my teeth as I crawled beneath the second table.

I just had to wait it out. I could do that. I grabbed a discarded linen napkin and clamped it to my arm, hoping to stem the bleeding and hopefully mute the scent of the blood as well. The back of my new hiding place was shadowed and dusty. No one would find me here.

I tried to steady my breathing, but it rasped in and out of my chest, where my heart already beat wildly. Blood continued to trickle down my arm from under the napkin, but it slowed as I tightened my grip over the wound. I didn't want to look—not that I'd see much in the dark, but if I tried, I'd imagine.

As I allowed my eyes to close and my head to rest against the wall behind me, strong fingers grasped my ankles and I was yanked into the open. The grip was too cruel, the movement too violent to be anyone who had friendly feelings toward me, and my eyes flew open.

A vampire I'd never met before stood over me, his hair disheveled, his eyes wild. There was something manic about him, something I'd seen in Francois too many times before. Those were the days I'd taken extra care to avoid my boss, but there was no avoiding this guy now.

Fear started to close my throat.

Then there was a blur of motion I almost didn't see, and Sebastian leapt between the guy and me, his gaze catching on mine briefly before he gave all

of his attention the vampire standing above me.

A growl ripped from Sebastian's throat, and his features started to change, his cheekbones becoming more angular, his fangs descending, his eyes reddening. I huddled in on myself, looping my good arm around my knees to make myself as small as possible.

The vampire squared off against Sebastian, but it was no good. He was no match for the man who called himself my mate, the man I *wanted* to be my mate.

My breath caught as Sebastian slashed forward, his nails now claws as he launched himself at the vampire, burying his fangs in his neck and applying enough pressure that the crack of bones echoed through the club, so loud that the screaming stopped for just a moment as people's fear hung like someone had pressed the pause button.

The wild vampire dropped to the floor, his body now a useless dead weight, his head resting at an awkward angle.

I didn't make a sound. I couldn't. But Sebastian was watching me, and I gazed at him as his features rearranged themselves to the handsome man I was used to. There really were monsters hiding in these men.

"You need to come with me." Sebastian's voice was gruff.

I didn't argue. Instead, I nodded and started to hold out my hand then winced as the movement hurt my upper arm.

"Fuck." Sebastian reached for me, gathering me against him. "You're bleeding." It was like he'd only just noticed as he turned his face away, like he didn't want to see or smell me. "It's not safe for you down here. There are too many vampires. You're too tempting as you are now. I need to get you to my office so I can lock you in. I'll come back for you when it's safe."

I nodded again, not trusting myself to speak. But I trusted Sebastian. I trusted him to keep me safe.

"Talk to me, Kayla." His gaze searched me even as he hustled through the crowd.

I gripped him tighter as he raced up the stairs, my good arm wrapped around his neck, my injured arm pressed between us. He opened the door to his office and carried me inside before lowering me to a small couch.

"I need you to wait here." He sounded more urgent than I'd ever heard him, but I only nodded. I had no plans to go anywhere.

"Don't try to help or get involved." He sounded like he had experience with well-meaning people getting in his way, and I nodded again.

“I’ll stay here.” It hurt to talk. My voice was croaky and thin. “My magic isn’t battle magic. I won’t be able to help you, I know that.”

He narrowed his eyes like he was testing the truth of my words before whirling away and speeding to the door. “I’ll be back as soon it’s safe. This door is reenforced and I’m locking it for your protection.” He patted it briefly like I wouldn’t know which one he meant.

I nodded again, even though he couldn’t see me. Then the door closed almost silently behind him before the snap of the lock echoed through the room. I wrapped my arms around myself in a pseudo hug, needing to surrender to being held, before my senses returned and I thought my situation through. I wasn’t a damsel in distress. I never had been.

I’d been alone a long time now, even with Lettie guiding me. And I was a kick-ass witch with skills sought after by vampires. I couldn’t afford to sit in the office and do literally nothing while I waited to be rescued. Oh, I wouldn’t leave the office—I wasn’t that dumb—but I could help myself, for sure.

My arm was still bleeding slowly through the napkin, and I could definitely do something about that. First, I ripped the hem of my dress and wrapped the makeshift bandage over myself while I prepared to cast an incantation that would speed my healing.

As I focused my energies and intention, a soft *snick* behind me distracted me. An icy breeze traveled over the back of my neck, and goosebumps rose on my skin. Sudden fear clutched my chest, and I didn’t want to turn around.

“Hello, Kayla.”

I turned then. A tall, thin vampire had emerged from the closet at the back of Sebastian’s office. His hair was so fair it was almost white, his eyes a cold, crystal blue, and his skin bordered on translucent. He looked hella old. Old like I hadn’t even seen a fucking vampire old since... crap. Émile Ricard.

He didn’t say anything else. Only studied me like I was a science experiment or a puzzle he needed to figure out, and I steeled myself against a shudder. It was like I was the wild animal rather than him. If Sebastian could transform into a monster, I didn’t want to see this guy mad.

I sat frozen before him as he took predatorial steps forward, gliding toward me rather than walking. His movements looked oddly effortless, every one of my muscles tensed at his approach.

He blinked and that released me from his gaze. I stood quickly and took a step away from him, then another, and it was like we were dancing. Every

step he took toward me, I took one away, until I was backed right up against Sebastian's desk, the edge of the almost-black wood digging into my ass. I pressed my palm down, shifting my weight onto my good arm as I leaned away.

The vampire's voice was like the sound of wind rustling through leaves as he spoke to me again. "We have a message for the king."

I inhaled a quick breath. Oh, shit. I was embroiled in something political. I opened my mouth to protest that I was just the singer here, nothing important, but he cut me a glare and I faltered.

"Nicolas Dupont and his regent will never take New Orleans. They will never own this city nor its vampires. No matter how many wolves they put on leashes. We are the authority here, and we have always been the authority. No one will be taking a knee but the pretenders to the vampire thrones." He laughed, and I shuddered at the dry, scratchy sound.

I lifted my chin, though. I didn't have to do a thing this guy wanted. I was a fucking dark witch.

He tilted his head. His gaze suddenly quizzical. "You don't look like you understand, Kayla. How can I make you understand? I need to send a message..." He tapped his chin as if in thought.

Before I could reply, he moved, slamming into me before I could even register that he'd closed the gap between us. I let out a strangled shriek.

"I've figured out how to send my message," he whispered, his breath hot against my ear. He smelled of blood and decay. Like something was rotting inside him.

I shuddered and shrieked again, the sound leaving me like I had no control over it. But damn, it made me sound weak, and I hated it.

"Aww, Kayla... Shh... Shh..." He made weird soothing noises, and I tried to move but he was too strong, deceptively so while his grip seemed to remain so soft. "It's not personal. It's just a message for the man claiming to be king. It's an honor to be chosen as king, and he has not been chosen." He smoothed one of his bony hands over my hair.

Then in direct contrast to his strange gesture of affection, something cold and sharp pressed against my throat.

He leaned closer, pressing against me until the knife sliced slickly at my skin, and I gasped at the sharp pain. He bared his fangs at me in a gruesome parody of a grin, and I tried to shrink away, but he gripped the back of my head, pushing me harder onto his knife.

He dipped his head lower and moaned. “The scent of your blood, my dear. How have you remained untainted by vampire venom?” For a moment, the press of the knife relaxed, and warm liquid seeped toward my collarbone.

His fangs scraped against my skin, and I whimpered. I didn’t want this vampire to bite me. If I wanted to give myself to anyone, it would be Sebastian. Only him.

I needed Sebastian now.

The vampire’s tongue flicked out and he licked over the delicate skin at my pulse. I didn’t move. I couldn’t. I even stopped breathing.

“Just one bite...” he murmured. Then he pulled back. “No. The message. Must deliver the message. It needs to be clear.” His breath fanned over my face again and I gagged.

When I swallowed, the movement pushed my neck against his knife once more, and he smiled. Up close, the dried blood around the tops of his fangs was on full display, and I closed my eyes against the sight of it.

The knife was so sharp, it slipped into my skin again with little more than a sting, but blood began to gush down my neck and my vision blurred as I blinked to try to regain my focus. The vampire drew the knife across my neck, and I tried to lift my hands to hold myself together.

Dammit, I wasn’t bleeding out onto the floor of Sebastian’s office, where he’d left me to keep me safe. I wasn’t coloring my clothes bright red as my vision faded in and out again. I wasn’t reliving all of my fucking worst moments on some sort of movie reel in my head.

In reality, though, I hadn’t been safe since I met Sebastian. Not even since I’d signed my first contract with the Ricards. I was twenty-two and I’d been living on borrowed time far longer than I’d really been aware of it.

The vampire stepped away from me, and I landed hard on the floor. I only knew I’d landed hard because I bounced. I didn’t feel the impact at all. As I looked up, the vampire licked along the blade of the knife and his lips parted in a grin.

“Such a shame to waste such a rare vintage, but I need your blood to turn this carpet red. *Then* the self-crowned king might get the message.” He turned and strode to the door before simply wrenching the handle hard enough to break the lock and leaving.

I let my head sink into the plush pile of Sebastian’s carpet, the same one I was supposed to be turning red. My hands were at my throat, trying to hold my flesh closed, but the wound was deep and my skin was slippery and

warm. I wouldn't survive this.

No human could—not even a witch.

My last hope was rescue, but what could anyone do? I was growing colder, and I started to shiver. It wouldn't be long now.

I closed my eyes and thought of Sebastian.

The man who said he was my mate. I'd pretended I didn't really know, that I didn't feel the same.

But I had.

I still did.

And I'd wasted it.

SEBASTIAN

My nose twitched. Blood. A fucking shit-ton of it. Panic seized me and adrenaline roared through my body until I could only hear a rushing sound in my ears.

Kayla. Her name beat inside my head in time with my heart. Faster and faster. Her blood.

I could smell her fucking blood.

It called to me, but I watched the other vampires in the club as they each turned and faced my office almost as one.

“Get them out of here,” I called to Kyle. “Get everyone out.” I blurred through the crowd, jostling anyone who even got close to being in my way as I made a beeline for the stairs. I’d never moved faster, and it still wasn’t fast enough.

I took the steps two at a time, and all the time the scent of Kayla’s blood grew stronger. It permeated the air and confused my mind. There was too much of it, but it just smelled so...good. I burst into my office, blowing right through the door that should have been locked but that opened way too easily.

Then I froze. Kayla lay on the floor, a pool of blood rapidly spreading around her.

“Kayla.” I dropped to my knees in front of her, and one of her eyes cracked open.

“Sebastian?” Her voice was thin and weak.

“Yes.” I reached for her, trying to cradle her head, smearing my hands through so much blood.

I was covered in it, and the sticky consistency and sweet aroma kicked my instincts into gear, and my fangs descended. Fuck. This was my mate dying in my arms... The last thing I wanted was a meal of her blood.

But there was just *so fucking much* of it.

I blew out a breath and sucked one back in. I could do this. I could fix it.

“Kayla,” I said again. “Let me heal you. I can make this better.” I could seal her wound with my saliva the same way I would any vampire bite. I sucked in another breath through my mouth. I had enough willpower for that.

“Okay.” Her eyes threatened to close again. She barely even nodded.

“Kayla.” I didn’t know where to touch her. I didn’t want to jostle her or move her too much.

I rested a hand on her left shoulder and bent down, hovering my mouth over her neck. “This shouldn’t hurt.” I swallowed before sticking my tongue out and taking the first lap of her blood, seeking the wound so I could seal it.

But the first taste sent a buzz right to my brain and I floated. Kayla tasted amazing.

I had *never* tasted blood this amazing, maybe that was to do with the mate bond. I lapped again then again, taking big swipes with my tongue as I cleaned a patch on her neck, but the more blood I licked away, the more seemed to pump out of the gash I was revealing. I pressed my mouth to the wound and began to suck.

Kayla moaned.

I jerked backward at the sound. What the hell was I doing? I’d nearly lost control. I was fucking sucking at my mate like she was a feeding station.

“Kayla? Kayla?” I called her name until she opened her eyes again.

“Is it done?” Her voice was little more than breath now.

“No... No, it isn’t.” I looked at her neck and the carpet surrounding her.

The bleeding was getting worse.

“I can’t stop it.” Emotion swelled within me. I was going to lose my mate before we’d even truly found each other, before she’d accepted me as hers.

I licked the wound clear of blood again. There was no reason it shouldn’t be healing.

“Maybe it was a poisoned blade.” I blurted the words out as I searched for a reason—*any* reason. There wasn’t much that made the human body immune to vampire saliva, but there were specific poisons that would do it.

I only had one option left. I looked at Kayla, gazing at her in what had been another stunning gown, and thought of everything she’d already been

through tonight. My heart twisted. This was all wrong, and not at all how I wanted to start my life with my mate—not with hers ending in front of me like this.

“Kayla.”

Her eyes barely flickered this time, and her breathing was shallow and slow.

“Kayla.” My voice came out urgent now, and it was all I could do not to shake her and make her respond. Desperation clawed at my insides. Losing someone had never felt like this.

I swallowed against a sudden bout of nausea when she didn’t reply.

“Kayla.” I kept using her name, hoping it would rouse her enough to make some sort of response to me. “Kayla, please. It’s me, Sebastian. I can save you, but I need to turn you. I have to make you a vampire, like me.”

She hadn’t even wanted to be bitten. She’d said to me that she’d worried about her witch nature, her powers...and I couldn’t make her any promises on that, because I didn’t know. She’d also needed time to process *forever*, and now I needed her to accept it, so she’d live. If she lost any more blood, there might not even be enough in her to make the exchange. This needed to happen fast.

“Please. Kayla. Can you hear me?” I cupped my hand against her cheek.

Her eyes flickered again.

“Can you hear me? I need to turn you. It’s the only way you’ll survive.” And I needed her to survive. I already couldn’t imagine a life without her. Especially not one as long as mine. “Kayla.” I opened one of her eyes. I needed her consent for this. “Can you hear me?”

My vision blurred as she didn’t even try to focus.

I tried again. “Can you hear me? I need to turn you so you’ll live. Will you let me?”

She sighed and her lips parted slightly. Her pupils changed size, and I blew out a sigh.

Her nod was so small I barely saw it. The tiniest movement of her head, but it was enough.

“Okay,” I said then blew out a small sigh of relief. “Okay.”

I swept her hair out of the way so I could access the other side of her neck. My fangs were already descended and aching, throbbing from when I’d tried to prevent myself from biting her so that I could heal her.

But now I had to bite. It was the only way.

I pressed my hand against the wound on the other side of her neck. I couldn't let her bleed freely from both wounds, the one made by a poisoned knife and the one I was about to make with my fangs, or she wouldn't survive, no matter what I did.

"I'm sorry." I whispered the soft apology. "This isn't the way it should happen. It should be magic and love and talk of forever. I wanted to make this special for you. I wouldn't have chosen this for us." There weren't enough words to truly apologize, and I didn't have enough time, but I needed to acknowledge that this was necessity, not choice, for me. I wanted her vampire, I wanted her with me, but not like this.

Never like this.

She breathed out a sigh that sounded like a fucking last breath, and I sank my fangs into her neck over her pulse point, gasping as the sweet blood hit my tongue. I couldn't take too much, though, and this wasn't a normal turning. I had to preserve her life above all else.

I had to drink as little as possible, no matter how much I wanted more.

I moved to her shoulder and sank my fangs in there too. I wasn't sure I'd taken enough from her neck to effect the change, but I couldn't keep taking while blood pumped almost as fast out of the other side, no matter how much pressure I applied.

Her blood was a trickle on my tongue now. She had no more left to give. It was a make it or break it situation for her turning, and I ripped a savage chunk out of my wrist as desperation flared through me at how little time Kayla had left. I pressed the hole I'd made to her lips, mashing the inside of my wrist against her mouth, working it inside, touching her lips and gums and teeth to try to encourage her to suck, however weakly.

"Come on, Kayla," I muttered. "Nearly there. Come on." I pushed my free hand through my hair. I just needed her to take a little. Just enough that she'd turn.

I could fix everything else after.

Her tongue pressed against my arm as some of my blood worked into her mouth. Yes, she was taking it. But no...she was simply trying to push me away, trying to spit out the very thing she needed. My blood slid down her chin instead of down her throat and I let out a frustrated groan.

"We're nearly there. Just take a little." I pressed my wrist to her mouth again, trying to seat it in a secure position where she couldn't reject my offering to her.

She swallowed. Just a little bit at first, then more until she was taking great gulps. Relief cascaded through me and made me lightheaded.

I stroked her hair. “Yes, that’s right.” I offered her as much encouragement as I could, even though I couldn’t be sure she could even hear or fully understand me. “You’re doing it, Kayla. We’re going to be all right.”

She’d live. She had a chance now, one she hadn’t had before.

Eventually, she fell away from my wrist, her body limp, but she was sated. Color had returned to her cheeks, and the flow of blood from the knife wound at her neck was slowing.

I blew out a slow sigh. We were nearly there.

I’d healed her from the inside, the only way I could have done it. And I didn’t know how to feel about it. Relief came first, then elation... Then guilt. But it had been the only way, and I’d have to hope she understood that.

Jason ran through the door and stopped as he looked at Kayla, still cradled in my arms. “Is she...?” He didn’t finish his sentence.

I shook my head. “No, but she’s not out of the woods yet. She has a long way to go. I’m turning her, Jason.”

His lips parted and his eyes widened. “Oh.” But it couldn’t have been an entirely unexpected development because his face smoothed back to neutral, and he took on Kyle’s usual at ease stance. “We got all the vampires but one.” His voice was almost wooden as he made his report. “That last fucker escaped.” He gritted his teeth and shook his head. “Shit, man. I’m sorry. We let one get away.”

I pressed my lips together as I listened to him. Yeah, there was one in the wind. But we’d have another chance. Another opportunity to round that rogue vamp up. I was more interested in watching Kayla, where her neck was starting to heal, the smooth edges of the knife wound knitting together as if by magic.

Kayla was still limp, though, her breathing still shallow. The most dangerous part would come next. Not every human could accept being turned. It was too much for some of their fragile bodies, and I hadn’t been able to discuss that with Kayla. I’d taken the only chance I had left. The only chance we had left.

“We need to get her home.” I lifted her into my arms.

“I’ll get the car.” Before he even finished the sentence, Jason was leaving the room at a run.

“I’ll meet you downstairs.” I didn’t dare go too fast as I followed him

from my office, my feet squishing in the blood-soaked carpet.

Kayla was precious cargo to move too quickly with because I didn't want to jostle her in my arms or shake her. Her body had a lot of healing and changing to do, and I didn't want to disrupt the process in any way. She needed the best chance of survival. I'd just given her a start.

The club was a mess as I walked through it. I hadn't seen the worst of it before I'd run to Kayla. The guests Kyle hadn't managed to evacuate littered the floor as corpses, and outside was even worse.

We needed clean-up here and quickly, but Kyle would need to organize that for me. I glanced at Kayla. I had something far more important to take care of. The only thing that mattered was getting Kayla home and helping with her recovery.

KAYLA

Everything inside me burned. I was trapped in hell with no relief and respite. Just heat and burning and a searing pain that never seemed to end. Occasionally, people moved like shadows in front of me, but were my eyes open or were they closed?

I could no longer tell what was a hallucination and what was real. There were too many voices, and they were all distorted as my muscles tensed and cramped, my body twisted all on its own.

It was my death by a thousand cuts, liquid fire that consumed me, and my head was heavy. So heavy that thoughts didn't matter. I couldn't grasp them. They were fleeting and didn't make any sense.

But Sebastian existed. Knowledge of him was like a cool balm, easing the fire, and his proximity washed away the pain. I clutched that awareness of him, holding it to me in times where I would have been all alone.

He kept me tethered when I would have floated away. Somehow, he was my anchor.

There were more voices and figures. Nic and Leia.

Maybe.

Leia sat at my side and whispered like she knew all the secrets of my world. "I know it hurts. It hurt me too, but you have to hold on. I held on. Sebastian *needs you* to hold on."

Her words didn't make any sense. I was still here. Sebastian was holding me.

She took my hand and pressed it to her cool lips. "Keep holding on," she said again.

My eyes flickered open and she smiled gently.

“Good girl,” she murmured. “Keep fighting the fire. You’ll come through. I did it. I know you can. Keep being strong.”

But I was so tired. I closed my eyes again as damp, cooling washcloths were laid over my forehead then removed again as they dried out when the inferno inside me burned hot again.

But I never lost myself completely in those moments. Sebastian was always there, keeping me from drifting away.

I was half awake, floating, when there was another presence. A female vampire who sat beside me. Sometimes next to Leia, sometimes opposite her, and the two of them spoke in low voices, an obvious familiarity between them.

I wanted to know more. But my eyes refused to stay open long enough, and my concentration wasn’t what I needed it to be to maintain focus. I couldn’t form the questions I wanted to ask. I didn’t even know if I wanted to know the answers or if I could process them.

Hours passed and turned into days before the fog in my head cleared and some of the heat receded. My throat was scratchy and raw, though, like something had climbed up it, digging barbed claws in all the way.

“Hello?” My voice was a thick whisper, and it cracked under the effort of the one word.

Right away, there was the rustle of fabric near me as Sebastian leaned into my field of view. “Kayla?” His forehead formed lines of concern, the creases unusual when they painted his face with worry.

I tried to smile but my lips were dry and they hurt. I licked them and Sebastian immediately dabbed at them with a washcloth he’d dipped in a bowl of water.

“How do you feel?” He touched the backs of his fingers to my cheek then to my forehead like he was taking my temperature.

I nodded while I considered his question. “I don’t feel *bad*...but I do feel different.” I plucked at the sheet covering me. “What happened?” I only had snippets of memory. The club...a fight...bleeding.

So much blood.

Sebastian closed his eyes briefly and swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Do you remember anything at all?”

“Blood.” As I spoke the word, my mouth watered and I lifted my hand to wipe actual drool from the corner of my lips.

He took my hand. “There’s no easy way to say this, Kayla. I turned you to save you.” He caught his breath before he rushed on, words spilling from him. “If I hadn’t done it, you would have died. I was so close to losing you. I asked you...you agreed. I mean, I think you agreed. You did agree, right?” He squeezed my hand tighter and didn’t pause for me to answer his question. “I thought I’d made you safe in my office, but there was a vampire I didn’t know about. He surprised you and used a poisoned knife on you. I couldn’t heal you. This was the only way.” He looked at me, his blue eyes swirling with darker colors like the decision he’d made pained him.

As I listened to Sebastian speak, my mouth watered some more and I focused on the pulse in his neck. I touched it briefly with the tip of my finger. “I’m hungry,” I whispered.

Sebastian laughed and turned to the female vampire I didn’t recognize. She handed him a mug with a Venus fly trap on it and Sebastian helped me to sit up before nudging the thick rim against my lips.

“Drink,” he murmured. “Feed.”

I drew back. “Feed?” But the copper aroma of warmed blood drifted from the mug, and instead of turning my stomach, it made my hunger more.

I took a sip then a gulp, and Sebastian laughed as he urged caution. But as I drank deeper, he and the female vampire both smiled.

As I was finishing the remaining drops, Leia entered the room. I hadn’t taken much interest in my surroundings, but I was propped up in Sebastian’s massive bed and there were chairs arranged around me like people had held vigils over me or at least visited in shifts. Leia sat in the chair next to Sebastian and took my hand as he lifted the empty cup away.

“Welcome to the family, Kayla.” Her smile was beautiful as she spoke, and her skin was radiant. She looked almost superhuman. Like she was an advanced version of a person, somehow. Like I could suddenly see her differently.

Nic entered the room, and all chatter stopped as everyone looked toward the Baton Rouge king.

“Look who’s awake,” the unfamiliar female gestured toward me. “Sleeping Beauty opened her eyes, finally.”

“Aimée.” Nic’s voice was chiding. “You haven’t even met Kayla properly yet. That seems a very inappropriate way to talk about her.”

“I feel like I know all about her.” The woman sat in one of the chairs. “How many humans are you boys going to turn for me to keep watch over?”

You're exhausting me with all of this worry." She scrubbed her hands over her face then looked between Sebastian and Nic, and Sebastian rested his hand on my shoulder.

"Kayla, this is our sister, Aimée. She's a bit undiplomatic when she speaks sometimes, but her heart's always in the right place."

Aimée snorted. "Whatever. Whenever you need me, you always know I'm right here."

Nic nodded, his eyes glinting with sudden amusement. "And I thank you for that, Aimée."

She preened a little and Sebastian suddenly clapped his hands.

"Right. Kayla and I need to talk."

As if he'd issued an actual declaration, everyone else stood and left the room, tossing a chorus of goodbyes and see you later's over their shoulders.

As soon as the door closed behind his family, Sebastian sat back down and took my hand between his. "So..."

"Am I a fully turned vampire now?" My voice came out very small.

He nodded. "Your body accepted the blood, so..." He shrugged like he'd just explained everything.

"But what about being a witch? Am I still that?" I couldn't lose my whole identity. Not like this. "Am I a hybrid? Do I still have my powers?" I asked questions faster than Sebastian could answer them.

He shook his head. "I don't know. But we can find out together, if you like? You've got plenty of time now. We can discover everything about you, about each other, about us."

"Can I start with something simple?" I flicked my fingers to see if I could still call the same energy I'd always been able to manipulate.

Sebastian nodded. "Sure. What are you thinking of?"

"Maybe just lighting your candles?" It was a flame spell. Pretty simple, and one of the first we were taught.

Even better, it didn't require any prep. Just knowing the right words. I pointed at the gothic-looking candelabra in the corner of the room.

"A little mood lighting? I could live with that." He leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs out in front of him, although the grin playing on his lips seemed like one of challenge.

I nodded. I could meet that challenge. The old energy had raced back through my body more quickly than I'd ever called it to me before. "Okay." I centered myself, muttered my incantation, and spread my fingers towards the

candles.

Fire roared to life, engulfing the entire candelabra, and creating an inferno of flames with tips that licked the ceiling. The burning column swayed, dancing dangerously close to Sebastian's curtains.

He leapt from his seat before I even saw him move and then there was a large plume of white furling gas as he aimed a fire extinguisher at the fire I'd created.

I pressed my hand to my mouth. "I am so sorry. I didn't mean... I had no idea..."

But he tossed a grin over his shoulder, and his eyes twinkled. "No harm done." He chuckled, and I laughed wryly.

"Yeah. Thanks to you." Then I laughed again. "Looks like my powers have leveled up, though?" I rubbed my hands together.

"Just remember we don't generally like fire..." His voice held caution, but his eyes still sparkled. "So maybe be careful with that particular parlor trick."

"Oh, shit." I covered my mouth. "I didn't even think. Could I have killed us?"

He lifted one lazy shoulder. "I keep fire extinguishers on hand to minimize the risk of death by witch fire." His grin widened. "And any other fire in my bedroom."

I stared at the slightly ash-blemished wall, my guilt slowly being overtaken by delight. "Wow... Imagine what else I might be able to do. Finding out is going to be so much fun!"

"And what is it you'd like to be able to do?" He sounded curious.

One thought sprang immediately to mind, something I'd never been able to do. I met his gaze square on. "I think I need to fight," I said. "I've never had battle magic but one of those vampires just tried to kill me, and I think I need to join your war and help end your enemies. I like you and your brother, and I support his reign. I'd like to be able to do that now. I thought some of the grimoires in your library might be able to help me with the lack of battle magic, actually. I mean, I've pretty much embraced the dark arts already, and now I'm undead so...I should be okay to learn it all, right?"

He nodded, his expression thoughtful as he dealt with the spent fire extinguisher. "As long as you're kept safe and no harm comes to you, I'll teach you what you need to know to defend yourself as a vampire. We can pick up the rest of the witch stuff as we go along. I don't know how witches

learn their magic, though — that’s something you’ll need to teach me.” He approached me and perched at the edge of the bed and I patted the space next to me as I wriggled to lie down again.

“Come and lie next to me,” I murmured.

When he moved, I continued my demands.

“Hold me, please.”

He wrapped his arms around me. “Gladly.”

I buried his nose in my hair.

“I almost lost you. I feel so lucky you’re still here.”

“Thank you.” He’d saved my life and gratitude filled my chest. I hadn’t been sure I wanted him to turn me, but he’d made exactly the right decision.

I definitely still wanted to be here, like this, with Sebastian, lying in his arms.

He looked down at me, and I pressed my lips against his, the touch soft but earnest. His fingers wove into my hair, and he cradled the back of my head as he pressed closer to me, his lips playing more urgently across mine as his tongue requested entry to my mouth.

I sighed at the pleasure of having him so close, and cupped his face in my hands as I probed forward with my tongue, sliding it carefully up the edge of one of his fangs. He groaned.

That was a pleasure I still needed to explore more fully.

“Stay right there.” Sebastian shifted his weight, moving away from me.

Except not away. He moved down my body, until he pressed my thighs apart with his hands.

I sucked in a breath and held it, everything still, the room quiet. There was no need to ask what he was doing. It was exactly what I wanted him to do.

When he pressed his lips to my inner thigh, I sighed, my breath escaping between my parted lips as I closed my eyes and pressed my head farther back into the pillow. Just the promise of where his head was... I tangled my fingers into his hair this time, my body moving before I even thought about where to put my hands.

His tongue trailed over my skin, and I wanted to inch down toward him, to encourage his kisses where I wanted them most. But he teased me, his fingers grasping my thighs to hold me as he wanted me, his mouth caressing a slow path higher. It was exquisite torture, and I waited, hanging in the moment he’d created.

Because it was like my body, my pleasure, was the only thing that mattered to him right then, and that knowledge set a fire burning inside me.

His focus was absolute, and I let go, relaxing into the experience and finding my pleasure through him, in every touch of his lips and tongue and every warm breath that skated over my skin.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, and the reverence of his praise warmed me further—and I believed him.

Anticipation prickled through me as he drew closer to my clit, and I writhed a little against the sheets, keeping my eyes closed as I reached for our bond and checked in with my body. I wanted this. I was ready.

Before his mouth touched me, one of his fingertips pressed against my entrance, nudging the sensitive skin there, and my lips parted in a small gasp as a wave of sudden pleasure crashed through me.

Then his mouth was on me, licking a delicate line from his finger to my clit, and I held myself still, letting him tease me with his gentle touches. And I wanted so much more.

“Oh.” My sound was part moan, part whimper, but all appreciation for the sensations he was evoking inside me with his clever mouth and tongue.

I’d never anticipated this type of pleasure. Not with the life I’d needed to live, but Sebastian was just so... *sexy, talented, amazing... unexpected*. The words bombarded me, but I didn’t have the capacity to voice them as he sucked my clit into his mouth and I pressed against him, seeking more.

His tongue flicked over it and I moaned my pleasure again so he repeated his action until I couldn’t control my breathing, and the more I tried to steady myself, the more difficult it grew as sensation started to overwhelm me. Thought was gone from my head, and I fully surrendered to Sebastian, his scent of the sea filling my lungs and drowning me in him.

I no longer had control of my body. My pleasure rose high like a wave about to crash over me.

Then it did, sweeping away the last of my abilities to breathe and think, and my body took over, tensing and tightening as Sebastian moved his finger inside me.

He slowed his movements, easing me back into the space we shared, and I sighed a sound of contentment.

He laughed. “That was a nice noise.”

I shrugged, the movement languorous as all of my muscles relaxed. “Well, that was very nice.”

He chuckled again before kissing the inside of my thigh one last time and returning to lie beside me.

“Hello.” I turned to him and captured his lips, our kisses softer now.

Thoughts of returning the favor sifted through my mind, but Sebastian seemed in no hurry to change positions again, so for now, I just lost myself in the kiss of the man who’d saved my life in more ways than I could probably count.

The man I was mated to forever.

SEBASTIAN

I woke up with Kayla resting against me, her hair splayed over my chest in wild ringlets and curls. My heart was the fullest it had ever been as I eased slowly out from beside her, careful not to disturb her. Her dark eyelashes fluttered against her perfect cheeks, and her red lips pouted in a way that almost begged to be kissed.

She might have had the heart of a vampire now, but she still had the face of an angel. And I was just so glad to see her lying beside me, her chest rising and falling regularly as she drew breaths.

I'd almost lost her. Even now, that thought wound a spiral of fear right through me. It had been so close. If I'd been any later, if she'd lost any more blood... I shuddered as I stood by the bed and cast another glance at her.

I'd do anything for her. Even before I turned her, I would have moved mountains. On some level I'd always known she was my mate. And at some stage she would let me taste her sweet blood again.

She'd accepted my blood, too. Next, we'd share a blood exchange as it was meant to be.

Sweet.

Loving.

Intimate.

It wouldn't be an emergency situation, where I'd acted through sheer desperation.

But, for now at least, Kayla needed breakfast. I wanted to help her keep her strength up.

She'd shown strong magical abilities yesterday, surprising even herself,

but fledgling vampires needed a lot of support to reach their true potential as simply vampires. I wasn't sure how to handle one who used to be a witch.

Was *still* a witch, I corrected myself. Hell, she'd nearly set my bedroom on fire with the flicker of her fingers. Clearly, my mate was still a witch. Possibly a powerful one, if she nurtured her power the right way.

And maybe I had an idea how to help with that. But I had something to do first.

I headed out of the room and down the stairs to the kitchen. Nic and Leia were already there.

"How's she doing?" Leia looked up as I entered the room.

"She's good." I opened a cupboard and took down a mug. "Thank you for coming back from Baton Rouge for her turning."

Nic clapped me on the shoulder. "We couldn't let you sit that out alone. I know what it's like to wait."

I glanced at Leia.

"Thanks, man. Maybe when she's better and we've got New Orleans back under control, I can take you up on the invitation to introduce her to Mother?"

He nodded, his lips suddenly a little tighter. "Yes, please. Anything to stop her dropping hints to me about grandchildren."

Leia rolled her eyes, and I changed the subject to the thing I needed to ask Nic. It was just an idea, one I'd only come up with as I watched Kayla sleeping in my bed, and considered her abilities, but it felt right.

"How would you feel..." I started, and Nic's eyebrows rose a fraction. "I mean..." Dammit. I wasn't asking permission. I was talking about something in the city he was trusting me to run.

Nic stared at me, clearly waiting for me to say something else. His entire expression telegraphed *spit it out*.

I folded my arms, then unfolded them. Then, no. I could fold the hell out of my own arms in my own kitchen. It was a power pose. "I'm planning to buy Lettie's old shop for Kayla. I think it will be good for her to be grounded here. It's familiar and a strong part of her past."

Nic still watched me, and I bumbled on, filling the silence.

"I mean, if it's available to buy. Maybe secure was a better word. Either way it will be Kayla's." Some fucking power pose. I sounded like an uncertain child. I shoved my hands in my pockets.

"Sounds good."

I glanced at Leia, surprised when she answered first, and she nodded. “I think that’s a very sweet thing to do.”

My cheeks heated as I shoved a baggie of Nic’s blood into the microwave and changed the subject again. If Leia agreed with me about the shop, it was unlikely Nic would disagree. I considered that deal done.

“Is Kayla okay to have another of these?” I pointed in the direction of the heating blood as I asked forgiveness more than permission.

He nodded. “Sure. We brought plenty of extras for her.”

“But haven’t you...?” Leia leaned forward and bared her fangs.

I shook my head. Even a month ago, this discussion between the three of us would have been unthinkable. “Not yet. She’s still getting used to the actual blood part.”

I didn’t really want to discuss Kayla’s and my personal life...and feeding was really pretty personal. I could see that now. And for fuck’s sake, my change of subject hadn’t meant to be to something even *more* personal.

The microwave dinged, saving me, and I grabbed the bag of blood. “I’ll take this up to her. See you guys soon. I’ll be back in time for our meeting at the club,” I promised Nic. I didn’t even wait for a response before I left the kitchen.

When I got back to Kayla, she was sitting up in bed—*my bed*—and she smiled as I entered the room.

“Do I smell breakfast?” She smiled even wider and my fangs itched in my gums.

She was my true mate and I wanted to taste her.

But instead, I handed her the cup and the baggie.

She frowned a little as she looked at her breakfast. “I have kind of a dumb question.”

“What’s that?” I sat in the chair next to her and tried to focus away from the exact spot on her neck where I’d like to sink my fangs, where I knew her pulse fluttered beneath the skin.

“Will I ever be able to eat normal food again?” The sad little voice she used forced a chuckle from me.

I nodded. “Someday, sure. Not right away—your system has a lot to contend with making this transition, but over time, you can train it to accept human food and drink again. Just small amounts at first, though, but gradually enough to pass as whatever you want to be seen as on any given day.” I shrugged. “I eat. It seems to put humans at ease.” Then I grinned, my

fangs deliberately on full display.

She laughed before speaking again. “Will I enjoy it?” She lifted her eyebrows, and I hesitated.

“You’ll appreciate it. And you’ll know if it tastes good, but it won’t be the same as it was before because it won’t be sustenance anymore.” That was the closest I could get because my memories from when I was truly alive were so foggy now.

She nodded, and I patted the top of her leg.

“I need to go see Nic. We’re going to the club to check everything and see if we can find anything else that’s useful.” I didn’t want to leave her, but I wanted to find the man who’d tried to kill her...and I couldn’t do that last one from my bedroom.

She set her finished mug of blood to one side and began to move, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. “I’m coming too,” she said but as soon as she stood, her knees buckled and she crumpled to the floor. “Dammit,” she shouted.

I hurried to her side as Nic and Leia burst through the door.

“Is everything okay? We heard Kayla shout.” Leia looked around like there might be an assassin hiding in the corner of the room.

I helped Kayla to her feet and back into the bed. “She can’t stand.” Worry seized me, and my next words showcased my panic. “Why can’t she stand? Has something gone wrong?”

Nic shook his head. “Initial weakness is perfectly normal in some turnings. But I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to come to the club. You should stay here with your mate.”

“But you need people to help.” Kayla spoke from the bed, her arms folded across her chest, a slight pout to her mouth.

Maybe she’d just used a lot of energy when she practiced her magic yesterday. I’d be more careful with her going forward.

“I’ll take Kyle and Jason with me,” Nic said. “Temple is already meeting us there.”

I nodded. “Thanks, Nic.”

He chuckled. “No problem. I think you’d probably be useless to me today, anyway. You won’t be thinking about anything else but Kayla and her recovery.” He looked at Leia, the light in his eyes softening. “I’ve been there, done that.”

Leia reached out and took his hand before pressing his fingers to her lips.

“And look at us now,” she murmured. Then she looked at Kayla. “This will be you and Sebastian soon. It’s like nothing you’ve ever known. But right now, your whole body is changing in ways you won’t even have anticipated.” She shrugged. “It’s a process.”

Kayla laughed. “That’s one way to put it, I suppose.”

Leia laughed too, her eyes sparkling as she nodded, but she didn’t add any further words of wisdom or reassurance.

“Okay. I’ll get to the club and talk with the guys, see what I can find out. You coming, Leia?” Nic addressed his wife and his fingers tightened around hers like she maybe didn’t have a choice but to be at his side.

She did have a choice, though. She always had. Leia was strong and vocal, and she’d been so active in her turning, she’d sought it out.

Guilt was slippery and cold inside me as I glanced at Kayla. I hadn’t given her a choice. I’d taken the choice from her completely. What if she no longer wanted this? What if she hadn’t wanted this in the first place?

But she reached for me. “What’s going on in that head of yours?” Her brow furrowed. “The feelings I’m getting from you are strange.”

Nic and Leia turned to leave, each of them casting a knowing glance at me as they did. “We’ll see you guys later,” Nic said as they left the room. “Take it easy, Kayla.”

“Try not to worry, Sebastian,” Leia added. “Everything will be fine. She’s done the hard part.”

The door clicked closed behind them and I looked at my mate. I wanted to ask her if she was happy, but I didn’t dare. I reached for where I usually found her emotions now, but they were scattered.

“Would you like to take a bath?” I asked the random question instead of querying anything riskier in case she told me something I really didn’t want to know.

She nodded. “Yes, please.” She started to push off the bed again, but I placed my hand on her shoulder.

“Let me get it ready for you. I’ll be right back.” I crossed the bedroom and walked into the bathroom, before surveying the space. It was large, modern, and continued the same muted grays and dark colors of the bedroom.

I started the water and added some scented bubble bath I’d bought with Kayla in mind. I swished the water back and forth until the temperature felt right. Then I returned to the bedroom.

I wasn’t used to feeling nervous around Kayla, and I didn’t like it, but I’d

forced the turn on her, and part of me was waiting for her fury about that.

“Everything’s ready,” I said before I scooped her into my arms.

She laughed and made a half-hearted protest then relaxed against me, her arms twining around my neck. “Will you help me wash my hair?”

I chuckled, quite sure she could wash her own hair. “Of course.”

“And my body?” She seemed to press a little closer, and my cock twitched at her proximity.

“If you like.” My voice came out deeper, almost needier.

“I’d like.” She met my gaze with a clear one and pressed closer still. “I might really like.”

“Well then.” I grazed a kiss against her temple. “I think I’ll be washing my mate.”

The bathroom was still filled with steam as I set her on her feet and wound an arm around her to keep her steady. I almost unwrapped her, like she was a gift just for me, discarding her night clothes to the side before I lowered her into the water.

“You joining me?” She drew big soapy bubbles up her arms, covering herself in suds.

“Me?” I hadn’t considered getting in with her, but now it was all I wanted. My body strained toward her, and I was already yanking my T-shirt off before she responded.

“Yes, you.” Just two words. She could have teased me by saying something flippant, but she didn’t.

Instead, she reinforced my importance to her, and some of my doubt about turning her slid away. Maybe we’d be okay after all.

I lowered myself behind her, my legs either side of hers, and reached for the shampoo, taking care to wet her hair thoroughly before I applied any.

She moaned, leaning back into my touch as I massaged the damp strands of her hair and kneaded my fingers against her scalp. I glanced over her shoulder to where her body disappeared into the water, the bubbles concealing her from my view as I imagined what lay out of sight.

I rinsed her hair as best I could and coiled it out of the way as I ran my hands over her shoulders. Her skin was so soft, almost begging to be touched as I smoothed my palms to her elbows and back, my strokes lengthening as I lost myself in the feel of her.

She rested her hands on my thighs and I shifted away from her, drawing back as my cock stiffened.

“Hello,” she whispered as I played my thumbs at the base of her neck, massaging the tension I found there. “Pleased to see me?”

I laughed, the sound embarrassed. *Caught.* “Always,” I confessed, trying to concentrate on something other than the way she made me feel. “But this bath is about you, not me.”

She turned, sending a wave of water up the side of the bath and nearly over the rim, but it receded as she settled on her knees in front of me. “Why can’t it be about both of us?” She leaned closer, bringing her face close to mine, like she was presenting herself to me.

I mimicked her movement until our lips were barely apart. “I’m trying to do something nice for you.”

Her laugh caressed me. “Then be *really* nice.” Her mouth was soft when she kissed me, her tongue gentle as it touched mine, and she rested her hands on my thighs again, keeping herself stable.

I moved my hands over her back, drawing my fingers over her shoulder blades and down her spine then to her waist and back up her front to where I could cup her breasts. She parted her lips farther in a gasp, and I grinned as I strummed my thumbs over her nipples.

She tried to crawl closer, but my sitting position and the small space of the bath made that difficult. Instead, I supported her under her ass so she could straddle me.

“That’s better,” she muttered as she wrapped her arms around my neck and lowered her face to mine, taking more kisses. I was happy to give them. She could have all my kisses. Always.

She rested a hand on my chest, casual, light. And as she drew her touch downward, it stayed casual and light, but the contact sent sparks racing through me, and awareness of her prickled inside me.

Shit. I wanted her. I wanted to move inside her and I wanted her blood on my tongue. I groaned at my thoughts, and her fingers stopped where they were tracing the lines of my abs. I froze, willing her on, waiting for her movements to resume.

“Did I hurt you?”

I almost laughed. Waiting was the most delicious pain. I shook my head. “Never.”

She teased me, trailing her touch toward my cock then drawing away, making me hope then letting me down. My muscles tightened with anticipation before relaxing, and she laughed as she looked down between us.

“It’s dancing.”

I laughed at the unexpected delight in her voice.

“Only for you.” My own voice was a little strained as I fought to control my desire.

“What else can I make it do...?” She sounded so thoughtful that a wave of horror nearly washed through me. I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and it wasn’t some sort of cock-based talent contest.

“Please.” I whispered the word against her temple. “Please touch me.”

She drew back a little. “Hmm.”

I waited.

“Like this?” She curled her fingers around my shaft and stroked upward from my balls to the tip.

I drew a sharp inhale and she did it again, her other hand reaching down to cup my balls as she covered my mouth with hers, suddenly demanding with her kisses. A groan rumbled through my chest, and I matched her kiss for kiss as my need for her grew.

Without warning, she switched her position, pressing closer to me and angling herself over my cock.

I held my breath as I met her gaze.

“I want you,” she told me.

I nodded, my throat dry. I wanted her in ways I couldn’t even tell her about. I wanted to bury myself inside her. I wanted my fangs at her throat, her blood on my tongue. Energy flashed through me, and I tilted my hips and sought her entrance as she pressed downward.

Shit, she was tighter than I expected. I reached between us and rolled her clit under my finger until she gasped and I nudged into her. Just a little at first until she raised herself higher again then dropped back down. She took more of me this time, and I bit my lip to contain a moan.

Inch by inch, she sank onto me. Kayla was fully in control, and I palmed her breasts as she dropped her head back.

The position exposed her neck to me, and I pressed my mouth over her pulse, teasing myself.

“Bite me, Sebastian.”

Her voice was so soft I almost didn’t hear her over the rush of blood in my ears.

“I want you to bite me. Make me yours,” she said, and my fangs descended in answer to her request.

I wanted to. Fucking hell, I really wanted to. “Are you sure?” But damn my manners.

My fangs grazed her skin and she shivered.

“Please.”

That was all I needed to hear. I pressed slowly forward with my fangs and she flinched, but then she relaxed as my venom hit her system.

My cock was buried in my mate, and now my fangs were, too. Her blood spilled into my mouth and... I’d come home. There was no other way to describe it. Kayla was my home, the woman made just for me. Her blood was my drug, her body made for me to worship.

We belonged together.

Too soon, I pulled my mouth away and sealed the small holes I’d made with a swipe of my tongue.

“My turn?” There was hesitation in Kayla’s voice as she continued to grind against me, riding my cock in a way that kept my muscles tensed and coiled. I was desperate for release.

“Your turn?” Her words made no sense. I could only feel the joining of our bodies. Actual thoughts were too much to process.

“Yeah.” She angled my head to bare my neck to her, and excitement took hold of me.

Her new fangs nipped at my skin, and I clamped down on my wince as she inefficiently bit through. Then her sucking filled me with euphoria, and she rode me with increased enthusiasm.

My balls tightened against my body and they throbbed as sensation rose through me, swelling my shaft inside Kayla’s body and signaling my release.

I groaned as Kayla sucked one last time and began to pulse around my cock as I came inside her.

She pressed her mouth against mine once more and I held her, my palms against the small of her back as our breathing regulated.

Later, after the bath had cooled, I clasped her to me and stepped out then draped her with towels. Her eyes fluttered closed, and I carried her into the bedroom before laying her on the bed and smoothing the water droplets from her skin. She was so sleepy when I tucked her under the comforter and gathered her in my arms again.

“I love you, Kayla.” I nuzzled against the side of her face and a slow grin took control of her mouth. “And thank you.”

She stretched before relaxing against me again. “You don’t need to thank

me. I'm around for a while now." Her laugh was tired, too. "I'm going to help you secure Nic's reign and get rid of those other shitty vampires who are acting against him."

"And after?" I smoothed my palm over her back, relishing the warm, soft skin. "Is there anything you'd like to do then?" I'd do anything for her, anything *with* her.

"There is one thing." She cracked open one eye and looked at me.

"Anything." I kissed her cheek.

"Lettie and I always said we'd go to Ireland one day. I'd like to go there."

"Consider it done," I promised her. "We have the rest of our lives to travel, and if you want to go somewhere, I'll make that happen for you. I want to make you happy, always." I kissed her again and watched her as her eyes fluttered closed again and her breathing evened out.

Then I held her in my arms as we both slept.

KAYLA

I pushed the door open, glancing up at the new sign Sebastian had ordered fixed into place. It read *Lettie's* in fine gold script. The old bell tinkled my arrival and I inhaled deeply, bringing the combined scents of patchouli and assorted herbs deep into my chest.

The aroma sparked my power immediately, but I shoved it down inside myself, into a burning knot of energy deep in my gut. It was uncomfortable sometimes, but I was getting used to it. I shivered as I stabilized, bringing myself perfectly under control.

Naomi glanced up from where she was rearranging a group of crystals on one of the low shelves that tourists tended to aim for.

“Hey, Kayla!” she greeted me. “Oh, I mean, *boss*.”

“Nope.” I shook my head then stopped. “I mean, kinda. But don’t worry, your job is safe.”

She rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t worried about it. I mean, where else would you find someone so easily micromanaged as me?” But she grinned.

I held up my hands. “I won’t be watching you change any lightbulbs, so don’t worry about that, either.”

She laughed and stepped away from the shelf as I wrapped an arm around her waist. She rested her head on my shoulder.

“I miss Lettie,” she said.

“Mmm. So do I. We just have to honor her memory, right?”

“How do we do that?” Naomi pitched her voice low.

“By just continuing being the best.” I shrugged, the movement slight. “We just have to keep her memory alive by making sure this shop stays

great.”

And we’d already had plenty of customers, even from witches from covens where I’d been rejected from. Most of them were probably here out of curiosity, but our till didn’t care about where the money came from or why.

“We just have to keep proving ourselves, Nay.”

She sighed. “Yeah, I know.” Then she turned toward the curtain that led through to the little room that was partway between storage and the kitchen in the back. “Can I get you some tea?”

Holy crap...tea. Lettie had created her own brew, and my mouth watered just from the memory. “Did you find Lettie’s recipe yet?”

She sighed again. “Nope. There’s so much back here. I’ll be wading through it for months, I think.”

I nodded. I got that. Lettie had been an oracle. Like the bank of all knowledge. She had solutions to problems I hadn’t even thought of yet. I wanted to be that person. I wanted to be Lettie, with all of that knowledge and all of the respect her position commanded. With my new immortal life, maybe I could succeed in that goal. It wasn’t like I was lacking time.

But for now, I just wanted a connection with Lettie. “I’ll take some of the paperwork to sort through. I’ll get Andrews to bring it back to the house tomorrow.” Looking over her familiar handwriting would bring her close again.

I followed Naomi into the back room and breathed deeply again before helping myself to one of the old grimoires on the shelves. “Are you okay if I borrow this?” It was what I’d really come for. Not to check up on my friend.

“Borrow it?” She quirked her eyebrows. “I think you’ll find you own it now, lady.” Her words brought me another pang of sadness.

“Oh, yeah.” I hefted it into my arms.

The bell jingled in the shop and Naomi started to move back toward the curtain we’d come through, but I moved as well.

“I’ll get it.”

“Great.” Naomi stepped away, back to the stove. “I’ve got a couple of spells I’m working on in here, anyway.”

I resisted the urge to check her bubbling cauldrons. Naomi was an excellent potion maker. Her mistake with me had only been the wrong page for the incantation. I paused as I swept the curtain aside. Could I even refer to it as a mistake these days, though? It wasn’t like I was disadvantaged by it. In fact, I was very, very happy by what had happened since Naomi had reversed

my virginity-hiding spell instead of reinforcing it.

As I walked into the small shop interior, I stopped. The witch facing away from me turned around, and I met her cat-like, green-eyed gaze before she ran it up and down me. But she didn't speak, and neither did I.

Maren had tossed me out of my very first coven. Before I even knew enough to control myself. Before I knew the magic that I was best at was bad.

I waited her out. Asking her what she wanted would sound rude. Asking if she needed help would just sound passive-aggressive.

"Maren." I spoke anyway, despite my resolve not to. "Can I help you find anything today?" I still sounded like that desperate young girl trying to preserve her place in the coven.

"Kayla." Her gaze remained cool. "They were right about you. I can feel your power now." She reached out, flicking her fingers in the air closer to me. "It's tangible now."

"Right about me?" I repeated her words. Who the hell were *they*?

But whatever the answer was, Maren didn't seem to have an issue standing in the same space as me anymore. Well, it was hardly like my magic could blacken my immortal soul, these days. I probably didn't even have a soul to worry about.

But Maren didn't say anything else. Instead, she simply turned around and left.

"Wow, what did Maren want?" Naomi touched my back softly as she stepped up behind me. "She doesn't come in very often."

"But she comes in?" I looked at my friend.

"Sure. They all do." She nodded.

"That's great." I looked at the door again, the bell still swinging gently above it. "But I have no idea what she wanted."

Naomi shrugged. "Oh, well. Who knows with Maren."

"Who knows," I agreed.

"You coming back for that tea?" She headed away.

"Sure. Just let me check..." I glanced at my watch. "Oh, shit. I didn't realize the time. Can I get a raincheck on the drink?" I swept Naomi into a quick one-armed hug and pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. "You're the best shop manager I've ever had."

She rolled her twinkling eyes. "I'm the *only* shop manager you've ever had."

"And the best." I shifted the grimoire against my chest and walked to the

door. “I’ll send for that paperwork tomorrow. We’ll get through it.”

“Ha! If you have time.” She returned to looking at the tourist trinkets as she had been when I first came in.

“True. It’s why I need to rush off now, I need to prepare my set.”

“Oh, please.” She made a *pshaw* movement with her hand. “A *set*? You’re the main attraction.”

My lips quirked into a small grin of acknowledgment at her words. It was pretty much my show these days, and I loved singing at Nightfall.

With one last wave, I hurried out of the door and slid into the waiting car. The ride to the club was uneventful, and entering the club was like entering the shop all over again—another jolt of energy, but not my power this time. No, this was pure adrenaline. Even as anxiety buzzed nervous wings all through my body, excitement lit me up from the inside.

Everything about this place—the beautiful decoration, the position of my stage, the delicious, heady scent of blood as it hung delicately, perfuming the air—made my blood race, and the urge to sing ripped right through me.

It was as if Sebastian had created the club just for me. Maybe he had. I met his eyes as he stood at the railing outside his office, and he crooked a lazy finger at me, signaling me his way.

Of course, he said that he was installed here to settle tensions in New Orleans for Nic’s reign, but I preferred to believe fate had a hand in everything, including true mates. Perhaps *especially* true mates.

I climbed the stairs toward Sebastian, maintaining eye contact with him. I almost floated to his side, safe while he watched me.

“Kayla.” His greeting was warm, and it wrapped me up in comfort and something else, when paired with that expression in his gaze.

“Yes, Sebastian?” I kept my voice low as I played lazily with a curl of my hair.

“In my office,” he growled, and I glanced back to his eyes at the unexpected tone, but only amusement shone there.

Wait. Not only amusement...lust too, and my heart rate kicked up.

I stepped inside his office, and he closed the door behind me. It shushed over the thick carpet and the delicate sound made as many promises as the soft click of the lock.

“We won’t be disturbed now.” Sebastian’s mouth was right by my ear, and I shivered as his lips barely grazed my skin.

I could never get enough of this man.

His mouth pressed against my neck, and I stilled, waiting as I always did to see what he'd do next.

"You still need to get changed," he murmured as he tugged my long-sleeved T-shirt over my head. "Let me help with that."

He dropped his head and kissed my collarbone as he unfastened my bra. Cold air hit my breasts and my nipples hardened as my skin tingled at the rush of sudden blood from Sebastian's touch on me.

On a day when just a glance from him was enough to arouse me, this was almost too much, and I pressed my thighs together, trying to find some gentle friction.

I was already wet for him, and he'd barely touched me.

He ran his hands over my shoulders and down my arms, discarding my bra to the floor as well as sending showers of sparks across my skin at his touch. I turned to face him and he captured my lips before I could speak or think, his kiss gentle but completely in control. He pressed his hand to the back of my head, holding me to him, and I wound my arms around his neck, happy to be close.

His tongue probed between my lips, and I met him with equal, unbridled enthusiasm, flicking my own tongue against the inside of his mouth and over his descended fangs.

I grinned. He wanted me. His body couldn't hide that. I pressed myself closer to him, grinding a little against the front of his body as the evidence of his arousal presented itself.

I drew back. "Pleased to see me?"

His eyes glinted as he lifted me, and I perched at the edge of his desk. "Always." He unfastened my jeans, some urgency in his movements, and I slid back to the floor to lower them.

Soon I'd be naked in his office, but I glanced around and wasn't worried. The glass walls were one-way only. No one could see the two of us in here.

As I lifted myself back to the edge of the desk, he bent and took one of my nipples into his mouth, his tongue swirling delicious heat over it as he sucked gently. I tugged on his hair.

"You're overdressed," I blurted the words out.

"So I am," he murmured softly before straightening and discarding his clothes at vampire speed.

He grinned at me, his expression almost bashful, and I laughed.

"Now you're not," I said.

“Now I’m not,” he agreed before stepping forward to stand between my legs. He pushed a curl of hair behind my ear. “You make me happier than I’ve ever known, Kayla.”

I ginned. “Me too.” Then I grabbed his ass and pulled him against me. “Now come here.”

He chuckled as he dropped his head and placed kisses at the base of my neck. I arched away, offering more of myself to him. His erection nudged the inside of my thigh and I shifted restlessly.

“Sebastian,” I murmured.

“Yes?”

“I want you.” Hell, I was hot...hot and impatient and needy. “I want you inside me.”

He caught his breath at my words, but angled himself differently. “Are you ready?” Concern laced his tone, but it was my turn to laugh.

“Always ready.” And I was. I was so wet for him still.

I sucked in a breath as he pressed inside me, stretching my body to accommodate him. “That feels so good.” I spoke on a breath.

He pulled out a little before pushing back in, the rocking motion anything but gentle, and I met him thrust for thrust.

“Touch yourself.” He grunted his command, and I reached between us, finding my clit, and rolling it under my finger, letting him nudge me every time he pushed back into my body.

His breathing began to change, and I looked up at him, meeting his gaze before I exposed my neck to him again. His eyes bled to the deep red I was used to seeing, and a growl rumbled through his chest.

He leaned down and his fangs scraped my skin before he pierced through, sucking immediately. As soon as his venom hit my system, an orgasm ripped through me, and I cried out at the unexpectedness of it. My body pulsed strongly around his cock and he thrust into me one last time before holding himself still.

Warmth filled me, and I sighed at the completeness of it.

When he moved away from my neck, he licked me gently to seal the puncture marks before tilting his head. “You wanna...?” He didn’t finish his sentence, but I smiled.

“Raincheck for after my performance?”

His eyes shone with fresh lust. “Already looking forward it.”

He pulled me against him, and I relaxed into his hug as our breathing

slowed. I relaxed even more as his heartbeat regulated under my ear. Eventually, I was just leaning against him, soaking him in, leaching strength from him as he held me.

“What time do you sing?” His voice was deep against my ear from where I heard it inside his chest.

I drew back a little. “Too soon.” Then I slid from the edge of the desk and gathered my clothes before shoving my legs into my jeans. “You gonna watch me?”

He paused from where he was grabbing his shirt. “Always. You gonna come back up here after?”

I grinned. “Always.”

KYLE

Fucking Sebastian.

That was what Nic would always say about his brother, although less so recently, but it still held true as far as I was concerned. I liked him but...well, shit. He was a paler imitation of the real Dupont king.

I shifted my position against his wall, stifling a yawn as he continued to yap from the other side of the room. Temple was barely listening, and Jason looked about ready to fall asleep. What the hell were we doing?

We'd been through everything with Nic last night. Why did Sebastian think he could do it better? I did yawn then.

I mean, I liked Sebastian, but he wasn't the king. Wasn't my king, anyway, and I wasn't his fucking errand boy here in New Orleans. Sebastian was kind of like a brother to me, too. It was like a true sibling relationship. Some days we got along great...Other days he danced right along my last nerve.

Today was one of those fucking days.

I wanted to be out there hunting the people who attacked the club, who nearly killed Kayla. Plus, I wanted to be out there before the fucking trail went cold but *yap, yap yap*... Sebastian's mouth was still moving.

"But now I'm going to hand over to Temple," Sebastian said. "There has been another update since Nic went home." He perched on the corner of his desk, one leg swinging loosely while he rested his weight on the other.

He nodded at Temple who stood, still half in shadow as he started to speak.

"We've found out who we're dealing with — who the rogue vampires

are.”

“Hoo-yeah!” Jason pumped his fist but largely seemed to remain disinterested. He glanced at me and cracked a smile. “Gonna enlighten us, dude?”

Temple huffed quietly. “They’re a faction of made vampires. Made by someone other than Francois, but right under his and Émile’s noses.”

I leaned forward. Now, this was interesting. Francois had created an army of fledglings in the first stage of his war with Nic, and he’d kind of been skating on thin ice since then because really only Émile had the right to create so many fledglings. However, acting as his father’s regent, Francois had taken it upon himself.

But someone else had also been creating an army?

“Did Émile know?” I directed my question at Temple.

He shook his head. “Nope.” Then he amended, “I doubt it, anyway. There’s no indication that this faction of vampires is in any way acting on behalf of House Ricard or that they’ve been officially sanctioned to be here.”

“They’re certainly not sanctioned now, anyway.” Sebastian scoffed.

“We actually think they move from city to city,” Temple continued. “They create new vampires where they can and pick all the other vampires in the area off before moving on.”

This was more information than he usually gave out in any one sitting. Sebastian stood, his casual pose forgotten as he pushed a hand through his hair. I rubbed my head reflexively, the short hair there making a rasping noise and my fingers nudging over my thickened scar.

“What the hell? They move around cities decimating the vampire populations they find there and increasing their own ranks by turning humans? Are they under anyone’s control at all?” Sebastian’s eyes were wide, and his hair was looking increasingly mussed.

Temple shook his head. “Nuh-uh. They answer to no one but themselves, and they’re called The Blackbloods. They have no humanity left at all. They can’t be reasoned with.”

“Ruthless killers,” Sebastian murmured, and Temple nodded.

“Makes them incredible organizers. They’re funded by the crimes they commit. They provide drugs for supernaturals, assassinations for hire, smuggle artifacts...All that good stuff.” Temple cocked his head. “In fact, they’re likely to be butting up alongside Conri and his guys sometime soon in the future.”

“Do they have a leader?” I pushed away from the wall. “If we could nail their leader, maybe we could destabilize them and take them all out.”

“Yep.” Temple nodded. “Call him Brock Dalton. He’s the most ruthless bastard of all of ‘em, and he’s not from around these parts, that’s for sure. We haven’t been able to find out where he’s from, actually, but apparently he never takes no for an answer — take from that assessment what you will.” Temple narrowed his focus on Sebastian, who sighed.

But I tensed. Shit. This was big. So big. There was an entire side to New Orleans that neither Sebastian nor Nic had known about or planned for. A seedy underbelly, but worse somehow.

“The last thing I need is a crime war overshadowing everything Nic and I are trying to accomplish with establishing his new reign and stabilizing New Orleans.” Sebastian spoke out loud and I stepped farther into the center of the room.

“I’ll go undercover.” I spoke directly to Sebastian. I’d done some work similar to that for Nic, and I could be useful again now. “We need to make sure this doesn’t get out of hand.”

“Yeah.” Sebastian sighed again. “We don’t have enough numbers here to take them on full force.”

“We need to be smart,” Temple said. Then he glanced at me. “And Kyle’s smart.”

I shrugged. “Nic might not like the idea, but he’ll get over it eventually.”

Sebastian sighed again. “Fuck. I don’t even like this idea, Kyle.”

“But what else are we gonna do?” Jason spoke from his position in the chair. He already had his orders—liaising with the wolf pack.

I had nothing. I was just a spare wheel kicking around here in NOLA. Going undercover would give me a purpose I didn’t have now.

Sebastian nodded. “We have no other fucking way. Dammit. I need to call Nic. I’ll report back.”

I almost laughed. More reporting from Sebastian when what we needed was action. But I didn’t say anything.

Jason stood. “I’ll go make some calls, too.”

As they left, I beckoned to Temple. He was my way in. Temple had connections all over this city, and I trusted him — or trusted him enough, anyway.

“I need to get into the Blackbloods,” I said. “We need to take them down from the inside. You think you can help me?”

He scrunched his nose while he looked at me. “It’s risky.”

“But like Jason said, what else are we going to do? They’re not going away. We have to *make* them go away.”

Temple nodded. “I do have a source…” He spoke low and urgently. “But I don’t like this, man.”

I just stared at him. I didn’t care if he liked this. We needed to do it. “Who’s your source?”

He stepped closer to me and lowered his voice. “Her name’s Esmé. She’s Dalton’s second-in-command — or supposed to be, but she isn’t loyal to him.”

I lifted an eyebrow. This *did* sound risky. Unpredictable people were both a necessity and a curse in this type of work.

Temple nodded like he’d caught wind of my thought. “She’s climbed the Blackbloods’ ladder because she wants revenge for Dalton’s group killing her human mate. She wants an end to Brock Dalton as much as Nic and Sebastian do.”

“We already have an agreement about something, then.” I nodded slowly and ran my hand over the back of my head. “Set up a meet for me. This could be the perfect situation, Temple. After all, there’s nothing like a woman scorned to topple a reign.”

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I'm a vampire's pet and I hate all vampires. But try telling that to my heart...

When my brother was killed, his vampire mate Esme made me her thrall. She's the second in charge of the Blackblood faction and is determined to make my life a living hell.

I never could stand vampires, but now I'm addicted to their venom. Somehow, I need to find a way to survive because all thralls are destined for one thing—death.

Then I meet Kyle, a vampire from another clan. I know straight away there's something different about him. I've never hungered for anyone the way I do Kyle, which is terrifying because I'm a virgin.

But I was right—Kyle isn't all he seems. He works for the Dupont family, the vampires who rule over New Orleans, and his mission is to bring the Blackbloods down before they try to claim the Dupont's territory.

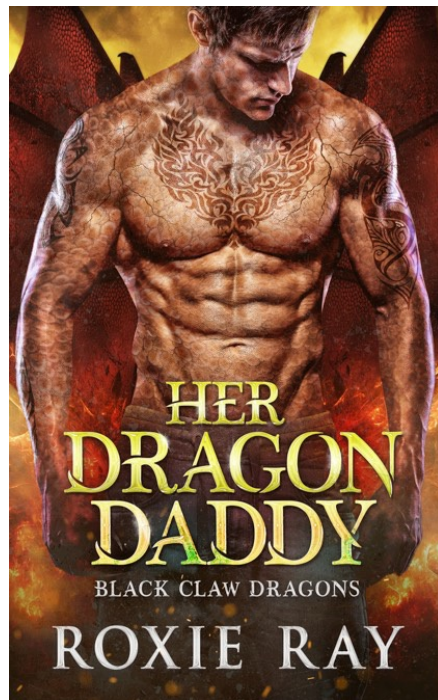
I know I shouldn't trust my feelings for a vampire, but Kyle is my only chance for survival. The battle for New Orleans—and my heart—is going to be bloody...

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“What are you doing here?” I demanded, my voice hard.

He chuckled. “Just some shopping. Picking up a few things for Mom.”

My heart clenched at his casual mention of his mother. Losing her and the rest of his family had hurt almost as much as losing him. I sucked in a deep breath and set my jaw. Cuss words filled my mind and threatened to spill out

of my mouth. The hurt I'd felt when he abandoned me had never gone away, even through my falling in and out of love with Cade. After birthing two children and eighteen years apart, the pain ripped through me like it had happened two weeks before instead of two decades.

I forced myself to speak. "I mean, what are you doing in Black Claw?"

"My family and I moved back about four years ago," he said. He moved to the left as if to come around the potatoes, but I didn't want him to come any closer. I couldn't take it, so I shifted to the right.

"How have you been?" he asked. His eyebrows were furrowed in concern and his eyes wide and worried.

I glared at him. How could I answer that without opening the biggest can of worms canned worms had ever seen?

There was no way to answer him.

He signed and his shoulders slumped. A few choice sentences sprang to mind, full of words of insult about him, but then I heard my son's voice.

No. Not yet. I wanted to introduce them in the right way. I'd imagined it for so many years, and this wasn't in any way how I wanted it to go, out of the blue at a grocery store.

"Mom?" Maddox walked out from an aisle of dry goods, several feet behind Maverick. I froze with my eyes on my son over his father's shoulder, and I knew that the instant Maverick turned around, it would all be over. They looked so much alike, I felt like I was watching a TV show that had found a doppelganger younger actor to play the scenes of the main character's past.

Please don't turn around.

Of course, Maverick didn't listen to my internal pleas. He turned, coming face to face with my son—Our son.

Maddox didn't notice at first and continued toward me, close enough that Maverick turned. I could see both of their faces now.

Hailey bounded forward, stopping her cart right beside me. "Mom, I'm up to twenty, but I want these granola bars. Granola bars are healthy, right? So, can that go in your cart?"

I didn't hear her words. I just took the box of bars from her and dropped them into my cart as I watched my son notice Maverick.

"Mom?"

"Hush, baby. In a second," I whispered.

Maverick's face had paled, and he'd put one hand on the potato display.

Maddox's face mirrored Maverick's. He paled as well, and I blinked several times. I knew they looked alike—almost identical. Maddox's sweet face had haunted me for nearly eighteen years. I didn't love him any less, just buried the pain of him looking so much like the lost love of my life.

I pretty much forgot how to breathe as neither of them said a word. Maverick looked up and down, scrutinizing Maddox. Maddox just stared at Maverick's face.

“Whoa,” Hailey whispered.

I tore my gaze from Maddox and Maverick to look down at my daughter. She'd figured it out.

I put my arm around her and pulled her close. “Yeah, sweetie. Whoa is right.”

Try it out [here!](#)

RUTHLESS PRINCE

VAMPIRES OF BATON ROUGE: BOOK 1

Roxie Ray and Lindsey Devin

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