



VAMPIRE SAVAGE

— NIGHTSHADE VAMPIRES —

ROWAN HART

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Nightshade Vampires

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CONTENTS

[Content Warning](#)

[Prologue](#)

1. [Wren](#)
2. [Lan](#)
3. [Wren](#)
4. [Wren](#)
5. [Lan](#)
6. [Wren](#)
7. [Lan](#)
8. [Wren](#)
9. [Wren](#)
10. [Lan](#)
11. [Wren](#)
12. [Lan](#)
13. [Wren](#)
14. [Wren](#)
15. [Lan](#)
16. [Wren](#)
17. [Lan](#)
18. [Wren](#)
19. [Lan](#)
20. [Wren](#)
21. [Wren](#)
22. [Lan](#)
23. [Wren](#)
24. [Wren](#)
25. [Lan](#)
26. [Wren](#)
27. [Lan](#)
28. [Wren](#)
29. [Lan](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Rowan Hart](#)

[About the Author](#)

VAMPIRE SAVAGE

CONTENT WARNING

Vampire Savage is aptly titled. Because of this, some readers may want to exercise caution before delving in. Some of the content includes:

Abusive Narcissistic parent
Deadly force from a parent
Attempted sexual assault (not from the MMC)
Extreme Kinks/BDSM: breath play, knife play, blood play, intentional scarring, and more
Dubcon sadistic play
Lack of safe word for a scene
Gratuitous violence

This list is not all-encompassing and readers should understand that this book is a darker mafia romance featuring a psychotic like main male character.

PROLOGUE

Lan

Winter, 1652
Near the border between the
Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Tsardom of Russia

This is a damn trap and all of us know it. We're foot soldiers, though, and we've all seen what happens if someone questions General Jurgis Demencius. At least out here, in the bitter cold and endless rain, we have a better chance of surviving than questioning the general. We're supposed to be fighting back against raiders and bandits plaguing the principalities as a show of allyship, but there's been no sign of bandits for weeks.

The general has us searching for something, something he's grown more and more obsessed with. Something that keeps him up at night, poring over strange drawings with symbols that compel most men to make the sign of the cross and pray to their gods.

I'm all too familiar with the world of magic to know that what the general is searching for could exist. The man my mother, Josephine, claims as her father, the one I will never see as my grandfather, is a monster. He is a *strzyga*, someone who was once a man but now cannot die and must drain the life of others to survive.

Oleksandr, though I know that is not his true name because he is already musing about new names. About moving across the sea and taking my mother with him. She will have no choice because of him. It is because of him that her husband, my father, left. Every bruise my father put on her flesh is this vampire's fault. Every tear she shed, every drop of blood. Doubly so,

because he did nothing to stop it. And when my father left my mother, what did her so-called father do?

Demanded she return to his side and obey him as a ward once again.

Soon my commission with the military will be up and I will have enough money to take my mother away from him and his ways.

That's if I make it through tonight. There are a dozen of us, muskets over our shoulders, as we creep closer to the large wooden izba house in the middle of the woods.

"This is where Baba Yaga lives," Sergi, my friend on my left, whispers as he moves beside me, his boots crunching in the snow. His hands are gripping the musket tight, and ice clings to the bristles of his black mustache. He's looking at the house, the two stories of windows dimly lit from within. "Evil is inside, Landon. You know this. We should turn back now."

I pause, resting my shoulder against a tree where we crouch and look back the way we came. Somewhere in the dark, General Demencius waits for us in his tent, warmed with braziers and wine while our fingers turn black from frostbite. I adjust the brittle musket strap on my chest and meet Sergi's dark eyes. He is my opposite. Bulky and dark like a bear where I am leaner and fairer like the snow mountain cats, ibises.

"Baba Yaga might be in there," I agree, inclining my head towards the house. We're fanned out around it. According to the general, what he seeks is in the house and we're tasked with retrieving it. But as Sergi says, there is evil inside. Experience with vampires tells me that we are not alone in these woods either. "But if we do not go in, we will die and be branded traitors. Your wife and daughter will not be paid your commission. If you die here, at least they'll be paid, ya?"

He spits on the ground and mutters a curse I silently agree with. "Then we run, Lan. We know these woods better than anyone else."

How to explain to him, a man who does not know of the creatures that exist in this world, that we would be hunted by creatures of nightmares?

"Better to fight here," I tell him, claspng him on the shoulder and squeezing. I put every ounce of charm and light my mother claims are within my soul into my smile and my eyes. She has said I've always had a gift to bolster others, something that my commanding officers have agreed with. A kindness that inspires bravery. "We fight as brothers, and I'll buy you a bottle of wine back home."

Sergi's brow softens and his eyes fill with renewed courage; a hint of a

smile even graces his lips.

His smile is all I can think about as I lay pinned under a chest of drawers, pain coursing through me, my mind screaming with agony, and blood half-blinding me. Sergi's vacant eyes watch me from across the room, his face gouged and bleeding. I don't know if anyone is alive. I can't draw enough breath to whimper, let alone try to move.

We killed the small gathering of magicians in the izba, despite the demons they summoned. Now General Demencius walks through the slaughter, his heavy footsteps vibrating the floorboards and squelching as he disregards the bodies of the men who died for him.

Someone pleads for aid—Jan, I think, through the haze.

“Kill him,” the general barks without turning towards his soldier. His command is followed without hesitation. “Kill all who survived.”

My eyelids grow heavy, the darkness creeping in, as I watch the general who sacrificed me and my friends so easily stop near an altar before the hearth. A vicious grin splits his face, and I know that whatever he wanted, whatever he'd been obsessing over, he'd found it.

In the shadows, somehow my dying gaze finds the small keg of gunpowder. I hadn't drawn my pistol and I don't know where I found the strength to do so now. Perhaps it is rage or grief. But I do, and General Demencius's shouts for me to be stopped are like the holiest hymn to my ears.

This bastard will die with his precious relic and the rest of us.

I fire, and let the darkness take me, a grin on my face.

Chapter One

WREN

Someone is watching me.

Considering I recently finished a cello performance with my chamber performance group, it shouldn't be surprising. I've grown up under the gaze of society's elite, working diligently to exceed my father's every expectation of his only child.

Since I was a child I learned equestrian, mastered cello, the piano, and the flute, became fluent in four languages beyond English, and graduated high school early. Then I became one of the youngest doctorate graduates in computer programming in the nation before working my way up to the senior director role in developmental engineering at Oberon Tech, my father's company, without accepting handouts. I've done everything he's asked and more.

Yet, it still isn't enough.

My nape heats and I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth as I keep the pleasant smile on my face while a woman in her mid-eighties continues to tell me about her granddaughter's upcoming nuptials. I refuse to look behind me, to seek out whoever it is currently making my nerves tingle with anticipation.

I'd felt the same focus on me at the beginning of our performance, and I'd been struck by an anxiety I thought I'd overcome as a teenager. However, the music pulled me away as it always has, until the world around me fades away. When applause grounded me once more, the feeling had disappeared.

Only to return during the cocktail reception where the performers are expected to be available for our wealthy patrons.

My own family's wealth dwarfs many of those around me, which is why

Newgate's elite surrounds me with idle chatter. At least two councilors, including the newly elected Michael Garner, and many former councilors are in attendance tonight, as well as several well-respected families. If whispers are to be believed, there are even a few supernaturals within the crowd. Even a vampire or two.

"It would be wonderful to have a cellist of your caliber to perform at my granddaughter's wedding, though of course not you, yourself! It'd be so unseemly for a guest to be one of the help." The old woman with silver hair laughs politely, her overly large sapphire and diamond earrings shaking where they pull down her lobes as she presses a hand on my forearm, rings worth small fortunes gracing her withering fingers.

"Of course not," I murmur, my polite smile never faltering and my grip on my single glass of champagne loose. "I'm more than happy to send you my personal recommendations, if you would like."

She squeezes my arm and drops her hand, her smile more genuine now that she's achieved her goal. "Would you, Wren? I know Cordelia will be thrilled. It's such a shame Oberon couldn't be here tonight. He must be so proud of the woman you've become. How is it that you're not married yet? I know just the man you simply have to meet at Cordelia's wedding. I'll introduce you to him myself. He's a Balthuman..."

I take a small sip of my champagne, tuning out the woman as she explains how she thinks the gentleman is a perfect match for me. To these people, the fact that I'm twenty-nine and still single is horrifying. It was scandalous enough when they learned I had changed my last name to my mother's maiden name after turning eighteen.

I'd given up on marriage by twenty-two and focused solely on climbing the ranks in my father's company, Oberon Tech Corps. To my father, my ultimate achievement in life will be when I marry, yet all the while, he absolutely refuses to condone the idea. He's made it clear that when I marry, it will be when and to whom he chooses.

Marriage, as he's told me several times, is the ultimate business agreement.

The fury I'll face if he learns I'm not a virgin is shudder-inducing.

Thankfully, the woman in front of me ends the conversation when she sees another influential person she must greet, and I seize the opportunity to slip through the crowd and find shelter in a shadowed inglenook. Being summer, the fireplace is cold and instead filled with a stunning bouquet of

red and yellow blooms above thumb-sized blue flowers just above the vase's lip. It's a floral imitation of a blazing fire and I'm in awe of the florist. I can appreciate the skill it takes to craft such a display and yet the people beyond me in the stately banquet hall don't even notice it.

The Palmer Hotel is one of the oldest and most respected hotels in Newgate and is the epitome of opulent art deco design held over from the turn of the century. At the far end of the hall, I and three other string instrumentalists had performed against the backdrop of floor-to-ceiling arched windows, the glass stained and designed in geometric patterns and warm colors. This room, aptly named the cathedral room, boasted vaulted ceilings unseen in more modern hotels. With golden walls and black marble floors, the room is surprisingly warm and welcoming with eight-foot-tall marble statues of nude sphinxes holding torches above their heads, topped with diamond-shaped lights which shine brightly, spaced evenly along opposite sides of the long room. The light is reflected and magnified by the six large mirrored hexagonal three-tiered chandeliers dominating the ceiling.

Even the inglenook I've found an escape in reflects the art deco movement, with a gilded geometric hearth around the fireplace, and the seating plush yet straight lined and perfectly in harmony with the rest of the room. Only the linens of the round tables look modern, with plain white tablecloths, as if they're nothing more than a way to display the golden plates and black place settings.

If only those in attendance matched such elegant, old-world glamor. Though each man wears a clean suit, it's as if the women are in competition with each other no matter their age. The room is filled with bold colors, as jewel tones are in fashion this season, but the designs are everywhere from classic to couture and daring. Each woman sparkles with jewelry, and no doubt spent most of the day on their hair and makeup.

Not for the first time am I thankful for the expectation that I wear a sensible black dress while performing. My strawberry blonde hair is tamed into a French twist, and the only jewelry I wear are simple emerald studs and a matching pendant on a delicate chain that were once my mother's. They're some of the few possessions I have of my late mother.

As much as I long to escape back to my quiet apartment, I know what is expected of me. If I leave early, it will get back to my father and I truly don't wish to hear a lecture tomorrow during our weekly brunch.

Swallowing half of the remaining champagne, I consider breaking my

self-imposed rule of one drink. To my embarrassment, I'm a lightweight and two drinks carry the risk of some social faux pas. Like hunting down the person whose weighted stare makes my blood warm and my hair raise.

From the relative safety of the shadowed inglenook, I scan the crowd, seeking out anyone unfamiliar. While my father, Oberon Benoit, moved his business here only five years ago, I've attended enough events to know each face by name.

Perhaps the person I'm looking for is one of the whispered supernaturals from Oldgate—or the Barrows, not that any of my father's peers would be so gauche as to call it that in polite company. Amusingly, a large number of them still hold the belief that supernaturals are legends and nothing more than stories made up by the lower class.

I know they exist.

The champagne is warm by now, but the crisp flavor still dances on my tongue as I take a delicate sip, nursing it as long as possible. I haven't eaten since lunch, and while there are hors d'oeuvres being served, no woman would be caught dead eating one.

I can't wait to get out of here.

My gaze snags on a tall man by the bar, his back to me. He has golden blond hair from what I can see. His impressive shoulders and tapered waist are hugged by an expensive suit I guess to be Italian made. He's at least six foot two and despite not seeing his face, I'm certain I've never seen him before. He reaches for the drink the bartender sets in front of him, and he moves with an ethereal grace, making my stomach flip and spin. I raise the glass to my lips again, mouth suddenly parched as his long fingers wrap around the pint glass. Every other man is drinking some ungodly expensive whisky or scotch, and he's drinking beer.

Every bone in my body screams that this man must be a vampire. No human man can move with such fluidity, where just lifting the glass to drink is seductive.

I don't even know what he looks like from the front and I'm gulping the dregs of my champagne, trying to put out the illicit fire building.

My most secret desire begins to claw its way from the depths of my mind.

I've been around vampires before; I've been to the Barrows, even. Each time, it only adds more fodder to the craving I dare not admit to anyone, not even my best friend.

If I gave in, I would earn more wrath from my father than if he learned

I'm no longer "pure."

I want to know what it's like to be fed on by a vampire. I've seen it at the Nightshade's club, Noir. Vampires embracing others, holding them close as they sink their fangs deep. I've stolen glances, envious of the rapture on the human's face as their vampire's mouth suckles at their flesh.

I crave to experience it—to, for a few moments, be the sole focus and desire of another creature. To be the life force of another, to be embraced and accepted and needed in such a primal fashion.

A throat clears politely, and my thoughts rush back to the present. My cheeks blaze, and I relax my grip on the now empty flute and school my face into a pleasant smile. One of the staff, a young man dressed like the rest of the staff in a white button-down and black vest, holds a gold and black patterned tray, on which my small purse rests.

"Your phone has rung twice in a short span of time, Ms. Foster," he explains politely. "We thought it best to notify you."

My smile turns genuine as I reach for the purse, trading my glass for it. "Thank you." Before he leaves, I slip him a tip, which he accepts with a smile and polite nod before leaving me to check my missed calls in peace.

Two missed calls, the most recent being three minutes ago, and four text messages. All from the same person.

Before I can return the call, my phone lights up once again, vibrating in my hand. I can't hide my smile and turn my back to the room as I answer.

"Niamh," I sigh out my best friend's name with gratitude. "What's wrong? Is it Charlie?"

Charlie isn't real. It's the codeword we came up with when we met in college. She's six years older than me and was the only other woman in the doctorate program. Rather than treating me like a child because of our age difference, or like a pariah who hadn't earned my place in the program, she decided we'd be best friends and become a force against the rest of the students in our program.

"Oh, thank god you finally answered," Niamh's smoky voice came. "Yes, it's Charlie! I know you had a performance tonight but is there any way you can come help? I really need you."

Charlie was a fictitious child that we use as a code and excuse to exit social situations. Niamh usually uses it to escape horrible dates, and I use it as an excuse to leave these soul-sucking events.

"Of course," I say, turning back towards the room. Unbidden, I look back

towards the bar but my mysterious stranger is gone. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Escape plan executed, I slip through the crowd and head towards the elevator. My family driver will have waited in the parking garage, and only one person tries to stop me. I plead my excuse, making empty promises to get lunch together, before sliding into the elevator and pressing the Door Close button harder than necessary. Swiping open my phone again, I read Niamh’s text messages and purse my lips. I’d planned on going home, changing into pajamas and crawling into bed to watch the latest episode of my favorite cooking competition but Niamh had other ideas.

When the elevator doors open, I reach back and remove the pins holding up my hair as I speed walk towards the silver town car to my left, the click of my heels echoing in the silent garage. The garage is full of cars and no one else is walking on the level, but I slow because that same awareness is back. Gaze darting between the concrete pillars and at the tinted windshields of dark cars, I see no one. I speed up, grateful for the flowing skirt of my black performance dress. I’d feel too much like a little mouse scurrying away if I was in a tight dress that made me keep to tiny steps.

Dragging my fingers through my hair, my driver, Simon, hurries out of the car as I approach to open my door for me. After the door closes behind me, a rough breath escapes my lips and I tell myself I’m just being silly. Of course, someone was looking at me. There are other drivers here and they were probably all looking at me to see if I was their client ready to leave for the night. Simon returns to the driver’s seat and turns the ignition while looking at me in the rearview mirror.

“Home, Ms. Foster?” He’s been my driver for long enough to know my usual routine and his hazel eyes are crinkled with kind familiarity. He’s older than my father and sometimes, when I really need a shoulder to lean on, he’s been there for me. The silent support of a kind man who doesn’t care how much money separates us. I try to repay his kindness any chance I can get, which isn’t as often as I should.

“Actually, let’s go to Kell’s. Niamh’s there,” I say and slide my kitten heels off, rolling my ankles.

“You’ve still got a bag in the trunk. Would you like it now?”

I perk up at that, relieved. A conservative but still expensive cocktail dress isn’t quite the right outfit for a casual, blue-collar pub. I usually keep an emergency bag of clothing in the town car, a habit held over from when I was

a kid and still clumsy. Then it was easily adjusted to when I was in college and wanted to fit in better with the students around me. I wave him off, though. "I'll grab it when we get there."

He nods and as we pull out of the parking spot, I fire off a text to Niamh, letting her know I am on my way. At least at our favorite pub, I'll be able to get a burger and tots.

Chapter Two

LAN

Wrens are a type of bird. They're tiny things, small enough I could wrap my entire hand around one and crush it without effort. They're shy creatures, difficult to spot in nature because of their brown coloring, which helps them blend into their natural habitat. You find them best by listening, their musical trills bold and captivating where their personality is shy.

This Wren is plain compared to the women wearing brilliant-colored gowns and weighed down by jewelry; she's wearing a knee-length black silk dress that allowed her to straddle her cello during the performance, the boat neck giving the slightest tease of her collarbone and with her hair the color of strawberries twisted into submission, the elegant slope of her neck is on display for all to see. She hides under simple dresses and demure expressions, moving through the sharks of society without causing a ripple.

It makes me long to bare my fangs and throw boulders in the waters, just to see her reaction.

She sensed my attention at the beginning of her performance, before she slipped into her music, and later in the cocktail reception. Her curious gaze touched my shoulders when I'd stood with my back to her, then later when I'd followed her into the parking garage, she'd sensed me again despite being hidden in the dark shadows above her.

A sick glee filled me as I crawled across the ceiling beams and listened to Wren tell the old man to drive her to a pub on the edge of Newgate. It's on the opposite side of the city from the Barrows, but I'm as familiar with Topside as I am with every dank gutter in my sire's kingdom.

It's so much more delightful when they're afraid.

The moment the town car pulls around the corner and out of sight, I let go of the ceiling, twisting in the air to land on my feet with ease. Straightening my jacket with a tug and rolling my neck, I consider leaving for the night. My goal was complete when I realized Oberon wasn't showing and I'd established my presence enough to unsettle Wren.

There's something about her though that makes me excited to play a little bit more. Introducing myself tonight is sooner than my original plan, but what is near immortality without a little chaos?

I run, faster than any mortal or shifter, hitting speeds only the vampiric are capable of. Hell, I'm faster than most vampires even, with Ambrose's blood in my veins thanks to my mother turning me centuries ago. I'd already hated him for turning her, even if it meant she lived through the flu and pneumonia racking her body.

And when I lay on her hearth, delirious with fever from the rot in my gut, burdened by hatred and guilt and anger, how could I have denied my mother when she asked me to allow her to change me? Her, the woman who has loved me at my darkest and cruelest.

Many would say the world would have been better off if my mother had let me die that night. Even I would agree. I'm not blind to the monster I am—the monster each Child of the Night is deep down. Before I became a monster in flesh, I'd seen the evil human men are capable of.

I'll never be the weakest monster again.

Topside, called such by those in the Barrows because of its location to the north of the river, passes me in a blur of bright lights and a symphony of city life at night. Voices, cars, dogs barking, ambulances, shouting, glasses clinking; I could pick out the smallest detail if I wish, but I ignore it as inconsequential. All that matters is I make it to Kells before Wren.

I estimate it will take her driver fifteen minutes at the most to reach Kells, but with my unnatural speed, I slow to a stop in a dim service alley a block away. Eyes darting along the building walls, I mark the security cameras and ensure I appear to stroll out of their blind spots. It may be odd to see a man dressed like myself in an alley used primarily by service workers, but footage is rarely watched live and only ever reviewed in the event of an incident.

One quality I appreciate about Topside, or Newgate as most residents know it as, is how clean it is. Even this alley is hardly an offense to my nose. There is no refuse beyond what is stored correctly in the dumpsters, no puddles of piss and vomit or blood and bodies. It is a city that cares about its

appearance, even its darkest parts.

Many of my brothers and sisters in the Nightshades either revel or are ambivalent to the blood and gore around us, accepting it as a product of our nature. Even Ambrose, our illustrious vampire king, will not hesitate to insert his entire arm into another creature's gut to pull its brains out through its intestines.

Then again, there is always a time and place for sheer brutality and I will not hold back when Jurgis Demencius is in front of me. In fact, I will fucking revel as I become the creature of nightmares that humans believe vampires to be.

Wren Foster, his daughter, is my key to his destruction.

I believed I was the only one who'd miraculously survived the explosion and subsequent house fire all those centuries ago when I was still a human soldier. A group of trappers had been close enough to hear the explosion and come to offer aid. They'd pulled me out and tended my wounds, saying I was the only one they found. The only comfort I'd had was knowing General Jurgis Demencius, the man who'd led us to our deaths without hesitation, had died in the flames caused by my actions.

Five years ago, I learned he'd survived. Not only did he survive the explosion, but he has continued to live through the centuries without being turned into a vampire or giving his soul to a demon.

For five years, I've studied him as he grew Benoit Tech Industries under the name Oberon Benoit in Newgate. He's been prolific through his centuries of life, and I still do not have the entire understanding of how he's survived all this time. What I do know is that it has to do with the very relic he had my regiment searching for in 1652, the one he ordered us all slaughtered to protect before I sought to end us all.

Unfettered rage darkens my vision as I stride towards the front door of the pub—because a pub is what the place is in every sense of the word. I force the anger down, just as I have for the last five years, but it's easier now. Now I have started down the path that will lead to his death, his lasting death.

Music and conversations flood my ears when I pull open the heavy oak door; a live three-man band is set up in the corner on a slightly raised platform. One taps out a tattoo on a hand drum, another dances their bow across the strings of a well-worn fiddle, and the final member strums the acoustic guitar while warbling into the microphone. It's a Friday evening, so the pub is filled with people who are clearly regulars by the slouch of their

shoulders and those who are more eager for a night of revelry.

The walls are red brick and covered with sports memorabilia along with photos of the pub throughout its history. Green leather booths line the walls, otherwise the floor is filled with four-tops, nearly all of which are currently occupied. There's a small area in front of the stage for dancing, but beyond three drunk women, everyone sits at their table with drinks.

Inhaling, I filter through the scents of overly fried food, burnt burgers, hoppy beer, body sweat, and hormones. There is no trace of another supernatural, not even the sinus-irritating haze of ozone of charms meant to ward creatures like me away. Not that the wards and charms Topsiders purchase are strong enough to really deter someone like me, especially since I'd fed the night before. My concern isn't for humans who are anti-supernatural, not when they pose as much of a threat as a newborn calf still covered in afterbirth.

Having the place free of any other supernaturals allows me to work more freely, though. I wouldn't have to be concerned that anything that happened tonight would get back to my dear old grand-sire, Ambrose. As much as I am the collector, the spy master of sorts, for the Nightshades, I understand Ambrose does not trust me blindly.

The feeling is mutual and always has been.

I ease through the crowd, spotting Niamh Wilder—Wren's best friend—sitting at a table in a row between the bar and booths lining the wall. It offers a view of the performers, but the bar offers some barrier to the music, making it easier to have conversations, it seems. Her friend's eyes glide over the crowd, clearly looking for her friend, and when they pass me, they dart back, wider.

Good. Her friend notices me. But I don't make any show of noticing her, moving towards a half-circle booth occupied by a handful of men who are already ruddy cheeked with a collection of empty pint glasses in front of them.

"Gentlemen." I greet them with a curt nod and slide off my jacket before draping it over my arm. "Your evening here is over."

Two of them stare at me as if I'm speaking a different language, another is frowning with confusion, and the one closest to me at the end turns redder as he glowers at me.

"What the fuck do you mean by that?" he spits out, his breath rancid from cheap beer. I refrain from rolling my eyes and stare impassively. Clearly, he's

the supposed leader of the group, seeing how the others are looking to him for direction. The first two are beginning to understand the situation. “You can’t just show up here in your fancy clothes and expect us to leave.”

I tilt my head, amusement twisting my lips, and it only makes the lad bristle hotter. I clasp the man on the shoulder, digging my fingers in hard enough that he whimpers as I bring my face closer to his, never breaking eye contact.

“Be a good boy and run along to your next stop on your night of supposed debauchery,” I speak low but clearly. “Unless you really wish to fight, which I do not have the time or patience for this evening, in which case I will simply slit your throat the moment we step outside and certainly rid your mother of a boorish irritant.”

The young man’s blue eyes fill with shock, and he tries to break free of my grip, but I let my nails lengthen into sharp points and dig in deeper and smile at him.

“What the fuck are you?”

I raise a brow. “A man quickly running out of patience.”

He looks over his shoulder at his companions, who watch us with shell-shocked expressions. Our exchange is subtle enough to be unnoticed by the others in the bar, but depending on his reaction that may change. I doubt it, though. With a grunt, he tries to jerk his shoulder free again and this time I release him, straightening and stepping to the side as he stands.

“This place is shit anyways,” he grouses and fumbles with his wallet until he tosses a twenty onto the table. His friends hurry to do the same, and slide out of the booth, leaving it to me.

Satisfied with my view of Niamh’s table, I take a seat at the table, depositing my jacket on the emerald green leather seat and look towards the bar. It’s a simple pulse of power to get a server’s attention, the man dressed in all black looking over his shoulder to raise his brows at the dirty table and the new occupant. I nod when he gestures that he’ll be over in a moment, and I settle in, observing the crowd of humans in the same manner I’ve watched colorful birds in royal aviaries.

A busser comes to clear the table and the server is there a moment later for my drink order.

“Johnnie Walker, blue if you have it. Black, if not.”

My order surprises the man, but I wave him away because at that moment, my lovely quarry walks through the door, her driver at her back.

Here, on the edge of a crowd much more boisterous and less pretentious, the reserved woman is more relaxed, her smile brighter and more genuine. Though she's wearing a dress that costs more than what some of the people here make in a week, she does not look out of place. She holds a worn gray backpack in one hand and when she catches sight of Niamh, she waves and gestures towards the back corner where the bathrooms are and lifts the bag with intent before speaking over her shoulder.

The driver, a man in his late sixties named Simon who has been Wren's personal driver for the entire time she's lived in Newgate, nods and makes his way to a single open stool at the bar top. My brow narrows when the bartender begins to pour a pint of near black beer for the man. Is he seriously drinking on the job?

I shouldn't care. In fact, if her driver becomes inebriated, it will give me an excuse to step in for him with Wren. Yet irritation grates its nails across my jaw at someone being careless with her. If she is going to be of any use to me, I need her safe and unharmed.

My gaze finds Wren moving through the crowd on the opposite side of the pub, completely ignorant to the appreciative looks sent her way. I clench my jaw, willing one of the men with lust in their eyes to touch her, to give me an excuse to break them apart.

Wren is mine. I decided it the moment I realized her father, the man I despise most in this world, covets her closely. I will take her away from him, ruin her in every way, use her to steal whatever joy and shred of happiness that man may have in his life before I end him. Just like he did to those soldiers, my friends. But not before I take that relic from him, the one that has kept him alive all these years, and watch as realization and fear fills those eyes of his.

I press my heel into the floor, eager to simply steal Wren away and have it done. It wouldn't be satisfying enough that way, though. Not nearly enough.

The server arrives with my drink and I pass him my black card. "Leave it open," I say as I curl my fingers around the glass of nearly thirty-year-old scotch whisky. The man, likely sensing the opportunity for a large tip, says nothing and quickly disappears. I bring the glass to my nose, indulging in the scents of smoky vanilla, honey and chocolate, and the bitter yet smooth heat of the alcohol through it all. Only after I catalog the different traits of the cask this single malt was aged in do I take my first drink.

Like a good woman, good whisky is meant to savor and linger over.

Setting the glass down, I move to the next phase of my impromptu advancement of my plan. Unbuttoning my sleeves, I roll the sleeves of my button-down halfway up along my forearms before removing my narrow black tie and opening the first two buttons at my neck. Quickly, I rake a hand through my hair, ruffling the white blond strands enough to add to my relaxed appearance. By the time I slouch back against the booth, I look as if I've been there for some time rather than less than ten minutes.

I'm in position with perfect timing as Wren exits the restroom, dressed now in high-waisted, wide-legged mint green slacks and a white tank top, her riotous pale red curls released from the confines of the chignon she'd tamed them in for the performance. She'd traded her short heels for flats, and even though her wardrobe cost more than what many here made, she blended seamlessly in with the crowd once more.

A true wren indeed, always trying to blend in to stay safely hidden away.

She drops the backpack off with Simon, who nods once, and she pats him on the back before finally joining her friend Niamh. Niamh stands with a happy squeal more suited to a woman a decade her junior and throws her arms around Wren's slender shoulders in a tight hug. Wren tucks her hair behind both ears, moving to sit to the right of Niamh; as she is about to lower herself into the chair, she pauses, looking around until her gaze finds me.

Unlike her friend, I act as if I'm startled to be caught looking at her and offer a pleasant smile and tilt of the head in greeting. Her cheeks warm and she sits down quickly, making Niamh look over her shoulder at me quickly.

I take another sip of whisky, pleased. Tuning out the rest of the pub's chatter, I focus on Wren's ribbon-soft voice and Niamh's smokier replies. It's too early to approach Wren, but I'm a patient man.

After all, Rome wasn't destroyed in a day.

Chapter Three

WREN

“I know I’ve said this before,” Niamh says before she pushes a stolen cheese-covered tater tot into her mouth. She quickly chews and swallows. “But your dad is a dick.”

I sigh with my entire body, resting most of my weight on my forearms on the only slightly sticky table we’re at, my now burger-less plate sitting towards the edge of the table. Fiddling with the empty straw wrapper. I don’t immediately defend him. Maybe when I was still a fresh, wide-eyed, naive child in college I would have. The truth is, my dad—Oberon Benoit, tech mogul and business genius—can be a dick. He was supposed to be at my string quartet’s chamber conference. I had checked out his calendars and seen he was free, so I’d held a flicker of hope he’d actually show.

I should be used to this enough by now that it shouldn’t hurt this much, but it does. My father is the one who signed me up to learn the cello as a child and for years, he made every performance and it felt like I’d finally discovered what it took to make him proud.

My eyes drift over the noisy but good-natured crowd at our favorite pub. I want to blame the city. I want to say my dad only started to pull away after he opened his next headquarters here in Newgate when I graduated with my degree. It wouldn’t be true, though, and I’ve gotten pretty good at being honest with myself.

“You know what I think?” Niamh continues when I don’t answer, and I push off the table and slouch back in the wooden chair, raising a brow at the mischievous glint in her eyes.

“What?” I ask warily. Despite being so much older than me, I’m often the one preaching caution.

My father may be a dick and not show up to my performances when he says he will, but I have no doubt he treasures me and my safety. Niamh's hazel eyes twinkle and she leans forward over her drink, some sort of boozy mixture of fruit syrups, clear soda, and vodka. Her pouty lips rest just above the straw, and her cheeks are approaching the same color as her drink.

In short, my best friend is drunk.

"I think you should find someone that will make you forget your own name."

I snort and grab a tater tot to throw at her. "I'm not so sad I need a one-night stand, Nee-nee."

Niamh's face twists up. "Don't call me that."

I giggle and reach for my pint glass, having gone for a cheap pilsner. "Why not, Nee-nee? Oh, Nee-nee!"

Nee-Nee is the nickname a boyfriend gave Niamh during their very short-lived relationship. It was one of the reasons she broke it off so quickly, and I love to tease her with it.

She points a well-manicured nail at me, her face set in a serious expression even if her lips are twitching as she tries not to laugh. "Seriously. If you keep it up, I'm going to find the ugliest man in here and tell him you've been staring at him all night but you're too nervous to approach."

I gasp dramatically, pressing my hand flat below my throat. Adopting the most Southern belle accent I can manage, I say, "Well, I never."

We look at each other for a long moment before breaking down into snickers. The entire exchange would have earned us disapproving sniffs at the reception I'd left, surrounded by people who are so rich they seem to have lost touch with reality.

"So is your dad still talking about setting you up with Miles?" She scrunches her nose as she says my father's right-hand man's name.

A server saves me from answering right away, setting a fresh beer in front of me and a new drink for Niamh.

"We didn't order these?" I look up at the young man dressed in all black in confusion.

"They're from the gentleman in the booth. He said to tell you that your performance tonight was—" the young man hesitated, the tops of his ears going pink with embarrassment – "bewitching and exhilarating."

"Oh," is all I manage to produce as I stare at the drinks before lifting my bewildered gaze to Niamh. "Thanks."

He leaves with a quick nod, and I look past Niamh towards the booths. Instinctively, my eyes go to the same booth where the man I'd made eye contact earlier with had sat. I jolt when he's still there, watching me with a wry grin as he raises his glass in a clear toast. My face burns, and Niamh whips around in her chair to see who I'm looking at. I force a pleasant smile on my face even while the greasy burger and tater tots threaten to come back up. This wasn't supposed to happen. No one from that part of my life is supposed to be in this part of my life. This is where I can be more than Oberon's perfect little daughter, where I can be myself and not worry about what I say or how I act or what I eat or—

“Well, fuck me,” Niamh lets out in a whoosh as she turns back to me, looking like the cat that got the cream -and- the canary. “You sure you don't want to reconsider a one-night stand? I know I sure as hell would be racing over there, taking my clothes off, if a man looking like that bought me a drink.”

I narrow my eyes and dip my head towards her fresh drink. “He did buy you a drink.”

She waves my comment away with a roll of her eyes. “Please. He's being nice. He sent a message complimenting you on your cello performance tonight. Clearly, he's only interested in you.”

I shake my head, and eye the beer. “I don't like it.” I keep my voice low, thankful that the band is done for the evening. “I don't even recognize him.”

It's the only reason I'm not bolting to Simon and saying I'm ready to leave. At the same time, it almost makes it worse. If I recognized him, at least I would know if he is likely to gossip about how I left the performance reception to come drink at a blue-collar pub. Then again, so did he.

Slowly, carefully, I look back over at him. He's looking at his phone in one hand, the other hand wrapped loosely around a tumbler. He's wearing a crisp white button-down shirt, but the top two buttons are undone and he's slouching against the wooden back of the booth. His hair is ruffled, and while his clothes scream money, his entire posture is relaxed.

Niamh is right. He's one of the most beautiful men I've ever seen. Even slouching behind a table, I can tell he's tall. If I had to describe him, I'd say he looks like a Scandinavian prince with his elegant high cheekbones and his stern jawline. His pale blond hair is nearly white but rather than making him look odd or aged, it gives him the look of an ancient creature like an elven king. It's long on top and shorn close on the sides. Earlier, it may have been

slickly styled back in controlled waves, but now it's tousled as if it couldn't wait to shake the confines of high society too. His lips are thin, but not unattractively, especially when one side of his mouth tilts up into a smirk at whatever is on his phone. Letting my gaze drop, I appreciate his strong shoulders and how the white button-down turns into something more seductive under the warm lighting of the pub. My mouth dries and stomach flips again when I get to his forearms.

To borrow Niamh's favorite phrase, fuck me. I've always been an arms girl and this man's forearms are weapons of mass seduction. And his hands—his long fingers now tapping a rhythm on the tabletop—his hands are the things of dark fantasies.

“That man is built like a grandfather clock.” Niamh's lips wrap around the straw in her fresh drink, her eyes twinkling, as I blink at her. So, she caught me ogling.

I clear my throat, reaching for the beer. At least he is considerate enough to order us another round of what we already are drinking instead of ordering something he assumes we'll like. “What?”

She perches her chin on one hand, leaning heavily on her elbow over the table, while stirring her drink idly with the straw with the other.

“You know—built to bang on every hour.”

I sputter at her words, spitting and choking on the swallow of beer I'd been taking. A few people seated around us turn to look as I glower at my cackling friend and try to clear my lungs of beer. Great. This is the last thing I need. First, he runs in my social circles and knows I'm at this pub, and now I'm making a spectacle of myself like I've never had a beer before. God, why doesn't the ground just open up and swallow me.

Niamh doesn't help, snickering into her drink before taking another long sip. I grope for the paper napkins, patting at my mouth and then the table, and when mine are sodden, she takes pity on me and hands me a couple more from the top of the stack closest to her.

“Thanks,” I mutter, not at all gracious. “Now if I even do talk to him, I'm going to smell like beer.”

She rolls her eyes. “This whole place smells like beer. And fried cheese.” She looks over her shoulder again, and I can't help but look too. He's not looking at us, so maybe I escaped the embarrassment of having him see me making an utter fool of myself.

“He's alone,” she muses and looks back at me. “You should go thank him

in person for the drinks.”

My stomach goes queasy. It’s definitely the greasy burger and not butterflies at the idea of talking to such an attractive man. I’m surrounded by attractive men in my life, I can handle them.

Some deep part of me, the primal woman’s sense of survival or something, tells me that this man is not one to be handled.

Despite my father’s preaching and his current assumption, I haven’t exactly stayed chaste. I’m not a virgin, though I haven’t jumped as eagerly into beds as Niamh. Not that I’m judging her. Far from it. I wish it was easy for me to find partners, but because of my family name and my position at Benoit Tech, I learned early on that most men see me as a stepping stone—access to my father and the prestige he offers.

I can count on one hand how many men I’ve slept with and they never lasted long and I never let it go beyond physical.

It’s why they always end up leaving. I know the joke is that men, especially in their early twenties, can be commitment-phobes.

While I know it’s fucked up, I can’t stand the idea of keeping a relationship secret from my dad. And I know he will be furious if I’m in one.

I bite back a groan, wanting to rage against the control I’ve let my father still have over me. I’ll be thirty soon, for fuck’s sake, and I don’t have the courage to be like, “Hey, dad, this is my boyfriend.”

Especially now that he’s started talking about Miles, and I have the sinking feeling that if he has his way, I’ll be married to Miles before my thirtieth birthday whether I love the man or not.

I don’t even count Miles as a friend.

“Come on.” Niamh nudges my foot with her own under the table. Her face is softer, understanding in her eyes. “What harm is there in talking to him? Let yourself flirt with a hot guy, Wren. You’re in your twenties! Let yourself act like it once in a while.”

I drum my fingers against the pint glass, watching the tiny bubbles rise to the pale amber surface before popping. The ambiance of the pub is relaxed and easy, the music blending with the noise of conversation and clinking of glasses. It’s cozy, despite being a packed pub, and warm. Completely the opposite of the Palmer Hotel I’d fled earlier.

“But I came to hang out with you.” It’s a weak argument and Niamh stares at me, telling me exactly what she thinks of that. Catching my lower lip between my teeth, my whole body sighs as I relent. The moment I do, she

beams at me.

“Go get him, tiger. Flirt your heart out before you have to go be Ms. Foster again tomorrow.”

I groan and then take a hearty swallow of my beer for courage. It’s almost halfway gone. With the single champagne flute at the performance, this is my third drink for the night. Out here where no one knows me—except this attractive stranger apparently—I don’t have such a hard limit, but standing, I decide four is the most I’ll have tonight. If this guy does circulate in the same circles as me, I can’t afford to lose my head.

“Yes, I’ll keep an eye out for the save-me look,” Niamh says while moving chairs, before I can even ask. “Go! I’m just going to be here reading fanfiction on my phone and ordering another round of cheesy tots on your tab.”

I snort but swipe up my beer and start walking before I can chicken out. There are only two tables between mine and his booth, no more than fifteen feet away, yet it stretches on forever. Except before I know it, I find myself at his table.

He’s still looking down at his phone, though I can’t see what’s on it.

“Hi,” I squeak out and flush, my ears burning. His head snaps up and my eyes go wide.

It’s not the slow, sinfully attractive grin that steals my breath. It’s his eyes.

Vampire gold.

“Ms. Foster,” he greets, his voice warm honey and whisky smooth. He gestures to the booth seat across from him. “Please, join me.”

I swallow hard, another flush washing over me. My head is everywhere, my body throwing out so many contradicting signals that my poor brain can’t decide what to do.

So I accept his offer, sitting and setting my beer between us like it is some sort of barrier.

He turns his phone off, pocketing it immediately, while watching me with his smile still in place.

“How do you know me?”

Well, that isn’t what I meant to say. Why, oh, why, am I suddenly this awkward bundle of nerves? I’ve stared down and gone toe to toe in boardrooms with men forty years older than me and come out victorious.

Fortunately, he doesn’t seem offended.

“I’m a fan of classical music. Tonight was not the first night I’ve seen you perform.”

Oh. His answer honestly throws me off-balance. His lip quirks higher as if he knows it, and he lifts the lowball glass and takes a drink without ever breaking my gaze. It’s actually refreshing, the look in his eyes. He’s not looking at me like I’m a little girl playing dress-up at her father’s company, or like a pretty doll who’s meant to be seen and admired but not offer opinions of her own.

He’s looking at me the way Niamh does. Like he actually sees me as a person with nuance and depth and opinions.

Dammit. I’m going to have to thank Niamh and tell her she was right to goad me into coming over. It’s going to be terrible.

I study his eyes, looking between them and taking in the vibrant color. His pupils are wide in the pub light, but not so wide I can’t admire how it looks as if someone laid a snowflake made of gold foil in his irises. His eyes are warm enough they almost look metallic.

“Are you going to ask?”

I startle, realizing I’ve been staring at his eyes like an absolute creep. But he still only looks amused, except it doesn’t feel like he’s mocking me. His teasing voice invites me to share his humor.

I duck my head, my cheeks burning regardless, and tuck my hair behind my right ear as I look back up with a sheepish grin.

“Are you a vampire?”

He inclines his head to the side, his eyebrows raising slightly. “I am. Does that bother you?”

“No.” The answer is immediate, and his smile widens. It makes my next decision easy. I reach over the table, offering him my hand. “My name is Wren,” I introduce myself officially.

He takes my hand, his palm smooth and cool, squeezing gently as we shake once. “My name is Landon. A pleasure to finally meet you.”

When I pull away, I swear his fingers ghost over my palm as if reluctant.

“So, you’re a vampire who enjoys classical music,” I begin before taking another drink of the beer and then tilt the glass towards him. “Thanks for this, by the way. What do you do for work?”

Lan’s eyes narrow in consideration. “I work in acquisitions: information, primarily.”

I can’t help slipping into my corporate voice. “How long have you been

doing that?”

He leans forward, propping himself up on his forearms and lacing his fingers together, still meeting my eyes. “About a century now. Before that I preferred trade in antiques.”

“Interesting. How long have you been in Newgate?”

Lan raises a brow, his eyes warm and teasing. “Are you interviewing me for a job, Ms. Foster? I can assure you, any position I’m interested in with you is strictly unprofessional.”

My face goes as red as my hair, my heart leaps into my throat even as my core grows slick just at the insinuation.

“Sorry,” I quickly apologize, and I mean it. I gesture between us. “I’m not really good at this type of thing. Put me in front of a panel, and I can handle the sharks. Something like this where…” my mouth dries as I trail off, embarrassment at my social awkwardness taking over the blush in my cheeks.

Lan, though, takes it all in easy stride. “Something like what?” he asks, his voice is like a cool balm over my burning skin. “A conversation with a man who finds you extremely attractive and would happily accept anything you’re willing to share with him?”

Oh, fuck me sideways. His blunt statement is not helping things, as much as I appreciate it at the same time.

“We just met!” I point out when I’m capable of words again. “We don’t know anything about each other.”

He takes another long drink of his whisky, studying me. He’s hypnotic and as much as I want to squirm, I’m frozen under the attention.

“I make a point to know everything I can about things I enjoy. I know you graduated high school at sixteen and entered college the same year. You graduated with a double major at twenty in business and computer engineering. You completed your PhD by twenty-two. Your academic accomplishments are impressive on their own, but doubly so considering that you’ve continued your cellist career the entire time as well as beginning to work at Oberon Tech. Most would say what you’ve accomplished is impossible.”

Lan recites the basics of my professional history, and if I hadn’t been used to it, I would have found it uncomfortable. As it is, the only thing I feel is resentment and sorrow that a vampire who is at least a century old thinks I’m impressive and my own father doesn’t.

I finish the last quarter of my beer and set the glass down with a clunk of the tabletop before grabbing an unused pulpboard coaster for something to fidget with. Another thing that would disappoint my father.

Lan draws my attention when he raises a hand, silently ordering another round. I force myself to set down the coaster and smile at Lan. I came over here to flirt and have fun, not wallow in my baggage.

“That’s just my professional portfolio,” I say dismissively but keep my tone light. “It doesn’t tell you who I am.”

“Oh, I disagree, Wren.”

I’m frozen under his warm gaze again. He says my name reverently, with approval and appreciation. A part of my brain perks up, wanting to hear it again, to soak up the praise dripping from the vampire’s lips.

“It tells me that you are tenacious, a hard worker; someone who strives for perfection, to master subjects not just for yourself but for others. It tells me that despite hurdles and obstacles others wilt and crumble before, you are strong enough to endure, overcome.” His golden gaze heats, taking my body temperature along with it.

“It tells me that you’re a good girl.”

His words punch the air from my lungs as my body overheats. I’m snared, utterly and completely, and I have no way to find my balance again.

The moment is severed, and I slam back into reality when the server drops off another beer in front of me. Lan tells the man to close his tab and slides from the booth.

“You’re leaving?” I’m absolutely discombobulated.

Standing beside the table, Lan is as tall as I suspected. At least six two, maybe six three. He slides on his suit jacket, the color and fit confirming he was the mysterious man I’d seen at the bar. I could have sworn I left before him, though. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a leather billfold. He drops a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill on the table and then draws out a matte black business card, holding it between his index and middle finger as he offers it to me.

“For the tip,” he indicates the money he left. “I have other business to attend to tonight. If you decide you want to continue our interview, you can contact me here.”

I reach for the card, and he bends his wrist, keeping it just out of reach, and my brows narrow. The warmth in his eyes has transformed into a blaze with clear intent, the smile on his tempting lips utterly salacious.

“I assure you, I’m experienced in all manner of positions.”

He lets me take the card with almost limp fingers before turning and striding towards the bar. I wrap my hand around the card, ignoring the sharp edges cutting into my palm, as I watch him sign his receipt and stroll out of Kell’s without a single glance back at me.

When Lan doesn’t reappear, I collapse back against the bench seat. A moment later, Niamh is sliding into the booth, eagerness brightening her.

“So?” She immediately presses.

I can only shake my head, still reeling from the entire interaction, and take a long, long gulp of the fresh beer. I slide the card Lan gave me into my pocket, keeping it a secret for now. My best friend starts to coax everything that happened from me, and I recount it almost feeling like it happened to someone else.

The card searing into my upper thigh reminds me otherwise.

Chapter Four

WREN

My father's office is on the tenth story of the building that comprises Benoit Technology Corps. When he first purchased the building seven years ago, he expanded the original administration section of the building upwards, adding on another five floors. When I asked why, since we had yet to employ even half the people we'd need to meet our expansion demands, he simply stated it was so he can watch over his growing business empire and rivals.

Standing at the floor-to-ceiling windows that make up two of the four walls of his enormous office, I can't disagree that the view is spectacular. The blackout shades are fully retracted, giving me a panorama of Newgate. With our location in the southern business district of the city, there is even a view of the broad river and on the perpendicular side, Oldgate—the Barrows.

It's that view I face now, as opposed to the one to the left of me looking over Newgate and the buildings as they increase in height the closer to the city center they get. Everything in view is brilliant and warm in the late morning sun. It's as if the city strove to clean itself of any connection to Oldgate, mandating all buildings be built in pale colors and rigorously cleaned to ensure the image of wealth and prosperity Newgate represents.

I wonder if those in the Barrows call this city Topside because our buildings tower over them, reaching into the sky as if the city itself is straining to touch the stars.

My eyes don't linger on the near eye-watering bright buildings of the city I live in, but on the bold, dark length of Oldgate in the distance. From where I stand, the city limits of Oldgate are seven miles away.

Is Landon in Oldgate now? Very few supernaturals live in Topside, I'd

learned, and almost all of them live close to the river. Landon, with his luxury suits and casual display of wealth at Kell's, doesn't strike me as the type to live in the small, less affluent homes or apartments that make up those neighborhoods.

It's been a week since he gave me his card. It's matte black and embossed in a metallic bronze is only three things. His name and a phone number below the Nightshade symbol of a weeping Belladonna flower.

I should have gotten rid of it, but instead I've kept it in my wallet only to take it out in the privacy of my bedroom. Twice I've come close to calling Landon, once as far as inputting the number from the card, before my courage failed me and I deleted it.

My lack of courage hasn't kept the vampire out of my thoughts, though. Landon has occupied every spare moment to the point of distraction. I've thrown myself into work, diving into the details of the projects and proposals within my department and working late into the night. I tried to play my cello once, but all I could think about was performing for Landon and then how he might show his appreciation for my skill with those dexterous fingers of his and those too sinful of lips. How he might murmur my name, full of praise, in my ear and against my skin as he explores me.

How he might sink his fangs into my flesh and feed from me.

It is unnerving, the power this vampire has over me after a single meeting, where nothing beyond a few bold insinuations were offered.

The door opens behind me, allowing me to wrench my thoughts back under control and turn to face my father as he enters, my hands clasped demurely in front of me. The office is a perfect reflection of my father, Oberon, seamlessly blending modern style with old-world masculinity. His desk is large, but not ostentatiously so as many other men in his position seem to require. It's dark walnut, and often reminds me more of what a war general may have had when kings and queens still ruled the world. Two monitors take up half of the space, and he keeps it as meticulously clean and organized as he does everything else in his life.

"Has the issue with the hydro pistons been resolved?" He asks in lieu of a greeting as he marches to his desk, a leather portfolio open in his hand. This is the first time I've seen him since before my chamber performance, and I swallow down the emotions threatening to tighten my throat.

Oberon Benoit, a man whose genius is recognizing it in others and profiting from it, is built broad-shouldered and hard-faced. He's barely six

feet tall, but that doesn't stop him from towering over everyone in board meetings and contract negotiations. He wears his Armani suit like its armor, every move he makes is one of power and determination. He demands respect and recognition from every person in a fifty-foot radius. Benoit Tech is as successful as it is because he expects nothing less, and the punishment for failure is too high to risk.

Gone are the days he'd sit at my recitals or attend my horse shows. No longer does he frighten my nightmares away, letting me sleep tucked beside him while he works in bed.

I used to wonder when he stopped looking at me like his little girl and started looking at me as a business commodity. By now, I've stopped fixating on it. All it does is exhaust me emotionally, still bereft of answers.

"Of course. Production for the latest version of this prototype is active as we speak," I report, moving closer to his desk and ignoring the two chairs available. No one sits in front of my father without an invitation, not even me.

"Good. I want this to be the final version. If we are going to take the lead for this new energy grid upriver, there can't be any more delays."

I nod, even though he's not looking at me. He's opened something on his computer, the leather portfolio open on his desk to the right of him. I wait, patience instilled in me since I was a young child, for him to continue. It gives me more time to look at him, searching for the father I once had.

Physically, he's hardly changed since I was a child, though he's in his mid-sixties now. His jaw hasn't softened like so many others his age, and he is as strong as a man half his age. Even his hair is still a deep brown, as if his own body is too intimidated to grow a gray hair.

Even if I don't age as well as him, I'm thankful I take after my mother. Like her, I'm slender and narrow boned. I'll never have an ass men drool over or breasts that spill out of a bra, but I've never been envious of more curvaceous women. I'm old enough that the hurtful words of a guy in college don't sting anymore. He'd been in one of my advanced marketing courses and flirted with me genuinely enough I'd thought he was truly interested.

But then at the college frat party he invited me to, I overheard him in the kitchen with his friends. How he laughed at how easy it'd be to sleep with me that night, even if it'd be like banging a two by four.

Landon called me beautiful, though, and something about his eyes told me he was sincere.

“This evening you will be attending dinner with myself and Miles,” Oberon states and finally looks over at me, his gray-blue eyes narrowed critically. “You’ll change into a dress before. Something with color. Keep it appropriate, we’re meeting a potential new contractor.”

I don’t let my expression falter from its respectful and pleasant mask. I’m wearing narrow black ankle-length pants, a long-sleeve pastel blue silk blouse with a single button black blazer. The only thing that verges on unprofessional are my black flats with delicate ankle straps. When I know I’ll be walking to and from the production floors and my team’s offices, comfortable flats are my choice. My father has often expressed how my mother always wore heels and I should too.

It’s one of the few things I refuse to try to please him with anymore. He can be happy I wear heels three-quarters of the time.

“Of course,” I say, keeping my tone pleasant and submissive. “Where are we going?”

“Alder,” he says, still watching me. It’s unnerving, and I clench my toes as I try not to show my discomfort. His eyes soften, and with them, the uncertainty disappears. In moments like these, I see a fleeting glimpse of who I remember. The father I adore.

“You look so much like her, sometimes,” he begins, his voice even but his eyes hold a touch of emotion. “I remember her at your age.”

My smile turns sincere at his words. “I wish I knew her better,” I murmur.

My mother died when I was a year old, when she accompanied him on a trip overseas. I think she knew something was going to happen, since I’m told she insisted I remain home with the nanny. Their driver had swerved to miss a deer, and their car went off the road and tumbled down a ravine. My father had been the only survivor, escaping with only a bruise but a broken heart.

His eyes glaze over, as if lost in memories of her, before refocusing on me. His dark brows lower, expression turning serious once more.

“Saoirse would be disappointed you are not married yet,” he says, his words clipped. My stomach turns hollow as my heart beats fast enough I feel faint. He sits upright in his chair, closing the leather portfolio before lacing his fingers together and resting his forearms on top of it. Years of expectations are the only thing keeping my eyes locked with his instead of looking somewhere else. Anywhere else.

“As your father, I have always wanted the best for you, to keep you as whole and pure as possible, untainted even. I know my rules have not been

easy for you as you've grown into a young woman, but it is because of your obedience I have been able to secure a husband for you."

Internally, I'm screaming and pounding against the office door demanding to escape. I'm spiraling into a panic that promises to never end. I lock my knees, tightening my clasped hands as I desperately attempt to hide my reactions. He continues, his eyes narrowing on my hands. I force myself to relax, to shove everything away until I'm alone.

"You are a well-accomplished woman and will make a good wife for Miles," he states, confirming the suspicions I revealed to Niamh. "Tonight, he will propose formally and you will accept. The wedding will take place in three months and a wedding planner has—"

"I hardly know Miles," I interrupt, and his jaw snaps closed. Disapproval stains his eyes, and I drop my gaze to the floor, face burning. "Please forgive me for the interruption. I am overwhelmed, I fear."

He waits a long moment before replying. "As are most women when they learn they are to be brides. You'll have plenty of opportunities to get to know Miles better before the wedding. This marriage will open many opportunities for my company due to his family connections. This is not a love match, but you are expected to provide him children. You will not only be Miles' wife but ensure the continuation of my legacy. This is the greatest thing you'll ever do, Wren. Do you understand?"

I swallow hard, blinking back the tears threatening to flow down my cheeks, before I look up once more to meet his stern gaze. I put on the perfect society lady's smile, disguising all traces of discontent.

"Of course, Father. It has always been my greatest wish to make you proud," I answer. Then desperate to escape. "If that is all, may I return to my department? If I'm to be married in three months, there is much to prepare for."

He stares at me, studying me for any suggestion of disobedience, but my answer is honest. I've only ever wanted him to be proud of me, and he knows it. I don't dare look away, don't dare give in to the anger and fear-filled maelstrom in my gut, threatening to bring up my breakfast from two hours ago.

"A driver will pick you up at six. Be ready," is all he says as a dismissal. I dip my head in acknowledgment and leave his office.

It takes every ounce of hard-won control and resilience I've built up to walk calmly from his office to the elevator, to stand with a serene look on my

face as the elevator carries down to the eighth floor, and nod greetings to my staff and team. Only when I'm locking the door of my private ensuite office bathroom do I begin to tremble.

I stumble across the white tiled floors, falling to my knees as I clutch the toilet and rip up the lid, puking and crying at last. When I'm certain nothing more is going to come up, I collapse back onto my ass, pressing my eyes with the heels of my palms. I'm going to look a mess, but I can't find any fucks to give.

I can't let this ruin my team's day, though. Just because I'm a mess doesn't mean I can leave before lunch. Niamh's voice is in my head, telling me that I can, actually, leave after that shitshow of an announcement. Wiping my hands down my face, I take a deep breath, my tears under control once again. Standing, I flush away the evidence of my minor breakdown and move to the counter.

My reflection makes me snort. Only my eyeliner is smudged, though I'll need to powder my face again to cover up the tear tracks. I guess this waterproof mascara really is heartbreak-proof like the advertising copy claimed. Forcibly controlling my breathing and refusing to even think about what my father announced, I find a facecloth in the small cabinet and rinse it under cold water before patting my face clean. My eyes are red and puffy but my eyeshadow looks less "3:00 a.m. drunk" smoky eye and more like "end of a long day" smoky eye. It'll have to do.

I square my shoulders before I leave the bathroom, determined to show no sign of distress. When I get to my desk in my office, I pull my cell from the top drawer and check the time. It's twenty minutes till noon, and in about six and a half hours, I'll have a fiancé. Niamh's voice chirps up again and I don't care if my father finds out I left early. I'll just tell him I wanted to make sure I had the perfect outfit to accept a proposal in. Decision made, I text Simon to meet me out front while pulling my designer tote bag over my shoulder and flipping the lights off in my office.

"Something came up and I'm headed out to handle it," I inform Raul, my very capable assistant. He nods, not even questioning me since he knows I'd just met with my father.

"I'll make sure all of your meetings are moved to later this week and send you a confirmation when your calendar is updated," he answers, already pulling up my appointment program. "Have a good day, Ms. Foster."

"Thank you," I say, hoping he doesn't notice the strain in my voice. The

chances of a good day went out my father's floor-to-ceiling window the moment he announced I was marrying his business partner.

If I want to make it through the dinner tonight, I'll need to get ready. And by get ready, I really mean arrive at Alder an hour or more early and take advantage of the happy hour cocktails, one-drink rule be damned.

Chapter Five

LAN

Alder is a favored restaurant and bar for Topside's elite, with its dark tables, crisp linens, and warm-colored walls. It creates a sensual and opulent backdrop for the politicians and businessmen who are seeking votes or funding for their machinations.

I've arrived early, much earlier than when Oberon and his partner, Miles, will arrive for dinner. Over the centuries, I've embraced the predator within me and I refuse to underestimate Oberon, my rival predator. No one else in Topside may truly understand how dangerous Oberon is, but he is as vicious as a wolverine.

So I'm here, surveying the field, so to speak, before our first battle in a war he isn't aware of. There seems to be no initial security for Oberon, which tells me he sees Newgate and myself in particular as no threat.

Poisonous glee ripples in my stomach as I take another long sip of Johnny Walker.

Scanning the bar behind me through the mirrored backdrop, a sparkle of evergreen silk catches my eye.

Wren Foster is here, an hour before her father is set to dine with me. Perhaps he is more careful than I first thought. Sending his daughter as a scout is brilliant, because dressed as Wren is, no one will consider her a femme fatale.

Her strawberry blonde hair is plaited along the sides of her head before being gathered near the crown where it flows out in a tail. Her narrow, fae-like face is dusted with freckles, her makeup light with only bold dark lines making the pale green of her eyes pop and a soft pink color staining her lips. She's wearing a dress, evergreen silk draping her willowy body. Unlike her

performance dress, this dress is quietly seductive. A dress that teases and tantalizes, with its narrow straps plunging to embrace her small breasts before hugging her torso tight. The silk wrapping over her hips drapes to just below her knees, but it's gathered on her right hip, revealing a tasteful amount of her thigh. She strides confidently towards the bar counter, ignoring the appreciative stares sent her way, in four-inch velvet nude stilettos. No doubt she'd walk over the lecherous men in this room wearing them, like a vicious queen uncaring of the rabble beneath her feet.

The only thing she wears that I've yet to see her without is her simple emerald earrings and the teardrop pendant nestled in the hollow of her throat. Otherwise, three silver bangles adorn each wrist.

She looks like a fae queen of old, a proper Tuatha Dé Danann, come from Tir na nOg to tempt mortal men into losing centuries of time in her realm.

She has yet to notice me, and why should she? To her, I'm another man in the background of her world filled with them.

"A double mojito, please," she orders as she sits at the stool. The dress and her heels make her already long legs stretch on for miles. She sets a small clutch on the bar, staring down at the warm light reflecting off the bar top.

If she's a scout, looking for potential threats for her father, her strategy is interesting. Luckily for her, the only threat is me.

When the bartender sets her drink in front of her, a man in his mid-forties or so with an expensive suit stretched across his paunch gut stands, his eyes stuck to Wren's nape. He runs a hand over his thinning dark hair and receding hairline, his intent clear in his eyes.

I'm standing before I realize it, drink in hand, and the movement catches his eye.

With a cold sneer and a jerk of my head, the man glowers at me but drops back into his seat, angrily gesturing for another beer.

Satisfied, I move until I'm just behind Wren. She stiffens as I lean over her shoulder, her eyes finding me in the mirror. Her recognition jerks through her as I murmur, "You never called."

I pull back, tilting my head as I study her. Her cheeks pink, and her hand wraps around the sweating cocktail as she takes me in before her gaze meets mine. Her brows dip in a display of the slightest confusion.

"Your eyes are blue."

I slide onto the stool beside her, never breaking her gaze. To my amusement, she doesn't shift away in spite of me sitting closer than

considered polite.

“I’ve found it can be much easier to conduct business in Newgate if those around me believe me fully human,” I explain, tilting my head towards her as if imparting a secret. “Not everyone here is as fascinated with my kind as you.”

To my curiosity, she doesn’t blush as I imagined she would. Instead, she takes a sip of her mojito, and I’m riveted by her pink lips wrapping around the narrow black straw. When she sets it down, I drag my gaze back to her eyes, where the embers of her arousal from Kells are slowly reigniting.

“How have you been, Wren?” I ask, keeping my voice smooth and calm. She’s like the bird she’s named after and if I’m not careful with my approach, she’ll fly away and hide where I cannot find her. If I want to turn Oberon’s scout against him, I must convince her I pose no threat. Only when the little bird is tempted within my maw will I clamp my jaws tight and crush her.

“Very busy,” she answers at last, her eyes flicking towards the display of liquor bottles behind the bar and back. “My team is finally producing golden samples for our next product that we hope will advance power technologies.”

I hum as I take a drink, my eyes never leaving her. Breathing deep, her scent of rosemary, lemon, and mint tease my senses. What will her blood taste like? “The hydro pistons?”

She startles, eyes narrowing and suspicion clear in her gaze. “How do you know that?”

I let a languid smirk form. “I deal in information, remember, my little bird?” Her pupils expand, and rather than push further, I lean back slightly, giving her more space. “Don’t worry. I have no interest in ruining Benoit Tech with corporate espionage. In fact, I respect the project you’ve spearheaded. Your hydro pistons will revolutionize hydro electronics and sustainable energy. It will help people across the globe, no matter their economic class.”

It’s the complete truth, and I deliver it as such. Her suspicion clears, replaced with a bright eagerness.

“That’s my goal,” she explains, leaning towards me and closing the space I’d created. She clings to her mojito with both hands but swivels her body towards me on the stool. “When I was an undergrad, I traveled to Borneo on a conservation and energy expedition and spoke with many small native villages who have little or no electricity. These pistons are small enough, yet powerful enough that they can be used with the small streams that provide

drinking water. One piston can create enough power for a village of a hundred people.”

Her enthusiasm is admirable as well as engaging.

“But won’t having foreign corporations coming in with solutions simply make these people more dependent?” I countered.

She shakes her head, smiling. “That’s the brilliant part of my plan. Studies have shown that the best way to assist native people is to not just help them acquire the technology but teach them how to maintain it themselves. That’s what my team has been working on. Not only do the pistons have to work, but they have to be simple enough that we can train the villagers to maintain the system themselves.”

Wren glows from within, full of enthusiasm and conviction. She is a woman with incredible resources and intellect, and rather than spend her days planning parties, she seeks to help those less fortunate. How did a vile creature like Oberon father a woman so disgustingly good?

Unbidden, I reach forward and caress her cheek with the back of a knuckle. “You’re so beautiful.”

Wren’s ears turn pink and she captures her lower lip between her teeth, but she doesn’t look away. I tuck my knuckle under the point of her chin, and free her lip with my thumb, stroking it as if to ease the pain of her bite.

“Don’t do that,” I murmur, pitching my voice soft enough she naturally leans in to hear me easier. I stare at her plump lower lip, stroking the soft flesh, unable to pull away. “If it must be bitten, at least allow me to do it for you.”

Wren pulls back, breaking the spell she’d cast over me, and I clamp down on the desire building in my veins. Damn, even my cock is half stiff without my permission.

I hold back a snort at my own weakness. I must remember who her father is, and that she is not some woman meant to be trifled with. She busies herself with sucking down the rest of her mojito and signals the barkeep for another one.

Taking the time she’s giving, I take a long sip of my own whisky. When the bartender eyes me, brow raised, I give a short nod to indicate another for me as well. Sometimes I long for the ability to get drunk like mortals can. To use alcohol to temper and dull the rage inside of me. To remind me of who I used to be before my mortal life went to shit with the head injury.

Traumatic brain injury is what I’d be diagnosed with in the modern world

if I were mortal still. Neurology was in its infancy in the late 1600s, and even Ambrose—who went by the name Oleksandr—tried to bring English physicians to examine me after I returned to my matka. The one thing I can be thankful of is his refusal to allow a priest to look at me, making it clear to my mother, Joséphine, that I was not possessed by a demon. I'd always disliked Ambrose, but at least I knew he'd had experience with true possessions. No, instead, I was subjected to bloodletting, purging, and forced exercise until I'd had enough and slipped away in the night.

My mother had to accept that I'd never be her boy filled with sunshine again. Even now, understanding traumatic brain injuries and their effects on personalities, it doesn't matter. I'm a *strzyga* in my native tongue. A vampire with the blood of a true Child of the Night in my undead veins. The psychotic son she turned is who I'll be for eternity.

One thing that General Jurgis Demencius—Oberon Benoit did not steal from me that night was my love for my mother.

Glancing at my wrist watch, I bring my thoughts back to Wren and my task at hand. Wren accepts her second mojito and I mouth my tab at him as he pours another two fingers of Johnny Walker Black into my lowball.

“So, was your successful week the only reason why you haven't called me?” I murmur, watching her through half-lidded eyes. I don't bother hiding my smirk as her neck flushes, and her eyes dart a look at me before taking another fortifying drink.

I don't hide my appreciation and study of her body, and considering I have thirty minutes before her father is likely to show, I step up my efforts to throw her off-balance and catch her in my web.

“No,” Wren admits, appearing to weigh a decision from the hard set of her narrow shoulders. She turns her face towards me, only enough to meet my gaze. I want her, that much I know. I'd always planned on taking her to my bed, but feeling this level of desire and sensing its reciprocation sweetens my victory against Oberon.

Oh, how he will loathe me when I tell him how I had his precious daughter under me, begging for my cock and fangs.

I shift on the stool, my cock hard and straining against the fly of my slacks. Wren's eyes drop down to my lap, her mouth parting in surprise as I don't bother to hide from her.

Her pale green eyes meet mine, the black of her pupils allowing a glimpse of the coals of desire now burning bright. Her throat bobs as she swallows

and I linger over the flutter of her rapidly increasing heartbeat at her throat. Then it hits me. The sweet tang of her arousal, and my smirk turns into a wolfish grin.

She rolls her lips for a moment before twisting once again to fully face me, one hand resting on her thigh just before the split in her dress, the other tracing nonsensical swirls on the bar top. Her eyes are half-lidded as she stares boldly at me, confronting me and the desire between us.

“I almost called you,” she says, her song-like voice feathery and honeyed. “Twice, in fact.”

I reach out and capture one of the strawberry blonde curls caressing her shoulder, twirling it before rubbing the silken strands between my thumb and forefinger.

“What stopped you?”

Her hair fascinates me and I force myself to release the lock, though it wraps around my finger as I pull away, as if begging me to bury my hands in the strands and never let her go.

A shadow flies across her eyes, there for a fraction of a moment, but there nonetheless. She’s thinking about whatever made her hesitate and if I let her think too long, she’ll take wing and fly away. I drop my hand and hook two fingers under hers that rest on her thigh, the silk of her dress warm from her body heat.

“Why don’t we conduct a working interview?” I infuse my voice with sensual warmth and illicit promises, ensuring I’m quiet enough that only she can hear me. I never break her wide gaze, even as I stroke the back of her hand with my thumb just as I had her lip.

When her mouth lifts in a small smile, I know I have her.

“And when would we schedule this working interview?”

I lift my lowball with my free hand, bringing it in front of my mouth before answering. “What’s the saying? No time like the present?”

Her eyebrows shoot towards her hairline, and she looks at the crowded bar around us.

“Not here at the bar, of course,” I continue after taking a satisfying swallow of whisky.

“I can’t leave,” she says, chewing on the inside of her lower lip in consideration. Good, she isn’t willing to give up so easily. As I told her, she overcomes hurdles others would wilt before.

“Nor can I,” I reply and then drink the rest of my whisky with a speed

disrespectful to the vintage and flag the bartender down. He hurries over, ignoring the men and women still waiting for service. "I'll be back," I inform him and he nods while I stand. Out of habit, I button a single button on my black suit jacket before offering my hand to assist Wren.

She hesitates only for a moment before sliding her hand over mine and allowing me to help her stand. I drop her hand the moment she's steady, moving to press my palm against the warm evergreen silk at her lower back, a bit lower than decorum dictates. She doesn't seem to mind, though, when she looks at me as I guide her out of the bar and deeper into the restaurant.

"Where are we going?" she whispers, then looks around at the busy dining room. A few people look up at us as we pass, drinking either one or both of us in. No doubt we make an attractive couple.

Me with my Scandinavian looks and pale blond hair towering beside Wren, a woman who appears to be a seductive tree nymph pulled from Celtic lore, the crown of her head only a few inches shorter than mine courtesy of her tall heels.

"Trust me, Little Bird," I answer her and school my expression into one of bored aloofness. She says nothing and presses her small clutch to her stomach.

By the time we slip into the service hall off the kitchen entrance, her sweet arousal surrounds me and my fangs are elongated with the desire to sink deep into her and learn if she tastes as alluring as she smells.

Her heart is racing, and she struggles to control her breathing as we disappear down the hall. I turn a corner, glancing either direction to ensure we're alone. There is a security camera behind us at the junction, but with what I have planned, they won't see a thing.

"Landon—"

The way she says my name causes a visceral reaction in my viens. I crowd her against the plain white wall, trapping her there with only my nearness. I dip my head until my lips brush the shell of her ear.

"Wren," I breathe her voice, my fingers flexing at my sides as her hands fly up to press against my chest. She isn't pushing me away though.

"We'll be caught," she protests, nervously looking in the direction we came from.

"I won't let that happen," I promise her. It's true. I won't let anyone interrupt us. "Now, look at me, Wren."

I move my head back enough she can twist to face me, our mouths inches

from each other. Her gaze moves to mine, her tongue darting out to wet her lips.

“I imagine you’ll be gorgeous with my cock between those pretty lips of yours,” I tease, and she reacts exactly how I want. Her head slips back a few inches until it rests against the wall, and I hold her eyes. Already she is flushed and panting, eager to be debauched.

“But that will be later, if I pass this interview.” I tease the silk at her hips, barely brushing my fingertips over the fabric. “Say yes, Wren.”

She takes a deep breath and meets my gaze, bewildered but determined.

“Yes.”

Chapter Six

WREN

I say yes. Why do I say yes?

Captivated by Landon's eyes, in spite of the blue contact lenses, how can I have said anything else?

I want to blame the rum in the mojitos I drank quickly and on an empty stomach, since my mind is definitely looser than it was when I walked into the restaurant. I want to blame the fact that in less than twenty minutes, I'm expected to accept a proposal from a man my father's picked out, whom I don't particularly even like. Maybe it's Landon, his sheer presence dominating the space around him and making my knees weak. The weight of his entire focus bears down on me, making me grateful for the wall behind me since it's the only thing keeping me up right now.

He's watching me, his eyes full of heat, and it's like he's striking a match down my spine, the spark igniting as it reaches the bottom of my spine to set fire to the coals in my core.

He hasn't even touched me since backing me against the wall.

There are many reasons I can claim for why a shiver racks through me, fear and excitement wrapping together, but the one I shouldn't admit is that I simply want him to. He's my hidden, darkest fantasy come to life. A vampire who watches me with hunger and desire. My lips are dry. I dart my tongue out to wet them and his eyes snap to my mouth with the speed of a viper, obliterating my ability to breathe.

Will he kiss me?

His eyes lift to mine again as he pushes closer into my space. I brace, waiting for the pressure of his body against mine, pressing my palms flat against the smooth wall behind me, my clutch digging into my palm from my

grip. He stops before ever touching me. Not even a whisper of his suit against my dress. This close, I breathe him in. He's wearing a subtle cologne, something that reminds me of a warm fireplace on a dreary day. Wood and smoke and something spicy and masculine.

My nipples harden, aching with expectation and his control is only turning the levels of my fear higher...and my arousal even more so. He's aching close, close enough I can bridge the gap if I really want to, but my survival instinct keeps me firm against the wall.

A fingertip ghosts over the silk at my hip, slipping down and leaving a scalding path in its wake until it's finally against the bare skin of my thigh exposed by the natural slit of the wrap dress.

"I've found, in my experience, a slow approach with projects of this nature often leads to a more encompassing finish." Lan's voice is steady and professional, completely opposite of the lewd sensations he's coaxing from my leg. His hand is returning up my leg, but this time he slips under the fabric of my dress, his finger dancing towards my inner thigh. Unbidden, I shift to widen my stance and the corner of his mouth tilts up with approval. That look alone makes my body sing. "Do you have any established routines you require your... associates to follow? Or do you allow a certain level of freedom for the right candidate?"

I gulp and clear my throat gently before attempting to adopt the same unruffled tone Landon is using. "While I have my preferences," I begin, my voice more breathless than I'd like, "I also believe that freedom to—" the pad of his finger starts to trace my sex through the lace of my thong. I force myself to keep going, even as every brain cell wants to focus on that small, delicious point of contact between us. "Freedom to explore and experiment unlocks the potential for greater successes."

"I concur," he murmurs, his finger still taunting me through my panties, his eyes never leaving mine. With how hot I'm burning, I'm surprised my panties haven't gone up in flames. No previous lover has ever gotten me this wet, so quickly—and with so little effort. "I prefer to adjust my process to the environment and subject I'm working with. For example, with this interview, I think a more direct, unapologetic approach will be more than sufficient."

The moment the last word slips from his lips, he's pushing aside my thong and dragging his finger through my embarrassingly wet slit. A clatter echoes through the empty hall, and a part of me registers that I've dropped my clutch to better brace against the wall. I'm panting, still caught in Lan's

gaze while he adds another finger to his exploration.

“It’s much better,” he murmurs, “when the subject is eager to be worked with, don’t you think, Little Bird?”

“Of—of course,” I manage to stutter out, my nails digging into the wall behind me. All of my focus is honed in on his fingers stroking my folds, glancing over my entrance and stopping shy of my clit. If someone enters the hall right now, I don’t think I’d even notice. I haven’t entirely lost myself though. “Especially when there are time constraints.”

“So true,” he agrees. He doesn’t kiss me or move any closer. My small breasts ache, my nipples tight enough to be visible through my bra and dress, eager and wanton. All he does, though, is continue to hold my gaze as his fingers circle and tease my entrance, coating themselves with my slick. “This isn’t a project to linger over, not right now. Fortunately, I perform well under pressure.”

He glides his fingers up, finally circling my clit. He toys with me, alternating pressure and strokes, observing every detail of my response. His focus is intimidating, as if he’s memorizing every single time I gasp, or when I bite my lip, or, like when he slides those two fingers into my channel and curls them against the front of my core, how a muffled whimper escapes me.

It’s been minutes and this vampire has me racing towards orgasm, touching me as if he knows my body better than I do. If I wasn’t becoming desperate to come, I’d be embarrassed. He pumps his fingers, curling and pressing against my G-spot, his eyes refusing to let mine look away. My hips rock forward, moving with his hand as I try to fuck myself on his hand. I curl my toes, tensing my legs; my orgasm is just out of reach, and so, so close.

Lan’s eyes spark, the hue of red showing through the blue contacts, bypassing indigo entirely to remind me that it’s no simple man commanding my body. This is a vampire, a dangerous creature girls like me have always been warned about. A creature I’ve craved since I first saw one feed.

Will Lan feed from me?

The thought alone nearly catapults me into orgasm and I’m whimpering behind my lips, biting hard to keep from being discovered. My eyes drift lower, too overwhelmed to watch.

“No,” comes his gruff order and my eyes snap back open. His cheeks are flushed, his mouth pressed firmly shut as he watches me. “Keep your eyes on mine, Little Bird. Can you do that for me?”

I nod, at least I think I do, and I don’t let my eyes close again.

“Good,” he bites out the word and then his fingers are gone from me.

Deprived of my orgasm, I want to shout, but his other hand is under my dress and then he’s tugging my thong down until it’s stretched tight above my knees. He pushes his fingers into my pussy without ceremony and I gasp at the stretch. He’s using his middle fingers, his pinky and index fingers on the outside of my folds, the heel of his palm now grinding against my engorged clit.

I shake my head, never breaking eye contact but unable to handle the intensity. I’m so, so close again, as I rut against his fingers as he’s ruthlessly pumping into me.

“Please,” I try to say, begging for something. In the past, I’d have already come by now but somehow I’m teetering on the edge, riding the tightrope and desperate for something to push me over the edge. Something to force me to let go.

A dark, almost sinister gleam makes the red of his gaze more violent, more alluring. His other hand grips my left thigh, the skirt of my dress rucked up without care, exposing me to him. His fingers dig into my flesh, his thumb so close to my sex he’s abusing. His fingers within me curl hard.

Sharp pain lances through me under his thumb and for a split second, it’s all I can feel. Then I’m shot from the edge into a mind-whitening orgasm, the pain and pleasure mixing together so thoroughly my body writhes against the wall, held in place by his hand gripping my sex.

Landon eases me through it, hot pride and approval in his eyes, making my channel squeeze and clutch his fingers as they slow their maddening strokes. My ears ring in the quiet of the hall, the only other sounds are my breathing and the wet sounds of his hand over my folds.

“Such a good little bird,” he murmurs as he slips his fingers from me, and my chest flushes. I’m panting, breathing like I’ve just ran a marathon, and rather than exhaustion, I’m buzzing with energy, already eager for more explosive pleasure. He raises the hand he used between us, his fingers coated in my arousal. My cheeks burn as he smells his hand, humming with the appreciation of a connoisseur. When he rubs my lower lip with his middle and ring finger, my eyes widen.

“Open.” Landon’s voice is a dichotomy of authority and warmth, and I’m unable to disobey. The moment my lips part, he’s pressing his fingers into my mouth, his eyes desperate and hungry. Without prompting, I suck and lick his fingers clean, not minding the musky tang of my slick so long as it means I

get to wrap my tongue around his long fingers, half-wishing they were his cock instead. His fingers fill my mouth, bordering on uncomfortable. There's absolutely no reason why I should be letting this vampire, this stranger, do this to me, especially in such a public place.

Caught in his attention, though, I've never experienced this feeling of freedom. Later, I'll scold myself for this inexplicable display of trust.

Lan blinks, long and slowly, before his eyes dart to the side. He removes his fingers and I'm strangely bereft at the loss. Mind still electrified, I watch in a daze as he crouches before me, his fingers nimbly pulling my pink lace thong down to my ankles.

He taps one ankle in silent command, and I raise my foot, then the other, as he slips off the scrap of a garment. Then he scoops up my clutch where it'd slid after I dropped it and rises, holding it out to me. I take it, only now realizing how my hand shakes. When I grasp it with both hands, Lan rights the skirt of my dress before stepping back, a moment before a woman dressed in all black and wearing a waist apron turns the corner.

Righting myself from the wall, Lan's hands have slipped into his pockets and he's wearing an arrogant smirk.

"Excuse me, this area is for employees only," she says, her expression cautious. I don't blame her. Most patrons of Alder have more money than they know what to do with, and while she has to do her job, she knows the consequences of offending us could mean losing her job. Lan turns towards her, his eyes glinting with charm as I'm still trying to catch my breath.

"Apologies." His voice oozes contrition. "She needed a moment to compose herself. We were just returning to the dining room."

The woman has no chance against Landon's charm and blushes at his sly cock of the head and sheepish grin. I'm struggling to keep my jaw from dropping as the man who gave me the best orgasm of my life moments ago now looks like an innocent little boy who wouldn't dream of breaking any rules. He looks at me and offers his arm.

"Let's head back and not delay this young woman anymore," he said.

I slip my arm through his, hand landing on his bicep which I squeeze in admonishment. Like him, though, I keep a pleasant smile on my face. Being caught in a hallway by a staff member isn't something that should send my pulse racing. If she'd arrived even a minute earlier, though. Giving no sign of the cartwheels my stomach is currently performing, I direct my polite society smile to both of them.

“Thank you,” I say. “I’m feeling much better now.”

Lan escorts me, and when we are near the woman, she steps aside and he pauses. He slips his wallet out and takes out a crisp hundred-dollar bill and extends it to the woman. Her eyes shoot up to her hairline, but she accepts the money.

“For your discretion,” Lan explains. His expression is still charming, but his eyes are sharper and there’s a clear edge to his words.

Her blush disappears, her cheeks paling two shades lighter. She clearly understands his meaning. “Of course,” she answers and he lets go of the money. He pays her no more attention as he prompts me forward. As we approach the dining area, the din of a busy restaurant replaces the silence of the hall. My thighs are slick and I stop abruptly. Lan sends me a questioning look as I yank my arm away.

Darting my gaze around to ensure no one is close, I lean in. “You took my underwear,” I whisper harshly.

The corner of his mouth lifts into a smirk and my heart turns into a hummingbird. The look in Lan’s eyes both scares and excites me.

“Think of them as collateral,” he says, not bothering to keep his voice low. “If you want them returned, you’ll need to schedule a second interview with me. Unless, of course, I failed to meet your expectations earlier.”

I gape at him; clearly, between the two mojitos on an empty stomach and then an illicit and mind-shattering orgasm, my PhD capable brain has melted. I can’t even manage to sputter, and worse, Landon seems to know that. His smile turns arrogant and he freaking winks at me before walking away, disappearing around the doorway into the bar.

Irritation slams through me, and my mind is perfectly clear now that I can’t shout at him. The audacity of that man. It’s as if the moment he’s out of sight, I’m myself again and can string more than two sentences together.

“There you are.”

My blood freezes as my father’s familiar baritone tinged with disapproval draws my gaze further down the hall. His expression is neutral, but there’s a storm in his eyes as he strides towards me, Miles a step behind to his side.

Shit

I smile and force every muscle to relax as I walk towards the men with my chin up but shoulders soft. It won’t do me any good to reveal any of the chaos swirling within me, stirred up by a vampire of all creatures.

“You are early,” he states as we close the distance. “I expected you to be

at the house so we could settle this business between you and Miles.”

My heart drops through the floor, and I look past my father to Miles. Right. He’s supposed to propose to me.

I’m not wearing any panties.

And I just had the best orgasm of my life less than five minutes ago.

My smile is forced, but if either man notices, they don’t seem to care. My father steps to the side and gestures towards Miles, clearly indicating we are to get on with it.

Miles really isn’t an unattractive man. He’s nearly as tall as Landon and built similarly. Except, looking at him now, I can’t help but find him wanting. Like my father, Miles wears tailored, expensive suits. His jacket is a charcoal gray, his slacks a matching color, and he wears a pale gray button-down. Everything about him screams corporate management, down to his black oxfords and platinum Rolex. His brown hair is slicked back, and tastefully short, and his brown eyes are inviting. He carries himself with the confidence of knowing his place in the world... and the expectation that others will bow to him.

He’s one of Newgate’s most eligible bachelors and one of the last men I’d ever want to marry. He’s a sycophant of my father, someone who alters his personality based on those around him. There’s no drive in his soul or spark in his eyes.

He’s boring.

Perfect for my father to mold into his own creation.

Miles steps forward, an award-winning smile showing his perfect teeth, and retrieves a ring box from his pocket. He stops a polite distance away, nowhere close enough to suggest enough of an intimacy between us that a couple should have. To his credit, he doesn’t look at my father as he opens the ring box, keeping his attention entirely on me. The ring is ostentatious, a large round cut diamond that’s at least three carats, set on a thin platinum band.

It’ll be impossible to wear while playing my cello.

“I know this is unconventional, Wren,” he begins, his tenor voice inspiring nothing within me. “However, I can say from the years I’ve been acquainted with you that we will suit each other in marriage. I look forward to growing closer to you and continuing your father’s legacy through a family of our own.”

I’m quiet, waiting for him to actually ask me to marry him. As the silence

stretches out, Miles' expression hints at uncertainty and he steals a look at my father. Oberon clears his throat pointedly. I realize then that the question isn't coming. Gritting my teeth, I hold my left hand out flat, splaying my fingers enough that Miles can slip the ring on.

He does so with the same smile he wears after signing a contract he negotiated in his favor, and while I'm fixated on the ring, which dwarfs my narrow finger, he steps forward and presses his dry lips to my cheek. Out of instinct, I jerk back from him, not expecting any physical affection from him. His brows narrow, and I clear my throat and smile at him apologetically.

"You took me by surprise is all," I say, adopting the serene voice I use when speaking to peers. I glance down at the ring again. "It's lovely. Thank you."

Satisfied by my explanation, Miles turns beside me and takes my arm and threads it through his before patting my hand. "We'll get used to each other easily enough, I'm sure." His eyes drop to my low neckline before winking at me. My stomach curdles at the slight leer from him. My father saves me from needing to make any response.

"Good," he says with a clap of his hands. "Wren, you'll be hearing from the wedding planner in the morning. Until then, we're running late."

He turns, practically marching back towards the restaurant like a general leading us into war. Like a good little soldier, Miles follows on his heels, tugging me along with no care for the height of my heels or my considerably shorter stride. I don't mind as much as I should, since focusing on keeping pace lets me ignore how my thighs are still slick from another man pleasuring me. I don't think about the heavy weight on my left hand, the one Miles has placed on his arm to ensure the clear display of the engagement ring. I don't think about how the last thing I want to do is to sit through a business dinner where I'll be limited to salads or low-carb entrees.

"Ah, Mr. Polastri."

I look up as my father greets the man we're having dinner with. His back is to us as he rises and when he turns towards us, his hand out to grasp my father's in a firm handshake, I'm ready to run the hell out of there.

"You know my associate, Miles Wright," Oberon says as they both turn towards us. Miles releases me to shake the man's hand, and then my father gestures to me. "This is his fiancé, and my daughter, Wren."

Polite manners ingrained for years in me has me mechanically smiling and accepting the handshake as I meet blue eyes, glinting with

mischievousness.

“What a pleasure to meet you,” Landon purrs as he grasps my hand with the very one he’d fucked me with.

Chapter Seven

LAN

She's engaged. I imagine the proposal was very recent given that the tasteless boulder of a ring wasn't weighing her down when I had my fingers in her hot channel earlier, nor would it have fit in her clutch without an unsightly bulge. Based on how responsive Wren is to me, blushing each time I make eye contact with her across the table, and how little she engages with Miles, it's certainly not a love match.

Oberon doesn't realize what a perfect opportunity he's creating for me in his daughter.

"Now, Mr. Polastri—"

"Call me Landon, I insist," I interrupt Oberon, watching him closely. I've never taken a new name and served under him as Landon Polastri. If he recognizes my name, he hides it well. I've pushed my plate aside, ignoring it in favor of discussing a so-called business deal with Oberon. Miles is little more than a puppet, agreeing with Oberon and never offering an opinion unless I directly ask for it. He's even wearing a near identical outfit to Oberon, though Oberon wears the charcoal suit better.

"Landon," he agrees, his dark brows raising in acceptance. "I prefer to be direct in my dealings. I've found anyone worth doing business with is willing to face confrontation and doesn't mind a direct approach."

He sits in the dining chair, his forearms resting wide apart on the table, his palms flat, lording over us like the war general I know him as. In defiance of him, I lean back comfortably in my chair, one hand curled loosely around my glass of whisky, the other in my slacks pocket toying with the lacy thong I'd stolen from his daughter. My cock has been at half-mast the entire dinner, and my easy grin has nothing to do with being in the presence of the great

Oberon Benoit.

“Then by all means,” I say, keeping my gaze on him. His heartbeat is steady, but it’s the quick one across from me that is trying to demand my attention. It’s almost irritating, how much effort it’s taking to not look over at Wren and memorize her. To not imagine how her heart will race as I drag the tip of a blade over her unblemished skin.

When I’d had her on the precipice of orgasm earlier, I’d given her a taste of my own depravities. I’d used my vampiric strength to cut her inner thigh with my thumbnail.

I craved her pain, and I’d almost come in my pants when it had sent her over the edge. Her pussy clamped down on my fingers so brutally, her face contorting in beautiful pleasure.

Wren is dangerous.

It makes me want her even more.

Fortunately, I want her father dead more than her.

“As we discussed over emails, I’m looking to expand into different industries. A passion of mine, shared by my late wife, is collecting relics from ancient civilizations. I have an impressive collection already, and I’m nearly ready to open the studio. If you, as you claim, can provide information on where the Dark Helm is, and facilitate the sale, it will be the centerpiece of my collection when the doors open.”

The Dark Helm, the helm which allowed Hades to become invisible to even the Titans. I know exactly where it is, just as I know demons within the motorcycle club will never part with it. They have named themselves the Knights of Hades, after all. If a man like Oberon found himself in possession of such a powerful item, he’d never sell it. He knows how much magic is in the real world, unlike many human billionaires with too much money to spend and a penchant for old things. No, he’d be about as willing to sell the Dark Helm as he would the obsidian chalice that’s kept him alive these last four centuries.

“I have a contact with a verified account of its location,” I answer smoothly. “As well as interested buyers for what may be in your current collection. As we are speaking plainly, I must insist on viewing your collection to validate the authenticity. I cannot risk doing business with someone who has potential replicas, I’m sure you understand. Even one replica could destroy my reputation as a negotiator.”

Oberon studies me, a hard look in his dark eyes as he realizes I am not

someone who will bow to his name and wealth.

“Trust, but verify,” Miles speaks up, drawing the gazes of the table. He’s looking at me with mild approval, like his opinion matters.

Wren is sipping her water and as she places it back on the table, he reaches for her hand. She isn’t quick enough to hide the miniscule flinch as he wraps his hand around her fingers. She doesn’t pull away, letting him grope her hand and the bulbous ring on her finger. Her eyes flick up to meet mine, and she drops them, pink coloring her cheeks under her freckles.

I want to rip his hand from his arm and shove it down his throat.

Ignoring the impulse to protect Wren, I force my attention to the puppet.

“Exactly,” I confirm politely. Turning back to Oberon, I have to hide a smirk as inspiration comes. “I’ve no doubt you’re a busy man. No doubt your daughter is familiar with your collection. Maybe if she can find the time between all the wedding planning, she can show me around?”

Wren’s eyes go wide before she quickly masters her expression. Oberon smiles, as if he’d been the one to suggest it.

“What a brilliant idea,” he practically booms, drawing attention from other tables. I hold back from rolling my eyes at his need for attention. He looks at Wren, true affection in his eyes. It’s bitter, being reminded that a man I loathe with my entire being is human. It’s a cruel joke that the man can feel love for another when he is the reason I cannot.

“Tuesday, late morning, will be an opportune time, Wren,” he tells her.

Her brows lower a fraction, and her eyes dart to me and then back to her father.

“Tuesday is when we expect the hydro—”

“No matter,” Oberon interrupts her, waving away her protest. “This takes precedence, child. You know how much I appreciate it.”

I clench my jaw as her shoulders wilt, despite the pleasant smile on her face. I remind myself that it only makes my goals more attainable if she’s broken.

Except I want to be the only one to break her.

“Of course, Father,” Wren says, her voice supplicating and the insincere tone I heard her use after her cello performance. She pulls her hand away from Miles, and this time he lets her go, and she opens her clutch. Seeing her pull out a business card, I retrieve my own wallet. Knowing she has a card already only makes it more satisfying when I offer her another one across the table.

“My number,” I say, holding her gaze, letting the smallest smirk twist my lips when her brows drop with disapproval. “I’ll take yours as well, in case you forget...between all the wedding planning, of course.”

Her smile is tight as she takes the card, a twin to the one she already possesses, and offers me one of hers in turn. I take it, letting my fingers brush hers in spite of her holding it by the tip of the far corner.

Like her, her card is crisp and professional when I glance at it. Printed on the expensive white stock is her name, title with Benoit Tech, and her contact information. I tuck it into my wallet, amused that her business card matches her perfectly. It reveals only what is expected, a mask I’m growing more determined to remove.

“I’ll be sure to call you when the arrangements are made,” she answers primly before hiding behind another sip of water. To my amusement, she’s hardly touched her glass of wine Oberon ordered for her.

“Well, gentlemen, lady,” I say, rising. “With that concluded, I’m afraid I must depart early. More business, you understand.” Oberon and Miles nod, and Wren avoids looking at me entirely. “Please, enjoy dessert. I’ve already seen to the meal.”

With a nod to Oberon, I stalk away from the table. My neck prickles, and its heat means it can only be Wren watching me leave. I slide my hand into my front pocket, gripping the soft lace of her thong.

I’m grinning as I stride from the restaurant and to the waiting black town car. Opening the passenger door, I slide in, and Ashe is pulling away the moment the door closes.

“So?” the vampire asks, his eyes on the road ahead of us.

Ashe is the Nightshade’s runner, our transporter, so to speak. Even when he was human, he was appreciated for his ability to deliver messages or packages, no matter the obstacles he faced. Be it war, extreme weather, or terrain thought impossible, Ashe was able to overcome. Becoming a vampire has only increased his skill and he’s made it a point to master the modern transportations of each century he’s lived through.

I pull out my phone, pulling up my contact for Wren. I already have her phone number and personal email, not that she’s aware of that. Creating a new text message, I send her:

I look forward to Tuesday, Little Bird.

Message sent, I return the phone to my pocket and then retrieve the tablet I know is in the console before answering Ashe. Using the thumbprint and

facial recognition, it unlocks for me and I find the surveillance app.

“I’ve secured an invitation to look at the other relics currently in his possession,” I say, half-distracted as I flip through camera feeds surrounding Alder until I find a view of Wren. I should focus on Oberon beside her, but she’s a magnet and I’m simply the needle that must always find her. “I doubt he will have the obsidian chalice on display, but his hubris is enough it’s possible. Has our contact in city planning sent the blueprint of his building yet?”

Ashe turns left, driving us towards the easternmost bridge that’ll take us into the Barrows. “It arrived while you were at dinner. I uploaded it to the network and into your files.” I sense his gaze and studiously ignore it as I dismiss the security app and navigate to the right folder to view the file. “So, you’re set on stealing it?”

I hum noncommittally as I scan the PDFs, displaying each floor of the high-rise building Oberon lives in. He occupies the penthouse, which is made up of three entire floors and a rooftop garden. I find it curious that Wren, despite her shackles to her father, lives in a separate smaller building a mile away. From the time I’ve spent observing her, it’s clear she wants to break free from her father but, at the same time, longs for his approval.

“From what I’ve learned, he only needs to use the chalice every twenty or thirty years,” I say, ignoring Ashe’s original question. “He’ll keep it close, though.” My eyes narrow as I see the plans for a fortified room on his level. I zoom in. “He has a panic room on the second floor of his penthouse, but there was an addition to it just before he moved in, according to the notes here. It’s the right dimensions for a safe.”

“That’ll be where he keeps it,” Ashe surmises and I agree. The panic room was expanded, ensuring the installation of the safe without losing space in the panic room. Rather than be set into the walls, an alcove was built into which the safe was then installed. Meaning it wouldn’t be any easier to get to the safe through the back wall, even with my enhanced strength. “Are the specs noted?”

A quick scan through the footnotes disappoints me. “No, but I can hack into the security of the building and find a backdoor into Oberon’s personal security. Even if it’s on a separate network, I should be able to learn what I need. How’s our dear sire and his human this evening?” I switch topics abruptly and return the tablet to the console compartment.

“You should speak of Eloise with more respect. She will be our queen

one day.” There’s a faint warning in Ashe’s voice and I roll my eyes. Eloise appears to have wrapped every Nightshade vampire within Ambrose’s so-called inner circle around her tiny mortal finger. Even my mother adores the young human, spending a ridiculous amount of time with her and Kasar’s mate, Deidre. I understand that as vampires, we have the potential to find mates, but it seems to be catching and it’s something I have no taste for.

Between Ambrose and Kasar and then Ashe’s entire thing with Eris possessing the body of his witch mate, Cassandra, it’s enough to reinforce my distaste for lasting relationships. It’s bad enough when a submissive grows too close and believes they will be the one to finally claim my so-called heart. Their tears are the most exhausting part when it all unravels. It gives me no pleasure when their own beliefs and mistakes make them cry.

I’m always explicitly clear. Any sexual partners I play with stays just that—sexual and detached. It’s not that I don’t care for those who kneel for me, I do in my own, albeit unhealthy, way. I take care of them like a favored toy because that’s what they’ll always be. It’s when they convince themselves there is an emotional attachment that I set them aside.

It’s the reason I haven’t had a regular sub for over a year. Not since I’ve begun investigating Wren and how I can use her to get to Oberon.

“I have no issue with the girl,” I brush off Ashe’s chiding. “My issue is with how obsessed Ambrose is with her. He has grown lax in his control of the clan, delegating too much out to us and foot soldiers.”

Ashe snorts and gestures to the buildings around us with a hand, since we’re now driving through the Barrows. The sidewalks are gilded from the rain, with splashes of bright neon colors painting the street and pedestrians scurrying along. “Yes, because the Barrows is clearly struggling,” he drawls sarcastically, before raising a brow at me as we pull to a stop at a red light. “It’s called living, Lan. Ambrose isn’t growing lax. If anything, Eloise at his side has made him a better leader for the Nightshades and the Barrows. She balances him, like a mate should.”

“How is Cassandra these days?” A snarl rips through the air, and I smirk at Ashe’s anger before tutting. “Always so easy to rile. I assume Eris still shows no signs of vacating your mate’s body? Maybe you should just fuck the demon. I’m sure if you close your eyes—”

Sharp pain blasts through my jaw before my head collides with the passenger window. Laughing, I rub my jaw. “You could have done far worse.”

Ice ripples from Ashe beside me and he very pointedly presses a button on the steering wheel and my door unlocks. He's glaring straight ahead, his cheeks flushed with anger. "Get out."

Not bothering to respond, I do. I haven't even closed the door all the way before the tires are screeching as he takes off, zooming into the evening traffic. I shake my head. Some pedestrians watch with surprise, then look back at me in curiosity. I may still be wearing the blue contacts, but plenty of those around me are supernaturals and recognize me for what I am. They quickly find something else to hold their interest, giving me a wide berth as I begin to walk, ignoring the smattering of rain. Absently, I remove the colored contact lenses, blinking with relief.

Ashe is too predictable when it comes to his pressure points. His conflict with the chaos demon Eris possessing Cassandra has lasted long enough, nearly one hundred and fifty years, that he should have mastered his emotions already. Instead, the vampire wears his heart on his sleeve, following Eris around like a lost puppy pretending to be a sentinel all in hopes that he'll get his wife back one day. His assault in the car was minor compared to the time, roughly six months after Cassandra summoned Eris on the Nightshade's behalf, I suggested he consider Cassandra dead and rid the world of Eris by beheading her. I even offered to do it, if he couldn't bring himself to do it.

I spent a fucking week in bed recovering from his attack. The only reason why Ashe hadn't killed me is because we are forbidden from killing fellow Nightshades without express permission from Ambrose. Joséphine had reprimanded me, informing me that I'd crossed the line far enough Ambrose had considered not ordering Kasar to step in.

Fucking cowards. I know my so-called clan cares little for me, and I have the same level of affection for them. I've considered exiling myself voluntarily if I knew I could still visit my mother. Unfortunately, Ambrose has shown how thorough his exiles are. Ezra, the one Nightshade I felt closest to, was banished fifty years ago. By dawn, it was as if the vampire demon had never existed. He'd broken the one rule Ambrose gave him when he'd joined the Nightshades: to never claim a mortal's soul.

A demon cannot deny its nature just as a vampire cannot deny ours.

Losing Ezra hit the Nightshades hard, but Ambrose couldn't let the transgression slide. Not when a horde of demons had been pushing back against the king. Would Ambrose have made the same call if it happened today, now that he was mated to Eloise? Ezra claimed the soul was freely

given to him, but he'd refused to say who.

Whether or not I'm right in my belief that Ambrose is growing lax, it doesn't change the fact that I have to tread carefully around him and my true intentions with Oberon.

A familiar scent has me navigating the streets deeper into the Barrows, becoming more crowded as I approach my destination. Most of the inner circle prefer Noir, but me? I have more deviant tastes. Lush, the Nightshade-owned sex dungeon, is my favored hunting grounds. In fact, I have a majority role in ownership in the business, much to the annoyance of some of my fellow vampires. Not that they complain when they're looking for something rougher than their norm.

I stroll past the line at the entrance, already spanning half the block despite it not being even nine. There are quite a few I recognize as regulars, some I've played with and some I haven't. My tastes run to the sadistic, so not all of the pretty submissives who look at me with awe will suit. Near the front, though, is a slender woman nearly the same height as Wren. When she looks at me, her eyes are brown instead of green, and her hair is an unnatural fire-truck red. Close enough, though, and she's obviously alone.

Daniel, the demon who is working the front door this evening, unhooks the rope to let me pass, and I hold up a hand. I stop in front of the woman, raising a brow. She meets my eyes, before lowering them, and a slow smirk twists my lips.

"Do you enjoy the cane?"

Her grin is anything but properly submissive, but she answers in a polite tone. "Yes, sir."

"You'll do, then." I gesture for her to step out of line and she does, her heartbeat picking up. The scent of her lust and fear prickles my nose and it... does nothing to me. Snarling at myself, others waiting to get in take a step away from me as I stalk forward, gripping the woman by the back of the neck and making her walk faster. As Daniel secures the rope behind us, I bury my other hand in my pocket, fisting Wren's underwear before wrenching my hand back out.

This woman will be enough tonight. I'll fucking make sure of it.

Chapter Eight

WREN

Pacing always seems to help people in movies but all it's doing is cranking up my nerves. In twelve minutes, Landon will be walking through the door of my father's specially curated antiques and curiosities gallery. I'd been confused by it when he first announced his decision to open it a year ago, since it has no connection to his Benoit corporation. My father has always been an avid collector, filling our home with ancient pieces of history from civilizations lost to time. Before now, he's always preferred to invite people to our home in order to see these pieces. And his intentions to sell some of the pieces? No, this place is entirely unlike my father.

Checking the time on my watch, I consider running to the bathroom. I don't necessarily need to, but I feel like I should splash water on my face or something. Anything to compose myself better. Lan had texted me directly following his departure from dinner, and I hadn't been able to reply until the following day. Even then, all I could say was a time for him to arrive. What I really wanted to ask was who the hell does he think he is and where was my thong?

When I'd realized Lan was the man we were meeting for dinner, I momentarily considered faking a heart attack or some other medical emergency. Anything to get me out of there. I still don't know if enduring that dinner was easier than the consequences of ruining it in my father's eyes.

"You are a grown-ass woman," I tell myself as I stop near the middle of the showroom and put my hands on my hips. Reminding myself of the fact doesn't completely ease my nerves, but that and a deep breath has me better prepared. Adults who have had illicit . . . assignments do business with each

other all the time after. It's not like he's going to waltz in here and push up my dress again. I'm wearing pants, anyway.

Landon might not be on a directors board, but I dressed as if he were anyways. Clothing is a woman's armor, especially in a field dominated by men. I settled on my tailored heather gray three-piece suit and sky-blue silk blouse. I've kept my accessories to a minimum, wearing my mother's earrings and the delicate chain watch my father gave me when I graduated high school. Recalling how tall Landon is, I forewent my flats and opted for my "man-killer" heels, as Niamh dubbed them—my four-inch Christian Louboutin black leather pumps with the famed red soles. Sometimes a girl just needs to feel like a femme fatale.

With Landon, I know I need every edge I can get.

The only thing I relented with is my hair, leaving my strawberry blonde curls to fall down in a riot around my shoulders. A couple of bobby pins manage to keep it out of my face.

There's only five minutes until he should be walking through the door and now I wish my father hadn't ordered the windows papered to prevent pedestrians from seeing in before the grand opening.

It's necessary, of course, for security reasons as well as PR. Many people have strolled past the building, located centrally in the most popular high art district in Newgate. Across the street from us is the only other studio on this street with a primary artist, though my father isn't necessarily an artist. The Steele Gallery is run by a proprietor by the name of Elizabeth Juerta, and I liked her the instant I met her when my father and I first explored the district. The gallery features awe inspiring metal sculptures, some as finely delicate as sugar work and others as intimidating as a full-size rendition of Venus de Milo, so perfectly rendered in stainless steel that it boggles the mind it was done with a welding tool. When I inquired about the artist, Elizabeth gave me a secretive grin and told me that Mr. Steele never appears at the studio and in fact lives outside of the city itself. If anyone is interested in a piece, she is the only contact for the man. My father made some amused quip about artists and their eccentricities. The smallest frown marred Elizabeth's brow before she smoothed it away, agreeing noncommittally. I noticed, even if my father did not. Later, when I'd returned to look at the pieces for greater inspection, not shocked at all at the five-figure price tags on most, I gathered enough from Elizabeth's and my conversation that she was protective over her artist. To my great delight and surprise, Mr. Steele also created subtle pieces of those

who live in the Barrows; shifters, fae, and vampires had featured in his pieces.

My favorite, the one I long to buy, is one Elizabeth showed me in the back. She's preparing for a paranormal event, revealing that despite Newgate's disdain for the Barrows, the pieces featuring supernatural creatures are bought nearly as quickly as they are displayed.

No doubt the one that captured me under its spell will be bought as quickly. A massive sculpture of seduction, inspired by Hades and Persephone. Hades, in this case, is a domineering vampire, his head dipped down towards his Persephone, a human woman, and his fangs bared. Rather than depict the woman in fear, he'd sculpted the woman in a pose and expression of willing submission. She clutches him, even as he looms over her, promising to fill her world with darkness.

She looks how I felt when Lan crowded me against that wall, his eyes full of wicked promises.

A tall figure stops in front of the door, and thanks to the one-way tint, I have the brief advantage of seeing Lan before he sees me. Unless, I realize, his vision is strong enough to see through it. Squaring my shoulders and reminding myself I am a professional with incredible accomplishments under my belt, I pull on the same confident persona I use in any meeting with my peers. The gallery is wider than it is long, and the center is still clear of podiums, the relics currently on display organized around the outside of the room and walls. My father wants the Dark Helm to be the central piece of his opening. It takes me all of thirty seconds to make it to the door, and while I walk, I pull out the key ring and select the front door key. My hand quivers but I slide it in on the first go. A moment later, I'm pushing open the door as he takes a step back.

He's wearing a pitch-black three-piece suit that seems to absorb the light, with a crisp white shirt with the collar unbuttoned, foregoing a tie completely. If I have to guess, I'd say it's Armani. With his tall and lean Scandinavian figure, his extremely kissable jaw, and perfectly tousled back wheat blond hair, words escape me for a long moment.

Landon Polastri is beautiful in the same way as a blue-ringed octopus—fatally.

Like Persephone, though, I long for his darkness.

My eyes find his, his right brow arched in quiet amusement, and like the pub, I don't seem to have control over myself.

“You’re wearing contacts again.” My cheeks burn and I try to recover, gesturing inside with my other hand. “Please, come in.”

“Thank you,” Landon’s voice is distant, but it still washes over me. When he steps past me, the draft carries a scent of crisp snow, a touch of balsam, and something else that makes me think of cozy nights by the fire in winter.

I pull the door closed behind him, locking it again before pocketing the keys. Still not used to the engagement ring, it catches on my pocket and I mutter a curse.

“Did I congratulate you on your upcoming nuptials?” He asks sardonically, and I shoot a glare at him.

“It’s unnecessary,” I dismiss it and gesture to the open floor gallery. “Welcome to Demencius Antiquities.”

Lan stiffens when I announce the name, something we’ve kept secret despite all media inquiries. Money goes a long way to keep even public records private. I wait a beat but when he says nothing, I begin the introduction I’ve given multiple times.

“My father has always collected pieces of great historical value, to the consternation of many museums. He has traveled much of his life and collected pieces while doing so. Before, we kept each piece in our home in a specially designed room. Just as we had there, we’ve installed the best technology to control the environment within the gallery.”

I begin to walk to the right, at a stately pace that allows Lan plenty of time to study each display briefly. With heavy dictation from my father, the curator has positioned the relics in a way that allows the viewers to explore a specific type of item at a time. It begins with less consequential items, stones or plates etched in archaic symbols depicting messages to tradesmen, or simple pottery whose only note is the age and remarkable preservation. On the left side, the relics are similar. Then as we walk further into the gallery, more impressive pieces are on display: reed parchments, books, plates and vases, and then weapons.

“As you can see, each piece is in a case. Each one is environmentally controlled, specific to the requirements best suited to each piece’s preservation. Benoit Tech Corp has pioneered the protective technology that allows us to display items sensitive to light, such as our collection of Persian scrolls, without harming or risking degradation.”

Lan looks at me, his head tilting to the side. “From what I recall, it was your team heading the design. You were one of the main creators, right?”

Something warm washes through me at the smile he gives me, and I have to swallow before I can answer. “Yes, I was. It was the last project I worked directly on before I was promoted to my senior director role. I’m rather proud of it.”

He steps closer than is appropriate and I can’t bring myself to step away. A warm light is in his eyes, the same one he’d had when he told me how proud I should be of my accomplishments. He’s almost as close as we were in the hallways and my sex pulses, arousal hitting me hard.

“You should be,” he says, his voice thick and low, his eyes taking me in. It’s like he’s trying to strip me bare, to take me apart layer by layer until he sees the very essence of me. My heart flutters in my throat and my breaths grow shallow as he holds me there with his gaze alone. In spite of all my layers, I feel utterly naked. His eyes linger on my lips, long enough I end up rolling my lower lip in a fraction, wondering if he is about to kiss me. Do I want him to kiss me? Then he meets my gaze again, and instead of pride in his eyes, there’s no mistaking the desire burning there. “As I said—” I hold my breath as he raises a hand to capture an errant curl and rub it between two fingers, “—you’re a good girl.”

I sway, more aroused by him touching a single curl of hair than any of my previous lovers ever. When he releases the curl and drags his knuckle under my jaw, I sink into him enough I have to catch myself, my hands coming to grip his waist. I’m still completely hypnotized by his gentle words and caresses. He tilts my chin up with his knuckle.

“Do you want him?” His voice is hard, his brow narrowed.

I blink rapidly, confused by who he means. “Who?” I ask, my voice hoarse and dry.

“Your fiancé.”

Oh. Right. I’m engaged. I shake my head slowly, my eyes never leaving his. “It’s an agreement between him and my father,” I explain, and I can’t prevent the bitterness from slipping into the words. “I never even thought of him as a friend. Technically, we’re engaged, but I can’t think of us as in a relationship.”

Lan’s thumb comes up to hover over my lip and a wanton part of me wants to suck it into my throat and see if I can make him feel as good as he made me. The world around us has once again disappeared, narrowing down until even the fortune of ancient relics surrounding us are nothing more than pieces of paper, clay, and trinkets with gems. It’s as if this vampire can order

reality to change, that he's powerful enough to command the very air I breathe.

"You know, when I was your age, a formal agreement between a father and the groom was enough."

That pulls a smile from me. "It's a good thing this is the modern world then," I whisper.

He huffs out a quiet snort of amusement, and it's ridiculous how happy it makes me to have made him laugh, even the smallest amount. He angles his head and begins to close the distance between our lips, watching me through half-lidded eyes.

I jerk. "Wait," I protest and he halts immediately, a shuttered look in his eyes.

Landon doesn't pull away, but he doesn't push any further. He's perfectly still, waiting for an explanation. My stomach flips as nerves make my spine tingle and my cheeks flush. I gather my courage though, because I can't deny that I want this. That I want him.

"Not like this," I say, looking between his eyes, and gripping his suit jacket tight. "When you kiss me, I want you to be you. Not you disguised as a human."

The gallery is silent, not even the white noise of the display cases can penetrate the space around us. Even my pounding heart is drowned out by his gaze, his presence next to me all-consuming. Logically, I know that he's a vampire, that to him I'm a small, weak thing he can easily destroy. It wasn't so long ago that violence between humans and those like him was rife. But this close to him, our only connection being his thumb and index finger on my chin and my hands on his sides, I feel safe. Protected from the world in a sense I haven't felt since my father grew distant.

The heat returns to his eyes even as he retreats. Even though I'm the one who asked him to stop, disappointment sinks into me. He lets go of my chin, but steps forward as he wraps his arm around me, his fingers sliding into my hair at the base of my skull, grabbing hard enough to make his claim but not enough to hurt. Arousal washes through me as he crushes me to him, and I let my hands fall away from him even though I'm still off-balance on my four-inch heels. His other hand clamps onto my hip, his thumb pressing into the hollow of the bone there and sending firebolts directly to my sex.

Landon leans forward, moving my head to the side until his lips are aligned with my ear. When his cool breath brushes along my skin,

goosebumps rush over my arms and legs and my eyes close. His touch is possessive and demanding and hotter than it has any right to be.

“I already knew that every piece in your father’s possession is authentic,” he whispers, as if divulging a secret.

My eyes fly open and I try to turn to look at him but he doesn’t let me, his hold of my hair keeping me firmly in place. I strain to see him through the corner of my eyes. From this angle and our positions, I can see his hair and that’s about it.

“You’re wondering why I requested a personal inspection,” he continues, speaking as if he can read my mind. “It’s because I wanted to make sure you’d see me again. I know men like your father. I see how he treats you. I knew he’d order you to be the one to meet me here.” He turns his head, pulling a gasp from me as he brushes a sharp point along my throat. The gasp is followed by a whimper as I realize it was his fang, and I’m hardly breathing as I wait for his next words.

“I know that night made you nervous, that it makes you question if you should even be in the same room as me let alone let me slide my fingers into your cunt.” He presses his fang against my throat again, holding me tight and I can’t help but think of the Hades and Persephone statue. I’m as aroused as I was in the hallway, more maybe. I’m melting into him and I don’t even want to fight it. I want the opposite in fact. I want to bare my throat to him and let him take from me as he pleases, so long as he keeps looking at me the way he does.

“Now I’ve tempted you back into my arms, Little Bird,” he speaks against my skin, his lips moving against me. I’ve never been this close to orgasm with so little stimulation. “And what do you tell me? You want me, the vampire, to be the one to take you apart. To bring you pleasure. Is that right?”

I nod and he pulls his mouth away from my neck, tutting me.

“Use your words, Little Bird.”

Wetting my lips, it takes two attempts before I can answer and even then, I’m not sure if he can hear me. “Yes. Please, yes.”

He raises his head until he’s able to press his cheek against mine. “Good girl,” he purrs into my ear and my legs turn to jelly. My panties are embarrassingly soaked, my core clenching. I shift my thighs, seeking any relief. I’m so close that one touch from him will send me over the edge.

“Please,” I breathe out, even quieter than a whisper.

He pulls away, releasing me, and I have to throw my arms out to avoid toppling over. I watch him, mouth open in surprise, and stupidly horny. His hands are in both pockets as he steps out of reach.

“Have you heard of Lush, Little Bird?” Landon asks and I nod, but when he still waits, I answer aloud. He nods once. “Good. If you want to continue this, be there tonight at eleven. Go to the front and tell Daniel that you’re Little Bird.”

Once again, Landon strolls away from me with an easy, cool gait, and I’m left floundering and breathless. Unlike Kell’s though, this time I have no doubts. I’ll be at Lush tonight.

Chapter Nine

WREN

I almost cancel my ride twice before sucking it up and slip out of my apartment and head to the service elevator. When you have an overprotective father like mine, you learn fast to make friends with the staff. If it weren't for them, I'd never have my own service badge and I'd never be able to leave my floor without notifying the security guards my father thinks I don't know about. I debated taking my phone, the one that Landon has the number but leave it in favor of my secret phone. It's under Niamh's plan, and only she and the occasional boyfriend have the number. Tonight, I put the vampire's number in it, but hopefully, I won't have any reason to use it.

Do I feel bad that I have a secret phone that my father doesn't know about? Yes, and I'm sure a therapist would have plenty to say about that. But I know for a fact my father tracks my phone and when I really don't want him knowing where I am, I leave it home and take the other with me.

And I really don't want him to have any idea that I'm going to Lush.

Along with my main phone, I also left my damn engagement ring. I take every advantage to leave it off, only wearing it when I leave the house for work. Thanking my team for their congratulations made my stomach churn. I haven't even been able to bring myself to tell Niamh yet, since I know exactly what she'll say.

But how can I say no when it's something that only I can do for my father? I don't want to marry Miles, and until I can figure out how to convince my father that marrying Miles isn't the best thing for my father, I'll play the part.

I hug my knee-length white wool jacket tighter as the elevator descends

to the delivery bay where I'll walk to the end of the block to meet the car. Niamh would be impressed that I decided to wear this outfit all on my own. If she gets me to a night club, I tend to wear something that balances modesty with sexuality, unable to risk the potential society blowback if I'm caught doing anything less than proper. Tonight, though, I dug through my closet until I found pieces I bought when a fling made comments about how I never dressed sexy at home. He didn't last after that comment, but he had a point. So I'd gone out to a store specializing in lingerie loungewear.

I did enough research to know that Lush has a dress code, which surprised me, but my outfit should fit in even if I feel like everyone will be staring at me. Under my coat, I'm wearing a sky-blue lacy crop top with a flesh-toned liner over my breasts, the front tied together like a corset with matching blue ribbon and silver eyelets. I'm wearing matching satin shorts that barely qualify as more than boy shorts, since the only thing keeping the bottom curve of my butt covered is the lace that matches my top. My shoes are comfortable, white three-inch Mary Jane pumps with an ankle strap. With simple make-up and my hair tamed back into a French braid, I feel like anyone who looks at me will know I'm basically wearing lingerie under my coat.

What the hell am I doing? How is it possible that someone I've met only three times has this much control over me? True, Landon didn't tell me to wear something I feel sexy in. But he makes me want to feel sexy for him. I want him to feel like he can't think around me, just like I can't think around him.

My phone pings and I pull it out of small purse, trying not to look at the condoms I'd put in there. Swiping it open, I follow the ping to the meeting place for my driver. Fortunately at this time of night, the area around my apartment isn't too busy. The fee to take me to the Barrows is expensive, but there's no way I was going to ask Simon to take me to Lush, even if he promised to never tell my father or log the trip. It'd be like asking your favorite uncle to take you to a sex club.

"How are you this evening?" the driver asks, meeting my eyes in the mirror. He looks friendly enough, with warm brown skin, cleanly cut black hair and bedroom eyes. He can't be too much older than me, since he doesn't have the baby face that guys in their young twenties always seem to have.

I pull my seatbelt on, giving him a brief smile. "Good, thanks." Hopefully, my tone will make it clear I don't feel like chatting during the

ride.

“That’s good,” he answers, as he begins to drive and I bite the inside of my lip to prevent my sigh. Looks like I’m stuck with the awkward conversation that I loathe. “It’s a slow night for me, so I was happy to see a fare like yours. All the way to the Barrows, hmm? You look like a girl who likes to have fun.” He laughs, flicking his gaze to me in the rearview mirror before looking ahead again. This time his gaze is more creepy than polite and I want to sink deeper into my seat.

Instead of answering, I hum noncommittally, staring hard out the window, hoping he finally gets the point. He’s right, that it’s a slow night, and it took long enough just to find him as a driver willing to go to the Barrows. If I asked to get out at the next light, I might not find another driver and he’s already going slow enough I’m worried I won’t get there on time. If I’m late, what will Lan do? Will he leave, thinking I stood him up? Will he call me, only to get my voicemail? Will he... punish me?

A shiver that has nothing to do with how little I’m wearing under my coat moves through me until it pools in my core. I’m not wearing any panties, and the satin against my sex is warm and smooth. At this rate, they’ll be so wet, Lan will know I thought about him the entire way to Lush.

“So, fun plans tonight, then?”

God, will he just shut up? I give him a tight smile. “Not really. Meeting a friend.” I’m very thankful that I selected a drop-off point two blocks away from the club’s entrance. I have a feeling if this man knew I was going to Lush, he’d be the creep that keeps my number. Another good reason for having a secondary phone.

“I know some clubs in that area. Specialty ones.”

“Is that so?” I ask in that bland, supplicating tone all women have mastered when it comes to men in situations like this. “I wouldn’t know.” Looking at my phone, I’m relieved to know we’re approaching one of the bridges that connect the two cities. I only have to deal with the driver for another ten minutes. The estimated arrival time is seven minutes till eleven, which means I’ll need to power walk in these heels to make it to the door on time. I hate being late, hate how it makes me feel anxious and like I’m risking failure and angering someone. If I was late as a child, it was almost worse than not performing well in my father’s eyes. Not even a perfect performance at whichever extracurricular it was could absolve me of the sin of tardiness.

I consider texting Landon to let him know I might be a few minutes late,

but something holds me back. Maybe it's some survival instinct? He's seemed to slip into my life so easily, and having a phone that he doesn't have the number to offers a small slice of comfort. I'm not afraid of Landon, more so of how he makes me feel and how much I want him to take over every part of my life.

The driver continues making increasingly suggestive comments, and I surreptitiously check to make sure my coat isn't open and revealing my lack of attire. No, I'm still fully covered, so he's just a grade-A creep. My foot starts bouncing as I keep my eyes on my phone, replying with a bland, non-answer to each of his overtures. Finally, he pulls along the curb next to the block I listed and I'm unbuckling before he even stops the car.

"I'll send you my phone number," he says, looking over his shoulder with a smirk. I'm already opening the door. "That way when you're ready to go home, I can drive you again."

"That won't be necessary," I bite out and slam the door behind me. "Fucking creep." I have five minutes to walk two blocks to the entrance of Lush according to my phone and the driver isn't leaving. Determined to ignore him, I stride down the street, hating the sensation that he's still watching me. Did I think he looked nice at first? He definitely looks like a creep. I can't even relax when I hear him driving, since the dude decided to drive in the same direction I'm walking. When I get a chance, I'm absolutely reporting this asshole.

The street light is red, and I don't have the walk sign. He pulls beside me and, making the sudden decision, I take a right, continuing down the street away from him. I'd rather be late to Lush than have him follow me the entire time.

Maybe it's because I'm listening so hard on the sounds behind me that I don't notice anything until it's too late.

A fierce grip rips me off my feet, pulling me into a narrow alley I hadn't noticed. My feet scrape across the ground as I try to get them back under me, my heart racing as panic floods my veins. In the struggle, I drop my phone, hardly registering the clatter as it hits the dank ground. I wrestle against the steel grip, but whoever has me isn't human. There's no way a human is as strong, as fast as this person is.

I force the panic back. I've trained in self-defense and even took a few years of martial arts. Sucking in a breath, my eyes smarting from the foul stench coming from my assailant, I use the hand on the arm he's gripping and

grab his arm too. Then in a practiced move, I swing my weight to the right while bringing my other forearm down over his elbow.

He barely flinches.

He pushes me up against a building's stone wall, pinning me there with his forearm across my chest. I look towards the alley's entrance even as I'm scratching at his arm, trying to get him to loosen up enough I can slip away. My eyes widen as I realize how far away the street is; whipping my head in the other direction, all I see is more darkness. A dead end.

The man laughs, his rancid breath washing over my face. I squeeze my eyes and mouth shut, gagging at the smell. It will serve him right if I vomit in his face.

"A pretty little thing like you should know better than to walk around by yourself," his voice is raspy and spittle hits my cheek. "If you keep fighting, it might just work me up enough that I'll take more than I planned." His other hand goes to the belt on my coat and I freeze, finally meeting his eyes. "Now you're getting it."

He almost looks human, but his nose and mouth are elongated into a short snout, two tusks curling up over his upper lip, and an overly pronounced brow. He's thin, but his arms and legs are long, with short but sharp claws instead of nails. One of which he hooks through the loop threaded through my belt to tug it open.

I drop my hands to my coat, fisting it hard to keep it closed. "What do you want?" I'm proud of how steady my voice is, despite the rest of my body shaking.

He tilts his head, and a passing car's headlights reflect off of his eyes enough I can see vertically slit purple pupils set in black sclera and his hair is in a short, bristly mohawk. His clothes are shabby enough to suggest he's not concerned about getting dirty.

"At first I just wanted whatever you got in that purse of yours, Topsider." He must feel me flinch because he grins. "Yeah, you scream rich topsider. Like a pretty cake just asking to be eaten." He eases his forearm back, twisting his arm until he can press two claws against my throat in obvious warning. "But then you showed how spirited you are. Now I'm thinking I want something more." He closes his eyes and inhales deeply before opening them again, his pupils wider. "And you smell so sweet."

My insides turn to water, fear making my heart pound again. I don't know what he is, but he's stronger than me by far. Faster, too. I've never been

assaulted like this before, but growing up the way I did, I've always known it's a risk. That I can be taken to be used for ransom, whether that be money or something my father has. I know what to offer people like him to make him reconsider what he's suggesting. I know my lawyer will immediately authorize up to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to be wired to any account with a promise of no authorities.

Except that's not what I say.

"You'll piss off a very powerful vampire if you do that." My voice is cold and I stare hard into his eyes. All the panic has disappeared, replaced by confidence as I think of Landon. Even if I don't know exactly who Landon is, I do know that he's more powerful and dangerous than this beast.

The man pulls his head back, studying me in a new light. I will him to believe me, to believe that he's making the biggest mistake of his life by having dragged me into this alley. It looks like he's going to believe me and a drop of hope forms within me. Then he laughs, shaking his head.

"You almost had me, little human," he says, a snide grin on his face as he closes the distance between us again. God, his breath really is disgusting. "Even if you are a vamp's blood donor, they'll just get a new one. Humans mean nothing to them, with how short your lives are compared to theirs. But I'll play along. Who is this scary vampire I should be shitting my pants in front of?"

A gust of wind carries the scent of winter snow and warm fires, cutting through the stench surrounding the alley. The man and I look towards the entrance, my heart racing for an entirely different reason now.

Landon stands just inside the alley, half cast in shadows, the other half illuminated by the yellow streetlights, and snarls. His usually neat hair is out of place, a few strands falling across his brow, and his face is twisted in rage. He looks nothing like a savior, and even a part of me is terrified of what he looks like. A creature of darkness, hell-bent on destruction, his golden eyes bleeding into red, noticeable even to me from this distance.

"Me."

Chapter Ten

LAN

My office at Lush doesn't include a floor-to-ceiling wall allowing me to look over the activities going on below. Unlike Ambrose, I feel no need to loom. Instead, I have a bank of monitors, each one displaying a different security feed. Everything here has its place, its own use, and nothing is more than it needs to be. Instead of a grand desk, I have a simple modern glass-topped one and my computer chair is meant to be comfortable for long hours. File cabinets and bookcases are used as necessary, and in spite of Malachi's continued efforts, I refuse to get a couch to set against the wall.

It's bad enough he'll linger in my office for close to an hour already. I don't wish to encourage him to stay even longer by bringing in a couch.

Another difference between Ambrose and me is that I never play in my office. Even if the only woman he's taken in his office is Eloise, my point still stands. This is my place of work, as much of my own dominion as one can have while a part of the Nightshades.

The image of Wren walking into my office dressed in one of her skirt suits, moving around to perch her cute ass in front of where I sit, before raising her skirt and spreading her legs to show me how much she needs me, jumps to the forefront of my mind. My cock begins to stiffen, and I look at the clock again before scanning the security feeds. She should be here any minute.

Malachi's voice grates through the delicious image, effectively killing my growing erection.

"Which is why I think a burlesque restaurant is the perfect first expansion into Topside," he says, still pacing in front of my desk. I think back over the last few minutes, recalling what he's been saying. Malachi, the so-called

general of the Nightshade's foot soldiers, has been entertaining the idea of entering the business world like Ambrose and me.

"You hate business," I remind him dryly. Wren still hasn't appeared at the front door. Did I scare her away? Something twists around my spine, a sense of unfamiliar trepidation. Something I haven't felt in centuries. "Kasar and Ashe don't have businesses. Why do you need to all of a sudden?"

The trepidation sparks into a bolt of fear, only a flash, but it's enough that I shove back from my desk and stand, startling Malachi. The vampire stops, his shoulders squaring.

"What is it?" He knows this has nothing to do with his business idea, and despite him and I giving each other shit frequently, I know he'll fight at my side.

"Something's not right." I don't bother to explain more, striding out of the office, before calling over my shoulder, "Lock up when you leave."

I jog down the stairs, each step thudding through me increasing this restless uncertainty. It's been so long since I've felt anything like this that it scratches under my skin along my ribs, and the urge to claw it out has me clenching my fists at my side. My office had blocked out the music playing through the club, a heavy, sensual soundtrack of bass, drums, and tantalizing guitar or violin.

Or, like recently, hypnotic cello.

When I enter the main floor of Lush, I scan the room, cataloging every person and creature. Not even the darkest shadows in private nooks can keep them from my senses. If I can't see them, I can hear them. The floor, filled with plush leather couches, armchairs, low tables, and a delightfully wicked amount of furniture designed for pleasure, is close to maximum capacity. Humans and supernaturals are indulging with one another tonight, focused inwards on their own play area unless they enjoy voyeurism.

Pleasure, sweat, blood, rapture, and other scents flood the room in spite of the heavy ventilation installed.

It takes me a matter of heartbeats to sort through every scent, every sound, every glimpse of a body to determine that whatever is causing this oddity isn't here. Lip curling in a snarl, I stalk through the floor, disregarding the established path and walking straight towards the entrance even if it means through scenes in play. No one protests, and it's a damn good thing because I'd likely rip out their throats without stopping. Then I'd have to deal with Malachi, Ambrose, and paperwork.

When I get to the entrance, Daniel is there, manning the door as expected. He seems surprised to see me, raising one of his dark brows sharply.

“Problem, boss?” His voice is low, otherworldly, and sinister enough that the group of humans at the front of the line recoils out of primal instinct.

“I haven’t decided,” I murmur, looking past him and along the line. Nothing but excitement and arousal emanates from the crowd lining the sidewalk waiting to get in to Lush. I jerk my head in a nod and Daniel unhooks the line for me, and I move to the curb, ignoring the heavy stares of those in line. I’m more than a familiar face here at Lush though most do not know I run the place. The area directly in front of me is bathed in a bright violet thanks to the Lush sign above me, and the rest of the street is illuminated by the different neon lights of the surrounding clubs and establishments. The sidewalks are busy, the Barrows coming to life at night, and music bursts into the cacophony each time a door opens.

It’s a chaotic maelstrom of scents, sounds, and sights and where I feel most comfortable. Right now, though, I wish they’d all just shut the fuck up.

Another lightning bolt of fear slices through my head from the left. I snap my head in that direction, nostrils flaring, and inhale deeply while casting my senses wide. A thread of rosemary, lemon, and mint cuts through the rest of the detritus of smells surrounding me. Woven through it is a sour scent of fear.

Wren.

I take off, fast enough the people in line shout in surprise as my passing buffets them back against the building. I weave through the pedestrians, focusing solely on Wren, tracking her scent like a damn bloodhound except better. She’s close and I skid to a stop, outside of a side alley her scent is thickest at. Along with a troll. Rage fills my veins as the damn male bends his head closer to Wren, who watches him with defiance even as fear ripples from her.

“Even if you are a vamp’s blood donor, they’ll just get a new one. Humans mean nothing to them, with how short your lives are compared to theirs. But I’ll play along. Who is this scary vampire I should be shitting my pants in front of?”

How dare this fucking scum of the earth creature touch Wren? The urge to slaughter this troll, to protect her, erupts in a dark cloud from the void of my soul, elongating my fangs, and my nails sharpen into claws. The unease scratching along my ribs morphs into bestial fury, and a snarl rips from my

chest even as my vision turns red. The fucker has his godsdamned claws on her perfect neck.

Wren and the troll look at me, Wren's eyes widening at the sight of me. The scent of her fear vanishes and a wave of satisfaction curls around me. The satisfaction turns sinister once more when I move my gaze to the troll and fear spills from him.

"Me."

My voice is harsh, ripping through the air between us like a blade, full of promises of death and pain. The troll falls back from her, turning towards me and raising his hands.

The alley is dark, too dark for a human like Wren to see, but for the troll and me, we might as well be facing off on a cloudy day. He's at least a foot taller than me if he didn't hunch so much, his long, spindly arms hanging low near his knees. He's got an over-pronounced brow ridge, a long, pointed nose better suited to a human's witch costume, two tusks curling up from his mouth from his lower jaw, and violet slit eyes.

Many creatures who aren't able to pass as human have adopted the punk and grunge fashions and this troll is the same with shabby red and black plaid pants with chains hanging from the belt loops, and a sleeveless black shirt that might have had some sort of design on it at one point. The most important feature, the one I look for and find missing, is a ring on his nose or on an oversized, pointed ear. No kin ring means he's on his own.

Which means I can dispose of him without ramifications.

"Whoa, man, I was just trying to get her wallet--"

I leap forward, crossing the distance between him and me in a blink, and wrap my hand around his throat before spinning and slamming him up against the wall opposite of Wren. Fear rushes from him and I drink it in. It's so deliciously bitter and sour and I delight in it. I ease my face close to his, filtering out the stench of his pallid blue skin and filthy clothes.

"You touched what is mine, troll," I speak, letting my vampiric power flood my words. His heart is a rapid, frantic beat as his situation sinks in. The troll doesn't try to escape, deciding to skip the arguing stage and go right to pleading.

"I'm sorry man," he gets out and squeaks when I tighten my grip, my sharpened nails cutting into his thick, leathery skin like paper. "I thought she was just an easy mark. I didn't smell your mark. Please, dude!"

A cruel grin twists my lips and I shake my head slowly. "I don't give a

fuck. You scared my little bird. Now you'll pay for it, kinless."

His violet eyes go wide, understanding hitting him as I purr out the last word. Being kinless, or without a pack or clan, in the Barrows means anyone can seek out retribution or justice against them without concern of Ambrose's rules. His fear grows even higher and when he swings his right hand at my face, I catch his wrist with a dark chuckle.

With a jerk, I snap his wrist, and a howl of pain echoes through the narrow alley. I dig my nails deeper into his neck, his dark red blood running in rivulets down his throat and my hand, staining my white shirt.

His howls lessen, but he's starting to scramble against me as desperation takes over. He looks over my shoulder to where I sense Wren still stands. "Help—"

"No!" I spit out, jerking him to face me, rage twisting my face. "You don't get to speak to her. You don't get to look at her."

The desperation to survive takes over the troll, making him rash and chaotic. He flails his other hand at me, this time going for my exposed side. I whirl us around, as if leading him in a deadly waltz, before throwing him away from me with a roar. He staggers back, deeper into the alley, stumbling over the trash littering the uneven ground. I don't give him time to recover, leaning back and planting a kick to his stomach, just below his lungs, sending him to his back with a crash. He might have been able to scamper away like the rat he is if I hadn't followed through my kick, pinning him down with my foot. He swings up, his long arm capable of slicing deep gouges in me if I let it. I catch it with both hands, wrenching it towards me. It fills me with fucking glee as I feel the bone pop out of socket, the tendons and ligaments straining until they snap. I revel in his screams.

I drop his now useless arm, and still keeping him pinned, I reach down and grab his other arm, the one with the broken wrist. Holding it aloft, I twist it away from me and give his lungs a moment of relief by kicking his elbow, shattering his arm so brutally two bones burst out of his skin in a spray of blood. I bare my fangs, the air filling with the metallic scent of power for my kind.

The troll is crying now, thick green snot blubbering from his long nose, blood splattered across his face and more running from the punctures on his neck.

Anyone else would leave him as easy prey for those who lurk in the Barrow's shadows. But my rage at his transgression isn't yet satisfied.

I tower over his writhing body, staring down at him, my hands finally uncurling from fists as the tension eases from me, bleeding away like he is. He looks towards me, eyes filled with tears, and opens his mouth, no doubt to plead for mercy. I raise my knee and stomp my heel into the center of his face. The first stomp is enough to crack his skull and knock him out. I stomp again and his face buckles. Again and the thick bone finally crumbles under my heel with a wet squelch. One more stomp ensures his head is nothing but shattered fragments of bone and gray matter.

Lifting my foot from the mess, I scrape the sole clean on the troll's still chest and pull out a folded handkerchief and begin to wipe the blood from my hand with efficient swipes. Looking at the mess below me, my brows dip with displeasure. I didn't end him as slowly as he deserved.

A shoe scuffs behind me and I twist, turning towards Wren. All displeasure and thoughts of punishment disperse at the sight of her green eyes, pupils wide with fear and the dark. She's wrapped her arms around herself, her body shaking. I'm in front of her in an instant, cupping her jaw with both hands, keeping my touch light but needing to touch her, to feel her.

Her hands fly up to grip my wrists, her eyes meeting mine in the dark alley. Her eyes are glassy and when a breath shudders into her, a large tear slips over the edge and pools against my hand.

"Landon," she whispers, her voice ragged with fear and relief. Again, the emotions pulse through me, and the urge to wrap her in my arms, to hold her tight and shield her against the world is nearly impossible to fight.

I tilt her face, allowing me to inspect the small drops of blood desecrating her neck. The cuts are minor, nothing that won't heal on their own. I want to lick them, not to taste her blood at last, but to help heal her even more quickly.

I cannot let her be afraid of my world. I still need her to get to Oberon, and I refuse to let a troll ruin my plans.

"Let me take you somewhere," I say, not really asking but I wait for her shaky nod before dipping my knees and scooping her into my arms, one arm under her knees and the other cradling her back. Wren's small hand grips the front of my button-down, and each hot tear soaking into the fabric is like a brand against my skin. If I could kill the troll again, it still wouldn't be enough to satisfy me.

I consider my options, knowing Malachi is likely still at Lush, and dismiss returning there. He's good in a fight but shit with the aftermath if it

doesn't involve booze and fucking. There's an apartment I keep nearby, but it's something I only utilize when I have a regular submissive and not appropriate for the care she needs right now. I could take her to the Nightshades' clan home, where I have a suite of rooms...as does my mother, Ambrose, and the rest of his inner circle.

Considering her, I decide. Shifting to guide her head into the crook of my neck, I duck my head towards her. "Keep your eyes closed, Little Bird."

Wren nods, the effects of fear and adrenaline still rattling through her and into me. I breathe in her scent, steadying myself, before walking out of the alley. Near the entrance, my foot hits something and I look down to see a cracked phone. I crouch and utilize my supernatural speed to let go of Wren, swipe it up and place it in my pocket, before holding Wren again and rising. As we leave the alley, I can't help but smirk at her white coat and silver heels. Only my little bird would seek out the darkness wearing the clothing for the light.

It's harder than it should be to pull my gaze away from her. I begin to run towards the bridges to Topside, determined to rebuild the shields this beautiful human has somehow managed to penetrate. There's too much at stake to let her become a distraction. She is a tool, an opportunity for revenge, and that is all she can be.

Chapter Eleven

WREN

Air washes over me, enough to tell me that Landon is taking me somewhere quickly. I've often daydreamed about how it would feel to be able to move as quickly as a vampire, but now that I'm experiencing it, I don't care. I can't let myself focus on anything except the warm campfire and balsam scent of him as I keep my face buried against his neck. If I do, the events of the last few minutes will overwhelm me. Later, I'll break down.

Under my hand, his heart is a slow, steady beat and other than his smell, I try to use it as a metronome for my own, which still is fluttering like the bird I've been named after. Landon's arms are strong around me, his grip never wavering even as lights flash in the dark of my closed eyes. This vampire makes my world narrow to him, demanding all of my attention and energy, and before I may have fought it but right now it's saving my sanity.

The troll. Being pinned to the wall as it threatens me. Landon arriving. Landon brutalizing—

No. I cut off my thoughts. Those are things for later.

We stop as suddenly as we began and Lan is shifting me in his hold, lowering me back onto my feet. I'm unsteady, but he keeps one arm firmly around me and I look where he's taken me. My breath hitches in surprise as I recognize the delivery bay at my apartment complex. He doesn't say anything as he slips his hand into my purse that somehow survived the incident and retrieves the service badge, waving it in front of the door to allow us in. He keeps it and I'm still too confused to say anything, especially as he hurries me inside to the elevator. Another wave of the badge and the doors open.

“Twelve,” I whisper, but he’s already pressing the right floor and pocketing the badge.

The small part of me that screams in his presence is shouting again but there’s too much going on right now for me to care. Later, I’ll dissect his actions and figure out what unnerves me about them. Right now, I just lean into his side when he tugs me close again, wrapping an arm around his front to cling to his shirt, glad that the elevator is fast.

In the harsh fluorescent lighting of the steel-walled elevator, the blood staining Lan’s white shirt makes my stomach crawl up my throat, threatening to expel itself. Yanking away from Lan, I slap my hand over my mouth, rushing from the elevator before the doors are fully open. I race to the kitchen, since it’s closer than the bathroom, and retch into the sink.

Never have I been more thankful for a housekeeper than right now, so I’m not puking on my dishes from dinner.

Lan approaches me and I squeeze my eyes shut, gripping the marble counter hard enough for the edge to cut into my palms. In the dim lighting of my kitchen, how can I ignore the fact that Lan just killed the troll who wanted to mug me—and threatened worse. Not just killed him but did so violently and brutally. Even though it was too dark for me to see most of it, I heard it all.

I heard the troll screaming and crying. I heard the wet snap of bones and impact of Lan’s foot. Still, when Lan turned back towards me, all I could do was reach for him.

He doesn’t touch me as he stops at the counter, his gaze weighing heavy on my shoulders. I spit one last time and scrub my mouth with the back of my hand, not able to look at him yet. My heart is racing again, but this time I don’t know if it’s from earlier or if it’s a new fear.

Staring hard at the subway brick walls of my kitchen, I have to know. “Should I be afraid of you?”

Landon doesn’t answer right away, and that sensible voice of mine is screaming *Yes!* I flinch when he touches a finger under my chin, but he waits a long beat and then when I don’t pull away, he guides me to look at him.

His eyes are still ringed with red, but once more the metallic gold shines through. All the fury and snarling from earlier is gone from his face and once again he’s watching me with a nearly unreadable expression. Nearly, because there’s a tilt to his brow that warns me I may not like what he’s about to say.

“I am not a good man, Wren.” His voice is hard as stone and blunt with

honesty. “You would be better off telling me to leave and never come near you again. That troll, earlier? It’s the least of what I’ve done. What I will do again in the future no doubt. I am a monster, Little Bird.”

I swallow hard, my chin dipping against his finger, the only place of contact between us. What is it about this man and his demand for distance? I don’t run, though, and he continues.

“I cannot promise to not hurt you. But it is not something I wish to do.” Again, his eyes and voice assure me of his honesty. Then his mouth lifts in a smirk. “At least, not non-consensually.”

I flush as my thoughts go to the healing bruise on the inside of my thigh, the one he gave me that sent me careening into the hardest orgasm I’ve ever had. My cheeks burn, as does my sex, slicking at the reminder of the pleasure he offers. Tonight I would have consented to that and more, letting this vampire show me a part of myself I’ve never explored. Stepping back, I fight back the arousal stirring inside and tilt my head at him.

“Technically, you didn’t ask last time,” I counter, my voice wobbling enough that I blame it on the tremors still shuddering through me.

His brow rises. “You liked it, didn’t you?”

Crossing my arms, I roll my eyes, letting irritation beat back the arousal. “That’s not the point.”

He steps forward, following me as I retreat, until he’s pinned me against another kitchen counter. Gritting my teeth, I stand as defiantly as I can with him looming over me, his expression pure sex.

“Oh? Would you like me to kiss it better?” He grips the butcher block counter on either side of me, yet again caging me. He tilts his head down until he’s looking at me through his eyelashes, strands of his blond hair falling across his brow. Desire crushes any irritation, no matter how I grasp at it. “Because I’m more than happy to.”

My mind fills with thoughts of Lan’s head between my legs, his lips and fangs kissing along my thighs, his hands gripping me tight. He’d kiss the bruise he left me, taunting me by being so close to where I ache yet denying me. He’d look at me with those wicked lips, going no further until I broke down and begged him to use those lips on me, to make me come as hard as he had with his fingers.

Or beg him to sink his fangs into my thigh and drink his fill.

A chirp from the intercom stops me from reaching for him, and Lan glides back from me, letting me stumble over to the small speaker set in one

of the kitchen walls. It's after eleven, so the only people who'd be buzzing me are my personal security team.

I clear my throat and press the button down. "Yes?"

The response is immediate, and I recognize Kevin's voice as it comes through. He's closer to my age and, while he's always been professional, I get the idea that if I showed any interest, he'd return it happily. I've used that buried attraction to my advantage before, even if I feel guilty after.

"There's been activity with the service elevator. Is everything OK up there?"

I blanch. I should have expected the security team to monitor the service elevator but I had hoped it'd be too minor of an access to my apartment. At least I put together that they don't have access to the cameras inside else they'd know all about my use of it. Lan is still a predator, waiting to see what the next move of its prey is.

I press the button for the intercom again, letting out a girly laugh and keep my voice sweet. "Oh, thanks for checking on me, Kevin. It was the housekeeping. I decided to have ice cream and wine and ended up knocking over the entire bottle on my rug. The staff just sent up another set of towels for me to grab from the elevator since I found more that I'd missed the first time. I told them no one needed to bother coming up again."

The intercom is silent, the moment stretching out for eternity and cranking up my nerves. I'm frozen, staring at the stainless-steel rectangle and the circle of speaker holes in the top half of it. When Kevin speaks again, I practically jump out of my skin.

A warm chuckle comes through first, and I sag with relief, catching myself with a palm against the wall.

"Sounds like a fun night, Ms. Foster," Kevin replies, his amusement coming through despite the transmission clarity. "I'll let you go now that I know everything is okay. Remember, if you need anything, I'm just a press of a button away."

"Thanks, Kevin," I say, exhaustion flooding into my voice. "I'm probably just going to turn in now. Have a good night."

Fortunately, he doesn't reply and I push off the wall, turning towards Lan. He hasn't moved, but he's relaxed. I can't exactly explain how I can tell, since there's no outward sign. It's a gut instinct though.

We're no more than twenty feet apart but it's as if we're in a standoff. Maybe not necessarily against each other, or maybe against each other and

whatever it is building between us. For the first time tonight, I'm able to take him in.

He's wearing a similar outfit to every other time I've seen him, but he's left the suit jacket behind tonight. A wrinkle free white button-down, one forearm's sleeve half stained with blackish blood, is under a black vest, with the first few buttons undone and giving me a glimpse of smooth pale skin. It's tucked into black slacks he wears with a matching belt. I can't see his shoes from here, which a part of me appreciates, but I can guess he's wearing similar oxfords that he's worn each time before.

Standing in my kitchen, Lan looks like he fits here. With the white subway tile walls, warm butcher board counters, and storm-cloud gray cabinets and modern steel appliances, it's not just because he matches the color scheme. He looks like society refined, a man who thrives and exudes money and class.

Yet he just killed someone for assaulting me and told me himself he isn't a good man.

It's no wonder he fits in so well in Newgate.

I was honest when I told Kevin I was considering turning in. After the last hour, I just want to go to sleep. My nerves were already crazy before I even left to meet Lan and now they're completely fried. Too tired to keep up pretenses, I wrangle my hands, looking away from him towards my living room, trying to figure out how to tell him I won't be fun company tonight.

"Why don't you go shower, Little Bird?"

My gaze darts back to Landon, surprised and somewhat relieved that he seems to understand. Then again, vampires can smell emotions and the last thing I am right now is turned on. He moves towards me, an easy pace that is nonthreatening, his usual smirk has been replaced with something softer. When he's before me, I sway towards him. I want to melt into him, to let him take control if it means I don't have to. He raises an arm, the one not stained with blood and his hand hovers at my side, guiding me to turn without touching.

"Show me to your bathroom." Landon's voice is soft, but there's still enough of a command that I relent. He keeps his hand at my lower back as we move through the dining room and cross my three-bedroom apartment.

In the center of my dining area stands the antique oval table I found at a thrift store and had refurbished, and despite only rarely having guests, my housekeepers ensure the table cloth is bright and season appropriate. The set

of four chairs are modern with thick, comfortable cushions and removable covers in geometrical patterns. Fresh flowers in a clear vase sit in the middle.

Growing up, my father always kept our homes in neutral whites and grays, so when I began to live on my own, I embraced color and comfort. Colorful rugs soften our steps over the rich oak hardwood flooring.

It's the same throughout the apartment, and I've put in a lot of effort to make sure it doesn't look like a clashing hodgepodge of color. On the walls, which I've painted a pale terracotta brown, is vivid artwork, playful prints that struck my fancy, and some of my favorite photographs.

When we enter my room and I flick on the light absently, I find myself breathing easier.

In here, the walls are a shade of light gray, yet again creating a backdrop for the colorful pieces I've collected. It's a large enough bedroom that there's plenty of space even with a queen size bed centered against the wall. The headboard is plush and tufted in creamy velvet, but my bedspread looks like it should be in a bed and breakfast according to Niamh. It's luxurious and inviting, with a floral pattern in a pale pink.

Only Niamh has ever been here; it was one of the issues which contributed to my short-lived relationships. I don't question how it feels right for Landon to be in here as he slides my jacket from my shoulders after I unbuckle the belt and unbutton it.

I tense as my outfit is revealed, knowing that the lace top leaves the majority of my back exposed and my satin shorts cling to my bottom, the lace frills barely touching the top of my thighs.

Landon makes no move to touch me, instead moving to drape the coat over the chair at my vanity. I cross the room to my bathroom, ignoring my large bed with its assortment of throw pillows in solid vibrant colors. Inside the bathroom, the only place in the apartment with a neutral color scheme, I close the toilet lid and sit, reaching down to unbuckle my shoes.

Lan shadows me, moving to the shower stall and turning it on before crouching in front of me.

My hands are shaking, and it makes my lip tremble as I struggle with the miniscule buckle. His long, deft fingers brush my hands aside, and he does it for me. With an unexpected gentleness, he slides my shoes off and sets them to the side before looking up at me, his hands resting on his thighs.

"Do you need help undressing?" His voice is still quiet, barely above a whisper, like he knows I can't handle much right now. There's no lust or

hunger in his eyes, and the red ring around the pupil is thinner than when we first got here.

I shake my head, and he taps my knee, a silent admonishment. I wet my lips and croak out a decline. He inclines his head in acknowledgment before standing, looping my heels with two fingers, and steps towards the door.

“Take as long as you need, Little Bird.”

As he steps through, panic grips my throat and I reach out towards him. “You’re not leaving, are you?”

He stills, turning his head to look at me. “Not yet.”

I nod dumbly, thankfully, and turn my attention back to the shower. He closes the door behind him, leaving me alone for the first time since I headed out earlier this evening.

It’s as if the door closing triggers everything I’ve been repressing tonight, making it burst out of the confines I’d tried to hide it in. Each breath becomes a shuddering half-sob and my throat burns with a promise of tears. The air is warm and humid and I strip down quickly before stepping into the shower, curling my hands under my chin as the warm water flows over me.

My hair, always wild unless tamed with the ferocity of a dictator wielding expensive hair products, has turned the once somewhat tidy French braid into a wild mess. Pulling it out and working my hands through it, I hide under the fall of hot water, eyes closed and trying to let the events of the night wash down the drain under me.

Landon’s display of raw, brutal power frightened me.

Now that I’m home and safe, I can admit to myself that it also turned me on more than it should. More than I’d ever admit to anyone, not even Niamh.

I’ve been protected by security guards my entire life, my father refusing to lose me like he did my mother.

But no one has protected me like Landon did tonight. Like I’m more than a client, that I matter to him. I’ve never experienced that protective, possessive energy. My father obsesses over my safety, in the same way he obsesses over the safety of his relic collection.

Lan’s protection feels personal. Intimate. When he swept me into his arms, his hand cradling my head to him, I’ve never felt so safe.

Even now, knowing he’s still here in my apartment, provides me a sense of security as I scrub the skin where the troll touched me.

Feeling more composed once I’m clean, I leave the shower and dry off quickly before wrapping the towel around me. I squeeze my hair dry with my

jersey towel, leaving it to air dry even if it means my curls will be a wild jungle in the morning. I brush my teeth, and when I'm finally ready, I crack the door and look into my bedroom.

He turned off the overhead light but switched on the lamp on one of the nightstands, leaving the bedroom dimly lit. The bedroom door is cracked, enough that I can hear cabinets opening and closing but not enough to see inside. Assured, I leave the bathroom, and a stack of clothes at the foot of my bed makes me pause. Something warm flutters against my ribs as I see a set of my favorite, cozy rainbow and unicorn printed pajamas waiting for me. Beside them is a balled-up pair of fluffy pink and orange socks.

These are the absolute opposite of sexy and exactly what I would have chosen for myself. Dropping my towel, I hurry to dress, wanting to return to who might just become my vampire.

Chapter Twelve

LAN

While Wren is in the shower, I avail myself of her apartment, beginning with her bedroom. Exploring her modest walk-in closet, I find a set of pajamas that are so imbued with her scent it's clear they are a favorite. I collect them, along with a too-large university tee underneath the pajamas. I lay hers neatly at the end of her bed, and with deft motions, unbutton my own top and slide it off. The tee shirt is yellow with a faded blue logo of her alma mater and just large enough to fit me. I doubt it's a previous lover's shirt, as Wren doesn't strike me as the type to keep such tokens. It will serve my purpose though, ridding me of the bloody shirt. Fortunately, my slacks were spared the worst and the black hides the blood stains well enough.

Taking my shirt with me, I venture into the rest of her apartment. From the building plans, I'm familiar with the layout but I haven't bothered to break in, opting for an organic opportunity instead.

As I enter Wren's office, I have a brief moment of disappointment. Perhaps I shouldn't have killed the troll. Then I could thank him for creating the perfect opportunity to strengthen Wren's trust and grant me entrance to her home. The image of the troll hunched over Wren, her fear radiating from her, threatens to cloud my vision in red again.

No, he could not live. Being a monster myself, I recognize that darkness in others. Not even Ambrose could fault me for giving in to my constant craving for violence against the troll.

Had it been Eloise in Wren's place, Ambrose would have done worse. He likes to pretend to be above it all, to lord over a denizen of degenerates and criminals from some moral throne. It's as if he wants to pretend he hasn't

spent centuries feasting on the blood of others, as if he forgets how crazed the first few years after being turned are. When we're worse than animals. They only hunt when they're hungry.

Newly turned, a vampire's only thoughts are to feast and fuck and slake an unquenchable thirst for flesh.

All vampires do as we age is learn control, to ignore those urges until they're nothing but a rare indulgence.

Even without the head injury stealing my capacity for true emotions, the Nightshades would deem me a psychopath. For no other reason than I refuse to forget about the monster I am. Since I refuse to forget, I'm a constant reminder of their own monstrous nature.

That is the true reason they hate my presence.

Dismissing the animosity of my clan, I focus on the task at hand. I wasn't expecting the opportunity to have access to Wren's personal computer, but that doesn't mean I can't take full advantage.

I'm a collector for the Nightshades, and without the distraction of human emotions, I've acquired many skills around technology.

It's only a matter of a few command lines as I boot up her Mac before I'm granted full administrative access. Keeping an ear out for the shower, somewhat difficult thanks to the impressive sound-proofing of the walls, I pull up the web browser and navigate to my personal dark site. A few more clicks and I'm downloading the program that will grant me complete remote access to this computer and any of her devices connected through her accounts or networks. It's a program I created a few years ago, making sure to keep it updated with each advance of technology. With the right credentials spoofed, the computer will never flag it as a virus because in truth, it isn't one.

The truly brilliant part of the coding is that it will replicate itself to any device Wren uses that's connected to this computer. Considering she uses this computer to work from home at times, I'll have access to Benoit Tech's computer network within the next twenty-four hours. If she visits her father's residence and uses his Wi-Fi, I'll have access to his personal network.

As soon as I have that access, I can determine the best way to steal and destroy the relic keeping Oberon alive.

The sound of running water disappears and I log off after ensuring every trace of my access is erased properly. By the time I hear her soft footfalls in her bedroom, her heart beating rapidly for a moment, I'm in her kitchen and

opening her large freezer drawer. As I suspected, there are pints of various flavors of ice cream dominating one side, the other side being taken up by frozen meals that make me wrinkle my nose in distaste.

Surely Wren can afford to eat better than these barely nutritious meals. I have a mind to throw them all in the trash before ordering the staff at the clan house to prepare more nutritious, filling options for her. Telling myself that urge is nothing more than my dislike for the current contents, I select a chocolate ice cream and close the freezer before it can irritate me into actually sending such a request to my mother.

Her kitchen is laid out logically and it only takes two tries before I find her cutlery, then the glassware, which I fill one with water and a slice of cucumber I find in her fridge. Fortunately, her refrigerator is stocked with fresh foods and I don't have to chide her for not taking care of herself.

Even as I make my way to the large, overstuffed cobalt couch, I tell myself that my concern is nothing more than ensuring my plan's success. If Wren collapses from malnutrition, I won't gain access to her father's computer network, which will make infiltrating his residence more annoying. If it means I must ensure she is taken care of properly until I succeed, I will do so.

Her living room is like her bedroom: full of vibrant colors and life. It is not the standard display of wealth I've witnessed among Topside's elite. Wren has clearly decorated her home to be exactly that—a home.

I set the ice cream and water on the low, live edge wooden table in front of the couch and slide my hands into my pockets. I pull out the cracked cell phone that I'd picked up from the alley and study it with amusement. The screen is black, a chaotic spider web of cracks branching out from the lower left corner. It's not the same phone I've seen Wren with, which means my little bird has secrets of her own.

Her footsteps precede her into the living room, despite the thick, fuzzy socks I'd set out. I look up as she turns the corner, her damp curls hanging low over her shoulders. The moment her spring green eyes meet mine, her heart rate fluctuates and she wraps her arms across her stomach, shifting her weight as if uncertain.

“This is certainly not how either of us expected the evening to go,” I say and tilt my head towards the ice cream pint and water. “I figured you might want the ice cream you claimed to be indulging in.”

She nods, her thoughts distant as she stares blankly at the tub while a drop

of condensation slides down the side to pool at the base on the table. I step forward, ready to retreat for the evening, and her wide gaze snaps back to me, a blast of fear coming from her, sour and itchy. Her eyes narrow, focusing on my chest, the fear disappearing as her brows draw together.

“Are you wearing my shirt?” Her voice is incredulous, which is an improvement over timid. “Is that my phone?”

I raise the cracked phone in question and make a show of studying it. “Is it? I don’t recall your phone being this model. As for the shirt, it seemed prudent and this was the only one within your closet which would fit.”

She snorts and strides forward, some of her confidence returning, and holds her hand out for the phone. I raise my brow but place it in her open palm. “That shirt is giant on me. I bought it because Niamh dragged me to a frat party where all the girls were wearing university tees as dresses. It makes a good pajama shirt, though.”

I snort in amusement, absolutely ignoring the desire to turn back time and remove the eyeballs of every man who saw her so scantily dressed. Now that the software is installed on Wren’s computer, it’s only a matter of time before I have everything I need to begin Oberon’s downfall. She’s served the primary purpose of our interactions, though as I watch her move from me and sink onto the cobalt blue couch, the color making her strawberry blonde hair richer, I surmise that it wouldn’t be prudent to take my leave of her life so quickly. I should ensure this part of my plan is completed successfully, which means spending more time with Wren.

She tries to power on the broken phone and with a sigh of disappointment, she drops it carelessly on the low table before grabbing the ice cream and spoon, ignoring the water completely. She brings her legs up on the couch, crossing them under her and cradles the ice cream in both hands. Wren brings her eyes to mine; the sour scent of fear is faint but there nonetheless.

“Are you leaving?”

I don’t allow my amusement to show at the change in tone. Her fire from moments before has dampened and now she looks once again uncertain. I slide my hands into my front pockets, and shrug. “Do you want me to leave?”

I’d told her before she showered that it’d be in her best interest to send me away and never allow me to see her again. It’s the truth; I am no good for her. For anyone. I’ve never hidden from my nature, my desires to control, consume, and ultimately destroy what I possess. Seeing Wren so vulnerable

does create a want to shelter her, but it's nothing compared to my desire to hurt her until she's crying, bleeding as I break her apart, to make her pain sing sweetly from those tempting lips of hers. The thought alone has my cock filling, my cold blood warming with lust.

If she wants me to leave, I will. It'd be best for the both of us.

"No," she says, never looking away from me as she unwittingly damns herself. "I don't really want to be alone right now."

I say nothing. I move to the couch and sink down on the opposite end, languidly laying my arm out over the top of it, crossing one ankle over my knee as I angle myself towards her. "Then I shall stay, Little Bird."

Wren ducks her head quickly before prying open the blue tub of chocolate confectionary ice cream before twisting to reach behind her for something on the side table. A moment later, she's aiming the remote towards her large television and glancing at me as she navigates the options. "Do you have a preference?"

Some vampires, or other long-lived creatures, feel the need to live up to a baseless image of intellectual superiority, which includes demeaning modern-day television. I, on the other hand, am confident enough in my superiority to appreciate what most call trash TV. But why ruin Wren's view of me so soon?

"I'll watch almost anything," I answer instead. "So long as it's not a history documentary, I'm fine with whatever you pick."

She snorts, looking aside at me before back at the screen, navigating through the options with a determination suggesting she's decided what we'll watch. "I can only imagine how frustrating watching those can be, if you lived through the period or event."

Relaxing a bit into the couch, I pay more attention to her than the show she's selected—other than that it's some cartoon. The best way to ensure someone allows you close enough to manipulate them to your own ends is to open up strategically yourself.

"For me, it is. For a peer of mine, Malachi, he enjoys making a mockery of it. He, Ashe, and Ashe's demon-possessed mate will sometimes put one on simply to shout or laugh at the narrators. Then again, Malachi's taste in television is somewhat questionable, as he adores reality television about dating or marriage. To my utter loathing, he, Deidre, and Eloise now have weekly viewing nights of a current show. Even my mother will watch with them some weeks."

I send her a languorous grin to show that there's little real heat behind the words. She's studying me, as if she has no idea what to make of me.

"A peer? Not a friend?"

I dismiss her questions with a careless wave. "I don't do friends."

She's quiet for a long moment. My chest constricts at the idea of upsetting her, and I quash the notion quickly. She snorts and shakes her head.

"I have so many questions and no energy to deal with it right now." Wren indicates the screen with the remote, hitting play at the same time. "This is Gravity Falls. It's a kids show, but I love it when I need something absurd but high quality. It's about these twelve-year-old twins staying with their great-uncle in Oregon for summer break, and all the crazy supernatural phenomenon that happens and no one else seems to notice."

I nod and do make a valiant effort in my opinion to focus on the show. Each time Wren moves in any way, my eyes are pulled to her, and I find my fangs tingling with desire to sink into the dewy flesh of her neck. To rip the spoon away from her mouth and replace it with my own. Her eyes glaze, the show's reflection in her eyes, her hair haloed by the table lamp behind her, and I'm struck by how fascinated I've become with her. For the previous year, when I was only observing her from a distance, she intrigued me. Rarely does a mark draw me in as she has, though.

Never has a mark's fear resonated within my own chest.

The primary distraction, however, is the growing scent of arousal. Warm and sweet, like winter honey, I'm surrounded by Wren's scent. Not just her arousal, but the distinct smell of her, permeating throughout her apartment. I'm practically salivating, and my cock has been at half mass since I'd thought of hurting her. Now she sits within reach, and I find myself holding back from dragging her under me. Stripping off those ridiculous pajama pants. Finding the cut and bruise I gave her that pushed her into orgasm. I want to dig my thumb into it, renewing the bruise and ensuring my mark never leaves her. I want her to scream in pain and bliss, my cock buried in her.

As if sensing my thoughts, the tension thickens in the air between us. She keeps shifting, stealing looks at me while trying to remain unnoticed. Her cheeks are flushed, even in the lighting from the television and her arousal continues to grow.

When the credits begin to roll, below a gnome vomiting a rainbow, I grab the remote and turn the episode off.

“Wha-?” Wren asks, her eyes wide with confusion and pupils blown wide with desire.

After returning the remote to its place, I slide over to her. She presses back into the corner of the couch, retreating by instinct even as the scent of her lust spikes along with her heartbeat. I study her freckles, a map of constellations that with enough time promise to reveal the truth of her. Her breath hitches when I drag a knuckle down her cheek, and then lower, over the rapid fluttering of her pulse in her neck.

Meeting her eyes, I keep my face blank. “You want something, Little Bird.” My words making her jump. “So, ask.”

Wren rolls her lips, wetting them with her tongue as she gathers her courage to ask whatever has been heating her blood for the past twenty minutes. She breaks my gaze, staring at my mouth, her eyes wary yet full of fire, before dragging herself back to look at me.

“Would... would you feed from me?” she asks, and I find myself stunned. Every instinct is demanding I bury my hand in her hair and sink my fangs into her. She continues to speak, to ramble really, when she mistakes my silence for rejection. “It’s silly, forget I asked. I’ve just always been so curious and when I’ve seen it at Noir, it just looks so...” she breaks off with an envious sigh and drops her gaze to her hands.

“Go on.” My voice is as dark as an approaching storm. It should warn her to seek shelter anywhere except for with me.

She looks up again, the recognition that I’m taking her quite seriously sparking relief in her. I sense it in the way her shoulders lower from where she’d bunched them, how her hands don’t grip one another so tightly.

“It looks as if, for that moment at least, the human is the center of the vampire’s world. It looks so intimate and even romantic.” I want to snort at that but I don’t want her to stop talking. Instead, I move my hand to grip her nape before stroking my thumb along the line of her jugular, coaxing her to continue. “I’m not a virgin, despite what my father believes. But I’ve never felt a strong connection between the guys I dated. I don’t even know why I’m telling you this. Maybe it’s because, for the first time tonight, when you defended me, I finally felt like I mattered to someone. That someone wanted to protect me.”

A miasma of emotions radiates from Wren as she spills her thoughts. How is it that this woman has never felt protected? Cherished? Has her father truly put so much pressure on her to leave her ripe for my tastes? For my

control?

I smile, softening my natural smirk and Wren's eyes brighten. It causes a strange ache in the cavity of my chest, an urge to make her always look so alive. To keep her aflame amidst my darkness.

Bringing up my other hand, I grip the arm of the couch behind her, leaning towards her to cage her in. There's nowhere left for her to move as I rise up to bring a knee onto the couch, tightening my grip on her neck. Arousal is pouring off of her and her eyes flutter closed as I lower my lips to brush over the siren call of her pulse.

"To feed can be such a sensual experience for both," I murmur against her skin, flicking my tongue out to steal a taste of her. One of her hands grips my shirt, neither pulling me closer or pushing me away. I hover there, maintaining the distance between us save for her throat. "Some of us prefer more brutality. To hunt you in the shadows..."

She gasps as I scrape my elongated fangs against her skin, not enough to break it. Not yet.

"To chase you through the dark."

I lick a line along the tendon of her neck towards her ear lobe.

"To pin you down, and take what we want. What we need."

I capture her ear lobe in my lips, sucking once and releasing her.

She's panting under me, her chest rising and falling in deep waves, her eyes squeezed shut and her head dipped back into the open air over the edge of the couch, as if in submission to me.

I force myself back, releasing her entirely and returning to my place on the opposite side of the couch. It takes her a moment but then she yanks her head up, her eyes flying open to find me, shock and irritation gripping her.

"You're not ready for that, Little Bird," I tell her before she can protest. "But I can smell how needy you are. If you truly want me to feed from you tonight, you must come to me."

Let it never be said I forced Wren.

She hesitates, smart that she is, but I sense the moment she becomes resolved. She rises, taking the two steps towards me and rather than sitting beside me, climbs into my lap and straddles me. Her hands, slight and graceful, hold onto my shoulders while her expression looks guarded, as if she is preparing to argue with me.

I slide a hand around her waist, dragging her closer and making sure she feels exactly how much I want her. A gentle mewl escapes her and she

captures her lower lip between her teeth.

“Good girl,” I say, cataloging her every reaction to that phrase. This time, my full smirk escapes me and when she notices, she huffs, but her irritation can’t overcome her arousal.

“So I’ve got daddy issues,” she grumbles, as if having to justify her desires. “And I like to be praised. Is that a crime?”

Ignoring her attempt at deflection, I tilt my head, considering her words. It’s a struggle to ignore her heat grinding down against my cock, but I’m too experienced to let that derail me entirely.

“Have you ever called a partner Daddy?” My curiosity seems to surprise her, her body going still as she takes the question seriously.

With a lift of a shoulder, she bares herself to me. “It always felt like something they’d take as a joke, honestly.”

A fierce satisfaction sinks its claws into my chest, a plan to achieve my goals as well as indulge myself in this unexpected craving for her coming together in that instant. I bring my other hand up to cup her jaw, holding her firmly enough she can’t look away but not enough to hurt her.

She said she’s never felt as protected as she did with me. It’s so clear that my little bird craves approval, craves the praise and adoration of a devoted lover. That she’ll do whatever she must to please me.

Keeping my touch on her face tender, I don’t bother masking my desire. “Do you want daddy to take care of you, baby girl?”

Chapter Thirteen

WREN

Oh, god.
Oh, *god*.

Landon's voice is sin and chocolate and everything I shouldn't crave as he asks me that. I've told him two of my most secret fantasies, things I've never even said aloud, and instead of mocking me, he's embracing them. It's as if this vampire, this man who claims to be a monster, can see the cage I've become trapped in and is letting me free.

He killed for me tonight. How can I not trust him with this? With my body?

"Yes, please," I admit, letting myself fall into the scene I've always craved. I lean closer, pressing my chest against him until our lips are only inches apart. His hand drops from my face to my thigh. "Please, Daddy."

I thought it'd be weird, actually saying the words, but Landon looks ready to devour me. My pajama bottoms are soaked through and I won't be surprised if I'm making a mess of his pants. This is like the hallway, all over again, except a thousand times more intense. My clit is throbbing already, and it won't take me much to get off. It makes me pull back, needing to reveal something else that makes me feel vulnerable in a different way. I have to spit it out to get it over with or I'll never tell him. Something tells me it won't be as easy to trick him as the guys in my past.

"I can't get off multiple times."

His brows rise, and shame sinks like an anchor in my stomach. Is he going to be disappointed with me? Dread creeps its icy fingers up my nape.

"You can't get off more than once, or is it that you haven't had a partner who is willing to put in the effort?"

His question washes away the dread, replacing it with the warmth I'm beginning to associate with Landon being close.

"Both, I think," I say after a moment of consideration. I'd be concerned that I'm ruining the moment, but I can still feel how hard he is under me and the fingers on my thigh are stroking me, keeping the liquid heat pooling in my stomach hot. "Even by myself, if I want a second orgasm, it takes a lot of effort. Usually a toy and porn."

My cheeks are red with my confession, but I'm twenty-nine and months away from my thirtieth birthday. I'm a grown-ass woman and masturbation isn't anything to be ashamed of. Niamh and I've talked about porn, and recommended toys to each other, but I've never been this candid with a lover. Landon is safe, though, and just like opening up about my desire to be fed from, to have a Daddy, telling him about my masturbation habits isn't weird or mood-ruining.

"I'll keep that in mind, baby girl," he answers, the spark of pride in his eyes sends a shiver of anticipation through me. "Thank you for telling me."

Landon is most definitely dangerous, but not in the way he warned me about. I'm swiftly realizing there is little I won't do to keep earning his praise. Not when it feels this delicious.

He slides his hand up my thigh, around my waist, to grab my ass before patting it once. "Now, I want you to take off these clothes so I can see you."

I scramble off of him almost as quickly as I'd climbed onto him. I'm too eager to put on a show, ripping my shirt up and over my head, not caring where it lands, then pushing my pajama pants down my legs, before toeing off my socks as I step out of the pants and kicking the pile to the side. Landon is watching me with a blend of desire and amusement, my skin burning from his perusal.

I know I'm not curvy, that one potential fling told me I was a carpenter's dream "flat and straight." It made me insecure at the time, but I've learned to love my body, small breasts and ass included. I'm tall, willowy, and strong enough to stand against my opponents in the boardroom. Freckles dust my shoulders, but I refuse to be ashamed of them in spite of them being unfashionable.

From his hungry gaze alone, my nipples become hardened peaks, my pussy even wetter, my arousal slicking the inside of my thighs now that I'm bare before him. There's no room for insecurity in the spotlight of Landon's attention, and when he leans back against the couch and casually grips then

adjusts his obvious erection, I want to preen and pose for him. In fact, I decide to.

“Like what you see, Daddy?” I run my fingers across the flat planes of my stomach, enjoying the rough pads from decades of cello playing. No amount of manicures will ever get rid of the calluses, and again I don’t care how unfashionable it is for a woman in the social elite of Newgate to have rough hands. I earned these calluses through decades of dedication to my favorite instrument. I refuse to lessen myself for the approval of strangers.

“You’re beautiful,” Landon says, his voice deeper and more rough than before. He pats his knee. “Come sit on my lap, Little Bird. I want to explore you.”

I turn, sitting on the knee he instructed and wrap an arm around his shoulder. The worn jersey material of his shirt and the smooth, cool fabric of his pants are practically abrasive to my sensitive skin. One of his arms wraps around my lower back, bracing me, though his hand goes to my outer thigh, coaxing me to spread my legs for him. With his other hand, he doesn’t make me wait, dipping two fingers between my folds near my entrance and dragging them upwards.

“You’re fucking soaked, baby girl.” The approval in his voice has my head dropping back, my eyes closing, as my heart beats faster. “Are you always this wet, or is this just for daddy?”

“You,” I whisper out, hips following Landon’s fingers as he continues to explore my pussy. He deftly avoids my clit and entrance, teasing me and dragging out the pleasure. I find myself doubly glad I told him about not being able to orgasm multiple times. It’d be so easy to give in and get myself off right now, but I don’t want it to be over yet.

Landon’s fingers leave me, my folds swollen and sensitive. I open my eyes, bringing my head back up, only to gasp out a broken moan when he spreads my slick across my sensitive nipples. With my free hand, I grip the edge of the couch cushion, arching my back to press my breasts into his hands, eager for more.

A huff of warm air, filled with dark mirth, washes across my shoulder and neck before he nips my neck with his lips. “So eager for me. So ready to be such a good girl.”

I nod, unashamed, hungry for exactly that. “Please,” I whine out, already reduced to a creature of pure need and desire. I arch my neck, baring my throat to him. The need to experience his fangs in me is visceral, all the way

down into my soul. “Bite me. Feed from me.”

He drags his nose along the line of my throat, and my eyelids flutter closed, unable to hold against the onslaught of sensations.

“How can I deny you when you beg so sweetly, baby girl?”

Landon gives me no other warning. On the heels of his words, twin sharp pinches burn in my throat—an agony intense enough to make me shout, my hand flying from the edge of the couch to his shoulder, fisting his shirt. Tears flood to my eyes, and it’s as if my entire being has been cast into molten lava. After a long, drawn-out heartbeat, the pain transforms into soul shuddering bliss and my shout becomes a wail. His hands hold me, one gripping my thigh, the other having risen at some point to fist my curls and keep me in place.

I cant my hips, humping the air as my pussy throbs in time with each long suck against my neck. Landon’s lips brand my neck, the rest of his body cool thanks to his vampiric nature. I’m thankful for it, else I fear I’d spontaneously combust.

My core begins to throb, clenching and fluttering, and I whimper. Shaking my head, I breathe out, “I’m so close. Please, not yet. I don’t want this to end.”

The tugging at my neck, the draining sensation disappears at once. The place he bit me aches, but he lavishes it with his tongue, soothing the pain.

“Oh, I’m not even close to being done with you, baby girl. You taste so fucking perfect,” Landon growls against my ear.

Dropping my hand between us, I grope for his erection, grinning when he groans as I stroke him through his pants. Turning my face towards him, I open my eyes just enough to see his. My stomach drops out from my body, plummeting the twelve floors to the earth below. His golden eyes are illuminated with desire, his pupils so wide the gold is only a bright ring.

“On your knees,” Landon orders and I melt off him, twisting to land on my knees between his splayed legs, bracing myself on his thighs. He leans forward, gripping my chin and running his thumb over my lips, eyes glinting when I capture it between my lips. “I’ve been dying to see your lips around my cock. But your lips are just as pretty around my fingers.”

He pulls his thumb from my lips only to replace them with the two fingers he’d teased me with, giving me no option except to take them into my mouth. His fingers are long enough I almost gag, but he pulls back right before I do. His eyes are glued to my lips, where he’s finger-fucking my

mouth, and when he brings a third finger to my lips, I open them, eager to keep him so pleased.

“Such a good girl,” he murmurs, and I swirl my tongue around his fingers, enjoying the taste of my pleasure blending with his skin. He presses further back, and naturally I pull away, not wanting to gag.

“No.” His hard voice makes me freeze, my eyes flying up to his. “Don’t move, baby girl. Relax your throat for daddy.”

My hands slide to his shins, holding on, but I try to do as he says. Holding his gaze, I focus on relaxing, on opening my throat like the magazine sex articles talked about. My eyes water, but it’s all worth it to see Landon’s expression as he presses his fingers deep into my mouth. Even when I gag, I force myself to stay still and not pull away, the tears spilling down my cheeks.

“Such a good, good fucking girl for me,” he practically snarls, and I fucking moan even when he pulls back and thrusts back in, gagging me again. When I think he’s about to push me too far, he pulls back, drawing his fingers completely out of my mouth. He doesn’t bother wiping them clean before undoing his belt and fly, reaching in to free his cock from his pants.

I’ve never cared for cocks, really. They all seem to look fragile and awkward, but I should have expected Landon’s to defy all of expectations. When hasn’t he? Long and uncut, the glans half exposed from how hard he is, a drop of precum tempting me to get my own taste. He strokes himself lazily, an arrogant expression on his face.

He inclines his head towards it. “Will you let me fuck your mouth, baby girl?”

I’m entranced by his strokes, lick my lips eagerly while nodding and lean forward. He stops me though, rising to his feet, and I have to lean backwards so he doesn’t knock me over. But he grabs my hair with his free hand, wrapping it around his fist and holding my head still despite the awkward angle making my thighs burn. I grip the back of his thighs, splaying my knees wider to try to stabilize myself, since this is the position he clearly wants me in.

Landon drags his cock over my lips, his grip forcing my face upwards to see the harsh look on his face. My heart skips at his expression; it’s so similar to the one he wore when he first found me trapped by the troll.

I open my mouth, sticking out my tongue and he hisses as I lick his sensitive head. He doesn’t tease me anymore, pushing into my waiting mouth

with a groan that I match. His taste is musky but clean, and he throbs against my tongue as I take every inch. When he reaches the back of my throat, I start to gag, my fingers digging into the backs of his thighs, my scalp burning from where he tightens his hold to keep me in place. I force myself to stare up at him, making my throat relax and fight the urge to keep gagging.

Maybe in the dark of the night, when I'm all alone, I'll reflect on what it says about me that all of this discomfort is turning me on so much I feel it down my thighs.

When he pushes the final inch, my nose buried in his neat curls as his cock slides into my throat, I swear a mini-orgasm strikes when he smiles down at me.

“So beautiful, just like I thought, baby girl,” he coos and I feel myself smiling as much as his cock lets me, so fucking happy from his praise. He swipes a tear from my cheek, bringing it up to his blood-tinted lips, licking it with relish. “I could get addicted to your tears.”

I hum around him, the burn in my thighs, throat, at the back of my head, every little pain becomes sheer bliss at his words. Holding absolutely still, I'm obsessed with watching every minor change in his face as he pulls out of my mouth only to push back in, past the urge to gag and into my throat, choking me a little bit more. If it means learning how to hold my breath forever, I'll do it for him.

I'll do it for Daddy.

Landon fucks my mouth, his lips twisted in a snarl, and I'm becoming a mess. Tears pour from my eyes, snot and spit coat my face from how my body reacts to his unrelenting thrusts, and I'm so damn wet, my pussy throbbing, I have to be leaving a puddle on my floor.

When it becomes too much, I let go of his thigh, needing to touch myself, desperate to come. Before I can make it further than my stomach, Landon pulls his cock free of my mouth, leaving me choking and gasping for breath.

“That's mine,” he snarls as he bends over at the waist and hooks his elbows under my arms, hauling me up. He spins us around, tossing me on my back along the couch and falling on top of me. His cock slides against my oversensitive folds and I moan hoarsely, nothing but a primitive creature at this point. All I care about is how empty I feel, how amazing Landon's weight is on top of me, and how much I want him to fuck me.

As if reading my mind, he angles his hips, sliding a hand between us to guide his cock to my entrance. My legs are gelatin, one pinned against the

back of the couch by him, the other splayed out, foot on the floor. The moment he's lined up, he slams into me with a punishing thrust and snarl.

I think I scream, but I'm not entirely certain. I'm spiraling, he's stretching me and it hurts so perfectly. I have to reach back and grip the arm of the chair, arching my back as each powerful thrust unravels my mind further. His hands grip my hips as he sits up, lifting my ass completely off the couch until I'm only on my shoulders. He's making me damn cock-drunk, something I'd only ever read about and never experienced.

Forcing my eyes to stay open, I see how his visage turns bestial, uncontrolled like the monster he claims to be. It only turns me on more, eager to feel the monster's claws tear into me. Each of his thrusts hits my needy clit but I know what I need to send me over the edge. Something he's already given me, something only the deepest, darkest part of me has ever admitted.

Licking my dry lips, I beg, beg for what I want from Landon.

"Hurt me, Daddy." I don't recognize my own voice, not after submitting wholly to him and the desires he promises to fulfill. "I need—I need—"

A blood-chilling snarl rends the air from above me and I answer with a moan. Landon's baring his fangs, his face twisted into a wicked countenance. He drops my hips, following me to the couch. One of his hands wraps around my throat, his fingers digging into me as he cuts my air off completely. My eyes burn and my chest screams with the need to breathe, and it's still not enough.

"Daddy," I barely manage to croak out.

Landon arches down, pressing his mouth against my ear, and rakes his nails—somehow sharper now—along the inside of my thighs, grinding against my clit with each deep thrust.

"Come for me, Little Bird." His voice is sheer violence. "Come on daddy's cock like a good girl."

His nails bite into me again and I'm lost, my vision going spotty. My orgasm unleashes, and he releases my throat, oxygen flooding my veins alongside my twisted, pained pleasure, making my entire body convulse and shudder. I can't even make a sound, gasping as I'm entirely under the control of my orgasm.

Landon roars above me, pulling himself free but I'm too gone to protest. Hot ropes of his cum streak across my breast and stomach, as if he's staking his claim and it drags out the aftershocks of my orgasm. My eyes close, the world going black around me, as I struggle to string a single thought together.

Time becomes lost to me. One moment I'm a wrung-out human puddle under Landon, another moment I'm being carried into my bedroom, then a warm cloth tends to me, and I ache to drag him next to me, to curl up in his arms again. Whether or not I'm able to communicate that, I find myself tucked in under my blankets, wrapped up in him with my face buried in his neck.

A single clear thought takes hold of me before the void of sleep overwhelms me.

I want to stay like this forever.

Chapter Fourteen

WREN

“M s. Foster?”

I jolt, sitting upright in my office chair, and look towards the woman across my desk. From the delicate pout on her perfectly made-up lips, it's not the first time she called my name. Miles sits next to her, attention on his phone in front of him and I bite the inside of my cheek to prevent sighing at the unwelcome reminder of my reality.

“I'm sorry, Lacey. What would you suggest? You're the wedding planner after all.”

Lacey arrived at my office over an hour ago now with eyes full of hearts and a sunny disposition that has yet to wane in spite of my lack of interest. When Miles arrived, she took his half-assed comments in stride, apparently used to the groom-to-be's disinterest. But the bubbly blonde isn't as used to the bride's lack of care, and I think I'm finally getting to her.

She nudges the binder closer to me, fabric swatches in various shades of pink paired with complementary greens. “Surely you have a favorite? Victorian rose garden is the theme of the season, and with your budget, your wedding will be the event of Newgate.”

I give the colors a thin smile, barely concealing my distaste. Is she serious? Even if those are the most fashionable colors right now, they're going to make me look washed out and horrible.

“I prefer a classic look,” I say at last, pushing the binder back towards her. Her blue eyes go wide at my protest. “Whites and silvers. Simple.”

Miles snorts, and my eyes shoot to him. He's tucking his phone into his jacket pocket and eyeing me skeptically.

“We will not be having a boring wedding, darling.” He turns to Lacey,

and graces her with a charming smile that has her blushing prettily and I hold back a scoff. He'd fuck her in the elevator if he could, I'm sure.

The thought freezes me. I've never been this callous or crude towards him, even in the privacy of my thoughts.

"Lacey, why don't you leave this binder with us and I'll make sure my fiancée makes every selection you need. Then we can meet again for, say, lunch, this weekend, to go over it?"

He stands, offering her a hand up which she accepts with a blustering thanks. As he escorts her to my office door, I flip the offending wedding planning binder closed and turn to my computer, pulling up my emails. I've spent the morning lost in memories of two nights ago—as I did yesterday too. Which means I'm behind on projects which need my attention, projects I refuse to let falter just because I'll be expected to give up my position after my sham of a wedding.

I scroll to the oldest unread email and click it, scanning it and absolutely refusing to think about the ache in my thighs from Landon's marks. Or how I'm constantly wet now, because any time I move my legs, the twinges of pain remind me of the sheer bliss Landon gave me.

"What the hell is going on with you, Wren?"

"Excuse me?" I don't bother looking at Miles, who's come to stand in front of my desk again. I type out a quick response to the email and open the next.

"With the wedding planner. I expect you to take some interest in it."

This time I let myself snort and twist in my chair to face him, and lean back, crossing one knee over the other. "And why would you expect me to take interest in planning a wedding that I have no interest in?"

Miles' face dapples with red, marring his perfect rich playboy appearance. Really, he is a conventionally attractive man, and I can understand why Lacey was so charmed by him. But he's so... plain. There's nothing special about him. I don't even understand how he's worked his way up to be so vital to my father.

"This is a very important—"

I hold up my hand. "Let me stop you right there." He sputters, his face growing more red as he's confronted with the same expression I give every other too self-important man I've faced down in my career.

I stand up, bracing myself by flattening both hands on my desk and looking him square in the eye, ignoring the bite of the awful engagement ring

on my left hand.

“This wedding is nothing more than a deal between you and my father. There is nothing between us, and I have no interest in there ever being anything between us beyond mutual respect. We will be married in name only, and if I can avoid being legally married to you, I promise you—I am looking into that.” A shadow overcomes Miles’ eyes and he mirrors me, posting up on the other side of my desk, meeting my glare with one of his own. Finally I’m seeing a hint of a personality from him.

“Oh, we will be legally married, Wren. And it will be a real marriage. You will be my wife and you will be having my children, and everyone in this city will think it’s wonderful how much you adore me.”

I narrow my eyes, my lip curling slightly. The idea of sleeping with Miles revolts me. A month ago, when I theorized this possibility to Niamh, I didn’t care one way or another. Suggesting I could simply lie back and think of my favorite book scene, but now? After Landon destroying and remaking my entire world? Even the idea of letting this man kiss me at the altar makes me recoil.

“If I must have children, there’s artificial insemination,” I spit out. “I’m more than wealthy enough to afford it. You will not be touching me.”

Miles stares hard, his eyes dark and his sharp jaw clenched with irritation. I don’t back down though, even as I struggle not to vibrate with anger. If I back down, he’ll think he’s won, and he will never win. I’ll never submit to him.

He shoves off my desk, straightening and squaring his shoulders as if he’s a linebacker readying for a play. He won’t be taking me down though. He tugs the bottom of his suit jacket, and with a sniff, gives me a cruel, knowing look.

“We’ll see about that,” he tells me, his voice suddenly full of arrogance. “I’m meeting with your father this evening. I’m sure he’ll be interested in hearing how eager you have been to plan our wedding. He’s already been extending invitations to most of the Newgate council members.”

I bare my teeth in a fierce semblance of a smile, refusing to be intimidated even if a swirl of sour sickness is dripping down my throat into my stomach.

“You do that,” I tell him, making my voice super saccharine. “Make sure to take your lips off his cock so he can understand you first.”

Miles recoils at my crude words and storms from the office, slamming my

door hard enough to bounce open again. I straighten, seething through clenched teeth as I struggle to calm my breathing. Turning from my desk, I face the large window looking out towards Newgate and press a hand to my forehead. I can't believe I said that.

"Uh... Wren?"

I look over my shoulder. My assistant, Raul, is peeking his head through the door.

"Is everything okay?" he asks when he's got my attention, and I let out the sigh I've been holding in since he let me know Lacey had arrived. No, everything is decidedly not okay. Why is that? I can blame my father all I want, but ultimately it's my fault. I'm the one who has let Oberon dictate so much of my life. I shake my head and turn back to my desk, hurrying to collect my things. Then I start laughing, unable to stop it.

When I look up again, handbag slung over my shoulder, and slide off the engagement ring, Raul is grinning. He congratulated me when the engagement was first announced, but he was also the only one who expressed confusion. He knew I wasn't seeing anyone, especially not Miles, but he also knows how my father is.

"It's going to be," I announce, and stride towards him. He falls back out of the doorway as I leave the office and close the door behind me. "Reschedule the rest of my day. Let Simon know to meet me in the garage. There's something I need to talk to my father about, immediately."

He falls in step with me to the elevator bay, a damn cheerful expression on his face and I can't rebuke him for the life of me. Not when I'm grinning the same exact way.

"Can I go out on a limb and say that one of those meetings I don't need to reschedule is with the wedding planner?"

The elevator door slides open, a couple of bored-looking people already on it, and I step in, turning on my heel. Meeting his eyes, I answer with a large grin. "Nope." The P pops unbecomingly but I don't care, and Raul gives me two thumbs-up as the doors slide closed. I pull out my phone, shooting a text to Niamh telling her of my plans.

I'm not so naive to think that one night with Landon has changed me so much to make me finally tired of trying to please my father, but it certainly helped. Since I woke up, even though I was alone, I've felt fully in my skin. As if confessing my deepest desires to someone who then accepted them without hesitation or judgment even though I didn't fully understand them

myself has let me begin to shed the need to please my father. For my entire life, it always felt like it was just him and me. That I needed him and he needed me.

And right now? As I walk out of the elevator and into the parking garage towards the town car where Simon waits, I don't feel like I need him.

"Good afternoon, Wren," Simon greets with a smile as he opens the door for me and the smile I give him is brilliant.

"It is one, isn't it?" I ask, sliding into the seat and buckling myself in while he closes the door behind me. My phone goes off, and I slide it out, grinning at Niamh's emoji-filled response. When Simon returns to his seat, I confirm that I need to go to my father's penthouse—it being one of the days he works from home. Usually that means he has a new relic being delivered that he wishes to inspect personally, and no one else will dare interrupt him at home. Not even Miles, I think with a savage grin.

Miles can threaten me with my overly domineering father all he wants, but I'm done being the perfect little daughter for Oberon.

Halfway to the high-rise my father lives in, my phone vibrates again. Lust courses through me at Landon's name on the lock screen and I surreptitiously look at Simon, whose focus is on the road ahead of us. It's not as if he could see whatever Landon's message is anyways, seeing as his back is to me, but there's something exciting about holding my phone closer to my chest as I unlock it.

My cheeks become pure fire even as I squirm in the seat.

It's a picture message, more specifically of Lan's lap. He's sitting in his own office chair, wearing black slacks, and enough of his torso is showing that I can see he's wearing a white shirt under a black vest, but that's not the only reason why my mouth is going dry even as my nipples turn hard as marble in my lace bra. His legs are casually spread, but rather than disguise, his pose highlights the massive bulge in his pants, and yet... even that isn't what has my stomach doing somersaults.

It's my thong draped between two of his fingers; the one he stole after getting me off at the restaurant.

How's my baby girl doing today?

Is it possible to orgasm from a text message alone? Because I swear I'm on the verge of coming. I can hear him saying that in my ear, and it makes me want to purr and rub up against him.

Glancing out of the window to gauge how close we are to my father's

building, I bite my lower lip as my thumbs hover over the keyboard while I consider what to reply. I'm wearing a high-waisted pencil skirt today, I can't send him the type of photo I really want to.

Eying a focused Simon again, I can manage something if I'm quick. I ruck my skirt up to the top of my thighs and spread my legs as far as the constricting fabric lets me. I pull up the camera, and pose my fingers next to the bruise barely visible from this angle. Clicking the picture, I right my skirt. I attach it to a message and hit send before I doubt myself, both impressed and embarrassed at my audacity.

Missing her Daddy's cock.

I've never texted anyone like this, and it's crazy how turned on this is making me.

It sends while Simon pulls into the building's parking garage and turns towards the elevator in the center of the complex. We've done this enough times to know the routine. He drops me off and pulls into one of the Benoit reserved spaces, where he will wait until I am either ready to leave or let him know that he is free to go until I need a ride later. We pay him well enough to be on call twenty-four-seven, and he's assured me I'm an enjoyable client to work for.

I wave him away as he makes to get out of the car, letting myself out. He rolls down the window and I grip my bag with one hand and my phone in the other as I tilt down lower to his level.

"I'm hoping it won't take too long," I tell him, then lift a single shoulder. "But he's not going to like what I have to say, so I'll try to give you a heads-up if it's looking to be a battle."

Simon, with sympathetic understanding in his eyes, reaches out and pats my arm affectionately. "I'll be here. When you're done, maybe we'll go to that pub Kell's again. Your friend has good taste."

I toss my head back with laughter, the sound echoing through the concrete parking area and nod. "Yeah, if it goes bad enough, a burger and beer might just be in order. I'll let you know."

He pulls away as I head into the elevator and I, strangely, don't feel the need to rehearse my arguments on the way up. I'm not marrying Miles; no matter what my father wants. If he wants Miles in the family so badly, he can marry him. Gay marriage is legal, after all.

Niamh once asked me if I was hurt that Oberon seemed to prefer Miles to have more control over Benoit Tech than me, but honestly it's never been a

dream of mine to take over when my father steps down.

I work for the company because of the opportunities it provides me to achieve my own goals, helping those in need of advanced technology. I've even interviewed at other companies but never accepted an offer because, when it came down to it, they didn't have the same reach that Benoit Tech does. I know a part of that is because I'm the daughter of the CFO and my father's name will open doors otherwise locked shut.

Another part has always been wanting to stay close to my father, because it has been us against the world for so long. I know my father loves me, even if he's become distant over the years as I've grown older. Even if I'm new to this feeling that I don't need him anymore, I still feel as if he needs me.

The elevator opens directly into my father's penthouse, its access restricted without a key, and the doors open to the chords of Chopin. Oberon only listens to the Polish composer when he's especially satisfied with whichever relic he's recently acquired. It settles me as I stroll into the foyer and drop my bag onto the entrance table and head in search of my father.

Unlike the spartan design of his office, his penthouse is lavishly decorated. Though the color scheme is still his preferred neutral tones of whites, creams, and beiges, it doesn't detract from the opulence he surrounds himself with. Where I prefer an overstuffed cobalt blue couch with bohemian vibes, my father prefers a cream loveseat and matching Windsor chairs. A single bolster pillow in matching fabric sits in the center of the couch, and not a single divot in any of the furniture suggests it's actually used. I've wondered if he lived like this when my mother was alive, or if she insisted on something less pristine.

I bypass the living room and don't bother looking towards the kitchen. I've never seen my father cook a day in my life. Instead I walk down the white-painted halls with expensive artwork in silver frames towards his relic room. Before we moved to Newgate, it would have been the largest room in our home, but ever since he decided to open Demencius Antiquities, he's downsized. In spite of having the showroom's workshop, Oberon prefers to receive and inspect any purchases here in his custom-designed work space.

The door is open and I pause in the doorway, taking my father in. It's rare to see him so casually dressed, though many wouldn't consider slacks and a polo casual. For my father, someone who never wears anything less than a three-piece suit outside of the house, it's the equivalent of sweats and a tee. I'm wrong, in that he has a recent purchase, as the relic on his table is the one

I have the oldest memories of. Its technical classification is a chalice, with its carved foot, and believed use in rituals. I've never seen anything like it, and my father once told me it is one of its kind and there were no others created to match. It's a single piece of obsidian, mined from eastern Turkey, and from what my father has said, is over six hundred years old.

As a child, it was the only thing I was ever jealous of. If I had to say there was one thing my father would choose over me in this world, it would be this chalice with no name.

"Father," I say, and clear my throat. He looks up from where he's carefully polishing the delicate stem, his brows rising at my presence. I incline my head towards the chalice, asking a question that's burned at the back of my mind for months now. "Do you plan to display that at the opening of the gallery?"

"No." His tone is as abrupt as a cliff's edge and it takes me aback. He drops the polishing rag on the worktable and lays the chalice in its custom-made protective case, taking the time to close and latch it, then secure it with the biometric lock before looking up at me again. "Why are you here, Wren? Is there a problem at the office?"

Nerves creep out from behind my steel spine now that I'm in his direct gaze. I don't doubt I'm doing the right thing by refusing to marry Miles, but I know Oberon will be incredibly disappointed with me. I can't recall the last time I directly disobeyed my father like this.

"I'm not going to marry Miles," I say, standing firm.

He picks up the case with the chalice and carries it to the safe set in the wall, the door halfway open. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course you are marrying him."

Irritation bubbles up within me and I take a step into the room, crossing my arms. "Why? Because you say so?" I shake my head, hating how he continues his task as if this is a trivial discussion. "I've done everything you've ever asked, Father. But I cannot, will not, do this. You can't make me."

I watch him, waiting for any reaction, heart in my throat. But he keeps his back to me as he locks up the safe where his precious relic lives and only when he's satisfied it's once again secure, does he turn back to face me. My heart plummets to my feet, my resolve cracking. He's wearing an expression I'm all too familiar with. The expression that means he will not be argued with, that he will not accept anything less than what he demands.

He strides up to me, and I stiffen while he cradles me to his chest. Once, I loved to be held by him like this. He's so much larger than the world that when he hugged me like this, I felt like nothing could ever hurt me. Now it's as if he's the one hurting me. My eyes fall closed, tears lining them, before he even begins to speak.

“You will be marrying Miles, my daughter. Even if I have to drag you down the aisle myself.”

Chapter Fifteen

LAN

A restlessness has consumed me since leaving Wren's side two nights ago. I've forced myself to maintain the distance I've kept since I first began observing her, confining myself to the clan house in the Barrows. Unfortunately, that means subjecting myself to the presence of others. With Ambrose and Kasar mated, both males tend to dine more frequently at the formal table with their mates, which delights my mother, Joséphine. With their increased attendance, though, comes my mother's increased insistence the rest of us—specifically me—participate as well.

My mother has run Ambrose's household since she was a human, and despite his insistence that he can hire others for the position, she refuses to step down. It used to anger me, how she bowed to him as a servant. Over the centuries, I've come to accept that while Ambrose is a king outside of these walls, my mother is the queen within who even he must obey. It's rather satisfying to see that the all-powerful Ambrose d'Vil, vampire king of the Barrows, leader of the Nightshades, get his fingers slapped with a wooden spoon by my mother.

Joséphine is an elegant woman, not having been turned until her late fifties, and despite the difficulties of her mortal life, she'd been rather healthy up until the end. As she strides into the dining room, a plate in each hand, the only warm affection I've felt for centuries takes hold of my heart. Her golden eyes meet mine, genuine care in them, and I will never not miss the warm walnut browns from my childhood.

"You're late," Ambrose informs me from the head of the table. He isn't even looking at me, instead focusing on the tablet to his left. It's a rare day when my mother allows any of us to work while we eat, our sire included. I

roll my eyes, but say nothing, choosing to sit halfway down the table next to Malachi.

The entire inner circle is here. Kasar sits to Ambrose's left, while Eloise sits to his right, on the other side of Malachi. Deidre, Kasar's human-but-altered mate sits beside the enforcer, watching me with a frank assessment and slight smirk. Ashe is beside her, directly across from her. My mother sits next to me on my right, setting one of the two plates in front of me.

"Thank you, Matka," I tell her, pressing a kiss to her cheek before directing my attention to my sire. "Apologies. I didn't want to be here."

Ambrose's eyes look up at me through his lashes, his displeasure plain. Deidre and Eloise both fail to cover their snorts, and even Malachi shifts next to me.

"Regardless," Ambrose says, looking away from the tablet and giving the table his complete attention, ignoring the plate of food in front of him. "Now that you're here, I can get to business."

In direct contrast to Ambrose's ignoring of the food my mother either prepared herself or ordered prepared, I make a point of eating it with enjoyment. Joséphine has spent her centuries on this earth mastering multiple styles of cuisines and we've reaped the benefits. Simply because we are vampires does not mean we do not need to eat as mortals do.

Only true Children of the Night are able to sustain themselves on blood alone. As for the rest of us, those who were once mortal, we still need to eat food along with blood. In fact, there are those like my mother who feed on human blood only as much as is required to avoid falling into a sort of coma. When a vampire must be punished and death is thought too good, they are bound in chains and entombed, starved of blood and left to linger in a state of half-life.

It is what Ambrose and Kasar did to their sire, who was a true Child of the Night—a goddess-made creature who was never human.

Today is baked salmon and pears with balsamic vinaigrette over a fresh basil and couscous garlic salad. As I squeeze the lemon wedge over it, my thoughts go to Wren and how I'd like to feed her such a dish...preferably with her tied up to a chair and naked. The photo included with her reply to the text I'd sent while walking down from my room tests my control, as it's the primary reason I have no desire to be in the room at the moment. I'd much rather be encouraging my little bird to dive into the darkness I'm delighted to be within her.

“Malachi has submitted his plans to open a restaurant and burlesque show venue in Topside. I’ve a mind to agree, unless any of you can think of a pressing reason that advancing the Nightshade business beyond the Barrows is inadvisable at this time?”

Ambrose looks to me, his brows narrowed, and the rest of the table follows suit. I chew slowly, setting my fork down, and reach for the glass of white wine chosen to accompany lunch today. After taking a sip, I return the stare of my sire.

“Should I have a reason to protest?”

Ambrose threads his fingers together, resting his elbows on the table, but doesn’t quite set his chin on his knuckles. “You’ve been spending an inordinate amount of time Topside. Malachi has been covering Lush more frequently for the past year while you pursue a personal matter. It’s come to my attention that the personal matter directly involves Wren Foster, the daughter of Oberon Benoit. It is my duty, as the head of the Nightshade vampires, and king of the Barrows, to make certain that no personal matters negatively impact our business.”

“Yes,” I droll out, gesturing towards him idly. “Because you’re so impartial yourself when it comes to personal versus clan business.”

“Landon,” my mother warns me softly, but I ignore her. The moment Wren’s name fell from Ambrose’s lips, my senses sharpened. He would not have brought her up specifically without reason.

Ambrose’s lips dip into a frown, his brows pinching together, and the rest of the vampires continue to eat as if our sire may not decide to spill my blood in a moment. After all, conflict between the two of us is not new. However, Eloise and Deidre watch our exchange with obvious fascination.

“You are always so ready to fight,” he says, shaking his head with slight exasperation. He opens his hands, as if displaying the space between us. “What issue do you take with me today? It can’t be the fact that I turned your mother centuries ago. Nor that I gave her permission to turn you. Or is it that you wish to challenge me again, to make me pay in blood for some harm I have done you?”

I say nothing, gritting my teeth. I’m aware Ambrose has done little to provoke me this time, but after so long, it’s become a habit to quarrel with him.

He shakes his head once more. “I’m done with this childishness of yours, Landon.” His tone changes, and his eyes grow hard, before looking long at

my mother, who sits beside me. I stiffen, lifting my chin, and brace for his next words. “I found myself curious as to your interest in Wren Foster, and more importantly Oberon Benoit.”

No. Ice-cold dread fills my veins. Why had I not suspected Ambrose would eventually go seeking answers?

I refuse to say anything, clenching my jaw to hold the words back. I won't look away either, not even when the prickle of my mother's curious gaze trails along my nape.

“Why did you not feel it pertinent to share with me that Jurgis Demencius was still alive and went by the name Oberon Benoit?”

My mother whispers a prayer to saints she only reaches out to in extreme situations. Now everyone looks at me, each vampire with their own thoughts clear on their faces while the human women are confused. The inner circle of the Nightshades know who he is to me, having already been a part of our clan in Kasar's and Ashe's cases— or having heard my story in Malachi's case.

I make a point to reach for my wine glass and take a shallow swallow before then picking up my fork and knife and spearing a piece of perfectly cooked salmon.

“Because this is a personal matter,” I reply, my control steel-clad and absolute as I look away from my sire. A chime follows my words, originating from my phone in my pocket. A very specific sound and perverse satisfaction fills my stomach better than the meal ever could. My lips twist upwards as I raise the salmon to my lips, speaking first. “Wren is an access point to Oberon. One that has now been successfully implemented.”

The bite of salmon is all the more delicious for the knowledge that Wren is at her father's and the worm I installed on her personal devices burrowed its way into Oberon's private network. A less patient man would be eager to run from the table and begin the next step in orchestrating Oberon's downfall, but I want to linger with this delight. Jurgis, Oberon, no matter the name he goes by, will suffer watching his empire crumble under him, helpless to stop it. He will know, at the end, exactly who I am and why I did it.

I smile at the table, practically fucking giddy enough to laugh, but restrain myself. My mother reaches a hand towards me but draws back and I lean against the chair, reaching over to squeeze her shoulder affectionately.

“I will say this, Landon, and you will listen to me,” Ambrose says, his voice firm and I release a sigh, rolling my head towards him reluctantly. Can't he let a man bask in satisfaction for more than thirty seconds?

“If you’re going to reprimand—”

He raises his hand and I stop, barely keeping from rolling my eyes. Only the good mood inspired by my plans advancing keeps me from antagonizing the man who leads the vampire clan.

“In spite of our contentious history, you are a Nightshade and of my blood. We protect our own and we did not the night you went on that mission, regardless if you desired my influence or not.”

I furrow my brows, intrigued in spite of my instinct to deny Ambrose’s assumption of responsibility for the injury I received that night. He has never spoken so plainly about it before, not that I would have appreciated it. Not that I appreciate it now.

Ambrose leans back in his chair, his hands flat on the table, shoulders square and looking every inch the king our kind has proclaimed him to be.

“You began this on your own, but you do not have to complete it on your own, Lan,” he declares. “We will help however you see fit.”

Kasar nods once, sharply, while Ashe gives me a determined chin lift. Malachi reaches over, gripping the back of my neck before I can pull away, squeezing in support.

“We are brothers,” Malachi says, letting go. “Even if we annoy the fuck out of each other. This man ruined your human life. He hurt Mama Joséphine. That’s all I need to know to stand at your side. Just tell me when and where you need me.”

I snort, jerking away from him, and he lets me go. I set the fork and knife down, abandoning the luncheon and steeple my fingers. “Even if what I need is all of you to fuck off?”

Ashe rolls his eyes and Kasar huffs, shaking his head while Deidre laughs. Eloise leans forward and throws a crouton at me.

“Just say thank you, jackass,” she admonishes, but I see the amusement in her eyes.

A strange sensation twists and ropes through my chest, one I haven’t felt since the days before that eventful night in the wilderness of the Russian border with Sergi and my other soldiers. A small part of me—a very, extremely miniscule part—wonders how it’s possible that these people still consider me one of their own after how clear I’ve made my own opinions of my position within the clan.

Clearing my throat, I ignore that part of me and return to Ambrose’s question from earlier. Looking towards Malachi, I give him a nod.

“Have you narrowed down the locations of where you’d open the lounge? The last you spoke of it, you’d only had a general idea.” The topic switches to Malachi’s plans for his burlesque lounge readily, my business regarding Oberon dropped for now. My mother, Eloise, and Deidre excuse themselves to their own work, leaving us to debate the merits of Topside districts.

With the new council member, Michael Garner, under Ambrose’s compulsion—a rare ability only some of the oldest, more powerful vampires have, Ambrose has given the Nightshades the clear to move forward into expanding our reach out of the Barrows and more firmly into Topside. While the city is our unofficial territory, the Rapture leak and Michael Garner’s attempt, with the help of the prominent Holland family, to establish their own crime syndicate north of the river revealed the time had come for the Nightshades to expand.

For almost two centuries, we have controlled Oldgate, back when it was little more than a small seaport in a growing country, but for many reasons, we have kept our businesses within the old borders. First, it was to protect the supernaturals who looked to us for safety from the humans that refused to acknowledge the truth of our existence, then it was to give them employment, acceptance, and a community in a world that continued to grow more hostile to our kind.

Now a majority of humanity believes vampires like us are nothing more than figments of imagination, only found in books or television.

The brain fascinates me when I consider how much effort it must take to convince itself of such beliefs.

We move on from discussing potential locations, with Malachi settling between either Pearl District—a liberal, artistic, and cultural focused area, and the more potentially lucrative Trade District, where many high-end restaurants already cater to the multi-million-dollar corporations occupying the numerous high-rises making up the center of Topside.

My phone rings, a not uncommon occurrence, but the ringtone is one that has me going on alert and standing from the table. Ambrose, Kasar, Ashe, and Malachi all look at me, their eyes hard and jaws tight as I answer.

“Little Bird?”

I don’t look at them. I know I couldn’t keep the true concern out of my voice. Why is she calling me in the middle of the day?

Her breath is unsteady and I’m about to bite out her name when, finally, she answers.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice is hoarse and choked, as if she’s trying not to cry, and an irrational anger fills me. “I—just. I just needed to get away from him. Can I come over? Oh, god, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t just invite myself to—”

“Where are you?”

Ashe is rising, all of them able to hear her on the phone. Ambrose nods to me and for once I don’t feel the typical resentment at the dismissal and return the gesture before following Ashe towards the underground parking garage.

I can hear cars and people in the background, but nothing identifiable enough to pinpoint her location.

“Uh,” she trails off, breathing out a half-hysterical laugh. “Shit, I don’t even know. I just dropped a pin somewhere in Oldgate without looking and I’ve been walking around since. Oh, there’s a coffee shop at the corner called Black Death Beanery. Kinda morbid, if you ask me.”

I look at Ashe as we stride through the door into the garage and towards the Mercedes-Benz S-Class he prefers.

“She’s at Darcelle’s,” I tell him as he unlocks the car and he nods. The coffee shop is witch-owned and operated, and also a favorite of Eris’s—the chaos demon who has been possessing the body of Ashe’s wife for almost a hundred and fifty years now. She once said it was because of the proximity to where she lives, above the nondescript brick building that the drug we create and control Rapture is produced at. But Eris once stopped an attempted robbery when one of the gunman turned his weapon on Darcelle herself, and the demon does nothing out of the kindness of her heart, which means I’m convinced Eris actually likes Darcelle.

“Go inside there and wait,” I instruct Wren, biting back the urge to scold her for blindly going into the Barrows after what happened last time. “Get a drink, and something to eat, Little Bird. Tell them to put it on Landon’s tab. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” I get into the front seat, closing the door and then growl into the phone. “And don’t move that ass of yours, or I’ll bend you over my knee and turn it red.”

Chapter Sixteen

WREN

I'd left my father's building in a bleary-eyed haze. On autopilot, I'd informed Simon I didn't need him, the lie of remaining at my father's coming too easily, then I'd ordered a rideshare as I left the building, not even caring where I asked to be taken. I just knew I couldn't stay in Newgate, and the Barrows had Landon.

It should terrify me how quickly I'm becoming attached to the vampire. I've avoided any meaningful relationships, knowing there was never any future in them. Anyone who expressed interest in me wanted my connections more than they wanted me, and I learned quickly enough to never let them get close. One time was all it took.

Landon defies my boundaries, my walls I've perfected to keep my heart safe. The walls that let me endure Oberon's increasingly high expectations and demands. It's all too clear, now, that the walls kept most of the pain out but has allowed me to be buried alive.

When sense began to clear the haze, I'd called the only person I really wanted to see. I probably should have called Niamh, since she's been telling me for years that I need to get out from under my father's thumb and take control of my own life. She'd let me curl up on her lap even, but it isn't her arms I want around me.

Now I'm still half-adrift in a more cheerful than expected coffee shop, staring blankly at the board while waiting for the woman ahead of me to finish talking to the barista. For such a morbid name, Black Death Beanery is cozy and light, with an eclectic decor. None of the furniture matches in style, color or patterns, the walls are exposed brick around the black steel industrial windows dominating the two exterior walls. Even the lighting fixtures are

centerpieces, with each ceiling light being a different chandelier style.

Nothing is new, and it only adds to my certainty that the owner must shop primarily from thrift shops. I like it. It adds so much to the coffee shop and reveals a lot about the owner.

Unlike my father, who needed everything brand new and the more expensive the better.

A loud slurp breaks me out of the introspection and I startle when my eyes land on the customer who's now facing me. She's got shoulder-length black hair tucked behind her ears, both of which have multiple earrings along the shell. She's wearing all black, and while she isn't as tall as me, her clothes hug her well enough it's obvious she's the strong type of slender. Her extremely long nails are sharp stilettos and painted a more vibrant hue of her drink.

She slurps her drink again, her unsettling eyes never leaving me as the pale orange frozen drink disappears.

I clear my throat and tighten the grip I have on my purse strap over my shoulder.

"Can I help you?" I keep my voice steady and dart a look over at the barista. The woman in front of me is the same one who'd been ordering when I approached. The barista, who I can't quite tell the gender of between their long blown out hair, heavy makeup, harsh jawline, and who is at least Landon's height, watches us with amusement. I get the sense that they're used to the customer in front of me.

At least she should be relatively harmless then.

She takes another drink of her frappe and smacks her lips before grinning. If her stare is unsettling, her smile is petrifying. Maybe she's not so harmless after all. This is the Barrows, after all, and Landon did order me not to leave the coffee shop.

"You can tell me why you've got Lan's scent all over your fragile neck," she says, her tone suggesting a love of gossip. When his name slips from her painted blood-red lips, my stomach curdles as I take another look at her.

She's all strong lines and ferocity, with black leather pants painting her legs and wicked-looking high heel booties. She's got modest curves, enough to know she would rock a runway in lingerie. If she can smell Landon on me from days ago, it also means she isn't human.

Is she one of Landon's former lovers? Oh, god, what if she's still his lover? I had just assumed that I was the vampire's only lover. Doubt sinks

like a stone inside me. I'm such an idiot. Landon basically instructed me to show up at Lush, a place I know is a sex club. He's gorgeous enough he can crook a finger and women will crawl on their hands and knees to him.

Taking a half step back, any control I have over my voice is gone. "Are you—" I clear my throat again. "I apologize. I didn't know he had any other partners."

The woman snorts, and unfortunately for her, she'd been taking another drink. This results in her starting to cough, slapping her chest as the pale orange drink dribbles off her chin and down the straw.

The barista chuckles, shaking their head as they hold out a bar rag for me. I take it, and when I start to say thanks, they interrupt me.

"Your drink is on the house," they tell me, their heavily made-up eyes sparkling. "I've never seen someone take a demon by surprise so easily. I'm Darcelle, by the way."

I'm not sure what surprises me most, honestly. The deep, masculine voice of Darcelle, or the fact that he—she?—called the woman a demon. I get the sense that it's not because the sharp-nailed woman has an attitude.

"Uh, thanks," I respond, at a loss. I order the first thing I see. It's a chai-spiced apple cider called Mabon's Delight. Darcelle nods and turns to make it as the towel is snatched from my loose grip. I turn to follow it and watch as the woman—demon? demoness? wipes at her black shirt with a grumble.

"Normally, I'd take a finger or two for this, but if you're the one that's got Lanny boy all out of sorts, I guess that's recompense enough. Name's Eris, by the way. And Landon and I are more likely to kill each other than fuck."

"Not to mention, Eris here has the void where her heart should be set on a certain vampire," Darcelle says as they hand me my drink. Eris growls, the sound signaling my lizard-brain to run from the danger. Darcelle just laughs and waves Eris away.

"Don't growl at me. You know I'm the only one who can make your drinks right. I still don't see why you and Ashe haven't figured things out yet."

Eris rolls her eyes and turns her attention back to me. She blinks just as I take a sip, making me sputter when her eyes close from the sides rather than vertically. From the satisfied smirk as the cider soaks into my shirt, and the sudden disappearance of the rag, I gather it was intentional.

"Don't listen to him," Eris says before tossing her now-empty drink

through the air and landing it perfectly in the trash. “I may be a chaos demon, but growing affectionate for my vessel’s mate is over the top even for me.”

Blinking, I’m still trying to process her words when she grabs my arm, her nails sharp enough to prick but not break the skin, and hauls me over to an overstuffed yellow, paisley-printed couch. She sits me down in the middle and lowers herself beside me, still looking at me with her nerve-razing gaze. I’ve never met a demon before and I’m not really sure what I’m supposed to do.

“So.” She cocks her head at me and I hide behind taking a sip. “You’re prettier than in the pictures on his computer.”

This time I managed to swallow my drink before gasping out, “Excuse me?”

She grins, another sharp, dangerous expression that can never be mistaken for comforting. “Oh, yes. Did he not tell you? Lan has been interested in you for some time now. Something to do with your father.”

I stiffen at her words. Of course, Landon is interested in me because of my father. I almost want to laugh. I’m such a damn fool. How many times have I been through this before with a man who has gotten me into his bed? I must not hide my reaction, because one of her elegant brows lifts into a perfect arch.

“Did you not know?” She seems genuinely curious.

“I should have,” I say, voice oozing self-deprecation. I take a long drink of the chai-spiced apple cider, irritation replacing the blood in my veins. “Every time I let a man get close, it’s always got to do with my damn father,” I bite out, my voice loud enough to draw a few looks from other patrons but Eris doesn’t seem to mind. She nods encouragingly. Gripping the hot cup, I glare at the polished, yet well-worn wooden floors of the coffee shop.

“Why is it that someone can’t be interested in just me? I’m a damn catch, you know?” I look to the demon, who I don’t even understand why I’m suddenly venting years of frustrations to. “I play multiple instruments, I graduated high school years early; I have multiple degrees and a PhD! I still perform concerts, plan and attend charity events, and sure, I don’t go out and party every chance I get but it’s not like I’m some prude! I might not have huge boobs or a big ass, and my fingers are callused but I can still be sexy!”

The front door opens and my glare shoots to the tall, imposing vampire filling the entry, his blond hair perfectly styled. He’s dressed impeccably in a charcoal gray suit and crisp white shirt, and his golden eyes lock onto me.

Then they flick to Eris beside me, a frown marring Landon's too beautiful, too hard face. My stomach clenches and arousal swoops through me, and it makes me that much more irritated.

I rise, slamming my drink down on the small side table, and cross my arms. Landon's eyes move back to me, his frown still in place as he crosses the shop. Emotions, like desire and need and anger and hurt, all whirl around in me and I know if I let him get too close, I'll melt into him and let it go. Unlike all the other men I've had in my bed, this one—this vampire, is the most dangerous. Not because of his unnatural strength or his ability to bleed me dry.

It's because I'm already falling hard for him. He's gotten past my defenses, making me feel cherished and protected and cared about. Now I'm remembering why I have those defenses, because my heart is beginning to crack and I hate that I want him to put it back together. That self-loathing erupts from me when he's a few steps away.

"Do I have a sign around my neck that says, 'Fuck for access to Oberon Benoit' or something?" The vitriol in my voice makes Landon stop short, his brows snapping together. Then the expression is gone, his face going blank again as he closes the distance between us and grips my upper arm with an iron hand.

"Let go of me." I yank at him, but it's useless. I look around, desperate to see if anyone will help, but all the people who'd been watching me before now seem to find their drinks fascinating. Eris and Darcelle are the only ones who look at me, the former with a smug expression and the latter with sympathy as Landon starts to march me out of the place.

Another vampire, one with sandy brown hair and an almost kind-looking face, waits beside a black Mercedes GLE Coup SUV, in a tailored black suit. One look in his golden eyes, though, and I know he won't help me. Especially not when he opens the back door for Landon, who proceeds to force me into the vehicle.

"Eris was with her." Landon practically spits out the demon's name, and the other vampire looks back towards the coffee shop. I peer through the car door and around Landon's bulk, I see her leaning in the doorway. She isn't watching me. Her eyes are on the other vampire. He must be Ashe, the one Darcelle is convinced Eris has feelings for.

"I'll deal with her," Ashe says, his tone resolute. He strides towards the door and she pushes off, straightening, and I'm worried I'm about to see a

fight go down but then the car door slams in my face. Landon moves into the driver's seat, taking off fast enough that I rock back into the seat and hurry to get my seatbelt on.

"Are you always a fucking asshole?" I grumble, too pissed and hurt to care about the answer. My throat burns as I stare at the passing buildings, but I don't want to let myself cry. I'd called him because I felt safe with him and it turns out he's just like every other man who convinced me they cared. "I want to go home."

"No."

"Dammit, Landon," I shriek, turning to face him and hit the back of the driver's seat. "What the hell did I do to deserve this? I let you in. I shared things I've never shared with anyone, and you've just been using me this whole time! Do you even plan to sell the helm to my father or was that a lie too?"

The truth of knowing so little about Landon slams into my chest and I crumple against the back seat as he remains silent. He drives fast, speeding through the early evening traffic with absolute control. He warned me that night that I was better off telling him to leave and never speak to me again. I should have listened.

It's not until he's pulling into an underground parking garage that I realize I've left my handbag back at the coffee shop. I groan and rub my face. How much worse can this day get? He parks and kills the engine, getting out and opening my door before I can even unbuckle.

"Come on."

He's gripping the top of the door, and the look in his eyes has any argument dying on my tongue. Wariness that should have saved me the first night I met him is finally taking control and I ease out of the car, keeping my eyes low and submissive. Other than his eyes, no emotion is coming from him and that's more terrifying than if he were stomping and slamming doors. Instead, he's completely disconnected, as if everything that we shared meant nothing.

The splinters in my heart get longer and I hug myself.

"I left my bag at the—"

"Ashe will retrieve it," he interrupts me. The moment I'm clear of the door, he closes it and then his hand clasps mine. "This way."

Startled, I stare at where his fingers are laced between mine, his grip strong but not painful, as I hurry to match his stride. He takes me through a

door that leads into an open space of pale hardwood floors and cream-colored walls. It almost reminds me of my father's condo, but there are colorful geometric rugs on the floor and landscape art covering the walls, transforming the place into a home as opposed to a showroom.

"Is this where you live?" I try to take everything in as he pulls me into another room, the architecture ignoring halls in favor of connecting rooms directly together. We pass through a room overflowing with houseplants; no matter how hard I try, I can't picture Landon taking the time to water them.

"This is the clan house," he answers, his gait finally slowing as we cross into another room. This one is filled with built-in shelves and has a stairway along one side, and it's clear he intends us to go up. A door closes above, and two feminine voices reach me, making my doubt from earlier with Eris rear its head again. Why should it matter if I'm Landon's only lover or not? Not when he's only been using me this entire time.

Landon stills too, and finally a crack in his void-like demeanor appears. I glance at him, worry nagging at the back of my neck. He seems nervous, his jaw clenching. I look up to the top of the stairs where the two women come into view.

"Oh."

My eyes widen on the surprised older woman, who is looking down at him with wide golden eyes. Even if Landon hadn't told me that his mother was also a vampire, there would be no doubt who she is. She's wearing a gray, long-sleeve dress, in a modest cut, but it does nothing to diminish the elegance she holds herself with. Her graying hair is pulled back in a neat twist, and while her face is rounder than Landon's—their eyes, noses, and lips are the same.

"Forgive my rudeness," she says after a heartbeat, her accent vaguely French, and she walks down the stairs. "I was not aware we were expecting a guest. My name is Joséphine."

We both take a step back as she reaches the landing, and her eyes go to where Landon's hand holds mine. I hold out my left hand, cheeks burning, but determined to be polite. I'm in her house, even if unwillingly. "My name is Wren. It's lovely to meet you."

Her golden eyes light up with joy, and the smile she gives me is sincere enough it almost makes the heartbreak worth it to meet her. Joséphine has the air of a mother, and I have the biggest urge to let her wrap her arms around me and tell me everything will be just fine. How is it that a woman so purely

welcoming and good has a son like the one I'm discovering Lan really is?

The other woman, clearly younger than me, clears her throat and holds out her hand, grinning. Her eyes are totally normal, not a speck of gold in sight in the dark brown. Her hair is up in a messy bun, and she's the first person I've seen to be wearing anything less than runway-ready clothing. Instead of a chic outfit, she's wearing an overly large sweater that says 'Eat A Bag of Dicks' in pretty cursive and surrounded by flowers, tiny shorts printed with toads, and fuzzy pink and purple donut socks pulled up to her knees.

"I'm Eloise," she says with a grin. "And I need to know everything."

Lan snorts and I glare at him, finally tugging my hand out of his. To my surprise, he lets me go. Putting my hands on my hips, I stare at him while I answer her.

"Oh, nothing much. Just a bit of light kidnapping, after seduction with the intent to gain access to my tech billionaire father."

Eloise, to my shock, doesn't seem too surprised when I look back at her. When she sees my expression, she lifts a shoulder and gives me a wry grin. "You'd be surprised how common kidnapping and seduction are around here."

I shake my head and Joséphine tuts. I turn back to Landon, crossing my arms and meeting his glare head-on.

"What do you want from my father? A job? Money? A relic?"

Landon blinks slowly, and my stomach plummets at his response.

"No, Little Bird. I want to kill him."

Chapter Seventeen

LAN

Eloise's and my mother's eyes bore into me but they weigh nothing compared to the stare of my little bird's pale green eyes. When I saw her in the coffee shop, sitting next to Eris, I'd known the chaos demon would reveal my intentions. I also knew the demon's nature would demand she twist or cloud the information, but I hadn't been prepared for my own response to the pain and hurt in Wren.

Wren is unraveling me and it's threatening my entire plan. Yet I cannot allow her to leave me, even if it means getting the revenge I seek against her father.

"Wha—what do you mean?"

I let out a sigh, an usual act for me, and pinch the bridge of my nose as I take a moment to think. Such a task is impossible around this human woman, not when all I want to do is bury my fangs in her neck and my cock in her tight pussy. First the photo she sent, then seeing her in that tight skirt made my mouth water, and I want to bite and scratch her hips and ass until they're wet with her sweet, delicious blood and she's coming undone.

"Don't worry!" Eloise butts in, her voice strained and unnaturally cheerful as she hurries to Wren's side. "Lan has a good reason for anything he does. Usually." She hesitates and I give her a cold look. "Okay, sometimes. But I'm sure you're not in danger." The future queen of the Nightshades laughs brittle. "He'd have killed you already."

Wren takes a step back, and Eloise's eyes widen as she realizes her mistake.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I growl out and step between the two human women, ignoring my mother's excited look. Wren is the first lover I've

brought to the clan house since we settled in the Barrows. I've had others throughout the centuries, but she's never looked at me the way she is now with Wren at my side. I tuck Wren against my side before striding up the stairs, giving her no option but to follow.

Wren's scent distracts me, a delicious combination of anger, arousal, and fear. It's all I can do to allow her to walk, rather than gather her into my arms and race to my personal suite.

"Should we help her?" I hear Eloise ask my mother, who tuts, and I close my eyes briefly, begging the gods for patience with the human mate of Ambrose. "Is he a danger towards her?"

"Oh, my lady," Joséphine says with a too-pleased sigh, and I grit my teeth, focusing instead on the feel of Wren's body against me. "I know my son. He'd never hurt that woman. He may not recognize it yet, but I can. She's his mate."

I stumble over my steps in front of my door as my mother's soft words reach my ears, no doubt as she knew they would.

"Landon?" Wren asks, her palm coming to rest on my stomach, the hostility towards me replaced with concern at my misstep.

"I'm fine," I get out, and press my thumb to the sharp, barely visible needle point in the door handle. Ambrose isn't the only one who knows how to ward his quarters with ancient runes. His blood in my veins allows me the power to use such runes, things humans today and even some supernatural creatures would call magic. Unlike Ambrose, I've combined it with modern technologies. I see little need to tear into my thumb with a fang and smear blood across a door when a clever mechanism can be built with enough patience and expertise.

Only my mother and I can access my rooms if the wards are in place. And they're rarely in place.

I usher Wren through the door, closing it hurriedly behind me, as if that will stop my mother's words from ringing in my ears. Mate. I storm over to my large walk-in closet and yank off my jacket, giving little care that it's more expensive than what some people pay for rent, and shove it onto a cedar wood hanger.

I cannot have a mate. Her father had stolen my ability to love from that mission, my brain injury too traumatic. I remember what it was like to be happy, to feel affection and care and love for others before that fateful night. I'd survived the explosion when I shouldn't have. I'd already been dying, yet

being injured and trapped is what saved me from death and sentenced me to an existence filled with anger, hatred, and the craving to inflict pain.

Seething, I don't realize I'm still holding the hanger with my coat until it snaps in my grip. Muttering a curse, I throw it to the floor.

I turn back to my room, stopping in the doorway at the sight of Wren standing near the French doors that lead out onto the wrap-around balcony. The sun is only beginning to set, and its warm rays turn her strawberry blonde hair into flames. Her peridot green blouse flutters loose before being tucked into her skirt, and somehow, the way she holds herself, I'm transported back to when I was human.

My father was a Polish merchant who'd met my mother during his travels through the Mediterranean. They'd fallen in love at first sight, according to Matka. He'd left his employer, wed her, and began to work for Ambrose—who went by the name of Oleksandr at the time. He'd never known Ambrose's true nature until he'd walked in on Joséphine attending Ambrose as he fed from another.

I was three years old.

Divorce was not legal then, and my mother would not allow Ambrose to kill my father when the abuse first began. My father cherished me and kept me from Ambrose's estate. I grew to hate Ambrose, because if it weren't for the vampire, my father and mother would live happily together. I begged her to leave Ambrose's service, going as far as to threaten to leave with my father if she did not.

It broke me when she chose to stay at Ambrose's side, her arms covered in bruises, as I sat in the back of my father's cart when he finally left. Her brown eyes, so familiar and strong, were filled with love even as her pain spilled over in tears.

That night, when the moon was at its height, I left my father at the inn he'd booked. I may have hated Ambrose for tearing my family's happiness apart, but I loved my mother more.

I'd seen love between people, even met a few women in my days as a young soldier that I had considered pursuing.

Since that night, when I shot a barrel of gunpowder in a ransacked house in the middle of snow-covered trees, that future had been dead to me. I'd become a cruel monster, my own self stolen and twisted, my friends dead around me—all for the greed of a man who wished to live forever, like Ambrose. Like the rest of the Nightshades.

Now, though, Wren Foster stands before me, an ethereal vision that makes me feel almost human. It should be impossible, but I shouldn't have been able to feel her fear the night of her attack. The first night I took her. She makes me feel things, things that aren't my own emotions, and the only possible answer is that my mother is right.

I pride myself on being logical. Detached. Separate from the situations around me. It's what makes me so good at collecting the information Ambrose needs to have such iron control over the Barrows.

Logic agrees that Wren is my mate.

Now what the hell I'm going to do about it is another thing.

Wren must sense my presence as she turns at the waist, hugging herself, a wary expression on her face. She makes my large bedroom look complete, being here with me. I want to pin her hands to the French doors behind her before burying my face in her cunt.

"I've never lied to you," I say, moving towards her slowly, as if she is the small bird she's named for and I don't want to spook her into flight. "You are in no danger from me. Only your father."

"But, why?" Wren asks, her voice hoarse with pain and confusion. The same pain and confusion that echoes in my gut and stirs up a hatred in me that I'm the cause. "What has he ever done to you? Was any of this even real?"

I tilt my head, studying her. I wonder how much I should tell her, how detailed I should be. Will my Little Bird even believe me? The latter question is a whisper, and she looks away as if ashamed to have asked. It's her hunched shoulders and her bowed head that have me moving the rest of the way to her.

I do not offer comfort, not even in most of my scenes with submissives. Yes, I tend to their abrasions, but it's clinical for me, and often many of them have other doms there to soothe their emotional needs. But for Wren, I try.

Tucking her back against my front, I ignore how she stiffens as I wrap my arms around her possessively. Resting my temple against the side of her head, I breathe in her grounding, addicting scent. It soothes the self-hatred in me and in a few moments, she relaxes into my hold.

"I was born in 1606," I begin, and she's preternaturally still, hanging onto every word. I stare out the French doors into as I speak, looking over the Nightshade vampires' territory as the sun sets. Soon the streets will be lit with bright neon lights, enticing those who live in the shadows to come whet

their dark appetites. “As many other young men, I enlisted to become a soldier. The details of my life matter little, only that my mother, Joséphine, worked for Ambrose and considered him her father. The true nature of Ambrose drove my father to abuse and eventually he left my mother. I blamed Ambrose for everything my mother suffered.”

Wren’s small hand comes up to rest over one of mine, squeezing with silent support. Other than my mother, who had ever offered me such comfort? Who had ever been willing to listen? Hell, who had I ever allowed close enough to grant such an opportunity?

“I was in the military for seven years and was on my final campaign. I wasn’t always like this,” I say, needing her to understand suddenly. “I once laughed easily and sought joy in life. I didn’t crave pain or violence like my next breath. I could find pleasure in things other than blood and strife.”

Wren shifts her head closer towards me, her soft hair caressing my cheek. “What happened?” she breathes out.

“My regiment was under the command of General Jurgis Demencius.” My voice is devoid of all emotion, and her fingertips stroke the back of mine. “He was obsessed with the occult. He had tracked an obscure, nearly wiped-out pagan sect to the remote forests at the border of Russia. As a foot soldier, I didn’t know much and only learned most of this afterwards. He sought a chalice that those worshipers claimed was gifted to a mortal man whom the goddess loved. She was jealous of his mortal wife, and he wanted to live for eternity. The sect claimed the chalice would maintain the youth and life to any who drank from it—so long as it was filled with another’s blood. More, that if the blood came from a loved one, immortality would be granted.”

She shudders and I press my lips to her head, needing to comfort her.

“The entire team who went in were killed or gravely injured. I was trapped under a heavy shelf, certain I’d die soon from the blow to my head. When General Demencius walked in, I knew I’d die because he ordered his two men to kill all of us. He found the chalice. I decided then I wouldn’t let him get away with our deaths and managed to use my pistol to blow up a keg of gunpowder. I thought I was the only survivor, pulled out by a passing caravan of traders. They said the rest were dead. That was until I saw your father in Topside three years ago. Except, instead of going by Jurgis Demencius, he was going by the name Oberon Benoit.”

I wait, the silence thick in the room as I feel her mind at work. Wren is brilliant, and no doubt she’s turning over every detail I’ve revealed so far to

come to her own conclusion. I have more evidence, tangible records I can show her. Once I recognized him, I hunted him down through history, and he's more of a monster than even I can be.

Should I tell her that he sacrificed her mother to continue his stolen life?

I wait, centuries teaching me patience, the tattoo of Wren's heartbeat soothing me better than any prescription of alchemist's elixir.

She shakes her head, and I bite back a sigh. I knew the likelihood of her believing me without argument was nil.

"That just doesn't make sense," Wren says, disbelief in her voice. "My father is too well-known. If he was prolonging his life through—through blood magic," she says the term with enough exasperation to make me smirk, "then he's stupid to show his face. The one thing my father certainly is not is stupid."

She twists in my arms, and I let her, a hollow emotion familiar to gratitude hitting me when she puts her hands flat on my chest and stares into my eyes. She is the one making me feel again. Not just her own emotions but helping me experience emotions I thought forever lost to me. I need to push her away. It's not safe for her, myself, or the rest of the Nightshades. If I begin to care again, if I begin to feel again, I cannot be the monster Ambrose requires.

Worse: I will not know who I am. I've spent centuries like this, and not even two proper decades as a human with access to the full spectrum of emotions. Claiming Wren as my mate will leave me with nothing.

"Are you certain it's my father?" Her green eyes look between mine, pleading with me to be wrong. "Could your memory from that time be wrong? You did get a traumatic brain injury."

"Oh, Little Bird," I sigh out my name for her and stroke my hand over her hair, deftly unpinning it and stroking the strands. Another emotion I'd grown accustomed to doing without slides along my throat. Regret. "As much as I enjoy your tears, revealing the truth of your father brings me no pleasure. If I was wrong, I would never have sought you out in the first place."

Her kissable lips flatten with displeasure and her eyes burn with the same anger she'd had at the coffee shop. She presses against my chest, trying to get space between us but I don't let her go. I can't let her go. I won't.

"You're just like every other man who I've let into my bed," she accuses, her voice raised in defiance. Holding her trapped in my arms, caging her when she wants to be free, and hearing that tone from her has my cock

stiffening. Fuck. Any time I'm in her presence, I'm half hard. I have been since the first time I was close enough to catch her scent.

Damn my mother. I should have figured out Wren was my mate much earlier.

Growling, I grip a fistful of her hair and jerk her head back, that makes a delicious gasp escape her lips, until I can lower my face to hers until our noses almost touch. "I am nothing like those boys you let touch what they were unworthy of." My voice is cold, and she shivers in my embrace but the scent of her fear is mixed with an equal amount of arousal.

The same perverse delight, the craving to lose control that struck me when I killed the troll, climbs up my spine now. I need Wren. I need her on my cock, screaming and crying and coming. She's mine.

"Did my pursuit of revenge against your father put you in my path?" I ask before brushing my lips across the curve of her cheek, darting my tongue out to taste her freckles. "Yes. Have I used you to gain access to your father's private network?"

She sputters, trying to demand clarification on the statement, but she cuts off into a throaty moan when I press a tingling fang into the sensitive flesh just behind her ear.

"Yes, Little Bird," I whisper, pressing kisses against the column of her throat, teasing both of us by being so close to her pulse point. "And you did perfect for me today. You got me into Oberon's secure network. Thanks to you, I can finally achieve my goals."

"You're—" I lick her racing pulse "—my—" I kiss her jaw "—perfect—" I lick her parted lips "—baby girl."

I crush my lips against hers, giving into my vampire nature. I will consume Wren until all she knows is me.

Chapter Eighteen

WREN

Lan makes a deep, masculine sound that sends lust through me as he forces his tongue into my mouth. His arm wraps around me, pinning me to his body as if he can't get close enough. The moment his tongue touches mine, I shiver and curl my hands into his shirt in a desperate attempt to stay upright.

Oh. Damn.

He yanks my head back, my scalp burning from his grip, as he lifts me from the floor. He's demanding complete control and despite the last hour and everything I've just learned, I'm desperate to give it to him. I need to submit as much as he needs to conquer. I need the feeling of safety and certainty he gives me when I give him everything.

"Pick a word, Little Bird," he growls against my neck, his fangs scraping my skin hard enough I'm sure there are welts. It just makes my panties wetter.

"What?" I ask stupidly, fumbling with the buttons of his shirt. I manage the top two before he wrenches away from me. A moment later, I'm sinking onto the edge of the bed, panting and alone, while he's out of reach. He's across the room, but right now he feels a hundred miles away and a whimper builds in my chest. He looks primordial, beastly, and ready to snap. His lips are kiss swollen as he leers, his eyes wild and bright. He's breathing hard, with his hair and shirt rumpled.

I did this to him. I pushed him to the verge of losing control.

"Last time I didn't care," he says, his expression shuttering as he battles to regain control. That's the opposite of what I want. I want the savage who's killed for me. I want the vampire who made me bleed with pleasure. He

closes the distance until he's before me, and he grips my chin as I crane my neck to look up at him. "I'm a sadist, Little Bird. The type who gets off on hurting his lovers. Some sadists prefer the chase, the fear that they inspire. They don't play with masochists."

His thumb strokes my lower lip and I capture it, sucking it wantonly. His nostrils flare and he presses his thumb deeper into my mouth.

"I want to hurt you, Wren," he says, his words steady but his voice is gruff. For all the control he's recovered, he's still battling his desire. "It's so fucking perfect to me when you submit so completely, I can do whatever I want to this delicious, delightful body of yours. That I can hurt you, and you want the pain because you want to please me as much as I want you to submit."

I lean back, Landon's thumb sliding out, and meet his gaze. His words unlock something in me, something I've known was there but never wanted to inspect too closely. "Do whatever you want, Landon," I tell him, my voice breathless. Unlike him, any control I had is gone. "I'll never say no."

His lip curls up in a smirk that sends fear skittering down my spine and arousal flooding from my veins. He runs his nose along the side of mine. "But I do so enjoy if you tell me no. I want you to. I want you to beg and plead for me to stop." His eyes grow darker, and the air stills between us. He's not with me anymore, haunted by something else. I reach up and wrap my fingers around his wrist and his eyes refocus on me. "Pick a word. If you say it, everything stops. Because as much as I crave to hurt you, I told you the truth. You are in no danger from me."

I consider refusing, because I told him the truth too. I'll never want Landon to stop. Then whatever haunts him has me swallowing. I may not need the safe word, but my vampire does. The image of the vampiric Hades and Persephone statue at the galleria across the street from Demencius Antiquities flashes through my mind.

Landon is my very own Hades, my dark god of death, granting me freedom from the land of the light.

I meet his golden eyes, red beginning to edge his wide black pupils.

"Pomegranate."

Landon's eyes narrow, a flash of understanding brightening those golden orbs, and his hand moves from my chin to grip my cheeks. His kiss is brutal, but I match it with my own need.

He abandons the kiss to hiss in my ear, "You think you're clever, baby

girl?”

I rip at his shirt, buttons hitting the floor. I make a sound meant to be an agreement, but I'm too preoccupied with his beautiful chest. He hisses again as my palms run over his pecs, and I make sure to tease his pale nipples. His hand wraps around my throat under my jaw, shoving me to sprawl on the bed.

He yanks off his shirt with barely controlled strength and I lick my lips as I watch his long, elegant hands undo his belt. Rubbing my thighs together, I practically moan from the way his belt slides from his pants.

“Tell me what you want, baby girl.” Landon's voice is strong, but the bite keeps my arousal flowing.

I shake my head. “You,” I answer honestly. “All of you. I want you out of control. Using me. Making me yours.”

His face darkens and he looms over me, all powerful and all consuming, even in the warm light of his bedroom. I want to slide to my knees and worship him. He places one knee on the bed, bracing one hand by the side of my head and raises his other. Somewhere he'd gotten a switchblade, the shink of the blade releasing was quiet but it echoes between my ears.

“Is that right, Little Bird?” He muses, dragging the tip of the blade along my throat before bringing it down between my breasts. “You want to be Daddy's little fuck toy?” The blade slices through the expensive silk like water, barely any pressure at all and it makes my breath hitch in excitement. His next victim is my bra. Landon meets my eyes again, gauging my response. A part of my heart—my soul—tells me he's not looking for reassurance about the blade still teasing my now exposed navel.

I bring a hand up and caress his jaw. This man has had such violence and harshness in his life. When was the last time he had gentleness and comfort? I want to be that for him. Always.

“I'm yours,” I voice, and his breath shudders. “And you're mine.”

“Fuck.”

Landon lunges forward, kissing me again, the blade at my stomach held perfectly still and never biting too deep into my flesh. When I'm dizzy and ready to combust, my nipples hard and aching against the sheer lace of my bra, he pulls away. With a fierce look, he slices down my pencil skirt as well, jerking his wrist at the end as it cuts through the last inch.

“I liked that skirt,” I tease, but most of the humor is missing from my voice. I'm too turned on to joke.

“I did too,” he answers, using the flat of the blade to flip the fabric off of me and bare me to him. “I’ll buy you as many skirts as you want. I love the way your ass looks in them. Like you’re just begging me to pin you down and fuck it like a beast.”

His words from earlier come to mind and I shake my head, widening my eyes. “No. I’m a good girl.”

Lan’s low rumble of laughter rocks through me and I wonder if it’s possible to come without him ever touching me. His fingertips replace the blade, teasing and stroking my thighs near my soaked panties. Each touch sends another shiver through me and it’s taking everything I have to not grab his hand and put it between my legs where my clit aches.

“These panties say otherwise, baby girl,” he says, his fingers dancing over my mound. “I can smell how wet you are. Is this all for Daddy?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer and forces his hand under my panties. I yelp and slam a hand over my mouth when he pinches my clit. It hurts but feels so damn good and it’s like my body doesn’t know how to react. Am I writhing because I’m close to getting off or am I trying to escape? He pulls back and then rips my panties from me, the waistband biting into my skin delicious before finally snapping under his strength.

Lan pushes my legs apart, forcing my knees out wide so I’m completely bared to him. He tsks and shakes his head. “Look at this mess.”

Every word of his, with that sharp edge of condemnation, only makes me slicker. I reach for him, my fingertips barely grazing his waist. “I want you naked,” I demand, a petulant look on my face. “I didn’t get to see you naked last time.”

He raises a perfectly arched eyebrow and I bite my lower lip, squirming. He moves faster than I can think, his hand gripping my face, thumb forcing my lip from my teeth.

“What did I say about biting your lip, baby girl?” He waits for an answer.

“That you’ll do it for me.”

“Exactly.” Lan leans down and sucks my lower lip into his mouth, his teeth clamping down but deftly avoiding using his fangs. I cry out, grabbing his shoulders and digging my nails in. He isn’t gentle and it hurts, and damn, it feels so good.

Then he’s gone, stepping off the bed and lifting his arms to the side. His golden eyes are full of storms and wicked promises, his face sculpted into a perfect picture of a conquering warlord.

“Undress me,” he commands.

I move off the bed, leaving my ruined skirt on the bed and letting the blouse he sliced fall to my feet. I reach up to slide my bra off before stepping towards him and Lan growls, freezing me in place.

“I suggest you obey me, baby girl. Unless you want to be punished.”

I dip my head, trying to hide the flush on my cheeks at the image his words provokes. Bent over Lan’s knees, one hand gripping my hair and the other turning my bare ass red. When I’m in front of him, I don’t need his instruction to sink down onto my knees in front of him. I dare not look higher than his toned abs, and I first slip off his black oxfords, running my fingers over the exquisite and expensive leather. Setting them to the side, I slip my hands under the hem of his pants, and remove his socks, tucking them neatly away in his shoes for now.

There’s something heart-racingly intimate about seeing a man’s bare feet. Some men have ugly or weird feet, but Lan’s feet match him. It’s a strange thing to notice, but I appreciate the fair, smooth skin, elegant-shaped toes and even nails. They’re strong, large but not overly long. They’re the feet of a man who prowls the world, assured of his powerful position within it.

Moving to his waist, I avoid his large bulge as much as I want to run my hands over it. Lan’s commanded me to undress him and I want him naked. Carefully, I undo his pants and then hook my fingers into the waistband of his tight black boxer briefs. I slide them down, releasing his fully hard cock and fold them when he steps out of them.

I want to run my hands over his strong legs, which are lightly covered by pale hair that tapers off near the top of his thighs. Instead, when the folded pants are set over the oxfords, I put my hands on his thighs and wait for his next order.

My eyes flutter shut when his hand slides over the top of my head, his fingers curling and gripping the hair at my nape and tilting me back. When the soft head of his cock drags across my lips, my eyes fly open and lock on his. It’s the only warning I have before he’s guiding his cock into my mouth. It fills me, hitting the back of my throat and making me gag, my eyes watering. Like before, though, he doesn’t let me move, and in moments, the sensation disappears and he pushes deeper until my nose is buried in the neat, pale patch of curls at his base.

I don’t question it anymore and embrace the sense of sheer relief his dominance sends through me.

“That’s it, baby girl,” Lan praises, cupping my face with his other hand. “I’ve been thinking about my cock in this mouth since I saw your first cello performance. When you play, you give yourself over to the music. I wanted to see if you’d look the same when you gave yourself to me.”

He withdraws, a centimeter at a time, and I suck in a breath through my nose, blinking the tears out of my eyes. When just his head is in my mouth, I run my tongue around it and suck eagerly, addicted to the taste of his pleasure. Then he pushes back in, just as slowly and repeats the process. Each time he pushes past the back of my mouth, I sink deeper into relaxation, my mind going blissfully blank. All that matters is how good it feels to be able to do this for Lan.

When he pulls back completely, I whimper and almost protest. He scoops me up in his arms and I cradle against him, breathing him in. He lays me on the bed like I’m delicate and fragile, running his hands over my skin, removing my bra, and turning every inch of me into an oversensitive mess. He leaves me there and I watch with curious contentment as he walks towards a door, admiring his hot ass and naked back. He has scars, but rather than detract from his beauty, it makes him more intense. Like they’re hints to the savage he claims to be.

Lan disappears into the closet for a brief moment, returning with a small black duffle bag in his hands, his eyes setting me aflame. He says nothing as he stands at the side, setting the bag on the bed, and opens it. He pulls out neatly tied lengths of black rope before moving the bag to the floor.

“Wrists, baby girl,” he says, and I offer them without hesitation, earning a small smile from him. It makes me beam, and I wiggle with giddiness as he binds them together firm enough the rope bites before guiding them over my head to the headboard. I watch as he weaves the rope between the metal slats, a question erupting before I could finish thinking it.

“You don’t have any hooks set up for this?”

Lan stills, and I worry that I’ve upset him. But he gives a final tug to the rope at the headboard and runs his nails down the tender skin of my inner arm and meets my eyes.

“I’ve never had a woman here before.”

My mouth opens in surprise. He hasn’t? I know we’d intended to meet at Lush, but to never bring a lover home? Hope builds inside of me that my feelings are returned. There’s so much between us that I have to figure out—especially concerning my father and Lan’s original intentions with getting

close to me. But for now, right here, with his confession, I'll embrace us.

While I'm left befuddled with my thoughts, Lan's clever hands bind each of my legs. He's moved my heels back towards my butt and tied rope around my thighs and shins, forcing them to stay bent.

He takes a step back, and my stomach tumbles as I watch him tug at himself idly while inspecting his work. His eyes devour every inch of me, and in spite of being bound to his bed and unable to move my legs much, I have never felt so powerful. So sexual. So desirable.

His gaze finds mine and he smiles, a full smile baring his fangs, and it's breath stealing. It should be illegal for someone to be so sexy.

"There are so many things I want to do to you, Little Bird," Lan says, his hand still slowly working himself. "But for now—" he reaches down and retrieves a scalpel from the black duffle bag. He holds it up so I can see, the light glinting off the cold metal, the edge of the narrow blade a deep black. He inspects it, moving it around. "I knew you were special. I couldn't play with you using anything that's touched someone else. You require your own toys, and only the best. This blade is high carbon steel, the edge set with rare obsidian. It will take years of carving your delightful skin before it even begins to dull."

Lan looks back at me, his pupils blown wide and cock hard. "Is that something you want, baby girl?"

A hot bolt of fear strikes my stomach and I shiver with need. I'm so wet I can smell it. I let my knees drop to the side, arching as I lean my head back, baring my throat to him. "No," I groan out, allowing fear and lust to color my words. "Please don't, Daddy."

"Too bad, baby girl," Lan drawls, his voice dark and sinister. Squeezing my eyes shut, I shake my head and struggle against the bindings on my wrist. The bed dips, and I bounce and see he's leaped onto me, holding himself over me like the wolf who's caught his prey at last. He kisses me savagely and abruptly, pulling back as fast as he'd come. "You want to make me happy, don't you?"

Unable to speak, I nod, and strain to look for the scalpel. Then he's got his mouth on my throat, his fangs sinking deep and harsh, and I scream.

Chapter Nineteen

LAN

Bright, delicious blood floods my mouth and I drink deeper from Wren, her scream sharp and perfect in my ear.

Before tonight, I'd appreciated the state-of-the-art sound-proofing Ambrose had installed years ago for many reasons. The house is over a century old, but as the clan grew, we grew tired of hearing each other's activities in the bedroom. Now, I'm doubly thankful that Wren's screams are for me and me alone.

I pull away from her, letting her blood spill down my lips and over my chin.

"Fuck," I grunt out, the sight of her bound to my bed under me making my cock throb. Blood is smeared around the bite over her fair skin, her rapid pulse sending more oozing out and under her slender neck until it absorbs into the blue-gray pillowcases. I'm not going to change these cases until the scent of her blood is gone. Or, better yet, I'll keep her here and never sleep without her taste on my tongue or her scent in my nose.

I may not remember exactly what it is to love a woman, but I know what I feel about the one I'm straddling. Complete possession. She is mine, forever. There will be no other person that gets to touch her, taste her, fuck her.

Idly, I caress her nipples with the back of the blade until they are hard and she's whimpering.

"I want to carve my name into you," I murmur before bending down to capture one of those tempting nipples between my lips and sucking hard. Wren mews and arches up against me, so I reward her by biting the nipple hard between my teeth until she shouts. I give the other nipple the same treatment. When I'm done, Wren's pretty pink nipples are dark and swollen.

I trace the scalpel over the swells of her breasts, nothing more than a ghost touch, not ready to slice into her quite yet. Wren shivers under me, goosebumps flowing over her flesh, and I smirk, my eyes going to hers. Her pale green eyes are blown wide with desire and need.

“Would you like that, baby girl?” I ask, and shift back, teasing her all the while with the blade. “Have my mark on your skin for all time?”

She nods eagerly, her eyes stuck to the scalpel as I move it down and circle her navel.

I strike, faster than she can expect, and slice the scalpel across the inside of her thigh. The blade is sharp enough the pain response is delayed and when she finally gasps, the cut is red with blood. I do it again on the other side, moving slow enough she can see it coming. Can anticipate the sharp bite of the blade.

Her whimper is delicious and I can't resist dipping down to lick the blood from her pale skin. She moans, the scent of her arousal thick in the air.

“I won't scar your gorgeous skin,” I murmur, using the blade to tease once again. “Except for my mark. I'll open it over and over, each time I fuck this pretty pussy until it can never heal.”

Flipping the blade over, I hold the tip against her flesh and find her gaze. Her eyes are closed, her mouth open in a soft O as her body flushes with need. Snarling, I grip her cheeks with my other hand, and her eyes open wide. Leaning in close, I refuse to let her look away.

“You will watch me cut you,” I demand, needing her to obey.

“Yes, Daddy,” she answers, her words distorted by my grip. Her eyes look between us, where I still hold the blade against her thigh.

Satisfied, I release her, and cock my head, studying her pulsing veins barely visible under her skin. I move the blade, never pressing hard enough to cut the skin. “As a vampire, I can enjoy this type of play so much better than any human. I can sense your veins. Like right here.” I stop near the top of her inner thigh. “This is your femoral artery.” I trace the vein towards her knee. “It'd be so easy to cut just deep enough to bleed you out in minutes.”

I flick the blade, creating another cut an inch away from the first one. It wells, a drop of the most decadent wine vintage forms and I collect it with the scalpel and press it to the flat of my tongue. A future spans out before me, with her as my eternal bride, bound by my side. A possessive need for that reality strikes me so fully it's like rage.

“I'd bleed you out and then fill your mouth with my blood.” I cut her

other leg, then twice more, moving closer to her dripping pussy. “Make you like me. You’d be mine forever,” I snarl, and press the blade to the renewed bruise from the first time I had my hands on her in that hallway.

“Yes.”

I still. Every part of me freezes and I look up at her from under my eyelashes. She’s watching me with a clarity that wasn’t there moments ago, her eyes too clouded by desire. The desire is still there, but there’s a strength of will in her eyes. She’s all steel under her graceful beauty.

“Yes, Landon,” Wren repeats, holding my gaze, her voice steady. “I want to be yours. Forever.”

Snarling, I throw the blade to the side and pounce. I fuck her mouth with my own, claiming every sound and breath she makes. Gripping my cock, I drag the head through her sopping sex, coating myself and making her shake under me.

“This pussy is mine,” I growl into her mouth, lining myself up at her entrance. Wren whimpers and I bite her lip, hard. “Whose pussy is this, baby girl?”

“Yours, Daddy,” she whimpers, losing herself in desire again.

I push in, far enough we both groan as I stretch her. With my free hand, I swipe the blood from her thigh and stroke my shaft, watching where I disappear inside of her. When my fist hits her swollen clit, her pussy clamps tight around my head and I groan. I sink in to her with one hard, smooth thrust and trace circles around the sensitive nub as I sit upright.

Wren thrashes against her bonds, making me hiss as she moves herself over my cock.

“That’s it, baby girl.” I reach forward and pinch her nipple, twisting it hard enough she keens and fights it.

How far will she let me go before she uses her safe word?

“Come on my cock,” I purr, moving to the other nipple. My thumb at her clit never slows. “Come for daddy, baby girl.”

Three more circles of her clit and Wren’s orgasm explodes from her. She screams, the sound cutting off as her entire body bows against the onslaught. I curse, gritting my teeth, my fangs practically buzzing with the instinct to sink my teeth into the flesh above her heart and claim her as mine. Her pussy squeezes my cock hard, almost dragging my own orgasm from me but I hold it back. I’m not done with my little bird yet.

When she sinks against the bed, her eyes closed and her face slack as she

pants for breath, I ease my cock from her pulsing pussy. She hardly notices, and I let myself smile smugly before sliding my hands down her bound legs.

This tie, the frog-tie, is one of my favorites because it gives me so many options for my submissive. I slip my hands lower, cupping her ass and squeezing appreciatively. Then I flip her over, the rope binding her wrists twisting and keeping her off-balance. I force her knees under her as she wobbles, startled and still unbalanced by her orgasm.

Leaning back on my heels, I admire my work. Wren's inner thighs trickle with blood, and aftershocks of her orgasm still ripple through her body. My bed is soaked from her cum and I want more.

She gasps out, straining to stay upright, her head hanging down towards the bed between her bound arms, as I spread her ass and fall on her, hungry for more of her taste. I lick her folds, drinking down her pleasure, nipping her folds with my fangs until blood mixes with her slick.

"I'll never get enough of this," I say against her before pressing my face against her again for another hedonistic lick. Wren moans and my cock throbs with need. I drag my tongue up through her folds and don't stop until I'm at the tight hole I have plans for. She freezes, before clenching and trying to pull away.

"No." The word is a savage snarl from me, and I bite the soft globe of her cheek, sinking my fangs into it. I suck hard, filling my mouth with her blood but not swallowing. Moving back to her hole, I grip her ass, spreading her wider and I let her blood spill from my mouth and onto her.

"Please," she begs, her voice shaking. "Don't."

I move closer to her, licking her blood from my lips, and fist my cock again. The sight of her is delicious and once I've filled her perfect, tight ass, I know it won't take me long. Anyone else, and I wouldn't hesitate. It's just another piece of evidence that she's truly my mate.

I press my cock against her tight hole but hold myself back. "Do you remember your word, baby girl?"

If she says it, I'll find some way to rip myself away from her. Even if it means tearing off my own cock.

Wren arches her hips towards me, pressing back against me, and my eyes almost roll back at the sight.

"Yes, Daddy," she says, her voice thick with lust.

I run my hand down her back, stroking her reverently before slapping her ass with a loud crack. She shouts, and I'm already groping her cheek,

spreading her wider for me. “Such a good slut for Daddy.”

I press into her, guiding my cock with one hand and gripping her hip and holding her still with the other. She hisses and her body tightens up around me.

“Take it, baby girl,” I order between clenched teeth as my head forces its way into her channel.

She cries out and thrashes her head. “It hurts, Daddy.”

“I know,” I tell her, my balls tightening and lightning crackling along my spine. “But you’ll take it for me like a good girl.”

Wren is magnificent. Taking my cock in her ass with no preparation and nothing but her own slick and blood lubricating the way. I push in deeper, passing her tight entrance until I can grip her hips with both hands and sink the rest of the way into her. She’s crying, shaking under me, and the fresh scent of her arousal makes me pulse inside her.

“So deep, Daddy,” she gasps out. “I can’t—I can’t—”

“You will.” I pull out a couple inches before slapping back in with a groan. She cries out and I love it even more. I fuck her tight ass, watching where I disappear inside of her. Anytime her blood begins to disappear from my cock, I scrape my nails along her cuts and smear the fresh blood along her crack.

I’m getting close so I reach under her and find her clit, massaging it harshly. “Come on my cock, baby girl.”

Wren jolts under me. “I already came—” she gasps out. “I won’t be able to again.”

Arching over her, I press my front along her back as I keep thrusting. I wrap my other arm around her, just under her breasts, and pull her tight against me. My face is next to her ear, her strawberry blonde hair a wild mess.

“Submit, Wren,” I command harshly and bite her shoulder. She sobs again, the salt of her tears wafting between us. She’s a beautiful, gorgeous mess. Releasing her, I press my face against the side of her head, glaring sightlessly before us. “You’ve given me your pain, Little Bird. Now give me your pleasure. Submit entirely to me.”

Wren doesn’t reply, but a shudder rolls through her as I feel her struggling to do what I command. I keep my thrusts short, but hard and steady, my fingers never leaving her tortured clit. I sense it the moment she’s able to let go, not just in her physical response but in my chest.

Trust and a warmer, purer emotion than I can ever be worthy of hits my chest and I know it originates from her.

Finally, Wren Foster has given herself to me utterly and completely.

When her second orgasm strikes, her ass clamps down on my cock and I pound harder, my own climax barreling down. I push her flat on the bed, gripping her hips as I rut into her with a primal ferocity, my teeth clamping down on the back of her neck. With a growl, I come, spilling inside of her, over and over, fucking her through it, unable to stop.

At last I still, draped over my little bird but bracing my weight on my forearms next to her so I don't crush her with my heavier weight. She's panting underneath me, her face turned against the pillows, her arms still straining upwards towards the headboard. With a surprisingly shaky hand, I reach up blindly for the loop that will easily release her wrists. She slumps the moment she's free and I find the same loops on her legs.

As soon as she's free, I ease out of her ass, my cock covered in her blood and my cum. It twitches at the sight of my cum coating her but I ignore it and roll to my side. I collect Wren, tugging her close until her face is buried in my neck and she's tight up against me. In a few minutes, I'll need to tend to her cuts.

This is the part I usually have no patience for. I've never been satisfied fully after a scene, so I leave the subs to another dom to attend to.

Not even Oberon Benoit could pull me away from Wren right now.

She's mine, and I'm hers. There is nothing I won't do for this woman. I've killed for her, but that's the least of what I'd do for her. She's too good for me, too full of life and light, and I'm too selfish to let her escape my darkness. I will never let her be taken from me.

Chapter Twenty

WREN

When thoughts begin to form again, I'm still in Lan's bed. My body is delightfully sore and the last thing I remember is Lan's demand that I submit completely to him. I thought I had, but in that moment I realized he was right. I had no hesitations giving my pain to him, but it never occurred to me that I could give him my pleasure too. It took effort, but with his hands on me, his cock filling me in a way no one has before, I'd realized the truth.

No matter his claims of my father, no matter his original intentions with me, I can trust Landon Polastri with my heart, body, and soul.

Once I embraced the rush of adoration and joy filling my veins, I gave him every part of me. He'd taken it, claimed me, and brought me such pleasure—not just of my body, but of the deepest, truest part of me.

Gentle touches stir me enough that I open my eyes, and once again I'm on my back. He must have moved me as I'm near the edge, and I watch with sleepy eyes and languid thoughts as he cares for every cut he gave me, a low murmur of words coming from him like water in a brook. From what I can see, he's still nude, and I give myself permission to drink him in entirely, wanting to memorize every inch of this vampire.

His skin is as pale as many Topsiders think all vampires must be, but there is still vitality in him. He doesn't look like someone who died and then was brought back to live in a supernatural life. His blond hair, short on the sides with finger-length tresses on top, is messy, so different than the slick, put-together man I know. My stomach dips and my pulse turns to butterflies. I'm the one who's made him look so ruffled. His face is more relaxed than I've seen him yet, the permanent tension at his jaw isn't there, and his eyes

are soft, like he isn't looking deeper into the shadows, hunting secrets and enemies.

Lan leans down and presses a kiss to my knee and I let out a long sigh.

"You're beautiful," I whisper, finding the energy to reach for his elegant hands. "Thank you for taking care of me."

His golden eyes meet mine, and the emotion in them makes hope burst like a flare in my chest. He may claim to not know how to love, but he looks at me as if I am a treasure. That is all I need. He takes my hand, weaving his fingers with mine.

"I will always take care of you," he swears, his voice solemn. The air stills in my lungs as my world narrows down to the space between us. "You unravel me, Wren. Make me question myself in ways I never have before. I should take you home and never look back, but I can't. It's far too late to escape me, Little Bird."

I smile and tug our hands to my lips, where I press a kiss to one of his knuckles. "It's a good thing that escaping is the last thing I want to do, Lan."

His eyes darken, a shadow of pain I would give anything to never see in his eyes again. "Even though I am a savage? Even though I may never be able to love you?"

Oh, my heart aches for this vampire. Keeping hold of his hand, I force myself to sit upright, ignoring the aches in my body, and cup his jaw with my free hand. "You may be a savage, Lan. But you're my savage. As for love," I press a kiss to the back of his hand, "I have enough love for both of us."

He may believe he can't feel love, but what else can it be when he looks at me as he is now? It's soon, much too soon. Niamh will yell my head off when I tell her that I'm in love, but it's true. Fate, destiny, chance—whatever is out there put Landon in my path because we are meant to be. Lan watches me as if I'm something to behold with awe, and I think he's about to say something, when a knock has his jaw clamping shut and his stone mask of arrogant indifference slides back into place.

He pulls the bedspread over me, shielding my nakedness, and pulls on his slacks before striding to the door. He opens it, using his body to shield the rest of the room from view. I can't hear what is being said, but the other voice is Joséphine, I'm pretty sure. I look towards the wall of French doors and realize the day has disappeared and night has fallen over the Barrows. Beyond this house, the Barrows' streets and lanes twist and turn around each other like a pile of snakes, the multitude of bright lights from buildings and

cars giving the impression of movement, making the city look like its own living entity.

The door closes, and I hug the bedspread closer to my chest and bring my knees up, wincing at the ache between my legs. He has a pale green satin dress draped over his arm as he returns to the bed.

“How do you feel?” Lan’s voice is brisk, and I try not to sigh at the loss of him from minutes ago.

“Sore, but not in a bad way,” I admit, and think of how I got sore. My cheeks burn, and I smile shyly, tucking my hair behind an ear. I rally and look at the outfit in his hand. “What’s that for?”

He lays the dress across the foot of the bed and offers me his hand. “I requested that Eloise find you a dress, since your current options are not ones I’d allow outside of this room. That was my mother, informing me that we’re expected to join dinner this evening. It’s into the shower for you, Little Bird.”

Dinner? Oh, boy. I’d never gone as far as to meet the parents of my boyfriends, and having dinner with a vampire’s mother after what I’d just let him do to me? I want to burrow under the bed and hide, certain it’s possible to die from embarrassment. But Lan moves his hand closer to me and I take it on instinct, letting the bedspread fall from me as he pulls me to my feet. My legs shake, and I grasp at him to keep from falling, and he laughs, low and quietly.

It’s one of the most beautiful sounds I’ve ever heard.

“Who is going to be at dinner?” I ask, trying to prepare myself as much as I can. We cross into the bathroom and I still, taking in the harmonious blend of opulence, Gothic charm, and refined taste I’ve come to associate with Lan. There’s a small antique chandelier casting a warm glow over the bathroom, the walls covered in rich burgundy wallpaper pattered with charcoal gray designs of flowers, branches, peacocks and ornate open birdcages. Over the marble double vanity is a long antique mirror, its opulent frame gilded with gold, that looks more suited to a palace.

The centerpiece is the freestanding clawfoot silver porcelain bathtub, though, large enough for two people to lounge in comfortably. A vermilion plush rug is before it, looking like a puddle of blood on the white marble floor. A silver, tarnished tray is perched on the side, and I can easily picture myself spending my evenings soaking in bubbles after a long day’s work, with a good book and a glass of wine. Before Lan would slip in behind me and give me toe-curling orgasms.

He takes me around the tub, though, to a glass-encased walk-in shower with the same brass fixtures as the sinks and tub. Lan lets me go long enough to remove his pants and then I'm back in his arms as we enter the shower. A moment later, warm water is falling from the rain showerhead mounted in the ceiling.

"The inner circle and their mates, most likely," he answers, before reaching towards an inlaid shelf filled with bottles. A quiet pop follows, then a moment later his hands are in my hair, lathering the shampoo through the wild curls. "Your hair is wild, untamable."

I sigh, lamenting how many times I've thought the same thing. "I know. I hate it."

He tugs a strand, the sharp pain making me scowl up at him.

"You shouldn't," Lan says. "I enjoy it."

I hum, content again with my savage, luxuriating in his arms while he washes me. Then his answer penetrates the haze. "Mates? Are they also vampires?"

"No," he says, moving me to rinse my hair, expertly keeping the shampoo from running into my eyes. When my hair is clean, he moves to my body with a body wash that feels like silk and smells like him. "You've met Eloise. She is human and Ambrose's mate. She intends to turn at some point but isn't ready. Then there is Deidre, a friend of hers. She is human, but not. She was forcibly addicted to an altered Rapture and to save her life, Kasar claimed her as his mate. It tied her life to his. My mother, Malachi, and likely Ashe will be there too."

The tension in his jaw is back, twice as hard now. I trace it with my fingertips, trying to soothe it away. "What is it?"

"Eris is likely to come as well," he grits out. "After dinner, Ambrose will wish to discuss Benoit and my intended next steps."

He waits, watching me closely for my reaction. Right. His next steps for his plan to kill my father, who is supposedly centuries old and the target of Lan's loathing. Steeling myself, I press my hands flat against his toned stomach and rise up on my toes to press a kiss to his lips. He grips me harshly, and the kiss turns dirty fast. We pull apart when I'm panting, and he backs me against the tiled shower wall, his hands going to my ass and scooping me up. I wrap my arms around his neck, my hands to his hair. His cock is hard as steel between us and I moan as he slides it between my folds.

"One day, I'm going to fill this pussy with my cum," he says, watching

where he strokes against me hungrily.

“Do it now,” I beg, grinding back against him, trying to shift and force him inside me.

He raises his brow, looking up at me. “Did you know vampires can get humans pregnant? It’s rare and depends on multiple factors. The woman has to have the gene that would allow her to survive being turned.”

I still, having never considered needing a condom with a vampire. I’d never even heard of a pregnancy between a human and a vampire. I lick my lips, weighing his words. Maybe this is why he pulled out when we had sex on my couch. “How rare?”

His other brow raises. “Less than a 10 percent chance of conception, then only a 3 percent chance of it being viable beyond four weeks.”

There’s a chance I could have this man’s child, as impossible as it sounds. Yet, the idea of being filled with his seed, claiming me as his own in all ways?

Landon’s pupils widen and his nostrils flare when I grow even wetter. I drop my hand between us, gripping his cock and lining it up. Then he lets me drag his mouth to mine as he slides in with a purely masculine sound. Against his lips, I smile between kisses. “Apparently I have another kink,” I say.

“I can work with that,” he says, and starts to thrust.

TO MY SURPRISE, dinner with the Nightshade vampires is an entirely comfortable affair. Given my experience with high society, and the rumors surrounding the vampires at the table—I expected it to be formal and boring. The dining table was grand, equally as large as any my father had in our many homes over the years, and while the men and Joséphine wore their suits, the two mortal women were dressed decidedly more casually. In fact, if it weren’t for Deidre wearing black pencil pants and a vibrant orange silk blouse, I’d have felt overdressed. Eloise did not look as informal as she had when I’d first arrived, but she’d only swapped out pajama shorts for black leggings and her oversized sweatshirt for a black cashmere sweater large enough to hang off of one shoulder. From the heated looks Ambrose gives her, I can only surmise that the sweater belongs to the vampire king.

Ambrose and his enforcer, Kasar, speak quietly where they sit at the end

of the table. Ambrose is all sharp lines and regal strength, with his suave black hair artfully slicked back, his cheekbones high over his brutally hard jaw. His golden eyes are framed by thick black lashes, and his eyebrows seem to be fixed permanently in a judgmental position. His black suit, an Armani if I had to guess, is tailored perfectly to him, and even without a tie, his white crisp shirt unbuttoned at the neck, he looks like the indisputable leader of this clan. The glimpse of black tattoos only adds depth to his seat of power. A warlord confident on his throne, his victories recorded on his body for only his queen to see.

Kasar, the infamous Nightshade enforcer, sits at Ambrose's left. Where Ambrose has sharp beauty, Kasar is beautiful the same way a black panther stalking prey in the jungle is beautiful. His long hair is as black as shadows, falling past his shoulders, like a shield for his always searching gaze. He's olive skinned and every movement is filled with purpose, and when he glances my way, I look away first and reach for my glass. I never want to find myself as his target.

Deidre, his mate, sits beside him and says my name.

"Yes?" I ask, settling into the same personality I show when in Newgate. I cut another bite of the seared pork chop, swirling it through apple cranberry chutney before bringing it to my mouth. Whoever Ambrose employs in his kitchen is a master chef because I don't think I've ever had anything that's tasted so good. Even the roasted Brussels sprouts and wild rice pilaf are done to perfection. This meal is the same caliber I expect at charity galas and exclusive restaurants.

"You can totally keep that dress," she says, waving her fork towards me. "It looks much better on you than me. Try as I might, I can never pull off that color. So, have you learned Lan's greatest secret yet?"

Deidre has a mischievous smile on her face and Lan sits beside me, and I swallow down the bite of food, it sinking into my stomach. I look at him, searching for any sign, but his impervious mask is firmly in place. Joséphine, his mother sits across from me and she's frowning, looking between her son and myself. When I don't answer immediately, everyone else looks towards us, including the two other vampires in attendance: Malachi and Ashe. Eris didn't show, and I'm glad because I don't think Lan would be very civil towards her right now.

"That he planned to get close to me so he could kill my father?" I hazard a guess, looking at her then back to Lan. Deidre barks out a laugh and the

vampire named Malachi snorts, almost choking on the wine he'd been drinking. At least, I assume it's wine. It is rather dark red and thick.

Deidre dismisses my answer with a wave of her fork. "No, he told you that," she says, her expression like a cat who's caught the canary.

I set the fork down and dab my mouth with the cloth napkin before crossing my hands in my lap.

"Deidre."

Lan's warning earns a pointed glare from Kasar. Deidre laughs, pats her mate and steals a quick kiss when Kasar turns towards her. She looks back at me, and once again I look across the table to Joséphine, who has Ashe's mouth near her ear. The woman snorts and rolls her eyes, fighting a smile. Ashe straightens, not bothering to hide his grin and Lan tenses beside me. On instinct, I put my hand on his thigh and in a moment, most of the tension slips from him.

"Then, no," I answer, chin high, "I don't know it."

Deidre, sharp and clever-eyed and gorgeous, points her finger at Lan. "Your man may be a centuries old vampire, but his favorite food is Count Chocula cereal. He's extremely possessive of it and if you ever need to get back at him, do what Malachi here does, and eat all of it."

Blinking rapidly, I try to process the unexpected words. The entire table is silent for a long heartbeat and then Malachi, sitting on the other side of Lan, finally breaks and howls with laughter, reaching over to slap Lan's back. Eloise and Deidre join him, Ashe and Joséphine laughing quieter. Even Ambrose looks amused, the vampire king shaking his head and going back to his dinner.

Lan is still stiff beside me, and a fierce wave of protectiveness comes over me. I have no doubt Deidre and the others are not laughing at him in mockery; it sounds like the same banter my team at work has after years of working together. But Lan doesn't like being the object of amusement, and I want it to stop. The conversation Lan and I had at my apartment after the troll jumped me comes back and I smirk, reaching for my water again while their laughter dies down.

"Is that so?" I ask before taking a sip and setting the glass back down. I lean forward enough to lock eyes onto Malachi. He's likely what every woman pictures a mafia hero as—dark hair and skin from what I suspect is Italian heritage and a finely sculpted face that suggests Eastern European. He sits relaxed in his chair, his suit coat unbuttoned as he toys with the wine

glass, a veritable vampire Don Giovanni. His thick brows raise in silent question when I meet his golden gaze.

“I suggest being careful about that,” I warn him, squeezing Lan’s thigh in solidarity. “You may find your recordings of *Married At First Sight* mysteriously deleted.”

The table is shocked silent, and everyone’s attention is on me. I refuse to look away from Malachi’s stunned gaze. Then the man breaks, his head thrown back again with laughter before everyone else joins in. Lan relaxes beside me and I go back to my dinner, smiling to myself as I take another bite of the pork chop. Malachi tosses back the remains of his drink before shaking a finger at Lan.

“Don’t you fucking dare mess with my episodes,” he says, humor in his voice. “I’m not caught up yet and they took down two seasons!”

That sets everyone off again, even Kasar and Ambrose this time. Conversations start up again and I feel the weight of a stare and find myself looking at Joséphine. She’s beaming at me and mouths a silent thank you. I dip my head, my cheeks red at the approval. Deidre and Eloise are debating couples featured on Malachi’s show, and even Ashe has opinions when they move to another relationship reality show.

Looking around, I realize how content I am. This, right here around me, is what I never had with my father. A family. Even if Lan doesn’t feel it, these people care about him, and they’ve brought me into their fold without hesitation.

I’m dragged back into the conversation and slowly I lose the sophisticated charm I employ as armor. It’s when I’m breathless with laughter, Joséphine wiping away tears of happiness, and Malachi and Ashe arguing about the particulars of a mission gone horribly, hilariously wrong, when all the vampires and Deidre go quiet. Their heads snap towards the doorway, and Lan practically growls as he grips my thigh. It’s unnerving. It’s like when a cat suddenly is staring at something with intense focus but you can’t see anything. A chill creeps down my nape and a sense of foreboding grows in my stomach.

The harsh click of high heels on wooden floors comes a moment before Eris storms in, her eyes entirely black and fury radiating off of her. She stops just inside the doorway and no one moves. She has a bloody blade in one hand and it’s only then I see the blood splattered across her. No one moves.

Her eyes lock onto mine, and it’s as if the world falls out from under me,

the only thing anchoring me in place is Lan's grip.

"Your father has something very important to me." Eris's voice is otherworldly and fear ripples through me, Lan snarling at my side. "And you're going to help me get it back."

Chapter Twenty-One

WREN

Eris's arrival shuts down dinner and we're all herded into Ambrose's large office, even Eloise and Deidre. The spacious room has richly paneled walls, polished hardwood floors, and ambient lighting from brass wall sconces. One wall is lined with grand bookcases, with two club chairs and a small tea table set in the center, the shelves filled with everything from leather-bound tomes to modern glossy paperbacks with cracked spines. My fingers itch to explore them, but I control myself and let Lan set me in one of the club chairs. Joséphine sits in the other, just after setting down a large china plate stacked high with mouthwatering cookies.

Ambrose claims the plush leather chair with high armrests behind an imposing mahogany desk with intricate carvings. It holds a massive, modern monitor and wireless keyboard and mouse—a fusion of old and new. From my father's penchant for antiques, I'd place the age of the desk to about three hundred years. It's a desk my father would covet if he saw it.

Thinking about my father pains me, with everything that's happened since this morning. At least I've already decided I'm not marrying Miles. Lan disappears from the room the moment his mother is beside me, and I wring my hands, anxious for his return. Then I give myself a shake. I'm not helpless, even in a room filled with vampires and a demon. I'm not helpless against my father, if what Lan says is true even if I've yet to see evidence of my lover's claims.

Eloise takes two cookies from the plate with a quiet thanks before she leans against Ambrose's chair. He raises his hand, his eyes still on the monitor before him and she takes it while watching him work. The love between them is evident and gives me hope for my own vampire. He'll see

what he's capable of in time. Deidre has joined Kasar beside a window, their bodies a breath away from touching. They may look different than Ambrose and Eloise, but there's no mistaking the sheer masculinity of his claim on the woman next to him. One look at her is all it takes to see she's just as possessive and protective of her vampire.

Malachi has propped himself on the edge of Ambrose's desk, ignoring the dark glare from the vampire king, and he directs his attention to the center of the room where Ashe stands like a marble sentinel, his gaze never leaving the pacing, fuming demon that possesses the body of his wife.

"Tell us what you've learned," Malachi orders the demon, rather than Ambrose, to my surprise. The vampire's libertine attitude is gone, and in its place is a vampire I'd be wary of. Nothing escapes those sharp eyes, his body poised to look relaxed but there's power lining his limbs ready to strike or defend. I may be falling hard and fast for Lan, but I have eyes and this serious Malachi is sex in a suit.

Eris doesn't pause in her pacing, her sharp-heeled boots clicking menacingly with each step on the hardwood. She'd taken off her black leather jacket to reveal the black cotton tank she wore under, her black jeans painted on. I didn't notice them in the dining room, but she has knives strapped to her thighs, and another knife handle coming from the top of her knee-high boot. Her sharp nails, long enough to be talons, are the only part of her that has color, though the pumpkin orange manicure's effect has only grown more ghoulish with the dried blood on them.

She tosses her head back, hissing with irritation at her unruly locks getting in her face, and Ashe slides a hand from his pocket, silently offering a hair tie. She snatches it from him and angrily ties her hair up and back. I gasp, along with Deidre and Eloise, as nasty wounds that look like she'd been whipped by fire are exposed. Ashe halts the woman with a firm grip on her bicep and she flinches and glares.

"What happened?" Ashe's voice is full of dark promises.

Eris sneers, her eyes going black. "Don't worry, Ashe. Your precious mate's body will recover without a trace."

He doesn't respond, waiting her out, and I notice she doesn't pull away. Darcelle's words may have more truth to them than the demon wants to admit. Eris grumbles again and rolls her eyes, then finds me.

"Somehow your father has gotten his hands on a celestial blade," she says accusingly as if I had anything to do with it. "Mine, to be specific. I found

this out when canvassing Demencius Antiques. When I tried to take it back, the godsdamned blood spell that bastard Aeternaphiel cast on lashed out.” She jerks her head towards the burns. “That wasn’t caused by mortal fire. It’s celestial flames. Hurts like a bitch but will heal without a mark. Angels don’t like to ruin their image of perfect beauty, so they’ve mastered punishments like this.”

“Angels? Aeternaphiel?” Deidre asks, her expression incredulous. “And why would you have a celestial blade? You’re a demon.”

When Eris tugs away from Ashe, he lets her go this time and she turns to face the woman I’d learned was an investigative journalist for the top newspaper in Newgate. Eris crosses her arms, but her face is less angry than before. In fact, she seems almost uncertain before she shrugs, adopting a look of indifference. “I wasn’t always a demon. I’ve got my own past, you know.” Then she sends her glare to each of the vampires, lingering on Ashe at the end. “You’d all know that if you ever tried to get to know me and not just think of me as the crazy demon possessing a woman that you can use as a weapon whenever you want.”

Ashe’s head jerks as if she’d slapped him.

When no one says anything, I clear my throat and everyone’s gaze turns to me. “Why were you at the gallery?” As much as I’d grumbled about my father assigning me the management and responsibility of the new gallery, I actually care about the place. I’m proud of what I’ve achieved with it so far. Another thought strikes me and I grip the armrests of the chair. “Did the fire hurt anything else?”

I don’t have my phone on me, and I have no idea if I had gotten any alerts about a fire or disturbance at the gallery.

My answer comes from Lan, who’s striding in with an open laptop balanced on his flat palm and my phone in his other. “Celestial fire only harms the intended target,” he answers, his tone clinical and almost bored. He stops beside me, eyes still on the screen, but he hands my phone to me. “The gallery is fine. And it looks like security is handling it. Eris held back, fortunately, and didn’t kill anyone. Niamh has texted you.”

“Oh,” I say, distracted as I look at my screen to see two missed calls, and five text messages. Looking at the date, I want to groan. I’d totally forgotten we had plans for happy hour earlier. I text her a quick apology and a promise that I’m fine and I’ll explain everything later. With that sent, I look back at Lan, my brows narrowing. He said he used to deal in information. “The

gallery has top-rated cyber and on-site security.”

“So does your father’s penthouse,” Lan replies before handing me the laptop. My jaw drops when I see the screen. It’s the internal access to my father’s network, something that shouldn’t be possible. When I look up at him in question, the man smirks. “They’re good. I’m much, much better. And so is Eris.”

Eris nods in confirmation, her expression back to a blend of irritation and confidence. “I didn’t want to deal with the mess. Regardless, I want my blade back.”

Finally, Ambrose speaks up, Eloise’s hand on his shoulder. She may be dressed down, but she stands next to him like a queen. Together, they look like power and beauty.

“Why is the blade so important? Especially if it is spelled so you can’t touch it.”

Eris doesn’t look at Ambrose when she answers. She turns around and locks gazes with Ashe, and I’d swear everyone is holding their breath as we wait for her answer.

“Because retrieving my celestial blade will meet the first condition of the bargain Cassandra and I struck when she summoned me for aid all those years ago.”

“Well, shit.” Deidre responded before anyone else. She pushes off the wall and walks towards me, but her destination is the plate of cookies. She swipes up four and makes to hand one to Lan only to pull it away as she turns, grinning. “Payback, Polastri.”

My vampire huffs, practically silent, and confused, I reach for the cookies at last and silently pass him one. He seems surprised, his eyes meeting mine as he accepts it with the barest lift of his lips. He passes it to his other hand, then runs the back of his hand along my hair as if I’m something new and enthralling. I return the smile, mine larger and bolder, before taking a bite of my own cookie and looking back at the screen.

Soft, gooey chocolate and toffee bursts on my tongue and I groan, unable to stop the sound.

Eloise and Deidre laugh, and I blush, looking at the woman standing next to her king. She holds up her own half-eaten cookie. “I know, right? Joséphine’s cookies are the best.”

“We’ll get the blade for you,” Ashe announces, as if my distraction with the cookie never happened. From my angle, he has an almost manic

expression, and it hits me that this must be the first time he's been this close to getting his wife back. He whirls to me, desperation making his golden eyes wide. "You can get it, right? We could go tonight."

I force down the bite of cookie to answer, but Lan does instead.

"No," he commands, his voice and expression daring Ashe to challenge him. Ashe looks as if he almost wants to, his hands clenching into fists. "If she retrieves the blade too soon, it'll make Benoit go into lockdown." Lan looks past Ashe to Malachi. "We need a plan that allows us to corner Oberon Benoit and retrieve the celestial blade for Eris. I've confirmed I have access to Oberon's secure personal network. If it's on there, I can find anything."

I continue to eat the cookie, using the touch mouse pad to access the network listed as my father's. "How'd you manage this?" I'm more curious than shocked, as I start to look at folders I've never had access to before. My father has an entire drive I never even knew about.

"I hacked your computer that night while you were in the shower and installed a worm that would duplicate a program that would create an undetected backdoor to his computer. I just needed you to visit his penthouse and your phone to connect to his Wi-Fi."

I pull my eyes away from the PDFs of historic newspapers and look at him. He's watching me, waiting for my reaction. A part of me is irritated, but I already knew he'd planned to use me. I let out a harsh breath and point a finger at him. "No more hacking me, understand, Landon? Next time, you'll explain first and then ask."

Joséphine makes a happy sound and I look over at her, blushing as I take in her thrilled expression. She reaches over and squeezes my shoulder affectionately before standing and clapping her hands together.

"It sounds as if you will be spending much of the night in here," she says and strides towards the door, but not before pausing to pat her son's chest approvingly. "I will go get tea and have the night staff bring up refreshments later. As for you, my son, I like her. You've done well."

Landon leans forward and presses a kiss to her forehead. "Thank you, Matka."

She leaves, and then the vampires get down to business. I'm distracted by exploring my father's files, absorbing the evidence of Lan's words—that my father is much, much older than I ever believed. It's all here in these files. Different lives in different cities, all across the world. I'm not even his only child, though from what I can guess, I'm the only one currently alive. At one

point, Eloise extracts a promise from me to go to brunch with her and Deidre before the two women retire.

Lan refills my tea, a black mango tea that is perfectly balanced, as my cup empties or cools. All the while, masculine voices fill the room as they debate the merits of planning the death of my father and the procurement of Eris's celestial blade. I'm not sure when the demon disappeared but my eyes are burning from exhaustion and I'm pretty sure I've been too shocked to blink as I comb through the secret past of my father.

I move to a more recent folder, since I'd started with the oldest first. I recognize my mother's maiden name and click on the file. It's a damn brief on their relationship. How my father met my mother, how he'd decided to pursue her once he'd researched her lineage and bloodline, he even had a damn report on her mental health and an evaluation by a psychiatrist who determined that she was impressionable and had no further goals than falling in love and raising a family. She came from a wealthy family and had her own accounts and investments, all of which were signed into joint ownership after they were married.

Her pregnancy appointments are recorded in detail, and when I was delivered, there is a picture of me sleeping in a hospital bassinet, swaddled in an elephant-printed blanket and wearing a pink cap. There are the standard details recorded at the time of birth, then a note that he's started my own file after an unspecified blood test confirmed his "hopes."

Horrific fascination grips me as I scroll faster, through the few years of my life my mother was alive, until I reach the second to last page.

There's another picture of her, but she has a wild expression on her face. The date on the photo is the same day she died. Heart pounding, I read my father's notes.

Saoirse is ready, eager to complete the ritual that will grant me eternal life. For the last year, I've been grooming her for this moment, and in the event that tonight fails and she does not love me as she claims, I will have the child Wren to focus on next. Regardless of tonight's results, I will at least renew the spell for another forty years, giving me ample time to make arrangements in the future. For now, I believe I am safe to remain as Oberon Benoit.

Below that:

Once again, the ritual sacrifice of a loved one and the imbibing of their blood has failed to accomplish my goal. After so many centuries, I must

consider if the obsidian chalice was harmed in the explosion caused by the soldier Polastri the night I retrieved it. If he is to blame for this failure, I would wish him still alive so I could kill him myself. Alas, he burned with the rest of them. It is the child I must focus on now. Perhaps the love of a child is more potent than the shallow emotions from a woman.

My mind is silent, blank, thoughtless, as I navigate the newest folder. I have my own brief, just as the annotation said. I scroll through it, pictures and notes flying by. I think Lan says my name, but I can't look away. I have to know.

I made it to the final page.

Wren continues to seek my approval, aiming to be the perfect daughter. She has even foregone sexual relationships and all relationships, as I've groomed her to remain pure until marriage. That being said, she's beginning to pull away and question my commands both with her personally and with the business. I cannot chance losing her affections, so the ritual must take place before her thirtieth birthday. I've decided to use the same strategy as I have in the past. However, she will be marrying Miles, rather than myself, of course. She's already agreed and accepted his proposal this night. I will gift them the use of my private jet and pay for their honeymoon. With today's technology, it will be more difficult to fake their deaths, but not insurmountable.

Once they are married, I will finally achieve eternal life.

A hand turns my head away from the computer, and Lan's thumb swipes over my cheeks. Only then do I realize I'm crying.

"Oh, baby girl," he says, his voice quiet and almost kind.

"He wants to kill me." My voice is raspy and barely audible.

Lan crouches in front of me, cupping my face in both his hands. His eyes are fierce and burning. "I will not let that happen, Little Bird. You are my mate, and I'll tear him apart, piece by piece, if he tries to take you from me."

Chapter Twenty-Two

LAN

Wren is asleep in her own bed, her face relaxed and looking peaceful at last. It's been a week since she learned the truth of her father, that we both learned she is his intended next sacrifice.

That I'd vowed to protect her and claimed her as my mate.

After Eris discovered the celestial blade she claims is hers, the incident had Oberon in arms about the gallery and the security. Fortunately, Wren was able to talk him down from pulling the project altogether since it would make our plan more tedious to accomplish.

My mate—for there is no doubt for me now that is what she is—struggled to sleep the night before. Today, she will see her father face to face for the first time since discovering his rotten truth. I'd spent quite a long time exhausting her so she'd finally sleep. She has a vital part to accomplish today. She must convince Oberon to hire the Nightshade vampires to provide supernatural security.

Our hope is that the antagonistic break-ins Malachi orchestrated will make Oberon willing to hire us. Multiple times over the last week, Malachi had ordered our foot soldiers to break in and cause minor disturbances. Nothing bad enough to warrant the police force, though each time the current security guards called for them, Ambrose's power ensured they never investigated. Considering our forces are under strict orders to not steal a single thing, but make a show of their supernatural abilities, there isn't much for the police to investigate anyways.

B&Es as guerrilla warfare. According to the heightened stress filling every contact Oberon makes with Wren, it's working as expected. After last night, when two young shifters tailed the human security guards on their

patrol, the company finally pulled out of their contract with Oberon despite his threats of litigation. According to the email he's just sent to Wren, he's demanding a meeting with her in two hours. When she doesn't respond in the next twenty minutes, he'll be calling her.

A man like him should know how dangerous it is to become so predictable.

She shifts, pushing the comforter down and stretching an arm across the bed where I'd lain with her. I don't need much sleep, especially not with how often I'm feeding from her. My veins hum with power, my muscles coiling with energy, ready to be unleashed. I haven't fed so frequently for decades, perhaps even a century. And never from a single person.

Other vampires may choose to have a regular blood donor, like Ambrose before he met Eloise, but I've never cared for the intimacy such an arrangement naturally has. Now that I've supped on Wren's liquid nectar, I detest the idea of ever drinking from another. Her agreement to be turned was in the throes of pleasure and pain, but I cannot stop thinking about it. If I turn Wren, she will be truly mine forever. Mine to torment and torture. Mine to please and possess.

Before her, I could never believe one woman could satisfy my cravings for eternity. Now, if I cannot have her, life will hold no pleasure.

I slide my hand into my pocket, fingering the capped scalpel there. I've a desperate need to mark her as mine. She shifts again, her strawberry blonde curls fanning out over her satin pillow cases, one curl falling across her face and making her scrunch her nose in a way that makes my chest constrict. With my other hand, I press the heel of my palm against my sternum as if possible to ease the ache.

Could I have been wrong about myself my entire second life? Can I truly feel emotions like genuine care for something other than selfish reasons?

Stepping from the doorway, her bedroom reflects the vibrancy of life Oberon has groomed her to dim so that he may shine brighter. Even without his crimes against me, I would desire to punish him. He's a master at cruelty in ways that I can almost respect, if it were directed towards anyone else. It takes a master to cultivate such an overwhelming need to please in someone without damaging their devotion to you by continuous mistreatment.

Her room is not overly spacious, the large windows along one wall letting in the early rays of dawn. The second time I'd come here, I inspected each window to ensure the security of my mate. The security may be better here

than at the gallery, but they aren't infallible considering they've yet to detect my many comings and goings.

The soft morning light only adds to the soothing light gray of her walls, turning her room into an abstract garden of watercolors waiting to bloom. Sheer, blush-toned curtains glow with the dawn and it's the same exact shade as the flush of arousal across her chest. Fangs elongating and chest aching with a primal instinct to claim, I ghost across the room to her bed where she lies.

Her colorful, eclectic collection of pillows are still strewn across the floor from the evening before, leaving Wren pillowed in a cloud of white. A vestal image, my own goddess of spring waiting to enjoy the defilement of darkness.

Easing the comforter off of her so slowly she doesn't stir, my cock fills at her nudity. She is fine boned and fragile looking, yet there is steel in her bones and her hands reveal the years of work she's spent mastering her chosen instrument. My little bird has had jesses keeping her from the sky and once her father is gone, I will see her soar.

With a touch, I guide her to roll onto her back. She lets out a pleased little hum as I run my fingertips down her throat and between her breasts to just below her navel. I admire my work, her body bruised and scabbed from my insatiable appetite for the last week. One day I will use a blade to carve a piece of art worthy of her beauty into her skin.

Right now, though, I give into a need much more basic. I coax her legs to spread, breathing in the scent of her sex, her pleasure mingled with the scent of my seed. Once she'd known the odds of pregnancy, she requested I don't use condoms. The chance, however miniscule, that I could breed her has taken her pleasure to even greater heights.

I slide the scalpel from my pocket, thumbing off the blade protector, and lean down to press a kiss to the nearly healed bruise I'd first ever marked her with. Then I grip her thigh and bring the blade to her skin. The moment a red bead wells under the blade, Wren wakes with a gasp.

"Lan?" she asks, her voice husky with sleep. My grip on her leg prevents her from moving as I work. In further evidence why she is the perfect mate for me, she doesn't demand I stop or pull away. Instead, my little bird eases up to watch me with curiosity. "What are you doing?"

Darting my gaze to hers then back to her thigh, which is growing more wet with blood, I start to carve the second part. These cuts are the deepest

I've given her and I have every intention of a scar remaining.

"I'm marking you, Little Bird," I explain as I continue the embellished P just below and beside the L. "You're mine and I never want you to forget it."

Fresh arousal wets her folds and I catch her rolling her lips while watching my hands with desire-filled eyes. She endures my carving without sound. When I'm done and set the blade aside, a small whimper escapes her. I wipe my hand across her thigh, smearing her blood across her skin before inserting two fingers into her pussy without warning.

Wren's head drops back against the pillows, her mouth open in a gasp as I pump her slowly. We're quiet, not breaking the stillness of the sleeping world around us. When her pussy flutters around my fingers, signaling her approaching orgasm, I move. I cover the top of her pussy with my mouth, my fangs sinking deep into her soft mound.

My mate's orgasm ruptures around my fingers and I continue pumping her through it, sucking on her folds and swallowing down the mix of her slick and blood. I curl my fingers within her, not letting up as her body begins to jerk and buck against my mouth's onslaught on her oversensitive nerves, my eyes watching her face the entire time.

When she's finally begging for me to stop, I rear up and move to straddle her waist. Her small hands collide with mine as we release my aching cock from my pants. Her green eyes are eager as I fist her hair and yank her face towards her head, her lips parting.

"Eager little slut this morning," I grind out, gripping the base of my cock and running the head over her lips tauntingly. "Beg for it."

Wren's tongue stretches out and I hiss as she licks the underside, reprimanding her with a twist of her hair. She meets my eyes, the hunger there a mirror of my own.

"Please, Daddy," she begs so sweetly. "Fuck my mouth with your cock."

I rest my cock tip against her outstretched tongue but don't pass her lips. "Who owns this mouth?"

"You do." She's breathless, her face flushed with need. "You own all my holes, Daddy."

"Damn right I do." I slide my cock into her mouth, keeping her head in place with my grip. Her nails dig into my thighs through the material of my pants. I fuck her mouth and throat, our gazes locked on one another and never breaking, even when tears cascade down her cheeks.

My balls tighten as pleasure coils like electricity at the base of my spine.

Before I come, I pull out of her and shift backwards. Pumping my cock, my face twisted in a snarl, I command her, “Push those pretty tits together for me, baby girl.”

Brilliant girl she is, she obeys immediately, displaying her pert breasts just as I want.

My orgasm rips through me. Grunting, I watch as my cum paints her breasts, and I squeeze myself harder, milking more onto her skin. My shoulders slump as I finish, and Wren lets out a girlish giggle at the mess I’ve made of her. One line crosses her nipple and I’ve never been one to fight temptation. As I lean forward, I find her gaze once again as I suck the hard bud into my mouth. It turns her giggle into a whimper that makes my spent cock twitch with new desire.

Releasing her with a wet pop, I lick my lips clean of her blood and my cum. “I taste delicious on you, baby girl.”

“God, you’re filthy,” she says with a laugh after a shocked pause and stretches her hands back behind her, arching under me before collapsing back onto the bed with a sigh. She’s still smiling as she says, “Good morning.”

I press a quick kiss to her forehead, a move that inspires a happy sound from my mate, and move off of her and the bed. Tucking my cock away and doing up my pants, I run a finger down the length of her nose. “It is. I’ll have coffee for you in a minute.”

I swipe the scalpel up from the floor and replace the cap before returning it to my pocket. I’ll clean and sanitize it after I start the coffee.

“You’re the best,” Wren says before sitting up, eyeing the mess. “I guess I should take a shower first.”

I freeze in the doorway, my hand gripping the sill hard enough that the wood creaks. I turn back to face her, a hard look on my face. “No. Leave it. I want you wearing my cum all day.”

Wren gapes at me, blinking, and I wonder if I’m pushing her too far.

“I’m meeting with my father and, more than likely, Miles today,” she says, and the side of my mouth curls up.

“I know, Little Bird.” I turn to leave again and release the door before tossing over my shoulder, “You aren’t allowed to wear any panties today, either. I’ll know if you don’t listen.”

Wren may try to smother her squeal in the pillow but with my vampire hearing, it’s perfectly clear. I make my way to her kitchen, satisfied that I’ve marked her with my blade and seed.

It's quick work to get a cup of coffee going for Wren; her kitchen is well-organized and is the perfect blend of high design and functionality. Everything has its place and the control the organization suggests soothes a need in me. My mother's kitchen at the clan house is much more chaotic. Going in there, even when it's empty, makes my skin crawl with the need to bring order.

Opening the pantry to grab granola for Wren, I'm stunned. There, next to the box of her favorite granola, is an unopened box of Count Chocula cereal. It wasn't there yesterday.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Wren asks. I didn't even notice her approaching. I grab the cereal and turn towards her, struggling to fathom its meaning. She's putting in her mother's emerald earrings and when she sees what's in my hand, she bounces over to me and presses a quick kiss to my cheeks. "It's your favorite, right? That way you can always have some here. Come on, I'll grab a bowl."

She's gone as fast as she arrived, her bare feet padding on the hardwood floors. She opens a cabinet and brings down two bowls and, as if under a spell, I follow her to the island where she takes the box from me and proceeds to fill two bowls with the chocolate cereal. When her coffee is done, I break from my daze and grab it and the milk from the fridge.

She hums with appreciation as she takes her first sip of coffee, but winces when she eases onto one of the hidden stools.

"Let me see." It's all the warning I give her before I'm spreading her legs and sliding up her skirt. Today she's wearing a high-waisted black, loose skirt with a loose bow that ends below her knees. It's long enough that no one will see the cuts she enjoyed receiving. Her top is a gray short-sleeved mock turtleneck and I'm almost disappointed at how hidden her skin is from me. It's replaced by fierce satisfaction where I see the material stick to her chest. As I ordered, she didn't clean up my seed.

My cock is hard in an instant, but I ignore the need to fuck her and focus on the bloody inside of her thigh.

"You cleaned it?" I asked, tracing my fingers over my initials. "Why didn't you bandage it?"

"Because I like the feeling of it bleeding," Wren admits with a lift of a shoulder and looks at me over her coffee mug. "But you could kiss it better?"

A bark of laughter bursts from me, startling me, and I pinch her thigh. "If I kiss it better, then it will heal without a scar. I want it there." I pluck the

hem of her skirt, lifting it the rest of the way to see if she'd listened to my second demand. The minx spreads her legs wider, baring her pussy to me. I drop her skirt with a smirk.

"Like you said," she says, reaching for her bowl of cereal and nudging mine closer, "I'm a good girl."

I hum noncommittally and lift my spoon to my mouth. As I eat, I consider the situation I've found myself in. I'm in a lover's home, my mate more specifically, performing mundane acts like eating and preparing for the day. It is not... as horrible as I'd have once thought.

From the bedroom, her ringtone shatters the pleasant silence and I check the time on my phone. Oberon held out to thirty minutes. I'm almost impressed. Wren eases off the stool with a sigh, her anxiety echoing down our unfulfilled bond and I have to stop myself from answering the phone for her. She's answering it in moments and walking towards me, the phone held slightly away from her ear as Oberon's loud voice comes through the speaker.

"I understand, Father," Wren says, her voice bland. She comes to stand in front of me and I grip the back of her neck, anchoring her to me as she continues the call. "Of course. Perhaps you'll consider listening to my security proposal? No, of course not. I'll be there within the hour."

Oberon hangs up the moment the last word is out of her mouth and Wren pulls the phone away only to stare at the screen.

"Can you do this?" I ask, my voice calm, when she remains silent, rubbing my thumb along her neck.

She breathes in a shaking breath and squares her shoulders before nodding resolutely. She meets my gaze, a hard look in her own. "I have to. I have to remind myself of what I saw in his files. How I've never been anything but a resource for him. That he killed my mother, and now he plans to kill me."

I don't let my expression or tone change, and my thumb continues its caress. "I won't let that happen."

"I know."

Letting her go, I straighten my cuffs and press a hand to her lower back, guiding her ahead of me. "Let me put a band-aid on that, and then I'll see you to the office."

Chapter Twenty-Three

WREN

Riding in the glass and chrome elevator at Benoit Tech, I grip my Kate Spade tote slung over my shoulder harder, the leather squeaking from the pressure. The mousy-looking older woman on the other side gives me a look in our reflection and I give her a brittle smile in return.

“He’s in a mood today,” I say, and her expression turns sympathetic. No need to explain who he is. Everyone knows who I am, not just because I’ve worked my ass off here, but because my father has always ensured I’m behind him during press conferences celebrating his successes. I have to resist shaking my head. Looking back, how could I never see that everything my father did for me was truly for himself?

Every victory I achieved, he claimed. I thought it was because he was proud of me. Then when he stopped offering me praise, he convinced me it was because he was pushing me to be even better. To help me reach my full potential.

Graduating early from high school. A double bachelor’s degree and then becoming one of the youngest people to ever graduate from the college with a doctorate. Competing in equestrian, performing as a cellist until I became a sought-after musician for chamber groups. Always telling myself that this time, this time he will be there with a smile on his face and tell me how proud he is of me.

How foolish I was. But Lan let me see the truth of the man Oberon Benoit is.

As much as I hate it, a part of me still loves my father, doesn’t believe he could have manipulated me my entire life after doing the same to my mother.

The elevator doors open and the woman steps off, leaving me alone with

my reflection as the doors slide closed. The ascent jars me and my heart starts beating faster as my mouth dries. Shifting, my thighs stick together for a split second but it's enough to distract me and my eyes drop to my breasts. I can't hold back the smile even as my cheeks turn more red than my hair.

I'd obeyed Lan, getting dressed with his cum still wet on the tops of my breasts. It's entirely inappropriate, something a well-respected woman in tech and business should never have allowed from a man. I should feel degraded, being reduced to a piece of property, something that he does to whatever he wants. He woke me by carving his damned initials in my thigh, for fuck's sake. Yet, rather than feel caged and used and pathetic, all I feel is a liberating power and adoration.

I am Landon Polastri's, body and soul, to use however he wishes. And he's proven over the short time we've been together that he takes care of what is his.

He's claimed me, taken me into his possession through brutal, savage, unapologetic honesty.

Nothing like my father.

My sex warms and I try not to squirm. I really don't need to walk into my father's office horny as hell. Beside, I'd already convinced Lan to fuck me, not that it was difficult when I was sitting on my bathroom counter, my skirt up around my waist and legs spread so he cover his mark in a bandage. It was harsh and wild, his hands gripping my thighs hard enough to give me more bruises as I clung to the counter's edge. He spilled inside me, his expression hard as he snarled, his hair still perfectly in place. His golden eyes locked on the bandage covering his mark on me. I didn't even get off, but I didn't want to—didn't need to. The high of making a vampire like Lan come undone so viciously, so completely, was enough that I grinned the entire way down to the parking garage of my apartment.

I refused to clean up. Feeling him trickle out and coat my thighs was the only way I was able to stomach sliding on my so-called engagement ring.

Even now, after listening to Landon's plan, which requires me to act as if I'm excited for the arrangement with Miles, I hate the ring.

Grimacing, Lan holds my left hand and slides on the overly large engagement ring Miles had presented me with. His face is blank as he does, the ring slightly tight and it feels constricting in the way being bound in ropes doesn't. My vampire notices my expression and seems amused as we stand in front of my private elevator. He'll ride down with me then use his speed to

leave me, keeping my father's security guards unaware of his presence.

"How can you stand putting the ring on me?" Bitterness fills my voice and if it weren't for Lan's insistence, I wouldn't wear it in his presence at all.

Lan hasn't let go of my hand when the elevator opens and he tugs me in after him. Even after spending so much time together in my apartment, in my bed, I want to press right up against this cold, unfeeling-appearing vampire. I know all too well how hot he burns inside his shell of frozen steel.

"Because it means nothing," Lan answers easily. The blunt statement in his unaffected voice erases my own conflict around the ring. "You are mine. This ring is nothing more than a prop on a stage for a play that will soon be over, Little Bird. It is a pretty chain that you can slip on and off at will, knowing that you are mine and never theirs."

His words bolster me as the doors open onto my father's office floor. This floor is similar to my own, and I'm greeted by a sleek and modern reception area with polished marble floors and contemporary artwork on the walls. The reception desk is waist high, exuding the air of high standards of efficiency and professionalism that Oberon demands. One receptionist is not at the desk, which means my father is likely already dictating orders to her and the other is speaking into his slim headset rapidly. He gives me a pained look, and I nod in return. When my father is in a sour mood, everyone knows it's best to do what he says as quickly and unobtrusively as possible.

I stride through the workspace filled with cubicles on one side and glass-walled conference rooms on the other. The rooms are empty, the lights off, but the large windows along the outer walls let in enough light that the scattered paperwork and askew chairs suggests half-finished presentations.

The Nightshade vampires really have thrown my father into a tailspin. My lips purse as I try to hide my amusement.

As I reach my father's office, his door opens and a flood of frazzled-looking employees hurry out. Oberon's loud voice is still barking commands as they flee to their stations, and I square my shoulders. When Raul exits, I raise my brows. My father has never requested my assistant's presence.

When he sees me, the dark-haired, dark-skinned man beelines for me, tugging me to the side so everyone else can pass.

"How bad?" I ask, my words sharp as I study the people flowing towards their desks or the elevators.

"Bad," my assistant confirms. He hands me a leather portfolio. "The gallery was bad enough, but now security is reporting issues at manufacturing

sites.”

My heart leaps. Landon didn't tell me about that. “Our projects?” If the Nightshades are tampering and delaying my hydro pistons, Lan will have hell to pay. Genuine relief washes through me when he shakes his head.

“It seems to be targeted to the lines under Miles' purview,” Raul says, his lips twitching like he's trying not to smile. “Miles is on-site. Ran out of here this morning with his tail between his legs.” My assistant eyes me, the smirk appearing in his eyes alone. I blush, unable to stop it. It's like he can see my shirt sticking to my breasts or the cum on my thighs. “You're in later than usual. Late night?”

“Me?” I laugh him off and wave my hand with the engagement ring in front of him. “I'm an engaged woman, Mr. Davis. I don't know what you're implying.”

Raul's face pinches at the engagement ring and I pat his shoulder. “I know what I'm doing,” I tell him and he nods. He offers to take my bag, and after I retrieve my phone, I let him. “I'll see you downstairs when I can. If the wedding planner calls, please arrange a meeting for later this week. A short meeting. I'll get Oberon settled and then I'll be downstairs. I want to check on our outreach progress for the electricity program.”

Raul leaves me and I run my hand down my shirt, straightening it as I prepare to face Oberon for the first time since he made it clear I would marry Miles regardless of my own desires. Striding towards the open office door, I go over my goals for the meeting just as I would if I were walking into a business meeting with potential investors. I can't look at him as my father any longer. He can be nothing more than an adversary that is in between me and what I really want.

My freedom. My own life.

I don't bother knocking as I enter his austere office, ignoring the beautiful panoramic views of Newgate and the thin line of Oldgate on the horizon beyond the wide river. I flip open the portfolio Raul passed off, silently praising him for the meticulous notes he took. I lock down my expression as I see how many lines have been disrupted at the manufacturing warehouse across the city that Miles is in charge of.

“Fucking finally,” Oberon spits out as he turns towards me. I stop a few feet from his desk, cocking my head to the side as I snap the portfolio closed and tuck it under my arm.

I thought seeing him would turn me back into the little girl I've always

felt like around him, ready and eager to do anything he wanted to feel the love and approval he once showered me with. Now... all I see is an older man looking like he's thrown a tantrum and is about to throw another one because he's not getting his way.

I'd always seen my father as this man of power, dominating every room he walks into. People respected him, listened to him, wanted to do whatever he said so that they'd earn his notice. He flaunted his power and his wealth, lording his accomplishments over the rest of the world. Studying him now, I see past the veneer of billions. Instead of power, I see a... a man.

A man with dark hair I know he has dyed, wrinkles at his eyes and curving around his mouth. His jaw is softer than I realized, the sharp edge having disappeared somewhere over the years. His eyes are baggy and dark, and his usually neat hair is a mess like he's been running his hands through it. He's abandoned his suit jacket, which hangs askew on a chair, and his royal blue shirt is rumpled and half-tucked.

I ignore his scathing remark, shocked at how easy I'm finding it to detach. "You're a mess, Father. When was the last time you slept?"

Oberon glares at me and I don't flinch or look away. His graying eyebrows narrow, deepening the wrinkles on his forehead. "How can I sleep when someone is fucking with my empire and no one seems to care except for me? You've done nothing to stop these break-ins at the gallery."

I refuse to take the bait. "Each time I've attempted to secure the premises, you've refused to allow me control."

He freezes where he sits, his glare turning ice cold. "Are you suggesting that I'm to blame?"

"I'm suggesting you let me do my job."

He lets out a disgruntled noise and shoves his hand through his hair. I wait, knowing if I'm patient enough he will come to me. I don't plead and cajole in board meetings or at charity galas and I won't now.

At last, he lets out a rough blow of frustration, waving at me to begin. This is it. Lan is counting on me to convince my father that the only acceptable security for the gallery is by hiring the Nightshades. According to Lan, most of the Nightshade businesses are legit despite the control they have over the crime in the Barrows. Ambrose sits above the city, controlling everything from the drugs and weapons on the streets to ensuring schools have the funding they need for children to access a proper education. The Nightshades run a true empire, the likes of which Oberon could never have

because he refuses to trust those around him.

Ambrose doesn't run the Barrows by himself, he hasn't created the empire he has without help. He's so successful because he knows the strength in a team. In a family.

"Over the week, the gallery has been targeted by multiple supernatural individuals," I begin, reciting the facts as dispassionately as I can. "From the reports, it seems that whoever is targeting you is doing so with the intent to disrupt the gallery's opening event. Nothing has been stolen, and beyond the first incident, no artifact has been specifically targeted. The security personnel were all human and unable to offer the specialized skills necessary to counter supernatural creatures."

I pause, waiting for Oberon to add anything, but he still sits in his chair, resting his jaw on his thumb and knuckles as he glares out of the window towards Oldgate.

"I have researched multiple security contractors and I believe I've found a company with the skills and experience we need to protect the Benoit assets. Additionally, because of the contractor's reputed connections, I believe once the word spreads as to whom we've hired, the harassment will stop."

That gets his attention, and he faces me, propping his elbows on his desk and laces his fingers together. "Tell me." His voice is hard and I don't let my nerves show. He'll have objections, but I have to counter them. Even if I don't want Lan to kill my father, I want Oberon stopped. Which means I need to get the Nightshades into the galleria for the opening in a way that won't make Oberon suspicious.

"Nocturna Solutions."

He studies me for a long moment, my heart climbing into my throat. "Vampires? The ones connected to the crime lord who claims to be king?" He shakes his head sharply, cutting his hand through the air. "No. Absolutely not. How do we know that they aren't the ones behind the break-ins?"

"Because if they were, they would have succeeded," I counter, then make a show of hesitating. I let my eyes soften a bit, my shoulders dropping slightly. "I know the Nightshade vampires have an... unsavory reputation, but Nocturna Solutions comes highly recommended regardless. Councilman Michael Garner uses them for both his personal and professional protection, as does the Newgate Times."

Oberon makes a noise of consideration and I press on.

"The success of this opening is paramount for me." Now I let a bit of

pleading into my voice. “It’s my hope that after the wedding, I’ll be able to focus solely on the management of the gallery as I’ll be stepping down from Benoit Tech.”

He cocks his head to the side, a half-pleased smile on his face. My stomach twists and I fight the instinctual pleasure of knowing I’ve made him happy. It’s hard, though, and using it instead, I smile abashedly and go to tuck a hair behind my ear despite the neat twist I’ve tamed my curls into.

“So, you’ve accepted your engagement with Miles, then?” He rises from his desk, walking around with his arms spread wide and folds me into his embrace. I free my arms enough to grip his sides, frozen in place. A part of me wants to hug him tight and demand to know the truth. I want to hear it from him that he convinced my mother to sacrifice her life for him, and that he intends the same for me. I want him to tell me that he loves me, that everything I saw is a carefully constructed lie Landon has created to fool me. That it’s impossible for Oberon to kill me when he was the one who’d put band-aids on my scraped-up knees and read me bedtime stories of princesses in far-off lands.

“I have,” I answer after clearing my throat and blinking back unexpected tears. When he pulls back, I give him a watery smile and he chuckles. “I think I was just so overwhelmed with it on top of everything else. You know how much I’ve been working lately, and I haven’t had an invite for another cello performance so it was just a lot.”

“Oh, I know,” he says, his voice a fraction too cold to be sympathetic. “I’d informed your chamber group that you would no longer be performing as you’d be too busy planning your wedding.”

“What?”

He was the reason no one had reached out to me for another performance? He’d decided for me, just like that? God, I really am such a fool. How many times has he done something just like this? I’ve never been the one to choose when I was finished with a hobby or interest. He’d sold my horse, canceled my robotics courses, limited my instruments to the cello—only because I fought for that one.

“Oh, don’t look so surprised,” he says and walks to where he’d abandoned his coat sometime before I arrived. He shrugs it on and looks at his watch. “I knew you’d appreciate it being handled. This way you can focus on your wedding. Oh, I was going to keep this as a surprise but I’m gifting you and Miles a honeymoon. You’ll use my private jet. I’ve arranged it all.

Three weeks in Italy. How does that sound? I know you've always wanted to go."

It's a cold, stark reminder of his plans. I watch closely, looking for any sign of his cruel deceit and find absolutely nothing. Why would I? This isn't his first time lying to someone he planned to kill. A tear slips out and runs down my cheek and I dash it away, forcing a smile.

"That sounds amazing, Father," I tell him, using the same fake cheer I have for years. "Thank you."

He sits down at his desk, reaching for something in his drawer. "Go ahead and hire Nocturna Solutions. I want the gallery to go off without issue, especially since that damn dealer fell through with the Helm of Darkness. Now we need a new feature piece."

I nod, but he's not paying attention, and I turn to leave. I'm almost at the door, feeling utterly hollow inside, when I stop and look back at him. He's bent over his desk, studying the papers in front of him, completely moved on from his plans to kill me and Miles.

"Father?" I try, uncertain, but knowing I need to.

"Hmm?" He doesn't look up, and a sharp pain stabs my guts.

"Why not the chalice?" I ask and his head snaps up. I do my best to look as naive as he believes me to be. "It's beautiful and you've never shared it with the world. No doubt a single night where the great Oberon Benoit's favorite piece will be on display will drive up the sale of tickets."

He frowns and I know he's about to refuse. He's never let it out of the safety of his workroom.

"Just consider it, please? As an engagement gift for your daughter?"

He scowls. "No promises," Oberon says at last. "But you may have a point."

I leave quickly, knowing the moment I'm out of his sight, he'll move on to other projects. The displaying of the chalice will appeal to his ego, and once the attacks stop on the gallery thanks to the new security, I'll create a press release announcing the chalice's presence. He won't be able to resist the increased acclaim the chalice's presence will grant him.

Oberon Benoit may have spent my entire life learning the best ways to manipulate me into his willing sacrifice, but I'm still his daughter. I have nearly two decades of experience learning how my father operates and he'll never expect my betrayal.

Chapter Twenty-Four

WREN

“I’m serious, the dick better be good.”

I try not to choke on my coffee in the middle of my office and Niamh smirks as she sips her own. She arrived just after lunch without announcement and Raul had too many hearts in his eyes to deny her. I swear that man would throw me under the bus if Niamh asked in that sweet tone that always gets her way. She might be seven years older than him, but I think that’s one of the reasons he’s so besotted with my best friend. Not that he’d ever admit it to me.

“It’s the only reason acceptable for you to keep bailing on happy hours. I’ve had to resort to ambushing you, for fuck’s sake,” my best friend continues, gesturing between us. She’s got her shoes off and feet tucked up under her where she’s sitting on my office couch, her chin perched on her fist. Her eyes dart towards my office door and back to me, and I raise a brow.

“Are you sure I’m the only reason you’re here today?” I tease, wagging my own brows. When she scoffs and tosses her hair, I laugh. God, I need this right now. With everything going on, sometimes a girl just needs her bestie. “I don’t see why you don’t put both of you out of sexual misery and drag Raul into a supply closet.”

“I do not need a man, let alone a younger man,” Niamh protests but it’s a weak one.

“You aren’t your mom, you know,” I tell her, my voice gentle, and glance at my phone. A pang of disappointment hits me when I don’t see any messages from Lan. Looking back at my friend when she hasn’t replied, I go sit next to her when her expression is troubled. Niamh gets along with her mom, except when it comes to her mom’s boyfriends—her very young

boyfriends. I put a hand on her back, rubbing gently. “Everything okay?”

Niamh blows out a breath and shakes off her stupor to shoot me a grin. “Yeah, I’ve got my big girl panties on.” She glares at the ring on my hand. “There’s no way it’s Miles—” she says his name as if he’s an incurable STD “—who is fucking you down so good.”

I blush and, after a moment’s hesitation, get up and close my office door. By the time I sit down next to her again, she’s upright and eager, like a bloodhound who’s caught the scent of a juicy rabbit. Even sitting close enough our knees brush, I whisper.

“You know the man who bought us drinks at Kells?” Niamh doesn’t seem to care about being quiet as she squeals. I rush to shush her, trying not to laugh myself. Then I fidget, wondering how she’ll take the next bit.

As always, she reads me well, her brows furrowing. “What is it? Is he some sort of weirdo?”

“He’s a vampire.”

Niamh isn’t fazed. “So?”

“And...” I’m hesitating and I know it. Ever since Lan told me, I’ve been oscillating between obsessing over it and refusing to think about it. “He says I’m his mate.”

“Are we talking mate as in girlfriend-boyfriend territory or like he wants you to have his vampire babies?”

“Oh, god, I love you.” I throw my hands around Niamh, and she flings her hand out with the coffee to avoid me knocking into it before returning the embrace. Her cavalier reaction has taken away most of the anxiety winding up inside me about Lan. When I pull back, I think about it. “I think it’s more like a soul mate, one true love thing? Before you scrunch up your nose like that, I know it’s fast. But I feel it too? It’s like I can feel him sometimes, inside me.”

She starts to say something and I slap my hand over her mouth. “Not like that, you sex fiend.”

Niamh licks my hand, like we’re children and not grown adults with successful careers, and I scowl, yanking my hand away and rubbing it dry on my skirt. Picking at the hem, I think about what it might mean to Lan for me to be his mate. He’s said he might never be able to love me, but in the short time we’ve been together, he’s made me feel more loved than anyone else before.

“I really, really like him, Niamh,” I confess. “Like, I think I’m in love

with him. And not just because he makes me come harder than I ever thought possible.”

Niamh reaches over and squeezes my hand and I meet her eyes. She’s looking at me with pride and encouragement. “Then embrace it, babe. You know I’ve always thought you deserve someone who is going to make you the center of their world. If that’s a vampire? All the better. I know how you’ve always had a thing for the blood-suckers.”

I snort and bump my shoulder against hers. “How about I make you a deal? I’ll embrace this whole mate thing if you finally make Raul take you out for dinner.”

“He should ask me,” she says with a sniff and I roll my eyes.

“He never will, out of respect for me,” I counter then give her a sly look. “Besides, he has a thing for you bossing him around.”

Niamh considers it for a long moment before standing up and downing the rest of her latte then pointing at me with the empty to-go cup. Even with her painted-on jeans and faded graphic tee-shirt under her black blazer, she looks every inch the badass computer engineer I know her to be.

“If I do this, you aren’t allowed to, one, say I told you so if it works out, or, two, fire him if it doesn’t.”

“Fair enough.” I manage to keep my grin to a minimum. Niamh flicks her hair over her shoulder one last time, grabs her purse and power walks out of the office, and I grin as she starts to speak.

“Raul, you’re taking me to dinner tonight,” she says in that confident tone that made our fellow engineering students listen in spite of her being a woman. “Put your number in my phone and I’ll text you my address. And throw this away for me.”

I don’t hear Raul’s response, which I assume means he’s sputtering in shock but since Niamh isn’t saying anything else I take it that he’s following her demand.

“Six sharp, got it? Wren will make sure you’re off in time. I like real food, and nothing too fancy so don’t go overboard trying to impress me, got it?”

“Uh, yeah, I’ll think of something!”

Raul’s excitement makes me grin and I move back to my desk, satisfied that those two are finally doing something about their attraction to each other.

A few minutes later, I’m scanning the updates forwarded to me by the dev team when Raul knocks on the doorframe. I glance up, my mouth

quirked up in a grin. A part of my world might be chaos, but seeing how cute Raul is over Niamh makes me happy.

“Thanks, boss lady,” he says, his smile brilliant.

“No problem,” I tell him. “Oh, a tip. Niamh really likes pub-style restaurants and arcades—the ones where you get tickets to redeem for prizes. Don’t get her flowers because her allergies are horrendous. A six-pack of craft beer will go far.”

His grin grows wider, showing off his brilliant white teeth. I’ve never considered it, not just because he’s my employee, but Raul is a handsome man that’s absolutely Niamh’s type, with his warm brown skin and black hair inherited from his Brazilian mother, and his green eyes from his Irish father. I’d warn him that Niamh will eat him up if he isn’t careful, but like I told her, I’m pretty positive that’s exactly what he hopes will happen.

Drumming my fingers on my desk, I consider my own romantic situation. I could research supernatural mates online, but it doesn’t feel right. Something this important seems like it needs to be discussed face to face with someone who knows. Frowning, I spin one of my emerald stud earrings, wishing I had my mom to talk to. This is definitely a mom situation.

I sit upright. There is someone I could talk to, if she’d see me. I have no way to reach her though, so I’d just be showing up.

Screw it.

I’ve never bailed on work early so frequently, but I grab my bag and text Simon to meet me in the garage. Raul isn’t at his desk when I head out, so I text him to reschedule my meetings for the rest of the day. He’ll make me pay for it later, since he’s the one who has to face the irritated managers. Then again, I did just get him a date with my best friend so he can deal. Checking the time on my phone, I do some mental calculations and just hope she’s home and able to see me.

“Are you sure you don’t need me to wait?” Simon asks as he eyes the streets nervously before looking up at the large, three-story French colonial style house dominating the block.

“I promise,” I assure him and press a kiss to his cheek. He blushes and I pat his shoulder. “I hope you know how much I appreciate you, Simon. Sometimes I feel like I’m closer to you than my father. I’m perfectly safe here, and I need to sort out the security contract with the Nightshades for the gallery. They’ll have a driver take me home when I’m ready.”

Simon makes a face when I mention my father, before adjusting his

driver's cap. "Someone has to worry about you, girl. If you change your mind, promise to call me?"

"I promise."

He waits in the driver's seat as I push through the white iron garden gate and hurry up to the imposing set of double doors that serve as the entrance of the Nightshade vampires' clan house. Before, Lan took me through the underground private garage so it's rather novel to ring the doorbell and wait.

Will Joséphine even be home? Maybe it's a good thing Simon is still waiting.

Just as my thoughts begin to spiral into doubt, the right door opens. Joséphine, to my relief, is the one who answers and when she sees me, her expression morphs from mildly curious and blank into a warm smile.

"Ms. Foster," she greets, her words welcoming even with her slight French accent. "How unexpected. You must come in."

I turn enough to wave at Simon and he pulls away as I follow Landon's mom inside. This time I take my time drinking in the house, and I'm surprised again at how many houseplants there are.

"If you are looking for Landon, I'm afraid he's out working," she says, closing the door behind me.

Like the first time I met her, she's wearing a dark outfit that makes me think of the Victorian era with its collared neck, voluminous sleeves cuffed at the wrist, and slim bodice tucked into a high-waisted, floor-length skirt in black. It should look dated, but with her delicately lined face and gray hair pulled back into a tight bun, she looks regal and timeless.

Compared to her, my dark blue jeans and white cable-knit sweater feels too modern and casual. There was no way I was showing up to talk to Lan's mom with his cum on my breasts and thighs, so I went home to shower and change before coming over.

"Actually," I begin, shifting as the nerves return. "I was hoping I could speak with you? If you're available, that is."

"Oh!" Her smile grows wider. "Of course. Are you hungry? I can have something brought for us to nibble on."

I don't think I'll be able to eat anything, so I shake my head. "Thank you, though."

She guides me through the connected rooms until we settle in one I haven't seen before. It's tucked away in the back of the house and smaller than my bedroom but filled with light from the large windows. There's a

small writing desk in one corner, and an antique-looking low couch set across from two matching chairs. Between them is a table in the same style, and the entire room is done in shades of pale pinks, lavenders, and creams. It's feminine without being overwhelming or cliché.

"This is what Ambrose calls my own office, but I've never considered it a place of work," she explains before sliding a phone out of her pocket. A moment later, she returns it as she sits on the couch, gesturing for me to sit beside her. "I've requested tea, since it will not do to have a conversation without refreshments. Now, tell me, child, what brings you here to see me?"

I set my Kate Spade tote down and tuck a foot under my thigh as I gather my thoughts. Joséphine exudes calm and motherly support and just being in this room that is so clearly hers has me ready to lay everything out at her feet.

"Landon said that I'm his mate." I figure it's best to get right to the point. She doesn't say anything, waiting patiently for me to continue. "I have no real idea as to what that means. I thought about looking it up online but I don't know if whatever I found would be accurate or not. I know I could just ask him, but he's already told me he may never be able to love me, so I doubt he'd give an unbiased opinion."

Joséphine snorts, shaking her head. "That boy has convinced himself that he's a psychopath as they call it in modern times." Before she can continue, she looks towards the door. "Ah, our tea."

A young man in a suit similar to what Landon and the other vampires wear walks in carefully holding a large tray. He's got sandy blond hair and his golden eyes tell me he's a vampire, but something about his mannerisms tells me he's younger than even me.

"Here you are, Mama Joséphine," he says, his voice a soft tenor, as he sets the tray down on the table. It's a full tea service, with delicate china and a plate of sandwiches and another, smaller one of the cookies I'd enjoyed the last time I was here.

"Thank you, Edward. That will be all," she says, and after he leaves, she pours us both a cup. I decline the milk and sugar and note how she adds a generous amount of both to her own. She takes a long sip before facing me again.

"You know that Landon is my son, both by birth and rebirth?" When I nod she continues, an affectionate look in her eyes. Her love for her son is so obvious that a spike of envy lances my heart. "As a young man, he was full of life and joy. He had resentment for Ambrose, of course, because he

blamed him for his father's actions. I often wonder if Landon would have responded differently to Ambrose turning me if the incident never occurred."

I cradle the porcelain tea cup in my hands, the china finer than even most of the social elite in Newgate. "By the incident, you mean the night my father's orders got most of his fellow soldiers killed?"

"He's told you? Yes, I mean precisely that. His head injury changed him, but I think it was also humanity itself that turned him so cold. Lan had always wanted to believe in the best of men, which is why he had such distaste for the man who raised me. Ambrose has never hidden that he operates on both sides of the law of man and morality.

"After I nursed my son back to health, I think the flames burned away any hope he had in his fellow men. I consulted the best doctors at the time, and I was finally told I must accept that this new Landon was how my son would always be."

I reach out and cover her free hand with my own, squeezing gently. "It must have been incredibly difficult to face."

She returns the squeeze and then takes another sip of tea before setting her cup and saucer down. "Cookie?" she asks, and I accept, unable to resist the chocolate chip and toffee treat.

"I only say this because he still believes himself a savage. I am not unaware of the brutalities my son has committed, nor am I oblivious to his enjoyment in such acts. Yet, I believe my son still has a light in him, dim as it may have grown. It is why he recognizes you as his mate, and it brings me so much joy that he's accepting it." Her soft expression turns puzzled as she studies me. "Though your scents are mixed, he has not marked you yet?"

Something tells me she's not talking about his initials carved into my thigh.

"No," I say, nibbling on the cookie. "It's one of the questions I have. Or really, I should just say my question is broad enough to cover everything to do with being mated."

She nods, understanding on her face. "I'll explain what I can. I'm sure Ms. Eloise or her friend Deidre will be happy to share their experiences so far as a human mated to a vampire."

Later I might seek them out, but right now I just need someone who feels like a mom guiding me through this. I feel like a preteen, completely naive to the world of dating and boys all over again. At least this time I'll have more than pop culture magazines to give me advice.

“A vampire, or any creature such as a shifter, witch, or fae, only ever has one true mate. It’s the origins of the human idea of soul mates,” Joséphine begins, and I’m hanging on her every word. “It’s more than that, though. For us, it creates a connection between the souls. It is weaker in the beginning, but it’s still possible to sense the other’s heightened emotions.”

“I’ve felt that!” I thought I’d been looking too much into it, imagining I felt some of Lan’s emotions in my heart when they weren’t there. To know that what I sensed was true sends my heart racing.

Joséphine nods knowingly. “It will grow stronger when he marks you as his mate.” She leans forward and presses her fingertips to my chest, just above my heart. “A vampire’s mate bond is made by drinking of the other’s heart blood. Once marked, the bond cannot be broken save for death and when one mate dies, the other one rarely lives for much longer.”

“Death by a broken heart?”

“Essentially,” she agrees and leans back in her seat. “You are human, so your lifespan will be much shorter unless he turns you. I worry he has not marked you yet because of his belief that he is unworthy of a mate.”

I consider her words, and then the memory of Lan explaining the chances of pregnancy comes to the forefront. Unable to help it, I press a hand to my stomach.

“He said there’s a chance I can become pregnant, because I have the gene to become a vampire.”

Joséphine’s brows shoot up and she looks at where my hand lay before cursing in French under her breath.

Panic grips me. “What?” I practically yell.

“That foolish boy,” she says with the same tone of any exasperated mother. “It may be a fortunate thing that he has not marked you yet. The chances of pregnancy increase tenfold between mates, especially those with a completed bond.”

“Oh.”

I have a PhD, two bachelor’s degrees, multiple scholarly awards to my name, and countless other achievements but that’s the best response I can come up with at Joséphine’s revelation.

Looking down at my stomach, I’m struck dumb by the idea that I could be pregnant with Lan’s child at this very moment. Thinking about the time between my last period and when I last had my birth control shot, my heart skips a beat.

It's entirely possible. My period has never been regular, and it's been a couple of months since I postponed my last shot during a hectic week at work.

I suck in a breath, trying not to hyperventilate, and Joséphine leans forward, rubbing my back soothingly as the panic hits.

"This... this wasn't in my plans," I say, my voice shaking. Then I laugh. "Then again, being murdered by my father in a ritual sacrifice wasn't either, so why the fuck not. A baby is much better than being dead."

"A baby?"

Lan's cold voice silences my maelstrom of emotions and my face snaps to the doorway. He's a pillar of hard, fierce ice surrounded by the gentle comfort of his mother's parlor. His golden eyes are frigid and terror grips my throat.

"I need to go," I say to no one, setting the tea cup and saucer down with a clatter on the tray and pushing to my feet. The dread growing inside of me only intensifies as Lan steps out of my way as I flee.

Chapter Twenty-Five

LAN

Wren passes me, the pain on her face only confirming what I know to be the truth. I am not meant to keep someone happy, to provide a place of comfort and gentleness. I had sensed my mate's presence the moment I turned onto our street, a primal instinct pushing me to be derelict in my duties to Ambrose and go to her side. I'd inhaled her sweet scent the moment I entered the house, following it to my mother's tea room.

I'd arrived in time to hear that Wren may be pregnant, and the words struck me more brutally than any fight I've been in. Not even the explosion that should have taken my life rocked me as hard as her words.

"Matka?" I turn towards the one anchor I've had my entire life, seeking her out as the ground beneath my feet turns from stone to sand. Wren is the wave that crashes against me, stealing my footing and understanding of the world with each encounter.

My mother rises from her couch, swiping her hands down over skirt habitually to straighten the folds as she moves around the tea table to my side. Her concern is evident in the slight bend of her brows and pinched lips.

"You should be going after your mate, my son," she reprimands me gently.

I swallow, knowing she is right. I stare at the floor, and I can feel the weight of her gaze on me. I may be centuries old but I still feel like a little boy around my mother, especially when it's clear I've disappointed her somehow.

"I am the last person who should be a parent," I say, my ears picking up the front door opening. Wren is leaving, and I feel her conflicting emotions as if they are my own. "Is she pregnant?"

Joséphine strokes my upper arms, encouraging me to look up at her. The concern is still there, but it's the concern I've seen ever since my father left her.

"You are not incapable of love, my darling. I wish you would allow yourself to see that." I want to protest but she shakes her head and continues. "Yes, you changed after that horrible incident, and after I turned you. It hurt me to see you try your best to become a monster, and I've done my best to support you and keep you in line so as to avoid punishment from our sire. But what I've never done is apologize to you for turning you."

I rear back, stepping away from her and bumping into the door sill. "Why would you apologize for that? Do you wish I were dead, then?"

She shoots me a glare. "Don't you dare say that ever again." Her expression softens, and she raises her hand as if to stroke my cheek but pulls back before she can. "You hated what Ambrose was, and you could never understand why I asked to be turned rather than die. You thought that I was choosing him, but I was choosing you, my love. You had so much pain and hatred in your heart. I couldn't leave you when it was clear you needed someone."

In the centuries we've been vampires, my mother has never broached the reason Ambrose turned her. I had accused her of choosing Ambrose over me, over humanity. I'd turned my back on her for the first two years after she'd become a vampire. She never blamed me, though Ambrose made his displeasure clear. Now I'm confronted with the fact that Ambrose may have known her true motivations and when I left, all I did was confirm his belief that I wasn't worth Joséphine's sacrifice.

My mother cups my face, her thumb stroking my cheek.

"You look so much like your father," she says, before clearing her throat and meeting my gaze. "I never apologized for turning you. When you were dying, I took advantage of you. I knew you'd never have agreed if you were healthy. I'd seen change in you, though. I'd seen glimpses of the boy you were, my sunshine, despite the black clouds that'd consumed you. Ambrose saw it too, saw that you just needed more time to heal. So he agreed to my request to turn you, because he too had faith that you could recover in time."

I shake my head. "I haven't, though, Matka," I protest, using my preferred name for her. "Modern science has proven it. That night, your son died and I was born. Then after being turned, it only made me worse. I cannot feel emotions like you and others."

I drop my head, my teeth clenching for a moment. “You should have let that damn gut wound kill me.”

“Bullshit.”

The curse in my mother’s slightly accented voice has my brows shooting up with shock. She never curses and now she’s looking at me as if I’m an idiot.

“If you could not feel, then you would not love me as you claim,” Joséphine announces, her hands on her hips. “You would not have grown attached to Ezra, or Malachi, or the rest. You say you do not care for them, yet you are always there to stand at their back or their side. Even Ambrose, as much as you claim to still hate him. You feel so much, my son, you just don’t allow yourself to acknowledge it.”

I scowl, shoving my hands in my pockets, unable to come up with an adequate rebuttal.

“As for your mate and the chance of you being a father, you will be a good father. Wren wouldn’t let you be anything else.”

Faint amusement breaks through the gray emotions clouding me, and my lips twitch but I don’t give in to the smirk.

“You’re right,” I admit. I brush a hand through my hair, letting out a sigh. “I need to report to Ambrose; he’s expecting me and it can’t wait.”

Joséphine makes a noise of disappointment but doesn’t suggest I blow off the king, even if he’s essentially my grandfather.

“I’ll message her,” I compromise with myself and pull out my phone. My mother pats my shoulder before going to clean up the tea I’d interrupted. I head towards Ambrose’s office across the house, tapping out a message before deleting it and calling Wren instead. I scowl when it goes to voicemail after the second ring. After her greeting, I leave a message. “Don’t hide from me, Little Bird. I expect you to answer next time.”

Hanging up, I pull up our messages and hesitate on the threshold of Ambrose’s office.

My reaction was poor, Little Bird. There’s something I must do for work, but I need to see you.

Ambrose is typing, and from the blended scents, Eloise had recently been in here. Good, perhaps the king of the Barrows is relaxed enough to hear the news I have. He doesn’t look up as I finally enter, and I sink into one of the chairs on the other side of his desk. Waiting like this used to irritate me, convinced Ambrose does so specifically to remind me of my place beneath

him.

Now I take the opportunity to study the man who took my mother into his house and heart and raised her as his own child. A man who treated me like his grandchild, even when I did my best to thwart his authority.

He looks only a few years older than he did when I was human, thanks to a vampire's delayed aging. But his eyes reveal the truth of his age, the haunted blank look of a man who had seen and committed great violence over centuries.

He is ruthless and, not for the first time, I consider how alike we are. This time, though, I let myself see our similarities beyond our capabilities of being monsters when required.

At last he looks up and turns his attention towards me. He, like the rest of the male vampires, wears an expensive, custom-tailored suit, preferring black with crisp white shirts. Unlike his usual garb, he's foregone a tie and his shirt is open enough to give a glimpse of the tattoos he got as a Kievan Rus human soldier. It's also rumpled enough to confirm Eloise's presence in here earlier.

"How did you know Eloise was your mate?" I ask, instead of delivering the intel he'd requested. I don't know who is more surprised, myself or Ambrose.

He studies me, his shrewd eyes seeming to look through my skin and deep within me. I hold myself still even though it's supremely uncomfortable.

"The moment I tasted her blood, I knew she was different," he admits at last and props his elbow on the high armrest and gestures at the space before him. "It took you taking her to that damn club for me to admit to myself she was my mate. But even before then, I knew I couldn't let her leave me. I worried she would be a weakness, but in reality, Eloise is my greatest strength."

I process his words, propping my jaw up on a thumb, my index finger along my cheek. I feel similar towards Wren. The idea of her leaving my life is gut-wrenching and inspires an infuriating rage to confront whatever is between us.

"Don't convince yourself that you can't have a mate, Landon."

My eyes fly to Ambrose's knowing gold ones. He continues when I say nothing.

"Do you know what pisses me off the most about you?" He doesn't give me a chance to answer. "You've limited yourself to this role and convinced yourself it's all you're capable of. The unfeeling psycho with deviant sexual

tastes. You could be so much more if you'd accept that your brain has healed much more than you believe."

I want to refute him, to insist that he and my mother are wrong. That I am a cold, heartless bastard with no empathy for those around me, but I cannot. Not when I feel love for my mother, and not when I feel ... something for Wren.

"What if I can't ever love Wren?" It's physically painful to expose such vulnerability to Ambrose, but I refuse to be a coward and look away from him.

Rather than mocking me or taking full advantage of my state as I would have done, he gives me a moment of consideration.

"What do you feel for her now?"

"Possessive," I answer without hesitation. "She's mine. I ... need her." I press the heel of my palm to my chest, my feelings for my mate intense enough to cause a physical ache. "I crave her, with a strength that will never be satisfied. In every way."

"Have you been with anyone else since her? Have you fed from anyone else?"

"Not since the first time we had sex," I muse. I'd taken my urges out on the redhead at Lush that one night, but even then I couldn't bring myself to fuck the human. As for feeding, I'd never cared who I'd fed from before. With Wren, I simply assumed I had no desire to feed from additional people since she is always eager for my bite. Now, though, actively considering feeding from a woman other than Wren causes my guts to twist in revulsion.

Ambrose shrugs, the gesture pulling me from the realizations.

"You may not be ready to accept you love your mate, but what you're describing is the foundation of a vampire's love," Ambrose says. "You can love Wren, if you let yourself."

"What is this, Emotionally Stunted Men Anonymous?"

A snarl rips from me, and it's echoed by Ambrose, as Eris waltzes in. She rolls her eyes and inspects her talon-length nails. Today, they're painted a metallic gold almost the exact shade of vampiric eyes.

Ashe enters a moment later and steps around the demon in his wife's body; his arm brushes against her and neither jerks away.

Interesting.

He sits in the other chair on my side of Ambrose's desk, casually unbuttoning the single button on his black suit jacket before he crosses his

ankle over the opposite knee. In a single glance, I catalog everything about him. How his shoulders are slightly more relaxed than normal, his dark blond hair a bit longer than he normally allows, his right hand—his gun hand—resting lightly on his shin. The inherent violence every vampire has in our muscles is languid in Ashe.

He's fed up with the last twelve hours.

My eyes dart to Eris, to her neck, then to her dark gaze which meets mine with a challenge. There's no evidence, even with my enhanced eyesight, of a bite on Eris's exposed neck. She crosses her arms, and I smirk. She's wearing long sleeves. It may be getting cooler as autumn takes hold of the Barrows, but not that cold for a woman known to wear sleeveless tops until frost coats the ground every morning.

Definitely interesting.

"What do you have?" Ambrose gets straight to business.

Ever since Eris revealed the existence of her celestial blade and her failure to acquire it, Ashe has devoted himself to the fulfillment of Cassandra's bargain. The return of her celestial blade is only one part of the bargain, according to the demon. The second half is Cassandra's agreement to locate and help defeat an archangel Eris only refers to as the Benevolent.

"While information is typically your wheelhouse—" Ashe inclines his head towards me.

"—Eris and I have been combing through religious establishments and searching databases for any indication of a supposed miracle or sighting that can be connected to him."

I peer at Eris. "You're certain this Benevolent is still in this realm? What if they—" I gesture upwards "—returned to Heaven or whatever they call it?"

Only Ambrose looks at Eris where she stands behind Ashe. She's like one of the many solitary, stone guardians the mortals place above graves to protect their loved ones' spirits—or ferry them to the depths of Hell. Ashe must have already asked this question, as his expression never falters as he looks at our sire.

"It is not well known, even among my kind," Eris begins, her voice hollow. I sit up straighter and she looks pained at my movement, grimacing at my clear interest. It only makes me want to know this secret more. She pushes on. "Eons ago, in the times where mortals believed gods walked the earth, there was a reckoning. Many cultures have recorded it as a great flood, while in other areas a battle between the gods, like Ragnarok. The context

doesn't matter. What does, though, is not everyone who survived was able to return to the other realms. The Benevolent is one of them."

I recall and file through everything I know about religious mythology, but I never paid attention at the Mass my father made me attend while he was with us. Everyone knows the story of the Arc, and many know Ragnarok. But beyond a shallow, referential knowledge, I've never had a reason to dig deeper into supernatural history and its impact on the mortal realm.

"And, to clarify, you want him dead?" Ambrose asks, his fingers steepled under his chin. "Why?"

"He has terrible fashion." Irritation burns in Eris' eyes. "It doesn't matter. The bargain has been made."

Ambrose concedes with a tilt of his head. "Any sign of him then?"

"No," Ashe says, and the single word sends Eris into agitated pacing. "Nothing for the last hundred years. Eris was close after her summoning, so I imagine he went to ground. He knows she's still on this plane, looking for him."

My phone vibrates and I pull it out, brows narrowing at the notification. Ambrose and Ashe continue to speak, a part of my mind still listening and noting the important points for later.

Wren is at her father's penthouse. She must have taken a car directly there after leaving. I grit my teeth, my phone creaking under my grip. I should have blown Ambrose off and chased her down.

Swiping open the phone, I send her another text.

Don't do anything stupid, Little Bird. I want you safe.

My frown deepens when the message fails to go through. I try it a second time, but again it fails.

"Something wrong?" Ashe asks, breaking through my fixation.

There shouldn't be, but my instincts are roaring to life. Is it just because she's my mate and she's now within reach of the man I've sworn to destroy? Or is something truly wrong? I focus inward, searching for her emotions through our tenuous, unsolidified mating bond. There's nothing concerning radiating towards me. Annoyance. Frustration. Conflict. Hope. Each of those Wren felt as I let her walk away after hearing she could be pregnant with my child.

I've learned to trust my instincts over the centuries. They've never been wrong and have kept me and my fellow Nightshades alive. But why would she go to Oberon immediately? Does she doubt the evidence against him? Is

she planning to confront him?

More importantly, why the hell are my messages not going through?

I meet Ambrose's gaze, holding it as I call Wren. A bestial sound overwhelms Wren's professional greeting for voicemail. As I stab the End Call button with my thumb, I realize the sound came from me.

"Yes," I say, rising. "I'm not sure what yet, but I intend to find out."

Ambrose nods and I turn to leave. I need to get upstairs to my computer. If Wren is at Oberon's penthouse and I can't get through to her, it means she's in danger. My little bird may be upset with me and my reaction, but she's not rash. She's never rash. It's something I love about her.

Love. I stop in my tracks. I love something about her. I might even... love her.

"Landon?" Ashe's voice is thick with concern and even Eris is looking at me strangely.

I look over at Ambrose, who sits back in his leather chair and gives me a knowing look. It's as if he's experienced the same sort of realization.

My ringtone breaks the silence and I look at the screen. Unknown number. Ice fills my stomach as my instincts tell me this is what they were warning me about.

I answer the call and bring the phone to my ear but say nothing.

"Hello, Mr. Polastri. Or should I say, Soldier Polastri?"

Oberon's voice is haughty and amused. By sheer force of will I don't crush the phone and I say nothing. Rage replaces the blood in my veins, my fangs elongating and spine turning to steel.

I will not play this monster's game.

Locking everything down, I let a grin twist my lips. I had always planned for this confrontation. I will not fail my vendetta or Wren.

"Mr. Benoit," I say, modulating my voice into practiced pleasantries. "Or do you prefer General Demencius? I'd say it's a pleasure, but we both know I'd be lying. Which I hate to do."

An amused chuckle rumbles through the line. "I truly thought I was the only one to survive the blast. I almost didn't, but I used the chalice and—what was your friend's name? Erik—no, was it Jan?"

"Sergi."

"That's him!" Oberon answers, jovial. "Sergi was already dead, but I'd planned the attack well. The cultists had begun a ritual, one with enough of their magic that everyone's blood was imbued with it as they died. So when I

had to drag my broken body across the burning floor, it was a relief to find Sergi's body intact but bleeding. It was difficult, since I was badly burned, but I managed to get enough of his blood into the chalice and say the rite. It healed me well enough that I walked away from there, laughing your name."

Ashe and Ambrose rise, moving to stand in front of me. Ambrose's eyes are wrath filled, and Ashe looks murderous.

"What a shame," I reply drolly. "Is there a point to this call beyond gloating?"

Oberon is quiet for a long moment and I smirk at the idea that I'm getting to him.

"You must have thought I didn't recognize you at our meeting—in fact, until that day I had no idea you'd survived. I—"

"Can we skip the monologue?" I interrupt him. "I have many things to do today."

"Wren."

"Wren?" My heart stops but I don't let it show in my voice. It's more difficult than I'm used to; I've never struggled with emotions, even ones of rage and anger. Oberon saying her name, though, threatens my control. The need to bury my fangs in the man's throat before ripping out his jugular twists inside me like a pissed-off viper, its poison dripping into my veins and fueling the rage.

"Her driver was concerned about her visiting the Barrows, even if she claimed it was for work. He informed me of her location, and I considered what she and I'd spoken earlier about. I instructed him to bring her straight to me if he picked her up, and he's a good employee so he did. He knows not to risk upsetting me." Oberon explains. "Regardless, what's important is I believe you have a fascination with my daughter. I thought it only fair to tell you she will no longer be available. I thought she was a loyal, loving daughter, but I'm learning she is not as obedient as she appears. Much like her mother."

Ashe mouths for me to stay calm, and I do. Barely. "Do you have a point, other than you're locking your daughter up in your tower? My fascination was due to the connection to you."

"This is a warning, Mr. Polastri," Oberon says. "Do not interfere in my life and I will not interfere in yours. We can go back to how it was before. Blissful ignorance of each other."

"Goodbye, General." I end the call and look between Ashe's and

Ambrose's gaze.

Ambrose speaks first. "What do you need from us?"

The inferno of rage disappears as if in a vacuum, replacing it is an indomitable glacier and focus. Plans and variables fly through my mind at lightning speed, being dismissed or added to the strategy forming inside. Only three heartbeats pass before I nod sharply.

Ambrose and I have a conflicted history, but I will accept his support without hesitation when it comes to protecting my mate.

"Oberon cares for nothing but himself, safeguarding the chalice above all. So I need to know everything about every single person who works on his security team. I want their families, their debts, their hobbies, their secrets."

"That'll take time," Eris says, stepping forward to stand beside Ashe. "Why not just go in guns blazing and get the girl?"

A sadistic grin stretches my face, my fangs fully exposed. "Because in addition to saving my mate, I'm going to destroy Oberon Benoit's empire completely."

Chapter Twenty-Six

WREN

Maybe someone else would be scared after their father, who murdered their mother, dragged and locked them into a bedroom.

Frankly, I'm just pissed off.

I was shocked when Simon was still so close to the Nightshades' house, then grateful as he stopped by a pharmaceutical corner store when we crossed over the bridge into Topside. I needed a pregnancy test, just to find out if all of the fucking Lan and I had been doing has created something from the both of us. I'd stored it in my purse, intent on taking it as soon as I got back to my apartment but that plan went out the window when Simon drove me to my father's building and escorted me upstairs.

I want to be angry at Simon, but he works for my father in the end, not me.

No, who I'm angry at is the man who raised me to be a sacrificial lamb.

Oberon asked for my phone, and like a confused idiot who still trusts her dad somehow, I showed him it. He stole it from me then marched me to this damn guest bedroom. At least he hadn't seen the pregnancy test box in my purse.

I sink onto the sleek king-size bed, grumbling with resentment how comfortable the mattress is with the plush linens. Like the rest of my father's penthouse, the guest room may as well be a professional showroom and has no spark of life. There's a seating area by the one large window that offers a stunning view of Newgate but I hate it because it's a reminder that I'm trapped in here.

Obviously, I need to escape. Joséphine mentioned the mating bond connecting Lan and me, and how mates can feel one another.

Landon! My asshole father has me locked up in his penthouse! I think at him as loud as I can and scrunch my face at how ridiculous I feel.

I should have started carrying my second phone with me, not that it'd help since it's currently broken and tucked away in a drawer with a semi-permanent spot on my to-do list.

Think. I'm an intelligent boss bitch, as Niamh likes to remind me. I can figure out a way to escape and get back to Lan, who will keep me safe.

My hand drifts to my stomach, and a dizzying combination of fear and hope hits me. I've always wanted kids, though it was always a future thing. I eye my handbag and after a moment's cowardly hesitation, I grab the pregnancy test out of the box and storm into the connected bathroom like I'm on the warpath.

The bathroom is just as meticulously designed as the guest bedroom, with a seamless glass shower and marble accents that match the marble countertops. I ruin the pristine image by shredding the thin box as I open it and discard the white and pink pieces on the counter without care. Two wrapped sticks fall out, along with a folded instruction paper. How hard can it be to pee on a stick?

Shucking down my pants and underwear, I open one of the tests and sit on the toilet. I make a face when pee splashes my hand, but when I deem the proper end is saturated enough, I pop the cap back on and clean myself up.

The instructions say the results can take three minutes to appear. So of course I leave the bathroom and start to pace the length of the bedroom.

Will a pregnancy from a vampire even show up on an off-the-shelf test? Is a baby human or vampire? Or a hybrid of both? Oh, god, is the baby going to pull some horror movie thing and eat its way from my stomach when it's ready to be delivered?

"It'd be great if I had my phone!" I yell at the locked door.

If I had my phone, I could look all these questions up. Instead, I'm left here to be the city's largest ball of tangled yarn spun out of anxiety.

I continue pacing, rubbing my arms and trying to keep my breathing normal. Even if I'm pregnant, there's nothing I can do about it at this very moment. That's it. I need to keep compartmentalizing.

First, find out the test result. Second, decide to deal with the result later. Third, come up with a way to get out of here.

Lan will come for me when he doesn't hear from me. I'm certain of it, even if he'd gone full iceman at the idea of a baby with me. I'm his mate, and

I know that wasn't a part of his schemes to get to my father.

The only thing I can't answer is what he'll focus on first. Will he try to find me, then rescue me if I haven't made it out on my own, or will he prioritize seeking his revenge on my father?

I may be Lan's mate, but it hasn't even been two months for us. He's held this hatred of my father for centuries.

I saw the look in Lan's eyes when he told me the truth of his past, heard the pain and fury in his words. It won't take much to snap that fierce control of my vampire's, and he's eager to let the savage out.

Believing more than three minutes has passed, I brace myself before going back into the bathroom. From the doorway, I study the innocuous piece of plastic lying on the marble counter beside the pristine sink. I've faced down misogynistic department heads, billionaire investors, shitty boyfriends, and now have even looked at the man who plans to kill me in his eyes.

Breathing out, I go to the sink and get it over with. Looking at the stick, I hold my breath. I look closer, pinching my brows at the tiny window. If I'm pregnant there will be a horizontal line bisecting the vertical line.

It's faint, barely there... but it is. I'm pregnant.

I suck in breath, not realizing I'd been holding it and my head gets light. "Oh, shit, oh, shit, oh, shit," I chant in a whisper as I scramble back to the bedroom and sit down on the side of the bed. I'm still staring at the plastic stick and the barely visible but unmistakable second blue line. If I thought I could pee again, I'd take the other test just to double-check but well, I've never had a nervous bladder.

"I'm pregnant," I tell myself, and I don't feel like I can believe my own words. It's weird to say. I've always been the image of the perfect socialite daughter. Getting in a "situation," as many refer to it, is rare and quickly covered up by a hasty marriage or timely visit to a specialist.

I'm publicly engaged to Miles, but I have no intention of marrying him. My name and reputation will be dragged through the mud and I'll be scorned at any event I dare show my face at.

A giggle surprises me, and then I'm laughing and crying as I flop backwards on the bed, my legs dangling over the side.

Who the fuck cares if the rich snobs think I'm a slut and disapprove of me being pregnant outside of wedlock? I laugh even harder at the idea of the wrinkled faces in too much makeup scoffing at me and turning me away. God, maybe I should announce it as soon as I get out of here?

Deidre can run a segment in the gossip column for me. I can imagine it now: Heir to the Benoit fortune escapes her murderous father but even more scandalous: she's pregnant and it's not her fiancé's baby!

The amusement tapers off and I'm left staring up at the white ceiling, contemplating the future. I want this baby, even if it wasn't expected or planned. Even if Lan doesn't want it, he'll be a good, protective father. He would never treat our child the way my father treated me. Joséphine will be the grandmother who spoils the child rotten, and Niamh will demand to be the cool aunt. Simon can be his or her grandpa.

My eyes burn with tears, my throat closing up, as a perfectly clear image is depicted in my thoughts. Lan, dressed in his pressed, too-neat clothes, holds a little toddler girl covered in paint. He's smiling that small, beautiful smirk of his while our little girl laughs and leaves blue handprints over his pristine shirt. He looks over at me and says something to the little girl that makes her squeal and then he reaches a hand out, inviting me to join them.

Yes.

That is the future I want. One filled with real family, real love.

To get that, I have to escape. So, I'd better get on that.

AN HOUR LATER, I'm standing in front of the large window, both hands pressed to the glass. Fear and disappointment cloud my earlier determination. I've searched every inch of the room. There's nothing I can try to use to pick the door's lock. The window is sealed shut, never having been designed to open given what floor we're on.

The room is as empty as it was the day after the furniture was moved in. No one has ever stayed here; every closet shelf, drawer, and bathroom cabinet is empty. There's not even a stray piece of paper or fabric under the bed.

Come on, Landon. I could really use your help right now.

Faint anger and worry tease me in reply to my thinking and I push off the mirror in shock. Pressing a hand over my heart, as if that'll amplify our connection, I concentrate on the part of me that feels like him. Instead of focusing on words, I try to project my need for him, my fear for my life, a silent, emotion-filled plea for rescue.

I can never tell Niamh that those meditation classes she forced me to take in college are coming in handy now. She'd be sick with gloating.

Releasing focus, I try to push down the feelings I'd gathered up and concentrate on the link between Lan and me. If I'd known he had to mark me to complete the bond, I would have asked him to and then we wouldn't be in this situation. I'll take what I can get, though, and wait for anything from his side.

When nothing comes, I question if it'd really happened or if it's something I want so badly I'm now imagining it.

Then a wave of confidence and certainty, tinged with fury and passion, comes flooding into me. A sob breaks free, and I press the back of my hand to my mouth as my knees buckle from the relief.

My savage is coming for me. I don't know what he knows, other than I need him, but I trust him. I trust him to scorch the earth for me and the first person he'll look at is my father. I just need to survive long enough for Lan to rescue me.

Two hard knocks rap against the door and I straighten, wiping at my face to hide any evidence of tears. The door opens as I'm smoothing my clothes and Oberon's impassive face and broad body fill the doorway. I can't think of him as my father anymore.

"Come," he orders. "It is dinnertime. You must eat."

I want to refuse, but if I'm going to escape I need strength. Not only that, but I'm pregnant, which means I definitely need the food to keep my strength up. Raising my chin, I give him a clipped nod and follow him from the room.

I will be ready to take any opportunity to escape. Lan is coming for me, for his family.

When I enter the dining room after Oberon, I nearly stumble, catching myself just in time so no one notices.

Miles turns his attention from the unfamiliar comely older woman in a simple blue dress to me, smiling broadly.

"My dear fiancée!" He strides around the ostentatious dining table and wraps me in a hug before pressing a firm kiss against my lips. He pulls away before I can bite him or gag. His grip is hard on my bicep as he turns me towards the woman who is beaming at us. Looking between Oberon and Miles, both wearing pleasing, kind-appearing smiles, my brain is shrieking at me to run.

"You should have told me you were so overwhelmed by the wedding

planning,” Miles chides playfully. “As your fiancé, it’s my duty to ease your burdens.”

“If only there were more men like you,” the woman, who must be in her seventies, says with a dreamy sigh. “There’d be less divorces. Don’t let this one go, young lady.”

I give her a tight smile and look at Miles and then Oberon, who is taking his seat at the head of the table. “What is this?” Out of habit, I slip into the sweet, non-combative tone I use at parties, when I really want to just scream.

“Now, dear, I’ve spoken with your father,” Miles starts and, damn, I want to slap that patronizing smile off his too-classically handsome face. “There’s no reason why we should wait, though I know all of our friends will be disappointed in missing the wedding of the year because we’ve eloped.”

My brows shoot into my hairline and I sputter. “Excuse me?” My voice breaks on the second word.

“You and Miles will marry here, now,” Oberon explains and my head whips towards him. He’s interrupted by one of his security goons walking in and going to his side. The man whispers something in his ear, and for a fraction of a second, hope that Lan is already here crests within me. It comes crashing down as I see the goon pass my pregnancy test to Oberon.

Oberon looks at it and then to me. I freeze against the intensity of anger in his eyes and though he quickly masks it and slides the test into his pocket as he replaces his congenial smile, I can’t help but feel targeted by a dangerous predator.

“This is Sandra Ellens, a Newgate judge who has graciously agreed to perform the ceremony this evening.” Oberon’s words hit me like individual blades, piercing into my body and making me bleed. “It’s a good thing Miles and I planned this, since you wouldn’t want news of your pregnancy to get out before the wedding. We can ensure everyone knows you married quickly because of love.”

“You’re pregnant?” Miles’ smile is brittle and his grip on me tightens.

Sandra claps with excitement. “Oh, how wonderful! Starting a family together is the most heartwarming and fulfilling thing a couple can do.”

I bite my tongue at her words but don’t quite hide my eyes rolling. Only Miles sees and his glare is potent. I simmer back at the man I had no intention of marrying.

“I only found out an hour ago,” I tell him and press a hand to my stomach. “I’m so excited for this baby.”

I'll give Miles some credit. He's able to keep that fake grin of his in place as he turns back towards Sandra. My back stiffens but I move forward with him, my own fake smile firmly in place. Sandra slides a leather notebook from her purse, excitement in her eyes. I almost feel bad for her. She clearly loves weddings and has no idea what's going on right now. She's just another pawn on Oberon's board, just like Simon.

I know if he'd had any idea what Oberon planned for me, he'd have never brought me here. Simon isn't jaded like so many others in this world.

She looks at Oberon, and then beams at both Miles and me. "Let's begin, shall we?"

My mouth turns sour as Sandra speaks about love and the joys of marriage and all I can do is scream at how wrong this is. Miles isn't the man I choose, he isn't the one I love. If I don't go through with this, though, Oberon might just slit my throat right over his dinner plate. I have to survive. I have to last long enough for Lan to get to me.

I can do this. I may be shaking, but I can do this if it means getting back to my mate.

"Now, do you have the rings to exchange during the vows?" the officiant asks, her eyes crinkled with enduring excitement.

My mind is blank and I look at the engagement ring on my finger. Anger blasts through me, so potent I gasp for breath. Sandra reaches for me, concern on her face.

"Aren't you supposed to ask if anyone objects to the marriage?"

Relief rattles through me, washing away the fear I'd felt moments ago. I turn towards him, grinning wildly. Lan is here. Somehow. Looking calm and collected, as if he interrupts weddings every day. I sense he's barely holding onto his anger.

Lan's gold eyes lock on to mine, a band of red around his pupil. "Because I most certainly object."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

LAN

Wren is gorgeous, even with irritated, swollen eyes and the wan color of her already fair skin. Her pale green eyes are locked on me, baring her soul to me in a mirror of what our bond is sharing. The moment I get her back into my bed, I'm marking her fully. She's mine, to possess and protect.

"How the hell did you get in?" Oberon pushes to his feet and I take my time looking over at the man I've hated for my entire second life. I'd love nothing more than to leap over the table and rip his throat out, slaughtering both him and the man who still has a hold of my woman. "Security!"

Two large men, human, appear behind me. They're dressed like professional thugs and watch Oberon impassively.

"Remove this man," he commands, and they both reach for me.

"The one on the left is Mark Simkin, and the other is Jude Dossy."

Deidre's a voice in my ear, feeding me information from her workstation at the Nightshade's clan house. Oberon's contracted a well-respected security company for his safety and the guards—including Mark Simkin and Jude Dossy—have a reputation for never accepting bribes. It's a good thing I have no issue with threats of violence to loved ones instead.

"Simkins has a wife, two kids, and another on the way. Dossy's widowed but takes care of his late husband's mother."

I take a step forward a moment before their hands grasp me and eye them, offering them a faint smile. Deidre continues to feed me their personal information, just as she did for the guards downstairs who let me in. "Mark, I think the name your wife suggested, Cora, is an excellent name for your first daughter. I know your wife, Lily, is excited after your boys, David and Ben."

Mark freezes in place, his eyes going wide. I look at Jude, cocking my head and sliding both hands into my pants pockets. “And Mrs. Dossy’s recovering from her hip replacement is rough, which is understandable given her advanced age.”

“How the fuck do you know about my mother-in-law?” Jude advances again, his hand going to the handgun at his waist. Before he draws it, I pull my SIG Sauer from my shoulder holster and press the barrel to the middle of his forehead. He freezes, his dark eyes going wide but he doesn’t panic.

The same can’t be said for the officiant Sandra Ellens, who screams behind me. I’ll deal with her in a moment.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” I tell him, still smiling faintly. “I don’t think your mother-in-law could handle the grief of losing you only two years after her son, Ethan, dying. She’d be all alone then.”

Jude grits his teeth and darts his gaze beyond me but I don’t look away from him. He’s debating, but his mother-in-law is his weak point. He might have no need to accept monetary bribes, but he’s protective of his only remaining family.

“Why are you two just standing there?” Oberon demands, his heart racing. Each person’s heartbeat is racing, creating a chaotic song low in my ears. Sour fear, most likely the officiator’s, taunts my nose and I almost wish I could let go and slaughter everyone in this room.

Not yet though.

“Check your phone, Lan.”

I retrieve my phone, the corner of my lip rising into a smirk as I swipe open the picture message from Malachi. An older woman is sitting on a back porch, playing with a small white dog. I show the picture to Jude, who growls in response but he doesn’t make a move towards me.

“Good,” I nod and lower my gun. The phone vibrates again and I swap to the photos Eris has sent. Grinning, I make a cooing noise. “Oh, Mark. Your twins are just precious in their matching outfits. And your wife looks ready to pop any day.”

“Give me that.” Mark snarls and charges me, I let him take the phone and his face goes white at the series of photos. Eris is particularly good at what she does. The twin boys are napping in their crib together, and another photo is of his pregnant wife curled up in an armchair. “Get the fuck out of my house.”

I reach out and pluck the phone from his grasp and return it to my pocket.

Gesturing to the dining table that can seat eight with my pistol, I order, "Sit, sit. We're just here to talk." When they hesitate, I cock a brow. "Or, I can have the demon in your house...."

Mark stalks around me and sits down in one of the chairs, Jude following him when I jerk my head. Oberon takes a step and I don't bother looking at him as I raise the pistol, training it on him. He freezes, grumbling. My eyes flick to Sandra, the older woman's heart racing with fear.

"Sit down, Ms. Ellens," I tell her, her quivering breaths are like nails on chalkboard to me. "Little Bird, please relieve the two stooges of their guns."

"No," Miles protests, his grip so tight on Wren's arm when she tries to move that she gasps. I snarl but Wren stomps her heel on top of his foot, hard enough the bones crunch and he lets go of her with a holler.

As she comes around the table, I resist the urge to tuck her against my side. She's been kept away from me for less than six hours, but it may as well have been an eternity for how badly I need her.

"Miles, you go ahead and sit down too," I instruct the man as Wren is more polite than necessary when accepting the two pistols from the guards. Miles blusters, squaring up his shoulders as if he means to intimidate me.

"What are you going to do if I don't? Shoot me?" He asks with false bravado. Wren finally moves beside me, careful and awkward with the guns in her hands.

"Listen to him, Miles," Wren conjoles, yet again proving how considerate she is at heart. "He isn't the type to make idle threats."

Miles huffs and jabs his finger at her. "You need to get away from this psycho, Wren. Get over here where it's safe." He sends Oberon an incredulous look before looking back at me. "You're just a fucking relics dealer. What is this? Wren," he says again, "get over here. Now."

She doesn't move and I holster my SIG before taking the confiscated guns from her and removing the magazines and clearing the barrel. I toss them back through the doorway without care. Then, finally, I turn towards my mate, raising my hands to cup her face.

"Little Bird," I murmur before claiming her mouth in a kiss. It's hard, brutal, and when she opens under me with a sigh, it's hard to remember my unfinished business.

"Oh, my," Sandra whispers, her tone scandalized.

"Him?!" Miles shrieks. "You let this thug get you pregnant? You were a fucking virgin!"

Wren stills in my embrace and I pull back, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead before stepping away. Miles watches me warily as I move towards him. I grip his shoulder and forcibly seat him in a chair before bending in close.

“The next time you speak to my mate, I will remove your tongue.” Miles looks at me in horror and my expression doesn’t change. “Understood?”

“Y-yes,” Miles says, his voice wobbling.

I straighten and pat him on the shoulder. “Good.” I send Sandra a charming smile. “Now, Ms. Ellens, I’m sure you didn’t expect to find yourself in such a situation this evening. My boss, Ambrose d’Vil, has instructed that I’m to give you the opportunity to leave—”

The woman bolts up but freezes like a deer when I lift my hand.

“He also wants me to remind you that we are aware of the 132 cases you’ve presided over and accepted bribes in exchange for favorable verdicts.”

Sandra Ellen’s face goes white and her heartrate stutters enough that cardiac arrest may be a real concern. “What—What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean.” I stare her down. “Just as Mr. Benoit here knew about them and used them to get you to officiate a wedding with a bride under duress. Say nothing about what you saw here today, and you won’t have to worry about a thing. In fact, I’ll personally ensure there is no evidence of those transactions ever occurring.” Except for in my private database as insurance, of course.

Sandra’s eyes go back to Oberon, and I finally let a low laugh escape. “You don’t need to concern yourself with Mr. Benoit,” I assure her. A visible shudder racks the woman at the chill in my voice. I smile widely, flashing my fangs. Sandra squeaks and hurries from the room. I touch a finger to my ear as I turn back to the table.

“Ms. Ellens is exiting the penthouse,” I say, locking eyes with a furious Oberon. “Ensure she returns home and is reminded of my appreciation of her cooperation.”

“Copy.” Kasar’s answer is a grunt in my ear.

I return to Wren’s side, giving in to my need to be close to her. She leans in against me, our arms brushing, but I’m entirely focused on the four men sitting at the table.

“Now, gentlemen, I believe it’s time we have a civilized discussion.” The two human guards look over their shoulders at me, tensing. I take a step towards them.

Oberon snaps, his face red with anger, his dark brows furrowed. He slams his hands on the table, his fingers going white from the pressure and roars defiantly. I catch Wren's flinch from the corner of my eye.

"If you dogs don't fucking be men and remove this asshole, I'll destroy your entire fucking lives," he snarls at his two security lackeys. They're tense, debating. Oberon's fury takes me back centuries, to the night before we attacked the building holding the pagan sect. He looked exactly like this when four soldiers attempted desertion. He commanded our regiment by fear, and it seems he's never learned any better.

Don't do it, I think at the men apathetically. The moment their bodies tense, I let out a quick sigh.

The moment they stand, both turning towards me, I move. Like the night the troll attacked Wren, I revel in my savagery. I may be coming to terms with my ability to care about another person, but I will never not be a creature who enjoys slaughter.

I deliver a hard chop between the shoulder blades of Jude, sending him flying forward into Mark. Neither of them have time to recover as I yank the dining chair back hard enough to crash into the wall beyond me. Even as I focus on the two before me, Wren is like a homing beacon in my senses and I ensure the chair doesn't go near her while also keeping my body between her and the guards.

I grab the back of Jude's neck then deliver brutal, precise blows to his kidneys and kick his calf, snapping both bones. The next hit is to the back of his head and his cry of pain cuts off as he goes out, cold. Mark is still staggering against his associate's weight, his eyes wide with bewilderment as I dispatched Jude. Grabbing the unconscious man's shoulders, I fling him toward the open doorway, his body slamming into the hardwood floor with a thud.

Mark recovers, bringing his fists up and sliding away from his seat. He strikes out and I twist, letting his fist sail through empty air. His breath is already coming hard, fear skittering through his veins. No doubt he'd be a formidable opponent to a human, but he's no match for a vampire and he knows it. It's too bad it's too late for him to back out now.

He punches again, and I slap his fist away as I advance on him. This is almost boring. At least the troll gave me a slight challenge. Mark does his best, kicking and punching with skill but never landing a strike as I force him backwards. His back hits the wall and I see in his eyes the moment he

realizes how fucked he is. He brings his forearms up to guard his face.

My first punch breaks his ribs, the second hits his diaphragm and the air whooshes from his lungs as he hunches over. An uppercut to his face shatters his nose, bright blood flying from his face and splattering the white wall as his head snaps back against it. One more sharp jab to his jaw and his eyes roll up into the back of his head and he crumples, sliding down the wall.

Flicking my right wrist free of blood, I turn back to the table and freeze, save for a snarl.

Some fucking how, Oberon got to Wren. He's holding her to his chest, his thick arm a band of steel around her shoulders and he's holding a knife to her throat. She's gripping his forearm though not struggling. Her fear reaches me now that I'm no longer distracted, but it isn't strong. Her heart is beating quick, but when I look into her eyes, all I see is her trust.

The truth slams into me as I hold her gaze. I'm not capable of falling in love with Wren, because I already am in love with her. I sought to infiltrate her life and use her for my own selfish means and in doing so, she slipped past my barriers of ice and found a home in the remains of my soul.

"Do you know why I named her Wren?" Oberon asks, his tone mocking now. It's clear any care he had for his daughter is gone. He glares at me, jerking her harder against him, the blade's tip pressing into her skin hard enough that a drop of blood wells. My brave mate doesn't give him a whimper. "Wrens are tiny things, delicate and hardly ever noticed. It doesn't take much to shatter their bodies."

"Give it up, Jurgis," I grit out, reverting to his true name as my eyes locked on the thin trail of blood created by the drop's descent towards her chest. "You will not win. As we speak, the Nightshades are dismantling your empire."

Miles stands from his seat but I don't dare look away from Wren in her father's grip. The sycophant of Jurgis, the man who tried to force Wren to marry him minutes earlier, has regained the outward appearance of calm as he stands just behind Oberon.

"You should have appreciated me, Wren," Miles sneers, looking towards her with contempt. "I convinced your father it was in our best interests to let me marry you and get a child out of you before sacrificing you for both of us. Then we'd have a child to raise, just like he did after your mother."

"Fuck you," Wren spits out, struggling against Oberon's grip but he presses the blade up against her jaw and she stills. "I bet that's what you

thought,” my mate continues, her voice pure defiance. “My father is too damn selfish to share, you stupid idiot. He planned on killing us both after the wedding, crashing his plane as we supposedly traveled to the honeymoon he was gifting us.”

Miles frowns and shakes his head. “No, we had a deal.”

I roll my eyes, easing forward but Oberon’s eyes catch the movement and he forces Wren with him as he moves backwards towards the door leading to the kitchen. She lets go of his arm as she tries to keep her balance and not press into the blade against her. She looks at me and I tilt my head, no more than a hair, and look at the set table for no longer than a blink. She blinks twice with understanding and pride suffices me.

My Wren is no meek little creature like Oberon believes.

“You can’t really believe that,” I say drolly, raising a brow in mockery at the commercially handsome man. He clearly has more looks than brains. “It’s no wonder why Oberon chose you as his puppet. You’re just so desperate for the attention your parents never gave you.”

Miles glares, his dark eyes focusing on me. Oberon is silent, taking another step back towards the exit, putting them beside the dining table. I don’t let myself look at Wren as I catch her slight hand sway towards the table, a movement that’s easily mistaken as her keeping her balance. As she sways against Oberon, she’s able to grasp the knife and twist it so it’s concealed, her hand around the handle and the blade upwards, pressing flat against her wrist and forearm.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Miles says and I tut, sliding my hands into my pockets.

“Malachi and Ambrose have secured the building,” comes Deidre. “Communications are jammed, along with any surveillance cameras. The elevators are disabled and they’re on their way to your level through the service stairwell.”

“I do, actually,” I say, calculating how long it’ll be until my fellow vampires reach the penthouse. The service stairwell is at the opposite end of the penthouse, but that means little with the speed we’re capable of. “My father decided he hated my grandfather and left my mother and me. Then I spent the last few centuries fighting against my grandfather in every way I could without hurting my mother. I blamed him. I thought my mother chose him over me, I blamed him for my father deserting us. I acted out, thinking I didn’t have a family. The difference between you and me, though, is it turns

out I do have a family. One that helps me even after all the fucked-up things I've done.”

Apparently, today is the day for multiple breakthroughs for me. I barely keep from rolling my eyes. Malachi would say he's proud of me and probably make a joke about his reality TV being a therapist in place of the ones I refused to see over the years.

Because, as much as I might have believed I'd resented Ambrose and the rest of the Nightshades, I hadn't really. I'd resented myself for surviving that night when I should have died when I shot that gunpowder keg. I resented the fact that I lived when Sergi died—a man with a wife and kids, whereas I had only my mother. Then when I was turned, it felt like another merciless punishment. It'd be even harder for me to die, in spite of all the opportunities I'd given Death to take me. Drunken bar fights, gambling debts with the worst of criminals, picking fights with anyone who looked able to take a beating and deliver one in turn.

Until Wren, I never realized why I didn't care if I lived or died. Never cared if I had the respect of the Nightshades. Never cared about my own soul. I made the underworld my home, learning to revel in the darkness like Hades himself. It wasn't until I captured a little bird, one filled with light and life like my very own Persephone, that I realized how much my darkness was of my own design.

“Fuck you!” Miles yells belligerently and pushes past Oberon and Wren to charge at me. I see Oberon smirk over his shoulder, then blink away faster than should be possible with Wren through the kitchen door.

To hell with this.

Miles has taken two steps towards me and I pull out the SIG from my shoulder holster. As Miles reaches for me, the anger in his eyes transforms into shock but it's too late. I pull the trigger. His head snaps backwards, a bullet between his eyes, as his body collapses.

Malachi and Ambrose enter the room as his body hits the floor, both with their own guns drawn and expressions of stone.

“Benoit?” Ambrose asks, taking in the room before holstering his gun on his belt.

Malachi does the same, no longer looking like the debonair ladies' man but instead the merciless soldier and general he is. He steps over to Mark, cocking his head before looking at me with a raised brow. I know he's surprised I'd left the man alive.

I lift a shoulder in a shrug. “What can I say? Wren must be a good influence on me.”

Malachi grins and shakes his head, rising again. “Never thought I’d see the day where you’d take the fall.” He jerks his head towards the door Oberon dragged Wren through. “You and Ambrose go after them. I’ll take care of these three.”

Ambrose is at my side, his eyes meeting mine as he grips my shoulder. “Let’s finish this and get your mate back.”

I nod sharply and head out the way I came in. There’s only one place Oberon would take her now.

“Guys, what the fuck.” Deidre sounds pissed and I start running towards the panic room Oberon uses as a workplace. “I have visual from cameras on the neighboring building. Benoit left the building in a silver Mercedes. He has Wren in the front seat, but she looks out cold.”

Ambrose is on my heels as I slide to a stop in the open doorway of the room and I start cursing. The room is empty, but there’s an open safe and a panel in the left wall is gone, revealing a narrow shaft with a steel cable going down. Fresh blood makes my nostrils flare and both of us sweep the room, tracking it like hellhounds. A vicious grin rends my face as I see the blood-covered steak knife.

“Wren’s?” Ambrose asks, and I shake my head once.

“Oberon’s,” I answer, before swiping two fingers through the small pool and tasting it. It confirms my new suspicions and I grin. It’s going to make killing Oberon so much more satisfying. I press my fingers to my coms. “Deidre, see what you can find in Benoit’s records again. We missed something. He’s got supernatural abilities, but he’s human.”

“So one of the sacrifices might not have been,” she muses. “Eloise is on it. Ashe has almost caught up with Oberon.”

No one can shake Ashe, not if they’re trying to outrace him in a car.

I rise up and roll my neck. Ambrose will have heard too. “I know where he’s taking her.”

Ambrose frowns. “The gallery?” At my nod, he smirks. “Race you there?”

My lip curls, and I realize I’ve smiled more since Wren burst into my world than the rest of my life combined. I don’t give him any warning before racing out of there, the world blurring around me.

I’m coming for you, Little Bird. And I’m ending this once and for all.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

WREN

My head feels like someone took a battering ram to it, and I groan as I come to. Blinking, I take in the dim space around me. It's only a moment before I recognize the main showroom in the gallery, and that I must be propped up against one of the pedestals.

Pressing a hand to my temple, I try to fight through the throbbing pain and make my eyes focus. I must have a concussion from when Oberon backhanded me. My lip is swollen and I taste blood but it's worth it. The expression on his face when I buried the steak knife in his side just before he knocked me out will remain satisfying each time I remember it for the rest of my life.

Oberon's voice pulls my focus towards the center of the room, and where the centerpiece of the Demencius Antiquities opening exhibit would be is no longer empty. Using the display behind me, I get up, fighting past the dizziness making the room spin. Definitely a concussion. Just another strike to add to the list of the many my so-called father has made against me.

He's crouched in the center of the room, chalk in his hands as he draws now-familiar runes on the black marble floor. They're the same ones I saw in the files we accessed through Lan's hacking. A question burns through the fog.

"What did you tell my mother the night you sacrificed her?" My voice is raspy, but strong.

Oberon pauses, briefly looking up at me, before returning to his work. "What does it matter?"

The only lights in the gallery are the recessed ones near the back of the showroom, the standard low-energy ones that come on only at night. I glance

at the front windows, still covered entirely to keep the exhibit secret until the grand opening. Anyone walking by won't be able to see inside, not with any clarity. A detached part of me doubts the front door will ever open to the public now.

I look at him, really look at him. He's shed his coat at some point and his white shirt is dark with blood from where I stabbed him after he dragged me to that damn workroom. Pity I missed anything vital. His usually neat hair is messy, and his expression is strained as he carefully moves around the circle he's filling with those archaic strange symbols.

Pushing off the display, I force my legs to hold under me. "It matters because I want to know what you said that would convince her to leave her only child for a man."

Oberon scoffs and looks at me, pausing in his scribblings. His dark eyes glint in the dim light and I don't recognize the man before me. Had I ever?

"She didn't even want you." His words are a blow but I don't let myself bend under them.

"You're lying," I say, touching the earrings I always wear. It was the only thing she left me. He sees me, his mouth twisting in a slimy grin.

"Those aren't from her," he says and shakes his head as if disappointed me in. I lower my hand, my blood cooling as he shatters my beliefs even further. "I bought them when you were five and asking about her. I knew if I gave you something to hold on to, I could use her memory whenever I needed to. Do you know how many times she begged me to let her end the pregnancy?" He draws the final two symbols as I reel. He stands, tossing the chalk away and dusting his hands off before looking back at me.

"Saoirse was so damned needy," he says with disgust. "It was a damn relief to get rid of her. Turns out, she wasn't as devoted as she claimed. When she realized she'd have to slit her wrists for me, she tried to back out. In the end, she didn't love me like I'd hoped. She'd loved my money."

Anger fills me. "I don't love you, either," I say and gesture to the circle. The armored box he keeps the obsidian chalice in lies at his feet just outside the circle. "This isn't going to work. You won't get immortality by killing me."

He shakes his head, his face sullen. "No, but I'll get enough years to try again." He eyes me speculatively, his gaze dropping to my stomach. I press my hand over my womb, where the tiny life Lan and I unexpectedly created lies. A fierce wave of protectiveness renews my determination to live.

“Don’t even think about taking my child,” I snarl, my other fist clenching. He eyes me and snorts, shaking his head as if dismissing the idea. “No, that vampire will keep hunting for you if you’re his mate. Better to kill you tonight and twist the knife in him further. He should have died in that fire or stayed dead to me.”

“I won’t let a monster like you win.” I shake my head, stepping back. “He’s coming for me. He’ll save me and then I’ll have a real family.”

Oberon advances, looking at me with pity, and I hate him for it. I look for anything I can use to ward him off but all the weaponry is on the other side of the gallery.

“Once I met him at dinner and realized who he was, I did my research,” he says, following me as I walk backwards through the gallery. “You say I’m a monster? I’ve killed, yes, but only who I needed to so I could live.”

He snaps a hand out to grab me but I’m able to twist out of the way and put another display between us, this one showcasing a necklace from the Bronze Age. He shakes his head and I turn, running towards the ancient weapons. They’re nothing compared to today’s weaponry, but I’ll take anything I can get. Then I remember Eris’s claim and run as fast as my weak legs and concussion will let me towards the celestial blade.

Does Oberon know what it really is?

“Do you know how many people that vampire has slaughtered?” he asks, taking his time to advance on me. His confidence rattles me but I whirl around to the back of the display where the blade is held, fumbling for the alarm hatch. “And I do mean slaughtered, Wren. He’ll kill you eventually. It’s who he is.”

The blade doesn’t look like much, and if it weren’t for Eris’s reaction to it, I’d think it nothing more than a brittle-looking, pitted and chipped, iron long dagger with a worn hilt with eroded designs. The cover finally opens and I press my thumb to the scanner, watching Oberon through the dark. He frowns and I don’t hesitate to shove the display case up and off. Picking up the blade, I half expect to be covered in flames like Eris experienced but nothing happens.

I hold it with both hands, pointing it towards Oberon. “Don’t come near me,” I warn him.

“I know you, Wren,” he says, not pausing in his slow stride. He doesn’t seem to be affected by the wound in his side, and I remember him telling Lan how drinking blood from the chalice had healed him before. With how fast he

sprinted us out of the dining room, then used the steel elevator cable as a rope to slide down with one arm while holding me over his shoulder with the other, clearly the ritual has done more than just grant him a longer life. “You won’t hurt me.”

The blade isn’t too heavy, but it shakes as I fight to hold it up. I shake my head. “Don’t bet on it.”

Oberon stops in front of me, the tip of the blade a whisper away from his gut. I swallow, meeting his eyes and tighten my grip. He raises his hands slowly, palms facing me, as if trying to show no threat. I recognize the look in his eyes. It’s the same one he has while he dominates a boardroom of investors before walking out with exactly what he wanted.

“What if you don’t have to die?” he asks, his voice gentled. I start to shake my head again but he talks through my protest. “You’re my daughter. You’re smart, so think about it. A willing sacrifice could grant me the years I want, even without death. If you willingly come into the circle and perform the rite, I’ll take the blood from your hand. You can even cut yourself and fill the chalice. Then you could live.”

“Yeah, I am smart. Even if I do that, and I stay alive, you wouldn’t let me go.”

“True.” He inclines his head, conceding my point. “But it’ll buy you more time. Opportunities to escape me, unlike tonight where you will die otherwise.”

I narrow my eyes at him. Everything he says is true, but it’s too good. Too simple. If I agree and give in to him, there would never be any future opportunities to escape. He’d lock me up like the obsidian chalice. I may not need an opportunity to escape though. Lan would find me eventually.

Oberon looks down at my stomach. “Think of your child, Wren. You aren’t like Saoirse. You want that baby. This way, you can protect them.”

“Landon will never stop looking for me,” I grit out, keeping the blade level. I hate how he has a point. It’s more than just me since that faint blue line appeared on the pregnancy test.

“I can deal with a single vampire,” he says coolly. “He wouldn’t be the first.”

I stare at him, the gallery dim and silent around us as seconds stretch into minutes. My arms are burning and the blade is getting heavier with every breath. I work through Oberon’s offer, knowing him well enough to know it’s not what it seems. My head hurts too much, and my knees are still weak, so I

can't see the trap that is hidden by supposed sensibility.

My strength wavers as nausea rolls my stomach and the blade dips. That moment of weakness is all he needs and he launches himself at me. With a fist, he punches my wrists down, the blade clattering to the marble floor as pain shoots up my arms and I cry out. He's too fast, almost as fast as Lan, and I don't have a chance to take a step back before he's caught my throat with one hand and starts to squeeze. I try to gasp in a breath, but he's choking me. He looks at me with disappointment, the same look I've seen too often in my life. I scratch at his arm, but my efforts weaken as my vision goes spotty.

"You've always taken too long to decide," Oberon says as he lets go of me. I crash to the floor, my hand going to my throat as I gulp in air into my screaming lungs. He grabs the back of my shirt and then I'm sliding across the polished floor towards the center. Without a grunt, he tosses me into the center and it's all I can do to catch myself on my hands. "Maybe if you were more like me, I'd have sought someone else out. But you are too much like your mother. Always needing to be praised, to have my approval. My love."

I try to get up, but it's too difficult and my head and vision is spinning like I'd gotten up too fast after sitting. I hear him flick open the case. I'd recognize that sound anywhere. I'd heard it too many times in my life, each time growing more resentful and jealous of a fucking ancient cup.

A different sound comes a moment before a familiar voice cuts the silence. "Put down the chalice and step away from the circle, Benoit."

I try to find the owner of the voice, and when I do, I can't get my eyes to focus. I recognize Ashe, though, even if I'm seeing double. He's striding from the back of the gallery, his gun trained on Oberon, the soft lighting behind him casting his face in too much shadow for me. Hope flares within me, clearing some of the haze in my head. If Ashe is here, Lan can't be far behind.

"I don't have time for this," Oberon says, annoyed. He sets the chalice down, but then his hand is moving, arm swinging out towards the vampire. A shot echoes through the space. Ashe doesn't have time to react to the man's unexpected super speed, and I watch in horror as Ashe's gun falls and the vampire falls backwards, slamming to the floor.

Oh, god, he isn't moving.

"No," I croak out and try to push up and get to the still vampire who was always kind to me. I think about Eris. I make it to my knees before gagging from the nausea roiling my stomach.

A hand grips my hair, yanking my head back. Oberon watches me with irritation as he sets the chalice in front of me. Then he has the same knife he'd held to my throat earlier. Fear makes my heart pound in my ears.

"It's not the new moon, but I'll still get a decade or two out of you."

I close my eyes as I feel the man who raised me step behind me, his grip on my hair absolute. I press my hands weakly to my stomach, wishing I had the strength to fight back. I feel for the place inside me that a piece of Lan lives and tears slip down my cheeks. I love him, my brutal, savage vampire who was so betrayed by the world he cut himself off from it entirely. I send everything I can towards him. My love, my regret that we won't have time, that I hope that he won't destroy himself after this.

He feels so, so close, and I cling to that as Oberon starts chanting above me. The air vibrates around us, resonating with a sickly dread. Fear grips my heart in its claws and I sob, unable to hold back the terror as I'm about to die. The chanting stops and everything is strained, waiting for something to release.

Windows shatter, and I'm twisted to the side as Oberon moves behind me. He brings the blade to my neck, the edge cutting into my flesh but not enough to do more than sting.

"Ah, perfect. I had hoped you'd make it in time," he taunts. "I wanted you to see another person you care about die."

Landon and Ambrose stand less than ten feet away. I'm a sobbing mess. Ambrose looks like a devil, his fangs bared and the nails on his hands long and sharp. Landon, though, looks like a hungry death god. His eyes are pure red, his fangs nearly an inch long as he snarls at Oberon. Power ripples from him and I understand how a single vampire is capable of killing hundreds of soldiers by themselves.

He flings himself forward, only to slam into the invisible radiating force created by Oberon's chanting.

"You didn't think I wouldn't be prepared for you, did you?" Oberon laughs. "I've learned more than just this spell of life over the years. I've learned exactly what runes are required to keep creatures like you out."

Lan and my gaze both go to the floor where he'd encountered the barrier. A marking drawn in what I think is blood is there, and Lan snarls. It's a sound that should inspire fear in anything living, and even my instincts make me question him. I don't recognize this Lan. There is no humanity in him, and even through our weak bond, his unadulterated rage is overwhelming.

Another gunshot goes off, making me jolt against the blade and I bite back a cry. Ambrose curses and as my father laughs, I see the bullet flattened on the floor.

Oberon leans down next to me and I try to pull away but he's too strong. Lan is watching us and I hate that he's going to have to watch me die, just like he watched his friends die because of this man.

"I love you," I breathe out, barely audible. Lan hears them though, his vermilion eyes locking onto mine.

"I will always win, Landon Polastri."

I can't hold back the scream as the blade slices through my throat, but the sound is cut off as I start to choke. Oberon releases me and I fall forward, my hands going to my throat as I try futilely to stop the bleeding. Oberon shoves the chalice under my hands, my blood flowing into the cup. He's chanting again. It's drowned out by sound filled with such pain and rage that my heart aches for the creature.

Oberon removes the chalice and I slide to the floor, finding Lan in my hazy sight. The floor rocks under me once, then again. I gasp for air and begin to cough. I must be drowning in my own blood. The floor shakes again and I realize what my mate and the vampire king are doing. They're pummeling the marble floor, shattering it with violent blows.

"No!" Oberon's shout feels distant. My pain grows faint, my body going numb and cold.

Lan charges past the rubble, towards us. Good. My eyes are too heavy to keep open. At least I know Lan will destroy my father so he can never do this again. I hear Oberon's screams as if underwater. I'm close to the end, then. Strangely, I'm not afraid or happy or anything. I'm just ... blank.

Someone jostles me and I crack my eyes open. A hand strokes my face and I only catch a glimpse of Lan's bared fangs descending before death claims me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“**Y**ou need to rest.”
Eloise is right.

“I will later,” I say, knowing how vulnerable I sound but unable to care. Watching Oberon slit Wren’s throat obliterated any remaining walls I had to protect myself. Madness had driven me to break the damn floor, desperate to destroy the rune magic keeping me from my mate. I shattered every bone in my hands, but it hadn’t stopped me from ripping Oberon apart.

Looking at Wren, skin nearly translucent, as she lies in my bed, threatens to rekindle the anger. I killed him too quickly. His death was merciful compared to what he deserved.

“She just needs time,” Eloise tries again, putting her hand on my shoulder.

I shrug it off. “Leave,” I bark out, not bothering to look at her. I can’t look away from my mate, not after I felt her die in my arms.

“Watch how you talk to her,” Ambrose growls, but Eloise shushes him.

I close my eyes, taking in a shuddering breath before opening them again. I glance over at where Ambrose leans against my open door, Eloise now standing beside him. She fits him, and he her. I never understood it before, what drew him to a measly single woman. Never understood how he’d look for her first in every room, rather than potential threats. Never understood the expression he often had even when she was only reading in his office.

I understand it all with perfect clarity now.

“How’s Ashe?” My voice is still gruff, but I’m doing my best. Ambrose seems to understand that as he doesn’t reprimand me again.

It’d been a week since Oberon shot Ashe in the chest and killed Wren.

Fortunately it takes a hell of a lot more than a bullet to the chest to take out a vampire, even if it had nicked a major artery.

“He’s almost fully recovered,” Ambrose answers. “It helps that Eris, for all her animosity towards him, has been more than willing to offer blood to aid his recovery.”

Eloise sighs, and I look back to my mate. The only movement is the slow, prolonged rise and fall of her chest. “I think she cares about him a lot more than she lets on. I heard Cassandra talking to him while he was resting.”

Considering Eris has to willingly give up control of her host for Cassandra to present, I suspect Eloise is right. The room falls silent again and the only thing keeping me from losing my complete and utter shit is the steady heartbeat coming from the bed. Even hearing Wren’s heart beating is only barely keeping my insanity at bay.

I need her to open her eyes. To see her smile and know she’s truly alive.

At least, in one sense of the word.

As I’d gathered her into my arms, her vibrant, sweet blood flowing from her neck and coating us, I felt her slipping away. I couldn’t let her die, so I acted without thought. I bit my own wrist open and let my blood flow over the sickening cut in her throat. Fortunately, Oberon had yanked her head back so when he cut her, he didn’t completely cut through her arteries but he did enough damage for it to be fatal. It gave me a chance, though, and I grasped it with every part of my rotten, fucked-up soul and blood-soaked hands.

After coating her wound with enough of my blood to help it heal, I forced her mouth open and pleaded with her to drink.

I felt it the moment she died.

If Ambrose hadn’t been there, I’d have followed her. I’d follow this woman anywhere.

He ordered me to lay her flat and began chest compressions despite his own injured hands, barking at me to keep feeding her and massaging the muscles of her throat. At some point, he must have communicated the situation to Deidre because Kasar, Eris, and Malachi arrived within minutes.

I didn’t even realize I was crying until the tears fell onto her face.

When I’d begun to lose hope, my world shattering under me, I finally felt it. The smallest flicker in our bond, the smallest spark of life. Ambrose never faltered in chest compressions, staring hard at her while I begged her to live. She began to swallow shallowly, and her heart started once more. We couldn’t stop though, her heart stopping each time Ambrose tried to pull

away.

A gurney appeared, Malachi barking orders to the lower station Nightshade vampires he'd called in. Before, I'd have bristled at anyone else's attempt to help, but I was grateful my brothers could handle this so I could focus on keeping my mate alive. Malachi switched places with Ambrose, so smoothly and efficiently that her heart didn't falter, straddling her on the gurney as the others lifted it. I rose in sync with it, keeping my wrist to her mouth.

By the time we got her to the house, her heart was beating steadily, if weakly, on her own.

She has yet to regain consciousness.

Blinking, I realize I've lost sense of time. Ambrose and Eloise are gone and there is a pot of tea on the nightstand beside the chair I've dragged to the edge of the bed.

Wren's hand twitches, fisting then flexing, her face contorting with pain. I'm at her side in an instant, biting my own wrist open and bringing it to her mouth.

"That's it, baby girl," I murmur as she suckles at my wrist, draining me of my blood. I'll give her every drop if it means she will live. I stroke her hair with my other hand, taking comfort in the strawberry blonde strands across my pillow.

When her body settles and she's no longer feeding, I pull my wrist away with a weary sigh. Eloise is right; I need to rest. But the idea of not being here if Wren needs me or wakes keeps sleep at bay. I haven't slept since the day she was taken, feeding her myself each time her new appetite stirs her body from its healing slumber. More than sleep, I need to feed myself. The thought of feeding from anyone other than her sickens me and I refuse to feed from her when she still hasn't woken.

My body slumps, and I rest a palm on her chest directly over her heart. I drift, my mind going empty, and the world disappears, narrowing down to the woman in my bed.

An indeterminate amount of time later, a hand squeezes the back of my neck. My mother's familiar, comforting scent of clean cotton and jasmine embraces me a moment before her hand slides across my shoulders and she tucks me against her side. Automatically, my other arm wraps around her waist, clinging to her like I'm a child all over again.

Joséphine is silent for a long moment, simply comforting me with her

love that has never faltered in the face of all my attempts to ruin it. A breath rattles from me and then she's turning me, guiding my face to her stomach as she wraps both arms around me. For the first time in centuries, I let myself break and cry.

It's cathartic, like lancing the years of pain free from my infected heart.

When I pull away, she tilts my head up to look at her. There's only compassion in her golden eyes.

"You are no good to her like this, my love," my mother speaks gently. "You will go bathe, then feed to restore your own strength. Don't do it for yourself, but for her. I will stay with her."

I'm too far gone to argue and I let her guide me up from the bed. When she sits in the chair I'd vacated earlier, I finally let myself stagger to the bathroom. Someone had left me a stack of fresh clothing, and beside that, three pouches of donated blood. I don't want to, but my mother is right. I choke down the blood, my energy slowly returning. So I shower, quick but thoroughly, before redressing in the gray cotton pants and white t-shirt. Exhaustion finally hit me as I walk from the bathroom, my hair still damp.

"Sleep," Joséphine says, moving to the other side of my bed and pulling back the blanket. I slide in, tucking myself close to Wren. My mother tucks the blanket in around me, and as my eyes close, I feel her lips against my head.

THE GENTLE BRUSH of soft lips across my own slowly wakes me. The room is dim, but it doesn't prevent me from seeing the breathtaking sight of golden eyes watching me through light eyelashes.

Wren's watching me, her eyes roving over my face as if to memorize me. I do the same, knowing there will never be anything more beautiful than my mate newly returned to me.

"Hi," she whispers, almost shyly.

"Hi," I whisper back. Sometime while I slept, she'd turned towards me and my arm is tucked under her neck, my other wrapped around her waist, our legs tangled together.

"I'm a vampire now, aren't I?"

I can't tell how she feels from her tone and our bond is still weakened.

Now that she's awake I can feel it strengthening.

"I couldn't lose you," I offer in lieu of an answer. "You're mine. Not even death can have you."

Her perfect face twists in concern. "The baby?" Her voice is a whisper.

"They survived the transition, since they were already half vampire." It'd been a shock at how relieved I was when my mother told me. I want this child more than I ever thought possible.

I was wrong about something, though. Wren's brilliant smile at my assurance is the most beautiful thing in this world. She closes the distance between us, capturing my lips in a hungry kiss. Desperate for her taste, I deepen it; both of us moan as our tongues slide together.

My cock is hard and I shudder as she presses against it.

Wren pulls back from the kiss, nipping my lower lip with one of her new fangs and triggering a spark of desire deep in my belly. "I need you in me, Daddy," she whispers against my lips. "I want my mate."

I groan and roll her onto her back, settling between her legs. Maybe another man—a better man—would say no, make her rest.

But I've never claimed to be a good man.

Holding her gaze, I tilt my hips, gliding my cock through her folds. Her arousal is quick and then, when my cock is coated in her, I sheathe myself in her body with one swift thrust. Wren cries out in pleasure, her nails gouging into my back with her newfound strength. I'll gladly wear scars from her.

She writhes under me, urging me to move and I do. "Keep your eyes on me, baby girl," I murmur. I angle my thrusts so I'm grinding against her clit with each stroke and I know I won't be able to last much longer. Wren's breathing is ragged, her pussy fluttering around me and I know she's close but she needs more.

I need more. I need to claim her. Mark her as mine forever.

Lowering my mouth to her chest, my fangs elongate and I scrape them against her skin above her heart. Her hands go to my head, holding me there as she arches against me.

"Yes, Landon," she moans. "Do it."

On the next thrust, I sink my fangs into her. Her blood, my personal ambrosia, fills my mouth. Wren's orgasm erupts, and I'm teetering on the edge of my own. Swallowing down her blood, I raise my head when she guides my head away. Her body still shakes with pleasure but she leans up and I feel her fangs for the first time. She bites me in the same spot, and it's

the most exquisite feeling I've ever experienced save for sinking into her for the first time.

My thrusts grow erratic as my pleasure threatens to overwhelm me. She pulls back, her lips coated with my blood, and I swoop down, crushing my mouth to hers. The taste of our blood mingles on our tongues and I thrust hard, burying myself deep as I roar into her mouth as I come.

I gently kiss her then rest my forehead on top of hers, still filling her. Both of us are breathing heavily and unable to look away from the other.

"I love you," I say, needing her to know. "I'm still who I am, but I realized I can and do love you. When I couldn't get to you and then I felt you die." I close my eyes and I feel her hands gently stroking up and down my back. I open my eyes again. "I'm never letting you go, Little Bird."

Wren smiles and steals a quick kiss, pulling back before I can deepen it.

"I love you too, my beautiful savage," she says, and I don't just see it in her eyes. I feel it, wholly and encompassing my dark heart, through our fully formed bond. Where there was darkness in my heart, Wren's love shines brilliantly.

I kiss her and give into my need to make love to my mate.

EPILOGUE

Ashe

It seems the sudden death of Oberon Benoit has brought out Topside's elite in droves. The gallery, renamed Memento Mori in the late tech mogul's honor supposedly, is at capacity for the grand opening. It's been four weeks since Benoit kidnapped Wren and attempted to sacrifice her to continue his unholy life. Four weeks since he'd shot me and I'd come the closest to death since being turned.

Glancing across the gallery's showroom, the place I'd lain staring up at high ceiling unable to move while clinging to my second life has men and women in expensive gowns admiring the antiquities and relics from Benoit's private collection.

Only the Nightshades are aware of what truly happened here four weeks ago. Ambrose had his contacts working around the clock to spin the story of Oberon's death. Malachi had dealt with the police, making it clear they were to report Oberon's death as natural. His heart had given out, according to official records. Wren, grieving for her father, had taken an extended bereavement.

Dedire, with her position at Newgate Times, had ensured that the newspaper kept any other speculations out of print. Especially when Miles Lawson, Benoit Tech's second-in-command, was also revealed to have died. His death is being spun as a mugging gone wrong.

Too bad Ezra has disappeared since Ambrose exiled the half-vampire, half-demon. He'd always been the one who ensured our business was smoothed over with the police and media. When Ezra left the night of his exile, he hadn't revealed which mortal soul he'd accepted. Accepted, as in been given—not bargained for. Having spent the last century and a half

keeping tabs on the demon inhabiting my wife's body, I've learned a few things about demons. A mortal can give their soul freely to a demon, and in doing so, bind their lifespan to the demon.

Ezra had refused to reveal who'd given him their soul, but Ambrose had his suspicions. The suspicions of the vampire king are more often correct than not.

My own demonic complication strolls casually through the center of the showroom, where Oberon had hoped to display the Helm of Darkness. The demons who have it, appropriately dubbed the Knights of Hades, would never part with it of course.

Instead, the Nightshades had offered our own personal possessions for a one night display. It was the least we could do for Wren while she recovered. It was Eloise's idea, and when Wren was finally aware enough to think of the gallery, she'd hugged our future queen with tears in her eyes.

Wren stands next to Ashe, his hand possessively clamped around her. She's wearing contacts, as is he, while her Newgate peers continue to approach her to offer false condolences and to tell her how proud her father would be of her keeping the gallery going.

It's a marvel how gracious Wren is able to sound, given that Oberon had slit her throat in a quest for immortality. The true miracle is how calm Lan is while hearing the platitudes, given how he'd dismembered Oberon in a brutal frenzy. From what Malachi said, there was little left to identify Oberon and Lan had only spent moments destroying him.

Given that Wren is Lan's pregnant mate, I wasn't surprised.

I find my own mate, my wife, my Cassandra. But, of course, it isn't her inspecting Kasar's lion stylized helm from his days as a varangian soldier under his sire Sir Mhichíl. It's Eris, the chaos demon my witch wife summoned when we were on the verge of a defeat that would have ended the Nightshades. I wrestle with a strange dichotomy daily, knowing that while I find my wife gorgeous and desirable, it's not really her.

In addition to Kasar's helm and gauntlets, Ambrose's favored elk hilted blades, Malachi's flintlock pistol, and my own short sword have been brought out of secure storage for the opening exhibit.

Tonight, Eris has foregone her standard black clothing, opting instead for a short, dark gunmetal silver backless dress that hugs her ass and shows off long, toned legs. Legs I'm intimately familiar with how they taste, how they feel wrapped around my waist. Her black hair is pulled back in a simple braid

that lays along her spine--a spine I've spent hours memorizing with my lips.

As daring as the back is, the dress' neckline is straight across and the shoulders are sharp before the sleeves embrace elegant arms all the way to her narrow wrists. Wrists I'd sink my fangs into the same moment my cock sank into Cassandra.

Ever since Eris took possession of Cassandra's body, she's worn her nails as vicious demon talons and in the last decade began to paint them. Tonight, though, her fingers and nails are sheathed by silver filigree rings that imitate claws, turning them into a thing of fierce beauty and belying their cruel nature. She's darkened her eyes with black liner, but otherwise her makeup is neutral, letting Cassandra's natural, sweet face shine through.

Dammit, I miss my wife.

My cock twitches as I watch Eris cradle the champagne flute in her fingers and grit my teeth. It is my wife I want, my mate whom I get scarce moments with when Eris feels benevolent. Not the demon in current control of her body.

Yet, when Eris meets my gaze from across the showroom, her lips tilted in a mischievous smile, a part of me wonders if...

No. I turn my back on the demon, refusing to give life to the desires that have tried to take root in my heart as I've been forced to work with Eris. It is simply what it has always been--my longing for Cassandra, my mate. Any man would be tempted if they had to work with their mate for over a century but be unable to claim her for his own as he'd grown accustomed to.

It's only this hard right now because of Eris's willingness to help my recovery. She'd been at the clan house when I'd been taken there, bleeding out from the bullet that grazed my heart. It wouldn't have killed me, especially once Josephine had removed the bullet. But Eris had guided my mouth to her neck--to Cassandra's neck--and I'd fed. For days, she did that, all the while talking to me. In the beginning, I'd thought it was Cassandra, and maybe it was. Maybe they both brought me back, but when I'd finally been fully recovered, it was only Eris at my side.

I press my finger to my earpiece. "Status?"

Despite the Nightshades being the source for the break-ins and hazing of the gallery, Wren has still employed Nocturna Solutions. Something about the other contractor being too hesitant considering supernaturals being the primary assailants. Humans, I scoff.

"Clear enough I'm tempted to flirt with the blonde by the Ottoman

Empire vases,” Malachi’s bored voice replies. I shake my head, bemused.

“One day, you’ll find a woman who knocks you on your knees,” I reply, finding a clear space in the back to lean against the wall and shove my hands in my pockets, studiously not looking towards Eris before failing miserably.

“There’s too many women to ever settle down with just one,” Malachi retorts. “I’ll leave monogamy to the rest of you. Consider it my self-appointed duty for maintaining PR between us and humans.”

I roll my eyes and don’t bother replying. Malachi is the same as he always is, and even as a human he was too wild to settle down. He was too busy climbing the command chain in the military and now he’s busy running the Nightshade’s foot soldiers and planning his venture into entertainment with his burlesque theater and restaurant in Newgate.

Unable to resist the pull towards Eris, I watch her glide through the gallery. Men and women both give her appreciative glances, but none are brave enough to approach her. Cassandra’s sweet natured face may be inviting, but Eris’s natural aura of fuck around and find out keeps people at bay.

The quiet jazz is silenced and Wren leaves Ashe’s side to take her place just off to the side of the main display. Her cello is brought out by an assistant dressed in all black, and her mate watches protectively from the side as she begins to play.

Eris drifts away, and I follow her movements. Wren’s returned the celestial blade to the demon, though the curse on it prevents Eris from wielding it. She looks casual, relaxed, but I know her too well. Something is wrong.

Pushing off the wall, I move towards her, slipping through the crowd with murmured apologies. If there’s an issue, I don’t want to tip the assailants off. In moments, I’m at her side, my hand cupping her elbow.

Eris doesn’t give me time to question her before she speaks. “He’s here,” she hisses, her eyes scanning the crowd. No need to ask who she means, not after she finally revealed the bargain Eris and Cassandra had made. “There,” she says, inclining her head towards the entrance.

A dark haired man is slipping out of the door.

“Let’s go.” I update Malachi as we head out. I’m determined to take down this Aeternaphiel and get my wife back. We make it onto the busy sidewalk in time to see the archangel get into a car and drive away.

I grab Eris’s arm before she can chase the car down in her tall heels and

ignore her snarl. I steer her towards my black Jaguar parked on the street.
“Get in.”

Eris doesn't hesitate and I move to the driver's side, searching the road ahead for the town car among the traffic. I spot it and smirk before getting in. The engine roars to life and calm settles in my veins. It's time to do what I do best.

I hope you loved Landon and Wrens's story! Do you want more? Sign up here for my VIP list and read what happens when these two spend an evening at Lush.

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The Nightshade Vampires continues with Ashe in *Vampire Runner*, as he, Eris, and Cassandra pursue an archangel determined to start a second celestial war.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rowan Hart is a potty-mouthed romantic who is obsessed with all paranormal monsters. It all started with Goliath and Demona.

Since then, Rowan has fallen in love with all different vampires, werewolves, gargoyles, demons, and well... you get the picture.

She's written over twenty books featuring romances between a woman and multiple heroes, or anti-heroes in some cases.

Now she's dedicating Rowan Hart to her love of gritty romance with dark heroic monsters who have to deal with feisty women who refuse to run from the big bad wolf.

