

FROM THE MONSTER BAE SERIES

YOUR COFFIN *or Mine*



JACKLYN HYDE

YOUR COFFIN OR MINE

THE MONSTER BAE SERIES

BOOK ONE

JACKLYN HYDE

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DEDICATION

This book is for anyone who ever made gimme hands at any vampire character ever and wished one would come play with their fun buns

This is also your sign to not take this book seriously. Crack on

YOUR COFFIN OR MINE PLAYLIST

- Shadow – Livingston
- Miley Cyrus – Flowers
- Adele – Oh My God
- Apashe – Lacrimosa
- Remo & Selena Gomez – Calm Down
- Post Malone & Doja Cat – I Like You
- Taylor Swift – Anti Hero
- Ed Sheeran – Shivers
- Machine Gun Kelly & Travis Barker – Girl Like You
- Harry Styles – As It Was
- Shawn Mendes – Treat You Better
- Zayn & Sia – Dusk Till Dawn
- Taylor Swift – Shake it Off
- Ed Sheeran – Bad Habits
- Sleep Token – Granite
- Maneskin – The Loneliest
- Teddy Swims – Lose Control
- Bobby Pickett – Monster Mash
- Ed Sheeran & Justin Beiber – I Don't Care

[Click here to open Spotify Playlist.](#)

TRIGGER WARNINGS

- Infidelity not between the MC
- Self-deprecation and mild body shaming
- Mild biting and blood play
- Alcohol consumption

PROLOGUE

VLAD



“YOU WON’T EVEN KNOW THEY’RE HERE.”

I scoff, leaning back in my favorite chair as I point a bony finger at my one and only friend in the world. Although, I can’t say I won’t be reconsidering our relationship after this. “Doyle, it’s a construction crew. I’m going to know they’re here.”

“It is necessary.” Doyle’s brows furrow above his scowl.

“*Necessary?* You’re turning my ancestral home into some cheap, tawdry hotel,” I grumble. “You know how I hate inns.”

He runs his fingers through his cropped brown hair, pushing it away from his handsome, bearded face. His chiseled features are often twisted into a smirk, though, which ignites in me the desire to punch them.

Doyle glances up to the heavens, muttering to himself, complaining about how much of a righteous ass he believes me to be. The sorry sod should know better. Those pearly gates are forever out of reach for the both of us, damned as we are. Doomed to be alone forever.

“You didn’t like your ancestors when they were still breathing, and it’s not an *inn*, Vlad.” He waves his hands in a circle before shrugging. “It’s more like a hotel, a bed and breakfast where guests can stay in a real castle and feel better about their mundane existence.”

The House Tepesh has survived centuries of war and famine, and Doyle wants to make it into some pleasant holiday

stay for brainless humans. If only I had a smidge less ancestral pride, I would've been done with the crumbling heap ages ago and traveled the world—but no. Instead, I'm rotting here, and for what?

It is a question I've pondered for centuries and I'm still no closer to an answer.

“Breakfast? You'd turn my ancestral home into some common lodging house?” I grimace, wishing he would leave me in peace. I rub at my head, growing more annoyed by the second as coarse white strands pass through my fingers. *How long have I been sitting here?*

“The financial advisor says the best way to generate income is to glam up our assets,” he continues, and I blink in horror as I take in each and every dreadful word.

It's blatantly obvious what is happening to his mental state. Each time Doyle intrudes on my solitude with his *ideas*, it becomes clear his mind has been defiled and deteriorated by humans. Years of interactions have affected my protégé and made him more like one of *them*. Brainless.

“Glam?” I've never heard of such a ridiculous word.

“Are you just going to repeat everything I say, like an imbecile?” He throws up his hands in despair, as if *I* have done something inherently wrong. Me.

Three hundred years and he has learned nothing.

“It means make it chic. You know, give it a makeover. Glam it up so people will want to stay here. Apparently, we could rent a room for several thousand pounds a night with just a little investment.”

My gaze slips across the weathered stone walls of my dimly lit bedroom. Then it drifts over the ornate hand-carved wooden wardrobe, the soothing fireplace, and the aged, embroidered curtains that have been here for decades. Suddenly I fear it being covered in gaudy wallpaper, cheap sheets, and commercial soap.

“Chic?” I turn my head back to him, my eyes widening in alarm. “When did we employ a financial advisor? *He*, who?”

Doyle sighs heavily, rubbing his hand down his tan face. “It’s a human.”

“I *knew* it. What the hell is glamming it up supposed to mean? It’s a castle, not some cheap prostitute you can just throw rouge on. I will have to respectfully decline.”

“You can disrespectfully decline if you like, but it won’t change anything.” Unbuttoning his double-breasted suit, the pompous bastard rolls his eyes and heads to the sideboard to pour a glass of brandy.

“He’s very good at what he does, and I trust him. The castle could use some renovations, anyway. The electricity doesn’t always work, and it doesn’t even have proper plumbing. It means updating things. Making them look nice. Maybe returning the castle to its former glory. The crew is already on their way.”

“This is beyond humiliating,” I huff out. “And where did you get your suit made? You look like a fucking peacock.”

He squares his ostentatious tie. “Frank had it made for me, and stop changing the subject. This is important.”

Important to a man who dresses like a *peacock*. “I wonder how much mercenaries are paid these days?”

Doyle shakes his head, letting out an exasperated sigh and pinching the bridge of his nose. “Let me level with you, ancient one. You don’t have a pot to piss in. You’re not eating, sleeping, or even bathing from the smell of it. You’re one step away from a shallow grave except you can’t die. Don’t you see the problem here?”

I straighten as his words sink through the thick walls of my skull and my spine pops into place. I glare at him because that’s the only thing I’m capable of. “I’ll have you know I bathed only last week.”

“Falling into a pond doesn’t count,” he says in an annoying, sing-song voice that makes me want to push him out the window. “We’re not hiring a damn mercenary. Look at yourself, Vlad, you look like the Crypt-Keeper.”

The small amount of blood left in my veins boils. “How *dare* you!”

I push myself up from the plush cushions of my chair, my arms shaking as I bring myself to my full height. I tower over Doyle for about three seconds before my legs buckle and I swiftly collapse to the floor.

Doyle chuckles, and if I could move a fraction of an inch, I’d destroy him. But he’s right. My body is severely malnourished, and I’ve aged a millennium over the last century—yet I still can’t bring myself to care. I will remain in this castle until it falls to ashes, or it’s turned ghastly pink and full of glam.

The most powerful vampire in existence and, at nearly six hundred years old, I am allowing my ancestral home to be turned into a hotel. It is despicable, distasteful, and everything dreadful.

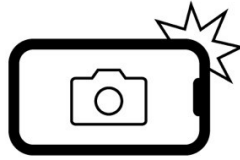
I sigh against the dusty green carpet, my eyes closing on their own volition. “Fine,” I manage to mumble. Most humans wouldn’t be able to make out my words, but I know Doyle can hear me clearly. “But no fucking pink.”

“No pink it is. I’ll handle everything, Vlad. Don’t you worry, it’ll be totally *fab*.”

Stake me now.

CHAPTER I

AUBREY



“WE’RE ALL GOING TO DIE.”

I may or may not have said that out loud as my pink manicured nails claw into the armrests of my chair and I stare wide-eyed at the tiny door in front of me. Blonde strands of my hair fall in front of my face until I almost inhale them, but I’m too terrified to swipe them away. Alarms are blaring and the pilots have been shouting for, oh, a good three minutes now.

Me? I’m box breathing like my life depends on it and wishing like hell I hadn’t picked the trash-panda plane. *Why did I agree to this?*

Hours ago, I gushed over how cute it was. Cute little airplane that was just so adorable, but no, it’s a raccoon. Oh so cute and fluffy, but garbage is its only purpose in life, and now I’m riding in a disaster waiting to happen.

If only I had noticed the duct tape. *If only I had noticed a lot of things.* I was supposed to be safe on the ground in Tahiti doing a photo shoot with Chad, but of course the little plane I naïvely boarded has smoke billowing out its ass and I am #single.

Mistakes have been made, people.

The engine emits a strange grinding sound and I squeal, letting go of the armrest to grab my phone. Tears well in my eyes, making it hard to see as I type out “I love you” to Grams. I cry out when something smacks me in the eye and my phone drops to the floor. Damn it.

Grunting, I lean down and make a grab for it before I realize there is a freaking *oxygen mask* dangling above me. I stare at the thing in utter panic. *Why have I never paid attention to how to use these properly?*

It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay.

This is so *not* okay.

My hands shake as I snatch the mask hanging from the ceiling and pull it roughly over my face. I breathe in the fresh shower-curtain scent and glance out the window. Every part of my body freezes. *Is that . . . is that fire?* I'm pretty sure that's not meant to be there. I suck in a hard breath.

Worst day ever.

"Please, please! I just want to get off the plane. I'm not ready to die," I plead, praying whatever god is listening may be open to negotiations.

Tears leak from my already red and puffy eyes, and for the millionth time in the last twelve hours, I start going over my life choices.

Mistake number one: trusting a man who gets irate with shop attendants when his favorite products are out of stock.

Mistake number two: saying yes to a man who clearly thought it was perfectly acceptable to fuck not one, but two people at the same time, two months before our wedding day.

Mistake number three: letting my best friend, Bernadette, talk me into exchanging my ticket to Tahiti for a one-way trip to Romania, when I have never traveled anywhere by myself.

The plane jolts and I scream, the sound muffled inside the mask. I squeeze my eyes shut, my harsh breath the only thing I can hear over the roaring in my ears before the plane jerks to a stop. Blood rushes, thundering in my skull, and one second passes, then two, before adrenaline kicks in, sending me into overdrive. My fingers fumble, but I manage to get the lock undone and stand up.

Off the plane. Off the plane. OFF the fucking plane. The mantra plays in my head on repeat.

Dizziness floods my brain from standing up too quickly. I rub my eyes, shaking my head to clear it just as strong hands catch me around the waist. I scream on instinct.

“Madam! Madam! You are safe,” a male voice shouts in my ear. “Just breathe, madam.”

Opening my eyes, I look down at my hands, currently squeezing one very confused airline attendant, and I can’t stop shaking.

He freezes before giving me an awkward pat on the shoulder and I crack, breaking down with more emotion than I have in months. I grab him into a hug, latching onto him for dear life. “I’m alive.”

“*Madam.*” The soft but stern voice snaps me out of the breakdown, and my sobs turn to hiccups. I pull away, eyes fixed on his white shirt in alarm. Mascara and tears cover it.

“Oh my god! I am so sorry.” Without thinking, I spring into action, rubbing my hands over his chest to try and get it off. “I am so, so sorry.”

My gaze darts up from the mess I’ve made of his shirt to find his eyes wide in fear, and I’m not sure if it’s because I’m touching him or he’s worried I’ll sue for the death-trap plane.

He recovers quickly, his mouth twitching into a small smile. “Iz alright, yes? We have a taxi waiting on you to take you wherever you wish for ze inconvenience,” he says, gesturing to the side door leading to the airport tarmac.

I scramble to get off, only to find out minutes later that they’ve lost my luggage! What a nightmare this is turning out to be. All I have is my handbag and carry-on, which contains my pajamas, slippers, makeup, and toothbrush, in case there was a delay. Stupid plane.

An hour later, I’m sinking into the back seat of a taxi and snowflakes are falling outside the window. The Romanian countryside is calm and peaceful—the exact opposite of what I’m feeling. I suck in a hard breath, trying to calm down.

What am I going to do?

For years I've put up with Chad's shit—the frat parties, the pills, bailing him out of jail more times than I could count—all on the promise he was going to get his act together. But he didn't.

The tears start up again and I wince, rubbing my eyes. Crying is stupid. Men are stupid.

I drop my head back on the headrest and stare into space. How could I have not seen this coming?

My phone vibrates and I take a deep breath in preparation for the infinite questions and total disregard for boundaries I'm about to endure. But there is no hashtag or grand gesture that can help him come back from this.

Suddenly, I wish my phone provider *didn't* have international service.

I swipe to answer the call, unable to hide the annoyance in my voice. “Mom. I really can't deal with much more right now.”

“Aubrey, honey, men sometimes do these things, and it's best to just look the other way. They eventually come to their senses. Now, your father says he has had a stern talk with Chad and wants you to come home—”

The. Freaking. Audacity.

“Mommm,” I groan.

What would be the point in even telling her? Like, “Hey, Mom. Was almost in a plane crash today.” Her reply would probably be to ask if I want white or cream cards for our wedding invitations. That's how concerned my parents seem to be with my life at the moment.

“He says he is sorry.”

“Mom, he was screwing Brad up the ass while Ashley was riding his face.”

She sighs heavily, and not because of what Chad did. Nope, not Emma Townsend. My mother would rather I never mention what he's done because then it makes it real, and we

can't have that. It would ruin the perfect image she tries to portray at all times.

"There's no need to be crass." She sighs again. "Just come home and we can sort all this out. We just want—"

"I highly doubt a *stern* talking to will change anything. I'm done, and I am sorry you won't be getting what you always wanted."

"Aubrey Lynn Townsend, what has gotten into you? Now, that is not true. We just want what's best for you."

"What's best for me?" I scoff. "You just want me to marry him so you and Daddy can have what you always wanted: a merger."

My father and his business partner, Ethan Hawkins, have been cooking up a plan for their company for as long as I can remember. The stipulation being that I marry Chad and pop out tiny little heirs to their multimillion-dollar empire.

It's basically an arranged marriage with all the finesse of a modern-day fairytale. As a result, Chad used me to gain notoriety and fame while my father stands to gain equal shares of the company. Everyone lives happily ever after. Except for me.

Cheating, unfortunately for them all, was the line for me, and Chad hurdled over that bitch like an Olympic gold medalist.

I look out the window at the passing snowy forest, only to find my glare in the reflection. "Mom, I'm not marrying him."

"Where are you?"

If I tell her where I am, they'll have a plane here by tomorrow and try to talk me into taking him back.

Shaking my head, I take in a fortifying breath. "I'll call back in a few days. Bye."

Breathing out roughly, I hang up and drop my phone onto my lap, my chest churning with equal amounts of hurt and betrayal. I shouldn't be surprised they don't support my

decision to leave him. No one at home will. He's the golden boy, Chad Hawkins. Everyone loves him.

Little do they know that he's a selfish dick and that will never change, at least not for me.

Needing a distraction, I open Instagram and scroll through hundreds of messages, all well wishes for my upcoming wedding day. My stomach flips. What a disaster. I have no idea how I am going to spin this. What can I say? *Sike, we aren't getting married, haha. Or: Men are dicks! Want to see a castle?*

It doesn't matter. Once we get too far from the airport's Wi-Fi, my internet cuts out, leaving me with no bars. I quickly reset the cellular service on my phone, but it still reads "roaming." *Crap.* Maybe it's a good thing. I won't be able to doom scroll through my life falling apart.

I am an idiot. Our lives are so intertwined it's impossible to tell where his ends and mine begins. I thought he loved me. I thought he wanted what I wanted. I thought we would eventually have cute-looking cherub babies and travel the world. Tears stream down my face as sobs rack my body.

"Madam?" the driver calls.

I look up and a white handkerchief hangs from his fingertips.

"Oh. Thank you." I wipe the tears from my cheeks and blow my nose into a clean corner, sniffing loudly. "Sorry," I say, attempting to hand it back, but he shakes his head, smiling in the rearview mirror.

"You keep it."

Maybe chivalry isn't dead. Or at least common decency. *Or maybe he just doesn't want his snot-covered hanky back.*

Nearly an hour later, my heart lodges in my throat when the car rounds a bend and Tepesh Castle comes into view. *Wow.* We cross over a bridge and head under an arched iron gateway leading up to the castle.

The pictures Bernadette sent do not do it justice. I'm momentarily stunned by the imposing size of it. It's dark and intimidating, the deep-gray walls of the place almost black against the fresh snow. The castle is set on a cliff's edge, overlooking the countryside, and it is elegant, but oh so gothic. I rush to snatch up my phone and set the filter I want, desperate to capture the beauty of it.

"Are you sure you have reservations here?" the driver asks uneasily. "I've never even heard of this place . . . never mind—the gates are opening."

He navigates the long drive and onto what looks like a carriage loop. He parks in front of a fancy entrance on the side of the castle before scurrying to open my door.

I climb out and spin around, trying to see everything at once. Oh, it is gorgeous. Especially with the giant, lush evergreen trees dotted behind it. I try and fail to count all the turrets. The windows are all lancet arched, typical of the gothic times it was erected in. *Breathtaking*.

"Thank you so much," I gush earnestly.

I've barely gotten out my thanks when I realize the driver is already back in the taxi. His eyes are wide when he tips his head and speeds off like a bat out of hell.

Left to my own devices, I allow myself a moment to let where I'm at really sink in as I snap pictures of the woods with the castle in the background. The snow is falling, but it isn't heavy, just a light dusting. It covers the trees and dots the cobblestone pavement leading up a set of stairs to the castle entrance. This isn't what I planned, but maybe it's going to be just what I need.

Breathing in the crisp air, I close my eyes, enjoying the feel of the snow on my cheeks.

When I open them, an old man stands in the doorway, watching me like I just stepped on his prize-winning lawn. He wouldn't look out of place at a nursing home, with how the navy silk gown he's wearing hangs off his shoulders as his sparse white hair blows in the wind.

“What do you want?” A grumpy European accent accompanies his words, and I blink at the hostility in his voice. His eyes crawl over me and his lip curls.

I look down at my outfit. Black leggings, teal-blue turtleneck, my pink Dolce and Gabbana coat, and Uggs. Why is this guy looking at me like I’m the ridiculous one when he’s literally in a dressing gown?

“Hi, I might be a bit early, but I have a reservation,” I say, smiling.

He looks over his shoulder into the castle, and when his gaze lands back on me, I swear there’s nothing but disgust in his eyes. “A reservation?”

“Yeah,” I hedge, taken aback by his unfriendliness. Usually hotels have helpful service, not old men who look like they’re about to shake their fist at a street hooligan. “I’m sorry, if you could just tell me where to check in . . .”

“Doyle,” he bellows and turns on his heel, disappearing into the castle.

What the ...?

I guess that’s my cue to follow him?

Yikes.

CHAPTER 2

VLAD



THE FEMALE LOOKS UP AT THE CEILING, HER MOUTH OPEN IN shock. “Oh my god, it looks just like something out of *The Addam’s Family*.”

Out of the what? I really will murder him this time. This is all that pompous, pretentious prick’s fault.

What the fuck is she doing here?

“Doyle!” I shout again, willing him to fix this problem he’s made.

Suddenly, she tips her head back and squeals. I groan as the sound ricochets in my brain and vaguely wonder if women’s voices are several octaves higher than I recall . . . Or is she just an abrasive *thing*?

“Oh! It’s so beautiful,” she gushes, obviously enamored with the place.

At least she has good taste.

“Oh my gosh, no one said there were actors here. Holy crap, you’re exactly what I would picture Dracula looking like! You have the whole Gomez Addams vibe down for sure.”

My nose wrinkles as I follow her gaze to where Doyle is standing at the top of the grand staircase, and I frown when my idiot friend looks just as surprised as I am at her presence. Except the asshole is *still* laughing.

“Dracula?” Doyle snorts with amusement, gesturing to himself.

My eyes flare wide. *How dare she!* Humans with their ridiculous pandering of all things supernatural, and she dares to call him Dracula. *Him?* She is delusional, obviously, and must leave immediately.

“Seriously, though. You are killing it, Mr. Vampire,” she says up at him as he descends the stairs.

I clear my throat to get her attention. “Madam.”

She turns, her long blonde hair waving around her pale face, as if she just now remembered my presence.

“Oh, I am so sorry. Here,” she says, pushing her carry-on luggage into my arms before scampering toward an old suit of armor I acquired centuries ago from within the walls of a long-forgotten empire. “This is freaking amazing!”

A bright light flashes from her camera, and I groan as my vision is bleached of color. *Women are the bane of male existence.*

Why am I holding this? I growl in disgust, dropping the bag to the polished, black-and-white checkered marble floor with a plunk. “Doyle, this is intolerable. This woman has got to—”

She waves at Doyle, and I scowl even harder.

“Hi, sorry. I have a reservation,” she repeats like a nitwit.

“But of course,” he says just as the words “absolutely not” exit my mouth.

I stand annoyed and unamused as he takes her by the arm, brushing past me whilst he promises her hot chocolate and offers her “the best room in the whole castle.” The absurd male turns into an overzealous buffoon when a woman is present. The flea-bitten jackass.

Outrage pours off me in waves and I have half a mind to throw the bag at my feet into the moat, if only to watch *Dracula* retrieve it and deal with the consequences. I hope the Loch Ness monster fucking eats them.

An hour later and he’s attempting to bring me to task for not carrying her bag to her room. In my own study. *This is not*

happening.

“What do I look like, Doyle, a fucking servant?”

“Honestly, no. You look like you got into a fight with a dehydrator and it won, you bag of bones.”

“Why is she here?” I grip the armrests of my chair, more annoyed than I have been in decades.

Doyle stands there staring down at the silly contraption in his hand, his expression full of worry and dismay. “How should I know? We weren’t supposed to open for another week. The east wing isn’t done yet.”

“So, get rid of her.”

“And how do you suppose we do that?” He crosses his arms over his chest.

I scoff. “This wouldn’t be an issue if you hadn’t decided to turn the castle into an inn.”

“For the last time, you are looking for the word *hotel*, as in a bougee suite, not an inn.”

“Boo jee? I suddenly regret not throwing her bag in the moat,” I mutter.

“You what?”

“Never mind.” The thought that I could send him away—and her with him—comes to mind, but it only serves to annoy me further. “She cannot stay. I can smell the stench of her from here.”

Her blood calls to me even now, the scent of her still invading my senses. It has been longer than I can count since I have been in the presence of a woman, much less one of true flesh and blood.

Even her sweet, flowery perfume can’t hide it, making my fangs ache.

Doyle begins to pace in front of me while I settle into what he calls my “old man chair.” It’s a fantastic chair, has lasted me decades. Sure, the red plush backrest is a little sunken, but it just fits around my weathered form better.

“Vlad, we open in two weeks. There are going to be human guests here. If you would only eat, it wouldn’t be an issue.”

“I wasn’t going to be around any guests!” I seethe, my claw-like nails biting into my hands as I ball them into fists. I don’t even have the energy to retract my claws. This was not part of the plan, and no one said there would be a *her*. Her scent is so . . . tantalizing.

“I should hope not. You’re falling apart. I can just hear the ‘ewww’ now.” He wrinkles his nose for effect.

“I’m in mourning.”

“Me too. Mourning the fact that you’re content to waste away. Eventually you’re going to look like Hilda,” he mumbles, shivering.

I glare down my nose at him as if I’m wearing nonexistent glasses. “Hilda is a wonderful woman.”

“She’s literal walking bones and hasn’t spoken a word for two hundred years now. It’s unnatural.”

“What would you have me do? She loves the place.”

Rolling his eyes, and ignoring the topic of Hilda, Doyle shakes his head. “You could eat, for starters, which reminds me—we need a fucking chef.”

“What?” Why in the hell would we need a . . . oh.

“Humans, Vlad. We invited humans to stay but we have no food. Granted, she’s only a few days early, but what are we to do? If we turn her away, it would give us a bad review, and then what? Are we going to have Hilda be a character witness? Oh my god, this is terrible.”

A memory of sitting with Hilda when I was a boy, waiting as she cooked breakfast flits through my brain.

My fist lands on the worn leather of my chair arm. “I will cook.”

Doyle whirls around, his eyes bulging comically from his head, and I imagine them falling from his insipid skull. “You

haven't set foot in the kitchen for almost a hundred years. How in the hell are you going to cook?"

I sigh heavily and pin him with a glare. "Calm down, *Dracula*. It is one measly human. I will cook. And stop pacing—you look as if you're going to wet yourself any moment, you idiot."

He huffs. "Me, an idiot? If only you could look in a mirror." He starts laughing, and I wish I had the energy to punch his face just to make him stop talking.

"Who would have thought she would name me *Dracula* of the two of us? It must be the suit, eh?" He fixes it over his torso. "We also need the internet."

The *what?*

My eyes widen at the thought of that new-aged internet claptrap within these walls. Of course, I know about technology—I haven't remained completely ignorant of the digital age—but I have no illusions that I would ever enjoy something so frivolous and distasteful. *Books* are where real knowledge comes from.

"Fine."

I hold back a smile as Doyle's eyes widen with disbelief. It is worth getting Wi-Fi just to see his expression of surprise, and we have to keep our little human happy.

"Whatever the *guests* want, they shall get," I say with a wave of my hand.

"Right. So does that mean you're going to eat again? Because you are starting to look like you're decomposing. No one wants white hair in their soup." A smirk lifts one side of his mouth and his eyes twinkle.

"Bugger off."

His smirk morphs into a toothy grin. "She's quite pretty, don't you think?"

A whirlwind of messy blonde hair, pert nose, and bright-blue eyes on a heart-shaped face comes to mind.

“I suppose. I was a bit busy fighting my instincts to eat her to take note of her features.” I lie, shaking my head at the absurdity of this plan. “How in the hells did you ever think it was a good idea to bring humans here?”

“The price is seven thousand pounds a night per room, Vlad. That’s my thinking.” He looks at me and shrugs nonchalantly. “Once you get some nourishment, you will be less grumpy. Besides, you look like a homeless retirement-home reject and here I am just trying to keep you afloat. Help me help you.”

I point a boney finger at him. “I will kill you.”

“Not until you get a healthy diet of O negative, you won’t. You’re decrepit and dodder around the castle like an invalid.”

I growl at his impudence. “I will make you eat those words,” I bite out, wishing for once that I hadn’t allowed my body to wither.

“Looking forward to it, Father Time.”

“If it weren’t for our disastrous circumstances, it wouldn’t be an issue,” I mumble.

Doyle glances at me, a strange light forming behind his eyes, and he straightens his suit tie. “Maybe it’s a good thing. Finally, something to snap you out of whatever it is you’ve been doing for the past century. I’ve got to go get our guest room ready. Try not to fall and break a hip on your way to the kitchen. The fridge is stocked.”

The door shuts behind him and I’m left with only my thoughts for company.

The fridge is stocked, he says. Useless ingrate. I am perfectly fine wasting away. Centuries of being undead have left me a hollow shell; there is little in life that brings me joy, and I only want to be left in peace, away from everyone.

My lips lift into a snarl. Doyle and his machinations have made it so I have little choice but to heal myself. Mind control is surely impossible with my body this wasted, and I’m sure the little strumpet will get into trouble.

I must remember to instruct Doyle that no guests are to find themselves in my rooms. Hilda would be impossible to explain away.

“Ahhnnn.”

Speak of the devil. Her white skeletal hand drops two blood bags on the table next to me as her skull dips into sight. “Hilda, stop your coddling and leave me.”

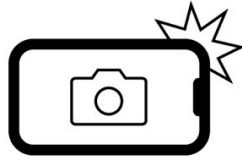
The creaking of her joints echoes through the room as she moves away, and with a sharp screech of metal, I’m left in silence once more. I need to remind Doyle to oil that door.

Blood bags. I grimace and bite into one, swallowing the bland liquid, then finish on a sigh as I watch the flesh on my hands begin to glow with life. Humans in *my* castle.

This is going to be a disaster.

CHAPTER 3

AUBREY



VIBRATIONS WAKE ME. MY EYES ARE SO GRITTY IT FEELS LIKE I've been rubbing my face against a beach, and I groan as I swipe at them. *Please stop calling me.*

Chad's name lights up on the screen. *Oh, hell no.* I press the ignore button, letting it go to voicemail, but the small amount of satisfaction I get out of that is gone in the next instant when I see the time. *Six a.m.? You cannot be serious.* Continents away and the asshole is still finding ways to fuck up my day.

The sheets stick uncomfortably to my skin, and I frown. Why is it so hot?

I harrumph as my mind once more snags on the fact that I'm halfway around the world, getting woken up by the cheating bastard, when the dick was average and the orgasms almost nonexistent. It is laughable.

Completely irritated now that my brain obviously isn't going to shut off any time soon, I push the sheet away and stretch, growing even more annoyed at the sweat beaded on the back of my neck. So gross.

Ten minutes later, I slam my feet into my bunny slippers and march down the staircase, muttering under my breath. *I know I took my bra and sweater off last night and left them on the back of my chair in my room. This Murphy's Law has got to end.* My slippers thwap softly across the parquet wooden floor of the hallway. Sheesh this place is big.

The walls are a deep burgundy, which is really making all the gold sconces and chandeliers stand out but there's not much on the walls. Weird.

I wish the airport didn't lose my luggage because now I'm forced to wear my pajamas through the castle. I need to wash my dirty clothes from the *hours* of either boring or terrifying air travel.

"Oh my god, it's somehow hotter down here."

I run my hand down the smooth wooden railing of the main staircase as my eyes catch on the winter wonderland I can see out the foyer windows. I'm in here, sweating my ass off, and it looks like a blizzard is happening outside.

"Doyle?" I call out, wondering where he would be at this time in the morning.

"Umm, good morning," he says, appearing at the bottom of the stairs like he sensed me coming.

"Why is it so hot? I swear I am baking." I push away the sticky strands of hair that have fallen out of my topknot. "If I had a bikini in my bag, I would be wearing it."

Hopefully the airline calls about my luggage soon, but at least there's a fat chance of freezing to death, as hot as it is in my room.

He frowns. "You're not cold?" He says this and looks at me as if it's my fault it's so hot.

"No! It's like a freaking sauna in here." I point at the snow outside and pull at the fabric of my nightshirt. "Pretty sure you got your money's worth on insulation or something. Seriously, dude, I am dying."

His face pales. "My apologies. There must be an issue with the heating. If you give me a moment, I will have that turned down for you."

"Thank you. You're a lifesaver." My tummy grumbles. "Umm, is there breakfast somewhere? I didn't get a chance to look over the website."

I am praying there is. It's been six months since Chad insisted we start fasting before our wedding, and now that there is no Chad, I am going to eat all the things. If I never have to speak the word diet again, that would be great.

“Down the hallway and to your left,” he replies. “We thought you may be up early due to the time difference, so everything is ready. The *chef* is warming it up now.”

“Hey, how is it you're not sweating?” I ask, but when I look back, he's gone. Crap, I meant to ask about my missing clothes.

I can't help but sigh with relief when cool air blasts me as I finally find the huge dining room, and my eyes catch on the obviously expensive and massive chandelier overhead. Jeez, this place is like a freaking palace—even the walnut-colored chairs look to be centuries old. They must be replicas.

As I head toward the grand table set up with breakfast and overlooking the grounds, my tummy lets out an almighty growl.

“Be Our Guest” randomly pops into my head, and I start to hum, looking up at the woodworked ceiling in awe. Maybe that'll be the hashtag: “If you found the beast's castle.”

I sit down to doom-scroll social media, ready to devour whatever is on my plate—that is, until I actually look down and take it all in. What the . . .? I don't even know what I'm looking at. At worst, it looks like a flattened turd, and at best, a charred miscellaneous bit of meat. This looks nothing like any breakfast I've ever come across, and I am not so sure I'm *this* eager to cheat on my diet.

“Try it.”

My fork falls, clattering loudly onto the table. “Jesus, you scared me.”

I turn to find the voice and my mouth falls open. Holy shit.

The most gorgeous man I have ever seen leans against a side door that I hadn't noticed when I came into the room. His arms are crossed over his suit-covered chest and his mouth is set in a thin, downturned line. He stands unmoving, and I feel

my face heat the longer I stare, but I can't seem to make myself look away.

The dark-brown hair falling across his forehead has my fingers itching to brush it back to see his coffee-colored eyes better. But it still can't hide the fact that he could seriously star in every men's magazine ever and would definitely cause panties across America to combust. Especially with the trimmed mustache and goatee, his stubble going up his cheeks and jaw.

God, Aubrey. Stop drooling. I shake my head. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you there."

My lips curve up into a smile, but he doesn't even twitch.

"I said try it," he bites out.

"Umm, okay?" I look down at the weird dark-colored patties and blink. "What is it?"

"Black pudding."

My stomach churns. "That's definitely not any pudding I've ever seen. It looks like someone took a shit on a summer sausage," I mutter under my breath. "Do you know the cook? Maybe if I can order some eggs and toast . . ." I say louder.

"Eggs and toast?"

I look up and flinch like a deer in headlights, his nearness sucking all the oxygen from the room while butterflies erupt in my stomach like they're having a dance off. *When did he come closer?*

"Yeah. Do you work here?" I pick up on his earthy, clean scent when he leans down. My nipples tighten. *Oh my gosh.* My brain stutters and I start rambling. "I like eggs and toast in the morning, or sometimes oatmeal, or a muffin. You know breakfast is the most important meal of the day, especially when sexercizing." My face goes up in flames as I splutter.

Sexercizing? I did not just say that.

"I had plans to go walking around the castle. Course, fat chance of that since all the snow. It's crazy out there, am I right?" I blurt in a rush.

His expression morphs, making his brown eyes appear stark against his pale skin, and he looks at me like I've grown two heads.

Oh, shut up already.

He whirls around, stomping from the room, and I breathe easier. The door slams behind him and I roll my eyes. The man is as sweet as lemon is tart.

“Nice meeting you too!” I shout at the empty room.

I groan aloud. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day for *sexercise*? Kill me now. I prop my elbow under my chin and gaze out the window.

A cold blast of air hits me as the door opens again, plastering my nightshirt to my chest. My now very transparent nightshirt. Shit. I wonder how much of a view Grumpy got before stomping away. Today just keeps going from bad to worse.

I cross my arms over the table, hoping Doyle doesn't notice my awkward fidgeting.

“Okay, I've turned down the furnace. How was breakfast?”

“Honestly, I think I just want some eggs and toast if possible. There was a guy here a minute ago and—”

The color bleeds from Doyle's face and his smile drops. “What?”

“Yeah, he went that way.” I nod toward the almost concealed door, and he pivots on his heel, heading the way I said before I can even ask who the grumpy guy is.

“Wow, I am making so many friends today.” My stomach rumbles again and I sigh.

CHAPTER 4

VLAD



“APPARENTLY, WE WORRIED FOR NOTHING. HER FRAIL HUMAN body won’t die in the winter,” Doyle says at my back. “I turned down the thermostat.”

The pots and pans clang noisily in the sink as I toss them, infuriated by the harridan who insists on having *eggs and toast*. “Eggs, and fucking toast, Doyle.” Why is it that humans these days have no palate?

I turn to him and finally notice he looks like he’s been in a windstorm with his hair sticking out at all angles.

“In her defense, it’s what most people like to eat for breakfast,” he answers.

“Did the little miss send you in here?”

His eyes bug from his head and I hide a smirk. “What the fuck were you doing talking to her to begin with?”

“I spent three hours this morning grinding ingredients to create her breakfast, and she called it ‘fecal matter.’”

He shrugs, hands lifting, as if I’m the ridiculous one. “Well, she’s not wrong. Black pudding does look like shit, which is why I ordered muffins. What did you do with them?” He asks, looking around the kitchen counters.

My eyes lift heavenward. “I’m surrounded by imbeciles.”

“I thought we agreed that I would handle the guests and you would stick to the east wing? What happened to you

having no time to deal with ridiculous humans? This wouldn't be happening if you would just agree we need a chef."

I just wanted to see if she would like the food I made, since I took the time to cook for a fucking human.

I step to the side to tilt bottles on the spice rack so I can read their labels, only to return seconds later. "Do we have any more belladonna?" I ask, despite knowing there would be none in the kitchen.

I hear his weary sigh. "You are not poisoning the guests, Vlad."

"She's cheeky." I scowl into the skillet, willing her eggs to solidify.

"She's harmless and unaware she's living among predators."

"That's because humans are idiotic, with low survival skills and hardly any sense of self-preservation. It's not my fault they breed like sheep and can't mind themselves." The toast pops from the toaster and I plate her eggs. "Move."

He folds his arms and pinches the bridge of his nose. "You threw the muffins away I bought, didn't you? Dammit, Vlad, we have more guests coming next week. We need to outsource for a chef immediately."

I raise a brow. "Oh, and how do you plan to do that? Run an ad? 'Castle Tepesh seeking chef with flexible hours. Preferably O negative blood type. And no heart conditions.'"

He is delusional. And his muffins will stay in the bin.

"Be serious," Doyle intones.

"I am. How do her eggs look?" I ask, showing him the plate.

He glances over and nods. "Looks good to me."

"Good. I hope she fucking chokes on them." I step around him as he laughs. "You sound like a hyena. Don't you have anything better to do?"

"At least I don't look like a *starved* hyena," he retorts.

“Incidentally, neither do I after eating an entire fridge of vile blood bags.” I wonder if Frank could come up with bags with the texture of flesh. It would possibly make them more palatable.

Doyle thankfully keeps his mouth shut when I open the door and move to take the little prima donna her food. *She would do well to appreciate my efforts or I will be packing her off myself.*

I look up and freeze instantly.

She stands, blinking like a confused owl, her hair falling in flaxen waves, and her mouth open. When did sleepwear become this erotic? Her breasts are visible through the thin gray material, and it does little to hide her pink nipples. My god. My mouth waters and my cock stiffens, causing my flesh to heat. *Oh fuck.*

I can't remember the last time my cock has stood at attention, and now I can feel every drop of blood in my veins slowly pooling in my groin. My incisors gnash in my mouth and my nails lengthen. I need her gone, and I need her *breasts* gone. Now.

I withhold a whimper, anger snapping into place instead. “Where are the rest of your clothes, madam?”

“What?” She blinks, then frowns and looks down at herself.

“Put your nipples away.”

It's sort of cute how her tiny hands ball into fists at her side.

“Excuse me?!”

“Aubrey! I was just coming to see if you're ready for a tour of the castle.” Doyle shoves past me abruptly, jostling the tray of food, and I glare at his back.

My god, they bounce and sway as she moves. Surely, she must realize her effect on men? I move further into the room to place her eggs and toast on the table.

“See for yourself.” Ignoring his attempt to de-escalate the situation, I grab her, propelling her toward the wall with the antique mirror and nod at her sharp intake of breath. “Exactly.”

Hastily covering herself with one hand, a blush rises on her cheeks and instantly has my fangs aching. “Stop looking at my boobs!” She blinks at the mirror. “H-hey wait. Where is your reflection?”

I frown just as Doyle pulls her away from the mirror. “These are some funny Halloween mirrors we found on Etsy. You know, props.” He chuckles, and the sound is so obviously forced.

What the hell is Etsy?

Her eyes go wide, and she nods as if she’s impressed by this. “Wow. I had no idea they made mirrors like that. What do you need the props for?”

“It’s nothing, just an idea for an opening day sort of thing for the castle,” Doyle says, smiling at her, and I get the sudden urge to wipe it from his face with my fist. “I wanted to come ask if you’d like a tour of the castle today. The Wi-Fi should be up and running today as well, but the technician did warn that due to the castle’s remote location, we may see outages.”

A smile spreads across her full lips and she claps her hands excitedly, then moves to hug him.

My jaw tightens and my teeth lengthen further as I become mesmerized by the breasts in my line of sight. I inhale, and the scent of wildflowers floods my nostrils.

“I will show her the castle,” I say, before I can second-guess myself.

Alarm spreads across her features. “Oh, don’t worry about it,” she says with a wave of her hand.

“Nonsense. Doyle is busy, and I will show you the castle,” I insist, my gaze never leaving her heaving bosoms. I could stare at them for hours. Days.

She points to her face with her gaze dull. “My eyes are up here, you know.”

“I’m well aware of where they are.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, breaking whatever magical spell she has over me, and I glance up at her face, instantly intrigued by the fire in her eyes.

Her skin flushes an enticing pink, full of rage and spite. “I think I’ll eat in my room. Let me know when the Wi-Fi is up, Doyle.”

“Stay out of the east wing,” I warn. *I don’t need her or her magnificent breasts poking around in places they shouldn’t.*

I arch a brow when she rolls her eyes at me, then grabs her plate and saunters away, her nose tipped up in the air. My eyes settle on the globe of her ass, barely contained by little, frilly white shorts, and I groan.

“Why is she dressed like that?” I snarl under my breath.

Doyle shakes his head. “You cannot go around telling women to put their tits away, and she did say she lost her luggage.”

“Right, humans lost it. Find her some clothing then.”

“Are you sure?” He wags his brows at me. “I was enjoying the view.”

Irrational jealousy flares in my chest and the mask I show the world drops away. “You will not touch her.” I bite the words out, wondering why I am reacting this way.

Doyle tips his chin and arches a brow this time. “You were supposed to stick to the plan. Now you’re offering to play tour guide after cooking for her?”

“Plans change. I can’t stay cooped up in the east wing forever.” *She’s intriguing.* From her wide blue eyes to her bunny-slipped feet, she is fascinating. She said “my eyes are up here” like a furious goddess.

“Vlad Dracula, the Impaler, brought low by the first pair of tits he’s seen in ages. If only I had known all it would take was

a set of breasts to get you up and walking,” he snarks.

I back away and grin. “They really are an exceptional pair of tits, and you are now done looking at them forever.”

“Like I have time for females, anyway, but *no* biting guests.”

I smile, thinking about how quickly she had covered herself, how that alluring scent rose off her skin when she was flustered. It makes me wonder what she will smell like when she becomes aroused.

“No promises.”

A strange emotion flits through my chest that I am almost positive is excitement. Because of her? I push away the thought. She’s most likely this interesting because she is the first human I have encountered.

“Frank is going to lose his shit,” Doyle mutters.

“Frankenstein should mind his own business and stay out of my affairs.” I lean my hip against the dining table and fold my arms, brooding to myself.

“He worries is all, the poor prick. We all understand that no one can find out what we are, Vlad, but if you can acclimate, it should be fine. With your control, I can’t see why it would be an issue.”

“Exactly. I stopped attacking humans centuries before you came into existence, pup. Find her suitcase and bring it to me.”

His shoulders slump. “Fuck me. It’s like what I say doesn’t even make it to the ear. It’s probably at the airport by now.”

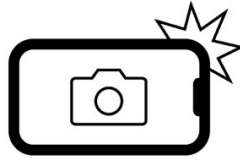
“Just get it and stop sulking like a child in need of a spanking.”

He stomps off in a huff, and I stare into the empty mirror, sighing to myself. In one fell swoop, she has made it all too obvious that I have been without the nearness of a woman. Merely the thought of my hand palming her bottom has my cock begging for attention.

Fuck. It’s been decades.

CHAPTER 5

AUBREY



I REPLAY THE GRUMP'S WORDS IN MY HEAD FOR WHAT SEEMS like the hundredth time in the last thirty minutes. I cannot believe that asshole would talk about someone's boobs like that. Who even says *nipples*? Especially like he does, as if he's savoring each syllable, the weirdo.

Finding the kitchen in this massive castle is a pain, but I don't actually know how to call room service as there is no phone. I didn't want to just dump my finished plate on the floor outside my bedroom.

It feels like the hotel isn't really equipped to handle guests, but I did make a reservation with the wrong date by accident—only to notice my mistake when I climbed off the airplane of death. I'd been hoping to play the dumb-bimbo card—not that I am one—while fluttering my eyes and waving my credit card for the inconvenience, but I'm glad I didn't need to. It's concerning that I haven't seen any staff besides the old man, Doyle, and Mr. Grumpypants, but surely there are more, and I just haven't met them yet.

I shrug, the thought forgotten, when I finally reach my destination.

The kitchen is quaint, but very charming. A large brick oven is on one wall, along with an arched window and a newer stainless-steel stove on the other.

Placing my empty plate on the small table against one of the kitchen's brick walls, I sigh to myself, annoyed in the

extreme. I have never in my life wanted to punch anyone I've just met as much as I do that man.

"I'm well aware of where they are," I imitate, throwing my nose in the air like he did. *What an asshole.* An asshole wrapped in a package of fine as hell.

Taking my phone out to check my socials, only to see I have no signal, I round a corner and collide with someone. Rough hands grab me by the arms and my entire body lights up like it's the fourth of July.

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't watching where I was—"

Of course, it would be tall, dark, and stick up his ass.

"Do women where you're from typically leave their bodies on display like this?"

The husky sound of his voice has me grinding my teeth, but there's no way in hell I'm letting this guy ruin my vacation. *On display?* His eyes are fixed on my breasts like they've been magnetized, and I hold my phone in a death grip. What am I, Tits R Us?

I bring my shoulders back and put my fisted hands on my hips. "Do you typically go out of your way to be a dick? If my pajamas bother you so much, don't look at them."

I refuse to be made to feel insecure by this asshat, even if he does look like a Greek god. Satisfaction fills me as an uncertain frown spreads across his face. No man should ever make a woman feel less than. I shake my head and try to push past him, but he steps in my way.

"As you can see, you're mistaken," he says.

It's my turn to frown because I have no idea what he is talking about. "What?"

He clears his throat. "It isn't that your *pajamas* bother me, if you can even call that proper attire."

I frown and my gaze trails over him. Eyes widening, I'm now openly staring at this man's erection. His slacks are tented in the front and—oh my god—even from here, it looks huge.

I blush and turn away to leave. “Stop looking then.”

He practically growls, the sound sending heat pooling in my belly.

“Cover yourself until we purchase some clothes in the village. We leave in an hour,” he says, holding a blanket that he got from who knows where.

What the hell? Who does this guy think he is?

“No, thank you.” Besides, it’s still hot as hell in here.

His brown eyes light up with fury and I wonder when the last time was that someone disobeyed him. *Sorry about your luck, sir, but I don’t take orders. Not anymore.*

His entire dominant vibe is giving me constant chills, but I smile, refusing to give in. I could totally throw some clothes on, but fuck this guy. For once, I am going to do what I want, starting with this vacation, and right now I wish I’d have come downstairs in a bra and panties just to piss him off.

“Put it on.”

A sly, cheeky smirk curls my lips. “No.”

His face darkens as he pushes it at me. “Dammit, woman, put it on!”

“No! I don’t even know your name, asshole, and I don’t care for your attitude either.” I point my finger up at him, my voice rising with each word while his face twists into a snarl. “I will wear what I like on *my* vacation!”

A throat clears and I sigh, rolling my eyes. Doyle hands me a pair of sweats and a hoodie, his eyes looking at everything he possibly can but the boobs in front of him. I have always had big breasts but never have I ever had any man treat me like this.

“Here you go, Aubrey. They may be a bit big, but they’ll have to do until we get you more clothes from *town*,” Doyle says, shooting the man a narrowed look. “Or at least get yours laundered.”

“Awww, thank you, Doyle. That’s so sweet of you.” I smile at him. I haven’t caught him looking at my chest even once, unlike some people.

“My name, madam, is Vlad Tepesh. I am the owner of this castle, and I will see you in one hour or I will sew your body into a fucking blanket,” Vlad snarls, pushing Doyle away from me as he walks by.

I’m struck dumb, weirdly turned on by the argument, and curious about his blanket threat. Wait. Vlad Tepesh . . . like Dracula?

Doyle turns and shouts, “Hey, where are you going?”

“Fuck you!” His words echo back to us down the hallway.

I glance at Doyle, who is smirking like our spat is giving him life. It’s obvious they’re best friends, which makes no sense to me because Doyle is so sweet. And Vlad . . . is not.

I hike my thumb in the direction he went. “What is his problem?”

“Alphabetically or categorically?” he deadpans.

“Ummm.”

Doyle grins before it morphs into a laugh. “Never mind about him. If nothing else, it should help that the internet will be up and running soon.”

“Dude, I could totally kiss you. You’re coming too, yeah?”

“Uh . . .” he starts, looking surprised that I would ask, but I figure it would be better than being stuck with Mr. Grumpy the entire way.

“No. He is not. Put your fucking pants on,” Vlad says, striding back to us.

“Whoa. I’m not going anywhere, buddy, if you’re going to be an ass the entire time. I have no problem waiting on Doyle to take me, so drop the attitude or deal with the consequences.”

“Madam. For the safety of my sanity, you have got to cover up. Please.” Vlad winces, like using manners physically

pains him.

If he were a bit nicer, I would almost feel bad that he gets blue balls from shirt-covered boobs.

“It’s not my fault it’s so hot in here.” I roll my eyes and toss the sweatshirt over my head and push my arms through, so he doesn’t start drooling or worse.

Doyle grins, but there’s a hungry look in Vlad’s eye that sends tingles up my spine. A muscle ticks in his jaw and Doyle laughs.

“Put them on in the lobby,” Vlad demands, his eyes boring into mine. “I’m sure the temperature is more than adequate there, but I am taking you to get better attire.”

Wanting to annoy him further, I shake my head.

If my nightshirt affects him this much, I wonder what a bikini will do. In fact, I almost want to rub it in his gorgeous face. What could he do about it?

“Umm. We may need to discuss a proper clothing policy?” Doyle chimes in.

“Fine.” I can use the clothes until they find my luggage.

“Fine,” Vlad retorts, crossing his arms over his chest, a scowl on his face.

“Excellent,” Doyle says with a clap.

If this asshole thinks I am going to let him walk all over me, he has another thing coming.

My phone dings and then dings repeatedly for what seems like forever, causing my stomach to dip. Most of the messages seem to be from Bernadette and there are lots of shouty caps. Oh shit. Woo hoo! *Service*.

“Hang on, give me a sec,” I say over my shoulder, typing out a quick message.

BURNIE:

Hello?

ME:

What happened?

BURNIE:

The screenshots won't send! The asshat is playing victim and it's working.

Ugh. I do not have time for this. It's probably just another plea to try and get me back, the dipshit.

"Does the village have internet anywhere?" I ask Doyle.

"I think there are a couple restaurants that have—"

"Alright, Sir Asshole, let's go." I turn around and head for the lobby, praying whatever Chad has done can be fixed. No matter where I go, it seems I can't escape jerks.

CHAPTER 6

VLAD



SHE IS A CONUNDRUM. HER FIRE AND SPIRIT ARE UNLIKE anything I have experienced, and I find myself at a loss for what to say to her, grossly aware that I have no notion of how to even speak to such a creature.

Although the drive to the village is a silent one, the small sounds she makes when something catches her attention outside the vehicle are a surprise, and I want to ask what she's thinking about. That is, until she pulls out that wretched mobile device to capture an image.

The castle became a revolving door of humans after Doyle enlisted a construction crew and the stench was stomach churning. After observing them from a distance, I concluded humans are typically disgusting creatures who seem to lack intelligence and are more than content to waste away gazing at technology like it is God.

She is anything but disgusting. Even so, she has looked at her phone no less than eight times in the last hour. Watching her so enthralled has me questioning what it is that pulls humans in all walks of life to stare at such a thing for so long.

Doyle has been badgering me for years to at least give technology a chance, that times have changed, and it would be a simple thing to catch up on current events. Perhaps it's time. The special sunscreen concoction coating my skin makes living among humans . . . seem doable.

I mistakenly take in a deep breath and the smell of Doyle wrapped so closely around her floral scent has my fingers

tightening on the steering wheel in annoyance.

I hate the scent of the overgrown dog intermingling with her wildflower-sweet smell. It makes me want to scrub her down in a scalding bath until I can remove all traces of him . . . And now I am thinking of her in a bath, naked. Blast . . . I don't need to encourage my newly replenished blood supply to go south again.

"I love this car," she says, reaching forward to brush her hand over the polished wooden interior.

"I do too. It has been a while since I've driven it."

A frown puckers on her face. "It's a Cadillac, yeah? If I had this car, I'd drive every day. Why don't you drive it more?"

How should one answer that? I have been half a man for almost a century? It was one of Doyle's antics to try to get me eating again sometime in the 1950s.

I clear my throat. "Obviously because I didn't feel like it."

She scoffs, the epitome of an offended female. "What's obvious is you don't like me, and, believe me, the feeling is entirely mutual, buddy. I didn't ask you to take me anywhere, and I definitely didn't ask to lose my luggage."

Anger pours off her in waves and I bring the car to a stop, turning off the engine when I do. My blood pumps through my veins, and I hesitate for the barest second before unlocking my seatbelt. I reach out as if to touch her and she stiffens.

I draw back and put my arm across the back of the bench seat. "Who said I don't like you?"

She crosses her arms over her chest and attempts to ignore me.

"I would sew you into a sack cloth if it would keep me from wanting to devour you," I can't resist biting out, unsure if it's the truth or if I'm just saying it to get a rise out of her.

Her blue eyes widen in her reflection of the car window, before she snaps her head to me. "Excuse me?"

“Your *pajamas*, as you call them, leave little to the imagination,” I say, and her breath catching in her lungs is music to my ears. “It makes me want to lay you across my bed, spread those pretty thighs of yours, and eat my fill.”

She gasps, and my hands move to bite into the soft leather of the steering wheel as I fight to keep them off her. I don’t know why I’m having such an intense reaction to her, but I’d like her clothed properly until I figure it out. I should want away from her, not to nip into her flesh to tease—rather than a taste of blood. Although that, too, as sweet as the smell is, could likely be the cause.

“So, unless you want me to rip your garments from you and show you the many reasons why you should cover yourself more adequately in front of me, get out of the car and let’s go shopping.”

Her breathing is ragged as I wait for her to decide. The smell of her arousal is a rising inferno, coming off her in waves, but no matter. My desire for her is most likely from being without a woman in my bed for years, one that smells so wonderful, and I will find one later who is less . . . troublesome.

She hesitates a moment and undoes her seatbelt, her fingers shaking. A predatory grin spreads across my lips and I get out of the car when she slowly reaches for the handle. Thankfully, the special vampire-proof sunscreen lathered on my skin stops me from burning in the sun—for once, I thank Frank’s ingenuity. I hurry around and open the door for her, then help her from the car, resisting the growl in my throat that wants to escape.

I have to admit I admire her self-control. If she had chosen otherwise, I’m not sure I could have stopped myself from taking her right there in the car for all to see.

“Let us find you better clothing, shall we?”

Aubrey

HE DID NOT JUST SAY that to me.

I should have kept my attitude in check. Normally I have no problem with going with the flow. Granted, I'm not sure how much more "with the flow" you can get than agreeing to let a stranger take you clothes shopping.

Why am I this turned on? Hell, I want to *rip* my clothes off for him even though I have only known him a day, and it's pretty unsettling.

C'mon, Aubrey, get it together. He told you to put your tits away. Who does that? *He also just said he wanted to devour me.*

I shake my head as I follow him down the street, worried my favorite bunny slippers look like I'm a crazy person who just escaped an institute.

"Welcome to Bella. How can we help?" A tall, leggy blonde is eyeing Vlad like he invented Botox, but he's not even looking at her—he's looking at me.

He waves toward me. "Yes. As you can see, my . . . friend is in need of some clothes. Unfortunately, her luggage was lost during her flight."

I smile at him, thankful he explained why I'm dressed like this, and he raises a brow.

The woman snaps her fingers. Suddenly heels click-clack on marble from all around, and it's like something out of one of those wildlife movies. Multiple brunettes come out of nowhere and swarm around us, practically bending over themselves to serve him.

He's only dressed in jeans and a T-shirt that's plastered across his chest, but apparently they don't mind the dressed-down look, if the drooling is any indication.

Not why you're here, Aubrey. I pull out my phone to distract myself from the onslaught of thirsty women and groan. *Crap, I am really going to have to look into a new cell provider when I get home.* I snap a few pictures for some later content, noticing how the styles really aren't that different from the more upscale places in Atlanta.

I hear a fake laugh and roll my eyes, moving toward the back of the boutique as annoyance coils in my stomach. Not that I have any claim on the asshole. If he's interested, she can have him. *He's rude and obnoxious, anyway.*

"Remove your hand from my person," he growls out with that mean-ass tone he has. *Oh shit.* "Madam, it seems you are under some sort of misconception," he says coldly, his voice echoing across the empty storefront. "I am not here to shop. *She is.*" Vlad's sharp voice rings out like a shot, and I clap my hand over my mouth.

I watch as the woman slinks away, and my eyes widen when he turns to stare directly at me.

He unfolds his arms, moving toward me, and my heart leaps into my chest. I grab hold of the first black dress I see and hurry to the dressing rooms.

Of course, they're locked.

Vlad snaps his fingers, capturing the attention of the blonde, and motions for her to open the door with a scowl on his face.

"Hey, you can't just snap your fingers at people," I say, shaking my head in disbelief. "What is wrong with you?"

"It is their responsibility to take care of the customer. You, my dear, are the customer." He turns toward the blonde, whose eyes dart around like she wishes to be anywhere else, and I really can't blame her.

"Could you please try to not be a dick for a few hours? I know it must be very hard for you, but, dude, it's just a dressing room. Calm down," I hiss at him.

He opens his mouth, and I put my finger to his lips, shushing him. None of the ladies have been rude. Handsy and clingy, maybe, but not rude, and look at him. I wanted to get handsy with him, too—until he opened his mouth. *Liar liar, pants on fire.*

I beam a smile at the woman, ignoring him. "Hi, I'd like to try this on."

“Of course,” she answers, casting me a relieved and appreciative smile. “So sorry about that. We haven’t been open long.”

My smile grows, and I step inside the small fitting room, not missing the glare on Vlad’s face. After I lock the door, my smile drops as I look down at the dress and wince. *Wow, it’s tiny.*

As soon as my clothes are off, I realize this thing is never going to fit. The fabric is slinky, and the V-cut looks like it’ll hit my navel.

“Are you alright?” he asks. “How long does it take to don clothing?”

“Umm. I think I need a bigger size. . .”

“It’s form fitting. Just try it on and we can go from there,” a woman’s voice calls out.

After what feels like five minutes of me squeezing my body inside the *form-fitting* dress, I look in the mirror and groan loudly. “I look like Elvira.” My breasts are spilling out of the thing, and the long slit up my thigh is super revealing.

“Who?” Vlad says in a confused voice, and my eyes roll.

Okay, that’s fair. Not everyone knows who Elvira is. I’ve only been watching her with Bernadette and my Grandma for forever, since it’s Gram’s favorite show. But the way my boobs are falling out of this thing is wild, even though I look super hot in it.

“Yeah, this isn’t going to work. Do you guys sell pants?”

One of the women calls out, saying she will get a pair, while Vlad starts spouting off in a weird language—Romanian, I’m assuming.

“English, Vlad,” I remind him through the door.

“Come out here.”

This guy cannot be serious. “Uh, definitely not.”

He bashes once on the door, giving me such a fright that I squeal.

“Aubrey,” he says, sending skitters down my spine. It should be a crime for my name to sound so sinful in his deep, accented voice. “Come out here this instant or I will come in there.”

Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ. If he tries to bitch about boobs in his face again, I will rip him a new one. “Fine.”

Unlocking the door slowly, I step out, my skin tingling. I meet Vlad’s eyes and plant my hands on my hips, posing. His eyes darken and his hands ball into fists.

“Whatcha think? Oh wait.” I grab my phone and push it into his chest. “Take a picture.”

He looks down at the phone, dumbfounded. “No.”

I read the blonde’s name tag and hand her the phone. “Clarissa, will you take a pic for me please?”

She nods and I smile in return.

“I think you need several sizes bigger,” a mean voice says in derision.

My smile falls as the words register; the brunette’s tone is catty and condescending. The camera flashes and Clarissa hands the phone back to me, glaring at the brunette who shrugs and walks away. “So sorry about that. She’s new.”

A wave of humiliation washes through me. Vlad, who has been silent this entire time, looks at me with his jaw tight, hands balled into fists, and I freeze.

“Aubrey. Go change.” He turns to Clarissa, dismissing me. “We will take the dress. I’m assuming you can gauge her size by now?”

Clarissa nods.

He snaps his fingers at me, glaring. “Did I not tell you to go change?”

My stomach flips at his tone and I grit my teeth. All I want is to grab some clothes and find somewhere with Wi-Fi. I do not have dealing with a hot bully or a cuntasaurus on my to-do list for today.

Before I can tell him how I really feel, his eyes soften. “It looks stunning on you.”

Don't fall for it. He just snapped his fingers at you like a dog. “Compliments don't give you a free pass to be a dick.”

His brows arch and his eyes bore into mine like he's trying to see into my soul. “Get everything in her size she needs for a week's stay.”

Clarissa, the lucky bitch, flees the scene while I stand there sputtering over how controlling he's being. “You are not buying me clothes. I can buy my own things. I don't need you to—”

“Silence. You're my guest, and I won't have you gallivanting around in men's sweatpants. Since you obviously have issues with dressing yourself, I will do it for you. Starting with this.”

He gestures at the dress and pointedly looks down at the girls trying to make their great escape.

“You cannot be serious. Holy déjà vu. I'm pretty sure the last time we were in this situation, you told me to put my nipples away.”

At the word nipples, his mouth curls into a smirk. “I think I could become accustomed to those.”

“To nipples?”

He nods and his eyes heat, traveling to my hips. “Among other things. Now get dressed. Or do you need me to assist you with that as well?”

“As if.”

I glance around at the women obviously eavesdropping but trying really hard to look busy. *You aren't fooling anyone, ladies.*

I gasp at the contact of his hand wrapping around my arm, and it sends shivers down my spine.

Holy mixed signals.

His words hold me in place. “I do find it interesting how you would choose *this* dress.”

His fingers brush through the air in front of my exposed cleavage, the movement so light it is a mere whisper of sensation. *Oh my god*. One minute I’m about to melt into a puddle like that witch from Oz, and the next I blink and he’s across the room. *What the shit?!*

I start to call out something completely inappropriate, like come back and kiss me, or list the ways he’s an asshole, but decide against it.

He *is* an asshole, and after my ex, I’m done with those. Huffing to myself, I shut the dressing room door behind me and wiggle out of Jessica Rabbit’s body glove.

Five minutes later, I’m back in Doyle’s sweats and my bunny slippers, and feeling slightly better. Wanting to get back to my room and away from Vlad, I hastily pick up my pace to zoom past the racks of dresses.

“I’ll be sure to handle this slight immediately, and I apologize for any issues my *staff* may have caused you today,” a man’s angry voice says from the speakerphone on the counter at the front of the store.

“See that you do, Frank,” Vlad replies coldly, leaning his elbow on the counter while speaking down into the phone.

He watches me walk over, and the closer I get, the faster my heartbeat thuds in my chest.

God, it is fucking criminal how good-looking he is. His brow arches and my stomach clenches in response. What a dick.

My eyes widen as the shop girls bring forward bags of clothes, one right after the other, while passing sly glances. It’s obvious they’re wondering what the hell I am doing with him. Honestly, I wish I knew myself at this point because there is no way he is buying me all of this.

“How many of these are yours?” I ask, rubbing my hands on my pants nervously.

He looks at me like I've grown a third arm. "None."

"Um, this is way too much." I count no less than twelve bags and shake my head. "What the hell, dude? I'm only staying a week. We do not need all of this."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't."

"Aubrey, you're taking them all," he says matter-of-factly.

I glare at him and snatch a bag from the floor, pulling the first piece of clothing out that I find. "Oh, we need this, do we?" A bright-red thong hangs from my fingers, and someone snickers in the back.

He looks at the scrap of butt floss before his smoldering gaze swings back to me, undressing me with his eyes. I expect him to say something outrageous, like how he is buying it and that's final, but after clearing his throat, he bends over. In one swoop, he stands, somehow carrying all twelve bags as if they weigh nothing.

"I suggest we get back to the castle, unless you would like to model for me the clothes we *need*, and those we don't," he says, eyeing the red panties again.

"That's not . . . we're not . . ." I glance around nervously, and it looks like the girls are dealing with some thought constipation—Vlad's innuendos have done a real number on them.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"There will be no modeling," I say, reminding myself that he is, in fact, a dick. Just a very pretty one.

"Then you will have no issue accepting the clothes."

He's looking at me like he is daring me to argue and cause a scene, except it's obvious he would just make a bigger one. "Fine."

"Very good, let's go." He turns and looks down at all the attendants, and I notice the rude brunette missing from the ensemble. Probably for the best. "Ladies, it's been a pleasure."

“Thank you,” I say to them, since all these women were actually really nice to me.

“After you, my dear.” He speaks like a perfect gentleman, and I smile.

“Thank you guys so much.” Surely their day can only get better once Sir Asshole leaves. *I can't believe he called the owner.*

Oh shit, wait. I almost forgot why I freaking agreed to come to town in the first place! I wouldn't *willingly* go anywhere with this guy without a good reason.

I pull my phone from my pocket as I ask, “Is there anywhere with some free Wi-Fi?”

CHAPTER 7

VLAD



“WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT ON THAT INFERNAL THING?” I scowl as her eyebrows pinch together for the twelfth time. We have been sitting in the car in front of a store with Wi-Fi for what feels like hours, leaving me to watch the different emotions play across her expressive face.

She doesn’t even look up as she grunts, “Huh?”

Humans and their addiction to all things technology has me grinding my teeth, especially with how it takes her attention so completely.

She continues staring at the damn thing as if I hadn’t spoken a word, and irritation eats at me as the seconds pass. What is it about her that has me so engrossed?

“Is there a reason we are sitting in front of this dismal coffee shop while you stare at your phone?”

Her blonde brows furrow and her fingers fly across the screen.

“Aubrey?”

Sighing heavily, I tap my fingers against the steering wheel, becoming more annoyed by each second that passes without an answer. I pluck it out of her grasp, trying to see what could be so interesting.

“Hey, give that back.” She reaches for the phone, but I smack her hand away, my attention fully engrossed in what I am seeing.

It's her, but different from the woman I've seen since she arrived. Photos, so many photos of her in different outfits, makeup, and poses. Some of her at the beach, smiling and completely at ease.

"What is this?" I stare down at the small screen, transfixed.

"You don't know what Instagram is?"

I choose to ignore her, my fingers sliding across the device to reveal row upon row of pictures that have captured her innocence and fire. Eventually I come across a photo of her with a male, her face tucked close to his and her eyes shining.

My eyes narrow and jealousy rears its head. I hand the phone back to her and start the car.

"Hey, I need like five more minutes."

"No. The internet should be up and running at the castle, and I refuse to sit in this car another moment waiting on you to get your telegram fix." My tone is harsh and unyielding even to myself, but there's no way in hell I will sit here while she pines after some insignificant human.

"It's Instagram. And yeah, you're probably right."

She sighs and throws her head back against the seat as we pull away to head back to the castle.

"Something wrong?"

"Yeah. You could say that, but it'll blow over."

We sit in silence for a moment, and I glance at her. My chest tightens at the forlorn expression on her face. The fiery woman that told me off in the boutique is nowhere to be found, and for some reason, it bothers me.

"Who is that man?"

Her lips purse as her eyes squint. "What man?"

I breathe in and attempt to keep the irritation out of my voice. "The one in your photos."

Her nose wrinkles with disgust. "No one important."

She turns away to look out the window, and I can see the sadness etched across her reflection. Eventually she will tell me; my curiosity won't allow for anything less.

“Apart from you owning a woefully inadequate wardrobe, what is it you do?”

“Jesus. You sound like a grandpa.” She shoves her elbow on the window rest and pouts with her chin on her fist. “I'm a social media influencer . . . or trying to be.”

“Social media?” How does one influence social media? I thought that's what reporters were for. *Shit*. Did we let a reporter in the hotel?

“Yeah, you know, like YouTube?”

“I see.” You tube? Absolutely no idea.

Silence yawns between us and I find myself wanting to fill it.

I dip my head as I drive. “Do you like music?”

She looks at me curiously and nods. “Yeah. I mean, who doesn't?”

I turn the radio on and realize it's probably the first time it's ever been touched in the vehicle, having preferred to play pieces on my piano myself.

A woman croons about wanting to have fun, and Aubrey's face lights up instantly.

“Oh, I love Adele,” she gushes, before mouthing the words, and I grin to myself. She sings along, blushing and giggling.

The light tinkle of her laughter causes warmth to spread through me. Who is this creature? I want to learn everything I can about her immediately. She continues to hum along as we pull under the arch of the castle gates.

“Oh wait!” She points at the windscreen. “Pull off right here.”

I frown but do as she asks. The car comes to a stop, but before I can unlock my seatbelt, she's out of the vehicle with

her phone aimed at the brick of the bridge.

I sigh inwardly at her antics and grumble under my breath, “Blasted humans.”

Stepping out of the car, I find her further down the lane near the bridge. Her phone is in the air, a light flashing behind it faster than even I can move.

“What are you doing?”

Her cheeks are flushed a rosy red, and the snow is falling again, dusting her in tiny white specks. She spins around, opening her mouth, face to the sky like a child. “Taking pictures. What else?” I glance at the frozen lake, the horizon of the sun reflecting off the ice like a mirror. It is beautiful, but the way the wind tears at her hair, the smile that seems to be always present on her lips is breathtaking.

Enough of this.

“Get back in the car before you catch your death of cold.”

She laughs, then playfully pouts like an impudent brat. I turn around, intent on getting the car door open and her inside the vehicle, but there’s a wet slap at the back of my head. Snow coats my shoulders, and my feet move before my brain registers, prowling toward her.

“Do not do that again.” I tell her, unsure of how to react.

“I don’t know, Vlad. You kind of look like you need something to help you cool off.” Her face stretches into a wide grin as she bends to pack another ball of snow.

She shrieks with laughter, her eyes crinkling in amusement as she runs away with a second snowball in her hand. She turns and lobs it at me, striking me in my chest.

“I’m warning you,” I say, but she only chuckles, her hands reaching into the snow again. “Aubrey, do not.”

She blows a raspberry at me, and I take a step toward her—only for her to jump back with a giggle. Snow falls from her hands as she scrambles to create her ammunition, causing my lips to twitch.

Extraordinary. Such an action from any other human would most likely result in their death, and yet when she does it . . . it is absolutely adorable. What is it about this female?

“Are you going to play with me or are you chickening out?” she asks, her cheeks pink from the cold winds, but her blue eyes are so vibrant and alive.

Play with her. There's an idea.

She seems to take my silence as acquiescence because she tosses the ball, but this time misses entirely.

A mistake.

The next moment, she's in my arms, and her sweet scent invades my nostrils. She squeals lightly, but her body turns warm a moment later as I hold her. A hint of arousal meets my nose, intoxicating to the senses. *She smells delectable.* My hands tremble as overwhelming need washes over me. She gasps and I take advantage, pressing my lips to hers.

Her fingers pull at the cotton fabric of my shirt. Her tongue tangles with mine, and I grip the ridiculous ball of hair at the top of her head, tilting her mouth so I can delve deeper. *Her taste is incredible.*

I try to remind myself she's human and a guest in my home, but the sounds she's making drive me to insanity. I feel my control slipping and step away, clenching my jaw at how her body tries to follow mine. Her heart is thundering in her chest, and a shiver ripples through her. Her need is palpable, and I shove my hands in my pockets to keep myself from reaching for her again. What the fuck am I doing? And in the snow, no less? I still don't know why I kissed her, yet I lick my lips for another taste.

The last thing I want is for her to become ill from the cold or for me to fall on her like a starved beast. *Humans are so fragile.*

She blinks as if coming out of a daze and grins. The blush on her cheeks spreads and I scowl.

“Umm. Would you mind if I take your picture?”

I expect her to rail at me for having touched her, but she asks for pictures.

“Yes, I do mind.”

Her smile falls. “Why?”

My mouth pulls into a grimace. I’d be more amenable to conquering an army of enemies for her than allowing my picture to be taken.

“Please?” She pouts, and I find I am unable to deny her. The sad expression makes me want to pull her to my chest and comfort her. *What the fuck is she doing to me?*

Not only that, the sunscreen on my skin is becoming unbearable as time passes. It itches and sinks beneath my flesh like fire. With each beat of her heart, I grow more aware of the blood in her veins, but instead of sensing impending danger, her only concern is, of course, pictures.

“Fine.” Cameras are no longer made with silver, so there is no real harm, and perhaps I should in case she becomes overly curious about the castle mirrors’ inability to show my reflection. Fuck.

I stand stiffly with my arms crossed over my chest in boredom as the camera flashes, wishing she would get into the car so I can get back to the castle without biting her—or bending her over.

“Alright, enough.” I grab her by the arm and steer her toward the vehicle, while she stares down at her phone.

“Ohemgee, these are going to be fab. Thank you so much for today.”

Her smile is infectious, and I can’t stop a flicker of an answering grin. It is strange how I find Doyle’s deplorable use of the English language exceedingly annoying, but with her it is refreshing.

“Come,” I demand. “Your hands are like ice.”

Of her own accord, she leans her body into mine, and I inhale the sweet scent of flowers from her hair. Every muscle in my body freezes when she lays her cheek against my chest

and her arms go around me, squeezing lightly, sending warmth through my torso. I can't remember anyone hugging me in years—decades even—or showing even the slightest of affection.

She takes my hand as I help her into the car before I hurry around to the driver's side and get in.

“Yours are cold too. Oh my god, where's your coat?”

I stare into her eyes, willing her to obey under my coercion ability. “Be quiet, woman.”

Humans have a long record of overreacting when discovering monsters live among them, and I have no intention of explaining why my body temperature remains cold no matter the season. I'm also unnerved by her placing her head on my chest moments ago, as my heart has not thumped since I was a young lad, not yet frozen in my immortality.

She is so frail and tiny, which is what led to Doyle's attempt to cook her alive in the first place, turning every furnace on in the castle just to keep her warm. I suppose I have him to thank for the spectacular view of pajamas and breasts.

She frowns and snaps her seatbelt into place. “*Be quiet, woman?* God, could you get more bossy? I mean, seriously, dude. Calm down with the caveman vibes.”

I blink at her incredulously. My powers of mind control have never failed me before; even at the atrocious seamstress shop, the women moved swiftly to do my bidding. Yet this one continues chatting away as if I've said nothing.

The scent that has been clouding my brain all day rises with her temper, making my cock throb in response. In the past, no woman would dare speak to me this way. Meek and biddable women present no allure, no fire.

Not so with this petite hellcat. Her face is a mask of fury as she goes on about my “attitude,” as she calls it. I sit, waiting for her to conclude her tirade, but the smell of her skin is too fucking good—like the first days of autumn when the grape fields would ripen. I want to consume her like a sweet wine

from my vineyard. My instinct rears its ugly head, and the need to bite, to feed, batters at my resolve. Why do I want *her*?

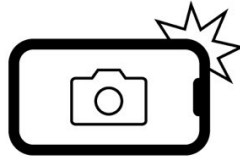
“This is not the Stone Age, sir, and I don’t care who you are or how good-looking you may be. You don’t have the right to talk to me like that.” She throws her hands around dramatically before waving one at me. “And how are you not freezing right now?”

“Stop. Talking.”

I surge forward, pressing my lips to hers, and instantly become lost in the taste of her.

CHAPTER 8

AUBREY



HIS LIPS CONNECT WITH MINE, AND I INHALE THE WORDS “fuck” and “you.” Oh dear god—he can *kiss*. I find myself returning it, his mouth sweet and rough. Thoughts become mush moments later when he pulls away and growls. The sound sends shivers down my thighs, then he kisses me again, forcing an involuntary moan out of me. My stomach contracts in response. *Oh my god.*

Holy shit. I gasp for breath, and he bites my lip before pushing his forehead into mine.

“Behave for five seconds or I will tan your backside.”

I blink, my eyes focusing on my fingers that at some point started gripping his shirt without my knowledge.

Part of me wants to call him out and see if he will deliver, but something tells me if he does, I’ll only want more. I rub my thighs together, and his eyes fall to my lap. Oh crap. I freeze and bite my lip, but he pulls away only to start the car while staring at my thighs like I look at cupcakes.

“I’m going to tell Doyle to have dinner ready at seven. Is that sufficient?”

Sufficient? He makes it sound like I’m difficult to please.

My brow wrinkles in confusion at the sharp tone in his voice. “Umm, yeah.”

“See that you wear proper clothing,” he bites out.

Hurt and confusion roll over me instantly, and I sit back, stunned from the hot-and-cold whiplash. What is it with this guy?

“Wow. Yeah, no problem. In fact, don’t worry about dinner. This back-and-forth routine is getting old.”

He says nothing, and I lean toward the window, attempting to ignore that the asshole even exists.

My pussy is still throbbing, but I’ll be damned if I let him know it. Besides, what the actual fuck? *I just rubbed myself all over him like a bitch in heat and all he’s worried about is if I’m covered up for dinner?*

As soon as the car rolls to a stop, I scramble out of it and make my way inside. *I need a drink and a bubble bath.* It’s my grandmother’s cure-all for everything traumatic, and the wetness between my legs mixed with the scowl on this guy’s face is definitely traumatic.

Doyle smiles when I open the door, but it swiftly falls from his face when he gets a load of my expression. “What happened?”

“Vlad is a dick is what happened, Doyle.” Who kisses people like that and then says that?!

A low growl comes from Vlad behind me, but I ignore him and glance up at Doyle with a small smile. “Is the Wi-Fi up?” I ask.

Doyle frowns at Vlad over my shoulder. “Yes. The password is ‘password.’”

Totally original. I reach the stairs and smile back at him. “Thanks, Doyle.”

I bolt up the two staircases to my room and slam the door. No man has any right to be that gorgeous and that much of an asshole. He has riled me up with just a kiss, and now I’m more turned on than I can remember. My body doesn’t seem to care what bullshit his pretty mouth says, not with the kisses he gives me.

I punch in the Wi-Fi password and shoot a text to Bernadette. I need support in a bad way.

ME:

Hey, went shopping today. It was a disaster.

BURNIE:

Do tell ...

ME:

I still don't have my luggage. And this. <uploads image>

BURNIE:

Hello handsome.

ME:

Meet Vlad. Asshole castle owner.

BURNIE:

Is he single?

ME:

I'm barely single. Do you even read?

BURNIE:

Woman who cares if he's an asshole? Look at him.
He high key looks like David Gandy.

ME:

I know! He is hot.

BURNIE:

Hot? Haha! If you don't ride that man like his dick
owes you money then I don't know you. <water
emoji> <eggplant emoji> I will try to track down the
luggage. <wink emoji>

ME:

Omg.

BURNIE:

He is seriously hot.

ME:

He kissed me . . . after telling me to put my nipples
away. Who tf does that?

BURNIE:

LOL. Men lose 50% of their thinking abilities when
they see nipples. Look it up.

ME:

Dude he's sending serious mixed signals.

BURNIE:

I've never met a man who doesn't love nipples. Methinks he doth protest too much. Maybe he's one of those grump types.

ME:

He's a dick.

BURNIE:

All men are.

BURNIE:

Here's what you do. Shave your vagigi to look like a landing strip and we're gonna need a cute sign saying feed cock here. He can read right?

ME:

Lmao

BURNIE:

Seriously, get you some good vacay peen and you'll feel better.

ME:

Idk

Vlad's face flashes before my eyes, and my body lights up with tingles. Ugh.

BURNIE:

You're on vacation in Romania after catching your asshole ex in bed with not one but two ppl. If anyone deserves orgasms it's you. Who cares if the man is an asshole? Hate sex is good sex. Especially if he kisses half as good as he looks.

ME:

I meant Idk why I'm friends with you.

BURNIE:

Easy, because I drink and I know things. Now go away and start operation get the dick. Love u.

ME:

Idk what I'm doing. How do you even do that???

I chew nervously on my nails, waiting for her to reply. How does hot vacation sex even happen?

BURNIE:

...

BURNIE:

There are condoms in the coin pocket of your carry-on. Grab one and go roam the halls in pajamas and be your cute self. He will do the rest. If he doesn't, call me.

ME:

I cannot believe you.

BURNIE:

You love me.

ME:

<eyeroll emoji> This is stupid. Love you too.

BURNIE:

It is not stupid, it's foolproof. Go go go! <eggplant emoji, water emoji> <hip thrust GIF>

Snorting with laughter, I head into the bathroom to run a bath, pulling out my top knot as I go. The thought of Vlad giving me orgasms has my downstairs tingling, but he will have to lose the attitude, or I'll be finding a way to avoid him the rest of the week.

My phone vibrates and I grab it from where I left it on the bed, my anxiety instantly going through the roof as I stare at the screen. I groan inwardly and press the notification.

It's a pic of Chad posing for the camera on the beach with the words "forgive me" laid out in seashells and he's wearing a stupid pout on his face. "Ugh."

Comments explode with women from all over the world sending hearts and water emojis almost instantly. The overall consensus seems to be I'm a garden utensil that really likes trouser snakes.

"Little do they know he couldn't possibly be a bigger douche canoe."

God, this is so like him. He fucks up and then does something sweet like this bullshit, and every single time I forgive him. *Well, not anymore, Chad.*

I grin up at the camera and snap a selfie, making sure to get most of the room in the photo with me. The suite has a huge gothic poster bed that is unreal and a bay window overlooking the countryside. The photo also happens to scream I'm not even in the country.

"*You're a mean one, Mister Grinch,*" I hum as I add hashtags to the post: #castles #snowywonderland #travel.

And posted. *Suck on that, Chad.*

My first vacation alone in my life, and I meet the grumpiest, hottest man in the world. Making my way to the bathroom, I scroll through the pictures I took of Vlad, including the ones he didn't know I took, and grin. Even in the photos he looks hungry and downright sensual.

Hot vacation sex? Yes please. Besides, I haven't had sex in months. Between the stress of planning a wedding and covering the groom's mistakes, it's hard to pop a lady boner. My sex drive is more than healthy, I just couldn't stomach sex with Chad at the time, which is hilarious since he blamed *me* for him cheating.

I wonder if some sexy time will make Mr. Stick-up-his-ass less grumpy? Like a public service? God, I'm officially an idiot if that's my reasoning.

I sit the phone on the floor near the tub and strip out of my clothes, looking forward to a nice hot bath. I step in and screech—the water is ice cold. *What is my life?!*

CHAPTER 9

VLAD



“DOYLE! GET IN HERE.”

I pace across the well-worn carpet of my room, trying to keep my body under control. The need to devour her is vibrating just beneath my skin, setting me on edge. I will not be laid low by some trifle of a woman. I am lifetimes older than her and yet I can't recall hungering for anyone more. *Her body definitely doesn't look like an infant.*

Footsteps hurry down the hallway, Doyle's words preceding him into my room. “What the hell did you say to piss off our guest?” His tone cuts like a whip, full of derision.

“Never mind that. Did you get what I asked for?”

My gaze meets his and the glare on his face has my hackles up. I turn away to stare into the fireplace. This area of the castle hasn't been renovated at all, except for my bathroom, and normally the familiarity of my room would give me peace. Today, I want to tear the walls down and flee because I can't get the smell of her out of my nose no matter where I go.

Doyle sighs loudly before tossing something to me. I catch it deftly in my hand and touch the screen. Peculiar little things.

“That's your new phone. Perhaps now you'll stop shouting across the castle to get my attention and send a simple text. The little earth symbol is the internet. I'm sure you can figure the rest out on your own.”

I put it in my pocket to toy with later. “Why would I ever write you a letter on this thing when you have super hearing? Seems like a waste of my time.”

“I don’t know, Vlad, common decency? And it’s not a letter. Good god, I do not have time for your bullshit. Here is her luggage.” The heavy pink suitcase lands on top of the table.

Doyle lifts a brow in question, but I ignore him, frowning as I begin to rifle through her belongings.

“Thanks for picking it up at the airport, Doyle,” he mimics, like a coddled infant. “Oh no problem, Vlad,” he says before rolling his eyes. “You can at least have the decorum to thank someone when they break so many laws for you, asshole.” He continues pouting with his arms over his chest.

“Why would I say thank you?”

All of her clothing seems to cover nothing. I hold up some strange black string. “What is this?”

“That is a bikini. Although I’m not sure why she would need one in Romania in the dead of winter.”

Strange. *Why would she purposely pack something so . . . revealing?*

“And this?” I hold up a pink device between my thumb and finger.

Doyle laughs and shakes his head. “I suggest you learn how to google quickly on your new mobile and search keywords such as women’s pleasure devices.”

What in the hell . . .? This minuscule thing is what women use for pleasure these days?

My lips flatten into a grimace. “Why is it so small?”

“Just spitballing ideas here, but I doubt Aubrey will be understanding of you hijacking her . . . things.”

My nostrils flare. “If you breathe one word to her about this, I’ll invent new ways to kill you.”

I push a button and it vibrates in my hand. I glance at Doyle, who's grinning at my ignorance.

"Not one word." I tell him. I push the button to turn it off, but it begins vibrating at an alarming rate. "My god." I push the button again and a new vibration begins. It pulsates! "It's so fast."

I fumble to turn the damn thing off and set it on the table.

Doyle nods while cupping his chin. "I know. Isn't it fascinating? I've been around for most of it instead of wallowing like some people. Most of us have adapted—Frank, for one."

The light scent of berries wafts from her clothes as I slam the lid of the suitcase shut. *I am pathetic.*

Speaking of Frankenstein ...

"One of Frank's shop attendants was rude to our guest today. That would be a bad look for your little business venture. Double check that he fires her immediately—I don't want him getting soft-hearted in his old age."

Doyle sits down across the table I'm standing at and arches a brow in question. "So now we're telling Frank how to run his business empire and you want him to fire one of his staff because of Aubrey?"

"Exactly. I called him while there. Also, be sure you tell him that sunscreen of his smells vile," I grumble.

"Why don't you try it yourself on your new phone?" he urges.

I tap the phone screen and gesture at Aubrey's little toy. "Are these things on the Etsy too? What the hell is an Etsy?"

"Here, I'll download it for you. It's a place where humans sell their wares online. I do find it strange that I've been attempting to get you to keep up with the times, and all it takes is one woman."

I sit, only to shift in my seat and hand the phone to him. He is right, though I would never admit it. I'm more curious than ever after seeing what this woman deems fit for a

vacation and wonder if this pleasure device can make her toes curl the way I know I could. But more than that, I want to see the world from her eyes.

“Get me gram or whatever the hell it’s called too.”

Doyle pauses and lifts a concerned gaze to me, both brows rising. “I’m not sure what you’re playing at with Aubrey, but she can’t know what we are. None of the guests are ever supposed to know, Vlad, and the more you interact, the harder it’s going to be. The rest of us have been mingling with them for centuries while you’ve locked yourself away trying to forget humans exist. It’s been one day, and you’ve already managed to upset our only guest.”

I put my head in my hands. “She took pictures *everywhere*.”

“She’s one of those social media influencers. I looked her up. It’s fine. I’ll take care of it.”

My forehead hits the table. “My coercion doesn’t work on her.”

“It doesn’t?” He hums as he strokes his short beard. “Maybe you haven’t been eating enough?”

Not a bad idea. “True, I’ll eat more,” I say, surprising him.

I sit up and eye her luggage. The thought of her wearing such clothing for another man has jealousy tearing through me.

“Right. All the apps are downloaded now, and I’ve set up accounts on Etsy and Instagram. Also added YouTube. If you have any questions, call Frank. I’m sure he would be glad to walk you through social media.”

I shake my head at his continued reminder that Frank exists. He would never approve of me chasing after a human like a lovesick fool.

“Bugger off.” I wave my hand at him dismissively before halting. “Oh, and dinner at seven.”

He rises to his feet and walks to the door. “I’ll get some new sunscreen and make sure Frank understands we can’t

have a whiff of drama. Is Aubrey coming too?”

“I don’t know,” I say, frowning down at her luggage.

He glances at it and his eyes meet mine before he arches a brow. “Perhaps you should try a little harder to not be a dick?”

Once he leaves, I settle back into my chair, intent on learning more about her. *Try to not be a dick, he says.*

I notice the blood bags Hilda has left for me on a plate of ice, and sigh. I puncture a bag of O negative with my teeth and grimace.

“Why didn’t the coercion work on her?”

This has never occurred before, and pondering it leads to several more questions. Why, when I have never cared for humans, do I want to know everything about her? Why does she make my cock stand at attention with hardly a look, and how could she almost make me come in my pants like an untried lad?

I come to the conclusion that she is some sort of siren.

I must get her out of here.

CHAPTER 10

VLAD



“HOW HARD CAN IT BE TO WITHSTAND ONE HUMAN?” I grumble.

Doyle’s advice of remaining away from her replays in my head, and it frustrates me to no end. The smell of her, so strong in my rooms and the hallways, as if it follows me, caused me to flee to the library. I close my eyes and inhale, grateful her scent is dulled here from the smell of old parchment and books. *What has she done to me?* The fireplace crackles and pops as I stare out at the falling snow through the arched stone window, brooding over one slight and impudent human.

It has been hours, and my cock is still hard from her kiss, but I refuse to be broken by her.

Never again will I let myself waste away if one human can have this much control over me. It’s been more than a hundred years since I have felt the soft flesh of a woman beneath me, and I can’t argue that Doyle is right.

It would be much simpler to resist her and find some other willing woman to slake my lusts on—at least until this one leaves, returning to wherever the fresh-sunshine hell she came from.

My will of iron is close to crumpling, much like the drained and discarded blood bags at my feet. It would be bearable if the smell of her didn’t permeate the castle, adding fuel to the flames of my foul mood.

I sit scrolling through the hundreds of photos of Aubrey with another man on this Instagram, allowing curiosity to get

the better of me. The most recent photo has my back straightening with rage and a growl rumbling from my chest. There are so many of them with Aubrey in his arms, laughing and smiling.

This pathetic human is begging for forgiveness with seashells? I find it even more immature that he would do so publicly.

The buffoon is pouting like a child, and clearly women of this era have no idea he has no manhood to speak of. It is disgraceful that Aubrey was ever involved with such a male. Is *this* what women want these days?

That she could possibly forgive him because of one infantile gesture is infuriating. I force myself to put the phone down before I break the fragile contraption. The aggravating jealousy filling my brain is swiftly followed by confusion. Why should I care? She is one insignificant human plaguing my peace. *I should be able to withstand her.*

Frank insists the blood bags are enough, but if that's true, then how can she cause me to react this way?

The thought annoys me as I rise and stalk across the room to the piano half shrouded in darkness. I collapse onto the bench and pour out my frustration onto the keys. I haven't touched the instrument in decades, but I could play this piece blinded and half dead. The familiarity of the music is a balm to the want raging in my chest.

Footsteps sound on the wood floor down the hall and I grit my teeth, holding back a snarl. My gaze lands on the predicament I find myself in. Her scent grows stronger, right after I escape it.

“Damn and blast it.”

Swiftly I scoop up the empty blood packets I left from the night before, and toss them into the fire, cursing the smell of burning plastic that rises. Fuck. *This woman will be the death of me . . .*

I hiss out a sharp breath when a strange light blinds me and she screams, waving her arms about like a startled animal out

of its wits. Her phone clatters to the floor, sliding across the worn wood.

“Hello, Aubrey.”

Her hand curls into her chest and the shock bleeds from her face. “Oh my god, you scared the shit out of me.”

The light from the fire bathes her in a soft, cozy glow, and I move to turn on a lamp. “Decided to explore the castle, did you?”

She’s wearing new clothes. *Clothes I know I purchased.* Satisfaction swells in my chest at the thought that she would choose to wear them, even knowing she has little other options.

The black leggings stick to her like a silky second skin. Her white blouse cuts low, tickling just below her breasts, revealing the inside of her cleavage and the black lacey bra keeping them contained. I swallow down a groan, instantly salivating for a taste of her.

My cock hardens, straining within the confines of my pants, as the sound of her heart thunders in my ears. I bend down a tad awkwardly and pick up her little mobile device, then set it down on the nearby table.

“I-I heard music from my room and came to investigate.” Her pretty brows wrinkle with confusion before her nose does. “What is that smell?”

I step into her space and reach out to toy with the blonde silk of her hair. “It’s nothing. A mishap with the fireplace.”

Her soft panting breaths and her melodic pulse roar in my ears. My gaze drops to the white blouse, the fabric pulling taut over her covered breasts. I grin in delight. Her blonde locks are a mess, and I want to rake my fingers through them. The succulent scent that seems to follow her around blooms into the space between us, and I barely stop myself from groaning aloud.

I force myself to step back and arch a brow. Daring her to stay and not flee like her heart rate tells me she wants to. I

push my will into my voice when I tell her, “Stay with me a moment. I apologize for my earlier manners.”

Her arms fold over her chest and she tilts her chin up and to the side. “Why should I?”

Why indeed. Doyle did say I should try to be less of a dick, and I would rather she didn’t put me in the same category as the seashell fool.

“Because I have been a cad, and as Doyle so recently reminded me, you are a guest in my home.” Those kissable lips of hers purse together, and I want to haul her into my arms. “Come, I’ll play something for you.” I gesture over my shoulder at the piano.

“Oh, no thank you, I was just looking for Doyle.”

“Why?” My hackles rise. “What is it you need?”

She rubs at the side of her cheek, suddenly looking exasperated. “I tried to take a bath, but there isn’t any hot water. I was on my way to find him and heard the music. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“I am sorry. The renovations to the castle have been a difficult undertaking, to say the least. The castle is an old one and was a keep for far longer before that. Doyle may have given you the best view of the garden, but we hadn’t quite finished with all the renovations before you arrived.”

“I thought everything seemed a bit unfinished. Is that why I haven’t seen any staff yet?”

“Yes. So, come have a drink with me. I haven’t played for anyone in years.” I gesture to a wine cabinet before drifting my hand toward two cushioned chairs with a table separating them. “Besides, Doyle is otherwise occupied at the moment.”

Indefinitely, as he’s most likely dealing with Frankenstein.

She shrugs, and my eyes track her movements as she heads toward the piano seat instead, leaning in to squint at the music. At least she didn’t immediately storm away.

I grin when she cautiously sits down on the edge of the cushioned bench. She looks like prey who is ready to scamper

away at a moment's notice.

“Mozart?” she asks, and I move to sit beside her, delighted that she seems content to stay by my side and doesn't shy away. She pushes down a key with a delicate finger, then the one next to it.

“Do you play?” I ask, noticing her interest. Her hair shimmers in the light and my palms begin to sweat with the need to touch her.

“No, but I used to listen when my grandma would play. I only know one tune.”

I curl my hands into fists, needing to know what has caused the happy expression on her face. “Play it for me then.”

She snorts. “No way.”

“Why not?” I ask, cocking a brow when her shoulders turn inward nervously.

“Because it's silly.”

“Why would anything you play be silly?”

Her blue eyes flick to me before looking away once more. “You know the movie *Big*?”

I frown and shake my head.

“Yeah, it's kind of old. Anyway, this kid gets turned into an adult and he goes to the mall and plays this song on a keyboard. You know, like this piano on the floor in this massive toy store.” I stare, mesmerized, as she talks with her hands, light infusing her face as she remembers this film that she's obviously enjoyed many times. “The guy is really like twelve or something and ends up sleeping with this girl.” Her eyes catch on mine and her face heats. “Not that that's important.”

The irony isn't lost on me. I wonder how she would react to knowing exactly how old I am. *Would she run in fear?*

“Play it for me then,” I repeat, sliding over to give her more space while waving at the piano keys.

“What?”

“The song from the movie.”

She looks at the keys to avoid me. “No way. I heard you. You sound like a freaking maestro or whatever.”

I start to roll my eyes but catch myself. I place my hand over the back of her slender wrist, soothing her skin with my thumb, and her heat sends a tingle through my fingertips. “Please?”

Her lips part in surprise, and I just know someone somewhere is cackling with glee. Me saying please is absolutely unheard of.

“Fine,” she finally says, yet the smile on her face is at odds with the way her brows are furrowed.

Her fingers shake slightly, but they move along the ivory keyboard, playing a light, cheery tune. She giggles in delight, and I find myself drawn under her spell, craving to watch her eyes crinkle again and again.

Wanting her to fall under that spell with me, I chuckle. “So, you’re a maestro yourself.”

Those blue eyes of hers widen and her head tilts back. Her arms wrap around her middle as she laughs, and I have never seen anything as beautiful as she. Maybe that’s what it is: she truly is full of life. And I cannot look away.

“Your turn now.” She slides over for me this time, and I frown, shaking my head.

“Play yours once again?” She smiles and plays it once more. “Very nice, and see? Not silly at all, not when it makes you smile like that.”

My fingers brush over the top of hers and her lips part, eyes dilating immediately. *Interesting*. I pick up her hands in mine, noting how fragile they feel, how soft and pliable.

“Let me show you how to play a different song.”

I stroke the keys with her hands lightly, playing a soft tune that most likely hasn’t been heard in centuries. It’s a simple one, but it always makes my chest full.

Her eyes go soft. “That’s beautiful.”

“Yes, it is,” I reply, staring at her, admiring the way the fire makes her hair shimmer like gold. She catches me and her teeth nip at her bottom lip, and a new aroma floods the air. *Oh fuck me.*

“Come here,” I beckon and catch the subtle movement of her swallowing.

I wait a moment for her to voice her choice, enchanted by her continued resistance to mind control.

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea.”

“And why’s that?” I cup her cheek and run my fingers over her soft skin, my thumb raking across her bottom lip. I’m enraptured by the soft tongue that peeks from her mouth as I push my thumb slightly in, and her eyes darken.

She pulls back, and I let her go. “Because of this. Whatever this is,” she says, gesturing between us.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re rude and sometimes say things like, ‘Make sure you wear proper clothes.’” She says all this while shaking a finger at me, her voice overembellished and obnoxious. “And then you kiss me like *before*, is what I mean. You make no sense.”

I give her a broken smile, trying my hardest to not let my usual ire get in the way of this. “I do not sound like that.”

“Yes, you do.” She shakes her head and laughs.

The sound touches something in my chest, and the way the firelight kisses her eyes, combined with her luscious scent, makes her more alluring than a witch’s magic. At the thought, I breathe her in fully, but there is no witchcraft on her, not a hint—just her addictive aroma.

I feel my control slipping and reach out to trace her cheek lightly with the tips of my fingers, unable to resist touching her in some way. Her full and pouty lips are so tempting.

“I want to kiss you. May I?” The words are out before I can stop myself. Nor do I want to, if I’m being honest. I need her lips on mine.

She shudders as I trail my hand lower, asking for permission. But when she leans her body imperceptibly into me, tipping her lips, I lose control. *She wants me as I want her.*

My lips crash against hers and the swelling of my cock becomes painful as she moans. I growl into her mouth, and she opens, allowing me to delve inside. Her tongue toys with mine, and I snake both my hands down to grip each perfect globe of her ass, groaning at the feel of her.

Something comes over me. This was only meant to be a kiss, but I find myself wanting more. I want Aubrey closer, to feel her heat, her arousal, and have it consume me.

She pauses our kiss to squeak in alarm when I deftly pick her up and stand, only to settle into one of the chairs closer to the bookshelves, away from the light, with her secure in my lap. Her fingers clutch the fabric of my shirt.

I rock her hips into my hardness, and she shudders, a whimper escaping. Her lips descend on mine, and she sucks my tongue into her mouth. The aggressive maneuver has my body freezing in place, the blood in my veins suddenly scorching. I wrap my hand around her throat and squeeze lightly, pushing back and forcing her to break her onslaught.

“*Aubrey.*”

Her face is flushed, and her eyes are heavy with lust. I keep her pinned with my gaze and reach between us to rip the fabric of her leggings between her thighs. Her eyes widen and I can feel the quiet gasp escape her throat underneath my hand.

I try to remind myself she’s human and a guest in my home, but the tastes and sounds she makes drive me to insanity. *I can’t stop touching her.*

Running my fingers along her soaked panties, I watch the emotions evolve and play across her expression. Her thoughts are written on her face, and I could read them for hours, never becoming bored. They tell me she doesn’t want me to stop.

The way her body responds to mine is unlike anything I can ever recall experiencing.

When I slide my other hand up from her ass to one of her perfect breasts, grazing her nipple, her thighs quake and her body trembles beneath my hands.

“So responsive,” I purr out in appreciation.

She bites her lip in reaction. I shove the scrap of lace to the side and grin as her breathing turns erratic and broken.

“Oh yes, please.” Her voice is low and breathy, and music to my ears.

My fangs are stabbing into my gums, and I have to fight their release, digging deep to keep my awareness on her and maintain the leash on my control. *There are a thousand things I want to do to her in a thousand different ways.*

“Look at you. So needy. Does your pretty cunt need attention?”

Her face turns a beautiful shade of red, but she nods slowly. I stare into her eyes as I reach down, snipping her underwear with a claw as easily as scissors before looking at my handiwork. Her sex glistens and my nostrils flare at the sight.

She slams her eyes shut and trembles, but I want to see her. I want to look into her eyes and watch her break. I sheath my claws in preparation.

“Open your eyes.” I gaze into the bottomless blue depths and her face contorts into one of pleasure when I rake the back of my fingers across her pussy. I growl at the feel of her. She’s shaved bare and slippery wet. “Beautiful.”

“I have a condom,” she says, her heart beating fast, her eyes dilated with arousal.

“A what?” Wait. *A condom?* I blink in confusion until it dawns on me. She means a prophylactic. I grin in delight, elation fills me at the realization that she wants me as badly as I do her.

“It’s in my pocket.” She’s carrying one on her? It appears I am not the only one who was hoping for more.

“Shhhh.” My cock head throbs in my pants, my underwear sticking uncomfortably.

If I told her it has been more than two lifetimes since I felt a woman beneath me, she would call me a liar. That may be a bit much for her to process at the moment, so telling her I’m impervious to disease and she will bear me no children could cause bedlam.

“I’m also on the pill, but you know . . .” She licks her lips nervously, like she hadn’t meant to say that.

Her eyes take on a vulnerable sheen, and I lift to kiss her. Thankfully, she melts and rocks against me, and I cup her breasts, teasing and pinching her nipples beneath her shirt.

She moans, her head tilting back wantonly. I let go of her and clap my hands, bathing us in darkness, knowing she will be the only one of us unable to see. Releasing my fangs so I can relax fully, I flip her body in my lap, pulling her back to my chest to remove what’s left of her leggings. She sighs when I cup her throat in my hand and slip my fingers through her folds to play with her clit. When she groans and grows wetter, I slip a single digit into her pussy. My jaw grinds when she clasps her hands around my wrist, holding me to her.

I play inside her sweet pussy, twisting and curling my finger, loving the small sounds she makes. Her hips roll as she attempts to ride my hand, her body demanding more. *Fucking hell.*

She shifts against my erection, and I groan against her nape. “Be still.”

She rolls her hips again. “I can’t,” she whines.

My palm slapping her inner thigh rings out over the crackle of the fire, and she gasps.

She turns her head and I get a perverse sense of pleasure from the confusion and irritation on her face. Oh yes, my Aubrey is a little she-devil and will demand everything I can give, then come back wanting more. I rub my fingers across

her clit and squeeze her nipple lightly, humming with approval when her head falls back on a sigh.

“Good girl.” I slide my finger through her wetness before dipping back inside her warmth. Her body is like a furnace on mine, and I can sense her temperature rising.

Blood explodes in my mouth as I bite down on my cheek to keep from violating her more than I already have. I add another finger to the first, stretching her slowly, only wanting to watch her come apart in my arms. She whimpers, and I wrap an arm around her chest to hold her still as I thrust my digits, groaning at the way her body grips my fingers. I want to be inside her, filling her, consuming her.

Her whimpers turn to moans as I fuck her with my hand.

“Please, don’t stop,” she pants out.

Her fingernails are claws biting into my thighs, and her body begins moving uncontrollably. I smile at the sight and growl, wanting to see more. More of *her*. Her ass grinds down just right across my erection and I see stars.

“Woman.” The word *stop* clogs my throat and I groan. The sound is warbled and distorted, mingling with her soft cries as thick spurts of cum fill my slacks. *Fuck*. A growl rumbles out of me as her bottom rubs down hard again, and I realize I am shaking. My entire body is, all while my fingers are still nestled, squeezed in her tight cunt.

Holy hells. *She just made me come fully clothed.*

I am never going hungry again if this is the cost. I grind my teeth in my mouth, attempting to ignore my bruised pride for the sake of her orgasm.

“Come for me.”

I hold her to my chest as my fingers thrust inside her over and over, while her sensual cries get longer and louder. Her wetness drips down my hand and my vision goes black. *How I wish I could drink from this woman.* The scents coming off her in waves are almost more than I can bear as she crests her orgasm, her pulse beating like a hummingbird.

She is extraordinary.

Her back bows and she cries out long and hard as I wring every drop of ecstasy from her. Her face is scrunched in an expression of bliss, and I want to see it again and again.

Baring my teeth as footsteps register outside the room, I suppress a hiss.

“Open that door and you will die.”

I can sense Doyle’s growing annoyance, even with the wall between us, and will have to re-establish the hierarchy, apparently. His nose and hearing are nearly as good as mine, and there is no doubt he is acutely aware of what we are doing, meaning he is interrupting intentionally. Most likely fearing I will go too far with our little guest. *If only he knew.*

Aubrey’s body goes still atop mine and her eyes are wide, the lust in her gaze dissipating as she realizes we’ve been caught.

“Oh my god,” she wheezes, laughing lightly. The sound cuts off into a barely audible moan as I move my fingers still nestled inside her.

“What do you want, Doyle?”

“Dinner is ready,” he bites out, the irritation in his tone evident.

Aubrey’s face is pink with embarrassment, and I reach up to stroke her cheek affectionately. *She is adorable.*

I try not to grin for fear she’ll see my extended fangs. “We will be down momentarily.”

His footsteps recede and I dart my eyes over her face, taking in her dazed expression.

I clutch her in my arms and stand up, gently setting her on her feet before kissing her affectionately. Then I bend down to retrieve her torn leggings and hand them to her with a smirk. She stares at me as if I’ve grown two heads when I straighten out her shirt and kiss her lightly on the nose.

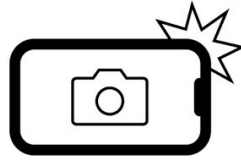
I put my hand on the small of her back and usher her toward the side door. “Would you like to freshen up and meet me downstairs for dinner?”

She blinks as if in a daze and nods slightly.

Astonishing.

CHAPTER II

AUBREY



“UMM. YOU GUYS DON’T THINK THIS IS A LITTLE . . . PINK?” I stare down at my plate, wondering if maybe this is just a European thing? The steak is so rare it’s trying to eat the salad, and I cringe inwardly at the blood pooling on the plate. *Men will literally eat anything.*

“Oh, here,” Doyle says, picking up my dish from the dining room table. “I’ll go throw it on the grill a bit longer.” His chair scrapes the floor and his footsteps echo toward the kitchen.

“Thank you,” I say awkwardly, instantly wishing I had just eaten the cow and not said anything. Anything to keep me from being alone with *him*. My body is still tingling from the aftereffects of me coming on his fingers, and feeling his eyes on me isn’t helping the situation.

I’m struggling to process the way he brought me to orgasm so easily and wondering how he did it. The two men I had been with before him needed the stars to align to make me feel an iota of what just happened to my body. With Ben, a college fling who took my virginity, it had been awkward, not only because it was my first time, but because it was his too. All I remember is pain from that encounter.

Chad wasn’t much better with his groping hands and expecting me to come immediately, like we were always competing in a two-minute race.

Maybe it’s a fluke since it’s been so long? Three months is a long time, and vibrators can only do so much, right?

I play with my cutlery to avoid looking at Vlad. The old table is beautiful and fits the green-and-black walls and carpet of the gothic-themed room. Black candles are mixed with cream ones everywhere, including the low-hanging iron chandelier above. Being here with him, in this place, I realize how easy it would be to market it to every goth around the world who loves chiseled jaws and smoldering, dark eyes.

“Aubrey?” Vlad says.

My face heats and I paste on a fake smile. “Yeah?”

“I would very much like to know what you are thinking right now.”

I'm thinking that my time with you makes me realize how closed-minded I have been.

Sparks flew when I first met Chad. He had said all the right things, although I wouldn't be surprised if my father had fed him lines. With Vlad, in comparison, it's like what you see is what you get. He is such a grump, but at the same time, he can be so sweet. It also makes it harder to keep my legs closed when I can't be in the same room as him without becoming instantly aware of the attraction between us. *I am ridiculous.*

I make the mistake of looking at him and my abdomen tightens, my body lighting up with shivers.

People talk about butterflies when attracted to someone, but this feels like a flock of birds in my stomach—birds directly tied to my vagina, aiming at Vlad and going “mine.” *How can he turn me into a puddle with one look? His whole face should be illegal.*

I reach for the first thing that pops into my head to answer him. “My room still has no hot water. I even tried the sink and nothing. It's all cold. I had to have a cold wash just to get changed.”

His brow furrows. “The renovations were just finished today, but perhaps something was missed. You can use my private suite until yours can be repaired, if you like. It has been recently renovated, and I think you will be pleased with it.”

If I like? Where did he pull all this sudden charm from? His ass?

My heart rate kicks into overdrive at the thought of using his bath. He stares at me from across the table and heat pools between my legs. He grins, the edges of his mouth curling, and it reminds me of a show I watched as a kid: little red riding hood and the big bad wolf. He looks like he wants to eat me, and my body is fully on board to let him.

My cheeks burn from his attention, and I realize it's not *him* making me uncomfortable. It's that I just let him finger me, practically begging him to, when I have never acted like that with anyone before. More than that, I want to do it again.

I clench my eyes shut. *Just remember what Bernadette said. I can do whatever I want on my vacation. That includes having a random fling.* That's why I put the condom in my pocket in the first place.

Oddly, there is something about him that makes me feel safe, but that could be because of the orgasm situation. Chad couldn't find a clitoris with a diagram and a map.

"I've deposited your luggage in your room, Aubrey. The airline dropped it off earlier," Doyle says as he enters the dining room with my steaming plate, and I let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh, they found it?" I ask, my voice perking up. "Thank you. Maybe Vlad will leave my wardrobe alone now," I say a little too enthusiastically.

Vlad arches a brow. "Doubtful."

I laugh and shake my head. "I actually packed for Tahiti, so I guess I owe you a thank you for that too."

"How is it you ended up here, anyway?" Doyle asks as he places my steak in front of me again, and I'm pleased that it's no longer threatening to moo at me.

Vlad sits back, obviously wanting to know the same.

I'm surprised Doyle is here, but I get the feeling it's because he doesn't want to leave us in the same room alone

together. *Oh god, I can't believe he almost walked in on us!*

"I had plans for the beach that fell through. Instead of staying home, I just swapped tickets to Romania." Awkwardness spreads, or maybe I'm just imagining it because I don't really want him knowing that I caught my ex cheating just days ago and would rather not talk about anything serious . . . Ugh. I am such a slut.

It's also how I got my days mixed up when booking, since I was shaking through tears, justifiably upset.

Doyle's face lights up, and he smiles warmly. "Lucky for us then."

"Indeed it is." Vlad's eyes undress me, sending shivers down my spine.

Yep, I'll admit it. The way he looks at me makes me feel like a schoolgirl with a first crush. The thought that he could want me as much as I want him is almost too hard to believe. I smile at Doyle, trying to cool off from my reaction to Vlad, and look around the dining room as I dig into my food.

"I wanted to ask you about that castle tour, Doyle."

Doyle smiles and sits down to eat his steak. "Of course. Just let me know when you would like to do it and I'll make myself available."

"That won't be necessary."

Vlad's tone is hard, and I can practically feel the tension rising between them. Is there a dick-measuring contest happening that I should know about? I kick him lightly under the table. "Doyle can show me around tomorrow. I'm sure you have plenty of other things to do around this big place."

Doyle smirks. "Like opening the door to visitors."

"Oh, right," I rasp, before my lips tighten in memory. "What happened to the old guy who let me in? Does he live here too? I mean, honestly, as big as this place is, I wouldn't be surprised." That guy was *so* cranky. Sheesh.

I take a bite of salad and then freeze at the expressions screaming WTF on their faces. *What did I say?*

Vlad starts choking as Doyle says, “He is actually on holiday visiting family in Australia at the moment.”

“Oh, that’s so nice! I’ve heard it’s beautiful over there,” I gush, until Vlad looks like he’s dying as he suppresses another cough. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he wheezes after a moment.

Doyle clears his throat. “The castle has fifty-seven rooms in total, although one wing is in disuse. We even have a ballroom and a cellar.”

“Okay, that sounds cool.”

Doyle’s gaze softens toward me. “Yes, we can look at whatever you want tomorrow.”

“So, are you guys into cosplay? Is that why you’re wearing the whole Gomez Addams get-up?” I glance at Doyle’s suit that looks like something from a renaissance fair.

His cheeks turn red, but he nods. “Yep. That’s exactly what this is. Cosplay.”

“Eeeek! Awesome. Can I help? I don’t think anyone has ever done an immersive cosplay thing and that would be so cool. It’s too bad Halloween is already over, but honestly, who cares? It’s still an amazing idea any time of the year, especially with the history of the place.”

“So *cool*,” Vlad says, staring down into his glass as he finishes it off.

Doyle is grinning like he won the lottery. “Right?! I think so too. Tell me, what would you expect from an immersive cosplay experience?”

Excitement flares in my chest. If I help them, this could be the coolest thing ever. *What would Dracula have, anyway? I mean, other than a castle.*

“Well, with the whole Dracula vibe you have going on, I think you should—”

I flinch when Vlad takes my hand in his, the coldness of it shocking.

“Jeez!” Covering his hand with both of mine, I rub to make friction. “Why are your hands so cold? Maybe we should bump the heat up a tad more?”

“He has a heart condition,” Doyle says, before quickly shoveling a bite of his steak into his mouth.

My eyes go wide at the announcement. *It didn't seem like he had any kind of heart condition earlier when he was pulling an orgasm from my snatch like he was exorcising a demon.*

I squeeze his hand lightly. “You have a heart condition?”

“I have an iron deficiency, not a heart condition.” Vlad glares at Doyle, who grins at me with a mischievous smirk and shrugs.

Weird much? But before I can say anything, Vlad is talking as if nothing odd is happening.

“Doyle, Aubrey tells me that her bath chamber isn't working properly. It seems she lacks hot water.” His voice rolls over me and the birds in my stomach take flight again. *Do male phone sex operators exist?*

Doyle's eyes flash with concern and I try to focus on what he's saying. “I see. I'm sure I can get someone to fix the issue tomorrow.”

I nod in thanks as I finish my last bite of steak and sit back in my chair. “That was so good. You know, we should totally get some garlic bread going next time. That would set this off so well.”

Vlad clears his throat. “I'm sure that can be arranged. Would you like me to show you the bath now?”

“Okay.” Lead the way, sexy iceman.

WE WALK IN SILENCE, shyness and anticipation thrumming inside me and warming my cheeks as we make our way to his bedroom. I glance at the décor changing the further we go as he gestures toward a hallway I haven't seen yet. The walls of it are unpainted and empty.

“What happened here?”

“We had to move some of the older antiquities to another part of the castle. We thought it best as most of it is old armor and weaponry,” he says, not breaking his stride. “And not very safe for guests.”

“Oh.”

He pauses at the end of the hallway and opens a door for me, letting me enter before him. I walk into the room and have to stop my jaw dropping at the size of the bed.

Vlad’s bedroom is just as gothic as the rest of the place, except the walls are papered a dark blue, and it smells like him, which means I am in trouble. His bedding is the same blue as the walls, with dark-colored furniture and a cream-colored sofa, giving it a masculine but cozy vibe. The massive four-poster bed is calling my name, made even worse by the way my body is warming up from not only his closeness, but because since he fingered me, I’ve been made hyper aware of just how long it’s been since I’ve been touched.

“It’s in here,” he says, oblivious to my issues, thank god.

I walk into this gothic-style bathroom, and I let my jaw drop this time. No joke. The castle walls are high and a pretty hunter green, matching the chairs and an accent rug near the tub. I gasp. Who the hell hangs a chandelier in the bathroom? What the fuck is this place?

He chuckles. “I’m guessing you approve?”

A huge white marble tub sits along one wall, large enough for two people to fit in. The ornate bronze-colored fixtures catch my eye, especially the faucet in the shape of a lion’s maw. It’s beautiful, and the standing oval mirror in one corner is a nice touch.

“I definitely approve. This is amazing.”

“Feel free to use it whenever you wish for your stay. I prefer the shower.” He gestures toward the far wall and strides over, pointing out a set of controls I hadn’t noticed.

With a touch of a button, all eight of the showerheads come to life, steam rising quickly from the tiled floor. Surprisingly, there's a bench inside big enough for at least two people to sit comfortably.

“Fancy.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but the next expression on his face as he flicks the shower off makes it clear he changed his mind. “The towels are in the cupboard there. I'll be in the study when you get out. Third door on the left from mine.”

“Thank you.”

He nods and leaves the room.

I finally relax when I hear the soft click of the door shut on his way out, then I let myself fully freak out. Oh my gosh, this bathroom! My insides flutter with excitement as I snap a few pictures and grab a bottle of stuff near the tub. I inhale its woodsy scent and it instantly reminds me of him. I turn on the knobs to run a bath, a heady anticipation coming over me at the thought of bathing in his smell, of taking a bath in his space.

I could really get used to this.

CHAPTER 12

VLAD



I LISTEN THROUGH THE DOOR OF MY ROOM AS THE TUB FILLS. The water almost drowns out the soft sounds the fabric makes as it pools at her feet, and the knowledge that she's now completely naked sends lust thundering through me. She's in my bath. My cock rises again. Dammit.

At this rate, all of my clothing will be sullied with cum. *My wardrobe has seen worse.*

My phone vibrates softly inside the room, and I mutter a curse. The blasted thing should not be this difficult to keep up with.

I enter quietly so I won't disturb her and grab the infernal device from the dresser, then turn to leave. My eyes flicker to red as I become instantly arrested by the sight of Aubrey laid bare in the mirror. My fangs drop from my gums, and I barely withhold a growl. The swells of her breasts floating above the water and the bare skin of her thighs have my mouth watering.

I will my eyes to shut but they disobey, only fluttering closed when she emits a sigh of approval. The sound sends a sharp shock of lust to my balls, and my cock swells in response. Fuck me.

Etiquette demands it is bad form to observe a woman in such a state, but at the moment, I would impale and destroy anything on earth that would attempt to remove me. Her blonde hair is wet, making it look like honey curling around the soft crest of one nipple and her expression is one of blissful relaxation.

My hands grip the wood of the doorframe when she moans and bites her bottom lip. *What is she doing?*

My chest expands when she throws one leg over the edge of the tub and shuts her eyes. I freeze, completely transfixed, and wonder if she is touching herself beneath the bubbles. Every molecule of my being stands to attention when her fingertips slide over her breast to toy and tease her nipple. The memory of her convulsing around my fingers causes me to groan aloud, and she goes still, staring at the ornate, freestanding oval mirror with a frown.

“Hello?” she calls.

My vision fades to a red haze. The scent of fear along with the sweet smell of berries permeates the air, and I grin. Vampires cannot be seen in silver-backed mirrors, and fortunately I have several. Doyle, the prick, loves to move them around the castle simply to fuck with me, but this time, I’m afraid I owe him one.

After a moment, she settles back into the bath, her anxiety easing as her mind glosses over her inability to see me. Need and want override the logic that I should stay away from her. *I want her.* She has consumed every thought in my mind every moment of each day since she arrived, and I am tired of fighting my instincts. I want her to be mine.

She moves to grip the edge of the tub, making the decision for me. Water drips from her hands to the floor and steam rolls lightly through the room, wafting her scent my way. I can withstand it no longer. The smell sends need roaring inside me, my balls draw up, my cock lifts like it has for only her in the last century, and all rational thought is lost.

I speed over and silence her from behind, muffling the shriek that tries to escape her mouth as I take in her wet, quivering flesh. Her breathing is harsh, and her tiny body is obviously overcome with adrenaline.

“It’s only me,” I whisper into her ear.

Making sure my body is blocking the view of the mirror, I uncover her mouth and she glares. “You scared the shit out of

me.”

She moves to cover herself and I reach down into the tub to grasp her thigh.

“I came back in because I forgot something, only to find you pleasuring yourself,” I softly rasp against her nape, drawing my nose along her flesh to smell her sweet aroma. “Was earlier not enough for you?”

She bites her bottom lip and looks down at my hand creeping up her thigh. My shirt is wet, but that’s of zero concern once she moves her hand covering her pussy for me. My fangs ache at the sight of her and smell of her skin. I kiss her but pull back to watch as her hips buck in the water, chasing the fingers so close to where she wants me.

“Vlad,” she moans, her thighs spreading for me, and that is all the confirmation I need.

Gripping her wet body, I pull her into my arms easily. I palm the sweet swell of her ass and swing her legs around my hips as I cart her to my bed.

“What are you doing?” she cries out in surprise.

I have no idea. And I don’t care anymore. Earlier was not enough for me either.

I can’t control myself and roll my hips into hers, rubbing my hard cock between the damp flesh of her thighs. She squeaks and her arms tighten around the back of my head, effectively putting my face in the bend of her neck.

“You are mouthwatering.” Her arousal floods my senses, and I slap her lightly on the bottom. “Did you enjoy your bath?” I ask, sensing she’s overwhelmed by her glazed and unfocused eyes.

She nods. “It was so nice.”

My hands dig into the plump thickness of her ass and thighs. *Heaven.* “Mmmm, you feel like a dream.”

I lay her on the bed, and she looks up at me. There is desire, but also trepidation. Her heartbeat thundering in her chest makes me pause. This must be her choice. I stand up,

allowing her a moment, my eyes darting over her body. The bath has turned her skin a soft pink, and she smells like she's mine.

"I don't know which piece of you I want to bite first."

Her eyes widen as she tenses, and the scent of her arousal increases. *Interesting*. Fuck, I need to taste her.

"Aubrey, I would very much like to kiss you."

Her tongue slips out of her mouth, wetting her lips. She nods. "Okay."

She sighs lightly and falls onto her back. She is a goddess sent from hell to tempt me. Her hungry gaze runs over me, and a throaty sound leaves her lips that shoots lust straight to my groin, causing me to leap into action. I rip the tie from my suit and bend to kiss her pussy, sucking on her clit lightly and purring in the back of my throat.

I lift my head and stare into her dazed blue eyes. "If you ever want me to stop, tell me and I will."

Her eyes are glazed and my cock jerks in response. "Yes."

I stop and tip her chin up. "Aubrey, I mean it."

She nods and beams an adoring smile. "Okay."

"Spread your legs."

Her entire body shakes like a leaf, but her thick, beautiful thighs part.

I tear the jacket and shirt from my body and kneel, gripping her soft legs in my hands. I take her by the ankles and pull her easily to the edge of the bed, darting my lips down to her core and kissing the little nub nestled above the folds of her pretty pussy. My tongue slides down her soft flesh and I groan at the taste I find there, like morning dew. I devour her sweet cunt until she's gasping and pulling at the sheets, then I move to kiss the soft swell of her stomach and nip at the flesh of her hip. I lower my head again and she cries out as I lick up one fold and then the other, tonguing her slit and growling.

"I am going to own this delectable body."

I push one finger inside her and her back bows up, arching on a sigh. I rub lightly through her wetness, dragging my finger along her seam, and dip my finger back inside.

Her soft pants and the slick sounds her body makes roar in my ears. “Nnnh,” she moans, and my cock aches with the need to fill her. I want to ruin this woman, lay claim to her in a way no mortal man can.

I add another finger to the first and she shudders.

“Can you feel how wet you are for me?” I whisper, enjoying the slight shiver my words cause in response. I insert my fingers again and roll my palm across her clit, feeling the way her body tightens down on my fingers. I thrust them shallowly for a moment before inserting a third, stretching her tiny hole to accommodate me. “Look at that tightness. You’re going to squeeze my cock to perfection.”

I thrust my fingers almost lazily, and use my other hand to reach up and thumb one of her nipples, her moans becoming wails.

“Oh my god, please!”

“Shhhhh.” Removing my hands from her sweet body, I climb further up the bed and hug her to me. I kiss her temple, rubbing my hands down her body in calming motions. She settles onto the soft sheets and I trail my fingers low, teasing her with my touch.

“Please, I need to come.” Her fingers reach up to pinch her nipples, and goosebumps cover her entire body.

She looks like a painting with her hair a yellow wave of color against the blue sheets and her eyes sultry and wanton. She whimpers and her hips gyrate as she seeks out anything to assuage her discomfort.

“Show me where you want me,” I dare her.

Except it’s my jaw that drops when her fingers trail down low and dip inside. I stare dumbfounded and in complete awe as she fingers herself lightly, and her digits come out wet with her slick.

“Dammit, woman.” She is a temptress sent to bring me to my knees.

I push my forehead into hers before catching her lips with mine, damn near shaking with want when she moans into my mouth. She kisses me greedily and tenderness floods me just as every cell in my body erupts with need when her hands clutch at my hair. Her scent is everywhere all at once, and I have to fight its dizzying power as I unbuckle my belt and trousers.

My cock jumps when freed, desire consuming me like a flame to a powder keg. My body is on fire—hot and hard from the need to be inside her. Her hips roll beneath mine and my cock grazes her wetness, making me groan.

“Behave, wench.” My palm slaps lightly against her hip.

“I want more.” She grins before pouting.

“I have every intention of giving you more, Aubrey.” *As much as you can take.* I cup her cheek and kiss her softly before nudging my cock at her opening. “Breathe for me.”

Aubrey

HE PULLS BACK, taking the cock I want *so much* away with him, and I want to cry. “No! What are you doing?”

Just fuck me already. I have never been so turned on in my life. Probably from months, no, years of really mediocre sex, and I have no doubt that I’m about to have my mind blown. With Chad I would usually end up having to get myself off, and I can already tell sex with Vlad is going to be life altering. The looks he gives me make me feel sexy and powerful, the coldness of his skin on mine indescribable. I want to arch into him like a cat and give him everything he wants if only he will touch me.

“I forgot the condom,” he growls out, moving to get to his feet, and I shake my head. *This isn’t happening.*

I grab his arm. “But I’m on the pill.”

He blinks before looking at me with a confused expression.

Just tell him.

Pushing through the embarrassment, I squeeze my eyes shut. “I haven’t had sex in a few months now, and I’m clean.” I haven’t had sex since my last checkup, but that’s not relevant.

The bed moves and I peek one eye open, watching as he moves on top of me, a wide smile on his face, making him look almost younger.

“I confess it has been a long time for me as well.”

I nod, licking my lips at that ridiculousness, but he stares down at me so sincerely. *I believe him.* “Okay.”

He kisses me and my body grows warm all over again, like a spark to kindling. The sensation of his legs brushing against my inner thighs makes me shiver. I arch against him and feel his cockhead rubbing lightly against my slick pussy.

“Oh fuck,” I moan out at the size of him.

My eyes go wide as he pushes his hips forward, a shock of pleasure taking my breath as he breaches my entrance with the tip of his cock. My thighs are quaking, and I want to hide at how they jiggle with every move, but he doesn’t seem to mind. He moans and grips my ass tightly, slowly working himself into me.

“So tight,” he bites out. He groans above me as he watches himself enter me, and I relax, observing the play of emotions dance across his face before he looks up at me. “I knew you would feel sublime.”

My body warms and relaxes as he slides further inside, stretching me to fit him. My back arches off the bed at the tightness, and he stops, giving me a break to get used to the size as he captures my mouth in a kiss that makes my head swim. His big hands are everywhere, kneading my breasts and stroking my nipples. The feel of his skin against mine, his odd coldness has me wanting to feel more.

“Oh my god,” I pant out.

“God damned me long ago, and if you’re going to cry anyone’s name, it will be mine.” He reaches between us to play with my clit and rubs it lightly.

I dig my fingers into his shoulders when he sinks in deeper, his cock stretching me wide. “Oh fuck. It’s too much.” My body is full, filled to the max.

“Shhh.” His hand covers my mouth, and he pushes forward slightly. My sex burns with the stretch, and I breathe deeply through my nose. “Deep breath in again.”

I do as I’m told and suck in air before he pushes forward. My hips finally meet his and I am so full I can feel him in my sternum. I stare up at him wide-eyed as his body shakes, obviously trying to go easy on me.

Before I can ask if he is okay, he rolls his hips and I cry out as he surges forward again.

“My god, this cunt,” he rumbles out next to my ear.

Four hard, furious thrusts of his hips and pleasure splinters inside me. Oh my god. My fingers dive into his hair, and I pull his head to mine, kissing him. I suck lightly and my body seizes.

I can literally feel his cock harden even more inside me. How the fuck is it getting bigger?

The snarl on his face is gone, a wicked grin in its place, and I look up at him with wonder. One of his large hands latches onto my ass and my eyes fly wide open when he pulls out of me slightly before plunging back into my drenched pussy.

“Hell yes!” I cry out. He’s impossibly huge, but it hurts so good.

He lets me catch my breath before kissing me like he has all the time in the world, like I’m a rare vintage he wants to savor. His hands capture mine in his and he stares into my eyes. He stares so long it’s as if he can see inside my soul, and I’m caught up and overwhelmed quickly. Heart thundering in

my chest, my pulse races and I close my eyes, hiding from the sensations coursing through me. It's too much. He's too much.

“Aubrey.” My name leaves his lips like a prayer before his body begins to batter mine as he fucks me, thrusting himself home again and again.

My body seizes and my hips lift to meet his strokes, causing him to groan. *I can't*. Oh my god.

A millisecond later, stars explode behind my eyes as I orgasm again. My body seizes around his thick, pounding cock, clenching around him just as he heaves and goes rigid. I bite my lip in excitement, moaning when I feel his hot cum spurting inside me. His depthless brown eyes bore into mine, and the thick slashes of his brows pull down low as he growls.

Holy fucking god!

He thrusts again and again, his hips bucking against mine uncontrollably. I grab hold as he trembles, my eyes rolling into the back of my head as he fucks me, all while I breathe in his earthy, sweet scent. He finally goes still and groans before falling on me, making me giggle.

“That was spectacular,” he says, staring down at me with a soft look in his eyes, then brushes the hair from my brow and peppers kisses across my face and throat.

It's strange how sweet he is being. The soft kisses are completely at odds with how he was just murdering my pussy a moment ago, and it feels *nice*. Shit.

“I haven't come like that in forever.” My voice comes out wrong, as if I've been yelling for hours, and my limbs don't seem to be working right. I am well and thoroughly fucked.

I blush as he chuckles, yelping when he gathers me up in his arms to lift me toward the pillows.

“Thank you,” I croak, more satisfied than I have ever been in my life.

Feeling warmer and more content than I can ever remember, I close my eyes. He rolls, tucking me in next to him

protectively. My heart swells when he kisses me on the forehead, like I am precious. He makes me feel *precious*.

“Sleep now. You won’t get as much rest next time.” He bends to kiss me lightly on the nose. “Until then, I’ll tide myself over by inventing new ways to fuck your pussy.”

I can’t stop the blush that creeps over my face. I stare up into his eyes that practically smolder with fire, and his cock stirs against my thigh. How the hell do you even reply to that? I bite my lip, lost for words, but his sexy, arrogant mouth curves into a smile. *The jerk knows what he does.*

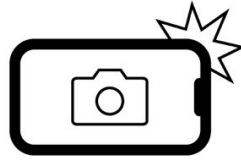
“Go to sleep,” he urges again, squeezing me in his arms.

I sigh and close my eyes when I feel him relax against me.

Best sex ever.

CHAPTER 13

AUBREY



I STARE DOWN WITH COMPLETE DISBELIEF. THAT . . . THAT IS just . . . my god. I scoot away, biting down on my lip to keep from whining like a little bitch. My poor, poor vagina. No wonder he didn't let me look at it. It's vaginal death in the form of a penis, so big I would cringe if I had to see it next to a ruler.

I wince and move to get out of the bed, barely breathing for fear I'll wake him—or *it*—up.

Attempting to avoid the aching between my legs, I awkwardly tiptoe to the bathroom, sore from the night before—which shall henceforth be known as The Dickening.

Oh my god, I am waddling. I whine before stretching my legs, performing a few yoga moves to stretch my hamstrings out. I pee like I came in here to do, and groan into my hand.

By the time I get back to the bed, I've worked out most of the soreness and bladder aches, but he still hasn't moved.

I look down at his peen with awe. The man is laying here, spread-eagled, his jackhammer-sized dick out for all to see and the thing has got to be in the Guinness World Records. No wonder it feels like my snatch was put through a meat grinder. Visions of the night before filter through my mind of him above me and my body lights up with arousal, even through the pain.

The orgasms were worth it. Orgasms. Good god, the orgasms. I lost count sometime in the night after he woke me up a third time. Each time he made me come on his fingers, his

mouth, and his cock—so much I have no clue who the real culprit is for how sore I am.

My lips curl into a satisfied smirk and I collapse on a pillow, curling up next to his chest to listen to his breathing.

My brows pull together. Wait. Is he even breathing?

On the rare times I actually shared a bed with Chad, he would snore like a freight train, and this guy, not even a peep. I look over at him again. Okay, not weird at all. His chest isn't moving.

It's not moving.

Oh my god, is he dead?! No way. No freaking way. I start to press a hand to his drool-worthy chest, my eyes scanning for any sign of movement. Still nothing.

Okay, what do I do? Call an ambulance! Panic begins to set in harder, and my heart gallops in my chest. What's the number for 911 in Romania? *They probably don't even have 911.*

What do I do? My hand shakes as I reach out and put my fingers to his nose. Instantly, I suck in a shaky breath and start to freak out. Oh my god, he's not breathing. He's dead. What the shit?! He's dead!

His cheek twitches. "What are you doing, Aubrey?"

"Ahhhh!" Vaginal trauma completely forgotten, I am out of the bed and shaking with anxiety the next moment. "What the fuck, Vlad?!"

He peeks open one eyelid and looks at me. "Come back to bed."

My heart thunders in my chest as I watch him rub the sleep from his eyes and yawn. "Hell no. You weren't breathing! I thought you were dead."

He rolls his eyes as he sits up against his black carved headboard that looks like it came out of a gothic romance novel.

“Obviously I am alive.” He holds out a hand to me while I stand trembling like a jackass. “Come here.”

I look down at the meat missile of death between his legs, my eyes widening as it twitches back to life. “No thanks, I think I’m good here. Now that you’re breathing again.”

He smiles and my stomach flip-flops, the pain between my legs doubling from the spark of arousal. “Dude. Stop doing that with your face, okay? That is so not cool.”

A frown spreads across his forehead. *How are eyebrows hot, for fuck’s sake?*

“I was hoping to wake you for breakfast,” he says, his gaze raking over me with a wicked glint, and I can’t help but go warm. It’s nice when a man finds you beautiful, but that thing . . .

“If you think we are doing anything with *that* today”—I wave my hand at his oversized genitals—“you have another thing coming. Definitely not before a hot shower.”

He leans forward and pulls me into his arms. I let him, sagging against the cool skin of his chest and breathing in the spicy scent that’s just him. He kisses the top of my head and I beam a smile. This isn’t so bad, so long as I don’t move.

His hands rub soft circles up and down my arms. “I suppose I can allow you a shower.”

I snuggle into him, ignoring how we’re both naked and the fact that his peen is hardening beneath my thigh. “You for real weren’t breathing, though. Are you okay?”

“Have a listen.”

I push my ear to his chest and sigh in relief when I hear his heartbeat.

Tilting my head back, I stare up at him and smile, then push away from him, needing space. “Weird. I’m sorry I freaked out, but you were totally sleeping like the dead.”

He wraps his arms around me again. “Do I look dead to you now?”

Shifting around, I look down and blink like a damn owl as my gaze zeros back in on his cock. “Nope,” I say, popping the P. It’s bigger than my wrist, with thick veins and a large mushroom head. “But keep that thing away from me or you will be.”

He laughs and puts a hand over his chest. “You wound me.”

“Ha, you wanna talk about wounds? I can hardly walk,” I scoff.

He catches my hand in his and kisses my palm. I scowl grumpily at him. He kisses the inside of my wrist and my will to resist starts to melt.

“Stop that. Until I get a hot shower, touché pas mon chat.” I snatch my hand back and push him away as he sits up.

He laughs, his head tilting back as he does, and I can’t help but admire how handsome he is. “Parlez vous Français?”

“Non. I just know how to say, ‘Don’t touch my cat.’” I grin when he shakes his head, his cheeks crinkling with humor. “What?”

A slow smile spreads across his kissable lips as he falls backward on the bed and puts his hands behind his head. “You are . . . something I have never encountered before.”

“Pffft. Well, I hope that’s a good thing,” I volley back at him, before snatching the bedsheet to my chest. Next thing I know, I’m hauled up against a hard, bare chest.

His cock grazes my hip as he turns me, concern pinching his brows. “I will not apologize for our love making last night—”

“Love making?” My heart flips. We are practically strangers. Is he serious?

His eyes darken and a muscle ticks in his jaw. “Yes, woman, did I stutter?” He lets me go and gets out of bed before jerking his jeans on. He turns toward the door. “I will go see about some pain killers for you.”

“Awww, that’s so sweet of you.”

He snickers. “No, it isn’t. I plan on fucking you again tonight, and we, my dear, are taking the grand tour of the castle today. I don’t need you limping around like a weakling.”

“You cannot be serious,” I say, my jaw dropping, ignoring the little thrill that goes up my spine.

“On the contrary, my darling, I take the welfare of you and your pussy quite seriously,” he says, just before the door closes on his way out.

“Wow.” I head back to bed, unable to keep a smile from my face. *Meet Prince Charming everyone.* Except Prince Charming is a dick.

A few minutes later, I whine dramatically when he keeps insisting on taking care of me. I suppose I should be more grateful, but it really is embarrassing. “This is humiliating.” I glance at his unbuttoned white shirt, at his drool-worthy chest. Nope, not doing it, look away.

I have never been this sore in my life. Muscles are hurting in places I didn’t know existed, and here I thought this shit only happens in romance novels with Duskwalkers or blue aliens that have dicks down to their knees.

“Aubrey, so help me,” he growls, and the sound makes my nipples tighten in response.

My insides feel like they’ve been pulverized, but somehow, he still makes me want more. His tone is gruff as usual, but the way he rubs soft circles on my back, like he’s been doing for the last hour, gives him away. My closet softie.

My stomach flips—he’s not *my* anything.

“Open your legs.”

“Fine.” Doing as he asks, I shake my head, wondering how it is that I am currently living in a fairytale castle, with a sex god between my legs, applying a warm cloth to my snatch.

“What would you like to do today?”

I stare up at the ceiling and sigh. “Cuddle?” The one dreaded word every man will run from, but he asked. I’m done

with telling men what I think they want to hear, and I really could use a cuddle.

He kisses my forehead and there goes my heart. “Very well, cuddling it shall be, but you will eat soon. It’s almost lunchtime.”

I’m surprised he agreed to it!

I prop myself up on my elbows to look out the window, but the curtains block out all light. *Wait, what?*

“Lunch? What time is it?” I move the blankets around, looking for my phone, but don’t see it anywhere. *I know I didn’t see it in the bathroom, so I thought I brought it with me to the bed.*

“It’s a little past noon.”

I start lifting pillows in my desperate search. “Have you seen my phone?”

“So beautiful.”

Huh?

Words cannot describe how he stares at my vagina. His eyes smolder and my body begins to melt under his gaze. My clit pulses, standing up at attention, and I am again wowed that I want more after so much the night before.

I wiggle my hips and he grins, his expression reminding me of the big shark from *Finding Nemo*. My stomach dips and butterflies erupt. *Focus, woman! Get your mind off how good it is.* Dick later.

“It kept making this incessant buzzing sound, so I turned it off for you,” Vlad murmurs.

The grin melts from my face and my heart seizes in my chest. “You did what?”

I didn’t realize it was turned off! I should have looked for it, but the whole “I think he’s dead” thing really messed up my morning.

My palm slaps over my face. *Shit! Bernadette is going to kill me.* She made me swear before I left I would check in

every night, and I meant to after I took a bath.

The blanket falls over my lap and I scramble to get out of the bed. “Where is it?”

Vlad’s eyes darken, but he sighs. “On the dresser.”

I grab the sheet to cover myself and race to it. I snatch it up and turn it on, anxiety rolling through me in a wave. I haven’t had my phone turned off for more than an hour in years.

“You act as if the world will end if you’re not attached to that device.”

My gaze follows his voice. Far across the room, he’s sitting in a chair with his chin in his hand, his elbow propped on the arm rest. My god he is beautiful. Wait. *How did I not see him move?*

Pulling the sheet tighter to me, I walk over and sit in the chair across from him.

“My friend Bernadette, we have this thing where I’m supposed to check in every night. I didn’t get to last night because I was busy . . . doing other things.”

“Ahh, I see. Speak with your friend, then.” His eyes dance with amusement and he scans them over me, his gaze practically smoldering with heat. Then he pushes to his feet, and my mouth goes dry at the sight of him shirtless. I startle the next moment, surprised when he leans down to cup my cheek. “Aubrey?”

“Hmm?” I ask, unable to form words.

I gulp when his gaze narrows and his expression hardens, as if enraged. “Put on some clothes before I fucking eat you.”

Warmth pools in my middle at his words, and I bite my lip. He kisses my nose and I sit back, dumbfounded. My mouth is open like an idiot as I watch him walk to the door, my skin flushing when he turns and winks at me on the way out. *My god. I am in danger.*

“What happened to cuddling?” I shout out. “I might be feeling better.”

I hear him chuckle from the hallway and I grin, biting my lip.

Best vacation ever.

CHAPTER 14

VLAD



“I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU,” DOYLE SAYS, PACING THE CARPET of the study as if he is a perturbed parent and I’m a juvenile in need of a lecture.

I glance around the room, my gaze landing on the deep walnut furniture, most of which is the oldest in the castle—if anyone ever cared to look. Even the seat before me is medieval; the carvings in the woodwork and the inlaid metal make it one of my favorites.

“There were things we needed to discuss last night, yet you chose to go play with Aubrey.”

Doyle’s continued interruptions are becoming a thorn in my backside and getting increasingly annoying. He stopped me on my way to collecting her foodstuffs from the pantry, insisting there are things we should discuss, and now I wish he would get on with it. Aubrey has to be sore from how I kept her busy for most of the night, and he is hindering me from returning to her to continue my aftercare plans. Although, he does seem more agitated than usual.

Doyle walks toward the arched window and pulls back a curtain, causing a shaft of sunlight to hit my forearm and I hiss in reproach, yanking it back. “Stop it, asshole. That hurts.”

“Serves you right, you dick,” he says haughtily, throwing his arms over his chest which seems to have grown overnight.

“For fuck’s sake, I haven’t put on any sunscreen yet,” I grumble, waving my arm as it heals. “And why do you look like you’re about to tear out of your shirt?”

“Sorry,” he mumbles in response, his size diminishing to his normal state as he resumes pacing like a caged tiger. *How strange.*

I arch a brow at him before settling into my chair, annoyed but amused by the hostility coming off him in waves. It must be that woman. *Oh, how the tables have turned, old friend.*

“The things I needed to do to Aubrey were much more enjoyable than what we need to discuss, I assure you,” I tell him. And will be again if he will leave me be.

“Be serious, Vlad,” he says, concern coloring his expression, and his mouth is in a hard, thin line, so unlike his usual affable self.

I wave my hand back and forth in front of my nose. “Who are you and what have you done with Doyle?”

Wolfish fangs drop down, far too large for his mouth, as his eyes begin to glow a bright yellow and fur spreads along his temples and cheeks. His face turns feral as rage explodes across his expression.

“This is important, and if you cannot listen for five minutes, well, I guess you’ll get what’s coming to you.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Doyle sighs loudly, and I watch the anger melt away, leaving only tiredness and concern. “It means that we have more guests on the way, and you need to control yourself with her.”

My body stiffens and I lose the calm that had washed over me the night before. *He dares to reprimand me?* “Control myself or what?”

He clenches his teeth and his nostrils flare.

“Please, Doyle, tell me. Control myself or fucking what? I found you in a ditch in shithole London three hundred years ago. You were uncontrollable and lost, and now you have the nerve to tell me to control myself?” It has been so long since anyone had the temerity to question me, and that he would

dare at all has my hackles raised with the need to dominate him into submission.

The blood roars in my veins, and I realize that at some point my fangs have made an appearance. Silence and tension thicken the air.

“You forget yourself,” I mutter coldly.

He shakes his head. “No, Vlad, I am only trying to do what I have always done—protect you.”

“I don’t need your fucking protection. Our friendship means much to me, but do not forget to whom you are speaking. I haven’t lost control in half a millennium, and I don’t intend to anytime soon.”

“If she finds out what you are, we will be done for, which is why I say sample the local women. You say you can’t touch her mind. I’m not questioning your control so much as I am reminding you of what is at stake. Maybe if worse comes to worst, Hyde may have a solution.” His tone is beseeching as his hands squeeze the back of the centuries-old chair.

My stomach immediately rolls with nausea and rage at the thought of anyone other than me daring to touch her.

“No one is to touch Aubrey. Especially not that manwhore Jekyll.” I let the image of him with his filthy hands on Aubrey take form and a bloodred haze fills my eyes. I would rip them apart so not even Frankenstein’s maker could put them back together. “You will leave her out of this.”

“She has bewitched you,” he says, moving to sit in front of me.

Utterly. My chest swells at the memory of her cries of pleasure, her sighs, and even the enchanting way she laughs. I am besotted and don’t even understand how.

I sigh loudly and run my fingers through my hair in frustration. “Yes, I am bewitched. I want her as I have wanted no other.”

Doyle’s brows raise in shock. “What?”

My lips flatten as I look away. “I fell asleep.”

I hear his gasp and his phone, that seems to always be in his hand these days, falls with a clatter onto the table. “Come again?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t hear her when she woke up this morning because I was in such a deep rest.”

It has been years since I have fallen asleep naturally, so long that I cannot remember if I have ever trusted anyone enough to allow myself to sleep for more than minutes at a time.

My gaze darts back to Doyle, and it’s comical the way his eyes are almost bugging out of his head. I nod and fall back into my chair wearily. “No one can touch her, Doyle.”

The rattle of bones pulling across the stone steps in the opposite room causes me to groan inwardly.

“Hilda, would you be so kind as to clean the caskets this week? And keep out of sight,” I bite out, my tone disallowing any argument.

Hilda is so old and decrepit that she can no longer speak, but somehow when she wants, she can communicate. Although she rarely speaks to Doyle. The poor dear only wants to clean and watch soap operas.

He frowns and nods. “Any guest sees your face and there will be widespread panic—no offense, Hilda.”

Her bones fold over themselves as she bows. “Annnngnnn”

“Yes, I know. But we have guests now and you cannot be seen in the study. Just go clean something.”

She grumbles, but obeys, and Doyle and I share a look. We won’t be able to keep this up if she is seen. *You can explain away many things, but a walking corpse of bones would be impossible.*

Doyle eyes me skeptically, his expression full of suspicion. “So you,” he says, jabbing a finger at my person, “who hasn’t slept for longer than an hour or two for years now—*years*—are all the sudden falling asleep beside a human you’ve known

for the span of two days?” He opens his palm in emphasis of how illogical it sounds.

“She thought I was dead.”

Doyle pales and starts pacing. “That is unfortunate.”

“Sit down. It’s fine. I forced my heart to beat long enough to satisfy her. I can handle Aubrey. Tell me about these pesky guests.”

He grins and the smile on his face crinkles the corners of his eyes. It’s cheeky and I don’t trust it. “I really do love her cosplay idea.”

That doesn’t bode well. “What did you do *now*?”

He sits down and rubs his hands together in excitement. “It’s going to be brilliant. There are thousands of people who are interested in an immersive Dracula experience. The feedback is substantial. My phone has been popping off all night, but I figured as it was, we should only allow a couple of guests. Sort of a trial run.”

“A *trial run*? Are you out of your fucking mind?”

Doyle nods. “It’s perfect, really. All you have to do is act surly and arrogant, and they will adore you.”

“Piss off.”

He waves toward me flamboyantly. “See? You’re a natural.”

I detest the entire idea with all my being, but I can’t argue the truth of it. He’s right.

I rub my temples, frustration welling up within me.

“It was your lover’s idea, after all, and I’m sure she will be excited. If we can sell this, it will be plain sailing. We still need the cooks, maids, gardeners . . . and yeah, an army of staff, basically. I’ve already interviewed someone I like for the hotel manager’s position. You know, we could check in the village and see if—”

“Please, for the love of god, stop talking. I can literally feel myself losing the will to live.”

Doyle chuckles, knowing if he had his way about it, we would have gotten a housekeeper—a living one, at least—long ago. But I'd wanted nothing and no one to interrupt my solitude.

“For that, you'd have to be alive first. Besides, the place could use a little life in it. We need housemaids and you know it. Hilda hardly counts, since she can't leave the catacombs.”

“I don't want anyone else in the castle. But I suppose you have a point.”

He shakes his head. “Why don't you listen? I usually have points, and several of them.”

“You have three months to convince me. That was the deal, and not a moment longer. The thought of more guests is making my skin crawl already, and I refuse to play a part in this farce. You're on your own.”

He gets up and walks to the door with a spring in his step. “Is this you talking? Or the stick in your ass?”

“Very funny.”

“By the way, Casanova, the cook will be here sometime late tonight, and the guests should be arriving tomorrow morning. The agency said that is as quick as they are able to get someone here.”

“I suppose that'll be fine. I plan on showing Aubrey around today. We'll have a picnic indoors or something, maybe eat in the village.”

“God help us all. Vlad Tepesh sleeps and goes on picnics.” He gives me a last look, one that's serious. “Just be careful what happened to Frank doesn't happen to you.”

“I will spend a week in the company of a fascinating woman and then she will return home. It's a temporary thing.” *Temporary*. The thought of her leaving makes my mood sour instantly, and the expression on his face says he knows it as well as I do.

He scoffs. “Mmhm.”

Aubrey

“OKAY, NOW MOVE TO THE LEFT,” I say.

My winter boots crunch in the snow as I try to get the right angle, and I’m thankful my new scarf is helping to keep me warm, but I should have grabbed some gloves.

Vlad looks entirely disgruntled by the whole thing but obeys, and the smile that’s been plastered on my face all morning stretches some more. I snap a picture, squealing on the inside at how great this is going to look on my Insta. Vlad is sex personified, and the snowy landscape behind him sets off the whole vibe.

His black pea coat is dusted with snowflakes, his hair ruffling with the wind, and he looks like something out of a men’s magazine in winter. After last night he seems ... calmer now somehow. I guess good sex after going without for a while will do that.

“Good. Now smile!” I tell him, grinning like a loon.

His lip curls in disgust and he looks at me like I asked him to fight off a wave of spiders. “No.”

“One teensy little smile?” He bares his teeth and I giggle. I lower my phone and eye him for a moment. “Yesterday you acted like you’d rather do anything but this. What made you change your mind?”

“Normally, I would rather face a firing squad than to do something as frivolous as take photos.”

“Then why are you?”

His brown eyes flash in the sunlight. “Because you asked, and as much as I abhor smiling into the camera like a buffoon, who am I to object to a lady’s request? If you want photos of your time here, I am obliged to fulfill your every desire.”

His dark eyebrows lift and bounce dramatically. I laugh, the twinkle in his eyes telling me he knows exactly how he wants to fulfill me.

“Uh uh. None of that, mister.” That’s all I need—to fall back in his bed. With my luck, I’ll come out of it even more

dickmatized.

“What?” His expression is full of mischief and it’s clear he knows how cute he is, what he does to me. “It’s only because there are several other interesting things we could be doing.” He winks, and I laugh. “But I notice you take this sort of thing seriously.”

He holds out his hand to me and I take it, warmth spreading in my stomach at the contact. I bite my lip, wondering if this is a good time to explain how I just got out of a relationship and have no idea what I am doing.

How is this the same grumpy man from two days ago? The more I get to know him, the harder he is to resist—not that I can truly see anyone who finds men remotely attractive saying no to him, but he can be so sweet and affectionate. It’s making me want things I shouldn’t.

I shake my head at him, then we resume our walk across the gardens near the moat, and I tilt my head back, enjoying the crisp scent of winter on the wind. The hedgerows are covered with snow, and a pretty stone bench overlooking the water sits waiting for spring. God, it would be so beautiful to see in springtime.

“You know, the air here even smells different,” I point out, changing the subject.

“Hmm, I suppose it would. Every country I’ve visited has different smells.”

“Have you been to many countries?” I ask, shoving my other hand into my coat pocket to keep it warm.

He arches that brow and a tingle spreads through my body. “Why do you want to know?” he asks quietly.

Shaking myself inwardly, embarrassment floods. What has he got to be thinking? Probably not about a relationship so soon, and honestly, neither should I. *Get a grip, Aubrey*. It is becoming ridiculous how often I’m now arguing with myself. Maybe I should clear the air?

“Well, to get to know you, obviously. I know nothing about you other than you have an issue with nipples and like to

cook weird stuff.”

The shame is immediate and swift. I might as well add coward to my resumé at this point. My only excuse is the man is beautiful and fucks my vagina as if bringing me to orgasm is his day job. I refuse to acknowledge how my stomach swoons every time he looks at me.

He laughs, and the sound causes warmth to fill my chest. Dread quickly follows as I grapple with reality. *You are leaving in a week. This is a vacation fling, and it doesn't matter how good the sex is, you do not have the funds to stay—and you're leaving.* My thoughts circle and swirl. My reactions to him are too much, way too soon.

“I’ve been to several countries in my life. Some I detest, others I can somewhat find enjoyable.”

“Have you been to America?” I blurt. Smooth Aubrey, super smooth.

A pucker forms between his brows like it takes him a moment to think about what to say. “I have been to a place called Virginia and once to New Orleans.”

“Oh, I’ve always wanted to visit New Orleans and see the French Quarter. Mardi Gras looks like it would be amazing.”

“Hmm. Yes. It is a filthy place full of vagabonds and festering vessels of pestilence.”

I blink at that. “Wow, tell me how you really feel.” I laugh.

“Most countries, I’m sure, have nice places and others that aren’t so nice.”

“Yeah, I guess that is true. I’ve always wanted to see the world.” I shrug. “It’s what I would love to do most, really.”

“Do what exactly?”

“Show people new places like this, and let them see the world as I do. Lots of people never leave their hometowns or travel, and some want to know the best vacation spots. It’s why I have such a big following on Instagram.” I tug my phone from my pocket and unlock it for him.

“See? Here is when I visited Cancun. It was beautiful, and the villagers were so nice.”

He eyes the photo. “When was this?”

“A few years ago.” I shrug. “I went with some friends.”

“Right. So this is what you want to do here?” He gestures at the mountainside. “Take pictures and show everyone?”

“Yes. Show them my experiences, the people, the cute little villages, the castles. People love to visit places to find their secrets.”

“Hmm. Well then, I suppose that won’t hurt.” He waves his fingers. “Give me your phone.”

I hand it over and he holds it out toward me, his brows drawn down in concentration.

I watch on in puzzlement. “What are you doing?”

“Be quiet. I’m trying to take a picture.” He holds the phone out, aiming it at me with a concentrated expression.

I giggle and he snaps a photo. He looks down at the phone, staring intently at the picture he’s taken with a strange expression.

I walk backward and hold my arms out. “Take one now,” I say, beaming a smile at him.

He does, and I spin in circles, laughing as snowflakes land on my face. I spin faster and faster, smiling at the gray sky, before I’m suddenly in the air, picked up off the ground like I weigh nothing.

My thighs lock around his hips like they’re magnetized to his sex lines as he guides me down to his lips. I close my eyes, letting him pull me away from the moment, enjoying his taste. Three days with this man and he knows just how to catch my bottom lip to make my breath hitch in my throat.

When he sets me on my feet, I pull away. Exhilaration races through me, and I want to play more. Running toward the nearby woods, I look back and shout, “Catch me if you can!”

His eyes narrow, but he walks sedately, a slow grin pulling at his mouth.

I squeal in delight and run through the snowy trees, zigging and zagging to get away. I turn to look behind me and stumble. Firm hands wrap around my waist, but my palm meets the ground and something sharp grazes my skin.

“Ow!” I hiss out as Vlad pulls me up to standing.

“What did you—” He stops on the last word, his eyes fixed where blood has welled on my palm, and his face goes pale.

The scratch throbs painfully with how cold my hands are, and I suck in a breath as I make a fist and hold it against my chest. “I’m okay. It’s just a scratch.” I frown at his pale, hardened features. “Hey, are you okay?”

He pulls me closer, his expression full of concern. “Are *you* okay?” he asks, his tone gruff and deep. It’s even hoarse, like his breath is tight. “Foolish woman, where are your gloves?” he murmurs, the sound so low I can barely hear him.

“I’m fine. Just a small cut, I think.”

He opens my palm, and I wince when I look down at it.

“Vlad?” He’s still staring at my hand. His jaw ticks and his face turns stony. I swear his brown eyes flash a strange color.

Before I can ask him what’s wrong, his lips are on mine. A burst of sizzling desire heats my body, sending tingles down my spine. One touch and I want to bump his uglies so hard he forgets every woman before me.

I gasp when his tongue licks at the seam of my mouth.

“Aubrey,” he moans, his voice thick with emotion.

He pulls back, staring into my eyes, and my heart does a little pitter patter in my chest. *Oh no.*

I am very much afraid I could be falling for the grump, and it’s a heady mix of amazing and freaking terrifying.

CHAPTER 15

VLAD



I AM IRREVOCABLY FUCKED. AS I PRESS MY LIPS AGAINST THE soft skin of her throat, my instincts to bite, to tear into her flesh and drink her in, rear their ugly heads.

Pushing her back against the nearest tree, I kiss her hard, dueling my tongue with hers as she kisses with a passion that takes what little oxygen I can allow in my lungs.

The scent of her blood in the air is mouthwatering, but when the smell of her arousal registers, it almost brings me to my knees. I want to fuck and consume her at the same time, and it is taking every bit of my control to not act on the impulse.

Sliding my knee between her legs, I groan as she whimpers, rubbing herself against me like a cat. Just the feel of her in my arms is heady and exhilarating.

“Woman, you would test the control of a saint.” And she is definitely testing mine.

She arches against me, and her fingers pull at my hair tightly, causing me to growl low in my chest before bending my head to breathe deep at her neck. My fangs extend, her pulse throbs, and my vision turns to red. I squeeze my eyes shut, listening to her panting breaths. I focus on her smell, on how good she feels in my arms. My mind slows, concentrating on the air filling her lungs, on her heartbeat that I could never bear to stop. *I refuse to hurt her.*

“We should get back to the castle,” I say, when her fingers tighten around the back of my neck.

My control is barely hanging on by a thread. I want to lick, bite, sink my teeth into her—and never let her go. I have since the moment I first saw her, but *not* like this. I will not attack her like some beast in the forest.

“Do we have to?” she says, pouting cutely. “I was having fun, you know.”

Normally it would be no question whether I could control myself, even if she were bleeding out in the snow, and I hadn’t eaten from a human in more than half a century. But this is Aubrey.

“There are wolves in the area and you’re bleeding.” I hate the lie, but she is in more danger from me than wolves.

Her face pales, her brows scrunching together with worry. “Right. Yeah, I’m not up to fighting off wolves today.”

Or any day.

I pull her to me and lift her into a cradle in my arms. “No more tumbles, either,” I mumble, unable to force my limbs to let her go. The urge to protect her is overwhelming.

She lays her head on my shoulder, and the action floors me. This slip of a human is burrowing into my cold, undead heart.

I walk in silence, listening to her soft breaths. The feel of her in my arms makes me wish for a moment that I was human, wish that I could fuck her tight cunt right here in the snow like the monster I am, but not *bite* her. Her soft throat is too beckoning, and I want her too much. I can’t trust myself.

She does something to me I’ve not experienced in my long years on this earth, but thankfully the want to protect her overrides all else.

My control has never been tested this way, and it is agony to force myself away from her, unsure of what I may do to her, especially with her so willing in my arms. *She is astonishing.* And far too trusting for the likes of me.

After what seems like an hour, we finally reach the side door.

“Doyle will know where all the first aid is kept.” I set her on her feet in the foyer, intent on putting as much space between us as possible. I indicate to his large office doors. “Get your hand looked at. I’ll be up to your room in a moment.”

She nods. “Okay, I’ll see you in a bit.” Her expression is puzzled, and I flee as soon as her feet head in that direction.

My gut fills with disgust at myself for not thinking of something like this. She could have easily been hurt. Hollowness spreads within me at the thought, and my mind swirls with possibilities.

I belatedly wonder if Frank can come up with some concoction to keep me from wanting to bite her. The sunscreen seems to work effectively, so why not something that could prevent me from hurting her in the future? That would require me admitting this flaw I have with her, and that may make him ask questions. I will have to be cunning about it.

Breathing deeply when I enter my study, I pour a glass of scotch and knock it back as I wait. Doyle will come. I know he will.

Twenty minutes later, he finally steps into the room, looking concerned, and I can already tell what he’s thinking.

“You almost attacked her, didn’t you?” Doyle sighs and reaches for the decanter himself. “Humans bleed too easily, and you haven’t fed in decades. If you would just stay away from her . . .”

“Have you smelled her?” I ask, wondering if she calls to him the way she does me, the way I cannot smell or think of anything but her.

I watch him as he tilts his head to the side and shrugs. *The bastard has*. I growl menacingly and he flinches. As well he should. *She is mine*.

“What am I supposed to do, plug my nose?” He wrinkles it as the scotch pours into his glass. “You two have the entire castle full of pheromones.”

I roll my eyes in distaste, my fury subsiding. “Hmmp. She was hurt and all I could do was stand there like an idiot before falling on her like some sex-crazed buck in a rut. I should have more control.”

He frowns over his glass when he lifts it to his mouth. “I think you’re being a bit hard on yourself, really. I mean, as long as she was, well, you know.”

I lower my own glass. “What?”

“From what I can smell, she wants you just as much, but I think her emotions are a bit all over the place. She’s just scared, Vlad. You forget what time is so quickly because you have so much of it. You’ve known the girl three days.”

“I know.”

“Give her time. She’s fine, it was just a scratch, hardly bleeding, but as cold as her hands were, I’m sure it didn’t feel nice.” He stops to take a sip of his drink before setting it on the table. “I sent her to her room with some milk and cookies. Maybe I should send wine?”

“I want to speak with Frank soon. Perhaps he has some ideas on how I can keep my urges at bay in such circumstances. And no, don’t get her drunk, for fuck’s sake. I’m barely hanging on to my sanity.”

The thought of her lush and willing has my blood boiling, but something about alcohol loosens the inhibitions in humans, and I want her to be aware every time I take her. I want her to know who it is inside her, fucking her perfect heat and filling her until she shatters. Watching her as she breaks apart.

“With Jekyll at his disposal, I’m sure they can come up with something to keep the guests safe while here,” Doyle says, interrupting my thoughts. “We just have to be careful with what we tell them. They don’t know about the hotel yet.”

I eye him a moment, my thoughts snagging on the words “guests” and “hotel.” The notion that I’m not so concerned with anyone else crosses my mind. “Reach out and let me know what they say. I’m willing to try if it will keep our *guests* safe.”

“What if we tell her you’re indisposed? I can keep her busy with things around the castle.”

I growl, the sound reverberating out of my chest, and my lips curl into a snarl. “You will not touch her.”

His eyebrows raise. “Should I be worried about how possessive you’re acting right now? Do you hear yourself? Ignoring the fact that you would question my honor, have you looked in the mirror lately?”

“No?”

“You might need to eat again,” he says, eyeing my face oddly, then nods. “At the very least, eat again. You’re sweating.”

“This is all a side effect, most likely from my body regenerating too quickly—or the sunscreen. It must be the sunscreen,” I mumble to myself. It has been almost a hundred years, after all.

“Jekyll wouldn’t allow anyone to alter the sunscreen,” Doyle offers, then sighs heavily, setting his glass onto the table before pulling the lapels of the coat he insists on wearing. “Vlad, just make sure you’re not making the same mistake as you did with Angelique.”

“Aubrey is nothing like Angelique. That woman was a viper in sheep’s clothing.”

“Yes, well here you are, with the same circumstances, actually. You chasing a woman and being all chivalrous.”

“The circumstances aren’t remotely similar. Angelique knew what I was from the start and was hell-bent on becoming a vampire. And we all know how that turned out,” I say, and Doyle shudders, his lips flattening. “It’s a moot point—she’s nothing like her.”

“No, I can’t say she is,” he agrees.

Angelique paid a small fortune to a perfumer to create a concoction made with a rare flower to seduce me, and once she realized I would never turn her, took it badly, to say the least. Crazy, odious woman.

I go still when I feel a slight vibration in my pocket. A notification flashes on my screen that Aubrey has posted a photo. A smile pulls at my mouth at the sight of her in the snow, and a sense of pride washes over me that she would post a picture *I* took.

I read the first comment, and rage envelops me. My fangs lengthen and my eyes go red.

“Vlad? What’s wrong?”

I grip my phone in my hand tightly before tossing it to him in case I break it.

He looks down at the phone and frowns. “Who is Chad?”

“A cad who is currently erasing his own timeline on this earth.”

“Oh my. ‘I miss you, please call me’?”

I will rip his heart out through his asshole and show it to him. “Find his location for me.”

“You cannot be serious,” he says, his eyebrows folding inward and his nose crinkling.

“Swift and imminent death would be too good for him.”

He barks out a short laugh. “Hate to burst your bubble, oh prince of darkness, but you can’t go around killing people anymore, I’m afraid. Besides, there’s no way you could get on a plane. Can you imagine if someone got a paper cut?”

I blanch. “Don’t be ridiculous.” I have better control than that.

“From the looks of it, it’s not as ridiculous as it seems. Plus, is one human really enough reason to leave the country?”

He’s right. *I wonder if I could get the idiot to come here and then eat him.*

“Personally, I think you should be focusing on other things, such as what we are going to do once all the guests are here. We should try to ensure they enjoy themselves.”

“How the hell should I know what humans enjoy? Find something to occupy them. We’re after their money, not here to act out some farce like circus performers.”

He walks toward the door to leave. “Hmm. I’ll just ask Aubrey then. Ciao.”

I sigh, rubbing my hands down my face. “Fine. I’ll think about it. Perhaps Aubrey will come up with something that’s appropriate.”

He points a finger at me. “Hahaha! You are so in over your head.”

“Yes, well, it’s not as if you’re helping matters.” I raise my fist and give him the middle finger.

“On the contrary.” He snickers. “That’s all I ever do.”

“Cheeky asshole.”

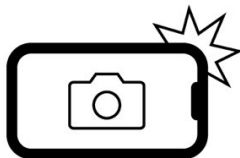
“Stubborn twat,” he says as a parting shot, before closing the door behind him.

Exhaustion rolls over me. The incessant need to drink pounds at my skull. I haven’t felt this hungry in ages—and it is beginning to take its toll.

I better find some of those blasted blood bags before I do something idiotic, like track her down and take my fill.

CHAPTER 16

AUBREY



“BURNIE, CHECK THIS OUT.”

Her face comes back into view on the screen, and she looks at me over her blue-rimmed glasses. “What’s up?”

I flip the camera, showing her what I see.

“Oh wow,” she breathes over the phone.

“Right? Crazy, huh?!”

I’ve been exploring the castle for about an hour now, avoiding Vlad, or at least giving myself some time away to think, but I keep running into him some way or another. I look back up at the portrait, at the grumpy, stern look on the man’s face—Vlad’s face. Well, kind of. He’s wearing an ugly hat, looks gaunt, and has a mustache.

“Reverse image search says that guy is Vlad Tepesh the Impaler, inspiration for Dracula. Well, his ancestor is still out there impaling women, isn’t he? Ohhh, what if you’re banging a vampire?!”

Shaking my head, I flip the camera back. “Bernadette, you are a child.”

Her bright-red curls—the same that helped the name Burnie stick—bounce as she does the same in her seat, her pale round cheeks reddening with laughter. She really is as fiery as her hair.

“Like you aren’t thinking it. Vampires are hot. I mean, look at him, for fuck’s sake. I’d bang his granddaddy too. I vant

to zuk your cock, blah blah blah.” Pretty green eyes cross on the last blah, her pierced tongue lolling from her mouth, and I snort.

“I feel like the amount of times I’ve asked myself why I still talk to you grows daily.”

She waves a hand dismissively. “You wouldn’t know what to do without me. Anyway, fun fact—apparently Vlad the Impaler liked to put heads on spikes in his front yard, and your new man . . . I mean, he really does look like him, huh?”

I grin at the awe in her voice. “Trust me. This one is not a vamp. I practically bled all over him, and all he did was hump me into the ground.”

She goes quiet on the other end before squealing, “Yassssssss! Wait, does his peen glitter?”

“Bahahahahaha! Of course you’re not worried about me bleeding. I was running, fell down and cut myself, and all you care about is if the peen glitters in the sun.”

“What did I tell you about running?”

I stare at her deadpan. “Only that you never do it.”

She looks sheepish for a moment before shrugging. “Okay, that’s fair. So you fell and then what?” She leans into the camera, her eyebrows wiggling suggestively.

I sigh. “No, he didn’t do me right there in the dirt. But it was close. He did carry me back to the castle, like out of a freaking fairytale.”

“Awwwww.” Her emerald eyes sparkle. “You really like him, huh?”

“I do, but it’s crazy here, you know? It’s not just Vlad—it’s Doyle, his friend. Then there’s the insane castle and the quaint little village. It’s just the whole vibe here is different from anywhere I’ve ever been.”

She perks up at the thought of more fine man meat. “Wait, who’s Doyle?”

I knew that would get her attention and I grin. “He’s sort of like the butler, the one with the whole Gomez Addams vibe.”

“So the servant dude is as hot as this guy?” She nods as if impressed. “Sounds like a good time to make a man sandwich. Side note, you haven’t mentioned the dipshit once, so I love Vlad already.”

“Honestly, they could probably sell sin to nuns. Next time, you and Clara should come.”

“Uh, no. Definitely not. I’m trying to get away from my family, not closer.”

A pillow enters the left of my screen and smacks her against the face, making me laugh. She comes back into view while fixing her glasses.

“See? This is why we can’t have nice things,” Bernadette says. “Alright. Call me later.”

We hang up and I look around a bit longer, tensing when a strange scraping sound echoes. I pull my earbuds out, shoving them into my pocket to listen.

“Hello?”

“There you are.”

I whirl around, inhaling my scream. “Ugh, I am sick of you guys creeping up on me.”

Doyle raises a brow and looks down the hall over my shoulder. “The east wing is closed to guests. I know Vlad told you, so I was just wondering . . .”

My gaze follows his, and I notice it is actually dimly lit now that I think about it. It first drew my curiosity because it’s not renovated. “This is the east wing?”

He turns back the way I came, obviously wanting me to follow. “Yes, it is. These are old family heirlooms that Vlad wants to keep away from prying eyes.”

“Oh, that’s my bad. I just wanted to do some exploring and found this portrait that looks exactly like Vlad.”

He squints down at me. “A portrait?”

I look back in the direction of the painting of Vlad; it really does look just like him, minus the weird pointy mustache. “Crazy genes, huh?”

“Yes.” His tone is strained, as if the word is hard to swallow.

“So he’s named after Vlad Tepesh?” I lean forward so I can gauge his reactions. “Sorry, I was on the phone with my friend when I saw it and she searched him up.”

He clears his throat and places his hands behind his back as we walk. “Yes, that’s Vlad Tepesh, Vlad’s namesake.”

I lean back and look around, our feet echoing in the stone hallway. “It must be so cool to have that kind of history. Have you guys lived here long? I can’t believe I haven’t asked before.”

“Yeah. The family has owned it for forever, and the local villagers are really superstitious, which is why he didn’t want guests in this area. It’s somewhat of a sore spot for him,” he says, giving me the side-eye.

I put my hands behind my back as well, acting casual as a coy grin curls my lips. “Totally get it. I won’t say a thing.”

His mouth pulls into a half smile as he nods. “Good. More visitors will be here in the morning. I’ll take you back to your room.”

My face drops. “Oh, I think I want to explore some more.” When his lips pull inwards, like he wants to dissuade me, I quickly throw my hands up. “*Not* the east wing—promise.”

He eyes me a moment, but nods again. “Of course.”

“By the way, I’m sure you would make a killing if more people knew this castle was from *the* Dracula, you know?”

Doyle chuckles, before running his fingers through his hair. “Vlad isn’t the most open person in the world, meaning he wants to keep things on the down-low.”

“I don’t know if I believe that. If he really wanted to keep it a secret, would he have even set up the hotel? Oh my gosh, and just think, you could totally use the name Hotel Dracula.”

Folding his arms over his chest, he cups the end of his strong chin, like he hasn't thought of that. "I like it. However, Aubrey, I wouldn't go down the east wing on your own again. If he wants to share that part of the castle, he will, but don't go again without one of us. There's so much old war stuff and things you could get hurt on."

"Right, okay." I wring my wrists behind my back, an embarrassed blush rising to my cheeks. "Thank you so much. You know, for the Band-Aid and being a good friend to Vlad. You're a good guy, Doyle."

We turn a corner, coming away from the forbidden wing and to the staircase that leads to the foyer.

"It's been a pleasure." He bows, smiling at me, before waving down the stairs. "Milk and cookies are ready and waiting in the kitchen, if you would like some. The chef should be here this evening, but if they're delayed, we will make do. Any requests?"

I shrug. "Hmm, no, I'm easy. Surprise me. Just so long as it isn't black pudding, I'll be fine."

A grin pulls at his mouth, and he walks away, leaving me on my own again. All good, I'll have milk and cookies and check out what's happening in the world.

I make my way to the kitchen, and I'm instantly charmed, so I take a picture.

"How cute and cozy is this?!" I squeal, looking around.

The dining area looks almost too modern for the castle, but the kitchen is perfect and feels like I've partially gone back in time. The recently renovated stove is across from an old brick one that is obviously centuries old, and there's a huge window overlooking a courtyard I haven't seen before. Iron pots and pans hang above a massive island counter in the middle and most of the walls—save one painted white—are exposed brick.

"I love it here."

I grab up my plate of cookies and make my way to the small table near the window, watching the snow fall outside.

The courtyard is covered in a thick layer of it, but I can see a short hedgerow, marble statues, and lots of tiny trees. It's really coming down out there—I hope the guests make it okay. I can't imagine the tiny airport being open with weather like this.

My phone vibrates, and an unknown number flashes across the screen. I swipe to pick it up.

Shoving a cookie in my mouth, I place it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Don't hang up.” The voice instantly has my vagina drying out and bile rising.

“Chad, what the hell do you want?” I bite out, ready to end the call.

“Aubrey, look I fucked up, okay? I'm man enough to admit that. I've given you plenty of space to get over being mad, but it's time to come back to the real world. Okay, babe? Come home and we can get this all settled. It'll be like it never happened.”

I scoff at the sheer audacity of this dipshit. “Do you even hear yourself when you talk? You were fucking other people, or did you forget?”

“No, I didn't forget, and I'm trying to tell you I love you. It was a mistake, and it won't happen again, okay? I just got so lonely because you never have time for me, and yeah, these things just happen sometimes.”

I place my elbow on the table, and stab my thumb and fingers into my closed eyes.

“No, Chad, they don't just happen. That's absolute bullshit and you know it.” I pull my rage-shaking hand away, wishing my bubbling tears would evaporate. “I told you. I told you I would never be my mother and here we are. You can't talk yourself out of this one. It is over, and I swear to god, if I could punch you through this phone, I totally would.”

My breath catches in my throat when Vlad is suddenly in front of me, a look of fury on his face as he stares down at my

phone in disgust. *Where did he come from?* And so suddenly, like he materialized from thin air.

I open my mouth to speak, but he puts his fingers to my lips, silencing me.

He rolls up the sleeves of his white dress shirt and arches a brow before gesturing for me to hand him the phone. Chad's voice gets louder, like he's shouting, his voice whiny and annoying. I hand it over.

Vlad carefully puts the phone on the table and turns on the speaker, allowing Chad's voice to fill the kitchen. I'm curious about what he's going to do, and I bite my lip, kind of excited.

"You never listen! If you would just listen and pay attention, babe, we could travel the world together just like you always wanted. If anything, this is your fault, but I promise if you'll give me the time, we can fix this. It'll be like it never happened."

Vlad cups my cheek before pulling me to my feet and picking me up to set me on the table. I cry out as buttons scatter from my shirt when he pulls it apart, and his eyes feast on my chest, making my skin heat with his gaze.

His hand circles my throat, and I watch his eyes darken before his mouth is on mine. Chad is still talking away on the phone, but his voice fades into the background as I lose myself in Vlad's kiss. I moan into his mouth and chills skitter up my spine. My body ignites and my skin tingles as his tongue dominates mine.

This isn't what I had in mind, but I throw my hands around his neck, brushing my tongue against his in welcome.

His hand squeezes my neck lightly, holding me in place as he breaks the kiss and steps back. He stares at me, his eyes darkening before he pulls me to my feet long enough to take my pants off, and my face goes warm for a different reason this time. He plants my ass back down and palms my thighs apart, and my pussy throbs.

"Hello?" Chad's voice crackles through. "Are you there?"

Vlad nods, indicating for me to answer. His jaw is clenched, and he stares at the phone as if he can melt it like Superman if he tries hard enough.

“Yes, I’m here.” My voice comes out breathy and light.

Oh my gosh, am I really about to do this? Yet the idea of Chad tasting even a second of what I went through has me burning for more, and the fact that Vlad instigated it—as if he figured it out all on his own and wants to make Chad pay just as much as I did—makes my stomach and pussy flutter.

“Jesus, well say something. This is part of the problem. You never contribute to the conversation, Aubrey. It’s like you never listen. But I’m willing to overlook your faults if that means we can move past this. Your parents want this. I want this.”

“Shall I make you come, Aubrey?” Vlad asks firmly, husky and rough, as he peppers kisses down my throat.

My eyes turn into saucers. Oh my god, *no he did not*. Heat climbs up my chest and I just know my cheeks are flaming. I snort a giggle, but Vlad pulls back to stare down at me with that hungry look on his face.

“Aubrey? Hello? Who was that?”

I let out a squeak when Vlad’s fingers graze my clit and rub between my legs. An involuntary whimper climbs out of my throat, and I gasp.

“Your pussy is so wet for me. How about I show him exactly what he could never give you, hmm?”

His fingers dip inside me and I moan. He grips my throat again and all thought of embarrassment flees—*poof*—into thin air. He pushes until I’m leaning back on my elbows and his other hand squeezes my inner thigh before brushing against my pussy.

I try to close my legs on instinct and his hand slaps against my thigh roughly, causing me to gasp in shock. He kneads one, soothing my muscles with his hands.

“Keep them there, and do not move. Do you understand?”

Chad's voice sounds irate over the phone, but Vlad looks at me with lust in his eyes, a feral grin on his face.

Then Vlad leans toward the speaker. "How about you stop yelling for a moment, *Charles*, and have a listen."

On the last word, his fingers plunge inside me.

I cry out at the intrusion as he thrusts his fingers rapidly, forcing me toward climax *fast*.

"Oh fuck!" I yell, my head falling back and my hair dancing on the table.

"That's right, love. You're going to come for me, aren't you? Maybe then he will understand who you belong to, hmm? God, look at you. This slick, wet pussy is all mine, isn't it?"

I whimper and my eyes roll into the back of my head as his thumb skates across my clit.

"Perhaps we should take a picture now? Show your ex-lover how I can make your eyes glaze over. How you mewl like a kitten in my arms."

I shriek, "Oh god, yes!"

His fingers move faster and faster, and with each swipe against my G-spot, my gasps get louder and louder. I delve my fingers into his hair and pull him down to me, kissing him with all the passion thundering in my veins. I lose myself to sensation, the hand around my throat keeping me grounded, while my body feels like it's trying to fly away toward heaven.

Stars dance behind my eyes as I start to come.

"Look at me," he growls.

My eyes fly open, and I look up into his face as his palm rubs down on my clit roughly. My body seizes as I come, screaming with it. I dig my nails into his shoulders as my arms shake, my back snapping into an arch.

"Holy shit," I breathe, my body trembling and my heart beating so fast it's like it's trying to fly out of my chest.

He rubs my hair and kisses me on the forehead, causing me to melt. I float back down to earth and my jaw drops. *He just made me do that on speaker phone.*

With my ex on the line.

CHAPTER 17

VLAD



HER FACE IS PINK, FLUSHED FROM HER ORGASM—BEAUTIFUL—but there’s a slight look of trepidation in her eyes. She scrambles to her feet, and I move to cup her elbow, ensuring she doesn’t fall.

Her gaze is downcast, and she covers her mouth, looking at her phone like it will somehow reach out and bite her. I smirk at the thought that I will be the only one biting her for the foreseeable future. I ignore the slow throb of my cock, imagining all the different ways I will take her later this night.

“I can’t believe we just did that.”

I hand her pants to her from the floor, and she quickly puts them on. Moving toward the fridge to get her some juice, I’m smug with the knowledge that her ex-lover missed out entirely on the sounds she makes when she comes. *The ingrate didn’t have the gumption to stick around for that.* I go still, realizing if he had, I would need to speed his death up considerably.

“Juice?” I offer casually, as if my fingers still aren’t slick from her.

“Huh?” I turn to her as she brushes some wayward blonde locks back from her face while looking shocked. She pauses, registering the orange juice. “Oh. Yes, please.”

I pour her a drink, frowning at the expression of fear she now wears.

She cups her hands over her cheeks and shakes her head as she slides down to sit in her chair once more. “Oh my god,

what have we done? He will totally tell my parents.”

The moment I heard him speaking over the phone, I dashed through the castle at speed to her side. Jealousy clouded my judgment, although I cannot argue with the results. I had wrestled with the thought of letting her go, leaving her alone to enjoy her stay, and removing myself from her presence to ensure I wouldn't be tempted. But overhearing how he spoke to her dissolved all my control and reason. I will not allow some insolent fool to have her, much less speak to her the way he had. It made me want to mark her somehow, claim her as my own, and warn him away. What better way to do that than to show him?

Ideally, I want the male six feet under, but this will suffice for now.

I frown at the way she stares outside, unseeing. “You care so much what your parents think?”

“Well, no. I just . . . yeah. I guess I do.”

I hand her the glass and slide across from her, enjoying the way her eyes drift over me. “I'm afraid I won't be asking anyone for permission to touch your pussy.”

She blushes and waves a hand dismissively. “Oh my god, no. Nothing like that. It's just, my parents had these grand ideas about me marrying Chad. His parents are friends with my parents.”

I quirk a brow and wait for her to continue.

“It's not their fault—it's mine, really. I was in love with the idea of love, not him, and sort of just went along with it. You know, start a family. This big dream of kids and a white picket fence. We would have never worked out, though. What I wouldn't give to see their faces when he tells them about you.”

I grin at her wryly. “They wouldn't approve?”

“No, unless you're secretly royalty or something. Then you would have to beat them off with a stick. I just usually like to go with the flow and have never really stood up to them. Pathetic, huh?” *Oh, darling. If you only knew.* Her shoulders turn inward self-consciously. “I'm almost twenty-

five years old and have never told my parents no. My father in particular.”

“You seem like a capable woman.” I tilt my head at her with a reassuring smile. “I can’t imagine they would be disagreeable to how you have turned out.”

“Ha. You’d think that. Really, my father doesn’t believe my social media aspirations will lead to much. But I want to try anyway.”

I nod my head and watch the snow fall outside. I have never paid much attention to parents or parenting. Humans die so quickly. What’s seventy years in the grand scheme of things?

Of course, I can’t tell her that. I suppose most humans are reluctant to go against the wishes of their fathers. There was such a time when I sought my father’s approval, after all.

My eyes cut back to her. “Do your parents believe that marrying this man will give you happiness?”

She shrugs, then lowers her gaze with a hint of hurt and sadness in it. “To be honest, I’m not sure they’ve thought about my happiness at all. It was never on the list of reasons why they wanted me to marry him; it’s more like a business arrangement.”

“Ah, I see.” Maybe this world isn’t so different from mine after all, even if it was centuries ago.

“Yeah. It’s never going to happen, though.” Then, as if she wants to change the subject, she picks up a plate and thrusts it toward me. “Do you want a cookie? I’m not sure where Doyle got them or if he made them, but they’re delicious.”

“I don’t eat many sweets,” I tell her honestly, crossing my arms and leaning against the table she’s sitting at.

She moves to set the plate of cookies down. “You are missing out. Oh, hey, I saw something interesting today. A portrait.” She leans into the table, biting her lip conspiratorially. “Is it like your great-great-grandfather?”

I laugh and clear my throat behind my fist to hide my choke of surprise. “There are a lot of those.”

“He was wearing gold armor with a dragon on it.”

“Yes, it’s an ancestor of mine. He built the castle where it stands today, and the village was built roughly a hundred years after.”

“That’s so cool. You know, I was doing some thinking about what Doyle said. About what you could do with the whole cosplay idea. No one has ever visited here, and so I think you have an opportunity to make something great. If you play up the immersive Dracula experience, people will be into it, and you wouldn’t have to take on very many each stay. I think you need to do something like a grand opening. There’s got to be a catering company close. You wouldn’t have to do much . . . maybe, I don’t know, thirty guests or so?” She tilts her head and nods. “That should do it.”

Doyle will most likely piss himself with glee if I agree to any of this. The thought of more people here sends unease down my spine, but how can I deny her? I shove the misgivings from my mind.

“What would a grand opening do exactly?”

“Well, no one really knows this place is here. But if I make a few mentions on my socials . . . I mean, there’s no telling. You could get an influx of people wanting to stay. But what’s going to seal the deal is Doyle and the whole Dracula schtick.”

“Dracula, huh?”

She giggles, her cheeks finally warming as her melancholy fades. “Yeah. I mean, even you have to admit Doyle straight-up looks like Gomez Addams, and you literally live in this castle that was the inspo for Daddy Drac.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Daddy Drac?”

“It’s not my fault the idea of vampires is hot. People say they hate *Twilight* but most of them have seen the movies at least twice. Dracula is huge, you know. There are people who love vampires, pretend to be them, that whole thing.”

My eyes fill with humor as I face out the window once more, trying to hide it. I wonder what she would think were she to discover that I am, in fact, “Daddy Drac.” Oddly enough, I don’t mind the name, considering she uses it so enthusiastically.

“Do they?”

“For sure.” She folds her arms and nods. “I mean, just the amount of movies based on the guy is ridiculous. The only real one is Bram Stoker’s, but you know. I showed Bernadette your ancestor’s painting and google says he’s the same guy the author based his book *Dracula* on.”

I hold my jaw, reluctant about the whole idea. “Hmm.”

Her eyes light up. “Did you know that? You wouldn’t happen to have heard stories from your family or anything?”

“No, but it doesn’t surprise me. The villagers have always been a superstitious lot.” In fact, the humans very rarely get the truth about the supernatural right. But perhaps I should look into these movies.

Her shoulders bunch and excitement lines her being as she practically vibrates with eagerness. “Oh my gosh, we basically would have like a dinner party, maybe some dancing, and invite a bunch of people. It would help put this place on the map.”

“I will think about it.”

She makes little fists and shakes them, bouncing and dancing in her seat. “Eeeeeek, awesome. Also, I’ve been meaning to ask you if you mind me putting the photos of you on my Insta too. Be warned, though, you may get bombarded by all the thirsty women.”

“Thirsty women?”

She frowns for a moment, as if taken aback. “It’s just a saying. Jesus, I swear sometimes it’s like you weren’t even born in this century. Thirsty because you’re hot, attractive. A tall glass of water?”

I lean across the table and twist a soft curl of her hair around my finger, enjoying how her smell deepens. “Do you find me attractive, Aubrey?”

Her chest rises as she takes a deep breath in. “I think that’s pretty clear.”

I cup the back of her neck and pull her to me, whispering my lips against hers teasingly. “I find myself very thirsty for you as well.”

Her cheeks pinken as she blushes, and the pulse at her neck takes up its alluring dance. Her scent rises and I kiss her, groaning into her mouth almost instantly. It doesn’t seem to matter how many blood bags I consume . . . I want her regardless.

One whiff of her and my cock and fangs rise to attention so quickly it should be criminal.

CHAPTER 18

VLAD



THIS WOMAN WILL BE THE DEATH OF ME.

“She’s going to kill me. My tombstone will read: Vlad Tepesh, ended by fucking garlic.”

I cross my arms over my chest, place the side of my fist over my lips, and pace.

If I had just declined, I wouldn’t be in this predicament. Her offer to feed me is something I have not experienced, and it’s obvious the meal is special to her.

She’s turning me into a weakling. A garlic-eating weakling.

“Why are we whispering in a pantry closet?” Doyle asks, looking around the small room lined with wooden shelves full of food and provisions. The “closet” is massive, with stores of goods, and has a secret hatch into the underground tunnels. One I have half a mind to throw him down at the moment.

My fist opens, and I slap my face into my palm, growling at myself. “Because I can’t think around her, obviously.”

I groan at the overpowering smell permeating the kitchen. The thought of her wanting to cook for me has a strange sensation coursing through my body, because she would do this for me, but the fear of death is not an obstacle easily overcome.

“You’re being dramatic.”

“Doyle, there’s enough garlic in that dish to kill every vampire in Europe.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and lifts a brow. “You *are* the only vampire in Europe.”

“Exactly what I just fucking said.”

He blows out an exasperated breath and shrugs. “So just tell her you don’t want any.” His eyebrows pinch together and his face twists into a look that says *you’re an idiot*. “Why are you making this complicated?”

It’s unheard of that I would allow anyone, much less a human, to cook for me. Wine is usually the only thing I imbibe other than blood. That I’m allowing her to make me a meal laced with garlic is absurd, and yet here we are.

I pace some more. “Because I’ve never had a woman want to cook for me, Doyle.”

“Technically, it could kill you,” he remarks, jutting a finger in my direction.

“But she doesn’t know that.”

Before attempting to encase me in iron, Angelique had tried poisoning me with laced blood wine. Luckily, she wasn’t aware of how keen my sense of smell is.

He eyes me curiously. “You really like her then. I have to admit I get the appeal—Aubrey is a beautiful woman—but Vlad . . . this is absurd.”

I pause to glare at him. “I am not an idiot.”

Doyle grins, a malicious glint in his eye. “You’re lucky I saw fit to consult Frank on this issue before guests even arrived. Have you heard of an EpiPen?”

“A pen what?” I ask. He pulls his hand from his pocket and uncurls it in front of my face. I grimace. “How does it work?”

He turns it in his hand and makes a stabbing motion. “I stab you with this in your thigh and it stops the allergic

reaction. Frank says it's perfectly safe—humans use them all the time. But this one he altered to suit your genetic makeup.”

“You want me to thank you for finding a contraption to stab me with?”

“Well, when you put it like that ...”

He smirks, and I wish I could rationalize punching him in the mouth. However, I may honestly need it.

“But actually, yes,” he continues. “It's to save your life, so it's allowed.”

Avoiding death would be preferable, but I'm unsure how much contact with garlic I can withstand. Vampires' natural immunity to garlic increases the older they get, but I haven't been near any in more than two centuries.

I sigh heavily as he smiles in obvious excitement. “Fine. Just make sure she doesn't notice.”

“I'll be gentle,” Doyle says, arching his eyebrows suggestively.

In an instant, my hand is wrapped around his throat, hoisting him into the air. “For fuck's sake, I will rip your—”

“Hey! Why are you guys hiding in the pantry closet?”

I remove my hand and watch dispassionately as Doyle falls to the floor moments before Aubrey flings the door open, her expression curious.

Doyle rights himself and turns toward her with a strange grin on his face. “Discussing the theme colors for the grand opening. I'm thinking fuchsia and bright purple.”

The words “over my dead body” climb up my throat, but I somehow swallow them and stare daggers at him, sincerely contemplating throwing him in the moat.

She laces our fingers together and smiles. “I think purple and pink might be a bit much, but I like where your head's at. We should see if there are any local catering companies. Never know.”

She bites her bottom lip and I become instantly arrested by the soft swirls of blue in her eyes. I want to touch my lips to hers and taste the sweet velvet of her mouth.

Doyle clears his throat behind us, breaking the moment. I clench my teeth and use my power, sending his clipboard up to slap him squarely in his face.

“Ouch,” he grits out, his expression twisted in annoyance.

Aubrey tenses in my arms, then peers to look at him. “Are you alright?”

Doyle’s face morphs and suddenly he’s a pathetic beggar, laying it on thick as Aubrey shows her concern. “Yeah, just a bit of a headache.”

She leaves my side and heads toward the closet door. “Let’s get you something to eat and some Tylenol, yeah? Lunch is ready.”

I wave dismissively. “I’m sure he’s fine. He’s just dramatic.”

Doyle breathes in deeply. “I think that would be nice. Don’t start without me—I have to grab something from my room.”

I lift my nose into the air, breathing cautiously once he leaves, and find it truly does smell delicious. Instead of overpowering garlic, there’s a scent of salted pork and . . . cheese?

My mouth pulls into a grim line and her smile drops, her brows knitting in concern. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Just looking forward to your culinary delights.”

“Haha! I don’t know about delight, but it’s my grandmother’s spaghetti recipe. Everyone always loves it. I had to use penne. You didn’t have any spaghetti noodles.”

“I’m sure it is fine. Have I told you how beautiful you look today?” My hands encircle her waist, pulling her into my arms. Her cheeks flush pink and she tucks her arms around herself nervously. “I am a whole mess and a half, and you think I look beautiful?”

I kiss her neck, inhaling her scent, unsure of how the next twenty minutes will unfold. One last taste before I *die*.

“You could be wearing a sack, and covered in mud, and still be beautiful to me.”

Her blonde hair is a strange mess perched precariously atop her head, and a soft blue sweater falls across her shoulders, bringing out the color of her eyes. She grins and her gaze softens. I lean down and brush my lips with hers, enjoying the way she sighs into my mouth.

Resisting the urge to growl when Doyle returns, stomping toward the open pantry door, I kiss her lips once more before pulling away.

“Weird place to suck face, but whatever.” He stands staring at us, one hand holding a black bowl and the other shoving a spoonful of whatever concoction she’s made into his mouth.

Aubrey smiles and rolls her eyes. “Hey, what happened to us waiting on you? I’m starving too.”

She brushes past me and Doyle smirks. “It’s really good. I say we keep her.”

He shovels in another mouthful, and I snatch the bowl from his hands with my mind. He glares at me in reproach, and I glare even as sweat beads across my forehead.

“Seriously, you guys. Come sit and eat,” she calls out.

He catches the bowl deftly from the air when my control breaks.

“I see you’re getting some of your strength back,” he says, grinning.

I flex my hands and stretch. “Yes, some, but I’m not at full power yet.”

He stares daggers at me, holding his bowl of food as if worried I will take it again, feet shuffling backward as he makes his way to the door. “Maybe next time you’ll rethink not eating for a century.”

I follow him and he stops me before I head toward the dining room.

He nods toward the parlor doors. “She’s set lunch up there, and says she likes the light.” He shakes his head at me when I raise my brow and sniff lightly. “If you were a youngling, you’d have died an hour ago just from the fumes. I think you’re safe.”

I cringe at him. “It’s not the same as ingestion, as you well know.”

“The things we do for love, and by *we*, I mean you. A fucking vampire eating garlic willingly, you realize you’re an idiot,” he says, while shoving more of Aubrey’s food into his mouth.

I stare in disgust, my body fairly shuddering with revulsion as I watch him eat. “Chances are I’m immune. Have you heard of a napkin?”

Vampires heal at an alarming rate already, so as the years pass, they become immune to properties like garlic. Even the sun doesn’t burn as bright after the first five hundred years. But it does still burn.

“Shhh. It’s delicious. So good.” He groans, swiping at his mouth with a hand. “And besides, chances are your undead heart could stop for real, but luckily I have the EpiPen. Not to worry, Vlad, I won’t let her kill you.”

Doyle claps me hard on the back and I growl low. I follow behind him toward the old parlor room.

I haven’t spent much time in this part of the castle, but fully approve of her choosing to eat here. The windows are large, and the pale color of the walls gives the place a sense of the outdoors, but it’s cozy and intimate.

Aubrey’s head is bowed in concentration at a small round table near one of the more lavish lancet windows the castle is equipped with. She clicks away at her phone, a sharp frown on her face.

Grabbing my phone from my pocket, I send Doyle a text, which is rather simple with my only contacts being Frank and

Doyle.

ME:

I need Aubrey's contact information.

DOYLE:

Why?

ME:

Now.

Dots surface on the screen and I scowl, watching across the table as Doyle's fingers punch digits inhumanly fast.

DOYLE:

Here you go, enjoy sexting.

A photo accompanies his text with a nine-digit number.

"What the hell is sexting? Plus one?" I whisper.

Aubrey

SITTING AT THE LARGE, lavish dining table, I pout at Vlad sitting across from me, with Doyle next to him.

"Just try a bite. If you don't like it, you don't have to eat it." I smile, looking down at my now almost empty plate and Doyle's, which is practically licked clean.

Vlad has yet to touch a bite and has been staring at it for the last five minutes as if it's going to jump off the plate and attack him. I can't help a little laugh that escapes me from the look on his face.

“Very well.” He sniffs hesitantly before popping a bite into his mouth.

I nod, waiting for his reaction as he chews. Gram’s recipe really is the best. “Good, huh?”

“Mmmm. It’s good. Just splendid.” Vlad digs in for another forkful and my phone pings just as Doyle burps loudly.

“Ugh, Doyle, gross,” I say, grinning.

He leans back in his chair and rubs a hand over his stomach, groaning like a man well fed.

“My apologies, madam, and my compliments to the chef. Simply marvelous,” he says, kissing his pinched fingers with a smacking sound and opening his hand. Suddenly, his eyes flare wide and he gasps, pointing out the window to my left. “Look! A wolf.”

“Where?” I squeal with excitement.

Rushing to my feet, I look out at the snowy hill just as Vlad lets out a horrible grunt. I turn around to see him clenching his eyes shut, and I scream, the sound shrill and piercing to my ears. The floor shakes violently, and the table quakes, shaking every dish on it as if there’s an earthquake. Even the light above flickers.

“Oh my god!” I cry out and move into action from what they teach in schools.

I duck under the table and cover my head with my hands. The room goes strangely quiet after a few seconds. When the shaking stops, I peek out from under the table, only to see a panicked look plastered across Vlad’s face.

“What was that?” I ask, my breaths shallow.

Vlad groans, a look of rage covering his expression before it clears. Anxiety creeps up my spine, making my skin flush as I slowly move to stand up, worried another quake may start again.

“Excuse me,” Vlad coughs out, his face cherry red, before he practically runs from the room.

“That’s unfortunate,” Doyle voices oddly, watching him leave from his seat.

I stare at Vlad’s retreating form in confusion. “Where are you going?” I blurt out and move to go after him, but Doyle hurries to cut me off and shakes his head.

“Stay here, Aubrey. He’ll be back soon.”

I frown and my shoulders droop. Between the earthquake and Vlad’s reaction, I’m wondering if maybe my cooking is cursed. “What happened?”

“Just a tiny tremor, nothing to worry about. They happen at random sometimes. I think Vlad went to go check the, uh, castle foundations, though.”

The foundations? Is that a thing? Crap, I bet everyone in the village felt that and a whole castle sits on top of it. Oh no. “Is the village okay?”

“Perfectly safe, Aubrey. No worries, they don’t even feel them. I promise.” He gestures toward the door, and I turn to glance at the table, lunch completely ruined and water dripping off the table. “Don’t worry about that, either. I think now would be a good time to show you another part of the castle.”

I shake my head in disbelief. No way they didn’t feel that—it shook the whole castle. “What do you mean? That was crazy.”

He rocks back on his heels before shoving his hands into his pockets. “Come, let me distract you. This will be the perfect time to get you to look at the ballroom with me. We need theme ideas on colors, that sort of thing.”

I think to myself how maybe they should move. Eesh. I hope the quakes don’t happen that often, even if they are harmless.

“I’ve been trying to think of ways to get more people to come stay.”

The subject change is not lost on me, but I indulge his comment and let my promotional brainstorming take over.

What touristy things could pull some people to visit? I know Mom has an entire flock of women who adore visiting vineyards.

I can't help but laugh and say, "Might want to get rid of the tremors first?"

His eyes crinkle and his lips curl upward as we walk. "If only we could control the world, my dear."

"Right," I murmur. "Are there any wineries in the area?"

"Yes, the age here to drink is eighteen, and in each county, the wine tastes different. In most rural areas, the menfolk even make their own wine."

That would totally add to the attraction. "Huh, that's cool. Where I'm from, men only know how to make bad decisions."

He smirks, and I can't help but smile. "That tends to be the consensus of most women, in my experience. I'm sure the women here would say the same, which is why I need your help."

Doyle leads me down a hallway before turning a corner and approaching a set of double doors.

"I'll do what I can," I offer.

"I want to know what you think of holding the whole event here." He pushes open the doors to reveal the ballroom and I gasp in amazement at the sight before me. The room is large and grand, with high painted ceilings and black gothic chandeliers that are all lit, casting shadows around the room.

"Shut up." I gape at the fresco paintings on the ceiling. "Oh my gosh! Look at the cherubs."

The light-blue walls are adorned with ornate moldings and intricate paintings, and the marble floors gleam beneath our feet. Only issue is it's a ballroom, but there is no room. Furniture lines the walls and sits haphazardly throughout the space, but it all looks movable. I spot a covered marble statue and itch to pull the sheet off to see what's behind it.

“This room is amazing,” I breathe, looking down at the checkered marble floor.

He smiles. “Yes, it is. It was originally the great hall, but we turned it into a ballroom. It’s probably my favorite room in the castle, and there are several others, but those will need more renovations before they’re ready for visitors.”

I nod, taking in every detail of the room. “I think it’s perfect for a grand gala. You could even hold weddings here with this—and receptions.”

“Yep,” he agrees. “But I’m not sure what color scheme we should go with.”

I smile, feeling inspired by the possibilities. “Hmm. I’m thinking we lean dark and gothic. It’s got that vibe anyway.” I nod at the chandeliers that look like they’re made of a pretty onyx, glittering and shimmering above us, then point to the ceiling. “Shades of black, and maybe dark purple? We can use shades of gray to contrast with the darker colors. Do those chandeliers dim?”

He looks up at them. “They don’t, but I’m sure we can change that.”

“Some dim lighting and shadows will create one hell of an atmosphere.”

He nods and strokes his bearded chin. “You’re probably right.”

I turn around, walking to the blue wall to reach out and touch it, feeling the gray patterned fleur-de-lis things. “How do they even make this?”

“Wallpaper?” Doyle asks, his tone full of humor.

“This is so not wallpaper.”

“No, it’s really not. It’s called damask. When these walls were done—I believe two centuries ago—they were hand painted using blocks of wood that were cut to create the damask designs.” Doyle pulls his phone out and starts typing. “Right, so capes and vampire teeth. The whole thing. It’ll be awesome. Like a Halloween wonderland almost.” His eyes flit

to mine and he wiggles his brows. “We just need to talk your *boyfriend* into it.”

My brow furrows. Is Vlad my boyfriend? *He can't be—you are leaving.* I push the thought away.

Then, the joke registers and I giggle while rolling my eyes. “I can ask. Surely he will see it’s a good fit, right?”

“Vlad has never been one for change. But stranger things have happened.” His gaze sharpens on me as he continues, “You seem to be quite cozy with one another.”

My cheeks heat as I try to come up with a response, rocking back in my sneakers. “Um, yeah, I guess we are,” I say, trying to sound nonchalant.

Doyle nods, a small smile playing at his lips as he arches his eyebrows. “Vlad can be a bit . . . ummm . . .”

I giggle at his expression. “The stick-up-the-ass thing? Yeah, I noticed.”

“But you will never meet anyone more loyal.”

I nod in agreement, relieved that Vlad’s best friend would think so much of him. Chad’s friends are vapid people and mostly toxic; I never really liked any of them. But Doyle is just a genuinely nice person, and always making jokes. He might give Vlad shit a lot, but anyone with eyes can see how much he cares for him—and that’s rare.

“So, what are your plans for the rest of the day?” he asks, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I shrug. “Not much. Probably wait and see how Vlad is, and make sure the castle foundations are okay.” *Which is probably the wildest thing I’ve ever said in my life.*

“I promise Vlad is alright. The quakes haven’t happened for many, many years. I doubt they will again any time soon.”

I hope he is right. “Okay.”

His shoes clack across the gleaming marble as he heads back to the hallway. “Stop worrying about Vlad. He will be

back before you know it, and truly, Aubrey, the grand opening will be epic.”

My shoes squeak as I pivot on the shiny floor and follow him. “Hmm, do you think I can get Vlad to dress up? Maybe a vampire costume, or maybe even a werewolf?” I can’t see Vlad ever willingly playing dress up, but I want to try. It’ll be good for him to have some fun.

He smirks and holds out his fist, wanting a fist bump, and I hit his knuckles lightly with mine. “I think if anyone can talk him into wearing one, it would be you.”

Breaking into a lopsided grin at his compliment, I glance off to the side in embarrassment. “I guess we will see then.”

He opens the door and bows, gesturing for me to leave first. “If you need anything, just let me know.”

I shuffle into the hallway and watch curiously as he flicks a nearby light switch, throwing the ballroom into darkness. He closes the doors and I pull my phone from my pocket when I feel it vibrate with a message from an unknown number. Weird.

I frown before I even open it. “Will do.”

He turns around to stare at me solemnly. “And Aubrey?”

My eyes flick to his, my brows raising. “Hmm?”

“Thank you.”

I smile, although I’m unsure why. “I haven’t done anything yet.”

A smile spreads across his face before he turns to leave.

I watch him go, feeling a sense of warmth in my chest. Excitement flutters through me, and I hope I can help Doyle make the castle a vacation hotspot. I just need to get Vlad on board. Maybe, just maybe, things are starting to look up.

I open the message to find a simple text that reads: You have a present.

Confused, I look at the message again. What? This has got to be spam or a prank.

As I stand there, pondering, my phone buzzes again with another message from the same unknown number: Check under your bed.

Vlad.

My heart races as I slowly make my way to my room. Lifting up the bed skirt, I peek underneath and retrieve a small box wrapped in shiny red paper.

Trembling with excitement, I unwrap it to find a beautiful silver necklace with a large, elegant, red-jeweled pendant. *Holy shit.* Is this real? No way this is a real ruby, but the tiny diamonds twinkling in the light have my stomach flipping. Surely he wouldn't. Nah, no way it's real.

I quickly add him to my contacts and shoot him a message.

ME:

Are you okay?

VLAD:

Perfectly fine. How do you like it?

ME:

It's beautiful but it's way too much. OMG how are the foundations??? <shocked face emoji>

The three little dots spin and spin for a moment before a message finally comes through.

VLAD:

They are fine. I am sorry that lunch was ruined.

ME:

It wasn't ruined! And it's okay, as long as the village is alright. That was super scary.

VLAD:

Everything is fine. I will be back as soon as I can.

ME:

Okay. Be careful <kiss emoji>

I frown, tossing the phone onto my bed, my gaze landing on the ruby necklace. What a wild vacation this has turned out to be.

CHAPTER 19

VLAD



DOYLE LOOKS UP FROM HIS PHONE, SEATED AT THE SMALL kitchen table as I walk through the door. “She’s asleep.”

The fact that he knew she was asleep before I did gets my hackles up. “It *reeks* of garlic in here.”

He raises an eyebrow and grins. “Where did you go?”

I lean against the kitchen counter, the stainless-steel surface even colder than I am. “The local pub,” I scoff. “Where the fuck did you think I’d gone?”

I spent the last few hours walking around the castle, attempting to force my fangs and claws to retract like an untried vampire in his youth. To say I found it humiliating would be a gross understatement, and I missed Aubrey opening her gift because of it.

His jaw clenches. “I’m sorry. I was a bit busy playing actor of the year with that performance about the fucking wolf that doesn’t exist, oh great and powerful one,” he says, typing away on his phone. “Just do me a favor and make sure Aubrey isn’t going to call some fucking government official on the castle, yeah? That’s all we need.”

“Why would she contact anyone? And by the way, spending the night roaming the castle grounds while waiting on my body to adjust was splendid. Thanks for asking.”

His phone clatters onto the table when he tosses it away before rubbing at his temples in frustration. “I’m pretty sure I was the one saying it was probably a bad idea to eat garlic.

You know, since you're a vampire. Now she thinks the castle has fucking earthquakes because you shook the whole damn building."

"She what?" I wince, thinking back on my reaction. *That's why she asked about the foundations.*

My powers came out and shook everything in the room. I feel bad that I scared Aubrey so much she hid under the dining table. I also seem to be having a reaction to whatever chemical was in that EpiPen. It saved me from the garlic, but made everything else go haywire.

"The goal was to hide what you are from Aubrey and eat her poison, right?" He sucks in a breath. "Sorry, meant to say food."

"Fuck you."

He chuckles. "If I had known *how* you would react to the pen, things would have happened differently, but at least we now know you can't control yourself afterwards. And you didn't end up killing anyone tonight," he says, angling his head to eye my pants for blood stains.

I clasp my hands together on the counter and shrug nonchalantly. "The night is still young."

He climbs to his feet and makes his way around me, and I take in his missing suit jacket, and his rolled shirtsleeves. He moves behind the kitchen counter, bending out of sight to retrieve something.

"I told her you needed to check the castle foundations and that we sometimes get tremors, but they're harmless," he continues, ignoring that I've even spoken.

My nose wrinkles and I level a piercing stare at him. "It's astonishing, really, your inability to see how very badly things could have gone wrong. I could control myself just fine if I hadn't been stabbed with fucking adrenaline! What the fuck were you thinking? I could have hurt her."

"Keep your voice down." He heads down into the cellar, and his voice grows muffled in the dark space. "Honestly, I was thinking you had lost your mind attempting to eat garlic,

but my job is to keep you alive, remember? I told you not to, if you will recall.”

He climbs the stairs with a bottle of cognac in hand. He gives me his side as he reaches for two glasses to pour us both a drink. Good man, I’d say we both need a stiff one.

“Hmm. What other foods does she like, I wonder?”

I pick up an apple from a fruit-filled plate on the counter and toss it into the air, before floating it with my gaze. I like that I’m truly getting my strength back.

“How should I know? I only wish I could have gotten a picture—it was great! I especially liked when you hid your face with a napkin like a blushing bride.”

I put my hands into my pockets, watching the apple spin in midair before slapping the back of Doyle’s head, hard, with my ability.

He winces, rubbing where I hit him, but continues pouring one handed. “Hey, watch it. Do you want a drink or not? I’ll have both if you keep it up.”

“Since when is stabbing someone protection, Doyle?”

“Today actually. I reported our findings to Frank, and he’s going to add them to the trial notes.”

“I am sure he was overjoyed to hear it,” I say sarcastically.

He laughs and shoots me a look. “Actually, he questioned what would give you cause to go near garlic. I threw him off, but no more human dishes for you.”

“Do you think she’s starting to suspect?” Garlic and the sun are practically the only things that can harm a vampire, and the sunscreen increases my chances of avoiding detection considerably.

“I’m not sure. You left so quickly, I had no idea what to tell her.”

I rap my fingers across the cold countertop. “You are the most annoying person in existence.”

“Therein lies the problem. You don’t even have a proper basis for what is and isn’t annoying in existence anymore. It’s been a hundred years, there are new annoying things. Like getting cut off while driving and helping older relatives with technology.” He grins. “Now, *that’s* annoying.”

My eye begins to twitch, and he laughs, shaking his head. “Truly though, what is most concerning to me is that we may need to send Hilda to Jekyll. He’s been asking for centuries, and it wouldn’t hurt her. She may even be happier there.”

I take a deep swallow of the cognac he slid across the counter moments ago, while I place the apple back where it belongs using my powers. “You don’t know that. I refuse to let the woman who raised me suffer at the hands of idiotic scientists.”

“It could be good for her, a new venue, one that isn’t underground.”

“This was your idea, not mine. It’s not as if she’s holed away,” I retort. “You make it sound as if I’ve imprisoned her.”

“She can’t even come upstairs, Vlad.”

“The catacombs are as big as the castle and twice as dirty. You know she’s been trying to get me to let her clean down there for centuries, so she’s enjoying herself.”

I arch a brow when Doyle collapses dramatically in his chair. “You basically use the woman’s obsessive cleaning habits against her.”

I point my finger at him, squinting and pursing my lips. “You know I’ve seen this somewhere. Petulant children whining across the internet. There are memes about this.”

He stiffens and levels a pointed finger at me in return. “Fuck you. I’m serious about Hilda—it would be better for everyone.” His palm opens as his brows furrow. “And where are you watching these things?”

“YouTube obviously, and you let me worry about Hilda. You worry about finding the sunblock Frank concocted, so I don’t blister tomorrow.” There is no way in hell I’m letting

one insignificant—albeit exquisite—woman discover the supernatural exists.

His chair scrapes the wooden floor of the kitchen as he moves to find the lotion.

A thought occurs to me. “How did he ever figure out how to allow vampires to walk in the sun, I wonder?”

“The same way he can mask his scent from everyone. Remove your shirt. You’re going to need to stand with your arms out and I’ll spray you down. What is the plan with Aubrey?”

“Prove to her I’m not a vampire?”

“And you plan on doing that how?”

I finish off my drink in one swallow and walk to the table. “I’m adaptable, Doyle. I no longer feed from humans. I’m walking in the sun, and soon, Frank will come up with something more permanent. She doesn’t need to know. She must never know.”

She’s a delightful ray of sunshine and I am the damned. Humans are fearful creatures. They fear what they do not understand and attempt to eradicate it. Learning that the supernatural exists is a death sentence. *If she ever looked at me like a monster . . . My stomach sinks. I wouldn’t recover.*

He opens the box under his arm and grins. “Remember Celeste? Oh, and Angelique, wasn’t she burned for being a witch?”

My gaze slips away, and I glance at the light hitting the pots and pans before landing on the small spray tanning machine he has acquired from somewhere. I hang my shirt over the back of Doyle’s chair. “Aubrey isn’t Angelique, and times are different now, or I wouldn’t be subjecting myself to this humiliating bullshit.”

He grins. “Good. Now stop acting like an infant and hold your arms out.”

A mist sprays across my chest and I stiffen, the smell invading my senses. “Why in the fuck does it smell like

cookies, Doyle?”

“Well, this definitely isn’t what I expected.” The low sound of a female voice has us both turning toward the door.

A brown-haired woman is standing in the kitchen with her hands on her wide hips and an incredulous expression on her face.

“Who are you?” I ask.

She pauses, and her heart rate increases. Her dark eyes flick to Doyle and she smiles warmly. “Whitley. The office sent me around for the chef position. This is Tepesh Castle, right?”

“The chef,” Doyle says stiffly.

“Yeah, can’t say that I’m sorry I’m arriving so late at the night, though.” She breaks into a cheeky grin as she saunters closer and plops down into a chair.

I arch a brow as she crosses her legs and bites her lip while she eyes Doyle like he’s a snack. Doyle’s face darkens, and he snaps out a curse about sunscreen, and I realize the issue. The sunscreen was coating the air, making it harder for him to smell. The poor chap cannot stand being caught off-guard.

Doyle clears his throat and bows, looking ridiculous with his sleeves rolled up like a handyman. “I am Doyle, the proprietor. If you wait in the dining hall, I will meet you shortly.”

“You look ridiculous,” I whisper, enjoying his discomfort.

The woman’s smile spreads. “Oh, you mean I can’t stay and watch? I’ve seen less interesting porn than this. I’ll stay if it’s all the same to you.”

What is it about this era where spirited women seem to be around every corner?

I laugh, but Doyle’s face reddens, and I can see the hairs rise on his arms the closer he gets to her. I grab my shirt and pull it on, uncaring that it will be ruined.

“How did you get onto the grounds, madam?” Doyle asks, obviously agitated. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“The gate was open and a layout of the castle was provided with the post. Umm, did I do something wrong?”

Doyle stops and crosses his arms over his chest. “You should have let someone know of your arrival.”

She raises a brow. “Well, no one was at the door when I knocked, and it’s dark and cold outside. Since I couldn’t find you, I wanted to get acquainted with the kitchen. I didn’t know what to expect, what with the ad stipulations of being in good health and the location. Trust me when I say, you’re lucky I’m here. Not many chefs qualify.”

Doyle frowns. “Is that so?”

Her eyes narrow. “It is. Which is what I’m doing here. First, I want to be assured I won’t get murdered in this creepy place.”

I stare at her in confusion. “Creepy?”

She blinks and looks at me like I’ve grown another head. “Yes, emphasis on creepy. As in, I saw something move in that lake around this place on the drive up. It was huge.”

Neither Doyle nor I react to her apparently having seen Nessie in the moat outside. Yet another issue we haven’t discussed. I’m surprised he broke through the top layer of ice. He’s probably hungry.

Doyle looks at her and frowns. “Alligators.”

She mirrors him and a determined glint flashes in her eyes. “Right, alligators, not creepy at all. Wait . . . alligators in Romania in the middle of winter?”

Blithering idiot! If he’s going to lie, couldn’t he come up with something more believable? He’s not usually this daft.

The frown on his face transforms into a cold and calculating smile. “Rest assured, you and all the guests are perfectly safe here.”

Her eyes flit between us as if to gauge our sincerity. Doyle, oddly enough, looks like he's wishing for her quick and imminent death. *I like her.*

She uncrosses her arms and leans across the table. "Fine. But let's get this straight here and now. I am the chef in this kitchen, and you two will stay out of it." She jabs a finger at Doyle, her face alighting in anger swiftly. "Do you know how disgusting it is to be doing that here?"

I blink in confusion just as he turns to look at me.

"Most airborne sprays shouldn't mix with food, and by the smell of it, it's toxic. Get out. For real, just get out," she says as she grabs a washcloth and begins cleaning and wiping the counter like a madwoman.

"Are you, an employee, telling *us* what to do?" Doyle stares at her like an idiot and the anger on his face clears. I bite back a smile and pull him from the room.

"Yes. I take food safety very seriously. I'm surprised you haven't poisoned yourself yet, if this is what you get up to in here." Then she mutters under her breath, "Should I hide the oil from these two, so they don't start rubbing it on each other?"

"I can't just leave you here until you sign a contract and speak with me properly," Doyle insists.

"This should be interesting," I drawl, letting my grin fly.

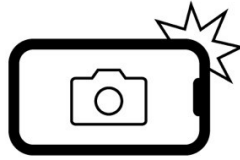
Doyle eyes me with disgust. "Oh, you think that was funny, do you? Take care of Nessie and Hilda tonight," he says under his breath. "The guests will be here in the morning, and so will the new hotel manager. We can't have this happening again."

"I'll have a talk with the *alligators*," I say as I walk away.

He sighs and I grin. *Alligators indeed.*

CHAPTER 20

AUBREY



I TWIRL THE ROSE IN MY HAND, GRAPPLING WITH MY emotions. This feels like a first crush, the kind where you're skipping on the clouds, and the possibilities are endless because the person you like actually likes you back and . . . I am scared shitless.

I stare out, unseeing the grandeur before me, sitting in one of the bloodred antique chairs in the hallway near my room. Whoever came up with this color scheme really went all in with the burgundy walls, gold sconces, and dark wooden furniture. It truly is like a gothic fairytale castle around here, a fairytale just like the castle's owner.

ME:

Thank you for the rose. It's beautiful.

How can such a grump be this sweet?

Vlad couldn't know, but this simple rose actually means a lot to me. I thought Chad had ruined flowers for me forever with the endless romantic scenes he would construct. Even after the first, when I realized it was all an act, I still somehow found it adorable. Then it quickly became an annoying situation where he would show up late to wherever he wanted to go live, then push a bouquet of flowers into my hands a few seconds before the camera was rolling—the jerk.

In the end, I couldn't argue against making more because he wasn't wrong; they did get a lot of views.

My phone buzzes, and I look down to see a message from Bernadette.

BURNIE:

You are going to have to hold me back from destroying this man. I want to reach out and slap his bitch ass upside the head. Tell me you have seen this before I kill maim destroy! <explosion emoji>

ME:

Who?

Dots go across the screen seemingly forever and I growl in frustration. Stupid slow internet.

BURNIE:

Chad! It's not looking so hot out there my dude. Hmu when u can <heart emoji>

I look down at the screen shot she has sent me and can't help but grin, before reality sets in that this is what the world is looking at. *Shit.*

I'm wearing a sequin bikini in it, tits almost on display, in the middle of a keg stand with two dudes holding my ankles. Not my best moment, but what never fails to make me grin is Bernadette below me, with her tongue hanging from her mouth in one corner of the photo, excitement bleeding from her eyes. My only excuse is we were three drinks in when I agreed to do the keg stand. It was a cool memory we talk about sometimes and laugh over, but Chad just made it ugly.

Two comments are captured in the screenshot.

One says, "OMG Chad are you #single? Pick me," and the other says, "Always knew she was a slut #youcandobetter."

Ugh, of all the petty things, this is what he chooses?

It's rare that Burnie and I go out at all, and he grabs the one photo that looks inappropriate. This was taken right after Chad had gone to jail for the first time, and I can remember just wanting to drink and have a good time—feel normal for once when life felt upended.

I stare at the photo and waves of anger pour over me. Anger that he would do this, anger that he would reduce me to this. Years of me taking care of him, through all the binges, the partying, handling his bills, appointments, *everything*, and he would show this to the world?

“Why is he such an asshole?”

He has been in jail three times for drunken conduct, and twice for drinking and driving. There is no way I don't have some shit that will ruin him worse than he has me.

I click on my photos, speeding past the recent ones of Vlad and me, not wanting to see his face right before I have to find some disgusting photo of Chad. *I will murder him via social media and make him crawl into some cave and then shit on his cave!*

My brow furrows when I remember I never once took a photo of him behaving badly, and I always demanded for anyone who did to delete it. In reality, I asked each person nicely, my embarrassment motivator enough for them to take pity on me, which they always did. But it means I have fuck all for my split-second toxic photo revenge idea.

Stomach rolling with sadness and nausea, I slump against the chair cushions, tossing my phone beside me.

All it takes is one video to go viral with that kind of content and everything I have worked for is gone. *Why would he do this?* But I know why. He has never cared about what kind of publicity we would get, just that we got some.

I have talked to him about this in the past; this is basically my one fear come to life, and he knows it. *That's why.* He knows the social media idea was just a starting point for me.

But this ... this could end it all.

After college, social media really kicked off, and I thought, why not? What I wasn't expecting was how quickly my page would grow, then grow again after Chad decided to help me. Not that being a social media influencer doesn't have some perks, but the tide can turn oh so swiftly.

I have a healthy stash of funds I have been building up with small investments, but the little wedding fund I am currently tapping into won't last forever.

It will be okay. Even if I have to quit social media altogether, I will find another way to travel the world. I can totally work and travel, just not at the same time.

ME:

Thanks for the heads up.

Standing up, I rotate my shoulders and shake myself out, trying to let go of my anxiety over it all. Deep breaths. A scraping sound I recognize reaches my ears—the huge front doors are always loud when opened. Probably the guests Doyle was talking about.

I head toward the grand staircase that overlooks the foyer, but frown as soon as I peer over the railing. Vlad has a beautiful blonde woman on his arm who is staring up at him like he invented calorie deficits. My stomach flips with nausea when I notice a rose in her hand, the same color as the one I'm holding.

So much for it being special. My stomach drops at the sight, and irrational jealousy floods throughout my being.

“What do you mean, you walked here?” Vlad murmurs down at her, the sound carrying.

She giggles and I have this weird urge to go down there and rip her hair out. The entire drive is on a sharp incline uphill. She is so full of shit. I take in her Jimmy Choo pumps and handbag, and roll my eyes. Walked here, my ass.

I head downstairs, not liking the way Vlad is still letting her touch him, and vice versa.

“What is that smell?” an older guy calls out loudly, pulling my attention from the bimbo Barbie on Vlad’s arm.

But before anyone can say another word, a sharp yip comes from the man’s luggage he’s holding at his side.

The man glances at me and his eyebrows lift to his hairline, and that’s how his expression stays as he turns to Vlad. “Can we speak to the manager? I need to know where to let him out. There wasn’t any information on the webpage.” The dog gets louder, and the man heaves the luggage up higher. “Shhhh, Fifi!”

Doyle appears from a side entrance, trying to direct the man to somewhere.

“We allow dogs?” Vlad bites out, his arm still coiled around bimbo Barbie.

I’m not sure how anyone could hear him ask over the dog barking, the flirting, and the overall panic, but everyone goes quiet.

Doyle blinks and his brows turn down with his frown. “We do.”

Vlad pulls his usual grumpy face. “Since when?”

“Why don’t we discuss it once the guests are settled?” Doyle says, looking like a super pissed-off rain cloud just parked above his head.

“Very well.” Vlad clears his throat and turns to the woman before handing her a handkerchief from his pocket. “Here, allow me.” His dark head bends over her platinum one and my heart drops to my feet.

That is definitely not the reception I got when we first met, and she’s dressed like something out of Kate Middleton’s closet.

He stares down into her eyes, murmuring something while smiling. She stiffens, and I want to vomit.

I bite my lips, upset, and don’t stay to watch the rest, turning around and heading back to our room. *Our room.*

Jesus. *He is not yours, Aubrey. No strings.* You're leaving in a few days.

I grab my phone to shoot a text to Bernadette, then head to get my coat. Some fresh air will be nice and it might distract me from being jealous. *It doesn't matter if he falls for the superficialite.*

I shake my head inwardly at myself. It is ridiculous that I am being this jealous at all, much less whining about some hot chick coming to stay at his hotel. I will have to go back home soon and deal with my life once this whole grand opening thing is over—not to mention my new baggage with Chad—and I shouldn't be worrying about who Vlad talks to in his own home.

Maybe it's a good thing she showed up? I have a solid plan of hitting size ten within the next year via cupcakes and ice cream. Vlad may not be on board if she's anything like what he wants.

I will never be a size two like that.

I scroll through the pictures we took yesterday, and my heart hurts at the soft smile in his eyes. So stupid. *It'll be better this way. It was fun while it lasted.*

“Aubrey?”

I whirl around at my name and come face to face with the entire issue. He wears a frown, as if he can sense the confusion roiling in my stomach.

I can't even meet his gaze. “Hey.”

“You dropped this.”

He hands me the rose, and I inwardly wince as my face burns with embarrassment. *Way to go, Aubrey.* I murmur my thanks and take it from him awkwardly, although I want to throw it on the ground and stomp on it. *Totally not irrational.* Instead, I paste a smile on my face.

“I assumed you would come down for breakfast?” he says, looking down the hallway.

“Oh, I think I’ll just grab a bite and eat in my room. You seem kind of busy this morning.”

He folds his arms over his chest. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” I frown and step back, inwardly wishing he would just go back to bimbo Barbie, so I don’t have to explain how jealous and insecure I am feeling.

“It’s something.” He eyes me up and down, like he’s trying to assess what’s pissing me off.

“Don’t you have important things to do?”

He unfurls his arms and frowns like I’m being weird. “I’m doing them now.”

I know I am extra emotional having just gotten out of a toxic relationship, but it doesn’t explain why I am so drawn to him and why I am having this reaction to seeing him with another woman. He steps closer and I steel myself against his nearness.

He pushes my hair behind my ear and my breath hitches. I quickly mutter, “Right, well, you know I’m leaving soon, and you have more guests to take care of now, so maybe it’s a good time to call it quits.”

His eyes grow wide. “Call it quits?”

“Yeah. You know, I’m saying this badly. We never even dated, so this was just a fling, right? God, I’m so sorry.” If my face was hot before, it’s now a raging inferno. Sweat beads at the back of my neck and I just want to crawl away and hide.

“Where is this coming from?” he asks, and I fidget in place, which is made all the worse when he focuses his attention on my hands. “Aubrey?”

Screw it. “I may have seen you with your arm around another woman, and I got a bit jealous.”

“Jealous? You’re avoiding me because you got jealous of that female with octopus arms?” He blinks as if coming to some sort of realization. “The rose.”

I snort. It was more than that. It looked like he was about to kiss her, which is why I turned away when he was smiling and whispering at her.

“Doyle gave it to her when she came through the door.” Rage slowly spreads across his face. “Do you see me chasing down that harridan through the castle?”

My shoulders rise nervously. “No?”

“Do you see me begging another woman to stay with me?”

He pulls me to him, and I make no move to stop him. My eyes are locked on his while they tell me all the filthy things he wants to do to me. My idiot body is totally on board to let him, too, as my heart skates into the danger zone, thudding for all it’s worth.

“I want you to *stay*,” he growls against my lips before kissing me lightly, “with me. And only you.”

Our breaths mingle together and my body melts into his, all my panic leaving when he touches me. The thought of him with another woman had sent me careening, but here he is, in front of me, wanting *me*.

“I suppose I could stay a little longer,” I mutter against his lips before he pulls away.

Any excuse not to go back to reality for a little while longer is the only reason I’m agreeing. That’s what I tell myself, at least.

He breathes in deep at my neck and I can’t stop the grin creeping onto my face.

“Why do you smell so fucking good?” he says.

Our lips meet again, and his tongue touches mine, causing me to moan as arousal floods me. He pushes me into the wall, and I clutch his shoulders to me. His kiss makes my head swim, and my clit pulsates with every beat of my heart.

He finally breaks the kiss and I realize I’m gasping for breath, my body practically begging for more. “Will you stay?”

It takes a moment for my brain to catch up to what he asked. My face heats at the look of longing on his.

“Only a week. After that, no promises.”

CHAPTER 21

VLAD



NO PROMISES, SHE SAYS.

I clutch her to me and kiss her lightly on the neck, enjoying the way her pulse gallops beneath my lips.

“Come, let’s get you bundled up, and I’ll show you something you won’t see anywhere else.”

I am quickly becoming infatuated to the point where I’m not sure how I will ever let her go. Lacing my fingers in hers, I pull her toward the foyer. Once there, I locate her pink coat left from our last outing and place it around her shoulders. Her fit of jealousy is promising, and I know I would never have reacted as well if the tables were turned.

“Where are we going?” she asks, excitement evident in her bouncing steps.

“You’ll see,” I respond coyly, pushing her gloves into her hands. We won’t be having another situation like last time.

She smiles sheepishly before putting them on and giddiness spreads.

I want to share with her my favorite part of the castle.

Doyle is against showing her the inner secrets of my home, but I want to see her reaction. I want to know if she will find them as wonderful as I do and have no intentions of following his edict of staying away from her. His panties will be in a twist no matter what I do, the whiny ass.

We finally exit the castle through a rough wrought-iron gate, and she gasps. “Oh my god! I had no idea this was even here.”

Her eyes light up as she takes in the massive balcony. Its steps are inlaid in stone, and it overlooks the massive hedge maze that’s currently dusted in snow. The fountain can be seen from here, but the hedges are so tall it’s easy to get disoriented once inside.

“Well, it was a later addition, maybe three hundred years ago. But it is my most treasured place in the entire castle.”

“I can see why. It’s like a little hidden world back here.”

Her eyes widen and she comes to a stop. “Oh my gosh, it’s gorgeous.”

I smile and gesture for her to follow. “This part of the castle is kept secret, and in the winter, you can see it, but only if you’re looking for it. This way,” I say, walking underneath an archway.

Her blue eyes look around, surprised. “What, that’s not it?” she says, pointing at the balcony.

“No. Come and I will show you the secret of the castle.” I hold my hand out and she takes it, her glove-covered grip sure and warm in mine. We walk hand in hand, and I help her up the stairs, ensuring she doesn’t fall. “It’s just this way.”

“Wow.” Her gaze darts around eagerly as she lets me lead her along.

The balcony winds around the back of the castle, hidden from view by the massive evergreen firs that were planted expressly for this purpose. It’s a hidden alcove with a fireplace and stone seating area. Not that we will be sitting today, not for what I want to show her.

I walk into the darkness, the evergreens thick and lush, covered in white.

Letting go of her hand, I wave them down. “Wait just here.”

She looks up into the muted sunlight, closing her eyes as the soft flurries caress her pink cheeks. She's warmth and light, and I find myself drawn to her. She looks like she belongs here, which says a lot because I have never invited another soul to this place.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes, feeling them turn red behind my eyelids. It takes but a moment and I hear the flap of tiny wings before Aubrey squeals excitedly. "Oh my god. Are those . . . bats?"

I open my eyes when a tiny one alights on my upturned palm, and I stroke its wings, showing her that it is safe. She does the same and pride wells in my chest. The grin on her face is brighter than the sun, and right in this moment, I wish I could see it every day. Tiny squeaks fill the air as the small bats leave the cave below the balcony, hearing my call and coming to say hello.

She giggles as another comes to sit on her shoulder. "This is freaking amazing. Oh my gosh, how did I not know how cute they are? What do they eat?"

"These are mouse-eared bats. They usually eat things like spiders and small insects for sustenance."

She glances to me. "So, they don't bite?"

"These won't. I still wouldn't venture out here alone at night though. It's safe if you're with me, but otherwise, they're animals and are a part of nature as much as you are."

"I can't believe this place. Burnie would freak right out." She twists her palm and more alight across her shoulders squeaking in her ear. "Are they always so friendly?"

"No, usually I bring them crickets Doyle procures from the nearby fish hatchery. They were probably expecting treats since I haven't been here in some time."

"Well, we have to get some then. Poor things."

I watch as she pets one lightly and the others fly away, probably to go back to sleep. They are nocturnal, after all. The sight of her grinning and laughing amongst them fills me with joy.

“Oh, I just want to take you home. Look how cute you are!”

I’ve never brought anyone here, have never wanted to bring anyone near the cave, actually. But somehow I knew she would like it. This odd, spirited woman who is slowly but surely taking over my undead heart.

She rubs lightly under the little bat’s chin, and I become irrationally jealous of the bat. *I am bewitched.*

I push my hands into my pockets and let her play a few moments longer until the last bat returns to its roost.

“Okay, that is the coolest thing ever. They are so adorable. I just love them.” She sighs, and I laugh at her sweetness. She crosses her arms over her chest. “What’s so funny, Vlad?”

“Your exuberance is what’s adorable.”

A sweet smile curves her lips, and she walks toward me until her chest meets mine. “Adorable, huh?”

I cup her face and rub my thumb over her pouty bottom lip. “Mmhm.”

“Thank you for showing me. It’s wonderful.”

“I will show you everything in my power, if only to see you smile like this again.”

She smiles and stretches up to pull my head down to hers. Her lips graze mine and I groan from just the feel of her body against mine. My skin itches with the temptation to take her here in the cold, but I can’t risk her getting sick or worse.

The blush on her cheeks has me smiling back. She pulls away and searches my face like she’s never seen me before.

“Would you want to come home with me?” she asks. I blink, and she rushes on. “There’s this wedding I have to go to, and I would have been going with Chad. I mean, you probably wouldn’t want to come. It’s for my—”

“Yes,” I blurt out.

“It’s my cousin. She’s getting married on Valentine’s Day, and yeah, you don’t have to if you don’t want. I . . . I just

really like you and wanted to see if you could come or would even want to.” Her teeth bite down on her bottom lip in nervousness.

Unfettered joy spreads through my chest at the notion that she sees anything between us past her visit here. Excitement quickly follows from the realization I will see her part of the world and her in it.

I grip her ass and lift her, enjoying the feel of her in my arms as her legs wrap around my waist. “I want to, and I really like you too.”

She giggles and kisses my mouth, but I can sense the shyness she tries to hide. She curls into me, hugging around my neck.

“We may not have anything for our friends here, but I think I’m ready for a treat,” I whisper across the skin of her throat, willing her to relax.

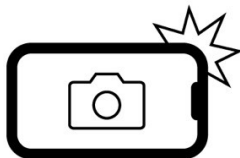
Her skin lights up with goosebumps and her heart stumbles in her chest. “Treat?”

“Mmhm, I plan to eat your pussy until you cannot walk.”

Her beautiful laughter bounces, echoing against the stone walls of my home, and happiness floods me for the first time in my life.

CHAPTER 22

AUBREY



“NICE DOGGY,” I SAY, OFFERING IT A WARY SMILE.

Gripping my coffee cup a little tighter, I look over the table and down at the small pug that’s growling like I am steak, and his only wish in life is to be a wolf. Obviously not a people person, then.

“Felix, you stop that right now,” his owner whisper-yells in a soft southern accent.

I stare curiously at the black-rimmed glasses atop his head and take in his outfit. A white shirt sits over a thin torso, while suspenders keep up black slacks. A tiny matching bowtie rest at his throat.

“I thought his name was Fifi?”

The man bends to pick him up and the dog quiets momentarily, his bulging, slightly misaligned eyes staring through my soul. A low sound rumbles from him again.

“Oh, it is, but it’s short for Felix,” the man says, smiling, and the dog cuts off with a low whine. “I named him after my asshole ex-husband. I’m sort of sentimental like that.” He cocks his head at me curiously. “Do you mind if we sit down? I promise Fifi is more bark than bite.”

“Not at all.” I wave at my table.

He wiggles into the chair right next to me and glances at the dog, giving him the side-eye. I adore the cute, quirky man on the spot and can’t help but laugh as he holds a hand out for me to shake after placing the dog in his lap.

Wrinkles form as he gives me a warm, welcoming smile, revealing his age. "I'm George."

"Aubrey."

"Nice to meet you, Aubrey. This view is marvelous." George fans himself with one hand as he looks around the room.

It really is marvelous. The parlor walls are painted a soft yellow that I bet looks beautiful in the spring. The room is still bright and cozy, with the large lancet windows filled with arch-shaped glass and overlooking part of the castle grounds.

"I know," I agree, while gazing at the snow falling. "Doyle saw a wolf out there yesterday."

"That will be a sight to see for sure, but I meant all of these men," George says, raising his brow and stealing my attention.

I laugh when his elbow nudges mine and he gives me a cheeky wink.

He nods his head to Doyle. "I tell you what, I've not seen an ass that tight since the eighties."

My laugh deepens, and my smile spreads as Vlad saunters into the room. His gaze scans like he's searching for something.

"Sweet baby Jesus in a manger." George's voice comes out breathy as his eyes widen. "That one's just as pretty."

Vlad stops and arches a brow at me in question, the corner of his lips quirking.

"Oh my. Well, I see which way the wind is blowing. You hold on to that one with both hands, young lady. Where I come from, that man would be snatched up faster than candy on Halloween," George says.

Vlad's gaze travels to George's lap as he walks closer, and I snort at the look of disgust he fights to keep from his face. Looks like Vlad doesn't care for dogs. And the way his nose scrunches, I can't help but find it hilarious. Felix, finally sensing there's someone else he may want to intimidate, starts to growl. He stops when Vlad's jaw ticks.

Vlad's expression softens when he looks at me. "I just wanted to tell you I'll be back in a bit, darling. Doyle has me doing the heavy lifting," he says, before leaning down and kissing me on my forehead.

"Okay. I'm sure George and I can find something to get up to."

We both watch him appreciatively as he walks away, only to be intercepted by the bimbo, and I suddenly feel like I need something stronger than coffee. He walks around her, and I relax a little.

"You know, that woman there is eyeing your man like he's the tallest glass of water she's seen in her life."

"He's not my man. But yes, she is."

She glares with pure hatred at me before turning her nose in the air and swinging her hips as she walks away.

"Like I said. So, what brings you to Transylvania?" he asks, wiggling his white bushy brows suggestively.

I flinch when Fifi's cold nose touches my elbow. He must have wiggled his way out of George's arms when I wasn't looking. He raises his furry chin and sniffs the air in disdain before turning back to his owner. What a little twerp.

"Escape, mostly. Just needed a vacation." I relax into my chair, watching George feed the menace a sausage before sipping his coffee.

"Oh, honey, I feel that. I confess I'm just staying for a few days to avoid life in general," he says, setting his cup back down.

"I wanted to take pictures, see what it's like to stay in a castle, and lucked out on the listing. Now I'm trying to help Doyle; he wants to reach more people to come stay, so I'm sharing it on my socials."

"That's what we are doing here, actually." He blows air kisses into the dog's face and smiles. "Fifi travels the world. They're even making it into a kids' book."

"A children's book?"

“Yes. Fifi has over six million followers and the children’s book comes out next year. Isn’t that right, Fifi?”

The pug paws lightly at George’s palm, and he scratches at his chin. The dog’s collar shimmers every time he moves, and I have a strange feeling the thing is probably worth a lot of money.

I quickly search him up on the gram and, sure enough, millions of followers. George slides his phone from his pocket when it pings. He looks down at it, grinning.

“Well, hello.” He raises a brow at me, and a sly grin pulls at his mouth. “We should make a couple videos together during our stay. Whaddaya say?”

I like that idea, and I do need more content. Enough to hopefully bury whatever bullshit Chad will try to pull in the unforeseeable future.

Hours later, I find myself unable to leave George’s presence. After depositing Fifi in his room to nap, he insisted on exploring. He is so easy to talk to. I was instantly smitten with the man, so I offered to show him the stone path that curves around the moat of the castle. I can just imagine how pretty it is in the spring, although right now it’s frozen. Birds chirp overhead and fly away to nearby bare trees. I grin up at the sky, feeling content, which is nuts considering what’s currently happening on the internet.

The camera flashes, and when I look over at George, he’s wearing a mischievous look.

“Couldn’t resist,” he says. “You look like a picture in that scarf and hat.”

I crack a smile and kick at a rock with my booted toe, sending it careening along the cobblestone path that wraps around part of the castle. I suck in a hard breath and tilt my head back, letting the light sprinkling of snowflakes kiss my cheeks. “I love it here, George.”

And I really do. I stare across the paved bridge toward the forest that Vlad took me to just yesterday, warming at the thought of how he had kissed me.

“Mmmhm. I gotta say it’s one of the nicer castles I’ve stayed at, and of course the company helps. Fifi hates the snow, but I’ve always loved the colder months—means hot chocolate.”

I smile at the last bit, and we walk along the driveway, our boots crunching the gravel under our feet. I’d have to agree with George’s opinion, as I am beginning to really adore this castle, and all the people in it.

“So, are you going to tell him?” he finally asks.

He means Vlad. I scoff and shake my head at the little man. George seems to be one of those wizards. A person you meet and somehow instantly end up telling them your life story for reasons you can’t explain. The eccentric man knows everything from what Chad has done, to the flight over, and everything that happened in between. Minus the sexy bits since George doesn’t need to know Vlad can lay pipe like a *Mariokart* game on steroids.

“What?” My lips twist into a cringe. “Tell him that I’m a twenty-six-year-old woman and my dad is trying to force me to go home and marry someone I can’t stand?”

“Well, what is it you want to do?” He tilts his head and regards me shrewdly, the poof atop his beanie waving at me as he does.

“I don’t know, George. I’ve only just met him, and I’ve never done anything like this.” I breathe in the fresh air and sigh heavily, shrugging before I rest against a stone pillar near the bridge. “I don’t really know what to do. Hopefully help make Doyle’s party a success? I’m just waiting for the whole social media drama to die down because I can’t even think. I didn’t want Vlad dragged into that part of my life.”

“Are you looking to vent or get some advice?”

“Both, probably. I have no idea what I am doing with anything at this point.”

“This social media situation is not going to die down, but all you really need is a new narrative.”

I shove my gloved hands into my pockets, frowning down at the pavement. “So what do I do?”

He pushes his brown scarf—that’s somehow worked its way out of his winter coat—away from his face and wraps an arm around my shoulder. “Sugar, baby, you’re already doing it. We just need to think bigger.”

“Bigger?”

He pulls me away and we walk closer to the moat, his hand in mine. “What happens when you look at Vlad?”

“Ummm . . .” Just the thought of him and my body goes warm. I can practically feel myself begin to melt where I stand.

“Exactly. And that happens to everyone else. That man looks like sex and sin on two legs, and he can fix your little dilemma, lickety-split, plus add in some Doyle. Honey, you don’t need anything else.”

“They wouldn’t go for being in the spotlight.”

He lets me go and his hands plant on his hips. “How do you know if you don’t ask? Oh, sweetheart, I used to throw these galas and soirées when my ex-husband and I were together. Here I’ll show you.” He whisks his phone from his pocket and even though his hands are gloved as well, my phone pings when he tags me in the comments from an event that happened over a year ago.

Fifi is there in a rhinestone—surely it’s rhinestone—collar, and a handsome man is staring coldly at the camera over George’s shoulder. There’s a good twenty people around him and they’re all wearing obviously expensive suits. The whole theme screams money, but fun. Colors of green and purple are everywhere, even the small champagne glasses. Maybe Doyle is onto something.

“Oh, I love that.”

“Right? Girl, you just need to get Vlad on board, and we could make this thing the talk of Europe. I mean, look at this place. Not to mention the scenery.”

I frown when a large shadow moves below the moat's frozen surface. "What was that?"

"Where?"

"Aubrey." Vlad's voice comes from behind us.

I whirl around and gasp when I stumble, but Vlad's arms circle around me securely.

"Woman, can you not get into trouble for at least a few hours?" he growls in my ear.

"I'm sorry I didn't mean to get so close and—"

"That's my fault. I wanted to see the moat and Aubrey was kind enough to show me the way," George says behind us.

Vlad turns to my new friend, and I step away, tucking my arm through George's protectively. He's only a couple inches taller, and when he hugs me back, I just grin, knowing I've made a lifelong friend.

Vlad eyes him suspiciously before looking at me. "Indeed. Let's get back to the castle and find something less . . . deadly to take pictures of. If you come visit the kitchens, the chef has made hot cocoa."

George grins. "Oh, yes. I could use a cappuccino. And Fifi will need to eat lunch."

I smile when Vlad's jaw ticks, but he only nods. "This way. I'll show you one of the secret entrances."

"You never mentioned secret entrances!" I shout.

A small smirk pulls across his mouth, making me want to nibble on his soft bottom lip. "I've lived here all my life, and this place still finds ways to surprise me. Come, George, let me show you some of my home."

He claps George lightly on the back and George's eyes light up. "Vlad, honey, I would never turn down such an invitation. This place is simply magical. When was it built? I am loving the stonework."

Vlad's brow scrunches in thought before he gives George the history of the castle. His words fall away as I watch him

talk with his hands, pointing at different parts of the roof. I can find zero fucks within myself to learn about roofs at the moment, but this man . . . he could recite the urban dictionary and it would sound like poetry to the female population, and I am no exception.

He throws his head back with laughter when George says something amusing—bless him. The man can charm anyone, even someone as rigid as Vlad. He still has his moments, but I can tell he is letting loose. Maybe I did help remove his stick a little.

I pout, since George whispered something I couldn't hear. "What are you two laughing at?"

"Nothing, dear." He waves his hand up and down. "Men stuff. Just reminding Vlad here how to properly woo a woman."

I arch a brow at Vlad, whose look of humor grows. "Is that right?"

He mimes zipping his lips, silently saying he won't let me in on their secret.

George claps his hands. "Let's go get some of that cocoa and you can tell me more about this amazing idea of yours, Aubrey. Vlad, babycakes, you better be paying attention. I think your girl may be onto something here."

Vlad looks down at George, clearly perplexed by the man's liberal use of terms of endearment. "I beg your pardon?"

"Exactly. You can act all gruff, but we both know you're a softie, Vladdy. Now c'mon and make the little lady happy. It'll help your rating, which I looked at, by the way, and you don't even have one."

I nod enthusiastically and turn a pleading face to Vlad. "What we're trying to say is: no one knows this place is here. No one has a castle like this, and it would help me to tell people about it. There is so much content here."

"Not to mention it would put that little shithead in his place," George mutters.

I glare at him. *Keep your mouth shut.*

“Shithead?” Vlad frowns. “You mean the pathetic weasel over the phone?” He leans into me, his lips grazing my ear. “The one who hung up before he could hear what it sounds like when another man makes you come?” he purrs.

My entire body is covered in shivers, eyes wide at the thought of George hearing. My elbow meets his stomach, and a harsh *oomph* leaves his lips just before he keels over with a choked moan. “Yes, him, but don’t worry about it,” I rush out.

It’s not his place to fight my battles for me. I shouldn’t need him or anyone to help me with Chad. I made one stupid mistake years ago. Scratch that, I made multiple stupid mistakes and I have no one to blame but myself.

George clears his throat behind his fist, looking all sheepish. *As he should.*

“I’ll just head on to the kitchen so you both can chat.” George throws me a wink, and I’m beginning to realize he’s meddlesome. *Sigh.* But I can tell he has the best intentions. “Won’t be long till my little sleeping beauty wakes up. We can look at the secret entrance another time, eh, Vlad?”

Vlad places his arm across his stomach and bows. *What is he from? The sixteen hundreds?* I snort a laugh. *Who bows these days?*

“My apologies. Perhaps I could give you a grand tour at a later date as my treat?”

George’s cute little face turns red as a beet as he clutches his chest, giggling like a young schoolgirl. “That would be lovely.”

“Traitor,” I whisper-hiss back.

“Later, darling.” He gives a jaunty wave and walks away with his beanie poof dancing in the wind as he goes.

CHAPTER 23

VLAD



“AUBREY?”

She rolls her eyes, muttering obscenities under her breath, and I can’t help the irrational jealousy that spreads. *She would tell George what’s bothering her and seek his help, but not me? Why?*

The only person it could possibly be is that infernal male I wish would die a horrible death. The fact that he touched her before I did is enough to make me want to decapitate him. The moment she became mine, his grave was dug for hurting her at all—the fool just continues to move up his own expiration date.

“It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“I’ve never thought you were incapable.” The notion that she will not trust me rankles.

We walk for a few moments in silence, and she clears her throat. “Can I ask you a question?”

I’m going to regret this. “What do you want to know?” I take her hand in mine and pull her along toward the castle.

“How old are you?” she blurts. “We’ve been sleeping together for a week, and I don’t even know how old you are.”

“I’m twenty-nine.” *At least, I look that old in human years.* I am actually over centuries old, and haven’t aged a day since I matured.

I dislike that I have to keep the truth from her, and it is becoming harder to repress this need I have to be around her always. It's bad enough she seems to be pulling away because she knows so little about me. I frown with the knowledge that there isn't much I won't do to keep her in my bed and in my arms.

"Now, how is the shithead causing you stress?" I ask, batting my eyelashes. I just want her to open up on her own.

She laughs as she says, "That didn't last long." Her lips twitch, curving up slightly for a brief moment. "Chad posted a picture of me with a friend, but it's not very . . . appropriate? I guess that's the best word. People are upset and so my phone has been going off like crazy ever since."

"So they are upset that he posted a picture of you?"

She groans. "I guess it is time I tell you about Chad."

"Mmhm."

I slide my hands into my coat pockets and gesture for her to walk with me, nodding toward the pines near the back of the estate. She follows my direction, and the snow crunches beneath our boots to leave behind prints.

"I met Chad in college, and now that I think back, I'm pretty sure it was totally set up by our parents," she begins, talking with her hands as she walks. "Anyway, I'd started up a blog and video, not thinking it would turn into anything. I was making these shorts of the beach where my parents and I went on vacation, wanting to use them to set up a sort of online real-life travel guide. I stupidly agreed to let him help after they—him, and his parents, I mean—showed up there randomly." She scoffs, her nose scrunching up. "What a joke. But we managed to make a business of it, sightseeing beaches and playing on romantic things. He was such a gentleman at first. He wanted to take things slow, he said. Flash forward two years and I discovered him cheating."

Her shoulders droop, her demeanor completely at odds with her normal self. Her shine dulling.

I nudge her arm with mine, trying to distract her, and the smallest appreciative smile curls her lips. “Go on. I’m listening.”

He will never touch her again, if I have any say in the matter. He has never deserved her radiance, not if he was this willing to dampen it, and I am more than greedy enough to covet her shine like she is a precious jewel.

“I had even stupidly agreed to marry him, if you can believe it. I was so caught up in sponsorships and ratings, I couldn’t see straight. It’s so silly, and I would have been absolutely miserable if I had gone through with it.” Snow scatters from her uncovered hair as she shakes her head. “He has to know it wouldn’t have worked out. I just don’t think he was expecting me to move on so quickly.” Her whole face spreads into a smile, only for it to quickly fall. “But there’s no telling what our parents have been saying to him in the meantime—they’re not exactly the greatest.”

A frown furrows my brows. “Your parents aren’t against him after everything?”

Her lips flatten and pain gleams in her gaze. “No. My parents have a business deal with his, so they’re still pushing for it despite my feelings and what he’s done.” She throws her hands up, her fingers rigid with frustration, only to drop them to her sides as she sighs in defeat. “Pretty shitty of them, right?”

I clear my throat, swallowing down a plethora of colorful curse words. “What can I do to help?”

She bites her lip, and her cheeks flush as she looks away with a panicky laugh. “Actually, you’re already doing it. The party will give me enough content to last a few weeks for sure. I mean, no one is going to blame me for wanting to tell people about this place, and the stuff with Chad will all blow over eventually. I may lose some followers, but it’ll be fine, I think. So long as he doesn’t post more incriminating pictures.”

With her arms behind her back, she toes the ground with her boot, her gaze downcast.

I am going to rip his head from his body and then call in a favor and reanimate him just so I can do it again. My eyes flash red, snuffing out the brown in them for a brief moment, as the many options replay in my head of how to silence this ingrate. I will tear him apart. His entrails will become extrails, and there will be pain, so much pain.

If I had known he would retaliate this way, I . . . no, recalling how she came on my fingers, her back bowing off the table . . . I wouldn't have done anything differently.

“Are you okay?” she asks, her voice small and sweet. Standing in the snow with a look of concern on her face, she is like an angel who has fallen from the heavens to tempt me. She is absolutely stunning.

The male is obviously a blithering idiot.

“I'm irritated on your behalf.” *How can she not know how strong she is?* “Aubrey, I must tell you that I believe you are extraordinary. Anyone watching you talk about anything will see it too.”

She smiles, but it doesn't sit quite right. “Thanks, Vlad. That means a lot.”

“Did you like the necklace?” I ask while tipping my head, attempting to change the subject to one less tension filled.

The dipshit will get his comeuppance soon enough.

She turns to look up at me. “It is beautiful, but I can't accept it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Is it actually real?” Her shoulders lift nervously.

“What does that matter? Do you like it?”

She pales and comes to a stop. “Oh my god, it is real! I can't just walk around wearing a necklace worth a small fortune, Vlad. It's too much.”

My gods. I've never had such issues giving a woman a simple gift. I almost want to roll my eyes with a huff. Most women from my past would have been trying to get their

manicured mittens on such a piece. And here's this one, trying to give it back to me. Who cares what it's worth?

"But it reminds me of you," I say.

She snorts and purposefully stumbles into me. She throws her arms around my waist. "I'm still not keeping it, but thank you."

She is absolutely keeping it.

Her blue eyes are cool pools of liquid, beautiful like the sea before a storm. Her lips part, likely to keep convincing me, and I bend down, silencing her with a kiss.

Her hands reach up to pull at the nape of my neck and bring me closer. I growl against her lips. "Behave, wench."

She giggles against me, like I said something funny, which only annoys me further.

"It's too cold out here for you. Come. This way." I wave a hand toward one of the turret additions I added. "In ages past, many exits were necessary in case the castle was breached by enemies."

Her face finally lights up, as her gaze spans over the round tower as we walk toward the castle wall.

The castle entrance near the moat is one of my favorites, as there is no way to find the door without knowing which stone to press. She looks at the wall, perplexed as I push the rough stone, the edges worn away from centuries of exposure to the elements. There is the familiar sound of scraping and sliding, and finally a passage is revealed.

"At least if the castle goes under siege while I'm here, we have a secret getaway." She waggles her brows playfully at me.

I visibly cringe while groaning at her lame joke—despite the humor I find in it, in her. "There are quite a few entrances to the castle. Perhaps if you stay long enough, I will have time to show you them all."

Her eyes sparkle with excitement. "Where does this one go?"

I grin down at her. “Want to find out?”

“Okay . . . but you go first,” she says, uncertainty passing over her features.

I grab her hand in mine, pulling her with me. Lifting the lever, I wait for it to shut and throw us into darkness. She gasps, gripping my arm hard, and my chest tightens at how she clings to me trustingly. My sight needs no adjustment. I can see fine in even pitch-black darkness, but I know she most likely can’t see a foot in front of her.

I pull her along and stop at a breaker in the wall. I throw the lever upwards, and warm, orange globes crackle and flicker before moving up the tunnel to light the way for her. Old gray stone walls are revealed in the brightness. “Is that better?”

“Yes. Thank you.” She looks up at the tunnel and then down at our feet, eyeing the floor as if she expects it to move.

“Whatever are you doing?”

She lifts a boot. “Looking for mice.”

I look down at the spotless stone, noting that Hilda has been here recently. *So this is where she’s been hiding with the arrival of our new guests.*

“You may have a hard time finding any.”

Taking Aubrey’s nimble hand, her warmth bleeding into mine, I assume the lead. The long tunnels act as hallways, connecting all the hidden rooms together. Her delicious heartbeat returns to a normal cadence after being frightened.

She lifts her face to the ceiling, the walls, and the floor again. “How is it so clean in here?”

“We call in a cleaning service often.”

If she had any idea that the cleaning service was literally an ancient bundle of bones, she would be running for the hills.

One of the lights illuminates the small chamber further along and she melts into my side.

“That’s nice,” she muses. She rubs my arm lightly and contentment spreads through me at the small affection before she turns in my arms and comes to a standstill. “Vlad?”

Unsure as to why she’s stopped us, I ask, “Yes?”

Her arms go around my neck. “Thank you.”

I frown, wondering what she is thanking me for.

“I didn’t do anything.” *Yet.* I still have to remove that weasel Chad from existence and hopefully win her over.

I rub slow circles over her back. Wooing a woman in this century is quickly proving to be more difficult than any other, but if what I suspect is true, it will be worth it.

“You have, though. I didn’t want to tell you about Chad for a lot of reasons.” Her hands push at my chest, sure and sensual, making my cock jerk in my pants. Her mouth touches mine briefly, her lips soft and supple. “I don’t want to think about him anymore. I want to focus on myself and live my best life. For the first time in a long time, I feel free, like I can be myself with you. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of wasting any more of my energy thinking or talking about him.”

“Aubrey, I didn’t mean to—”

Her lips silence my words, and the action shocks me. She pushes until my back meets the wall, and her feet are dangerously close to a pressure plate.

“Aubrey I—”

“I haven’t done this in a while, so just let me?” she asks, eyes shining in the low light. Then she twists her tongue with mine, making me lose myself in her taste and the little sounds she makes in the back of her throat.

My dear, you can have and do whatever you please, I want to tell her, but I keep silent, wondering what it is exactly. Her fingers fumble at the seam of my pants, while her mouth remains firmly against mine.

“Aubrey,” I moan when she grabs my rapidly stiffening cock.

My eyes go wide when my slacks pool around my ankles and her hand makes a fist around me, jerking me to hardness. *Oh fuck.* My nose crinkles, and I stifle a groan seconds later when she kneels and her warm mouth encircles the head of my cock. I close my eyes and lightly fist my hands in her blonde hair. She sucks and I moan, flinching when I hear the snick of the stone step that activates the sliding door.

“Aubrey ...”

“God, your cock is so big.”

Behind her, the room goes silent and utensils clatter to the floor. Dammit. I didn't realize how close we were to the dining room.

The new chef looks as if she's seen a ghost. “What the fuck is this place?”

“I want to live here forever,” George exclaims from somewhere near the back of the room. *Cheeky bugger, that one.*

Aubrey's eyes widen with horror, and she glances behind her before squealing.

“Are we . . . are we in the kitchen?” Aubrey whispers, hiding her face at my groin where she's been immobile for the last few moments.

“Mhm.”

“Oh my god,” she whispers against my dick, her body temperature increasing with her embarrassment.

I chuckle at what we must look like, her kneeling before me and my pants around my shoes. I pull her up, gathering her to me and hiding her in my arms whilst using her to cover my erection.

“I tried to warn you,” I whisper, hearing her heart thudding in record time. It makes my fangs ache every time her pretty pulse flutters this fast.

She groans.

“What would you like me to do?” I ask her.

“Make me invisible forever?” comes her soft reply.

I chuckle into her hair. “I’m afraid that’s not within my power.”

“Was worried about that,” she murmurs.

Since I refuse to wear any foul undergarments, I reach down to pull my pants up and she pulls away once I’ve hidden my cock from view. Her cheeks are bright-red flags of color as she tucks her hair behind her ear, braving a smile.

Her gaze slides from mine as she addresses the room with her arms open wide. “Hi everyone. Vlad and I were exploring the castle.”

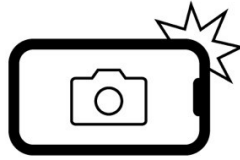
“Amen, honey,” George says, grinning like a lunatic. “But it looks like you were exploring his secret shaft.”

Bianca scoffs loudly, and Aubrey’s slight frame stiffens. I move to cup the back of her neck and turn her in my arms, kissing her soundly on the lips. The room goes silent as I force her tongue to dance with mine.

I no longer care who sees me kissing this beautiful woman with long-denied passion.

CHAPTER 24

AUBREY



“I AM GOING TO MURDER HIM,” I MUTTER, AND BURNIE ERUPTS into giggles again over the phone, making me wish I could reach through it to smack her.

Instead, I stare down at it in horror. The caption on the Insta post says, “Swear y’all, are these two not the cutest couple you’ve ever seen?” Attached is a super cute photo of me and Vlad, which wouldn’t be an issue at all, but we are locked in an open-mouthed kiss. George must have snapped the picture while we were in the dining room.

Bernadette’s ongoing snickering makes me a tad defensive. “It’s just a kiss.”

“With tongue,” she retorts, ruining my attempt at playing it down.

She would die if she knew what happened only an hour ago but, unfortunately for her, I’m taking that entire humiliating incident to the grave.

“Let me lie to myself,” I whine obnoxiously.

Still, she’s not wrong. Add that to the fact that I haven’t made mine and Chad’s break up official yet, and people are losing their minds. Probably because George decided the moment needed to state #instalove and #loveatfirstsight.

Setting the phone on my nightstand, I go back to what I was doing: sorting through crazy costumes that have been left by Vlad’s family over the years. So far, I have sorted through three massive trunks that are mostly full of super old dresses,

but I managed to find some fake vampire teeth, one fairy costume that looks a hundred years old, and a heavy cloak that Vlad or Doyle could wear. There's really not much here and my room looks like a disaster area. I cough at the dust.

"It did look like you're trying to inhale him face first." There's a pause, then Bernadette's voice turns soft. "He is seriously the cutest person I have ever seen, so we can't murder him. Besides, he is solidly saving your ass."

Of course she means George. Vlad being named the cutest person alive is just delusional. Hottest. Definitely. Cute, not so much.

"Awwww! Look at Fifi on Halloween."

"Don't let him fool you. That dog is evil incarnate. How in the hell is this happening? First the shit with Chad, and now this? What am I going to tell Vlad? He has no idea what this means."

"Considering the consensus after this photo has been online for an hour is that he's as sus as he is hot, I'm unsure myself. Obviously, he likes you, and I wasn't going to say anything but . . ."

"But what?"

"The man has zero anything on the internet—like nothing, nada, zilch, and his family supposedly died off a couple hundred years ago. Seriously, I can't find anything anywhere, Aubrey."

"I know. Most of the comments are calling him fake and me a hoe bag."

"If I didn't know any better, I would say he's a fraud, right?" Burnie asks with a sudden twist of concern. "Like he's just using the gimmick of it, and it's a fake Dracula name, right? Whose name is actually Vlad Tepesh?"

My eyebrows crinkle. "I don't think it's fake." Never once have I questioned who he says he is, even when we first met. He says it so matter-of-factly.

The line goes silent and then her keyboard becomes possessed once again, making me groan. She'll be like a dog with a bone now.

The thought that I've been banging some guy I hardly know has my gut churning, but I feel like I *know* him, and it's not just the sex talking. The hard pill to swallow in all of this is that I *really* like him, enough that I invited him home to my cousin's wedding.

"People still exist that have no social media presence, you know."

She snorts. "He's either a liar or he's a weird hermit. He said hello, my name is Vlad Tepesh, and what did you do? You just invited him into your pussy, him and his fake-as-fuck name. This is why we research," the hussy has the balls to say.

My jaw drops and my eyes narrow. "As if you wouldn't be right here where I'm standing. You're the one who told me to get the hot European dong in the first place! So, don't you dare."

"Well, at least we are totally sure he's not an axe-murderer, right? Like, if he were, you'd be a goner. Obviously, you're not, so let's look at your options, shall we?" Her voice is placating as fuck.

I sigh and keep digging for costumes.

"God, he is pretty. With a man that fine, I sincerely hope the dickening was good."

"Can we be adults, please?" I huff.

"Then you're welcome. It looks like it would be damn good, and I would have done the same thing, but are you listening? Because I know things."

I eye the pile of old, unwanted clothes, most of it yellowed and faded with time. Ugh, how long has this stuff been in here? "What things?"

"You know the CEO of Talbot Global?"

I blink at the mention of one of the richest men in the world. "Frank Stein?"

“Okay, so Vlad still doesn’t even have a profile pic, but he does have connections to Talbot Global, aka Frank Stein, and all his money too,” she says.

I scoff. “Burnie, how much caffeine have you had today?”

“Four red bulls and two teas, but that’s not the point.”

“No, the point is, Frank Stein? The guy is a billionaire. Why were you even digging into Vlad?” My hand smacks soundly against my forehead. “God. You do this every time.”

“I know, and you love me, but also this is why I didn’t tell you. Vlad Tepesh owns shares in Talbot Global—a huge amount. Which means connections with Frank Stein. How does a person go from being a nobody to being a secret part owner to a multibillion-dollar company?”

I shake my finger, pointing at a wall like I would her, fully knowing she can’t see me. “Bernadette Theodora Crenshaw, I don’t want you digging. No more digging. Promise me.”

“You never complained when I tracked Chad down across the city.” I can practically see her talking into the phone, rolling her eyes at me, and it drives me up the wall.

Grabbing my phone from the small table, I frown down at it less than a foot from my face.

“The point is, I don’t even know what Vlad and I are doing, and now he’s gone viral. And you have been digging into a company owned by a billionaire!” I whisper-hiss that last bit while bringing the phone mic right up to my lips.

My head thumps and I can feel a headache coming on. *I am losing it.*

“Aubrey, stop it. You’re halfway around the world getting googly eyes over a man you do not know. If you think I’m not going to do some digging, you’re cracked out of your mind. No one will even know I was in there. Don’t be mad, or I’ll start crying into my ice cream early.”

God, I hate that she’s right. I take a couple deep breaths and reality sets in again. The man I’m seeing is a hermit, but knows Frank Stein? *Make it make sense.*

“Ugh, I need wine for this, and I cannot believe you tried to guilt trip me. You don’t even *eat* ice cream,” I say, sliding on my bunny slippers, the ears flopping. I shove my wireless earbuds in as I walk to make sure Burnie and her crazy talk isn’t overheard.

“True, but I will straight-up tell my lactose intolerance to fuck off if you break up with me.”

A smile curls my lips, almost ruining my false tone of irritation. “You realize how ridiculous you are, right?”

“Whatever. I’m not going to lie to you though—it looks like he is hiding a lot.”

My stomach flips with dread. Please don’t be a sex trafficker. I duck down the hallway, heading toward the kitchen. God, I hope I don’t bump into Vlad. My stomach flips a second time.

“What do you mean?” I finally ask when I think the coast is clear.

“I mean, most organizations have significant firewalls protecting most of their assets. But it’s strange. I found this small subsidiary, and all the files are encrypted. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen. Think of Fort Knox level security.”

I frown as I whisper, “But what does that have to do with Vlad?”

“I’m still working on that, but I did find one old document. Apparently the Tepesh family has been part of Talbot Global since its creation.”

What? “But Talbot is worth billions. If that’s true, then why are they needing help to set up this grand opening? If Vlad is a partner with Frank Stein, then why this whole thing?”

“Maybe he wanted to extend his portfolio? Who knows?” I can almost hear her shrugging through the speaker. “To be honest, I’m wondering why that place isn’t swarming with more models.”

I flip the light switch on in the kitchen and glance at the spotless brick-encased range and countertop. “Right, like what the hell? Just one Miss America, no biggie.”

“I’m serious, Aubrey. I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m getting a hinky feeling.”

“You have been having episodes of hinky feelings since the second grade,” I say, trying to remember which door is the pantry. They really need to get a map made; it would make this entire issue easier. Phones in every room wouldn’t hurt either.

“Listen, whatever they have going on, it took me days to break into it, and it will take weeks to sort through it all,” she murmurs, just as I realize which door leads to wine.

“How much trouble would you be in if you got caught?”

“As if any of those dipshits he hires could catch me.” She snickers across the line.

Bernadette is a doll, a cute, freckled, redheaded doll who prides herself on never meeting a computer system she can’t crack. This isn’t the first or the last time we’ll have to have conversations about other people’s intellectual property.

I open the pantry door, making my way to the stairs leading to the cellar.

“Well, I guess you won’t be bored then.” Pausing at the top of the steps, I mutter, “God, it’s so dark in here.”

“So turn on the lights.” Then a growl comes through the phone before she continues. “Thing is, I can’t get into the hard drive. Words cannot express to you how many red flags that is for me.”

I step down into the cellar, running my hand along the wall in search of the switch. “I *am* looking for the lights, and I don’t see what Frank Stein’s hard drive has to do with Vlad.”

“Wait. Why do you need lights when it’s daytime?”

“I’m in the cellar. People only die in the cellar at nighttime.”

“Right, that sounds legit. Anyway, ask Vlad about it. Talbot has been around for a couple hundred years. He has to know something. Maybe one of his granddads bought shares at one point but, from what this says, his family helped found the company.”

I lean against the wooden railing leading down to the cellar. “Nope. You’re on your own,” I say, but the line is silent when I expect a retort. “Burnie?”

My phone screen reads *call disconnected*, and isn’t that just my luck. Dammit. I rip my earbuds out and shove them in my pocket, then search around in the dark, wondering where this damn light switch is. A sharp scraping sound sends a cold shiver up my spine.

“Okay, the creepiness levels are rising.”

“Aubrey? Whatever are you doing in there?” comes Vlad’s voice from the doorway.

I scream and whirl around to look up at him bathed in the kitchen light, like there’s a halo around his body.

“Hey,” I croak, hoping he didn’t hear any of our conversation.

His arms are folded, but I can’t see his face. I get the feeling I was overheard, but at least he wouldn’t have heard the insanity that is my best friend and her illegal computer actions.

He makes his way down the steps and heads straight for the wall opposite the stairs. The lights flicker on.

“Why would anyone put the light switch there?” I murmur.

He turns, grinning like he’s happy to see me, and it settles me. My heart melts at the smile, reminding me of the picture George took and how someone called him “hot man meat” in the comments.

I smile and pray it doesn’t look like I’m panicking. Fuck me and fuck Chad, but mostly fuck George and his cute, cuddly face. Burnie, too, for freaking me out. My stomach somersaults with dread and I suddenly remember the reason

I'm in here in the first place. The room is lined with so many shelves, all filled with old bottles, some with bright-red stoppers. I eye a crate just to the right inside the door that looks like a label I recognize.

"What are you doing?" he asks, stepping closer, and I try to move away without making it obvious.

"Umm, I needed wine 'cause, uh, yeah. I really need to talk to you." My shoulders slump, and I squeeze the first bottle I grab ahold of to my chest.

"What's wrong?" he says, concern lining his voice. It makes me want to kiss him.

Focus, Aubrey. "It's about some stuff that's been posted online, and I just wanted to give you a heads up about it."

"If you want to speak to me about what is bothering you, we should find somewhere more suitable than the cellar." He frowns, his face going all broody.

It reminds me that there are possibly millions of women salivating over him and wanting to punch me in the tit right about now.

"You're viral," I blurt. He needs to know, and the longer it takes me to tell him, the more of an asshole I will feel.

"I'm what?" he asks.

"George snapped a picture of us and posted it."

"Oh."

"Yes, *oh*, and now you are viral."

"So, this has nothing to do with the shithead?" he asks, his forehead crinkling as he does.

My mind blanks. What shithead?

"Oh my god, are you still on that?" I whine. "No, it doesn't have anything to do with Chad." He grips my arm to help me up the stairs like a gentleman and I spiral. "Well, I say that, but it kind of does."

"It's okay." God, why doesn't he sound concerned?

I shake my head. “I didn’t even think about that. Fucking George! Chad will probably try to make this ugly, too. Not that I mind anyone knowing about you. Shit, I am saying this wrong. You’re not a dirty secret.” My words die off as he forces my lips together, squishing them between his fingers to give me a duck mouth.

“Aubrey, stop worrying. I am sure everything will be fine.”

“Okay,” I say, the sound muffled behind his fingers.

“Will you listen for a moment and not speak?”

I nod and he smiles, his hand still covering my mouth. “Are you sure? Because I don’t want to interrupt your incessant rambling.”

I glower at him and roll my eyes.

His hand moves to cup my cheek. “Good. I don’t care about that weasel, Chad, and truly I don’t care what George does, as long as it doesn’t upset you. To be perfectly honest, George probably assumed this would fix the issue after I asked him for his help. So, if you want to blame anyone, love, blame me.”

I stand, blinking up at him like an owl. “Wait, what?”

His hand moves to cup my elbow and we make our way out of the cellar, coming to a stop near the kitchen counter. “I am curious about what it is you do. I haven’t been on social media long, and the simplest solution was to see for myself. George offered his services.”

My jaw falls. “Huh?”

He places his hands on the counter on either side of me and lowers his head to stare into my eyes intently. “Aubrey, I want to date you.”

“Oh, shit.”

What is even happening? I start to say just that before reality kicks in. *You just got out of one relationship.* But does that make it too soon?

Nausea somersaults in my stomach when he pulls away. “You don’t seem enthused.”

“I just, yeah . . .” I suck in a deep breath. “It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just that I still feel like I’m in limbo with Chad. I don’t want you to feel like you have to fight my battles, and now the internet thinks we are a couple. It feels rushed, you know? Not to mention, I live literally across the world.”

Just say it: I haven’t been totally honest with you, and I’m worried I’m here so I don’t have to focus on how fucked up my life is. I’m in Romania, sleeping with a man I’ve known for one week, despite recently going through a break up. I just really don’t know how to handle all this, but also, if I were going to date anyone, it would be you. Who would say no to him? Shit.

“I don’t care about the internet. I only care about you. Things can go as fast or as slow as you want them to. I am not trying to rush you, but I do want to make my intentions known.” He raises his brows and leans back to shove his hands into his pockets. “I would prefer Chad not have any part in your decision, and it does not matter where you live. If you are mine, where you go, I go.”

My stomach dips, and he turns to rest his backside against the kitchen countertop.

I can practically feel him shutting me out with each second that passes, and panic hits. I start to fidget, twisting my hands together nervously. Oh man, don’t say I’ve hurt his feelings. Why is this *so* hard?

His eyes narrow on me and his jaw tics. “Is this why you didn’t want to tell me about Chad earlier today?”

My face flushes. “Yeah, I mean . . .” I shake my head, not knowing what to say. How do you say that you realized you never loved a man that you basically took care of for years?

Relief flows through me when he says, “I am willing to wait.”

Those eyebrows of his wrinkle as he eyes the bottle in my arms. He places it on the counter before taking my palms in his hands and pulling them to his lips, kissing each one.

“Before you start torturing George for his lack of loyalty, are you ready for our dinner?”

Our dinner. We’re practically dating already, and what’s weird is the thought doesn’t make me want to run as much as I imagined it would.

I adore the idea of a night out on a normal date, instead of the ones I’m used to where it’s a farce—nothing more than a simple set up of cameras selling romance to the public.

“I would love to, but, umm, do I need to change?”

“No. You are perfect as you are for where we are going.” He doesn’t even bother looking down at my outfit, a cashmere sweater and jeans he bought, his eyes never leaving mine. He smirks and reaches for the wine bottle, moving it further off to the side.

He chuckles boyishly. “If only she would look at me that way,” he teases, as I gaze at the bottle longingly.

“Ha ha, very funny,” I mock, a smile threatening beneath the surface. “Where *are* we going?”

His brown eyes roll away as he turns. “I’m afraid that part is a surprise.”

My gaze narrows at him as we walk. “I’ve had enough surprises to last me a while, I think.”

He ignores my expression, his lips curving into a slow grin. “I believe, madam, you will continue to be disappointed if surprises are an issue for you.”

A few minutes later, I’m looking at a mountain of food, and Vlad is obviously nervous. It is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. “I have set up sort of a movie theater in a room that overlooks, umm . . .”

I look around at the tall ceilings and forest-green papered walls, but the most interesting part of the room is the shape of

the windows. Massive stone oval windows line the room, and I can just make out a matching railing outside.

“It overlooks where the bats are?” I continue for him.

“Yes, exactly.”

“You called it a refuge, didn’t you? How about the bat cave?”

His eyebrows come together as he nods. “I suppose that fits.”

“Bat cave it is.”

I gaze out the glass, wondering if I will find any bats nearby or peering inside even.

“They should have left the cave not long ago. We can camp out here tonight, and maybe see them on their way back home, yes?”

“Yes, that sounds cool. They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

“I think they are.” Then he looks at me softly as he says, “But I think you are exceptionally beautiful too.”

I grin at how cute he can be when he wants.

My stomach growls and drool practically starts at the corner of my mouth from looking at the table full of food on one wall. It seems Whitley, the new chef, has really outdone herself—there are even cupcakes with icing and sprinkles.

“I asked Whitley for a picnic,” he says, and I glance at the massive TV above his head. He holds my chair out for me, then he fidgets, awkwardly adjusting his tie.

“She went a bit overboard, but I am so not complaining.” I smile, sensing his nervousness. “I can’t wait to try a cupcake.”

He eyes them warily. “I confess I’ve never eaten one.”

I regard him closely and he doesn’t seem to be joking at all, but I guess he does look like he’s never had sugar in his life. “Wait, so you mean you’ve never had sweets? How is this possible?”

“A very strict diet,” he says, as my attention catches on the curved TV again. “I also have not seen very many American movies. Would you like to watch some with me?”

My mouth drops open when a huge burgundy-colored couch swivels around. “That is so cool.” It continues to move across the floor as if on gears hidden beneath the floor before coming to a stop in front of the massive television. “I am so down.”

While he thinks I’m too distracted to notice, he fist pumps the air. He clears his throat, as if quietly embarrassed by what he’d done. I consider picking on him, letting him know I saw it, but decide not to.

A smile pulls at my lips. *He is the cutest.*

Vlad

I CAN HEAR the adrenaline pumping through her veins and can see the way her eyes dilate with excitement. She’s bouncing in a rush, and I can feel it. It’s almost visceral how human she is, and how she can somehow make me feel it too.

I stare at her, wondering how it is that this slight female can make me want to hand her the world. Anything, everything she asks for, I want to give her. If only she *would* ask.

She giggles, popping another kernel of popcorn in her mouth, and I am lost. *The Mummy* movie credits roll on the screen, and she’s been giving me grief about not liking the main character the entire time.

“He is just some money-grubbing gravedigger, the same as the rest of them.”

“You did not just say that.” Her laughter goes up in pitch, and the corners of my lips curl.

My god, she is adorable.

“You do realize everyone loves Rick O’Connell, right?”

“He is obviously the bad guy. How Imhotep was treated is terrible. He only wanted to be with his love, and that jackanapes *fucked* it up.”

“Uh huh. Tell me how you really feel.” She laughs again, sputtering in my face and cackling, her head thrown back as she does.

Normally laughter in my vicinity, much less when it’s directed at me, would be cause for beheading at the least. But when she does it, I can’t help but pay attention, marking the occasion and noting how to make her do it again. After all, if not for her, I would never have attempted to try new foods. Her laughter fills me with warmth. A warmth that thaws my cold, undead heart. I will have her at all costs, even if she does mock my ignorance. Her presence and her soft smiles make me feel alive.

“All he did was love one woman for eternity,” I say in his defense.

“Vlad, honey, I think you’re missing the point. He was killing people.”

“People kill people.”

I sigh, remembering I come from an era where murder was considered normal.

Her flushed face lights up again, and she giggles. I will watch a thousand movies if it means I get to see her like this.

“Do you even realize how beautiful you are?” I ask her.

She stops and settles back into the couch. “You’re probably more beautiful than I am, you know. You have that whole European thing going for you.” She leans over and touches my face. “I mean, just look at your cheekbones. I may have a hard time keeping the ladies off you tomorrow night.”

I dip my head forward. Wanting to get away from the conversation of my face before my own cheeks flush, and I lose some of the precious blood I sucked down earlier, I ask, “Did you find any costumes you like?”

She takes a sip of wine and shakes her head. “None for me, no. I will probably just wear one of the dresses you bought.”

A smirk curves my lips, knowing she will be wearing a dress I ordered the same day as the ones in her closet. It should arrive tomorrow.

Pulling her across the cushion to me, I enjoy the way she melts into my side as I breathe the scent of her hair into my empty lungs. Her gaze flicks around the room, landing on the large table that was full of food, which now looks like a village attacked it. I’m quite proud of ourselves.

“This was the best day,” she sighs out, her cheeks rosy and her blood an inviting hum in her veins, rushed by the small bit of alcohol in her system. She glances out the window, her expression content as she watches the falling snow.

“It was, wasn’t it?” I agree, leaning back into the couch with my arm over her shoulder. She gets to her feet. “Where are you going?”

She arches a brow at me. In one swift move, her bare breasts bounce into view, her shirt thrown to the floor.

Fuck. I’m shocked into silence by the prettiest breasts in creation and one thought becomes a mantra in my skull. *I want to pound my cock so hard into her pussy that it knows my name.*

My cock jerks, and with one unthinking wish the next moment, I lunge. The button flies from her pants, pinging loudly against the wall as I mentally remove it by accident.

She gasps, staring down at her pants in horror. “What the hell?”

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath, squeezing my eyes shut. Do I admit I didn’t intentionally attempt to remove her clothing with force?

Before I can decide how to explain away her wardrobe malfunction, a crash sounds downstairs. I tense, holding back the urge to shift at the suddenness. The last thing she needs to see right now are my claws and fangs. *What the fuck is he doing?*

She jumps and looks toward the door. “What was that?”

“I will be right back,” I tell her with my hand up.

I have neither the time nor the patience to deal with this. From the sounds of the shouting below, Doyle is arguing with the chef, and now Aubrey is looking down at herself as if she’s grown two sizes larger in the span of minutes. They’re being so loud I bet the village can hear them.

I growl in annoyance. She should be staring at my cock while it drives into her sweet cunt right about now.

“I’m going to fucking kill him.”

“Kill who?” Aubrey asks, staring up at me, a look of confusion on her face.

“What?” How the hell did she hear my thoughts? Or did I say that aloud?

Her brows furrow as if I’ve lost my marbles, but I already lost them centuries ago. “You said, ‘I’m going to fucking kill him.’”

“Doyle. I’m going to kill him for interrupting us.” I shove to my feet. “Go to my room, shower, and get comfortable. I’ll return.”

“But I—”

I break her protests off with a kiss. “I’ll go deal with them. You relax. I’ll bring back some wine, shall I?”

“Yeah, okay,” she says, smiling.

I rush toward the exit, pretending I didn’t just hear her ask if there is a scale in the castle. *I will murder him.*

Then again, perhaps it was the best timing. One simple thought of removing her clothing and a button flies off? This will need to be addressed soon.

I open the door and the sound of shrill shrieking meets my ears.

“Is that Whitley?” Aubrey shouts in question.

“No. I believe that was Doyle.” I would know that girlie shriek anywhere.

She laughs, the sound twinkling and light, before it fades away.

My body is a blur of movement to the untrained eye as I run through the castle to the floor below, where all the ruckus seems to be happening. I come upon the great hall.

“For the last time, there will be *no* unicorn cupcakes,” Doyle says.

“Cupcake unicorn, you idiot!” the chef replies, and Doyle’s already red face blazes brighter.

“Okay, but cupcake unicorns are necessary,” George deadpans, his hands on his hips. “Not that anyone is paying attention to me anyway.”

George is standing on top of a large sarcophagus lying flat on its back. I haven’t seen it in decades, but I’m pretty sure Doyle stashed it here for safekeeping at one point or another.

“How did you get up there?” I ask him, noticing scattered glass across the marble floor.

Doyle and the chef are still arguing, oblivious to anything else, it seems.

He shrugs and gestures to the two imbeciles. “They’ve been at it for almost an hour now.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry about the glass. I thought maybe some vodka would calm everyone down but they’re being ‘responsible,’” he says, making air quotes. “Not that it worked anyway.”

He sways drunkenly, hiccupping. I spot the empty bottle of vodka by his side, given to my father by the sultan of the Ottoman Empire back in the 1300s. Anger I haven’t experienced in ages has my claws wanting to extend, only for me to groan when I remember I’m in the presence of humans. I also like this particular one, surprisingly.

I wave the drunken fool toward me. “George, why don’t you get some rest and I’ll take it from here?”

“Oh, not on your life. I’m waiting for the moving men.” He hiccups again, inducing more swaying motions.

“The what?”

“Doyle mentioned a crew of movers, big boys I would say, by the look of that couch. I can’t wait to watch them move it. I just wanted to come down and meet one . . . or three . . . for dinner.” He sighs unhappily. “Course, they haven’t made it in yet. Have you heard anything?”

“Movers?” *This entire farce is folding like a house of cards on its head.*

“Well, duh, big red truck. Honey, how else do you suppose all of this will get set up in a day? It’s going to take the whole”—he breaks off, yawning—“night,” he finishes, and I smile.

“Come, let’s get you down from there and tucked into bed.”

I hold my hand out to him, and he takes hold of it light as a feather and presses a hand to his chest like a blushing matron of old. He clears his throat. “Chivalry isn’t dead, be still my heart.”

Once I help him get two feet back on the ground, he happily sways to the door, twirling like a ballerina every once in a while. *I do like George.* “Do you need help to your room?”

“Nope. Got it.” He waves over his head.

I turn to the couple arguing near the back balcony doors, which are covered in ghastly black-and-white curtains. Doyle looks like he’s ready to commit murder, and if circumstances were different, I might actually be enjoying this. But no, instead of undressing Aubrey with my teeth, I’m dealing with whatever the hell it is Doyle is doing.

But it does look like he’s been busy.

My favorite part of the great hall, the massive fifteenth-century fireplace that takes up an entire wall, is transformed into a spider's nest. There is even a tunnel web at the bottom with what looks to be a spider nestled inside.

“How clever. I wonder how they did that.”

Of course, the question goes unanswered. Doyle and Whitley are so caught up in their own melodrama they have yet to notice my presence.

The petite chef is still wearing her uniform, but her hat is missing, her dark hair coiled atop her head. Her eyes blaze with fury. “Of course your opinion matters, Doyle. Just not to me.”

I frown at the rejoinder. It's odd to find a woman who isn't instantly smitten with Doyle, and even stranger still that he, for whatever reason, despises her. He usually loves women, and they, in turn, adore him.

“I do not like you,” he grumbles out.

She scoffs. “If you don't like me, congratulations, I don't give a fuck, *Doyle*. What I do have fucks to give about is how *I* want to do *my* job. How about you go do yours and worry less about what I am doing unless you have any complaints about the food?”

“The cupcakes—”

Her hand rises in the air to stop him. “Other than the cupcakes I haven't even made yet. You know what, Doyle? Since you all told me to take control of the catering team, I will bake what I like, and if you don't like it, *don't* eat it!”

Whitley storms off, leaving Doyle fuming like an untried lad. Is he really about to chase after her? I use my telekinesis to pick up the cast-iron fire poker hidden beneath the cobwebs and send it crashing against the back of Doyle's thick skull.

He swivels around, furious as intended.

“What in the fuck are you doing?” I growl.

“What the fuck did you just hit me with?” he says, wincing as his eyes turn back to their natural brown. He rubs the back

of his head.

“A fire poker. You and your new girlfriend are ruining my night, not to mention your obvious inability to keep your baser self in check,” I say, noticing the way his skin ripples under his suit jacket.

This only happens when Doyle is extremely on edge, which is very rare. Since the first year of him being turned, he has never once lost control of himself, which is unheard of for any supernatural being. I expect no less of him—not with everything he has been through.

“She is *not* my girlfriend,” he says, his tone offended.

“I have never once seen you be so unpleasant to a lady.”

His hands ball into fists where he stands and his nostrils flare wide. “She is not a lady! She is Satan in female form sent to drag me off to my own personal hell. She refuses to listen to reason, and it’s uncanny how unaffected she is by me telling her no. What possesses a woman to step into my domain and tell me how to run my household? She’s always on about how I need to— What are you doing?”

I smirk as my fingers fly across the screen of my phone. “Sending the chef a list of your favorite things in life. She sent me her number.”

“Fuck you, Vlad,” he snarls, lunging at me.

I slap my palm against his suit-covered chest, and I can feel the wall of power behind his form. The man has the strength of Goliath, trapped in an eerily human body.

“You are literally vibrating, Doyle, and we have more guests coming in twenty-four hours.”

He blinks, then visibly shudders in an attempt to suppress his anger.

My irritation, however, is still simmering. “Aubrey is in my room, naked, and what the fuck am I doing, Doyle? Where am I? Babysitting a werewolf who needs coddling for the first time in his three centuries of life? I think not.”

“If you ever hit me with a fire poker again, I will eat you.”

“Keep your shit together and I won’t have to.”

The soft sound of footsteps clipping down the hall has his whole body tensing once more. *Strange.*

“When will the movers arrive?” Whitley asks, reappearing with her features contorted in irritation.

What is it with these people and movers?

“Why? What is it you need, chef?” I ask *politely*.

I grin at the unadulterated annoyance written across Doyle’s face. At least some fun will come of this.

“George mentioned the movers coming late tonight, and I wondered if they wouldn’t mind moving some things I need for the morning. It’ll make much more sense to move them tonight without guests everywhere so the caterers can get through.”

“Oh.” An idea forms, and I grin wickedly, showing my teeth. “I’m sure Doyle has nothing pressing to do at the moment. He can help you.”

“I need the rack ovens moved before tomorrow.” She eyes Doyle, her lip curling in disgust. Her voice is sultry, but there’s a challenging glint in her eyes. “As long as he keeps his mouth shut during the process, I suppose.”

My eyebrows raise to my hairline at the double entendre.

As predicted, Doyle’s eyes blaze with cold fury, and I really wish for the first time I’d paid attention to what it was they were arguing about in the first place.

“You know we can fire you at any point, right?”

“Doyle,” I snap out, trying to suppress a growl. “We need her.”

“Fine,” he says, his eyes tracking her as she leaves the room again.

My gaze narrows on him. “This was all your little idea, and I am more than willing to send everyone away within the hour if it means I’ll get a bit of peace and quiet.”

He smirks, but there's a malicious gleam in it. "Oh, but that's not true, is it Vlad? Not when it benefits Aubrey and her social media career."

"Not sure if you've noticed, Doyle, but our female problems, if you could call them that, are vastly different."

He chuckles, yet his nose crinkles with spite. "Oh, they're alike in the ways that matter, old friend. They're both trying to kill us—you with garlic and affection, me with diabetes and hate."

"You're joking," I scoff.

"If only I were." His voice is deep and disgruntled, much deeper than his normal speaking voice. *What the hell did she do to him?*

"I don't know how you're allowing her to do it, but it's obvious she's getting under your skin." I step forward and flash my eyes red purposefully to remind him of who I am, and who he fucking works for. "Get yourself in check and do it quickly."

His eyes flick away from my own, but his skin buzzes again in annoyance at me. "Fine."

"Fine," I bite back. "Meet me back here at midnight."

The faster all of this is over, the faster I can have Aubrey to myself.

CHAPTER 25

VLAD



SHE IS THE MOST STUNNING CREATURE IN EXISTENCE. IT ALMOST makes up for the fact that I missed my opportunity to touch her.

After dealing with Doyle and his infuriating women drama, I came back to my room to find Aubrey asleep from too much wine. I had slipped under the covers with her, and pulled her so she lay upon my chest, and watched her as the hours passed.

Peace rolls over me the moment her mouth eases open in sleep again. She is so perfect. Even when the soft snores get loud, as if she's attempting to imitate a foghorn, I cannot help but find her appealing. It's unlike anything I have ever experienced. I will do anything to keep this creature and will gladly listen to her snore for the rest of my days.

She curls into my chest, fast asleep. I pull my phone from my pocket, taking a picture of us together, her wrapped in my arms and sleeping like an angel. She lets out an ungraceful snort and groans. Beautiful. I squeeze her lightly and brush the hair from her face.

My ears pick up on Doyle's footsteps down the hall, and I glare at the doorway. As soon as I take a step outside, he is sure to follow. He won't be able to resist, which is for the better in this one instance, as I am assuredly not doing everything on my own.

It has been some time since I have moved around so many objects. The nursemaid in him won't allow him to leave me in

peace for very long when expending that much energy. At least I achieved some rest, although sleepless as it was.

I extricate myself from Aubrey, who grumbles but thankfully rolls onto her side. “Cookies and coffee,” she mumbles in her sleep, her lips smacking loudly before she begins a light snoring.

Doyle arches a brow when I greet him in the hallway.

“She makes a lot of noise for something so small.”

“Yes, she does,” I comment, not bothering to look at him as he falls in with my steps at my side.

“So, what’s the plan?” he asks. “I have some of the decorations up, as George instructed. How we lucked out with a literal home designer in the castle on the eve of something like this, I will never know.”

“George has proved useful, and the plan is to remove the furniture from the room.”

He groans. “That’s a lot.”

“It shouldn’t take long, and need I remind you: it was you who decided to use the great hall as an antique catch-all. We can move the furniture in one night. I need it to be perfect for her.”

Doyle chuckles, as if he knows something I don’t.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. Just something Whitley said about the seating and dining.”

“Whitley, is it? Have you made up already or does she still wish to flay you alive and turn your cock into a whoopie cushion?”

He winces, and I can’t help a satisfied smirk. For as long as I can remember, Doyle has been a pain in my backside. No one in all that time has ever managed to get under the skin of the unflappable guard—a position he carved for himself. I refuse to feel an ounce of empathy for the man when it has been his life’s mission to annoy me for over a century.

“I would rather chop my own dick off. Just the scent of the woman sets me on edge,” he says, his accent changing to that of a Londoner.

I stop in the hallway and ponder that for a moment. “On edge how? Like you want to bed her?”

“Definitely not. Did you not hear what I just said?”

The level of animosity he seems to have for the woman is troubling.

“Maybe we should consult Jekyll?” I ask.

At one time, Jekyll was the only doctor who could treat Doyle, especially when his turning made it almost impossible to reason with him.

He bristles, and the hair at the nape of his neck lifts, but he shakes his head. “No need. She’s not a threat, just annoying and completely unbiddable. The woman must have been raised in a barn. I have met dozens of chefs over the years, and never have I had such a reaction.”

“No matter. I’ll ask Frank to do a search. Maybe he will come up with something you missed.”

His mouth goes flat as his eyes darken. “I already have.”

Shocking. He’s been in talks with Frank and didn’t think to tell me—strange. “And?”

“Everything checks out. She comes highly recommended, even. Logically, my reasoning tells me I’m the problem.”

Irritation pours over me. “Then keep that shit to yourself and help me. I need this all to go well, and your bullshit does not help matters at all. What if she discovers what I am?” I say, shoving him to the wall. “What we are. You are literally vibrating with the change.”

“I will handle it. It has to be the full moon.”

“Doyle, there’s a fucking full moon every month. We have seen every full moon, every month, for the last two hundred years together, so don’t give me that rubbish like it’s Frank

you're talking to. It's as ridiculous as watching bouncing cat videos."

He chuckles as his eyes roll at me. "Those are spectacular."

I wrinkle my nose. "Absolutely ridiculous. I don't care how much the media adores them, they're obviously not intelligent enough to realize cats want dominion over humans."

"You are absurd."

"What's absurd is how furious I will be if this evening doesn't go to plan."

He snorts. "Do you hear yourself right now?"

"My only concern is that, tomorrow night, Aubrey gets what she asked for—to keep her busy for the next week."

"You've talked her into staying longer already?"

"She will be staying in my room as my guest, and the rest is none of your concern," I say pointedly as I kneel and press the pressure plate to slide the fireplace from its position in the great hall.

He blows out a hard breath. "You understand that once Aubrey posts about the castle, or anything remotely about you, her ex will make things worse."

I glance over the room, noting the disarray of furniture and boxes that will be set to rights shortly. "Look who hasn't been paying attention—that's old news, but that is why I need it to be perfect. And I will destroy the imbecile if he does attempt to get between us. It is not an issue."

He throws his hands up in weak surrender. "If you say so. It most definitely needs to stay a non-issue."

It will. Nothing will stand in my way of winning her. The battlegrounds may have changed, but I would not mistake the playing field as anything other than war. "I will unalive him."

Doyle lets out a bark of laughter. "You have got to stay off social media. Unalive? Who even are you?"

With the fireplace moved, Hilda steps into view, her skeletal head swiveling around eerily.

“Unnngh,” she complains at me.

“I know you just cleaned in here, Hilda,” I answer, the only person able to understand her. “But we have a dilapidated castle to decorate, and we now have . . . five hours to do it,” I say after pulling back my shirtsleeve to look at my watch. “We are just storing the furniture here for the time being.”

They both groan.

“Stop it, the both of you. Hilda, you know you’re not allowed upstairs, so don’t even think it. You must stay hidden, and you”—I eyeball Doyle, now reclining on the massive chaise lounge—“go help the chef, or so help me, I will hire men in loincloths to do it just to spite you.”

He leaps to his feet theatrically and runs to Hilda, grabbing her bony fingers in his hands. “Men in loincloths, in the castle? Oh my! Whatever shall we do?”

“Oh, for *fuck’s* sake.”

“Hilda, he’s gone mad, madder than usual. Want to help me crypt him for a century or so?” Doyle says dramatically. “I bet Aubrey would appreciate men in loincloths, too. George will need a bib for all his drooling. I have no idea Bianca’s opinion on loincloths, unless one of the movers is rich.”

My upper lip lifts in disdain and I fold my arms. “You’ve made your point.”

Hilda huffs, yanking her bony fingers from his hand, her jaws clacking together ominously. The feather duster she holds shakes. “Unnngh.”

“No, you old dragon, I don’t need any blood bags.” I pinch the bridge of my nose in frustration. “Go find something else to clean in the crypt.”

“Unnnghn.”

“Then go clean it again,” I exclaim, lifting my hand away in disbelief. “One more week, Hilda, darling, and you can clean any part of the castle you desire. I swear to you.”

Hilda parries with her duster so quickly the wind whistles by my ear when she moves. Centuries older than myself, she is only slightly weaker, and I truly do not have time to play her little games. “Unh ungh.”

“Fine. In a week’s time, you may even clean the old cathedral. But leave the altar alone—those cobwebs have been there since grandfather decided to start a religion,” I say, rolling my white dress-shirt cuffs to my elbows as she leaves.

“She’s been acting more strange than usual,” Doyle remarks.

“You know she can hear you. Leave her be.”

“I know what she is, but it seems like you forget. She’s probably bored. God knows I would be with only cleaning to keep me entertained.”

My lip curls in censure. “You know nothing about Hilda. Now go do as I say.”

“The things I do for friendship,” he grumbles under his breath.

Shaking my head, I take in all the bric-a-brac left over from the past centuries. What a fucking mess. “You told everyone to expect lots of noise from the movers, yes?”

“Yes. Why?”

Utilizing telekinesis, I whip a chair into the air and chuckle when he scrambles around an odd-looking couch. His eyes widen with true fear.

Holding up his hand, he tries to stop me. “Do not, Vlad. Don’t you dare. Not again.”

“Dare what?” I cock my head at him. “Slapping you with furniture may get you in the mood to help. Besides, it’s been forever since I’ve been able to lift anything of this size. This will be fun.”

“I just don’t want you to overdo it, old man,” he says, chuckling as if he doesn’t believe I’ll follow through. *Just for that, I am going to make him catch furniture until he drops from exhaustion.*

“Doyle ... play catch.”

At the words, his eyes flash yellow as he loses his temper. “Fuck off, you insolent son of a whore.” And then they widen when he sees the furniture floating above his head.

“Shit! No no no.” His eyes begin to glow in earnest. “Quit it. This is *not* funny.”

I watch him run backward with his arms raised. An evil grin crosses my lips at the sight.

“Dammit, Vlad,” he groans out, catching the antique armoire before it slams into his pretty face. He grunts under the weight and speed with which I tossed it. “Alright, that’s enough.”

“Not nearly. I hope you can keep up, Doyle. Let’s decorate, shall we?”

“These pants cost five thousand pounds!” he shrieks as a newly airborne chaise lounge barrels toward him.

“This is what you get for turning into a fucking peacock while I wasn’t looking.”

His head whips around in outrage. “I beg your pardon?!”

A grin spreads across my face, full of childlike exuberance just as the sharp tear of cloth erupts. It’s been forever since I was able to wield my powers like this. Why did I ever think it was a good idea to let myself wither away into an aged, powerless husk?

“I cannot wait to tell Frank you need to order new pants.”

“Fuck you!” he barks out, running to catch the buffet barreling toward the stone wall across the room.

CHAPTER 26

VLAD



WALKING IN MY ROOM TO HEAR THE SHOWER GOING, I collapse onto the chaise instead of going to Aubrey.

Lethargy hangs like a heavy blanket on my mind, leaving only the image of her asleep in my arms, or waking up on my cock. The idea plays on repeat, for several moments, in several different ways. I imagine the plump cheeks of her ass bouncing up and down on me, her sweet cries in my ears. I haven't been able to get them out of my head since leaving her last night, and I am greedy to touch her again. Exhaustion and hunger batter at my senses.

We spent all night moving and arguing over where the decorations should be hung, but it is done, and she should find no fault with any of it.

I throw my arm over my face and sigh. *I do hope she likes it.* I'm only doing this for her, otherwise I wouldn't give two shits what the damn *hotel* looks like.

"Are you okay?" her sweet voice calls, and I find it remarkably soothing. "I was worried about you and was just about to come find you."

Satisfaction floods me as I realize she *would* come looking for me. I lower my arm and turn my face to stare into her eyes, and it's as if time slows, almost to a halt. My blood rushes through my veins, and my nails bite into the flesh of my fingertips, wanting to claw quite literally out of my skin to get to her.

"I'm fine. I hope you slept well."

Her lips pout as she comes closer to stand over me. “I did, but I was disappointed when I didn’t find you in bed with me.”

Visions of her under me while my cock sinks between her thighs bombard my brain. *Shit.*

Now that she’s near, her sweet scent calls to me. It brings me calm, even as it makes my cock stand at attention. I want to hold her to me, comfort her, and make her beautiful body feel all the ways I want her.

The soft fabric of her sweater does nothing to hide her curves, and I envision shredding it, ripping it away, and leaving her bare.

What is making me react this way? Whatever Frank put in that sunscreen must be wreaking havoc on my senses, or that last blood bag was off.

Her breasts are close enough to reach up and touch, and it’s already driving me to insanity. I mistakenly take a quick breath in, regretting it immediately at the scent of her so close. Need, nerve-racking need batters at my rib cage. I shouldn’t have asked her to come here last night, but I’d been greedy to fill my sight with her. I just can’t seem to stay away from her.

“I should rest.” My voice wavers as the words leave my mouth, and I grimace.

Bite, feed, sink into her. Claim her. It feels like it’s been ages since I’ve been inside her.

Currently fighting myself from either biting her or fucking her into oblivion, I shift on the sofa, and growl when my cock rubs against the inside of my trousers. *Fuck.* I’m not going to be able to resist her. *Get her out.*

I close my eyes, straining to locate where Doyle is, but don’t sense him anywhere in the castle. *Shit.*

“Vlad?”

Strumming my fingers on the couch, I snatch at a decorative pillow and toss it onto my lap in the hopes of hiding my predicament. “Why don’t you go downstairs and meet the others, hmm?”

“And go to the spa with Bianca?” She makes a face. “Gag. No, thank you.”

I’ve been holding my breath for what seems like hours when a soft hand strokes across my forehead. Oh, damn me, *her touch*.

Her eyebrows wrinkle. “Strange, you don’t feel warm. You’re kind of cold.”

She moves back and fidgets awkwardly, her expression concerned, and I have to stop myself from reaching for her again.

“I’m just tired and need rest, but don’t want you to feel I am keeping you here. George, I am sure, would love the company.” I try again to get her from the room as sweat beads on my forehead and I close my eyes, blood rushing in my ears.

“Or I could stay and take care of you.”

“No.” My tone is full of hostility, and I wish I could take the word back when a flash of hurt crosses her face. “I mean to say no, I want you to enjoy your day. Why do you think I went through all the trouble to do *any* of this?”

“Because Doyle—”

If she knows nothing else, she will at least know the lengths I would go to for her. “Hang Doyle. The only reason the rest of today is happening is because of you.”

“That is the sweetest thing,” she says softly, spinning to sit next to my side on the chaise.

“Yes, it is. Now be gone, woman. I can’t handle this headache *and* an aching hard-on when you get near.”

My fangs pierce through my gums, wanting to fully emerge and bite into her neck.

Her teeth snag her bottom lip, and her cheeks blush beautifully. *Fuck, I want her.*

“Okay, just let me check your fever one more time.” Her touch makes my control slip, allowing her scent to invade my

nostrils. Her voice hesitant, she says, “You really don’t look so good.”

The perspiration dotting my forehead is revolting, my clothing suffocating. I push up off the chaise and stand, leaving her puzzled as I head to the bathroom, needing to feel cool water on my feverish skin. *Feverish. Me?* I will take Frank’s head for this. He will suffer for the rest of his undying days. It can only be the sunscreen doing this.

I know I extended too much of my power after not utilizing it for an age, but I should not be reacting so intensely.

“I’m fine, truly. You and Doyle both fuss like mother hens,” I manage to force out, pulling off my suit shirt and undoing my pants.

I am not fine at all. My vision waivers and my skin feels hot and uncomfortable. I inhale roughly through my nose and everything in me seizes.

I lean against the stone wall of the bathroom, my stomach churning with the need to go after her. *What the hell is happening to me?*

“We’re allowed to be worried about you.”

Her scent gets stronger the closer she comes to the bathroom, and fear like I haven’t felt for centuries fills my chest. My self-control slips again, my vision fading to red, and I can’t clear it. I hit the button on the wall and damn near yank the shower door off its hinges in my haste to get under the spray of water and away from her.

“Can I get you anything?”

Eyes wide, I leap back against the cold tile in the furthest corner of the stall and meet her gaze through the glass.

Her eyes drop and dilate instantly at the sight of my cock, her mouth forming into a soft O shape. “Oh, wow.”

My fangs fully erupt from the top of my gums, and I pivot toward the spray of one of the jets to hide them. I brace against the wall and shake my head. Hunger gnaws at my insides and makes me veritably convulse with want.

Fucking hell.

I glance at her, at the cloth of her sweater lovingly hugging her breasts, and I begin trembling at the sight of her nipples that tighten to peaks under my gaze. “Mother Mary and all the saints.”

“Vlad? You’re really worrying me.”

It’s my name on her mouth that does it. I want to hear her cry out my name right now, wail it. I want it to be a litany on her lips. I want her to fucking scream it with the orgasms I force from her body.

The irony is that I would tear off my own arm to keep from hurting her and yet my instincts are to bite, to rip into her flesh, and to feed. Red blazes across my mind even as it clears from my eyes and finally my fangs retract. She is precious to me, and I *need* her.

My mind fogs, and I extend my hand out. “Come here.”

She backs away, shaking her head and covering her breasts from my view. “Nuh uh. I only came in here to check on you.”

“Don’t leave me.”

She bites her lip but thankfully doesn’t leave. I wait and let her see the want in my eyes, the only part of myself I can reveal. I stroke down on my cock and her mouth drops, followed by a little gasp that is ecstasy to my ears. *She isn’t looking away.* Her body calls to mine the same as mine does to hers.

I breathe in deep, and my balls draw up in their sac as I stroke up and then down again, groaning, then look directly into her wide blue eyes. “Do you want this?” I stroke again harder, showing her how it was made just for her, and *only* her forevermore.

Her gaze is heated and full of lust, but she arches a brow, looking directly into my eyes. “You’re supposed to be sick, sir.”

“I am. And I am suffering with it,” I say, taking a step toward the glass to open the door, and she backs away.

My eyes become hooded, and the corners of my mouth quirk as I back away, settling onto the smooth wooden bench against the shower wall. I spread my legs wide, making her watch me. Her eyes fall to my cock, and I press my lips together in a hard line. Every molecule in me wants to devour her.

“Aubrey, do you want me?” *Please, for the love of god, say yes.*

She seems to startle at my question and blinks rapidly. “I, umm, yes. I do.” Her voice turns raspy and low.

“Come here,” I request a second time.

Her bare feet pad across the wet shower stall, the color high in her cheeks as her stare is riveted between my legs. She pauses at the spray of water.

I suck in a hard breath through my nostrils, inwardly groaning at her soft, sweet scent. “Take your shirt off.”

Her heart rate picks up, and those tiny harmless teeth she has make an appearance, biting softly on the edge of her lip, but she does as I tell her. A thin blue bra—that does nothing to hide her succulent nipples—holds her beautiful breasts in place. I swallow at the swell of her hips under her skintight jeans. Her curves make me want to weep.

My cock jerks at just the sight once she unclasps her bra, and I stand, needing closer to this beauty. Walking to her, I pump my cock in my fist, staring into her eyes, pinning her with my gaze. I kneel before her. My knees press into the marble floor as I touch my lips to her stomach, and warm hands comb through my hair as I set about removing her pants.

She gasps when I bend to kiss over her panty-clad pussy before removing those too, leaving her completely bare.

I kiss one hip, reaching my hand to grasp her voluptuous ass, squeezing and gripping where it meets her thick thigh. “I dreamed of you fucking me,” I whisper, remembering how vivid my dreams were of her when I finally slept.

Her heart stutters, the air leaving her lips on an exhale, and I get to my feet. Staring down into her wondrous blue eyes, an inferno of need rushes me.

I could come right now with how my body can so vividly bring her to mind. The image of her sucking my dick with her cunt takes my breath.

“I dream of you when I sleep, I crave you when I’m awake.” I step back, roaming my eyes over her and groan, clenching my fists at my side. “Let me have you.”

“Then have me,” she breathes, her body flushed with desire.

I scoop her into my arms, step back to the shower seat, and guide her to sit across my lap. I settle her back to my front so she can’t see my face and, more importantly, my damn mouth. I can’t seem to control my fangs right now; they throb, begging for me to lance her subtle skin.

It’s all I can do to keep from humping her like some stable boy. My fingers want to bite into her soft, luscious hips and wreak havoc on her body the way she has on my senses.

“You really will be the death of me,” I whisper in her ear, done with the attempt at keeping my fangs at bay.

They slide from my gums, and I want to sigh with relief, unafraid she will see them with her facing forward in my lap. She whimpers, and her sweet flesh warms with the hot spray of the shower. I rake my fangs down her throat, and she lets out a high-pitched gasp, causing my cock to pulsate *hard*.

I cup her neck, and her pulse flutters under my palm. It picks up the pace when I grip her full breast in my other hand and thrum her nipple, then pinch to sting her. She releases a breathy cry, throwing her head back onto my shoulder.

“So gorgeous,” I groan against her skin. Touching her seems to be easing the worst of my need, her cries little rewards for my patience.

“Please, Vlad.”

“Mmm, please what?” I just need to hear she wants me.

I hold her to me with one hand as the backs of my fingers make their way down her body, pausing in the crease of her thigh an inch from where I know she wants me. I stop, and she wiggles on my lap, attempting to force me into submission. Oh, how I want this human, in any way I can have her.

“Touch me.” Her voice is soft, needy.

I chuckle darkly. “But if I touch you”—my fingers skim across the lips of her pussy— “I’ll want to bite you,” I say into the shell of her ear, scraping the edge of my teeth across the soft flesh just below it, then kissing her there.

“Yes.” She has no idea what she’s agreeing to.

My eyebrows squeeze together as I wince, regret and longing ambushing my being. With a nip at her ear, I make my confession. “If I bite you, my love, I won’t be able to stop.”

“Oh god.”

The hair on the nape of my neck stands on end and my eyes bleed to red. I thrust my fingers inside her, finding that small spot that makes her body quiver and her mind turn to mush.

“Fuck, this pussy is so tight. So wet.” The sounds it makes as I thrust my digits in and out are music to my ears.

She moans as I pinch and roll her nipple, and slow my fingers inside her. She chases them with abandon, her hips bucking—undulating on top of me, and I want to fuck her senseless. My grip turns hard with the need to take her again and again until she is changed forever and *mine*.

Her thick thighs start shaking atop mine and she bares her neck to me as her fingernails rake into my forearm. “Oh fuck, yes! Please. Bite me. Do it now.”

I can’t take it anymore. The plead of it sends my mind reeling, and I foolishly push her up to her feet.

Fuck it. Faster than she can comprehend, I turn her in my arms and impale her tight pussy on my cock in one thrust. She screams out, and I push my fangs into her soft neck the next moment with a muffled groan. Her warm skin is tight around

them, and the pressure of it eases the longing I've been feeling. My eyes roll as I drink her in, the sounds she makes full of pleasure in response. Her blood is nirvana in my mouth, and my taste buds explode into sheer euphoria. My body vibrates with ecstasy.

It's been so long since I drank straight from the vein. I told myself I would never again, but somehow with Aubrey, it feels so fucking right. Her nails score down my back, and the pain only makes me burrow deeper with ravenous need. Her legs tighten on me every time I thrust into her, and I bounce her harder on my cock, her body gripping me like a vise.

The cries exiting her mouth meld and bounce off the walls as I fuck her harder, slamming my hips against her over and over in a frenzy. The wood bench begins to give beneath us, cracking from the force of my movements. With her sweet blood staining the seam of my lips, I lift my head and watch her face, admiring how beautiful she looks with her head thrown back.

I pull back to watch my cock slide in and out of the hottest haven it's ever known. "Look how pretty your pussy is when I conquer it and make it mine."

Mine. Mine. Mine. It repeats in my head like a prayer.

She moans, her lips parting even further as I attack her sweet spot.

Her head lolls forward and, with her eyes beginning to cross, her wails get louder. I bite again, and her whole body seizes in my arms, tightening down on my cock just as I stand, lifting to move her to the wall before the bench gives way.

"Vlad!" she yells, her nails digging in to keep herself to me.

I press her back against the tiles, then her cunt takes my breath and my seed in the next moment as her lush thighs squeeze around my hips.

"Holy god." I thrust in fully, sliding her wet and thoroughly fucked body up the wall, where I pause for a long moment before rocking into her again and again. My legs

almost give out as I fill her, and I gnash my molars to stay upright. “Fuck. You are perfect,” I whisper into her hair.

Once I calm, my fangs hide away again.

I don’t want to stop, but the realization of what I’ve just done hits me with post-coming clarity. My eyes widen as my gaze flicks across her wounds.

I bit her. Fuck, I actually bit Aubrey! How the hell am I meant to explain this to her?

My mind controlling abilities don’t work on her. I can’t just wave my hand and make her forget, and she’ll notice the puncture marks on her neck. They’re still bleeding, but my clotting saliva should start to take effect soon.

The longer I stare at them, the more a sense of revelation comes over me. A satisfied thrill encompasses me at the sight of my markings on her soft skin.

Why do I care? If I want to keep her, she’ll find out eventually. Why not now? It gratifies me seeing them, like I am supposed to do this with her.

“Oh my god. What the fuck was that?” she breathes out with a shudder.

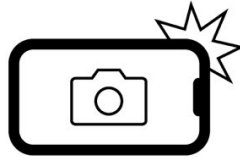
“Hopefully our nightly plans for the foreseeable future?” I tease, despite my reservations. Even now, I want to lean forward and suck on the marks or lick them as I softly pump into her sweet pussy. The idea of doing this every night fills me with elation.

She looks down at me, her eyes warm and shining with happiness, her body shaking from the aftermath. “I think I can handle that.”

I look up at her with all the complete and utter adoration I possess, refusing to settle her feet back to the ground for a little while longer. Everything I am is hers, and will be for the rest of my days. *My mate.*

CHAPTER 27

AUBREY



“NO FREAKING WAY.” ALL THE SWEET THOUGHTS I WAS having a few minutes ago are gone and have left the building.

I stare in the bathroom mirror, blinking, unwilling to believe what my eyes are seeing. Is that . . . is that *blood*?

I start to collapse, but catch myself against the bathroom sink. *What the hell?* I try to say, but it comes out as a weird whimper.

My mouth opens to tell him exactly what I think about him keeping his teeth off me.

This is going to be terrible, and photos— Wait. Those . . . are those puncture wounds? I gather my wet mop of blonde hair out of the way and push myself up as close as I can to the mirror. “Oh my god,” I whisper.

Those are totally puncture wounds on my neck.

If I bite you, my love, I won't be able to stop.

The room is spinning and there's a slight buzzing in my ears. *He bit me! Vlad bit me like a freaking vampire!*

My heart and stomach drop.

I hear the closet door of his bedroom close and blow out a breath, slumping against the counter as I do. *Oh, I want to vomit.* This is just a dream.

I squeeze my eyes closed, then open them wide and groan. *What the hell, dude?* I've never even had a hickey and here I am with freaking bite marks.

Slamming my eyes shut again, I rub them in confusion, and when I finally open them . . . the wounds are . . . fading?

I blink and stare in the mirror. *They're gone?* The marks were just there. How are they gone?

My tummy flips and somersaults like crazy. *I know what I saw.* Turning around when I hear movement behind me, my heart seizes in my chest with him entering the bathroom. *Fuck.* I take a peek at the floor to see his bare feet stopped just inside the bathroom doorway. Neither one of us says a word, and it's like one of those weird movie moments, as if I could hear a literal pin drop in the room. I lift my gaze, my eyes trailing up his blue jeans and catching on the top button that sits undone, then passing over his beautiful chest I have trailed my fingers over countless times in the past week.

When my gaze finally lands on the stony brown of his eyes, he folds his arms across his chest and leans back against the door frame. I can't get away with him there, and he silently watches me.

His expression is hard, unyielding. A look of desperation passes over his features when I don't move or say anything. It's like he's waiting for me to gain the courage to speak. *And we are panicking.*

Faster than I can blink, he is in front of me, his hands coming up to cup my cheeks. My heartbeat thuds with alarm even as my brain is going haywire. Suddenly my thoughts snag onto one simple truth. He is so sweet. How is he this sweet? He's a *vampire*.

His eyes search my face like it has all the answers, and my lip quivers.

"Your heart is racing," he finally says, which points out that he can *hear* it.

"I, umm . . ." My brain fights to come to terms with the fact that the man I have been falling for is somehow a freaking vampire.

My brain trips, short-circuiting on how gentle he has been with me. Not once has Chad ever been worried about how I'm

feeling, even after fights, and here I am, staring up into Vlad's coffee-colored eyes that are full of worry for *me*. Just clear and genuine concern that makes me wish I were a little braver.

It's been an entire week with the guy, and he only just bit me now?

His jaw ticks, the movement completely at odds with the hint of vulnerability in his gaze. Is he nervous about me finding out?

I rub the now-healed spot on my neck, and the impatient grumpy pants lowers his brows and looks at me with determination in his eyes. "Aubrey, just fucking ask. I am waiting on you to *ask*."

My eyes land on the bathroom sink, on the same ornate faucet that matches the tub, a lion's maw open wide. It seems so long ago since I admired it, and yet that was just days ago. I stare unmoving, unsure of what to say—or to think. He finally comes closer and grazes my cheek like I'm something precious.

"Are you a vampire?" I hate how I sound like every basic vampire movie I have ever seen come to life, but what am I supposed to say when the man I'm sleeping with *bites* me, and literal fang marks are involved?

"Yes," he says.

"Oh my god," I gasp when he tips my chin to his face.

Brown eyes glow red, and there are literal *fangs* in his mouth, dripping over the sides of his gums. *Holy. Shit.* He smiles reluctantly and my stomach drops to my feet. He *is* a vampire. I *slept* with a vampire.

"You bit me." I lift my gaze from his lips to stare up at him, and his expression is full of chagrin.

"Yes."

His hands fall from me to shove into his pockets, his eyes avoiding mine as he shifts away slightly. I wanted him to tell me I'm dreaming. Tell me he's not some crazy vampire being who lives in a castle and bit my neck.

“If I say I hoped the marks would fade before you saw, it would be a lie. I am sorry if I hurt you, but I am not sorry for what I have done.”

“How is this possible?” I whisper under a quiet breath.

Vlad shrugs, and I realize I should have figured it out sooner. Vlad? As in Dracula the vampire, Vlad? Oh god, I need a *drink*.

“I need you to know it was never my intention to tell you.” He reaches out to brush my hair behind my ear, and once more I can only think of him as sweet and gentle. He looks where his *fang* marks were just minutes ago, admiring the length of my neck lovingly. “You must understand, it goes against every rule my kind has, but I cannot repress my desires for you any longer,” he whispers. He raises his head and his bloodred, glowing irises fade to their usual brown, and his fangs disappear. “You have bewitched me.”

Oh my god, he's a vampire for real.

CHAPTER 28

VLAD



SHE KNOWS WHAT I AM. WHEN I BIT HER, I THOUGHT SHE might have some questions, but only if she took the time to really look. The bites were painless, but I wasn't expecting her to be so . . . nervous? I think I just wanted her to accept them, and me, willingly. Still, she isn't screaming, and that's a start.

You bit me, she said, as if she wasn't truly questioning me being a vampire and her asking was a mere formality. She looks curious, excited, but I can also see the hesitancy in her eyes.

I would love to know what is going through her brain right now, but unfortunately I only have moments before I need to leave. Aubrey's event is tonight, and I only came here for a few minutes to collect my thoughts and rest. I hadn't expected her to still be here, or for my need for her to come on so strongly. This isn't how I wanted to introduce her to what I am, but I can't take it back—nor do I particularly want to.

"I know this must be startling for you as a human to understand or even accept, but I promise it will be okay." I rub the knuckles of her hands in light circles, calming myself as much as I hope I am calming her fears. "I want you to know I would never hurt you." Then, hoping to brighten her mood, I let a forced, but otherwise charming, smile fill my face. "Unless it has you screaming my name like in the shower again."

She has to know I would never want to cause her pain of any kind. If my bite is too much, she need never fear me

feeding from her again, even if it kills me.

Her cheeks flush, revealing I didn't take too much from her. Her eyes then land on the half-caved-in seat we almost destroyed in the shower stall, and her heart picks up again for all the right reasons.

"I can't believe vampires are real."

"What we are is unknown and mostly hidden, Aubrey. There are rules in place to keep our kind safe. You can't tell anyone what I am, or that I really exist. I'm just a fairytale, and apparently a goth's wet dream, but that's all I need to be to humans. A dream, a myth, a lie."

"Then why are you telling me?" She does that lip biting thing that just instantly makes me want to steal her lips with a kiss. Her heart is slowing, and her shaking is easing.

"I need you to trust me, trust that you are safe." I hold the side of her face and brush my thumb over her lip to stop her incessant nibbles. "Will you give me until tonight to explain?"

Her face turns cute with a pout. "Why can't you now?"

A smile curls my lips, and I'm just thankful she's not freaking out. This is what I need—for Aubrey to be calm and accept what she can for now.

I lean in to plant a kiss at the corner of her jaw so I can speak near her ear. "Because a certain social media woman wanted to throw a ball in my home, and there is still much to be done." Her breath hitches when I nip her ear. "And we both know Doyle will howl and throw a hissy fit if I don't do my part."

Finally, I get what I want. She gives me a small giggle, and the sound is music to my worries. "He does like to get pissy."

My vision fades to red again and I shake my head to clear it. I glance at Aubrey, and my entire body seizes. Goddammit, even now, I still want to fuck her into the wall again. *I'm posturing like an aggressive gorilla during mating season.*

I pull back and she looks at me as if she's staring directly into my charred and blackened soul, like I've exposed it for

her.

I managed to hide it well, but I do fear what's going on in her mind. I hate that I have to leave, and I'm aware I'm pouring all my trust into someone who could very much damage me. She is a social media fiend, and I doubt it'd take her long to gain attention. Though, admittedly, everyone would just think she's gone insane.

She would destroy my trust in the process if she does, and many may hunt her for it, but ... I'm choosing to have faith in this woman because I think I'm in love with her. I want to believe this was all meant to be, even the messy way I revealed to her what I am.

"You promise to talk to me about this tonight?" she asks, and I nod. "What about Doyle? Is he a vampire, too?"

I laugh, but instantly cough when she looks disappointed in my reaction. "That's not my story to tell," I say as I clear my throat. "But no, he wishes he was like me, in all ways."

I wink and grin when Aubrey's lips twitch, suddenly put at ease.

"I have to go, but I'll see you tonight." I kiss the corner of her lips and grow disappointed she doesn't chase mine for more.

Although the last thing I want to do is leave her alone, I will never put Aubrey in harm's way for anyone. As much as I trust Doyle, I need to keep him from her until the scent of what I've done has faded. He will just have to wonder what's happening for a bit longer. And to be honest, I would like to know that as well because it is all her decision. I hope she accepts me, this, us, but I can't force her.

I cup her cheek. *What an unusual and vibrant creature.* I want to hold her and feel her in my arms until she agrees to be mine. She's going to let me explain, and so far, there haven't been any hysterics. She is perfect. Her pulse hasn't jumped since I touched her again, and I thank my maker she isn't afraid.

Someone somewhere is laughing at the absurdity of this chapter in my life. *Me* concerned with decorations for some inconsequential dance over making sure she understands? Preposterous. Better for Doyle to believe I am so fascinated with her that I would paint the castle pink to see her smile, rather than him finding out I bit her and there are new developments. *Not just yet.*

“I can either finish planning your ball, or I can have a go at seeing if we can repeat the shower. You did seem to find that very exciting,” I say with mock exasperation, since she isn’t answering me.

“No!” She sputters a laugh and grins. “I think I’ve had enough shower sex and almost falling to my death for one day.”

I laugh in return. “Then we’ll talk tonight.” I place a finger over her lips. “But you can’t tell anyone what you’ve learned.”

She arches a brow and purses her lips a moment. I can practically see the wheels turning in her mind.

“Okay,” she mouths against my finger, and my body is instantly flooded with happiness.

She will be mine. *My bride.*

Aubrey

“WHAT IS YOUR LIFE? I mean, how is this possible? Do you know how many times I have watched Bram Stoker and you, of all people, find *the* Dracula? Come on, man,” Burnie says over the phone, the sound muffled as she eats.

As soon as Vlad left me alone, I called her. Of course I called her! He’s *freaking* Dracula and I need to tell someone before I lose my mind. Plus, whenever I promise not to tell a secret, Bernadette is always excluded from that. She’s my best friend and my platonic soulmate. She doesn’t count.

Now that I’m back in my room, I eye the made bed from the couch, toying with a loose thread on my pink shirt I changed into from my recovered suitcase.

“Burnie, this is serious.” I cup my hand around the bottom of the phone and my mouth, sincerely not wanting anyone to overhear me, even if I am in a bedroom behind closed doors. I’ve lost my earbuds, but that isn’t going to stop me. “Legit-as-fuck vampires.”

After several messages trying to explain the rollercoaster I’m currently riding, that also feels like it’s on fire, I gave up and called her. There is no way possible to have this convo via text. Vampires are real? What the actual eff?!

“So, like, he for real bit you?” she says, around a mouthful of food.

“Yes. I already told you that,” I whisper.

She swallows audibly. “And you didn’t get a picture? Where’s your head at, dude? We need receipts.”

I walk to the bathroom just to get to a mirror to look at the exact spots where the marks have faded. I’ve done this so many times now I can’t even count. I keep expecting them to pop back up.

“No, they faded by the time I left his bathroom.”

“Or he’s messing with your head.” I can hear the disbelief in her tone.

The thought isn’t a new one. I mean, obviously the guy has fangs. I know what I saw, and he even admitted it to me!

“I don’t think he is,” I grumble as I make my way back to the couch.

“If that’s true, why didn’t he do it earlier?”

Okay, she kind of does have a point. He has had plenty of time to bite me and has only bitten me once. He also told me after that we would talk about it later, and he would answer all the questions I had. I just didn’t realize how many questions I’d have within the next hour.

“When I said he could bite me, I didn’t mean this. I just thought he meant like a love bite or something, you know? Men are weird sometimes.”

“Can confirm, but I like. And, if he is a vampire—can’t believe I’m saying this but it totally tracks—I mean, it’s not like he can help it right? What if you’re literally his only food source?” she says.

The thought of him biting someone else sends rage crashing over me. “Hell, I better be the *only* food source.” My eyes widen. “Oh my god, what if he’s been biting the other guests?”

Burnie bursts out laughing.

“What?” I will kill him.

The question makes her laugh harder, the bitch.

I get to my feet and pace, unable to keep still. “I swear to god, Bernadette, I will murder him.” He is *mine*.

She snort-laughs through the phone. “You’re gonna what now? Murder a vampire? Do you even hear yourself right now?” Her cackles grow louder. “Should I ship you a wooden stake?”

She has a point. “He said he wants to talk.”

“So talk to him then! What are you going to do though, huh? You’re for real staying another week?” I swear, it sounds like she doesn’t believe me and is just humoring me. Well, in her defense, I probably sound crazy, but I appreciate she isn’t calling a mental institute.

I throw my hands up in a fit of frustration. “I don’t know what to do.”

She breathes heavily and her computer chair squeaks as she moves in it. “Okay, here’s the thing. I know what I would do, and it wouldn’t be packing my bags to come home.”

“You’re taking this really well, you know.”

She doesn’t respond for a few seconds.

“Burnie?” Her keyboard clacks like mad and I wince. “What are you doing?”

“Making sure you have a way out of Romania if anything happens. Maybe we can go ahead and get a flight booked just

in case.”

My stomach leaps a bit, and I wish I could hug her. *Smart.*
“I love you.”

“Love you too, bitch. I swear, if you find another vampire, let me know. Oh my god, do you think the butler is? The photo you sent me of him screamed ‘I’m an animal in bed.’ I volunteer as tribute so hard.”

I roll my eyes. “Uh huh. I’m not even sure that’s what he is yet. I just know Vlad bit me and said I’m safe.”

“Right, but how cute is that? And, seriously, I have high standards. No werewolves or monsters need apply. Vampires are definitely the alpha species.”

“I’ll be sure to never tell Vlad you said that.”

“Oh my god, does that mean I actually get to meet him?” She squeals, and I have to pull the crackling speaker away from my ear.

A knock sounds on the door a moment before it opens. “Hello, hello darling!” I see his white head of hair before his familiar grin.

Shit. Can’t I just get a moment to freak out?

“Hi, George,” I say, trying my hardest to smile.

“Does he know about Vlad?” Burnie whispers.

I glance at him as he shuts the door and moves deeper into my bedroom.

“I don’t know,” I answer truthfully.

“Why the hell are you whispering?” she asks.

“How the hell should I know? Why are you?”

Now we’re both just whispering through the phone.

“Is this a bad time? Vlad mentioned you might need help getting ready,” George says, smiling.

Vlad sent him? I squint my eyes in suspicion.

“No, just trying to ask the bestie which shoes to wear with my dress.” I grin, knowing Bernadette would rather do anything but that, and is right now more than likely wishing me dead. She is so not the outfit type and has a blog devoted to pajamas and how they should be accepted at every social function. I don’t think she’s wrong, just that she may have questionable hills to die on.

“Am I on speaker?” she asks.

“Nope,” I say, getting to my feet.

“In that case, fuck your shoes, alright? Shoes are just devices created to further instill our own futile existence. The only way I ever wear shoes is if I have to leave the house, which again, is entirely ridiculous. Like, who even needs to or should have to leave their house?” she rants on.

I stop listening because I have heard the “why people shouldn’t have to leave their homes for any reason” rant for years. It has been an argument I’ve been an unwilling party to since sophomore year of high school. To say I am over it would be a whole-ass understatement.

“Yes, I am aware,” I say, my tone hinting at how hard I’m eye-rolling. “Been aware for twenty years now.”

“Well, everyone should be. Wearing pajamas while sitting behind a desk does nothing to anybody. Why should we be made to wear uncomfortable clothes all the time?”

“Burnie, I’m gonna have to let you go. I think George would be appalled if I suggested wearing my PJs tonight.” I wink at George, who acts as if he will faint if I dare leave the room in my sleep attire.

“Well, duh. That’s not what I meant, but fine,” she says, and I laugh. “Hey, for real though, be careful, okay? He could be Dracula, or he could just be some really hot weird guy with a made-up last name and weird teeth. I’m starting to get creepy vibes with how off the dead end you sound right now.”

“Uh huh,” I say, instead of pointing out how, just a bit ago, I had literal fang marks on my neck. “I know what I saw.”

She yawns. “Call me if you need me. I’m keeping my phone on.”

“If I have service, I will.”

“Ugh. I’m ready for you to be home,” she moans.

My lips curve into a weak smile. “Me too,” I say as I hang up the phone.

I beam at George, who is quite literally jumping in place. I don’t like that Vlad’s basically sent him here to keep an unwitting eye on me, like I need a babysitter, but that isn’t George’s fault.

“I just had to come and see it.” He waves his hands around as he gushes. “I can’t wait to see you being the belle of the ball.”

“See what?” I ask, frowning.

“Your gown, woman. What else?”

Right, my dress. Suddenly my priorities are entirely flipped. I haven’t even thought to look at it or take pictures of any kind.

“Oh, it’s in the bathroom.” I’ve seen it, but I’ve been too distracted with the potential return of bite marks to even give it a true glance.

He swishes his hips toward the bathroom and then gasps. “Oh my goodness. It’s beautiful.”

Vlad did say he was going to dress me in something scandalous. And right now, I’m not so sure how I feel about that. Today has been more than one revelation, and I would really just like to sit down.

“Aubrey, are you okay?” He pokes his head into the room. “I expected you to be more excited.”

Do not blurt vampires are real, and you’re losing it. What if he already knows?

“Yeah, I’m okay. Kind of anxious about tonight, that’s all.”

“Oh, doll, it will be fine. Besides, I’ll be there, and we will have a fabulous time. I’ll keep you company till Romeo makes his entrance. Might be a good idea, since I’ll be batting the men away. I wonder who the designer is?”

I finally get a good look at it and my jaw drops. “How the hell am I supposed to keep my boobs in that?!”

CHAPTER 29

VLAD



“YOU’RE ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN I DON’T LOOK LIKE AN IDIOT?” I ask, standing before the oval mirror. I inhale deeply, sucking in the calming aroma of leather and books that fills the study.

“You look great, even better if you’d stop fidgeting like a boy in knee pants,” Doyle answers, his voice muffled with the number of pins in his mouth.

I glance around the room, noticing how little it has changed with time, unlike the rest of the castle. It’s clean, because Hilda would never allow it to be anything but, and the room is all dark wood. The walls are inlaid with intricate carvings of men hunting elk, made the same year Doyle attempted to talk me into hunting with him.

His head bows as he reaches the hem of the cape.

“What if she’s my mate?” I blurt out. I’ve been trying to figure out what pulls me to Aubrey so intensely, and Doyle has been my venting board since we started the alterations to my suit.

I haven’t told him yet that I bit Aubrey, and I won’t until I speak to her about it properly. Her blood still sings in my veins, and I have more energy than I can ever remember having. Like high-octane fuel, my engine is roaring with life.

“Your first piece of ass in a century, and she’s your mate? Really?” His large frame moves to stand after hemming my pants. “The odds are high that she isn’t. You cannot keep her—she’s a human, Vlad.” His tone is stern.

“Speak of her like that again, and I will rip your balls off and make you eat them.” *I will never let her go.* “Stop worrying. I know exactly what she is. Just help me make sure tonight goes as planned.”

“I like Aubrey, but it had to be said. And how can I do that when I don’t know what you are planning?” he asks, folding his arms over his chest.

“I need you to handle something for me.” I grin when he stutters, feeling more alive than I have in an age. “I know how much you love surprises.”

I snicker loudly when he does exactly as expected, and his eyes turn suspicious.

He raises a brow. “I enjoy surprises even less than you do. Speaking of, how in the hell did you get the damn goddess statue into the ballroom?”

My thoughts wander to the display downstairs I had wrapped in red silk only hours earlier. It really was one of Michelangelo’s bolder pieces.

“You mean the one from the Greek renaissance you’ve been keeping secret in the crypt?”

“Yes,” he says, obviously put out by me removing it from his treasure trove, but it reminds me of her, in the throes when she’s crying my name.

I am sure Aubrey will love it.

It is strange to feel a human emotion such as anxiety, when I have gone so long feeling nothing. My skin is tight, unease bristling below the surface of every cell with her absence, and the need to go to her is all but consuming. I hope Aubrey enjoys the show because I feel absolutely ridiculous.

Doyle frowns and blanches. “It was too much for you to renovate the floors and the plumbing, but dipping into my art collection is fine?” he grumbles. “If anyone notices it’s not a replica, it’s on your head.”

As if that even warrants a response—I hardly have time for such things. She mentioned in one of her posts that her

favorite movie is *Ten Things I Hate About You*, not to mention the majority of romantic movies I have now seen depict many men dancing to woo their fair lady. *I'm here to woo.*

“God, you’re a dick,” he murmurs, placing the thread and pins back in their box on the fireplace mantle. He points to a blood pack on the table filled with O negative. “Now, drink that.”

“Absolutely not.” I grimace. With Aubrey’s sweet taste flooding my veins, I don’t need it. Still, I say, “Surely they can do something about the plastic taste.”

“One, it’s not actually meant for consumption, and you know that. Two, you’re about to be in a room with a bunch of humans. You need it.”

“I had some earlier.” I meet his blue eyes with mine to hide my lie.

He gives me a suspicious look, but otherwise drops it. He knows I won’t do anything that can lead to reporters with a headline stating “Blood-sucking cannibal goes on rampage at hotel party.”

“The caterers have already arrived,” Doyle explains, before settling into a chair to sigh with exaggerated exhaustion. “So have the rest of the new staff, including our manager. The hotel is probably going to get busy after this.”

He’s complaining, but that’s what he wants. I don’t care, so long as I can chase my pretty woman through my castle. “All you do is bitch and moan,” I tease, and he lifts his head to shoot me a glare.

“Yeah, but while you were decorating and then getting your beauty sleep for an hour, I was organizing everyone. I haven’t had this much human interaction in decades because *someone* decided to become a decrepit old man for years. It’s tiring.”

It’s been hours, but I’m still buzzing from Aubrey and don’t even have the will to be annoyed about so many people in my precious home. “Sounds like a *you* problem.”

He rubs his forehead. “Ugh. Can you be any more insufferable at the moment? I’m still surprised you even agreed to the party at all.”

“I think I’ll do just about anything for her,” I state honestly. Then, under my breath, I mutter, “I can’t wait to see her in the dress I picked.”

“Well, you’re going to have wait because you’re helping me greet the guests.”

I spin to him in disbelief. “You must be joking. I don’t want to welcome people.”

“Too bad! This is *your* home.”

“But I’m not the one who wanted to turn my castle into some insufferable hotel.” I want to spend the night with Aubrey, not greet sweaty blood-sacks with a false grin. I’d rather impale my own head on a spike.

“Can’t you just do it with your new *staff*?” I say with a mocking sneer.

“Nope. You are helping me, or I’ll ask Frank to drive down and do it.” He cocks a brow, and I curse this foul cretin like the annoying pup he is.

Until I sort everything with Aubrey, I can’t have Frankenstein here. It won’t bode well if I do.

“Fine,” I snap, turning back to the mirror to yank on my suit and make sure it’s sitting right. “But you better leave me alone for the rest of the night.”

“I’ll try, but no promises.”

Ignoring him, I focus on Aubrey, imagining her smile and the way her dress will sit over her beautiful curves. The soft sway of her ample hips, and her cerulean eyes I want to fall into like they are the sea. I open my eyes and shed the small things that help me hide among the humans. *It’s her*. She is who is doing this to me. My nails turn to claws, my fangs elongate, and I can finally relax from holding them at bay. I flex my claws in front of me.

She will know exactly what I am and what that means before the night is done. I guess I can wait a little longer to see her, so long as the night ends how I want it to.

“If this all blows up in your face, I don’t want to hear about it.” Doyle shrugs as he heads to the door. “I will not be part of the pity party afterwards.”

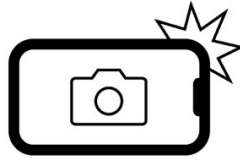
I laugh and shake my head. “As if I would ever throw a party without you.” After this morning, I feel like I’m truly at peace, and I can tell he’s confused about my sudden cheer, but I need him to understand what I now have. I need to ease him into what will hopefully be my new future, especially as he’ll be a part of it. “I’m telling you, Doyle. She *is* my mate.”

He blinks in astonishment, as if surprised I’m bringing it back up. He reads my face like he’s searching for the truth, and his eyes widen when he sees my conviction on the matter. “But that’s impossible! She’s a human.”

My grin grows. *I know.*

CHAPTER 30

AUBREY



“STOP PULLING ON IT,” GEORGE HISSES, SMACKING MY HAND away from the cloak currently suffocating me. “You’re going to ruin the lines.”

I sigh and push him away, trying to get a better look at the ballroom as he fiddles with the cloak. Drinks clink together and people are milling about, waiting on the party to start, while I try to get a glimpse of Vlad. I was never actually given the details about tonight.

The white cloak makes me feel like I’ve stepped out of a LOTR movie set and Frodo Baggins needs this perfume bottle of light I’ve been saving, but it truly is absolutely gorgeous. It’s heavy and embroidered with some insignia I don’t recognize. I suppose it does match the ethereal forest vibe of the ballroom, though, with all the fairy lights, fog, and trees dotting the place.

He planned this.

I guess I should have known Vlad would come up with something this outrageous. The whole white cloak screams innocence, but the dress under it is a red so deep it looks black in the low light and shimmers like rubies as I walk. The waist accentuates my curves, somehow bringing the eye to my hourglass figure without making me feel insecure. Except for the whole part where my boobs threaten to pop out each step I take, or maybe it’s just that I feel like they’re going to, which makes sense given the damn thing is V-cut down to my belly button.

Vlad and his obsession with my boobs is a whole situation I cannot even deal with tonight. Not with this many people around.

George's eye twitches—it's been doing that ever since he volunteered to help get me dressed, making me giggle.

My gaze roaming over the sea of people, anxiety bubbles in my chest at the thought of dancing in this ensemble. Send help.

Who in the hell invited all these people? I am definitely going to need a lot of wine to make it through this. To say I'm feeling insecure in the scandalous dress would be an understatement, especially knowing Bianca is somewhere in this mess, probably looking like a gazelle.

I do think my makeup is pretty. Although I'm a whizz at doing it because I need to look on point in every photo on my Instagram post, George uses a makeup brush like it's a fucking magic wand. The smoky eye with a red lid crease and glittering highlights on my cheeks catch my own eye in every reflection. He managed to make my black lipstick shine with red in the center and, somehow, I feel like a vampirette or some shit.

"The whole place looks really incredible," I murmur.

"Right? Too bad they still haven't gotten the internet back up yet," George says, staring down at his phone, almost pouting.

"It'll be fine. It always comes back eventually. Once it's going again, we can upload everything," I say, eyeing my favorite piece in the room.

The marble statue bathed in a blue-and-purple spotlight glows in the dimmed lights. It's obvious the artist wanted to capture a woman undressing with her breasts on display and a swath of fabric pooling around her hips. It is stunning and I cannot wait to share it. It's amazing how much they accomplished overnight.

"Good call." He points to another statue, this one of a man. "I *need* to post about that. It's gorgeous."

Excitement and nerves thrum through my body as I scan the ballroom, looking for anyone familiar. There are seriously more guests than I thought there would be. It was only supposed to be thirty people, but it looks like there are hundreds in here. Where Vlad and Doyle collected all these people from, I'm not even sure, but it's made everything lively. Some people are dressed in Halloween costumes and others in elegant gowns, almost as if no one is really sure what kind of party it is.

I'm pretty sure that makes all of us, but the ballroom is unlike anything I've ever seen.

The usual light-blue walls are covered with black hanging drapes to give a darker vibe. Cold lights trickle down like snow or raindrops, giving us all the illusion that we're outside. My gaze keeps slipping to the fireplace, which looks like a giant spider will crawl from the webbing at any point.

"Since its winter, we've gone with more crisp colors of blue and purple to create an ambience reflective of the season." George beams, dressed in a blue retro pantsuit. It's eye-catching, to say the least.

"I love it."

Fog rolls across the floor between tiny trees dotted around the great hall, making it resemble a snow-covered forest. A small band is playing classical music, and the light sound is calming. Even the wine glasses were somehow done overnight. They're a frosted light-blue color, with bats etched within.

"Are the bat wings lace?"

"Mmhm. Vlad insisted."

It's like he's been trying to give me hints this whole time. *Is it because I adored the bat cave so much?* The idea that he would do that just for me makes my heart somersault, despite the freakiness of learning he's a vampire this morning.

"It's so beautiful." Like I can't help myself, I take another photo of the ceiling, but this time holding the wine glass up as the centerpiece of the image. *All the new light fixtures make it*

way brighter in here now. While I'm checking the image, my eyes catch on a large glittering ball on my phone screen, and I gasp and look back up. I didn't notice that before! "George, oh my gosh, there's a disco ball?!"

"Aubrey, it would be a good time for you to stop asking questions, darling, and just enjoy the moment," he says, staring off into the crowd.

"Excuse me? Would you care for a glass of champagne?" a tall, dark-haired waiter asks with a thick accent, holding up a tray with one hand. His face is cleanly shaven, his suit black, and I almost giggle at the fake vampire fangs he has in his mouth.

"You are never going to make it through this without a glass or three," George says, rocking back on his short heels.

He's not wrong. "I agree."

George grins and hands me one. He winks at the waiter, who blushes and bows before moving onto another group of guests milling about on the empty dance floor.

"Have you seen Vlad yet?" I ask quietly.

"Not since he asked me to come help you get ready."

We hadn't really talked about what would happen tonight, and nervousness flutters deep in my belly. It feels like everyone's eyes zone in on me at once, and I have the urge to turn around and run back to my room for a while. I'm used to being in the limelight on social media, not in real life.

Something in my expression must give away how I'm feeling because George frowns lightly. "Do you want me to go find him?"

People start whispering and it feels as if their eyes are searching for me. Ugh. Don't panic. You're imagining things.

I wave him away. "Oh god no. It's just I haven't seen him in a while. I'm sure he will turn up somewhere."

I've had more than enough time to process, and now I'm just overanalyzing every conversation I've ever had with him and Doyle.

My phone rings abruptly, and my dad's name lights up on the screen. Great, what now? I have no internet, but have just enough bars for people to call, I guess.

I consider answering, as dad never rings me unless it's important. I spoke to Mom earlier, and she wasn't happy that I was staying another week in Romania.

Dad is likely calling to blast me some more for it, and I just can't deal with them right now. I'm tired of them, and I have enough on my mind. I click the end call button, wishing I could smash my phone, but feel even more defeated. I down my drink as a way to vent my frustration, wishing my parents would take my side when I know they won't.

"Your parents again?" George asks with sympathetic eyes.

I cast him a pleading look to drop the conversation, otherwise I fear I'll start crying again like I did when my mom called while he was doing my makeup.

"C'mon, doll. Let's get you another drink, yeah?"

I don't say anything. I can't. If I have to say even a word, I will lose it.

George searches my face, and his expression turns hard. He grabs champagne from a waiter's tray and shoves it into my hand, then pulls me around the edge of the dance floor.

"What are you doing?" I say with a fake laugh to hide my anxiety. Not that there's any chance of that; my whole day has been a shitshow.

For such a petite man, he sure can move quickly. We're weaving through the crowd so fast I can barely keep up, my cheeks pasted into a strained smile.

"Excuse us!" he shouts, right before we bump into someone, jostling them.

The woman squeals as her champagne almost spills down her dress when it sloshes. Droplets fling onto her. I blurt out an "I'm so sorry" before I see it's Bianca eyeing me like I'm a slug.

Great, now I've almost spilled her drink on her. She'll likely think I did it on purpose when really I'm just at the mercy of a madman.

"Watch it." Her face is twisted into a snarl that truly doesn't match the outfit she's wearing. It's pink and ruffled, probably some designer's fresh work.

"Bianca," George sneers, and it's clear the two have had some arguments as of late.

"Oh, it's you," she says, her face somehow grimacing even harder at George before she cocks her head at me. "And Aubrey." She smiles with red lips. "Isn't that dress a bit too glamorous on someone with that kind of . . . figure? I think it's a brave choice."

I fidget, pulling my cloak around me. God, could this chick be more of a bitch? Rationally, I know she's an awful person and her words don't mean shit, but my stomach flips with dread.

George looks her up and down, and tuts. "What happened, Bianca? Did you forget you're supposed to be the wicked one with that surly-as-fuck attitude? Your dress looks like 1939 Glinda the Good Witch and a whole batch of cupcakes threw up on it."

The dress really does look like that big puffy pink Glinda dress with all the sparkles, or at least a massive cupcake. There are layers. Many, many layers.

"As if either of you understands fashion. It's Vera Wang, isn't it stunning? I would never expect someone like Aubrey to get it. But you, little man—I would think you would recognize an artist. However, with this outfit?" She points at his tuxedo. "What are you even supposed to be?" She giggles behind her hand as if she's the funniest person ever.

George's grip tightens on my hand.

Rage thunders over me. *How dare she hurt his feelings!*

"Honestly, Bianca, I don't know who told you being mean gets you favors—because it doesn't. It just makes you look ugly, which is a real shame because you are really beautiful." I

don't take the time to look at her face and see if my words hit where they should. "Come on, George."

I tug my hand out of his grip and tuck it into his elbow.

No one deserves to be talked to that way. I just can't imagine what it would feel like to be that nasty to people. She must be miserable.

My heart is thundering, and my body is flushed with heat as we turn our backs on her.

George tosses his head into the air and pulls me along again. "God, that woman is repulsive. I have half a mind to message Felix and tell him how terrible she is."

We come to a stop at an empty table. Maybe now that I'm full of adrenaline, I might actually do what this was all for: take photos and help promote the hotel.

Admiring all the ballroom tables and finery glowing under the purple-and-blue lights, I try to take as many photos as I can for when the internet is functioning again. I plan to post all night—video reels, story posts. I want to snap anything and everything that can capture someone's eye, and not just with the party, but the hotel itself.

"Hopefully Vlad shows soon," I say when I notice the bored look on a few faces.

"Yeah, people seem to be getting antsy." He points to someone new entering. "I think guests are still arriving? Maybe they are welcoming everyone."

I turn to take a selfie with George so I can cross tag my posts for better promotion, but my phone pings, and the sound echoes loudly in the ballroom. I scramble to turn it to silent, but the notifications keep coming one after the other and heads start to turn. The internet came back at a horrible time! I glance around sheepishly at the guests in silent apology. George finds us a quiet spot in a back corner of the ballroom so we can both check our phones and camp out for Vlad to show.

George gasps. "Oh my goodness," he exclaims, staring down at his phone. "That is the sweetest thing!"

“What is?” I say, attempting to turn around in our little corner of the ballroom, but my cloak catches on something. “Owww!” I spin around and bump into him. “George, you’re on my cloak.”

He moves, apologizing, and I pull it behind me and out of the way. My phone vibrates and I look down, my eyes going wide.

“Oh my god!” I squeal, suddenly uncaring if people stare or not. “He tagged me as coordinator for the event. Why would he do that?” I whisper-shout, completely astonished.

The picture is one of Vlad and Doyle in the foyer of the castle. Vlad is staring into the camera, unsmiling, while Doyle grins, breaking hearts across the internet in one fell swoop.

George sucks in a hard breath, just as the room goes quiet.

“He’s here,” George announces, followed by the distinct tinging of cutlery against a champagne glass and the hush of the crowd.

“If my father could be here today, he would be proud of what the Tepesh family has accomplished.” Vlad’s strong, projected voice sends shivers up my spine. “Not only that, he would be proud that I have found my happiness.”

Before I can turn to watch Vlad, George moves to grab at my cloak, trying to take it off.

I tug it away, smacking at his hands. “Stop it,” I hiss. The vision of my boobs spilling out of this thing on a dance floor full of people goes through my mind.

He pulls himself to his full height of maybe five foot seven, and plants his hands on his hips. “Bitch, that is the prettiest dress I have ever seen. If you don’t show it off, I will cry.”

I step around him. “I’ll go find you some Kleenex,” I shoot back.

“Fine. Whatever, you hussy, but if you mess up that dress you will never remove my foot from your ass,” he threatens from behind me.

I feel my cloak being moved as he fixes the back. “Thank you.”

“He would often say that love can accomplish anything,” Vlad continues, “and so I would like to present a toast to Doyle, my one friend even in the bleakest of days. You are the best man I know, and without you, I guarantee none of us would be here today. So, from the bottom of my heart, I thank you—even if you’re a thorn in my backside ninety percent of the time.”

Clapping starts up, and I hold my phone above the crowd, snapping pictures and catching a smile here and a man chuckling there. *These are going to be so great.* I’ll put them all together later and make a reel. I wish I could have teased a bit more about what I’m doing to gain some traction with followers, but they will just have to be pleasantly surprised.

The clapping gets louder when Doyle shakes his head, his dark-brown hair slicked back again like his Gomez gig the first time we met.

“Aubrey?” Vlad’s voice rings out over the crowd.

Oh no.

My face goes hot as the crowd parts, and he strides through it toward me. Wearing a cloak the same cut as mine, his black and open, it showcases what looks like a vintage black suit underneath. The tie at his throat is the same red as my dress, and the wicked grin on his face is definitely creating feelings.

He looks like something out of a gothic romance.

“Oh my god, look at you,” I breathe, and it’s all I can do not to start fanning myself.

“You look stunning.” The words rumble from his lips.

“I cannot believe you.”

“What?” he asks in surprise.

I wave at my body. “This outfit.”

He tilts his head with a wry smile. “You look phenomenal. What do you mean?”

“I mean the dress, not the cloak.” I can’t help but roll my eyes. “The cloak is beautiful.”

“The dress is delicious,” he practically purrs out. “Just as you are.”

His eyes drop to my cloak-covered chest and his gaze heats. I hesitate, looking around, then look down at myself, suddenly wondering if he has some kind of special eyesight that can see through clothing. I check all sides. Definitely no side boob showing and nothing is falling out. *Maybe that’s a super vampire power?*

“You can see my dress through the cloak?” I whisper.

“No, I can’t. You simply look stunning in anything.” He laughs and reaches for my hand, pulling me to him, the coldness of it shocking. “I would much rather see your pretty dress where no prying eyes can get a view of what I want to be mine.”

“You two lovebirds have a good time,” George cuts in, and I blush that he overheard what Vlad just said to me. “I’m going to have a sweet time myself. We will meet up later, Aubrey.”

I give him a nervous smile, and he stops to give me air kisses on each cheek before leaving me alone with Vlad. He lifts my hand to his lips, kissing my knuckles, and my heart races. He’s totally turning up the charm. I don’t know what to say, and that just seems to make his eyes gleam.

He grins, his fangs on full display, and nips my hand. I guess he doesn’t have to hide them, at least not tonight with the waiters all wearing them too.

“How do you hide them?” I ask, pointing at my teeth.

“That, my dearest, is a very long story, and one I will be more than happy to tell you. But to do that, we will need to escape these people and find somewhere more private. Is this amenable to you?”

“But you only just got here,” I say with a pout.

Music starts up through a sound system, and it swells with deep beats. To my amusement, “WAP” by Cardi B starts playing. I see Doyle rushing to change it when the lyrics start, only to be thwarted by George who fights to keep his song choice on. “I’m trying to start the lame-ass party you have going on!”

Vlad grimaces. “As much as I would like to dance with you, whatever infernal racket is currently playing is not what I would call good music.”

I laugh as I look back at all the guests and catch Bianca staring at Vlad like he is a popsicle and it’s the middle of July.

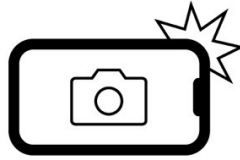
I keep getting the feeling she was on a mission to get closer to him before she even came here. Now that I know what he is... her jealous stares seem to have a deeper meaning. Or maybe I’m just looking too deeply into it. I shake my head to get rid of the thought. I’m probably being silly.

Vlad looks back, trying to see what caught my attention just as Doyle wrangles control of the music.

“Ah, there we go,” Vlad says when something more appropriate plays. “Now we can dance, if you like. However, let’s get rid of this first.”

CHAPTER 31

AUBREY



VLAD BRUSHES HIS HAND OVER MY EXPOSED NECK. “MAY I take your cloak?”

I wet my lips in hesitation, feeling vulnerable, but reassured by the calm confidence in his eyes. I nod slowly and his eyes seem to warm. His hand touches my waist as he moves to remove the cloak, the clasp tight at my throat.

The cloak falls from my shoulders and my cheeks blaze red instantly as my stomach drops to my knees. Vlad places it on the backrest of an empty chair that’s only a few steps away before returning. I fidget, grabbing the sides of the dress under my armpits and tug, attempting to somehow cover myself more.

As if he can tell I’m nervous, Vlad’s voice slides over me like silk as he says, “You are breathtaking.”

My shoulders lift as I fill my lungs with oxygen, forcing myself to relax. His breath is at my neck the next second, his hand solid at my back, hugging me to him. My head is at such an angle I stare at the red silk pocket square on his chest, the color rich and vibrant against the dark-gray fabric.

“Do you not know how stunning you are? Look at me.” His fingers nudge at my chin, tilting my face to look up into his red eyes. “You are magnificent. And you are done hiding.” I grip his suit-covered arms when cold hands move to cup my face, my mouth agape at his harsh tone.

I nod, practically melting inside from the emotion shining in his eyes. How can I be nervous when I have this man

completely fawning over me? “Okay. No more hiding.”

“Good.” He grasps my hand in his and leads me to the middle of the room.

Sweeping me into his arms, he dances me around the ballroom, forcing people to move out of the way as he does. The song changes almost as if by magic, a sweet, soft tune for a slow dance. We dance in silence, my head on his chest, him unbreathing.

“Now it makes sense why I thought you were dead that morning,” I say, giggling when he grunts. “The ball really is beautiful. You did an amazing job in such a short timeframe.”

“So I take it that means you’re enjoying your party?”

“It’s not my party,” I retort, shrugging.

He pulls back and arches a brow down at me. “Oh, but it is. None of these people would be here if it weren’t for you, so I assure you, it is *your* party. I would never allow this otherwise,” he says, looking at the guests with obvious disdain.

His grumpy face has me giggling again. “But Doyle said you needed the exposure?”

He dips me backward, bending me at the waist. The slit at my leg rides up with the motion, making me gasp when his eyes begin glowing crimson again.

He shakes it off. “We do, but I also don’t care about the hotel. I never have.”

My face drops. “What? Really? But I thought this was all your idea.”

He shrugs as he holds my waist and brings me closer, and I can feel his fingertips dancing just above my ass. His nose scrunches when his eyes drop to my breasts squished against his chest, and something grows against my belly.

A tick runs through his jaw. “Come. It’s time we talked. Unless you need more content?” he asks, yet his eyes are full of heat and promise. Clearly he no longer wants to just talk.

I look around at the dancers finally enjoying themselves and loop my arms around the back of his neck. “I think I want to do whatever you want to do.”

He throws his head back, laughing, and at the intoxicating sound, it’s like I’m struck dumb.

“My darling, I’m afraid that would ruin your party.” He leans down to whisper in my ear, “Because if I were doing whatever I wanted, your feet would be pointing at the stars and I would be inside you, making you scream my name.”

I gape openly, a fluttery feeling erupting in my belly.

I most definitely want that.

I let him take my hand and weave us gently through the crowd, unlike a scampering George.

He pulls me toward a set of large double doors and pauses just inside them.

“Last chance to stay here before I steal you away for the night,” he says with a grin. “I still can’t understand what it is you love so much about the internet, as all it seems to cause is drama and discourse.”

I giggle as I look back one last time. “How long have you been on the internet?”

He smiles and those dimples make an appearance, causing my flutters to morph into butterflies. “How long have you been here?” His brown eyes sparkle.

I can’t hide my disbelief. “You’re joking.”

“No,” he says, snagging my white cloak from the chair’s backrest as he finally leads me out of the room. “I have hardly been awake, it seems, for quite some time. Until *you*.”

Until me? Why does that make my heart flip-flop?

Vlad

“I HAVE BEEN SO BLIND—ALL the mirrors,” she says, noticing my lack of reflection.

She shakes her head, her flaxen hair glittering once more over the white of her cloak. That dress is too much of a distraction and I need to keep my wits about me for our conversation. I know she has questions, and I want to answer them without wanting to pin her against every wall like she's a masterpiece.

“I knew those were not from Etsy.”

I smile when her hand clutches at my elbow as we walk somewhere more private. Since I mentioned being alone, her heart rate hasn't slowed, which could mean she's terrified or excited. I am hoping for the latter, but will make no assumptions where she is concerned. I can be patient.

“Warm?” I ask, wanting her to be comfortable.

She gives me a sidelong glance and smirks. “I am, yeah, which is crazy considering how little material this dress has. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?”

I smile and bend down to whisper in her ear. “Allow me to show you the gallery. We will be able to speak freely there. Too many ears here.” I'm worried our voices will echo.

“Okay,” she whispers back softly. Her cloak swishes against mine as we move through the castle, and I find I feel . . . at peace. Her presence lends me the calm and tranquility I need. I would do anything for this creature; she has bewitched me.

We reach the steps of the grand staircase, and she looks up. “You should really think about putting in an elevator.”

My eyes flash red for a moment as I check our surroundings to make sure no one is near enough to witness what I do next.

I can't hide my smirk when I lift her inches above the ground with my power. She squeals in fright and turns to me with her arms swaying.

“Who needs an elevator?”

Chuckling, I take her hand in mine and lead her calmly up the steps while she floats, her eyes wide in a panic.

“This is insane.” Her voice comes out high pitched, and it makes me want to show her more.

“What is your favorite Disney movie?”

“What?” she says, obviously taken aback by my line of questioning.

I pull her along as she floats above the steps, trying not to laugh at the way she’s eyeing her feet as if something is going to bite her at any moment. “I have been doing some light reading and understand that favorite Disney movies are important to members of the opposite sex.”

“Oh umm, hmm. Well, I guess I would have to say my favorite is *Beauty and the Beast*.”

I clasp my arms behind my back, pondering this. “What is it that you love about it?”

A pleased look passes over her expression, and she glances around the room. “The castle.”

That surprises me and yet it fits. I suppose something had to have drawn her here to begin with.

I make a sweeping gesture with my free hand. “Luckily, I have one of those.”

“Only one?” she scoffs mockingly, her hand to her chest.

“Sadly, yes, as far as I’m aware. I actually haven’t thought to look over my holdings. It is possible Doyle has purchased one or two in my name over the years.”

“Oh my god, is Doyle like a member of your coven or something?” she hisses under her breath, her eyes wide in shock.

“No, and why a coven?”

She grins when I set her on her feet finally at the top of the grand staircase. “I may have watched *Twilight* a few times too many. It’s one of my favorite movies.”

“*Twilight*?”

“Yeah. It’s a movie about, you know,” she says, gesturing to me. “But they glitter in the sun.”

How ridiculous. I blanch at the audacity. “Vampires that glitter? What has the world come to?”

“Never mind. Don’t even worry about it.”

I bring her hand up to rest on my bent arm as we walk down the hallway. “Well, Doyle will need to explain who and what he is in his own time. It is, after all, a special thing to entrust a human with one’s identity,” I admit.

Her nose crinkles and she looks up at me, amusement in her eyes. “How did I ever think you were thirty? You even talk like an old person.”

“As to that, not very long ago, I reached the conclusion that humans have butchered various languages with the passing of time. But bro, it grows on you. Does it not?”

She shakes her head in awe. “How is this possible?”

“Me being a vampire or my power?”

“Both.”

“Come, I’ll show you.” I walk, listening to her heels clack against the marble flooring. I wave a hand and light the candles along the gallery. “The gallery is the only wing that wasn’t updated during the castle renovations, for obvious reasons.”

She walks up to a portrait I sat for a few centuries ago. “I found this place before.” Her cheeks pinken. “And I assumed this was your great-great-grandfather.”

I smile in amusement. “Uncanny resemblance?”

She nods.

“Not quite.” I stop to stare at my own portrait. “This was painted some time in the sixteenth century.”

Her jaw drops. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“Uh huh.” I can hear the eyeroll in her tone.

I smile. “Five hundred and ninety-seven years of age.”

Her jaw drops. “Oh my god.”

“Being so old gives me many abilities, but I did gain a few from my parents,” I continue, moving deeper down the hall.

“Parents?” she hisses, looking around the hallway as if someone could overhear. “You have parents?”

“Well, how else do you suppose I came to be?” I cock my brow.

She waves her hands in the air. “I don’t know . . . I’m assuming someone bit you?”

“That was my father, who found his bride, my mother, who then, over time, grew pregnant with me.”

“Wow.”

I watch her nervously for any sign that any of this may be too much for her, some inkling that she will need time to come to terms with what I am. We continue walking and she stops to stare up at a suit of armor I had worn during some long-forgotten campaign.

“Are they still alive?”

“Sadly, no,” I tell her. “They passed long ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She goes silent, but I can practically see her mind whirring. “So all the terrible things Dracula did. That was you?” she asks this while crossing her arms over her chest.

I nod. “It’s possible. I have experienced many wars.”

Annoyance flashes in her eyes. “So?”

“So, it was very long ago, and men behaved differently,” I say, shrugging.

“Oh yeah? All the impaling?”

I scoff. I’d forgotten about that, and I almost chuckle to myself. “All the impaling—you make it sound like I staked an entire legion to the ground. It was lifetimes ago when the

battles of men were much different. Besides, it was probably only a few hundred at most,” I say, waving her off.

She arches her brow. “Failing to see how that’s any better . . .”

“They started it. I was only defending my homeland.”

“Okay. We will circle back to that one later. You bit me. Does that mean I’m going to turn into a vampire too? And how did the marks fade that fast?” She peeks down at her phone.

I lean against an uncovered wall, my arms folded across my chest. “You made a list of questions, didn’t you?”

She nibbles at her bottom lip. “Of course I did.” That doesn’t appear like the whole truth, but I don’t pry.

I roll my eyes, but I suppose she does have cause for concern. “No, you will not turn from being bitten by a vampire, and all vampire bites heal quickly. The difference is, at my age, I have more control.” It is much more complicated than that, but that information is for another time, once she becomes more accustomed to my condition.

An odd expression passes over her face. “You can eat garlic?”

I wince. “Actually, no. Doyle stabbed me with an EpiPen to stop the allergic reaction that night.”

Her hand flies up to cover her mouth. “That’s why you disappeared! Oh my god, the foundations.” Her lips turn down in displeasure at our lies.

I hold my hands out to placate her, but she tosses her arms over her chest in obvious pique.

“I had no hand in the *foundations*. That was just something Doyle made up so you didn’t become overly suspicious. I spent most of the night roaming the hills and staring up at your window because my fangs and claws wouldn’t retract.” Holding a hand for her to see, I let my claws come through, biting into the flesh at the tips of my fingers and extending out to razor-sharp edges.

“Wow,” she says, before boldly touching one tip, causing my heart to thud rapidly in my chest. “And how do I know you won’t get all bloodthirsty and eat me?”

My heart sinks that she would even question it, but I supposed she is right to ask. She hasn’t been here long.

“I have not lost control of myself for longer than you can fathom, and I would *never* hurt you.”

Her eyes roll up to the ceiling and I can practically see the questions multiplying. “The sun?” she finally asks.

“Sunscreen.” I smirk.

I wait for her to try to call for a priest or any telltale sign she’s going to collapse into a heap like women of the past when faced with what I am.

“Oh my gawd.”

“I have only been eating a handful of days. I have been sequestered away for almost a century and did not realize how frail I had become until—”

“Until you bit me,” she murmurs, an odd expression on her face. She turns her head away slightly, her eyes bouncing across the many trinkets and antiquities I have collected over the years. “The whole entering a house thing—do you really need permission?”

“Since the creation of the welcome mat, not so much actually.”

The alabaster cloak she wears rustles as she nods. “I guess that makes sense. Do you like food at all?”

“I like brandy on occasion.” I’ve only been eating human food for her sake.

“Does holy water work against your kind?”

My teeth clench and I almost stop myself from telling her, but this is Aubrey. “It doesn’t exactly give me the best of feelings to hear you immediately asking about how to kill me, but I’m afraid holy water won’t work.” My stomach suddenly

feels full of lead, and I have the horrible suspicion that if she rejects me, it would be my undoing.

“So, you’re a vampire who doesn’t eat humans?”

I push away from the wall I’ve been leaning against and pull her into my arms. “The only thing I want to eat, woman, is the pussy between your luscious thighs.”

Surprise colors her expression before her soft laughter echoes through the hall, her head back, laugh lines crinkling her face with mirth.

“But there is something I must tell you. And it may be, well . . . to say it is too soon would be an understatement, but I hope you will at least hear me out.” I take a step back, trying to brace myself from an unwanted reaction. “It is, of course, your choice.”

“W-what is?” she asks, nibbling on her lip.

I take a breath in preparation. “You are my mate, Aubrey. Now that I have bitten you, the mate bond may begin. But it can take decades for it to solidify completely.”

She blinks as if trying to comprehend my meaning and hope wells within me. “Holy shit! *I’m* your mate? What does that even mean?”

I nod succinctly. “It means that I have been waiting for you for a very long time. It’s rare for one of us to find the person we’re supposed to be with, and even less common for them to be a *human*.”

“Wait . . . that means I’m like your soul mate or something?”

“All of this is entirely your choice, as there’s a fail-safe for our kind to prevent forced matings. You are not obligated to be my mate, but I would very much like you to be. I was telling the truth; I *do* want to date you. I want to be with you in any way I can.”

I don’t tell her that rejecting us means I’ll end up being alone for the rest of my life unless I mate with someone outside of our bond, which I would never do. Being rejected

by our mate never bodes well, and can be very damaging to an immortal beings' mind, but the choice must be made willingly, and I will not use any kind of coercion to trap Aubrey.

She slides onto a cushioned bench from another age, as if her knees are growing weak.

I refrain from telling her that the odds of finding a mate are slim to none. I have seen more than one vampire expire from the wait. It can take hundreds of years and the solitude can be maddening, which is why there are so few of us now. The loss of a mate is a death sentence. If she decides to leave now that my side has started ...

Her shoulders and torso seem to loosen as she blinks. Her golden-haired head lifts and her eyes meet mine, a timid smile on her lips. "Okay."

Does that mean yes? "Okay?"

I kneel in front of her and reach for the soft edges of her cloak, rubbing it gently between my fingers.

"I will agree that any questions you have are valid. I have no issue telling you anything you wish to know, especially given how I wanted to speak with you about the future—at a later date, of course." I am just astounded at the fact that she's not running away screaming or trying to stab me with sharp instruments. "I must say, you're taking all of this rather well."

Her eyes take on a bright sheen, her face flushing as she leans forward, her hands gripping her knees. "I am, aren't I?"

"I want to learn everything I can about you, and I find you entirely enchanting. My feelings will not be repressed, and I only want to care for you, if you will let me," I continue on, hoping she will return at least some of my affections.

She wets her lips and looks up at me. "I think I need you to kiss me now."

I brush my hand across the soft skin of her face and cup her cheek, leaning down to press my lips to hers. Her intoxicating scent floods my nostrils and I groan. "Fuck, you smell so good."

She pulls back a moment and brings her petite hand up to her face, placing it on top of mine. “What do I smell like?”

“Like magic and sunrise, with a hint of wildflowers, and like the summers of my youth,” I tell her honestly.

Her hands dart up to grip my face, and she pulls me to her. Her tongue licks at the seam of my lips and my cock goes rock hard. I open my eyes to look down at this beautiful creature, who is seemingly just as passionate as I am about her, and hope flutters within my chest.

I pull back and her eyes open, the blue seas of them so tranquil and bright I could look into them for the rest of my days. Her face is flushed, and she tugs slightly at her cloak.

“Are you ready to take that off and show me your pretty dress in the light?” Now that I’ve answered all her questions, I want to see and touch her.

The way those blue eyes blink with nervousness makes me smile.

My gaze can’t help but follow when she licks her lips before biting her bottom one between her teeth.

“It *is* pretty warm in here,” she says primly, unmoving from the bench seat.

I stare down into her eyes and reach for the ties holding it in place, pulling it apart to get a look at her. The cloak falls away slowly from her shoulders, revealing soft, succulent skin. My mouth waters and I whine like a wounded animal. I’m the one embarrassed when she laughs lightly.

I get to my feet, dumbfounded and lost when her breasts come into view, seemingly seated in the dress by magic. One wrong move and it looks like they will both fall free. The red shimmers like rubies in the light, but when she moves—she is the sea, deep and treacherous, just as her curves are to my willpower.

I take her hand and pull her to her feet, placing her in my arms where she belongs. “You are never allowed to wear this in public,” I growl out.

She blushes and smirks. “No worries, not even George could talk me into it.”

I lean in closer, wrapping my arm around her waist, and her breath hitches in her throat. Her body goes rigid when my lips graze her ear.

“In my experience, humans are quite simple creatures. They do many great things. Some of the most awe-inspiring architecture in the world has been created by humans, but, in the same breath, they also commit horrible atrocities. Especially toward things they cannot explain. Do you know why?”

Her brow furrows with concentration. “Fear? They’re afraid of the unknown?”

“Is that what you feel?” I rub slow circles down her sides, loving the goosebumps accompanying the shiver that she can’t hide from me. “Is fear the reason your heart races in your chest?”

“No.”

A swelling sensation fills my entire being, and I can’t stop myself from squeezing her a bit tighter. “I don’t want your fear—I never want you to fear me. What I want from you can’t be coerced or taken. What I want only you can give.”

“What do you want?” She gasps when I nibble lightly at her neck, watching her skin shiver in response.

“I desire you to want me as much as I want you, to crave me the way I crave you. I want your heart, your touch, for as long as you will have me.”

Her breathing grows erratic, and she turns, glancing along the walls of the hallway as she does. She blinks and attempts to pull away to look over my shoulder.

“What are you doing?” I ask, thoroughly perplexed by her actions.

“Looking for the cameras.”

I frown and stop her movements, taking her hands in mine. “There are no cameras.”

Her eyes widen and fill with tears. “You meant all of that?” She blinks rapidly, her posture slumping, her disbelief apparent.

I allow earnestness to fill my expression. “Of course I did. Why else would I say it? I want every part of you that you will allow me.”

I sense rather than see her eyes flutter shut when my lips press to the soft flower-scented skin of her neck. The need to touch her is one I cannot resist. I trail my fingers down the sides of her revealing gown, sweeping past the slit that rides up her hip, dipping inward toward her center.

“I want every shudder, every whimper, every cry, every muffled moan uttered from your perfect little body to be mine.” I slice the lace of her panties with a carefully extended claw and softly touch her mound.

“Oh my god,” she squeaks as her body goes into overdrive, wetness flooding her wanting and needy little cunt.

She looks around as if worrying someone may come by and see.

I would, of course, be tempted to kill whoever dared to look upon what is mine, not to mention Doyle should have everything in hand for at least another hour. I gaze down at her, waiting to see her flinch at the red color of my eyes, readying myself for her to recoil in fear, shout for help, tell me she wants nothing to do with me, to renounce me.

But she does none of those things; she just watches me as if waiting to see what I will do next.

“Do you think, given time, you could possibly find it in your heart to try to love an old bat like me?”

She smiles and nods, and I let out a sigh of relief. Pulling her more firmly against me and pressing her over my stiff cock, I adore the sweet warmth her body creates. Her curved lips meet my own as she loops her arms behind my neck.

I take in a rough breath and my eyes roll to the back of my head. Her smell is too much, and it feels like it’s been a lifetime since I was inside this woman. “Entirely bewitched.”

I rub my hands down her back and grab the swells of her ass, ready to lift her and fuck her against the wall.

She says nothing, but her body tells me everything I need to know. Unfortunately for her, her silence isn't good enough tonight.

“You're going to have to use your words this time, love. I'm feeling rather possessive, but I have yet to hear the word yes.”

“Yes, Vlad, we can see where this goes.”

I kiss her and cup her cheek.

A slow clap starts down the stairwell, and I peek over the grand staircase. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Listening, mostly,” Doyle says, shrugging, his dark hair slicked back and his beard neatly trimmed. “Pleasant evening we are having, isn't it, Aubrey?”

I steady her with my gaze when she stumbles from attempting to grab her cloak lying on the floor. “Hello, Doyle,” she grits out as she covers herself.

Doyle strides through the hallway, his lips pressed in a tight line and his gaze alert. Something's wrong.

“Right. I suppose it's now my role to play the bearer of bad news.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “What news?”

His gaze darts to Aubrey before landing on me with accusation, clearly against the decision he knows I have made. Tying oneself to a human hasn't always been the best scenario for creatures such as us, and I can't blame him, but I know without a doubt she is my mate. Her scent soothes me, and I have greater control when she is near.

He opens his mouth, but it slams shut just as quickly. “As much as I hate to once again interrupt, Vlad, you're needed.” His eyes are slits, and agitation is apparent in every line of his body.

“What is it?”

“If what I just heard you tell her is correct, then we need to call her a cab and get her on the first flight out of here.”

I shake my head as I push her behind me. “She stays. Tell me what is going on this instant.”

Doyle’s lips flatten. “Jekyll is here, Vlad.”

Rage pours over me swiftly. *Why is he here?* The need to protect Aubrey comes to the forefront and my entire body bristles, causing red to flood my senses.

If it’s Jekyll, then all hell could break loose. I turn to her.

“Aubrey, I have to take care of this.” I cup her beautiful face in my hands, and she leans into my chest. “We will speak more later. But just know I will not rush you—I literally have all the time in the world.” I step back and right her cloak around her, securing it at her neck. The red clears from my eyes and I smile down at her in hopes of calming her, despite my fury. “I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“Will everything be okay?” she whispers, her eyes wide.

“Vlad,” Doyle calls.

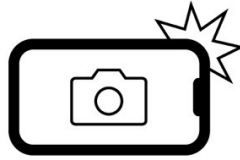
“Right. I’m coming.” I nod and take her hand in mine to kiss her knuckles softly. “Everything will be fine. You should go back to the party and have fun.”

She will be safer with the other humans.

I need to send Jekyll packing and get back to Aubrey as quickly as possible. I have a night planned she won’t soon forget.

CHAPTER 32

AUBREY



AS I WATCH VLAD LEAVE, EMOTIONS FLOW THROUGH ME. I'M unsure if I should worry or not. He's leaving me here, but he told me everything will be okay. I trust him, and that he wouldn't leave me alone if I was unsafe. *It's probably something to do with the hotel.*

I play over what he said to me, and my stomach drops and I squeal.

I'm sleeping with a gorgeous vampire who says he wants to date me. I'm smiling to myself like an idiot, practically skipping down the halls of the gallery to go back to the party.

What if I can have this? . . . Him? My fingers trail over some bronze statue of what looks like a goat. I can see why they wanted to keep this wing closed off. There are crates and boxes everywhere, full of things that would look better in a museum.

What if this could be everything I've ever wanted? Normally I would be telling Bernadette all of this and let her sway me one way or the other, but I find myself wanting to keep this to myself, keep *him* to myself.

My relationship with Vlad is somehow different, not only because he's a vampire, but because I find myself wanting to protect him, as odd as that sounds. Protecting a vampire? As if. He can move me through the air with his mind, for Christ's sake.

I reach for my cloak to find the pocket he put my phone in when my eye catches on something glinting in the candlelight.

A bracelet matching the necklace he gave me lies on an old wooden desk, sitting on top of a collection of rocks. I remove one from the pile and bring it to the light, and my eyes grow round. *Holy shit, I think these are uncut stones.* I'll have to tell Vlad to put the necklace back with this. *Why would he have all this just sitting out here?* The crazy man.

I sigh, thinking of how sweet he is. The way he stares at me never fails to make my skin flush in response, which I suppose makes sense because he is a vampire. When the man walks into the room, my downstairs pops up for attention like it's urging him to play Whac-A-Mole with his dick.

I want to stay here and wait for Vlad in hopes we can continue our talk, but I make my way back to the party like he told me to.

When I arrive, the ballroom is completely changed. Instead of blues and purples, everything is red and black. The walls look like blood is oozing from them and the lights flash in different colors. Oh my god, who turned on the rave? People are shouting and laughing, obviously drunk on the dance floor, holding their drinks over their heads.

"Aubrey!" I hear across the ballroom and look up to see George dancing on top of a statue's base.

He snaps his fingers and two waiters seemingly come out of nowhere to lift him off his perch. He blows kisses at the blushing boys. "Ciao, darlings!"

"Oh my god, George," I shout over the music, shaking my head.

He waves them off, turns to me, and grabs my hand to pull me back to the entrance. "And what are you up to? Where's Vlad? Tell me everything."

I shake my head and look around, a smile filling my face. "I'll have to tell you later."

There's so much to think about, and I still have so many questions for Vlad.

"Awww, pooh on that, tell me."

“How much have you had to drink, George?” I ask, changing the subject.

I’m worried about how much he is swaying and how outrageous he’s being. Then again, it’s George; he really does stand out in a crowd.

“Not nearly enough yet. What do you think of Vlad’s surprise? Did you see the strawberry fountain?”

“No, where is it?” I spin, searching for it. I love strawberries, and I’m just so hungry I’m ready to start chewing on someone’s leg.

He points to where a fountain is stationed that looks as if it’s filled with blood. “It’s wine.”

“That’s so cool.”

Gran would adore all of this. She’s been the reigning champion of Halloween for as long as I can remember. I take my phone out, ignoring the many messages, and start snapping pictures for later. Maybe we can do red punch instead of wine next year.

“Here’s your dog, sir,” one of the waiters says, holding Fifi away from him while the dog bares his teeth, growling at the poor man. One of his fake teeth pops out as he fights the wiggling tawny ball of rage.

George reaches for him. “Hi, Fifi, did you miss Daddy?”

Before he can take Fifi, the waiter accidentally drops him. George and I gasp, stepping forward to grab him as the waiter looks horrified. Fifi is honestly a tiny ball of hate and I’m not surprised he can’t be contained.

“I’m so sorry,” the waiter says, trying to grab him, and I almost smash heads with him.

“Fifi!” George shouts above the music.

The dog’s short little legs gain ground fast as he heads toward the kitchen. I think the music and people have just freaked him out.

I cup my mouth, shouting, "I'll get him!" over the heavy bass.

This is the last thing I want to do right now, but I don't see that drunk little man making it out of the ballroom without tripping over something. I wanted to wait for Vlad, but I know how important Fifi is to George.

The bass thumps in my head and I can feel a headache coming on, my anxiety ramping up a notch when I hear a sharp squeal in my eardrum from a happy partygoer to my right. Balloons start to fall from the ceiling, and I fight my way to the edge of the ballroom. Jeez, whose idea was that?

Ugh, I head toward the open door Fifi went through.

Maybe I'll find Vlad on the way. I bet the dog is camped out in the kitchen with Whitley, eating sweets. If I were a dog, that's where I would want to be.

I haven't had nearly enough to drink for a blaring hotel rave.

I doubt any of this was Vlad's idea.

CHAPTER 33

VLAD



“I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU,” DOYLE PRACTICALLY GROWLS, HIS voice deep and menacing. It’s rather cute how he thinks to admonish me.

We walk through the castle, attempting to appear like all is normal as he sniffs the air every now and then, searching for Jekyll’s scent. With this amount of people and so many new smells, it’s near impossible. The castle is large, and it takes time to walk through it, which annoys me even further. I will find him faster flying.

Uneasiness eats at me. The idea that Aubrey is alone with this many guests in the castle makes my skin crawl. Not only are my instincts screaming to protect her, it’s difficult to determine and sense where everyone is. Not to mention Jekyll being here unannounced has my hackles rising.

“You not only told her about us, but you bit her, didn’t you?” he asks.

I continue staring ahead, as I concentrate on locating one person among many. It’s not the easiest thing to do, especially with him yammering in my ear. “I fail to see how that’s any of your business.”

“How could it not be my business, Vlad? There are other supernaturals who could be your mate if you would just go out and meet them. How can it be Aubrey, a human, Vlad? It doesn’t make sense. You’re just hungry and haven’t eaten properly for a hundred years. You were insane for a while there.”

Finding a born vampire was uncommon, and turning a human mostly resulted in death. The odds of finding a true mate have always been slim, and the idea of picking a bride just to see her die never interested me. But with Aubrey being my mate... I just know the fates wouldn't be so cruel as to give me the one woman I seek, only to take her away from me.

I could choose a mate if I really wanted to, could force a bond, but nothing is as special as a true bond.

"Other supernaturals? I can't see myself with a wolf woman," I say with a scowl.

"I find that rather offensive," he scoffs, and I shake my head. "It doesn't matter. Once the others find out, they will want to stick to the rules. They'll come for her."

"Be offended, I don't care." We round a bend in the hallway. "And that won't happen."

"As soon as they find out about her, I promise you they will want retribution. That was the deal. You stay away from humans and so will they. Frank—"

"Frank can whine all he likes. It is irrelevant because she is the exception."

"They're not going to be happy about this," he hisses loudly, causing a staff member and guests in the hall to turn and look. "Frank will try to fight it, and honestly, I can't blame him. This is the most insane thing you've ever spouted."

He smiles and waves, playacting for the humans watching and whispering amongst themselves.

I turn to him briefly as we walk. "What if I'm right, Doyle?" I'm always right about everything, so him whining at me now makes little sense.

He throws his hands forward. "But what if you're wrong? You have to know they will never let this go if you are. Forcing a mate bond with a human is against the rules."

Forcing a mate bond, he says. I know what draws me to Aubrey is the real deal.

I sigh. "Come off it, Doyle. I don't have time for this."

“You forget I was there, Vlad. I was there during Angelique,” he goes on. “I warned Frank the same as you did about mixing with humans, and look how he turned out.”

Normally, any mention of Angelique or Celeste and I would want to pummel him, especially mentioning Frankenstein’s hand in how it all transpired. Now I can see why he raged and railed against the world when his own mate, Celeste, died. I will never let that happen to Aubrey.

“I will protect her.”

“Against them all? Aubrey has no idea what she is getting into.”

I smile and allow him to see, to feel the rage boiling within me at the mere thought of anyone touching her. “Aubrey will be fine. If she accepts me, there’s nothing they can do.”

His brows come together. “Yeah, but until then.”

Until then, she could become a target. I always knew that, but I’m hoping to convince her by the end of the week. So long as everyone leaves us alone, everything will go splendidly.

She did say okay to “dating” as the humans call it. Even after I told her everything.

I shake my head and continue down the hall. “Find Jekyll before someone does something stupid. I am fairly starving after all.”

He rolls his eyes at the joke.

“This is not going to end well,” he murmurs.

His throat is in my hand the next millisecond before I wrap it around the back of his neck, hugging him to me. I nuzzle his head with my own, like I would when he was a boy. “Doyle, I have waited centuries for her. My father waited more lifetimes than I can fathom for my mother, and I vow to you here and now, I will never let her go. I cannot.”

He huffs. “This fucking sucks. You know this is going to create an even bigger rift among us,” he says, whining, and I grin, hugging him for a moment before shoving him away.

He is correct. This could plummet our friendship forever, but I find I don't care. Aubrey is more important, and times have obviously changed. She is mine, and that's all that matters.

"No larger than what it is already."

Rotating my shoulders, I loosen, allowing the monster to slide free as I rip off my tie. I rip my cloak off, preparing to fly off into the night. The faster I find Jekyll, the faster I can get back to Aubrey.

"Fine," he growls. "But I am not saying fuck all for you. Frank is going to have an aneurysm."

"That would be so tragic." Maybe next time he can get a better brain, the blockhead.

"Just try to get along. The party will be over soon." He sighs and takes one last look around. "I saw Jekyll leave his car, but I can't smell him inside."

"If he's not inside, then there's only one place he could be."

"The cathedral?" he asks, stroking his chin.

I nod as I open a window on the second floor in preparation. "Only place I can think of. Although, I don't know why he's not coming to me head on."

Then again, it's Jekyll, and nothing he does makes any sense. It's why I can't tolerate his presence. I like calm and control, which is best achieved alone in solitude. Jekyll is chaos personified.

I jump from the open window and morph into a bat, relishing the crisp wind rushing over me. It doesn't take me long to pick up their scents when I head over the forest, proving I was right—like I always am.

Moments later, I swoop over the abandoned cathedral not far into the forest and land on a branch to scout, my hackles raising immediately. The wind pushes familiar scents into my nostrils and annoyance flashes. *Frank is here too*. Doyle didn't tell me about him. Frank probably found his own way onto my

lands, as no one likes being alone with Jekyll in tight, unescapable spaces like a car with the way he annoyingly rambles.

I fly in through a broken window and morph as I land before them. Jekyll stands near the podium steps with his hands overlapped on top of his cane. Frank, the broody, quiet half-man, has his arms folded with his back against the wall. Neither react to my materialization. They knew I would come.

I growl in frustration before clearing my throat. “Gentlemen, isn’t this a surprise?”

“Good to see you, old friend,” Jekyll says, his blue jeans and black leather jacket not matching his cane and hat. Frank leans, unmoving, dressed similarly to Doyle, like a fucking peacock in a business suit.

“Yes, it seems after all this time, Doyle is getting his wish,” I say. Doyle’s been trying to get me to meet with them for over a century now. I just wish it wasn’t now—or ever. “All of us in one place.”

“The old blighter kept you entertained, then?” Jekyll asks, breaking me out of my reverie.

Jekyll has always been the most unpredictable of the bunch, and I don’t care for the wild look in his eye. The concoctions he drinks often make him appear inebriated, but he has a cunning and intellectual mind. He makes most mad scientists from the past seem tame.

“So tell me, where is the delectable Hilda? I bet the old bag of bones has only grown more lovely with time,” he says, lifting his cane as he shrugs.

“No one is touching Hilda,” I bite out. “And what the fuck are you all doing here?”

Frank waves his hand. “You’ve been keeping secrets, Vlad,” Frank says, his gray eyes narrowing on me. Not one for humor, he sneers. “What? You think I wouldn’t know about your new human pet? I have eyes and ears everywhere.”

“My business is my own, Frank, and as ever, keep your nose out of it,” I say, wishing Doyle would hurry up. I am sure

it's his fault these imbeciles are here, as much as Frank would love to make me believe otherwise.

Doyle finally shows up, lightly sweating but mostly fine. The old dog is used to running long lengths, just not as fast as I can fly. I take in his disheveled appearance.

“What the fuck happened to you? It's been five seconds,” I say incredulously.

“The fucking chef is trying to poison me,” he says furiously, his eyes flashing yellow. He shakes his head and his eye turn to normal. “Never mind. It's not important.”

Jekyll, Frankenstein, the wolf, and I all in one place? It bodes ill.

I vaguely wonder how in the hell Frank knows about Aubrey, and I question if perhaps Doyle is at fault for all of this. The only one who knows how much I care for her is my friend and confidant.

I give him an untrusting look as he stands beside me, and he gives me a confused one since he's just arrived.

If he's betrayed me, I'll flay him and put his head on a spike like the old days. My claws elongate, ready to tear into flesh. I'm too old, too tired for all this—and too damn desperate to return to Aubrey and make sure she's safe.

Jekyll grins in delight at my fangs, and his eyes start to glow a bright, deep green. “If you want to play, Vlad, all you had to do was say.”

Growling, unsure if my new costume can handle the type of brawling Jekyll enjoys, I make my fangs and claws disappear.

“He looks testier than usual, Doyle,” Jekyll says, straightening his jacket, and he tips his cane. “Have you not been taking care of our blood sucker? He hasn't been this way in, well, I can't remember how long. Is something wrong in paradise, Daddy Dracula?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Don't call me that.”

“Well, perhaps had you checked in more often, you would understand more about his state of wellbeing,” Doyle snarls at them both. “It has not been the easiest of centuries, as I am sure you have guessed by now, but really, you have no fucking idea.”

“Et tu, brutus?”

“He had me fucking fire my own employee for an oversight to some human, so I think I have some idea,” Frank snaps, finally pulling away from the wall.

“Yes, and I am sure he had his reasons,” Doyle fires back.

Frank points a finger and waves it between us both. “This entire situation is entirely unacceptable. Why did no one inform me of the ludicrous idea to open up a hotel? Did none of you learn anything from what happened? We are *not* for humans. When I learned of Vlad’s playmate, I nearly choked a minion to death. Well, to *more* dead.”

Doyle laughs at this, and the sound is hollow. “Times have changed, have they not? Mr. CEO of *Talbot Global*.”

How do they know about her already?

I blink, and something that feels oddly close to betrayal registers in my sternum. “What happened, Doyle? Did you just casually give them updates every day? Abused by my one true friend, or so I thought.” My eyes begin to glow red.

“You are such an idiot,” Doyle says.

“I beg your pardon?”

Jekyll laughs. “The internet is a wonderful place, Vlad.”

“You think I wouldn’t have done some snooping when I found out you made an *Instagram* account?” Frank asks incredulously, and I open my mouth to respond. “Really, Vlad? You? On Instagram? I thought it was a prank from Doyle until I saw you going viral on your human’s profile. I knew something was up straight away,” Frank says, crossing his arms and tipping his chin superiorly.

Jekyll snaps his fingers. “That one bird—what was her name? Agatha? Alicia?” He shakes his head. “Actually, I think

both of those were mine. Umm, Angel. That's the one."

"Angelique?" Doyle supplies, obviously stunned.

He snaps his fingers again and nods. "Yes, that one was a spitfire," Jekyll says, then whistles for emphasis.

"You knew Angelique?" Doyle asks.

"I'm pretty sure I knew her a few times," Jekyll says, rubbing his chin in thought.

"She's the one who put him in iron, remember? He'd been missing so long even Frank was forced to come and help," Doyle says with a low laugh.

I shake my head. "Is it really such a great mystery as to why I don't open my home to vagrants? Fuck all of you. Months of being held and locked in a cage by some enraged woman hell-bent on having immortality, and what do I get? You lot sharing it like it's an old bedtime story."

"Whatever happened to Angelique, anyway?" Jekyll asks.

I growl. "She married some farmer in the Americas."

Growing bored with standing idle, Jekyll starts to explore, weaving between the pews. He picks up random books left inside the old place from god knows when before tossing them to the floor. No one stops him, as it's never a good idea to get in the way of his movements.

"Hey, I think I left my favorite jacket here," he says to himself, and I shake my head.

He lights a match, and the fireplace comes to life. Of course he starts a fire even though no one here needs it. *Pyromaniac*. At least it's contained this time.

"Do you mind?" I grumble, waving at the flames.

"Don't mind if I do," he says cheekily.

I eye the floor where Jekyll has created a pile of bibles and the like. I have had enough of this. "I'm afraid I must ask you to leave. We can even have one of your little tea parties soon, my treat of course," I say, clapping my hands once. "But do piss off."

I turn around to head to the skewed double doors, intent on heading back to Aubrey, images of our extended vacation around the world bouncing around in my mind.

“Oh, and what were we to do exactly? Knock on the door and ask to come in?” Frank says derisively.

“No, absolutely not, and I’ll tell you why. This is my home, not some supernatural gathering place,” I snap, the need to get back to Aubrey itching just beneath my skin, making me more agitated by the second.

“You know, I think he’s gotten grouchier with time. We assumed you would want to see us after so long, Vlad,” Jekyll says, his tone hurt and whiney. A complete lie. “I suppose you think yourself too lofty now?”

“You assumed incorrectly. I just have no desire to relive New Orleans.”

“That wasn’t so bad,” Jekyll says. “Odette was . . .” He purses his lips and smacks them obnoxiously.

No one can resist Odette. I glance at Frankenstein, who looks like he wishes to pummel Jekyll for mentioning her. Well, *most* can’t resist Odette. The witch queen herself is like a siren to the supernatural, all except for Frank.

My brow lifts. “She made us start the fire of London. Well, you lot, mainly.”

“Okay, I’ll admit that got out of hand, but Frank was holding the lantern. That wasn’t *my* fault,” Jekyll says, placing his hand over his heart. He bats his eyes, like he thinks any of us would find that tasteful.

A muscle ticks in Frank’s jaw and his eyes darken as if shadows line his irises. “You told me to hold it.”

Jekyll pats Frankenstein’s chest, practically reaching above his head to do it, although Jekyll is six foot himself. “Let it go, man.”

“All of this is irrelevant to why we’re here,” Frank bites out, before shooting a glare at Jekyll. “How do you always derail the point of everything?!”

“Well, does it matter if Vlad is in love with a human?” Jekyll asks him as he picks up a bible, only to curl his lip in disgust. “I mean, as long as he doesn’t bite her, it’s all null and void, right?”

“You cannot be serious,” Frank says, anger lining his face. “I told you no humans. It’s why I went to all the fucking trouble to make the sunscreen. Can you imagine *him* heartbroken? You thought the fire of London was bad.”

Jekyll clears his throat. “Ahem, last I checked, I made the sunscreen.” All eyes immediately go to him, and he shrugs. “Well, I did.”

“I was willing to make sure you could live among us,” Frank retorts, his ears turning a faint green color. “I know the allure of humans. I understand how tempting they are, but it is futile to even suggest it.”

“Pretending to be a human to fit in among the sheep is hardly living,” I tell him.

“This will never work. I know it, and more importantly, you know it. Love does not exist, not for people like us,” Frank continues his blustering. “Humans die too easily.”

My claws and fangs return. “She is mine, and you will not touch her, so it is irrelevant.”

He grins evily. “I don’t really have to, do I? Even if she could love and accept who and what you are, where does that leave you? Seventy years with her if you’re lucky. Just enough to bring you down when she does pass,” he bites out. “I won’t have it. Turning her is impossible. She’ll die.”

“This conversation will quickly become a confrontation if you continue, Frank,” I growl out.

Frankenstein laughs. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that you would be so easily influenced by a human. Mark my words, this won’t end well.”

“No one is controlling me. If you truly think I would ever put any of us in jeopardy, then you are sorely mistaken.”

“How exactly did you influence her, then?” Jekyll retorts.

“I didn’t,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Aubrey is not like that. She isn’t like Angelique,” Doyle states to no one in particular. “I’ve tried to keep her away from him and vice versa, but it’s not working.”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth? In this lies the conundrum, lads,” Jekyll speaks up, fumbling in his pocket for a cigar. He clamps it with his teeth as he lights it.

“Bring that into the castle and I will make you eat it,” I say, pointing at it.

He arches a brow. “Charming as ever, Tepesh. You have a wonderful new pussy—I mean gentlewoman—to play with, and yet you’re still angsty.”

Within the blink of an eye, I fly across the cathedral, snatch him by the throat, and lift him into the air. I will *not* have anyone speak of her this way.

He grins above me. “Down, killer. For fuck’s sake, I was only kidding.”

Snarling, I throw him, watching as he lands in a heap with an *oomph*, his body slapping the ground. He pops up like a fucking dandelion, fixing his suit and dusting it off before looking for his cigar. I stamp it out, and he gives me a pout.

“You have to either wipe her memory or we kill her,” Frank says, his blonde hair lifting slightly with the wind.

“No one is killing anyone,” Doyle interjects, his voice obviously annoyed.

Red clouds my vision. “You want me to wipe her memory?”

“Yes,” Frank insists. “If you haven’t bitten her, then—”

Doyle steps between us, holding his arms out, knowing I am seconds from ripping Frank’s face off. “No one is wiping anyone’s memory.”

“You don’t have a say in it, pup,” Frank sneers.

“Why can’t we all just get along?” Jekyll calls out.

“I have,” I finally state. They all turn to me, wearing various expressions of disbelief. “I’ve bitten her. I’ve made my side of the bond.”

“You’re fucking joking!” Frank yells, as Doyle slaps his hand over his face. “Do you know what this means?!”

Yes. It means they can’t do anything. It could fade, but I won’t let that happen. She may be human, but she is my mate, whether or not any of them believe me. As an immortal, now that I’ve started it, she can return it—despite her *current* mortality.

“I am leaving. Feel free to see yourselves out,” I toss over my shoulder as I walk away.

I make it a few steps and Frank starts laughing. “One hundred years and this is what you have to show for it? Lovesick over some insignificant human. You fool, you don’t know what you’ve done,” he says, and I ready myself, waiting for any excuse to rip into him. “Humans cannot be trusted. How often have you said those same words?”

“Watch yourself.”

“You know the rules. If you wipe her mind before she returns it, all will be well.”

“For the last time, no one is wiping anyone,” Doyle snaps, losing his patience. He stomps to put himself in Frank’s line of sight. “Aubrey is innocent and has actually been good for him, from what I can tell.”

Surprise that he’s defending me, and her, fills me. He gives me a look over his shoulder that says he will side with me, no matter how he feels.

“I’m done talking to you lot. Gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me, I have a party to get back to. Doyle, make sure they leave my home.”

“You will regret this,” Frank says to my back.

The only thing I regret is leaving Aubrey alone and unattended for any amount of time. Especially with Frank here, the one person I need her farthest from. The thought of

her being hurt by anyone makes my hair stand on end and my undead heart feel like it's fallen from my chest.

I wave my hand dismissively as I exit the cathedral. They won't do anything, not with her under my watchful protection.

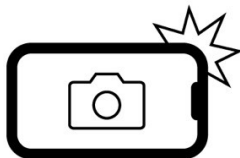
“Threaten me all you like, Frank, but I promise you this: friend or no friend, if you touch a single hair on Aubrey's head, I will burn your precious empire to the ground and dance on the ashes. I may be old, and let myself wither for an age, but you forget who I am.”

The Dracula Tepesh.

I have been alive for longer than all of them, and I will outlive them as well.

CHAPTER 34

AUBREY



“REALLY, FIFI. REALLY? ALL THE WAY DOWN HERE? LIKE, what were you even after?” I say to him as I hold him in my arms. “There are zero doggy treats in here, bud, and definitely no hot babes for you to bark at.”

After trekking awkwardly through the dark hallways for ages, my red dress clinging to my thighs as I walk, I am currently cursing myself for not wearing comfortable shoes. Anything that looks remotely familiar would be amazing at this point. My palms are clammy, and sweat has been trickling down my spine so much I know this dress is ruined even though the cloak protects it.

I look down at my phone for the millionth time, cursing it for not giving me bars this deep in the castle. It’s the whole cellar issue again, but apparently worse. Not to mention the corridors down here are definitely creepier at night, and I have been fighting panic for what seems like hours already.

The pug whines suddenly and I squeeze my arms around him tighter.

“What is it, boy?” I whisper.

We are, after all, in this together and talking out loud makes the tunnel less scary, which means I haven’t shut up since Whitley said the dog had raced off this way. Vlad has never taken me down here, and I didn’t know it existed until I saw Fifi’s chunky little butt racing down some stairs. *I hope he wasn’t chasing a rat.*

“Oh, George owes me big time. Your owner is in for a rude awakening, and I swear I will get you a nice leash. It will be perfect.” The dog growls again. I don’t know if it’s at me, or a spooky ghost I can’t see, but it scares me every time he does it. “Okay, maybe like a diamond-studded leash. You help me find our way back and I will buy you so many dog treats you won’t know what to do with yourself.”

My god, my feet are killing me. There is no way I can wear these shoes for much longer.

My eyes land on a lever on the wall. “Look, Fifi, we are saved.”

After some unladylike cursing and grunting, the lever finally moves and the wall rotates, revealing an outdoor exit. Nothing about this area of the castle looks remotely familiar. Snow flurries swirl, and the bite of winter slaps at my cheeks, chapping my lips almost instantly.

“This is so not the door I was looking for.” I shiver and hold Fifi closer to steal his warmth. “Man, it’s cold.”

A flash of light passing outside in the distance catches my eye, and I can just make out the vague outline of someone moving quickly and holding a lantern.

“Hey, you!” I shout, but the sound is lost in the wind.

I look down, shaking my head at the dog.

“We are not doing it,” I say, glancing in the direction the lantern guy went. “That’s like the start of every horror story ever.” Shivers slide up my spine and Fifi yowls pitifully. “C’mon, it’s just a joke. We’re totally safe.”

I step back inside the castle tunnels and pull the lever again, relieved when the door slides back into place, blocking out the cold. *Whoever that was out there is mental.*

“Maybe there is another farther down that will take us back to the kitchen,” I murmur. I pet Fifi’s soft tawny coat. “Let’s get out of here, huh? Vlad or someone will find us eventually.”

“Isn’t this a pleasant surprise?”

Fifi goes ballistic at the sound of the low voice and barks his little squished face off, sending my anxiety racing toward newfound heights. My eyes go wide as he switches to a rumbling growl, his whole body vibrating in my arms.

“Who’s there?” I clutch him to my chest tightly and squint into the darkness past the dim lightbulb in this section of the passage, seeing only shadows.

“You’re a little far from home, aren’t you?” The words are low and sinister, making my stomach flip violently. I step toward the light, only to back into the shadows again when a man’s gunmetal-gray suit and pale skin flashes as he passes through it.

“Who’s there?” I repeat.

“Hush, poochie,” the male voice says, and Fifi stops growling, pressing his little body backward into mine with a whimper. “It’s easy to get lost down here, isn’t it?”

He comes closer, as I step toward the light again so I can see, nervous about being alone with a stranger in the dark.

“Listen, I don’t know who you are or what you want, but it’s creepy enough down here as is. So, if you could lay off being scary, that would be great,” I say as I force a fake laugh.

“Apologies,” the man says, before we both come into the sparse light.

A new kind of fear takes hold, rooting me to the fucking floor when I finally see him. My god, he’s fucking tall. He’s got to be almost seven feet because his head is practically touching the top of the passageway. He’s also so pale he makes Vlad look like a beach bro, and his eyes are an odd gray that almost appears silver.

I look up and realize I’ve seen that shocking white-blond hair, and chiseled, clean-shaven face before. It’s been plastered across tabloids and prestigious magazines for years. Who doesn’t know him?

“You’re ... you’re Frank Stein,” I gasp out.

His eyes that usually sparkle with charisma in photos look flat and annoyed.

“In the flesh,” he sneers. “You weren’t who I was looking for, but I’m pleased all the same.”

My expression falls as dread sends goosebumps across my arms and chest. I hold Fifi tighter.

“Since you’re here, let’s see about getting you out of Romania before you cause any more problems for our dear friend Dracula.”

Fifi starts growling again as the hulking man moves toward me with his hand out.

I narrow my eyes and back up a step. “I think I’d rather stay here, if it’s all the same to you.”

Most women would give their left tit to trade places with me right now, but I am picking up on everything but warm and fuzzy feelings while being alone with him. I just want Vlad and to get out of this creepy tunnel, in whatever order that needs to happen.

He chuckles, yet his head twists in an unnatural, almost inspecting manner. “Isn’t this typical? Don’t you know what he is?”

“I know he hasn’t been a jerk to me, and he’s not holding me hostage down here like some creep.”

My palms grow clammy when he stares at me blankly. Not an eye twitch, nothing, and it freaks me out. If Vlad is *the* Dracula, then doesn’t that mean . . .?

His name. “Oh my god, are you the real Frankenstein’s—?”

His dark and maniacal laugh cuts me off. “No, but my creator drew inspiration from that silly tale.” He bashes the wall with his fist to scare me on purpose, and I jump. “I am much more cunning and dangerous.”

The way he looks at me, like I’m disposable, makes me gulp. I tremble, frozen in place, unsure of how to get myself away from him.

“You have two options, little lamb. You can leave with me, and I’ll put you on a plane to whatever hovel it is you call home, or I can kill you,” he finally says, unblinking.

Panic climbs up through my chest into my throat, and my brain short circuits. “Umm, but why?”

He looks at me like I’m stupid. “What?”

“Why are those the only options?” my voice squeaks out and ends on a high note.

He jerks back while sliding away from the wall. “Because I said so.”

I scoff. “As if that’s even an answer.”

I back up a step, wishing the stupid wall beside us would disappear. Maybe I can grab the lever and somehow get away. Sure, Aubrey, then spend hours running through cold snow? *Crap.*

“It’s the only answer you will get.”

“I have a hard time believing a guy who donated five million dollars to this year’s Rescue the Dolphins Fund would hurt people.”

“What you and the other foolish humans know about me is wrong.”

“Frank!” another voice rings out. “Finally we found you.”

I stare for a moment in a state of shock as a guy wearing basic blue jeans and a leather jacket approaches from the shadows.

Mr. Stein’s eye finally twitches with some sort of response other than a robot, and I breathe a small sigh of relief. I’ve watched enough profiling shows to know I really need him to give me some kind of clue he’s human.

“Jekyll, what the fuck took you so long?” he growls, his tone annoyed as hell. “We’ve been searching for your little project for thirty minutes.”

I turn to the new man. *This* is Jekyll?

He looks so ... normal. His eyes are green, his chin-length hair is brown, and his skin is tan like Doyle's. He looks like he should be rolling around on a movie set, not creeping around in dark tunnels in Romania in the middle of winter.

"My gods, isn't she the most stunning thing you've ever seen?" With the way he waves back to the darkness, I know he isn't talking about me. His tone is alight with glee, like a computer nerd geeking out over a new part. "I swear Vlad never lets me play with any of his toys. She's simply marvelous, much better than I even imagined."

Frank nods in greeting at someone behind him I can't see. His tone softens as he says, "Hilda."

My eyes widen, my mouth drops open, and the next thing that registers is Frank Stein taking a growling dog out of my arms which seem to be malfunctioning. But I can't think about why my limbs aren't working past the strange buzzing filling my ears, followed by the blood leaving my face in a rush.

A low moan sounds and snaps me out of it. I scream in absolute terror when a walking skeleton comes into view.

"Ahhh!" My fight-or-flight kicks in and I scramble away, my heels getting caught up in my cloak, and I tumble to the floor. "What is that?" I blurt out.

Frank grabs me by the arm with a perturbed sigh, yanking me to my shaky legs.

"This is Hilda, and don't call her a *that*. It's hurtful," Jekyll says, like I've offended someone. He places his palm on the skeleton's shoulder. "Don't mind the human. They're all idiots and blind to your beauty, my skeletal doll."

"Vlad is going to kill you for this," Frank sneers, before setting Fifi down on his feet.

The pug turns tail and runs off down the tunnel, hopefully heading to find his owner.

Jekyll rolls his eyes. "Highly doubt that, Mr. Control Freak. It's fine. She wants to come with me, and he will just have to deal with it." Then Jekyll turns and looks me over. "And you're one to talk, Frank."

My body goes stiff when his bright-green eyes shine strangely in the low light and there's a wide grin on his face. He careens to the side as he walks, obviously inebriated.

I stand there blinking like an idiot, not knowing what to do, effectively trapped here. Now that there's two of them, I feel more alone and scared than I did before, especially after Frank's threats.

"Please don't hurt me," I whisper, my back finding the wall as I snap my eyes closed.

"Hurt you? Don't listen to Frank and his temper tantrums," he says in disgust, so close I can smell the alcohol on his breath. "My darling girl, I would never hurt you. I quite like living—and breathing, for that matter. Good lord, the women that will weep when I die."

What the actual hell is this guy on? I open my eyes and look at him warily. "Then let me go."

He shakes his head and sniffs the air oddly. "No can do, I'm afraid." He sniffs again, near the top of my head, and his green eyes *glow* even in the dimness. "That's interesting. Vlad really does get all the things. Seems you found Tepesh's woman wandering the halls, Frank. I can smell him all over her."

"I know that, you pompous nitwit," Frank snaps out.

"Of course you did! You and your intel." Jekyll wags a finger at Frank while laughing. "Well, I guess we both got we came here for, then."

Frank reaches out to grab me again, and I swipe his hand back. "Do *not* touch me."

I fight the panic that threatens to sweep me away. Thank god Vlad made me wear the cloak, otherwise these weird freaks might see my dress and get even creepier. My heartbeat thunders in my chest and I wish Vlad would somehow appear right at this moment and get these guys away from me. This night has just gone from bad to worse.

"Have you gone mad? Threatening Vlad's plaything?" Jekyll says to Frank. Oh, this guy is definitely off his rocker.

He appears to be the mad one here. Then he turns to me. “I would congratulate you on your upcoming nuptials by kissing your hand, but then, you know, *schlick*.” He sweeps his hand over his throat. “Then again, I do agree we need to get her as far from that half-deluded vampire before that happens, before he becomes ... attached.”

Frank eyes him reproachfully, and the skeleton, *Hilda*, tilts her head to the left as if she’s annoyed by them both.

“Exactly, which is why we need to get the fuck out of this castle before he realizes where she is,” Frank says.

“Old friend, I think you’re missing a fact or three in this equation,” Jekyll says, reaching for the skeleton and roping his arm around her waist before turning away. Jekyll looks down at his watch. “Oh, would you look at that, is that the time? You’re right. We should get Hilda to the car.”

“I’m not going with either one of you!” I yell, but they aren’t listening.

My brow furrows when I notice what Hilda is wearing. Is that . . . *my* sweater? My stomach rolls with nausea. The skeleton is wearing my sweater, the one that’s been missing since I arrived. *Oh my god, get me out of here!*

Snickering, Jekyll pivots back in front of Frank. “Anyway, it looks like you have your own problems to contend with. Shall we, Hilda darling?” He leads the skeleton woman away and I’m still left wondering how she even exists.

Frank bows to Hilda, and it’s odd how fluid and graceful he is from the sheer size of the guy. I remember watching *The Princess Bride* with my grandma one summer, and I swear on my life Frank Stein is every bit as tall as Fezzik.

Frank’s eyes meet mine, and I fight a sudden wave of revulsion that rolls through my middle, making me want to vomit.

“Come with me,” he bites out, pulling my small frame next to him.

I fight to free myself. “No! I’m staying here.”

“You must know what he is,” Frank says as he crowds me against the wall. “He’s a vampire. He’s probably bitten you recently if Jekyll can smell him on you. What do you think Vlad does to humans?”

“Vlad would never hurt me,” I say with confidence.

“He’s a monster like the rest of us, and you are one measly human who knows nothing.”

I shake my head stubbornly. Frank can say what he wants, but I trust Vlad. I know him. He would never hurt me.

“No? Still not afraid of a man that likely wants nothing but to drain you like a blood bag?” he scoffs, as if I’m the insane one. “Fine. As much as killing you would benefit me, we still need his side of the bond to fade. I’m going to get you as far away from him as possible, so you can’t hurt him, and you are going to stay there, or I will find everyone you know, everyone you love, and I will destroy them any way I can. I will be in every corner of every shadow, watching.”

I try to calm my nerves, but I can’t shake the fear that even though I know Vlad will help me, the man in front of me is a different story. He’s *the* Frank Stein. He has enough power, money, and influence to bury anyone—even six feet under if he wants to.

I don’t know what he means about me hurting Vlad, though, as I would never do anything to hurt him. I . . . *love* him. Of course I do. I want that man like he’s a piece of candy on a stick.

He pushes me down the corridor.

“Where are we going?”

I pray to whatever higher power exists that Vlad or Doyle will somehow be on the other side of the wall when Frank pulls a lever. Cold, wintry night air greets me.

I look back toward the castle when he leads me outside and into the forest. I try to break free, but nothing I do gets me away from the freakishly tall and muscular man. I keep looking over my shoulder as tears stream down my cheeks. I can’t get away, no matter how much I try.

What if I never see him again? My body trembles, shaking and shuddering as I finally allow myself to let go of the tension I've been holding for what feels like hours.

Devastation crests and tosses me under like I'm being battered by ocean waves. I can't breathe. Images of Frank Stein threatening me and my family, Hilda the walking skeleton, and Jekyll inspecting me like I'm a toy flash through my brain as my head pounds. *I wish Vlad was here.*

Wind whips my hair around my head as he takes me down a path before stopping at a black SUV. A man, who somehow looks normal and yet like a supermodel, greets us and opens the backside passenger door. Frank tosses me into it.

I pull out my phone when he goes around to the other side and slides in. Before I even bring Vlad's contact info up, he snatches it out of my hand.

"Nuh-ah," he says, moving it away from me as I reach for it. "Can't have you contacting him."

The car tires screech as it takes off. He sends a text to someone before going through my phone as we drive. I see him deleting all the photos I took of Vlad, the castle, and all the contacts I have, even from my cloud backup drives.

"Stop!" I plead, reaching for it, but he shoves me away.

Panic resurfaces when Frank then crushes my phone in his hand. Everything else I can get from the cloud, but I don't know Vlad's number off by heart! Frank is doing everything he can to separate us, and he gives my tears a disgusted look when he hands me the crumpled pieces.

He's going to think I've run away. My heart breaks again with the knowledge, but there's nothing I can do right now. *Vlad. Where are you?* How did my night and life go to shit so quickly?

Frank pulls out his own phone. "Where is it you live?"

"Atlanta," I say quietly.

He rolls his eyes. "Such an American, only saying your city."

He makes a call, and I overhear him telling someone to have his jet ready with Atlanta as the destination. He ends it quickly.

Shaking in my seat, trees pass in a blur as we speed down some kind of back road of the castle grounds. Frank is silent as I sob. The richest man in the world is a total dick. I don't even know why he's doing this, but to go so far as to threaten me and my family... I have no choice but to do what he says.

Even as we drive onto the tarmac of some small, rundown-looking private airport, I say nothing. We pull up right next to a private jet that says Talbot Global—Mr. Stein's company.

My heart racing, I squeal when Frank leaves, only to come get me from the other side. He grabs my arm and drags me toward the plane.

“Make sure she gets home,” he demands as he shoves me toward the boarding stairs where two people stand at the bottom.

A man and a woman dressed as flight attendants bow toward him before regarding me. They're gorgeous, both looking like supermodels. I scream and scramble back when they grin and feline fangs extend.

“Don't mind the ghouls,” Frank says, laughing. “My minions only bite if I tell them to.”

He pushes me again, forcing me to go up the stairs. With no other choice, I climb them, and the *ghouls* follow to block me from escaping.

“I just want to go home,” I mutter through tears. *And for this night to be over.*

How am I going to get back to Vlad?

Worst day *ever*.

CHAPTER 35

VLAD



“WHERE COULD SHE BE?” I MUTTER UNDER MY BREATH, fidgeting with my black wool-lined cloak.

Aubrey’s scent is everywhere in the castle. Pleasant, light, intoxicating. It makes my skin prickle with unease. I have looked everywhere. I have checked the gallery where I left her, and every nook and cranny of the entire castle, and I cannot find her.

My pupils bleed to red.

Something is wrong. Alarm ripples across my skin and my hair stands on end.

The four of us in one place—what a terrible fucking idea.

Shrieks from guests near the front of the castle reach my ears on the second floor. I run to the high windows of the castle and see Jekyll holding the passenger door of a black car for Hilda. She climbs inside, and Jekyll manages to find me in the window, his grin large and *insane*. Tires squeal, and a set of bright round headlights flash through the windows as the car peels around the drive.

I growl and run for the balcony doors, throwing them wide. *I should have known he’d take her*. I’d been a fool to think he would just leave, but it does leave me wondering where the hell Doyle is.

“I’ll kill him for this.”

My vision morphs and changes when I shrink into a bat, my world becoming larger, and I growl at the screams from

the guests that continue to fill the night. *I don't know how we will explain her to the humans. Perhaps an elaborate costume?* Fucking Jekyll. He has no regards for the rules when it pleases him. Wings flapping in the moonlight, I dive toward the car barreling down the switchback of the mountain. Trees blur beneath me as I fly, my body tense with rage. *Hilda.*

The moment I get close enough, I propel myself forward and shift back into a human. Landing a short distance in front of the moving vehicle, I take control, yanking the car three feet into the air like a mere toy.

My anger gets the better of me until I hear Hilda's groans of fright. I drop it back down to the ground, but turn off the ignition as I do. I can hear Jekyll cackling in the background, obviously having the time of his life.

I really need to make new friends.

The doors come off next as I rip them from the hinges and a wave of fear slices down my back instantaneously. *Aubrey?* Her scent washes over me, coming from the car, and my eyes flash red as a haze of fury unleashes. I stomp over to the car, dread thundering in my chest when I think of how it was careening on the road seconds ago and how I ripped the doors off without thought. She could be scared or hurt.

Jekyll sits in the driver's seat, not showing an ounce of shame whatsoever by the mischievous grin lighting his face. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Jerking Jekyll from the car, I smash my fist into his face once, twice. He only smiles as my fists rain down on him until a firm, bony hand wraps around my arm, stopping me.

I toss him as Hilda groans, "Ahhhhhhnnnn."

I hold Jekyll down to the ground with my power, Hilda's skeletal hand trying to pull me off the bastard. I try to shrug her off but it's as if she's cemented to me. I lift her form into the air, and her neck rattles as she attempts to pull away from my power. Aubrey's scent is all over her, and I look more closely at what she's wearing. Surely, I'm imagining things.

"*Why* are you wearing her clothes?"

“Annnngg.” *Because she didn’t have clothes to wear.*

She has only ever worn her uniform, ever since I was a lad, and has never asked for anything. I assumed she wore the clothes out of want rather than purchasing from humans. Hilda has been a stern, but caring nanny to me all my life, but I never suspected she would want to leave. She has never given an inkling otherwise.

My brow furrows. Perhaps Doyle was right, and she hasn’t been happy. *She only needed to tell me, and I would have done anything for her.*

But her wearing Aubrey’s clothing only makes me worried over my mate’s whereabouts.

“Where is Aubrey?” I ask.

Her bones rattle. “Anng.”

“What the fuck do you mean, gone?”

“We don’t know where your woman ran off to,” Jekyll says with a laugh from the ground, still immobile.

I don’t know if I should believe them or not, but Jekyll didn’t seem to mind that I have a human mate. Only Frank, and that worries me even more.

“*This* is your way of telling me you’re leaving?” I nod at Jekyll laying down on the asphalt, his arms behind his head, obviously nonplussed by his current situation. *Typical.* “You really want to go stay with this idiot? Him?”

“Unnhg.” *Yes.*

“He doesn’t act as if he excelled past grade one most of the time. He quite literally is a man-child.”

Jekyll sputters out, “I’m lying right here!”

“Shut up, Jekyll,” I snap at him, wishing he would just disappear.

“Kay,” he says, nodding his head solemnly.

“Aannng.”

“Fine.” I have other things to worry about and truly she can handle Jekyll herself if that is her decision. I let her go, and her cold bony hands touch my cheek affectionately. “You know you will always have a home here. Just send word if you need anything or want me to come get you.”

She pulls away and bones clack as she curtsies. With a snap of her fingers, she takes Jekyll from my power, and floats him back to the car with her own. The sweater hangs off her form awkwardly, and a tightness forms in my chest. All this time, was I holding her hostage?

“Anng aaa.” *Tell her I’m sorry if I scared her?*

“What do you mean? How did you scare her?”

My phone pings, and my world tilts into chaos as the notification crosses the screen.

AUBREY:

I’m sorry. I can’t do this.

What the fuck does that mean? I quickly dial her.

The solid sounds of *beep beep beep* greet my ear, and my stomach drops that much further as tires pull away behind me. Dust kicks up into a thick cloud, cloaking me in dirt and debris, but I can’t find the will to care as anguish rips through my being.

She left me?

“Why is everyone leaving me?” I whisper.

Aubrey wouldn’t do this, *not like this*. At least I hope she wouldn’t.

The thought that she would leave after agreeing to be mine tears at something fundamental inside my chest. A keening cry leaves my lips as tears well in my eyes, and I slap my hands over my face to hide them. My nostrils flare the next second as clarity roars through my brain, and I glare at the taillights slipping over the bridge of my lands.

There is no way Frank didn't have a hand in this. *Where the fuck is Doyle?* My blood boils as I recall Frank has a nearby airfield, and there's no way that pompous prick didn't fly here in something.

If he took her, I will find her.

Changing back into my bat form, I fly up around the castle and zoom over the trees, intent on reaching the small stretch of land Frank has always used for his flying contraptions. The stench of exhaust meets my nostrils and I push myself harder, morphing and changing to let my feet touch the ground at the small airfield with its empty tarmac. There are no planes to be seen.

Engaging my keen sense of smell, I track her to a few feet away where fresh tire marks have imprinted the dirt road. I growl in frustration when I realize I am too late. Staring up into the night sky, I spot the twinkling lights of the private jet in the distance and catch the faint rumble of the engine, long gone.

I smell no more than a tiny trace of her, and my stomach sinks with the realization that she really has left me.

CHAPTER 36

VLAD



“FOR THE LAST TIME, I DID NOT INVITE FRANK HERE.” DOYLE rubs at his temples as he sits in his chair across from me, obviously still fighting the effects of whatever Jekyll used to incapacitate him. “You started all of this by going viral.” He punctuates this with a glare from across the desk of my study, rubbing the back of his head and wincing.

Bullshit. “I highly doubt that.” Frank must have been planning this from the start.

I don’t for a second believe Aubrey would leave me *willingly*. She has always spoken her mind and would tell me herself if she were unhappy, unlike Hilda. I stare at the fireplace, going over recent events, and there is no doubt someone has orchestrated all of this.

“It’s true. Frank wouldn’t have wanted to join Jekyll in coming here if he hadn’t seen you plastered all over the internet with a human,” Doyle says.

I grind my teeth to keep from losing my temper entirely and hurting my one friend in the world. “What do you mean, *join* him here? I didn’t realize I had extended him an invitation.”

His brows come together, a resignation filling his expression. “You wouldn’t leave her alone, so I had no choice but to ask Jekyll’s opinion. He thought maybe the sunscreen could be causing some side effects.” He holds his palms up, shaking his head. “You have to admit, it’s not a bad theory.

You started eating and then claiming she's your mate almost instantly. What did you expect me to do?"

So he did invite them here.

My fist clenches with the need to pummel him, but his attire gives me pause. I have not seen Doyle this disheveled in years. His white shirt is unbuttoned, he doesn't have a hair in place, and dirt stains cover most of his arms and a shoulder. His expensive suit jacket is missing entirely. For as long as I have known him, this is as dressed down as I have seen.

It serves him right for not discussing Jekyll with me.

"Except she *is* my mate, you idiot. Vampires are not like the wolves you've studied. I am acting this way because *she is my bride*. A drop of her blood, Doyle, and I haven't eaten in hours." I wave my hand through the air in frustration. "Get me a plane to the Americas."

Thinking his elbows down onto the chair's armrests, Doyle ducks his head and runs his fingers through his hair. "Impossible. We've been hacked."

"What do you mean, we've been hacked?"

"I mean that Frank has locked down everything. I can't get into the router because there are no phone lines at all. No Wi-Fi, no nothing. You see?" he huffs out, flipping his open laptop on a nearby table toward me and pointing at the "No internet connection" message on the screen.

Frank would try to keep me grounded, most likely thinking the mate bond will fade given half the chance.

"He also took down the cell towers. We don't have access to anything. We don't even have a radio to use to get you anywhere. You're going to have to wait, and I don't know how long." He sits back in his chair, tossing his hands into the air as he does. He scowls at the computer screen, pulling at his hair roughly, making it stick out in all directions. "I don't know what to do."

I have been played for a fool in my own home, my mate torn from me by my very comrades. I stare down at my phone and look at the images of her smiling up at me, of how her

nose crinkles in one photo, and her mouth is in a wide grin in the next. All I can focus on is how to get to her.

“You have no way to track her?” I ask, scrolling through what few photos I thought to take. I should have taken hundreds. Once she is in my arms again, I will take thousands.

He huffs in annoyance. “No internet means we have been put back into the stone age, Vlad. You might as well fly your bat self all the way to America. It’d only take you a few weeks ... if you could withstand the sun.”

That’s too long. “They shouldn’t have even been here. And you let them waltz through the castle and fucking take her.”

A muscle ticks in his jaw, and his eyes light up a bright yellow. “I did not *let* either of them do anything. None of this is my fault. Yours is not the only night that was ruined, you know. When I see Jekyll again, I am going to beat the shit out of him for whatever tranquilizer he hit me with,” he growls.

Speaking of . . . “There is also the little matter of Hilda.” I tell him, wondering how he will take the news.

He goes still but doesn’t look up from his stupid computer screen. “What about her?”

“She and Jekyll walked through the front door to leave.”

His gaze meets mine and color leaches from his face. “That’s what all the shouting was? Oh fuck. How bad was it?”

I fold my hands and peer at him across the table. “I didn’t stay to watch. I was a bit busy chasing down Jekyll’s car to save her, only to realize she wanted to leave with *him*.”

“You can’t believe I would have a hand in that. I would never let him take her!” His expression turns from confused to horrified.

“Did you know Hilda was wearing Aubrey’s sweater? That she has been wearing her clothes?”

His head lifts and his gaze clashes with mine as he gets to his feet. *He knew*.

“Yes. I caught Hilda wearing it the day after Aubrey arrived.” His hands dive into his pockets. “I didn’t want to tell you because I thought there was no harm, but I didn’t say anything, and I wasn’t going to return it. Not after you went full *Pretty Woman* on Aubrey.”

“I went what?”

“I did try to tell you. Hilda hasn’t been happy for some time.”

Slamming my fist onto the table, I hold him with my stare. “You did this behind my back.”

He holds his hands in the air. “Like I said, I tried to tell you. She has been restless for the last month. I thought it was because of you.”

Dammit.

It doesn’t matter. Hilda is a grown woman and if she wants to babysit Jekyll, she can. I have to get to Aubrey. Every minute that passes pushes her further away from me.

“Where is *Atlanta*?” I ask, remembering she mentioned the city she is from.

He frowns. “It’s a city in part of the United States, Georgia, I think. Why?”

“Hello?” someone shouts from downstairs.

I shake my head, stabbing my finger in the direction of the door. “Go deal with that.”

Getting up and backing away toward the door, he pauses after opening it into the hallway, his expression serious. “I honestly didn’t know how to tell you. There is no good way for me to say your skeleton nanny is wearing your new girlfriend’s clothes.” He stomps from the room, only to come back a moment later, peaking his head in the door. “I am sorry about Aubrey. For what it’s worth, I was only trying to protect you.”

He is lucky I already know this. It’s the reason I haven’t attacked him for his hand in any of Frank and Jekyll’s obvious scheming. Jekyll saw an opportunity and took it. The truth is,

if Doyle hadn't decided to open the castle, I would have never met Aubrey.

“Give me a few days and I will find you a way to her, if you're that sure. Frank wouldn't leave us in the dark long. My guess is he just wants to put some distance between the both of you.”

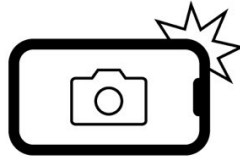
None of them understand. It is easier for them to believe me so weakened after a century that I do not know my own mind. I look down at Aubrey's smiling face again, wishing like hell I had never left her side. I toss the useless phone onto the table.

“Fine,” I tell him, wishing him to leave.

A door slams somewhere downstairs and I wait until his footsteps rush down the hall before getting to my feet. *A few days, he says.* I will be on a plane to Aubrey tonight, no matter if I have to coerce an entire fucking airport to do it.

CHAPTER 37

AUBREY



One Week Later

“SCOOT OVER.” MY BEST FRIEND GRUNTS AS SHE TRIES TO make room by pushing me with her hips and wiggling.

I grumble back at her as I slide over on the couch, and my fingers tighten on my white cloak that’s been covering me like a security blanket. We aren’t going to talk about that, or how it somehow smells like Vlad, and we definitely aren’t going to talk about how I’ve been secretly crying off and on since I made it through my grandmother’s front door.

Burnie sighs like I’m trying her patience, which, I mean, *good*. Mission accomplished. Because, after a week with her up my ass, I am starting to feel smothered. My social battery is hitting its limit.

But I still would rather her be up my ass than alone in my apartment. My stomach flip-flops with dread at the thought of being there alone.

Her hand heads near the popcorn bowl and I strike like a cobra, smacking the shit out of her. “Hands off, that’s mine.”

“She’s going feral again, Estelle!” she hollers, telling on me. “You have got to learn to share.”

“When I do, you eat it all!”

“Aubrey Lynn, you share your popcorn, or you don’t get any cheesecake after dinner,” Grams yells from the kitchen.

“Bernadette, you stop eating it all.”

“Tattletale,” I whisper, as Burnie sticks her tongue out at me like a baby.

It has been this way since we were eight years old. She even has a bedroom upstairs—so after she decided to stay with us a week ago, no questions were asked. We haven’t stayed at my grandma’s since we were teenagers. Grams has been acting like we are on the brink of starvation, and all I want to do is go sit in my old treehouse and cry my eyes out. Sigh. If only the woman were a bad cook, it would be easier to say no.

I roll my eyes, even when she pulls me to her for a hug.

“Love you, Miss Bitchiness,” she snarks teasingly.

“I love you too.” And I really do.

I move over and she tucks in with me, lifting her legs and resting them on the old wooden coffee table.

There is a full-sized couch and two recliners in the room, but Bernadette is in comfort mode. Unfortunately for me, her way of comforting someone is cuddles. Sometimes forced, apparently. I’m almost positive she wants to become my colon at this point, and when I told her that, she just laughed. My best friend, people. *Let me tell you.*

“Stop pulling on the blanket. I’m fine sitting by myself, you know.”

“I am acting as your shoulder to cry on, and I can’t help that you always seem to have the snacks,” she huffs as she finally steals it from me.

“That’s fair I guess.” I let her have half the blanket, smiling inwardly as she scoots to touch me in some way.

“Here,” I offer, handing over the blue-colored bowl of popcorn.

When I stepped off the plane in Wheeler—a tiny town outside of Atlanta—in the middle of the night last week, I paid for a cab straight to Gram’s. Burnie arrived within fifteen minutes, and if anyone did the math, they’d know she sped the

whole way. Gram lives an hour from the city, and thirty minutes from mine and Burnie's suburban apartments.

A new phone was delivered the next day. It had a welcome message as soon as I turned it on, saying, *Have a nice life, little lamb*. It was a threat, and Frank Stein's way of proving he knows exactly where me and my family are.

I threw it away and have never been happier when garbage day came. It was enough to keep me mostly quiet about everything in general. I reached out to my phone company to get a new number as soon as I could, scared that if Vlad were to contact me, Frank would make good on his threats. I just haven't been able to force myself to block him on socials.

I can tell Bernadette is about ready to burst with questions because I have barely spoken of Vlad at all, but I have no idea what to tell them. *Frank Stein doesn't want me to be with the man I love, and walking skeletons exist?* Hah! It even sounds insane in my head.

What's worse is I am pretty sure I owe the skeleton an apology, and that's not even the weirdest thing about my trip. My heart hurts with missing Vlad, and I really can't seem to stop crying.

She cackles at something on the television, and the popcorn bowl bounces.

I manage a half grin at her dramatics. "Calm down, homemade popcorn is sacred."

I breathe out a sigh, glancing around the old farmhouse walls, decorated in a light flower wallpaper with beige trim. It's kind of strange staying here as an adult, and I'm glad Grams hasn't changed the place much.

"So, Talbot says my package will be delivered tomorrow. Which is insane," Bernadette says, placing the popcorn on the table.

"Their shipping is always on point," I say, refusing to acknowledge how Frank Stein has ruined me for Talbot forever. Even the reading app makes me nauseous.

I squint as she shoves her bright-as-fuck phone in my face to show me something.

My brows come together when I see wooden spikes with tiny crosses on them that look like something out of a B-rated vampire movie. “You bought stakes?”

“Umm duh,” she says, taking her phone back. “And the holy water is on the way.”

“Holy water doesn’t work. Not on vampires, at least.”

She perks up at this, her expression excited. “So he *did* tell you something about vampires?”

“First of all, no one is staking Vlad.” I roll my eyes. “And secondly, we aren’t talking about this.”

She turns to face me, setting her phone down as she does, and folds her legs under herself. “Why can’t I stake him? Unless it’s something silly, like, I don’t know, you’re in love with him?”

My stomach flips and tingles go up my spine. “What?”

“Seriously? I have had to hear about every dude on earth you have ever had so much as a crush on. Do you remember Dan Klinksy from science class in third grade?”

The question throws me. I try to think back, remembering a cute boy with braces, and bright photos of the zoo where we shared an ice cream once on a school trip. “I forgot about him, but I remember the scrapbook is purple.”

“Yeah, but that’s not important. What is important is you made a scrapbook on what your life would look like for every dude you’ve ever had a lady boner over, and I have had to hear about each and every one, except for this one.”

And you never will. Trying to explain Hilda will solidly get people discussing straitjackets and psych wards, which is a total no for me. There won’t be a scrapbook for this one. Ever.

“Yeah, so?”

“So, hello?! You said he’s a vampire, Aubrey, and I, as a good friend, have decided to believe you. I’ve been half

worried he fucked with your memories, or some weird superpower happened and that's why you're not talking." Her green eyes shimmer with tears behind her blue-rimmed glasses, and her bottom lip quivers. "Did he brainwash you?" she breathes.

I'm scaring my own friend. My arms go around her as I pull her into me. "Burnie, I'm fine. He didn't hurt me at all."

"Good. I was getting ready to make it my life's mission to become Buffy two-point-oh," she says shakily, before grabbing a tissue.

I just don't like how my chest aches as I remember the things Vlad said. What if it was all a lie, anyway? Wouldn't it be just my luck to fall for well-played lines again? I mean, his mate? What a joke, right?

I curl into myself, wrapping the blanket around me comfortingly. Vlad's social accounts have been completely silent, and there is no way to reach him with how Frank wiped Vlad's existence from my phone. I have been checking that profile constantly, equally terrified and hopeful that he messages, too afraid to message him myself. He hasn't, and that just hurts more.

To top of this entire disaster, I am constantly praying Frank Stein doesn't find out Burnie hacked into his company. I have no idea what he would do, and I do *not* want to find out.

"Whatever you did that night, Vlad's hotel became an overnight sensation. George is still there partying, by the looks of it," Burnie says, frowning down at her phone. "Connor O'Doyle—he is super hot, by the way—says the castle is all booked and there are no openings at this time. At least that's what I found on the new castle website page," she says, shrugging.

"Connor?" My nose wrinkles. "Wait, is there a photo? Let me see."

She holds the phone up to my face, and sure enough, Doyle is there, listed in the directory for all to see. *Is his name*

actually Connor? I guess it's not that surprising Vlad would call him something different.

I knew George was still in the castle because I messaged him as soon as I got a new phone replacement and number. He thanked me for saving Fifi and filled me in on how Vlad and Doyle are both missing. No one has seen either of them, not even the new castle manager knows anything.

I look up to see Burnie staring at the television with a strange look on her face.

A news channel is broadcasting a grand opening for Frank Stein's new medical facility, and there are phrases in the captions like *sustainability measures*, and *the importance of human life*. I quickly grab the remote in a panic and change channels.

"The way I would fuck that man," Burnie says, shaking her head at the TV. "I know he's hiding something, even if he does pour money into charities." She turns to look at me and frowns. "Why do you look like you've seen a ghost?"

"You would fuck Frank Stein?" I ask, shivers running up my spine at her words.

She wiggles her brows. "He has that whole broody villain vibe."

I go still, frozen for a moment as she goes on about how he's a fraud. "Have you been digging?"

"No," she grumbles, her face wrinkling. "Not since you came back, anyway."

I grab her hand in mine and squeeze, making her look at me in surprise. "Promise me you will stop digging. I don't even want you searching up the man's name. Swear it." Fear has my heart thudding in my chest at the thought of Frank Stein hurting Burnie.

Her eyebrows pinch together, but she nods. "Okay, okay fine."

I settle back down onto the couch, relieved she won't be getting into any more trouble with him.

She pushes her shoulder into mine. “So, how was it?”

“How was what?”

“The sex,” she whispers.

“It was magical,” I whisper back, unsure of how to describe how another person can just read your body and know exactly where to touch you to make your toes curl. I suppose it’s to be expected when he’s not exactly a *man*.

It was magical while it lasted.

I force a smile and change the topic. “Want to talk about what I’m wearing to Erica’s wedding tomorrow?”

“Gag me,” she says, getting up and fleeing to the kitchen.

I grin, but I’m not exactly looking forward to it myself. Erica loves to use my following to boost her own, not that I mind because she’s not malicious about it. I’m just not so sure I am ready for the public, which is why I took Burnie up on her offer of a sleepover tonight. I can get dressed at her place and catch a cab to the wedding.

“Do you want a cookie?” Gram’s voice comes from over my shoulder, and she smells like sugary goodness.

I look up at her, and the silvery hair atop her head bobs as she nods. “And it’s nice to see you at least showered today.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but she’s not wrong,” Bernadette calls from the kitchen doorway, chewing loudly on a piece of toast while holding her hand underneath to catch crumbs. “This jam should be illegal, Estelle.” She emphasizes her statement with a moan.

Grams shakes her head. “Thank you, Bernadette. Grab the Hoover when you’re done making a mess.” She smiles at me next as she places the plate of cookies on the table. “Now, what kind of finger foods do you want for later?”

“You’re going to make me gain another ten pounds,” I say with a sigh.

“Good, you need some meat on your bones,” she sasses back.

I follow her as she makes her way to the kitchen, sidestepping Bernadette. “Grams, I’m going to need you to live forever.”

“Ha! No thank you. People were not meant to live more than a lifetime,” she says, kneading a ball of dough on the kitchen counter. A pot on the stove starts boiling over, and I turn it to simmer.

If you only knew.

I sidle up beside her, watching as she works the floury mixture. “What if someone did?”

“What if someone did what?”

“Never mind,” I whisper.

She blinks twice and looks me up and down before tossing a towel over the dough and turning the stove off. “I’d like to know exactly what it is you found on your little vacation I keep overhearing you and Bernadette talk about.”

A WHOLE BOX of tissues later, my face hurts from crying, and Grams is taking it all in stride while I just feel depleted and drained. I guess that’s to be expected; the older generation is tough as nails. I left out the vampire and threatening bits, though.

“Ugh, my head hurts.” I pat my face dry and blow my nose. My face feels swollen, and I don’t need a mirror to tell me I look like death warmed up.

Grams shakes her head. “You are every bit as stubborn as your mother. Holding stuff in like this doesn’t do anyone any good.”

“Here, take some ibuprofen,” Bernadette says, pushing two tablets and a glass of water into my hand.

“Thank you.”

“And you haven’t spoken to him at all?” My grandmother asks, pushing my hair off my forehead affectionately.

A heavy weight settles in my chest, and I swallow. “No.”

I'm not ready to let him go, even if Frank Stein wants me to. I'm really not. A voice in my head reminds me I only knew him a week. My heart says something altogether different, and the fact that he's a vampire doesn't even play into it. Never once did he make me feel like I should be afraid. He made me feel cherished and like I was important to him.

Grams suddenly frowns. "Your mother called worried about you yesterday."

"Yeah," I say, my face screwing up into a grimace. "She messaged me this morning on Insta to remind me about Erica's wedding, since my phone wasn't working." She shouldn't have bothered. *Erica* has been blowing me up on Insta asking me to come.

"I will tell everyone you have the plague," Burnie says. "You just say the word and we can play hooky."

My lips curve at the thought. "No. I'll go." I sigh. "Erica would for real never forgive me."

"Fine. I guess I will come too." Burnie moans like a wedding is straight torture.

I grin, thankful I will at least have her as my plus one. Besides, there's no point in wallowing over Vlad anymore, so I might as well go.

It's been a week, and he hasn't reached out. I hate myself for even wanting him to, scared that Frank Stein will somehow find out. Vlad said, "Where you go, I go." So, why? Why has he not messaged?

I slump in my chair, feeling Bernadette move behind me to hug me over the backrest, squeezing me tightly. I can't keep doing this to myself.

I take a couple deep breaths and squeeze her arms back. "Why are men such assholes?"

She stares at me sadly, then rattles her car keys at me and points her thumb toward the door. "Ready to go to my place for our sleepover?"

Nodding, I push her away and swipe at my tears with my pajama top.

Grimacing, I look down at myself. I haven't been dressed the entire time I've been here, and for what? *This has to stop.*

I stupidly fell that hard, that fast, deeper than anything I had ever felt for Chad. And yet, here I am again. Waiting for a man to tell me where to be. Not a man, a *vampire*. Whatever.

CHAPTER 38

VLAD



“YOU ARE SERIOUSLY THE MOST INCAPABLE BAT IN existence,” Doyle says with a teasing sneer.

The cage I sit in sways beneath me after having finally been rescued from my imprisonment by an unknown veterinary clinic in America. A holding cell that has been almost unbearable these last few days. I stare outside the tiny bars of my cell as Doyle walks, unable to see much except for the stone walls in a place with little to recommend about it given the constant animal squawking and stench so foul it will take several baths to rid me of the scent.

There’s a big list as to why I’m so weak right now. All the work for the event, Aubrey being the last time I had a meal, all the morphing and coercion I needed to perform just to get to the Americas. I’ve also been injured terribly, and healing myself took what little I had left. A week has passed, and these wretched humans kept trying to force feed me disgusting bugs like a normal mouse-eared bat when they should have been giving me blood. I am well and truly depleted in my smallest and fluffiest form.

And Doyle is having the time of his life because of it.

“How in the hell did you manage to get hit by a truck?” he asks, snorting. “Forget to turn on your sonar?” Doyle begins to laugh at his own joke, and I’m tossed head over heels as the metal enclosure slams against an unmovable object. “Oops. That doorframe popped out of nowhere.”

He did that on purpose.

Dogs bark and bird wings flap around inside the building.

“Poor things. If I’m already breaking you out of this sad place, I might as well let the other vermin loose, eh?”

Vermin? The fucking bastard. My nostrils flare uncontrollably. I yell, my voice a squeak, and hardly audible. I’m jostled a moment later as the fucker shakes my confines, a squeaky door sounding from disuse as it opens.

I will murder him. This is beyond humiliating.

I sit inside the same infernal cage I woke up in days ago as he whistles jauntily. I have never, in my recollection, wanted to punch anyone more.

“I knew that tracker I outfitted you with would come in handy. After Angelique buried you that one time, you’re lucky I thought of it,” he continues, talking as if I am not sitting in a fucking cat cage, waiting on him to let me out. “If you would have just waited, none of this would have happened.”

The clinic door opens, and I finally see freedom outside the walls of the veterinary hellhole that has been my prison. I was becoming afraid I would never get the pungent smells of disinfectant, bleach, and animal dander out of my nose.

When in the fuck is he going to open this thing? I know I can change forms one last time, but this prison cage feels like miles of solid rock to my weakened strength.

I fight revulsion as so many disgusting odors batter my senses at once and curse this city to hell. It took me an hour to fly to the closest Romanian airport in my bat form, where I was forced to coerce no less than ten people to get on the plane, and from there, the humiliation has only continued.

“The cell towers and all other communications came back online the next morning, you know,” he says, placing my cage down on a park bench.

I look out at a street with tall buildings but few passersby. *Finally.* I expect him to open the latch, but the imbecile *keeps talking.*

“Good thing I made it in time, not sure what they do to animals like you, what with you being a rodent and all.”

He is *dead* to me.

The door to the contraption opens, and my fist surges to meet his smirking lips as I morph into my humanoid form. My fist cracks against his cheek loudly but he just guffaws, taking the hit, the blow barely registering to his overinflated head.

“That was hilarious,” he says around chuckles. The fuckwit holds his stomach, leaning over the side of the park bench, wearing one of his usual suits.

“You stupid fucking asshole. Why in the fuck didn’t you let me out immediately?” I yell into the night.

My neck cracks, popping loudly, as I stretch my limbs and sigh, releasing the crick that has been annoying me for what seems like ages.

He ignores the question but quietly hands me a cooler that I pray is full of blood, tears leaking from his eyes as he bends again, laughing uproariously. “Here, I brought the sunscreen too.”

Fangs rip into plastic, my hands gripping the bag roughly as I suck the contents, collapsing it while my vision crosses and my body begins the slow process of fully healing itself. A car horn sounds in the distance, and I slurp loudly.

“Mmm,” I moan, pulling the foul stuff into my mouth.

“As if you wouldn’t have done the same to me. You were picked up by animal control,” he sputters, laughing all over again. “You should have seen my face when I realized where you were.”

“Shut up and get me another,” I tell him, holding out a hand as I suck down the dregs of the first bag of O negative. He swiftly hands me one.

The last few days are by far the worst I have had, and that’s including my stay chained inside a coffin, all because I wouldn’t give a witch immortality. After an excruciating flight

to the Americas and dealing with not one but two layovers, I assumed the worst was over.

“At least we are all in agreement: she’s your mate. I can’t see anything else getting your cantankerous ass to fly that far when I couldn’t get you out of bed for decades,” Doyle says, folding his arms over his chest, looking smug. “If you had just kept your phone on you, none of this would have happened.”

My lips purse together as I fight the want to hit him again. “Where are we?” I remove my fangs long enough to ask.

“Near Atlanta. Aubrey’s apartment isn’t far. How was your last week?”

I grunt in reply.

“I can just imagine you flying coach,” he says, closing the cooler and grinning. “And a fun vet stay? What an adventure that must have been!”

“Just be quiet.” I don’t need his pompous shit after so many days of being stuck in bat form, disgraced and degraded, and hand-fed *bug gruel*. I give him a look. “There were *strange bathing rituals*, Doyle.” I shudder, covering my crotch as I recall the incident. “The ultimate indignity was when a young girl commented on the size of my balls while toying with me as if I were some exotic pet.”

He blinks, and his nose wrinkles in confusion. “All that and no charge?”

“Fuck you.”

His chuckles escalate until he’s laughing again as I glare. “That sounds like a pretty good welcome to me.”

My nostrils flare with annoyance. “Any news from Jekyll or Frank?”

His head shakes as he settles back against the park bench, crossing one leg and bouncing his designer shoes. “Nope, not a peep, but I expected as much. Jekyll will have holed himself away at his mansion, and Frank is busy fighting with other people, what with his new medical facility being under heavy scrutiny.”

“Hmmpf.” Good. They will both get their comeuppance once I have Aubrey back.

I sidle in alongside him, putting the second bag back to my lips.

“So what happened?” he murmurs.

I think back to the horrendous airport experience, remembering how the cloying smell of humans became a distant memory once my gaze landed on the twinkling lights outside. The city was a kaleidoscope of color I had never witnessed, and truly a wonder to see. I swiftly changed into a bat, determined I would sweep the city and find Aubrey overnight in one fell swoop, only to hear the thunderous sound of a foghorn before being swiftly knocked unconscious by a heavy moving vehicle.

“It doesn’t matter. Do you know where she is?”

He looks out at the city street. “Not far from here, actually. But we will need to take a cab.”

A cab.

I drain the rest of my reprehensible dinner, tossing the plastic carelessly aside, and straighten my hair.

“Ugh. Come on, Vlad,” he groans, shuffling to his feet to pick up after me and stuffing the trash into the cooler. “Where are you going?” His tone is suspicious, but I am in no mood.

Buttoning my dirty and tattered suit, the same I wore dancing with her, I walk boldly into traffic. I stop the first yellow vehicle I see, holding out a hand and grimacing as the car horn begins to blare in front of me.

I am done playing with these ingrates, and I will not go another day without Aubrey in my arms.

“Here’s your fucking cab.” I wave at it.

“Dammit, Vlad. You can’t just do that,” Doyle whines as I make my way around the car to the driver.

“I just did.”

The cabbie yells obscenities, obviously enraged.

“Stop screaming,” I tell the human, glad when the poor man quiets, submitting to my power and listening easily, unlike *some* people. I get into the car, shutting the door quietly behind me, and lean back in the seat.

“You’re not going to coerce every human you see tonight, are you?” he asks outside the car, holding the cooler at his side.

I will if I have to. “Get in the fucking car, Doyle. I am not putting up with any more of your antics this night.”

Headlights flash over his face and body as he makes his way around the automobile to do my bidding. He opens the car door and pops his head inside. “You have money. You are just wasting energy for no reason.”

He climbs into the car, and I stare at the cabbie in the rearview mirror, looking into his ordinary brown human eyes.

“Perhaps you should have told me that, instead of making me believe we were destitute and forcing me to let you turn the castle into an inn.”

“For the last time, it is not an inn. It’s a *hotel*.” He turns in his seat, his head going back as he does, and I note how he doesn’t argue. Just as I suspected. The castle was just one of his many attempts to get me to eat, one large scheme that Doyle came up with just to fuck with me.

His hands go in the air. “You were going to turn into Hilda. What did you want me to do?”

I don’t bother answering. He may very well be right ... if it weren’t for Aubrey walking through my door.

“YOU SAID SHE WOULD BE HERE,” I say, stepping into Aubrey’s living space, sending envelopes skittering across the floor as my feet collide with a pile of mail at the front of her door. The smell inside the small but cozy looking apartment is stale, the place empty of life.

Doyle sniffs the air. “Her scent is everywhere, but it’s faint.”

It's clear she hasn't been here, not in some time at least. I glance around, my attention landing on a plush blanket and a small couch that looks barely large enough for her to lie on comfortably and would surely collapse under my large frame.

"This was the only address she has on record. It's the one she used for her reservation." Doyle frowns, stepping around me to investigate. "Maybe she just hasn't been home yet."

"Why can't you just message her Insta account?" I ask.

"I told you. Why doesn't anything get through that thick skull of yours?" he huffs, shooting me an annoyed look. "She's blocked me. Not that I know how she found my account, since it's under my full name."

Connor O'Doyle. I blanch but worry fills me at the reminder. What if this is her way of saying she wants nothing to do with us? I eye him warily. "Could Frank have done this?"

He shrugs. "It's possible if he had her phone at some point."

He heads to open one of the bedrooms, I assume. My gaze lands on a bookshelf situated on one wall, filled with all manner of books, along with a photo of her and another woman grinning into the camera.

I pick up the small portrait, grief making my chest tighten at the smile on her beautiful face. I run the tip of my finger over her face, wishing it could somehow allow me to feel her warmth.

Doyle reenters her living room while shaking his head. "Maybe we could ask the neighbors? Or the bellman. He may know something."

He heads toward a small kitchen, and I place the photo back where I found it, feeling out of place in a space I know she adores. The colors of the room are soft and muted. Several pieces of artwork dot the walls, one a pretty pink flower in bloom, and an oval mirror near a large window with a view of the city street below. The place is tasteful and light, just like her.

If she isn't here, I will just have to track down where she's gone. She mentioned her friend Bernadette quite a bit, so it would be safe to say that's where she is.

"I found something!" he calls out. I move to the kitchen where he's staring at the fridge, pointing at a calendar. "She has a wedding she's going to tomorrow."

He grabs something from the counter and looks down at it before handing it to me. Another photo, this time in a glossy finish with a date and time listed.

A bright bouquet of roses is pictured on the front of the large card.

I flip it over to read, "You are cordially invited to the wedding of Erica Townsend and Randy Martin, soon to be Mr. and Mrs. Martin."

It's the wedding she invited me to accompany her to before she left the castle.

A burst of hope floods my chest as I realize I have found her, and she is within reach, only for my optimism to plummet the next moment. What if her text of *I can't do this* wasn't a scheme of Frank's and she really did mean it? I don't want to be a fool who suddenly turns up only to be coldly rejected.

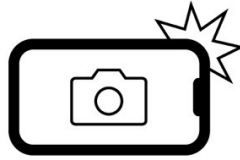
It doesn't matter; she is my mate, and I will protect her from afar if I must.

Doyle frowns before pulling his phone from his pocket to check the time.

"At least we now know where she's going to be and when." He leans in toward my shoulder and sniffs. His face crinkles as he cringes and plugs his nose. "Good thing that leaves enough time for a bath, and to find you a tux."

CHAPTER 39

AUBREY



“I ALREADY TOLD YOU I DON’T KNOW WHERE HE IS OR WHAT he’s doing, Erica.”

I shift my weight in the satin-covered chair and straighten my yellow dress as I try to get comfortable, while my cousin interrogates me about my vacation at Hotel Castlevania—or that’s what George has now dubbed the place.

“I’m sure he will call though, right? If a man that hot kissed me like that, I would still be at that castle.” My cousin Erica’s voice crawls over me and my eye twitches from the strain of keeping the smile pasted on my lips. “Did you guys not hook up?”

I inwardly sigh and stare down at the patterned hotel carpet, wishing like hell I would have taken my time getting to Erica’s wedding. I was so excited to get out of the house, but now I just want to go back to Burnie’s apartment and binge watch something until I pass out from carb overload. The bridal suite is full of people, and the number of squeals that have erupted over the petal-covered bed in the next room is infinite.

“Let me go get you a drink,” Burnie whispers, patting me on the shoulder before making a hasty escape from my cousin.

Traitor. How dare she leave me alone with her?!

Burnie’s dark blue dress swishes as she walks, and the toes of her converse sneakers peek out every step she takes. To be honest, I was shocked she agreed to wear a dress at all,

especially with how much she hates weddings. At least she was excited about doing our hair.

“Say cheese!” Erica suddenly says, pushing her head next to mine as she leans over my shoulder to snap a photo. She bounces away to chat with her bridesmaids.

My eyes collide with Burnie’s as she looks over her shoulder, her red updo moving with her as she gives me a wink and lolls her tongue from her mouth. I smile the first real smile I’ve had since coming here.

“She is just stunning, isn’t she?” I ask Erica’s bridesmaids.

The four of them grin as one and giggle like the ditsy gaggle of geese they are, one pushing a massive white-and-yellow bouquet into Erica’s hand. Erica’s dress is traditional white with a long train, simple and elegant, her hair flowing freely behind her.

“Absolutely beautiful,” they gush, and I smile wider.

“I am so sorry about Chad, Aubrey. I know he cheated on you, but I couldn’t get Randy to pull him off the groomsmen list—they’ve been friends for forever. You understand, right?” Erica says this conspiratorially, as if her voice isn’t loud as hell and she hasn’t just dropped tea to everyone in the bridal party.

“It’s fine, truly.” I’ve already spent the last hour reassuring her she looks beautiful and that, no, I’m not going to murder her because Chad is in her wedding. It isn’t *my* wedding, and the only thing Chad can make me feel now is annoyance.

“Look!”

I squint when her phone brightness blinds me as she shoves it into my face. *Oh*. I glance down at my name and realize Chad’s followers and mine are verbally sparring across the internet. I suppose I should have seen it coming when she asked for a group photo.

The media might hate me for ruining their girl-next-door fantasy of mine and Chad’s wedding, but after my stay in Romania, I can’t find it in me to care what anyone thinks. *I shouldn’t have come.*

A glass is pushed into my hand, and I look up at Bernadette.

“You’re not smiling. Smile or the photos will look like shit,” she says, baring all her teeth obnoxiously. She settles into one of the white-covered seats next to me to wait. “I can’t believe I shaved my snatch for this. The spanx are killing me.”

Laughter bubbles up from my chest, and I have to fight to keep from spraying wine on myself.

“Burnie,” I choke out, setting my glass down on a nearby table as I cough.

“They’re ridiculous.” She shrugs and goes back to eyeing the women, who are now posing like Charlie’s Angels. She cringes like they’re lepers and it’s contagious, but she’s not wrong. If anything, all of this just goes to show how superficial social media can be.

“Hey, Aubrey?” a male voice calls out into the room.

At the sound, the women collectively gasp, and heads turn to the door. I inwardly groan when I get a look at Chad, standing just inside the room.

“Want me to get rid of him?” Burnie murmurs.

I wave her off. “No. It’s fine. I need some air anyway.” I get up to leave and Chad’s smarmy face locks onto me over the flittering women as I make my way to the doorway. His brown hair is upswept and styled like he does for big events, the boyish grin on his face making my stomach somersault with nausea. I roll my eyes and push past him. “Go away, Chad.”

“Aubrey, please,” he sighs out from behind me.

The women begin to whisper. Just what I need.

I turn around in the beige-colored hallway to tell him off, but someone pulls me in for a hug from behind, knocking the breath from my lungs. My mother’s familiar scent washes over me and I relax. “Mom?”

She pulls back and smiles. “My god that girl is ridiculous,” she says, wrinkling her nose up and glancing to where Erica

stands with the bridal party, still typing on her phone. “You would think someone would be more concerned about getting married on their wedding day. You look nice.”

Her eyes float over me from head to toe as she holds me by the arms. I take in her classically cut maroon cocktail dress and bright eyes, her hair a shade darker than my own and clipped back with tiny flowers. She looks different.

Her brows come together, a look of concern clear on her face. “I just wanted to check on you and make sure you’re alright.”

“Hello, Mrs. Townsend, I was hoping to have a chat with your daughter,” Chad says over her shoulder.

“Chad, could you please find a way to get lost? I think we’d appreciate that,” my mother says in a soft tone, as if she’s inviting him to dinner.

His jaw drops, and my eyes fly open. I turn around to see Burnie standing just behind me, equally stumped.

“What the fuck?” Burnie mouths at me.

“Aubrey is going to marry whoever she wants, when she wants, so I think it’s best you give up. I’m not going to push for her father’s business schemes anymore.”

I have no idea what’s going on. My mother, who has not stood up for herself once in the last ten years that I have seen, going against my father? I never thought I’d see the day.

He looks at me, as if waiting for me to say otherwise.

A smile curls my glossy lips. “Seriously, Chad. Fuck off.”

He huffs, turns to leave, and stomps like a child down the hallway.

“Mom?” I ask, spinning in her arms.

Her eyes shine, and she hugs me. She whispers so no one else can hear, “Since the first time I caught your father in his office with his assistant, who I like to call Barbie Karen, I’ve been slowly buying up all the shares of his little company. I plan to leave him, and have for a while.” She pulls back, her

manicured nails lightly digging into my shoulders. “I’m sorry I haven’t been the best mother. After you left and refused to speak to us, I decided I don’t want us to be like this anymore. I miss when we were close.”

Tears begin to form in my eyes. “I miss that too.”

She cups my face and brushes my cheek. “Don’t cry. You’ll ruin your makeup. We’ll talk after the wedding, okay?”

“Okay,” I reply, dazed by the woman who seems like a new person.

“I love you,” she says, her shoulders curving inward before she hugs me to her, and I can’t swallow past the lump in my throat.

“I love you too, Mom.”

I watch as she turns to leave, the phone conversation where she said she only wanted what’s best for me floating through my brain, how she was upset when she thought I was staying another week at the castle.

My mother, who I accused of having no backbone, has been buying shares of my dad’s company for years to get back at him for cheating. *Wow.*

Burnie wraps her arm around my waist comfortingly. “Way to go, Mom.”

“I know, right?” Hope flares in my chest that we can be close again, like we were when I was a girl.

“It is time, people,” the wedding planner shouts.

Suddenly I’m being hustled into the bridal procession and toward the hotel elevator.

“Hey, you’re staying for the reception, right?” my cousin asks, pausing the hallway traffic as someone adjusts her gown. “We need to post lots of photos together.”

My teeth grind together.

I’m really tired of people trying to use me, and my public internet break up, for themselves. That just made leaving a

very easy decision. There's no way in hell I'm hanging out a moment longer than I have to.

It takes three trips up and down the elevator to get the bridal party to the ballroom where Erica will walk down the aisle. The entrance music starts as I wait my turn, smiling as I walk slowly, finally picking up on what the universe has been trying to tell me. If Chad hadn't cheated on me, I would be marrying a man I could never love, and would never have met the one I do, even if I can't be with him.

A hush goes through the room as Erica's dad walks her to a waiting Randal, who looks like the happiest man in the world.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to bring together two people, Erica and Randal," the minister says, and I smile, noticing how Erica's eyes light up when she looks up at her soon-to-be-husband.

The large mahogany ballroom doors open just slightly, catching my eyes, and my stomach plunges as Vlad and Doyle sneak in like a pair of thieves. The blood leaves my face, and my stupid heart skips a beat just at the sight of him.

Oh shit. He's here. I panic. What am I supposed to do? The first thing my body wants is to run into his arms, but I'm stuck on this show-pony wedding altar. I've missed him so much, and my bottom lip trembles.

He's wearing a three-piece black tux with two rows of buttons that would look amazing on the cover of GQ, the tiny pocket square on his chest a pretty blue color. I try to focus on the wedding, but my ovaries are already tripping up over him even being here.

A waving Burnie catches my eye. Covering the side of her face, she mouths, "He's here!" while pointing repeatedly in the direction of the door like a loon, as if I don't already know.

"I know!" I mouth back.

I'm so excited to see him, but Frank's threats ring in my ears. Vlad also hasn't contacted me, and now he just shows up at my cousin's wedding? My heart stings with how I'm feeling

—happy, yet so scared I want to start eating my flower bouquet.

My skin flames under his heated stare and an overwhelming riot of emotions builds in my chest. A slow, nervous smile turns up the corners of his lips, and my chin wobbles. *Shit.*

CHAPTER 40

VLAD



IRRITATION EATS AT ME AS I STARE ACROSS THE ROOM AT Aubrey, wishing these humans would get on with it and leave so I may speak with her. The sharp scent of flowers and heavy perfume is almost unbearable, so much so I wonder how Doyle is so unaffected. I glance around the room, noticing the pink-and-yellow lights, and how everything is *shiny*. Flower petals and glitter sparkle across the floor, and I vaguely wonder if this is what a normal human wedding looks like in this age.

I catch Aubrey staring back, and my palms itch with the need to hold her. It is torture sitting here with her so close and yet so far. The idea of having her, of sharing a life with her, it's all I have ever wanted. I want her more than I want anything—it's why I can hardly stand to be this far from her even now. The need I have to protect her, to keep her safe, is enough to drive anyone mad, and she is so very vulnerable as a human. I have never been more aware that, even if she agrees, it will take time for her immortality to fully set in. Years.

“Well, isn't this tons of fun,” Doyle says, unbuttoning his suit jacket in the seat next to me.

I search out Aubrey again and our eyes collide. Bliss swells at the sight of her, but she looks wary and ill at ease. She tugs at her yellow dress nervously and turns her head away, focusing on the flowers she holds, obviously avoiding me. My stomach sinks. She *must* speak to me.

Doyle straightens his tie. “Are you going to tell her about your veterinary visit?”

“Piss off.”

AS SOON AS the happy couple say their I do’s and walk away, my throat suddenly clogs with uncertainty. *What if she rejects me? What if I am too late?*

The rest of the humans follow suit after the bride and groom, heading toward the reception area. A light buzzing starts in my ears, drowning out the happy cries of those around me. I only want to find Aubrey.

Where is she? I roam my eyes over the crowd, searching for her, only to catch a glimpse of her yellow gown retreating through the crowd. *She’s running away?*

I resist the urge to shove the guests aside and go after her, annoyance racing through me as I force myself to walk slowly and sedately through the hallway. The throng disperses as the wedding party leaves and my gaze hardens.

“Aubrey,” a male voice calls out.

My vision goes red with the sight of Chad touching her, his hand encircling her arm. How dare he touch her in my presence?! I will fucking end him.

“Vlad, don’t,” Doyle says behind me, but I growl low, letting him know he will regret it if he thinks to stop me.

Before I can rush to her side, a short redheaded woman shoves Chad away from her, a finger pointed in his face threateningly. Panic overtakes Aubrey’s expression when she notices me striding down the hall. Her gaze darts between the cad and me, her blue eyes full of worry. She knows what I want to do to him.

I flatten my mouth into a thin, hard line as I finally reach her side.

“Don’t hurt him,” she whispers, tugging at my arm lightly, begging for the sorry excuse of a male’s life. My eyes slide

shut at the feel of her against me, her wildflower scent instantly calming the rage burning in my chest.

Chudley and the redheaded woman continue arguing, the diminutive female spitting fire from her eyes as she delivers the imbecile a dressing down. Aubrey looks up at me nervously, her hand clutching at me, then her gaze darts back to the woman I assume is her friend.

“What is the meaning of this?” I say to no one in particular, but at least the arguing stops as they both turn to me.

“You.” The imbecile’s lip curls in contempt, and I wish she hadn’t bid me not to kill him.

“Me,” I say, rubbing softly at her hand on my arm.

“Oh, shit,” the redhead breathes.

“Vlad, have you met Bernadette?” Aubrey asks, obviously attempting to pull my attention away.

The idiot snickers, oblivious to the danger he is in. “Aubrey, please come with me. I want to show you something,” he says, ignoring my presence entirely.

I begin internally going over the many ways I could turn his body into a piñata.

“No thanks, Chad.” Aubrey squeezes my arm tightly and her brow furrows.

The idiot steps closer.

“Touch her again, and I will tear your arms off and beat you with them.”

Bernadette’s jaw drops, and Aubrey wheezes a breath from my side.

“It will only take a minute.” His eyes turn hard and turbulent as he curls his lip at me.

Footsteps sound behind me and I register Doyle coming to try to neutralize the situation, no doubt. “Evening, everyone,” Doyle says in way of greeting, his hands in his pants pockets.

“I made you a new—” the idiot begins to say.

Aubrey sighs, her tone weary. “Chad, I am not going anywhere with you. I thought my mom and I made that obvious earlier.”

Enough of this.

“Look at me,” I command. It is the only choice because one more second in this dimwit’s presence while he attempts to woo my mate will end in bloodshed no matter the witnesses or how much she complains. I am fighting every instinct I possess to not rip him to shreds where he stands.

He goes stock still, immobilized under my power.

“I suggest you pick a country very far away, Chudley, lest I find you, and show you exactly what it means to be *hunted*.”

I push images at him, flooding his brain with what I will do to him if he ever speaks to her again. The women gasp when he wets himself despite his frozen mind-control stupor.

“Vlad. Seriously?” Doyle sighs, as if I’m trying his patience.

Shouts go up in the next room, the music changing to something upbeat. “You may go now.”

The male’s chin trembles, and I let him leave, watching as he heads toward the exit without saying a word to anyone.

“Wow,” Bernadette whispers under her breath. “He really is a vampire.”

She told her friend about me? Not just me, but what I am, when she promised she wouldn’t? I cock my head to Aubrey, and she flushes nervously under my surprised gaze. I want to be upset with her, but I find it impossible with how elated I am to have finally found her again.

Doyle clears his throat. “Perhaps we should move this party to somewhere a bit quieter.”

Bernadette eyes him, suspicion in her gaze as she looks him up and down, folding her arms over her chest. “Are you supposed to be a vampire too?”

“No,” Doyle says, his tone full of amusement. “I’m a wolf shifter.”

“Uh huh.” She nods. “Well, wolfman, want to help me sniff out where they’re keeping the cake? Pretty sure these two have some talking to do.”

Doyle lifts a brow. “I don’t eat cake.”

“Fine. You can watch me eat cake,” she says, grabbing his arm and tugging him away.

He is forced to hop awkwardly backward before giving me a look and turning to move with her.

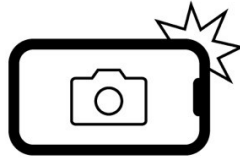
I turn to Aubrey, suddenly nervous for the first time in my long life. “Is there somewhere we can talk?”

She searches my face and seems to find what she’s looking for there because she nods. “The bridal suite should be empty for a while.”

I turn and extend my hand forward, gesturing for her to lead the way, relief coursing through me that I will have the opportunity to speak with her. She hasn’t turned me away like that loathsome cad. I am almost positive the last message from her was completely contrived, but I would be lying to myself if I said I wasn’t the least bit afraid she did send it.

CHAPTER 41

AUBREY



I WALK INTO THE SUITE WHERE THE BRIDESMAIDS SAT UNTIL the wedding and start picking up the disposable cups and things left from getting ready, tossing them into the nearby trashcan. I need something to keep me busy, since I'm really not sure what to say now that Vlad's here in front of me. The white-backed chairs are full of different clothing, a plush sofa in one corner, and the room is lined with windows overlooking the city.

Wringing my hands together, I finally brave looking at him. He stands a few feet away, devilishly handsome in his black tux that fits his broad frame to perfection.

"I've missed you." Vlad's voice is deep and low, making my heart leap at the cage of my ribs.

"I wasn't sure I would ever see you again," I reply. My gaze travels over his cheekbones to his eyes, which are wide, and pinging all over me like he's trying to memorize my face as much as I am his.

"You fill the void of where my heart should be, Aubrey. How could you think that?" he says in that low voice of his, and I have to steel myself from melting into the floor like some swooning movie character.

I let out a shaky breath as my knees weaken. I'm a massive ball of emotions. His dark eyes flick to my lips when I lick them nervously, and his gaze turns hard when I take a step back.

His brows narrow. “Did you send me a message that night you left the castle?”

The question throws me, and my heart instantly thuds with dread. I think back to Frank Stein typing away on my phone before crushing it like an empty soda can. “I—”

His eyes flash red. “Did you say you couldn’t do this and that you were sorry?” His voice is practically a growl leaving his mouth and red light suffuses his irises.

Frank’s words that he would find everyone I love and destroy them flits through my mind. Does Vlad not know what he did?

“Yes,” I blurt. Because I cannot do this, and I am sorry. My heart aches in my chest, a knot forming in my throat that threatens to choke me. I wish with all that I am that I could just leap into his arms and hope for the best, but there is no way I can let Frank Stein go after my family.

His nose crinkles. “You’re lying,” he snarls.

I wrap my arms around myself and shuffle backward, squeezing my eyes closed.

“Why are you lying, Aubrey? Is it because of Frank?”

The name sends tremors through me, and I turn away to the windows, but fingertips flutter on my waist, rising just slightly to my ribs.

My breath hitches. “Vlad,” I warn.

“Shhh.” I feel his breath on my bare shoulders before his cool hands land on my back, sliding over my skin. “Tell me you don’t want to be with me, and I’ll go.”

My pulse stutters. *Don’t make me say it.*

“True mate bonds are for life, but if you truly do not want to be with me, I will respect your wishes.” His tone is serious, and the last bit sounds like it was forced from his lips. “I know Frank did something that night,” he murmurs at my back, making me stiffen in response.

I feel his lips on my shoulder as he sniffs lightly at my neck before a cold hand brushes my nape.

My emotions are so tangled because the selfish part of me wants to tell him everything. I am so tired of being scared of thinking the world's most powerful man wants me dead, all because I fell in love with Vlad. He's a vampire, and I have no idea what Frank Stein is, but living in fear is not on my to-do list. I can at least hear him out and tell the truth, trusting that he won't let Frank hurt me or anyone else.

"I didn't want to leave." My voice is a whisper, and his hands tighten on me. His earthy scent fills my nose as he pulls me into his arms, and I want nothing more than to lean into him.

"Frank sent it. Didn't he?"

My stomach somersaults and I nod my head, unsure of what to say.

"He will never come near you again. I swear it."

"Is Frank Stein your friend?"

"Former friend," he bites out. "He will never hurt you, let alone be near you again unless you wish to see him. I swear it."

I twist my hands together and swallow. "Who's stronger? You or Frank?"

His brow furrows at that. "He is strong, but I am stronger. What did he tell you?"

My shoulders slump. "He told me he would go after my family if I tried to contact you. I've been so scared."

"He will not touch you or your family. Again, I swear to you."

Tension leaves my body, my shoulders sag, and I finally turn to him. "When I didn't hear from you, I thought maybe you changed your mind about me," I croak.

I'm in his arms, a hand tightening around my back as the other cups my face to his chest. "I have waited so long for you,

so many years that you cannot even fathom. I confess I had given up entirely until you walked through my door.”

My head swims as I stare, wide-eyed, completely floored by his words.

He tips my chin up. “I will never want anyone but you for as long as I live, and I’m not sure if you know this, but that is a *really* long time.”

A happy cry leaves my lips when he kisses my temple and then bends to pepper kisses over my face. “Vlad,” I whisper.

“Aubrey, my heart,” he says, and I notice the scared look in his eyes, vulnerability stark in his expression.

“Kiss me.” I put my arms around his neck. “Please.”

His lips descend on mine, and I’m immediately put under his spell, my body lighting up like it’s the fourth of July and this vampire is holding all the fireworks. I thought I imagined what he could do to me with only a kiss. I pull away, trying to regain some semblance of control, but it’s nearly impossible with how my fingers itch to touch him.

His hands cup my face and I bring mine up to hold his wrists as he stares. “If I had known Frank was there that night, I would have never left your side.”

I turn my head. “He said I was hurting you and that I had to leave. He broke my phone and—”

“Stop,” he says, and I look up and gasp. His face is more terrifying than I have ever seen it as he literally vibrates under my hands with anger. His eyes are red, and fangs have descended past his lips that just kissed me so thoroughly a moment ago. “Did he hurt you?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Did he touch you?” His tone is feral, and I realize Frank Stein is a dead man.

“No, he didn’t touch me,” I tell him, pretty sure he doesn’t mean him dragging me onto the plane.

I glance at the window, realizing we are stories high in the sky and Vlad can make an entire castle shake. Probably best I don't tell him anything bad just yet. Honestly, if Vlad can keep him away, it doesn't matter what he did anymore.

"I need to hold you," he says, picking me up without waiting for a reply and walking us across the room to the sofa. He sits and pulls me to his chest, rubbing his hands lightly over my back and arms.

"Why didn't you message me?" I ask. "I got a new phone as soon as I could and kept waiting for you to message me on Insta."

"I have not had my phone." His hands touch me everywhere, his mouth kissing anywhere he can reach, as if he is trying to relearn my curves. "I will tell you that story when we have more time."

I smile. "The wedding will take hours."

His head goes back at that. "Hours?" He kisses me softly, his tongue licking at the seam of my lips.

I open, letting him inside, and moan. A sad, embarrassing whimper of a sound escapes me as he pulls his mouth from mine. I want more.

"Vlad," I breathe. "I need you."

The wedding really will take hours and I am about to combust with the need to get my hands on him.

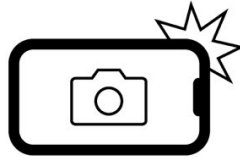
The hand cupping my cheek moves, and his fingertips skate over my face, thumbing my bottom lip, his breath coming in pants and ghosting over my chin as he leans to kiss me there. Goosebumps erupt on every surface of my body. He tips my chin up and kisses my neck, making me shiver.

"You are the loveliest thing in existence," he whispers against my skin. My cheeks heat, and I cup his face in my hands to gaze into his coffee-colored eyes. "You make the stars look like cheap fluorescent lightbulbs," he says, searching my face like I really am the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

He's such a sap. I laugh at that, and kiss him again.

CHAPTER 42

AUBREY



WE SCRAMBLE TO OUR FEET AS HE TEARS HIS JACKET OFF, HIS fingers a blur as he unbuttons his waistcoat, and I start salivating when his bare chest comes into view. His slacks drop next, and my mouth hangs open. *Fuck me*, I almost forgot how huge he is. He pulls me to him, and his cool skin feels so good against mine which seems to be burning from the inside. His muscles bunch beneath my hands as I touch.

“Stay still,” he breathes at my neck.

I obey, freezing in place, and my dress unzips itself. His hands follow the path of the zipper, sliding down by back, then hips, easing the fabric from me until I’m left in my strapless bra and panties. Like my dress, my bra seemingly unclasps itself and falls to the floor, and he becomes motionless, staring at my breasts like they’re Starbucks and he’s a thirsty millennial. The thought makes me giggle.

“I need you to listen.” His tone doesn’t allow argument and I look up into his face. “If you ever mistake my feelings as anything less than complete adoration of you, of the very air you breathe,” he says wrapping his hand around my throat, “I will make sure my name is the only word that leaves your lips until you understand.”

My nipples tighten as he squeezes, his touch sending lust skittering up my spine. Oh god, what this vampire does to me!

“Please, Vlad.”

I cry out when he lets go of my throat to grab my breast, plucking my nipple to tease me. I stretch up to kiss him,

nipping at his lower lip.

Vlad lifts me so my legs wrap around his waist, and I grind into his hard cock. In a blur of movement, my back is against one of the floor-length windows that look over the streets beneath the hotel. The cool glass at my back and him at my front sends shivers down my spine from the mirroring sensations.

Our gazes lock as he pushes at my entrance, and a legit growl rumbles out of him when he realizes I'm still wearing my underwear. He rips my panties from my hips impatiently, and I cry out as he pushes his big cock inside me, stretching me. God, it's been so long, and the fit is deliciously tight.

"Fucking hell, this pussy," he says with a groan, pushing my back against the window. His cock surges inside me on each word. "You feel so fucking good."

I have a death grip on his shoulders, and I cry out each time he thrusts. I'm so wet, it's like I'm a slip and slide for his dick. He nips at my lips, and I open, letting his tongue graze mine as I come completely undone. Lifting his head, he looks up at me, his large hands kneading my thick thighs.

"Yes," I whimper, and his thrusts turn frenzied, making me climb that hill that leads to ecstasy as he pounds into me over and over until I am a rag doll in his arms.

I shriek when my orgasm rolls over me like a Mack truck, and my eyes fling open wide at the sight of the ceiling two inches above my head. My back is still on the window, and I glance out of it for a second, worried people are seeing my ass floating while Vlad fucks the hell out of me. He has literally fucked me up the wall.

Holy hell. My thighs shake, and my vision rolls as my eyes cross when he hits my G-spot just right.

"Shit," he suddenly says, slowing.

"Whaa—" He covers my mouth, and my brows come together when he stops, only for him to somehow zoom us into the nearby closet at super speed, closing the door behind us.

My breathing turns ragged as he holds my mouth closed and begins fucking me again on his thick cock. Hangers clack together before one falls, but I'm too busy rolling my eyes in bliss to care.

"Housekeeping, do you need fresh towels?" Doyle says in a sarcastic voice, and I have to hold back a snicker as Vlad refuses to stop pounding my pussy.

"They're not in here, obviously. That nose of yours is full of shit, wolf boy," Bernadette says.

Doyle says something I can't quite make out.

"Then where did they go?" Burnie asks loudly, as if she's moving further into the room.

I breathe roughly through my nose as he adjusts me in the closet, holding me in his arms and kissing my neck. He reaches down to thumb my clit, and stars burst in my eyes. I moan. He is going to kill me. Death by dick.

"Oh fuck," Vlad groans softly, thrusting into me harder. "I'm coming."

I whimper when I feel it, my pussy spasming around him.

"Are you for real right now?" Burnie practically shouts. "Aubrey, please tell me you are not fucking in a closet."

She walks closer and Vlad stops his movements, uncovering my mouth as he breathes roughly against my neck. "If only I could touch you without being interrupted," he huffs out. "How do you feel about a trip to Greece?"

Greece?

"Dude. C'mon now. Erica is going to lose her shit." A door opens and closes next to us. "Well, at least you didn't fuck up the bed. It's still covered in rose petals. I'll go get a room, for fuck's sake. Let's go, Connor."

Doyle, who has been practically giggling like a schoolgirl since they walked into the room, calls out, "Can I get you anything, Vlad?"

Vlad lifts his head from my neck, and I can see the red glow of his irises shining in the pitch-black closet. “Fuck off,” he says. “Would you like to get our own room?” he whispers at my lips. “I don’t think I’m done fucking this pussy just yet.”

I smile against his mouth, knowing he can feel it. “I would love to.”

Aubrey

“I NEED TO GET DRESSED,” I whine.

His chest rumbles beneath me, our naked limbs twined together across the bed in the hotel room we moved to yesterday after Burnie caught us in the closet. A soft kiss lands on my head, and I am gently lifted into the air, blankets and all. He moves from underneath me and floats me back down to the bed, all while searching for the tossed pieces of his black tux. It is *trippy*, but I am starting to get used to his powers and what he can do with them.

“When is our flight?” I ask, my palm covering my mouth as I yawn.

He looks down at his watch. “We have three hours.”

“Okay.”

Three more hours and we will be on our way to Greece.

My body is relaxed, so languid there’s no way I could even acknowledge an inkling of anxiety. My pussy throbs at what that man—oops, vampire—has done to me in such a short time. If I hadn’t already been in love with him, the last day would do it. He fucks me so well and then holds me so tenderly, treating me as if I am a gift, something he treasures.

With all his fears and mine now out in the open, we can be ourselves, and it’s as if we are learning new parts of each other with every conversation.

“You seem different,” I murmur.

He kneels on the edge of the bed to kiss my lips before getting back to his feet. “I am happy, and I no longer have to

hide what I am from you. It isn't the easiest thing being an immortal."

After learning that Frank had a mate, but she died, I can sort of see why he did what he did, even if I don't agree with it. He ended up destroying the hospital she was in, making a bunch of hunters come out to hunt them all. That's why Vlad and Connor have been staying out of sight.

I also learned that a mate bond can be forced if two people want it enough, but true mates are super rare.

"Speaking of immortals—what exactly is Hilda?"

He frowns a moment before grabbing his dress shirt. "Hilda is a vampire. She raised me as a boy, but stopped eating so long ago I don't recall when."

Wow. "So vampires turn into skeletons if they stop eating?"

"It's more complicated than that, but basically yes," he says, buttoning his shirt.

I prop up on my elbow, admiring the view. "That's cool."

"You continue to surprise me with how well you're taking all of this."

I sit up and give a small shrug. "As long as you don't implode like the vampires on *True Blood*."

His head lifts in alarm. "What?"

"Never mind." I giggle, getting to my feet to kiss him while still wrapped in the duvet.

He smiles down at me and shakes his head, then chuckles quietly to himself before muttering, "No one was supposed to be there."

"Where?"

He stares down at me, hands on his hips, bare-assed from the waist down. "No one was supposed to be in the castle, Aubrey. I was never supposed to be near any of the guests at all. My suite was being emptied into the east wing the day you showed up."

“What? Really?”

“Really.” He smirks. “I never saw you coming. I started eating again the same day.”

A big goofy grin pulls at my lips. The way I love this vampire. “Speaking of food, why would you eat mine if you knew it would poison you? Grandma’s recipe has *a lot* of garlic in it.”

“I wanted to please you, and you were the first human who *wanted* to feed me.”

I stare up into his deep-brown eyes, and a sense of weightlessness strikes my heart. I squeeze the blanket to me and rub at my cheeks, my face hurting from the wide grin stretching my lips. “You obnoxious, sappy vampire.”

He smirks, bending for his pants. “You ignored every directive I gave you. I only assumed it was because I hadn’t eaten in so long, but it drove me insane just to look at you.”

I snort. “Ha, I drove you crazy just to look at me? Sure, Mr. Put Your Nipples Away. What a way to meet.”

“Woman, I hadn’t seen breasts in over a hundred years. How do you think I felt?” He arches a brow. “And that is not how we first met.”

I squeal when I’m tossed into the air by magic, my back falling softly into pillows. I roll to my side to look into his eyes as his knee hits the bed, and he prowls across it toward me. “Yeah, that was the first time I saw you, when you brought me the eggs, remember?”

I remember how he scowled, so different to how he now smiles.

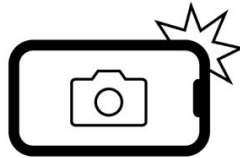
His nose rubs mine and he laughs. “I opened the door to the castle and this blonde nymph bounced in, demanding I take her bags. It was love at first sight, mon amour.”

“What?” My brow furrows as I think back to that day. *Who took my bags?* I start to argue before a memory of some really old guy in a sleeping gown flits through my brain. His lips lift into a smile. “Oh my god. *You’re the old guy?!?*”

He throws his head back and cackles loudly, and his joy steals my heart all over again.

EPILOGUE

AUBREY: MISTRESS OF DARKNESS, AKA BRIDE OF DRACULA



Six Months Later

“WHAT ARE YOU UP TO?” I PAD ACROSS THE KITCHEN FLOOR of the castle, my cotton robe cinched tightly, and stare at the way Vlad’s boxer briefs hug his butt. I bought them on a trip to Italy, and they’re the only kind he doesn’t seem to mind wearing.

He smiles, his lips curving like he knows exactly what I’ve been staring at. “I’m thinking of attempting an Americanized breakfast.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, popping a brow.

“Yes.”

My breath leaves me the next second as I’m hoisted up into his arms. His hips push between my thighs, his underwear-covered cock rubbing against my panty-covered pussy.

“Would you prefer chocolate or fruit pebbles?” He growls in the back of his throat and lifts his eyebrows suggestively before setting me on the steel counter in front of him. I burst out laughing and try to cover my face, cackling harder when he pries my hands away. “This is no laughing matter, young lady. It’s your fault we can’t have a normal breakfast.”

My eyes open and widen. “My fault?!”

He looks up at me, holding my arms hostage as I pout.

“My god, who knew there were creatures so adorable?” He lets go to cup my face in his hands. “Your fault because I can’t stay out of your delectable ass long enough to call for a proper meal for you,” he says with a slap to the top of my butt.

I roll my eyes. It also wouldn’t have anything to do with it being three a.m.

“Who knew even a centuries-old vampire would still act like a man-child, mesmerized by nipples?” But as say the words, I can’t keep a smile from my face.

Every night for as long as we have been together, I go to bed with my cheeks hurting from laughter and my body satisfied. He makes my heart so happy.

His head lifts, and I laugh at how his hair stands on end, his expression serious. “I beg your pardon?” He flicks the tip of my boob, making it pebble beneath my shirt. “My heart, anyone would be mesmerized by your nipples. All men would fall to their feet after seeing them, if only I wouldn’t have to murder them for looking,” he teases, and I squeal when his hands tickle my sides. “I am but a humble vampire who wishes to worship you.”

“I suppose that’s acceptable.”

He pushes my thighs apart and lowers to his knees to fit his head between them, making my toes curl in the process. “Mmm,” I moan.

“You’re too delicious to resist.” He kisses the insides of my legs slowly, fanning his breath over my skin, spreading me wider on the cold metal surface. Then, like the flick of a switch, his face dives between my legs, and he snarls against my underwear, making my clit vibrate.

“You’re my zing,” he whispers against my pussy as he pulls away.

Awwwww. “Wait, what? You finally watched *Hotel Transylvania*?” I smile at how adorable he is. Give a guy a Roku TV and this is what happens. I’ve been trying to get him to watch every vampire movie and show known to man.

“Yes, I found it delightful,” he says. “Much better than that glittery vampire rubbish.”

His hands push the robe up to my waist and my stomach fills with butterflies as he dips down once more.

“We zinged?” I whisper.

“Not you, woman. I’m talking to your vagina. Do be quiet.” He kisses me squarely on my pubic bone, and I start giggling.

My laughter subsides when our gazes clash and his is filled with adoration. I stare down at him, feeling happier than I can ever remember.

“What room would you like to sleep in tonight?” he murmurs between my legs, then returns to kissing my thigh lazily.

“I’m not sure,” I say, running my hands through his hair.

Since staying at the castle, Vlad has insisted we christen the entire place, all fifty or so bedrooms, before guests are allowed back in. So far, the count is up to thirteen.

I look down at the dark lock of hair resting on my shoulder that appeared one morning a few weeks ago. My honey blonde hair has slowly changed, somehow turning paler, and now one bit has turned black as night, like Vlad’s.

He, of course, is on cloud nine about it, going on about the mate bond to anyone who will listen. The thought that my heartbeat will eventually stop is kind of scary, but he’s been there for me every step of the way and isn’t going anywhere. *Neither am I.*

Warmth spreads through my middle. I adore my new hair and can’t wait to show Bernadette. Platinum blonde with a sharp streak of black? *She’s going to be so jealous.*

He lifts his head and arches a brow. “Well, wherever you want is fine by me. As far as I’m concerned, it’s your coffin or mine.”

Red blooms in his brown irises, and he stands to kiss me, his lips parted in a smile. My grumpy vampire, the closeted

softie, my mate forevermore.

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was a lot of fun to write, but it was also a labor of love. I set out last year to bring this story to life and it has been one of the hardest, but most enjoyable and rewarding things I have ever done. So many people have helped and supported me through its creation that there are sincerely too many to count. To each and every one who has lent me support, help, a shoulder to cry on, and advice, you know how much I love you. I have undoubtedly already thanked you, but I want to do so again, I am forever grateful to you. I have to say, without Cliterature Book Group, this book would have never been written and to the girls in Cliterature love and booty slaps. To everyone who picked up this book and read it, or reviewed it, loved it maybe. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am so ever grateful. I hope I made your pp tingle and that you enjoyed it.

Jacklyn Hyde

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lover of all things smut and Cliterature, Jacklyn spent most of her childhood hoarding her grandmother's scandalous reading material and hiding it from her mother. This led to a lifelong love of romance novels and a voracious reading appetite. She enjoys baking cookies when not writing about vampires, witches and peen filled goodness. Jacklyn lives in Tennessee with her brood of crotch goblins of which there are five boys and one girl, and her Boston Terrier, Dr. Dreco Malfoy. She has numerous book boyfriends and when she isn't writing or Momming you can find her watching shows off Hulu like *Letterkenny*, *Archer*, and *The Vampire Diaries*.

To keep current on what Jacklyn is doing, feel free to stalk on any of her social media.

<https://linktr.ee/jacklynhyde>