



BLOODY
BILLIONAIRE'S
BABY

KAY WIDOW

BLOODY BILLIONAIRE'S BABY
AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS VAMPIRE ROMANCE
NOVEL

KAY WIDOW

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CHAPTER ONE

JULIA

HE'S FOLLOWING ME AGAIN!

I don't know how long he's been here.

I noticed a flash of movement in the crowd behind me and recognized the gray hoodie he always wears.

It's confirmed when I stop and turn around, pretending to look for a shop or something of the sort and get a good glimpse at the marks on his neck—two black circles, side by side. I whip around, hoping I didn't tip him off, and rush through the streets of this small town. My bags are weighing down my arms and digging into my elbows. What started as retail therapy has become a death sentence.

This guy has been following me for weeks. I don't know who he is—I've never seen him before. Sometimes I wonder if he's someone I knew from school playing a trick on me. Or maybe a friend of a coworker who saw I was going through a rough time and decided a prank might cheer me up. Assholes.

Sometimes I get anxious that that girl, Eden, who's always nice to me at work, secretly talks about me behind my back. Maybe only trying to get close to me to learn about me, hoard ammunition. I have half a mind to confront the stalker, demand he and Eden leave me alone. I tell myself I'm being paranoid and let it go.

As desperately as I wanted a coffee and a pastry from a little café on the way home, I decided against it. The stalker has never caught up with me, and I'd hate to find out what he'd do if he did.

Someone bumps into me on the street, and I nearly fall over, dropping a bag. Some things roll out-a box of cookies and some pasta. I glare at them but don't say anything as I pick everything up and head home. The town I like to shop in, Hidden Moors, is about fifteen minutes from my hometown and is surrounded by wilderness. It's a nice walk from my apartment in the city, but not when you're stalked.

I stay vigilant, keeping out my headphones and off my phone, my house key pressed between my knuckles. I don't jump at every noise-I'm past that-rather, I analyze each one, seeing if a human could make it; the answer is always no.

My phone rings in the forest. I sigh, set my bags down as quickly as possible without breaking anything, and hurry to answer the phone.

“Yes?”

“Julia.” My boss' voice is tight like he's pretending to have patience with me that has long since vanished. “Did you

remember to take out the trash in the private room?"

I curse internally, but I'm angry at myself for forgetting and at him-he knows I forgot. Why be so passive-aggressive?

"No, I'm sorry-"

"One more."

I swallow. "Pardon?"

"One more mistake," she says sweetly. "That's all this restaurant can handle. Please don't make me fire you, Julia. I'd hate to lose such a hard worker."

I bite my tongue. "Yes, ma'am."

"So I'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning, yes?"

"Uh-" That is not on the schedule. "Uh, sure-what time?"

"Come on, Julia, do I have to tell you everything?"

I want to snap at her, insist that I can't read her mind, but one mistake. I can't afford to use that right now.

"Six a.m. on the dot. No earlier, no later. I leave a meeting at five thirty, and I need time to recover before you arrive. But don't be late! We have plenty of work to do."

She hangs up, and I grit my teeth. Shoving my phone in my pocket, I grab my bags and freeze as something cracks in the forest.

Slowly straightening up with my bags in hand, I look around. No animals nearby. Are they hiding? Do animals know to hide, or would they run? Is it possible a human could have made that sound?

Yes. It is.

I hurry away, trying to escape the wilderness as quickly as possible. It feels like someone's chasing me, even though I know that's silly. But I can't blame myself. This guy has been stalking me for weeks, and the surrounding police won't do anything about it. Not until he does something, they say. Not unless I can prove he's following me and it's not just a coincidence. I feel crazy.

I return to my apartment in the city, climbing the rickety metal stairs and shoving my key in the lock. I ensure the lock and deadbolt are done before collapsing on the couch. I watch television for a bit, bored out of my mind but too tired to do hobbies like reading or painting, then stand to put away the groceries and start dinner. I notice I'm missing my pasta. I groan in frustration-I must have forgotten to buy it. I even brought a list this time. What good that did me.

I consider whether I can go without it until tomorrow, but my stomach growls. I have sandwich stuff but for the fourth night in a row... I was looking forward to that pasta. I sigh deeply and put the rest of the groceries away. I go to change, decide my work uniform won't do any longer, and freeze.

My window is open.

I rush to shut it and lock it, looking around in paranoia. Everything is how it was. I check the closet, under the bed, the bathroom, everywhere. The only thing I can point out that's weird is that the deadbolt is no longer locked.

I should have remembered.

I try to tell myself that as I rush out of there, suddenly not feeling safe in my own home, and make my way back to Hidden Moors. The walk takes longer than usual, as I stop to check my surroundings every minute, but I get there just an hour before the market closes and hurry to get my pasta. I decide to go ahead and treat myself to the café since they don't close until midnight and get myself a coffee and a lemon square. Sitting at a little table in the corner, I watch those around me.

The pastry is soft and fluffy, and the coffee is hot and sweet. I leave, happy, ready to return to the city and eat dinner. I had also picked up a few other things; nothing I needed, but I decided it would be okay. I'm walking down the street when it starts to rain. Cursing under my breath, I pick up the pace, only to nearly slip and fall. Now getting frustrated, I right myself and take careful steps, only to hear them double. I look behind me with a confused frown.

And come face to face with him—the stalker. Gasping, I turn and duck into an alley, but he's chasing me, and I've never actually been chased before. Still, it's probably the scariest thing I've ever experienced. My heart is pumping, the ground is slippery, and I'm hitting the cobble and knocking the wind out of myself before I know what's happening.

I struggle to my feet, only for him to grab me by the shoulder and whip me around. Something punches me in the gut—at least, that's what it feels like. Then I feel the blood. I look down, and he rips a large blade from my stomach,

crimson soaking my dress. I'm lightheaded yet still on my feet as the stalker holds me there.

Digging my nails into his shoulder, I spit in his face. He flinches, then laughs.

"Aren't you special? Don't worry. I'll fix that." He grins and raises the knife.

It takes all my strength to nail him between the legs with my knee. He nearly drops the knife as he groans, and I scream in pain as I shove him to the ground. I stumble away, snatching my purse and hurrying down the street.

He's chasing me, and he's gaining. *Damn, he recovers quickly.* My vision is starting to go dark, and I'm still trying to process what happened in the first place—he stabbed me. He fucking stabbed me! Am I going to die? I have to find help.

Lights in the streets. I rush toward them. Something hits me from behind, and I slam into the ground, digging my teeth into my lip to stop the cry of pain. He grabs me by my hair, and I go to yell for help, but he puts the blade to my neck. I freeze.

"You're feisty! You poor, stupid thing. You have no idea what's going on, do you?"

A few tears drip down my face as I close my eyes. This is not happening.

But it is. And I have to do something about it.

1... The light is fading.

2... I have to do something now.

3...

Slamming my head back, his nose crunches beneath my skull. While he's distracted, he groans, and I grab the knife to throw it into the bushes, as I don't trust myself to wield it. I'm losing focus—I don't even remember how I got to my feet. Everything is a blur as I stumble into the street, towards the light, turn a corner, and slam into something cold.

CHAPTER TWO

LAURENT

MOST VAMPIRES HAVE AN oracle. At least, Oracles tended to be drawn toward vampires. Sometimes they worked independently or not at all—it was up to them what they did with their powers. As much as I don't like that phrasing, my Oracle has been with me since before I was born. She must have known I would turn, and maybe that would have tipped off my parents, but if it did, they kept it from me as a child, and by the time I was of questioning age, I was too used to it to care.

I sit with her now, trying to convince her to tell me what's on her mind. The older woman insists she does so because she likes to limit what she tells people, something about being responsible. I wouldn't say I like it, but I understand. I can always tell when something big is about to happen, and she's keeping it from me. I wonder how much she keeps from me. I used to hear stories from other vampires when I was first turned. Stories about their Oracles. Some had been betrayed, and some covens wholly wiped clean by imposters.

I focus on my dinner as I think of what I can tell her I haven't tried. I had roasted some chicken and asparagus for her, myself, and Antione, my advisor. We're the only ones left. I was disappointed when everyone had to go—outright upset, even—but at least something good came from it: I had more reason to cook. I find myself cooking every day. I haven't been on my feet this often since I was a kid, but I don't mind.

“Can you don't mind some advice?” I ask her, and she looks at me from under her hood, concealing most of her face.

“My boy,” she starts, “do you think I'd withhold information from you? Because I wouldn't, and you should know that by now.”

“But you haven't told me anything,” I say in frustration.

“Because there's nothing for you to know.”

I take a bite of my food. It's a summery dish, making me forget the cloudy fall weather. If I weren't consumed with dread, I would enjoy it more.

“Okay,” I sigh, “I have one last request.”

“What is it?” She asks kindly.

“I... I've fed recently.”

“This is correct.”

“I'm still getting cravings. They've been harder to deal with lately, almost like now that I don't get to interact with humans as often, I... I think about them, and I only see food.”

She hums to herself. “Well... walks help with cravings, don't they?”

I blink. “What?”

“Walks,” she repeats. “I've heard they can help with cravings. Why don't you go take one?”

“Maybe,” I mumble with a sigh. The Oracle's probably just trying to get rid of me. Maybe she's tired—I should let her rest. I finish my meal quickly and stand, taking her empty plate for her. “Thank you for your help, miss.”

“Any time, boy.”

I return to the manor, a sprawling property made of dark bricks with tall windows and towers. I walk the ghostly halls, making my way into the kitchen, where Antione finishes with a book I haven't heard of before, *The Teal Witch*. It looked to be a horror thriller, judging by the cover. Antione is a lot like how my father was, in some ways more than others. They're both very protective. Only my father always valued survival—he was a doomsday prepper, and I was raised that way. Antione enjoys life's finer things, takes his time, and lives in the moment. My dad just wanted to make it to tomorrow. Sometimes, their differences make me angry, even though I know that's not just. I can't help it.

“Antione,” I say as I wash the dishes. He hums and flips the page. “Do you want to go for a walk?”

He thinks about it for a moment—at least, that's what I think he's doing. Or maybe he's just finishing up his page.

“I suppose,” he says. “The Oracle suggest this?”

“Is that a problem?” I ask in confusion.

He laughs. “Of course not. I just figured because you don’t like to leave the house these days.”

I shut off the water and set the dishes up to dry. “It’s dangerous,” I mutter. “What if I hurt someone?”

“You can’t quarantine yourself,” he insists, scraping his plate in the trashcan. We have a large set of Tupperware that Antione has never used. I try to tell him we shouldn’t waste so much food, but he tells me we can afford to. Being a billionaire has its advantages. “Don’t you feel the need to go out, meet people? Maybe meet someone like yourself.”

I know what he’s insinuating: that I need a girlfriend. Well, I don’t. Especially not someone ‘like myself.’ Another vampire in my life would be far too much, and so would hiding my vampirism from a human girl—not that Antione would ever approve of me going steady with a human girl. If I could pick, I don’t know which I’d rather. I guess that’s why I don’t leave the house—I don’t want to find out.

We change into clothes appropriate for a night walk. The clouds have gotten darker and thicker, covering the sun nearly completely.

“Oh, you know what?” Antione leads me off the property and into the woods. “Let’s go into Hidden Moors. I want to stop by the market before it rains.”

“Are you sure we can make it?” I ask as I follow him.

“Oh, we’ll be fine.”

“All right...”

As we walk, my mind wanders. I think about a girl I met a few years ago with whom I could have fallen in love. She was human, which is probably why we didn’t work out. I still think about her some days, and it is hard not to miss her. She was a spitfire, really, and very headstrong. Not only that, but she was a survivor. She’d had a hard life, and I only wish the best for her.

I look up as it starts to rain. Sighing, I hold out my hand, feeling the droplets gather in my palm. “Still going to the market?”

“Oh, we’re already out,” he drawls, unbothered.

We continue towards the market. By the time we get into town, I’m soaking wet and all around in a bad mood, but I swallow it down.

“Do you hear that?” Antione asks, and I frown, stopping.

I listen closely. “Uh, no. Hear what?”

He shrugs and shakes his head. “Must have been my imagination.”

We continue. The market is closing soon, and I don’t know if we’ll make it on time. I can’t help but wonder why Antione is so insistent. We have plenty of food, including the delicacies he likes. What’s the point of this?

I'm about to question him—a poor decision, really—when there's a muffled cry. I freeze, frowning, and turn towards it.

“I heard it this time,” I say, alert. “What is that?”

“A homeless, I suppose.”

I shake my head. “No, someone is being attacked!”

Heading towards the sound, I check down alleys and any hiding spots someone could be keeping a victim. I can't find anything, and I no longer hear the struggle.

“What do we do?”

“Up to you, master.”

I listen, waiting for it again. Part of me wants to go home. I don't want to be responsible, and I don't want to be helpful. I want to go to bed. I want to stop thinking about sucking humans dry and stop remembering what a monster I am. It's ironic; I suppose that the idea of helping someone is what makes me feel like a monster.

But I can't help it. If I find this person, what will stop me from seeing them, weak and helpless, and finishing the job? Antione, he could try, but... well, it's a toss-up who would win between the two of us. I'm stronger than he is, sure, but he's clever. I've known that since I met him.

“We have to keep looking,” I insist, and start down the street.

I hear him sigh behind me, but he couldn't have, so I brush it off. I check into several alleys and stop inside one, looking

around desperately. The sounds have all but stopped. Thunder starts grumbling overhead.

And I don't know what to do. I'm starting to give up, insisting we didn't hear anything. Antione watches me ponder this and convince myself I'm just crazy, hungry to be a martyr or a savior. There was never anyone in danger in the first place.

Then I hear the stumbling. I smell the blood.

And it reminds me of what I am.

I have a split second to get a hold of myself; I instinctively know this. My bones start tingling like the aftermath of an adrenaline rush, and my heart starts pounding like I'm having a panic attack. My fangs begin to extract, growing in my mouth as a hiss builds in my throat. And the smell was getting more pungent, and I didn't realize how hungry I was.

It's my last thought before a girl slams into my chest, and we nearly fall to the ground.

CHAPTER THREE

LAURENT

THE SMELL OF BLOOD is fresh, like a leaf split in half, strong as gasoline.

At the last moment, I find my balance, and my hands land on her waist, steadying us both. She looks between me and Antione, red hair a wild mess and freckles tear-streaked. She opens her mouth to speak before her eyes roll back in her head, and she crumples. I catch her before she can hit the ground.

“She’s losing blood,” I tell Antione. The stench is pungent in my head as the warm liquid coats my hands wrapped around her waist. “Help me get her to the house.”

“Is that a good idea, Master?” Antione asks hesitantly. “The prophecy—”

“I know what the Oracle said,” I snap, and a coil in my stomach reminds me I should not have done that. I shake it off. “Her life is at stake here.”

“Understood,” he mutters, then speaks up. “Would you like me to carry her? What if she freaks out and hurts you?”

“No, we don’t have time.” I lay her on the rain-soaked cobble road and unbutton her jacket. “First aid kit, quickly. Besides, she can’t hurt me. She’s human.”

“You know better than anyone that that’s not how it works,” he says. “You’re strong. Not invincible.”

Her scent is potent. The blood on my hands from the gaping wound in her belly makes my mouth water. Something about her blood type is strange, exquisite—O positive? Yes, but rarer. What could it be? Virgin blood?

I snap myself out of it and wrap a bandage around her stomach. She moans in pain as I apply pressure. I can imagine leaning down and taking her exposed skin between my teeth, suckling at her neck until nothing is left.

But that isn’t who I am, right? I’m not a killer.

“We need to get her home,” I insist. “She won’t make it without proper medical care, and I don’t have the things I need here.”

Antione hesitates. “I ask again,” he says, “for you to reconsider. If it is her—”

“What are the chances?” I ask in frustration. My every instinct tells me to listen to him, that he knows best, just as my father always had, but I know she’ll die if I don’t help her. “Look, she’s losing color. I’ll get her home without your help if I have to.”

He shakes his head. “No need. I can help.”

We carry her back to my nearby compound just outside town. It’s a large, sprawling property with close to eighty rooms. Initially built as a small castle to house soldiers during dark times of war, it has lost some grandeur through renovations and time. We weave through dark, untouched corridors until we reach the infirmary. I lay her on the medical table and unbuttoned her dress, exposing her bleeding stomach. I check to see how deep the wound is, and luckily, it’s terrible but not lethal. Antione hurries to get supplies as I order them, and I work on stitching her up. She dozes in and out of consciousness, occasionally asking where she is or murmuring something that doesn’t make much sense. I am conflicted when she is awake—relieved because I can focus on her voice and remember she is a person I am responsible for, but guilty because I know she’s in pain.

“Antione,” I say, breathing heavily once finished, “will you get her to a room? I need a minute.”

“Of course, Master.”

I return to my bedroom, one of the few rooms I’ve claimed just for myself, where I lock the door and strip for a hot shower. I let the steaming water run over my skin and relax my muscles, the adrenaline from being so close to a meal wearing off. A tiny part of me regrets not giving in, which is the part I condemn.

I am not a killer, and I will not turn into one.

Not for anything. Especially the prophecy.

I spent a long time as a new vampire, callously killing because I thought I had to. Because I felt I had no other choice. But I know better now; I'm kinder now. I feed when I need to, not when I want to, and I only feed on people who have done wrong. Not that that's always black and white, I've certainly made mistakes. But honestly, I don't know what else to do. I have to feed, or I'll die. Is their life worth mine? I don't know.

I'm alone in my room with only introspection to keep me company. I sit at my desk with my journal and fountain pen, dumping all my thoughts onto the page until I can't anymore. Mapping out every little reason I will not harm another being, I walk away feeling stronger. But there was one more thing to do.

Walking quietly through the mansion, I creep from room to room until I make it outside to the courtyard. A large tent, deep purple in hue and smelling of vanilla spice, sits in the courtyard's center. It's the home of one woman who has been in the family for as long as I can remember. I am still determining her age, where she's from, and even her name.

I step inside, flipping up the tent's flap and blocking the sunlight. The space falls dark.

“Come to see me again, boy?”

The Oracle is an old-looking woman with wispy gray hair and tanned, wrinkled skin. She's slender and delicate, in dark robes with constellations stitched into the sides. I've never seen what she looks like, only caught glances, like the bottom

of her chin or bony hands. This feels normal, even though I met her over ten years ago. She's always been kind to me, patient. She has trusted me with her prophecies since I first met her, even though I was never a trustworthy kid. I prided myself in my secrets as strongly as I gave others away because I wanted the power. I'm not like that anymore—my father taught me better. And Antione taught me better.

I hide a smile and come to sit by her low table, cross-legged. She sits across from me. "I have a question."

"You want to know if that girl you brought home is the one from the prophecy?"

"Yes. Is she in danger?" setting my jaw, I don't falter.

She hums, counting on her fingers under her breath, her lips silently moving under her hood. "Hm... based on how things are going right now? No. But that can change."

"What does that mean?" I know better than to get impatient. To get snappish. This woman takes her time.

"She is the girl I expect you to kill. She is the girl from the prophecy. And hear me: *expect*. I know you're trying hard to keep her safe, but I only tell the truth. And while nothing is set in stone until it's happened, I have pretty good intuition."

I swallow, my stomach churning. Does the Oracle not trust me? We've known each other my entire life, and she just wants to write me off as a heartless murderer.

"Right," I mutter and stand. "You keep saying that."

"Laurent," she says as I start to leave.

“What?”

“Keep her safe.”

I hesitate before I leave. Does the Oracle have faith in me? More than *I* do in myself, it seems. I steady myself, confidence renewed. When I sneak back inside, hoping to avoid Antione, I find the empty halls just as haunting as they were the day Antione fired everybody. All the mistrust and fear they had about my condition proved to be an unsafe working environment for everyone involved. The manor is full of ghosts, full of nothing. I run my fingers along undusted banisters and kick crumbs over the carpet, no one around anymore to clean. Antione and I try to keep on top of it, and I’ve suggested he hire others, but he won’t hear of it, and it’s a lot to take care of on our own.

I stop by a room close to my own at muffled sounds. I frown and press my ear to the door.

Moaning. Pained moaning.

Afraid something’s happened, I pull the door open and head inside. My heart is racing, but I’m steady and calm.

It’s the girl. She’s thrashing around the bed, fighting some imaginary being, bleeding through her bandage, moaning in her unconsciousness.

Grinding my teeth together, I hesitate. Antione is not around to help me. To control me. But she will die if I do not help her.

I rush over, lift her gown, and remove her bandage. The smell of blood hits me like a sucker punch. I inhale deeply on

instinct and repress a growl. She arches her back with her breasts to the ceiling and lets out a horrible, throat-scratching sound, low and pained. I have to snap out of it. I have to help her.

Gathering her in my arms, I carry her back to the medical room, laying her on the table to repair the sutures. My hands are steady, and my heart is pounding.

Her eyes crack open—Hazel, like the deepest grove in the darkest forest.

“Where am I?” she croaks. “Who are you?”

“My name is Laurent,” I say softly. “You’re in my home. What is your name?”

“Julia.” She closes her eyes. “My name is Julia. What did you do? It hurts...” Blinking, I stare down at her. Does she think *I* did this to her?

I almost get angry, then force myself to calm down. Julia’s delusional. She’s lost blood. She’s experienced trauma.

It’s fine.

It takes me a moment to realize she’s passed out again. It worries me that she can’t stay awake, so I double-check the sutures as I fix them, making sure they’re doing their job. No bruising to indicate internal bleeding... she must have lost much blood. Her skin is cold, not like it should be, so I carry her back to her room, pull the blanket over her, and go into the closet to grab a spare. When I leave the room, Antione is waiting for me.

“Master,” he says quietly as I pass and then follows me, “Are you all right? There wasn’t... an incident, was there?”

“Of course not,” I snap. “Why would you even ask that? Where were you, anyway?”

“There was a phone call I needed to make. I figured Julia’d be okay for that long.”

“Well, she wasn’t.” I stop walking as I reach the kitchen and turn to face him. He almost runs into me. “You need to keep a better eye on her. We need blood—O Positive. Immediately.”

He remains calm like he always does, and it pisses me off like it always does. “Master, if I do recall, this was your decision. My job is to cater to you, not your mistakes.”

Clenching my fists, I glare. “You’ve made plenty of mistakes yourself, Antione. Need I remind you?”

Antione smiles. “No, Master. Trust me. I remember them all. I’ll go get that blood.”

I keep my face stoic but give him a nod to show I appreciate it. He leaves.

I busy myself making a plate to take upstairs to Julia’s bedroom.

I stop in the doorway. Looking at her, watching the rise and fall of her chest, I take a breath. She’s gotten some of her color back and seems to be finally resting. I can trust she’ll make it, at least slightly. I set the plate by her bedside table, hoping she’ll have the stomach to eat some of it and stop.

There are flashes when I look at her, flashes I try to suppress to no avail. Moments of death, by my hands. But I feel a strange hold on myself, one I don't feel often, letting me know everything will be okay.

CHAPTER FOUR

JULIA

I WAKE TO HYACINTHS. They're carved into the ceiling, colorless and plain but beautiful, nonetheless. It's a comforting sight.

Sitting up, I gasp and grip my stomach, then let out an agonized groan. The bed creaks as I flop back.

Through my pain, I can barely register that something smells good—a whiff of lemon.

I pull up the gown I don't remember owning and inspect my stomach. It's black and blue under all the bandages. My mother was a doctor, and she taught me a few things, so I'm impressed by the dressings. I wrap myself back up and prepare to sit up again.

I was assaulted. The distinct smell of tobacco and rain. A man in a gray hoodie, a grin. A knife.

My skin breaks out in goosebumps, and tears fill my eyes. I feel violated, bare. I hug myself and grit my teeth as tears drip down my face.

I'm starting to panic. Where am I? Who's clothes are these? Who fixed my wound? Someone saw me naked! The terror begins to creep in.

I rush to my feet, knocking over the bowl of pasta, which thunks to the carpet and spills. I nearly fall over and scream in pain as I right myself on the bedpost. I glance around at all the lavish furnishings, and my panic only builds. I don't know anyone this wealthy. Where am I?

Have I been kidnapped? Rushing out into the corridor, I look around—empty, beautiful halls. Maroon carpets and big windows let in rectangles of sunlight. I charge over the rug barefoot and against the warm fabric.

I want desperately to scream for help, find someone who can get me out of here, but I don't want to alert the wrong type of person of my presence. As my panic grows, I speed up, ignoring the pain in my stomach to go faster. I turn a corner and nearly run into a man on a ladder, someone who looks vaguely familiar, but I can't even begin to place it right now. He has beautiful curly chocolate hair, olive skin, and bright green eyes.

I swivel around and head down the corridor as he calls for me. He seems nice enough, but I can't trust him. What if he's lying to gain my trust to keep me here? What if he's working with the stalker?

But why would they be working together if the stalker wanted me dead?

“Miss!” He calls. “Miss, you're going to get hurt!”

“Leave me alone,” I snap.

He grabs my wrist, and I turn around, slapping him as hard as possible. He stumbles back with a gasp, cheek red. I use the distraction to slip into a bedroom.

I close and lock the door. The mystery man thuds against it a second later, pulling at the handle. “Let me in!” He insists. “I need to check the stitching!”

“I don’t trust you! Where am I? Who are you?”

“My name is Laurent,” he says, “I found you in the street, bleeding. This is my home. I’m not going to hurt you!”

“Where is he?”

“What? Who?”

He had to be lying. The stalker was right behind me, wasn’t he? There’s no way he didn’t see him.

Footsteps behind me. I whip around for something to stick into my neck, and my body weakens.

The man opens the door as I try to stumble away. Laurent rushes inside.

“Antione!” He snaps. “What did you do?”

I don’t remember the rest before it goes dark.

When I wake next, there’s murmuring nearby.

“I think we should just let her go,” one says.

“Do you think she’ll be safe out there?”

“I don’t know,” he sighs.

I test my wrists—no binds. Interesting. I sit up and look around, finding myself back in the bedroom, my wound stitched closed once again. The two strange men, Laurent and Antione, look at me with varying expressions; Laurent's one of concern, Antione's discontent at best.

“How are you feeling?” Laurent asks.

“Fine,” I say stiffly. “Ready to leave.”

Laurent nods once. “Very well. I'll show you out.”

They both stand, only Antione leans forward and whispers something in Laurent's ear. I scowl. Laurent shakes his head and whispers something back, then gestures for me to follow as if nothing happened. Nothing grinds my gears more than being treated like a child.

I followed Laurent out of the room after gathering the few things I had on me—a purse with my cell phone, ID, and such. He leads me through the property, and I'm grateful for it. I don't know how I would have found my way out alone.

We get outside to the front yard, where there's a hedge garden and a fountain that I try not to look at too much. He leads me to the front gate, and the woods loom over me like a predator. I hesitate after he creaks open the gate.

“What is it?” He asks kindly.

“Nothing,” I insist. I head out. “Thanks. Uh... sorry for, you know.”

He smiles. “It's all right.”

I head into the woods. I'm walking towards the city, maybe a thirty-minute walk, when I hear something—footsteps in the leaves. And once again, I ask myself, is that a sound a human could make or is it just a woodland creature? And once again, the answer is yes.

My breathing is speeding up. I can't get control over it. I look around, behind me, through the brush every two seconds, but nothing makes me feel secure. I'm eventually so lightheaded and weak that I must stop and crouch to catch my breath.

I've been there for longer than I want to admit.

Every sound has me jumping to the point that my body is aching, and I find myself sobbing into my hands.

“Hello? Miss?”

I nearly scream but jump, then relax when I see it's Antoine. A small part of me wonders what he's doing here, but the other part is just glad he's here.

“Hi,” I say weakly. He comes over to me.

I shake my head and go to speak when I start sobbing again, and it's so embarrassing, and I'm afraid that I can't help but crumple, trying to hide from the situation. He kneels beside me and rests a hand on my back.

“Hey, it's okay. Here, come back with me, okay? You don't have to stay, just until you feel better.”

I find myself nodding and following him back to the property, so much for going home.

We sit in the kitchen, and he brews tea. I'm sitting at the table, hands clasped tightly in my lap, staring at the wood. I can't believe it...I'm so humiliated.

I check my phone and frown. "Do you not get service out here?"

Antoine shakes his head. "No, sorry."

I shrug and put the phone back in my purse. We drink our tea, and Antoine offers me a chance to roam the property.

"I'd give you a tour," he says, "but I know you might want some alone time. You are safe here. Um... can I get your name, by the way?"

"Julia. My name is Julia." I blush.

"Nice to meet you, Julia. Would you like to go explore?"

I find myself in the garden. It's a beautiful area, small and cozy. I sit on the marble bench and breathe in flora, tilting my head to the sky. I'm surrounded by tall brick walls that make me feel safe, protected, like a shield. The garden area is wide open. A raindrop lands on my forehead. I grin as rain begins to pour, cutting through the sky like a fork through red velvet cake.

I've always loved the rain, so it's instinctual for me to stand, play in it, jump around, and splash in puddles. Only when I'm soaking wet, do I forget where I am. I feel that knife drives into my stomach, and I gasp, suddenly dry heaving against a tree. I grip the bark as my stomach lurches, and I panic. There

must be something wrong with me, indeed. I know I'm not there anymore-so. Why can't I convince my body of that?

It takes a while of riding it out for me to feel better; I'm almost ready to go inside when the door opens. I turn, sighing in exhaustion, as Laurent walks into view.

"Aren't you worried about getting wet?" I ask glumly.

"The rain doesn't bother me." He shakes his head. "Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

"Like where? Bed?"

"Yeah. Recovering."

I roll my eyes. "Well, aren't you sweet?"

He pulls out a pair of garden shears as the door clicks shut. Something about the shears gets my heart racing. He trims back a rosebush, the bulbs unusually perfect and rich. "You act like everyone is out to attack you."

"Gee, I wonder why."

"We're not all holding knives, Julia."

"How am I supposed to know that?"

He sighs. "Because we're showing you our hands."

"Yeah, your hands," I mumble, "not what's up your sleeve."

"Are you serious?" He turns to me. "Just because something bad happened to you doesn't give you the excuse to point the finger at everybody you see."

I jump to my feet. “I’m not pointing my finger at anybody! There’s nothing wrong with being cautious!”

“Cautious”—his voice dripped with sarcasm—“*right.*”

“You know what?” I snap. “I’ll just stay out of your way.” I head for the door.

He scoffs. I pull at the handle, and it catches. I pull again, then harder.

“What?” he asks, voice halting.

“It’s not opening.” I frown. “Does it lock on its own?”

“No.” He came over to me quicker than I’d have expected. “At least, it never has.” He bangs on the door. It’s sturdy glass, thick and bearable. We need someone to come for us. We call for Antione.

“Great.” Laurent sighs. “I guess we’ll just have to wait.”

I was stuck with him. Perfect.

I sit on the bench and cross my arms. Laurent sits on another, a bit away from me, staring at the ground, sulking.

We sit in silence. The rain starts seeping deep into my bones and makes me shiver. I eventually get up and start hollering for Antione again until my throat is hoarse. “If we’re out here too long, we could get sick,” I say, wrapping my arms around myself.

“I’m not w—” He hesitates. “Right. Let’s get you inside.”

He starts toward me at the door, then his eyes fix on my stomach, and he almost seems to pale.

“What?” I ask nervously.

“Are you... bleeding again?”

I look down. “Gosh! I must have overdone it. It’s fine. I’ll wrap it up. Could I use your jacket?”

He nods, quickly handing it over. His hands are shaking.

“What, you’re squeamish?” I ask as I wrap it tight around my waist. I grit my teeth and hiss through the pain.

“Incredibly.” He stumbles back and sits on the bench.

“It’s not that big of a deal. You can barely see it.” I laugh.

“I can smell it.”

“You can, what?” I look at him, a little afraid.

Then he looks at me. His eyes are severe, a contradiction of panic and calm.

“RUN.”

CHAPTER FIVE

LAURENT

HER PRETTY EYES BULGE.

“What?”

“You have to run,” I repeat, gripping the bench. All I can think of is how beautiful Julia’s blood would look, dripping from my teeth.

She stumbles back, and my heart is racing, my stomach is clenching, it’s *lurching*, it’s hungry. I’m so hungry; when was the last time I had a good meal?

Looking around for a place to escape, she presses her back against the wall and drags her nails on the brick. It takes everything I have not to pounce on her. It’s not that I want to. I feel I *have* to, a primal instinct telling me to *feed*.

“What’s going on?” she demands, her eyes filling with tears. “You told me you wouldn’t hurt me!”

“I’m trying not to!” I snap.

She looks at me like I'm crazy and I should know it. I nearly bare my teeth and snarl at her, but I stop myself. She can't know what I am.

I look at her. She's backing as far away from me as possible, pressing herself into the opposite corner. She's looking for a way to escape, but we both know there isn't one. There's no escaping this.

I rise to my feet and stalk toward her.

"Stay away from me," she threatens, or at least tries.

I pick up the pace and head for her. She ducks under my arm at the last minute as I reach up to, what? I don't know.

Whipping around, I dive for her, and we both fall. She cries and tries to crawl away, but I grip her ankle and drag her toward me.

I'm on top of her, and resisting temptation has never been more challenging.

But I can do it.

I don't want to kill her.

"Get away from me!" She kicks and throws punches, landing one right under my eye. I hiss in pain and yank back, and she uses that opportunity to jump to her feet and tackle me. Another blow to my forehead, and by the time I get my vision back, there's a shattering of glass. When I sit up, the door is broken, and she is gone.

“Where were you?” I snap, slamming the door open.

Antoine jumps, nearly dropping his book. “I was visiting Hidden Moors. Whatever are you so worked up over, Master?”

“Don’t—” I close my eyes and take a breath. Then, cautiously, “Don’t. We were *screaming* for you—Julia could have died!”

“You’ll have to explain,” he says patiently, so I do, and by the time it’s over, I realize he honestly had no idea.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I just... has Julia left yet?”

“Left?” He laughs. “Why ever would she do that?”

“Because I almost killed her! My fangs almost descended! The prophecy was coming to fruition!”

“Laurent... have you ever considered this girl might not be what she seems to be?”

“What does that mean?” I ask in surprise.

“She shows up in your arms one rainy night, insisting upon a wound—”

“The wound was there,” I interrupt. “What are you going on about?”

“A wound she likely gave to herself. You have enemies, Laurent. The Solar sisters are not extinct. You don’t know all of them.”

“She doesn’t want to hurt me,” I dismiss. “She’s not a vampire hunter. She’s just a girl.”

“Well, let’s say she is as innocent as you think.” He puts in a bookmark and closes the book. “This place is huge. The stalker can’t find her here. She’s more likely to hide somewhere on the property, away from you, than she is to leave.”

I nod slowly. “Okay... that’s good, right?”

“Considering I don’t trust her for a second, no, hiding from us is not ideal. We need to keep an eye on her until proven innocent.”

“I don’t think she’s going to hurt us.”

“So you’ve said.” He purses his lips and stands, coming over to me. “Let’s find Julia. I’ll start the lockdown.”

It has its uses, in any case. When we start a lockdown, it’s essentially pressing a button in the control room that closes and locks every door and window in the building. We only use it during emergencies, and sometimes not even then, as it can be dangerous, trapping ourselves in the manor like that.

I think about Julia. I scared her—terrified her. Does she know what I am now? A monster, a hungry animal, a vampire. If she has to live here, she should at least feel safe, right?

Julia’s not hiding anywhere. Maybe she did leave? Fear strikes like lightning.

I comb through the woods near our property. I check the entire east wing, every hiding spot I can think of, and find

nothing. We search for hours. I don't stop at the building; instead, I also check outside on the property. After looking, we return and induce 'lockdown,' a procedure in which all the doors and windows are automatically closed and locked. It all happens with a push of a button in our control room.

We check the library, searching through the shelves covered in every book Antione holds dear. We check the west wing, barely touched and covered in dust, and the lived-in east wing, surrounded in love scars and old stains. At one point, I suggest we get security cameras, but Antione insists that that's far too high-tech for our needs. I shrug it off even though it doesn't quite make sense. We already have the lockdown procedure as a whole, isn't that high-tech?

Calling out her name, apologies, and doing everything but beg her to come out, I search and search. The manor is hauntingly silent. It was terrible when Antione fired everyone. The sudden strike of loneliness, the pain of having my family ripped from my life with pliers... this is worse because this is *my* fault.

"Ask the Oracle," Antione says. "I'll lock down the property."

We split up, and I make my way to the courtyard. My shoes click over the tile and sink into the dirt as I exit the house, making a beeline for the tent.

"Miss," I say, throwing the flap open, then stop.

Julia.

She's lying in the Oracle's cot, fast asleep.

"Shh. She's sleeping, child." The Oracle smiles under her cloak, sitting at the low table and gesturing for me to join her.

"Sorry," I mutter and come to sit. "Is Julia okay?"

"She's very shaken up. You did quite the number on her."

I curse under my breath and shake my head. "She told you?"

"She did."

"I don't understand what I'm supposed to do," I say in frustration. "I'm just trying to keep Julia safe!"

She raises her hand and gestures for me to lower the volume. I glance at Julia—she shifts but stays asleep, curled under the Oracle's blanket. The Oracle snaps twice to get my attention.

"Running away will not solve any of your problems," she promises. "And her running away won't solve hers, either. You two must work together to keep her—and you—safe."

"What, me?" I blink. "What does that mean?"

She shrugs one shoulder.

A glare etches into my face. "You tell me."

"You're not my master, boy."

The way she says that—like *someone* is, just not me. To whom does she report? Why is she still here when everyone else has left? Should I be suspicious of her?

“Help me,” I demand, calming down. “I don’t want to hurt anyone, but I can’t always control myself.”

“You can,” she says patiently. “You need to have faith in yourself. And you need to explain.”

“How am I meant to explain this to her?” I whisper.

“You don’t need to tell her the whole truth. But you can’t honestly expect things to just be okay between you two when she thinks you tried to kill her.”

So the Oracle is convinced I wasn’t trying to hurt Julia. Very nice of her, but I’m not so sure. Thanks.

“Talk to her,” she says. “I’ll send her inside when she awakes. Just talk to her.”

“Fine.” I sigh. “Fine. I will. Uh... ask Julia to meet me in the kitchen, please.”

“Of course.”

I go back inside the house and busy myself in the kitchen. Talk to her. About what? Being a vampire? Nope. No can do. Humans don’t even know we exist. She would leave and end up right back in the streets. Right back in the hands of that stalker, mugger, or whatever he is.

Antione finds me chopping vegetables.

“Master?” he asks. “Did you find her?”

“I did. Julia’s okay.”

“May I end the lockdown, then?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“You know, master... if required, I can adjust the lockdown procedure.”

I frown. “What does that mean?”

Well,” he smiles, “it’s equipped with numerous functions we haven’t used yet. It connects through the air vents and the electrical wires to run throughout the house. If I had your permission, I could reach a compromise-instead of security cameras, which I find uncomfortable, there can be sensors. That way, we know when someone is in the house wherever they are.”

“I... don’t see why that would be necessary,” I say.

“Really,” he encourages, “I think it would help put your mind at ease. Besides, if Julia *insists* on wandering about, we’ll at least know where she is.”

I nod slowly. “Uh... yeah. You know what? Sure. I’m going to talk to Julia, however. I need to do it alone.”

He smiles. “Very well, sir.” He leaves.

Only about twenty minutes pass before the door opens again, and I turn to see Julia looking guarded. I set the knife down, as her eyes are lingering on it, and I know it’s giving her anxiety. She rubs her stomach, where it’s bandaged, like trying to calm and protect it.

Sitting at the table, I gesture for her to sit with me. She doesn’t.

“I’m sorry,” I say firmly. “I messed up, Julia.”

“I’ll say,” she mumbles.

“I know. You have every right... to want to leave. But, Julia, you should stay.”

“Give me one good reason,” she demands.

“Because I can protect you!”

“Right.” She crosses her arms. “What a good protector you are.”

“I know it doesn’t look like it, but... please, remember the man who carried you here. Remember the man who stitched you closed and fed you.”

“You can try to buy my loyalty all you want,” she snaps, “but it won’t work. I don’t trust you, Laurent. You’re dangerous.”

I swallow—Julia’s *right*. I am dangerous. I don’t know a vampire that isn’t. But everyone seems to think she needs to stay here—so what do I do?

I try to think about why she so desperately needs to stay here, and the more I think about it, the more I realize the stalker doesn’t know she’s here. She can heal and maybe learn to defend herself. I’d go to the police if the situation weren’t so dangerously close to a prophecy, and would risk having the Oracle sent away.

Oracles, like mine, are content prophesizing for the people they believe need it. Police departments and anyone else who can benefit from it like to claim the Oracles’ prophecies are dangerous whenever possible and should be used exclusively

to protect and serve. Some Oracles are okay with that, mine is not.

If I found the asshole myself, then what? I'm sure he'd make a great meal. Still, the best way to draw him out would be to use Julia as bait. We are not that desperate, but Julia would never be okay with it in a million years. Not to mention, what if he's a vampire himself? Vampires are not easy to kill.

"I... want to fix this," I say slowly. "I want to fix my bad habits and change my behavior. I want to protect you."

She looks down at me, chewing on her lip.

"I want *you* to heal. I want you to stay safe. Will you give me that chance?"

Julia hesitates, brushing her fiery hair behind her ear. "Okay," she finally says with a sigh. "Only because I'm hungry and don't want to ask you to cook me something when we're still fighting."

I laugh, surprised. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." She smiles hesitantly. "Get to chopping."

CHAPTER SIX

JULIA

I'M TRYING TO FIGURE out how I feel about Laurent. He's annoying, rude, and dangerous—but he seems to be trying. And I'm not the most well-adjusted person, either. Still, how can I physically heal if I surround myself with headcases? But that's not fair. "Headcase" is a harsh term, not one I feel comfortable throwing around. Laurent showed me how to julienne a tomato, and we laughed the entire time. It's almost like what happened didn't happen, and I'm unsure how I feel about that.

"So, tell me about yourself," he says as we wait for the chicken to bake. "Do you know what got that guy's attention, anyway?"

"Beats me," I admit, avoiding his question.

Part of me is embarrassed about my life before him. I was on the verge of being fired, just one mistake away, and if I couldn't even keep a café job, then what job could I save? Not to mention, Eden was my only friend, if I could even call her that.

“I don’t think I even noticed him right away,” I say, shaking myself out of it. “Some weird things were happening—stuff missing or changing location without me touching it, my door unlocking itself through the night... but that started well before I saw him.”

“Do you know what he looks like?”

I nod. “Blond guy. With a mark on his neck.”

He looks at me curiously. “What kind of mark?”

“I don’t know. I can’t tell if it’s a tattoo or a weird birthmark. Two small, dark circles side by side.”

I’d seen it too many times to count, more and more the closer he got to me. “Interesting,” he says. “Well, I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Thanks.” I crack a small smile.

He’s cute in a Gothic way. Insanely hot. He’s got smooth, flawless skin and these guarded, piercing eyes. His shirt hugs his abs nicely, and his jeans lay low on his waist, revealing his core as he reaches up to grab a spatula from the hook.

He glances at me and nearly does a double take, and it takes me a moment to realize he’s staring at me. The sunlight from the window behind me bathes my shadow along the tile. It’s warm.

“What is it?” I ask, frowning. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” he mumbles. “No. Sorry.”

He looks back to the oven and gets a mitt on, pulling out the tray of tomato basil chicken. It smells incredible. He flips them over and then sets them back in the oven.

“What is going on? There is something you’re not telling me?” I inquire.

He shakes his head and goes over to the counter. A drawer creaks as it opens, and he picks up a bronze juicer. “I ... can’t tell you.”

“I’m smarter than you think.”

He sighs harshly. “I don’t think you’re stupid. I think you’re... privileged.”

“Privileged?” I scoff and cross my arms. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not,” he argues. “There are things you can’t understand. I’m not trying to make you upset, Julia. It’s just *true*.”

Privileged. Laurent thinks I’m privileged. He doesn’t know anything about me! He doesn’t know how much I’ve struggled; he’s never seen the grief and pain I’ve had to go through. Losing my parents, hopping from job to job, apartment to apartment... the things I’ve lost. It makes me sick to think about it, so I change the topic slightly.

“You keep saying I don’t understand or *can’t* understand, but you refuse to try,” I spit.

Laurent sets the juicer down with a sigh. “You’re taking this way too personally.”

Annoying. Laurent's irritating.

"You know what"—I hold my hand up—let's change the subject."

He nods. "Fine by me."

"What about you?" I ask. "What's your life usually like?"

"Not much different from this," he admits, and I'm surprised.

I can picture him with staff to wait on him and a good book in his hand, feet propped up on his expensive Victorian ottoman. Drinking hot tea and homemade lemonade and malt liquor.

"I like to cook and garden. I used to take kickboxing, and I know my way around a longsword, but not so much anymore."

"A longsword?" I laugh haughtily. "You're telling me if the stalker burst in here right now, you could take that sword off the wall and destroy them with it?"

He laughs, too. "Pretty much. Well, I used to. I haven't done it in a while. But I'm sure I could pick it back up."

"You should." I move closer. "Girls love guys who know their way around a weapon."

"Do they?" He snickers. "Haven't heard that one."

"Oh?"

"I don't have much experience," he tells me, and I blink.

"You're kidding, right?"

“No, it’s always just come very naturally.”

I smack his arm. He laughs, and it’s an airy, carefree laugh—a beautiful laugh.

“I’m serious! I’ve never had any complaints.”

“How many girls have you been with?”

He rolls his eyes. “Two.”

“Two?” I ask. “*Really?*”

“Yes. And one of those girls, we are not on good terms. She would ensure I knew if I wasn’t good in bed.”

“Unless her revenge is your false confidence,” I tease.

He grins. “Oh, there’s nothing false about it.”

I laugh and brush my hair behind my ear. “Right... what’s that like?”

I could have been more confident. I pretended I was because people generally treated you better if you put your foot down, but I wasn’t sure about anything. The way he’s looking at me... makes me feel small.

“Oh, please.” He smiles and steps closer. “Like you’re not confident. Come on, how many guys have you been with?”

I blush bright red. “Uh—I don’t—”

“How many?”

“... none.”

He blinks. “What? None? There’s no way.”

“It’s true,” I press. “I haven’t been with anyone. Ever.”

He looks me up and down and bites his lip, and electricity runs from my head to my fingertips to my toes. “Want to change that?”

My eyes widen. “What? Umm—”

Grinning, Laurent comes over and presses my waist to the counter. I’m breathing hard. Bringing a hand up to my face, he brushes his thumb over my lip. He steps closer, my heart is pounding, he’s running a hand down my thigh, and his mouth is on my neck. I may pass out.

He nibbles at my skin, and I dig my teeth into my lip to stop the whimpers from coming out. His hand sits between my legs, as he starts to rub against me, gently nudging my legs apart. I accept him. The sensation of my panties and his fingers working together against my clit makes me see stars. His breath is hot and harsh in my ear, and warmth floods my abdomen. Suddenly his hand disappears.

A pathetic sound escapes, and I grip his shoulder, begging him to return. He chuckles, and it’s like velvet sugar in my ear. He touches me again, and I swear I will explode into minuscule pieces. There’s a scent of spicy calamari and old books from a neglected but well-loved library.... Electricity courses between us.

“Don’t stop,” I whisper, and that grin burns me to a crisp.

“You’re adorable,” Laurent whispers back.

Something is building in my stomach, abdomen, and head, rushing through my body like a storm. I try to moan, but it

comes out broken. I reach a peak that I couldn't imagine before this moment, and I yell, pathetic, loud, and he's grinning as I arch my back and grip him with white knuckles.

"How are you feeling, darling?" he purrs.

"Hmm" I gasp. "Sleepy."

I return to Earth, and he steadies me with an arm around my waist. We stay there too long, stroking and sometimes kissing. The chicken was overdone when we noticed what time it was.

Antione comes in, glancing at us in surprise. "You cooked together?"

"Yeah," Laurent says with a confused frown, "why?"

"Well, I thought you didn't get along."

"We don't," we say at the same time.

"It was just dinner, Antione." Laurent sighs.

"Don't worry. I still can't stand him."

We glance at each other. I blush and look away. A part of me feels terrible, like I owe Laurent something now, but what sense does that make? I've always heard sex comes with strings attached. But we don't have to be best friends because his hand was in my pants. Nothing has to change.

We sit down to eat, and it's delicious. I tried not to eat like a complete monster, but I had no idea how hungry I was. Antione watches me with an amused smile and a raised eyebrow. Laurent seems unphased.

“So, guys,” I say between bites, “what’s with the staff? Like, the lack of staff, I mean.” They look at each other, not knowingly, but more like Laurent is begging Antione to give him a reason.

“We don’t have any staff,” Laurent says shortly after an awkward silence.

“Okay, but why?”

“They weren’t treating Laurent very kindly,” Antione tells me, dabbing his handkerchief over his mouth. “Liars and cheats, all of them.”

“What about your family?” I ask.

Laurent stares at his plate. “When my parents passed, Antione was there for me.”

“Is that all the family you have?”

Antione shakes his head, and I wait for an elaboration that doesn’t come. I look down. Family is family. How bad could they be? When my mom passed, it destroyed me. I can’t imagine willingly kicking her out of my life. But he did the right thing if he wasn’t treated right as hard as it must have been. Part of me wonders if this is why he’s always so rude. He’s angry—he’s hurt.

“Well, when are you going to hire new staff?” I ask.

Antione chuckles. “What makes you say that?”

“Soon,” Laurent says, but I look to Antione.

“You don’t want more staff?”

He shakes his head. “Just slows us down.”

“Oh, come on.” I laugh. “You can’t take care of this whole place by yourself.”

“Then we can get a smaller place,” Antione says.

I look to Laurent for confirmation that he agrees or, hell, just that he’s hearing what I’m hearing, but he won’t look at me.

The three of us clean up after an awkward dinner, and I dry the dishes that Laurent washes. Antione sweeps and mops the floor.

“Why don’t you two walk through the front gardens? I have some errands to run in town.” Antione suggests. “It’s a beautiful evening.”

Laurent looks at him in surprise. “I don’t... know if that’s the best idea.”

“Why not?” I ask, folding the hand towel. “I could go for a walk.”

“Do it, then.”

I scowl. “What is your problem? If you don’t want to, say that.”

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “That’s not it. Stop acting like we’re friends.”

“Stop acting like a jackass. You’re just—”

Antione holds a hand up. “Go with her,” and I roll my eyes as footsteps follow me.

“Are you sure?” Laurent asks again.

If he hates me that much, I wish he’d be honest. I cross my arms over my chest, like the child he’s treating as, and head for the door.

“It’ll be fine,” Antione promises.

He shuts the door to the kitchen after we leave, leaving us alone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LAURENT

JULIA IS SOMETHING NEW for me. I've never met someone so confident and insecure at the same time. She's afraid to take up space, though she deserves the space. I see right through her like she's glass.

We make our way outside beneath the gloomy, foggy skies. The air smells of radishes and falls. I offer her my coat, as it's a little chilly, and she rolls her eyes, trying and failing to hide a blush. I sigh.

"Is this how it's going to be?" I ask as we walk into the hedge gardens. She admires the trimming, though it's a little outgrown for my liking.

"You act like I'm the hot and cold one," she says.

"Am I wrong?" I laugh, shaking my head and putting my hands in my pockets. "We were fine before dinner. Better than fine, I'd say."

"You won't tell me anything." She sighs and walks ahead of me, barely. "I know something is going on with you. I know

there's something strange about this place. Why don't you tell me?"

"There are things you don't need to know," I insist.

"'Need' has nothing to do with it." She glances at me over her shoulder. "Let me ask you this, Laurent: Have you ever had any friends?"

"What?" I ask, startled.

She stops and turns. "Have you ever had any friends?"

I swallow. "Of course."

"Are you sure? I won't make fun of you." She looks away with a sad little smile. "I had a friend once. Eden. She didn't tell me everything either, but she at least talked to me."

"We're not friends," I say calmly.

She laughs. "No, we're not. Are you happy with that?"

"What kind of question is that?"

We step out of the hedge gardens, and evergreen leaves formed into intricate statues and shapes of owls, mushrooms, and rabbits. Rosebuds that have yet to bloom dot the garden. We head over to the fountain, a huge thing just outside the manor's main entrance, carved with beautiful symbols that, though I can't directly translate them, have been part of my history since before I was born. There are coins gathered in the water decades old; it smells vaguely of copper, and the smell you get when you snap an aloe branch from its root, all green and robust. Julia dips her fingers in the cool water, splashing

and making ripples like little dive-bombers. “Just answer it,” she says.

Sighing, I tell her, “I don’t know. I’m very... conflicted about it.”

She looks at me in surprise, like she didn’t expect us to get anywhere. “Why’s that?”

“As I’ve been saying, there are some things about me that you shouldn’t know. Things that wouldn’t be safe to tell you. For either of us. But...” I laugh in disbelief. “I do like you, Julia.”

Her face turns pink. She straightens up and looks me in the eye, just for a second, before looking away. “You don’t act like it.”

“No,” I agree, “I don’t.”

We stare at each other for a moment. I reach out and take Julia’s hand. She sometimes makes me feel dizzy, especially when the moonlight slips down her features like a river down a meadow. I love to watch her, analyze her expressions, and theorize her thoughts. I’d love to hear what they are.

She pulls it back and steps away. “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t understand what?” I ask and step closer. “That I like you?” I reach out toward her. She doesn’t move back, so I rest my hand on her cheek.

“That and about a million other things.” She chuckles. ”

I take my hand back. We continue walking toward the outer gates. “I’m interested in keeping you safe, not happy.”

“You say it like I can’t be both.”

“You can’t.” I laugh harshly. “If you’re at all what I suspect you to be, you can’t.”

“I’m not some child you need to care for,” she says. “You’re treating me like I’m your responsibility, like I can’t care for myself. I’m sick of it.”

“You are my responsibility,” I say, “and you can’t take care of yourself.”

She groans and stops walking. “You are so unbelievable!”

I glare. “Look, this situation is not either of our faults. Stop being so insecure about what happened between us in the kitchen.”

“I don’t know why I ever let you—” Julia stops.

I cross my arms. “Really?”

She’s thinking, hesitating. Then she’s nodding. “Yeah.” Then she spits, “It was a *mistake*.”

Julia heads for the gate. I grab her wrist, and she yanks it away with surprising strength. “Julia,” I say.

She ignores me continuing for the gate.

“Julia!”

Still, she won’t look at me. I storm forward to block her, but she ducks around me and runs out the gate.

“Julia!” I follow her. “Come back!” I demand.

“You can’t keep me here,” she snaps.

I stop in front of her. “What are you doing? Do you think you’re making a good choice here?”

“I don’t have a good choice!” she explodes. “Out there, there’s some crazy guy trying to kill me. In here, you are playing *mind games!*”

“One of those options sounds better to me,” I tell her.

She shakes her head. “Does it matter when they’re both awful?”

I try to guide her back into the property, but she won’t let me. The woods are empty, and I question whether she would even know how to return to Hidden Moors, but I’m not foolish enough to think that’d stop her. She’d find hope in the woodland critters, the babbling creek, and the symbolic trail of breadcrumbs to follow. I try not to see it as a beautiful thing in her, this hope she tends to have. It’s h

“Listen, I’m not playing mind games with you. I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m just trying to keep you safe.”

The woods are silent around us—no chirping of birds, no chittering, no crunch of leaves.

“You keep saying that like it means *anything* to me,” she snaps. “I don’t need you treating me like crap to keep me safe.”

Guilt is getting to me. Julia's right—I've been brusque. But what am I supposed to do? I can't tell her I'm a vampire. Would she even believe that? The kitchen *was* a mistake. I can't get close to her like that. But I can't keep pushing her away, either.

"I'm sorry," I say quietly, her eyes widening. "You're right. That's not an excuse. Can we ... talk about it?"

Julia hesitates, tucking her fiery hair behind her ear. I'd never seen a girl look so gorgeous before. I remember her in the kitchen when the sun was still out, bathing her in its beauty and highlighting her own.

It's then I realize I want her in my life. And it is then I remember I can't. I am a vampire, and she is a human. A human I am prophecized to kill. But all I have to do is control myself, right? And maybe I can keep her a bit longer. Besides, it's never been this easy before. I'm frustrated but not thinking about ripping into her throat every minute. I realize I don't want to kill her. Damn the prophecy. There's not a single part of what remains of my human self that would rather kill her than be intimate with her. It's my instinct as a vampire kicking in looking for a good meal.

And suddenly, controlling myself is easy as cake. But she still can't know the creature I am. She agrees to return to the property, so we sit on a marble bench by the duck pond. I run inside and come back out with half a loaf of bread, which I split between us, and we take turns snacking and tossing bread to the ducks. She won't let me go any longer without some

form of explanation. Still, I'm not ready to reveal to her that I'm undead, so I explain that I have a condition that's hard to control. She listens intently as I tell her about mood swings and feeling out of my body. I tell her about the sudden rage for nothing that won't let go until I let it out myself. And I tell her I'm trying.

She rests a hand on mine. "I'm sorry I said that. It wasn't a mistake. I... I liked it a lot. I like you a lot."

I smile and lace our fingers. "I've never met anyone like you, Julia."

"Me either."

She rests her head on my shoulder, and I wrap an arm around her waist. She sits there for a long time, just whispering with my arm wrapped around her until it gets too cold for her to bear. We head inside and find an empty parlor, cuddling up on the couch with a couple of books. Antione comes in at one point to find a book for himself and gives me a look that makes me feel like a teenager again, but I glare at him, so he leaves me alone.

Julia falls asleep reading in my lap. I pick her up and carry her to her bedroom. Laying her in bed, I pull the blanket over her and go to leave when her hand shoots to mine.

"Laurent," she mumbles, "stay with me."

I laugh. "Are you sure?"

She nods.

I take off my shoes and slacks and climb into bed with her, wrapping an arm around her waist. She cuddles into my chest.

“Laurent,” she asks softly, “do you think Antione hates me?”

“Oh, that’s nonsense.” I laugh, and I mean it. “Antione’s a little hard to get along with, but he’s a good guy.”

“He doesn’t act like he likes me.”

“How so?”

“He’s just kind of... cold.”

“Get some sleep.” I kiss her forehead.

She rests on my chest and nuzzles into my neck. She’s small, a little spitfire I never knew I wanted or needed. She falls asleep in my arms. I stay awake, playing with her hair and pretending everything is okay. What would Antione think if he saw us like this? Likely, he’d make fun of us, and that’s okay—I’ve always been good at laughing things off. But would Antione be mad? Would he think I’m being careless and dangerous? Selfish? Putting my wants above her survival? Or is that my head, my voice, scolding me? I’ve never been good at seeing things.

When I was young, I was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder—before I was turned and lost my parents. My therapist told me I habitually thought irrationally, panicked, and catastrophized. I’ve gotten miles better at it since I was a kid. Though I no longer attend weekly therapy sessions, I work hard at maintaining. But sometimes, I still question

myself. *What if?* What if I'm wrong? What if I'm making a mistake? It's hard to escape. But something about her in my arms feels right. It's hard to second-guess it when it feels natural. She drives me crazy and upsets me, which I like. I like that she makes me feel something other than boredom. She makes me angry, but about things that don't matter, that aren't serious. And I can't forget to mention how insanely attractive she is. Silky hair the color of solar fire, sloping curves like peaks and valleys in a meadow, freckled pink skin like a map of constellations. She's perfect.

I worry I won't be able to keep her safe. If she leaves, she could be killed. If she stays, she could be killed. The prophecy still looms. I have to keep my eye on her, but my own hands are the ones that could harm her. I haven't felt that urge in a while, but I've fallen for false security before.

Glancing down at her, she cuddles into my arms and rests her head on my shoulder. I hold her close.

I can control myself, I decide.

I will restrain myself.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JULIA

I WAKE UP WARM.

I burrow into the moving heat, gently rising and falling under my cheek, and pull the blankets further over myself. Chuckling. I open my eyes and look up. Then my face flushes hot.

Laurent, asleep, breathes in and out softly as he holds me. It's nice, I'll admit, being held like this. I've never been held by anyone other than my mother. My father was too prideful to show much affection to a daughter he wasn't proud of in the first place, and I'd never had many friends or a single lover. I've never mattered to someone.

I sit back and enjoy it. I listen to the hum of the heater and watch the fancy chandelier fade in and out softly, not bright enough to be a whole lamp but reminiscent of starlight. The bed is so soft, like a bed of moss; it reminds me of camping with my mother when I was younger. We never used a tent, which we sometimes regretted-especially when it rained-so we

laid out on the grass with the tree branches arching over and the constellations calling to us.

Laurent shifts a bit. I say his name softly. His beautiful eyes crack open. “Morning.” He glances at me, then smiles briefly before it fades into something more controlled.

I roll onto his chest so I can peek up at him. “You didn’t have to stay, you know.”

“Well, how could I leave that face?” He rests a hand on the side of my cheek. I don’t know what I’m doing. Leaning forward, I kiss him softly, and I’ve never kissed anyone before him, and I can’t remember why right now. He kisses me back without hesitation, pulling me closer even, and I’m hot all over, but that doesn’t stop him from pinning me to the bed.

His lips attach to my neck, and I arch my body into his, letting out a pathetic mewl. Chuckling, he runs a hand down my side and then gently caresses the inside of my thigh. I spread my legs on instinct, and he grins at me.

“Awe, you’re just so desperate, aren’t you?”

I summon up a slight glare, and he’s only more amused. He nibbles into my neck while rubbing me and I’m squirming under his touch. A constant stream of moans pours from my throat uncontrollably. His scent overwhelms me and makes me more aroused.

He pulls my gown up, careful about my bandaged stomach, kissing right above the wrapping, then his head slowly dips down. He’s breathing against me, and it tickles, but I don’t

want it to end. He pulls my panties down while gently biting my thighs, calves, behind my knee, and the top of my foot. That mouth is warm and wet, covering me in delicious licks. He nudges at my slit with his tongue, moving in and out with a rapid pace that my panting can only match. With my underwear around my ankles, I whimper and stretch my legs—I've never felt anything like his lapping tongue.

Laurent's nails dig into the flesh under my thighs, and it hurts. It hurts so good; I wrap my legs around his neck and pull him in closer, practically grinding my pelvis into his face when it happens, like a rubber band that has been holding on for dear life, and finally snaps. Warmth and pleasure flood my body and didn't honestly think I would feel that sensation again.

I'm breathing hard, lying on the bed, and when my thighs finally let him go, and he smiles at me softly. My hands are tangled in his messy locs, and I pull him up to my face to kiss his glistening lips between gasps.

“God, Julia,” he pants against my mouth, “I want you.”

“Take me,” I can't believe I'm begging so easily, so carelessly.

I grip his face. “I want you so bad.”

I do. All my life, I've been waiting for someone special, someone worthy. I didn't know I would find it in a stranger.

His bottoms are down and off quickly then he hovers above me, positioned at my dripping entrance. “Ready?”

“Yes! Yes, *please*, Laurent, I can’t wait any longer.”

He pushes the tip inside, slow and gentle, and all I can think is that I want him harder.

“Laurent,” I pant, and he looks at me worriedly. “I’m not fragile.” He hesitates, then a devilish grin appears as his hips snap forward, and I catch my breath, jerking my head back and squeezing my eyes tight. I let out a broken moan, so he does it again. The pain of my first sexual experience is masked by the insane amount of pleasure that is building up, and I’m making noises I’ve never heard, but I’ve never felt like this. I might be falling in love with him.

I orgasm long before him, but he doesn’t stop. He’s plunging into my hips and groaning; I wouldn’t have it any other way. I squirm in overstimulation, which is the best kind of awful feeling.

Laurent cums, flooding me with his seed and moaning my name. When he collapses on me, I feel all is going to be all right.

He pulls me into his arms, and I rest against his chest as I catch my breath. He’s panting, and I’m a little embarrassed, but I’m mostly just... content. I feel safe.

Then he has to ruin it.

“I’ll see you later.” He rolls away and stands to dress.

I sit up in surprise. “Wait, what?”

“Sorry, Julia, I need to take care of things.”

I can't fathom the switch—I've gotten whiplash. "What is wrong with you?" I ask, my heart aching.

"We just... why are you acting like this?"

He seems sad but I only catch it briefly before he hides it, or it was never there in the first place.

"Listen, Julia"—he sighs and sounds annoyed now—"as much as I enjoy spending time with you... we just can't be close. There are things—"

"If you tell me there are things I don't understand *one more time*—"

"—It's true! You need to trust me on this, Julia." He starts getting dressed.

I'm so angry and confused that I don't know what else to do, so I pull on my gown with shaking hands and legs, snatch his slacks and boxers, and run out the door. If he's going to make me look stupid, I can play that game, too. I dump them somewhere random and storm out to the back part of the manor. I find myself in the backyard, still flaming mad, where the tree line cuts off the property and an old decrepit shed sits. The sun is slowly rising behind the manor's walls, turning the sky from the pinks, oranges, and golds of strawberry sherbet to soft baby blues. The stars have disappeared. They're gone. I'm still looking for them, praying for just a hint of white specks among the color, but no.

I'm calming down now, though I'm still hurt, and I slide down the shed's wall to sit in the grass. I bury my face in my

hands and start to cry softly, not because I'm despondent but because I'm embarrassed and angry that I gave Laurent my virginity for him to throw it out.

What is his deal?

CHAPTER NINE

LAURENT

GETTING ALONG WITH JULIA is torturous.

She's untrusting, naïve, and clingy. I tell her there shouldn't be anything weird between us, but she doesn't seem to process it. I sleep on the floor, and she is in the bed, although some nights I find her staring at me. Like she's trying to dissect what I am. It puts me on edge, alert. She can't find out what I am.

I think about what she would do and how she would run. But then she'd likely get killed once the stalker finds her. I am saving her life by not telling her I am a vampire; I have no doubts about that. But hiding it is becoming increasingly more challenging. And what if she found out and *didn't* run? She has so many options-vampire hunters included. If she wanted, she could be the hunter herself. She could even... I try not to go there, but it's hard.

She begins studying me very closely during our few-and-far-between interactions. I know the scrutinizing gaze, the pursed lips. She follows me out to the garden as if looking for how the sun interacts with my skin; she follows me to the

Oracle like she'll let something slip. It's a struggle to keep her at a healthy distance.

I regret sleeping with her. Not because she's now attached to my hip, but because I had to hurt her afterward. If I had only thought ahead, knew what was going to happen... I would never have taken her in the first place. That thought makes me ache—the idea of not having Julia nearby. I've been experiencing it in small doses lately, and it's not what I want, that I know. I must remind myself that what I want is less important than what we need.

We're sitting in the common room, reading—a classic mystery for me and a gothic romance for her—when Antione comes in. He leans into my ear and whispers, “Master, your attention is needed immediately.” Code. There's an animal outside, and it's time to feed.

It takes me a minute to process it, as we haven't had to talk in code in so long. Not since the staff was here. I remember the day Antione went on a firing spree—it was a little scary. He just seemed to snap, one wrong comment I don't remember, and he's off, questioning every employee and dragging them out by their aprons. I'd been asking him for a while if he could give the chefs fewer hours, so I could have more time to cook for myself, and I regretted that every day. I couldn't help but wonder if I was the reason they were all fired.

It was in my name. In the name of my happiness. That makes it my responsibility.

He's looking at me like I'm starving, but truthfully, feeding on an animal satiates me for about two weeks. Antione gathers wild animals for me and ensures our hunting licenses remain valid.

I excuse myself and stand.

"Wait, where are you going?" Julia asks nervously.

"He'll be right back," Antione says. "Just some things that need attending."

"I'll go with you," Says Julia.

"No need," I promise. "I'll be right back."

"But what if...."

"I'll be right back."

She hesitates, then nods. "Okay... don't be too long."

I leave and make my way into the gardens. It's a quiet, gray day. I can feel the energy of another living being—prey. My footsteps are silent, as is my breathing. Scuttling. I head into the hedge gardens and step carefully, avoiding twigs and crunchy leaves and rocks. Glancing around the corner, the boar is facing away from me, looking confused and scared. My mouth waters. There's this feeling I get right before feeding, a sense of adrenaline, electricity-joy, even. It's a primal instinct inside me that must be satiated, as much as I hate it. I stride toward it and am about to pounce when I hear

"Laurent?"

I jump and turn around. The boar runs off, disappearing into the hedge maze. “Julia! What are you doing here?”

So close to feeding my hands are shaking. I want to pin Julia to the ground and drain her. I have to control myself.

“Where did that come from?” she asks with a frown, coming closer. “I’ve never seen them this close.”

“You should be inside.” I come over and take her hand to hide the shaking of mine. “Out here, all exposed. You could get hurt.”

She rips her hand back and huffs. “Sure, I need help protecting myself, but I don’t need you to babysit me. What are you doing out here? Is this what you need to handle?”

My stomach is growling. “Julia, go back inside.”

I put my hand on her back and guided her toward the manor.

“I’ll be inside soon, okay?” I tell her as we get to the door.

She nods bedgrudginly.

After she’s left, I turn and go back to find the hog. That feeling returns, the satisfying adrenaline that courses through my body like electricity through a wire. The hog sees me this time, and it’s feral; that much is clear as it charges me. I square my shoulders and place my feet apart, and when it collides, we fall into the dirt, battling for victory. It doesn’t know what’s coming, however. If I think about it too much, I get upset. So I don’t. I dig my teeth into its supple flesh, and it squeals so loud and high-pitched that my ears ring, but I don’t stop,

bleeding it dry as best as I can without getting blood on my clothes.

I leave feeling satisfied.

I clean the blood from my face and hands, careful not to get it on my clothes, I meet Antione and Julia back in the reading room.

She jumps up and comes over to me. “Is everything okay?”

I shake my head. “No. I need to talk to Antione about something—could you get started on dinner? I’ll be in there in a few to help you.”

She nods and leaves. I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Master,” Antione says haltingly, “what is it?”

“When will she be ready to go?”

He shakes his head. “Sir, we’ve been over this. We must watch her until we know she won’t bring enemies to our door.”

“Well, I don’t know what to do!” I explode. “I feel like I can’t control myself and I’m going to hurt her!”

“Why don’t you speak with the Oracle?” he suggests.

“Can you help Julia with dinner? I don’t want to leave her alone for too long.”

“Of course.” He nods and leaves.

I go to the Oracle, where she’s sitting by where her table usually is, instead replaced by a camping stove. She stirs soup

around in an aluminum pot, which smells savory and sweet with just a hint of spice.

“Are you hungry?” she asks.

I sit in front of her and shake my head. “No.”

“Good answer.” She smiles and pours some into a metal cup. She sips at it, ignoring the steam and not flinching. She sets it on the floor next to her. “What can I do for you, my boy?”

“I... had a close call today in more ways than one. If she’d come just a second later, she would know that I’m a vampire and then she would run,” I say. “And the stalker would kill her. I need to know. How is it looking? Will I fulfill the prophecy? Will I kill Julia?”

She takes a long sip of her soup and swirls it around in her mouth before swallowing. She hums, sets it down, and reaches over for my hand. She pulls it over to her and inspects my palm. Her touch is ice cold.

“Hm... such violence.”

Fear strikes through me like being stabbed with a red-hot blade. “What? Yes, you are struggling. I can tell. No, this isn’t looking good.”

Hot pinpricks stab near my brow. My heart is racing. “What do I do? Am I going to kill her? Is the prophecy right?”

“As of how things are going right now”—she nods morbidly—“yes.”

“How do I change that?”

She shakes her head. “I can’t tell you that.”

My eyes widen. “What are you talking about? You know, don’t you?”

“Child, there are infinite ways this world could go. Infinite avenues and forks in the road and wrong turns. Only a fool could see them all.”

“I’m not asking for all the information in the universe,” I insist. “There’s gotta be something you know I can do to keep her safe! Anything!”

She chuckles dryly. “You need me to tell you that? Don’t you know all you have in this world is free will? The goddesses will look down at you, challenge you, and send you all over the earth, but you accept the mission at the end of the day. So if the goddesses offer you something you don’t want to take—don’t take it.”

I stare down at my lap, clenching my fists. My heart is still racing, and I’m scared and don’t know what to do.

“You’re not helping me. I *know* you can.”

“If you’re not hearing me, you can’t be helped.”

I shake my head and stand. “Will you just give me a straight answer?”

She laughs. “What good teacher just gives away the answers?”

I huff and stomp out of her tent making my way back inside. As soon as I walk through the kitchen door, the smell of blood, intense and concentrated, hits me. I nearly stumble back, like walking into a wall of humidity, only this time, it's cravings.

"Ow," Julia hisses, running her hand under the running water.

Antione sets the knife down. "I'm so sorry, miss." He glances back at me, looking like he feels horrible. "Are you okay?"

I try to turn and leave, but Julia notices me. "Laurent!" She laughs weakly. "Where are you going? I need someone to chop the potatoes. Antione over here clearly doesn't know how to handle a knife."

"I..." I swallow. "I can't, I—"

She frowns and comes over to me. "Laurent? Are you all right?"

I step back. I know what I'm missing and want to close the gap to... to feed. The cravings for human blood are worse after a feeding.

"Stay back," I say softly, and she freezes.

"Master?" Antione asks quietly.

"Get her out of here. Now!"

He hesitates, and it's all I need. I storm out of the room and slam the door behind me, finding a quiet place to calm down.

Far too close.

I hope this won't cause a more significant rift between us.

CHAPTER TEN

JULIA

I WAKE TO A horrible wave of nausea. I barely reach the restroom before doubling over and hurling into the toilet. I think back to try to figure out if I had too much wine last night, but no—I hadn't had any.

“Julia?”

A knock on the door. Something tells me I can't let Laurent know, so I hold back another wave and call out as soon as possible, “Sorry! I'll be out soon.” The doorknob jiggles. “Are you throwing up?”

“Nuh-uh!” I dig my teeth into my lip. “Sorry, no, I'm good. I'll be out in a minute.” He stops trying to come inside. I hold back a sigh of relief and double over the toilet again, silently hacking. After washing my hands and putting myself back together, I come out a few minutes later, and he puts a hand on my shoulder, looking me up. Scrutinizing me. “You didn't throw up?”

I shake my head.

“You wouldn’t lie to me, right?”

“Of course not,” I lie.

He examines me, then nods slowly. “Okay... let’s get some toast or something in you.”

I follow him into the kitchen and sit on the counter as he butters my toast. “What a gentleman,” I joke.

Laurent makes a face. “I’m just doing the decent thing.”

“Oh, come on. You can’t pretend like you haven’t gone above and beyond.”

He nods and slides the plate over to me. I nibble on the toast and throw the rest away, not hungry. We spend a while reading and listening to records and old indie folk music, and my nausea improves as the day goes on. Then, the next morning, it’s back.

And the morning after that.

Every morning, he’s knocking on the door, asking me if I’m okay. Every morning, I have a different excuse.

We’re sitting in the garden watching the birds when he asks me about my health.

“I’m fine,” I promise.

“Really? That’s why you must lock yourself in the bathroom every morning?”

“I’m fine,” I say again. “So I don’t feel great in the mornings. Sue me.”

“You’re not watering down the wine when I’m asleep, right? You seem hungover every morning.” He laughs. I snort. Like, I’d risk roaming alone when we have yet to determine if the stalker is here or not. “Of course not. It’s probably stress.”

“Well, maybe we should do something about that.”

I melt as his hand comes to my thigh. Swallowing, I gently rest my hand over his, then pull it higher.

We’re interrupted by a voice. I don’t recognize it, though something about it is familiar. It’s slightly off from something I know but can’t put my finger on.

My blood runs cold.

That voice—I recognize that voice.

“What is it?” Laurent asks in panic. “Are you hurt?”

“The stalker—he’s here,” I insist. “He’s found me!”

“He couldn’t have found you,” Laurent tells me. “I’m sure you’re just paranoid.”

“I heard him!” I step back. “I did! Didn’t you?”

“Hey,” Laurent says softly, “it’s going to be okay. Just don’t leave my sight, okay? Not until we know what’s going on.”

Instinctually, I bury myself in his arms, and he hugs me tightly. He leads me back into the kitchen and makes me a cup of tea. I sit with him on a loveseat, and we’re pressed together, me tapping my foot uncontrollably and him with a hand on my knee.

“Drink your tea,” he says.

I scowl at him. “Are you even listening to me?”

“There’s nothing to do,” he tells me, and I roll my eyes. “No, Julia, I’m serious. If he’s in here, we’ll never find him, just the two of us. We’ll have to watch you until we know for sure. Why don’t you stay with me in my room?”

I blush. My first thought is, *Yes*. Then I think of going through the humiliation Laurent put me through before and I weigh my options.

“Fine.” I sigh. “Just... you’re sleeping on the floor.”

“Sure thing, Julia.”

He winks.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LAURENT

I IMAGINE MYSELF SINKING my teeth into Julia's soft skin and draining her of everything that gives her life—her blood, her passion, all the same—that familiar thrill as my mouth waters. And I do want it, I know I do, but...

For any fraction of me that wants to kill her, a good-sized chunk intends to take care of her. There's a more significant piece. It's like a poppyseed compared to a boulder. And that boulder, I realize, is a fondness I never thought I could experience.

To love her.

I think about girls I've known in the past, girls I thought I was in love with. I now realize I've never experienced love, and there's a voice in the back of my head that says I may not ever. It's fitting, honestly. I always needed to improve at getting close to people. The few people I'd gotten close to before I turned all vanished at one point or another, for one reason or another. I like to act confident, but I know I'm insecure.

Would Julia be the one who stays? Likely, no. Especially with the prophecy at our throats. But don't we deserve to try? Now that I've realized how I feel about Julia, it's hard to be in the same room as her when she's so mad at me. I watch her get ready for bed, brushing a comb through her frizzy hair and singing softly. She's beautiful in a way I've never seen before. I've seen outspoken, I've witnessed down-to-earth, I've seen kind. She is like comparing the sun to a flame. I lie down, thinking of her. I wake up thinking of her. I dream of her. She's driving me crazy, like a parasite taking over my brain. One night, I dream of her skin, a pale expanse like a snowy slope of hills. The stark red of blood-soaked, tear-stroked tragedy, taking her away from me once and for all.

I wake in a pool of sweat on the ground and rush to her side to find her sleeping peacefully. Her snowy skin is unmarked. She's in one piece, just as she had been when I went to bed.

Going a few days without another nightmare, I let my guard down. The second one is worse than the first because it's my hand driving the knife this time. It's *my* blade cutting lines into her pretty skin, my ears relishing her cries and whimpers. Each one is like being deafened. If only it could be so I could never hear her pain again. But then I realize, if I cannot listen to it, how can I stop it?

After a tortuously long, agonizing wait, cut by cut, my dream self finally pushes her limp head back and sucks down her blood. I wake with a start and can still smell the blood; ashamedly, it makes my mouth water. It tastes like gingersnaps.

One morning, I realized she was throwing up in that bathroom every time I woke. And then I think, *God, is she pregnant?* I would smell it in her blood—she would be an inhospitable environment; she'd kill the poor thing. But then I realize she can't be—it takes a particular type of human to be a compatible breeding partner for vampires.

She must be sick. I'd give her a check-up if she'd let me. I spend hours preparing her a dinner that should bring her vitals up. Two days later, it still sits by her bedside table, and I found it untouched. She only gets out of bed to throw up and refill her glass of water.

Finally, I stop at her bedside, crossing my arms. “When are you going to cut the crap?” She rolls her eyes but doesn't otherwise react or answer.

“So we don't get along, big deal!” I throw my hands up. “Don't you think you're being a little immature?”

“Immature?” she whispers.

Standing slowly, she brushes down her gown and stalks toward me. I stand my ground, and we're nose to nose.

“Do you have any idea how you've treated me?” She clenches her fists. “I know nothing about you! You could be a monster, a murderer—you're a mystery! You're worse than that—you're *dangerous*.”

She doesn't know how right she is. I'm all of those things. I'm a vampire, but she can't know that. She wouldn't understand.

I nearly flinch but manage to swallow it back.

“I don’t trust you.”

“You don’t trust me.” I laugh a little

She pushes me away with surprising strength and storms out of the room. I think about going after her but stop myself, sighing harshly into my hands.

“Dangerous!” I scream at Antione later, pacing the library.

“She called me *dangerous!*”

“Completely unacceptable,” he agrees. “What are you going to do about it?”

“What am I going to do about it?” I laugh dryly. “What can I do about it?”

He shakes his head with a tsk-tsk-tsk. “It’s *your* house, Master. I have no problem escorting someone away if they don’t treat you in a way you can appreciate.”

I think about it for a second, caught off guard. “No,” I finally say softly after a moment. “No, I’m not kicking her out. She’d be killed. I’m pissed off; I don’t want her dead.”

“Very well then.” He smiles like he knows something I don’t. I almost smile back. “You know what to do.”

“And what’s that?”

He goes back to sorting books. “Protect Julia. Whether she likes it or not.”

Much of me wants to say, “Screw it,” kick her out, be done with this. I have to talk myself down. I have to try and see her perspective. She doesn’t know anything; it’s not her fault. She doesn’t know I’m a vampire.

I find her in the kitchen. I storm in and spin her around, shoving her hips against the countertop. She gasps, then her face twists into a glare. She pushes on my chest as I attempt to approach her.

“You can piss me off all you want; keep pushing me away—you’re not going *anywhere*.” I lean down to kiss her, caging her between my arms, my palms flat on the counter behind her. She doesn’t hesitate—kissing me back like it’ll save her life. I grind against her, forcing a surprised whimper from her lips.

“Julia,” I pant, kissing down her neck.

“Laurent, please.” Her chest rises and falls with heavy breathing. “Please, I—”

I smirk. “I can’t hear you.”

She lets out a broken mewl. “Please touch me.” She whispers louder, and I grin in her ear.

Nothing makes me happier than this beautiful girl in my arms begging me to touch her. My fingers swim under her dress, looping into her panties, and she wiggles them down until they fall to the floor. I turn her around and harshly bend

her over the counter. She gasps, her face flushing bright red, and I smile, bracing my hand against the small of her back.

“Awe, is someone afraid?” I chuckle. “Poor baby. Too bad.” I lean down and lower my head, whispering in her ear, “You know how to use your words, right? You’ll keep me updated on that pretty little head of yours?”

She nods frantically. “Yes, yes, please, please touch me!”

I slip my belt off through the loops and drag the buckle against her skin. She squirms and scrapes her nails against the surface. I took my time teasing her, far past what is necessary. I needed to feel her squirm against me and beg through her teeth to feel my cock. I pull her arms behind her back and loop the belt around her wrists, pinning the beautiful cluster of leather and skin to the slight sway in her back just above those two cute dimples. The sight breaks my restraint, and I’m quickly fishing myself from the slot in my boxer briefs to get closer to her wet opening. When I push inside, it’s a relief to both of us, and part of me thinks she comes instantly, but it makes no difference. Julia wails as I repeatedly slam my hips against her ass. My hands are busily tangled in her hair until I have the proper grip to pull hard; her head snaps back, and those soft eyes make contact with mine. They burn me with desire and longing, and I know she will cum. I hold her gaze, and when I feel her walls tighten, my cock jerks inside her. It’s all I have in me to keep my eyes locked on her as we both shatter.

I carry her back to the bedroom and lay her in bed. I'm about to collapse on the floor when she grabs my hand and pulls me into the bed with her. She nuzzles against my chest, so I hold her tightly, kissing her forehead.

“Laurent... I'm... I'm scared,” she admits softly.

“What?” I frown. “Why?”

She can barely keep her eyes open. She mumbles something I need help understanding, and I ask her to repeat herself, so she does, but it needs to be more intelligible than the first time. She falls asleep. I swallow and hold her close. And I swear, to her and myself, that whatever it is putting her in danger—I will stop it.

No matter what that means.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JULIA

DURING BREAKFAST ANTIONE GLANCES between us like he knows something's happened, and I flush deep red, but Laurent smirks and grips my knee under the breakfast table. I can't stop thinking of his hands on my body, his fingers in my hair. Something about it makes me feel shameful in a way that seriously turns me on.

“Julia,” Laurent says, so I snap back to the present.

“Yes?”

He wipes his mouth with a napkin. “I have errands to run today. Stay within Antione's sight, okay?”

“What?” I sit up straighter. “I can go with you.”

“No, it's too dangerous.” Laurent stands and rinses off his silver plate in the sink. “What if you get cut off or lost? And the stalker finds you?”

Sometimes, he makes me feel helpless, and he does it intentionally. Judging by his wink and how he squeezes my shoulder as he passes, he is.

“I won’t leave your sight,” I promise.

He leans in, and whispers in my ear, breath hot, “You going to miss me, darling? Don’t worry. You can take me straight to bed when I get home.”

I flush again as he stands and takes my plate. Antione quirks an eyebrow. “You’ll take care of Julia, right?” Laurent asks, and Antione nods.

“Yes, Master. I won’t let any harm befall her.”

So Laurent leaves and leaves me with Antione. I help him with the dishes, and the silence is so torturous that I can’t do it any longer.

“Do you think Laurent is dangerous?”

His smile almost widens—it’s creepy. “No, of course not.”

“Wait a minute—”

“Do you think he’s capable of keeping you safe?”

“I do. Do you?”

“I do.”

“Okay... what’s your next question?” I ask.

He hums. “What can we do to make you more comfortable?”

I look at him in surprise. “What? Why?”

He laughs. “You’re asking why? Why not just be grateful?”

I fume, embarrassed and angry. “I don’t trust you.”

“After all we’ve done for you, you should.”

Crossing my arms, I raise an eyebrow. “‘We?’ Who’s ‘we?’” I shake my head. “Laurent has taken every measure to keep me safe. What have you done?”

We work in silence before Antoine insists we move to the library. I closely monitor him and everything around us as we move there, uncertain if it is a trap. Annoyance strikes me, but I bite my tongue. Antoine hasn’t given me a reason not to trust him, but I don’t care too much. No one has to provide me with an excuse anymore. Guilty until proven innocent.

Has Laurent proved himself innocent? Probably not. So why do I trust him? In this case, he’s reversed. Why? Is my infatuation that strong? Or is it my gut? I’ve always had a strong intuition. Something out there is saying Laurent is good and Antoine is not, and I’m the only one picking up on it.

I need to speak to the Oracle.

I stand.

“Miss Julia?” He smiles. “Wherever are you going?”

Hesitating, I glance at him. “Uh... I wanted to sit in the garden for a bit.”

“Alone? I was given clear directions not to let you out of my sight.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I insist. “There’s no way Laurent said that!”

“What if the stalker finds you?”

He says it like I'm a child afraid of the boogie monster. *He'll get you. Be careful, or he'll call you.* Is that how he sees me? A kid running from a nightmare?

"I'll come with you," he says.

I cannot convince him otherwise, so we sit in the garden briefly. I remember when Laurent attacked me and how different he's been since. It was like he was a different person then.

"I love the flowers here," Antione says softly. "Bloom year-round, you know."

"That's impossible," I mutter.

"Mm."

He needs to be more committed to changing my mind. I don't meet many casual liars. It's almost a form of gaslighting, the way he makes me think, for a moment, that he's telling the truth.

I get an idea.

"I have to shower," I say and stand.

He raises an eyebrow. "Right now?"

"Yes." I cross my arms. "Is that allowed?"

Antione chuckles. "Well, I suppose it's up to you... Would you like me to escort you—"

"Don't worry about it."

Rushing out of the garden, I make my way back to the front. I'm passing by our room when I hear voices. One—one of

them, distinctively Laurent's.

I stop.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LAURENT

ANTIONE'S WORDS RING THROUGH my head. When I told him a few years ago that I was scared to hurt another person, he looked at me and said, "Sometimes you have to. But if you can't, look for someone who shouldn't be here anyway."

So now, when I need to feed, I look very carefully. I spend hours in town, watching, waiting. I almost go after a couple of people, but at the end of the day, I'm glad I didn't. I've made mistakes before. They're not easy to come back from. I'm still paying for some of them. I'm only lucky that most people tend to avoid Antione and I, almost like they know something is up like there's an air about us that threatens, *Stay away*.

"Oh, come on," a feminine voice purrs. "Don't act like you don't want to. Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Just leave me alone," a gruff voice mutters.

I look around until I find the source of the voices: a man examining a bouquet at a local stand and a girl with

ridiculously long hair peering over his shoulder. “You’re buying a whole bouquet,” Rapunzel says, batting her eyelashes, “and not one is for me?”

“Leave me alone.” He pushes her away, gentler than I would have, and I stop to listen. “None of these are for you. Get used to that.”

But she doesn’t leave him alone. As she pushes further, making the man more and more uncomfortable, I go up to them and put myself between them.

“Who are you?” Rapunzel asks with a raised eyebrow.

The guy mutters that I don’t have to do anything; I can let him handle it, but what does he know?

“My name is Laurent,” I say. “I’m his brother. He’s got a girlfriend, but why don’t I take you out sometime?”

She looks between us scrutinizingly, and when I hold my hand, she hesitates to take it.

“You’re lying to me,” she says flatly.

“He’s great,” the guy says dryly as he returns to examine the flowers. “Best brother a guy could ask for.”

“Come on”—I smile and step closer—“let’s go have some fun.”

My hand finds hers, and she’s still hesitating, still nervous. Not the reaction she expected. That’s fine. They taste better when they’re confused.

I cup her face with my free hand, and she closes her eyes, hesitantly leaning into my palm.

“Come on,” I whisper. “Let me take you home.”

And she agrees. As we leave, I give the guy a covert wave, and he grins at me. “Good luck,” he mouths.

She’s not as pushy as I thought—she seems nearly entirely satisfied. I have an arm around her waist, and a part of me doubles myself with how much she’s seemed to calm down, but I ignore it and sneak her into my room.

I lock the door behind us and push her against it. She’s panting as I kiss her neck, making hickeys, getting ready to sink my teeth.

Then I hear footsteps.

She starts to say my name, so I slam my hand against her mouth, bumping her head into the door.

“Come on,” I whisper to her under my breath.

She looks at me through lidded eyes, grinding against my thigh. She whines a little as the footsteps come closer.

“Shh.” I go back to kissing her neck, hoping to keep her quiet. “You don’t want anyone to hear you, do you?”

“Laurent,” she whines. “Please...”

I press her hips to the door, cover her mouth hard, and pierce her skin. She tenses hard, slamming against the door, and lets out an agonizing whine. Thrashing against me, she

escapes for a moment, just long enough for me to press her to the door by her throat and get blood on my palm.

There are a few slamming knocks against the door. Rapunzel yelps, and I curse under my breath.

I take a risk, praying. “Hello? Antione?”

“Let me in!”

It's Julia. Crap, it's Julia.

I trusted Antione to keep her distracted; what happened? The doorknob rattles. I grab the knob to stop the jiggling, but she turns it harder and cracks it against the lock. Rapunzel is squirming and whimpering, trying to escape.

“Julia?” I gasp. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Let me in! We need to talk.” Thumps against the door.

God, she thinks I'm—*crap*. She thinks I'm sleeping with this girl. Will she ever forgive me?

“We can talk later,” I say. “It's not what you think. Julia, you need to go.”

“You don't get to do that to me!” she sobs. “You can't just use me, then pick up someone else!”

I brace my hand against the wall next to the door. “Julia—”

“LET ME IN!” The door splinters under a harsh thump, and it comes open a crack. “Is that blood?”

“No!” I slam the door closed.

She lets out a frustrated cry and pounds on the door. “Are you all right?”

I’m about to lie, to tell the truth, to freak out and say I don’t know what, then it clicks. “No.” I gasp. “Go get help! Antione!”

A panicked pause. “I’ll be right back!”

The footsteps chase down the hall. I grab Rapunzel and force her to the floor, hurrying to finish my feed. She falls limp under my fangs, and Julia is coming back when I finish.

“Laurent?” Antione calls.

“I’ll be right out!”

“What—let go of me! Antione!” Julia snaps. “I have to check on him!”

“Wait here with me.”

I don’t know what else to do, so I roll her under the bed while Antione keeps hold of Julia. She bursts through the door just as I bring a handkerchief to my mouth.

“Laurent!” She looks me over, starting to reach for me before Antione comes in and grabs her. “Get off me! What is going on? Where’d she go?”

“Escaped, I think,” I pant. “I’m okay.”

I hide the blood on the cloth and stuff it in my pocket. Julia looks at me with beautiful wide eyes.

“What *happened?*”

“It’s not what you think,” I say, trying to think of a lie, but my mind is blank. “I—”

“That was an ex-girlfriend of Laurent’s,” Antione says, and my eyes widen. “She’s not happy with how they ended things.”

“So... she tried to hurt you?” Julia asks softly.

I hesitate, then nod. “Yes. She did.”

“Why were you telling her to be quiet?”

“I didn’t want you to hear and get the wrong idea.”

Julia rushes over to me and hugs me. I hug her back, sighing. She’s not mad. It’s okay. “You should get out of here,” I insist, knowing Rapunzel will turn soon.

“Find someplace safe until I know she’s gone. I turned around, and she just disappeared—she may have crawled out the window, but there’s no way of knowing right now.”

“No way!” she says. “I’m not leaving you alone!”

“Miss—”

Antione steps forward, and she glares daggers. “I’m not asking you.”

He scowls, and I snicker. “Dear, you need to get some rest. Okay? Have you still been feeling under the weather?”

“A—a little,” she admits. “I don’t know...”

“He can handle himself just fine,” Antione says in annoyance. “Let’s get *you*—” Scratching.

I freeze.

“What is that?” Julia asks quietly.

Antione looks at me. We’re both asking the same question—*is this happening?* But it is.

Rapunzel’s pale veiny hand crawls from under the bed, yellowed nails digging into the wood boards. I push Julia behind me.

“What is that?” she gasps.

“Come with me,” Antione demands, throwing the door open.

She doesn’t listen. “Laurent, what *is* that?”

“Go with him!” I step forward between Rapunzel—blood staining in a flowing wave down her front. “I won’t let her hurt you!”

Vampire Rapunzel locks eyes with me and staggers to her feet. Julia stumbles back. Rapunzel darts forward, and I catch her around the waist as she slashes her talons, barely avoiding them, tearing my face to strips. She digs her nails into my wrists, and I groan.

“Laurent!” Julia grabbed the long plank to lock the door and swings it like a baseball bat, smacking Rapunzel in the head.

I demand Antione do something as I rush to stop Rapunzel. Still, she’s too quick—she tackles Julia to the ground and digs her claws into Julia’s chest. Julia’s screams pierce the air as the talons squelch into her skin, and it’s a struggle to pull

Rapunzel off her. I drag her, kicking and screaming, over to Antione, who takes her and forces her out of the bedroom. The new vampire scratches and pounds at the door, wailing so loud it hurts my ears. I barricade the door and hear another slam down the hall, presuming Antione got away safely.

I turn to Julia.

I'm afraid to look.

The first thing I smell is blood, so much blood. It smells delectable, like a fine wine. Wine has never scared me this much.

I kneel next to her. "Julia?"

She whimpers in pain. I sigh in relief.

"Come on, let me help."

CRACK!

"There's no time," she whimpers. "She's going to get in!"

I help her to her feet and drag her to the ensuite bathroom. "Hide," I demand and push her inside.

The door locks behind her. I turn and rush to grab the plank of wood and put myself in the center of the room.

Waiting.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JULIA

THERE'S STRUGGLING, SHUFFLING, AND creaking before the door slams.

I wait a few minutes in silent agony before I poke my head out the bathroom door. The bedroom is empty and the door is closed. Rushing back into the bathroom, I put on a new dress.

I wander the halls, looking for Laurent or Antione and keeping a knife from the kitchen on me. I find myself on one of the top floors, looking out the window to the front garden, where Laurent stands at the gates with the girl who attacked me, hand on her shoulder. He's talking, and she's glaring, snarling even, but he doesn't seem stressed.

I rush for him. Then as I pass window to window, I notice she's not attacking him. She doesn't even look like she's going to try. I stop as she storms off of the property.

Confusion hazes my head. If she is so dangerous, why did she give up? What did he do? Why did she attack us in the first place?

I need an explanation.

Making my way back downstairs, I meet him by the front entrance. “Laurent,” I say, and he rushes over to me.

He goes to check me over, but I hold a hand out. He looks at me in confusion. “What was that girl here for?” I demand. “The truth.”

“I...” He swallows.

“Why are you so scared to tell me?” I storm forward, but he doesn’t budge, so now we’re nose to nose. “Were you sleeping with her? Is that why?”

“Why would she attack someone she’s trying to sleep with?” he asks in annoyance.

I jab my finger into his chest. “Don’t try that with me. You know what’s happening here, and you won’t tell me. Why?”

He meets my eyes, and the rage that fills me is unmatched when he says, “Because some things you don’t need to know about.”

“You know what? I’m not doing this.” I whip around and storm past him.

He hesitates for only a moment before he follows me. “Do what?”

“Living with you. You don’t trust me. You don’t talk to me. You only want me if we’re having sex—don’t touch me!”

He rips his hand away from where he tried to take mine, and I turn to look at him. “I am not a prop in your life,” I snap.

“You will treat me as an equal, or you won’t have me at all!”

He looks... scared.

“If you did care about me—”

“*If?*” He barks a laugh. “As if I haven’t done everything I’ve done these last few weeks in *your* best interest.”

“In my best interests? You’ve got to be joking. All you’ve done is hold my trauma over my head as if it gives you a right to keep me in the dark! I’m done!” I shake my head and continue toward the main gates.

“Julia!” He rushes after me. “You can’t seriously mean that! Just because you don’t see everything that happens behind the scenes—”

I clench my fists and stop at the gate, whipping around to look at him. “Being around you makes me feel insane! Like I can’t trust myself, like—like—”

I’m starting to hyperventilate now, my chest rising and falling rapidly. At the same time, I try to control my breathing to no avail. Laurent inches toward me, and as badly as I think I need to push him away, I can’t. He slowly, carefully pulls me into his arms and I let out a dry sob, hugging him. “I just don’t understand,” I whisper. “Why won’t you tell me anything?”

“I will,” he mumbles. “I will. You need some rest, okay? Then I’ll tell you everything.” I pull back to look at him. “You will?”

“I will. Come inside?” Laurent nods.

I follow him back to the bedroom, where he helps me to bed.

“Thanks,” I mumble sleepily. “Are you going to... stay with me?”

“You want me to?”

I nod.

He climbs into bed with me, and I curl into his side, sighing. There’s not much he can do to make me feel better, yet he manages it anyway.

When I wake up, he’s still there for once, and I nuzzle into his chest. He runs his fingers through my hair and smiles at me.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better, a little bit,” I admit. “I still want to know what’s going on.”

He nods solemnly. “Of course. I... I’ll tell you. Where should I start?”

“Who was that girl?” I ask.

Staring at the ceiling, Laurent holds me close. “Antione was telling the truth. She is an ex of mine. I was in love with her for a while. When she returned, she said she wanted to be friends, to...” He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I trusted her and shouldn’t have.”

“So you weren’t trying to sleep with her?” I ask, and I almost don’t believe him when he shakes his head. “So why

were you telling her to be careful?”

“She was extorting me. I asked her not to tell anyone... not to tell anyone.”

I want to ask him what, but it feels too personal. I almost ask him anyway, and something stops me. I shake my head and ask, “What’s her name?”

He looks surprised, then laughs. “You want to know my ex’s name?”

I nod.

He stares at me momentarily, smiling, then says, “Adrianna.”

“Hmph.” I look away. “French?”

“On her mother’s side. It doesn’t matter, Julia. I never wanted her back. I just thought she wanted to be friends.”

“Was she a good friend?” I ask genuinely.

He hesitates, then sighs. “No. Adrianna wasn’t, not really.”

“So why would you say yes?”

He brushes my hair back and kisses my forehead. “I guess sometimes I make bad decisions. I’ll do better,” he declares.

Something inside me blooms. I didn’t think Laurent could act in large doses of selflessness—I didn’t think anyone can. But here he is, offering to put in the effort to get better because he wants me in his life. But will he follow through with it? I’m not sure. I guess the best thing to do is to trust him.

Laurent acts on his promise and thinks through most—if not every—decision he makes. I ask him questions about his ex, first out of curiosity and then out of suspicion. He tells me they were together for a few years, then says he doesn't remember her birthday. I assume he has a bad memory. Then he perfectly recalls her mother's first name. It was a coincidence. Then he doesn't remember whom I'm referring to when I say Madelyn. He knows something, and then he doesn't. She's one way, and then she's another.

“So...” We're lying in bed and cuddling when I bring it up.

“How long did you say you were with Adrianna?”

“Adrianna? Oh, um”—he thinks for a second—“about a year, why?”

I sit up and move to the edge of the bed. Laurent sits up, too, and places a hand on my back. “Is everything okay?”

“You're lying to me, Laurent,” I say quietly.

He watches me stoically. “Why do you say that?”

Scoffing, I stand and cross the room. “Because you can't keep your so-called facts straight in your head! Nothing adds up! I'd have to be pretty gullible to take anything you've said about that situation seriously.”

“Julia...” He stands.

I cross my arms and raise an eyebrow, waiting.

He doesn't say anything.

“I want the truth,” I say flatly.

Silence.

“I don’t like being lied to,” I snap.

He stares at me, weighing his options, deciding what’s more important—his secrets or me. A voice in my head reminds me I have a secret I’m hiding from him. I suppress it.

I don’t know which one I want him to pick. Part of me doesn’t think this is worth it, but another part says it might be.

I walk closer, barely, footsteps silent. Looking Laurent up and down, I keep my voice strong as I ask.

“Well?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LAURENT

FOR THE FIRST TIME in a long time, I'm panicking. I'm trapped. I'm not used to being in this part of the food chain, with predators above as there is prey below. I'm begging myself not to tell her that her life isn't worth mine. But is mine worth hers? I only have a few choices.

"Okay," I say softly. "I'll explain."

My heart is hammering. I can't tell her I'm a vampire. No way she would believe me. Julia quirks an eyebrow and gestures for me to get to it, so I take a deep breath and prepare what I will say.

"There are... some things I don't feel comfortable admitting right now. But I'll tell you what I can."

She nods once.

"My condition." I swallow. What if she sees right through it? What if she doesn't believe me at all? "I have to get my medicine from some... sketchy sources. Sometimes it doesn't go well, and I need to defend myself. That's all."

“I don’t understand,” she says in frustration. “Why isn’t your doctor giving you medicine?”

“It’s an experimental medicine. It’s not even legal.” I keep my face stoic, though my heart is racing. “It’s the only thing that works for me, however. I... I need it, Julia.”

She hesitates. “How do I know this isn’t just code for an addiction?”

“I only really need it once a month. Every couple weeks, sometimes.”

“So this girl... this girl you pretended was you ex... she is your dealer?” Julia meets my eyes. “Where is she now?”

“I don’t like that term,” I tell her. “And I don’t know. Away. I don’t care.”

“What if she comes back? She knows where we live.”

I take her hand. “I’m not going to let anyone hurt you. I can’t tell you how awful I feel that... that she...”

She smiles and shakes her head. “So what’s this medicine? Can you tell me more?”

I hesitate, and her smile disappears.

“Oh, come on. I thought you were done hiding things from me.”

“It’s... very unorthodox,” I try. “I don’t know if...”

“If you need to hide it from me, it’s probably a problem.”

“I promise it’s not,” I insist. “I’m just not ready. I’m sure there are things you haven’t told me just because you’re not

ready.”

“Laurent...” She hesitates.

Something in her voice makes my heart stop. “What is it?”

“I need to ask you something.”

“Okay...”

“Um... where... where do you want to be in the future?”

“Me? Oh, I don’t know. I only have a few goals.”

Thinking about it, I realize all I want is companionship. I think of a few years from now when Julia will be nothing to me but a memory, making my heart ache. I swallow. I think about a girl, beautiful and silhouetted—I can’t make out her face. But that shape, it’s Julia’s, I’m sure. And now I’m realizing all I need in my future is her.

“I...” How to put this? I think about it for a moment before settling on my words. “I hope to have a family one day. I don’t know how given my... condition.”

“How would your condition affect your kids?” ”

“They’d just be different.” I sigh. “It’s not what I want for them. I want to adopt.”

Her face pales. She takes my hand, and she looks guilty.

“What is it?” I ask.

She lowers her head.

I rub my thumb over her hand. “You don’t have to.”

Julia frowns, looking at me. “You’re not curious?”

“Of course I am. But if you’re not ready, that’s that.”

She kisses me, then says, “I’m sorry we didn’t get along. I’m glad I met you.”

I stroke her hair. “I’m glad I met you despite the circumstances.”

Chuckling, she nuzzles into my neck. “You still piss me off sometimes.”

I let out a surprised laugh. “Oh, do I?”

She grins and nods. “Sure do. You’re annoying.”

I match her grin and tap her nose, which she wrinkles back at me. “You’re not so easy to get along with yourself, princess.”

Pulling away a bit, meeting my eyes.

She tells me, and I’m floored.

“I’m pregnant.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JULIA

I'VE HAD DETAILED PLANS for my children since I was one myself. I considered adopting for a while and decided I would love to. I would get married by twenty-five, have my first kid by twenty-seven, and raise them ideally somewhere out of the country. I would raise them to be exactly whom they wanted to be and *only* what they wanted to be, with a healthy encouragement of creativity and kindness.

If I could afford it, I'd put them in a private school-not in grade school, but high school. They'd go to a public grade school to meet other kids and cultivate friendships. After a private high school, they'd decide what they want to do but likely take a break before going to college. Throughout their life, I would build up savings from my good-paying job for them to use either for college or moving out on their own.

Those dreams I had-they're slipping down the drain.

He's staring at me like I've said something wrong, but surely not, considering he wants kids, but... this condition of his... maybe it's worse than I understand.

Maybe... He's still processing.

"Julia...Are you sure?" he hesitates. He hesitates for a long while, actually crafting the perfect sentences with the ideal words, sanded down to a groove so it does as minor damage as possible.

My mouth opens. Is that all Laurent can say?

"Am I—yes." I give him a look. "You think I'd tell you if I wasn't?"

"I just...I'm not trying to hurt your feelings; I don't know what to do." he sits up, planting his feet on the floor, and runs a hand through his hair in frustration.

"What now?" I ask softly as I sit up as well. "You said you wanted a family, kids...." My heart is racing. "This is what you want. Why won't you let yourself have it?"

"It's not that simple," he argues, but I shake my head.

"It is. It is that simple. Do you want a family or not?"

"Julia—"

"Do you want a family or not?"

"Of course I do," he snaps. "But do I look like someone ready to be a father?"

I stand and sigh, pacing. "Maybe if you're not ready to be a father, you should use a condom."

"Yes," he agrees quietly.

I put my anger aside long enough to stand before him and take his hands. "We're here now. What are we going to do?"

He thinks for a second, running a thumb over my palm. “Do you want to go for a walk?”

Surprised, I nod. “Sure.”

So we wear our light jackets and head out to the central garden, where the moon hangs over the sky like a crystal and the stars shimmer like sunlight reflecting off the glass. We walk silently for a few minutes before I realize my hand has gently rubbed my stomach. He asks if I’m okay, and it looks like he knows, so I lie and say I’m just hungry. I sit on a bench while he runs inside and return with a platter of fancy cheese and crackers.

Laughing softly, I say, “You sure know how to spoil me.”

“Least I can do,” he mumbles.

“You’ve got to talk to me,” I say as I eat. “I need more about why you’re so worried. We must decide what to do—we can’t just sit here and wait.”

He’s nodding. “I assume you won’t want to adopt the baby out?”

My eyes widen, and I hold my stomach. “God, no. This baby is mine.”

He smiles a little, then wipes it away. A part of him is hesitant, and I can’t explain why. It’s like he’s stepping around a minefield, choosing everything he says and doing so carefully, so patiently. What is he hiding from me? What about this baby makes him so worried for me?

Because that's what it is. He isn't worried about himself. No, this kind of worry comes exclusively from external love, from knowing there are few vital things you could do to help, but it's marginal.

“You are welcome to help me with the baby; I'd love that. Do you want to be, like”—there are butterflies in my stomach—“their father? Or are you wanting less involvement than that?”

He nearly interrupts me. “No, no, I'd love that. Yes— I'd love that.”

Laurent takes my hand, and I'm blushing. We're quiet as we eat, and there's still something unresolved in the air, but I don't know what it is, and I'm tired. I let him drop it, pretending like he was satisfied. Pretend like I'm happy.

We return inside a little later, and Laurent convinces me to go to bed while he cleans up the food. I climb into bed and curl up under the covers, falling asleep before he returns.

I wake to the door creaking open. I go back to sleep, only for a hand to slip over my mouth. I scream, and I first try to yell Laurent's name. The only sense I can get is a pungent stench of rain-soaked tobacco and a wisp of blond hair.

My heart stops.

I thrash and kick against the stalker, trying desperately to get free for at least long enough to yell for help. I can't. It's just me.

Footsteps. I fight harder, and there's a pressure on my arms, and I hear, "Julia."

It didn't cross my mind that the stalker knew my name, but of course he did—he followed me for weeks. Something about it makes me feel sick.

"Julia!"

He sounds frantic; why is he frantic? And why can I recognize his voice?

"Julia!"

My eyes snap open. Laurent's darling face is staring down at me, pinched in concern.

My eyes water. I'm shaking, covered in sweat, gown damp.

He holds me close as my heartbeat slowly calms, and a few tears escape.

"It was just a nightmare," he whispers. "You're safe."

"How do we know that?" I whisper. "I heard him."

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you." He brushes his fingers through my hair. "I will keep you and our child safe."

Butterflies. I hide a weak smile. "We need to make sure."

"Make sure what?"

“Make sure he’s not here.”

He nods slowly. “Okay... how shall we do that?”

“I don’t know,” I say in frustration. “We could...”

Then I realize what we have to do.

I curse under my breath and grip him, heart racing.

“What is it?” he asks, worried.

“We have to set a trap,” I whisper.

“*What?*”

“It’s the only way to know for sure,” I insist, talking in his ear. “If he’s here, he’ll come for me if I’m alone. We’ll have to... use me as bait.”

“I’m not doing that,” he argues, and I scowl.

“What else are we supposed to do? Just continue not knowing? Risking everything?”

He’s silent.

Then, he asks, “How do I guarantee your safety?”

“You’ll be close by,” I promise. “And I’ll have a weapon.”

He thinks about it for a while, mumbling and running his fingers through my hair.

“Okay,” he finally says. “We’ll set a trap. When?”

“It’s going to take some time to prepare,” I say.

“We should get started.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LAURENT

WHEN SHE TOLD ME she was pregnant, I nearly begged her to be lying.

Humans and vampires could not be together. I'd never heard of a vampire and a human having a child. Once, I had feelings for a girl named Maria, who was as beautiful as she was confusing, and she was human. I told Antione about her—this was long before the prophecy had been told, long before Antione was turned—and he insisted I let it go.

I asked him why, and he said it was simply because “we both deserved better.” We deserved people who could understand us, who wouldn't leave or be left behind. I told him then and again—that my feelings were too strong to worry about the future. But no, he told me, if she refused to turn, I would have to let her go.

I asked him why we could have a relationship if he was human and I was a vampire. He told me he was different, an exception. Underlying double entendre, one I picked up at the

time but refused to acknowledge. Denial. I've always been in denial about everything.

I dreamed about having children with Maria up until the day she passed. And true, a large part of me regrets every day not putting my middle finger in the air and choosing her instead, but... another part of me is scared. There has to be a reason humans and vampires don't mix, right? It's not like it hasn't been thought of before. So what is it? Why is it so dangerous, such a massive deal?

What is it about Antione that he can engage with the vampire world safely, even before he was turned? What is it that makes him different?

I don't know.

And as much as I worry about this, I worry about something far more perilous.

This baby—if Julia doesn't know about my identity before they're born, she will then. There will be no hiding it. If I somehow pull it off at the moment, and she insists on raising this child, she will undoubtedly notice things. The sharp teething phase, the need to feed—how often does a baby vampire need to feed? I have no idea. More? Surely not much, but it's not like I can make him a snack in the kitchen. We would need a consistent source of small amounts of blood.

How did I get us into this mess?

When Julia proposes being bait, the idea immediately turns me off. I want to say no, but part of me knows it'll only make

her want to do it more if I shut her down, so I listen and hear her out. And find myself being convinced.

If she does it either way, I need to be there. So after we plan what to do, I find Antione and fill him in.

“Interesting,” he says. “You think this will work? And no one will be harmed?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. I sit at the table as Antoine sorts through books.

“I think you’ll try to kill her,” he says simply, “just like the prophecy said.”

“Julia and I are going to be fine,” I retort.

“You are not meant to be together.” He says it like I’m a misguided child, and he’s just trying to lead me. “Whether I’m right about her intentions or not, if you keep her in your life, you *will* kill her.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I trust myself. I won’t kill her.”

“Master,” he says, “I only pray that isn’t true.”

Julia and I make dinner together.

“Laurent,” she asks casually as she seasons the chicken, “how did you guys meet the Oracle?”

“It’s a long story I don’t know very well. Have you ever met one before?”

She shakes her head. “No. I don’t think I’ve ever even... known *of* one before. I’ve always known they exist; they’re just... so rare.”

“She’s a close friend of ours. Unlike most Oracles, she doesn’t stay because we employ her—though we certainly do. She stays because we’re good to her. Or, at least, I try to be.”

“She’s spoken very highly of you,” Julia mumbles, and I look at her in surprise.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.” She smiles at me, but something isn’t the same. “I mean, it’s obvious she appreciates you all.”

“Do you want to bring her some dinner tonight?” I ask spontaneously, turning back to the stew.

Her eyebrows raise. “Uh—yeah! Yeah, maybe we can offer to eat with her.”

Once dinner is finished, we package it up and head out to the Oracle’s tent. We call her and ask if we can enter.

She sits at the low table, and we sit across from her.

“Hungry?” I ask, and she smiles and nods. I serve the girls first, then myself, and we eat silently before Julia speaks up.

“So, um, miss... where are you from? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“All over. I was born up north, headed west, traveled around the river, then came here. Laurent’s family took me in... a

decade or so before he was—She clears her throat as my eyes widen, “Before he was born.”

The Oracle almost told Julia I was a vampire. That is not the way for her to find out. The Oracle is correct, in any case. My family did take her into our compound about ten years before I was turned into the creature I am.

“Wow, they must have been old when he was born,” she says curiously, and the Oracle nods.

“Have they passed now?”

“Yes, a little bit ago now. Enough about us. What about you? What was your life like before you met our Laurent?”

“Well...” She laughs softly. “Kind of a mess, honestly. I don’t miss it.”

I look at her curiously as she sips her soup. “Really?”

“Yeah... I was a student but had dropped out of classes about a week before running into Laurent. It was too much for me to handle, that and working and....”

“Doesn’t your job miss you?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “They were about to fire me, anyway. They probably assumed I just gave up. Which, I guess, I did...” She smiles a little sadly. “That’s okay; I didn’t have much going for me.”

“Do you feel like you do now?” the Oracle asks.

Julia thinks about that one. I watch, curious.

“No,” she admits. “But I feel... okay with that, for once. I’m existing. There’s something nice about just existing.”

“Well, that’s all we were meant to do in the first place,” the Oracle agrees. “Darling, would you run and get me a glass of lemonade?”

“Me?” She smiles. “Of course! I’ll be right back.”

She rushes away before I can say anything. I turn back to the Oracle, about to make some dumb joke, when her look silences me.

“You need to get Julia away from here,” she orders.

My heart drops. “What? Why?”

“Because, Laurent, she is going to die.” She stands and comes over to me. She kneels beside me, lowering her voice. “I’m telling you, you must get her out of here. *Now*. She doesn’t know she’s living with vampires and is healed enough to take her chances with this so-called stalker.”

She’s freaking me out. Never in my life has she pressed her own opinion onto a premonition. Never has she even *implied* that she had wants or hopes. How much danger was Julia in? Why was the Oracle willing to compromise on her code?

She grips my shoulder, whispering harshly in my ear. “If you truly care for this girl’s safety, you will get her out.”

“I don’t understand. I thought I’d been doing everything right!” I stand and step back.

She straightens up. “It’s not about *you*, child! Don’t be so selfish!”

I look at her like she’s crazy—she’s sure acting like it. The only other people in this place are Antione and her. Antione has never struggled with hunger and assures me he has no limited food source. So what is it?

“I don’t understand,” I say, frustrated.

Footsteps. I’m still standing when Julia comes in. She goes back to her seat calmly.

“Laurent?” Julia asks curiously, handing the Oracle her lemonade. “Are you okay?”

“He’s fine, darling. Have a seat and finish your supper. You have a long night ahead of you.”

Julia looks at her. “What does that mean?”

The Oracle looks to me, so Julia does, as well. I bite back a frustrated growl.

“We’re going on a walk,” I finally say. “Off the premises.”

She looks at me in confusion. “Okay....”

“We have to talk.”

She places a hand over her stomach. I kneel before her as the Oracle nods knowingly and puts my hand over hers.

“It has nothing to do with this,” I say softly.

She nods.

Julia tries to entertain small talk, but the Oracle seems disinterested. She eventually gives up, and we finish eating.

“Have a good night,” the Oracle says as we leave. She looks at Julia. “I wish you the best of luck.”

Looking uncomfortable, she mumbles a thank you, and we’re on our way.

“What was that about?” she asks as we head to the kitchen to put everything away.

“It was nothing,” I say instinctively, and she stops. I turn to look at her over my shoulder. “What?”

She looks upset.

Crossing her arms, she asks, “Are you not going to tell me?”

“There’s nothing to tell.” I sigh. “I’m not hiding anything from you, Julia, don’t start.”

“Don’t start’?” She scoffs. “Right. Fine. You know what? I’m going to bed. Have fun on your walk.”

She starts to leave, so I follow her.

“Julia!” I grab her hand, and she turns to look at me, sneering.

“What, Laurent? What is it?”

“You can’t know *everything*,” I insist.

“That’s not the kind of relationship I’m looking for.” She’s rubbing her stomach. My heart is in mine. “So you either tell me right now, or we’re done.”

I think about how to tell her I'm a vampire. I think hard, trying to find the right words, but I'm not quick enough for Julia because she scoffs, drops my hand, and walks away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JULIA

I FIND MYSELF IN Hidden Moors. A part of me considers walking home to Mom, damning it all—Laurent, my safety, my fear of the stalker.

But I don't. I smell something in the air, like a baked pie with the metallic sweetness of blueberry, and follow my nose into the town square. I wander into the market and find the source of the pie scent. Market stalls are set up everywhere, people selling all kinds of small items— from statuettes to baked goods to used books to hand-sewn clothes. A wave of peace falls over me that I haven't felt in a long time, which can only come from reminiscing about my childhood. I feel down my gown frantically as I remember I don't have any money. I curse and then someone taps my shoulder.

I turn, and my eyes widen as they land on Eden, a girl I used to work with. "I saw you eyeing that. How much for the blueberry pie?" she asks.

She trades the money for the sweet and gestures at me to follow her, skipping out into the crowd. I thank the lady and

rush over. We sit on a bench with two forks, eating the pie silently.

“Thank you,” I say eventually. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know,” she says happily, tucking a black lock of hair behind her ear. “So, how’ve you been? You kind of just dropped off the face of the earth.”

I shake my head. “No. Uh, I didn’t mean to disappear; it’s just... God, it’s a long story.”

She shrugs one shoulder. “I am not in any rush.”

And I’m not, either. A large part of me, the region in the forefront, refuses to tell Eden anything. I can’t trust her, indeed. But I remember how she treated me back then, and I’m so tired of secrets.

So I tell her.

I tell her everything.

“Jesus Christ,” she says when I finish. “You’ve been through it, girl! You need a day off. This guy you’re staying with, he sounds like a real piece of work.”

“You think so?” I bite my lip. “Maybe I just explained badly. I can be biased.”

“Well, don’t you think I know that by now?” She laughs. “Worked with you for three years, Jules. I at least know you a little bit. I know how to pick out when you’re being dramatic. No, I don’t like that he’s not telling you anything. It seems so... disrespectful.”

“So what do I do?” I ask in annoyance.

“Ditch him!” She takes a bite of the pie. “Girl, you don’t need him. Look, we get my mom involved... this stalker will be dealt with before the week ends.”

“Your mother? I don’t understand.”

“My mom”—she smiles—“is a detective in the city. They might not do much down here, but they take it seriously. You give me the word, and I’ll tell her what’s happening. She can come down and help us out.”

“I don’t know,” I mumble. “Something is telling me not to, like I’ll regret it. Like Laurent’s going to hurt me.”

“Julia, he’s going to hurt you either way,” she says gravely. “He surely will if you don’t do anything about it. But my lips are sealed. It’s up to you.”

I think about it for a minute and don’t know where to begin. I sigh.

“Why don’t we take a different approach.” She stands, brushing her hands off. “Like this Laurent dude. Let’s figure out what’s up with him.”

I’m quick to stand and follow her. “What do you mean?”

“Someone’s got to know about him.”

“I don’t think—”

“He won’t tell you anything?” She grins. “We’ll figure it out ourselves.”

We start asking around the town square—if anyone’s met Laurent, heard of him, ran into him. At first, I thought we were just being annoying because people rushed away, shut us down, slam doors. But the more we’re rejected, the more I wonder why. Why do people refuse to acknowledge this man’s existence? He isn’t hidden from them—he was walking plainly in their streets the night we met! So why won’t anyone talk to me about him?

“This is weird,” I finally say as another person practically rushes away.

We’re standing in a park by a duck pond, little quacks filling the air while people nearby toss sourdough and crackers.

“Julia”—she turns to me—“stay with me. For just a few days, okay? Until we figure out what’s going on.”

I hesitate. “I don’t know...”

“*Julia.*” She grabs my shoulders and shakes me a bit. “You are in danger. I know we haven’t always gotten along... Lord knows we’re both hotheaded. But... you are my friend. And I was really worried about you. Please don’t do that to me again.”

I stare at her with wide eyes. I had no idea how much I had meant to her. She was a passing stranger to me, an acquaintance. But now I feel like I’ve known her my entire life.

I wouldn’t say she’s a close friend right now. But I wouldn’t be surprised if it ended up that way.

“Okay.” I sigh. “I’ll stay with you.”

She smiles.

We return to her place, where she immediately calls out of work and searches for Laurent online. It’s hard when we don’t have his last name. We only come up with a little.

“Try news articles on Hidden Moors,” I suggest as I sit beside her on the couch.

Nothing. We spend hours researching. Finally, Eden tosses her laptop to the side and goes over to her bookshelf, filled with nothing but card and board games.

“Any preference?”

I grin. “Dealer’s choice.”

She picks out *Spirit Island*, and we start playing. Eden puts out chips and guacamole and plays music, and I feel like an ordinary girl for the first time in months. She offers to make margaritas, and I freeze.

“Uh”—I laugh nervously—“I can’t drink.”

“What, why—?” She gasps. “No!”

I scratch the back of my head. “Yeah...”

She rushes over to me. “Way to leave that part out! It’s his?”

Nodding, I rub my stomach. “It has to be, yeah.”

“So... does he want anything to do with them, or what?”

“Yeah, he offered to help me raise them. It’s just... I don’t know if I want him to. He seems so unhealthy.”

“Well, you’re in no rush to decide,” she reminds me. “This decision will affect your kid’s whole life. Make it carefully.”

I lie back and stare at the ceiling. I think about all Laurent has done for me, all he hasn’t. He saved my life; that much is undeniable. But that can only stretch over so many negatives. Something is going on in that place, and he won’t tell me what it is, even when it directly affects me. In the name of keeping me safe, how can I trust that? I don’t know him. Yet here I am, carrying his child. How did this happen to me? How did I do this?

Still, I place my hand over my stomach and cannot deny the happiness that rushes through me like adrenaline. I wasn’t ready, but that doesn’t matter now. The baby is coming, and I will love them.

“Have you thought of names?”

I laugh softly. “No, not yet.”

Eden pouts. “Oh, come on. Not even once?”

“Well, of course, I have, in the past.” I chuckle. “I don’t know. I like Tabitha for a girl. Or Rosanne. I’d be daring and pick Rhiannon. For boys... I’m not sure. I always struggle with boys’ names. Adam has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

“I *love* Rhiannon,” she gushes. “If they’re a girl, you *must* name her that!”

“Yeah? What, and tell her Aunt Eden helped name her?” I laugh and nod, propping myself up on my elbows.

“Well, of course! I want my credit!”

I pop a guac chip into my mouth. “Of course,” I agree.

We fall asleep on the floor. I wake up to an aching back and the bright sun in my eyes. Groaning, I roll over and find Eden is gone.

Confused, I sit up and look through the apartment for her. I’m about to check outside when I hear a voice.

Eden.

“No, I have her. She’s safe.... You can tell him, ‘Over my dead body.’ I’m sick of how he’s treating her! What is she doing over there if she is the girl in the prophecy? Why wouldn’t you tell me? Ugh—I just can’t with you boys. She’ll stay with me for a few days and then have a decision to make. You two are going to respect that. Got it?”

I stumble back as the doorknob turns. Diving into the kitchenette, I pour a glass of sweet tea as Eden enters.

“Oh! Morning.” She smiles and gets herself a glass. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Just woke up.” I’m a better liar than I remember.

“Well, we’ve got a long day of fun ahead of us,” she says after taking a sip of tea. She heads for the living room. “Get dressed, girlie!”

As she’s leaving, I swallow and blurt out, “Eden?”

She turns to me. “Yeah?”

“You said you don’t know Laurent, right? You’ve never heard of him?”

She blinks at me. “Of course not. We just spent all day trying to learn about him; you wouldn’t think I’d keep stuff to myself, would you?”

She’s a better liar than I remember.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

LAURENT

I TELL ANTOINE EVERYTHING—THE tense, hesitant relationship we've cultivated, that I've been struggling to hide my identity as a vampire from her, the fighting, the protectiveness, the child.

His face pales. "You got Julia pregnant?"

"It's not that big of a deal," I say, hoping to convince him with a simple sentence.

"Do you have any idea what happens to parents of hybrid kids? What happens to the *children*?" He turns off the hose and puts it away, then comes over to me. "Master," he says thoughtfully, "they will come for you. If they haven't already."

"What? Who?" My eyes are wide, and my heart is racing. My voice is low like I'm worried someone will hear.

He looks around like he has the same fear. "Don't. Trust. The Oracle," he whispers. "You've heard of the Solar Sisters, yes?"

"Not in detail," I say, frowning.

“They’re an all-female group of vampire hunters. Sometimes they disguise themselves as Oracles to get close to vampires, usually going after the very trusting and genuine ones. Once they’ve got their trust, the fake Oracle will kill every vampire in their target’s social circle before leaving them for last.”

My heart is in my stomach. I recall hearing stories when I was a young vampling or Oracle imposters wiping out entire covens of vampires.

“You can’t think our Oracle is... a vampire hunter?”

How would she even do that? She’s been with me since before I was born. How could she get away with that?

“God, I hope not,” he says. “I certainly didn’t see this coming. Listen, Laurent, don’t do anything rash. I could very well be *wrong*. Just let me handle it.”

The color drains from my face. “Oh, God.”

I straighten up. Antione looks at me, concerned.

“What is it?”

“The Oracle... she told me to get Julia off the property because it was dangerous immediately. But if she’s a Solar Sister, she must be trying to get rid of her!”

“The stalker,” Antione says knowingly. “He’ll pick her off easily out in town. Listen, Laurent. He could have accomplices—trust *no one*.”

I nod. “I have to find Julia. Stay here, in case she comes back! Wait by the front door!”

I rush off. I need to figure out where to start looking, so I go into Hidden Moors and check the remnants of the market that has gone on today. I consider asking around to see if anyone’s noticed, Julia. Still, I worry that giving out her description would alert the stalker should he be nearby. Not to mention, no one tends to talk to me. I’m confident they don’t know my identity as a vampire, but they know *something* is up. They avoid eye contact and brushing of coat sleeves. They avoid me. So I’m on my own.

Spending the rest of the day looking for her comes up with nothing. I search until I’m dead on my feet.

When I was young—and still human—I was often bored. I spent time trying hobby after hobby, looking for something to satiate me. I spent my time painting, sculpting, biking, making music, and cooking. My parents were billionaires and weren’t home often. When my father passed suddenly, his life insurance took care of everything, most of which were luxuries, and the company passed to his right-hand man and I received an inheritance.

That boredom followed me into my vampirism, and an eternity of this felt like a nightmare. As an undead adult, I began making some... questionable decisions, bringing home strangers, picking fights, and breaking the law. All minor incursions, but risky nonetheless, even as a vampire. I had to get myself out of more than a few sticky situations, like the

girl who came home with me only because I was gloating about having money. She wanted to steal what she could. When I caught her, she panicked and attacked me. More muscular than she looked. I had to feed on her to get her to stop.

That snapped me out of it—for a little bit. Then the boredom crept back in, and I felt I had no choice. I know now that I had options and was simply in denial about my responsibility, but I can't return.

I was doing better; at least, I thought I was. Then Julia came along, she was a breath of fresh air but like the breath you take before a scream on a rollercoaster. Exhilarating, and full of freedom and fear. She is the adrenaline that I crave. And now, not only can I feel the boredom poking its head through the door, but I also know something worse is coming.... grief.

Will I ever see her again? If I do, will it be in the papers, a body found on the city's outskirts? Will she just split, make her way into the wilderness, and never show herself again? Surely, she wouldn't do that when carrying a child, right? But people do strange things when everything is dire.

I have to find her.

But I need to do more than search aimlessly. I need to guide Julia. So how?

I can't think of a way to draw her out, so I consider ways to push her in. Somewhere I can see and talk to her. Town square? Maybe. Would knowing I'm looking for her drive her back?

Antione only sleeps a little, so I am fine finding him at three a.m. I follow the sound of his voice and am about to call out for him when I hear a name.

“You have Julia with you? Good, good. Laurent is freaking out, wanting her back here.”

I freeze. There’s not another voice I can hear, which can only mean one thing—since when does Antione have a cell phone, and when do we get reception out of Hidden Moors?

“No, no, I don’t want that, either. I don’t know what to say. Laurent insisted. I didn’t tell you because—Yes, Eden. I understand.”

Does he know where Julia is? Why would he keep that from me? I listen for more, but I need something. My hands are shaking, and I’m so upset, but I get a grip on myself and insist I misheard or he’s keeping it from me for a reason; I don’t speak with him about it. I leave.

Without thinking about it, I go to his office and search his belongings. I painstakingly look through each piece of paper, mail, and document until I find one from Eden.

Eden Shepard. She’s written him several correspondences and knows about his vampire identity. How? Why would he trust some random girl with that? Unless he knew her very well, in which case, why had I never heard of her before?

She couldn’t be human. Antione last trusted humans a long time ago. I thought of a few years ago when I admitted to Antione how much I craved another companion or two with

the same infliction we had. I desire that connection, that understanding. He told me he'd give me contacts if he had any. He would introduce us if she's a vampire and he trusts her.

So what would cause him to trust a human?

I find her address in the mail and leave the property before fully realizing what I'm doing. What's the plan here? Demand she listens to me and tell her everything? I've always been good at acting but could have improved at the thinking that came beforehand.

I make my way into Hidden Moors a little before five a.m. The few people avoid my gaze as I walk by, and if I were to try to get their attention, they would ignore me—as they should. While they didn't know Antione's and my identities, they knew not to bother us. They knew it would only pull them into trouble if they engaged with us, so they kept their distance.

I have yet to plan what I will do once I get to Eden's apartment complex. I stop in the parking lot, thinking hard about what I would do if she were there. And I don't know.

And I think about that for a long time. I'm figuring out what I would say to Julia.

But I don't know, and I can only go in there with a plan.

So I turn to leave.

CHAPTER TWENTY

JULIA

I SPEND THE DAY pretending like I'm not suspicious. I think I do okay. I don't think she has any idea.

It's her day off, so we watch movies, order in, and do anything to kill time. All the while, I'm trying to fish information out of her. It doesn't go well. She shuts down at one point, demanding to know why I'm asking so many questions. I want to get angry, to snap at her, but I know it won't get me anywhere. I apologize and move on.

I offer to get us drinks. Eden agrees. I start to make our teas, then stop halfway to let her know I'm going to the bathroom. I quietly scrounge for some Benadryl to knock her out for a few hours. Making sure she's not watching, I crush up the pills, add them to her drink, then carry them out and hand her hers. I pocket two, flush the toilet, wash my hands, and return to making drinks.

And I wait.

I start to worry that I gave her the wrong glass, but, no, I'm not feeling sleepy, either. What is going on?

"Are you okay, girl?" Eden asks me.

I blink and realize I've been staring at her. "Yeah. Sorry. Just worried."

"About Laurent?" she asks, and I nod.

"Don't worry about him."

"It's hard," I admit, and I'm not lying anymore. "I mean, I'm carrying Laurent's child. It would be different if..."

"If what?"

"If we had been smarter." I sigh. "I shouldn't have slept with that jerk. I should have left the moment I was able to."

"Well, why didn't you?"

I think of an answer to her question: why *did I stay*? I know I'm smarter than to stay just because he's hot. Did he have me so convinced it was *dangerous* out here? How? I'm not usually so gullible; what about him is so persuasive that I stayed without much question? I can't think of an answer; honestly, it's frustrating. I think of the few boys who had interested me before, how I saw right through their lies, and how I wasn't fooled for a second.

"I thought I was doing it to stay safe, but... that can't be why."

"You did stay even after he attacked you," she says. "Like, yeah, he's got a condition, but what excuse is that? I wouldn't

even stay that long.”

I laugh. “Are you judging me?”

“Maybe just a bit. No, girl, I’m just trying to figure out what’s happening in your head.” She leans forward and places a hand on my knee. “There’s got to be a reason you stayed. Tell me.”

Something about Eden is enchanting—always has been. Her skin is deep brown, like the rich soil of the earth, and her eyes are soft and kind like a mother’s. She speaks with a firmness I can’t get around but a sweetness I don’t want to. Her hair is tight, neat, and braided into long strands down her back. Combined with her pastel, flowy clothes, she’s approachable and beautiful.

That doesn’t mean I can trust her.

When I first met Eden, I was a different person. I was shy and nervous. I gave everything I had for people I would never see again. And, sure, I’ve overcorrected a little bit, but... I can’t help but think I like myself better now than I did. I can be mean. I can be selfish. But I look out for myself, and that’s more than I did in the past. Eden appears to want the best for me, and I want the best for her.

The doorbell rings. Eden sighs and stands, going to answer it. I look over curiously, and my face pales when she opens the door.

“Can I help you?” she asks.

The stalker locks eyes with me.

“Close the door,” I snap, standing and looking for a weapon.

“What?” She starts to close the door, but he slams it open and throws her to the side.

She screams as I gasp, grabbing a metal fork from our earlier meal. The stalker charges me, and I attack, slamming the fork into his shoulder. He yells, ripping it out.

Eden jumps on him, and as she drags him backward, I grab a fork and run to stab him with it. He throws her off, and she hits the ground hard.

It happens slowly. The bastard turns, looking at Eden. Her lips peel back, and she hisses between her teeth, where fangs have extracted themselves, sharper than a knife. I gasp. She jumps to her feet and goes to bite his throat out, but he blocks her with his arm. She digs the fangs into his leather jacket.

He slips a knife out of a harness at his side.

A very familiar knife.

The stalker has Eden pinned to the ground, and I snatch the fork, about to help her, when she throws the man off her with unrealistic strength and pounces on him. Her fangs get centimeters from his neck when he grabs her by the throat and holds her back. I’m watching, shaking, as her fangs drip saliva, begging for blood.

And that’s when it clicks.

She’s a vampire.

There's an inkling in my mind saying, *you know who else is?* But I don't have the time to give it a thought.

"Eden," I say softly, scared, and her gaze snaps to me.

The stalker throws her onto me, and we fall to the ground. I scream as she's suddenly attacking me, ravenous, nails digging into my shoulder as she desperately snaps her jaws toward my neck like a rabid dog.

"HELP!" I scream, kicking and thrashing against her.
"EDEN, STOP!"

Footsteps rush down the hall.

"I'M IN HERE!"

Her weight is hoisted off of me, and I scramble backward, holding my fork protectively as if it could do anything for me against a real-life vampire. My eyes land on Laurent, dragging Eden off of me and across the now empty and ravaged apartment.

He pins her down, and my eyes are glued to his mouth, looking for the same fangs I *know* he has; it would explain everything. But they aren't there.

How are they not there?

He holds her down until she calms, which takes longer than I even want to think about. But eventually, her struggle ceases, and she's panting and gasping for breath but lying there.

"Are you done?" Laurent snaps.

"The hunter," she pants, "how did he find us?"

A hunter? A *vampire* hunter?

“You almost killed her! What are you doing with her anyway? Who are you? How do you know Antione?”

He gets off her cautiously, and they both stand. She stumbles back onto the couch and drops her head in her hands.

“My name is Eden Shepard.” She sounds exhausted. Glancing at me, she says quietly, “We should talk elsewhere.”

He nods, and fire courses through me. I stand.

“You’re not seriously still going to hide things from me, are you?”

They look at each other. Eden shrugs. “Up to you.”

“I don’t know,” Laurent admits. “I don’t know who to trust.”

“You can trust me,” Eden says in annoyance, and Laurent rolls his eyes.

“Says the girl who just attacked Julia.”

“Like you never—” She stops.

They both look at me.

I cross my arms.

They look at each other.

“You’re both vampires,” I say. “Aren’t you? That’s what’s going on.”

Eden whispers something to him, and I sigh harshly. Laurent shakes his head.

“Julia... if I promise to be honest with you... will you just come back with me?”

“Yes,” I lie.

Eden looks at me knowingly. “I don’t think she should be there. I think staying with me is the best course of action.”

“What about what I want?” I snap. “Neither of you own me! Why won’t someone ask me what *I* want?”

Laurent comes over to me. He takes my hand. “You’re right. I... haven’t been considering your feelings. I’m sorry; I ... want to keep you safe. What do you want?”

“I want to go home,” I admit. “My home. I’m so sick of all of this. I’m exhausted. I’m tired. I’m *pregnant*, for God’s sake! I want to go home.”

“But the vampire hunter—”

Laurent gives Eden a look.

“She already knows. Give it up.”

I feel faint. “I was right? You’re... vampires?”

Laurent hesitates, then nods. “Yes.”

“So your condition....”

“It was a lie. I don’t have a condition. Unless you count vampirism, in which case I guess I do.”

I shake my head and sit, putting my head in my hands. “What are we supposed to do?”

“Well,” Eden says, “now that you’re in the loop... we can tackle this as a team.”

“We need Antione,” Laurent says, and Eden nods.

“You’re right. Julia, can we convince you to come back to the manor? Not forever.” She cracks a smile. “Consider yourself granted free-roaming rights.”

I go to answer when there’s pounding at the door. We glance at each other.

“Police! Open up!”

“Damn! Took them long enough,” I mutter as Eden opens the door.

“Hi, Officers,” she says sweetly. “We had an attacker. Can we give you his description?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LAURENT

AFTER DEALING WITH THE cops, which took way longer than I wanted, we returned to the manor.

“Why didn’t you tell him the truth?” Julia asks. “He could help, couldn’t he?”

“A cop is no match for a vampire hunter,” Eden says, “especially not a cop from around here dealing with a hunter as prestigious as Cain.”

“His name is *Cain*? What kind of name is that?”

“Biblical name or not,” Eden says with an eye roll, and Julia blushes, “he’s too dangerous. It’s better to handle him ourselves.”

We get to the manor, and I lead everyone inside. Antione is in the garden watering roses and pales when he sees us.

“What are you doing?” he asks, sounding angry.

I frown. “Yeah, I found Julia. Why were you keeping her from me? And why wouldn’t you tell me about Eden before?”

“It’s not Antione’s fault,” Eden says. “We agreed it would be best if you didn’t know. He’s trying to keep you separate from the vampire world, Laurent.”

“How do you plan on doing that”—I cross my arms—“when I’m already a vampire?”

“I still can’t believe this is even a thing.” Julia rubs her forehead. “And that you would hide it from me for so long?”

“There’s more,” Laurent says.

“No,” Antione snaps, “there isn’t.” He drops the garden hose. “Eden, Julia, you need to leave. *Now.*”

“What are you *talking* about?” I demand. “Why are you so insistent on her being in the dark?”

“Because, Laurent, humans *can’t know*,” he hisses. “It gets them killed. *Every* time.”

My heart is in my throat. “Well, that’ll have to change because Julia knows. There’s no going back now.”

Antoine collapses onto the bench, letting out a little groan and putting his head in his hands. “Laurent, when will you learn to trust me?”

“I’m not just going to follow anyone blindly,” I insist. “If you don’t want me to tell Julia about what the Oracle said, you better give me a good reason.” Eden and Julia nod.

“Wait!” Julia holds a hand up. “There’s a prophecy, isn’t there? And I’m... I’m involved?”

Antione sighs. He seems to have given up, so I nod. “Yes. She thinks... I’m meant to kill you.”

She swallows. “What?”

“Remember,” Eden interrupts, “that’s just one Oracle.”

“I don’t understand,” Julia says.

“Options. “Each Oracle can see a different strand of the future,” I say. She sees one way. Another Oracle may say something else will happen. Neither of them is wrong or correct.”

“It depends on what we do,” Julia murmurs.

Eden nods. “Yes. The thought that Oracles are meant to tell the future—that’s almost a misconception. They’re slightly more informed advisors, and that’s all.”

“She hardly even knows about Oracles.” Antione laughs. “How are we meant to trust her, a *human*, with this prophecy?”

I don’t know when Antione became so at war with humans, but he hated them ever since he was turned. I would question his motives if I didn’t know him so well, especially with wanting Julia gone.

“You’re going to have to try!” Julia throws her hands in the air. “I am so *sick* of you not trusting me! What have I done to prove untrustworthy?”

“Stop fighting,” I demand. “Eden is right. We need to tackle this as a team. Not... whatever this mess is.”

“Why are you even bothering Antione?” Julia asks. “Genuinely. It can’t just be because you’re Laurent’s assistant.”

“I’m his *advisor*,” he says stiffly. “And the Oracle has told me, for your information, that you’re *important* to the future. At least, your child is.” He shakes his head. “I can’t imagine why, maybe only that it’s half Laurent’s, but still. I am not one to defy the Oracles.”

“But we don’t even know if we can trust her,” I explain to Julia. “She might not be an Oracle at all.”

“So, how do we test her?” Julia asks.

“Ooh.” Eden grins. “I like the way you’re talking.”

“Well, remember,” I say, “a real Oracle should be neutral about their prophecies. She was very insistent that I get you off the property.”

“Okay, but Oracles *are* human, right?” Julia asks, and I nod. “And has she been neutral so far?”

I nod.

“Then that’s not a fair test.”

“You know what it is?” Eden asks. “Real Oracles don’t die of old age. You said she’s been here since you were born, right, Laurent?”

“Yeah,” I say. “But I didn’t meet Oracle until I was fifteen. For all I know, they could have switched her out with an actor after my parents passed.”

“Which is why you need to get a good look at her,” Antione says, standing and coming over. “If she’s a Solar Sister, she’ll likely be a younger woman in disguise.”

“What, so if it’s some old lady actress, they’re immediately innocent?” Eden asks, and Antione sighs.

“You think there’s no difference between an eighty-year-old woman and a five-hundred-year-old woman?”

“I got it,” I say. “I’ll do it. Just—everyone, stop bickering.”

“You should do it right away,” Julia says softly. “Because if she’s telling the truth, I can’t be here.”

I nod. “All right. I’ll go now. In case the Oracle is lying... who’s coming with me?”

“Me.” Eden smiles. “I’ll wait in the building so if anyone’s watching, they’ll think you’re alone. Holler if something goes wrong, and I’ll hear you.”

Julia doesn’t look very happy about being left alone with Antione. Still, she doesn’t say anything other than to tell me to stay safe.

Eden and I walk inside and go to the courtyard in the center of the house. She waits for me inside, wishing me luck, and I head out. The tent looms over me, its shadow stretching to invite me. My hands are shaking. This woman has been a vital part of my life for my entire life. If she’s a lie... what else is?

I breathe, then lift the flap and step inside. The Oracle is sitting at her table already.

Hesitating in the center of the room, I say, “Are you feeling better?”

“Get on with it, child,” she says impatiently. “You want to know if I’m the real thing.”

I swallow. “How do you know that?”

She stands, and her robes come off, leaving her in a simple dress. She’s frail and hunched over slightly, bony. Without her hood to obscure her face, I can see sage green eyes, sagging skin, a bare smile, and miscut bangs. In the flesh, she is the oldest woman I’ve ever seen.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Antione told me....”

“Antione tells you many things,” she says as she pulls her robes back on.

I frown. “What does that mean?”

“You know what it means.” She picks up a pot from the table and pours herself a mug of tea. “Any for you, dear?”

“No, I’m okay.” I sit with her anyway. “Why do you wear the robes, anyway?”

“For my comfort,” she says. “I get cold easily and don’t like people seeing me. I understand the importance that *you* understand I am not lying.”

I sigh. “This whole thing is such a mess. Wait—” I curse and stand. “I have to get Julia out of here.”

She shakes her head. “She should have never come back.”

“What? Is she going to be okay?”

“You know better than to ask me that.” She sips on her tea. “You want my advice, boy? Listen up because I can only say it once. Let. Her. Go. Home.”

“How am I meant to do that?” I ask in exasperation. “He knows where she lives; he knows she’s carrying my child! She’ll die!”

“Laurent.” She grabs my hand. “Let her go.”

“What?”

“You cannot save her. Not like this. The more you fight, the more you push her away, the more she’s pushed into the arms of danger.”

I grit my teeth. “So I just let Julia get herself killed?”

“You have no faith in her.”

“She’s...” Several words come to mind—*weak, fragile, scared*. None of those are quite right, however. “She’s important to me,” I say quietly.

“She’s important to the world. Don’t keep her to yourself.”

“This baby... they’re not going to go unnoticed, are they?”

“You would be a fool to think so.” The Oracle finishes her tea and picks up the mugs, hobbling to her dish area. “Get her out of here, Laurent. Now.”

I meet Eden back inside. She looks at me expectantly.

“She’s real,” I say, “and we need to get Julia out of here.”

Eden takes Julia back home. We agree she can stay there if Eden stays with her, and I keep a close eye on the place. I find

Antione in the kitchen, making dinner.

“We need to talk,” I say.

He looks at me curiously. “What is it, Master?”

“Since when do you have a cell phone?”

He hesitates. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Since when do we even get reception out here? Have you just been lying to me?”

“Of course not.” He laughs, turning to look at me. “You think I’d lie to you?”

I cross my arms. “I don’t know anymore.”

“Laurent”—he approaches me and places a hand on my shoulder—“you know how much you mean to me. Can’t you trust me?”

“You’re not telling me anything,” I say in frustration. “You always do this—you throw around how much you care, brush things off, and never explain! How am I meant to trust you?”

His eyes narrow. He steps back. “Who was there for you when your father passed? Your mother?”

“That wasn’t their fault.”

“I didn’t say it was. The fact of the matter is, I was there. I’ve *been* here. No one else has. So why are you pointing your finger at *me* and not the strange ladies who show up out of nowhere, begging for your kindness?”

“It’s not like that,” I argue.

“It *is* like that. Why do you even care for this girl? What has she done for you?”

“Does she need to do something for me to be worthy of me?” I ask.

“Laurent,” he says condescendingly, “don’t be naive. Why don’t you find your family with a good-hearted vampire who can give you what you want?”

“You don’t know what I want!” I insist.

“What about this girl has you so enthralled? Something must be done about this, Laurent, or there will be consequences.”

“Look, I’m not going to sit here and say I’m in love with her or anything, but—I like her, shouldn’t that be enough? Why does it matter if she has fangs or not? Why can’t I *choose* who I want to be with? Why do you even care so much? There are bigger problems. She’s *pregnant*.”

“Laurent. *Open your eyes*. If it’s not the Oracle, undercover, against us, *hurting* us, who do you think it is?”

“You can’t still accuse her of being a vampire hunter,” I insist. “You can’t. She’s not! If she were a vampire hunter, why would she allow me to...

“Impregnate her?” He laughs. “I can’t explain that. I think she’s a delusion. Either way, *someone* is a double agent. Who else would it be? You know what—I can’t do this anymore.” He shakes his head and crosses his arms. “You’re either going

to have to kill her, or she'll kill you, and I won't be around to watch any of it."

I freeze. Antoine turns and leaves the room and I follow, demanding to know what he's doing, and my words choke in my throat when he opens a closet and pulls out a suitcase.

"What are you doing?" I ask angrily.

"I'm leaving, Laurent. Either end this now by killing her or... you're on your own."

The next few months are tormenting. I'll be pouring water one moment, think about all the possibilities in which Julia is a traitor, and suddenly it's spilling all over the counter. I can't stop thinking about what Antoine said, and getting stuck in my head like that is jarring.

There aren't any close calls, Julia being away from me. Nothing that could make me fear for her safety. No dangerous nights.

That only freaks me out more.

I keep in contact with her as best as possible, pretending I'm not questioning everything she does. There's still that chemistry between us, but it's strained. We're each holding onto it as tight as possible so we can't lose it and only end up pulling it taut. One day it will snap in half.

In the middle of the night, my new phone rings. I fumble to answer it, getting the buttons mixed up for a moment and almost declining the call before I answer it and put it to my ear.

“Hello?”

“We need your help,” Eden whispers. “Meet us in the city at the twenty-four-hour diner on Fifth.”

Click.

I’m there before they are. For an agonizing hour, I wait. I’m the only customer. The waitress gives me a weird feeling. She smiles at me, checks up on me every five minutes, and asks me personal questions. “Where were you born?” and “Are you still friends with your ex-girlfriend?” I ignore her.

I’m waiting. I’m waiting—my phone dings. I look at it.

Get out of there, Eden says. We’re waiting outside; we can’t get in. Run for the trees.

My phone is snatched from my hand.

The waitress smiles down at me. “You’re a real piece of work, aren’t you?”

“What?” I ask.

Her smile doesn’t fade as she pulls a knife from her skirt. “Don’t worry. It’ll be over soon.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JULIA

“WE LED HIM DIRECTLY into a trap,” I say, panicking.

“It’ll be okay,” Eden promises, squatting in the brush. “He’s strong; he can get out of there.”

“But what are we supposed to tell him? ‘Whoops, didn’t know a Solar Sister worked there?’ How could we make such a big oversight?”

“Listen, girl,” Eden snaps, grabbing my hand and dragging me down to her level, “we could have picked any place to meet in this whole city, and there’d be a Solar Sister there. We should have let him know we were being closed in on a few weeks ago. That’s our fault—my fault. I thought this was the best way to keep you safe. It was a mistake.”

I rub my belly, which is now very swollen. I’m a little bit into my second trimester and getting more stressed by the day.

“Well, boys,” a voice sounds from behind us, “look what we’ve found.”

We stiffen and turn. A girl with an enamel pin of a sun gleaming on her shirt stands with two guys behind her. They each have matching double dots on their necks, just like the stalker.

And I realize what those dots are. A symbol. Mock bite marks.

A symbol for vampires.

“Little vampire momma and her friend.” She fake pouts. “Poor little things, so lost. Why don’t you come with us?”

I move my hand toward the knife I’m hiding, then hesitate. It’s not a suggestion. Even with a knife and Eden’s help, I can’t take all three. Best to surprise them with it later.

“Okay,” I say, and Eden stares at me like crazy. “We’ll go with you.”

The boys walk behind us as the girl leads us. “Evelyn will take care of the boy.” She isn’t talking to Eden and me. “And we’ll prove the prophecy wrong. The child will not be born.”

The prophecy? Laurent’s prophecy? But his Oracle said he would kill me—it has nothing to do with the child. There’s something in the back of my mind; it tells me I’m missing something, something big. What is it? I’m too exhausted to think.

We hike through the woods and out of Hidden Moors into the wilderness. My feet and back ache, fatigue drags my bones down toward the earth. Eden’s expectant look becomes one of worry.

“Where are you taking us?” she demands. “She can’t walk this far!”

“It won’t matter soon,” one of the guys says, a tall man, built and pale, with shaggy brown hair.

Eden looks at me, and I shake my head. *I have a plan.* I want to tell her. *It’ll be okay.*

But she doesn’t know that.

If I’m going to do something, I must do it now. I’ll run out of strength soon; Eden will run out of patience. I look at her. She’s already looking at me, waiting.

I nod. Eden drops her jaw, and I watch as her fangs extract, her hands shaking. I reach for my knife.

“Isabelle!” One of the men calls, and I bring my knife up, ready to plunge it into the back of her neck.

She slips to the side, graceful as a ballerina, and twists, grabbing my wrist and tugging. I nearly drop my hold on the knife, which *hurts*, but I grip it tightly, groaning as tears spring. She digs her fingers into the tendons in my wrist. There’s snarling behind me, grunts, and the sounds of struggle. Eden is taking the two men on her own. Can she do it? I don’t want to risk it. I have to take care of Isabelle.

Yanking my arm back, she falls forward and catches her balance at the last minute. I stumble backward, and my back slams into Eden’s. She hisses and throws a punch, the guy she aimed for barely dodging it.

“What exactly is your plan here?” Eden snaps.

“Fight.”

“You’re pregnant!”

“We don’t have a choice!”

I slash the knife wildly, and she dodges each slice easily until one catches her in the cheek. She hisses in pain and holds her face.


“You little—ugh!”

She looks around; I’m not sure what for. I nearly tackled her, then the thought of landing on my stomach made me sick, so I shoved her to the ground. I stab my knife downward, and she rolls out of the way, leaving my blade to stick into the dirt. Arms grab me around the waist and lift. I scream, kicking, pressure in my stomach, but a few seconds later, I’m dropped. I see that Eden jumped onto the back of the man who grabbed me and sank her fangs into his neck.

His scream echoes through the forest. Blood splatters paint her face. The other guy stops to stare, eyes wide, jaw dropped, and I’m frozen for a moment.

Isabelle is not.

I turn to the sound of her footsteps only for something to slam into my temple, and the world goes black.



When I wake, there's something rough pressed to my wrists. I look around groggily to find Eden on the other side of the room, tied with thick rope to the pipes coming out of the walls made of exposed wood.

"Eden?" I ask softly.

"Thank God you're awake." She sighs. "We have to get out of here."

"I don't understand," I murmur, trying to blink the spots from my vision. "Why are they keeping us? I thought they wanted us dead."

"I don't know," Eden admits. "I have no idea what they're planning."

"Have you heard from Laurent? What *happened*?"

"When she knocked you out, Isabelle and the other guy pulled me off that dude I was attacking. I don't know where he's at now. The one with the two different eyes was too strong. She carried you back, and he dragged me. They took all my stuff, so I haven't heard from Laurent."

"What do we do?" I look around for anything that could be helpful.

It is a storage room. There are shelves along the walls, and Eden and I are sitting on opposite sides between them. I can reach the frame with my foot. An idea strikes.

Eden watches me kick the shelf as hard as I can a couple of times until a few boxes crash to the ground.

“Don’t you think they’ll hear that?” she hisses.

“Then we better be fast.”

I kicked the fallen box away, revealing the spilled hardware. A hunting knife sits perfectly between us, too far for either of us to reach.

“Okay,” Eden says, clearly trying not to panic, “now what?”

Footsteps. Coming toward the door.

I look around frantically. “Eden!” I hiss. “Kick the shelves over; barricade the door!”

We both kick at the edges of the shelves. They’re not budging—keys in the lock.

“This isn’t going to work, Julia!”

“Keep kicking!”

Finally, just as the door opens, the shelves crash like dominoes. The door bangs against the obstacle, and the person behind it pushes with increasingly louder and angrier grunts, unable to budge the four or five tall metal shelves piled there.

“Now what?” she asks.

“I need you to try to reach it. I can’t stretch that far,” I say worriedly, and she nods.

Sliding down to her back, she stretches out as far as possible. It helps that she’s taller than me. The tip of her sneaker barely reaches the hunting knife, not far enough to kick it or drag it in any direction.

“You girls are gonna regret that,” a man snaps, whom I recognize as the guy with shaggy brown hair. “I’ll get the whole compound to push through this door if I have to!”

“We don’t have much time,” I urge.

“I’m doing my best!”

I look around for something to help her. I test the weight of a box that had fallen intact by pushing it with my foot, then groan and shove it as hard as possible. It slides across the room, and she sits back up, struggling for a minute before she twists her body to grab it with her foot and pull it to herself. She works to get the knife into her hands, wriggling and pulling at her restraints until her skin turns a russet red.

He was scuffling outside. Slams on the door. The whole stack of shelves shudders.

“Can you do this?” I ask.

“I can do it.”

She twists her body in what looks to be a very uncomfortable fashion before she can get her legs underneath her. I’m losing my mind, unable to help her, wanting desperately to find some way to buy us time or help her get it done faster, but there’s nothing I can do. Nothing to do but watch. She leans over and grabs the knife in her mouth, leaning over her shoulder and closing her eyes for a second. I will ask what she’s doing before she drops the knife. I gasped a bit as she caught it by the blade.

The door scrapes open.

“Start looking for a way out,” she hisses. “I’ve almost got it.”

A small girl who looks younger than me squeezes inside the room. I can see the sun enamel pin on her shirt. She climbs through the maze of shelves with a determined look. I look around frantically as Eden twists the knife and saws on the rope.

“Up there!” I cry. “The window!”

She jumps to her feet, runs over to me, and cuts my binds. I stand and rub my stomach. We rush to the window, and she stands on a chair, banging her fist against the glass until it pops open.

“All right, come on,” she says, jumping down.

“What? No way, you first! They’ll kill you!”

Eden kneels to give me a boost. “That child needs to be born. No arguing. Go, *now*.”

The young Solar Sister is through the maze. I don’t have *time* to argue.

“You better survive,” I snap, then let her boost me up.

I barely fit through the window. Behind me, there’s a crash, then clutter, and more people crawling through the maze of shelves.

Hitting the ground running, I don’t look back. Branches whip against my cheeks, cutting my skin and bringing tears to my eyes. I beg for Eden to be okay.

I know she's not going to get out. I just hope they don't kill her before I can get help.

I've never had a friend before. Not a close friend, at least. And, sure, Eden and I aren't that close. But we could've been—we *could* be. I think of her beautiful face and hard-working nature, how she has a whole life ahead of her.

But not if she dies tonight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LAURENT

I RAISE MY HEAD from the corpse, panting. Blood drips from my chin. Looking around for witnesses, I'm relieved there are none.

I try not to think about this, but sometimes I scare myself. The Solar Sisters must be trained very well, I could tell by my fight, and it didn't take much for me to take her down. They're nasty things in a group, but it shouldn't have been that easy.

I suppress those thoughts. I have things to do.

After cleaning myself up, I rush toward the trees, hoping Eden and Julia will be able to help me. I don't find them. Cursing, I hurry back to the diner, where the body still waits for me. Okay. So I'm on my own.

Unless...

No. I will not.

I drag the body into the kitchen, out of view, in case anyone comes in. I check around everywhere for any chef or busser. No one. The place is empty. I look around for anything that

can help me hide the body. I texted Eden quickly, saying we had a situation and I could use their help, but she had yet to answer.

Clenching my fists, I close my eyes and steady my breathing, trying to calm myself. I need help reaching out to Antoine. So what would he do if he were here?

He must have a system back at the manor. If I can get the body back there...

I tear the place apart, looking for something to help. I find a laundry cart just big enough to fold her into and cover her with a few potato sacks.

I stack some boxes on top of her for good measure and breathe. This isn't Hidden Moors. People don't tend to avoid me here; they don't know something is wrong. They're much more likely to catch me here. But what choice do I have? I have to try.

I need to get back to Hidden Moors, then through the wilderness, back home. Nature will be the easy part. After cleaning up the blood left behind and changing into a diner uniform I found, I grab hold of the cart and push her out of the diner. My stress builds as we head for the outskirts of the city. Part of me wants to take back alleys and dirt paths, but I know that would be more suspicious. So I straighten my back, raise my chin, and head down the main roads.

People stare, stressing me out, but they don't seem suspicious or even confused. Just curious. That's almost worse. Curiosity gets people killed—in this case, me.

“Excuse me,” someone asks, and I freeze, “are you from around here?”

“Yes,” I say stiffly.

“Do you know the nearest place to stay the night?”

“Uh—” I glance around. No one is paying attention. I point the stranger off randomly and start to hurry away.

“Oh, do you know what they charge?” she calls.

“I’m sorry, I’m kind of in a hurry,” I say without looking at her. “Ask someone else.”

No one would talk to me if this had happened in Hidden Moors. They all know I’m a vampire so they avoid eye contact. They avoid me. Here in the city, everyone sees me. No one knows what I am or what I could do to them.

Someone mutters something about me being a jerk, and the girl sighs, but I don’t care. My heart is racing. How long does it take a body to start smelling? Part of me thinks I can already smell it. Am I being paranoid? Is it the city’s pollution? If it’s death, you’ll know. No, you can’t mistake the smell of pollution for the scent of death.

I push my way down the streets, weaving around people and waiting for crowds to get out of my way while I tap my foot, sigh, grit my teeth, and do everything I can to let them know I need to go—*now*. In this case, some people only move slower, which has the gums where my fangs extract tingling, but I ignore it. The sensation is fresh in my mind, and I crave it all

the more. So soon after feeding, it is both a blessing and a curse...

“Hey, buddy, why are you so important, anyway?” a man asks me as I push through a crowd of window-shopping zombies. He grabs my shoulder. “Hey, I’m talking to you.”

I glare at him, sizing him up. He’s short and squat, mostly made of muscle, but he looks like a buff garden gnome. I know better. The part of my brain that craves, soaked with bloodlust, wants me to tear him apart in the middle of the sidewalk...

I have to know better, right?

“I’ve got important business to attend to,” is all I say, and he laughs, which sends rage curdling down my spine.

“What, bigwigs need their potatoes? What is this... 1922? Get a delivery truck, you freak show!”

“Back off,” I warn, and he grins crookedly, arms crossed.

“Or what?”

People are watching. I could rip into this man, not physically, of course, but verbally. My tongue is just as sharp as my fangs. But attention is not what I need.

It takes all my strength, but I turn from him and finish pushing through the streets, leaving him behind.

This place makes me miss my small town.

I get back to the manor safely. Once on the property and out of view from prying eyes, I push the boxes over, squashing tomatoes and toppling out asparagus that has gone brown along the edges. Grabbing the body by its shoulders, I drag it up the stairs and into the manor, leaving the corpse in the foyer. I check my phone. Nothing. I'm starting to worry. Then I see the corpse in the corner of my eye and realize I have more significant problems.

I search the house all over for where Antione might have kept the bodies of his prey. He was never like me. Antoine doesn't fuss about hurting an innocent person. He says it's all part of the food chain. I'm trying to tell myself that now, remind myself it was self-defense, that callously killing her was my only choice. It's hard.

The house is torn apart by the time I give up. Hours have passed. The body is going to start to smell soon—I can only be grateful I'm in the middle of the woods. I grab my phone and call Eden. She doesn't answer. I called again, and I'm distraught now, but she still doesn't pick up. I only have two contacts in my phone—Eden and Antione, who pinned his number to my front door a few days ago. How convenient.

Now I know his manipulation, his games. I don't need his help. *I don't need his help. I won't have any part of it.*

I keep searching. Sitting down for a minute, I put my head in my hands. Come on, think, *think*. Where would he keep the bodies? How would he dispose of them? I rack my brain for anything I could pick up on, and then it hits me—his office.

There is the usual correspondence I noticed last time, but this time there's a statement from an electric company. This would usually go unnoticed—but not by me. I handle all the bills, considering it comes from my account. So if he has a statement on his desk, then he purposefully fished it from the mail before I had the chance to see it. I know we don't use *Lunar Eclipse Electric* so what is a statement from them doing here?

Reading it repeatedly, looking for clues or hints, I finally understand as my memory clicks into play. Antione had lighting fixtures installed in the basement. I checked down there already, but there must be something I'm missing.

Unlocking the door, I drag her down with me and leave her in the center of the room. Unlike last time, I'd closed the door behind me, so I flicked on the light switch. Creaking, scraping of metal on metal, the whimper of a dog.

Watching in confusion as hidden doors open along the wall, many dogs sprint forward, sniffing fervently and following the scent of the rotting body. Each jaw opens wide to attack and rip into the flesh like it's starving, smelling its first meal since birth. The dogs are dirty and poorly cared for, and I stumble backward at the site. They don't pay me any mind as they drag body parts back toward their respective doors.

Once they're gone, I flick off the light switch and shakily go back upstairs.

Well. There's one problem taken care of.

The sun is starting to rise. As disturbed as I am, I'm more worried about Eden and Julia, so I take the quickest shower of my life, wash off any lingering mess, and head for the front door. I open it only to get hammered in the face by Julia, who is about to knock.

"Julia!" I cry, and she grabs my hand and tugs.

"We need to go—now!"

"What—what *happened*? Where's Eden?"

She explains everything as we trek through the forest. Out of breath and crying, she looks at me at the end as if silently begging for my help. I take her hand and squeeze.

"She's going to be okay. Let's go."

"She could be dead already," she insists.

I shake my head. "No. They're keeping her as bait."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I'm sure they know she can't take all of them alone. What would be the point of killing her now? They want her dead eventually but are worried about you now."

"Me?" She gasps. "But I'm not even a vampire!"

"No," I say, "but you're carrying one."

“This is all too much,” She whimpers, resting a hand over her stomach.

I stop before her, holding her free hand close to me. “Hey, what’s going on? Is it the baby?”

“No, no, I just....” She sniffles. “Let’s just keep going.”

I hesitate.

“Please?” she asks. So I acquiesce.

When we reach their base, we crouch low in the trees, getting a good look before entering.

“What’s the plan?” she whispers.

“I don’t have one.”

“*What?*”

“We don’t have *time* to make a plan, Jules. Come on. We need to go.”

She grabs my arm as if to keep me from running off. “We can’t just go. We’re going to get ourselves killed!”

“Well, what do you suggest? You shouldn’t even be coming!”

“At least being a *little* careful. And you are not keeping me out of this. I can be helpful.” She gestures for me to follow her, and I do, so we inch around the building.

“We need a blind spot,” I whisper.

I look over the building, scrutinizing it for any weaknesses. “If it gets even dicey, I want you to run.”

She hesitates.

“Okay, we want someplace close to where Eden is being kept, but it can’t be the spot I came out of. They’re watching that, I’m sure. They’ve probably got twice the girls on her.”

“I have an idea,” I say as my eyes land on a staircase. I look around to make sure there’s no patrol. “Follow me.”

We sprint across to the staircase, which leads down below the building.

“You stay behind me, okay, doll?”

She says okay, and I try the knob. It was locked, as I expected.

“Julia,” I say.

“What?”

“Hide.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JULIA

I SHIVER, TURNING AND rushing back up the stairs, holding my swollen belly. Climbing into some bushes, I crouch and wait.

A bird whistles.

Then suddenly, Laurent is climbing in next to me.

“What are you doing?” I hiss.

“Shh!”

After a few tense minutes of waiting, footsteps come closer, crunching through the leaves. Laurent jumps out of the brush, tackling the Sister to the ground and sinking his fangs into her neck. I watch in shock as he drinks her blood like water down a drain. He is ever filling, never stopping until it is all gone.

She’s deathly pale by the time he’s finished, and I know she’s dead. I wait for him to give me the all-clear to come out, then shakily walk over to him.

“What was that?”

He feels around in her pocket, producing a key. “Let’s go.”

“Wait—Isn’t she gonna...?”

He shakes his head. “She’s dead, Julia. Can’t turn if you die.”

I have more questions, but I will hold off. We enter the basement of the building and sneak around aimlessly.

“We’re inside, but how are we meant to get to Eden?” I whisper.

“We’ll figure it out. Let’s keep moving.”

I’m about to respond when there’s a pained moan nearby. I jump, and Laurent turns, frowning.

“What was that?” I ask.

“That was a person. I think they’re hurt.”

He starts heading in that direction, and my eyes nearly bulge out of my head. I grab his hand and pull him back, whispering, “Wait, wait! What are you doing?”

“We can help them,” he insists.

“What if it’s a trap?”

“What if it’s *not*?”

“Then we’ll save them after Eden is safe when we defeat the Solar Sisters!”

“They might not have that long.” He yanks his wrist out of my grip and continues moaning.

I hesitate, then follow, holding my hands close to my face.

We find a new-looking room; all finished and free of stains. There's a metal door hinged into the wooden wall, with a slot at eye level. Laurent steps up and frowns deeply.

"It's a boy. Hello? Can you hear me?"

There is a weak gasp and tired scuffling. "Hello? Who are you?" the voice croaks.

"We're going to help. My name is Laurent; who are you?"

"Oliver. I don't know where I am," he whimpers.

"Help me open this door," he says, and I rush over.

"We'd get through the wall easier than the door," I say.

"Quietly?"

"I don't know."

He sighs in frustration.

"They keep a key somewhere," Oliver says weakly. "They only have one, so they leave it in a secret place for whoever needs it."

"Do you know where?" I ask.

"No. To my left, that's all I know."

Laurent and I tear the room apart, digging through boxes, checking under and behind shelves, picking up rugs, and running our hands over the wallpaper. It's not until I unfold a step ladder to try to see on top of the shelves that a metal key falls out.

Snatching it, I toss it to Laurent, who unlocks the door. It creaks loudly as it opens, making me cringe. I rush inside the room to help him with Oliver and grab the key from the lock.

Laurent starts to lift him, and he shakes his head, moaning in pain. “They’re coming,” he gasps as the pupils in his eyes disappear. His back arches, and he startles, chokes on his spit, and whispers as much as he can, “They’re coming, they’re coming, they’re coming.”

“He’s an Oracle,” Laurent says in shock. “They kidnapped an Oracle. We have to get him out of here!”

“How did that go unnoticed?” I ask, helping him guide Oliver to his feet. “Surely, such a small town would notice a missing person. I haven’t seen any flyers.”

“He must not be from around here.” We haul him out of the room and hesitate in the cramped, messy basement.

“We need to split up,” Laurent says, and suddenly he’s handing me Oliver and trying to pull away, but I grab his hand and won’t let go. “Julia! You have to get him out of here while I find Eden!”

“No,” I snap. “No, we’re not doing that.”

“You can’t go in there; you’re pregnant—”

“I know where she is,” I insist, “and I’m more careful than you are. I can’t carry Oliver back to the manor anyway. Just go! I’ll find her.”

I push Oliver into his arms, and he catches him, looking at me in worry. “Julia—”

“Vampires!” someone cries. “They’ve got the Oracle!”

“Go!” I shout and run to the first pathway I can see.

I can only hope they listen.

Footsteps chase after me. I’m holding my stomach from bouncing too much as I look frantically for a place to hide before they turn the corner and see me. I find a large trunk filled with cobwebs and squeeze myself inside, pulling the lid down. It *clunks* as it closes.

Footsteps.

They come closer and closer, then slowly pass. I’m about to leave when they return, and I must hold my breath with a hand on my belly to avoid being too loud. *It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be okay.*

“The mother is around here somewhere,” a Sister says. “Find her. Now. I’ll see if the others caught up with the vampire and the Oracle.”

“What are we supposed to do if they escape? The Oracle, he knows too much.”

Silence.

Then, “We’ve already gotten what we need from him. The vampire, too. Aim to kill, okay?”

I wait for them to leave. I must convince myself to get out of the trunk and hope they’re not waiting for me just to jump out and kill me. I creep along the basement, peeking around corners before moving as carefully as possible without

sacrificing too much time. Finding a staircase leading to the top floor, I take it slowly, ensuring it doesn't creak, and constantly checking over my shoulder. It takes a minute, but I know Eden is on borrowed time, so I force myself to do it.

The closer I get to where they kept Eden and me, the more I have to sneak, choosing my footsteps carefully so as not to creak along the fragile flooring.

I peek around the corner to where Eden's room should be, only to find a Solar Sister camping out there. Swallowing, I close my eyes and press my back to the wall. How am I going to do this?

I wish Laurent could be here with me. But he can't. I need to do this on my own.

I rustle through my pockets, finding the key that unlocked Oliver's cage. I place the key silently on the floor and press my foot over it, then slide it across the floor as subtly as I can, as hard as possible. My heart is slamming. The Solar Sister sits in her chair, elbows against her knees, chin propped up by her palms, looking bored. She jumps up, pulling a knife, and I hide behind the corner again.

After waiting a couple of seconds, I peek around the corner.

She's right in front of me.

I gasp and press a hand to her mouth so she can't scream, the other grabbing her wrist... I'm covered in sweat, shaking, but pushing her backward as hard as I can until we both collide with the wall and topple. We wrestle for the knife, and

I'm practically shoving my fist down her throat to keep her silent. I fumble the blade from her grip and end the fight with a swift blow to her temple from the butt of the handle now in my grasp.

I rush over to the room and press my ear against it.

"You're just so proud, aren't you?" a girl sneers. "You think you're so precious."

"More than you." Eden laughs. A *smack*, and she groans in pain. She snickers weakly. "That all you've got?"

I put my hand on the doorknob and almost open it before I freeze.

"No one is coming to save you."

I risked myself because I was more careful than Laurent. I need to abide by that, no matter what. And right now, they don't know I'm coming. So I can take them by surprise.

But how to contact Eden?

Then an idea strikes me, one so out there I don't know if it'll work. But I have to try. I kneel on the ground and press the knife to my palm. Biting my tongue hard as I slice it over my skin, I let my blood drip along the ground quietly, brightly.

I can only hope she smells it.

I listen in, letting my blood drip. Seeing it sends me through flashbacks, brief glimpses of rainy cobblestones and a strange man, and a gray hoodie. I have to fight to stay in the moment, to pay attention.

There's growling and grumbling like an ancient storm taking place overhead.

"What's happening to her?" a Sister asks nervously.

"Nothing," the other says. "Don't worry about it. Just stand guard, do your job."

The growling grows louder until Eden is full-on screaming with rage, and I can only imagine her determination as she tugs at the restraints. She's getting increasingly desperate, hungrier, I can hear it in her voice, and I know it's only a matter of time before the hunger wins.

When I heard the first scream, I burst inside with my knife and attacked the closest girl. I'm not a fighter, never really have been, At least not with a weapon other than my tongue. I slash and stab messily, but it gets the job done. A few cuts on my hand are the only price I pay. I make a beeline to Eden, cut her free, and we press our backs together.

"I knew you'd come back for me, Jules," she pants, then pounces on a Solar Sister.

I focus on the Solar Sister beside me and scream as her knife slices dangerously close to my stomach. Eden turns and grabs me, putting me between her and the wall. Snatching the knife from my grip, she holds it out.

"Figure out how to get us to the exit, pretty thing," she says. "Stay behind me."

I look around for a path and quickly realize there isn't one. "You'll have to make a path to the window!"

“A path? Got it.” She lunges forward and tears her teeth through a Sister’s neck.

The woman slumps to the ground to bleed out. I act as Eden’s second pair of eyes, warning her when someone gets too close to one of us. She struggles to protect us, and I get a few shallow cuts, but we make it to the window alive and I refuse to go first this time.

“Go,” I demand, and she knows I’m not arguing, so she hands me the knife and climbs up.

“Come on, girl!” she shouts from outside.

I press my back to the wall. The Solar Sisters are closing in on me, swarming me like angry bees.

“Oh, girls,” A voice I distinctly recognize as Isabelle’s calls. “Let’s play a fun game. *Let her go.*”

I look at her in the doorway in surprise. *What?*

A few of the girls need clarification. But they all lower their knives.

I think, *Surely not. Indeed, it’s a joke—a cruel trick.* But after a minute or two of just staring, waiting for someone to break, I finally turn and scramble through the window.

“What *happened?*” Eden asks as we rush through the forest.

“She let me go,” I say. “I don’t know why, but... she let me go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LAURENT

GETTING THE ORACLE HOME is easy. We don't pass any witnesses or any Sisters. When I transfer him inside, I immediately take him to the same infirmary I took Julia to when we first met. I lay him on the table and looked for any sign of what could be wrong with him. My assessment is complete—he needs food.

When was the last time the Solar Sisters fed him? The last time they needed a prophecy? I wonder this as I whip him up something quick and easy on the stomach, along with a glass of water, and rush back over to him.

I help him sit up and tip the water into his mouth. After a moment of drinking, I help him eat, and he can get half of the soup down before he has to stop. His pupils have long since returned, a brilliant onyx black, sparkling like he'd seen hope the first time in a long time.

I considered bringing him to our Oracle but decided we didn't have time. I would have to introduce them later.

“Oliver,” I say gently, “tell me what happened to you.”

“I don’t know,” he admits softly. “I was with my best friend. He left to use the bathroom, and... there was a sharp pain in my neck, and when I woke up... we were traveling.”

“Did they just... drug you in broad daylight?” I ask in confusion.

He shakes his head. “We were at his house. I guess they broke in. Can I go back?”

“I don’t know if it’d be safe,” I say. “But I can let your family know you’re okay.”

He shakes his head. “No, no family. ... my best friend’s name is Rupert Blaire. I can give you his address.”

“Yes, I’ll contact him if you give me his phone number. Oliver, I have to ask... do you know what you are?”

“Yeah... Please, don’t mention that to Rupert. Let me tell him on my own.” He nods sadly.

“Of course. What were the Solar Sisters using you for?”

“I had a prophecy about a year ago,” he says quietly. “That a hybrid child might be born—one from a human and a vampire. And this would change how we look at our relationships between species. I saw humans and vampires marrying, which *didn’t* lead to bloodshed or tragedy. We were able to evolve. And a new species would be created: the Hybrids.”

“And the Solar Sisters would rather die than live in a world where vamps and humans can live together,” Oliver sighs. “They’re so selfish! To think they’d put you through all this just because—” I shake my head. “I’m sorry. I will bring you into a room and barricade the door from the outside. If anyone finds you, you should be able to hear them move the barricade, and you can hide.”

“Thank you,” he says softly, looking up at me with wide eyes.

I settle him into a bedroom suite and secure the door. I hesitate before leaving. I don’t want to. I want to watch him, ensure he rests, and stay safe and protected if he needs it. But I don’t have a choice. I have to help Julia.

I’m getting ready to leave when the manor’s door opens. I poke my head into the foyer, relieved to see Julia and Eden trudging inside.

“What happened?” I ask in shock, coming over to take Julia’s hands and check her over. “Are you okay? Is the baby okay?”

“I think so.” She looks to Eden, then me, and cautiously explains what happened. “She just... let you go? Why?”

“I don’t know,” she admits. “But I have an idea.”

“*We* have an idea,” Eden says, and Julia smiles.

“Yeah. We have an idea.”

I gesture for them to follow me toward Oliver’s suite. I call Oliver to let him know it’s me and to let everyone inside. I

barricade it from the inside with a heavy shelf.

“What’s going on?” Oliver asks softly, sitting in the bed with the blanket over his lap.

“Oliver”—Julia sits on the edge of the bed—“what do you know about the Solar Sisters? Weaknesses?”

“Well... they’re pretty prideful people,” he admits. “I don’t think they know they’re going to lose.”

We look at each other. “What do you mean?” Eden asks.

“Well, obviously, they’re going to lose, right?” He smiles a bit nervously. “They’re the bad guys. They’ll lose.”

Eden and I make eye contact, asking the same question: *Should we tell him?* No, I decide, and instead say, “You’re right. They’re going to lose. Can you tell us everything you know about them?”

“They’re pretty common in this area... but work almost like a hive mind. I mean, they’re human, aren’t they? Their leader is Isabelle. She’s... well, she’s powerful. Very cunning. You’d need to be smart to get around her.”

“Well, you told us what she’s good at; what’s she bad at?”

“Like I said—pride. She’ll let her guard down if it means an ego boost.”

“Okay,” I say, “so she thinks she’s a shoo-in.”

“Right, which means our plan should work,” Julia says. “We’re going to act as stupid as she thinks we are. Make it look effortless. Then she’ll realize it’s not.”

“How are we supposed to do that?” I ask.

Julia suddenly looks nervous. Eden and her glance at each other, and I’m getting frustrated.

“*What?*”

“We need Antione,” she says plainly.

It’s like being punched in the gut. Oliver gasps and his pupils disappear and he arches his back. Julia rushes to help him, but I stop her.

“There’s nothing we can do,” I say. “Let him ride it out.”

So we do, and soon he starts to calm down, panting and gasping for breath.

“What did you see?” Eden asks.

He wets his lips. “I... I don’t know; it was... blurry.” He’s not looking at any of us.

“Oliver, you’re not hiding something from us, are you?” Julia asks.

“No,” he promises weakly. “No, I just need some time.”

“Okay...” Eden shakes her head. “Anyway... Laurent?”

“We can’t get Antione,” I insist. “He won’t help us. He’s done nothing but manipulate me ever since I met him.”

“Screwed up or not,” Julia says, “he cares about you and your well-being. I’ve seen it. He’ll help.”

“He’s always been good to me,” Eden tells me. “I’m not saying you didn’t have a different experience, but I think it’s

worth a shot.”

I hesitate, then sigh. “Fine. Okay. I guess we don’t have a choice.”

Part of me feels like I’m being childish. That my silly relationship problems shouldn’t interfere with rescuing Oliver, Julia, our baby, and myself. But something is just telling me not to.

I ignore it.

Grabbing my phone, I head into the bathroom and close the door. I hesitate about making contact. *Stop being a child*, I chide myself, but hitting that button is impossible. Why? Why do I struggle so much with him?

I wish I could understand.

I must separate myself from the situation to press the button, convince myself it won’t even do anything, then press the phone to my ear and set my jaw.

“Hello?” The voice is smug.

“Antione,” I say stiffly. “It’s Laurent.”

“How can I help you, boy?”

Gritting my teeth, I say, “The Solar Sisters. They nearly killed Julia and Eden—and they even kidnapped an Oracle! He’s just a few years younger than us. We have him now.”

Silence.

“You have him now?” he asks.

“Yes, he’s safe.”

“Good, good,” he says quietly. “I’ll be right over. They won’t see me coming.”

Click.

I stare at the phone. I’m angry at myself, almost, for asking for Antoine’s help—for *needing* his help. I should be able to do this on my own, to protect my own, on my own. But no. I had to come crawling back to Antione.

A hand resting on my back startled me—I didn’t hear the door open. “Laurent?” Julia asks softly.

She slips her arms around my waist and hugs me from behind. I sigh and lean against her. Something about her is calming now; before, we constantly rubbed against each other, friction building, trying to fit right. Now we’ve finally slipped into place. There’s not a single part of her I would change. I would die for her.

When we head back into the bedroom, Oliver and Eden whisper, discussing a book they’ve both read.

“So, the plan?” Oliver asks.

“Right.” Julia sits on the edge of the bed, and I sit next to her, putting an arm around her waist. Eden stands with her arms crossed near the bed. “Since we’ve got Antione back on our side, we can almost use him as a secret weapon. We should lure them here and make them think we tried hard to secure the place, but it has some weak spots. They’ll discover the weak spots, come inside, ‘trap us—’ and Antione will step in.”

“Step in to do *what?*”

“Activate the trap.”

We spend the rest of the day getting ready. Everything goes smoothly. We take shifts watching Oliver, ensuring he has protection should any Solar Sisters arrive unexpectedly.

“So, how does this work?” Oliver asks in wonder as he steps inside the living room. “I can’t even tell you did anything.”

“When Antione turns on the lockdown procedure,” Julia says, “it’ll release chloroform into the air. That’s why you’ve gotta know where we hid your gas mask and stay near it.”

“How’d you get chloroform?” he asks. “And what happens if they move me?”

“It’s homemade. Bleach and rubbing alcohol.” She quickly explains how they made it, ratios and all. “And that’s what Laurent will be here for. He won’t let anyone get near you.”

“Okay...” Oliver fidgets nervously. “I trust you.”

The doorbell rings. I glance at my phone and check the security app I installed, my heart dropping when I see Antione at the door. “He’s here,” I say.

“I got it,” Eden says, passing me to get the door.

I quickly pull away. The two return a moment later, and Antione smiles when he sees me. He pulls me in for a hug, and I stiffly hug him back. He squeezes tighter and tighter until I finally relax, sigh and hug him tighter. Something about it feels better, like getting a hug from my father when I was young.

“So, what’s my part in all this?” Antione asks with a grin.

“This way,” Julia says, leading him to the control room. Julia quickly explains the plan and ensures Antoine knows not to activate lockdown until the Solar Sisters are all within the building. We all follow.

“How do you know they’re coming?” Oliver asks.

“Oh, they’re coming.” Antione smiles.

And only a few moments later, while watching the security camera, we find a dozen girls with enamel sun pins on their shirts stomping up to the property. They carry bolt cutters to clip through the weak chains we put around the main gate.

“Let’s go,” I say.

“Laurent!” Antione calls out. “May I speak with you?”

Everyone else files out, leaving us alone. “What is it?” I ask stiffly.

“I meant what I said.” He puts a hand on my shoulder. “I will not watch you destroy yourself. I’m all but certain Julia is a Solar Sister in disguise.”

“How could you think that—” I start, and Antione holds up a hand.

“If you trust me, you’ll take it on faith. I will not release the gas until Julia is dead.”

My heart drops. Antione is our only option. What are we supposed to do?

“But... the others, they’ll—”

“They’ll understand once you explain. I promise.”

“I can’t do that,” I say weakly, and he shakes his head.

“Just think about it, son. For me.”

He turns and leaves.

I make my way to the sitting room where the gas masks are. We gather around near our respective covers and pretend to occupy ourselves. I act as though I do not have the worst panic attack I’ve ever had. The weight of the decision feels like a boulder cracking down my spine. And it feels wrong, staring at a book when I know the people who want us dead will be here soon.

I take Julia’s hand in mine, squeezing. She leans forward and kisses my cheek softly, so I tilt my head and kiss her. She smiles.

“It’ll be okay,” she whispers.

I force a smile.

The sound of the front door being breached echoes through the manor. We look up variously crafted expressions of alarm or horror. I can only pray they’re stupid enough to fall for it. No, not stupid enough. Proudful enough.

We’re about to find out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JULIA

THE DOOR SMASHES, AND footsteps rush into the manor and spread everywhere. I grip Laurent's hand tightly, itching for my gas mask.

I know Laurent's phone will buzz when it's about to be done—he's silenced all notifications but from Antione. I can't help but worry, regardless.

The door creaks open, and a girl grins. "I found them!"

Footsteps. We stand, as one, with cries of mock surprise and wearing various looks of shock, staying close to our hiding spots as Isabelle shoves her way inside.

Laughing, she says, "Well, well. Look what we have here! You all think you're so clever, don't you?"

We look at each other. "How did you get in?" I demand, hoping it sounds convincing.

She holds out the chain cutters, laughing fruitfully. "So adorable, you all are..."

She drops the cutters and comes closer with a knife. Where is Antione? She's coming closer, and I don't know what to do.

"Hmm, who should I start with? Eenie, meenie, miney, mo..."

She's giving him all the time in the world, and he's still not showing the signal. There's no hiss of the gas through the vents, nothing. She approaches Oliver, pressing the knife to his chin, to which Laurent lunges forward and tries to get between them. Isabelle shoves the blade tip against Laurent's chest, and he freezes.

"Sit down, boy."

He growls low in the back of his throat. I can imagine his fangs starting to extract, making me shiver.

"You stay away from him," he warns.

She presses the knife further, and he hisses in pain, stepping back as it bites into his skin.

"Laurent!" I hiss. "What are you doing?"

I love when he does big things to protect us, but I hate when he refuses to think ahead.

Isabelle brings the knife back to Oliver, who's sweating, tears in his eyes. She catches a teardrop with the blade, then laughs and flings it aside.

"You're no Oracle. You're a joke."

Rage boils in my stomach. Where is Antione? Why is she just *playing* with us? Eden is red with anger, and Laurent is

shaking. We're all dying for our gas masks to get this over with. What is *happening*?

"Isabelle, will you just get this over with," a voice drawls from the doorway.

I freeze. Laurent pales. We all look to the doorway, where Antione stands, familiar sword in hand.

"What are you doing?" I whisper, eyes watering.

"Isabelle," he says dryly, ignoring me, "I don't have all day. Kill them now."

"You're not my boss." She laughs. "Order him around all you want. But remember, *you* work under *me*."

Laurent's anger emanates into the air next to me. It's suffocating, like walking into a wall of heat in the summer after coming out of the safety of your A/C.

She looks back at Oliver. "But I suppose I can wrap things up."

She drives the knife into his stomach.

I gasp, holding my own, and Eden startles. The room goes silent except for Oliver's strained whimpers, grabbing his stomach and struggling to stay upright. He falls to his knees, and Isabelle kicks him over.

She's laughing so hard she doesn't see Laurent coming for her. The others try to warn her, but it happens too fast—he punches her in the nose. Pandemonium. I face a Solar Sister, wrestling her for her knife while everyone gets tangled up

around me. I rip the blade from her hand and stab without looking, only opening my eyes when she plops to the ground, groaning, blood pumping from a horrific gash in her gut. I leave her, frantically looking around.

Laurent is going face to face with Isabelle, and Eden chases Antione out the door. Solar Sisters are arguing about what to do, some running to help Antione, others piling up on Laurent. I look between Laurent and Oliver. I can only help one of them.

Only one of them *needs* my help.

I rush over to Oliver and haul him into my arms as he screams in pain and I break into the doorway. I'm stopped by two Sisters blocking my way, knives in hand.

Gripping the one I stole with a blood-smearred hand, I don't wait for them to make the first move. I block Oliver with my body the best I can without dropping him and slash as hard as I can, slicing lines across both faces. It's sloppy, and I almost drop him, but it gets the job done. They scream, and one drops her knife to hold her gushing nose, the other stares at me with tears rushing down her face.

"You're dead," she hisses and races forward.

I count her footsteps under my breath. When she reaches me, I twist to push Oliver behind me, duck, and jab my knife into her stomach. I shove the blade forward, pushing her into the other Sister, and rip it out. The girl falls onto the other, and while they scramble and gush blood, I rush Oliver out of the room.

The halls are haunting. Empty as they've always been, but ransacked, disoriented. I feel like I'm in a dream. I lock the door to the infirmary since neither of us can barricade the door and help Ollie to the table. He's deathly pale. I can't imagine how much blood he's lost.

"What's your blood type?" I ask, getting everything I think I need.

"A negative," he mumbles.

I pull his shirt up and get started, taking it as slow as I can without risking running out of time, making the sutures neat and tight. I prepare a blood bag, thankful my mother was a doctor and my lover has an emergency stash.

"I have to go," I say, pressing my knife into his palm. "I'm going to lock the door behind me, but please, *please* don't be afraid to use this if you need to."

"Julia—Julia, wait." He drops the knife and grabs my hand, smearing blood between us. "I need to tell you something."

"What?" I ask in confusion.

"I knew Antione was going to betray us. At least—I knew he might. A prophecy came to me, where he watched Isabelle kill us. I just hoped... I know he was important to Laurent. I hoped he'd make the right decision. I'm sorry."

I kiss his forehead and put the knife back in his hand. "Everything is going to be okay. Stay safe."

I rush away. I don't have time to process Oliver's confession, only that I know I'm not angry, so I let it go, at

least for now. I go back to the sitting room, but it's empty. No Solar Sisters, no Laurent. I grab as many gas masks as I can fit on my belt and drop one off with Oliver.

Not knowing what else to do, I search relentlessly for any sign of people—hostile or otherwise. I can hear fighting, though I'm not sure from where. I'm passing by a doorway when hands reach out and grab, then suddenly, the world is a blur as I'm slammed down and *crack!* My nose shatters, blood floods freely as my eyes tear up, and I'm shoved against a wall with a hand to my throat.

I can barely see him through my flooding eyes. Antione.

“You traitor,” I spit, trying to pry his hand from my throat as I slowly lose oxygen.

“I was never loyal to either of you in the first place,” he says, and black spots are starting to cover my vision.

Dropping his sword, his fangs retract, and I thrash against him. Pounding on his back and kicking his shins, I do everything possible to escape, but it's like running in place. I look around. Suddenly, the hand is gone, and I suck in a deep breath, falling to my knees.

We're in the control room, I now know. And a face I was hoping never to see again stands near me, a dagger in hand, covered in blood. Antione is on his hands and knees, breathing hard.

“Why?” He gasps.

The stalker rolls his eyes. “You were never anything more to me than another vampire.”

Grabbing Antione by the hair, he pulls his head back and exposes his neck.

I shakily get to my feet as Cain saws into Antione’s neck. I inch toward the door. Cain’s eyes flick to me, and a sick grin spreads crookedly across his bloody face. I make a break for it, and the room is so tiny that he doesn’t have to go far before he grabs me by the back of the neck and slams my head into the wall. I have a concussion now; I’m dizzy, my head is banging, and the pain in my nose is debilitating, but I’m doing everything I can to get him *away*. The rain is pouring down again, and the cobblestone is hard under my feet, and I can’t breathe—

“Poor thing,” He laughs, shoving me to the floor. “You’ve just tried so hard this entire time, haven’t you?”

“Screw you,” I hiss, slurred.

“I’ve never killed a human before,” he says, kicking me onto my side. I groan, curling up. “You won’t make it easy, and I know that. But what you’re housing is not human. You leave me no choice. I was hoping to avoid this, but, well...”

I look around for anything to help. The sword is too far to reach. Dust gathers on the floors, the vent, and the stepstool under the counter.

Reaching for the stool, before he can react, I slam it outward and catch him off guard. The stepstool knocks him off his feet,

and he hits the floor hard, knife flying. It clatters on the counter as I grab the stool and bring it over my head, slamming it down as hard as I can, over and over.

I won't stop until he does. I rise to my feet, breathing hard and trying not to sob. Where is Laurent? I have to find him. I check over Antione's body, looking for anything helpful, only to find a key. It's labeled *Basement*.

My skull explodes with pain as something tangles in my hair and yanks me back. Cain has me by the head, forcing me over the counter and heaving with rage. His words are slurred as he calls me every name under the sun.

“You thought you'd just get away with it!” he yells. “You have no idea what's coming!”

I close my eyes. I am trying to get a grip. Figure out what to do.

And it's raining.

My skin is wet. I can feel my breathing speed up, a panic attack incoming, but I dig my nails into my palms, and the rain starts to dry. I open my eyes, and they dart around the room, taking in my surroundings. And they land on the knife.

And next to the knife, the activation button—set up for Antione

Cain is still yelling. He grabs the blade, and I know I must act now, but something is telling me to wait.

He presses the blade to my throat. I tilt my head up, staring at the ceiling, my arms spread. And my hand is right above the

touchscreen.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “I’ll make this quick...”

I close my eyes. “I’m not worried.”

And I press the button.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

LAURENT

ISABELLE SLIPS OUT THE door before I can catch her. I hesitate, thinking about Julia, who ran out with Oliver, then deciding that Julia might not even live if Isabelle gets away. So I head out the door, hesitate, and attach a gas mask to my belt. Then I follow her.

Chasing the sound of her footsteps down the hall, I find myself at the top of the stairs to the basement. I hesitate. Why would she come down here?

But I don't have time to wonder. I unlock the door, twist the lock behind me, and head down the stairs slowly. I get halfway down when I stop. All the lights are off, which means the dogs are contained. I consider how I want to go about this. I can't just walk into whatever trap Izzy might have set, as much as I'd like to storm down there and pull her out by her hair.

I think about what Julia would do. Then I stand there, silently, listening.

Breathing.

She's hiding for sure. There must be a trap.

I'm figuring out where the breathing comes from, but it is coming from the wall itself. I frown and press my hand against it.

Then it hits me. How could I have been so oblivious? The walls are hollow. And Antione knows that.

They've been hiding in the walls.

But how is that possible? Antione said he installed sensors; surely I'd hear them go off unless he must have been lying. How could I have trusted him? His deceit was so blatant this entire time. The rose-colored glasses obscured all the red flags.

I think about the girl I turned, the one I lied to Julia about knowing. And suddenly, I catch her scent and know that's not Isabelle.

It's Rapunzel. She's been here this entire time. So what is Isabelle doing down here? My paranoia is rearing up that they've been working together this whole time. Everyone is organized and out to get me. Whether that's true or not, I need to end this.

I step down the stairs carefully, looking for anything that could lead to a trap, and my eyes land on a hole in the wall, big enough for an adult to fit through. I stop halfway through it. As a form stands in the spot, only their knees are visible. They have dirt and scrapes all over them; they're barefooted. I wish I'd come here more often; maybe I would have realized something was up.

“How long have you been here?” I whisper in shock.

“I know where she is. Follow me.”

I hesitate. Rapunzel kneels and reaches for a hand. Her nails are cracked and yellowed. She looks desperate for food.

“What did she offer you?” I demand. “A meal? Because she’s lying, you have to know that. Where is she?”

“In here.” She steps back and gestures for me to come inside. “Come on; she’s getting away.”

“I’m not going in there,” I say firmly. “Just come out. I can help you. You’re going to starve.”

She growls in frustration, then slowly comes out of the wall. I reach out a hand and am ready to help her forward when her nails close around my wrist, and she yanks me as hard as she can. She’s frail and hungry but angry and desperate, and she can pull me farther in than I care to admit. I wrestle against her, crying out.

“For a meal she’ll never give you?” “What, you’re just going to let her force you to do her dirty work?” I snap, ripping my hand free and stumbling back.

“Shut up!” she hisses. “This whole thing is your fault! I’m doing this for me, not her!”

She tackles me, and we hit the ground hard, wrestling for advantage. The girl stops struggling, so I stumble back to my feet. Footsteps enter the room... and a sigh.

“Usually so impulsive, aren’t you?” Isabelle crosses her arms over her chest. “What’s got you hesitating?”

“You’re a monster,” I snap. “Using a hungry girl to do your bidding. And you think I’m wrong. I didn’t ask for this!”

“Aw, the poor vampire didn’t ask to suck the blood from his victims.” She laughs.

“Like Antione never did?” I clench my fists. “You’ll work with him, and he kills innocents! Doesn’t even let them turn!”

“Because he doesn’t want the disease to spread. Besides... we never planned on keeping him around. He should be taken care of momentarily.”

I freeze. Something about that makes me deeply mournful, puts me back in that hospital room, and constricts my breathing. But I have to stay in the moment.

If I can make it to the staircase... I can let the dogs out.

“So you just use people and throw them away, is that it?”

“Not people. Vampires.”

I look around for a path. There isn’t one. Only when my eyes landed on the hole in the wall, and I know what I had to do.

“Vampires *are* people,” I insist. Rapunzel is blocking my way, but I don’t want to hurt her...

But what choice do I have?

“You’re getting so fidgety, Laurent,” Isabelle says with a laugh, stepping closer, and I know I’m running out of time.

“Planning something?”

I start talking, not even sure what I’m saying, and mid-sentence, I make a break for it, hoping to catch them off guard. I slam into Rapunzel, sending her sprawling to the ground with a yelp, and hurry to steady myself. Isabelle is rushing toward me, and I only have a second to react, running for the hole in the wall and sliding inside.

Leaping to my feet, I sprint down the tight corridor. “Follow that man!” Isabelle demands, and footsteps chase after me.

I feel along the wall as I run until my hand hits a groove that pushes inward and opens a secret door. Slipping outside to the corridor, I press myself against the wall near the door. When Rapunzel bursts from the opening, I tackle her from behind.

We fumble until I pin her to the ground. “Listen to me,” I snap. “She is not going to do anything for you. If you don’t help us, I will have to stop you. I don’t want that. Do you?”

“What am I supposed to do?” She sobs. “I’m so hungry...”

“She isn’t going to help with that. But this is my fault—let *me* help.”

She hesitates, then nods. I slowly rise to my feet and watch her cautiously. I don’t take my eyes off her as we head back to the basement.

I unlock the door as quietly as possible, and we slip inside. Isabelle is waiting at the bottom of the stairs, viewing the entire room but not us creeping in behind her. The dogs swarm her, tearing into her without realizing she’s still moving. I

count to three with my fingers, and when I hit one, I flick the switch, and Rapunzel shoves Isabelle into the center of the room.

They quickly back off when she starts screaming, and I realize they're not attack dogs—just hungry and confused. I rush forward before she rights herself.

“What are you doing?” Rapunzel hisses, but I don't listen.

I don't have time to think. With no weapons, I wrap my hands around Izzy's throat and extract my fangs. I'm just about to bite into her when there's a hissing in the air. It takes me far too long to realize it's coming from the vents, and I'm starting to feel faint.

I stumble backward and grab my gas mask. I'm about to put it on when the coughing behind me starts.

Turning to Rapunzel, I hesitate, then put the mask on her.

“What are you doing?” She gasps. “What about you?”

“I'll be fine,” I say, “and so will you.”

My words are slurring—I don't know if she can even make sense of them. But it's the last thing I hear before I crumble to the floor.

“The baby's crying again.”

Julia murmurs sleepily, cuddling into my chest. “I’ll get him,” she mumbles.

I laugh. “No, I got the boy.”

The door opens, and Oliver steps inside, going over to the bassinet. “I got him.”

“I guess Ollie’s got him,” I say, and she smiles.

I crawl from my bed, open the veranda doors to the outside and look around. The place is pristine, like nothing happened. It’s like the Solar Sisters were never here.

Oliver feeds the baby—whom we named Aayden—and a few hours later, everyone gathers in the kitchen—Julia, Rapunzel, Eden, and Oliver. Julia hugs me. I check every window and make sure nothing has been tampered with before starting breakfast. Julia and I cook together while Oliver and Eden watch Aayden, and after we eat, I pick him up out of his highchair and hold him to my chest.

I love this kid more than I’ve ever loved anything. If anyone were to take him from me, I’d raise hell.

“You’re not worrying again, are you?” Julia asks with a raised eyebrow. We’re alone now, just us and Aayden.

“I’m just trying to be cautious.” I sigh. “The enemy is still out there.”

“Many are now ashes or dog chow, and the rest likely skipped town. We’ll be careful, but with Isabelle dead, we should be okay. Hey”—she smiles and touches my arm—“remember what the Oracle said?”

“Of course I do.” I laugh. “That’s why I’m being careful.”

“Okay, but there’s a balance.” She guides me out of the kitchen. “We’re alive. Aayden is alive. Oliver and Eden are alive. Rapunzel is with us and safe. You have to be grateful for that and not spend all your time gripping onto it so tight.”

“Well, now you’re just directly quoting her,” I chuckle.

“What can I say? She’s smart.” We get to the sitting room, where Eden and Oliver are, and I set Aayden in his playpen.

I crack open a good book, wrap an arm around Julia’s shoulders, and drink hot tea as Oliver, Eden, and Julia quietly converse.

If there’s one thing the Oracle said that I will never forget, it’s this:

Expect the issues to continue. They’re gone for now, but there will always be problems. Never let go of your control over how you deal with them.

I will always have control in this life. And I use that control by making choices to save Rapunzel, help Oliver and Eden, and love Julia.

And there’s nothing in this world that could take that from me.

THE END.

**DID YOU LIKE THIS BOOK? KEEP
READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK!
THEN YOU'LL LOVE BLOODY
BILLIONAIRE...**

**I'M DISGUSTED WITH MYSELF—A human—stuck in
this estate, serving a vampire I've hated my entire life.**

All the vamps I've fed before smelt like death.

But Quinn is different.

Every time his hot breath slides over my skin, goosebumps erupt.

I can get him alone whenever I want, but when I do...

Arousal tints the air, and my body betrays me making me forget why I'm here.

His chestnut eyes are searching for me now.

And I wonder if he's thinking about what we did at the bottom of the staircase.

Ugh! Focus, Tessa! Just kill him, and you and your sisters get to live forever.

That's worth driving a stake through the heart of the man I love.

Sneak Peek - Chapter One

TESSA

Become a servant, they said. It'll pay off, they said.

I puffed with irritation. *Right.*

Only a servant like me would be trudging through the dark because the taxi driver didn't want to approach the house.

"It's too dark," he claimed. "All the lamps are out. Sorry, ma'am."

My eyes couldn't have rolled harder into the back of my head.

Because *that* made sense, leave a helpless chick without a car's headlights on a mostly darkened road. Sure, that's just the manliest thing anyone could ever do.

Halos of light soaked the tar ahead. My presence must have triggered those lamps to turn on. Cue eye twitching. That taxi driver was so full of shit.

Stars twinkled overhead, appearing more cheerful than I felt as I yanked on my suitcase. The wheels sputtered and stuck to the pavement every few seconds, sending lightning bolts of irritation throughout my body.

I had in me enough airport grub to cause a two-week stomachache. That was *just* what I needed before meeting some pompous billionaire who couldn't control his fangs.

I slumped.

What else did I expect from this mission? Grace and civility? That only existed in the world of royals—the same world I had been denied my entire life.

Until now.

Don't forget us. My sister's voice echoed through my mind. *He'll turn the rest of us when you're turned. Don't forget us, Tessa. Please...*

Emotions smacked into me like rough waves striking the side of a boat. Fear, anticipation, stress—there was no end to it. My contract was solid. Complete a mission for King Marr and get eternal life for me *and* my sisters. That was worth trekking through the metaphorical dark for.

I had to put an end to the perpetual stress and focus. I was in Nightworth territory now. They surely had guards posted wherever possible to defend their estate. Quinn Rodin wasn't an idiot.

He was just crazy for blood.

A twig cracked beyond the tree line. Human though I might be, my hearing was sharp, and I could sense a change in the air. Salt clung to my nostrils, a metallic scent that was undeniable.

Blood. And lots of it.

But it wasn't just any blood. It was dead blood that had festered all night in the muggy coastal heat. Blood spilled on purpose. Blood meant to satiate an undying hunger.

My lungs sucked a gulping, fearful breath.

They knew I was here. I just had to keep walking as if I belonged. It would work if I worked it.

I hoped.

Another twig cracked, and a soft *hiss* slid from the trees.

Tiny pings of paranoia radiated all over my body. These halogen lamps weren't meant to prevent attacks—to illuminate them. They follow the winding driveway, flanking either side and splashing a yellowish hue on the trees surrounding me. The forest is thick here. I better watch my back.

Ahead, the trees break, revealing an evergreen lawn leading to a massive manor. Its magnificent height blocks the moon's light. Bright spotlights illuminate columns with the unmistakable presence of black cameras in every available crevice. The air feels thicker here, too, not because of the humidity but because of more supernatural measures in place.

So, the bratty enemy king who wasn't controlling his thirst was also paranoid.

How fun.

Most vampires suffering from bloodlust were put down. But this one seemed to have a semblance of hope, according to his brother.

After I was through with him, it honestly wouldn't matter.

Kill or be killed, I thought. *That's the deal I made with King Marr. Kill the enemy king and gain eternal life—threefold.*

A chilly breeze fluttered around me. Pain pricked my neck as my world tilted, the stars appearing to my right instead of above. My heartbeat swelled to a new rhythm—a sucking rhythm.

Instinct took over. My hand shot up to grab the vampire's hair. Thick silky tresses, scented of sea salt and sand, met my fingers. I tightened my fist as anger coursed through my veins, preparing to yank his mouth away from my neck. No one feeds on me without permission. I'm a bloodbag, but I'm not a toy. And if this guy had any respect for his king, he wouldn't be violating me.

But I couldn't pull his mouth away.

Not just because I didn't have the strength.

Because I didn't *want* to.

Granted, bloodbags are spelled with such an attraction. Feeding is always mildly pleasurable, a gracious privilege given to us by a vampiric witch. If we're attracted to feeding, our vampire owners will be fed.

This, however, was *so* different.

Little bolts zapped through my core as I arched into the vampire. His musk struck me as odd. Most bloodsuckers have a certain air about them akin to those of freshly scrubbed corpses. It isn't necessarily unappealing, just a reminder of how death lurks around every corner.

But this one smelled like incense: Patchouli, sandalwood, *sage*.

My eyes rolled back as my usual loop played through my head. I call it my projector—it's simply a series of movies that help distract me from the slight discomfort of feeding. But every time I tried to focus on the reel, his hungry pull yanked me back into my body.

I had no choice but to pay attention.

With each pull, hot breath teased goosebumps from my skin, urging my hips to wiggle ever so slightly. The more I fought against his influence, the more I wanted to give in to the unending sweep of dizzying sensations that threatened to render me unconscious.

And that was when it hit me.

He hadn't stopped feeding.

My heartbeat slowed. My vision darkened. The sound of the world—of crickets chirping lightly in the surrounding brush—dulled to a faint hum.

That steady drumbeat slowly crashed into my ears, a pounding that accentuated the rhythmic draw of my breath. Aching, terrified, and utterly helpless, I gave myself to the vampire.

Because I had no choice.

Whatever contract I had made would be null and void. Marr would be deeply disappointed by the appearance of my dead body on his doorstep. But it wouldn't matter much to him. He had his pick of bloodbags—my sisters included.

Upon my failure, they would be sent in my stead.

And they would surely suffer the same fate.

My lower lip quivered as I struggled to speak. Another ravenous pull sent a nauseating wind through my body. I widened my mouth, lips dry, as my tongue danced drunkenly, trying to poke out.

The sound escaped me before I could stop it, the most awful thing I had ever said. “*More.*”

What crept from my lips wasn't opposition, wasn't a terrified squeak, wasn't the sound of my last dying breath.

It was so much more frightening than that.

It was so much more *devious*.

And it was all I wanted at that moment.

A slurp and a lustful lick later, the vampire hoisted me from the ground. My nipples were sore, the fabric of my dress scraping them incessantly. It wasn't that they had suffered any contact. It was merely the fact that they wanted attention.

And every part of me felt shame for that.

Arousal soaked my slit. My core muscles twitched with desire and throbbed in a timely beat to the vampire's heart. The attraction was understandable—but full-blown arousal?

That was odd, even for a bloodbag.

The air shifted around us. The world felt sideways still, a strange ride that made me woozy the more I tried to tune into it. Yet I had no choice but to focus on every sensation that assaulted me.

Because of this vampire, I could hear and feel everything. I could sense his draw to me, his very nature perverted by the taste of my blood. Though I couldn't quite place what about me had called to him, I knew he didn't have control. I knew his pulse raced equally influenced by unquenchable thirst and want.

Under the soft fabric of his pants, a lump emerged—a gloriously hot rod that poked my side. The presence of it alerted my slit and prompted a hurricane to erupt in my center. Nothing else mattered except him and his body, the warmth echoing from him in languid waves. Such an allure would surely be my end.

But it didn't matter. Desire was my only calling now. The king could go fuck himself for all I cared. Marr could do much the same, the abusive prick. I knew this guy would be hooked to my side wherever I was heading. That much I could sense.

Even when it *didn't* make sense.

My eyelids fluttered as I attempted to focus on the shadow carrying me. What did he look like? I knew his scent and his touch.

But his face...

“Don't worry, mon cher,” he whispered.

Those husky tones transported me from Miami and dropped me in a dark oasis. All I wanted was to stay with him. He would keep me, right?

His voice came again but in the shadows of my mind, unbidden and untethered to anything or anyone. Sweet wisps of sea salt embraced me while I slipped farther into an unconscious state.

“It’ll be over soon,” he assured. “I promise...”

Sweet savior gods, he didn’t understand how much I didn’t want that to be true.

No, that was silly. Almost a wasteful thought. *It’ll be over soon*, far from it.

I had to find the enemy king. I had to kill him.

My life depended on it.

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