



# Blood Gift

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Paranormal, Vampires

**Description:** Vanessa's plagued with dreams of a gorgeous man with haunting eyes that saves her from the grasp of an enemy sorcerer. Until she realizes the man's not a dream. Gentry's an outcast sorcerer strip of his powers, trying to figure out what he's supposed to do with his life, until he starts having these dreams, where he's saving a woman and he's got his magic back. And then one day, she walks into his life, and turns it upside down.

**Total Pages (Source):** 52

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## Prologue

Years ago, more like centuries and centuries ago, there a new strain of vampires was brought to creation. Nightwardens, they were called by those who knew of their existence. A Nightwarden's mission was simple. Guard the High Sorceress he was assigned to until needed no longer, then return back to his place deep within the earth, a place called The Fold.

A new High Sorceress would come to power every so often among the covens. Some covens were fortunate enough to have Nightwardens to keep them safe. These Nightwardens were bodyguards in essence, except they were bodyguards without a choice. Bound by the blood of the one they were charged with protecting, the Nightwardens were faithful, monastic, and unemotional. Or so it was thought.

No one counted on the emotions that would arise in these creatures that walk the dark and protect the sorceresses that wield power.

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Vanessa

It was always the same. Every night. I would go to bed telling myself it would be different, that I would sleep well, that nothing happening behind my eyelids was real.

It can't hurt me.

But it felt real. I could taste the fear as it filled my mouth. I could smell my sweat—sour and pungent—as I waited for something to happen.

Anything.

Death or escape.

It didn't matter to me at that point, after hearing what he wanted to do to me. After knowing how serious he was.

He wanted to hurt me. Make me scream in agony. Drain my power. Leave me dead. Not just dead, either. Torn to pieces, someplace public. I would be the crown jewel in his scheme. He had been waiting a long time for me.

It always came back, just as fresh and clear as if I were still there. In that terrible place that reeked of death and was always cold, always dark. Ruined. The way he wanted to ruin me.

I'd wake up with my heart racing fast enough to nauseate me. Drenched in cold sweat to the point where my sheets would be soaked in it.

I'd have to get up and change the bed before going back to sleep. Most of the time, I didn't bother trying. What was the point when I would only revisit the same nightmare again and again?

It was the same one cold night in mid-October, when I wrapped myself in my silk robe and padded barefoot to the living room. The walk felt endless. Sometimes I thought about moving to another apartment, especially when I woke up in the middle of the night surrounded by nothing but space. Cold, empty space.

The city, stretching out beyond my window, was the same as ever. Only darker. I was sure there had to be a million stories out there, but nothing changed from where I stood.

I considered creating a thunderstorm to make things more interesting, but I might get in trouble for that. We weren't supposed to affect the weather, even when we could.

Granted, I was the only witch I knew who was capable of controlling the elements, but it didn't mean I got a free pass.

Wasn't that what Mariya always told me?

I chuckled, shaking my head when I thought of her. As though I needed another nightmare to turn my attention to. But the only two people who'd ever dared tell me what to do were her and our mother, and I didn't want to ruin an already bad mood by thinking about her. Not that Mother was all that bad anymore—ever since the kidnapping, she was clingier but less demanding. I could accept that.

The sound of footsteps wouldn't have been welcome at any other time.

I liked my privacy, and I didn't get a lot of it with Holden at my elbow all the time. Holden wasn't even his real name—it was something ancient and Serbian, something practically unpronounceable to my New-York-born-and-bred tongue. He had invited me to call him Holden for short, only minutes after I woke him back in The Fold.

What a difference from my old life with Elias.

He frowned. "You're having trouble sleeping again?"

I nodded. "I guess I don't need to ask you that question."

"It's something I left behind a long time ago." He looked out the window along with me, but left a healthy amount of space between us. "The same nightmare?"

"The same."

I wished he didn't know about it, but there wasn't any going back from the night my screams sent him running to my room and kicking the door down, thinking someone was trying to kidnap me again.

He had no intention of letting what happened with Elias happen with him. I didn't have a choice but to tell him about my dreams and let him know that he might hear screaming like that in the future—and he had ordered me to stop locking my door when I went to bed, so he wouldn't have to kick it down again.

"Time will make it better."

"That's what you always say," I murmured, turning my head to look at him. "But it's been months."

He frowned.

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I shrugged. “Yes. I’ve been keeping track. And nothing. No change. The same nightmare, the same flashbacks. I can even smell those dead animals, all of them. It’s like being there all over again. He might as well come and take me every night.”

“He’s dead.”

“I know that.” I tapped the side of my head. “I know it here. While I’m awake. Once I close my eyes, it’s a different story. I can’t control it.”

“Have you considered...”

I held up my hand. “Please. Don’t.”

“Humans do it all the time.”

“What else does my mother have to say about this?” I folded my arms, glaring up at him.

In the old days, if Elias had even dared try to tell me what to do, I would’ve sliced him open with my tongue and liked it. I used to love telling him off, especially when I knew there wasn’t anything he could do to stop me.

“What makes you think I was speaking to your mother?” His dark eyes were nearly unreadable, but I didn’t need to read them. I could sense his uncertainty and guilt.

“There’s no reason why you should know how humans handle things like that,” I reminded him.

I couldn't help smiling, even though it would only encourage him to go behind my back again.

“Listen. I know you want to help, and it bothers you to see me like this, but I'm not telling my problems to a human doctor. I don't want one of them trying to get into my head. What happens if they ask what I do for a living? Or even how old I am? What if they do blood-work on me and find something out of the ordinary?”

“Of course. You're absolutely correct. Although I wonder why a mental health doctor would need to draw blood.”

“Quit while you're ahead,” I muttered as I turned away.

He snorted gently but went back to his room. I could relax a little when I was alone again.

It had helped to talk with him, even if he couldn't give me any real advice. Having a conversation with a real, mostly-live person shook away the last shadows of the nightmare. For the time being.

I leaned against the window and wondered if I'd ever get a decent night's sleep again.

\* \* \*

She tilted her head from side to side as she looked me over. “You're still not sleeping. You look terrible.”

“Thank you, Mother.” I shrugged into my robes with Holden's help.

He was more solicitous than Elias.

I wondered if I would ever stop comparing them in my head. Maybe time would change that, too, just like it would eventually sweep away my nightmares.

“Did you speak to her about what we discussed?” she asked Holden.

I shot him a look to keep him quiet and glared at her.

“Yes. He did. And it’s a ridiculous idea. You know we can’t open ourselves up to prying doctors. We don’t go to them for help.”

“Except in case of an emergency.” She stroked my black hair with her heavily-ringed hand.

I rolled my eyes, but didn’t pull away, which I considered to be progress. “I don’t think this constitutes an emergency. An emergency would be getting split from sternum to groin and my guts spilling out. That’s an emergency.”

“Please. Don’t be disgusting, Vanessa.” She shuddered before raising her hood. “And don’t make the mistake of thinking this conversation is over.”

“Why would I do that?” I whispered as she floated away with her robes trailing behind her.

She was difficult enough to get through to before Mariya left, but in the months since she lost a daughter, Mother had doubled down when it came to protectiveness.

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There was one area in which she had backed off, at least. She had learned how to attend a coven meeting without butting in and acting like she was still High Sorceress.

I remembered the days when she'd walk down the stairs with me, like she was the Regent or something. Guiding me until I was wise enough or strong enough to lead the coven. Undermining me. She had dropped that habit not long after I returned home and convinced her I was still in one piece, mentally.

The tricky part had been pretending Mariya and Elias were dead.

I walked down the stairs to the mansion's lower level and greeted the rest of the coven.

It wasn't my imagination: they all treated me with more deference than they used to. And that was saying something, because they had always stood down before me.

I was the High Sorceress. My word was law.

It didn't hurt that they were all slightly terrified of me because I was so volatile in those days. I wasn't proud of some of the stunts I had pulled.

Like deciding I would never step down as High Sorceress.

I picked up my candle and walked out to the garden.

I could hear the footsteps of my coven sisters behind me. We were all as solemn as

the event called for, with the ripe, full moon shining down on us. I stood at the center of the circle they formed around me and looked up at that moon.

The words were second nature, the call-and-call-back ritual between me and my sisters. A ritual which had been passed down for centuries.

I didn't have to think about what I chanted, which left me able to focus on the moon and the goddesses we worshipped and called upon for guidance.

I needed guidance at this moment. I needed it desperately.

Please, help me. If you're up there and you can hear me, grant me assistance. I don't know how much longer I can go on this way. Please, send me a way to heal from what happened to me. I've never felt like I could share with anyone before. I could never let anybody see what was inside me. So, it's hard for me to ask for help now. But I can ask you. I know I haven't always served you as I should. I know I took advantage of the powers you gifted me. Please, accept my apologies and hear me now.

The chanting fell silent, and I realized it was because the ritual was over.

The full moon was still above me, and my coven sisters still stood around me in a candlelit circle.

"Vanessa...?" Mom whispered.

I could see wide, worried eyes under the other hoods.

I walked back inside and conducted the rest of the meeting in a sleep-deprived haze.

\* \* \*

It was happening again. I was cold and half-naked and dirty, scared nearly to death. Wondering what sort of torture that damned, demented sorcerer Kristoff would put me through.

What did the ritual entail?

He wouldn't tell me. It was more fun for me to guess. Just another level of torture, letting me imagine the terrible things he'd do once it was time to get the party started. His words.

Cold, emotionless eyes stared into mine, and no matter how I fought to close them I couldn't. I couldn't stop him from digging into my thoughts, my secrets.

He laughed about them, taunted me, teased and shamed and humiliated me.

I turned my head from side to side as his laughter drove into me like nails. A new nail for every icy peal from his foul, disgusting mouth.

I spat at him and cursed him, but that was at first. When I had the energy. When he hadn't broken me down until all that was left for me to do was hang my head and wait for the inevitable.

I could hear his laughter echoing through the big, empty ballroom and bile threatened to project from my mouth as my skin crawled. When would it end? What had I done to deserve the torture, the shame?

When the doors crashed open, my head shot up out of sheer reflex.

Somebody had come for me. Yes, a tall, shadowy figure standing in the doorway, watching from across the room. But not for long. He flew to my side, throwing bolts of red and blue and white flame in all direction as Kristoff's men tried to stop him.

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There was no stopping him. He was too strong, powerful, brave.

Determined.

When he released the ropes tying me to the wooden posts, I collapsed in his arms. He cradled me against him as he ran from the room, through the lobby which smelled so much like death, outside into the fresh air. Only then did he look down on me.

The light was so bright, and I'd been in darkness for so long, that my eyes didn't have time to adjust.

I couldn't see his face. Only his eyes. Bright, flashing, jade green eyes under thick, dark brows. Passionate. Kind. Eyes I had never seen before.

I woke with a start, looking around my silent bedroom like it wasn't the same room I'd slept in for years.

Dreams could be like that, so deep and real they could make a person forget they were a dream at all.

I shook off the cobwebs and rolled onto my side, facing the clock.

Five thirty. And for the first time in months, I wasn't afraid to go back to sleep.

Who was he? I wondered as I drifted back off.

2

Gentry

Who was she?

I woke with a start and sat up in bed, looking around. Frantic. My heart beat rapidly. There was a roar in my ears as blood raced through them. Who was she? And where?

I looked at my shaking hands and could've sworn I could still feel her. Her cold skin, the nightgown she wore. Satin, maybe. Her weight in my arms—not much, she was thin, but even so. She was there, a physical presence. Wasn't she?

The otherwise empty motel room told another story.

I blinked hard as I ran my hands through my hair and talked myself down from near-panic.

All right, it was a dream. Just a dream. Dreams happen all the time. They weren't real. But this one felt so damned real—I could smell death and salt air. I hadn't even been to the beach in years. Decades. Not much time for fun.

Five thirty. Not hatefully early, though earlier than I wanted to get up. But if I went back to sleep, I'd never want to get up in an hour. And I had more miles to cover before I reached the city.

Sitting in rush hour traffic before I even got started was not the way I wanted to

spend the last leg of my road trip.

The motel mattress was hard, unforgiving, and my back screamed in protest as I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood up before gravity and sleepiness pulled me back down. Even an uncomfortable mattress was better than getting out of bed in the dark. Alone. In a shitty motel room in the middle of nowhere.

A hot shower helped work out some of the tightness in my back and shoulders. I leaned on my forearms against the shower wall—it was clean, at least, to the point where the smell of cleanser made my nose wrinkle in distaste—and let the water run down for a long time.

After I got to the city, what was I supposed to do? I had never held a job. I had no skills. I had no way to pretend I had skills.

I had a healthy savings in the bank—at least, I hoped it was healthy, though I knew how high the cost of living was in Manhattan.

At least I had something to fall back on. One thing they hadn't taken away from me. One of the only things.

I was lucky Dominic had offered use of the old apartment at all.

It couldn't have been easy for him, and it wouldn't curry him any favor with the rest of our kind even if he owed me much more.

No. Not our kind. Not anymore. His kind.

I wasn't one of them anymore. After spending my entire life as one of them, it would take time to catch up in my brain to the reality of losing my powers.

The reminder stung.

I pushed it aside in favor of returning to that dream. I had no idea who the girl was, but her face was still so clear to me.

My dreams were never that vivid, not to the point where I made up people I'd never met or even seen from a distance. Her long, black hair. The delicate nose and high cheekbones. Full lips. Even though she was a wreck—lips dry and cracked, eyes ringed in dark circles, hair limp and dirty—there was beauty to her. She'd be stunning under different circumstances.

What I'd done during the dream didn't take much interpretation to understand. I was powerful again. I had my skills back.

A sorcerer the way I'd always been. I had effortlessly cleared the way once I entered that awful, crumbling room.

There was no time to look around, but it seemed like an old ballroom or something of that nature, in a former life, before it turned into a home for bats and rodents and any number of slinking, crawling creatures.

When those creatures had come at me, I'd mowed them down and felt almost gleeful while doing it. Their cries of shock and surprise had sent fire rushing through my veins.

I finished shaving and looked down at my hands.

There was no magic left in them. Not so much as a spark when I held my palms up and concentrated hard enough to make my head hurt. I never even had to concentrate before. A flick of a wrist, and whatever I had envisioned became true. I had taken that power for granted. What I wouldn't give...

“Enough.” I looked myself in the eye, palms down on the cheap, particle board vanity.

The mirror reflected a tired, worn-out man when all I’d ever seen before was confidence. Youth. Vibrancy. I would have to get to know myself all over again—or, rather, for the first time. I’d never been one for self-reflection.

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I had, however, always been single-minded. Once I set my sights on something, it was mine. No questions asked, no excuses accepted. I only had to turn that single-minded focus back on. But what was there to focus my time and energy on?

“You will build a life for yourself,” I muttered, still staring at the man in the mirror. “You will be successful, as you’ve always been. You don’t need the power to be you. You were always more than your powers.”

I wished I believed it.

What was a sorcerer without his powers? Easy: a human. A pathetic, weak, cowardly, stupid human. I found myself examining my dark brown hair for signs of gray, then chided myself. The aging process wouldn’t speed up by much. I’d look thirty for a long time.

Just not as long as I would have before losing everything that made me who I was.

I closed my eyes and turned away, marching into the bedroom area and flipping on the TV for background noise.

As long as I didn’t feel so lonely, the self-doubt and apprehension didn’t gnaw so hard at my gut.

The nightly news was on, and the normal litany of disasters was being rattled off by the anchors.

Even on the other side of the country, in a hick town in the middle of nowhere, stories

were the same. Only the locations changed.

Instead of Sunset Boulevard, it was a heavily-traveled highway winding through the Appalachians. Accidents, missing people, robberies. The story of a trucker whose badly decomposed body was found in the woods, miles from the motel he'd been staying at. He'd gotten in an altercation at a diner with a man that customers later told police seemed supernaturally powerful, and wasn't seen again after that.

Whoa.

That got my attention.

Supernatural powers?

Humans were so quick to dismiss the obvious. Cops assumed the guy was on drugs which only made him seem strong, but I knew better. That was no human they'd been in the presence of that day at the diner.

I couldn't blame them, the humans. They didn't understand, so they tried to connect the dots. They'd long since been brainwashed into believing we were nothing but the stuff of folk tales, invented by ancestors even more hopelessly backward than they were. So they blamed drugs, or strange disorders, or untrustworthy eyes when they witnessed the truth.

There was a very sloppy vampire out there somewhere who had let humans see him for what he was.

He was probably long gone by now—and I wouldn't want to cross paths with him even if he wasn't.

Gone were the days of hunting vampires for sport.

Did Dominic still do that sort of thing? I would've bet on it. He was one of the most merciless hunters I had ever seen, lightning fast and without compunction when it came to taking down his prey.

I could never keep up with him. Not for lack of trying.

I clicked the TV off and tossed the remote aside.

It was past time to get moving.

Maybe if I drove long enough and fast enough, I could outrun my memories.

New York would be a good change of pace. If there was a city in the world in which I could start again, it was there.

3

Gentry

Dominic's apartment was just as I remembered it, right down to the mid-century style of furniture.

I ran my hand over the back of the low-slung sofa with its simple lines and lack of decoration.

"At least I'll make a fortune off the furniture if I run out of money," I muttered with a grim smile.

The entire place was like a time capsule, straight out of the early sixties. Kennedy was President the last time our mother had decorated. Before that, it was Roosevelt. The first one.

"Ah. You're here."

I jumped at the sound of a familiar voice coming from the hall, followed by the clicking of dress shoes on the parquet floor.

Dominic always believed in making an entrance, and always dressed like he was on his way to an important event.

Even when all he was doing was greeting his disgraced brother.

“I didn’t know you were,” I replied, crossing the room to shake his hand.

His signet ring pressed against my palm, like a reminder of who he was—and who I wasn’t.

I’d returned mine when he stripped me of all power.

“I was looking through the library,” he explained. “When I think of all the days we spent in there…”

“Doing anything but reading,” I finished, and we chuckled warmly at the memory.

We could relate to each other when discussing the past.

When things were better.

There had been no chasm between us then.

No shame to pointedly ignore while it hung over everything we said, every look we exchanged.

“Remember the time we built the pulley system and mounted it to the window frame?” he laughed.

“So we could lower the poor dog to the sidewalk instead of taking him out for his walk,” I recalled, shaking my head. “That poor dog. Always the subject of our schemes.”

He looked around, his smile fading. “As I said, you can stay as long as you like. It’s yours, too, you know.”

Yes, as he felt necessary to remind me every time he made it sound as though he were doing me a favor.

“I know,” I replied, and left it at that.

No sense in having an argument when I’d just arrived.

“You must be tired from all your traveling. Did you sleep at all last night?” He brushed invisible lint from the sleeve of his deep blue pinstripe suit.

Three-piece, complete with a pocket-watch on a gold chain. He’d inherited our mother’s penchant for holding on long after styles had changed, hence the time capsule apartment we stood in.

“I slept when I needed to. Never very well, if I’m being honest.”

“No nice hotels on the road?” He went to the bar, situated in the corner of the living room.

I checked the time when his back was turned.

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“It’s not quite five o’clock,” he muttered.

“How did you know I was checking the time?”

“You’re predictable.”

I held back a sigh. “To answer your question, I wouldn’t know whether there are nice hotels since I didn’t feel as though I could afford one.”

His eyes were wide when he turned back to me, holding a glass of bourbon in one hand.

I could smell it from where I stood, and the aroma turned back the clock, and I was a child again, running up and down the halls with model airplanes, imagining I was a flying ace who shot down countless Germans and earned a chest full of medals.

I didn’t know back then that people like us didn’t do things like that. It was fine for humans to participate in war, but not us. Their lives were dispensable. Not ours.

While we had played, Father had enjoyed his bourbon. Along with the recreational activities he had shared with us when he felt we were old enough to understand.

He swirled the bourbon in the glass, sharpening the aroma. “Where did you sleep? Not in the car, I hope.”

“In motels along the way, of course.”

He did know how to get under my skin.

“Motels?”

The way he grimaced, I wondered if I should’ve told him I camped out in the car.

“Dominic, I don’t feel like getting into this with you right now.” I took off my jacket and hung it by the door. “You know my situation and why it isn’t a simple matter of spending the money to stay in a fine hotel.”

“You must realize I’ll do everything I can to keep you comfortable, to be sure your needs are met.”

The very idea sickened me.

As if I wanted to be under his thumb for the rest of my life, constantly reminded that what was mine was really his—and in the next breath, reminded that I was welcome to it.

Just the way he treated the situation with the apartment, which of course was half mine according to Mother’s wishes. He acted as though he were doing me a favor by stepping aside and allowing me to use what was mine. When he wasn’t using it for himself.

I took a deep breath and counted to five before answering. “That’s a generous offer, but I don’t think it will come to that. I’ll find a way.”

“You have no skills, brother.”

“Thank you for the reminder,” I growled, looking out the window in a vain attempt to distract myself.

“You’re too good to perform menial work, you know.”

“What makes you say that?” I turned my head just enough to look at him, standing there with his expensive drink and his smug, self-satisfied expression. “I’m no better than any other human.”

“Don’t call yourself that.” His words cracked like a whip.

“It’s the truth,” I insisted. “I have no power. I’m as normal as any of the people walking along Fifth Avenue.” I pointed out the window and down, toward the street with its throngs of pedestrians.

He scoffed, taking another sip of his drink. “You’ll never be one of them. You were born into greatness, and you’ve spent decades living life as you were intended to. There’s no going back from something like that.”

“Is this supposed to encourage me, or drive me to suicide?”

“Stop being immature.”

“Stop being condescending. And stop deluding yourself. I’m average. Normal. Human.”

I emphasized the word, if only to see the way his face fell when he heard it. Perhaps I was as immature as he’d accused.

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“Not so long as I have anything to say about it,” he promised.

“You’ve said enough already,” I murmured, holding his gaze.

We stood that way for a long, silent minute, sizing one another up. He could’ve ended me in a single wave of his hand, sent me flying through the window and splattering to the sidewalk. If I took out a few humans when I landed, so much the better for him.

I glared at him, daring him without words.

Instead, he placed the glass on an end table. “I’ll let you get your rest, then. Please, come see me tomorrow. We’ll talk about a plan for you.”

“I don’t need you to—”

He cut me off with one sharp, cold glare. “You and I both know why I need to. I’m not the only one behaving condescendingly here.”

He took his coat off the hook and threw it over his arm before leaving without another word.

4

Vanessa

“Are you ready?” Holden stood by my side with his arms folded over his chest, sunglasses already in place over his red-ringed eyes.

At least it was a sunny day—he generally looked ridiculous when he wore them in the rain. It was either that or wear contact lenses to make his eyes look more human and less... unsettling.

“Why are you in such a hurry?” I asked, glancing at him in the mirror as I admired the dress I’d just picked off the rack. Tight but modest. It showed off my curves, but kept me covered. Just how I liked it.

“I’m not. I’ve been standing here waiting for over forty-five minutes. It’s a good thing I’m not in a hurry.”

I clenched my teeth against the snide comment threatening to come out. It wasn’t easy, trying to be nice and mature and even-tempered, but I had made a promise to myself and intended to keep it.

My entire life had been spent thinking only about myself, and I had sworn to any higher power listening while I was a tied up hostage in that old hotel that I would be a better person.

Of course, I didn’t expect to make it out alive.

A promise was easy to make when a girl thought she was standing at death's door.

I forced a smile. "It'll just be another few minutes. Relax. I know you're in a big hurry to get your caffeine fix on the way home." As if he would drink coffee.

He snorted. "Can't you magically make yourself feel more awake? Do you need to put drugs in your body?"

"Coffee is not a drug."

"It is."

"You've been talking to my mother again."

"She thinks you ingest too much caffeine."

I whirled on him. "Okay. Why don't you just tell me everything my mother thinks I do wrong or has given you the heads up to keep an eye on? Just get it out all now. Come on. I'm waiting."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"You're the one letting my mother—who is not your charge, in case you forget—tell you what you should be watching out for. That sounds much more ridiculous to me."

"She's worried... after losing your sister." He lifted the glasses and propped them on top of his thick, dark hair.

It was a staring contest, and I blinked first.

"I know she is." I turned back to the mirror and noticed the frown lines between my

eyes.

My hand shook when I raised it to tuck a lock of hair behind my ear.

“Can you blame her?”

“What do you think? No. I don’t blame her.” I was careful not to look at him.

“You feel a lot of conflict about your sister’s death, don’t you?”

“Wow. You can’t stop picking at half-healed scabs, can you?”

“A disturbing visual.”

“Says the guy who drinks blood,” I hissed, looking around first to be sure nobody was listening. “You know what? Screw it. I don’t even want to go to the coffee shop now. This is stupid.”

“I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

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“No. You shouldn’t have. Why would I not feel conflict over my sister’s death?” The words almost choked me. Damn. I used to be such a good liar, too. “I’m the reason she walked into that situation. I’m the reason she’s gone.” Because I couldn’t refer to her as being dead without guilt stabbing me in the chest.

“You weren’t responsible for what Kristoff did to you.”

“Yes. I know that. But it’s like the nightmares.” I tapped the side of my head. “It’s one thing to know it but another thing to actually know it.” I picked up my purse and went to the door—better to go for a cup of coffee I’d said I didn’t want anymore, than to stick around and rehash the same lies.

Does he know?

I stole a glance out of the corner of my eye as we left the store side-by-side once I made my purchase.

In his jeans and leather jacket with sunglasses to complete the look, he was a heartbreaker. I’d get lots of dirty looks from all the average, everyday humans who wished they could be with him instead.

If they only had a clue who they were lusting over—and what he lusted over, which was definitely not flesh.

If he knew Mariya wasn’t really dead, he had a fantastic poker face.

Was this some sort of reverse psychology situation, where he was waiting for me to

break down? Would he be more and more sympathetic until I crumbled and admitted it was all a story made up by me?

That was obviously not going to happen. I wasn't going to get Elias killed for leaving the Nightwardens, especially since I was the one who told them to run away together.

I had covered well up to this point and had no intention of screwing things up.

The coffee shop windows were all done up for Halloween.

I rolled my eyes. "The most wonderful time of the year," I whispered to Holden as we walked in and he ducked to avoid the paper bats hanging from the ceiling.

I couldn't help laughing at him a little.

"I would think you'd feel right at home," he muttered through clenched teeth.

"Please. I wish I had the time to go through all the ways they get it wrong."

He knew I was talking about humans, with their completely bastardized traditions and rituals. Witches with pointy hats and broomsticks. How did they think women sat on those damn things? I wished somebody would try to get me on a broomstick. They'd end up with the business end sticking out of their ass.

"Isn't it better that they don't know what to look for?" he murmured, elbowing his way through far too many people.

But it was a Sunday, late morning, and the craving for pumpkin spice latte was too much for humans to resist.

If I never saw another girl take a photo of a cup of coffee to upload to social media, I

would die happy.

“You mean it’s better that they don’t know we walk among them?” I asked as I got in what I guessed was the line.

I was starting to regret my decision, but humans weren’t the only ones with a craving for pumpkin everything. One of the few areas where I could relate to them.

“Exactly. It’s good cover.”

“It’s insulting,” I muttered, grinding my teeth. Orange and black crepe paper, how tacky. Who chose the colors, anyway? “It’s one of our most important festivals, and they treat it like an excuse to bother the neighbors and develop cavities.”

“I’m sure Christians feel the same way about Christmas,” he offered.

“You’re just trying to pick a fight, aren’t you?” I sneered up at him. “That was one of our feast days, and they took it for themselves. Even I know Jesus Christ wasn’t born in December.”

“I didn’t know it was a sore spot for you.”

“Don’t get me started.”

“I would never get you started on purpose, believe me.”

“Ha, ha.” I looked around, already bored with the conversation.

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I'd have to do a little silent convincing to get anybody to abandon their table to me. It wasn't strictly within the rules to use my powers for such trivial things, but a seat was a seat. And nobody would know.

"You're thinking about doing something you're not supposed to do," he muttered under his breath.

"Stop spying on me," I hissed. "And it's not like I would get in trouble."

I was about to read him the riot act and maybe tell him to go to hell when a familiar pair of eyes stopped me from all the way across the room.

"What?" Holden asked when he noticed my reaction.

I looked down and saw that I was gripping his hand hard enough to leave crescent-shaped marks in his skin from my newly manicured nails.

"I know that man."

I looked up again, craning my neck to see past a couple standing with their arms around each other's waists. They separated.

He was gone.

"What man?" Holden asked. "There are roughly twenty of them here."

"He's not there anymore. He was standing by the window." I stood on tiptoe, then

bounced up and down in the hope of seeing his head over the others. “Damn it, he couldn’t have left that fast!”

“Where do you know him from?”

My dreams. I’ve dreamed of him every night for a week. That wouldn’t sound insane at all. “I—I don’t know, really. He looked familiar.”

“You nearly tore my hand off.”

“I didn’t.”

Damn it, where could he be? I wasn’t imagining it. Was I?

I stepped up to the counter in a daze and rattled off an order without paying attention to what I was saying.

All I could think about was those eyes. Sharp, clear, gorgeous. Staring into my soul.

Yes, it had been a week.

I thought about it as we left the shop—I didn’t feel like sitting in a crowd, not anymore. Not with all that silly, cartoonish Halloween décor hitting me in the face. Not with so much uncertainty swirling in my brain.

I had slept well for a week, because my dream had changed.

He saved me every night. Whoever he was.

I wished I had gotten a better look at his face. All I ever saw were his eyes. But that was enough for me to know that the man I had seen in the shop was the man from my

dreams. Somehow.

“You only went to one store, and you already want to go home?” Holden didn’t bother disguising his glee.

Big surprise.

“I don’t feel well now. I think I need to lie down and rest.”

“With your coffee?” he snorted.

I had promised myself I would never be nasty to a Nightwarden again, but he was pushing me too far.

“Shut up, already. I’m not in the mood.”

5

Gentry

“Are you coming, or what?” Dominic was waiting for me outside.

He couldn’t stand the thought of being pressed in with all those humans. They were vermin. Rats in a rat trap. He tapped on the glass again, then pointed to his pocket watch.

I was holding him up.

But she was there. It was her. The girl from my dreams.

Yes, and that will earn a lot of sympathy from him.

As if he would want to hear about a dream I kept having. Every night for a week, ever since that last morning on the road. It never changed. Always the same girl in the same place, and I always woke up just before I could ask her anything. Even her name, or who she was, or how she got there.

But it was her.

Even though she was clean and dressed up and wearing makeup, I knew it was her. I couldn’t have explained it if somebody put a gun to my head and demanded I do.

Still, I knew.

“What took you so long in there?” My brother was already striding down the sidewalk like he owned it by the time I stepped outside into the crisp air.

“You saw how crowded it was.”

“I don’t understand why you insist on adopting the habits of those people,” he spat.

“No. You never could understand.”

“Oh, as if your heart has bled for them all this time,” he sneered, sidestepping a woman as she hurried past. Like touching her, even briefly, would infect him.

“For someone who hates them as you do, why do you still live here?” I asked.

It seemed like a fair question. The city was fairly clogged with humanity, much more so than the last time I’d been there. Decades had passed since then, when I’d decided to move to Los Angeles at the advent of its explosion into the public eye. Manhattan wasn’t big enough for both Dominic and me back then. It was better to put a country between us.

“It’s the only city in the world, or it might as well be,” he announced with a grin.

“Not even Paris? Rome? London?”

“All have their benefits, but this is home. I’m still bewildered at the way you adapted to the West coast.”

“I’ve always been better at adapting than you.” And I would adapt to being human, too, as best I could.

If only to show him it was possible. The thought still made my skin crawl, and I had

to convince myself at least twice a day not to jump out a window, but I had to at least try to make a go of it.

Especially after seeing her.

She was real.

“Are you even listening to me?” Dominic demanded, throwing an elbow my way. He hit my arm and made me spill my coffee, splashing my jeans.

“Wonderful. Thanks for that.” I stopped, bent and tried to brush some of it away.

Before I could get to them, the stains disappeared like they had never been there.

I shot him a look as I stood. “Careful, now. What if one of them saw you?”

“So what if they did? You mean to tell me you never performed even a simple little spell like that while in public?”

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“That’s not the point.”

“No. The point is, you’ve lost your spine along with your powers.”

“And who do I have to thank for that?”

The traffic light was red, and we stopped at the corner to wait for it while others crossed with no regard for the signal.

He glared at me, and I at him.

We were near mirror images except for our clothing. His suit was nothing like my turtleneck and jeans.

I could imagine the conclusions a passing human would draw—then again, they didn’t pay attention to much of anything around them, especially when they were in a hurry. And they were always in a hurry.

“Is this what’s going to happen whenever we’re together?” I asked. “Will we always come back to this place? I would rather not, but you make it impossible for me to stay civil when you keep bringing up what happened. I’m willing to let it go, but I can’t if you refuse to stop bringing it up.”

Rage, shame, guilt, frustration played over his features, so much like my own face.

I would age faster than he would, even though we were born three minutes apart. There would come a time when strangers would assume I was his father.

Strip a witch or warlock of their powers, you also stripped them of their longevity.

And it was all his fault.

And he knew it.

“We’d better hurry,” he muttered, continuing across the street.

I walked beside him with my coffee and didn’t say another word until we reached the hospital doors.

“I don’t see why she has to be here,” he murmured, eyes scanning the lobby.

He looked like he smelled something rotten.

“Even the priestesses she sought out in India gave her the same advice she got from the doctors. She needs aggressive treatment. This is not the sort of thing that can be magically treated. And they want her to move to a hospice soon.”

“I know what they want.”

We were two grown men, more than three times as old as we looked. Yet there we were, standing in an elevator, bickering over our mother’s impending death because neither of us could process the thought of her no longer being with us.

“You won’t tell her?” I confirmed before entering her room.

“I wouldn’t do that to her. It would...”

Kill her.

He wanted to say it would kill her. And he was probably right.

She couldn't know about my disgrace. The only good thing about the timing was that she was too sick when the disaster struck to be aware.

The first thing that hit my subconscious was the smell of death lingering in the air.

Not even her death, per se, but the deaths of others who had spent their last days in a bed, covered in tubes. And the smell took me back to my dream.

Crossing a large, death-filled room.

Reaching the girl on the other side, bound to a wooden X. Only this woman was my mother, and she wasn't bound to anything wooden—rather, she was tethered to countless machines which monitored her fading life.

And I couldn't save her. There would be no freeing her from this. Only death could release her.

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“My sons are here.” Her voice was barely a whisper. Not the loud, throaty, smoke-laced growl everyone who knew her had come to expect. A voice that could fill up a room, and a personality to go with it. She barely filled her bed anymore. “I’m sorry you have to see me like this. In this place.”

Her smile was strong, even if she wasn’t, and I reminded myself to stay positive for her sake though she looked like a living, speaking skeleton.

I had seen many terrible things—some of which I’d caused—but nothing like the ruined figure in this bed.

Wrapped in an ermine-trimmed silk robe, as always. When the light streaming in through the windows touched her face, I could nearly see through her skin.

I gritted my teeth against a sound of dismay.

“Don’t you have clan business to attend to?” she asked, slowing turning her head to look in my direction.

Her eyes were sunken, a pale version of their old vibrant blue, but as sharp as ever. She was a mother first, and could smell bullshit a mile away.

Dominic glanced at me and cleared his throat. “I managed to convince him to take a little time away from palm trees and tanned blondes.”

“You have to be convinced to visit your mother when she’s feeling under the weather?” she asked.

I could deal with that. As long as she wasn't aware she was visiting with a sorcerer and a human, instead of two sorcerers.

"I've been busy lately, Mother. I'm sorry." Yes. Busy.

I took her hand—so tiny, the skin like paper, the bones clearly evident underneath—and offered a sheepish smile. She was always a sucker for my smile. At least I could tell her I'd been busy without it feeling like a lie. I had been very busy. Extremely so.

Dominic sat on the other side of the bed, and we passed an uncomfortable hour making small talk before she was too tired to go on and needed rest.

I knew how she felt. I was suddenly exhausted myself.

We parted ways in silence, Dominic, and I.

There was nothing more to be said right now.

I walked back to the apartment on my own, which was a much more pleasant experience. No grumbling and bitching about humans, no putting on airs of superiority the way he'd been doing since the day we were born.

Three minutes older than me and one would think it was years for all his smug assuredness. Didn't he stop to think that when he insulted humans, he insulted me?

Because I was human, practically. Instead of this helping him see that humans weren't the scumbags we were raised believing they were, he silently lumped me in with them.

It was probably easier for him that way, I guessed as I turned down Fifth Avenue.

The less he thought about the implications of what he'd done, the better for him.

Self-preservation was always Dominic's highest priority.

A group of young women left Lord & Taylor together, carrying shopping bags and cell phones, wearing what looked to me like pajamas but to them, evidently, like the sort of clothing people wore in public.

I remembered when women dressed up to go shopping, especially in a store like that one; a lady had standards.

Then again, I remembered when Times Square was called Longacre Square. New York certainly had changed. As a human, I would have to change with it. I couldn't hold myself up to a lofty standard anymore.

I waited at the crosswalk beside a young, dark-haired woman who looked at me with obvious interest.

I smiled, but it was the sort of smile one offers when they're trying to be polite. I had no desire to strike up a conversation with her or any other woman except the one from the coffee shop. From my dreams.

This one reminded me of her, the hair was the same. Still, it was enough to get me thinking of her again, and maybe my overwrought brain needed something else to latch onto.

I wanted to see her.

I wanted to know she was real.

If it meant going to that coffee shop every day for a month and sitting there from

open to close, I would do it just for the chance to see her again.

And it wasn't like I had anything else to do.

6

Vanessa

“I don’t see why you have to come with me when I’m only running to the shop for a latte and a scone,” I grumbled as I slid into my riding boots.

He was waiting in the doorway to my room, and for once he didn’t criticize me for leaving it a mess.

“Only a latte and a scone?” he repeated, raising an eyebrow. One corner of his generous mouth slid up in a smile.

“What’s the look for?”

“You know what it’s for.”

“Indulge me, please.”

“You’ve been trying to decide what to wear for the last half hour.”

“How would you know? I only just opened the bedroom door.” Yes, and he was right there in the hallway when I did. “Were you listening outside the door?” I asked in horror.

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“For starters, it’s downright creepy. Like you’re stalking me.”

His forehead creased as his heavy brows drew together. “Stalking? How can I stalk when I live with you?”

“Don’t get technical with me.” I stood with a sigh, then fumbled around on my bed for the denim jacket I’d decided to wear. It had gotten lost under another hundred things I’d pulled out of the closet. “Sometimes I wish you were more like...” I trailed off, and my cheeks burned with shame.

“Elias,” he finished, sounding resigned.

“I didn’t mean to compare you two.”

“Oh, no. I’m sure.” Sarcasm dripped from his voice.

“How can I help it?” I slid into my jacket and pulled my hair out from underneath so it could rest against my back and trail over my shoulders. “He was my Nightwarden for years.” And I had loved him, which was something I didn’t see the need to bring up. But I was sure Holden could feel it when I thought about him. At least he was kind enough to never bring it up.

“I realize that was a very personal relationship,” he said, speaking slowly. “But I can’t do my job effectively if you keep comparing us.”

“Fine, sure, okay. I get it. I’ll do my best.”

If he would only be a little more reclusive. That was my favorite thing about Elias, besides... well, everything that made me fall in love with him. Holden was just as stoic and strong, and definitely just as handsome with his angelic features and a body that could pass for a heavyweight boxer’s.

But unlike Elias, he was more open. More talkative. More intrusive, and I still wondered if that had anything to do with my mother's influence. My mother probably ordered him to spend time with me, like that would stop a sorcerer from kidnapping me again.

I stepped out into the hallway and locked the door behind us with a heavy heart.

Why did he have to come with me?

For the last three days, I had camped out at the coffee shop with my laptop and my Nightwarden in the hope of seeing him again. My literal Dream Man.

"Why don't you admit why you want to go back and we'll stop pretending?" Holden asked as we stepped into the elevator.

"Why don't you leave me alone?" I countered.

"Don't be immature."

"Don't talk down to me like that. I don't know who you think you are."

"You know exactly who I think I am."

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That did it.

I was tired of tiptoeing around with him. Just because I'd promised some unseen force that I'd be a nicer person didn't mean I had to let him walk all over me.

"It's none of your business, and that is a stone-cold fact," I growled. "My private life has nothing to do with you. You exist solely to keep me safe. Do you understand?"

Silence hung between us as we plummeted down to the ground floor.

When the doors opened again, he nodded. "Understood."

I couldn't help feeling like shit, but he needed to remember his place.

I knew his last charge had been a lot more easy-breezy than I ever was with Elias, so he had an idea that we would be friends. He was wrong. One of us had to rein it in. I let him hold the door open for me as we walked out of the lobby, and again as we entered the coffee shop at the corner.

I swept over the room immediately on entering.

Hewasn't there.

Of course not. Every day, the possibility that I might have imagined him grew bigger and bigger.

It was my dream leaking into reality, as crazy as it sounded. No crazier than having

the same dream every single night about a man I had never met, who I could only identify by a pair of eyes.

“I’ll get a seat,” Holden announced, leaving me on my own to stand in line.

I told myself it was for the best. I didn’t need any friends—and the closer we became, the more dangerous things would be for us. He couldn’t protect me if there were personal feelings involved. A business relationship was best for both of us.

I remembered the cold, aloof attitude I took toward Elias and wondered how I could ever have been so thoughtless. And I wished for the hundredth time that I could go back and apologize to him for being such a bitch.

To him and my sister, both.

My laptop bag hung over one shoulder and reminded me of the research I was pretending to do as a reason to sit for hours in front of my computer the way humans liked to. Pretentious jackasses.

It wasn’t like I hated learning more about the history of witchcraft’s evolution after our coven came to the New World, but it wasn’t my idea of a good time.

The approach of Halloween put the thought in my head, and it seemed like as good a reason as any to sit around doing research.

It was a stupid, childish excuse and I didn’t owe Holden anything—still, it provided a cover story in case anybody asked him for a report on my well-being. And something told me my mother was, on the regular.

I didn’t know how she contacted him. Cell phone, most likely. While he was in his room, alone, where I couldn’t see or hear them talking about me. It was enough to

make my blood boil.

Which was why I spun so abruptly, latte in hand, and bumped into the man standing behind me. Coffee splashed out of the cup and splattered his jeans and shoes.

“Would you believe that’s the second time that’s happened to me this week?” he asked with a wry chuckle, as I scrambled for napkins.

I looked up at him as I handed them over and almost dropped my cup in surprise.

“You,” I whispered before I could stop myself.

Because it was him. I was sure of it.

The surprising thing was, he looked at me with just as much surprise.

“You,” he murmured in reply.

We shared one breathless moment before the reality of the situation trickled through, in the form of a barista asking if we’d please step aside so other customers could place their orders.

“I’m so sorry,” I breathed. “That was awful of me. Please, let me buy you a cup of coffee.”

“No, no, that’s all right. I shouldn’t have been standing so close to you. That’s what I get for not respecting personal space.” He chuckled good-naturedly.

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I couldn't help but notice the way his eyes kept grazing me, like he was just as stunned to see me as I was to see him.

"Can I at least ask you to join me?" I pointed to the table by the window where Holden waited.

Even with sunglasses covering half his face, I knew he was staring at us. And judging by the way his jaw was set, he wasn't happy. There was a surprise.

"It looks like you already have company."

"Oh, Holden? He's just... my brother," I stammered, hating myself the second it was out of my mouth.

My brother?

What was wrong with me? I was just so happy that this man existed, that I hadn't made him up, I would've said anything to get him to sit with me for a little while.

"Ah. In that case, sure. I would love to." His smile was wide, bright, perfect. Dazzling.

My insides turned to jelly at the sight of it. What was happening to me? Turning into a pile of mush because of a man's smile. I was too old for that nonsense.

Besides, he was human. My heart sank a little.

I didn't know what I expected—there was no aura around him when I first noticed him, either, nothing to indicate the presence of magical blood. Even so, a human was less dangerous than a sorcerer, so it was better for him to be ordinary.

“Who's this?” Holden asked when we reached the table.

I glared at him when the stranger couldn't see. “I invited him over when I spilled my drink on him. Promise you won't play the protective big brother, please.”

Don't ruin this for me. Shut up, shut up.

He only raised an eyebrow and nodded slightly, making me breathe a shaky sigh of relief.

“Holden,” he said, holding out his hand to shake.

“Gentry,” the stranger replied, shaking his hand before sitting across from me.

I couldn't stop staring at his eyes. Just the way I had dreamed them, along with a strong jaw and square chin and that beautiful, disarming smile. I drank him in, fascinated. He existed.

And he drank me in, too, which was even more fascinating. Why did he look at me that way?

“So, Gentry. What do you do for a living that you can afford to visit a coffee shop in the middle of a weekday morning?” Holden leaned back in his chair, arms folded.

I wanted to slap him. My hand twitched.

But Gentry didn't seem to mind. “I'm in town visiting my mother. She's... well,

she's only got a few weeks left. Days, perhaps."

"I'm so sorry," I murmured as I kicked Holden under the table.

Gentry nodded slowly, looking down at his cup. "Of course, I'm looking for a new job at the moment, too."

Holden kicked me back—not as hard as I'd kicked him, naturally.

"Doing what?" he asked.

"I'm not sure." Gentry shrugged. "I'm at what you would call a crossroads. I drove from California and am living in my childhood apartment, if you can imagine that."

"It sounds fascinating," I said, cutting into whatever Holden was about to say. "I mean, driving cross country like that. I've always been interested in that sort of trip."

I glanced at Holden, daring him to say anything to the contrary. He only shook his head. It wasn't a lie, either, but he wouldn't know that. It was easy to forget he hadn't been with me for very long.

"What about you?" Gentry turned the tables on Holden.

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I bit the inside of my mouth to keep from laughing. I could feel my Nightwarden's anger rise.

"I work in security," he replied smoothly.

Where had he come up with that one?

"I see." Gentry turned to me. "What about you?"

Only when Gentry smiled at me did I realize he had been scowling at Holden. The difference was like night and day. His face lit up.

"I... I don't do much of anything," I admitted.

I could've lied. I had lied before, so many times. When I opened my mouth to tell him one of my smooth lies, one I had told so many times to so many people, I came up short. I didn't want to lie to him. It made no sense. I didn't even know him.

"I'm sure you have to do something," he smiled. "Even if it doesn't seem like it would be all that important to anybody else."

Holden barely held back a snort of derision, and I kicked him again. "I forgot to pick up my scone in all the excitement," I said, staring at him. "Can you please go to the counter to get it for me?"

The way he set his jaw told me he wasn't happy, but he got up anyway.

“He’s intense,” Gentry murmured, and I wished he hadn’t. He didn’t know Holden could hear everything from a distance.

He’d be listening, too. I would’ve bet anything on it.

“Yes, he’s very protective,” I covered. “I’ve had some difficult times lately. He’s sort of my bodyguard right now.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have made light of it.”

“You didn’t know.”

Good. He probably thinks I’m a spoiled heiress who needs protection. I would rather him think that than know the truth.

Since when did I want to hide who I was?

He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “I should go. He obviously doesn’t want me around, and I understand that.”

“No, please, don’t.” I’ve been waiting for you. I’ve been looking for you. Don’t leave me now.

He stood anyway, but smiled. “I want to see you again. Tonight. Seven o’clock. We’ll have dinner.”

“Where?” I asked.

He chuckled at himself. “I haven’t been in town for so long, I don’t know any of the good places anymore.”

“It’s always changing, isn’t it? Do you like sushi?”

“I practically lived on it out in LA,” he grinned.

I gave him the name of my favorite spot, and we agreed to meet there.

He was still smiling when he walked past the window on his way down the street.

“You got rid of him,” Holden muttered, dropping the scone in front of me.

“Don’t act like you weren’t listening to every word we said when you were gone.”

“Sushi,” he scowled.

“You’re not coming in with me.”

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“Like hell, I’m not.”

“You are not. Coming in. With me.”

We glared at each other.

“I mean it, Holden. What did I just remind you of before we got here?”

“You don’t have to remind me again,” he growled.

His nostrils flared as he breathed harder, and I knew I was pushing him to his limit. Then again, he was pushing me to mine.

I tried another tactic. “Listen. I know this is new for us. I haven’t been on a date while you’ve been in my service. There’s bound to be friction when something like this happens.”

“Suddenly you’re diplomatic,” he muttered with a wry, humorless smile.

“I’m trying to be. I can drop the diplomacy in a heartbeat if it would make you feel better.”

“No, no, by all means.” He growled under his breath. “I don’t like him. There’s something I can’t put my finger on.”

“You’ll have to deal with that on your own,” I informed him, flipping my hair over one shoulder and turning my attention to the scone.

I wasn't even hungry. My stomach was too full of butterflies.

He was real.

And his name was Gentry.

And I felt like a teenager again.

7

Gentry

The first thing I noticed when I saw her get out of the sleek, black car was her beauty. I would have to be blind not to notice.

That face, those pouty lips, those luminous eyes. I had spent decades surrounded by Hollywood starlets, but none of them came close to her.

She had a sort of magic that hung in a cloud around her, like perfume, and it drew the attention of strangers as they walked past.

She didn't notice any of them. She only had eyes for me.

The next thing I noticed was her brother. What the hell was this?

My temper had been infamous in my circle and well beyond for as long as I'd lived in LA. I was the guy who everybody wanted to be friends with, if only to taste the lifestyle I enjoyed, but that adoration came with a price. And I had known it, and I had loved it.

The fear even my friends felt toward me. The almost comical deference of everyone from the guy who washed my cars to the staff at my favorite restaurants. They knew how volatile Gentry Duncan was.

Stories about me were legend in the underworld in which I'd traveled.

That familiar stirring of rage began in the pit of my stomach. I hadn't felt it in weeks, not since my humiliation back in LA. I didn't know whether to dread it or welcome it. At least one part of me hadn't disappeared when I lost my powers.

This isn't you anymore, I reminded myself, but that voice was nothing compared to the growing roar of frustration as the two of them approached.

I shoved my hands into my coat pockets before tightening them into fists. What I used to do with those hands...

"I think there was a misunderstanding," I said, looking straight at him without saying hello to her first. "This was supposed to be dinner for just the two of us."

"And she explained to you that I provide protection for her. That means everywhere she goes," he growled.

Oh, what I would've done to him. I would've loved every second of it and replayed it for my amusement again and again.

Maybe I'd have set his shoes on fire for starters and laugh while he screamed and jumped around. Or I'd sic a few dozen rats on him—it was New York, so there were bound to be plenty nearby. Or I'd make the skin bubble and melt off his smirking face until he writhed and shrieked in agony

But no, I couldn't do any of that. Not a single thing like that.

Instead, I turned to her. "Do you feel that you need protection from me?"

"No, but it would make him feel better if he could wait outside. He won't be coming in with us."

That was something, anyway.

I held his gaze—at least, I thought I did, though there was no telling with him wearing those ridiculous sunglasses.

Who wore sunglasses after sunset?

Assholes, that was who.

Men who felt the need to intimidate others with their appearance.

I had always kept in shape and knew my way around a boxing ring, but I had never tried to lord my physical strength over strangers.

Because you didn't need to, a nasty, taunting voice reminded me as I opened the restaurant door for her. You had your powers. You were nothing but a stupid, petty little bully. Do you think anybody you sparred with would've dared knock you out? Stop kidding yourself.

I tried to shake it off, just as I had shaken it off throughout my cross-country drive. There was little else to do when traveling down seemingly endless stretches of empty highway other than get lost in thought.

"I'm sorry about him," she whispered once we were inside.

"I'm sorry if I caused any trouble with him, for your sake." I helped her with her coat and swallowed hard at the sight of her body in a sweater dress which hugged her like a second skin.

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It covered everything while promising so much. I could've fallen to my knees and worshipped her then and there—not only for being the most exciting, most arousing creature I'd ever set eyes on, but because she understood what so many women didn't: leaving things to the imagination was far sexier than the alternative.

She shook her head, unaware of how I wanted her. “No. I just really hope you understand. Things were... pretty terrible for a little while, and it's better for me to have him around. Not just for my physical safety, either. He makes me feel better here.” She tapped the side of her head.

My heart softened. “I feel like a jackass. I should've thought before I reacted. It's just that I saw him and thought you didn't want us to be alone.”

“I want that. I want it very much.” She swayed a little, closing the distance between us.

I picked up the scent of her hair, and her skin and desire reared its head again.

She awoke a part of me I hadn't given thought to since the disaster at the club.

It had been weeks since I'd even looked at a woman, much less thought about one the way I was thinking about her.

Then again, she was special.

We took our seats and wiped our hands with the hot towels a smiling server offered.

I couldn't stop glancing at Vanessa, studying her. She couldn't possibly know what was going through my head...could she?

I wouldn't have imagined it if she hadn't kept glancing at me, too.

Her cheeks went pink when our eyes met. "You probably think I'm rude," she murmured.

"For looking at me? I was looking at you, too."

"It's just that..." She heaved a sigh. "This is going to sound ridiculous."

I snorted. "Try me. You might be surprised."

"I don't know. This is pretty crazy."

"Please, go on."

She sighed again. "I feel like I know you from somewhere. I told you it was crazy."

"It's not. I feel the same way."

"You do?" Her face lit up.

"I don't normally sit down with a woman after she spills coffee all over me," I grinned. "Even if she is the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen."

She took the compliment with ease, like a woman who's used to being called gorgeous and didn't bother pretending she doesn't know it. "I didn't think things like this could happen. You know. Meeting a person and feeling that instant connection. This sounds stupid. I should stop talking."

“Don’t.” I could’ve listened to her all night. All week.

Her voice was like music. Every movement was as graceful as water cascading over rocks or a bird taking wing.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “I’m not used to meeting men who don’t want something from me.”

“Is that who your brother is protecting you from?”

She chuckled, but looked away. “Something like that.”

There was deep fragility in her, something broken.

I wished my protective instincts didn’t react as strongly as they did when I noticed the flash of pain that twisted her mouth into a grimace. I wanted to promise to protect her. She didn’t need her thick-necked brother to do it for her.

I would keep her from the filthy, nasty world. It wasn’t good enough for someone like her, someone so perfect. Maybe that was what my dream meant. I was supposed to hold her away from the rest of it, to carry her away to something better.

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Geez. Who was I turning into? Some lovesick poet?

“The world can be a terrible place sometimes,” I muttered, looking down at my menu.

“Oh? You know that, too?”

“Do I ever. Life in LA isn’t always as glamorous as it’s made out to be. There’s a big, dark underbelly.”

And you used to live in the heart of that underbelly. You used to thrive on it, didn’t you? Maybe you should tell her about that. Tell her about the pain you caused, the lives you destroyed on a whim.

She might like to hear about the homeless man you set on fire, all because he stepped in front of your car when you were in a hurry. She’ll definitely want to spend time with you after you tell her that story. She’ll offer to have your children when you recall how you laughed at the poor, miserable wretch while he burned.

I didn’t really like who I used to be.

What was I even doing with her? I didn’t deserve anything as good as her, not after what I had done. It was like remembering somebody else’s life. Like I had been under a spell for all those years, sleeping in a quiet corner of my mind while another being—a dark, vicious, soulless being with endless hate, endless need to cause pain—took over my thoughts and actions. The moment Dominic stripped me of my powers, all of that had fallen away. I was ashamed of that person. That monster.

She would never understand.

“I’ve heard some stories,” she offered with a rueful smile. “I think everybody has. All the young hopefuls whose dreams were crushed out there. All the scandals covered up back in the old days. Especially when the people involved were powerful enough to sweep things under the rug.”

“You’re a student of Hollywood history?” I asked.

“Something like that. I enjoy reading about the past.” She looked down at the menu.

I couldn’t shake the impression that she was holding something back, but dismissed it as my imagination getting the better of me.

A movement outside caught my eye.

Her brother, pacing back and forth in front of the window. Reminding me of his presence.

“He’s intense,” I observed.

She didn’t need to ask who I was referring to. “Yes. By nature. It’s easier to let him think he’s the biggest dog in the room, if you get what I mean.”

“I don’t know how easy that’ll be for me. I’m used to being the big dog in the pack.”

“Are you?” She raised a playful eyebrow to go with a playful smile. “I should warn you. I’m a pretty big dog, too.”

“You don’t look so big from where I’m sitting.”

“Yes, well, appearances can deceive.” She held my gaze as she sipped from a glass of water, and I was sure she could see into my core.

An illusion, of course, and one which I was glad of. She wouldn’t like what she saw there. Even so, a part of me stirred to life. I shifted in my chair, grateful to the table for providing cover.

The air crackled around us and I knew only one thing for certain:

I had to be alone with her. Without her brother or anybody else. Just us.

Even then, I felt Holden staring at me through the window. Silently shutting me down.

8

Vanessa

I sat with my arms folded, facing away from him as the driver took us home.

“Still not speaking to me? Is this the way things are going to be from now on?” He had the nerve to sound amused, the bastard.

After the fool he made out of me, not to mention himself, he had the nerve to think the whole thing was funny.

“You’re too much to be believed,” I muttered, staring out the window.

Look at all the happy humans. If not happy, at least pretending to be. Look how they don’t need a chaperone when they go on a date. Look how they can ask a man home after dinner, like normal people do when they want things to go further.

“This is why High Sorceresses don’t typically date,” he pointed out.

I wanted to claw his eyes out. “Thank you for the history lesson. Maybe they don’t date because they’re usually much older than I am when they’re named coven leader. Did you consider that? My mother had already borne two children by the time she took her place. That time was over for her.”

He was silent as he considered this. “You have a point. Even so, I’m sure there have been instances such as yours. A young witch leading the coven. It’s a vocation.”

“I see. I’m supposed to forget about everything else in favor of my coven.”

“In a word, yes.”

“Unacceptable.” Especially since I had already named myself High Sorceress for the rest of my life.

Holden knew this, even though he wasn’t there for my pronouncement. When I woke him, the High Council had explained the situation. He would serve me for much longer than Nightwardens typically served, because only death would remove me from my position.

What a stupid, thoughtless, petty little bitch I was back then. Less than a year prior, but it might as well have been a lifetime. Instead of a happily-ever-after, I was stuck with the prospect of never having a relationship because the coven would come first until the day I died.

“I still don’t like him. More than ever,” he growled.

“Why? Because he stood up to you?”

“Because there’s something about him that doesn’t seem genuine.”

“You’re biased.”

“I’m experienced,” he corrected. “I’ve seen much more than you have, and I’m telling you this for your own good. Be careful with him. And don’t think for a second that I’ll leave you alone with him.”

“Holden, please. You’re being ridiculous.”

“It’s for your own good.”

“You are not my father,” I warned.

My palms went warm as my temper threatened to get the better of me. A simple flick of the wrist and he’d be dead. Gone. Shut up forever.

I tried again. “I’m trying to be better than I was, but you’re pushing me to my limit.”

“I don’t care about your limits. I care about your well-being. That’s my job. That’s my only job for the rest of your life. And I’m telling you, I won’t let you walk into a situation you’ll regret.”

I didn’t say another word until we got to the penthouse. I was too busy seething.

He did his customary sweep of the space, just in case somebody had broken in while we were out.

When I had a little more control over myself, I asked, “Would you like to feed before you go to your room?”

“Yes.” Just like that, he was my slave.

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Or he might as well have been. The mention of feeding turned him into a salivating, single-minded creature who'd do anything I asked as long as he got what he needed from my veins.

I sat on the sofa and held out my wrist to him, which he took in his clawed hands. I turned my head away, so I didn't have to watch his fangs descend and winced a little when they split my skin. No matter how many times I'd gone through it, I couldn't get used to that first flash of pain.

Or the sensation of being drained, either. I could feel my life slipping away as he swallowed, again and again, greedy, sucking the blood from my artery as fast as my heart could pump it.

I felt myself getting weak, losing focus. That was always my stopping point.

"Enough," I said with all the strength I could.

He hesitated for one breathless second—would he let go, or wouldn't he? Then, he withdrew, his tongue sweeping over his lips to catch the last of the blood on them. It turned my stomach every time.

"Thank you," he growled as he struggled to catch his breath.

"Of course." I rose, a little dizzy, and walked in the direction of my bedroom.

"And if you thought I wouldn't catch the significance of you offering to feed me when you did, you're wrong." He was still breathing heavy, but he clearly had his

wits about him.

I turned slowly, leaning on a small table to support myself.

I raised my chin. “What’s that mean?”

“It means you needed to remind me who’s in charge. Who needs who more.” He stood, in control of himself again.

It was incredible to watch, really. The way he went from a snarling, bloodthirsty animal to the handsome, self-assured vampire I saw in front of me.

I could’ve argued it. I could’ve wasted my time lying to him. He saw through me so easily thanks to the imprint—easier than ever immediately after he’d fed, too, like he’d downloaded my emotions and intentions with each greedy swallow.

Instead of making myself look foolish, then, I said, “There was nothing Elias could’ve done to keep me here that night, when Kristoff took me. He was a good Nightwarden, and he took his duties seriously. Kristoff was simply someone we never saw coming, and I don’t know whose fault that was. Maybe it was simply Kristoff’s fault for being who he was. There’s nothing you can do to keep me any safer than he did.”

“Is that supposed to reassure me?” he sneered.

“Yes. You don’t have to listen to me getting ready to go out. You don’t have to check on me while I’m sleeping. You don’t have to prowl around outside a restaurant when I’m on a date. You can relax a little bit. That’s what I’m trying to say.”

He stood there for a long time, his face unreadable. Was he processing or dismissing?

I would never know, since he went to his room without replying.

\* \* \*

It was a different dream that night.

I woke with a start, breathless as always, but for a different reason. The dream was so fresh and vivid,

I looked to the pillow next to me and expected to see him there. I was alone. But it had felt so real. My skin still tingled from his touch, and there were goosebumps up and down my arms and legs. Arms that had held him, legs I had wrapped around him to draw him closer, closer...

I closed my eyes in a desperate attempt to bring it back before I woke up all the way. I had to get back to that place, where it was just us. His powerful body moving over mine, touching me, opening me up to a depth of pleasure I never knew existed. How could I have lived so long without knowing what my body was capable of? But he had known. And he had taken advantage of that knowledge, playing me like an instrument, making me sing.

There was no getting back to it. I consoled myself with the memory and dared to hope that it would become a reality soon. I didn't know how I'd manage to be alone with him, but it had to happen. It was inevitable.

The way he'd looked at me all through dinner, making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. When his hand grazed my shoulder as he helped me with my coat and my knees almost buckled from that one little touch.

It was primal, my desire for him. He thought he was the Big Dog. I would show him a thing or two. The thought of how good we could be together was enough to steal

my breath again.

Holden's scowling face crossed my thoughts and burst my bubble.

I groaned, punching my pillow as I tried to get comfortable again. He wouldn't be easy to get around, but I'd manage it. I used to sneak past Elias all the time in the early days—then again, he was easier.

He never came out of his room unless I'd asked him to. Holden walked around like he owned the place.

Even so, I would find a way.

Gentry was worth it. At least, he was in my dreams. And hadn't he already proven just by existing that my dreams had the power to come true?

I fell asleep again with a smile on my face.

9

Vanessa

Going to visit Mom this morning. Meet for coffee beforehand? 10:00.

I beamed, reading the text again and again. He wanted to see me.

Holden hadn't completely scared him off.

Of course. See you then.

I kissed the screen before tossing it aside to get ready and laughed in spite of myself. If Old Me had been asked to get up and be presentable by ten in the morning, she would've thrown a fit and gone back to bed just on principal.

But Old Me didn't know Gentry, either.

Then again, neither did New Me. But I wanted to. And if he looked for excuses to meet up with me, he felt the same way.

Holden was dressed and waiting when I got out of the shower.

"Coffee again?" he called out as I passed by, clutching my towel closed.

Not that I knew why I felt so self-conscious. He was nothing. He might as well have been a Ken doll, just molded plastic below the belt.

“Yes. Coffee again. And you’ll be on your best behavior.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he growled, but at least he went back to the other side of the penthouse so I could have a little privacy while I got ready.

I wondered if I could trade him in for another model. One a little less opinionated. And a little less pissy.

It was another beautiful day. Maybe it seemed more beautiful than it was because I was on my way to meet Gentry. Even the Halloween décor didn’t bother me the way it had less than a week earlier. What a shame he hadn’t shown up sooner.

He was already waiting for me when we got there, and I noticed how he pointedly ignored Holden.

“I’m glad you could make it over on such short notice,” he smiled as he leaned in to brush his lips against my cheek.

I shivered a little and hoped he didn’t think I was a fool for blushing.

“I had to clear my calendar,” I joked as we got in line.

Holden waited by the door, looking for all the world like a bouncer.

“Does he even have eyes?” Gentry muttered with a grin.

“Shh. Please. Don’t talk about him.”

Because he can hear you and he already wants to tear your throat out and throw you in the river. How do I know? Because I can feel his feelings and they’re pretty nasty.

“Oh. You’re right. It’s not my place. He’s your brother.”

“I didn’t mean it that way—but I guess you have a point,” I added. “He’s only trying to help me.”

“Understood.”

Our hands brushed against each other, and he wound his fingers around mine. I didn’t stop him. Nothing had ever felt so right. We chatted about nothing in particular as we waited for our drinks. I wanted to ask about his mother but held back, telling myself we didn’t know each other well enough yet. He would tell me about her when he was ready.

He checked the time when our drinks arrived and winced. “I’m already running a little late. I promised my brother I’d be over there at 10:30. Would it be too much if I asked you to walk to Mt. Sinai with me?”

“No, not at all.” I was glad I hadn’t worn heels, though the hospital was only two blocks away.

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Holden fell in step behind us as we left and was discreet enough to stay a few feet away.

“He didn’t ask where we’re going,” Gentry observed under his breath once we were outside.

I chewed my lip and hoped he didn’t make a big deal of it—I should’ve said something instead of relying on Holden’s hearing. I had gotten so used to treating him like my shadow, something not to think too much about.

“You’re meeting your brother at the hospital?” I asked in an attempt to change the subject. “Does he live nearby?”

“Dominic? Oh, yes. Over on Beekman.”

“Well, well,” I grinned. “Your family did pretty well for itself.”

“You could say that.” Only his voice was tight, and he spoke through clenched teeth.

Sore spot.

“Is he your older or younger brother?”

“Older by three minutes.”

“Twins! Wow. Is it true that you have a connection, the way twins are supposed to?”

“In a way, yes. We’re much closer than most siblings, I suppose.” He looked at me.  
“What about you? Brothers or sisters?”

“One sister.” I looked away, ahead of us. “She’s... not here anymore.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sure she’s better off now.” That wasn’t a lie, at least.

She was happy with Elias. It didn’t matter where they were—I had seen enough of the two of them together to know location wouldn’t make a difference.

“That’s a fairly dark perspective,” he murmured.

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t the truth,” I replied, and he left it there.

I wondered if we would ever get to know each other when we both held so much back. I could never tell him the truth about Mariya, even though I knew there was nothing he could do to hurt her. He was just a human. It wasn’t as if he had connections to my world.

What was I doing with a human? It was almost beyond belief.

“I wonder if I’ll feel the same about my mother when she passes on,” he mused.

“I didn’t mean to come off as insensitive.”

Getting to know a man was exhausting, especially with such a complicated life as mine. Always afraid to tell the entire truth, always hoping I didn’t say the wrong thing. No wonder I had avoided it for so long.

“You didn’t. Trust me. I was only thinking out loud. She’s in a lot of pain. It’s difficult to visit her, seeing her like that. She was always the liveliest person in the room, no matter how full the room was. The sort of person who draws the eye. Spellbinding.”

I smiled to myself at his choice of words. If he only knew how familiar I was with spells.

“She sounds wonderful. I’m sorry she’s going through this—and you, too.” I let my hand brush against his again, and he took it as he did in line.

A wave of all-consuming fury hit me from behind, but I made it a point not to react when I felt it.

I was too busy glowing inside to bother with Holden just then. He had to learn to deal with Gentry, sooner rather than later. I had the distinct feeling that Gentry wasn’t going anywhere.

That warm, glowing, all’s-right-with-the-world feeling didn’t last long.

When we approached the hospital, he dropped my hand. It was so obvious, so abrupt, that I couldn’t help but notice the change in him. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

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“Nothing. Uh. I think I should make the rest of the trip by myself.”

I looked at the entrance, a half-block away. “Only if you’re not afraid to walk all that way all alone,” I joked.

He didn’t find the humor in it.

“What happened? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, not you. Not at all.” He kept looking off toward the entrance instead of looking at me.

I followed his gaze and noticed a tall, dark-haired man who bore a jaw-dropping resemblance to him.

A man with a deep red aura.

I took a step back, away from him.

It was his turn to be alarmed. “What’s wrong?”

I shook my head and took another step. “He’s... he’s...”

“My brother?” he asked.

By then, the stranger had noticed me. And he stopped looking like his brother in favor of looking like an angry sorcerer.

I pried my eyes from him and looked at Gentry. My heart crashed and shattered.

“He’s a sorcerer?” I whispered.

It couldn’t be true. That would make Gentry... no, there was no aura around him. Nothing magical. But how was that possible, when his twin was obviously a sorcerer—and a very dark one, judging from the shade of the energy surrounding him?

Holden caught up to us and saw what I saw. “You need to get out of here. Now.”

His hand closed over my arm, and I hated how relieved I was to feel it. I didn’t want him to be right. I didn’t want to need him. How could I have been so wrong?

“I don’t understand what’s happening right now. Just hold on a second!” Gentry shoved Holden, or tried to. It was pointless, like shoving a brick wall. “What’s this all about? You can’t manhandle her like that or tell her what to do. She’s a grown woman!”

“You don’t know the first fucking thing about her,” Holden snarled. So much for the pretense of being a nice, normal if somewhat overprotective brother.

The sorcerer reached us and pulled Gentry aside. “What the hell do you think you’re doing with her?” he hissed, shooting me a look so full of disgust it made my blood run cold.

“Dominic, relax. She’s just a girl—”

“She is not just a girl!” he snapped, then looked around like he wanted to be sure he hadn’t attracted attention. “She’s a High Sorceress! And he’s her Nightwarden!”

Gentry's face went dead white as he turned to me. "No. That's not possible."

"I told you," Holden hissed in my ear.

"No one told you to speak, Nightwarden," Dominic spat.

Holden growled. "I know who you are now. Dominic. Brother Gentry. Twin sorcerers. It all makes sense now."

The truth of his words hit me like a ton of bricks. "That club in Los Angeles," I whispered, feeling sick and distraught. "The vampire club. You killed all those vampires."

"And the humans who were visiting the club that night," Holden snarled, glaring at Gentry. "And they stripped you of your power when you admitted to causing the explosion. Filthy, pathetic monster." In a flash, he had Gentry backed against the wall. Only we could see his fangs descend. "I might kill you now for that. Let you see how it feels when someone carelessly ends your life."

"Do not touch my brother, you worthless animal," Dominic warned. "I could make you drop dead on the spot, and no one on the sidewalk would be the wiser. Don't test me."

"Holden," I whispered with my heart in my throat. "Please, don't do this. It's not worth it."

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I wasn't sure whether I wanted Gentry to live or die just then, but I knew my Nightwarden wouldn't be able to get away with anything he did.

Holden snapped at Gentry's throat, snarling once more. "You're not even worth the effort," he decided.

"Look who's talking," Dominic sneered.

"I wasn't talking to you, but I can if you'd like." He took a step toward the sorcerer, who cringed. "That's what I thought. Just try to throw a spell at me right now, out in the open. I could gut you quicker than you can blink and be out of here before anybody knew what happened. You're just as pathetic as your miserable excuse for a brother."

"Holden, stop," I warned.

Dominic's aura went deeper red than ever. Blood red. That couldn't be a good thing.

I tried again. "You can't do this, especially not in public."

"You're right," he decided, stepping back but still shielding me. "Come on. We have to get out of here, now."

I looked at Gentry—how could it be true? But it had to be. He hadn't denied it.

Holden slid his steel band of an arm around my waist and pulled me to the street, where he hailed a cab and bundled me into it before I had time to think.

There was no thinking when my thoughts swirled around as they did. How could I have been so wrong? It wasn't like me to take chances like that. I was always smarter. Wasn't I?

"Do you see now why you should've listened to me all along?" Holden asked when we were more than a block away. His voice was tight with fury. His hands shook from the effort it took to keep his claws retracted.

"Please. I can't do this right now." My voice was a weak whisper. Almost a whimper.

I had just been through the biggest shock since the Kristoff situation. In many ways, it was like reliving the whole nightmare again.

The feeling that I couldn't trust anything, that nothing good would ever happen again.

The pain. The deep, ardent wish that if I was about to die, I would just die and get it over with.

Because I didn't know how long I could survive pain like that.

10

Gentry

How could I have been so blind? So damn ignorant. Amazing, really, the things a person was willing to ignore in favor of maintaining the narrative they'd created in their mind.

Of course, he was a vampire. The sunglasses, even at night. I should've picked up on that right away. How many vampires had I crossed paths with over my lifetime? How many of their lives had I ended, for that matter? Their destruction had been my ultimate goal for so long. But I had ignored the obvious in favor of focusing on her.

And if he was a vampire, and he was guarding her, that would make her a witch. Not just a witch, but a High Sorceress. The magic I felt swirling around her was very real, and probably more intense than I had allowed myself to notice.

I was already half in-love with her the day I saw her waiting in line for coffee after dreaming about her as I had. It blinded me.

Dominic's rage was unlike anything I could remember witnessing.

"You stupid, useless piece of shit," he snarled, glaring at me like he wanted to strike me dead on the spot before pulling me into a tight alley beside the hospital.

"Excuse me?" I whispered, eyes narrowed. "I think you forget who you're talking to."

“Is this what happened to you as result of your powers being stripped?” he asked.

He looked almost nothing like me when he was as lost in rage as he was just then. His face twisted on itself until he became a monster. Or maybe, just maybe, the monster was his real self, and the human appearance was the façade.

“In a way, yes,” I spat back, “and I can thank you for that, brother. Even now, you’re forgetting one important fact. I suppose it’s all a way of making yourself feel better for what you did to me. You like to forget how I took the fall for you. The way you begged me to take the blame when it was all your idea, when you’re the one whose clan planted the explosives in that club. I would never have gone that far.”

“Oh, you would have,” he sneered. “You forget what you were like before you were stripped. You were just like me, brother. You can hold yourself above me all you want because you lost what made you a real man, but I know the truth.”

“What made me a real man?” I laughed. “If seeking out and destroying vampires for the very fact that they exist is what you think makes you a man, I feel sorry for you.”

“It was good enough for you before. When we were growing up. For decades, brother,” he hissed, lowering his head, looking at me from under dark brows. “You learned just as I did why they need to be wiped from the earth. Some hunt witches, some hunt vampires. We fall into the latter category. They do not deserve to live. How can you turn your back on everything you were ever taught?”

“Something happened to me,” I admitted. “I’m not like you anymore. In many ways. And you’re the one who did it to me, so I suppose I should thank you. If you want to blame anyone, blame yourself.”

“How dare you?” He had the nerve to look offended.

“Are you seriously that deluded?” I asked. “It’s like I’m seeing you for the first time. For almost two weeks, I’ve convinced myself that you kept bringing up the club incident because you felt guilty over what it did to me. But honestly, it’s like your memory of the situation is gone. How can that be? Are you truly that desperate to forget what happened? Did your mind break?”

“My mind is fine. I think you’re the one whose mind is broken. Don’t tell me you could’ve forgotten who you are.”

“It’s not who I am anymore. I’m no longer a sorcerer. You’re the one who saw to that. I confessed to killing dozens of humans—not just the random panhandler, not the sort of crime that could be swept under the rug. This was high-profile. These were wealthy young kids. Of course, it was a sensation. Somebody had to pay. You forced me into it, and you only spared my life because you knew you were guilty, not me. But you took my powers. Damn it, just admit it. Stop kidding yourself.”

Once again, a range of emotions crossed his face. Guilt was the prevalent one. But he pushed it away, as he pushed away every last thing that made him remotely human in favor of the strength of a sorcerer. He was truly lost. I didn’t have a brother anymore.

His pocket watch gleamed as he pulled it from its pocket. “We’re very late. We should go up.”

I backed away. “No. You go. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

He rolled his eyes. “Stop acting like a child. You promised you would visit her today.”

“I’ll go later. Once I know you’re no longer up there.”

“What am I supposed to tell her?”

“You are over one hundred years old,” I reminded him, speaking slowly. “Think of something.”

“Gentry.”

“Dominic. I mean it. Go without me.” I stepped aside, leaving the way open for him.

He paused for a moment before walking by, straightening himself up as he did. I watched him smooth his palm over his hair and brush off his suit jacket before walking into the hospital.

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And I leaned against the wall to my back and asked myself again how I could've been so blind.

The night he came to me rushed back, clear as if it were happening all over again. His panic. He hadn't meant for things to go that far. The bomb was supposed to go off after the club closed for the night, when only the vampires who lived beneath the club would be present. It was supposed to be his biggest triumph.

And I had railed at him. Oh, how I had eviscerated him with my words. How could you do something like this in my territory? You should've kept this to New York, on your side of the country where nobody could blame me for it. No, you coward, you did it here so you could blame it on me if things went south.

Please, please, Gentry. Sweat had rolled down his face in rivulets, soaking his hair, the collar of his unbuttoned shirt. For the first time in forever, he had looked unkempt. You know what something like this could do to all of us. I sit at the head of our world. I'm the only thing keeping us all together, all the clans. It would devolve into utter chaos if anyone found out I was responsible for this.

What about my clan? I had demanded, taking him by the collar and hurling him against the wall. You know how hard I've worked to keep things together, to keep us unified. Just when things were going well, you pulled something like this. How could you?

It was to be a gesture of strength! Something to unify all the clans under our family name. One grand gesture to put us back on top, where we belong!

Right. And look what happened. Everyone scatters like cockroaches with the lights flipped on, I had snarled, dropping him to the floor and spitting on him before walking away.

Please, brother. Please, do this for me. When I tell the rest of the clan leaders that you planted the explosives, please. Confess to it. I'll give you the details. You only have to repeat them when the time comes.

They'll kill me, I'd pointed out.

No, they won't! He had struggled to his feet, shaking his head like mad. No, I'll make sure of it. Remember, I have the final say. And I'll refuse to take your life. We'll only strip you of your powers.

You'll what? The very thought of it had made my blood run cold. No powers? How could I possibly survive? I had never known any other way of living. I had relied on magic for everything, my entire life. I didn't even know how to fry an egg, and he wanted me to live without my powers?

It's not a death sentence. He had changed then, from a man begging for help to babbling, wily, desperate con man fighting to convince his mark of something that could mean the difference between life and death for him.

And damn me for a fool, I had listened. I had bought into the entire story of how our entire family, all fourteen branches of the original clan, would crumble into dust if Dominic's crime came to light. His twisted, pointless crime. Even then, he had started sliding into insanity. It was the only excuse for what he did. I wouldn't have considered such a scheme, and he was the only sorcerer who'd killed more vampires than me.

I had listened, and I had allowed him to bring me up in front of the other clan leaders

and accuse me of being a murderer, of endangering the rest of us by bringing our activities to the public eye. I had risked our safety, according to him. I could've brought us all down.

The memory of his hypocrisy was enough to turn my stomach, but I forced myself to replay every memory then and there, sitting under a tree across from Mt. Sinai Hospital while he visited our dying mother. The hateful glares of the other sorcerers, men I had known my entire life. Men who had respected me. The ritual Dominic had performed to strip me of every ounce of magic. The feeling of dying, almost, or what I would imagine dying felt like. A light going out inside me. The sense of lessening, of shrinking.

And he had the nerve to act as though it was his duty. Like I had deserved it. He had fooled himself into remembering things the way he wished they'd gone. I didn't know whether to pity him or plot his death.

I couldn't do it, and not because he was my brother or even because I doubted I'd be able to harm him. He had power that was only a distant memory for me. I couldn't do it just then because Mother was still alive. I wouldn't break her heart that way.

Once she was gone, however...

He appeared on the sidewalk and didn't look around for me before walking back in the direction of his home.

I watched him, and for the first time in my long life, I felt nothing toward him. Not even hate. He was nothing to me. Barely even worth the air he breathed.

When I was sure he had gone and wasn't coming back, I crossed the street and went inside.

The lobby still had that death smell, or it might have been my imagination. I kept wanting to return to my dream of Vanessa, but that time was gone. I could fight as hard as I wanted to get her back—and I did want to, I wanted to so badly, we hadn't even gotten a chance to be together—but with a vampire standing between us, there was no chance. Not when he knew I'd killed so many of his kind.

I bristled when I imagined how satisfied he was with himself. He hadn't trusted me, and he was right. And he was very likely reminding her of that very fact as I rode up to the third floor in the elevator.

When the doors opened, a scene of chaos greeted me. Nurses and doctors rushed down the hall, muttering and asking questions, and when I stepped off the car, I saw where they were headed. I followed them to her room.

One of the doctors stopped me outside the door. "I'm sorry, Mr. Duncan. Your mother passed away a few minutes ago. It looks as though you just missed it."

I stared over his shoulder into the room, where medical professionals surrounded the bed. It was oddly silent in there without the monitors making noise.

"Mr. Duncan? Can I do anything for you?" he asked.

"No. No, thank you." I cleared my throat, turning my gaze back to him. "Her arrangements were already made, if I remember correctly?"

"Yes, sir. There's nothing to worry about. Everything's taken care of."

"Thank you," I said again before heading back down the hall, to the elevator.

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She was gone. I didn't even feel the need to look at her one more time before they took her to the morgue. I didn't want to remember her the way she was then, anyway. Sunken and drawn and in pain.

I remembered the woman who'd danced on top of a piano the day Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic, the one who had been my ideal version of glamour and grace for much of my life.

Besides, I had other things to think about.

Such as killing my brother for killing her.

I had never been so sure of anything. He'd done it before I could tell Mother how naughty he'd been.

And Vanessa.

I needed her.

There had to be a reason I had dreamed of her, and I wouldn't let her go until I found out what it was.

11

Vanessa

“I should’ve done it when I had the chance,” Holden snarled.

I closed my eyes but could still hear his shoes on the wood floor as he walked back and forth.

“I should’ve torn that bastard to shreds. I told you so.”

“I swear on everything, I’ll kill you if you say that one more time,” I snapped.

He walked back and forth across the living room while I stayed where I had landed when I walked through the front door, curled in a ball on the couch.

“If you had only listened to me.”

I’d had enough. “All right, all right. Damn you. What really happened, honestly? Nothing. We have nothing to worry about. He didn’t hurt me. His brother didn’t hurt me. Nothing happened. So things could’ve gone a lot worse.”

“You’re lucky they didn’t,” he growled.

“No shit!” I rolled over and glared at him. “Are you honestly so self-involved right now that you think I don’t know how lucky I am? Or do you think that little of me? Please put your fangs and claws away.” I shuddered.

“I can’t help it. When I think about what they did.” He punched his palm with the other fist. “I want blood.”

“Please, take one of the bags from the fridge,” I begged. “I’m still low from last night.”

He stalked off to the kitchen, and it sounded like he nearly tore the door off its hinges. The blood would calm him, or I hoped it would. I didn’t know how much I could take of his rage. I had enough problems.

Such as my broken heart.

How could I have let myself get so wrapped up in him so quickly? Just because of a few dreams? But they were more than dreams—or, rather, they meant more than a normal dream. He had saved me before I even knew who he was. He had allowed me to sleep again, to stop feeling like I was crazy. To feel safe in my bed for the first time since the night Kristoff took me.

Of course, as long as I was being honest with myself I had to admit that it was crazy to attribute so much to a person I didn’t know. Dreams were just dreams. It was my fault for letting myself fall for him, even a little bit.

A sorcerer. A murderer.

When Holden returned, he was a lot calmer but no less full of himself for telling me so.

I wondered how long I would have to put up with his reminders. Probably for as long as I lived, since I would be stuck with him for that long. Just the two of us.

No men in my life, not after this disaster. I had decades of loneliness to look forward

to. I wondered if adopting cats was next on my list of life choices.

My phone buzzed.

I barely had the energy to check it—when I saw Gentry’s name on the ID, I let out a sigh.

“I was waiting for this,” I whispered as my hands shook.

“Don’t answer.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.” And because of that, I answered the call. I wouldn’t have if he would just remember his place.

“Vanessa. Please. Give me a chance to explain.” He sounded desperate—but then, he would, wouldn’t he?

“I don’t owe you anything, and I don’t see what you could possibly have to explain,” I said, straining to keep my voice even. To keep from screaming. It wouldn’t even be him I was screaming at, I realized. I’d be screaming out the rage I felt toward myself for being so clueless. So willing to give my heart to a stranger, all because I had dreamed about him.

“Please, give me a chance. You’ll understand when I explain everything.”

“Don’t you dare allow him up here,” Holden warned.

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I looked up at him and wondered if he would ever understand me. Didn't he know better by now? That tactic was not one that worked well with me. So, I recited my address to Gentry before ending the call.

He exploded. "What are you trying to do?"

"Holden, think about it." I jumped up from the couch, full of energy and ready to go a few rounds with him if only because he was right there in front of me. "You're here to protect me, right? He has no powers. None. You could tear him limb from limb in the time it takes me to blink an eye. Correct?"

"Yes," he whispered from behind the fangs that had already descended again.

"And there are countless spells placed on this penthouse, with the express purpose of keeping any who wish me ill out of here. Correct?"

"Yes. But that didn't stop Kristoff."

"And if it'll make you feel better, you can spend the next month keeping watch on the balcony while I sleep," I said, hands on my hips. "For now, all you have to do is watch over me. Can you handle that?"

"What I can't handle is the way you keep insisting on walking into danger."

"It's only danger according to you," I pointed out. "I, for one, would like to hear how he plans to tap dance his way out of this."

“Bullshit. You’re letting him up here because you’re weak.”

In a flash, he froze, eyes wide with surprise.

I raised my arm, light radiating from my palm and wrapping itself around him. Rendering him incapable of movement.

“Now,” I whispered, “Let’s go over the balance of power in this relationship. Yes, you’re a vampire. Yes, you’ve been charged with my protection. I appreciate your efforts. However, you. forget. yourself.”

I lifted my arm, raising him in the air until the top of his head brushed the ceiling. “You forget who’s in charge here. That would be me, by the way, in case you need prompting. All I have to do is decide I’m tired of you and just like that, your life is over, and I move on to a new Nightwarden. There are plenty of you. The only reason I won’t do that right now is because I don’t feel like dealing with the inconvenience that would bring down on my head. Even so, it’s important that you remember who you’re dealing with.”

I stepped closer, still staring up at him.

Only his eyes could move, and they followed my movements.

“I’m the most powerful witch of my generation and maybe almost any other. I’m the Promised One, the one ancient sages predicted centuries ago. I’ll do whatever I want, and you’ll hold your tongue unless it’s absolutely crucial that you speak up. Understood? Blink once if you understand.”

He waited. Then blinked.

“Thank you.” I lowered him to the floor. “Now, keep this in mind if you decide to

lunge at me when I release you. And remember what it'll mean for the rest of you Nightwardens if you hurt me. All right? I trust you will." With that, I released him from the spell. He gasped for air once the constriction around his chest disappeared.

The doorbell rang. "Perfect timing," I murmured, glancing at him as I walked past to answer the door.

I hated doing it, I truly did. I didn't want to go back to the same demanding, bratty, volatile witch I was before. Even so, a little show of force couldn't hurt when the situation demanded it.

The first thing I noticed when I opened the door was how distraught Gentry looked.

I could relate. I had to remind myself how much more powerful than him I was to stiffen my spine a little. I raised my chin. "Yes?"

"I have to come in. Please."

"As long as you're prepared to deal with my Nightwarden," I stepped aside and opened the door a little wider. "By all means. I only hope you don't believe in karma."

He entered in spite of my thinly-veiled threat and nodded in Holden's direction. "I don't mean anyone any harm. I mean that. Those days are behind me."

"With your powers?" I asked, sitting on the sofa.

Holden stood behind me.

I thought I was doing a fairly good job at playing the powerful, untouchable High Sorceress.

Inside me was another story. Inside, I was shaking. Weeping. Wishing the morning had never happened.

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“Yes. Behind me with my powers.” He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, feet shoulder width apart. “I know you must have questions for me, and I’m prepared to answer them.”

I blinked. “Why would I have questions? Why would I believe anything you have to tell me?”

“Whatever you think you know, it’s untrue.”

“So you didn’t massacre vampires for fun?” I asked, tilting my head to the side. “And I’m not talking about that night at the club, either. I’m talking about your entire life. Your family’s hatred for vampires.”

Holden snarled behind me. “I could kill you for that. And I wouldn’t even get in trouble for it. You’re just a disgraced sorcerer. Nobody would even miss you.”

To his credit, Gentry didn’t back down. “You’re right. I wasn’t clear. And I won’t insult your intelligence. You’re right about my past. The way I was raised, the indoctrination I went through. There was no question that vampires were lesser forms of life than sorcerers. Lesser even than humans, which as I think we all know is around as low as a creature can get in our world—depending on who you talk to, of course.”

“And you listened to a hateful, hurtful, vicious bunch of monsters while you were growing up,” I murmured.

“Something like that, yes. But when I lost my powers...” He trailed off, shaking his

head slowly. “It sounds weak and hollow after what I’ve done, but all the past beliefs melted away. Like a veil I didn’t know was over my eyes suddenly lifted, and I could see clearly. I could see how wrong I had been.” His focus shifted, moved over my head. “I can’t apologize enough, and I know apologies mean nothing. But it’s the truth. I can never make it up, of course, but I mean it when I say it was wrong and I don’t feel that way anymore.”

“Why should you?” I asked, folding my arms. “You killed a club full of them, all at once. You probably got it out of your system that night.”

“I didn’t do that. Dominic did.” He held up one hand, closing his eyes. “I know it sounds convenient.”

“Extremely,” Holden hissed.

“I know. But it’s the truth. I would sit down to a lie detector test right now to prove it. Dominic wanted to bring the clan together by showing force, wiping out an entire club of them all at once. The bomb wasn’t supposed to go off when it did, while humans were there. He knew our entire clan, across the country, would fall apart if they knew he’d done it. See, he’s head of the family. They all report to him. I was only head of our LA clan. He thought they could better absorb the damage if I took the blame instead of him.” He shook his head, snickering. “And he acted like stripping my powers was a mercy. The normal punishment would be death.”

“It can still be death,” Holden warned. I cleared my throat to signal his silence.

“Why should I believe any of this?” I asked with a sigh. “I mean, really. We’ve been on two dates, if you can call today a date. What’s the big deal? Two ships passing in the night and all that.”

His gaze didn’t waver. “You know it’s more than that.”

“Don’t tell me what I know.”

“I dreamed of you before we met.”

It hit me like a wave and almost knocked me off the couch. “You what?” I croaked.

“I dreamed of a room. A ballroom, falling apart and moulding and full of rodents. And you. Saving you from something, I still don’t know what. You were there, though, wearing a dirty nightgown, tied to a wooden X. I freed you and carried you outside. I dreamed that every night for a week before I first saw you on Sunday.”

I wanted to tell him he was lying, but how would he be able to describe my dream if he wasn’t telling the truth? I started shaking when I considered what it meant.

“I did, too.”

“What?” Holden stared.

I ignored him.

“You did?” Gentry asked. His expression softened.

“I could only see your eyes. The sun was behind your head, so I couldn’t see your face for the glare. But I saw your eyes. And when I saw them in the shop...”

I remembered squeezing Holden’s hand.

He had to remember, too.

“That was why you said “You” when I spilled my coffee.”

“And why you said the same thing,” he agreed.

I touched a hand to my face, rubbing my forehead. I could hardly handle everything racing through my head.

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“Regardless,” I replied, “your brother probably wants me dead because I exist—wants Holden dead, too, I’m sure. It’s for the best that we let things go, I think.”

“I’m going to kill him,” he replied.

Like it meant nothing. There wasn’t even inflection in his voice.

“You’re going to kill your own brother?” Holden chuckled in disbelief.

“He killed our mother this morning. I didn’t go up with him—I couldn’t be in the same room. I waited outside instead. She was dead by the time I got up there.” His nostrils flared, and his eyes looked a little watery, but that was as much emotion as he showed. It wasn’t easy for him to hold it back, though. I could tell.

“You think he’s capable of that?” I whispered, stunned. “I mean, he’s a monster. Just the way you describe him tells me as much. And his aura. I saw it all over his aura. Some of the darkest color I’ve ever seen. But that’s not the same as killing his mother.”

“I’m sure of it,” he insisted in a flat, emotionless voice. “He’ll tell himself and anyone who accuses him of it that he did it for her. To ease her suffering. But I know better.”

“How?”

“I’m his twin. I know him very well. Maybe better than he knows himself. In fact, I’d

be willing to bet on that, seeing as how he's become a self-deluded fool. And I know he killed her before I could get up there. He didn't want Mommy to know what a bad boy he was."

"You're stretching a little, don't you think?" Holden asked.

"No. I don't think so. Don't you think the coincidence is a little much?" He looked at me again, and there was no pleading there. No cajoling. He looked very tired. "I've already lost everything—and if I lose you, well, I'll learn to deal with it. I have all the time in the world and nothing better to do. But I had to at least come to you and get it all down so you'll know."

"Know what?" I whispered.

"That I'm not evil. That I'm sorry for everything I've done, sincerely sorry. That I'm not that person anymore. And you would hate me if you knew the depths to which I was willing to sink back then. I'll spend the rest of my life trying to make up for that."

I waited. When he didn't continue, I prompted. "Is that all?"

Don't let it be all. Please. Tell me you want to fight for me. Tell me I'm worth it.

He took a deep breath. "And, if your Nightwarden won't let me near you without ripping me to pieces, so be it. But I won't stay away unless you want me to."

Holden's feelings on the subject were evident from the turn his feelings took. His red-hot rage and indignation hit me like a sledgehammer. He was smart enough to hold his tongue, however, probably because of what I'd done to him earlier.

"I don't want you to stay away," I replied. "But I don't think you should be here right

now. I have a lot to consider. Including my coven. And your brother is... your brother.”

“I understand. You know how to find me.” He nodded to Holden before turning to go.

I watched with a heavy heart. I wanted to throw myself into his arms. I wanted him to hold me. I saw so much pain in him that I wanted to take away.

I managed to wait until he reached the hallway before running after him.

“Wait,” I breathed.

He turned, surprised, and caught me just as I fell against his sturdy chest. His arms were almost strong enough to make me believe everything would be all right. He would save me, and I’d save him right back, if he’d let me.

His mouth was warm and rough and demanding against mine—but only at first, before it softened. He kissed me slowly, deeply, taking ownership of my lips and my tongue and everything about me.

For the first time in my life, somebody was stronger than me and I was all right with it. I rejoiced in it. I gladly gave myself over and would do it again and again if he would let me, so long as he always kissed me until my toes curled and my core burned with delicious fire.

He groaned just before his arms tightened like a vise and his kiss became desperate, breathless, the sort of kiss that made me want to lead him to the bedroom and strip him down before riding him. He pressed his hand to my lower back and pulled me in against him.

When it ended, I could hardly stand. He held me up until I could support myself, but

that didn't mean I wanted to leave his embrace.

I would've stood there until we both turned to dust. How had I lived without that sort of passion? How could I have tried to convince myself that life was worth living without it?

"Stay safe," he whispered, kissing my forehead and squeezing me once more before letting go.

I waited until the elevator doors closed between us before marching back to the penthouse and locking the door behind me.

I wasn't about to lose him.

"I'm calling a meeting," I announced to Holden as I pulled out my phone.

12

Gentry

I slung back the rest of the bourbon in the glass. It sent fingers of fire through my veins, made me glow inside. The world looked a little softer, a little kinder, when I had the help of the almost ancient bottle from Father's collection.

Mother had never touched the stuff, so the liquor had sat unopened at the bar for the sixty years since his death, and for years before that. Part of his collection. The rest, along with dozens of bottles of wine, sat in a closet off the kitchen. Another potential source of income should I need it.

I left the window and walked across the room, my bare feet not making a sound, down the hall and into the library. It was cold in there, but I had no intention of building a fire. I had never built one the same way humans did, anyway, and had no idea where to start. There was so much to learn.

Father's desk still sat there, as always. He'd used the space as an office, and clan business had been settled there for as long as he was in charge. As a child, playing with my airplanes and my dog while he conducted meetings, I couldn't have understood the meaning of some of the things he'd discussed.

Mass cleansing. Sending a message.

Always under the guise of keeping his family—both me and my brother and the family at large—safe from the unpredictable, violent, brutish blood suckers.

To me, they were just words. And he was just my father, who I'd all but idolized. Dominic did, too. He couldn't have raised two more faithful devotees.

Now, I sat in my father's chair for the first time as an adult. It had become worn over time, with indents in the stuffing from his considerable size. Roughly the same as mine. I slid into those indents easily, like I was the one who made them. Bridging the distance between us.

I shook my head at my poetic turn and blamed it on the bourbon. There were far more crucial topics in need of exploration. With a little liquid courage in my veins, it was easier to take stock of my situation as a whole.

My brother. What would his next move be? I imagined him sitting at Beekman Place, perhaps in his study or maybe in his bedroom. Alone, of course, because he was always alone and would be for the remainder of his short life. While we were similar in temperament, he never had my touch with women. Or men, if he preferred them. I had no idea, because we'd never discussed either. Too busy competing with each other to connect.

I did know he was generally alone and claimed to prefer it that way. After all, what were his choices? Sleeping with witches, who he detested, or with humans. Who he loathed.

And what was he doing? Plotting, of course. Always plotting. Planning his next move. He had to know I knew what he'd done in the hospital. And it was probably eating him up inside. So he'd excuse it away, make up a story where he was the hero. He'd ended her pain, he'd put her to rest. What a class act. I bared my teeth in a snarl at the thought of his hypocrisy and delusion.

There wouldn't be a big funeral. But he would want to meet at her grave. I knew how his mind worked. And if he were going to do anything to silence me, he would do it

there. It would appeal to his flair for drama, which he'd always possessed. Hence the explosion at the club. A grand gesture.

I would have to be ready for him. It was as simple as that. He'd use his powers, naturally. There had to be a way to beat him before he could turn them on me.

If not, I'd make sure to take him down with me. I wouldn't leave him behind, not with Vanessa in the world. I didn't trust him when it came to her. Our clan had a particular vehemence against witches that were not of our clan. Bloodlines, old enemies, that sort of thing. Things that didn't matter to me now.

And however powerful Vanessa might be, he was both powerful and clever, and he would take it as a personal insult that she'd so much as touched a member of his family. It chilled me to consider that I had once held similar beliefs.

Though I had never shared his complete disdain for humanity. How would I ever have gotten laid otherwise? I sniped at myself, but there was deep truth to the joke, just as with all jokes.

I was never one to be alone. Always surrounded by the rest of my clan, and by some of the most spectacular women in the world. The center of attention, the life of the party.

The death of so many others. Those memories would never be far behind. All the pain I had caused. The lives I had ruined. I didn't think of them as lives back then, not lives like mine.

I imagined it was something close to the way a human would view an insect. If the fly wanted to avoid death by rolled-up newspaper, it should've stayed out of the house. A similar attitude to the one I once held. If the panhandler or the prostitute or the vampire wanted to keep their miserable lives intact, they should've escaped my

notice. They would've saved themselves the agony of my warped sense of entitlement, and the glee I had taken in watching them suffer at my hand. Just thinking about it made me clench my once-deadly hands together until it hurt. If I were a praying man, I might never stop asking for mercy.

I almost shot out of my chair when the phone rang.

Even though it was well past three, I knew it would be her.

She'd be just as unable to sleep as I was, though she would never revisit memories like mine.

She was good. Not like me.

"Is everything all right?" I asked on answering.

"Aside from getting my ass chewed out by my mother for hours on end and not being able to call while my Nightwarden was watching me like a hawk?" she chuckled. "Oh, sure. Everything's peachy."

"I want to see you," I murmured as yearning unfurled in my core. Just the sound of her voice, her intimate whispers into the phone in the middle of the night, was enough to stir me.

"I need to see you," she said in a voice full of nervous excitement. "Should I come to you?"

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“No, I’ll come to you. You’ll be safer at your penthouse.” I was already sliding into my shoes.

“All right. Hurry.” Her breathy plea turned, even as the nasty voice in the back of my mind replayed the scenes of horror I had brought to life.

The dancing, burning man whose face melted like wax. The screaming prostitute I’d dangled high up over the Hollywood sign, laughing as her shrieks for mercy disappeared into the empty air before letting her fall to her death. The vampires I had hunted the way a man hunts game in the forest, attacking them when they least expected, sometimes holding them captive in remote locations until they begged for the mercy of death rather than face another day of starvation. And that was when I would drag them into the sunlight—weak, unable to fight me off—and watch them writhe and wail as the sun’s rays blistered them on contact and eventually turned them into piles of ashes.

She wouldn’t want me to hurry if she knew I was capable of those things and so much more. But that didn’t stop me from getting in the first cab to come my way and hurrying to her. It didn’t stop me from going straight to her penthouse and pulling her into my arms the moment the door was open.

I looked around while I kicked the door shut behind us. “We’re alone,” she whispered, answering my silent questions. “He’ll be dazed for a while, but he won’t feel a thing. Or hear a thing, either.”

“You cast a spell on him?”

“I need to be with you.” She slid her hands under my jacket and pushed it over my shoulders, to the floor. I lifted her up until her legs could wrap around my hips, and she pointed down the hall to her bedroom.

I could close the door behind us and block out the rest of the world. I could turn my attention to her, focus on Vanessa and her pleasure, and mine.

I could pretend nothing else existed but us as I lowered her to the bed and she pulled me down with her.

We both could.

13

Vanessa

“I don’t understand the dreams. Where do you think they came from?”

Gentry shook his head before I rested mine on his shoulder.

In the middle of insanity, being in bed with him with his arms around me provided peace. Solace. I could believe we’d be all right.

“I’m not sure,” he murmured. “It seems as though I came into your dream around the time I reached New York, or a little before.”

“And that was when I started sleeping again. Thank you for that, by the way. I missed sleeping through the night without blood-chilling flashbacks.”

“You dreamed that every night?” He craned his neck to look down at me, frowning with concern.

“Every single one since I got home. It sometimes felt like I never left. Part of me was always back there. You were the one who helped me feel safe, finally.”

“I would go insane if I had to go through that even once,” he murmured as he stroked my hair, then let his hand trail down my back, leaving goosebumps in his wake. “You’re even stronger than I gave you credit for.”

“I told you I’m the Big Dog in the pack.” I tried to smile and make light of the situation, but the joke died on my lips. It was safe for me to be vulnerable around him. I trusted him. “I didn’t feel strong. Not through all of this. I felt small and weak and scared. Or I did until a tall, dark stranger appeared and changed the dream’s script.”

“Even though I wasn’t the one who saved you.”

“Even so.”

He held me a little tighter. “For my part, at least I had the chance to feel powerful again. Even if it was only a dream.”

“Oh, Gentry.” I couldn’t imagine what it would feel like to lose everything that ever made me who I was.

Only another witch or sorcerer could understand how much of one’s identity was wrapped up in his or her special powers and talents. These were what set us apart from the rest of the world. They made us who we were.

That I was supposed to be The Chosen One always capitalized in my head because it sounded that way when my coven sisters said it. I was special. Without my powers, I’d be no one.

“It’s not all bad,” he admitted, almost like he was answering the many questions I was too afraid to ask. “I mean it with all my heart when I say I’m ashamed of the sorcerer I was. I deserved to have my powers stripped. Truly. I see that now.”

“Do you miss them?”

He chuckled. “Only all day long. When I’m hungry, and there’s no one to cook for

me. I sure as hell don't know how to do it. Before you called, I was cold and realized I didn't know how to use the fireplace. Having to walk everywhere instead of porting. A nightmare." But he was laughing at himself—even so, there was truth to it.

He could try to hide his true feelings from me, but it didn't work.

"You'll get used to it."

"I'm sure I will. It'll take decades, but I will." He looked at me again, sizing me up.

"How old are you really?"

"What a question."

"I was only wondering." He touched my cheek, barely grazing my skin. "You're so beautiful. And still so young. I'll age faster than you will."

I caught his fingers and pressed my lips to them. "Don't. Just don't. You'll stay young for a long time—and if you do age faster than me, it doesn't matter. What matters is this." I pressed my palm against his chest.

"You say that now," he chuckled.

"I mean it." The fact that we were talking long-term wasn't lost on me. It felt natural, the way Monday followed Sunday and November followed October. There wasn't a question in my mind.

The sun was starting to rise, and the sky outside the window began to lighten.

I wanted to stop time, to make the night last forever. I would give up everything else in life if it meant staying in his arms for all eternity, right there in that room, in that very bed. It would be an even exchange.

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But I had a gathering to prepare myself for. I'd scheduled an impromptu meeting for later that morning in the penthouse versus holding it right away, seeing as how several members were out of town and needed time to get back—we weren't scheduled to meet again until the thirty-first, when we'd have our own version of a Halloween celebration. And in the meantime, the rest of the coven had gone off to live their lives .

I left the comfort of his arms with a groan, then stretched languidly before getting out of bed. All drama and anxiety aside, I had never felt better. Maybe it was the three rounds of mind-numbing sex. The memory made me blush, even as I grinned wickedly.

He watched me as I slid into a robe and belted it tight. "Do you really have to do that?" he asked, when my eyes met his. There was no sarcasm in those familiar jade-green pools of light.

All I saw was desire strong enough to make my body cry out in response.

There would be more time for that later. "Put clothing on, you mean? No, I don't have to, if you're all right with me walking around naked in front of Holden..."

He growled. "Good point. Leave it on. Maybe wear a parka and snow pants on top."

I had to giggle at his flare of jealousy. "Oh, please. Do you really think Holden gives a damn one way or another? Nightwardens aren't supposed to think about things like that." But Elias had, and still was with my sister if there was any justice in the world.

“It doesn’t matter what they’re supposed to think. Any man with blood in his veins and a pulse couldn’t help but fantasize about you.”

“I hope that doesn’t sour your opinion of him.”

“The fact that he wants to kill me is reason enough to sour me, thanks.” He slid into his jeans with a grimace in my direction.

“That’s his job. It’s how he’s wired. He’ll come around.” With that, I opened the bedroom door.

Holden rushed in, almost knocking me aside as he hurled himself at Gentry.

Before I could cry out in surprise, he had him by the throat and up against the wall.

“Holden! What are you doing?” I ran to him, pulled on his arm.

It was no use.

“What’s he doing here?” he snarled.

Gentry’s face was red, but he somehow maintained his composure even though Holden was slowly strangling him.

“Put him down.” I stared daggers at my Nightwarden. “Damn it, we’ve discussed this.”

Holden bared his fangs.

Gentry didn’t so much as blink.

The two of them glared at each other. “I could bleed you dry right now,” my vampire Nightwarden whispered.

My skin crawled.

“I know you could,” Gentry gasped.

“What’s stopping me, then?” Holden whispered.

“She is. She’s your charge, and you have to do as she commands.”

“Bullshit!” A growl this time. “I’ll kill who I want to kill. She doesn’t know what’s right. She’s not thinking clearly. You have her twisted.”

“Put. Him. Down.” I pointed my palms in his direction but didn’t use my powers. Not just yet. “I’m giving you a chance to do it before I have to hurt you, Holden.”

“You would hurt me?” he muttered, still glaring at Gentry. Practically licking his chops at the thought of destroying him.

The amount of absolute loathing was staggering.

I didn’t know Holden was capable of that much emotion—or, frankly, that any Nightwarden was.

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It came at me in waves, wrapping around me, souring in my mouth. All that hate.

“I would do more than hurt you, Holden. Please, don’t push me to that point.”

He waited a beat before looking at me, and a wave of some other feeling slammed into me and almost knocked me off my feet.

No. I couldn’t be. But there it was. I sighed when it all became clear.

“Oh, Holden. I understand. We can talk about it, all right? But just not now. Please. There’s so much more at stake.”

Than you loving me, I wanted to add.

Why didn’t I see it before? It wasn’t just a matter of him outperforming Elias.

He glared at Gentry once more, and the claws at his throat tightened—I could see the way they dug into his flesh even at a distance—before he dropped him to the floor.

I held myself back instead of rushing to him. It would only rub salt in Holden’s wounds to watch me rush to another man.

Why hadn’t I seen it? It all made so much sense.

“Thank you,” was all I said, even though there was so much more to be said and we both knew it.

Gentry rubbed this throat. “Yeah, thanks.”

“Shut up,” Holden hissed. His claws were still extended, I noticed.

I could feel his emotions; every instinct he possessed told him to kill Gentry, and not just because of what he had done to vampires in his former life. I had been so blind.

“Both of you, stop. We need to work together, or we’re all screwed.” I held my head in my hands. “Like I needed one more thing to worry about. I have the entire coven on my ass, led by my mother, of course. A psychopathic sorcerer is nipping at my heels. And now this.”

“I wouldn’t say the coven’s on your ass,” Holden replied. He sounded a lot more like himself, and his eyes were back to their usual color.

“Please. My mother is furious, which means everybody else will be once she gets in their ears. Big surprise.” I flopped down on the bed. “She might have calmed down a little since the phone call yesterday, but I highly doubt it.”

“You told her about me?” Gentry asked.

“The little bit she let me get in edgewise had to do with you, yes.” I could still hear her shrill, ringing voice in my ear. “She wasn’t pleased.”

“I’ve caused you trouble,” Gentry observed, sitting beside me on the bed.

“Yes,” Holden replied before I had the chance.

I shot him a look before turning to Gentry. “It’s not your fault, believe me.”

“It isn’t yours, either. You didn’t know who I was, and I didn’t know who you were.”

“I knew,” Holden whispered.

“You didn’t know anything,” I reminded him, my voice sharp. “Having a feeling and knowing something are two different things. And you would’ve had a feeling about any man I dated. It’s irrelevant now. This is the situation we’re in, and that’s that.” I just had to find a way to make it work. Somehow.

“There’s no guarantee Dominic will attack you,” Gentry offered.

He didn’t believe it. I could see it on his face.

“Yes, just like there was no guarantee Kristoff would.” I stumbled on the name.

Saying it was like opening an old wound, but it was one that needed to be opened and dealt with for good.

I looked at them. First one, then the other. “I won’t wait around for another sorcerer to decide it’s time to strike. I won’t leave my fate in anyone else’s hands ever again.”

14

Gentry

It was perhaps the most surreal moment of my life: sitting on the bench in front of the grand piano, looking out over a room filled wall-to-wall with witches. And all of them looking back at me. The weight of their stares threatened to crush me—and for all I knew, some of them were literally trying to do just that with their powers. I saw no small amount of loathing among them.

Vanessa cleared her throat, and all eyes reluctantly turned to her. Standing there, head held high, she sent a blast of pride surging through me. Every inch the High Sorceress.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” she said, looking at all of them in turn, all except the tall, striking woman seated to her right.

Vanessa made it a point to avoid her. Anyone with eyes could see the resemblance between Vanessa and the woman with the long, gray-streaked braid and heavily-ringed fingers. In a way, her mother Cressida reminded me of my own mother. A powerful personality.

“They had little choice. None of us has a choice when we find ourselves painted into a corner,” Cressida remarked, pursing her lips in a disapproving scowl.

Vanessa accepted this without argument. “I understand this is a difficult position for all of us. And I’ve put us there. For that, I apologize.”

“A High Sorceress needs to be capable of better discernment,” her mother hissed.

“What would you have me do? Create an application form for every man I meet to fill out? Ask if he has any dark secrets or possible magical abilities?” Vanessa fired back.

Her temper flashed—she had told me about it, and about how easy it was to set her off, but I hadn’t seen it until then. She seemed to remember herself at the last minute and backed down before actual sparks flew between them.

One of the other witches spoke up. “We don’t blame you, Vanessa. It’s an unfortunate situation.”

She was lying. Even without powers, I could almost smell it on her. She was too afraid of her High Sorceress’s powers to challenge her. They all were, except for Cressida.

Another one of them nodded before adding, “The real challenge is knowing what to do about the sorcerer. Do you feel he’s a threat to the clan?”

Vanessa’s eyes met mine, but only for a moment. “I think it would be best for his brother to speak now.”

That was my cue.

Holden growled from his place behind Vanessa as I stepped up to her left.

It was important to me that I not start the meeting seated beside her. It would only give the coven the wrong idea.

“My name is Gentry Duncan. My brother is Dominic. My parents were—”

“Lawrence and Grace Duncan,” Cressida finished, her voice flat. “We know of your family and what it’s stood for ever since the first Duncan set foot in the New World. That family is legendary.”

I swallowed hard and reminded myself of how it felt to have my powers. The confidence they gave me.

I would never have let an ordinary witch, ex-High Sorceress or not, speak over me. I wouldn’t have let her look at me the way she was unless she wanted to permanently lose her sight—and I would’ve made sure to remind her of it.

I could still call on that confidence, even if I couldn’t call on the violence. “Yes. The family is legendary,” I said, slipping into my old persona as I did. It was like sliding into a favorite pair of jeans, or shoes which had been perfectly broken in. “It’s no secret that the Duncans have no love for anyone who isn’t one of us, but especially vampires and humans.”

“Why should we believe you’re not the one who planted the explosives in that vampire club?” she asked.

“It’s irrelevant whether you believe it or not,” I replied.

She raised an eyebrow.

I continued, “The question of my guilt or innocence isn’t why we’re here today. It’s for you to gain insight into my brother’s psyche. I believe he will attack the coven in some way.”

“Why would he do that? We’ve done him no harm.” A concerned murmuring rose up over the room.

Vanessa held up a hand to silence them, then turned to me as they rest of them did.

“Because the fact that I’m involved with you, even in the most tenuous of ways, is an insult to him.” I tried to put myself in his place, just as I had been since the night he burst into my apartment and begged me to take the fall for him. “He knows that if he hadn’t stripped my powers—which he was responsible for to begin with—this never would’ve happened. He’s twisted enough to do something to hurt you, to break off my involvement with your High Sorceress.”

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“What if you break it off before he can do anything about it?”

There was truly nothing in the world like a hopeful, strong-willed, domineering mother. I had to hand it to Cressida for trying.

“That’s not going to happen, unless Vanessa wants it so.” One look at her told me she wanted anything but that. I looked around the room again. “Besides, even then, there’s no telling what my brother will do. He’s completely unhinged. I suppose guilt will do that to a person. I have to strike before he gets the chance.”

“What possible good could you do?” one of the witches asked with a sneer of disdain.

I imagined gouging her eyes out from across the room, or sealing her mouth shut for having the audacity to speak that way to me.

It was difficult to remind myself those days were behind me when my blood boiled as it was at the moment.

Instead of maiming her, which I wasn’t capable of, I said, “I have an idea.”

15

Gentry

It was cold,crisp and clear. The moon was a crescent, standing out perfectly against the cloudless sky. The perfect late-October night.

And I was standing in a graveyard.

At my feet was the stone sarcophagus which marked the family plot. The word DUNCAN had long since been carved out of the marble coffin over which a weeping marble angel had stood watch for six decades.

Why an angel would ever weep over my father's death was well beyond me, but Mother had insisted. I could remember imagining the angel weeping tears of joy at the knowledge he was no longer walking the planet. A theory I had never shared with the rest of my family.

Mother was there, too, having been placed alongside her husband earlier in the day. The dirt was still mounded over the new grave. I dropped a handful of flowers and hoped she wouldn't be able to see what I was about to do, wherever she was.

I had never quite decided if I believed in an afterlife. I hoped for my sake there wasn't one, or I was in for an eternity of anguish. I would deserve every moment of it.

The pack was bulky, but my jacket zipped neatly over it.

I hoped my brother's eyes would be too full of lying, murdering tears to notice the difference.

"Do you think he'll come?" Vanessa had asked before I left the penthouse.

She had clutched my jacket, fingers curling into desperate claws.

I did think so at the moment, and I still did as I stood there waiting for him.

He would come. Nothing could keep him away.

A figure approached in the darkness, joining me on the hill which overlooked the rest of the cemetery.

"She would like being up here," Dominic murmured, looking out over the other graves and mausoleums, then at the city in the distance. "She can look down on everyone else."

"Yes. It suits her. I think that was part of the reason she chose this plot." I caught a glimpse of him out of the corner of my eye.

Dressed to kill, as always. I would've been disappointed otherwise. His long, black coat fluttered in the breeze which ruffled his hair as he turned to look at me.

"I suppose you've come for a reason other than paying your respects," he observed.

"Isn't that reason enough? I didn't get the chance to say goodbye to her before you ended her life."

He didn't bother denying it. "She was suffering. You saw for yourself."

“You’re so damned predictable.” I faced him, hands on my hips. “Why don’t you try being a little less predictable for once? That is exactly what I thought you’d argue.”

“It’s the truth.”

“It’s a convenient truth you tell yourself to soothe your guilt. Yes, she was suffering, but that wasn’t why you did it. Try being honest for the first time, while you still can.”

His shoulders fell when the truth of my words sank in. For a moment, he was my brother. Not the twisted, sick, corrupted sorcerer. Not the vicious, hateful monster. My twin. My first friend and first enemy.

“I didn’t want her to know.”

Finally, the truth.

“I understand that.” It didn’t make me feel better, but I did understand. “And I think she would’ve understood it, too. Just like she would understand what I have to do now.”

“What do you have to do?”

I unzipped my jacket and held it open so he could see the C4 strapped to my waist.

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Vanessa had been too upset before letting me leave to notice the extra thickness under the leather. She never would've let me leave if she had.

"I have to kill us both."

"You're insane."

"Maybe. Maybe I've always been." I slid the detonator from my pocket and held it up for his examination. "If you try any magic to kill me before I press this button, you'll set off the explosives yourself. So, it's really up to either you or me when we die."

He shook his head, falling back a step.

He had imagined multiple scenarios—that was how his mind worked—but none of them involved me doing this.

"Why would you...?"

"Because you came here with the intention of killing me. You can't stand the reminder of what you've done, and you can't live with the possibility of my telling the clan about it. It will be much easier for you with me out of the way. The thing is, I would be fine with that."

He scowled. "Be serious."

"You don't think this is me being serious?" I asked, almost laughing at how ridiculous he sounded. "I don't know how much more serious I could possibly be."

“You don’t want me to kill you, or else you wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble. Where did you even get your hands on that?”

“You’d be surprised what a person can purchase when they’re determined enough. That’s beside the point. And I meant it when I said I want you to kill me.” I moved closer to him, and took pleasure in the way his eyes widened. The sadist in me hadn’t completely faded away. “I’m not sure I want to live with the memory of what I’ve done. I’m not sure I deserve to live. You would be doing me a mercy, just like you tell yourself you did for her.” I jerked my head in the direction of the grave.

“So why go to all this trouble, as I asked?”

“I can’t let you hurt anyone I care about when I’m gone.”

Understanding touched his features, and he went back to being the cold, imperious sorcerer I recognized. “I see. This is all for her. You think you love her, don’t you?”

“Perhaps I do.”

“You’re weak.”

“Perhaps I am.”

“You always were.”

“I don’t disagree with you. Do you think these accusations will hurt me?” I asked with a smile. “You can’t hurt me anymore. I’m beyond that point. And I understand why you can’t comprehend what I’m doing now. You always considered love a weakness.”

“It is. It makes us do stupid things. Case in point.”

“This is the smartest thing I’ve ever done. The smartest and the best.” I held up the detonator. “I hope you’ve made peace with your life, because it’s about to end.”

The snap of a twig caused us both to look toward a large, gnarled tree a few dozen feet away.

From behind it stepped a hulking figure, cloaked in darkness.

Even though I couldn’t make out the face, I already knew the shape. He’d only tried to kill me several times.

Holden.

My heart sank.

Because if he was there...

“Gentry? What do you think you’re doing?” Vanessa stepped out beside him.

She didn’t know she had just ruined everything I’d barely managed to convince myself to do.

It was difficult enough to kill myself, but knowing I was leaving her had made the decision ten times harder. I couldn’t do it with her there.

Dominic’s laughter rang through the cold air. “Oh, my goodness. This just got interesting.”

16

Vanessa

“Don’t get any closer to them,” Holden warned, a hand on my arm.

I tried to shake him off, but he wasn’t having it.

Gentry nodded. “He’s right. Stay back. Stay as far away as you can. You shouldn’t have come.”

“No, no, she should have. I’m glad she’s here—her and her little pet,” Dominic sneered. “I can do what I wanted to do out in the street the other day. There are no witnesses here.”

“Don’t let him get to you,” I whispered.

It was bad enough he was close to getting to me. I couldn’t risk Holden losing control, as much as I would’ve loved to see him shred the bastard who laughed at us.

“Doesn’t it bother you, having to spend so much time with a creature who barely deserves your attention?” Dominic asked, shaking his head as though he pitied me. “You’re obviously a strong witch, or you wouldn’t have earned the position you now hold. Doesn’t your skin crawl when you stand as close to him as you do now?”

“Hold your tongue,” I ordered as Holden’s hand tightened enough for me to wince in pain.

“And you,” he continued, turning his attention to my vampire, “doesn’t it burn you up inside to know you’ll never be good enough for her? You’re not even fit to lick the soles of her shoes. You’ll never be anything more than a blood-sucking servant, a slave, someone to trail around in her shadow. She’ll never see you as anything more than a pathetic tool for her to use. And she’ll never love you.”

Holden shoved me aside then lunged at the sorcerer.

“No!” I screamed, throwing myself after him, but he was much too fast.

Not fast enough.

Dominic’s laugh was enough to freeze my blood as he held up his hand and fired a bolt of sizzling, white light into Holden’s chest. He seized up with an agonized shriek, his body freezing for a split second, before crumpling to the ground.

“No!” I screamed again as I landed beside him, rolling him over.

His eyes were wide open in unblinking, unseeing shock.

“No, no, no,” I whispered as I brushed his hair back and cradled his head in my lap. “Oh, Holden, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“See the way she kneels beside him in the dirt? See the way she debases herself for his sake even after I’ve ended his pathetic life? He’s lucky I didn’t prolong things as I wanted to.” Dominic laughed again.

I raised my head slowly, and the wind kicked up as I did. I got one foot under me, then another, and stood beside Holden’s body. My hands tingled and burned in anticipation of all I wanted to do to him.

Clouds rolled in from all sides, blocking the moon and stars. Thunder rumbled loud enough to shake the ground and lightning leaped from one cloud to the other, making the sky look as though it were on fire.

“Vanessa!” Gentry shouted over the storm. “Don’t do this! He wants you to do this!”

That wasn’t so. Gentry was right about a lot of things, but not about this.

His brother’s face was a mask of stone, but his eyes told another story. He was terrified. He had no idea what I was capable of.

I threw up a shield around myself in time to deflect one spell, then another, the bolts of white and blue light diverted easily before they could hit my body, shooting off in all directions.

I walked to him, one careful step after another, taking my time. Savoring the growing panic in the coward’s eyes the closer I moved.

He tried to put the marble sarcophagus between us.

I pointed one palm in its direction and cracked the monument in two.

“How dare you?” he shrieked. How could he look so much like Gentry but be so unlike him?

His features twisted in rage as he threw another spell, then another.

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One of them hit the tree I'd hidden behind, and I could feel the heat from the flames.

The rest bounced off my shield.

He was growing more frantic with every passing second, dripping sweat as nothing he tried to do to me worked. Meanwhile, I wasn't even breathing heavy.

"I'll kill him!" he screamed, pointing his palms in Gentry's direction. That stopped me in my tracks, even though the storm still raged around us.

Leaves twirled through the air in funnel clouds, and entire branches became projectiles as the wind tore them from the trees.

"And if I kill him, I'll kill us all!"

I looked at Gentry. My love. He was willing to sacrifice his life to save mine. I would do the same for him if I had to. But it wouldn't come to that. I wouldn't allow it.

I lowered my shield and turned my powers in his direction.

Gentry didn't feel the change—the storm had reached fever pitch, and he could barely keep his eyes open for the roaring wind and debris. He didn't notice what I did when I did it.

"Fine," I said, brushing hair out of my face. "You win. I won't kill you tonight."

"As if there was ever any doubt, witch." Dominic threw back his head and laughed

bitterly. “Oh, love. The stupid things it makes us do.”

“Yes. Very stupid.” I looked at Gentry again, and he shook his head.

“Don’t let him win! You can’t let him win!”

“That’s up to you!” I shouted. “It’s in your hands now!”

His hands.

Confusion touched his face, making him frown.

He looked down at the hand not holding the detonator and flexed his fingers.

A slow smile formed at the corners of his mouth and spread as understanding seeped in.

He raised his head, looking at his brother with loathing and pity and rage.

“This ends now,” he said as he slid the detonator inside his jacket pocket and pointed his palms in Dominic’s direction.

Dominic gaped at him in awe, then laughed louder than ever. “Are you that deluded? Don’t you remember I’ve already stripped you?”

Gentry’s answer came in the form of red bolts of light which blew the head off the marble angel just to Dominic’s right. He smiled wider than ever.

“What?” Dominic shrieked. “This is impossible!” He glared at me. “You! You did this! How could you do this? You’re just a witch!”

“Haven’t you heard?” I shouted back with a smile. “I’m The Chosen One.”

He turned back to his brother and raised his hands to attack, but Gentry was ready for him.

A single, blinding flash of light traveled from his palms straight to his brother’s chest.

Just as Holden had, Dominic threw his head back when the spell hit him. His body seized up in agony, limbs contorting, eyes bulging.

Then, it was over.

He fell on his back over the freshly-turned earth above his mother’s grave. His sightless eyes stared up at the stormy sky.

The wind died down, and the clouds parted, and it was just the two of us, standing on the hill. Gentry stared down at his brother’s body.

“You did what you had to do,” I whispered, approaching slowly. “We have to get this off you, now.” I helped him remove the explosives.

Only when they were off his body did I fry the wires connecting them, rendering the whole thing useless.

He pulled me against his chest and held me there. “I thought I was going to lose you. You shouldn’t have put yourself in harm’s way like that. I had it under control.”

I pulled back in surprise. “You mean the way you almost killed yourself for my sake? That’s not having things under control! That’s taking yourself away from me when I need you. I love you. I don’t think I could live without you now. I wouldn’t want to try.”

He smiled tenderly, brushing bits of leaves and dirt from my hair. “I love you, too, you know.”

“You’d better, damn it.” I pulled him down by the collar of his jacket and kissed him as hard as I could.

17

Gentry

“He certainly didn’t expect it.” I flexed my fingers again, looking down at my hands. I had killed him with them, using the power Vanessa had restored to me. I was me again. What did that mean?

Cressida clicked her tongue. “I’m sure it wasn’t easy for you to do that to your own brother.” She even sounded sympathetic.

“Actually? It wasn’t too difficult. I couldn’t think about him that way anymore. Everything that ever made us brothers was gone—well, almost everything. Only the blood which tied us together still existed. But that’s only as important as we make it.”

I didn’t share blood with Vanessa, but she would always be my family. I wouldn’t say that in front of her mother for fear of having body parts torn off.

I looked at Vanessa, curled up beside Cressida. The older witch needed to comfort her daughter, her only living daughter. I understood that.

There was plenty of time for me to hold Vanessa and cherish her and order her to never do anything so reckless again.

The memory of the storm she’d brewed flashed through my brain at the idea of ordering her to do anything. Maybe it would be smarter to let her have her head. It would keep me from getting hit with a bolt of lightning.

“You have your powers back,” Vanessa said. “How does it make you feel?”

It took no time for me to reply. “I don’t want them back. Not permanently.”

“You don’t?” Cressida’s jaw dropped.

I shook my head. “They were what made me who I was, and I hate who I was. You would hate me, too,” I added, looking at Vanessa. “You wanted me when I didn’t have them anymore. I want to be that man.”

It occurred to me that she might not want me that way anymore, knowing what she knew.

It was one thing to develop an attraction toward a man without knowing what he was capable of. What if she didn’t care for the human version of me?

Her soft smile wiped every doubt from my heart. “I only thought you might want them back for good. If you’re absolutely certain, I can take them away now.”

I looked down at my hands one more time. I could get used to being powerless. I could get used to anything as long as I had her by my side.

“Do it,” I decided. Seconds later, it was over. I could feel the power leaving me again.

“I don’t know that the coven will be easy to sway when they know you plan to remain with a human,” Cressida reminded her daughter as she stroked her hair.

Vanessa caught her mother’s wrist and held her hand steady.

“Which is why I think you and I need to have a talk,” she murmured.

“I can go,” I offered. I would rather.

“No, please. Stay.” Vanessa’s eyes searched her mother’s face. “Oh, Mom, I’m sorry to say this. But you and I both know it won’t work, me leading the coven while I’m involved with Gentry. And I plan to be involved with him for the rest of my life.”

“Don’t tell me you’re saying what it sounds like you’re saying,” Cressida whispered. She shook her head, chin quivering. “No. No. I won’t lose you both.”

“You won’t be losing me. You could never lose me. But I could never be the High Sorceress I need to be while my coven sisters doubt my choices. I would lose their confidence—in fact, I know I’ve already lost it. They don’t trust my judgment anymore. And I won’t bully them into submission, the way I would’ve done before. I’m not about to stomp my feet and throw a fit to get my way. It’s time to start being an adult.”

Cressida’s teary face turned my way. “And you would allow her to do this? You claim you care for her, but you would let her give up her birthright? She’s the most remarkable witch of her generation or any other. You would allow her to step down from what’s hers?”

“I don’t allow her to do anything,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “This is her decision. I would rather she not have to, of course, and I hate the thought of her losing the coven because of me.”

“But I don’t have another choice,” Vanessa finished. “This is the way it is. If I could have both, I would take both. Of course, I would. Gladly. But that simply isn’t possible.”

“I wanted so much more for you than this.”

“More than being happy? Because I am, for the first time ever. I’m actually happy. Being High Sorceress never made me feel even remotely satisfied. That’s probably why I was so impossible for so long.” She got up and came to me, then slid an arm around my waist. “I love him, and he makes me feel. I don’t want anything else.”

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Cressida sighed. “And the coven?”

“You’ll find another High Sorceress. And she’ll... get a new Nightwarden.” Her voice cracked. “I’m so sorry about Holden. He loved me. I should’ve been better to him. I should’ve taken better care of him.”

“He was only doing his job. It’s what he was meant to do.” The way Cressida made it sound, it didn’t matter.

The fact that it mattered to Vanessa told me she could never be the same sort of witch her mother was.

“You won’t lose me. I promise I’ll still be part of your life, if you want me to.”

“You’re my daughter. Of course, I want you to be part of my life.” Cressida draped a coat over her shoulders. “And I suppose I’ll have to clean up this mess, too. As always.”

“As always,” Vanessa agreed.

She sounded like a woman who was used to admitting she was wrong.

Cressida shot me one last look—she hated me, but what else was new—before porting out.

“She’s intense.”

“You have no idea,” Vanessa whispered, leaning against me. “I can’t believe how relieved I am that she’s gone.”

“You’re sure you want to do this?”

“More than sure.” She looked up at me. “I love you. I don’t want anything more than I want you.”

“Good thing, because it might not be safe to go back to my apartment after this. I think I need a place to stay.”

She tilted her head to the side, eyes narrowed. “I think we can work something out.”

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### Epilogue

Vanessa

“I hate this time of year,” I whispered as we passed yet another store full of orange and black garbage. If I stumbled over another pumpkin, I would throw it through a window.

Gentry only chuckled as he took my hand to lead me across the street. “Come on. They enjoy it.”

“They’re ridiculous. They understand nothing about our traditions.”

“Are you going to get this way around Halloween every year? Because I’ll make it a point to take you away for the entire month of October from now on, if that’s the case.”

“Hmm. Tempting.”

We both knew that couldn’t happen—especially since I had someone to celebrate the festival with.

It had only taken nearly a year to be sure nobody was watching my movements, to find her and convince her to meet up with me.

I would never have sought her out if I thought there was a remote chance of hurting either of them.

We walked up the endless flights of stairs, and I knew it wasn't exertion that made my heart race. It wasn't until I heard her voice again on the phone that I realized how much I had missed her.

And seeing her was better than hearing her. She looked better than I had ever seen her. Happy, radiant, healthy. I knew we made the right choice that night at her old apartment, after she and Elias saved me.

My sister Mariya threw her arms around me, then gasped when she felt what was between us.

"Vanessa?" She stepped back, eyes round and teary. "You're..."

"Five months," I announced with a grin, rubbing my growing belly. "Surprise."

"Get in here!" She pulled me into the apartment hugged me more gently than before. "I can't believe it. I'm so happy for you." When she released me, she bear-hugged Gentry. "I don't even know you, but I'm happy for you!"

He laughed in surprise and hugged her back—meanwhile, the sound of footsteps made me turn my head in time to see Elias enter the cramped living room. He looked just the same, but then, he always would.

"Hey there," I grinned, but I was unsure. When I thought of everything that had passed between us, I wasn't sure what to do. How he would react to me.

"Hey yourself," he said before cracking a grin of his own. "You look great."

I was surprised when he came to me with his arms open for a hug. We had never exactly been friends. Mariya had softened him up a lot.

I sat with her and we looked at each other for a while without saying a word. She was so different from before. No more permanent frown. She even looked younger.

“I’m so glad you’re happy,” I managed to whisper through the tears threatening to choke me.

“Me? What about you? When I think about you, all I remember is trying to talk you down from throwing a tantrum. No offense.” She glanced at my belly, then back up at me with one eyebrow cocked.

“Yeah. I know. And now I’ll be the one begging somebody to quit it with the tantrums.”

“You’re in for it. You know that, right? And you have it coming to you.”

Elias’s snort of laughter told me he agreed.

Gentry chuckled behind me. “I hate to think that I’ll end up hearing the tantrums when I didn’t earn them.”

I only rolled my eyes. He knew I knew he was no angel, either.

We laughed over the way we both used our powers to help us land and hold onto our office jobs. Not that we went over-the-top, but it helped when starting off with no marketable skills.

“Imagine not being able to do that,” Gentry grinned wryly, shaking his head at himself.

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“You’re not doing so badly,” I reminded him before turning to the others. “He’s writing his story, but turning it into fiction. He already had publishers interested in it.”

“The only catch is remembering to turn real-life characters into fictitious ones,” he chuckled. “And don’t be surprised if you find me knocking at your door in the future—this could become a series, and I’ll need more material.”

Mariya elbowed Elias. “This one has material enough for a series.”

They smiled fondly at each other.

It did my heart good to see them thriving in Philadelphia. The apartment was tiny and clogged with books, but cozy. Filled with warmth and the scent of cinnamon tea. There would’ve been a time when jealousy would’ve torn me to shreds, but now I was too busy living a happy life of my own. Only after I found happiness did I understand how unhappy I was before.

“How’s Mom?” she asked in a soft voice.

Elias touched her shoulder.

“Are you kidding? She’s living it up. Somebody had to lead the coven while I was gone, and she was more than happy to step up and make the sacrifice.”

We both chuckled.

“And she had to tell me all about it, of course. How exhausting it was. How the coven needed her. You know how she is. But things have calmed down now, and she’s back to only thinking she could do a better job.”

“It’s good to know some things never change,” she smiled, leaning against Elias.

It was surreal, seeing them together, relating to my sister as an equal. I had missed so much time with her.

She looked down at my belly again, and worry touched her face. “You know, it’s one thing when this little one can’t speak, and there’s no danger in seeing them. What happens when it turns into a chatty toddler, and there’s a chance of it blabbing about visiting Auntie Mariya?”

“Let’s not worry about that right now. I just found you—I don’t want to think about the future yet.”

Although in my heart of hearts, I knew we would find a way. We were both navigating uncharted waters but had managed well up to that point.

With the help of our men.

Gentry sat on the arm of the couch, and I leaned against him.

The slight pressure of his warm, gentle kiss on the top of my head was like a silent affirmation.

We would make it work, the way we made everything else work.

Together, always.