



Cursed Gift

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: As Izzy still moves forward with choosing her mates, she must also come to grips with the failings of her gift and the realization that her world isn't as secure as she thought it was.

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Chapter One

Kai gave me one of his special knives.

Right now, it was being used to send to the other side of the room as I worked on my aim—and my anger.

Frustration, sense of helplessness.

Whatever this feeling was, it sucked. I was going to train it out of me while the guys were still sleeping.

Yesterday after the Council meeting, we'd went to the perimeter to look at the tracks. Nothing. Well, they were still there. Monstrous and clawed. Nothing referred to the amount of visions I had in relation to the tracks.

Big fat zero.

I'd even sat down next to one of them and pulled my knees up to my chest. Closing my eyes, I'd willed something to happen. I wanted a look at what did this and what they would bring to us. Was this the root of the vision I'd had? The one with war and death and blood?

Nothing.

Only Alexei knew what I was doing. One-by-one they all left, giving me the most peculiar looks until it was just him and me and Mom. "Anything?" she'd asked.

When I shook my head, she didn't show any emotion, but I knew what she felt inside. Disappointment.

The same disappointment ran through my veins now as I sent the blade to the target. My aim was getting better. It narrowly missed the center. I sprinted to the target and ran back, toeing the line again only two seconds later. I was getting in training and cardio at the same time. The guard who'd been stationed outside my room and followed me here asked if I'd wanted help retrieving the blade, but I shot him down. I just wanted to be alone. To think about how useless this gift was if I couldn't even use it on demand.

Those tracks... a shiver went up my spine. They certainly looked like they were from an enormous animal. How could something get that close to The Fort but not be seen at all? Worse yet, the tracks just disappeared as they neared the woods. It was as if the animal turned invisible. At one spot, fresh tracks led into the woods. The next? Nothing. Just gone. Vanished.

I wanted to scream to the treetops.

Oh, and the guard/intruder? Nowhere. He vanished as well.

The Fort was searched from top to bottom properly after Felix said the guard wasn't from his camp. He was nowhere on the premises. Guards had been sent to Rajyvik house and my parents' estate as well. Still nothing. As I stood here working on my technique, guards were being sent to the other Council members' houses. Depending on the individual family's wishes, the guards were either going to stay there to watch over them or just look for any sign that the intruder—the tracked animal or the guard—had been there. So far, no word back. Then again, it was crazy early in the morning. Only me and Mr. Had To Stay Up All Night Outside My Room were awake right now.

Footsteps sounded behind me just as I was running back to the throw line after another narrow miss. I whirled to tell the guard I still didn't need his help when I saw Felix standing there. Of course he would be the only other person awake at this hour.

My shoulders slumped. I wasn't in the mood to put up my princess mask right now and hold onto it. There were just too many disappointing things going on.

"Felix," I said, nodding at him.

"Princess."

I eyed him warily. He moved closer, each step a deliberate move toward me as if he knew his presence was antagonizing the shit out of me and didn't care in the least. I tried to smile, but it probably came out more like a scowl. "I'm surprised you're up this early."

"Why?"

His brown hair, waves and all, was already perfectly styled where I'd pretty much rolled out of bed and threw my hair up into a messy bun.

He raised his eyebrows when I didn't answer.

Why? I didn't know exactly why I was surprised. If it was one of the other guys, would I still have been shocked to see they were up early? Maybe... Maybe not. Maybe this was all the prejudice against Felix's family forming my opinions of him.

I shrugged. "It's just early is all."

"But you're up."

I placed my bladed hand on my hip. “Does that surprise you?”

He shook his head. “Not in the least. You seemed a bit out of sorts yesterday at the perimeter.” His brows furrowed. “Actually, you seemed a bit out of sorts ever since you learned about the tracks.”

“Shouldn’t I be?” I countered. My barely there patience was already fraying. “We have leadership families here from all over the world and first, we have an intruder of the human kind, and then second, we have an intruder of the animal variety. Neither of whose whereabouts are known.”

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One half of his lip turned up.

My insides curdled into ice. I spun, lined up with the target and sent the blade end over end toward the target where, finally, it just nicked the bullseye center.

“You’re kind of a cliché, you know that.”

I let out a groan of frustration and turned on my heels toward Felix and his superior words. “Why is that?”

He snickered, then gestured toward me and the target. “Using training to get your frustration out? Like, everybody does that.”

I turned away from him and casually walked to the target, just using normal human speed to put as much distance between us for as long as possible. “I train during many moods, Felix,” I called back over my shoulder. “Frustration just happens to be one of them.”

“But you do come down here when you’re frustrated, right?” he asked. His voice was much closer. He was suddenly in front of the target right where I went to reach to pull the hilt of the blade out of the target. “Especially on your own.”

“Everyone else was sleeping.”

He pulled the curved blade out of the target. Then, he switched grip and handed it to me hilt first. “Not me.”

I tried not to show the frustration now riddling my veins. What was his point? I didn't know he was up.

He smirked when I didn't immediately comprehend. "Why not get your anger out on an actual, physical body? I'm here. You might as well use me."

I eyed him up and down.

"I meant in a sparring partner kind of way. Nothing else."

Ugh, I groaned inwardly. I hadn't even thought he meant the other way, but now that was firmly stuck in my head. I squeezed my eyes shut and then opened them again. "You want to train with me?"

He nodded, his shoulders rising minutely as if it was just an offer I could take or leave.

"Alright." I flipped the blade once, caught it by the hilt again and sliced it into the target. All using my left hand. Turning away from him once more, I made my way to the mats. It had been a long time since I sparred with anyone—in training—who wasn't Alexei or a member of my family. The last time had been when I was a student here at The Fort.

Like Felix and I had done just two nights ago, we lined up facing one another, each dropping into our fighting stances. He smiled. "I'll just try to evade for now. Get me if you can."

That sounded like a challenge to me. I moved forward, throwing a punch, meant as a fake, then dropped down to sweep his legs out.

It didn't work though. He stepped out of reach of the punch and jumped in time to

miss my kick.

“Again,” he said.

The hair stood on my neck and I let my body fill with the previous anger at not knowing what was going on at The Fort right now. I had a leg up on everyone with my supposed extra sense and still, I didn’t know more than anyone else. Why couldn’t I control this damn vision thing?

I kicked out, switched my stance, then kicked out again with the opposite leg. I knew I wouldn’t hit him. It was just a way to bridge the gap to get into his personal space. I pretended to punch, but then lowered my shoulder and tried to go for the takedown. Unfortunately for me, he sprawled, landing on me like a ton of bricks. The air whooshed from my lungs, but I didn’t let him know that. I used my hands and feet to spiral out from under him and grab his leg, bringing it up until he lost his balance.

He nodded, conceding the fact I would’ve taken him down if I kept going. “Again.”

We drew apart once more, circling one another. I watched his hands and his feet, trying to get a feel for how he fought. We’d already sparred briefly before, but that was for show. He had skills that much I knew. He was fast and a decent swimmer. He had weapons skills as well. I didn’t know what I was expecting. From all the talk my mother and fathers gave, I guess I expected Felix to come in with no prep, just using his station to live off of. It was a good thing he was well trained. It meant his clan had learned something from all those years ago.

“Get out of your head,” Felix barked. “I thought that’s what this was for. Stop thinking. Come on, come at me.”

I sprang at him again, but it was without a plan and only at his taunting. He easily stopped my efforts and sent me back to the start.

“What’s going on in that head, Princess? Why is everything bothering you so much?”

He didn’t ask out of curiosity though. He practically growled the words out at me. He was trying to get under my skin.

I fell to one hand and kicked out, watching as he moved back as I expected. Then I rolled forward, letting my vampire abilities kick in. When I stood, I brought my foot up into a sweeping kick that nicked his chin.

His lips thinned, and he nodded, acknowledging the hit. “Good one. Again.”

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Again and again we lined up across from one another, feeling one another out. He was good, athletic and skilled at seeing where my attacks were going to come from. I got him a few times, but he also evaded me too. Honestly, we were evenly matched, just as I'd thought from the first time we sparred in front of everyone.

I held my hand up signifying a break and then walked to the side of the mat to get a drink after we'd been going after another for twenty minutes straight. I took a water bottle and threw one at him. I didn't even look back to make sure, but I knew he'd caught it. I heard it as he pulled the water from the nozzle into his mouth hungrily, and then the slight pop as he pushed the nozzle back down.

"You ready to talk about it yet?"

I finally turned. "Talk about what?"

"Why you're really upset. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that you were expecting something to happen at the perimeter wall last night." His brows furrowed, a couple wavy strands of hair fell over his forehead as he regarded me.

He was handsome. There was no denying it. From how my mother described the Dumont of her younger years, he was stocky, disgustingly vain—a douche, basically. Not that Felix wasn't a douche some of the time, but he was a good-looking one.

"Did you really want to tell me about the tracks right away?" I asked instead.

His gaze narrowed further, almost like a war of wits had just commenced. I didn't really mean it like that. I just wanted to know.

“How come you get to ask questions and I can’t?”

“You asked a question.”

“You didn’t answer.”

“I guess you have the same option then.”

He took a deep breath and another long drink from the water bottle before throwing it off to the side. “Yes.” He paused for a few moments, his body relaxing the more he resigned himself to saying what he was going to say. “Yes, I wanted to tell you right away. Your friend Alexei told you that yesterday. Why? Is it surprising?”

“I guess so.”

“You guess so?” He smiled and shook his head. “Why?”

I shrugged. I really didn’t know other than I must’ve been bias against Felix. Was it that difficult to imagine I would be? His ancestor tried to take out my parents. Of course, I wouldn’t trust him right away. Felix knew it too.

“You just don’t want to say it,” he said. “You want to make everyone think that they all have a shot, but that’s not really true, is it, Izzy?”

I swallowed. “It is true.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

He turned to walk away.

My body tensed, begging me to say something. I didn’t want to leave it like that.

Everyone did have a chance. Even him. Right?

“I did think something was going to happen,” I called out, the words coming out rapid-fire. Heat, anger, and embarrassment coloring them. “At the perimeter, I mean.”

He stopped. His hand came up to rub the back of his neck. Then, he turned slowly. “What did you think was going to happen?”

My heart thumped in my chest. I wasn’t ready to trust Felix fully yet. “That doesn’t matter right now. What matters is that nothing happened and we’re no closer to figuring out what the hell’s going on.”

He walked up, his steps eating the distance between us. “You know something,” he growled. “You have to say what you know.”

“I don’t know anything for sure,” I said, tasting the tiniest bit of lies as I said it. I could trust my premonitions. That I knew for sure.

“I don’t believe you,” he said softly. “Trust goes both ways, you know?”

His eyes filled with disappointment, then he turned on his heels to leave again.

Goosebumps sprouted on my arms as I watched him walk away. The closer he got to the door, the more wrong it felt.

I rubbed my forehead, just hoping the feeling would pass, but it didn’t. Finally, I called out, “Felix!”

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He stopped again, a loud sigh filling the space between us. “Yes, Princess?”

“Will you stay to be my training partner?”

He turned and headed back my way. His face said he wanted to say something but thought better of it. He lined up in his fight stance and I let my water bottle drop to line up facing him.

I was less intense this time, focusing on technique rather than the emotions flowing through me. That told me the training was paying off. I was going to leave here significantly less stressed than when I’d come in.

Most of it to Felix’s credit. He was an admirable partner. I never thought about it before, but you could tell a lot about a person by the way they trained with you. He didn’t go easy on me. That was the number one thing I liked about him in this moment. He didn’t let me get away with anything, which meant he had the skills and the capacity to know I wouldn’t want it any other way. He also didn’t drive home any mistakes I made. Which, I had to admit, I pegged him as that kind of training partner. Gloating. Sarcastic.

But, he was none of those things.

Alexei and I were very competitive. We played with one another too much. This was different—and nice.

I kicked out at Felix but got over on my edge too much. He saw the opening, picked up my leg and threw me on my back. I lay there for a minute. Though we had the best

mats around, they were still mats, not pillows. Felix put his hand out to help me up, a small smirk on his face.

“That sucked,” I grumbled.

A line of uncertainty formed between his eyes, but it was only fleeting. Something else caught his attention—and mine.

“What the hell, Dumont?”

I looked over my shoulder to find Theo Nolan walking toward us, a scowl on his face deepening the already permanent serious lines.

I tried to say something, but Felix pushed to his feet. “What? We’re sparring. If the princess wants to play like one of the boys, she has to play like one of the boys.”

Really? I rolled my eyes at him. Sarcasm. It was his defense mechanism. I locked eyes with him and shook my head. This little episode—sparring match and all—just told me a lot more about Felix.

“I’m fine,” I said, pulling myself to my feet.

Theo gave me a once over. Not in a caring way at all, just methodical.

“Get that stick out of your ass, would you, Nolan?” Felix spat.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I think we’re done here.”

Theo bowed his head at me and turned, leaving the room as quick as he’d come in.

Felix chuckled. His laughter bit at me and without giving him another look, I walked

from the room too.

We all had shit happen to us in our past. We shouldn't let that run our present though.

My cell phone rang, and the guard spun to give it to me just as I approached the door. It was Papa Christian.

I answered it, frustration for a totally different reason dripping from my voice. "Yes?"

"I'm going to need you to get to the Rajyvik's. Now."

My heart thumped. "Is everything okay?"

"Li Chang just showed up. It's not good."

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Chapter Two

I hadn't heard of Li Chang before. The name I knew was Su.

Su was the member from Clan Chang that was supposed to be my sixth choice. He'd never showed.

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It quickly became apparent why when I burst through the front doors of the Rajyvik's.

Li Chang was older. At least thirty-five like every full-grown vampire looked, but he had the aura of wisdom around him that told me he was much older than thirty-five.

I noticed the pale pallor of his skin and the strain in his voice as I walked up behind him while he recounted the tale. He'd been away on business for his brother, Su Chang's father. He was running late and would miss the big send-off Clan Chang was giving for Su before he made the trek to the states and ultimately, The Fort.

They never made it though.

Li broke down, not finishing his sentence. I treaded carefully, then put my hand on his shoulder. Mom and my fathers, as well as Natalie, had seen me come in, but Li hadn't. He jumped. When he turned though, his eyes brightened, glittered with tears as he regarded me. "You must be Isabelle Ravana, the princess."

I nodded, and he did so in return. "Su was eager to meet you. I'm sorry he never made it."

I squeezed his shoulder and then moved further into the living room, taking up a seat next to Alexei wishing I'd taken better care of dressing this morning. Then again, I didn't know I was going to be meeting an elder from a leadership clan.

"I would've come sooner," Li continued. "But I wanted to make sure it was safe. I didn't want to lead anyone here."

“All of them?” my mother asked, her voice higher than normal. She didn’t exactly spell out what she meant, but we all knew it, anyway.

He nodded. “All. The whole clan.”

“You were away on business?” Papa Nic asked, pushing him to give more details.

“My brother needed me to stock up on blood for the journey. Our bank was running low, so I had to wait an extra day. I would’ve gotten there just in time to see them off and give them the blood they needed. Instead, I walked in on them all slaughtered.”

I bit down on a gasp. Alexei put his hand on my thigh and squeezed.

I didn’t know Su. Had never met him, but he was supposed to be here with us now, helping to unite the clans.

“I’m so sorry,” my mother said. “There are no words to say. I can’t imagine.”

Papa Stephan, who sat next to her, put his hand on her thigh just as Alexei had done to me.

“You talked about not wanting to be trailed,” Papa Nicolai said. “Do you know who did this, so we can take action?”

Li’s eyes got glassier. He shook his head slowly as if we weren’t even in the room with him anymore. “I’ve never seen anything like it. Ripped to shreds. Blood. Like a war had erupted in the middle of our ceremony room. I stayed long enough to see if there was anyone I could save. When I found no one alive, I ran, tried to stay hidden. I knew you were expecting them, so I came here as soon as I could. Not just to inform you, but to beg your help.” His eyes hardened as did his fingers as they curled into fists in his lap. “For days I have planned my retribution, but I have no people, no one

to stand beside me. I would gladly do it myself, but as—”

Mother held her hand up to stop him from going on. “You needn’t say another word, Li Chang. You have the Ravanans’ help.” She turned to Papa Nic and Christian. “We’ll need to get a team together.”

As they made plans, Alexei leaned over. “This can’t be a coincidence.”

I could barely listen to any of the conversations. Ones meant for me or otherwise. Flashes of my previous premonition skittered in and out of my head in scene after scene of gory mess. War. Blood. “Li?”

He looked at me. “Yes, Princess?”

“Does your ceremony room have massive white pillars on either side of a set of steps?” I closed my eyes, bringing up the rest of my vision. “They led to a room with white-washed walls and paintings lined in gold?”

“Paintings of our previous leaders, yes. They line the ceremony room to remind us of the honor and integrity we come from.”

I locked eyes with my mother. Hers grew large and round as she gathered my meaning. It’s what I explained to her when I first had my vision.

It came true.

And I couldn’t do anything to stop it.

“Natalie,” my mother said, her voice the calm before the storm, “Do you think one of your people could show Li from Clan Chang to a room, so he could freshen himself after his trip?”

Natalie nodded and rose like the graceful head of house she was. She helped Li to his feet and walked with him to the door where she squeezed his hand in earnest before leaving him in the hands of a trusted guard.

Alexei whispered something to me, but there was so much noise in my head. I saw things in glimpses, short bursts, each one colliding into the other until it was a jumbled mess. His whisper just added to the chaos until I wanted to scream.

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In a moment, Papa Stephan was on his knees in front of me. He grabbed my hands.
“Look at me, Izzy.”

I did as he said and the storm quieted.

“Remember we talked about focusing on the present?”

I nodded again, looking into my father’s eyes like they were an anchor in stormy seas.

Alexei was stiff next to me, looking on desperately but useless all the same.

“Is she okay?” Mother asked.

Papa Stephan nodded. “Maybe in a bit of shock.”

“Angry is more like it,” I said, the words passing through numb lips. “I saw it. I saw that same room. If I’d only known...”

“If,” Papa Stephan said, squeezing my hands once more to emphasize what he meant.
“You had no idea of knowing that room belonged to the Chang’s.”

“But when they didn’t show...”

Papa Christian moved forward now too. “They were free to do as they pleased. We couldn’t have known that was the reason.”

I knew all this deep down inside, but I still felt the heavy collar of guilt choking me. I knew, and I didn't do anything to prevent it.

Hands came up on my shoulders and squeezed me.

Alexei was warm, like the heat of fire on an otherwise chilled day. He rubbed my shoulders, still saying things to me I couldn't quite latch onto.

Papa Christian gave my mother a look. A defeated one with a smirk that I couldn't quite understand.

"I think we have to tell them all about my visions," I said, picturing Felix when I did so. "We can't wait any longer."

"I thought you wanted to wait until after you chose your mates," Papa Connor said.

"It's not fair if I wait any longer. Not with this going on."

"We'll have to call a Council meeting," Papa Christian said. "Everyone needs to know what happened to the Chang's. We can't sit on that information, so if you're sure, you can tell everyone then."

Alexei grimaced. I sensed his mood change as soon as I brought up the visions. He rose to his feet. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"What?" I growled. I'd have thought he'd be on my side, wanting to be my mate and all.

He held up a hand and his eyes caught mine. "Defensively speaking. If you tell everyone about your visions, the word is going to get out there. It won't be long before the enemy knows it too."

“We don’t even know who the enemy is.”

“Exactly,” Alexei said. “We don’t need to give them any information. I don’t like lying about it either. If it makes you feel better, you can tell the ones close to you, but I wouldn’t tell the whole clan. Word would spread just like it has always done with you, Izzy. The people are fascinated, and this, having the same abilities as the past queen, it would reach far and wide. Probably to the very people we would wish to keep it from.”

“Fine,” I said, teeth clenched. I hated to admit it, but his warning had merit. “Even though I can’t control it and it’s barely useful to me, I guess we’ll keep it to ourselves still.”

“Isn’t that a good reason too?” Alexei asked.

My body burned with fire. He’d hit me right where it hurt most. I hated I couldn’t control this damn ‘gift’. If I could, I could’ve helped them.

I gasped.

“The ones who wanted to leave?” I asked, suddenly looking up, panic streaking through my veins. “Did you already send them away from here?”

“This morning,” Papa Connor answered. “It was only Kai who wished his mother to leave. She was sent with two guards to make the trek.”

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Images flashed through my mind of Clan Iona. More blood, death, and misery. But it wasn't a premonition. Just a fierce imagination. A shiver crawled up my spine, hoping she wouldn't have to encounter anything like that. "Kai will need to know straight away, so something can be done if he wants her back here."

"Didn't Clan Chang have warriors?" Alexei asked, his voice holding on to shock like a vice. "How could they all be taken out?"

My limbs went ice cold. I'd seen it in my mind. Whoever it was that did this to them didn't give them a chance. Warriors or not. It was brutal. They were punished severely. But for what reason? Why?

That I knew nothing about yet.

Maybe Grandma Isabelle was right. This gift could be a curse.

To know something and not be able to stop it from happening was a terrible betrayal of rational thought and sense and human decency.

I wasn't gifted, I was cursed.

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Chapter Three

If you chose Kai Iona as your mate, please read this chapter.

If you denied him, please skip to Chapter Four or Location393.

A soft knock sounded on the door. Alexei and I sat close together in the sunroom of his house. The room was surrounded in all glass, tempered so it blocked the sun's harmful rays while still allowing us to feel the heat. He'd suggested we sit in there until the Council meeting could be called, but now, Kai wanted to join us.

He stepped through. Alexei immediately got up from his spot next to me. He shook Kai's hand and then left us alone.

Kai approached tentatively, but I reached out and he came, willing and quick. He pulled me to him and I wound my arms around his dark skin, ropey with muscles. He only wore a shirt to dinner. The other times, he went bare chested as he told me it was his custom back home. I sincerely didn't mind.

"They told you?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Your mom..."

He shuddered. He pulled me close for a few seconds and then brought me away at arm's length. He swallowed and the tendons in his neck protruded like the flex of muscles. "I admit, I'm in shock that something has happened to one of the leading clans." He dragged a stiff hand down his face. "Izzy, I have to go to her. I want to see her to the island and our home myself. I'll return quickly, I promise."

"You're leaving?" I blurted.

He winced, and I realized my mistake right away. Of course he would want to see his mom home safely, but I felt as if I was falling part from the inside out. I needed him.

He was my mate.

“I’ll be back,” he said, his voice sure, holding a promise that made my heart relax minutely.

“I know,” I said, guilt washing over me. “I don’t blame you for wanting to go. I’d do the same. I just...”

“...want me?” he asked with a hint of a smile.

I nodded. “There are things you don’t know yet. They’re important.”

He leaned over to kiss me on the corner of the mouth. My heart skipped. I didn’t let him retreat, I pulled him to me. My lips sealed onto his as I dragged him backward, my back hitting the seat cushions on the garden bench as Kai followed, hovering over me. Firm—in more ways than one.

I wrapped my legs around him when I sensed his hesitation. I wasn’t letting him up. Not now.

He made a low groan in the back of his throat. Then, he settled on top of me.

We lined up in all the right ways. His erection lay on my core and I breathed through the nerve endings firing off like fireworks.

“Izzy,” he said, his voice taut with a hint of warning. “This is definitely not the right place for this.”

“But you’re leaving,” I said. It wasn’t that I didn’t want him to go. I thought it was honorable, and noble. I was just being selfish.

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“I’ll return. I don’t make promises I can’t keep. This one, I know in my heart will be true. I’ll be gone only but a day.” He made space between us, pulling away so I could see his eyes when he spoke. “I just need to make sure my clan is safe-guarded from the threat.”

I opened my mouth, but he held up a finger.

“Whatever it is I don’t know, you’ll tell me. I know it. First thing’s first though. The car is already waiting for me.”

Dejected, I sat up, forcing him back. “I wish I could go with you.”

His palm cupped my cheek. “One day. Right now, we both have duty that calls us our separate ways, but not for long.” He kissed my cheek, his mouth lingering near my ear. “Be back soon, my princess.” He touched the bracelet I wore on my wrist all the time now. “I’ll be with you.”

I couldn’t let him leave without one solid kiss, promising one another there was more to come when he returned.

After a minute, he left. He didn’t look back as he made his way toward the door and I didn’t wonder why. If he looked back, he might never leave.

He was right. Each of us had duties to attend to. No matter what.

Chapter Four

In my admittedly short life I'd never seen anything like it.

The outrage, the worry, the fear. It was the fear that spoke to me the most. The dilation of the pupils, the hands that reached for their loved ones sitting near them. Even those who sat next to strangers reached out instinctively for something to grab onto. Worse yet, some of those hands grabbed only air and it made my heart ache.

I watched all this from the makeshift Council room at The Fort again. With all the guards that were normally stationed there and added to that the extra security that had been brought in because of my mate choosing, this was the most logical place to be. With the news about Clan Chang, this felt safe. As safe as safe could feel like right now.

I imagined Clan Chang also felt safe, only to be slaughtered one by one. Su... Though I didn't know him, I wondered what he thought about in his last moments. Was it the same fear whose tendrils reached for me now? Or was it something else? Defiance. Anger. Sorrow. A life cut too short. Many lives cut too short.

Out of all the stories I'd been told growing up, one would think I'd be used to chaos. But being told of it and living through it were two different things. I marveled at my parents as they fielded the questions lobbed at them like grenades. Each one more terrifying than the next.

What should we do?

Should we stay?

Are we safer together, or apart?

I was of the mind we were safer together...always. But perhaps Su and his family would disagree. Massacred together until only a bloody heap remained. But, we had a leg up on them. We knew something was going on. They weren't prepared. To them, all had been normal. At least we were running on an advanced warning.

After Papa Christian brought the meeting to an end, I retreated out the back hallway. I wandered aimlessly until I spilled out on the lawn of the side campus. The sun shone like dazzling stars overhead, filtered through the mesh that made it much safer for me to be outside than if the sun's rays were to directly hit me. Such sad, awful news on such a beautiful day.

The door creaked open after I'd only been out there a minute or so. Hands came to rest on my shoulders and I relaxed. I should've known Alexei would be the first to find me. As my best friend, he'd always been there. No matter what. Even when I didn't like what he was saying, I knew he was doing it for my own benefit.

"Your parents are discussing when and who to send to Clan Chang's headquarters. Li is vowing to go with them. He wants to give his clan proper burials."

"I have to go," I told him, my teeth gritted together. If I couldn't do anything to prevent it, I could do something in the aftermath.

"We have to go," Alexei said.

I nodded and reached my hand back. To my relief, his hand molded into mine. He walked to stand in front of me. His blue eyes that arresting color. His hand came up to cup my cheek, and I snuggled into it. After a moment, I said, "It's happening."

When he didn't say anything, I let my gaze meet his. Eyes like the deepest depths of the ocean drew me in. "It's sourturn," he said. "Our parents have done enough to keep our people safe. Lord knows you and I have heard the stories time and time again. It's

our time now.”

I nodded, stepping forward to reach up to him. I paused mere inches from his lips, committing the curve to memory before placing a soft kiss there and drawing back to the earth as if I never left it.

The door creaked open again, and I looked over Alexei’s shoulders to find Rafe, Theo, Felix, and Calen exit. Alexei stepped back but still held my hand. The others didn’t blink at our casual touch and I anchored my hand there more firmly, needing the familiar touch like I needed to be told this was all just a dream and the happy times of choosing my mates could commence again at any moment.

Felix spoke up first. “I imagine you’ll be wanting to go to China.”

“Me too,” Calen said. “My father’s returning to our clan lands to ensure their safety. They’ll be looking for me to bring back information about who or what has done this.”

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“Kai left earlier,” I said. When Alexei’s hand tightened, I pushed forward, realizing how that sounded. As if Kai would just run off at the first mention of problems. “He wanted to make sure his mother made it home safe and then do what he could to make sure everyone in his clan was secure. But he’ll be back. If anyone else wants to leave now, they can. This isn’t just random tracks on the perimeter anymore, this is a direct threat.”

“My parents can handle it back home,” Rafe said. “Like Calen, we’re better used here to figure out what this is, so we can bring the information back and help keep everyone safe.”

Theo shifted his weight from foot to foot as he thought. Finally, his voice rang out sure and authoritative. “I wish to go to Clan Chang as well. My parents are deciding what’s best to be done for our clan back home.”

All eyes turned to Felix. He just stared back at me until the heat of everyone’s gazes became too much for him and he looked around. “Seriously?” he asked, as if he couldn’t believe he had to say the words out loud. “I’m going to China, too. My clan’s probably the closest in distance. I’ve already arranged for tighter security and to wait for my next update.”

Well, now that was settled. We were all going. Except for Kai. He could meet us there or meet us back here when he was done ensuring the safety of his clan.

The door reared open behind them and Papa Nicolai stood in the frame. His face riddled in shadows, a few of the guys shrunk in his presence. He had that kind of effect on others.

“Izzy,” he said, peering at me over Rafe’s shoulder. “We need you all back. Everyone else has left and we need to discuss how to move forward with this...” he said, motioning toward my possible mates.

At that, he spun and left us there to follow. He knew we would. Theo grabbed the door, and we rushed through, only not as fast to keep up with Papa Nic. In times like this, he didn’t like to stray too far away from my mom. Neither did any one of them. With a whisper, I heard Rafe say to no one in particular, “Is it just me, or is he one of the scariest vampires alive?”

Alexei answered with a dark chuckle.

When we moved back into the room, it was eerily silent. They all just stood there looking at one another without saying anything.

Papa Christian jumped to his feet first and had us all sit in the first row of chairs. Tension thick like suffocating smoke, they looked down at us from the raised dais until it was Christian again who spoke. “I know we talked about this already, but if any of you would like to return—”

“We all just talked about this,” I said, cutting his thought off. “We’re all staying.”

“Besides Kai,” Felix said quickly.

I turned and locked gazes with the curly-haired vampire. “They know Kai left to make sure his mother got home safe.”

He merely shrugged and turned his attention back to the front of the room. Some of them shifted in their seats, but I was used to being stared down by the four Ravana kings and the most prestigious queen we’d ever had. They didn’t intimidate me half as much as they seemed to be intimidating the rest of the guys. Save Alexei. Alexei

was nearly a second child to them as well. Nearly. Maybe before the stunt he pulled in telling everyone he was in love with me.

When we'd moved into this room, my hand had fallen away from Alexei's. It was just in my lap now, empty. Alone.

King Christian's voice rose up again calling for my attention. "Okay. The next step to figure out is whether we should continue with the mate choosing."

"We're continuing," I said. "We can do both. Try to find out who murdered the Chang's and continue with the mate choosing."

"Told you," my mother said, quickly and under her breath. The rest of us could hear it if we were paying attention and by the small smiles forming on my possible mates' faces, they had all heard it.

"That was my next question," Papa Christian said, his jaw ticking and ignoring my mother's comment. "We need to know how many of you want to accompany the team going to China."

Everyone spoke up at once, saying either, "I" or "Yes", and even Felix's, "I'm in."

Papa Christian nodded. "We leave tonight. Get your things ready if you wish to come. Izzy, stay behind."

He caught me in mid-motion following the rest of them as they jumped to their feet, eager to get started in this.

Instead of joining them, I walked forward as they filed out, hushed conversations reaching my ears until the big door slammed behind them sending a reverberation through the room.

“I suggest you find a way to tell them about your visions before we land in Clan Chang territory. Maybe seeing what you saw will trigger another one and we don’t have to worry about explaining things after the fact.”

I nodded slowly, my gut wrenching. Though I knew it was the right thing to do, I wondered what they would think of me. Alexei knew and had known for a long time, but I still couldn’t get the thought out of my head that maybe the rest of them would think I was some sort of freak. People with powers like my grandma were revered, but I’d done nothing but screw this ‘gift’ up. I couldn’t help save anyone. What would they think of me?

I turned to leave, but Papa Christian called me back. His voice rang out strong. “You were right, Izzy. With this new development, I’d be calling for the clans to cooperate in information and in security. Because of you, we’ve already made the steps toward that. Li Chang came here first. Through us, the rest of your possible mates have already reached out to their clans.” A smile peeled his lips apart and a sparkle of pride twinkled in his eye. “I’m immensely proud of you.”

My heart soared, and I couldn’t help but smile in return. I hadn’t thought of it like that. I’d only thought about what I hadn’t been able to do, which was save the Chang’s, but maybe by what I’d already put in place, we could save the rest of the clans. “Thank you, Papa.”

“Now go get ready,” Papa Nic said. “You’ve got to show these boys who the boss is.”

I liked the sound of that.

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He wasn't such a meanie. I leaned over the table and gave Papa Nic a kiss on the cheek. "You're my favorite," I said, leaning down and whispering loudly in his ear so everyone else could hear.

"He doesn't need a bigger head," Papa Connor deadpanned.

"That's the truth," Papa Christian said, both taking my comment for what it was, a tease.

Papa Stephan just sat and chuckled, catching gazes with Mom. They smirked at one another for our "shenanigans". For the first time in a while, it felt like we were back to normal again. Teasing, laughter, so much joy.

I walked out of the room with a filled heart and a new purpose. Not another clan was going to die. To think of all the relationships, the kisses, the laughter that just ended because of what happened.

It wasn't fair.

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Chapter Five

After a quick kiss from Papa Christian and Papa Stephan who were staying in Pennsylvania to keep everyone calm, I boarded one of the several SUV's that lined The Fort's back parking lot. Besides my mother, Papa Nicolai, and Papa Connor, and us, there were two guards also coming and Li Chang.

Li's hand was rigid as he gripped the window seat, staring out at the mostly empty parking lot as we loaded up. He didn't say how he'd gotten here, but as soon as we were all in the SUV's, we were being driven to the local airport where we would be boarding one of our private jets which would take us directly to the airport closest to Clan Chang in China.

With all the nerves running through my body, I doubted I'd be able to sleep even though it was going to be a very long flight. The longest I'd ever taken. Alexei slid in next to me and I put my head on his shoulder. I was used to doing things like this with him. It never seemed odd to hug him or lay my head on his shoulder when we were watching a movie together. Now, though, I wondered if it had always given him a different idea.

Our SUV backed up and then pulled forward. No one spoke as we made the hour drive to the airport. Most of us looked sullen, sad or stressed. None of us looked eager. It wasn't that we didn't want to find out what was going on. That was our number one priority but knowing what we would be walking into tore at my senses. I'd seen it in my head often enough to know the goriness of what lay ahead. To know I would be seeing it in real life turned my stomach.

Finally, we pulled into the county airport. It wasn't a big commercial one. Just big enough to accommodate the size of our private jet. The SUV's pulled right out onto the tarmac and we quickly exited and pulled our bags with us to board the plane. Time was of the essence. We didn't want anyone—or anything—to hide the evidence waiting for us there. If all went well, we'd be leaving China with information on exactly who did this to Clan Chang so we could take swift action against them.

On a personal note, we'd also bury the clan respectfully instead of just letting their bodies decay where they lay.

My gut twisted. I wondered what Su's looked like. Would I see him? Would I

recognize him even if I did?

From what his uncle had said, he was coming here. He wanted to be a potential mate, and now he was gone. It chipped away at my soul to think about it.

I grabbed a seat in the back of the jet, plopping my bag next to me. Our private jet was big enough to accommodate this group and then some. Papa Stephan's miracle cream invention had been packaged and sold at retail stores everywhere in the United States for skin ailments. The public didn't know it had traces of vampire blood that helped with healing. It was my mother and Stephan's idea to sell it nationwide, bringing in more money for the clan in case we went through anything like the blood shortage again. Even in the vampire world, money spoke volumes.

Rafe came up the aisle next and sat across from me. He smiled, his teeth pearly white in contrast with his sun-tanned skin. He looked out of place on the plane. It was like he should be permanently on the beach. I could almost smell the ocean's waves and sand on him. "Do you mind if I sit here?" he asked, looking up.

I chuckled and smiled teasingly at him. What was I going to say? No? "Of course not," I said.

He looked around as everyone else was getting settled in. Mother, Papa Nic, and Papa Connor settled in the front. The rest of the mates and the two extra guards found places in between. When he turned back around, he smiled. "Just wanted to get some time alone with you. It's pretty difficult to do."

"Especially with everything going on," I said.

"I'm sorry about Chang," he ventured, most likely recognizing the despair in my voice.

What to say to that? It wasn't as if I knew Su. I'd never met him before in my life, but I still felt his loss because he was supposed to be here. "Me too," I said lamely. I looked up and smiled when I saw Alexei step on and take the row in front of us. Then, I inched forward in my seat and lowered my voice. "I just can't believe he was coming and now he's not here."

Rafe mimicked me, sitting forward in his seat too. He dragged a hand through his blond hair. "I can't imagine just having the whole clan wiped out. It's just..." His voice trailed off as a heaviness settled between us. His feet bobbed up and down as his eyes filled with thoughts that were a million miles away from here.

Before I knew it, the plane was taxiing, and the pilot came on the speaker system to tell us to buckle up. We really weren't wasting any time getting off the ground. I was glad for it. It made me feel better to be doing something about what happened. If I would've had to stay home, I would've been a fidgety nervous wreck.

Rafe and I locked eyes as the plane picked up speed for takeoff. I was facing forward, one of the reasons why I wanted this seat, but since he was facing me, he was going backward when we were taking off. It didn't seem to faze him a bit.

When we were in the air and leveled out, he scooted as far forward on his seat as he could. His gaze was focused now as if he'd finally figured out what he wanted to say. "This whole thing has got me thinking..." He bit his lip, one of the first signs of uncertainty I'd seen any of the potential mates display. It made me move forward. I didn't know what I was doing half the time, so to see Rafe with a vulnerable side? It made me connect with him. He took a deep breath. "I've never really thought about it before, but I guess out in California, I'm kind of isolated. I understand there's a whole other world out there and vampires live all over it. I know about your family and the others, but it's never seemed that important to me. When you invited someone from my clan here, I—" He cut himself off and then charged ahead. "—I just thought it was going to be a cool adventure. I heard you were special, and I

wanted to see it for myself, but I didn't think anything beyond that. Now look what's happened. A whole clan is no longer with us. You're everything I'd heard about and then some. Even your family. I'm in awe of all of you." He stretched even further, really testing the limits of the seatbelt. "To be honest, my clan seems pretty selfish compared to yours. Maybe that's just me and the role I play in everything. Back home, I don't care about anything but surfing, going out, and staying fed. I don't live next to a training center that trains guards for our world. I train because I like it, but if I didn't, I bet you I wouldn't. I'd be the first to admit that if it's surfing or training, I'll probably go surfing."

My eyebrows rose a little.

"I know that sounds crazy. Especially you hearing it because you know what it's really like out there, but I guess I've been sheltered. I've heard the stories, but they didn't affect me. The blood shortage didn't even impact us out in California nearly as bad as it did you guys out here. I know that. I've read it. I've listened to the stories, but..." He shook his head, his face coloring in shame.

Rafe's clan had helped us during the blood shortage. He was right they weren't hit as badly. For one, they weren't—and still aren't—as big as our clan, so their stores had held up even when ours had depleted to nothing. Even with their help, it hadn't been enough for us.

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“I kind of envy that, I guess,” I said honestly. Since he was opening up, I felt it right to do the same. “It would be nice to not always have the responsibility on you and your family to make the right decisions. To be held to a higher standard.” Embarrassment sunk into my stomach and I stuttered. “I-I mean—”

He held a hand up. “No, you’re absolutely right. That’s what I’m saying. I’m beginning to realize there’s a much bigger world out there and that’s a good thing. Maybe I can have a purpose, you know? I mean, my parents would be thrilled. And your family wouldn’t have to do as much if more people stepped up.”

He gave me a teasing grin, and I chuckled. I’d met his parents before—briefly—and they were a lot like him from what I could remember. They were very laid back, easy going, but I could imagine that would only go so far, especially since Rafe would be expected to be clan leader once his parents wanted to cross over. “How come your parents didn’t come?” I asked.

He sat back in his seat and shrugged, easily carrying on into the next conversation that wasn’t as honest and layered with tension. “I asked them to stay behind. I didn’t want them to push me one way or the other with you.” One side of his mouth quirked up. “Again, I’m selfish. Of course they sent me here with the expectation I’d come back as a vampire prince. Royalty, you know? More prestige for our clan.” He shook his head and chuckled. “If I didn’t like you, I didn’t want them pushing me to take you just because of what you could offer us. I know all that sounds awful, but...”

“But it’s true,” I said, my lips thinning. I didn’t fool myself into thinking everyone would be here for the right reasons. That was why this decision was so important. I didn’t want to take someone who just wanted the title and not all the work that went

with it. Especially with what was happening now, maybe they would all understand more. If they wanted the fancy titles, it would be work, and lots of it.

Rafe darted forward and grabbed my hand. “I hope I didn’t say too much. It’s different for me now.” His blue eyes seared into mine, and I felt the truth to his words as if they were raw from his heart. “I just wanted to make my own decision, and I still do.”

His thumb traced over my skin and a surge of electricity passed between us.

What had he said that was all that wrong, anyway? He came here to see me for himself. Not wrong. He was initially interested because I’m a princess. Could anyone blame him? I felt the shame in his words when he told me he was selfish. How many times had I wished I could be selfish too? Hell, I’d just admitted it to him.

“I believe you,” I said.

Rafe unbuckled his restraint and moved my bag to the floor. He took the seat next to me and turned, still holding my hand. His voice barely above a whisper, he said, “I want to be a better person. At home, it’s always felt like something was missing, but here?” He shook his head, his gaze still intent on me. “It doesn’t feel that way. It feels like I have something to live for, and you know, with vampires that’s a good thing because we basically live forever. I need something to occupy my time.”

“What about surfing?” I teased.

“Oh, I’m not giving that up,” he said. “I just might have found something I like more.”

“Might?” I asked, one eyebrow raising.

His eyes drew me closer until his breath hit my lips. I savored the whisper of a touch while my stomach flipped.

Suddenly, he chuckled. “I don’t know if I can kiss you right now. Is it against the rules?”

I drew back. His words taking me out of the moment. My heart beat in my chest like crazy and I laughed alongside him nervously.

I turned away, disappointment thrumming through my veins. I could’ve sworn he was going to kiss me and I wanted him to. Still wanted him to.

Instead, he sat back and interlaced his fingers with mine. His thumb trailed faint designs over my skin and I focused on that. My stomach twisted nervously, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as when he was inches away from me. I squeezed his hand and turned toward him. “For the record, the next time you feel like you want to kiss me, just do it.”

His mouth dropped a little, then he snapped it shut. He nodded, then turned away, his cheeks coloring all the way into his hairline.

What a time for him to decide he didn’t want to be selfish anymore...

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Chapter Six

Rafe fell asleep. His limp hand falling to the side.

I eyed him and then stretched. I was worried I wouldn’t be able to sleep, my mind too preoccupied on so many other things. Why hadn’t Rafe just kissed me? Why was I

thinking about that when there were bigger things to deal with?

Alexei peeked over the seats. His movement caught my eye, and I smiled. Checking on Rafe, he rose from his seat and came around to sit across from me. “You can’t sleep either?”

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

His lips thinned as he looked me over. Then, he sat back and motioned for me to come over.

“What?” I asked, eyeing him cautiously.

“Come here,” he said, patting his lap. When I didn’t immediately move, he said, “Come on, Iz. Come here.”

My legs felt like lead when I stood. Thankfully, Alexei was only two paces away. When I was close enough to touch, he reached out and grabbed my hands, pulling me down on his lap. I forced my mouth shut, so I wouldn’t make a loud, embarrassing squeal or anything else like that.

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His arms closed in around me. “There. Isn’t that better?”

I tried to relax, but I looked over the seats to the front of the room. “My parents are just over there, you know.”

He narrowed his gaze at me. “So? It’s not like I’m doing anything other than just holding you.” He chuckled. “I think King Nicolai really hates me now. I think he used to like me.”

I shook my head. “Don’t bet on it.” Nicolai didn’t like many people at all.

“What?”

I pressed down on my lips to keep from laughing. “Remember when we were younger, and you accidentally cut me when we were training. He hasn’t liked you since then.”

His eyes widened. “That was an accident.”

I shrugged. “Don’t mess with his princess.”

He needled me in the side and a jolt of electricity shot through my limbs. I rested my head on his shoulder, letting him hold me and feeling more relaxed this time.

His breath came out evenly. The steady raising and lowering of his chest like a comforting lullaby. I made my arms relax and rested my palm on his chest.

He lowered his voice. “I saw you talking with Rafe earlier.”

“Mmm,” I said, letting everything about Alexei lull me.

“Are you going to choose him next?”

My eyes opened wide, and I was suddenly tense again. His hand came up to rub my back, but he’d already done the damage. “I don’t know. God, Alexei.”

He kept his voice low, melodic. “I was just curious. We used to talk about everything, you know?”

“That was before.”

“Before?”

“Before you were a possibility.”

He pulled me close for a moment, then let his hand drop to my thigh. “At least I’m still a possibility.”

I laid my head back on his shoulder, hoping he’d come to his senses and stop talking about this stuff with me.

It didn’t happen. “I approve of your choices so far, by the way.”

“Good to know,” I grumbled.

But his words weren’t affecting me as much anymore. It was his touch on my thigh and the way it kept working upward, slowly, yet steadily. I tensed. Not because I wanted him to stop, but because it felt too good.

He seemed to know the difference, or maybe he didn't care. His hand kept traveling up, his thumb brushing inches away from my panty line.

“W-what are you doing?”

“Testing my boundaries.”

His hand inched higher. “Why would you do that?” My heart sounded off like a bass drum in my ears. Thought had left in an instant, and all I felt was his hand and all I heard was the mad beat in my chest.

“I want to know my limits with you, Izzy. Now that I've come out and told you how I really feel, I don't want to stop. I want more.”

I squeezed my knees together as he went impossibly higher. “More?” I asked, my voice squeaking. “How much more?”

He answered by pulling my knees apart and sliding his hand between again. He stopped midway down my thigh, but I got the gist, anyway.

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“You said you wouldn’t touch me inappropriately with my parents over there.”

“I did?”

I nodded, my breath coming quicker.

“I guess that’s not the question. The question is, do you want me to?”

I finally looked into his eyes. That was it. I fell over and into the beautiful blue sea. The rocking waves. The overpowering sheer volume of feeling. It was like seeing him for the first time. Like I was looking through someone else’s eyes and seeing him for him and not as Alexei my best friend.

No wonder why all the girls at The Fort were crazy for him.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he warned. His fingers tensed on my skin and an ice shiver steeled my back.

I put my hand over his and squeezed. No matter how much I wanted him to do what he was insinuating, Rafe was right across from us and my parents were not more than a few rows away. The first time someone touched me like that was not going to be in front of an audience.

He seemed to understand my meaning. A small smile split his lips. He reached up and cupped my cheek. “I know.” Closing his eyes, he leaned back against the seat and took a deep breath. “Now that I’ve got myself all riled up...” He squirmed in the seat, and I didn’t dare look down. After another deep breath, he opened his eyes and

looked at me. His gaze was soft. “When we get to the Chang’s, I want you to stick close to me.”

Really? I cocked my head to the side.

“Don’t give me that look. I know you can take care of yourself, but in case something is still there, I’d feel a hell of a lot better if you were near me. We’ve only trained with the rest of these guys a few times and though they seem strong, I’m not willing to put your life at risk based on a few observations. You’re sticking with me.”

I slid a glance toward Rafe. What Alexei said made a lot of sense. My parents trained with one another for years. Now they were like a well-oiled machine, but it wasn’t always like that. Alexei was the only one I knew like the back of my hand. If something happened, I could pretty much guarantee I knew how he would react.

I nodded slowly, and a pressure seemed to lift from his shoulders. He pulled my head down to his chest. “Get some rest, Princess. I promise I’ll behave myself.”

I lifted my eyebrows at him. Sure. Because that had worked out so well the last time he promised...

“I mean it this time,” he said, his lips curving into a smile.

I laid my head down. It rose and fell with the steady rhythm of his breaths. Before long, I could feel myself drift away.

It was nice having someone here who I was comfortable with. I was still trying to feel the other guys out, but Alexei was just like an old favorite t-shirt. Just because you’d had it a long time didn’t make it any less than the brand new one you got. The old one had memories and feelings all throughout it, whereas the new ones were just getting started.

There was something to be said for the old and familiar.

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Chapter Seven

I wasn't sure what initially woke me, but when I came to, it was the hard clearing of throat that made me blink.

Papa Nicolai stood above us.

Yep. Above us, as I was still in Alexei's lap and both of us were—or had been—out cold.

Alexei went to stand, and I nearly slid out of his lap and fell on my butt. Instead, I moved gracefully—or so I hoped—to my feet and smiled at my dad. He raised his eyebrows, and I smiled even wider. "I couldn't get to sleep."

I was kind of joking with Alexei when I told him Nicolai didn't like him, but maybe I shouldn't have. He was sure giving him the death look right now. Thankfully, he hadn't seen his hand halfway up my thigh.

"We're landing in about a half hour. We need to go over strategy together."

I nodded, and Alexei—slowly this time—rose to his feet. Papa Nic glared at him from the corner of his eye then turned and made his way to the center of the plane. A short snicker rose up, and I looked over. Rafe was trying his best to hold it in, but he was losing the battle. Apparently, he thought all that was funny.

"Thanks for the help, man," Alexei said, admonishing him.

Rafe held his hands up. “He came out of nowhere. I swear.”

I believed him. Nicolai had a talent for just sneaking up when you least expected him. Especially when you didn’t want him to know what you were doing.

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I smacked Alexei in the stomach. “Thanks for almost putting me on my ass.”

He smiled. “I panicked a little, didn’t I?”

This made Rafe laugh out loud. “A little? I thought you were going to have a heart attack.”

Alexei rubbed his chest. “I think I did.”

I pushed Alexei toward the aisle of the plane and then pulled Rafe to his feet, so we could meet with everyone. Theo was his usual guarded self, his face blank. Felix looked at us cautiously, a hint of despair in his eyes, though he quickly covered up his true feelings with a smirk.

“Now that we’re all here,” Papa Nic said.

My mother sent him a chastising look, but he didn’t even bother acknowledging it. Instead, she continued. “Thirty minutes until touch down. Then another fifteen minutes until we get to Clan Chang. Does that sound right to you, Li?”

My stomach dropped at the mention of his name. When I turned to look at him, his face was deathly pale. Maybe it was my mind playing tricks on me, but he looked smaller too, as if the world around him was taking up his space, dwindling him down into nothing.

“Yes, my queen, that’s right.”

I quickly looked away, not enjoying the flip of my stomach from seeing his pain so plainly laid out for everyone.

Mom took a deep breath and settled herself back into her role. I had no idea how she compartmentalized everything, but she did a good job of it. “Main mission is to figure out who did this to Li’s clan. We’re the first one’s going in with only the brief that he was able to give us. Stay aware. Whoever did this might still be lingering.”

“Watch over your fellow guards,” Papa Nicolai said, staring everyone down.

Papa Connor nodded, eyeing me briefly until I looked at him and then he looked away just as quickly. “We get in, we look, observe. Anything of note, please bring to our attention,” he said, gesturing toward my mother and Papa Nic.

“Secondly,” my mother continued. “Once everything has been looked over, Li would like to lay his family to rest. We’re going to move the bodies to the courtyard and give them a proper burial according to Clan Chang’s traditions.”

“Then, we leave,” Papa Nic said.

“I can’t stress enough that you be aware at all times,” Mom said again. “We don’t know what we’re up against which makes this mission an unknown.” She eyed the potential mates except for Alexei. “Watch your backs, and others.”

They all nodded.

“Li, you stick with Nicolai. Connor, you’re with me. Izzy—”

“I’ve got Izzy,” Alexei stated.

My mother’s jaw worked, but she nodded...eventually.

The hair on the back of my neck rose with injured pride. I so badly wanted to make sure everyone knew I could handle myself, but it wasn't the time or place. I'd just have to show them I could handle myself if there was cause. Actions spoke louder than words.

"Let's partner everyone else up," King Nicolai said. "Calen, you're with Rafe. Theo, you're with Dumont. Stick to one another and don't think for once second you're not being watched or judged. I won't have my daughter marrying a pansy-ass who can't follow orders." He stood and returned to his original seat, signaling the end of the meeting.

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing. Yep. That about summed my father up. Papa Connor and my mother just looked at one another with smirks as they followed Nicolai. I saw them whisper and laugh with one another as the rest of us rose and returned to our original seats.

"Way to go, Rajyvik," Felix whispered harshly. "Thanks for pissing him off."

Jeez. Had everyone seen us sleeping together? I'd have to get used to nothing being private.

"Just think," Alexei teased. "For as much as he hates me, he'll always hate you more."

That was accurate. Nicolai wasn't one to give up a grudge. As far as he was concerned, the whole Dumont family sucked.

Felix shrugged as if the knowledge didn't upset him, but it had to. Then again, maybe he wasn't concerned because he didn't want me, anyway. Who knew with him?

"I, for one, am a little jealous," Rafe said. "I couldn't get Izzy to fall asleep."

“To be fair, I’ve known her a lot longer,” Alexei said.

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Felix eyed me, his gaze traveling the length of my body. He stood mute for a few moments and then nodded. “I could’ve figured it out.”

It? How about her?

“You see,” Alexei said, “the thing with Izzy is—”

“Really?” I asked, smacking him in the arm.

He caught his lip between his teeth, his blue eyes dancing. “What? You really think I was going to tell them something? They’re my competition, aren’t they?”

I frowned. “I don’t want you guys to see it like that.”

“Chill. I was just joking, Iz.”

“No, but really,” I ventured. “Watch my parents. They’re not in competition with one another. They move as one unit.”

Alexei raised his eyebrows. “I’ve seen them compete with one another...over time with her.”

I shrugged. “Well, yeah, I guess.” Listen, I wasn’t deaf or blind. I knew that sometimes they had to make alone time for one another.

“How does that work?” Theo said.

His strong voice almost knocked me off kilter. Maybe it was because I hadn't heard him speak very much since he got here. "What do you mean?"

He scratched the tiny bit of stubble on his jaw. "You know, private moments."

I eyed him, wondering if that's what he'd been talking to Papa Christian about. Maybe that's why he was so standoffish. He didn't know how all this would work out with multiple men. I struggled to answer because I didn't have experience with one man let alone multiple. This was kind of like diving into the deep end without a life jacket. "Well, the way I see it," I said, honestly. "Is that we're all a family. I'd prefer intimate relationships with all my mates, but it doesn't need to go further than that. Just because there are other mates there doesn't mean it has to be a free-for-all. I think it's whatever anyone is comfortable with, myself included."

"So, you don't expect us to..."

"Do anything you're not comfortable with? No."

His shoulders firmed up a little. His brown eyes hinted at flecks of gold the more he relaxed.

Over the speaker system, the pilot came on and told us to prepare for landing. Most of us went back to our original seats, but I followed Theo. Since he'd finally spoken up about a few things, I saw it as an opportunity to talk with him further.

He'd sat in the row of seats just behind my parents, so I sat down next to him this time. I pulled at the seat belt and tried to get it locked in, but it wouldn't go. I tried to force it, but just ended up getting frustrated.

Theo put his hand over mine. "Let me try?"

I nodded, giving it over to him. He let out the slack a little and then pushed it neatly down into the lock. Then, he pulled the seatbelt tight, making sure I was properly contained. I smiled up at him. “Thank you.”

He sat back and looked straight ahead. I thought for a moment he wasn’t going to continue talking the way he had been, but again, he surprised me. “I’ve been observing your parents a lot,” he said, his gaze tracing over to them. “I never really thought about living this kind of lifestyle. I didn’t understand it.”

“Now?” I asked, hoping that somehow my parents had changed his mind.

“I can see it now. What you want is more of a family and not what others might extrapolate from having multiple male partners. I thought maybe you were some...” He trailed off, not willing to finish his sentence.

“Some sex maniac?” I asked, holding back a giggle when I saw how red his cheeks got.

He side-eyed me. “Maybe.”

I leaned in close to him. “It might interest you to know I’m still a virgin.”

His eyes widened.

I shrugged. What? It was something they all should know, anyway. If we were seriously considering one another for mates, we should be aware of this kind of stuff.

“I asked King Christian, but he wasn’t sure. Though, he thought you were.”

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Now it was my turn for my eyes to go crazy. “You asked my father?”

“Well, y-yeah,” he said, stumbling over his words. “I wanted to know, and it just kind of came up. I have a lot of questions about this arrangement.”

His embarrassment made it impossible to be mad at him. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “Okay... Maybe next time you’ll just ask me first. Okay?”

He nodded. “I can do that.”

I rested my head back against the seat. I sat there thinking about what it must have been like for Papa Christian to field that question about me. Suddenly, I was laughing. At least he’d had the correct answer. I couldn’t imagine if he said I wasn’t a virgin.

Theo peeked over at me. “What is it?”

“Could you maybe explain to me what King Christian looked like when you asked him that?”

His lips peeled into a smirk. “He was taken off guard.”

I laughed harder. “Like, how so?”

He put his fingers up next to his eyes, simulating huge circles. “His eyes were this big around. But, once he calmed down, he did take my question seriously.”

Of course he did. That was exactly like him.

“So, are you?” I asked, after a moment or two of silence. “A virgin?”

Theo shook his head.

I didn’t know why, but that answer kind of shocked me. He was so reserved. It was hard to think anyone could’ve gotten through to him to take their relationship that far.

“You’re disappointed?”

I shook my head quickly. “No, of course not.”

The truth was, I kind of was. Were there no other virgins in this mix? It was highly improbable any of the rest of them were.

I rubbed my head, a brush of cool air making me clammy. At that moment, I could feel the airplane start its descent.

“We should talk more often, Princess Izzy.”

I agreed. Theo Nolan was largely a mystery to me. He seemed as frigid as the harsh winters he got up in his native Canadian terrain. But, this talk with him had opened my eyes a little. There was more to him than just formality and his serious nature.

All-in-all, this lengthy plane trip was helpful. I got to know Rafe a bit more, got felt up by my best friend, and Theo opened up to me a little.

The only thing I hadn’t managed to do was tell them about my visions.

Who knew what would happen on the plane trip back?

Chapter Eight

Clan Chang's compound, though close to the city, was on the outskirts of the surrounding forest. We drove up a winding drive that led to the front door of a main building. Scattered around the building were other structures smaller in size but with the same design. The area reminded me of a commune.

Alexei leaned over. "I heard Li say they all lived here."

"All of them?"

He nodded.

No wonder why they were so easily taken down. Though some of our clan members preferred to live near us for protection, it wasn't a requirement. In fact, this showed that maybe it wasn't even for safety reasons. If we were all in one place, it made us more of a target, easier to dispose of.

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My gut wrenched again, and I breathed through the sickening feeling.

From the outside, everything was beautiful. I could imagine Li walking up to this building only a week ago and having no idea what he would find on the inside. All his family, dead. It was amazing his body didn't just shut down when he saw that.

Mom always said vampires had the strongest will to live of any species. We were like rabid sharks when it came to survival. We didn't want anything taking us down. I felt that, in some ways, but I was also still part human.

In either case, the whole idea of this happening was unimaginable.

Alexei rubbed my shoulder. "Be strong."

I placed my hand on his leg, and he reached down to link our hands.

The hired car pulled to a stop in front of the massive building in the epicenter of the commune and we got out. We assembled ourselves at the front while my parents went over last-minute directions. They told the cars to wait for us while we went inside after slipping them enough money so the drivers were sure not to complain if we took too long.

On my left, I saw Rafe and Calen sticking close to one another. Theo and Felix were beyond that. I tugged on Alexei's hand and positioned ourselves behind Theo and Felix. Theo was giving Dumont a wide berth, and I wanted to reassure them both. It wasn't fair to Felix in a way. It wasn't as if he was the one who'd tried to take us out all those years before. Should we all be punished for the wrongdoings of our

ancestors? That didn't seem like a solution.

Repositioning us worked though.

Both Theo and Felix seemed to relax with the extra precautions. Papa Nic and Li went in first while my mother and Connor were the last. As soon as Li opened the main door, a sickening odor wafted out. It was indescribable. Putrid. Disgusting. It made me gag, but out of respect for Li, we all kept our mouths shut. It was his family in there decaying to nothing. The least we could do was not mention the smell.

Li gave us a quick rundown of the layout of the main room when we walked in. His hushed whispers cut through the eerie silence like a blade through air. Nicolai motioned for the rest of us to search the room to make sure we were alone. Alexei and I kept close to Felix and Theo but went out separately to check a few anterior rooms and then worked our way back inside to the center of the ceremonial room.

There. That's where they all were.

The room buzzed with flies. It made me sick to think our bodies would look like that after our death, just orifices without spirit or feeling. Alexei grabbed my hand again. Li was already there in the middle, squatting next to a male body. I recognized him as his brother.

How sick with sadness Li must feel right now.

Next to him, at the front, was another male body.

Su.

My teeth clenched as I saw the dried blood spilled out amongst them. The gashes in their skin like claw marks.

Mother moved forward first, putting her hand on Li's shoulder. "We'll find out who did this. I promise."

I loved my mother in that moment. To give someone such hope in a time of despair filled me with courage. I walked forward and crouched down next to Li. I placed my hand on Su's forehead. He was cold, grotesque almost. But still, he deserved to be mourned as someone who loved him would've mourned him. Most of his whole clan was gone, but that didn't mean he shouldn't be properly said goodbye to.

I sucked in a breath and looked up to the ceiling, saying my prayer for his spirit. That it was in a much better place now.

Though we crouched, or sat, or stood still for some moments, eventually, Papa Nic got antsy. He cleared his throat, breaking all of us out of our reverie. "We need to look for evidence, then we'll help Li lay the bodies to rest."

Around us, the mates got to their feet first. Since we'd declared the building empty of threat, we all spread out individually.

I looked around the room wondering where to start. Entrances? Exits? Windows? Doors? In the immediate area, I didn't see anything that needed more attention. No distinguishable tracks like we found near the perimeter of The Fort. I closed my eyes and tried to think. Went back to the vision in my head. Was there something about what I saw before that would lead me somewhere in this room?

A white column kept flashing in my head. They were beautiful. Almost ancient Greek-like. When my eyes opened, I knew what I would see. There were columns all around this room, just like my vision. When my eyes fluttered open, I saw Felix already standing next to one, his eyes turned toward the ceiling. I followed his gaze up and saw skylights high in the roof.

I stepped forward, carefully avoiding any limbs or torsos draped about. When I got closer, Felix heard me coming. His gaze turned away, and he moved from the spot.

“Wait,” I called out.

He did so. One foot in front of the other as if he couldn’t wait to leave the area.

“Did you find something?”

He shrugged, not turning even though I was talking directly to him.

“Felix...”

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His shoulders tensed. The air between us was thick with unspoken words. My eyes drifted down the column where deep scratch marks marred the surface. When I looked up, Felix was turned toward me again. His throat worked, and his eyes were a mess of thoughts that he held captive inside.

“You found claw marks.”

He nodded.

I followed them up the column. Whoever it was must have come from the top skylights and rode the large columns all the way down. I could see deep cuts into the ornate columns as far as my eyes could see.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

He moved closer, his eyes ablaze. “Something’s about to change.” He grabbed my hand. “Izzy—” His face went pale as an electric current passed from my hand to his. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. With a few moments of struggling, he finally forced words. “You have to know I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be. We all have secrets. We all have a past, but you must look at what’s right in front of you. You know that, right? That what happened in the past isn’t—”

I squeezed his hands. “What are you saying?”

“Did you find something, Iz?” Papa Nic called out.

Felix tore his hand from mine and turned, making a straight line for the main exit. He

pushed the doors open allowing a stream of sunlight to work its way into the room for a moment before he was on the other side as if none of what happened occurred.

“Iz?” Papa Nic called again.

I finally turned to the sound of his voice. “Yes,” I said, forcing words from my mouth. “Felix found it first though. Claw marks in the column. I think they came in and out this way,” I said, pointing up to the ceiling to the high windows.

Everyone looked up, following my gesture. They squinted in the bit of sunlight that shone down. Though the windows were tinted, it was still a fair bit brighter than we kept things at The Fort. That was one thing I could tolerate more than other full-fledged vampires. The sun didn’t bother me as much though it could leave its mark during prolonged exposure. It was best to keep it safe. I never pushed what I could and could not handle.

“And here,” Alexei called out. “A print.”

We all moved in his direction like a swarm of bees. Calen knelt in front of it, his body going rigid. “It’s the same print from the perimeter.”

A cold dose of fear spread its way over my limbs. What had taken out Clan Chang had visited us at The Fort as well. Why? How? If they’d done this to Clan Chang, why hadn’t they done anything more to us? We were sitting ducks just like the Chang’s were. Even worse, we had prominent vampire families staying with us. It was as if we were asking for trouble.

Mother’s voice rang out calm. “Connor, Nicolai, make sure we document everything. I believe we’ve found enough evidence. Everyone else, let’s help Li take care of his family.”

Enough evidence? We still didn't know anything.

As everyone else dispersed, I walked up to Mom. She turned toward me. Though her voice was calm and as much as the queen's as it ever was, when she looked at me, I could see the lines around her eyes and the tightness in her mouth.

I lowered my voice. "We don't know anything, Mother."

She watched as Calen and Alexei carried bodies out the back door to the courtyard, laying them on top of one another. "We know as much as we're going to know from here. We've been all over the place and only found the prints and the marks. We know the same thing that was close to our home is the same thing that took out the Chang's. What more would you like us to know?"

"What exactly it is," I said, my voice coming out in a desperate rush. "If they killed the Chang's, they're probably going to try to kill us too."

She stepped closer and put her hand on my shoulder. "And thanks to you, we already knew that." When my face didn't change, hers softened, and she squeezed my shoulder where her hand lay. "They're not going to draw us a treasure map to their location, Izzy. They're not even going to make it easy to figure out what they are. Why would they? Right now, we know that they're not human. They're not even vampires. This is some sort of creature. Claws. Footprints." Her eyes looked around. "Connor took pictures of the wounds on Clan Chang. We're going to take them back to Stephan to see if he's seen anything like it before or if he knows what it might have been. This is a strategic attack, Isabelle. They're not going to lay all the evidence out for us."

I eyed the door, thinking about the way Felix acted.

He knew something.

He had to. Otherwise, what was all that talk about taking someone at who they were and not the actions of others? He wasn't going to say anything about the claw marks on the pillar except that I saw him looking at them.

I nodded, my thoughts a jumbled mess as I thought about Felix outside. He very well might hold the key as to what this all was.

Or maybe not. Maybe I read into everything wrong.

Li moved to one of the pillars and turned a large wheel. The skylights in the ceiling opened simultaneously. Then, he moved back to the center of the ceremonial floor. He closed his eyes, muttering something in his native language. Then, he took a box of matches from his pocket and struck one until it came to life between his fingers. He turned, inviting us all to move outside with him. With a flick of his wrist, the match landed on the discarded bodies, blooming into a flame immediately.

One-by-one, he went around the mass of bodies and threw matches down, his lips moving as he did so. The smoke started to build and build, taking what was a beautiful garden into something tragic.

The rest of us stood and watched. The smoke rose, wafting up and taking the remnants of Clan Chang into the sky on a breeze.

My eyes watered, and it had nothing to do with the smoke.

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Chapter Nine

Alexei stuck close to me after that.

The plan was to drive back to the airport and to leave China right away. With what we'd seen there, I couldn't wait to lift off the ground and leave this whole place behind. It had been a short, but sad trip.

However, things didn't work out the way we'd planned. The pilot that was supposed to come on to fly us back to the states never showed. The pilot that brought us here could take us, but he needed to rest first. An overnight stay in the nearest hotel was now in the works. Within moments, Papa Connor had the whole thing worked out and had the drivers take us to the airport hotel.

After dropping my things off in my own room, I didn't waste any time. I went straight for Felix's. The guy could be an ass, but he also showed heart. He'd seemed so open and honest with me standing there in the middle of Clan Chang's ceremonial room, begging me to understand something.

I raised my hand to knock on his door, but another voice rung out.

"Izzy?"

I turned quickly, noticing Rafe standing just outside his hotel door. His eyes were sad. The usual carefree expression on his face was marred with an intensity that immediately drew me his way. “What is it?” I asked. I lowered my hand and went up to him.

He held his hand out to me and I took it. When he pulled it toward the interior of his room, I didn’t stop him. I was too consumed with the sudden change in his appearance. Sure, he’d opened up to me on the plane, but it seemed like a lot more was weighing on his mind now than it had then.

He shut the door, and I stood in the center of the room that was a replica of my own. It was foreign looking, but familiar all at the same time. Maybe it was just me that seemed odd being there. Like my very presence in this country was strange.

Rafe gave me a quick tug, and I fell into his arms. Immediately, he lowered his lips until they were on mine. His ferocity surprised me for only a moment, then I was all-in. His hands clawed at my back desperately.

I knew the feeling. I wanted more. Needed more. Today was all about sadness and emptiness and uncertainty. I wanted something sure and real and Rafe was that, right? He was a solid body right in front of me.

He deepened the kiss, his tongue parting my lips as easy as could be. Like we’d kissed a hundred times before.

My body hungered for more. I moved closer though we couldn’t possibly be any closer. Yet, it still wasn’t good enough.

He took my hips and yanked them forward. They melded with his, but I still wanted more. My arms went around him, and I hung on tight, sealing our upper bodies with a fierce grip as he worked on my hips, pulling us closer and closer together until we fell

back on the bed.

We finally broke. The jarring of the movement split us apart for only a moment until he was right there again. On our sides, he pulled me close while my head rang, and breath sawed in and out. His fingers stayed on my skin, feeling its way up and down, never leaving me once. “You told me when I wanted to do that again to not ask.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” I said, Then, I moved closer, hovering over him. “This is me not asking.”

I initiated the kiss this time. His hands stayed on me, but I was in control. This was what I should’ve done on the plane. I wanted to kiss him, and I knew he wanted to kiss me, so why didn’t I just do it? Who knew how much time we all had left? This was the time to just go in head first without a care in the world.

Rafe made a noise in the back of his throat that made the area between my legs throb. I gasped and pulled away.

“I’m sorry,” he said immediately.

“No,” I said, reaching out and grabbing his arm. There was nothing he should be sorry about. “That was perfect. I just surprised myself is all.”

A small smile tugged at his lips. “I feel like I want to be closer when we’re pretty much as close as can be.”

I nodded. He took the words right out of my mind. “It’s probably because of today. That was rough.”

“It was,” he said. But then he sighed and propped himself up on his elbow, his free hand coming to rest on my stomach. It made small, lazy circles that made my skin

tingle. “But that isn’t all of it for me. I told you why I came here initially. I thought maybe you’d shun me when I opened up to you on the plane about it, but you didn’t. You understood. You let me in. After what happened today only solidified for me that I want what I want, and I don’t want to wait any more. I might not have come here under the clearest of intentions, but I have one now.”

“I want to be one of your mates, Isabelle Ravana. I want to be someone you look to when you have a bad day. I want to be someone you can trust. Most of all, I want to be there when things like this are going on. I want to protect you and hold you. I was just sitting in my room thinking that I hoped someone was taking care of you because you really shouldn’t be alone right now. Then I thought, if I just told you how I feel, I could be the one doing it.” His throat worked. “Izzy, I want to be your mate. I’m officially proclaiming to you my intention and beg that you accept me. Either way, I’ve found my true purpose, and that’s helping our people, but I’d rather be doing that while pledging myself to you. If that’s not possible, I understand, but—”

What do you think? Are you ready to accept Rafe as one of Izzy’s mates?

If yes, please continue reading!

If not, continue to Chapter Ten or Location 1056.

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I sealed my lips to his and yanked him down until his body was on top of mine. God, he talked too much. Not that I didn't like pretty words as much as the next girl, but sometimes I just wanted to feel it too. Rafe's touch said it all. It was all heat and passion. I felt all the things he just said to me in his neediness more than what the words proclaimed. Together, they were one powerful solidifier.

Rafe Simms was my next mate.

I hooked my leg around his and made him stay there. In between kisses, I mumbled, "Stay." And, "Yes, yes, I want you."

The more things like this I said, the more he gave me. His kisses turned feverish until we were all but dry humping. He'd move, and I'd sigh. I'd meet his touch with my own and he'd make this wickedly seductive sound in the back of his throat.

When my phone started to ring, I wanted to throw it against the wall. We kissed all the way through the first call, but when it sounded again, Rafe pulled away, his lips on my neck, teasing. "It could be your mom or dads."

I smiled at him. "You just want to get on their good side now."

He lifted himself away from me after placing a soft kiss on my lips. "It couldn't hurt."

I agreed. The last thing we needed was my parents finding us in his room like this. It wouldn't make a great impression.

He stood, helping me from the bed. He took my hand and kissed it before I pulled the phone out of my pocket.

“I’ll tell my parents,” I said to him as I made my way out the door.

His body tightened, so I moved forward to kiss him again all the while the phone still rang in my palm. “There’s nothing to worry about,” I promised.

He held onto my hand until I reached the door. He finally let it go when I pulled it open, and the phone started to ring for the third time in a row.

It was Papa Nic. I answered it.

“We can’t find Dumont.”

My body seized. “I’m on my way.”

Congratulations on your harem member!

Stay tuned for the next serial installment of The Ravana Legacy starring Izzy Ravana and her search for true mates...

For more interactive fun, join E. M. Moore’s Facebook Readers group to talk about the choice you made today! Just [clickhere!](#)

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Summoned By Magic

Order of the Akasha, Book One

Chapter One

The point was to watch them, not get sucked in. I failed. Holy fuck, this guy was hot.

I always was a sucker for tattoos and guns. Not the kind of guns that shoot things. Guns, as in thick, muscled arms I could sink my teeth into.

I blew out a breath. For heaven's sake, I needed a cold shower. It might even do these cramps some good. How the hell did I even end up here? Well, technically, I knew how. A long ass bus ride with people who weren't always the cleanest and some men who I could tell didn't have the best of intentions. The more appropriate question was why I ended up here.

I'd been getting cramps—I know, TMI—and a yearning in my stomach for something “other”. Something that wasn't in New Orleans where I'd lived my whole life. The pressure was like a pull, and when you grew up with my grandmother, you tended to want to follow your instincts because that's what she hammered into you

day in and day out. Don't trust someone? Don't. They're probably an axe murderer. Feel like you shouldn't go to school today? Don't. Who knows what shitty nonsense could happen? Don't like that guy around the corner? Neither do I, he's a dick.

I smiled to myself remembering Granny. She hated that name, but I called her it, anyway. She was a forever young person stuck in an old woman's body. And, she just so happened to be the local Voodoo Priestess, revered—and feared—by many. Yeah, my childhood was a smash.

The too-loud pop music in the bar where I'd been enjoying my eye candy stopped suddenly. Shoved into the present, I dropped the straw that allowed me to suck down my Amaretto Sour like it was Kool-Aid and turned. Wow. What a dive bar. The absence of Bruno Mars' Uptown Funk and the house lights exposed the thick layer of sticky grime on the bar and the off-brown checkered tile that led to the small stage at the back of the place.

The tall, lanky guy who lived with the Adonis I'd been lusting after since I got to Salem two days ago stood on the cramped stage. He tapped the microphone tentatively, sending a buzz through the air that made me cringe. "Sorry," he muttered, while pushing his glasses back up his nose. He stood there awkwardly for a few moments, shifting his weight from foot to foot while I—and everyone else in the bar—watched. He wasn't used to being the center of attention, that much was evident. My heart went out to him as his face blanched. The blinding white lights all turned on him and he stood there like a surprised animal getting caught taking food.

He was adorable, actually, in a dorky kind of way. All the guys who lived at the apartment I'd been drawn to were good looking in their own way, surprising and confusing me all at the same time. Before I could get sucked back down the rabbit hole of why I was here, he finally cleared his throat and spoke. "Uh, hey." He waved awkwardly, then put his hand above his eyes to ward off the spotlights. "Just wanted to send a happy birthday out to my friend, Randy. Um, guess I should've brought a

drink up here with me to toast or something, but uh...”

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One of the other guys from the apartment, the blond one who looked like he stepped off a sports magazine cover when he left for practice in the morning, ran a drink up to the front. “Bottom’s up,” he winked.

“Thanks, Gabe.” The lanky one bent over so his lips were almost on the microphone as he raised his borrowed glass in the air. “Happy birthday, Randy.” The microphone buzzed and squeaked as he stepped away.

The blond one—Gabe, apparently—stepped right up after. “Cheers, Mate!” He threw his own drink back, and stepped away from the mic, encouraging the lanky one to do the same with his. He did, his face immediately puckering, and then gave a quick shake of his head as he finally swallowed what was surely some strong, hard liquor.

I leaned against the bar and took a drink of my own. Following them to the bar tonight had been a good idea. I’d just learned two of their names—Gabe and Randy. I also knew that Gabe was apparently British and that it was Randy, Mr. Hot as Fuck’s, birthday.

I eyed the two as they made their way back over to the bar a few feet from where I stood. The same pull tugged in the pit of my stomach when they were all together. I moaned deep as the feeling became overwhelming. There was definitely something about these four. Was I supposed to know them? Was I supposed to fear them? Nothing seemed off. They were four regular guys. Three of them went to college at Salem State while Randy spent most of his time at the gym and a tattoo parlor.

Frustrated, I pulled the straw from my glass and downed the rest of my drink. I was just about to place it back on the bar when a deep, gruff voice said, “I hope that was

in my honor.”

My eyes widened, and I almost sputtered. The guy I’d been lusting after since I got here just spoke to me. Holy bananas. Now that he was six inches away, I got to check him out up close. It was easy to get drawn in. He looked sexy as sin wherever he went. He was either dressed for the gym, showing off his sexy as fuck muscles, or sporting tight ass t-shirts on his way to the tattoo parlor he worked at. Tonight was the same tattoo parlor look, jeans that hugged his hips with a black shirt that looked like it was tailor-made just for him. What I hadn’t noticed from watching him with what was usually a street distance between us, was his dark eyes. They were deep brown, teetering on black. A shiver rocked my spine.

Suppressing my inner freak out, I blinked up at him, doing my best to appear interested. Appear? Who was I kidding? I was interested. “Of course,” I answered. “Randy, is it?”

He nodded in assent before taking his time perusing my body. My insides clenched, a more potent feeling than I’d ever had before as his eyes raked all over me. I hadn’t brought much of anything with me from New Orleans, including clothes, since I didn’t know what I would find here. Tonight, I’d just tied off one of my black shirts right above my right hip, showing a little midriff. It was about as “bar appropriate” as I got, even when I was home. Coupled with the tight pair of jeans I’d brought with me, I didn’t look half bad in the small ass motel mirror I’d checked my reflection in before making my way here. I’d followed them to the bar and then decided I had to go back to the room and do a little mini wardrobe makeover before heading in after them and seeing what I could find out. It couldn’t help to be as sexy as I could while trying to feel them out. At least, that’s what I’d thought, and it was working too. Randy was actually standing in front of me, his eyes gliding over my skin as if his only thought was what he could do to me.

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Chapter Ten

What were all these emotions? Why was I clawing at him like I was in heat?

I pushed Rafe away and struggled to my feet. He was right. This was the time to do what we wanted. Life was too short as was evidenced by everything we saw today. Poor Su.

If anything, it made me see more clearly.

Rafe wasn't for me.

I enjoyed certain parts of him, but not everything. Not enough to want to ally myself with him for all the days of my life. It was time to focus on what made me happy. No one sat there on their deathbed and wished they hadn't done more of what they loved. They wished they'd done what was appropriate the first time.

It wasn't Rafe.

His eyes were glued to the ceiling when I finally looked up at him. "I'm sorry," I said.

What kind of person must I look like right now? All over him one minute, and the next, rejecting his proposal.

What was wrong with me?

"I'm so sorry, Rafe. I shouldn't have led you on like that. I don't know what came over me."

He shook his head, still not meeting my eyes. “Today was an emotional day.”

“Still, I had no right to do that.”

I sat next to him on the bed and after a minute, he mimicked me. Staring straight at the opposite wall where a dark wood desk was flush against the trim with the one lone lamp. “I really am sorry.”

“You don’t have to keep saying that.”

I never wanted to lead any of them on. I didn’t want to kiss them, use them essentially, and then decide I didn’t want them.

Was this what I really wanted then?

I searched my head and found exactly what I thought I would find. I liked Rafe, I just didn’t like him enough.

“I think I got confused in my head,” I said, making a lame excuse, but wanting him to see I wasn’t a terrible person who did things like this. That just wasn’t me.

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“I know,” he said. “I think that’s why I didn’t kiss you on the plane. I just sensed something wasn’t right, but—”

Maybe he was right. Maybe I didn’t know my own mind sometimes. Especially with everything that happened today. Seeing Su dead on the ceremonial floor. Someone who I should’ve been able to get to know. Unfortunately, that choice was taken away from me. Maybe that’s why I tried to force it with Rafe.

I turned toward him, my knees almost contacting his, but he pulled away. I bit my lip. “Will you still stay on?” If anything good could come out of this, it was that Rafe was a talented soldier, and if he truly wanted to help us, he would be an asset. “I understand if you don’t want to.”

His hands turned to fists. “I’m staying. I’ve finally found what I’m meant to do. That I’m sure of.”

I blew out a breath, but the more I stayed, the more an awkward feeling crept up my spine. I looked over and saw his jaw tighten. He probably wanted nothing more than for me to leave.

I stood, my legs shaky underneath me as if my very foundations had been shifted during this.

It was harder than I thought to turn people down. Especially when they were good people like Rafe. Someone who’d opened to me completely, but I still just didn’t feel the same way about them as they did me. “I’m sorry,” I repeated.

He met my eyes once more. “Me too.”

I swallowed and turned, not saying anything else as I made my way from the room. Just as I was pulling the door closed my phone rang. I fished it out of my pocket and tried to keep my voice under control as I answered it. “Yeah?”

It was Papa Nic. He paused for a moment before he said anything. Papa Connor or Papa Stephan would’ve asked me why I answered the phone like that, but that wasn’t Nicolai’s style. “We can’t find Dumont.”

“What?”

“He’s not in his room. We don’t know where he is.”

“I’ll be right there,” I said, cursing inside my head.

I knew he knew something. I took off down the hallway, my eyes peeled on my parents’ door as I thought about where Felix could be. And, about what the hell he meant earlier when he tried to tell me something.

By the time I knocked on my parents’ door, a headache had taken root and was spreading to my temples.

All in a day’s work for this princess, though.

At least, that’s what my new reality was now.