



Fanged Temptation

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Category: Romance, Adult, M-m Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: Runaway vampire heiress? Check. Furious ex-best friend? Double check. A love story that's sharp enough to draw blood? Oh, absolutely.

Maxine Belmonte has mastered the art of reinvention—power suits, perfect hair, and a playful grin that says “trouble, but make it cute.” As the executive assistant to a top-tier vampire coven leader, she’s got everything under control. Well, almost everything. Hiding from an ancient ex-fiancé with a possessiveness problem isn’t as easy as she makes it look. Especially when that ex is hunting her through New York City like she’s the grand prize at a blood-soaked carnival.

Then there’s Leah Price. Marine biologist, fiercely loyal granddaughter, and card-carrying member of the “I’m Over It” club—until Maxine waltzes back into her life looking like sin in heels. Leah’s still furious. Still hurt. And definitely not in love—nope, not even a little.

When Maxine shows up at her houseboat asking for a place to hide, Leah knows she’s in for trouble.

Their chemistry? Instant combustion. Their banter? Sharp as fangs. With Maxine’s ex closing in and Leah’s family caught in the crossfire, love might not be enough to save them. Secrets don’t stay buried forever, and betrayal cuts deeper than any bite.

Heart-pounding action, sizzling tension, and a love that just won’t quit—*Fanged Temptation* is a thrilling, high-stakes romance you’ll devour in one sitting.

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Maxine

Navigating the NYC flower district in peak season was something akin to plunging head-first into battle. Contrary to the serene scenes of bouquets and buckets filled with floral arrangements that you might see in magazines, the actual reality of my little escapade was pure pandemonium, complete with troops of influencers armed with cellphones and sunglasses and overpriced iced coffees.

I had just elbowed my way into an overflowing flower shop on the corner of 7th street when a young woman decked out in an “I love New York” shirt and an armful of peonies had the audacity to shove me aside, sending me tottering into a precariously stacked column of fertilizer bags.

She didn’t even glance back, lost in a loud conversation on her phone while I narrowly avoided taking a tumble into a bucket of daffodils. Her words were a garbled mix of hashtags and brunch plans, jarring against the calm I had anticipated on my flower quest.

I scowled at her retreating back. Really, the nerve of some people. And complete lack of fashion sense to boot...But today was not the day to let someone else's rudeness dampen my spirits. I took a deep breath, inhaling the mingled scents of jasmine and roses, and fluffed out my curls. I was here on a mission of joy, and I would not be derailed by a tourist with poor manners and terrible taste in footwear.

Turning away from the chaos my assailant had left in her wake, I delved deeper down

a deserted aisle to the left. Here, the flowers were piled high on either side of me, a colorful maze that stretched onward and ended in a cluster of ferns.

I ran my fingers over the petals of a bundle of lilies, the velvety texture and delicate fragrance like a whisper of peace amidst the noise. I needed something vibrant but also... classy. Something that screamed congratulations Hunter on finally telling us about your mating bond with Addison even though I knew it all along!– or something to that extent.

Two days ago, Hunter had strutted into High Stakes headquarters looking rather pleased with herself, and announced what I had already known for months. She and Addison were mated and Hunter was finally ready to share the good news with the rest of us – and I was finally able to jump for joy without the rest of the Leyore woman questioning my sanity.

That nobody had clocked it until then was beyond me. In my eyes, it was clear as day that Hunter had found her mate the moment she started slinking off to some random nightclub she'd never shown interest in before. But perhaps the rest of my companions were not as tapped-in to the goings on of each other's lives as I was.

Some would call my inquisitive tendencies nosey. I called it useful. In my opinion, it was good to know the ins and outs of just about everything that happened in the bustling streets of New York.

And bustling they were. The deserted isle I'd found refuge in was not deserted for long, and I had to duck out of the way of yet another twittering tourist before I ended up with a black eye and a coffee stain, from the way she was wielding her Stanley cup.

After successfully avoiding a gaggle of social media snappers taking selfies amongst the petunias, I eventually found what I was looking for – a sophisticated arrangement

of deep red roses, interwoven with sprigs of eucalyptus and tiny twigs of baby's-breath. Romantic, sensual, and certainly better than the dehydrated half-dead cactus Hunter kept on her desk for reasons I could not begin to fathom.

With the bouquet securely in my grasp and brandishing my Birkin bag like a weapon, I made my way to the cashier. The line was mercifully short and I shuffled forward, already mentally preparing my congratulatory speech for Hunter, when a streak of red blinked past my peripheral.

I turned, credit card hovering over the terminal, and stared out of the storefront window. There, just beyond the glass, a frowning woman pushed through a swarm of pedestrians, fiery hair vibrant in the sunlight. A familiar face.

Memories surged, unbidden – a different time, a different place, walking hand in hand with a red-headed girl down the misty streets of San Francisco.

“Miss? Excuse me, Miss?”

The cashier's voice snapped me back to the present and I blinked, disoriented, the remains of a foggy reminiscence still clinging to my thoughts.

“I... I'll be right back. I just have to – ” I stammered, not bothering to finish my sentence as I rushed out the door, bouquet still clutched tightly in my fist.

Outside, I scanned the heaving street, heart pounding, eyes searching for that familiar flash of red. But she was gone, dissolved into the crowd as if she had never been there to begin with. Had I imagined her? Was my mind playing cruel tricks, weaving ghosts from the frayed threads of my past?

Realizing I was still holding the as yet unpaid bouquet, I turned to head back to the shop, only to see the cashier standing in the doorway, a look of confusion and mild

accusation on his face. Clearly, he thought I was attempting to make off with the flowers.

Flushing with embarrassment I walked back inside, sheepishly adjusting my iron grip on the roses. I handed over my card, kicking myself for getting caught up in old memories and wishful thinking. It wasn't her, it couldn't be. Leah was long gone, left behind when I packed my bags and hightailed it out of the Golden City all those years ago.

With the transaction complete and the bouquet now rightfully mine, I stepped back onto the street. It was time to focus on the present, on Hunter and Addison, and the celebration that awaited – not the past and the ten thousand sentiments left unsaid.

But somewhere in the back of my mind, a wise voice whispered that the past is never just the past; it's a part of who we are, persisting in unexpected glimpses of red on a busy New York street.

And sometimes, it comes back to haunt us.

With the emotional whirlwind of the flower shop behind me, I made my way to High Stakes headquarters, bursting into Hunter's office and waving the bouquet like a baton.

"Look what I braved the urban jungle for!" I announced, setting the roses on her cluttered desk with a flourish. "Congratulations on finally opening up to your friends. God knows it took you long enough."

Hunter was buried in paperwork, her brow furrowed like it always was when she was attempting to decipher Jordan's terrible handwriting. She glanced up after a pointedly long beat, her expression shifting from intense focus to dry disinterest as she took in the flowers. "Ah, just what I wanted – hay fever."

“Oh, stop it. You love them and you know it,” I chided, perching on her desk. “Now you can throw out that piddling excuse for a cactus plant.”

Hunter eyed the lone plant standing sentinel in its pot. “But I like my cactus.”

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“Hunter, look at it. That poor plant is getting by on bone-dry soil and a dream,” I tutted, arranging my skirt over my knees. “It’s all prickly and sad – like you before your morning coffee.”

Hunter scoffed but the corners of her lips twitched in amusement. “Or you after a few drinks.”

“We don’t talk about that! Honestly, I spend all morning picking out the perfect arrangement and this is the thanks I get.” I popped an exaggerated pout, crossing my legs and flicking a stray petal in her direction. “Remove the prickly pear from your ass and accept the flowers, for god’s sake.”

“Thank you, Maxine,” was her sing-song response, delivered with a devious glint of humor in her eye.

“Whatever. Addison will appreciate them.” I huffed, tossing a curl over my shoulder. “Speaking of, how have things been now that your secret’s out in the open?”

Hunter, however, had no time to respond before the rest of the entourage burst through the door, spearheaded by Jordan who was already outlining the plans for the evening.

“So, we’re taking the new lovebirds out on the town tonight. No objections allowed,” she declared, pointing at Hunter who groaned over her pile of paperwork.

“Oh my god!” Sky, ever the appreciator of fine things, leaned in to admire the roses. “These are lovely.”

"Why thank you, Sky." I directed my triumphant smirk at Hunter. "At least someone in our sorry group has taste."

Laughter bubbled up as Dylan and Amara squeezed their way through the door, followed by River, making the office decidedly overcrowded but no less merry.

"Jesus, this place is cramped," River mumbled, edging her way over. "By the way, how the hell did you fit Addison under that desk?"

Hunter buried her face in her arms, but not before shooting me an accusatory glare.

I shrugged, batting my lashes in response. "I had to tell them. It was too funny not to."

Amara, her eyes twinkling, watched everyone's reactions before signing a story of her own. "Dylan once pulled me into a wardrobe to avoid having to talk to Maxine, so maybe all the Leyore women are just odd like that."

Dylan rounded on Amara, hand over her heart at the betrayal.

"Excuse me?!" I proclaimed, feigning indignation. "I am nothing if not a delight to deal with."

River nudged Amara, signing back with a wry smile, "Delightfully obnoxious, maybe."

And so it continued, the jabs and chides and lighthearted banter that grounded our growing family. I listened, nodding, smiling, but my eyes kept returning to the roses. My mind kept catching on that brief streak of red.

I stared at the red petals. Red like her hair. Red like the bridge I used to cross every

morning just to see her. And I wondered then if I would ever see her again.

It was late afternoon when I finally excused myself from the celebrations, slipping out of High Stakes with a promise to catchup with everyone when they hit the first bar. It was plain impulse that carried me back to the flower district, back to 7th street where the storefronts were closing and the streetlamps were flickering to life.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting to find, chasing ghosts across the city, but my feet propelled me onward. Until I was standing outside the window of that flower shop, right where I'd first caught that brief streak of red.

The place was empty, the lights shut off, and I stared at my reflection in the glass, trying and failing to catch hold of that loose thread dangling from my heart. It was a thread that had once connected me to someone, a thread I had severed myself a long time ago.

A thread that had suddenly pulled taut again.

I sensed her before I saw her. Some intrinsic part of my soul felt her presence long before I turned – slowly – dragging my gaze from the window to the sidewalk where she stood. Red hair, red coat. Red brows furrowed over a lightly freckled face.

Leah.

Her hair was a little longer now, draped over the shoulder pads of her burgundy coat, and the fringe was new but she wore it well. Her face had narrowed with age, but her eyes were the same, that deep vivid green of the sea. She was just as breathtaking as she had always been, even more so.

And from the fierce look in her eyes, roiling like an ocean storm, I could tell immediately that she was very, very angry.

Leah

‘Furious’ would be a good word to describe what I was feeling while I stared across the street at the woman I used to know. It was fury and something else, a sensation like stark relief, like a long exhale after years of holding your breath. Like my heart was whispering, Oh, there you are. I’ve been looking for you.

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It was a betrayal really, of the highest degree, that my heart would feel anything other than anger at the woman standing before me. And I was angry, I was furious. But I was also... happy to see her. How long it had been since I last laid eyes on her – too long.

And whose fault is that? She left you, my brain whispered, but my heart would hear nothing of it. She's here now, was the thrummed response.

Maxine. Her hair was darker, chestnut brown overtaking the strawberry blonde I remembered from our youth. It curled just under her chin, framing a heart-shaped face that hadn't changed much since back then. But she'd ditched the peach lipgloss and pale blush for heavy makeup, dark liner winging out from the corners of her eyes.

Eyes the color of molten chocolate, rich and warm and flecked with amber. A 1960s starlet, standing across the stretch of tarmac with her lips parted in a daze. Tentatively, I closed the gap between us, each step carrying me closer to the woman who had once meant the world to me.

Maxine looked stunned, her eyes scanning my face like she was trying to decide whether I was a figment of her imagination or real flesh and blood. I stopped a few feet in front of her and paused – sucked in a steady breath.

With no clever greeting at the ready, my hands found refuge in the pockets of my coat and my chin jutted out as I met her eyes. I was going for casual, confident, but my strained greeting said otherwise.

"Uh, hey."

Maxine stared like I'd grown a second head, then let out a dubious laugh.

"Hey," she echoed, cautious and hesitant, but the undercurrent of tenderness in that single utterance loosened the tight knot of anger in my chest.

"It's good to see you," I heard myself say, and I meant it. Despite everything.

"What are you –" Maxine took a half-step toward me, fingers reaching out before her hand fell to her side again. "I mean... You're here – what are you doing in New York?"

I forced a shrug, fixing a wobbly smile on my face. "I moved here, got a job working near the docks. I'm now a bona fide–"

"–marine biologist." Maxine finished my sentence for me, the ghost of a smile whispering across her features. "You always wanted to be one."

"I'm surprised you remember." I scuffed the heel of my boot across the pavement, both of us tiptoeing around the absolute absurdity of the situation. "It's... been a while."

A hush of silence followed my statement and I struggled to tear my eyes from the ground to look at her. That small kernel of anger flickered again, a faint spark in the dark, and my lips parted to ask her... why?

Why did you leave without saying goodbye?

But the question lodged in my throat, bitter words I could not bring myself to utter. I was afraid of the answer, afraid that all of my insecurities would be confirmed. Afraid that I was indeed easy to leave, and had never mattered to her at all.

When I finally met her eyes, Maxine opened her mouth, shut it again, and sighed. She looked uneasy, wrestling internally with whatever it was she wanted to say but wouldn't. I waited.

I wasn't sure what I was waiting for – an apology maybe? An explanation? Or maybe just confirmation that some small part of her had felt my absence the way I had suffered hers. Some slight reassurance that there was indeed a vacant gap in her heart that mirrored my own, however small.

Still, Maxine said nothing but she stepped forward, words dancing unspoken on the tip of her tongue, her eyes searching like she'd somehow find the answers in mine. Then she shook her head, cursed under her breath and, before I could brace myself, flung her arms around my neck and pulled me into an embrace.

I tensed up in her arms, heart thumping wildly in my chest, as I stared at some unfixed point in the distance and her long-familiar scent washed over me. Vanilla and jasmine, wildflowers and sweet honey, every lovely thing that bloomed under the sun. I inhaled it, tentatively lifting my hands to her back, fisting in her cardigan as the memories flooded back.

Past and present blurred, and the years of absence faded into the background. Here, under the flickering streetlights, with the hum of city nightlife growing to a crescendo, I allowed myself a moment of weakness. I let myself miss her, let myself remember the bond we once had. And for a brief, fleeting instance, I imagined what it might be like to have that again.

To walk hand-in-hand through the mist-shrouded streets of San Francisco like we used to. To sit impatiently while she applied my makeup and worried over my unbrushed hair, one hand tucked under my chin, tilting my head this way and that as she surveyed her handiwork.

Where had those days gone?

To the past, now. And, I had to remind myself, for the best. Things were different now – I was different, and so was she. We could never go back to what we were. The reality of our situation settled back around me like an old, familiar coat. We were not the same people who had once been inseparable. Life had moved on, and so had we, in directions that would never re-converge.

And if I were to let myself slip back into old feelings, to worry at old wounds, I would not be able to do what I came here to do.

It was an effort to untangle myself from her arms, to step away and re-establish the distance between us. Maxine reluctantly released me and backed up, fiddling with the strap of her bag. I cleared my throat and she stared at the floor, both of us unsteady and uncertain.

“We should –” I began, and then shut up abruptly when our words came out in unison. “Sorry, you go first.”

“No, it’s fine!” Maxine’s voice was shrill, the tips of her ears flushing pink where they poked out from her curls. “I was going to say we should... hang out, maybe, you know? Catch up – if you’d like.”

“I would...” I regarded her for a long moment, weighing my next words carefully. “I’d like that. Here – ” I rooted around in my coat pocket and pulled out a leaky pen and an old receipt, scribbling my number down on the back before thrusting it into her hands. “Give me a call sometime.”

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Maxine took the receipt, holding it delicately between her fingers as if afraid it might crumble to dust. I rocked on the balls of my feet, the urge to flee growing stronger by the second. It was too much, standing here with the ghost of what we had looming over us. With the pressure of what I had to do.

"Anyway, I should get going," I said eventually, my voice light, belying the turmoil inside. "But I'll... see you around?"

Maxine dragged her gaze from the receipt in her palm and nodded slowly. "Yeah," she managed, a little breathlessly, brown doe eyes fixated on mine. "See you around."

Walking away from her proved difficult. Every step backward heightened my anxiety, every footfall timed with my pounding heart. An irrational, grasping part of me worried that if I were to turn away now, she'd disappear again. Vanish without a whisper like she had back then.

But I turned and kept walking, each step a battle between the need to look back and the urge to get the hell out of there. When I reached the corner of the street, my pace slowed and my resolve wavered.

I stopped and turned, my gaze drawn back to where I'd left her. Maxine was still there, her eyes on me, filled with an emotion I couldn't read from that distance.

I let out my breath in a deep sigh and kept walking.

The chill harbor air was a welcome respite as I made my way back to Myrtle, my sanctuary on the water. The houseboat was nothing fancy, but it was home, and the

gentle sway beneath my feet was a soothing sensation, a physical reminder that here, at least, I could find balance. But as I stomped into the cabin, the comfort of the familiar space did little to ease the restlessness that had gripped me since my encounter with Maxine.

I tossed my keys onto the small pinewood counter in the kitchen and immediately pulled out my cell phone, worrying at my bottom lip with my teeth as I checked for any new calls or messages. Maybe Maxine had decided not to wait. Maybe –

But the screen only flickered with a missed call from my grandfather. Cold panic bloomed in my belly and I pressed the call button, pacing the narrow, creaking floor of Myrtle as I waited for him to pick up.

“Leah! There you are!” His voice crackled through the speakers and I breathed a sigh of relief, leaning my elbows on the counter as the air huffed out of my lungs.

“Hi, Grandpa.” I managed a cheerful chirp, flattening a hand over my heart to slow my heaving pulse. “Sorry I missed your call. Is everything all right?”

“I’d say everything is better than all right, I had quite the adventure today!” Over the line I heard the familiar thump and creak as he settled into his favorite chair, followed by a satisfied, wheezing sigh as he got comfortable. “Met a lady at the grocery store with the prettiest eyes you’ve ever seen.”

“Ooh, a lady, huh? Did your eyes meet over the last box of oatmeal?” I teased, easing into the wizened wicker chair to my right. Not as comfortable as the furniture back home but it would have to do.

“Not quite, though she did snatch the last apple pie. I told her it was a crime to deny an old man his pie,” he recounted, indignation coloring his voice.

“Well. I hope you gave her ‘the look,’” I tutted. I could recall with stark clarity that famous disapproving scowl of his that often set my lip wobbling as a kid.

“I did! But she just laughed at me – said it was every man for himself in the dessert aisle. Can you believe that?”

I chuckled and stretched out my legs, as much as I could in the compact space that was Myrtle’s interior. “Sounds like you met your match.”

“Perhaps I did. But enough about me. How’s the big city treating you? Are you still making waves with that boat of yours?”

“Just trying not to capsize,” I quipped dryly. “But yeah, I’m... I’m doing all right.”

There was a slight pause, and I knew he was peering through the phone, wishing he could see past my words. “Just all right? You know you can always tell me if things are going south. I’ve got a few good years left in me and I’m happy to come visit.”

I pressed my fingers to my temple, swallowing around the sudden stone in my throat. “That’s a comforting thought, Grandpa. But I’ll spare you the trip for now.”

I would have loved nothing more than to have him here, chattering away about this and that, handing me peppermints from various pockets – a seemingly endless supply. But he wouldn’t be safe here.

He wasn’t safe anywhere.

I straightened up, chewing on my lower lip. "Hey, Grandpa, has everything been all right at home? You haven't seen anything... unusual, have you?"

There was a moment of silence on the line, and I could almost picture him, bushy

white brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean unusual? I spotted an alley cat carrying a whole roast turkey yesterday, must have swiped it from the neighbor's kitchen. Does that count?"

"Uh, no. Never mind," I murmured, the words sticking in my throat. "Just... keep your eyes open, all right? Just in case."

We chatted for a while; about the weather, about what he'd had for dinner, and the latest innovations in shoeshine, before I eventually bid my grandfather goodnight.

With a promise to call again soon I hung up the phone, slumped forward, and let my head fall into my hands, spiraling quietly as the rippling waves rocked the boat beneath me, my mind heavy with memories I could not erase.

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Maxine

The city's incessant hum was a lullaby I no longer noticed, but this morning, a cacophony of construction noises had torn me from my sleep. I jolted upright in bed, pink pajamas askew, cursing profusely at the rude awakening. Alongside the typical sirens and distant chatter, the aggressive symphony of jackhammers, drills, and barked orders was happening right outside my window.

Squinting through the smudged pane and with half a mind to rain hellfire on whoever was responsible for that hammering, I came face to face with a pigeon perched on the scaffolding that had seemingly been erected overnight.

The scruffy, rather indignant-looking creature stared back at me like I was to blame for the racket going on out there. I scowled at it, fierce fangs on full display, though it could not have been very intimidating considering the ridiculous case of bedhead I could see in my reflection.

The pigeon cocked its head, ruffled its feathers, and then, perhaps deciding I was too much trouble to tolerate this early in the morning, flapped away with a dismissive snap of pearlescent wings. I glowered after it before flopping back amongst the silk pillows, tugging the pale pink bed sheets up to my chin.

The yellow penny of the sun was already pinwheeling across the sky, but it was my off day and I was perfectly content to remain cocooned under the covers until noon – if not for that blasted raucous noise going on outside.

I rolled over and clamped a pillow over my head, but the drone of the jackhammer

rattled around my skull. There was no escaping it, no fighting the headache already blooming behind my eyes.

In a last, desperate attempt at escapism, my mind clambered back to Leah, to the days when life was simpler, and our biggest concern was how late we could stay out before curfew chased us home. Looking back, we were rather unruly teenagers, and no doubt contributed significantly to the many grey hairs on her poor grandfather's head.

We had been inseparable once, two halves of a whole.

I pulled my knees to my chest under the covers. I had kept so much from her, secrets that had felt necessary at the time but now contributed to the walls between us. My undisclosed vampiric nature was one of them, a shadow over what I hoped could be rekindled.

But –god damn that awful noise– Leah was here, in the city. We had found each other again, all these years later. And that couldn't be a coincidence. If anything, it was a sign. Maybe, with a little effort and enough time reunited, the rift between us could mend.

Maybe one day she could forgive me.

With a pillow pressed firmly to my ear, I rolled over and fumbled for my cell phone, which lay somewhere amidst the clutter on my side table. Stretching out an arm, I knocked over an empty perfume bottle and a stack of magazines in my bleary-eyed state before finally fishing my cell from the mess.

Leah had given me her number, a slip of paper like a lifeline thrown across the chasm between us. After days of deliberation, maybe it was time to use it.

Before I could think twice about what I was doing, I dialed the number, burrowing

under the blankets as the dial tone chimed in my ear. It rang once, twice, before a clipped, curt voice said, “Hello?”

No time to back out now. So I sucked in a breath and grimaced as the hammering and sawing sounds started anew. “You have no idea what I’m dealing with here.”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, before Leah’s voice came again, softer this time, “Maxine?”

“Who else?” I chirped, rolling onto my stomach and stretching out on the buoyant mattress, “Can you hear that – construction! How the hell am I supposed to hear myself think?”

Another long pause, and then, a rather unsympathetic response. “That must be very hard for you, Maxine, but what exactly do you want me to do about it?”

“I want you to say you’re free to hang out.” I wove a smile into my words, crossing my fingers and feeling rather silly about my roundabout way of asking for her time. “If you’re up to it, of course. No pressure.”

There was a hum on the other end of the line and I could almost picture her, head tilted, considering – chewing on her lip the way she did when she was distracted.

"I'd love to, really, but I'm swamped today. Got to check on some rescued seals at the aquarium. They've been acting up, and I need to see what all the fuss is about."

Seals? Those stinky sea dogs that prowled the harbor? It was hardly the glamorous reunion I envisioned, but something in her voice, that familiar enthusiasm, piqued my interest.

"Can I come with you?" I found myself asking before I could think better of it.

"You? Mucking around with a bunch of seals?" Leah laughed, and it was a sound that warmed me from the inside out. The full concentrated power of the sun. "I think this job might be a little beneath your 'classy' taste."

"I can get my hands dirty when I need to," I insisted – lying, of course, through my fucking teeth. I could barely tolerate touching a speck of grime, let alone any sort of dirt under my nails. "Really, I'd like to tag along."

Her laughter faded into a soft sigh, and I sensed her smile through the line. "All right, if you're sure. Meet me at the aquarium in an hour?"

"Absolutely." I kicked off the blankets and swung myself upright, bare feet brushing the plush carpet. "I'll be there."

"Do not wear heels. You will regret it," was the rather ominous warning she left me with before the line clicked off.

I stared at the cell in my hand, tangled curls tumbling over my eyes. The tumultuous knot of something in my chest loosened slightly. Leah was giving me a chance, however small, to step back into her life. There could be no fucking it up this time.

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And that started with heeding her advice and ditching my darling kitten heels for the prettiest pair of pumps I owned.

As I set the phone down a sudden chill trickled down my spine, the hairs on my neck standing at attention. I glanced at the window once more, half expecting to see that pompous pigeon again, back for round two of our stare-off, but there was nothing out there but blue sky.

I crept closer to the window sill, compelled by some primal part of me that could always sense when something was amiss. I peeked through the pane, past the scaffolding, and down to the street below. The city was wide awake, the mundane bustle of morning routines unfolding before me.

But... there.

Standing incongruously still amid the rat race, was a man in a black suit and bowler hat.

His face was obscured, not quite turned toward my window, yet undeniably watching me. People streamed past him, oblivious to his presence. Like he existed in a separate slice of reality that happened to overlap with my own.

My pulse thrummed as he tilted his head slightly, a subtle acknowledgment that he saw me too. Panic fluttered in my chest and I stepped back from the window, the small distance doing little to alleviate the cold dread tunneling in my veins.

How did they find me? How did he find me? I won't go back, I won't –

"Get a grip, Maxine," I muttered to myself, the words straining out of me as if to scatter my fears.

After a moment to collect myself I inched forward again, compelled to confirm the reality of what I had seen – or to prove that it was just a regular businessman on his way to work and I was well and truly losing it.

When I looked again, peeking through the pane with my heart in my throat, the street below was just as busy as before, but the man in the bowler hat was gone. I scanned the crowd, searching for any sign of him, but he had vanished as mysteriously as he appeared.

I edged back from the window, tugging at a rogue strand of hair. Then I shook the fog from my head, heading to the bathroom to tame my curls. "You're seeing things, Max. It's the stress."

But the conviction in my voice was thin and the chill under my skin would not dissipate.

The aquarium was chaos, filled to bursting with school groups and happy couples, children with ice cream dribbling down their elbows, and babies in strollers hollering at the top of their lungs. The faint smell of salt water and detergent had my nose wrinkling and I pushed my way through the crush of bodies, clamping a lid down on my flustered nerves.

I spotted Leah near the seal exhibit, her attention focused on a particularly animated seal pup splashing around in the enclosure. Her sweater was two sizes too big, deep green like her eyes and rolled up to her elbows, tucked into faded blue jeans. Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, pushed through the gap at the back of her fraying cap.

She stood with her arms folded, her eyes darting back and forth as she traced the seal through the clear waters, oblivious to the crowds seething around her. And clearly, completely indifferent to the fact that those boots she donned were three years out of style.

My earlier bravado had dwindled to nothing and I found myself suddenly unsteady, unsure how to announce myself, contemplating walking myself out of there before she caught sight of me. But I couldn't abandon her a second time.

Drawing a deep breath and straightening out the lapels of my jacket, I inched towards her, nudging my elbow against hers. "Hey."

Leah turned, her slight smile guarded but genuine. "Hey. You made it."

She scanned me up and down, probably checking if I had indeed skipped the heels for more practical footwear. I showed off my pumps, twirling on the spot, and earned an eyeroll for my efforts.

"I wouldn't miss it." I found myself stuttering slightly, awkward under her level stare. "I, uh, I wanted to see the... seals. And you."

Leah raised a brow, amusement flickering in her eyes. "Really? Since when are you interested in seals, Maxine?"

It was a fair question – one I did not have a good answer to, seeing as I had no interest in sea dogs whatsoever and thought them quite smelly.

"I am full of surprises," I managed, solemnly fixating on the sea pup so as to not have to meet her eye.

"Mhmm." There was trepidation in her tone, like she was waiting for the other shoe

to drop. Like she expected me to up and leave again – and refused to be hurt when I did.

It stung a little, even though I knew she had every right to feel that way. Guilt twisted my gut and I swallowed, swallowed all the secrets I could not share with her. I could never explain myself, could never atone.

But I could stick around, and prove to her that this time... this time things would be different.

4

Leah

Maxine always had a knack for standing out in a crowd, but here she stuck out like a sore thumb. Her bright yellow dress swished around her knees, and her hair was done up with hundreds of little clips and doodads.

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With a full face of makeup and those god-awful pumps, she was significantly overdressed for the occasion, fiddling with her visitor's card hanging from the lanyard around her neck.

She trailed behind me as I dipped out of the stream of bodies and headed toward the warded section of the rehabilitation tanks, big brown eyes darting from the iridescent marine life to the faded informational displays.

Through the staff-only gate, we hiked the damp concrete stairs to the seal enclosure, where Rachel, a fellow conservationist, was coaxing a seal pup over with a handful of pilchards. The distinct scent of brine tickled my throat as I sloshed my way through ankle-deep water, avoiding the steep dropoff into deeper pools to my left.

Maxine hesitated behind me, eyeing the threshold like it might bite her.

I could see her trying to mask her discomfort with what I suppose was meant to be a pleasant smile, but the delicate wrinkle of her nose gave her away.

“Is it always this... fragrant?” God bless her, she sounded genuinely concerned.

“It’s not so bad once you get used to it.” Rachel chuckled ahead of me, tossing another shimmering pilchard to the pup before angling her chin at Maxine. “You a friend of Leah’s?”

“Something like that,” I muttered when Maxine opened her mouth, dropping into a crouch and plunging my hand into the nearby bucket of fish guts. “More of an acquaintance, really.”

Maxine harrumphed from her post at the threshold and I cocked my head in her direction. “Are you coming in or are you just going to stand there?”

She glanced down at the shallow water pooling over the slick floor, then at her pristine shoes. Her lips pressed into a line, and she huffed. “You didn’t say anything about wading. These aresuede, Leah.”

I rolled my eyes, tossing some fishy mulch to a frolicking seal at the far end of the pool. “Then take them off, princess.”

Maxine scowled, but she kicked off her pumps and picked them up, holding them delicately between her pinched fingers. She tiptoed forward, wincing as her bare feet splashed into the cold water, glaring at me like her ridiculous choice of footwear was somehow my fault.

“Good job,” I drawled, turning my attention back to Rachel. She was kneeling at the edge of the pool, gently stroking the hide of another small, gray seal pup who had flopped onto his side, waving his flippers in lazy arcs.

“He’s friendly, at least.” Rachel glanced up at me, expression drawn. “But he still won’t eat. I’ve tried everything – hand-feeding, syringe-feeding, even a fish smoothie. He turns his nose up every time.”

“Hey, buddy.” I crouched beside her, reaching out to run a hand along the pup’s slick, smooth coat. He tilted his head toward me, round onyx eyes bright and curious. “What’s going on with you?” The little seal flopped onto his back, exposing his belly, and gave an enthusiastic wave of his flippers. “Well, at least he’s not shy.”

Rachel nodded, but her expression was worried. “It might be stress. He’s been through a lot – entanglement injuries, dehydration. Poor little guy’s had a rough start.”

I sighed, gently inspecting the pup's flippers for signs of irritation or swelling. "He looks okay physically, but if he doesn't start eating soon..."

Rachel nodded grimly. "We'll have to intervene more aggressively."

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Maxine edging closer, still clutching her shoes. Her expression was curious, albeit a little wary, her brow furrowed as she watched the pup wriggle around.

"Maxine. Want to say hello?"

Her eyes widened and she took a step back, churning water around her ankles. "Me? Oh no, I don't think—"

"He won't bite," I coaxed, beckoning her closer and shoving the smelly fish bucket out of the way.

Maxine hesitated, then slowly crept forward, squatting awkwardly a few feet away with her skirts hiked up past her knees. "Uh... Hi, there."

The pup sneezed in response, a small snot bubble bobbing at its nose, before he yawned and splayed out in the shallow water. I braced for a swift expression of disgust from Maxine, but instead her face lit up with delight.

She shuffled closer, balancing her shoes in her lap, and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear – cocking her head to the side, mouth agape in an ecstatic grin.

And I... stared. It was like catching a glimpse of the Maxine I used to know, the one who would show up on my doorstep unannounced with a picnic blanket and a telescope at her back, and haul me to the rooftop to watch the stars.

“So... just an acquaintance?” Rachel whispered, her voice low and teasing in my ear.

I blinked once, heat rushing to my face, and shot her a glare. Rachel only shrugged and made a show of thoroughly examining the bucket of pilchards, a knowing smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth.

Then the pup whacked his flippers down in the shallow water, showering all three of us with salty brine, and whatever spell it had cast over Maxine broke with immediate effect.

“Ugh!” she yelped, shaking her hands out like that would somehow undo the damage and turning an exasperated expression on me. “Why is everything here so wet?”

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I let out a shaky laugh, one wary eye on Rachel who snorted behind her bucket.

When she recovered from the salty jumpscare, Maxine shifted her weight, crouching a little more comfortably now, though she still eyed the pup like it might suddenly launch itself at her. “So... what happens to him when he’s better? I mean, you’re not just keeping him here, are you?”

“No, he’s only here for rehab.” I adjusted my crouch and lifted the pup's flipper to continue my inspection. “We treat their injuries, help them regain their strength, and then release them back into the ocean where they belong.”

Maxine tilted her head, curls tumbling out where her hair clips had slipped loose. “And he’ll just... be okay out there? After everything?”

“That’s the goal,” I said, shrugging. “It’s not always a perfect outcome, but we do everything we can to give them a fighting chance. Life in the open ocean can be tough, but these guys are tough too.”

She frowned, her gaze dropping back to the little guy as he lolled rather dramatically under my fingers. “What if he doesn’t want to leave? He seems to like it here.”

I chuckled, gesturing over the pup as he waved his flipper again, clearly enjoying the attention. “He’s just soaking up the spa treatment while he can. Trust me, when he’s ready, he’ll be happy to get back out there. And we’ll make sure he has the best shot at a good life.”

Maxine’s lips pressed together, brows cinching thoughtfully. Then she glanced at me,

her expression softening in a way that made my chest tighten. “You really care about this, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.” The words came out a little sharper than I intended and I looked away, focusing on the pup. “It’s not just about the seals. It’s about fixing what we’ve broken, you know? Giving back. Helping, not hurting.”

There was a long pause, and I could feel her eyes on me, but I refused to look up. Finally, she said, “That’s... good. Really good. The world could use more of that.”

I risked a glance at her and was surprised to find her smiling – not her usual polished, preppy smile, but something smoother, almost wistful.

“Thanks,” I murmured, feeling suddenly awkward and keenly aware of the flush in my cheeks.

In the extended silence that followed, Rachel sighed with emphasis, slapping her knees as she hauled herself upright. “Well, my lunch break is coming up so I’ll leave you two to it. Nice meeting you, Maxine.”

I had never pinned Rachel as meddlesome, but the wink she gave me on her way out said otherwise, and I made a note to find her later and reiterate that there was nothing going on between Maxine and me – so she could kindly butt out.

Maxine watched her go, waving cheerily before turning to me. “She seems nice.”

I sloshed the fish bucket and debated dumping the contents in Rachel’s locker. “She’s a busybody.”

By the time we were done with the inspection the aquarium had quietened down, the school groups and tourists trickling out as the afternoon stretched onward.

Maxine and I found ourselves wandering the chilly halls, trailing past the glowing tanks and their undulating inhabitants. The water cast rippling blue light across the walls, across the high set of her cheekbones, and it was an effort not to stare.

Despite the serene surroundings, tension thickened the air between us. It wasn't as suffocating as our first meeting had been, our time with the seals had thawed some of the ice, but it was still there, lingering like a storm cloud in the distance. Heavy with everything that had been left unsaid.

I glanced sideways at Maxine. She looked so out of place here, her bright yellow dress, stained and stiff with seawater, standing in stark contrast to the subdued blues and greens of the exhibits. But what struck me most was how unchanged she looked – same flawless skin, same delicate features, same glossy curls.

Her looks had changed on a superficial level – her hair color, her style – but time hadn't quite touched her. And for some reason, that only made the tangled knot of resentment in my chest coil tighter.

“You know, I didn't think you'd actually come,” I murmured eventually.

Maxine raised an eyebrow. “Why? You thought I'd be too squeamish for seals?”

“Something like that.” I smiled half-heartedly but it slid off my face a moment later. “You always were a bit... particular.”

She laughed softly and fluffed out her skirt. “Still am, apparently. My dress is going to need a proper burial after today.”

“Your sacrifice is commendable.”

We stopped in front of a large tank, the shimmering fish darting back and forth

behind the glass that stretched from floor to ceiling. Maxine folded her arms and tilted her head back, a faraway look in her clouded eyes. I watched her for a moment, the question teetering on the tip of my tongue.

“Why did you come, Maxine?”

She blinked like I’d startled her. “You gave me your number.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

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Her lips pressed into a thin line, and she turned back to the tank, watching the fish with an intensity that felt forced.

I flexed my fingers, that small kernel of anger peppering my words with heat. “You disappeared. No explanation, no warning. Just... gone. And now, years later, you think you can waltz back into my life like nothing happened.”

“I didn’t waltz,” she muttered, but there was no humor in her tone.

I ignored her quip. “Do you know how that feels? Do you even care?”

She flinched, her fingers tightening on the sleeve of her jacket.

Her lips parted and I tensed. I waited for her to finally say something – finally explain – but all she did was shake her head, exhaling her words with a sigh. “I do care, Leah. More than you know.”

“Then why?” The question slipped out before I could stop it, sharp tone cleaving through the quiet space. “Why did you leave? Why didn’t you tell me what was going on?”

Maxine hesitated, her knuckles whitening.

“I – couldn’t,” she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Why not?” I edged closer, one step in front of the other, until we were practically nose-to-nose.

“Because it wasn’t safe.” Her voice trembled slightly on that last word and something awful twisted in my gut.

“Safe?” I echoed, frowning. “You were my best friend, Maxine. If I’d known you were in some kind of trouble I would’ve – ”

“Would’ve what?” she interrupted, her voice rising, pinging off the glass tank and reeling around the room. “Risky your own neck? Your grandfather’s? Gotten involved in something you couldn’t have possibly understood?”

Her words hit me like a slap, and I stepped back, stunned.

“You – you never let me in.” I stuttered the words out after a beat, my voice shaking now. “Not really. You always came to my place, always had some excuse for why I couldn’t come over. And I was too stupid to realize it wasn’t just ‘bad timing’. You didn’t trust me. Hell, you were ashamed of me.”

Maxine opened her mouth, then closed it again. “It wasn’t like that,” she said weakly.

“Then what was it like?” I demanded, lifting my chin, daring her to meet my gaze.

She didn’t answer. Her eyes darted to mine, then away again. “I can’t explain it.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

She didn’t respond, and the silence stretched between us. I stepped back, shaking my head. “You know what? Forget it.”

“Leah–”

“No,” I spat, cutting her off. “I don’t know why I thought this would be different.

You're still keeping secrets, Maxine. And I'm still paying the price."

Her face crumpled, and for a moment, I almost felt guilty. Almost.

"I'm trying." Her voice cracked, and the vulnerability in that note made my chest ache. But that kernel of anger was a roaring fire now, years of pent-up emotions going up in smoke.

"Try harder."

I turned away, focused on the fish tank, but my mind was churning, seething. Wondering how the fuck were we supposed to bridge this yawning chasm between us.

5

Maxine

High Stakes headquarters was a hive of activity, but it was a chaos I was comfortable in, strutting the labyrinthine hallways in a brand new Armani coat, shipped fresh from Italy. I was quite proud of my co-ord fit, freshly-steamed blazer and mini suit skirt all pastel pink and perfectly lovely.

I flitted about the upper levels like a butterfly, a stack of papers tucked under one arm while my fingers sifted through the file in the other. I was halfway to Jordan's office – and preparing to put her on blast for refusing to stick to the new filing system I'd so carefully come up with – when I realized I'd forgotten one key ingredient to my day – coffee.

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I paused, groaned, and turned on my heel, stomping back to the elevator and hanging my head in shame. I was distracted today – monstrously so to have managed that glaring oversight. All because of her, all thanks to that lingering ache from my confrontation with Leah.

I didn't know if I'd call it a fight, exactly. It wasn't loud or overly dramatic, but it left me feeling hollow. Leah's words had stuck, looping in my head like a bad catchphrase: 'Try harder.'

I grimaced, shying away from that enduring seed of guilt in my chest.

By the time the elevator dinged my arrival at the lobby floor, I had slid the last of the documents into their rightful place in my file and banished the encounter from my mind. The alluring scent of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the air and I followed it like a moth to a flame, craving that bitter cup of pick-me-up to survive the day.

The little coffee stand tucked in the corner of the lobby was my favorite haunt. Vampires didn't need coffee, technically, but it was one of the few human beverages we could indulge in and most of us found the ritual rather comforting.

Two Leyore employees were already there, casually docked against the coffee stand, deep in conversation. I hovered nearby, balancing my elbows on the wooden countertop and squinting at the chalkboard menu – all the while keeping one ear tuned to their chat.

"...left babbling in terror," one of them was whispering, low and conspiratorial.

“Who?” the other asked, fisting a hand at her chest like she was clutching imaginary pearls.

“Jenson. A Leyore noble, too. They found him in his apartment, ranting about some man in a hat.”

I stiffened, gouging a small valley in the countertop with one manicured nail.

“A man in a hat? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“No idea. But he was terrified. Like, actually terrified. They tried questioning him, but he just kept mumbling the same thing over and over. He’s practically catatonic now.”

The woman clicked her tongue. “That’s... unsettling. The highborn vampires don’t scare easily.”

“Exactly. Whatever happened to him, it wasn’t normal.”

I filed the information away, making a mental note to bring it up with Jordan later. Anything that could shake an ancient vampire to his core was worth investigating. My mind fluttered back to that morning in my apartment, and the mysterious man watching me from the street. A man in a bowler hat...

The conversation beside me shifted and I shook my head abruptly, clearing the unsettling image from my mind, though I kept listening out of habit.

“...heard about Liesle? She’s having an affair. With Darius.”

“No.”

“Yes!”

“How scandalous.”

“I know. And get this – rumor has it someone’s been stealing money from the Duvall family vault.”

I smirked, biting back a chuckle. Vampires loved their gossip, and High Stakes was a goldmine of juicy tidbits.

I quietly ordered my coffee, smiling at the barista while I mentally pieced together the threads of the stories they were spinning. Liesle’s affair was old news to me, but the theft from the Duvall vault caught my attention.

The Duvalls were connected to the Belmonte family –my family– through some convoluted web of alliances and bloodlines. If someone was stealing from them, it wasn’t just a crime; it was a scandal that sent ripples through the entire swarm of vampire elites.

I tucked the information away, adding it to the tangled map of connections I’d been quietly maintaining. It wasn’t a perfect system, more like a web of whispers and half-truths, but it was enough to keep tabs on my estranged family – the Belmontes. They were all pompous, highborn, well-known, and as such, their every move was fodder for gossip.

The barista handed me a steaming cup of coffee and I swirled the dark liquid under my nose. The sting at the thought of my family had long since faded. They were not my family anymore. Now it was more of a dull ache, like an old wound that had not healed quite right.

I harbored no love for my family, and I was fairly uninterested in stories of their antics that trickled down to me through the grapevine. But the thing about collecting gossip was that it was never just entertainment – it was leverage. And leverage, in the

vampire world, was power.

It was a survival tactic in a world where information was everything.

“Maxine! There you are.” My musing was momentarily disrupted when Jordan sauntered over, heels clipping on the tiled floors and her perpetually messy locks swinging at her back. Hunter trailed after her, exuding her usual air of blasé indifference.

“You—” I poked an accusatory finger at Jordan’s chest, lifting the leatherbound file in my free hand. “It took me all morning to reorganize your shoddy filing work.”

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“And it took me all evening to bring Sky to a glorious climax. Priorities, Maxine.” Jordan redirected my finger with her own, looking rather put out that she was expected to file papers in the first place.

“Unbelievable,” I mumbled, then turned my glare on Hunter when she snickered behind Jordan. “And you – don’t you have some poor secretary to terrorize? I know you’ve been shoveling your paperwork onto Claire instead of doing it yourself. Does nobody respect the filing system?!”

Hunter shrugged nonchalantly and I bristled, reaching around Jordan to whack her with my file. Slackers, both of them.

“Actually, I’m off duty as of right now.” Hunter preened, dodging my attack and leaning against the coffee stand. “Addison and I are heading out on vacation.”

“Ah, so you’re terrorizing her instead.”

“Something like that.” Hunter chuckled, waving over the barista who popped a fresh pot of coffee on the counter. “We’re meant to be heading upstate, but Addison wants to make a stop in San Francisco.”

My smile faltered for a fraction of a second. “San Francisco huh? Why – What’s in San Francisco?”

Hunter rolled her shoulders, but her expression softened. “Something about wanting to see the Bay again. She’s been all nostalgic lately. Which, honestly, works out, because I...” She trailed off, rubbing the back of her neck.

Jordan raised an eyebrow. “You...?”

“I’m –” Hunter hesitated, then sighed. “I’m thinking of... proposing.”

The words hung in the air for a moment before I yelped out loud, no doubt startling every poor sod in a three-block radius. “Hunter! That’s amazing!”

“Yes, yes. Shut up,” Hunter grumbled, suddenly very enamored with the steaming coffee pot, though her flushed cheeks betrayed her embarrassment.

“You’re nervous,” I twittered, my grin turning sly.

“Of course I’m nervous!” she shot back, setting down the sloshing pot and throwing her hands up. “This is Addison we’re talking about. She deserves... I don’t know, perfection. And what if she says no?”

Jordan snorted. “Addison’s been dropping hints about this for a while now, hasn’t she? If she says no, I’ll eat my hat.”

“You don’t wear hats.” Hunter glared at the both of us, simultaneously pouring herself a coffee and damn near draining it over her shoes in the process.

Jordan flicked up a brow, red lips stretched in a wide grin. “You’re spilling a little there, Hunter.”

“So help me, I will pour this over your head.”

The banter continued between them and I did my best to ignore the icy knot that had formed in my stomach at the mention of San Francisco. But despite my best efforts, a flicker of memory resurfaced – a sprawling estate, the fog rolling in from the Bay, and the weight of expectations that had suffocated me until I could take no more of it.

Until I packed my bags at the tender age of nineteen and left San Francisco behind.

I left Leah behind too. With no warning, and no farewell. My goal had been radio silence, it was the only way to keep her safe. But now she was here and the past had tagged along with her. It showed up in brief flashes of memory, in strange men in bowler hats watching me from the street...

Speaking of – “By the way, Jordan, I heard something strange earlier. Apparently, a Leyore noble was found babbling about an encounter with a ‘man in a hat.’ Know anything about that?”

Jordan wrinkled her nose, tilting her head while she contemplated. “No – that’s rather odd but I’ll look into it. Things have been pretty peaceful lately, we’re about due for another crisis of sorts.”

Hunter, happy that the heat was now off her back, rolled her eyes, mumbling into her coffee cup, “You , peaceful is supposed to be the norm, Jordan. Bloodthirsty cousins, evil mafias, and man-eating elves are not inevitable.”

“They are in this city.”

Hunter’s phone buzzed suddenly, cutting the conversation short. She glanced at the screen, her expression snapping from placid to tense in an instant.

“I’ve got to take this,” she muttered, stepping away with a curt nod to Jordan and me.

I watched her retreat, my curiosity piqued.

“I’ll... be right back.” I patted Jordan’s shoulder, already moving to follow at Hunter’s heels.

Hunter rarely looked that serious unless something was wrong. And when something was wrong, it usually meant trouble for all of us.

6

Leah

“No, Grandpa, I ditched the old motor.” The phone was balanced precariously between my shoulder and ear as I scrubbed at a stubborn patch of algae accumulating on the edge of my deck. “I told you, I replaced it last week.”

The scent of brine and diesel wafted in the air and I went about my morning routine of refreshing my grandfather’s memory and keeping poor Myrtle afloat.

“You replaced it?” My grandfather’s voice crackled through the speaker, nonplussed like I hadn’t already informed him of the engine swap three times over. “What did you do, duct tape a new one together?”

I rolled my eyes, scrubbing at the deck. “No, I actually paid a professional this time. I’m not that frugal with my money, you know.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” he chuckled. “When are you going to buy yourself some new boots? They were falling apart at the seams before you even left San Francisco.”

“New shoes,” I huffed, ditching the scrubbing brush and attacking the algae patch with my nails, “are not necessary. I’ll get a new pair when these fall off my feet.”

His response was a dubiousHm followed by a distinct crackle as he unwrapped what had to be his tenth peppermint of the day. “You’re so much like your mother was at your age,” he murmured around a mouthful of hard candy.

I stiffened, nails raking across the grain of the deck. “I don’t want to talk about her.”

“She loved you, Leah.” My grandfather’s tone was gentle, edged with that bittersweet melancholy he always slipped into when reminiscing about his only daughter. “You know she did.”

I sat back on my heels, abandoning my futile attempt at cleaning. “She left me. And I just... I don’t get it.” Wounds both old and new ripened my bitter words. “Why wasn’t I enough for her? For anyone?”

“Leah,” he murmured, benign but firm. “It wasn’t about you. Jocelyn loved you more than anything. That’s why she sent you to me. She knew she couldn’t give you the life you deserved, not with everything she was going through.”

“She could’ve tried.” I picked at my blunted nails, my voice fracturing.

“She did. She did try. But addiction isn’t something you can just will yourself out of. And your father... he didn’t make it any easier for her.”

I closed my eyes, the image of my mother’s face flickering in my memory. We had the same sloped nose and the same smattering of freckles. In a few years, our frown lines would be nearly identical.

I hadn’t seen her since I was six years old, but I could still vividly recall her gentle hands unraveling the knots in my hair, her voice wafting from the kitchen in the mornings, rousing me with an uneven, merry tune. I remembered the darker days too, when my father would shout and yell and stomp about the house. When Jocelyn would turn to those powdery pills that transformed her into a stranger, a vacant shell of her former self.

I dashed an algae-stained sleeve across my face, disrupting the film reel of my

disjointed childhood playing behind my eyes.

“She thought she was protecting you,” my grandfather continued. “When she couldn’t beat her addiction or dislodge herself from your father removing herself from your life was a final act of love. It was her way of giving you a chance. A better chance than she had.”

I sniffed, wiping at my nose with the back of my hand. “Maybe. But it still hurts.”

“Of course it does, sweetheart,” he said softly. “But you’re not alone in the world. You’ve got me, and you’ve got people who care about you.”

Who – Maxine? I thought bitterly, though the thought twisted uncomfortably in my chest. She hadn’t contacted me again since our spat at the aquarium.

I had her number saved since the first time she’d called but I hadn’t yet worked up the courage to pick up the phone. I was... what, exactly? Ashamed of my outburst. Guilty for laying into her when she’d braved the aquarium just to see me. And angry – still angry, that was certain.

“She left too,” I said before I could stop myself, attacking the algae with renewed vigor.

“Who?”

“Maxine.” I sighed, adjusting my cell on my shoulder and ignoring the ache in my neck. “Remember her? I ran into her the other day, here in New York.”

“Oh, that little lass?” The affection in his tone only stoked the anger in my chest and I bit my tongue as my grandfather prattled on. “She was lovely! Always so polite. I remember when the two of you would –”

“She left too.” I interrupted him and winced at the bite in my tone. “Sorry – it’s just... One day she was my best friend, and the next, she was gone. No explanation, no goodbye.” I stared down at my hands, dirt-lined and quivering. “It’s always the same. It’s always me. I chase people away.”

Grandpa was quiet for a moment. “It’s not you, Leah. Maybe she had her reasons too. Reasons you don’t know yet.”

I didn’t respond, the words settling heavily in my chest.

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“Leah,” he said after another long pause, “don’t let the past hinder you from forging new connections. People leave, yes, but sometimes they come back. They’re all just trying to find their way, same as you.”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me, and glanced down at the deck. The algae was gone, but it had left a lingering stain on the rough wood between my knees.

“Thanks, Grandpa,” I said quietly.

“Anytime, kiddo.” I could hear the smile in his voice, the faintcrunch as he ground the peppermint between his teeth. “Now go on. Finish your boat things or whatever it is you’re doing. And call me when you’re not so busy saving the seas.”

I laughed despite myself. “I will. Love you – and no more candy for god’s sake. You’ll rot what’s left of your teeth.”

“I’m old, I’ve earned the right to stuff my gob!” His voice softened, like a warm hug through the crackling speakers. “Love you too.”

I ended the call, slumped on my knees, and stared at the water; a swampy green-grey. Silvery fish darted about, riding the ripples that pulsed through the harbor from the cargo ship pulling in on the far side of the docks.

My mind drifted back to a different bay, to a distant memory of two teenagers crouched on the shore. To Maxine gripping my elbow, her nose wrinkled in dismay while I leaned over an injured turtle, hopelessly tangled up in a spool of fishing gut.

“Will he be all right?” she had asked, peering over my shoulder.

“I’ll make sure of it,” had been my steadfast response.

That was the day I finally decided what I wanted to do with my life. Conservation, preserving that big blue body of water that stretched out beyond the horizon – and protecting every slimy, scaled creature that lived there. I had told Maxine exactly that, and she’d smiled.

“That suits you,” she’d said. “I’m not a big fan of slimy, scaled things, but I hope there’s a place for me in that bright future of yours.”

She wanted to stick around, she had told me so. Then she’d up and left anyway. My grandfather’s words ebbed back to me; Maybe she had her reasons. Reasons you don’t know yet.

I lifted my cell, stared at the dim screen, and debated internally.

Maxine had reappeared in my life, sure, but that didn’t mean I had to chase her down like some lost puppy. Still, the sound of her voice had been stuck in my head. That slight lilt of amusement, the way she said my name like it hadn’t been years since she’d last seen me. Like nothing had changed.

Except everything had.

I sighed and tapped the button before I could think too hard about it. The line rang, and I immediately regretted my decision.

One ring. Two rings.

This is stupid. Put down the phone.

Three rings. Four—

“Hello?” Her voice came through, slightly out of breath.

“Uh, hey,” I said, my voice hitching just high enough to make me cringe. “It’s Leah.”

“Leah – ” Maxine repeated, her tone see-sawing between hesitant and thrilled. “Leah! Hi. What’s up?”

I swallowed. “I was just... wondering what you’re up to.”

A pause. Long enough that I wondered if she’d suffered spontaneous combustion and died on me.

“I was about to go shopping,” she said eventually, tentatively like she expected my scorn.

Shopping. Of course. The one thing I actively avoided whenever possible. Malls, fluorescent lights, overpriced everything, and swarms of people with bags stacked on their arms – it was my idea of hell. But it was a hell I would have to brave if we were to rekindle what we once had.

“Well,” I started, feigning nonchalance, “if you don’t mind the company, I could... tag along.”

Another pause. Even longer this time. I debated jotting down a eulogy.

“Sure,” she said at last, her voice quieter now. “I’d like that a lot.”

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Something eased in my chest, a weight sliding away.

“Great!” My voice came out overly chipper, nigh on squeaky. “Where should I meet you?”

She gave me the name of a café near the mall, and I hummed my confirmation. “See you soon?” I asked, doing my best to sound casual.

“Yeah...” She sounded hesitant. Almost suspicious, but there was a hopeful chime in her farewell. “See you soon.”

7

Maxine

Brookfield Place was everything I adored in a shopping destination – grandiose, glitzy, and unapologetically indulgent. Soft light filtered in from the soaring glass atrium overhead, a lovely outdoor illusion as I hauled Leah through one of the most luxurious malls in the city. My heels clicked on polished marble floors that gleamed beneath our feet, each step a crisp echo.

Designer boutiques lined the corridors, immaculate displays flaunting handbags, shoes, and clothes of the highest exclusivity. Every detail of the mall was carefully curated, from the elegant black-and-gold signage to the sculptural light fixtures that cast a warm, flattering glow on anyone lucky enough to bask beneath them.

The acrid scent of espresso and fluffy wafts of fresh pastries beckoned from an

artisanal café nearby, mingling with the faint hint of leather and designer perfume. I felt at home here, among the stylish shoppers and the soft murmur of wealth exchanging hands.

Leah, however, looked like she'd rather be anywhere else.

I cast a glance over my shoulder to where she trailed behind me, her arms folded and her face contorted in barely concealed disapproval. She stood out here; practical boots coming apart at the seams and her frayed corduroy jacket a stark contrast to the tailored suits and skirts of the strangers milling around us.

With her bangs askew and her mouth open in a kind of aghast grimace, she looked like a fish out of water.

“Impressive, isn't it?” I gestured to the sweeping staircase ahead of us that led to the mezzanine. Beyond it, the Hudson River winked and glinted through the floor-to-ceiling windows, boats bobbing gently in the marina.

“Impressive is one word for it.” Leah wrinkled her nose, glancing at the nearest storefront, where a mannequin in a sequined gown shimmered like a disco ball. “Intimidating is another.”

Itskedat her comment, looping my arm through hers despite her initial resistance. “Relax. You're with me. And we're only window shopping – for now.”

“Window shopping?” she echoed, arching an eyebrow as her gaze flicked to the price tag on a pair of boots in the display beside us. “I don't think my wallet can even afford tolookat this stuff.”

“Ugh.Unclench. I'm not asking you to buy anything.” I hooked a left and tugged her into a boutique, marveling at the crystal chandelier hovering over our heads. “Look at

that, how gorgeous?”

Leah stomped along beside me, grumbling something incoherent about overpriced footwear and absurdly tiny handbags.

The boutique was lovely, and I itched to run my fingers over every strip of fabric, every embroidered slipper and shiny clasp purse. I drifted over to a tailored coat on display, beckoning me with that subtle blue sheen, luxury in every softswish. I flipped the tag over and scanned the composition: 70% wool, 20% cashmere, 10% nylon.

Good blend. I mused over it, my mind ticking through the pros and cons I knew by heart. Wool for warmth and elasticity, cashmere for softness, nylon for durability. It was a trifecta of practicality and indulgence, though the shoulders could use reinforcement if someone actually planned to wear it often.

My gaze shifted to a nearby stack of sweaters, and my hand paused over a thick, ribbed turtleneck in a soft beige. 100% wool. Classic, but you’d better learn to darn those elbows if you want them to last.

“Do you actually know what all that means, or are you just pretending?” Leah’s voice cut through my calculations. She gestured vaguely toward the sweater. “The tags. The fibers. All that.”

I tossed my curls, indignant. “Of course I know. You have to know exactly what you’re buying. Wool, for example – it’s wonderful, but don’t ever throw it in a dryer unless you want it to shrink into a dog sweater. And polyester? Avoid it like the plague unless you want to contribute to microplastics in the water systems.”

Despite the judgment in her raised brow, Leah’s eyes darted about, taking in the glitz and glamor. She wouldn’t admit it, but some part of her had to have been intrigued. I

turned my attention back to the rack. This – this was why I loved shopping. To immerse myself in details that felt concrete, controllable. The fibers, the stitching, the craftsmanship of each garment.

While I shopped and Leah sulked, my mind muddled over her desire to tag along, her sudden phone call out of the blue.

She hadn't mentioned our tense conversation at the aquarium and I was hesitant to bring it up, unwilling to rehash what had already been covered. She was angry, and that was fair. I was the one who disappeared. And she wanted answers which was... also fair. But the truth was something I could not give her.

So we were at an impasse, tip-toeing around the elephant in the room.

I could not tell her of my vampiric nature or the Leyore coven. I could not explain why I left. And I certainly could not tell her that my family would never have approved of my friendship with Leah, or with any human, for that matter. To them, humans were food, a resource to be used, not bonds to be cherished.

That was why I kept her away from them. Why I kept her a secret.

Leah stopped at one of the racks I was sifting through and picked up a blouse, squinting at the price tag like it might bite her.

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“Two hundred bucks for this?” she muttered, holding it up like it was a crime against humanity. “It’s barely even a shirt.”

I shook off the tension in my shoulders and smirked, sliding a silk scarf through my fingers. “It’s not all about practicality, Leah. It’s about how it makes you feel.”

“Broke?”

“Shush. Like I said, you don’t have to buy anything.” I looped the scarf around my neck to test the look in the mirror. “Just enjoy the ambiance.”

“Ah yes, ambiance,” she grumbled, turning her nose up as we passed a rack of velvety garments. “That’s exactly what I’m here for.”

We drifted toward the shoe section, where I found a pair of silvery heels that were practically begging me to take them out for a spin.

I perched on a leather stool, slipping them onto my feet, while Leah flopped into the chair next to me, looking thoroughly unimpressed. “You always did have a thing for shiny, expensive things.”

I tilted my head, studying her reflection in the mirror as I adjusted the ankle straps. “I like what I like.”

She rolled her eyes and I stuck out my tongue, earning a low chuckle from her in response. It was almost like old times, except there was a tension between us now, a fragile thread that could snap at any moment.

After a few minutes of me parading back and forth in the – rather uncomfortable – heels, Leah met my eyes, mouth hewn in a straight line. Her lips parted and I faltered, dreading whatever impossible question she was about to ask.

“Why didn’t I ever meet your family?”

The question rocked me like a sucker punch, but I masked it with a breezy shrug, toeing the ground. “We’ve talked about this before. They’re... private people.”

“Private?” Leah raised an eyebrow. “That’s one way to put it. You dodged every question I ever asked about them. You still do.”

I focused on the shoes, slipping one off and pretending to inspect the sole. “It wasn’t about you, Leah. My family... they had certain expectations. Certain standards they wanted me to uphold.”

She frowned, leaning back in her chair, blowing her bangs from her eyes. “And I didn’t meet those standards. Is that why you kept me a secret?”

I didn’t answer right away, tipping the shoe back and forth in my hand.

I couldn’t give her the truth, not all of it at least. But I could give her this. “I didn’t want them interfering.” I met her gaze – held it. “Our friendship was ours, and I didn’t want them ruining it.”

Leah’s expression softened, but there was still a flicker of doubt in her eyes. “You could’ve just said that back then, you know.”

That ever present guilt twisted in my chest, suffocating like a too-tight corset, but I forced a small smile, teetering in one heel with my bare foot balanced in the air. “I probably should have.”

She didn't push further, but I could see the gears turning in her head, slotting this new information in place. As I slipped my own shoes back on I inspected her, the way she slouched in the chair, her fingers tapping idly on the armrest.

She was out of place here, surrounded by luxury she clearly didn't care for, but she was here anyway. For me.

"Thanks for coming, by the way." I spoke quietly, a whisper across the chasm between us.

She shrugged, but a small, wry smile tugged at her lips. "Yeah, yeah. Don't make me regret it."

It was about an hour of non-stop outfit changes on my part before we eventually left the boutique behind and stepped out into the concourse. My arms were heavy with shopping bags and my heart lighter than it had been in days. That was always the case after a successful shopping spree.

Leah followed close behind, her hands jammed into her jacket pockets, a bemused look plastered across her face.

"You know—" Her eyes flitted across the assortment of bags in my grasp. "If excessive spending was a competition, you'd have it in the bag."

"Excuse me! There are some truly timeless pieces in here, every one of them a damn necessity if you ask me."

"I'm sure they are." Leah snorted. "And nothing says 'timeless' like that frilly monstrosity you grabbed."

"It's called bold fashion, Leah." I turned my nose up, strutting ahead of her with my

bags jostling on my elbows. “Not that you’d understand, Miss Functional Outerwear.”

We weaved through the crowd, my heels clicking rhythmically against the gleaming floor, blending into the symphony of mall life. My gaze wandered idly, flitting over window displays until something stopped me dead in my tracks.

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The store across the way was sleek and modern, the mannequins in the window dressed in a muted palette of chic, minimalist designs. But it wasn't the clothes that caught my attention.

It was the woman.

She stood among the mannequins, utterly still. Her waxy, pale skin was blemish-free, poreless like pouring cream. Dark, vacant eyes like marbles in her skull. Staring at me.

She didn't belong there – not in her old-fashioned blouse with delicate lace detailing, her long, high-waisted skirt, or her polished boots. Her hair was perfectly styled in soft waves of platinum blonde, her presence as deliberate as it was unnerving.

My breath hitched and I stared back, the scene around me fading to grey like the woman was draining the color from the world.

“Maxine?” Leah's voice cut through the fog.

I blinked, and the woman was gone.

In her place stood a mannequin, pale plastic face turned downward, hands posed elegantly.

My pulse drummed in my ears, prickles of unease trickling down my spine.

“Maxine,” Leah said again, this time with more force.

I turned toward her, startled to find her standing at my shoulder. “What?”

“You okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I hesitated, my mouth dry. “I’m fine. I just... thought I recognized someone.”

Leah’s brow furrowed, but she let it go, her gaze dropping to the bags I was carrying. “You’re not seriously planning to haul those around all day, are you?”

“Of course not.” I shook my head, easing out my coiled nerves and shooting her a grin. “That’s why I brought you along.”

She rolled her eyes, but stuck out a hand to relieve me of my bags, muttering something under her breath about poor financial decisions.

As we moved toward the escalators I glanced back over my shoulder at the store window.

I told myself it was nothing – stress, maybe. Definitely stress. But as we descended to the next level the faint unease remained, the unsettling feeling of being watched curling around the edges of my thoughts like smoke from an extinguished flame.

8

Leah

Traipsing alongside Maxine through that uncomfortably packed mall, I couldn't help but think that perhaps I had made several poor life choices of late.

One of them was my decision to accompany Maxine on this day-long shopping spree, another my decision to haul her bags around after her – despite her being perfectly

capable of carrying them herself.

“Leah!” Her voice trilled in my ear and she brandished a swath of green fabric in front of my nose. “Look at this – this would look great on you!”

We had found ourselves in yet another swanky boutique and Maxine was yet to max out her credit card, meaning I would have to endure another hour or more of her humming and hawing over various articles of clothing before she inevitably bought them all anyway.

The dress she was waving about was gorgeous, shimmering and silky, deep green like the sea.

Maxine herself was bouncing on the balls of her feet, exuding dangerous levels of excitement that did not bode well for my peace of mind. “You should try it on.”

“Nope,” I said immediately, shifting the bags in my hands and stepping around her and the no-doubt exorbitantly expensive garment. “Absolutely not.”

“Come on, Leah.” Maxine followed me, holding the dress up against my frame with an appraising look. “Humor me.”

I glared at her, but she didn’t flinch, batting those big brown eyes of hers with an exaggerated pout.

“I’m not trying that on,” I muttered flatly.

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“But you’ll look amazing in it,” she insisted, clamping two hands on my shoulders and steering me toward the dressing rooms.

I stumbled along reluctantly, grumbling the whole way. “What’s the point in trying it on if I’m not going to buy it?”

“The point is that we’re having fun,” she said cheerfully, ushering me onward.

I relinquished the shopping bags to her and accepted the damn dress, shaking my head in futile protest.

“Fun, Leah,” Maxine reminded me before nudging me into the room, swinging her bags about like a mad woman.

The door clicked shut behind me and I sighed, staring at the garment in my hands. It’s pretty, I guess. I made a point of avoiding the price tag, focusing instead on the silky fabric slipping between my fingers. It’s soft, too.

With a resigned groan, I pulled off my jacket and my one-man battle with the dress began.

It was like wrestling with a very silky, very expensive octopus, and the zipper at the back proved to be my ultimate nemesis. I struggled, twisting and fumbling, cursing under my breath while it refused to budge.

After several minutes of fruitless tugging and twitching in a bizarre solo dance routine, Maxine’s voice floated through the door, overtly smug and entirely too

amused. “Need some help?”

“No,” I snapped, yanking at the zipper again.

The door creaked open anyway and Maxine slipped inside, her hands on her hips while I spluttered and swore at the intrusion.

“Stop fussing and let me see,” she tutted, ignoring my protests and turning me around. I scowled at her in the mirror, indignant and uncomfortable under her scrutiny.

“I can do it mys—” I froze as her fingers brushed my bare back, cool and featherlight as she guided the zipper up with ease. I was suddenly highly aware of the cramped space we were crammed into.

Maxine adjusted the strap on my shoulder, her fingers lingering a moment longer than necessary.

“There,” she said softly, her voice tickling the shell of my ear.

Her hands moved down to my arms and she gave them a gentle squeeze, propping her chin on my shoulder. From the corner of my eye, I watched her gaze into the mirror, a serene smile playing on her lips.

When she caught my eye I looked away, the proximity doing funny things to my heart rate.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror, and... did not recognize the woman staring back at me. The dress fit like it was made for me; ribbed corset accentuating my waist, a tumble of emerald fabric swishing around my ankles, my red hair vibrant against the silky green swaths. The woman in the reflection looked polished, elegant

– maybe even beautiful.

But then reality set in.

“I look like I’m playing dress-up,” I muttered, folding my arms across my chest.

Maxine met my gaze in the mirror, a somber note to her gentle tone. “You look beautiful, Leah.”

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry. The brush of her fingers, the way she anchored herself to me – it was too much and not enough at the same time. We stood there, watching each other in the mirror, while my stomach tied itself into knots.

For a moment I almost turned, almost faced her head-on. But something held me back, a tangled mess of emotions grappling for dominance in my chest. I shifted uncomfortably on my feet.

I wasn’t supposed to feel this way, wasn’t supposed to care so much.

Maxine’s mouth turned up at the corners, an encouraging smile as I held her gaze, and suddenly I was sixteen again, standing before a different mirror, with a younger Maxine at my back.

She had pulled out a dress from her backpack – a pretty thing, but too daring for someone like me. It was another one of her experiments, trying to make me “fashionable,” she’d said. She had zipped me up, her fingers brushing my back, light as a feather, and I’d caught her looking at me through the mirror with a softness that made my heart race.

Those butterflies – that old, familiar flutter – had started in my stomach again.

I'd known, even at that young age, that what I felt for Maxine went much further than friendship. But I'd been afraid to voice those feelings at the time. Afraid that they might horrify her, scare her away, or at the very least, put a strain on our relationship. So I'd swallowed them instead, buried them deep, and convinced myself that it was just a phase. That whatever I was feeling... it would not be reciprocated.

Now, in the confined space of that cramped dressing room, those buried feelings resurfaced with an intensity that was impossible to ignore. But this time, it wasn't fear that kept me silent.

It was guilt.

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Maxine had secrets. Secrets that she could not or would not share with me. But I had secrets too. How long then, until those secrets came to light? Until she learned that I was deceiving her.

I thought it would be easy. I thought my anger toward her would be enough to fuel me. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't look her in the eye a moment longer, knowing what I had to do.

With that I broke the tension, stepping out of her grasp and tugging at the zipper again.

"Thanks," I said awkwardly, trying to regain my footing, refusing to meet her eyes. "But it's not me."

Maxine's expression flickered, but she composed herself in a blink.

Before I could decipher what I'd seen rippling across her features she tossed her hair with a faint shrug, shooting me a lopsided smile as she backed out of the dressing room.

"All right. If you say so."

9

Maxine

All things considered, Leah was not as furious with me as she could have been. Not

anymore. Or at least, not outwardly anyway. Or maybe she was and she'd just gotten better at hiding it? Either way, the shopping trip had gone rather well, save for that small hiccup in the dressing room. But that was entirely on me. I'd let the mask slip.

My hand had lingered at her back for a second too long. I'd held her gaze and... had she seen it? The buried affection brimming behind my eyes?

I sipped my coffee, then grimaced at the subtle tang of artificial vanilla. Flavored coffee beans? A travesty.

"Maxine? Maxine, where's your head at?"

It took two minutes of frowning into my cup before I realized someone was talking to me. I blinked twice, lifting my head to find four sets of eyes on me, one of them being Ethan's.

The freshly-turned vampire man cocked his head to the side, blond hair tumbling over his eyes. He needed a haircut. "Something wrong with your coffee, madame?"

"I wouldn't call this coffee." I set my cup down, gesturing around me to the quaint coffee shop we were lounging in. "Who picked this place, anyway?"

"That would be Claire." Ethan leaned back in his seat and jutted his chin at the Leyore woman sitting to his right, a wicked grin plastered across his fine features. "Though I suspect it had more to do with the barista himself rather than the coffee he brews."

Claire flushed bright pink, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I just think he's sweet."

The rest of our small circle tittered in response; Ethan donning significantly more swagger since his transition into vampirism, Eric, the pretty young Leyore vamp

Ethan had been courting, and Analise, a shy, sensitive vamp with a keen eye for fashion. We got along swimmingly.

Our monthly meetups at various coffee shops around the city was something of a staple. While I loved the Leyore women more than I loved to shop, Jordan, Hunter, River, Dylan – all of them, they cared little for the finer things in life. They didn't want to talk about the latest Chanel line, or spin fresh gossip in a lovely little boutique.

This group, on the other hand, lived for the drama – and they were always well-dressed.

“Leave Claire alone.” Eric swatted Ethan on the shoulder with a laminated menu, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of the barista who scurried about, completely unaware of the attention on him. “I can see the appeal, he's got quite the buffet-bod under that apron.”

“And I suppose you're into that?” Ethan sighed, sticking out his arm and examining one skinny wrist. “If so, I've got a long way to go.”

Eric reached for his wrist, lifting it to his lips and pressing a kiss there. “You're perfect as you are. And that ass is immaculate.”

Analise sputtered behind her coffee cup, shaking her head. “We are in public. Save your lewd comments for the bedroom.”

“Oh please.” Ethan chuckled, linking his fingers with Eric's and raising a brow at Analise. “We've all read your poetry. Tell me, does Georgina know you referred to her breasts as – what was it again? ‘Glistening mounds of succulent delight’.”

It was Analise's turn to blush and she promptly lifted a menu to her nose, pretending

to be thoroughly invested in the assortment of pastries on sale.

“Speaking of gorgeous specimens –” Eric leaned forward, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Have you all heard the news of the new vampire in town? Apparently he’s quite the mystery – charming, according to my sources, and ruggedly handsome to boot.”

Interest piqued, the table leaned closer, myself included. It was not often that new vampires wandered into the city, those not bound to the Leyore coven. Vampires were territorial, and the various covens across the country – and the loners too – tended to keep a safe distance from each other.

A new face was not necessarily bad news, but in light of the strange occurrences of late, and the odd man in the bowler hat popping up outside my window, not to mention that wax-model woman at the mall... I was wary.

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"What does he look like?" I found myself asking, tension beginning to coil in my stomach.

Eric rubbed the dark stubble on his chin. "Tall, blond hair streaked with grey – a silver fox if you will. Dorian ran into him last week at a gala. Said he has a bit of an old-world charm about him. Dresses like he's walked out of another era. Beard just a little bit grizzly – very dashing."

I shifted in my chair. Dorian was another member of our motley crew, a highborn vamp and a hopeless romantic. He swooned over just about anyone with a modicum of decorum, and it often led him to trouble.

Eric's voice dropped an octave and we all edged closer. "But it was his eyes that added to the mystery. Dorian said they were red, blood red where they should have been white. And his irises were blue, crisp like icicles."

A cold dread settled in the pit of my stomach and I stilled, my hands curling to fists on my knees.

It couldn't be – it couldn't be him. But... those eyes, that antiquated charm that masked a festering rot beneath. Could he have found me? After all these years?

"What did he want?" I asked abruptly, interrupting whatever Claire was whispering. "When Dorian spoke with him – Did he mention why he was here?"

Ethan raised an inconspicuous brow at me but I ignored him, fixing my attention on Eric.

The vampire man shrugged, scratching at his stubble. "I'm not sure. Dorian was probably too busy looking at his lips to listen to a word he said. But I think he mentioned a love interest? Most likely to shut Dorian down – you know the guy isn't very subtle when he has his eye on someone."

"I need to go." I pinged to my feet, standing so quickly my chair scraped loudly against the floor. "Tell Dorian no matter what, he needs to stay away from that man."

"Maxine, what's wrong?" Concern flickered in Ethan's eyes and he half-rose from his chair. "Do you know him–"

"Nothing's wrong, I just... tell Dorian to keep his distance." I threw down some cash for my drink, swiping my purse from the table. "Excuse me."

I hurried out of the coffee shop and something rancid curdled in my belly. That age-old primal fear settled over me, slick and oily on my skin. He was here, in the city, and he was looking for me. And I would never go back. I wouldn't. Couldn't. I would never–

"Maxine! Wait." Ethan's cry reached me through the frenzied fog and I stumbled, my heel catching in the cracks of the sidewalk.

But I couldn't wait. I had to prepare, to protect the life I had built here. I had to–

"Maxine." Ethan's arms circled me and I halted, my breaths coming in short sharp bursts. I sagged against his back, my legs turning to jelly, and Ethan exhaled over my shoulder. "Just, hang on for a second okay? Just breathe."

I sucked in a breath. It came out again as a shaky sob. Ethan's arms tightened around me and I clung to him. My mind raced, reeling through sunken memories that ripped to the surface again. Memories of being nineteen, when my short life had veered

dangerously close to becoming a living nightmare.

When my parents, powerful nobles and painfully traditional, had arranged my marriage to a man I had barely met.

I squeezed my eyes shut, the memories coming back in waves, crashing over my bowed head. At first, I had resigned myself to fulfilling my duties, to abide by the expectations of my family. But then I had started to listen, to gather whispers and rumors, plucking hushed news from the grapevine and piecing together what I could.

My betrothed was known for his charm. It was a charm I had witnessed first hand, during our brief interaction at one of my parents' parties – before they broke the news. But he was also known for his cruelty, his possessiveness that bordered on obsessiveness. He was an ancient vampire with a long, dark history behind him.

He was a man who viewed his partners as possessions, to be locked away in a gilded cage and gawked at. To churn out heirs and keep him happy.

And I had seen it, in that brief instance at the party, when he had taken my hand and kissed it – and gripped it just a little too tight. I had seen it in his blood-shot eyes when they tracked me across the room, cold and confident, like I already belonged to him.

The more I learned, the more I understood that marrying him would mean the end of any semblance of freedom I so dearly cherished. At the same time, my heart had begun to stray towards someone else – someone who showed me what it could mean to choose love, not obligation.

I gasped out a breath, leaning on Ethan as Leah's face swam before my eyes. I had only just gotten her back, she had turned up out of the blue and offered me a second chance. I was not so bold to believe I would get a third.

And now he was back. He was going to rip me away from her all over again.

Back then, when I decided that I wouldn't – couldn't marry him, I ran. Driven by desperation and the first threads of real courage I had ever mustered I left everything behind – my family, my home, the life that had been meticulously planned out for me. And I left Leah too, unable to explain myself and unwilling to put her in danger.

I ended up in New York, a city bursting with strangers and big enough to hide in. I was utterly alone, scared, and without a plan. That was how I found myself outside High Stakes headquarters, having heard of the Leyore coven, and hoping that maybe, just maybe, I could find refuge there, or at least plead my case.

Instead, I bumped into Hunter, whose suspicion of me was immediate and palpable. Our first interaction was nothing short of a verbal skirmish, with me firing off a rapid list of critiques about her approach, her strategy, and her outfit. All of which were in poor taste.

Ethan's arms loosened around me as my breathing slowed, happier memories floating like snowflakes amongst the wreckage in my head.

Jordan had appeared back then, drawn by the trouble Hunter and I were stirring. Rather than dismissing me, she was intrigued – she'd rattled off something about my audacity and keen observations, impressed with my ability to point out ten things I disliked about Hunter in the short few minutes I had known her. Something Hunter had scowled at.

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By the end of the encounter, perhaps amused or partially impressed, Jordan offered me a position as her executive assistant. And my new life, with my new family, began.

When I stepped away from Ethan he put a steady hand on my shoulder, concern carefully concealed under a wry smile. “You good? You scared me a little there.”

“I’m good.” I straightened up, wiping tears from my eyes and smoothing out my coat, and offered a sheepish smile of my own. “Sorry about that.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.” Ethan nudged me with his elbow, before his smile faded. “That man, the guy Eric was talking about – he’s here for you?”

“How did you–”

“I know that look, Maxine.” Ethan’s tone was somber, his eyes heavy. “I’ve seen it before. Micere wasn’t all sunshine and body glitter.”

Of course. I passed a hand over my eyes, composing myself, a half-baked plan forming in my head. “Just, don’t mention this to anyone, all right? Not yet. And warn Dorian away from him – warn everyone. He’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

Ethan nodded, eyeing me warily. “What are you going to do?”

I straightened my collar, stealing my nerves despite the shiver of dread that lingered. “I’m going to speak to Jordan.”

My newfound determination held out until I climbed the final stairs to Jordan's office. But standing outside her door, scanning the letters stamped in frosted glass, I faltered. It wasn't that I didn't trust Jordan, far from it. She had taken me in, and had never questioned me about my history, or my family, or why I'd fled from them.

But there was a small, persistent voice in my head that told me to suck it up. That told me I was overreacting. Growing up, I had everything. My family was well off and all my needs were met. I had a roof over my head, money in the bank, and my whole life perfectly planned out without having to lift a finger.

That small, nagging voice told me that I was ungrateful, and that if I told Jordan why I had run, what I had come to New York to avoid, she would think me selfish. She would look at me like I was a petulant child throwing a tantrum and send me back to San Francisco to be wed.

She wouldn't do that. Of course she wouldn't do that. But still, that voice persisted. I pushed open the door.

I found Jordan reviewing paperwork, or at least pretending to. Her expression was giddy behind her hair, so she had most likely been chattering to her wife through their mental connection before I'd knocked.

She looked up, her face immediately shifting to one of concern when she saw my expression.

"Jordan, can I talk to you for a minute?" I asked, trying to keep my voice even, despite the turmoil inside.

"Of course." Jordan motioned me in, her tone immediately businesslike, sensing the urgency. "What's up?"

I closed the door behind me, taking a deep breath before I spoke. "There's something..." I hesitated, knotting the hem of my skirt in my hands. "I think I'm being followed. Well, I think someone might be trying to track me down."

At Jordan's raised brow I balked, fixing my face into a blasé expression.

"It's a bit of a personal issue, but it could get messy." I chose my words carefully, shrugging to sell the act of nonchalance.

Jordan's eyes narrowed slightly, her mind already ticking over the implications. "Do you know who it is?"

Yes. "No – I mean..." I hesitated, then shook my head. "I'd rather not get into specifics. But I think they've been approaching Leyore nobles to try and root me out. And they've got a bit of status."

Jordan was silent for a moment, her usually jovial expression intense and calculating. "All right. For now, I suggest you lay low. If this person is as connected as you imply, then they'll be probing for information about you through any channels possible."

My heart sank at her words, the reality of my situation setting in. "I'll keep my distance from the coven activities for a while. And I – I may not be able to come into work for some time."

"That's fine. The paperwork might suffer but we'll manage." Jordan's expression softened around the edges. There was a wisdom behind her eyes now, something she had come into during her time as coven ruler. She was looking more and more like a leader every day.

"Do you –" She chewed her lip, scanning me from head to toe. "Do you want to talk

about it?"

"Nope." I forced a dazzling Maxine smile, swallowing the hitch in my voice. "I'm sure this will blow over in no time. Just a precaution."

Jordan didn't look convinced. "I could have Dylan investiga—"

"Really, Jordan. It's fine!" My words came out a note higher than intended, but that could always be brushed off as standard Maxine enthusiasm. "I'll be fine."

"If you say so." Jordan shrugged, but her eyes lingered on my face. I forced my smile wider. Held it firm when she said, "Just, be careful, okay? If you need anything or feel unsafe, you come straight to me."

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“Noted. But there’s no need to worry.”

Leaving Jordan's office, the urgency of the situation crashed down on me. Lay low. But where? The thought of going home to an empty apartment twisted my stomach with anxiety. The walls that had once been a sanctuary now felt like a trap. Compromised.

I considered calling Hunter, Dylan, anyone, but... no. I could not explain the situation to them, could not bear the shame of it. And even if they did understand, it was selfish – dragging them into a mess of my own making.

On impulse, I found myself heading toward the marina. The rhythmic sound of water lapping against the docks was soothing, and my heart knew – even if my head didn’t – exactly where I was headed.

Leah had filled me in on her living situation during our crawl through the mall. A houseboat, and a dinky little engine that could carry it out onto the water. Away from prying eyes. It was a stupid idea, a dangerous one too if Leah were to be caught in the crossfire. But she didn’t know about Leah, nobody did. I’d made sure of that.

Arriving at her boat, bobbing gently on the water, I hesitated for a moment.

“Myrtle.” An odd thing, to be greeting a boat, but the house had character. It creaked and groaned like it was alive.

I looked around the harbor before stepping onto the deck and knocking on the fiberglass door. The sound echoed slightly, oddly hollow around the quiet dock.

Leah appeared at a window, red hair escaping her ponytail, surprise evident on her face. "Maxine? What are you doing here?"

"Heeeey," I started, rocking on my heels, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach my eyes. "I was wondering... could I hang out here for a bit?"

10

Leah

Maxine was on my boat.

I stared at her, partially aware of the dust collecting on the window pane between us. I need to clean that. "You... want to hang out?"

"Yes." Maxine's gaze flitted from my face, to the stain on my sweater, to the smudge on the window and back again. She couldn't quite meet my eye.

"Like – now?"

"Yes." She scuffed her foot on the deck. "And maybe... longer?"

I shifted on my feet, peering at her through the glass. "How long?"

"A while." Her eyes were darting around now, sweeping the secluded marina like she was looking for something – someone.

"You want to stay here." It was more of a statement than a question as I came to understand what she was implying.

"Yes."

"On my boat?" I couldn't keep the surprise from my voice. Maxine was many things, but a lover of the quaint or rustic, she was not. Myrtle, with her rather compact living space and lack of high-end luxuries, was about as far from Maxine's usual haunts as you could get.

"Yeah, I know it's not exactly the Ritz, but..." Maxine let out a small, nervous laugh. Her eyes were still scanning the docks. "Look, can I come in?"

Her request hung in the air, laden with unspoken tension. Something was off. I studied her for a moment, chewing on my lip, taking in her carefully maintained composure – barely masking an undercurrent of distinct unease.

"All right." I moved to the door and swung it open, stepping back to allow her entry. "Welcome to Casa de Myrtle."

Maxine stepped into the cabin, a cloud of floral perfume in her wake, and looked around with a rather critical eye considering my generous hospitality. "This is... nice."

I sighed and turned on my heel, stomping deeper into the cabin. "You can say what you really think. I know it's not exactly your taste."

"No, I like it!" Maxine insisted, stepping over a gym bag bursting with diving gear, and perching on an overturned bucket. She folded her hands in her lap, looking significantly out of place amongst my meagre belongings. "It's very twee."

"Mmhm." I elbowed the bathroom door shut – it had a habit of swinging loose no matter how many times I tampered with the hinges – and leaned against it, folding my arms over my chest.

For a moment, we simply stared at each other, the conversation tapering into an

extended silence. Maxine was perched awkwardly on her bucket, her fingertips tapping sporadically in her lap. She glanced around the cabin, nose lightly wrinkling at the pinewood furniture and shabby blue cushions.

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“Soooo,” I started, simply to fill the silence. I cocked my head to the side, angling my chin towards the miniature kitchen. “Coffee?”

“Is it flavored?” That scandalized look on her face had me wondering what the flavored coffee industry had done to wrong her personally.

“Uh, no?” I slunk into the kitchenette, which was really just a mini fridge, a few cupboards and a low counter separating the small space from the living room. “It’s just... coffee.”

“Oh.” Maxine’s eyes tracked me across the creaking floorboards and she rearranged her flighty fingers in her lap. “Then yes. Please.”

I eyed her over the counter, one hand rummaging for a can of coffee beans on the sagging shelf. “Are you all right? You’re less bubbly than usual.”

At that comment, Maxine’s spine straightened and she quickly rearranged her expression with a dazzling smile, equivalent to tossing a handful of glitter in my face. But the razzle-dazzle did not work on me.

“Oh, I’m fine!” she chimed, throwing her hands up like the whole thing was some great joke. “I’ve just been feeling under the weather lately, and you know all those old books where the woman comes down with some sort of malaise and they send her away to the sea to feel better? I was thinking maybe I should try that. But there aren’t any suitable beachfronts nearby so then I thought Leah has a boat, and so I came straight to you... you see?”

“I see.” I did not see.

I studied her, the setting sun casting long shadows across the cabin, turning her usually vibrant figure into a silhouette of secrets. I wanted to press her, to demand the truth, but something in her demeanor stopped me. She was on edge, maybe even scared.

I tossed a handful of coffee beans into the ancient hand-grinder – an heirloom gift from my grandfather, bestowed with much fanfare – gnawing on my bottom lip. I turned the idea over in my head. Maxine on my boat, hiding out for reasons she wouldn't disclose, felt like the setup to a mystery I wasn't sure I wanted to solve.

But then again, her proximity didn't have to be a bad thing. It would make it easier to do what I inevitably had to do. I ignored the twinge of guilt that followed that thought, concentrating on grinding the coffee.

“You can–” I paused, weighing my moral compass against my burgeoning feelings for the woman in front of me, then sighed. “You can stay as long as you want.”

Maxine's smile was genuine this time, faint relief simmering behind her eyes.

“Thank you, Leah!” She jumped to her feet and skipped over to me, throwing her arms around my neck. “This is going to be great!”

The sudden embrace left me breathless and stuttering, but Maxine was already turning on her heel, surveying the small interior. “First things first, this place could do with some redecorating.”

I slammed a fist down on the counter, rattling the coffee beans along with the rest of the boat. “Absolutely not!”

When the day crept to a close and night set in, I found myself unfolding the small sleeper couch into a makeshift bed for Maxine, who looked on in slight discomfort – though she examined the small reading lamp I'd handed her with mild curiosity, flicking it on and off until I scowled in her direction.

She looked out of her depth, lingering at my elbow, dressed in one of my old t-shirts and a pair of sweatpants that were miles too long for her legs. The contrast between her usual refined appearance and her current state was stark. With her hair tumbling loose and her makeup wiped away, she looked more like a regular person and less like a glammed-up porcelain doll.

"Are you sure you'll be comfortable here?" I asked, fluffing a scruffy pillow not nearly fluffy enough for my liking.

Maxine managed a small smile, perching on the edge of the newly made bed and tucking her bare feet beneath her. "It's perfect." Her eyes roamed the limited space, landing on the small windows that showed only darkness beyond.

I sat down across from her, tentatively broaching the topic. "So, you want to tell me what's really going on?"

Maxine looked away, her fingers picking at a loose thread on the blanket. "I just... needed a change of scenery."

I frowned, swatting at her hand before she could fiddle with the reading lamp again. "Maxine, people don't just crash on someone's boat for a change of scenery. Especially not people like you."

She laughed, a sound that held little humor. "People like me?"

"Yeah, you know, fancy people." I gestured to all of her. "People who don't own

sweatpants.”

She gave me a rueful look. "I own sweatpants."

We both knew she was dodging the question. When she dropped her gaze I shifted closer, our knees almost touching. "Whatever it is that's got you on edge, you can tell me."

When she finally looked up, my breath caught, my heart stuttering to a halt. Up close her eyes were gorgeous, deep molten chocolate flecked with amber turned gold in the warm lamplight. For a moment, there was a charge in the air, a tension that was as much about the unsaid as it was about the proximity.

Her pupils were blown wide and something flickered there – fear, gratitude. Maybe something more.

Or maybe you're just seeing what you want to see. I shoved the thought aside, swallowing around the heartbeat in my throat. There was something more – in the way she looked at me. That all familiar affection that sent my stomach fluttering. But that only made things worse.

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My betrayal would crush both of us.

When Maxine said nothing more I looked away, clearing my throat and rising from the thin foam mattress.

“I’ll be back there. If you need me.” I hiked a thumb over my shoulder, toward the bedroom at the back of the boat. “You can leave the lights on. I don’t mind.”

When we were young, she had been afraid of the dark. So much so, that for her fourteenth birthday I’d bought her a nightlight. It was probably silly to assume that she’d carried that fear with her into her adult years, but from the way her eyes slid to the windows and the inky darkness beyond, I suspected it was true.

"Thank you, Leah," she murmured, her voice so soft I might have imagined it over the gentle creaking of the boat.

With a final nod I slipped away, tiptoeing to my bedroom, and shut the door – then pulled out my cell phone.

A single message from an unsaved number flickered on screen: Have you found her?

I sank back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. The boat swayed gently, lulling me into a state of near peace, but my mind was far from quiet. Maxine trusted me, or at least, she trusted me enough to seek refuge here. And yet, here I was, holding onto a secret that could shatter that trust into irreparable pieces.

I closed my eyes and drifted back to that fateful day, four months ago, when I’d

finally met Maxine's family.

They turned up out of the blue, on the doorstep of the home I shared with my grandfather in San Francisco. There were two of them, a cold, cruel looking woman and a young man at her side. Even before they revealed themselves, flashing pointed fangs like needles and elongated claws, I knew there was something not quite human about them.

They were too still, too perfectly beautiful in the most boring sense. The woman's face could have been sculpted from marble, perfectly symmetrical with high cheekbones and pursed lips. Her eyes were a deep brown, like freshly-turned earth, and the man at her side was the same.

I knew who they were too. Maxine shared little similarity with the pair on my doorstep, but the family resemblance was there.

They had stepped inside, backed me into the corridor, and scraped long, glinting talons across the faded wallpaper. I could still vividly recall the way the woman said my name – “Leah, I presume?” – like I was little more than a speck of dust, an ant to be crushed under her boot.

I remembered the terror that had ripped through me, followed by a ferocious anger when they explained why they were there, what they wanted from me. And what would happen if I failed to do it. It was because of them that I had packed my bags, lied to my grandfather, and set off for New York City to track down the woman I used to know.

The girl who had left me behind with no explanation. Who had left me at the mercy of her terrifying vampire family.

I knew now that Maxine was a vampire, a secret she hadn't shared herself, but that

was only the tip of the iceberg. Her family wanted me to find her, to coax her back into a life she clearly wanted no part of. They painted her as the prodigal daughter, necessary back home to help run their sprawling business as her father's health declined – I had no idea vampires could even fall sick in the first place.

Her mother and her brother spoke of her with a cold disdain, calling her ungrateful and stubborn, words laced with an entitlement that made my skin crawl.

I understood why she ran; her family was the epitome of high-society snobbery, with a ruthlessness that came out as casual as discussing the weather. But despite my distaste for her family's tactics, I was in a bind. They were powerful, inhuman, and I wasn't in a position to defy them – not without consequences I wasn't ready to face.

I turned over, trying to find comfort in the cramped confines of my bed, while the guilt gnawed at me from the inside-out. Maxine was here because she believed she was safe. And I was tangled in a web of deception, wondering how long I could keep up the act.

I lifted my cell, stared at the screen, and typed a short message back: I've found her.

The response was immediate, setting the screen aglow and spearing through my heart: Do what must be done.

11

Maxine

Keeping away from Leyore coven activities was a top priority, obviously. However, there's only so many options a poor vampire woman has to get her hands on some fresh blood without horrifying her unsuspecting roommate. And so, while Leah was out fraternizing with sea urchins or something to that extent, I made my way to the

nearest underground blood bar to get my fix.

The place was cleverly disguised to look like an abandoned convenience store, the 'for sale' sign peeling from the smudged glass windows and empty shelves collecting dust within. I hovered under a streetlamp outside the back entrance, the bulb flickering to life as the sun sank below the sprawling buildings, and knocked twice on the aluminum door.

The sound echoed around the empty street and I danced on my toes, nervous out in the open. I glanced over my shoulder, scanning for anything out of the ordinary, but the street was deserted.

In the few short days that I'd spent holed up on Leah's boat, nothing unusual had occurred. No men in unflattering hats watching me from the sidewalk and no ominous woman hanging around either. It had been so peaceful in fact, floating out there in the bay, that I began to wonder if I'd overreacted and there was no reason to be hiding at all.

But something in my gut told me I wasn't out of the woods yet. And even if it had all been in my head and there was no one after me, I was rather enjoying my time with Leah.

Myrtle, the creaking houseboat, had a certain charm. It was a little dusty and could certainly do with some interior decorating, but there was something rather cozy about the small space. And there was something quite pleasant about waking up to the scent of fresh coffee and Leah's bright red bedhead the first thing I saw in the mornings.

She would stomp through the living room at the crack of dawn and bang cupboard doors in the kitchen, rousing me with a cup of coffee and a shake of her head while I whinged and moaned about the early hour. Then she would go off to work – and I would rub my eyes, sip my coffee, then promptly roll over and go back to sleep until

the cawing of gulls woke me a few hours later.

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I did not expect to feel as comfortable as I did, orbiting Leah in that small, floating home. But it felt like something I could get used to, a life I could live forever.

Before I could further examine that worrying thought, the door before me swung open and a slim, smiling Leyore vampire beckoned me inside. Through the dusty interior and down a discreet set of stairs to the basement, I found myself in the dimly-lit Leyore blood bar.

The underground haven was subtly bustling and at the far end of the bar, tucked into a booth, I spotted Jordan, accompanied by a bright-eyed Sky and a rather stormy-looking Dylan slouching in the opposite seat. Jordan caught sight of me first, eyes flickering with faint concern before she masked it with a welcoming smile.

"Maxine!" she greeted me as I slid into the booth beside them. Her tone was casual, but her eyes were sharp, probing. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm perfectly fine," I assured her, brushing off the concern with a shrug. My gaze flicked across the table to Dylan, who stared past me, frowning and deep in thought. A crease was forming between her brows. "What's up with her?"

"She's been cranky all evening." Sky sighed, propping an elbow on the table with her chin in her hand.

"She's been cranky her whole life." Jordan threw an arm over Sky's shoulder, shaking her head. "Although, more so than usual lately. Yesterday she nearly took my head off just for saying hello."

Dylan, finally coming to realize that she was the topic of discussion, blinked rapidly, before directing a withering glare at Jordan. “You didn’t just ‘say hello’ you blasted a fucking kazooright next to my ear!”

At my quizzical look, Jordan shrugged. “The twins left their toys at the office.”

I flagged down a waitress and ordered my usual concoction before turning back to the group, catching the tail end of their bickering.

“–wouldn’t be in such a bad mood if you would just cut it out,” Dylan was hissing, folding her arms and slumping back in her seat.

Jordan rolled her eyes, lifting her hands in mock surrender while Sky tutted quietly behind her drink. I kept my eyes on Dylan, simmering quietly in her seat. The atmosphere was light, but she was uneasy. And I had my suspicions as to why.

My theory proved correct when Jordan’s joking landed a sharp, if unintended, jab.

“How does Amara handle being married to such a grouch?” she teased, unaware of the minefield she was treading on. “And where is she, anyway? You never bring her out anymore.”

Dylan’s face darkened and she snapped, sharper than I’d ever seen from her before, “Can you not, Jordan?!”

The table went quiet. Sky’s smile straightened out, and Jordan’s face registered surprise and confusion. We sat in silence for a moment, before Jordan set down her drink, concern in her tone. “What’s going on with you?”

Seizing the moment to smooth over the crack, I jumped in – and offered Dylan an out. “Oh, leave her be, Jordan. Dylan’s just tired of our bullshit.”

Dylan opened her mouth but I spoke over her, flattening my palms on the table. “You and your kazoo – and me and my cellphone. I’ve been bombarding her with texts. Right, Dylan?”

Dylan looked at me, momentarily puzzled. She tried to speak again but I didn’t give her a moment to comment, turning back to Jordan with a sheepish grin. “I’ve been pestering her about all sorts of nonsense. So she’s probably just fed up with the lot of us.”

When I glanced back at her, Dylan raised a quizzical brow but she shrugged, playing along. “Yeah – Maxine’s texts are a real saga. Day and night, no escape.”

The group laughed, the tension dissolving as the focus shifted to me and my incessant texting which, apparently, everyone had strong opinions on.

“It does get a tad overwhelming from time to time.” Sky chuckled. “Especially when you start sending those multi-part messages at three in the morning.”

“And the voice notes. I’ve lost hours of my life listening to Maxine ramble,” Jordan added, and even Dylan cracked a real smile.

By the time the conversation drew to a close and I’d drunk my fill for the night, Dylan was in a significantly better mood, albeit still a little standoffish.

I waited until Sky and Jordan bid us goodnight to pull her aside, catching her by the elbow before she could wander off too. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

Dylan stiffened, but she halted, turning to me with an agitated groan. “I know what you’re going to ask so let me make it easier for you. Yes, I’m all right. No, I don’t want to talk about it. Thank you for diffusing the situation. And no, you absolutely cannot borrow my bomber jacket because the last time I lent it to you, you tried to

dye it pink.”

“Okay, firstly,” I sniffed, sizing her up, “I didn’t try to dye it pink. I put it in the laundry with my red nightgown and the color leaked. Secondly, you are clearly not okay. And lastly, we are going to talk about it because I already know what’s going on.”

Dylan sputtered out a humorless laugh. “How could you possibly—”

“Hunter told me everything.”

That shut her up. Dylan’s mouth straightened into a line and she narrowed her eyes at me, looking me up and down. “Of course she did.”

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I gave her my best devious smile. Back at High Stakes headquarters, when Hunter had hurried away to take a mysterious phone call, I'd followed her – I'd listened. Then I'd subjected her to two minutes of pestering and she'd spilled the juicy details. Details that I relayed to a stone-faced Dylan.

“A few weeks ago, you called Hunter to ask her about her experience of being turned into a vampire. In fact, you called her quite often asking for advice.” I scrubbed the smugness from my tone, softening my words as I reached for her shoulder. “So, how's Amara doing?”

Dylan stared me down, and then sighed. “So you do know everything.”

“I know you've turned Amara,” I confirmed, tilting my head to the side. “She's not doing well?”

“She's doing a little better now.” Dylan folded her arms, concern coloring her confession. “I'm just... worried. Jordan turned Hunter and Sky without a hitch, but I – I've never done this before. I'm worried I did it wrong.”

“I think you're overthinking this, Dylan.” I tried for a tentative hug, and was fairly surprised when she leaned into it. “She's going to feel like hell for a little while, but that will pass. And then you'll have an eternity to look forward to together.”

“An eternity together.” Her voice was a murmur as she propped her chin on my head, and I tightened my arms around her. “That's a nice thought.”

It was. And though I could not admit it out loud, my heart knew that I wanted it too.

An eternity with someone special, to make up for all the years that we lost.

The night air was cool against my skin as I left the comforting clamor of the underground bar, heading back to Leah's boat and struggling to come up with a plausible story about where I'd been.

The streets were quiet, muted under the cloak of darkness, and street lamps cast hazy halos of light over my head. My footsteps ricocheted around the vacant avenue, loud tap-tap-tapson the pavement as I picked up the pace.

I kept my head down, skirting down the sidewalk with my collar turned up, and wished for the umpteenth time that I'd asked Dylan to escort me home. But then I'd have to explain what the hell I was doing living on a houseboat, and who I was hiding from in the first place.

In the silence, a prickling sensation crawled up my spine – that unmistakable feeling of being watched.

I quickened my pace, head swiveling to scan the shadows that seemed to thicken around me, swallowing the faint glow of the streetlights. The buildings to my left and right stared back, vacant windows like ominous eyes tracing my every step.

I jerked at a sound to my right, and glanced down the alleyway. A small ginger street cat disappeared into the dark, scuttling footsteps fading as it went. I breathed a stilted sigh of relief and turned away – and my breath caught in my throat.

It was her.

The waxy woman from the mall.

She stood motionless on the sidewalk across the street, still as death, those empty

eyes – too wide, too glassy – fixed on me.

I froze. I forgot to breathe, forgot to blink.

There was something distinctly off about her. She lacked those subtle movements, the minute expressions that flicker across a face. She was an uncanny amalgamation of human parts with no real life behind those flawless features.

I took a small, hesitant step backward and, like I'd triggered an invisible tripwire, she moved.

She sprinted toward me, a streaking blur of silver in the dark.

Panic surged through my veins, propelling me, begging me to run. And I did. My mind raced as fast as my legs, weaving through alleyways, darting around corners, and hurtling over trash cans in a desperate attempt to lose her.

My heart pounded in my chest, my every step echoing off the narrow walls. Over the rushing in my ears and my own labored breathing, I could hear the near-silent footfalls of the wax-model woman. The nightmare hot on my heels. Catching up.

I couldn't outrun her. But maybe you don't have to.

I took another corner with screeching heels and halted abruptly, gritty asphalt scraping under my shoes as I spun around to meet her.

As predicted, the woman, driven by whatever unnatural force animated her, raced around the corner at full speed, an untraceable smear of silver. Without a second's hesitation, I pivoted my heel, coiled my strength, and threw a punch with all the force of my vampiric heritage.

The impact was jarring. My fist connected with her face, and the sound was nothing like hitting flesh – it was softer, muffled, like punching a pillow. The force sent her sprawling backward, and she hit the ground hard.

When she raised her head I blanched, backing up until my shoulders hit the wall behind me.

Her face had dented inward, the skin warped around the distinct shape of my fist, like soft wax molded under pressure. One of her eyes had been pressed shut, the other bulged outward, one good shake away from popping out entirely.

I steadied myself against the wall, panting, my words scraping out with effort. "Who are you?"

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Her laughter bubbled up, hollow and unsettling, as she twisted on the ground. Her limbs were bent at odd angles, like a puppet with its strings snipped.

"Gregor is looking for you." She spoke through malformed lips, her voice a distorted echo of human speech. "He wants his bride back."

Before I could register her words, her body began to change. The wax that made her up began to melt, pooling around her in a silvery-grey puddle that shimmered under the dim light of the street lamps.

Slowly, inexorably, she dissolved completely, her body seeping into the drain in the alleyway, leaving behind nothing but her soiled clothing and two empty glass eyes. I stood there, stunned, watching the last of her disappear as cold dread tunneled through my veins.

Heading back to the boat, I took extra care to weave an unpredictable path, doubling back and taking longer routes – anything to ensure I wasn't followed. By the time I reached Myrtle, my nerves were frayed to breaking point. I knocked urgently, and when Leah opened the door I rushed into her arms.

She stiffened at first, tensing up like she wanted to push me away. But then her arms wrapped around me, tentative and gentle. "Maxine, what's wrong?"

"I don't... I can't—" I buried my face in her shoulder, the words spilling out in a rush. "I don't know what to do. I can't stay in your life and keep you safe."

I was terrified, for me and for her. They were too close for comfort. He was too close.

And if I stuck around here, Leah's life would be on the line.

"I might—" I sucked in a breath, trying and failing to steady my breathing. "I might have to leave—"

"No." Leah's grip tightened, her words fierce in my ear. "Not again."

Her hands curled to fists at my back, and my cricket heart threatened to jump from my chest when she repeated, "Never again."

12

Leah

"Leah, are you absolutely certain that thing is seaworthy?" Maxine hovered on the jetty, eyeing the dinghy I stood in like it might sink on the spot.

I yanked at the motor cord, stifling a chuckle when the engine sputtered to life and startled her. She wobbled on her heels, grimacing as the jetty rocked gently beneath her feet.

"It's floated for this long." I reached out a hand to help her down, holding the boat steady as she hobbled her way onboard. "I don't see why today should be any different."

Maxine was dressed entirely inappropriately for marine fieldwork, dolled up in a pastel pink sundress and wedge heels, but that couldn't be helped. The sunhat was a good call at least, but it was way too big, with a wide floppy brim that she had to push out of the way just to see where she was going.

Once settled in the boat she sat stiffly, gripping the edge of the bench with whitening

knuckles. I eyed her quietly, internally rethinking my decision to bring her along.

Last night she had thrown herself into my arms, babbling something about keeping me safe and something else about having to leave immediately.

She wasn't making any sense and she refused to elaborate – I half expected to wake up and find her gone all over again. But come morning she was still there, though she had been tense and sullen ever since. So much so that I had offered to let her accompany me on a field job – anything to banish that haunted look from her eyes.

But maybe this hadn't been the right call. Maxine was poised like a cat about to take a bath. Which was to say, she was stiff as a board and ready to claw my eyes out if so much as a drop of water were to reach her.

But that too, could not be helped. I cranked the motor and the boat jolted forward, taking off in a spray of seawater. Maxine yelped at the sudden movement and raised a hand to mash her hat down on her head; the brim flapped wildly in the wind and she met my grin with a grimace.

I steered us across the water into a narrow canal, a prime spot for aquatic plant life away from the main harbor, and cut the engine, relying on the natural current to carry us along.

The urban sprawl on either side of us eventually gave way to tree-lined paths snaking along the water's edge, bright green foliage against a cloudless blue sky. Colorful kayaks sliced past, and up ahead a massive paddle boat churned out frothy water, chugging lazily along the canal.

Under her ridiculous sunhat, Maxine looked around, her apprehension giving way to a cautious intrigue as she took in our surroundings. "Oh... This is lovely."

I leaned an elbow on the motor, keeping us on course. “What exactly were you expecting?”

“I don’t know.” Maxine shrugged. “Waves. Water in my shoes. The general stench of fish.”

I gestured over my shoulder. “Well, there’s a fish market down that way if you’ve got your heart set on it.”

“No– No that’s quite all right!”

Her horrified expression had me snickering to myself.

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As we floated along, I flicked open my hunting knife and leaned over the edge of the dinghy, scraping the blade against the canal's concrete edge where layers of green algae clung.

Maxine watched me from under her hat, oddly pensive despite her wrinkled nose. "Why on earth are you collecting sludge?"

"I'm collectingsamples." I scooped the wad of algae into a glass jar. "You know, this stuff might look gross, but it's fascinating from a biological standpoint."

"It's sludge."

"It's algae." Despite the devilish urge to flick a bit of wet 'sludge' at her, I sealed the sample jar and stowed it away, wiping my hands on my khaki jumpsuit. "It's a critical part of the marine food chain, and it's useful in depollution efforts."

"Uh huh." Maxine peered over the edge of the boat, gripping her hat in one hand.

I joined her on the bench, resting a steadying hand on her waist when the dinghy tipped slightly under our combined weight. When she glanced back at me, brow raised, I scoffed. "My hands are clean! Relax, I won't get sludge on your dress."

Maxine tutted quietly as she straightened out her skirt, but her lips curved into something resembling a smile.

After a beat she met my eyes, tucking a stray curl behind her ear. "Thank you for bringing me along, by the way. I... I needed this."

“I figured as much.” I repositioned myself, my heart twinging at the pained note in her voice. “You’ve been quieter than usual today.”

She sighed, disappearing under her sunhat, letting her fingertips trail over the surface of the water. “Just got a lot to think about.”

Whatever it was that had her in such disarray, she clearly didn’t want to talk about it. But she had fallen strangely silent again, which meant it was up to me to find a suitable subject change.

I fiddled with the zipper of my jumpsuit, racking my brain for something to say. “What was it like for you, after San Francisco? I mean – how did you end up in New York?”

Maxine was quiet for a moment, fingers trailing listlessly over the side.

When she did speak there was a chime to her tone, like she’d dug up a few memories and struck gold. “God, I was so unprepared. I hopped off a plane with nothing to my name and far too much audacity. But I made some good friends in the end.”

Her muffled laugh was tinged with self-deprecation. “I learned what it meant to be independent. No parents. No future set in stone. No... obligations.” Under her hat, her lips thinned and I turned her words over in my head.

Was the prospect of running the family business really that bad? Bad enough to justify running away to New York and cutting off her family for good?

It wouldn’t compute. The selfish rich girl her mother had painted her to be and the Maxine before me were two starkly different people. She had to have had her reasons for running – real reasons. Reasons she would not share with me.

“It sounds like you’ve grown up,” I said eventually. “I mean, the Maxine I used to know would have fainted at the thought of being penniless in New York.”

“Oh no, I did faint. Often.”

We both laughed, though the knot in my chest curled tighter. She was happy here, and proud of the life that she’d built on her own. How could I possibly convince her to go back?

After a moment of silence, Maxine cocked her head, lifting the brim of her hat. “So, what about you? What was life like in San Francisco after I—” She broke off, like the word ‘left’ was too heavy to vocalize.

I forced a smile, focusing on my frayed boots so I wouldn’t have to look at her face. “It was... different. Suddenly quieter. I got a job at an environmental nonprofit. Spent some time volunteering at marine rescue centers, before Grandpa eventually shipped me off to study. I guess I threw myself into work and science. Tried to fill the gap with routine.”

“I—” Maxine dropped the hat back over her eyes, slumping over the edge of the dinghy. “I’m sorry.”

I chuckled quietly. “You’ve already apologized. And it’s fine, my life didn’t crash and burn after you left. It was just different. I just... missed you.”

“I missed you too.” Maxine’s hand touched my arm, startling me into looking at her. She yanked the hat off, sending her curls tumbling in the light breeze. “Leah, I never wanted to hurt you.”

I let my eyes linger on hers, something alive and electric pulsing back and forth between us.

“Well, you did,” I said gently, no point in lying about that, “but... I guess I’m still here, right?”

She nodded, swallowing hard, her gaze dropping to my lips before darting away again. My heart pounded at the unspoken invitation in the air.

Slowly, tentatively, I leaned closer – close enough to notice the faint shimmer of gloss on her parted lips. She leaned in too, the distance between us vanishing inch by inch.

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And then I... pulled back.

Heart racing, guilt roiling, confusion addling my mind.

The dinghy swayed violently at the sudden movement and I gripped the edge of the bench.

“We should, uh—” I cleared my throat, scratching at the back of my neck. “I should probably finish collecting those samples.”

Maxine blinked, once. She let out a shaky laugh, and I pretended not to notice how her cheeks had flushed pink. “Yeah,” she said, shifting her gaze to the water, positioning the hat back on her head. “That sludge isn’t going to bottle itself.”

I fumbled with the motor, hating how my face burned at the very obvioussomethingbetween us that still buzzed in the air.

“By the way.” I tried to laugh, but my voice wavered. “I lied earlier, my hands were not clean and there’s-algae-on-your-dress-I’m-sorry.”

“What!?”

13

Maxine

“Ouch!” I nicked my finger on the fish hook I was fiddling with and promptly stuck

the injured digit in my mouth. It was all patched up in two seconds flat, a la vampire healing, and I dumped the offending hook back into Leah's tackle box with a sigh.

"Serves you right for snooping through my stuff." Leah tittered from across the small living room, messing about in another box of doodads.

"I wasn't snooping!" I sat back in the creaking wicker chair, folding my arms indignantly. "God forbid I try to take an interest in your interests."

Leah looked up from the box she was rummaging in. "You're interested in fishing now?"

"Not anymore." I sniffed, sliding the tacklebox away with my foot. "My pride and my pinkie finger have been wounded."

She rolled her eyes, shoving a collection of odd sciency devices into her gym bag and shrugging it over her shoulder. "Well, there's a rod in the back if you change your mind. I'll be out at the aquarium all day so you'll have to find some way to entertain yourself."

"I have the latest Vanity Fair and a date with a curling iron." I gestured to the glossy magazine lying open on the couch. Leah had been kind enough to grab me a copy on her way home from work, and I was clever enough to always keep my curling iron in my purse in case of emergencies. "I think I'll be fine without your fishing rod."

"All right then." Leah was only half listening, already heading for the door. "Just don't burn the boat down while I'm gone."

"No promises!" I called after her, ping-ponging up from the chair and waving as she stepped off the boat, a smile plastered on my face. "And tell Rachel I say hi!"

Her groan carried across the water and she gave a noncommittal wave over her shoulder, stomping along the jetty in her decrepit boots.

The moment Leah disappeared out of sight a hush fell over the boat, and with it, the buoyant mask I'd worn for her sake slipped off. My hand sank to my side, and the smile I'd forced onto my face dissolved, leaving in its wake the worry that had been gnawing at me since the day I'd faced that wax woman in the alleyway.

I stared at the magazine on the couch, a glossy beacon of distraction, my curling iron poking out of my purse. Normally, I'd revel in a moment like this: alone on the water, free to indulge in a bit of self-care, maybe even try out some new look that might impress Leah when she got home.

But the weight pressing on my chest wouldn't allow such luxuries.

It washim. Gregor. He was here, skulking around the city, if that wax monstrosity was any indication. A twisted scout, or a warning, or whatever horrifying half-measure he'd used to track me down. My stomach churned at the memory of that gurgling voice, those empty glass eyes staring up at me from the gutter.

Instinct said to run again. Take off, vanish before Gregor could come knocking on this door and put Leah in danger. Let her wake up tomorrow, confused and probably hurt, but safe – spared from the shadows that clung to me. She wouldn't have to watch me face down old demons, or end up a casualty in the process.

And yet... I couldn't. I couldn't do that to her a second time. The thought of leaving her now, after we had slowly rebuilt the bridge between us, felt like digging a hole in my chest and walking away without my heart.

She had welcomed me back into her life with cautious warmth, nursed me through bouts of terror I tried so hard to hide. She gave me a place to sleep, a reason to stay, a

sense of belonging in a world that had suddenly become far too lonely.

It would be downright selfish to stay, knowing the danger lingering on the horizon, but leaving felt even more cruel.

I glanced around the small, cozy living area. The evidence of our makeshift life together was everywhere: the pile of marine biology journals Leah had thrust at me, insisting I “broaden my literary horizons”, the stray knit blanket I’d wrapped around myself last night – a relic that once belonged to Leah’s grandmother.

Every detail whispered a promise of something good, something genuine that I was downright terrified of ruining.

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I felt like a terrible person. Choosing my own happiness, my own longing for Leah's companionship, over her safety. Still, my body wouldn't move, wouldn't let me gather my things and slink away into the city sprawl.

Plopping down onto the couch, I ran a hand through my hair and eyed the curling iron, half-tempted to style away my worries. Instead, I flipped through the magazine, my mind a thousand miles away from the glossy photos of couture and celebrity interviews.

The hopeless romantic in me wanted to believe that Leah and I could just be honest with each other. That I could tell her everything and it would all go down well and we could stay here on this boat forever. Another part screamed that I'd be dooming her by staying, by dragging her further into the crosshairs of a centuries-old vampire with a twisted sense of ownership.

I sighed, letting the magazine slide to the floor with a muted thud. The day was warm, but I was cold all over, paralyzed in my indecision. With nothing better to do, I got to my feet and began a slow pacing around the cramped cabin – back and forth, back and forth – until I realized I was wearing a groove into the floorboards.

I paused at a shelf crammed with odds and ends: battered paperbacks, a jar of random seashells, a half-finished knitting project – knitting? The faint scent of saltwater clung to just about everything, brine and Leah's earthy presence that made me feel oddly safe.

Safe – but useless. I was caught in limbo. Hesitant to stay, unwilling to leave, and constantly retreading the almost-kiss that occurred between us. Did she feel the same

electric current I did? Was she as unsettled and enthralled by it as I was?

What if I was wrong? What if all those fleeting moments were only charged in my imagination? What if her kindness was nothing more than the same compassion she'd always shown everyone?

Even so, beneath all that uncertainty, a tiny, defiant hope had taken root. The near-kiss haunted me, an indelible sign that perhaps I wasn't alone in my desire. And it was desire. It always had been. Every time she caught my gaze, every touch of her fingers that I brushed off as accidental, every quiet moment that seemed to crackle with potential – it all stirred a reckless urge to lean in just a little more.

My gaze landed on a small cupboard I'd never opened. Before I could convince myself to mind my own business, I yanked it open. A hodgepodge of items greeted me: some spare blankets, a box labeled "emergency flares," and... an unopened set of wine glasses, still in their packaging.

My thumb traced the glossy cardboard, and an idea – a ridiculously impractical, possibly stupid idea – ignited in my brain.

"You're an idiot," I muttered to myself. And yet, a small spark of excitement flared in my chest.

Many hours and plenty of cursing later, I scrambled around Myrtle's back deck, adding finishing touches to what I hoped would pass as a classy dinner setting.

The deck was minuscule, but I'd done my best to transform it into something befitting a special occasion. A simple white tablecloth draped over a small folding table, the new wine glasses gleaming under the glow of a couple of paper lanterns, and a few seashells strewn about for good measure.

I had no idea if my cooking would impress anyone, least of all Leah, but I wasn't going to let that stop me. The pans in the kitchenette were still warm, and the lingering aroma of roasted vegetables and seared fish filled the cabin.

Even though I couldn't possibly stomach any of it, I'd gone through a bit of a cooking phase a few months back, convinced I was set to become the next Jamie Oliver. Whether or not that was true was still up for debate, as the only person who had been able to taste my creations was Addison, and she was way too polite for her compliments to be trusted.

I smoothed out the wrinkles of my evening dress, purchased only hours earlier, and adjusted my earrings. With nothing left to do but twiddle my fingers and wait for Leah to get home, I settled on one of the rickety chairs and tried not to think too hard about what I was doing.

A few minutes later, I heard the jetty creak and the boat dipped slightly as Leah stepped onboard.

"Maxine? What smells so good?" she called out, the chime of her voice sending a tingle down my spine. "Where are you?"

"I'm out here!" I answered, trying not to sound too jittery.

She poked her head out the back door, taking in the table, the wine glasses, and the soft lantern glow. Confusion clouded her features. "What's all this?"

With a blasé smile, I motioned toward her bedroom. "Go check your bed."

A suspicious gleam lit her eyes. "What did you do, Max?"

"Nothing – nothing! Just trust me, okay?"

She studied me for a beat, taking in my apricot evening dress and carefully curled hair, before turning wordlessly and striding to her bedroom. I busied myself pouring wine into one of the gleaming glasses and filled the other with another crimson concoction I'd had stashed in my purse since my trip to the bloodbar.

A few minutes later, Leah's bedroom door creaked and she stepped out onto the deck.

"Maxine, what is all this?" she repeated, her voice softer now, cautious. A touch of bashfulness colored her cheeks as she gestured at herself and the sleek emerald dress she'd slipped into.

I grinned in triumph, and my heart did a funny little somersault in my chest.

Back at the mall, when she'd first tried it on, I knew it was perfect for her. And while she'd huffed and puffed about the price tag, I'd seen the fascination in her eyes. That was enough incentive for me to quietly reserve the dress as soon as Leah wasn't looking.

I'd gone back to buy it and laid it out on her bed – and good god did she wear it well.

The corset accentuated her slender waist, the tumbling skirt making her look even taller than she already was. The neckline dipped just enough to be alluring without losing its understated grace. The nervous hunch in Leah's posture and the slight wrinkle in her brow did nothing to diminish the effect.

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I gestured to the second chair, breath catching in my lungs at the sight of her. “Well, since you hate fancy restaurants, I figured we could bring the fancy restaurant here.”

She blinked, her eyes darting between the table, the loaded plates, the wine, and the city lights twinkling over the harbor. “You... did all this?”

“I did.”

“You can cook?” Her incredulous look was certainly uncalled for, but I couldn’t fault her for being skeptical.

“More or less.” I shrugged, handing her the glass of wine as she slowly sank into her seat. “You deserve a night off. A real night off, with nice food and nice clothes, minus all the stuffy crowds.”

Leah accepted the glass, taking in the scene with wide, incredulous eyes.

I cleared my throat and lifted my own glass, suddenly bashful when she fixed her gaze on me. “I know I’ve basically been freeloading for the past few weeks. So, this is me saying thank you, and... that I care about you, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Ido— care about you.” I stammered out the words, shaking my head with a nervous laugh. “Look, can we just get this toast out of the way so you can get on with praising my culinary skills?”

Leah's lips curved into a smile that started shy and grew more confident with each passing second. The breeze played gently with her hair and the city lights twinkled on the water like a thousand falling stars.

She lifted her glass, her voice warm and buttery to my ears. "A toast then, to freeloading."

"Here, here." I clinked my glass against hers. "To letting me invade your life – and your boat."

"And cheers to you, Maxine. For sticking around this time." She paused, eyes dipping for a moment before she glanced back at me, a wistful smile tugging at her lips. "You didn't have to, but I'm glad you did."

14

Leah

"So, this salmon..." I speared a piece and waved my fork around to catch Maxine's attention. "Are we sure it's not laced with something? Because I swear I'm addicted now."

Maxine chuckled, sipping her wine. "I assure you, it's just salt, pepper, and a little bit of lemon juice. Nothing suspicious here." She tapped the rim of her plate with her fork and I pretended not to notice that she hadn't taken a single bite. Right. Vampire. I tried not to let my internal alarm show on my face.

In all our time together, I'd never seen her eat anything. But then again, we'd never sat down for a meal together so it was fairly easy to overlook until now.

She was clever about it, pushing her food around her plate. She'd spear a piece of

roasted vegetable now and then, move it around while she talked, bring it to her mouth, and set it down again to ask me a question. Then do it all over again. The perfect illusion.

My gaze flicked to her glass of wine, and I wondered what was really in there. The thought slid through my mind before I could stop it, a chill snaking down my spine. Of course, I knew Maxine was a vampire. I'd known for a while now. But in all the time she'd been living on my boat I hadn't paused to consider what that really meant.

She was just so... human. It was easy to forget, easy to brush it off like it wasn't a big deal.

I pushed the thought from my head, glancing up at the paper lanterns she'd strung up in the canopy. "You really outdid yourself tonight. The food, the decor, the dress." I set my fork down, meeting her eye. "Thank you. This – all of this... just, thank you."

Maxine's cheeks warmed, and she twirled the neck of her glass absentmindedly. "I just wanted you to feel special." She glanced down, and when she looked up again, her eyes held genuine sincerity. "You work so hard and you tolerate me like a champ. You deserve a little pampering."

Her sincerity tugged at my heart. She'd done all this for me – someone she didn't even realize had been... well, conspiring against her. Guilt curdled the food in my stomach as I forced a nod of appreciation, swallowing the confession that threatened to tear free.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," I teased, though my chest tightened somewhat. "But for real, thank you. It's... nice to have an evening that isn't all algae swabs and lab reports."

Maxine flashed a fleeting smile, then went silent for a long moment, pushing a piece

of broccoli around her plate. I could see tension coiling in her posture, like she was bracing for something. Eventually, she cleared her throat.

“Leah, I –” she faltered, lifted her glass, set it down again. “I know I’ve kept a lot of secrets from you, and... I know you might not fully trust me because of it–”

“I trust you.” I spoke abruptly, cutting her off. “I know I gave you hell for how you handled things but... I trust you, Max.”

“Oh.” She stared at me, suddenly at a loss for words, before shaking her head. “Well – Look there’s so much I want to share with you, so much you deserve to know. About me, about my – my family...”

She trailed off and I watched her, my heart lodged in my throat. Was this an attempt at a confession?

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When she failed to speak again, I leaned forward, propping my elbows on the table and asking cautiously, “Do you still speak to your family?”

She set her fork down with a definitive click and folded her arms.

“No.” The single word held a thousand unresolved emotions. A beat passed before she sighed. “I haven’t seen them since I left San Francisco. They probably haven’t forgiven me for running, but we never really got along to begin with.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t live up to their expectations. I still can’t.” Maxine brought her glass to her lips, shrugging between sips. “They want me to be something I’m not.”

I turned her words over in my head, slotting the puzzle pieces into place. I had met her family only once, and it had only been her mother and her brother, but I could see how they wouldn’t have gotten along. Maxine was sunshine, vibrant and lively. Her family was... lifeless. Cold and cruel.

Even so, I had a job to do. “So you don’t think you’ll ever try to make amends?”

Maxine stiffened, her expression shuttering in an instant.

“No,” she said curtly. Then, catching my uneasy stare, she forced a sigh. “It’s complicated.”

My heart pounded. Just one more push. “Would it really be so bad, though? Going

back, I mean? Maybe you could work something out.”

Her reaction was immediate – shock, then something that looked a lot like fear clouded her features. “Leah,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper, “if I go back, I’d be trapped for the rest of my life. You have no idea what they’re capable of.”

Guilt speared through my gut, twisting sharply. I have some idea, actually. Keeping my expression neutral was harder than ever as I watched her eyes fill with genuine dread.

“I’m sorry,” I offered quietly, my throat tight. “I didn’t realize it was that serious.”

She let out a mirthless laugh, dropping her gaze to the table. “Serious doesn’t even begin to cover it,” she muttered. After a pause, she spoke again. “Sometimes I still feel like they’re following me around. Breathing down my neck everywhere I go.”

“Is that why you’re hiding out here?” I attempted a light tone, playing it off as a joke, but the memory of her panicked state the other night made my chest clench.

“Partially,” Maxine admitted, her voice lowering as though she feared being overheard. “I’m almost certain someone is... watching me.”

I reached for my glass, taking a sip just to fill the silence. My throat felt tight. My guilt swelled, nearly choking me. Because, in truth, it very well could be her family following her around. It could be them, keeping an eye on her, making sure I did my part.

Maxine swallowed hard, her fingers gripping the edge of the table. “I can’t go back, Leah,” she said, eyes glimmering under the dim lantern light. “I’d lose myself. I’d lose everything I’ve worked for here. I’d be—”

“Trapped,” I whispered, reaching across the table to gently rest my hand atop hers. A part of me wanted to promise I’d never let that happen, but the knife of deception cut both ways and the cruel irony of my actual mission made the words stick in my throat. Instead, I just repeated, “I’m so sorry.”

Maxine looked at me then, a fragile smile ghosting her lips. “You don’t have to apologize. You’ve done so much for me. Letting me crash here, letting me... just be.” Her voice wavered. “I can’t thank you enough.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came. How could I explain the swirl of emotions – my old feelings for her reigniting, the guilt of betraying her trust, the confusion over wanting to protect her but also abiding by a promise that threatened everything she cherished?

It was an impossible situation, and she was looking at me with those big brown eyes that made me want to give her the world.

“Well, you don’t have to go anywhere right now,” I said quietly, and despite my deception, I meant every word. “This is your home too, for as long as you want it.”

A slight breeze hushed gently over the harbor, rustling my hair, and I closed my eyes. “I don’t think I’ve eaten that well since I left my grandfather’s house. I must say, you guys are neck-and-neck in the cook-off.”

Maxine and I had finished stacking plates and tidying up from dinner, and now we sat on the deck, shoulders barely a whisper apart. A steady rhythm of water against the hull filled the silence, punctuated only by the occasional cry of a distant gull.

With my chin on my knees and my evening dress hiked up, I cracked one eye open to peek at her. In the darkness, the lantern light softened into a faint glow, illuminating her pensive expression, her button nose.

She exhaled shakily when I tilted my head – a quiet invitation for her to say whatever it was she was bursting to say.

“Leah,” she began, her voice quiet, so quiet I almost lost it to the gentle breeze. Her gaze locked on a distant point across the water. “I wish I could explain everything... but I can’t. At least, not yet.”

She turned to me, eyes shimmering in the faint light. “I – I had my reasons for leaving the way I did.”

My heart thumped hard against my ribs. There was a time, not so long ago, when I might have pressed her for every detail, and demanded an explanation for the hurt she’d caused. But sitting here, I was no longer sure I wanted to force the truth from her. Instead, I craved connection, whatever fragments she could offer.

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“I never wanted to hurt you,” she whispered, the words trembling with sincerity. “Back then, I really thought it was for the best. If I stayed, I would have... I would have—”

Her voice caught, and I watched her throat move in a hard swallow.

“I would have ruined everything. Myfamilywould have ruined everything,” she finally managed. “I was scared, and confused, and I wanted so much to tell you that I lov—” A shaky breath left her lips, and she trailed off, unable to form the word.

But I could hear it reverberating in the silence between us.

My breath seized, and for a moment, all I could do was stare at her, my pounding heart stuttering to a stop.

She loved me?

Back then, when we were kids and... maybe now.

And she wasn't alone. Somewhere along the way I had realized that I wasn't just falling for the memory of who Maxine had been years ago. I was falling for her now—the complicated, guarded, insatiable woman sitting next to me, who was very quickly turning pink at her almost-confession.

Quite quickly, I came to a decision. And slowly, so slowly it felt like wading through a dream, I leaned in.

I didn't ask for permission, didn't dare breathe too loudly in case I shattered the moment. I just leaned closer. Our eyes locked, and I leaned closer and closer. Closer, until my lips brushed against hers.

It was a whisper of a kiss, soft, barely there. Gentle and questioning.

When I pulled away, my heart hammered in my chest, a potent concoction of exhilaration and fear rocketing through my veins. Maxine looked momentarily stunned, her cheeks flooding with color even in the dim light.

For a second, neither of us spoke, but a tremor of anticipation lingered, lacing the air around us like a live wire. I wondered if I'd pushed too far, if I'd misread the signals. But all I saw in Maxine's eyes was a stunned sort of wonder that mirrored my own.

I cleared my throat, tearing my gaze away, focusing instead on the stars overhead. The city lights glowed at the edges of my vision, but all I could concentrate on was the wild beat of my pulse.

"You can... share the bed with me tonight, if you want," I said softly, my words calm despite the nerves coiling inside me. "It's – there's plenty of room."

Maxine's eyes widened.

"Just—" I stood before she could speak, anxiety clawing at me, and turned to head inside. "Just, think about it."

I forced myself to breathe, and to believe that maybe, just maybe, she'd follow.

Thank god I was technically undead because if I'd been human when Leah had kissed me I would have died on the fucking spot.

I sat on the deck, staring out at the water and willing the rosy blush from my cheeks. The chill breeze brushed my skin, sending my skirt fluttering, and I realized absently that part of my dress was trailing over the edge, dipped into the water.

Normally, I would have been horrified by the thought of ruining a perfectly good evening gown, but at that moment, all my usual impulses were drowned out by a single, insistent thought: Leah just kissed me.

I exhaled, hugging my knees to my chest. My mind spun with conflicting emotions – caution, guilt, longing. This is a terrible idea. I still hadn't told her the full story about my fiancé, or the depth of my family's malevolence. She deserved honesty, and I had offered her half-truths and cryptic confessions at best.

But that kiss... that shy, tentative press of her lips against mine. She'd cracked open a door I'd been holding shut for so long.

My pulse fluttered as I stood and kicked off my shoes, gathering the wet hem of my dress and making my way through the cabin. The boat rocked gently beneath my feet, unsteady ground to match my shaky resolve.

I reached her bedroom door. She'd left it slightly ajar, a faint slice of light in the dim cabin, and I pushed it open entirely. Leah stood near the bed, her back partly turned to me.

She whirled around the instant I entered, eyes wide with uncertainty. In two swift steps I closed the distance between us. Her lips parted but I left her no room to speak.

My hand found the nape of her neck, gripped it tight, and I pulled her into a sudden,

fierce, devouring kiss.

It was nothing like the tentative peck on the deck; this was heated, frantic, as I poured every unsaid word into a single breath.

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When I finally broke away, still clinging to her with trembling fingers, I saw the mirrored surprise and desire in her gaze. The silence that followed was stark, thrumming with tension, an unspoken understanding that we were crossing a boundary.

There was a split second where we simply stared at each other, breathing hard, lips parted, hearts pounding in tandem.

Then we came together again, mouths meeting with a desperate urgency that made me dizzy. My free hand slid around her waist, pulling her flush against me, and her fingers twisted into my hair.

All thoughts of caution melted away as I lost myself in her – her warmth, her scent, the soft sound she made against my lips. All that mattered was the heat coursing between us and the certainty that, at least in this instant, we belonged here together.

We toppled sideways, down onto her bed, pulling apart for just a moment as Leah rolled onto her back on the creaking mattress. She propped herself up on her elbows, heavy-lidded eyes locked on mine as I yanked my dress up and straddled her.

She raised a brow, cocking her head to the side. “Why are you wet?”

“What – Is it not obvious!” I sat back, gesturing wildly to the both of us.

“Not that kind of wet.” She rolled her eyes, tugging at the sopping hem of my dress. “Did you fall in the harbor or something?”

“Oh. No, I – never mind that now!” I kissed her again, knocking the breath from her lungs. She exhaled a laugh against my lips, fingers fluttering on my jaw, teeth grazing my bottom lip.

Her laugh morphed into a groan that rumbled in her throat when my mouth migrated to her neck. I ran my lips over her fluttering pulse, fangs lightly pricking at her skin when I sucked a bruise there.

It was risky, nuzzling her neck like that. Her blood sang to me, rushing in her veins, and I battled the overpowering instinct to bite. My senses told me she would be sweet, better than any drop of blood I’d ever tasted. The thought sent molten arousal radiating down my torso, up my thighs, all of it culminating in that aching spot between my legs.

If Leah noticed the prick of unusually sharp teeth she didn’t comment; she bunched her fingers in my hair and held me in place, releasing a rattling moan punctuated with stuttered breaths as my tongue traveled down her throat.

Her hands migrated down my shoulders, my waist, around the narrow arc of my hips. A low, helpless moan escaped my throat when she cupped my ass and ground against me, bucking her hips while her lips brushed my ear, my cheek, capturing my mouth again.

My pulse thrummed between my thighs and I kissed her in kind, biting and sucking and sliding my tongue against hers.

“This is–” Leah’s voice was a hoarse whisper, her words guttering out between kisses. “This is–fuck. Why didn’t we do this sooner?”

The most probable answer was that we were both emotionally constipated and thus should not have been rutting like animals without being honest with each other first.

But every nerve in my body was set alight by her touch and reason and logic was well out the window by then.

“I’m still a little shocked we’re doing it now,” I murmured, seaming our bodies together and peppering small kisses along her jawline.

Leah twitched beneath me, then stilled, eyes flicking up to the ceiling. “Maybe we shouldn’t—”

Her preposterous suggestion ended in a strangled gasp when my hand slipped under her dress.

Her jaw jutted out and her back arched beneath me as my fingers slid down her stomach, stroking along the fabric of her underwear. I dragged my tongue down the cleft in her collar, then pulled back to tilt my head to the side. “You were saying...?”

Leah huffed out a nervous laugh, almost panting under my touch. “I’ll shut up now.”

“Excellent.” And with that, I lifted the hem of her dress, bunching the skirt at her waist and shuffling down between her legs.

A low, whimpering moan followed her exhale – and her hands snaked down to fist in my hair when I gripped her hips, yanked her underwear to the side, and swept my tongue up her core.

Leah writhed, and I gripped her quivering thighs to keep them from clamping shut, working her with my mouth, my tongue.

She thrust her hips up to meet me, rocking in time with the strokes of my tongue, gasping when my fingers followed suit. The sounds that came out of her were animalistic, crackling gasps that stoked the fire in my belly.

I curled two fingers inside her, circling her clit with the barest tip of my tongue, licking and nipping and teasing her into a tangled mess.

“Oh mygod.” Leah hitched herself up on one elbow, her free hand still fisted in my hair. I glanced up and met her eyes, heavy-lidded and gleaming, glazing over as she dropped her head back and moaned. Loud enough to carry across the water and let the whole harbor know what we were up to.

When her legs began to shake under my grip, her climax approaching like a tidal wave, I pulled back, earning a dismayed whine from Leah. I cut her off with a kiss, straddling her thigh and hiking her other leg up, bending it at the knee, splaying her out beneath me.

My fingers stroked her slicked entrance before delving back in, my tongue probing between her lips and along her teeth as I picked up the pace. Faster, harder, punishing as I added a third digit. All the while my thumb circled her clit, and her breath mingled with mine, and stars swam behind my eyes as I ground against her.

The mattress creaked and the floorboards groaned and the boat itself rocked in the water as I thrust my fingers into her, savoring every sweet, scandalous sound that came out of her mouth. I brought my lips to her throat once again, sucking blood to the surface without breaking skin as she clenched around my fingers and reached her climax with a voluminous “Fuck!”

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I grinned against her throat, and felt her breathy exhales brush past my ear. I had never known Leah to swear that often, but damn if it didn't sound good hearing her come undone, feeling her jolt and writhe beneath me.

My own hips bucked against her thigh, and my muscles spasmed of their own accord as I buried my face in her neck, gripping her shoulder as my own climax cracked me in two. Leah groaned my name, and a string of profanities, digging her nails into my back as the rolling pleasure ground the both of us down to dust.

I was left panting and breathless, a dead weight on top of her, brushing damp strands of red hair from her eyes.

Leah blinked up at me, fog clearing from her pupils as her heaving breaths slowed and the sweat cooled on her skin. A faint tremor traveled down her body, rippling under my palm, and her face was flushed with exertion.

Once again, we stared at each other, wordless and sated, and entirely spent.

Eventually, Leah opened her mouth. "Wow."

A tremulous laugh bubbled from my lips and I offered a watery smile in return. "Just 'wow'?"

"Jesus Christ, my soul left my body, just give me a minute to collect myself!"

"Fair, fair." I chuckled, trying and failing to rise from her chest. Every muscle in my body had turned to liquid and the look in her eyes – a brilliant green gleaming in the

low light – had me mesmerized.

“I think I have to agree.” I cupped her cheek, brushing a thumb over her bottom lip, pink and plump from punishing kisses. “Wow.”

16

Leah

When our heads had finally stopped spinning and our breathing had returned to normal, Maxine rolled off me and flopped onto her back with a sigh.

She stretched out on the mattress, hair fanning out around her, and closed her eyes. “I’ll be passing out now.”

I snorted a laugh, overly aware of the sticky wetness on my inner thighs. “Just like that?”

“Yep, just like that.” She hummed, tip-tapping her feet in the air where they stuck off the bed.

I chuckled again, but a single thought struck me and the laughter quickly died in my throat. Beneath the lingering warmth of our bodies and the afterglow of an earth-shattering orgasm simmering in my veins, I felt like a traitor.

You are a traitor, I reminded myself, the guilt coiling tighter in my gut.

While Maxine dozed, her eyes closed and her guard lowered, I lay wide awake, grappling with the implications of what we’d done. What I had done.

She had no intention of ever going home, and from the terrified note in her voice

when I brought it up, she clearly had a good reason. The more she'd opened up, the more I realized how damning my role in all of this was.

Yet here I was, lying next to her with my dress still bunched at my waist, our ankles hooked and our hair tangling together. I was the one who invited her into my bed. I was the one who kissed her like the world was ending. I was the one falling in love with her all over again.

I was the one suspending a knife over her back.

Every part of me wanted to protect her, wanted to tell her the truth. But the threat of her family loomed too large in the background, a collar tightening around my throat. If I disobeyed them, if I failed to bring Maxine back, who knew what they would do to the only real family I had left?

Her mother and her brother, when they'd turned up at my house that day, hadn't just threatened me. They'd threatened my grandfather. I saw the damage those claws could do, and the hungry way they sniffed around the house, taking in our scents. Running hadn't been an option. They could have followed us anywhere.

There was no way to explain the situation to my grandfather either, and he was too old to be uprooted from his home in San Francisco where he'd lived for the past fifty years.

I exhaled shakily, draping an arm over my forehead as I stared at the low ceiling. Maxine stirred, mumbling something incoherent beside me, then settled again. How the hell is she asleep already? I tried not to move, afraid I'd wake her and she'd see the turmoil dancing in my eyes.

How do I make this right? The question plagued me, demanding an answer I didn't have. My rational side argued that I should distance myself, that indulging in this

relationship would only make the betrayal worse when it finally unfolded. But how could I step back now, when her lips were still pressed into my memory, when her touch still lingered on my skin?

I had to find a way out, though I had no idea how. My grandfather was everything to me but... so was Maxine. How could I possibly choose who deserved my loyalty more?

I couldn't bear to lose her, I realized, a burning ache settling in my chest. Not again, not after what we'd just shared. The prospect of ending things now, of letting her vanish again, tore at my heart in a way that felt violently wrong.

Yet, the ominous shadow of her family stood between us, looming like a menacing figure in the dark.

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A soft snore escaped my bedmate, breaking the suffocating hush. I rolled onto my side and blinked at her. She looked so vulnerable, so small where she sprawled out on the wrinkled sheets. Her dress was crumpled around her, spaghetti strap slipping off her shoulder. I watched the rise and fall of her chest, chewing on my lip.

It would be so easy to pretend that nothing else existed outside this small cabin, no powerful family, no looming threats, no impossible choices.

But they did exist, and they weren't going away anytime soon.

I shifted onto my elbow, leaning over and pressing a gentle kiss to the crown of her head. Maxine mumbled contentedly, smiling in her sleep. Despite the knot in my gut, I had to savor the sweetness of the moment. Whatever came next, at least we'd have this.

"I'm sorry." I whispered the words that went unheard and unacknowledged. But the apology felt necessary, even if it was only for my own guilty conscience.

By morning, I'd have to decide how far I was willing to go for her, and how I'd face the consequences if I turned my back on the deal that had upended my life.

As I curled myself around her, burrowing into the crook of her neck, I realized I would do almost anything to keep her safe. But the fear of what might happen if I stepped out of line and crossed her family was enough to set my pulse racing all over again.

So I lay there, torn between the taste of her skin and the dread of betrayal, fighting

sleep like it might steal away the last little bit of peace we had together.

Sometime later, I rose from a deep doze into the hazy realm between dreaming and waking. Maxine's arm lay draped across my waist, her breath soft and steady against my shoulder. The cabin was still, illuminated only by a faint glow of moonlight filtering through the curtained window.

The neon face of my dinky little alarm clock told me it was 4am.

I lay there, wondering what could have possibly woken me this early, and then I heard it again – a sound that raised goosebumps on my skin: quiet, mocking laughter drifting over the water.

My pulse kicked up as a jolt of alarm shot through me and I eased myself free from Maxine's hold, heart pounding in my throat.

Careful not to disturb her, I shuffled to the edge of the bed and peered out the tiny window, half-expecting to spot some ominous clawed figure lurking along the dock. But the harbor was silent and empty, dotted with the occasional light from other boats that rocked gently on the water.

No sign of movement, no mysterious watchers in the night. Just the faint lapping of waves under a sky sprinkled with stars.

A moment later, another burst of laughter rang out in the distance, echoing across the still water. This time, it sounded more like raucous voices – maybe late-night drunks stumbling home from a waterfront bar.

My shoulders sagged with relief and I felt a flush of mild embarrassment at my own jumpiness.

Still, the flicker of worry didn't entirely fade as I returned to Maxine's arms, the mattress springs creaking softly beneath me. Her earlier concerns floated through my sleep-addled mind, her conviction that someone was keeping tabs on her. On us.

I nestled in close to her and tugged the bed sheets up to my chin. Maxine murmured something incomprehensible in her sleep and coiled around me, tucking her head against my chest.

My eyes drifted shut, but the lingering tremor in my pulse remained.

I tightened my hold around her, allowing the gentle sway of the boat and the warmth of her body to lull me back into a restless slumber.

17

Maxine

Leah went off to work the next day like usual. Only this time, she didn't wake me with a coffee and I didn't hear her leave.

I woke up in her bed alone, still in my evening dress, drooling on her shabby pillow.

I stretched out and blinked the drowsy haze from my eyes, recollections of the night before slowly swimming back to me.

A jolt of realization had my fluttering eyes flying open: We actually did that.

My pulse tripled all over again and I rolled over under the covers. The sheets next to me were cool, Leah's scent lingering in the fabric. I pressed my cheek to the pillow as a torrent of emotions hit me at once.

Part of me wanted her here – desperately. Another part felt guilty for all the things I did not say.

I glanced around the small cabin, taking in the evidence of her absence: the door ajar, her gym bag missing from its place near the vanity – and the guilt churned in my gut.

I should tell her everything. Should come clean about who I was really running from. Gregor's wax minions, my family, the fiancé I never wanted. It was the right thing to do, especially now that we'd crossed a very clear line.

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But the thought of losing her again, of watching her recoil in horror, paralyzed me.

Sitting up, I let the blanket fall away, smoothing out the wrinkled saffron of my dress. I was more in love with her than ever, and the notion was terrifying, an emotional free-fall without the promise of a safe landing. I'd wanted to avoid this, to keep her at arm's length. And yet, I'd practically thrown myself into her arms last night.

And now...Confusion.Contradictory urges.

"Fuck." I burrowed under the covers again, but the torment continued all morning, and long after that too.

I spent the whole day moping around the houseboat, languidly shuffling around in my underwear and one of Leah's old T-shirts. I wasn't thirsty, but I downed a cup of stale coffee anyway. I wasn't tired, but I napped on and off in random places – the foldout sofa, the wicker chair on the deck, forced down time and time again by an emotional exhaustion that wouldn't let up.

In our time together, Leah's pedantic tendencies had rubbed off on me and I eventually forced myself to tidy a few things around the boat. I folded blankets, fluffed pillows, and tinkered around in the kitchenette. The air in the cabin was thick and cloying, another suffocatingly hot evening in New York City.

When I finally curled up on the sofa with my nose in a nature magazine, I almost didn't notice the faint rocking that gently swayed the boat.

Just the tide.I lay back, propping the splayed magazine over my face and closed my

eyes. I'd lived there long enough to gain my sea legs and had adjusted to the light rocking of the boat, sometimes forgetting entirely that I was on the water at all.

A moment later, the rocking came again, only this time it was more obvious, tilting the boat with a sudden lurch that made my stomach flip. My head snapped up, the magazine sliding from my face. Maybe a stray wave? A speedboat or something? Except there was no accompanying engine noise from outside.

The boat tilted again, more forcefully this time, enough to make an empty glass on the side table rattle ominously on its coaster. I swore under my breath, trepidation prickling at the back of my neck.

A knot of dread coiled in my stomach. Someone was onboard. Maybe something.

My heart lurched, a chill crawling up my spine. Calm down, a quiet voice of reason whispered in my head, but my palms dampened anyway. I edged off the sofa and moved toward the window, careful not to make any noise. The setting sun glinted off the rippling water, the scene outside deceptively calm – if you didn't count the eight dark figures silhouetted on the jetty.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I backed away from the window. And jumped at the sudden, sharp knock on the cabin door.

My blood ran cold as I crept toward it, gently aligning my eye with the fish-eyed peephole.

I peeked through and there they were. More of them, the same wax-like beings I'd seen before – all of them well-dressed, plastic smiles stretched unnervingly wide across their perfectly sculpted faces. Their eyes, though, were dead and glassy, a parody of humanity.

They had found me.

Panic flared and I pressed a fist to my mouth, stifling the strangled gasp that burst from my throat. One of them reached out an unnaturally long arm and knocked again. The door rattled on its hinges.

I was rooted to the spot, breathing rapidly as I blinked through the peephole. The closest wax model woman twitched, painted smile widening like it could sense my presence.

I backed away with my heart in my throat, fisting my hands at my sides.

Another knock sounded around the cabin and I tripped on a loose floorboard, gripping the edge of a banged-up chair to keep my balance. It was followed by another knock, and then another, and then the cabin fell silent.

I froze, a deer caught in headlights, before the door was kicked off its hinges with a splintering crash.

The minions poured inside in a disturbingly calm, orderly fashion, their footsteps synchronized like marionettes on strings. I backed up, my mind racing. No, no, no. This can't be happening. They can't be here.

"Hello. Hello. How are you?" one of them called out, sing-song voice ringing too cheerfully for the nightmarish situation. There was a hollow echo to it, each syllable hitting an odd, off-beat note, like it was mimicking human intonation without any real grasp of the meaning behind the words.

I backed down the hallway and the boat rocked as more of them marched in. There were eight. Nine. Ten of them. And more hovering on the jetty. The overhead light swung wildly on its cord, reflecting a faint sheen on their too-perfect skin, glancing

off the pearly whites of their teeth.

“Hello. How are you?” more of them piped up and I caught snatches of that hollow mimicry in their voices. “He-ll-oh,” one of them crooned, syllables stretched and clipped, like a playback on a warped cassette.

“Stay back!” I shouted, fumbling for a weapon and eventually brandishing one of Leah’s fishing rods over my head. My voicecracked, and one of them let out a parroted laugh—ha-ha-ha—the cadence all wrong.

The closest wax model lunged, reaching out with stiff fingers that clicked at the joints. I reacted instinctively, winging out the rod in a wide arc, and it whipped against the figure’s pristine suit jacket. The impact did next to nothing, a light tickle, and the creature’s lips curled in an imitation of polite surprise.

I ditched the rod, and they came at me in a flurry of fancy hats and coats, a coordinated press from all sides. My back slammed against the boat’s wooden paneling and I snarled, letting my coiled strength surge through my limbs.

I kicked out, catching one in the chest, feeling a softgiveas if I’d struck something pliable. Another lunged for my arm, forcing me to twist and duck, narrowly avoiding their grasping fingers. There was too little room to maneuver around them. There was nowhere to run.

I lashed out, catching a second minion by the neck and slamming it into the wall. Its body yielded strangely, that uncanny waxy texture warping under my grip – but my advantage was fleeting. Another set of hands wove into my hair, yanking me backward hard enough that my teeth rattled in my skull.

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I fought blindly for a moment, adrenaline tearing through my veins. My elbow connected with a wax figure's face, and it felt like punching through warm putty. And still, they kept coming, a relentless onslaught of facsimiles that felt no pain.

A savage hiss ripped from my throat, and I shoved another three of them off me. They hit the cabinetry, toppling my reading lamp and scattering everything on the small counter.

I wheeled around and swung again, my fist aiming for one wax figure's impossibly perfect face. But it dodged my blow at the last second, and my knuckles smashed right through the thin wooden panel behind it. Sharp splinters ripped into my skin, sending a jolt of pain shooting up my arm.

I snarled an inarticulate curse, yanking my fist free and rounding on another cawing wax creature with a rumbling roar.

It lunged low and I kicked out my foot, catching it right in the chest and toppling it over the small end table in the corner. Another leapt for me, lanky arms outstretched, and I seized it around the waist and hurled it aside like a rag doll. It crashed through the narrow window, glass shattering outward in a spray of sparkling shards.

A gust of hot air whooshed inside, warm and clammy against my sweat-damp skin.

Myrtle lurched violently on the water, the deck tilting beneath the relentless onslaught. My vision blurred as I strained and struggled, but I could still make out Leah's belongings scattered about, shelves overturned, lamp cords dangling like torn sinew.

A violent anger tore through me. They were wrecking the boat. They were wrecking our home.

Another wax figure clamped a hand around my ankle and I stomped down on it, feeling its body squelch beneath my foot. It oozed like melted putty, waxy flesh ballooning under the hem of its suit.

I kicked it away, my eyes darting wildly, and all I saw was destruction: shattered glass, splintered wood, and dismembered wax lumps among the remaining assailants.

That's when I noticed it – the shift in the air, a new scent cutting through the acrid smell of melting wax and something putrid. It was a familiar scent, wafting through the broken window. My lungs constricted as a primal dread bloomed in my chest. No. No, no, no...

I spun toward the gaping hole where the door had once been. The sky outside was dark now but I could just make out a figure in the doorway. My heart jackhammered against my ribs, and a wave of helpless panic threatened to swallow me whole.

There, quivering at the threshold, was Leah, white as a sheet and looking on in horror.

Her startled gasp echoed in the cramped cabin and the remaining wax figures collectively paused, every head snapping toward her in perfect unison.

18

Leah

My first thought when I saw the gaping hole where the door used to be was that someone had broken into my boat. My second thought, when I stepped onto the boat

and found Maxine surrounded by those things, was that I'd walked into a living nightmare.

Myrtle's interior was all splintered wood and shattered glass, like a tornado had blown through. And those... people—no, things—their skin unnervingly smooth and their faces expressionless except for those wide, artificial smiles. They looked like mannequins come to life, waxy and warped in places, and my gut twisted at the uncanny sight.

Then the world moved like someone had pressed a fast-forward button.

One of those waxy figures jolted forward, impossibly fast, grabbing my collar and yanking me inside so abruptly that I lost my footing. I crashed to my knees – clawing at those bony fingers gripping my shirt – a scream lodged in my throat as I stared up into vacant, hollow eyes.

Maxine was at my side in a flash. She struck the wax figure so hard its entire chest cavity seemed to cave in, and it staggered backward, pulling me off-balance. I tumbled to the floor as the creature's grip loosened, adrenaline roaring through my veins as Maxine hauled me to my feet and shoved me toward the back of the boat, to my bedroom.

“This way—go!” she barked, gripping the scruff of my collar, guiding me along and kicking out at the grasping fingers that followed us.

My pulse pounded in my ears, but I managed to stumble forward. Maxine kept at my back, fending off another lurching attacker with a dull thud of impact. The boat rocked so wildly that I nearly fell to my knees again, but I forced my legs to keep moving, my only goal being to put as many doors between us and them as possible.

Finally, we stumbled into my cramped bedroom, and Maxine spun around, slamming

the door shut and lunging for the lock, twisting it and bracing her body against the flimsy wood.

No sooner had she done so than the pounding started – fists striking the door in a rapid, furious rhythm. I could see the wood creak and bow under the relentless assault, and every thud sent a jolt of terror through my chest.

Maxine was breathless, splattered with droplets of something that wasn't entirely blood—it gleamed in the low lamp like half-melted plastic. Her eyes met mine and I saw the panic there.

Outside, the pounding intensified, sending tremors through the thin walls. The door rattled as though it might give at any second. My gaze darted around the room, looking for something, anything, any object we could use as a weapon or a barricade. But my bedroom was small and sparse, hardly a fortress.

I swallowed hard, clenching and unclenching my fists. “What are those things?”

Maxine gave no answer. Instead, she gritted her teeth, her palms pressed to the door.

“Maxine!?”

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“I’ll explain later!” she snapped, pulling back to haul her shoulder at the door when the wood creaked and groaned. “Right now we need to get out of here. Do you have any matches?”

“What do you need matches for?!” I rushed forward to join her at the door when another thud from the other side had it rattling on its hinges.

Another blow thundered against the barricade, sending my teeth chattering, and Maxine hissed in frustration. “We need fire.”

I blinked at her. She wants fire? We’re on a fucking boat and she wants to light a fire?

“We don’t have many options here!” Maxine shouted over the banging, sensing my hesitation. “Please, Leah!”

A hollow thud shook the flimsy barrier of the door. Another splintering crack followed, and I pictured the wax creatures on the other side, pushing in with their grotesquely perfect smiles.

“I—I have flares?” I gasped, pushing off from the door where Maxine stood bracing her shoulder, scraping her heels on the floor. The tremors of another impact shuddered through the narrow cabin, nearly sending me stumbling again.

“Flares work.” Maxine spoke through gritted teeth, swearing as another jolt whipped her head back and forth on her shoulders.

I lurched to the opposite side of the bedroom and crouched beside a low cupboard. My hands fumbled with the latch, adrenaline making my fingers clumsy. Outside, the pounding escalated, accompanied by chilling half-laughs and warped murmurs.

Finally, I yanked the cupboard open. Blankets tumbled out, followed by some spare batteries. At the back, I saw the weathered box of flares and swallowed the bile in my throat, hauling it out between my knees.

The door gave another thunderous groan and Maxine released a sharp exhale. “When they break through, light them up.”

“No pressure,” I muttered, popping open the lid. The flares inside glinted a muted red, each with its own short ignition strip. I glanced at Maxine, terror tearing through my chest. “I’ve never used these like—”

Before I could finish, the door exploded inward, shards of broken wood flying across the room. I scrambled backward, snatching up a flare as Maxine tumbled to her hands and knees. Five wax figures piled in, limbs jerking with disjointed synchronicity. Their waxen faces had twisted into caricature grins, some partially warped from Maxine’s previous strikes.

“Now!” Maxine shouted, springing to meet them. She swung her arm in a wide arc, slamming one minion across the jaw so hard that its head warped and dented around her fist.

I lifted the flare. The ignition strip quivered under my sweaty fingers, but I yanked hard, sparks spitting to life. A blinding burst of orange flame flared at the tip, sputtering with acrid smoke.

The nearest wax minion lunged at me, too-smooth features contorted into that uncanny grin. With a terrified shriek, I thrust the flare forward. The bright flame

licked at its outstretched arm, which instantly began to drip and sag like candle wax under a blowtorch. The thing recoiled with a distorted gargle, a mechanical scream of rage.

Maxine seized the opportunity, catching one creature by the back of its head and slamming it face-first into the burning flare. The stench was nauseating, acrid chemical and hot plastic, but the effect was immediate. Its waxy skin softened, melting under the intense heat.

She snatched a second flare from the box at my feet, striking it to life and brandishing it like a flaming sword in the half-dark.

When the ceiling light was smashed out we were plunged into a hellscape of flickering red firelight and choking smoke. I lit another flare, sparks cascading onto the floor, and my heart seized with every flicker of flame near the curtains or bedding. Myrtle was a mighty fine home, but she wasn't fire-proof.

One of the creatures swung at me with a deformed fist, connecting with my shoulder hard enough to knock me down onto my backside. I bared my teeth, thrusting the flare upward, driving it into the creature's abdomen. Its midsection convulsed, melting away in rivulets of sludge.

Through the haze of heat, I caught a glimpse of Maxine, her hair wild, droplets of wax clinging to her skin like molten candle drips. Even half-feral she moved with an obvious grace, dipping, and weaving, slashing and cleaving – occasionally glancing over her shoulder to catch my eye.

Then I caught sight of a spark dancing across the ruffled curtains, creeping upward like a living thing. The smell of scorched fabric filled my lungs, and horror set in. Flames licked the edges of the flimsy walls and smoke rose in dark plumes.

The boat rocked as new bursts of fire found fresh fuel—wood, bedding, anything it could devour.

My pulse spiked, adrenaline giving way to dizzy terror. Already the heat intensified, acrid smoke filling the tiny cabin. I could barely make out Maxine, wreathed in haze, fending off the last twisted remains of one of the wax creatures.

“We have to go!” I choked, but my words were swallowed by a crash as part of a ceiling panel caved in, sending sparks raining down. The smoke was too thick, clogging my throat, burning my eyes. My knees buckled and I sputtered, trying to draw a breath that never quite filled my lungs.

I swayed and stumbled, hacking and coughing, crawling through the smog as black spots crowded my vision.

Then two lithe arms wrapped around me, and I felt Maxine’s breath against my ear, though I could hardly hear the words above the roar of the flames. The next thing I knew, she was half-dragging, half-carrying me through the boat’s narrow corridor. Embers flew like fireflies, small flecks of red-hot ash in the swirling dark.

The searing heat pressed in from all sides and I choked out a sob. My beloved boat was going up in flames. Hot smoke scraped down my throat, and it took everything I had not to collapse into a blubbing mess then and there. Maxine pulled me along relentlessly, keeping me upright even as my vision blurred.

We finally reached the back deck and Maxine shoved me onward, one steadying hand at my back. The cool night air hit like a slap against my heated skin, frosty compared to the inferno inside.

The next instant, she swept an arm under my knees, lifting me up princess-style, and hurled me into the water, my body slicing into the harbor with a shocking splash. The

all-encompassing cold closed over my head and for a heartbeat, my lungs seized up – until instinct took over. I kicked my legs, forcing myself to the surface with a frantic gasp.

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Maxine plunged in behind me, a bright blur under the water before breaking the surface to cough and splutter at my side.

Our heads bobbed in the ripples and I treaded water, lifting my eyes to see Myrtle fully engulfed, angry flames kicking out the windows and hatches. The screams of those wax nightmares echoed from inside the burning hull, a grotesque chorus muffled by the crackling blaze. None of them came lunging out after us.

“My boat,” I croaked, tears stinging my eyes. Smoke still clung to my throat, making every breath a raspy effort.

Maxine floated beside me, breathing heavily, watching Myrtle crackle and burn. “Come on.” She tugged at my arm under the water, paddling backward towards the jetty.

I kicked my legs out to follow her, but stiffened in a blink when something solid clamped around my ankle like a vice.

I let out a strangled scream, yanked under so fast that water rushed up my nose. The cold dark swallowed me and I writhed and struggled, fighting against whatever it was that snaked bony fingers up my leg.

In the distorted underwater world, through the bubbles of air rushing from my throat, I caught the outline of a waxy figure. Its face was half-melted, its mouth twisted in a silent snarl.

My lungs burned, and my thoughts spiraled. I kicked frantically, but it wouldn't let

go, dragging me deeper and deeper. My chest ached with the sudden lack of air, panic flaring in every nerve. Overhead, a dullboomsounded as the flames finally reached the fuel tank and I caught glimpses of Myrtle burning, an orange glow on the water like a lantern in the dark.

Through the roiling shadows another figure took shape, spearing through the water toward me. Maxine.

She seized the wax figure's half-melted head, her hair swirling like ink in the water. In the murky gloom she reeled back, wrenching the figure's head clean off its shoulders. A wave of black sludge billowed around us. The figure's limbs flailed, but Maxine struck out with a savage efficiency – ripping, pulling, tearing it apart.

At last, the hand around my ankle gave way and Maxine caught hold of my arm, kicking us both to the surface.

We exploded from the water in a scuffle of limbs and sputtering coughs. Air rushed into my lungs and I sucked itdown, ignoring the scraping burn in my throat. The taste of salt and smoke burned my tongue.

Somewhere close by, Myrtle's remains crackled and hissed.

Maxine slung her arm under my armpits, towing me toward the jetty. My limbs felt leaden, each kick an effort, but I forced my body to move, making for the battered wooden planks looming just ahead.

When we finally reached the jetty, Maxine hauled me up onto the slick surface and clambered up beside me, collapsing in a tangle of limbs. I choked up brackish water, heaving on my hands and knees, my lungs shrieking and my chest wracked with ragged sobs.

Neither of us could speak, sucking in wet, desperate breaths in our soggy clothing.

Sparks still rained down from Myrtle's blazing hull, the flames devouring what was left of my home. My stomach twisted, tears mixing with the salt on my cheeks.

I turned onto my side, watching the sturdy boat's silhouette crumble against the night sky.

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Maxine

I slumped at the edge of the jetty, watching Myrtle's smoldering remnants dip below the rippling water. The flames had sputtered out, leaving nothing but curling smoke that dissipated into the night. Beside me, Leah shuddered, her arms wrapped tightly around her knees.

Say something, my brain urged my tongue. But what was there to say?

My chest tightened with all-encompassing guilt. That was her home going under. Myrtle was shabby and cobbled together with grit and duct tape, but that boat had been a sanctuary to the both of us. And now... it was nothing but char and ash, sinking out of sight.

All I could manage was a trembling hand on Leah's shoulder. She sniffled, nodding faintly like she appreciated the gesture. Her clothes were waterlogged, her hair frizzled where the fire had caught it.

I rubbed her back in slow circles, stiffening when shouts started up from somewhere nearby. No doubt the rest of the harbor residents had caught on to the chaos. They'd be coming to see what all the commotion was about.

“I’m sorry, Leah, but we can’t... we can’t stay here.” My voice came out shaky, but I had to push. As much as I wanted to give her time to grieve, there was no telling when more waxen nightmares would crawl out of the woodwork.

Leah lifted her head, eyes rimmed red and bruised purple with exhaustion. “Okay.” Her voice was hollow, but at least she stood when I tugged gently on her arm.

We stumbled down the jetty, my arm around her waist to keep her upright, both of us worn raw by fire and water – razed down to the bone.

The marina’s security lights cast long streaks of white across the parking lot and I kept my head swiveling, scanning for whatever fresh nightmare might be lurking in the shadows. My bare feet scraped along the tarmac and I shivered in my sparse, damp attire.

A horn honked loudly to our left and we were both startled out of our skin.

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I veered around, nearly knocking Leah over in the process, and my rolling eyes landed on the sleek, cherry-red convertible idling by the far curb. The headlights cut through the darkness with twin beams, and the engine's low purr made my pulse quicken.

Leah stiffened in my grasp and I squeezed her waist, teetering on the line between fight or flight. "Stay behind me," I muttered.

But before I could do anything more, the car's window hummed down. A familiar voice, lilting with sardonic amusement, floated across the lot.

"Well, you two look like you've had one hell of a night." River poked her head out, tilting a pair of rose-tinted glasses down her nose. "Need a ride, or were you planning to stand around looking tragic a little bit longer?"

River's home was an eccentric sprawl of connected corridors, hallways that led to random dead-ends, cluttered rooms, and wild gardens that bled into indoor courtyards. Stepping inside, soaked and exhausted from our narrow escape, I nearly stumbled over the raised threshold, trying to catch my breath while supporting a wary-looking Leah with one arm.

The interior was just as odd as I remembered—trinkets from countless eras crowded every surface, paintings of questionable taste jostled for space on the walls, and a koi pond wove through the center of the home like a liquid tapestry. It was nature blended seamlessly with a vast selection of luxurious oddities and it was exactly River in every possible way.

Leah's eyes flicked around, wide with disbelief. "Is that... an actual river running through her living room?" she murmured. Her voice was raspy from the smoke and salt water.

I offered a tired shrug. "It's more of a stream—but, yeah. River's just odd like that. This is normal for her, believe it or not."

Leah offered a numb nod, her eyes flicking between the elaborate décor and the gently lapping water. She looked shell-shocked, still reeling from the loss of her boat and the nightmares she'd just witnessed.

River had disappeared around a corner moments earlier and she returned wearing a silky, flowing robe, ruby-red and embroidered with a thousand speckled birds. She regarded us both with a single raised brow.

"You both look like shit," she remarked as she swept her gaze over us—ragged and dripping, covered in soot and waxy residue. "Don't scowl at me, Maxine. It's the truth. And where's your pants?"

I glanced down at myself, irritably tugging my soaked T-shirt over my bare legs. "There wasn't much time to dress for the occasion."

"I see. Well, follow me." River turned on her heel, glancing over her shoulder at a bewildered Leah. "You can hang around here for the night. Leah, there's a shower in the guestroom if you'd like to warm up."

"Uh, th—thanks." Leah shot me a questioning glance, and I exhaled a deep sigh.

"We might as well, it's not like we have many options." I knew that wasn't what she was really inquiring about, but explaining how the hell River knew where to find us, and when, was something I was in no mood to tackle just yet.

No doubt the prescient vamp had been struck with another one of her visions. Or she was just a little too dedicated to keeping tabs on me. Either way, she'd shown up when we needed her most so I was in no position to complain.

River led us through a series of corridors, all lined with dusty artifacts and softly glowing lanterns. Every few steps, we passed small arched bridges that spanned sections of the interior koi pond. Leah stared down at the fish gliding beside us, her expression glazed and vacant.

When we reached the main foyer, River paused, her robe rippling like water. "I foresaw a bit of chaos on your horizon so I took the liberty of preparing a room. Are you guys an item yet or—"

"Thank you, River," I cut in abruptly, clearing my throat and avoiding Leah's eyes. "We'll be going now."

River only chuckled and inclined her head. "Guest room is down that way. But I hope you know you'll have to speak to Jordan eventually, before all this trouble escalates." Her gaze flicked pointedly between me and Leah. "I'm sure she'll have plenty of questions."

"I'm sure she will," I lamented, taking Leah by the elbow and guiding her down the corridor. "Thanks for the rescue."

"Anytime." River offered an exaggerated bow before sweeping away, disappearing in a flurry of red silk and dark curls.

Leah and I shuffled off, dripping briny water on the plush carpets that guided us to a set of double doors. The room beyond was enormous, the walls decorated with a vivid mural of birds in flight. A canopied bed sat in the center, gauzy curtains draped in elegant folds.

Leah let out a shaky breath. “This is... something else.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, combing fingers through my matted hair. “River has a flair for the tacky and dramatic.”

“No kidding—”

I steadied her when she struck up a fitful cough, hacking and huffing the last of the smoke from her lungs.

“There’s the bathroom,” I offered, pointing to an ornate side door on the far corner of the room. “You could wash up if you want.”

Her hair was still clumped and ruffled, caked with sea salt, and her clothes hung from her shivering body in singed tatters.

She gave a faint nod and disappeared through the bathroom door without another word. I listened to the soft hiss of water rushing through pipes, then the sputter of the showerhead.

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While she was gone I fiddled with a nearby lamp, adjusting the brightness until the room glowed with a low, soothing light. Then I rummaged around the gargantuan wardrobe and pulled out a set of silk pajamas, slipping into them and breathing a sigh of relief at the feel of the soft fabric on my skin.

After a short while, Leah emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a plush white robe. Her damp hair clung to her neck, and her eyes were still haunted. She hesitated near the doorway, looking anywhere but directly at me.

“Feel better?” I asked hesitantly.

“Cleaner,” she allowed, her voice cracking. “Otherwise... I still feel... everything.”

“I’m sorry.” My voice dropped to a hoarse whisper and I plopped down on the edge of the bed, pulling my knees to my chin. “I’m sorry about Myrtle and I’m sorry for scaring you. I’m sorry for drawing those things into your home.”

When she didn’t respond I continued, keeping my eyes down, “I think... I think it’s time I tell you everything. I want to tell you everything. But...you might not like me much if I do.”

She hesitated for a moment, then approached slowly, padded steps thudding on the polished floor. “Okay.”

She perched on the bed beside me, and my pulse thundered as I braced myself. I fiddled with the tassels on the duvet, trying to steady my trembling hands.

“Leah,” I began, my voice wobbling, “the reason I left you back in San Francisco—it’s... more complicated than you might think.”

She nodded, her gaze unwavering, though the tension in her posture told me she was bracing for the worst. “Go on.”

“It wasn’t just about my family. Sure, they were overbearing, controlling, and just generally terrible fucking people,” I continued, twisting the tassel around my finger. “That was part of it, but... they wanted me to marry someone. They had my whole life planned out for me and marriage was first on the list.”

Leah frowned, confusion flitting across her features. “Marry someone?” she echoed, clearly not expecting that turn of events.

“Yes. A man my parents had chosen, some influential person in my... circle. They expected me to just go along with it, and I considered it. But he had a reputation. A frightening one. And I didn’t want to spend my whole life under my parents’ thumb just to go on to become his property in some twisted arrangement.”

Her expression shifted and color drained from her face, lips parting in silent shock.

“So you ran,” she said quietly.

I nodded, swallowing around the lump in my throat. “I ran. I fled to New York, thinking I could start over and get away from them. But I never got to say goodbye to you.”

I hesitated, forcing myself to meet her gaze. “My family, they started to notice...well, you. All the time I spent away from home. They were suspicious, and I knew if they believed you mattered to me... they could hurt you, or use you against me. So I just left. It killed me to do it, but I was convinced you’d be safer if I just disappeared.”

Leah's brow furrowed, an odd, burgeoning horror brimming behind her eyes. "All this time... you were protecting me?"

"That was the plan." I let out a shaky laugh that held no real mirth. "I thought I was doing the right thing. Of course, it never occurred to me how much that would hurt you, or how it would haunt me."

Her eyes shimmered with emotion, but her voice stayed tense. "You were engaged..."

"There's more. And this is gonna sound really fucking ridiculous and you're probably going to think I'm crazy, but—" I closed my eyes for a moment, steeling myself.

"I'm—I'm kind of like a... a vampire," I finally said, the words tasting foreign on my tongue. "My whole family is. That fiancé of mine, Gregor—he's one too, and powerful. He's ancient. Those wax models that attacked us tonight were sent by him. He's the one who's been tracking me down."

Leah's expression twitched—fear, disturbance, something else. But to my surprise, it wasn't the vampire confession that seemed to truly disturb her; that much was clear.

She wore a haunted look, but she didn't seem particularly fixed on the idea that I drank blood. Instead, she'd looked more anguished by the idea of an arranged marriage, my family's control, and Gregor's violent pursuit.

I pressed a hand to my temple, trying to calm the riot of nerves in my chest. "I know it's a lot. And I'm sorry you got dragged into it. I'm sorry I never told you any of this before."

She let out a trembling breath, arms folding around herself as she tried to process it all. "Your fiancé sent those... those wax things?" Her lips pressed into a tight line,

eyes flicking briefly with anger. “Maxine, that’s... God, that’s horrible.”

A tear slipped down my cheek, and I reached to wipe it away. “I didn’t know what else to do,” I admitted, voice breaking. “I left to keep you safe. And now... after everything, I’ve only put you in danger again. I’m so sorry, Leah.”

For a moment, she sat in silence, her head bowed. I braced for her rejection or terror, but when she looked up again, her gaze was full of pained understanding rather than condemnation.

“You should have told me sooner,” she whispered, her voice rough at the edges. “I could have helped you, I could have handled it. I wish you had let me decide for myself.” Her eyes flicked away, and she let out a shuddering breath. “I had no idea you were engaged.”

I stared at her, my heart hammering in my chest. She shifted on the bed, running a hand over her eyes and exhaling a wavering breath. My mind spun. Did she not hear the whole vampire thing?

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Tentatively, I spoke again, my voice stilted. “Leah... you do realize what I just said, right? About me being a vampire?”

She met my gaze, eyes clouded with worry and shook her head in a small, almost dismissive gesture. “Yeah, I heard you,” she said, like it was the most ordinary revelation in the world.

I blinked, struggling to process her calm. “You—so you’re not... freaking out?” The words came out in a disbelieving rush. “You’re not even batting an eyelash that I’m a vampire?”

She shrugged, chewing on her bottom lip. “Not really,” she admitted. “I mean, everything you’ve told me, it’s... a lot. But I already knew that part.”

My jaw nearly hit the floor. “What do you mean you already knew?”

She sighed, steepling her fingers in her lap, and sucked in a breath. Then she met my gaze, tension and trepidation flickering behind her eyes.

“I have something to tell you too.”

20

Leah

I had never seen Maxine so vulnerable.

Her eyes glimmered with unshed tears, her posture timid and her shoulders slumped, like she might just curl up and vanish if I looked at her too long.

A heavy weight settled in my chest the moment I made up my mind to come clean. But I had to do it, I couldn't hide things from her any longer—not when she'd finally told me the truth.

I perched on the edge of the bed, quiet dread curdling in my stomach. Maxine watched me with wary eyes and I found I couldn't quite meet her gaze. I'm going to lose her forever.

"I—" I tried to speak, but my first attempt was nothing more than a crackling croak. Clearing my throat, I forced the words out in a stilted rush. "I haven't been entirely honest with you either."

Maxine tilted her head, damp curls clinging to her neck. "What do you mean?"

My lungs felt tight, and every beat of my heart pounded like a warning bell. Don't do it. Don't do it. Stop talking. Stop talking. Stop—

"Your family. They... they found me." I admitted, trembling voice little more than a whisper.

"What?" Maxine straightened up, angling her body toward me and half-reaching across the gap between us. "What do you mean they found you?"

"I hadn't heard from you in years. I thought you were long gone. But a few months back, they came to my house in San Francisco—your mother and your brother. I don't know how, but they knew who I was. They knew we were once... friends." I sucked in a breath, swallowing hard. "They said—they said you were an ungrateful runaway. That your father was ill, and they needed you back. They..."

I looked away, squeezing my eyes shut, but the memory of those terrifying beings haunted me still. Their raking claws would live forever behind my eyes. “They sent me to find you. Threatened me, too, if I didn’t get you to come home.”

Maxine’s expression shifted from confusion to a slow-dawning horror. “They sent you to find me?” she echoed softly. Then her pupils blew out and her face went pale. “Oh God. They blackmailed you.”

I nodded, my nails digging into the bedspread as I clamped down on a surge of panic. “That’s why I came to New York. They threatened to hurt me if I didn’t... do what they wanted,” I whispered. “They threatened my grandfather too. It was— I didn’t know what else to do. I just thought they wanted you back because... well, I didn’t know about Gregor or the arranged marriage or—”

Maxine stood abruptly, turning her back to me.

My words came in a flood then, desperation kicking in. “I swear, I had no clue about any of that. If I’d known—” My voice wavered. “I never would have helped them, Maxine.”

But she didn’t look at me. Her shoulders were tense, her arms rigid at her sides. A cold, awful sense of finality tightened around my throat. She hates me. She’ll never forgive me for this.

I pushed up from the bed, stumbling toward her, my breath catching on a sob.

“Maxine, please,” I pleaded, voice cracking. “I’m sorry. I had no idea they were forcing you into—into that. I wouldn’t have?—”

Slowly, she turned to face me, and her gaze was fierce, but... not furious. She set her hands on my shoulders, her touch surprisingly gentle.

“Leah,” she said, her tone steady though her eyes glistened, “it’s not your fault. You did what you had to do to protect yourself and your grandfather.” Her fingers tightened a fraction, nails digging into my skin. “I’m angry at them. Not you.”

I stood there, stunned, tears slipping down my cheeks. “But... But I lied to you. I’ve been lying to you. You have every right to be furious.”

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She gave a terse shake of her head. “I am furious—at my family, for manipulating you. For scaring you. For putting you in danger.” A flicker of guilt darkened her expression. “And I’m sorry I wasn’t there to protect you.”

The knot of fear in my chest loosened, replaced by an overwhelming relief that threatened to buckle my knees. I saw the regret in her eyes, saw the understanding, and the bittersweet melancholy there.

“You couldn’t have known,” I whispered, drawing closer even as her arms locked to keep me at bay. “It’s not your fault either. It’s theirs. They’re the ones who’ve kept us apart for so long.”

My arms slipped around her waist at the same moment that hers softened and slid around my back, and we clung to each other, anchoring ourselves in the raging storm. Apart no longer. And never again.

I buried my face in the crook of her neck, and her hand cupped the back of my head, fingers tangling in the damp tendrils. After a moment, I felt her gently pull back, her hands moving up to trace my face, my jaw, my throat. Her fingers fluttered on the nape of my neck.

Our eyes locked, and I could scarcely breathe at the proximity, the short distance between our lips.

I didn’t hesitate.

I leaned in, my heart pounding, and pressed my mouth to hers.

The kiss was soft like the first time, a tentative brush of lips that spoke of uncertainty and apology. Then Maxine let out a small, trembling sigh, and something within both of us shattered simultaneously—the tension, the fear. All of it rushing out in a breathy exhale. A long, deep sigh of relief.

The kiss deepened, and fire surged through me, burning away the final barriers between us.

A low sound escaped her throat, and I felt her arms tighten around me, pulling me closer. I responded in kind, my hands sliding up her back, tangling in her hair, tugging lightly.

Maxine's eyes turned to heavy-lidded slits and I surged into her, teeth grazing her tongue. My hands fisted in the silky fabric at her back, hauling her close—all heat and urgency and quiet little moans as I sucked bruises down her neckline.

She pulled me flush against her, one hand cupping the nape of my neck. The other traveled down my spine, circling my ass, and kneading the soft flesh there. I groaned into her mouth, the sound reverberating in my throat.

Maxine let out a hum of approval against my lips when my own hand traveled downward—down her stomach, and under the seam of her pants.

I brushed past soft pubic hair and felt heat radiating in my palm. Maxine groaned when I cupped her mound, curling one finger between the twin petals at her entrance. Her grip on me tightened and her nails dug into my skin, her legs buckling and locking up again as my fingers began to stroke, seeking out her clit and massaging slow circles there.

“Leah...” She murmured my name against my mouth, a half-warning, half-moan as I plied my tongue between her lips, gliding it over hers.

Finding her entrance I slid two fingers inside, starting up a gentle beckoning motion against the soft pad of her inner wall.

“Leah—fuck.” Her body contracted around my fingers, a squeezing pressure that only riled me up further. I picked up the pace, my free hand rising to fist in her hair. I tilted her head back, bared her neck, holding her in place as I pumped my fingers into her.

Maxine snatched at my gown, tugging it off my shoulders as she whined and bucked, hips rolling upwards to meet my fingers. I fastened my lips to her neck, kissing and nipping my way down to the juncture of her throat; the irony of sucking at a vampire’s neck wasn’t lost on me.

I bit down for good measure and felt a groan rattle through her throat.

She was on the brink in a matter of moments, hot wetness pooling in the palm of my hand, slicking up her inner thighs. But it was too soon. I wanted to taste her, devour her entirely—I pulled my fingers out abruptly and Maxine was... very vocal about it.

She whined and stamped her foot, and then flushed a brilliant beetroot red.

“Relax, you diva.” I kissed her again, grinning against her lips. “I’m not done with you yet.”

She mumbled something incoherent, grinding her hips against mine, seeking out any sort of friction. In response, I tugged at her pants, dropping them to her ankles and urging her to step out of the silken puddle.

I knelt in front of her.

Maxine’s breath caught in her throat and she let me guide her closer, let me haul one soft, smooth thigh over my shoulder. She braced herself on the bedpost when my

hands rounded her hips to grip her ass, dull nails digging into soft flesh.

I aligned myself with that cleft between her legs, inhaling the scent of her, and licked my lips.

And went to town.

“Fuckinghell,” was what I think she meant to say, but it was cut off halfway through when she sucked in a sharp breath, spearing a hand through my hair and lifting her hips to meet my mouth.

My tongue found her clit, circling the small bud before licking along her entrance and delving deeper. I relished the taste of her, the warmth of her arousal on my lips, smearing on my chin. My mouth found her clit again and I sucked at it, lapping at it with a rough tongue, and her hand tugged wildly at my hair.

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Maxine bucked and writhed above me, hissing through gritted teeth, and I pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses to her core.

My tongue was soon joined by my fingers and Maxine's moans rang around the room, her head tilting back, her hips rolling as she rode them to a violent climax. I kept up the rhythm, even as her own steady thrusting began to falter, stuttering to a halt as she hunched over and came on my tongue.

"Oh my god." It was a breathy whisper that escaped her lips and she stumbled back a step, lowering her leg from my shoulder, panting hard.

I hauled myself upright, licking the last of her orgasm from my fingers and pulled her into a kiss, all clashing teeth and sweet, tart flavor. It was heavenly.

Maxine kissed me in kind, grasping fingers tugging me closer even as I lifted her shirt over her head, laying her bare. My gown quickly followed, slipping off my shoulders and whuffing to the floor, and then we were both naked.

I pulled her flush against me, skin-on-skin contact coaxing me into overdrive. Her breasts pressed against mine, soft and full and warm against my heaving chest. My fingers trailed through her hair, over her face, down her bare back.

I wanted to touch every inch of her, every soft secret place I had never dared dream of approaching before.

Maxine moaned quietly, putty in my hands as I tugged her toward the bed and pressed her down onto the mattress. She collapsed on her back in the crisp white

sheets, parting her legs and reaching for me.

For a moment I merely stood there and drank in the sight of her. Her cheeks were pink, her whole face flushed, and her curls tumbled wildly on her shoulders. Her skin was smooth, faint freckles peppering her shoulders. Her thighs were damp and quivering, deliciously parted to welcome me closer.

I obliged, crawling up the length of her and locking my lips with hers again. I tangled myself in her, bent limbs and grasping fingers, until I couldn't tell where I ended and she began.

She kissed me and the world spun out of view. All I could see was her, the faint flecks of amber in her eyes, her full lips – pink and raw from my teeth. My hands mapped out the shape of her, tracing over the curve of her hip, the soft mound of her ass, the drenched crevice between her legs.

At the brush of my fingers against her clit, Maxine whimpered, thrusting her hips forward, chasing the slightest pressure.

I wedged my knee between her legs, straddling her thigh where I lay on my side and we both groaned in unison at the contact. Then we were grinding, kissing, teeth occasionally clattering together in the desperate mess of our urgency.

The sheets tangled up around us, the pillows fell from the bed and I kissed her. I kissed her until I was breathless, until that hot heat in my belly boiled over and my body spasmed through a climax I hadn't even anticipated.

And still, I kissed her.

On and on—I could have kissed her forever. It was all I ever wanted to do.

Maxine

It felt somewhat surreal to gather in River's living room—if you could call the sprawling, ornate space a mere “living room”—with the rest of the Leyore women and Leah tacked on for good measure. They all peered at her, and Leah stared back, part-defiant, part-deflated, like she couldn't decide if she despised the attention or couldn't care less.

Decorative lanterns illuminated every trinket-laden table, and bright koi fish glided through the indoor stream that snaked past plush couches and low-slung tables. It should have been a peaceful scene, but the tension in the air was palpable.

They were all there: Hunter and Addison huddled together on a bench carved to resemble a flock of swans, Sky standing by the tall archway while Jordan leaned against her shoulder, River perched on a high-backed armchair like a regal overseer, and Dylan, arms crossed, with Amara close by—looking pale. Paler than usual.

Her scent was different too, still human but definitely sickly.

Leah hovered at my side, her eyes darting around the room, taking in the rag-tag group of delinquents I happened to call my friends. All eyes were focused on me—and on Leah, by extension, and we both shifted under the scrutiny.

I swallowed, summoning my courage.

“So,” I began, voice coming out tighter than I intended, “I guess you all know... I'm the cause of the latest chaos around here.”

Jordan folded her arms, inspecting her nails. “Yeah, about that. Why don't you fill us

in on exactly what's going on, Maxine? From the top.”

I shifted from one foot to the other, glancing at Leah for a shred of reassurance. She shrugged, bug-eyed and out of her depths.

We'd woken up that morning in a tangle of limbs to River hammering on the door, yelling at us to get our asses out of bed. By the time we stumbled into the living room I realized it was an ambush; all the Leyore women had turned up, all ready to grill me on what exactly was going on.

Apparently, word had gotten out about the strange incident at the harbor, and River had conveniently mentioned to Jordan that two bedraggled boatmen had spent the night in her guestroom.

Now I was on trial, and Leah alongside me, and it was time to come clean about everything.

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There was no time to consider what had happened between us the night before. No time to talk about what it meant to either of us. And no time to examine the certain something that had clicked into place in my heart when I'd kissed her dizzy.

I was less than thrilled about baring my soul to all present parties, but it wasn't just my life on the line now. Leah was in danger too, and so was her grandfather. And if we were going to handle my family and Gregor's looming presence, we were going to need all the help we could get.

So I took a deep breath, tossed my hair over my shoulder, and launched into the story: how my family had tried to force me into an arranged marriage with a vampire named Gregor Voronsky, how I fled to New York and left Leah behind in San Francisco, how I'd hidden the truth, and how I'd hoped never to cross paths with Gregor or my family again.

The mood shifted as I continued, detailing everything Leah had told me about my family showing up on her doorstep—the threat they posed, and their true motives. No doubt they were working with Gregor, doing everything in their power to curry favor with the possessive, ancient vamp.

As I spoke, Hunter's lips drew into a grim line, Addison let out a low curse under her breath, and Jordan's fingers drummed impatiently on her forearm. The only sound from River was a soft cluck of her tongue.

When I was finally finished the room fell silent, save for the occasional swish of the fish in the trickling stream.

“Max,” Sky murmured eventually, raking a hand through her hair, “you could’ve told us sooner.”

“I know.” I blew out a breath, avoiding the various sets of eyes on me. “I just—I was... afraid.”

“Why?” Dylan piped up, signing the question too for Amara’s sake.

“I don’t know.” I kept my eyes down, my hands forming the signals alongside my words. “I thought you’d all think I was overreacting. That I was just some spoiled runaway princess who didn’t want to face reality.”

“Maxine, that’s ridiculous.” Hunter palmed a hand to her face, shaking her head. “Listen to yourself. You were being forced to marry someone against your will. Hell, if you’d told us sooner I would have tracked this guy down myself and sent him packing.”

“No.” I couldn’t keep the tremor out of my tone, blood draining from my face as I rounded on her. “Gregor is not someone you want to mess with. He’s ancient, Hunter. Ancient and powerful. He hides it well but...” I folded my arms, plopping onto the sofa behind me. “He’s a monster. And I don’t want to see you get hurt—any of you.”

“We’re not going to get hurt.” Hunter snorted. “But seriously Maxine, you should’ve told us sooner.”

Jordan, arms still crossed, finally exhaled a long-suffering sigh. “So your fiancé’s been sending wax monstrosities to flush you out. Fantastic.” She glanced at the others. “This makes way more sense now. We’ve had odd sightings reported recently, but we weren’t sure who was behind it.”

I shifted in my seat and crossed my legs. “I—”

But Jordan was still shaking her head. “We could have been better prepared if you’d just told me the truth from the beginning.” Her gaze darted to Leah—who hovered at my shoulder, freezing up when she noticed the eyes on her—and then back to me. “You’re a Leyore vampire, Maxine, you owe it to us to be honest when we have enemies on our turf.”

My pride flared. I couldn’t entirely blame them for being upset, but the guilt and shame burned me up, fueling my exasperation. I squeezed my hands into fists before forcing them to relax.

“Look, I know I messed up,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “But can we not pretend you all lay every secret you have on the table either? Because you don’t.”

An awkward hush settled. They glanced at one another, clearly not thrilled with where this was going. River, with an infuriatingly coy smile, signed a quick *What do you mean?* while Dylan and Amara looked on silently, eyes flicking back and forth between us.

I drew in a deep breath and stuck my nose in the air, letting the tension in me uncoil just enough to speak. “I’m just saying,” I began, “considering how many of your secrets I keep, maybe you don’t want me to betooopen and honest.”

That got a few raised eyebrows. Addison coughed, looking intrigued. Dylan eyed me warily.

I shot them all a titillating grin, dredging up something mild. “For example, Sky, you remember that time you and Jordan got hot and heavy in the High Stakes office? I do—unfortunately, I was working late that evening and happened to hear all about Jordan’s big—”

“All right, point made!” Sky’s cheeks turned a violent shade of pink.

“And you,” I turned to Hunter who stared back, already scandalized. “Aside from everything that went down with Addison and the elves, I know a few more of your secrets too. When were you planning on telling Jordan that you’re the one who taught Hilda how to swear?”

“It was you?!” Jordan rounded on Hunter, slamming her hands down on the back of the sofa. “I should have known. No one else would have taught her to say ‘fan-fucking-tastic’.”

“Hey, now.” Hunter attempted a weak defense, raising her palms in surrender. “You’re the one who decided to make me babysitter against my will. I can’t be held responsible for what those little monsters learn from their time with me.”

A chorus of snickers rippled through the group, the tension loosening a notch. I eyed Addison, whose arms were folded in feigned confidence. She’d thus far managed to avoid direct fire, so I turned the crosshairs on her.

“And Addison.” I smiled sweetly, relishing the mild panic that flickered in her eyes. “How’s that precious collection of yours? The one I hear you spend, oh, hundreds—maybe thousands—on?”

Addison’s jaw clenched. “What are you talking about, Max?”

“Oh, you know—those Cabbage Patch dolls you keep in the locked trunk under your bed,” I sing-songed, watching her face go white. “I recall you mentioning a rare vintage one that set you back a pretty penny, hmm?”

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The entire group perked up, turning to stare at her in various levels of amusement. Addison's lips parted, and she looked like she wanted the floor to swallow her whole.

"That's... a side hobby," she blurted, cheeks flaming. "They're collectibles!"

"Sure, hun." Hunter snickered, nudging Addison's shoulder. "You can be honest with us, you're not playing tea parties with them, right?"

Addison muttered something unintelligible, tugging the collar of her jacket higher to hide her mortification. I decided that was quite enough torment for Addison, so I rolled my shoulders and turned my attention toward Dylan instead.

Her posture immediately went rigid, jaw tensing. She flicked a quick glance at Amara—a silent, fearful look that all but screamed, Please don't say anything about her. Please for the love of god, let her be. I could feel the apprehension pouring off her.

I cleared my throat, letting my voice drop to a playful murmur. "Dylan, relax. I just want to test your memory. I'm sure you recall a certain... Care Bear tattoo you have hidden on your ankle?"

Dylan's face went beet red, her shoulders stiffening. "That was— it was a dare," she mumbled, averting her eyes. "My brother put me up to it."

Addison perked up, forgetting her own embarrassment as she shot a conniving grin at Dylan. "Hold on, you have a Care Bear tattoo? For real?"

Dylan groaned, sliding a hand down her face. “Yes,for real. Move along now.”

“Okay, but which Care Bear is it?” Jordan looked genuinely curious, and Dylan fended her off with a glare. “Hmm, my money’s on Grumpy Bear.”

A round of poorly stifled giggles spread through the group. Even Amara cracked a tiny smile, softly brushing Dylan’s arm in a show of support. Dylan shot me a grudging look of thanks—relieved that I’d avoided mentioning anything about Amara’s... new condition, I supposed.

“All right, you proved your point,” Hunter muttered, though a grin tugged at her lips.

Jordan cleared her throat, rolling her eyes. “So you’re forgiven—tentatively,” she announced, glancing around to see if anyone disagreed. “But now we need a plan.”

Sky and Addison made exaggerated harrumphing noises while Hunter slumped back in her seat, muttering something about never trusting me to keep any secrets of hers ever again. Dylan spoke and signed a quick,I hate you sometimes,but the curl of a smile on her lips undermined any real venom.

Then it was back to business, and the problem at hand. I glanced over at Leah, who still looked significantly out of her depth amongst our dysfunctional forged family. When she caught my eye I tilted my head, scooching over and offering her the seat beside me.

“So,” she began, perching on the sofa and sweeping wary eyes around the room. “What do we do about... well, all of this – Gregor, Maxine’s family? You guys are vampires, right? Can’t you just like– I don’t know, scare them off?”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” Jordan murmured, rubbing a hand at her chin. “The Leyore coven can’t handle another war right now. We already have our hands full

mending our bond with the elves of this city. If we go after the Belmontes in San Francisco all hell could break loose.”

“We need to get Leah’s grandfather out of the city,” I cut in, taking Leah’s hand in mine and squeezing it tight. “If we can get him to New York under our protection, they have no leverage over Leah anymore.”

“That’s not a long term solution, though. My grandfather’s whole life is in San Francisco. He’s crushing on a lady at the grocery store. I can’t just uproot him and expect him to be okay with that,” Leah countered, twisting around until her knees brushed my own.

Everyone noticed the slight moments of contact between us, but only Jordan failed to pretend that she hadn’t. She raised a brow, eyes flicking between both of us with slow-dawning realization.

“I know.” I brought Leah’s fingers to my lips, pressing a kiss to her hand. “But it won’t be forever. We just need to keep him safe long enough to take care of my family and Gregor for good.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Hunter quizzed me, folding her arms across her chest.

“Simple.” I shrugged. “We lure them to New York. And we dangle some tantalizing bait so that Gregor turns up too.”

Hunter shifted her stance, narrowing her eyes at me. “How?”

“I’ll give them a call.” I flicked my eyes to Leah and away again, biting down on my bottom lip. “I’ll tell them I’ve seen the light and I’m ready to come home—ready to get married. My only demand is that the wedding goes down in New York so that all

my friends can be there to send me off.”

Dead silence settled as they processed my words. Jordan arched an eyebrow, arms still crossed. “You’re... going to pretend to give in?” she repeated slowly.

I forced a tight nod. “Yes. If I offer myself up willingly, Gregor will come. And if my parents think I’m actually returning to the fold, they’ll come too—and hopefully drag their watchers off Leah’s grandfather. We can move him safely while everyone’s attention is on me. Then once my family and Gregor show up, we control the battlefield.”

Addison blew out a low whistle, exchanging a glance with Hunter. “That’s... bold,” she muttered.

Hunter’s lips thinned. “It’s dangerous, Maxine. If this guy sees through your act, he could kill you.”

I shrugged, trying to seem more confident than I felt. “I just need to keep up the charade long enough for you to get Leah’s grandfather to safety and for Gregor to let his guard down.”

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River arched one delicate eyebrow from her perch near the koi pond. “And you’re certain you can fool your parents?” she asked, her voice skeptical but not outright dismissive.

I steeled myself with a shaky breath. “My mother always believed if I was pushed hard enough, I’d eventually cave. My father’s the same way. Gregor... well, if there’s one thing I know about him, it’s that arrogance is his fatal flaw.” A faint tremor tightened my jaw. “He’ll come if he thinks I’ve given up running.”

For a few heartbeats, no one spoke.

Except for Leah. She leaned forward, lacing her fingers with mine. “Maxine,” she said softly, “you don’t have to do this. If there’s another way—”

I turned to face her, clasping her hand. “This is the only way. I can’t keep running. We have to force a confrontation—on our turf, on our terms. I have to do this.”

She held my gaze, and I could see the scales balancing out behind her eyes. She took a deep breath, unblinking, and offered a small, tight nod.

“Then I’m with you. To the very end.”

22

Leah

Listening to the eclectic group of women bickering amongst themselves, I was

coming to realize that Maxine was, in fact, the sanest of the bunch. And that was saying something. The woman could shop until the word met its end and she prioritized the silliest of fancies.

But when I glanced around at the others; River in her extravagant robe, quietly berating anyone who got too close to her precious koi pond, Jordan and Sky squabbling over unnecessary code names, Addison, pacing back and forth while muttering to herself, and Hunter, arms folded, looking like she'd fight an army single-handed if it meant keeping Addison safe—I realized this was a unique brand of chaos.

I'd come to learn all of their names in the short time we'd spent squabbling in the living room. Dylan and Amara—the latter of whom I understood now to be deaf, were standing a little way off, removed from the chatter among the other women.

Dylan had her arm slung around the smaller woman's waist, propping her up and staring daggers at anyone whose gaze lingered on the two of them for too long. Me included. I dropped my eyes before Dylan could launch across the room and lop my head off, but I caught Amara's small smile before I looked away.

I straightened up at Maxine's side, trying to absorb the rapid-fire instructions that were suddenly being exchanged.

"Let's get this straight." River was speaking, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Maxine draws her family to New York, and in the meantime, we whisk Leah's grandfather away from San Francisco on the pretense that his granddaughter is having some respiratory crisis?"

I nodded, chewing my lip. "I was asthmatic as a kid," I explained, feeling a bit silly saying it out loud, "but I haven't had an episode in years. Still, if you tell my grandfather it's flaring up—something to do with the air pollution or

something—he'll come running."

Jordan, leaning against a carved wooden pillar, gave me an approving nod.

Hunter, on the other hand, arms crossed tightly across her chest, didn't look so convinced. "Why not just deal with the Belmontes in San Francisco? It's their turf, sure—but we can handle it. Our coven is more than capable."

From the other side of the room, River shot her a warning look. "If we pick a fight there, we're basically declaring war. They'd rally other local covens, plus any allies of Maxine's fiancé. That could paint a huge target on our backs. We can't risk that."

A disgruntled frown pulled at Hunter's features. "Fine," she grumbled, tapping a foot on the polished floor. "I just don't like drawing enemies so close to home."

Sky pitched in, redirecting the conversation. "Anyway, we bring the old man to New York and keep him tucked away. Meanwhile, Maxine plays the dutiful daughter who's finally agreed to the marriage—"

"Ugh," Maxine huffed, throwing Sky a look of mock disgust. "I feel gross just hearing you say it."

Sky smirked, raising her palms. "Hey, I'm just clarifying. This was all your idea."

River was still lounging around like a regal queen, waving a hand to catch our attention again. "Enough with the dramatics, all of you. We have a timeline to sort out."

She turned to Dylan, who was still hovering near Amara. "You, Dylan, and you, Sky, plus me, we'll head to San Francisco. We'll handle the grandfather exodus." River's eyes flicked to me. "We'll make it look urgent, medical. Definitely not a

kidnapping.”

I flushed but nodded. “He’ll believe it,” I assured them, trying to keep my voice steady. “He’s always been concerned about my health.”

Jordan was nodding thoughtfully as some semblance of a plan began to take shape. “Then Hunter and I will hang back here to help Maxine.”

“I should be there,” Addison said firmly at one point, chin tilting up with quiet resolve. “I can help back you up.”

“No,” Hunter cut in, sharp tone leaving no room for argument. “Absolutely not.”

Addison’s eyes narrowed. “Excuse me? Why not?”

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“Uh—you’re human? You don’t have any fighting experience.” Hunter shot back a short list, voice tight. “We don’t even know how many of them will show up. The last thing I want is to send you directly into the line of fire.”

I watched Addison’s lips form a thin line and noted the set of her jaw. But there was an undercurrent of affection between them—worry, more than anything. Addison inhaled, dragging a hand through her hair.

“Hunter, I know you’re trying to protect me,” she said, voice taut. “But this is our coven, our fight, and if something goes wrong, I could—”

“—end up dead.” Hunter finished her sentence, fingers curling into fists at her sides. She took a step closer, dropping her voice so it was almost a plea. “I can’t risk that, Addison. I won’t.”

Even I felt a pang of sympathy for them, and I’d known them for all of ten minutes.

For a beat, the rest of the Leyore women paused, exchanging glances. River discreetly busied herself rearranging the trinkets on a nearby table, while Dylan and Sky whispered about flight times and infiltration details.

Jordan rubbed her temple like she had a headache forming there, and Maxine watched the two women with narrowed eyes—no doubt seeing something the rest of us didn’t.

“Hunter,” Addison said softly, “I’m not going to do something reckless. But I can’t just stand by, either.”

Hunter let out a frustrated sigh, arms dropping to her sides. “If we took the fight to San Francisco, we could pick them off one by one,” she muttered, clearly refusing to let go of the idea of taking the fight to Maxine’s family’s territory. “It’s better to face them on their ground than bring trouble to our city. At least then, there wouldn’t be civilians or—”

“And start a vampire turf war in someone else’s domain?” Jordan interjected sharply from across the room. She cast Hunter a stern look. “That’s the fastest way to get the entirety of the West Coast covens breathing down our necks. You know that.”

Hunter’s lips pressed into a thin, grim line. “It’s still safer than bringing them here.”

Addison touched Hunter’s arm gently, prompting her to meet her gaze. “You’re not going to shake me on this. If we’re doing it here, so be it.” She mustered a small smile. “I promise, I’ll be careful.”

For a second, Hunter looked torn, caught between terror and acceptance.

Finally, she inhaled, shoulders sagging in reluctant surrender. “Fine,” she gritted out, glancing at the rest of the group. “Addison can be the getaway driver or something. But that’s it. No going toe-to-toe with anyone.” She redirected a stern glare at Addison. “Understood?”

Addison rolled her eyes, but a faint smile tugged at her lips. “I’ll take what I can get,” she murmured, linking her arm through Hunter’s. “Thank you for letting me be there, at least.”

“‘Letting you’ is a strong phrase,” Hunter mumbled, but I saw the flash of relief in her eyes, that unspoken worry settling—just a fraction.

Soon, the final roles were sorted. River, Dylan, and Sky would head to San Francisco

to arrange Grandpa's "rescue" under the guise of my medical issues. Jordan and Hunter would stay behind in New York, ready to back Maxine when her family and Gregor arrived.

Addison was delegated as the "getaway driver," Addison herself rolling her eyes dramatically at being relegated to driver status but ultimately shrugging in acceptance.

I would stay with Maxine, presumably to sell the act that I did indeed do what her family had asked of me—thus putting me directly in the line of fire if her family actually managed to sniff out the truth.

As the conversation shifted back to finalizing travel details, Addison leaned over to me with a conspiratorial grin. "Look at her," she whispered, gesturing at Hunter with amusement. "Always so stoic, but she's just a big softie underneath."

I tried not to laugh too loudly, wincing when Hunter's ears perked up in our direction.

"I can see that," I whispered back, returning Addison's smile. "She must really care about you."

Addison's cheeks warmed slightly and she covered a small giggle with her hand. I noticed then the glinting band of silver on her finger—a subtle loop that, come to think of it, matched the one on Hunter's hand—before Addison turned away, attention snapping back to the discussion.

Maxine planted her hands on her hips. "Okay, folks, we have a plan. Let's just... hope it works." Her gaze flicked to me, softening slightly.

"Right," I said, forcing a small grin. "And just so you know, my grandpa's not the easiest man to fool, but if you get dramatic enough about my nonexistent asthma

attack, he won't hesitate."

Jordan gave a wry laugh. "We can be dramatic. It's kind of our specialty."

I turned back to Maxine. She caught my questioning look and raised a brow. "Something on your mind?"

I hesitated, then let out a soft laugh, gesturing broadly at the room. "Just realizing... in some bizarre turn of events, I think you might just be the most normal person here."

After the initial whirlwind, the group naturally fragmented. Addison tugged Hunter aside for a private chat, the two of them disappearing down an echoing corridor. Meanwhile, River linked arms with Jordan and Sky, guiding them toward a sunken seating area, discussing logistics in low voices.

I noticed Maxine step away from the cluster, her gaze flicking toward Dylan and Amara, who lingered nearby. With a nudge of curiosity, I followed.

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Dylan offered a small nod as we approached, though her focus was mostly on Amara, who still looked pale and shaky—like a wave might knock her over if she weren't leaning on Dylan's arm. The flicker of overhead lanterns revealed a faint sheen of sweat on her brow.

"Dylan," Maxine began quietly, glancing around to ensure no one else was eavesdropping, "you need to get Amara somewhere safe. Away from all of this."

Amara herself waved to catch our attention and signed something furiously.

"I'm right here." She also spoke aloud, soft but steely. "And that's the plan. I'll be staying with Ursula until this whole thing blows over."

"Right, right. Sorry about that." Maxine's lips curved in a rueful smile. "But that's good. The last thing we need is Gregor or my family getting any ideas about..." She trailed off, not wanting to say vulnerabilities outright.

Instead, she touched Dylan's arm gently. "Just keep her safe, okay?"

Maxine had explained Amara's predicament to me earlier, whispering over my shoulder when I'd noticed the sickly-looking woman. And sure, she looked like death warmed up, but there was a fire in Amara's eyes that told me she was nowhere near as fragile as they thought she was.

Amara rolled her eyes, shifting her weight onto one hip as she studied the two of us.

Then she zeroed in on me with a wry, tired grin. "Leah, was it?" she asked,

enunciating slowly. “Tell me—how the hell do you handle more than five minutes of Maxine at a time?”

I bit back a startled laugh, heat rushing to my cheeks. Beside me, Maxine made a noise of deep, theatrical mortification, throwing an arm across her forehead as though she’d been gravely insulted.

Amara’s brow arched, looking unimpressed by the display.

I shrugged, fighting a smile. “Honestly? I’ve had plenty of practice.”

A chorus of silent chuckles passed through Dylan—her shoulders shaking and the corners of her mouth quirked up in amusement.

Maxine scowled, tossing curls over her shoulder and sticking her nose in the air. “You’re all terrible.”

Once our unlikely group had fully dispersed, I followed Maxine into the small study River had pointed out. The place was tiny and just as cluttered as the rest of River’s home, and an ancient telephone sat collecting dust on the oakwood desk.

Maxine stood with her back to me, one hand braced on the desk, her shoulders hunched and tense.

She had the receiver clutched tightly in her other hand, staring down at it. I could sense her fear in the tight set of her spine, the quick rise and fall of her breath.

“Hey,” I said softly, laying a hand on her shoulder.

She turned, and I caught a glimpse of pure dread on her face before she tried—and failed—to school her features into that calm and collected mask of hers.

“Leah,” she whispered. “I—I thought I could do this, but...” Her voice faltered.

I slipped my arms around her waist, heartstrings plucking at how she trembled ever so slightly under my touch. She exhaled a shaky breath, leaning into me. For a moment, we just stood there, the koi pond’s gentle trickle the only sound breaking the silence.

My heart clenched at the realization of just how terrified she was—terrified of what she was about to do, of the fallout that might erupt from simply calling her parents after all this time.

“You’re not alone.” I pulled back to meet her eyes, laying a hand against her cheek. “This time, whatever happens, we face it together.”

“I’m just... scared.” Her eyes flicked shut, tears pearling at the corners. “And Gregor. He— he’s—”

“Forget about Gregor,” I murmured, pressing my forehead against hers. “We won’t let any of them separate us again. Never again.”

She inhaled slowly, and I captured that breath with a gentle kiss. When we drew apart, Maxine’s eyes were brighter, her posture less rigid. She squared her shoulders, the phone still in her grip.

“All right,” she whispered, casting a quick glance toward the doorway to ensure we were alone. “I can do this.”

I smiled and gave her hand a final squeeze. “You can do this.”

Maxine exhaled one final, trembling breath and dialed the number.

The soft ringing echoed in the hush of River's house, and I pressed myself closer to her side, silently vowing that no matter who answered, no matter what lay ahead, she wasn't going to face it alone.

23

Maxine

“You sure they’re gonna show?” Leah had her back to a crumbling column, grey paint peeling back from the brickwork beneath.

I glanced up from the dusty windowsill I’d been leaning against, my voice echoing down vacant corridors. “They’ll be here.”

In an effort to avoid any prying eyes should this meeting go badly, I had chosen the location carefully. Which was why we were holed up in an abandoned power plant in the Brookfield Waterfront. The space was cavernous and silent, save for the distant drip of water somewhere in the rafters. Grey light filtered through broken panes, illuminating swirling motes of dust.

Outside, the city bustled on in blissful ignorance under a haze of angry rain clouds.

Leah nodded once, but she shifted from foot to foot, betraying her anxiety. I couldn’t blame her. My stomach churned with a similar dread, my body thrumming with tension. We’d set the trap, arranged the bait, and now... all we had left to do was to wait.

Jordan and Hunter were hidden somewhere around the building, keeping watch from the shadows. They were primed to rush in if things went sideways, but for now, it was just Leah and me in the dim, hollow room. The chill in the air seeped through the thin fabric of my clothes, but it was nothing compared to the icy sensation of dread

forming sharp shards in my gut.

“Are you ready for this?” Leah eyed me warily, edging closer.

I forced a wry smile and turned to her. Even in the dingy light, her eyes were warm, the faint lines of worry around her mouth emphasizing how tired she must have been. Still, she radiated a comforting presence, one that made this ruined building we stood in feel a little less foreboding.

“Not really,” I admitted, letting my hand drift to her waist. “But I’ll have to be.”

We lapsed into brief silence. Shadows loomed around us, and the wind outside kicked against a rusted shutter that clanged eerily through the bowels of the abandoned building. Then, through the smudged window, a smear of motion. A car—sleek and black—rolled down the empty parkway, engine too quiet for this part of town.

I felt their presence. I felt this presence. My stomach plummeted.

Leah’s grip on me tightened, her eyes widening as she caught the motion outside, the faint scuff of tires on gravel. I reached into my pocket for my phone, sending out a signal to Jordan and Hunter. “This is it.”

After a quick, frantic kiss, Leah stepped back, swishing up coal dust. I angled my body toward the open doors, shielding Leah as best I could without making it obvious. The less attention on her, the better.

As footsteps echoed ominously in the corridor beyond I clenched my fists, summoning every ounce of courage I could muster, and sent a silent prayer to whatever god watched over the damned that we would all make it out of there alive.

The footsteps drew closer and then, there they were. Thomas, Eve and Therio—my

family. Lithe and poised, impeccably dressed, their eyes gleaming with arrogant certainty. My stomach churned at the sight of them, my mind flashing back to countless nights spent under their scrutiny.

But the dread curdled into outright terror when I spotted the silhouette that followed in their wake: Gregor.

He was as I remembered—tall, blond, ancient beyond reckoning, with a dangerously poised stillness that marked him as one of the most formidable vampires I'd ever encountered. His bloodshot eyes swept the dusty interior, immediately narrowing on me. I heard Leah's inhale catch as he tilted his head, a predatory smile curling at the corners of his mouth.

My father, Thomas, was first to speak, his voice echoing in the eerie silence. "Maxine. Dramatic, as always." He spread his arms like he was welcoming us to a dinner party. "But I see you've managed to stay alive and... in questionable company." His gaze flicked briefly toward Leah, contempt radiating from his eyes.

"Dad," I said, forcing every muscle in my body to remain taut but collected. "Mom." I nodded sharply at Eve, who carried herself with icy grace, lips pursed in obvious disapproval. Therio, my brother—ever the sycophant—gave me a condescending smirk.

Leah was silent at my back, the hush broken only by the distant drip of water and the bang-bang of a loose shutter in the breeze. I could feel her fear, her anger. I lifted my chin, hoping my parents couldn't see the slight tremor in my fingers.

Gregor finally stepped into full view. He paused to breathe in the stale air before speaking, his voice unsettling in its smoothness. "So, the prodigal bride returns." His eyes locked on mine, and I fought the urge to recoil from that piercing, icy blue. "Shall we end this charade?"

The corners of my mouth tightened. “Yes,” I croaked, hating how unsteady I sounded. “Let’s end it. I invited you all here because I’m done running.” I had to force out the last words, each syllable tasting of bile.

My mother lifted her chin in a show of triumph, casting a smug glance at Thomas. Therio rolled his eyes like he was bored already. And Gregor—he simply smiled, that chilling curve of his lips like a slash across his face.

“We have no time for games.” My father eyed me coldly, ringed hands clasped in front of him. “You understand that if we sense you’re tricking us, your little human,” his gaze cut to Leah, “dies first.”

I clenched my jaw, refusing to glance Leah’s way. “No tricks.” I kept my expression neutral. “And as for Leah, she did what you asked and she did it well. You should be thanking her, not threatening her life.”

My mother sniffed with disdain. “Well, after all this time, you’re finally seeing reason. Honestly, Maxine, what a waste of everyone’s time.”

I bristled internally but I let them revel a moment longer, my stomach knotting at their smugness.

Gregor stepped forward until he was alarmingly close, moving like smoke and shadows.

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“My bride, come here,” he purred, raising a hand, beckoning me like a dog. The fine hairs on my neck stood on end, my every instinct screaming danger, danger, danger!

But I forced myself to hold my ground, summoning every flicker of defiance in my blood. “Actually,” I said, voice tightening, “I have a few conditions first.”

My father’s eyes narrowed, but Gregor’s chuckle was soft and low. He enjoyed toying with his food. “Conditions? Do you think you’re in any position to bargain?”

I exhaled sharply, adrenaline surging.

“You might want to listen.” I turned my attention to my family, catching their gaze one by one. “You see, that human you threatened? Her grandfather is no longer within your reach. He’s under Leyore coven protection now.”

My words echoed in the cavernous space, and I felt Leah’s hand at my back. From the corner of my eye, I saw my mother’s face contort, and my father’s jaw flex. Good.

Their leverage was gone. If all was going according to plan, Leah’s grandfather would be well on his way to New York by now with Dylan, River, and Sky watching over him.

Gregor’s eyes flickered with annoyance, but I wasn’t done yet.

I stepped away from the shadow he cast, drawing myself up to my full height—which still wasn’t very tall but it was the best I could do. I edged toward my family, fiery

defiance coloring my words. “Through all the years we’ve spent apart, I’ve been keeping tabs on all of you.”

My father’s eyes flashed and my mother stiffened. My brother stared daggers at her side.

“I’ve heard all about your shady dealings, all the creative ways you’ve gone about breaking coven laws. I know that you’ve been scheming to take the San Francisco coven for yourself, edging your way onto the council to take the throne from the current ruler.”

I lifted my hand, counting on my fingers. “Not to mention, you’ve been threatening humans—revealing yourselves without authorization and putting the entire San Francisco coven in jeopardy. And—now this part is quite interesting—a little birdie told me that somebody has been stealing money from the Duvall family vault.”

I shifted to meet my brother’s gaze, eyes boring into Therio’s as his pupils blew wide. “What a coincidence it is that Therio has recently struck up a secret relationship with Linda, the heiress of the Duvall fortune. Rumor has it that Linda is lovestruck, but her secret man is more interested in filling his pockets than entertaining affairs of the heart.”

I tilted my head, flashing a smug little smile. “Have I left anything out?”

My mother opened her mouth but I continued, soaking in the satisfaction of seeing their faces grow paler. “The Leyore coven now knows your secrets too. And if anything happens to me, or to Leah, they’ll be taking it up with your coven directly. I’m sure your precious reputations would be done for, not to mention the punishment that would follow. Banishment, isolation. All of your lovely estates reclaimed. It would be a disaster.”

Silence weighed heavily in the air. My parents exchanged furious glances and Therio shifted on his feet. Then, with a hiss, my father snapped, “You dare—”

“Yes,” I cut in, blood pounding. “Idare.”

Drawing a deep breath, I swept my gaze across my family—my father seething, my mother stiff-lipped, Therio clutching the lapel of his immaculate suit like he could strangle me with the bare force of his glare. Summoning every bit of nerve I possessed, I squared my shoulders.

“So, to be absolutely clear,” I said, letting each word settle in the hushed air, “I’m not coming home. I’m not getting married to this... monster.” My gaze landed on Gregor, the corners of my mouth tightening. “And if you think you can force me, well, Leyore coven is fully prepared to expose every skeleton you’ve so carefully stashed away.”

My father’s nostrils flared. My mother paled noticeably, her fingers fumbling to clench tightly around Therio’s arm. In the brittle hush, even the ancient graffitied walls of the abandoned power plant held their breath.

I could practically taste the fury wafting in the tepid air.

“You would disgrace your own family—” my father began, voice vibrating with rage.

“I’d rather disgrace the lot of you than watch you ruin more lives for your own selfish gain,” I snapped back.

For a heartbeat, my parents exchanged frantic, scandalized looks, realization dawning that they had nowhere to turn. No leverage left. Therio’s lips parted in protest, but his eyes darted to the shadows, sensing the sudden presence of my allies, lurking just out of sight.

“Enough of this,” Gregor hissed abruptly, streaking forward with unnerving speed. His hand clamped onto my wrist in a vice-like grip and I gasped, pain lancing up my arm.

The stormy animosity radiating off him made my stomach knot and I veered backward as he leered in my face. “You may have bested your pathetic little family, child, but you have no power over me. You belong to me. Your Leyore dogs can’t protect you from that.”

Leah let out a strangled cry, half-diving forward to pull me free. My heart hammered in my chest. Gregor was older, stronger, temperamental and unwilling to let me go—just as I feared. But I was ready for this.

I lifted my fingers to my mouth and whistled—a sharp, piercing note that cut through the stale air like a blade.

Everything happened at once. From the far corners of the building, Hunter and Jordan burst into view. In a blur, Hunter tackled Gregor from behind, forcing him to release my wrist. I was wrenched off my feet, then twisted away, dropping to my knees as Jordan swept in. She vaulted clean over me, striking with violent lethality to knock the roaring vamp off-balance.

The abandoned building echoed with the crash of debris as they clashed, ancient strength meeting righteous fury.

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Clutching my throbbing wrist, I rose, adrenaline coursing hot in my veins. My family stood back, eyes wide. They had no intention of diving into this fight, not now that they were outmaneuvered. Meanwhile, Leah scrambled to the side in a cloud of coal dust, searching for cover behind a rusted metal pillar as pandemonium unfolded around us.

Gregor roared, swiping out at the two vampires dancing circles around him, and I rushed forward into the fray. I ducked under one of the furious man's wild swings and lashed out with a kick to his stomach. Jordan took advantage of the opening, landing a hammer-fisted blow that sent Gregor reeling back, and Hunter's follow-up strike caught him across the jaw. He staggered, hissing in rage, and my heart flipped somersaults in my chest.

For a brief, exhilarating moment, it looked like we had him.

But Gregor was older, cunning, and far from beaten. Snarling, he twisted away from our coordinated onslaught. The next instant, he shifted his heel, crouched, and sprang forward, his movement becoming a blur. He was a zigzag of motion, a grey streak past Jordan's fist and Hunter's gnashing teeth. And then he was right in front of me.

Before I could react, he seized my shoulder, whirling me around with a force that had my jaw snapping shut. The breath tore from my lungs as he lifted me high over his head, feet kicking wildly in the air, and flung me straight through one of the broken windows.

Glass splintered around me in a violent spray, the frame's rusted metal shrieking as I barreled through, tumbling down from the second floor. Time seemed to slow and I

saw the world tilt, heard Leah's cry of horror—then my back slammed onto cracked wet pavement, stars exploding behind my eyes.

Numb shock swallowed my senses for half a second, but I forced myself to roll upright, ignoring the blinding ache coursing down my spine. Gregor came crashing out right behind me, boots crunching shards of glass underfoot. His lips pulled back in a savage sneer.

A beat later, Hunter leaped through the blown-out window with Jordan following close behind. They advanced on Gregor once again, and I pushed myself upright, staggering from the pain but refusing to stay down. I fumbled fingers around the back of my head and grimaced when they came back wet and sticky, slicked with blood.

The four of us circled each other on the deserted concrete lot, faint city noise drifting from several blocks away. The stench of dust and rust hung in the air, mingling with the metallic tang of blood that tickled the back of my throat.

Jordan swung a fist and Gregor hissed, swinging a heavy backhand that knocked her arm aside. He seized the opening to lunge at Hunter, and the two met in a brutal clash of blows. My heart froze when Gregor caught her by the throat, lifting her off the ground with effortless strength.

“You worthless bitch,” he snarled, tossing her aside like a discarded rag.

Hunter landed in a heap, gasping for air. I launched myself at Gregor's back to break his focus, but he spun faster than I anticipated, dodging my punch and slamming his elbow into my side. Stars danced across my vision, and I staggered backward on shaky legs.

From the corner of my eye I saw Jordan rush in again—only for Gregor to duck under her strike and twist behind Hunter, who was still struggling to rise. In one swift

motion, he locked an arm around her neck. The breath caught in my throat as he jerked her into a headlock.

Hunter let out a strangled noise of rage, but her arms flailed, pinned at awkward angles at her sides.

“Hunter!” I shouted, panic surging. Gregor’s stance radiated lethal intent and Jordan shot forward with a snarl—but he dodged out of the way, a sickening smile slashed across his face.

I stumbled forward in a final, desperate lunge. He’s going to kill her. He’s going to fucking kill her.

With a vicious crack, Gregor bashed Hunter’s head against a broken piece of concrete, knocking her out cold. Blood trickled from her hairline as she slumped over in his arms. My stomach plummeted—fear and fury clawing at my insides.

Gregor bared his fangs, hunching over Hunter’s prone form, his eyes gleaming with a sadistic triumph. He opened his mouth, pointed teeth poised to tear into her throat.

Then a sudden cacophony blared—tires squealing, the deafening sound of an engine revving at full speed. Gregor jerked upright, mouth agape in preparation for that final, fatal bite. But before he could move, a sleek, battered sedan careened into the lot, headlights blazing, horn blaring a war cry across the waterfront.

Addison. She leaned on the horn again—loud, furious, unstoppable.

Gregor dropped Hunter and tried to leap away, but the front bumper caught him dead-on, sending him hurtling across the pavement in a sprawling arc. The crunch of impact tore through the air, muted by the dull sheen of rain that tapped down on the concrete around us.

The car screeched to a halt, Addison half-hanging out the window with white knuckles on the steering wheel. Her face was ashen but set with fiery resolve and she hollered an obscenestring of insults at the ancient, dazed vamp. “Stay the fuck away from my fiancée, you decrepit cuck!”

Gregor groaned, half-crumpled on the pavement, focusing a furious glare on the unwelcome newcomer. Hunter lay unconscious a few feet away, and Jordan scrambled toward her, checking her pulse. Addison cut the engine with trembling hands.

But in the space of a heartbeat, Gregor was on his feet. A snarl curled his lips, and he moved, centuries of rage fueling his battered body. Blood trickled down his temple, yet his eyes burned, bloodshot and icy and brimming with venom.

That violent glare swept over the scene, landing on me. Then, before I could so much as blink, his gaze darted to Addison, who was hauling herself out of the driver’s seat. Fear spiked through me and my feet moved on their own accord. “Don’t?—”

He lunged, faster than any of us could react. Addison yelped as he yanked her out of the car by the arm, pressing her against the sedan’s battered hood. The car’s metal groaned beneath the force.

“No!” I cried, horror cracking like lightning down my spine. I started forward, but Gregor tightened his grip on Addison, nails digging into her cheek.

Her eyes bulged, terror bright on her face. She gasped, clawing at his hand in vain. “You— bastard,” she spat, but her voice was choked off.

Gregor turned his head, cold satisfaction gleaming in those ancient eyes. Blood smeared across his mouth as he curled his lip.

“You’ve proven quite the nuisance,” he hissed, spitting a trickle of blood from his lips. “All of you. But you, Maxine—” His attention locked on me, sending a chill rattling down my spine. “You will learn obedience or you will watch your friend die.”

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Fear gripped me in a suffocating vise, but I forced myself to speak. “Let her go, Gregor.”

“I’ll let her go,” he purred, voice thick with mock benevolence, “once you fulfill your duty as my bride. You’ve already disgraced your family, but you’re still bound to me.” He tilted Addison’s head back, exposing her neck. “Or I could simply tear out this mortal’s throat.”

Addison made a strangled noise, her eyes darting in panic. Hunter stirred in Jordan’s arms, blinking watery eyes that quickly widened when she took in the scene.

Gregor smiled, a merciless twist of his lips.

“I’ll give you an hour,” he crooned, scraping a fang against Addison’s cheek. Blood welled where the point met skin, and I bit back a scream. “One hour to say your goodbyes. Then you’re going to meet me at Westchester County Airport. You’ll board my jet and we’ll leave for my domain, and you’ll marry me as planned. Or...”

He shifted his hand and pressed his fingers tight around Addison’s throat, making her wheeze, “I’ll send her back in pieces.”

“Maxine, don’t—” Addison croaked, trying to twist free. But Gregor only tightened his hold.

I felt my breathing lock, rage and terror tangling in my gut.

“You know, I think I’m being quite generous with this offer.” Gregor’s predatory grin

widened. “So, when you’re ready, you know where to find me.”

He leaned over, brushing a mockingly intimate kiss against Addison’s temple. Then, with nightmarish speed, he blinked away, reappearing beside a sleek black car parked behind the remnants of the building.

He kept one clawed hand poised against Addison’s throat, daring us to intercept them.

Jordan cursed under her breath and Hunter stirred, hauling herself forward, reaching a feeble hand toward her lover. Her engagement ring gleamed on her finger, one lonely little band reaching out for the other.

We watched, helpless, as Gregor shoved Addison into the passenger seat and climbed in beside her. The engine growled to life and then the car peeled away, tail lights flashing in the gloom of the deserted waterfront.

A single squeal of tires left us enveloped in desolate silence, broken only by the somber patter of heavy rain. Like the sky itself was weeping.

24

Leah

Addison was gone.

I stumbled out of the wrecked building, just in time to watch her disappear—nothing but tail lights in the distance.

The remaining Leyore women were scattered across the rubble-strewn lot. Maxine’s family had fucked off just as quickly as they had arrived, slinking into the shadows

without a backward glance.

Maxine herself was trembling on her feet, fists curling and uncurling at her sides. My heart had damn near exploded when that monster chunked her out the window, and the relief of seeing her on her feet was almost too much to bear.

I rushed over to her, inspected her from top to toe, and tugged her into my arms. Maxine leaned into me, wordlessly coiling her arms around my waist.

Over her shoulder, I glanced at Hunter—standing, or rather trying to stand, near a toppled wall, while Jordan hovered about trying to steady her. The air smelled of soot, blood, and cold dampness that matched the icy dread in my bones.

Hunter's face was a mask of pain and fury. Blood stained her temple and she clutched at her side with trembling fingers. Her eyes blazed, glinting with anguish.

Addison was gone.

I watched Hunter through a sheet of rain, and for a split second those haunted eyes locked onto me. But then Maxine stepped out of my grasp and turned. Her mouth settled in a grim line, and Hunter's eyes slid to her, pupils narrowing to pinpricks.

"You," Hunter snarled. She lunged forward, nearly toppling over. Jordan tried to halt her, but she shoved the redhead off, stumbling a few steps. "This is on you, Maxine."

Maxine blanched, her face twisting with remorse. She opened her mouth to speak, but before any words could form Hunter closed the distance between them, furious tears rimming her red eyes.

"You dragged us into your family drama. You lied and you kept secrets, and now Addison—" Her voice caught on Addison's name. She took a ragged breath, and her

expression contorted with pure grief. “Addison is gone. That monster has her—he has her because of you!”

“Hunter—” Maxine’s voice cracked, her posture faltering. “I’m so—”

“So what. Sorry?!” Hunter spat, cutting her off. “I don’t want your apology, Maxine. I want Addison back!” Her fury radiated outward, fierce enough that Jordan stepped in, arms raised in a cautionary gesture.

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“Hunter,” Jordan hissed, catching the seething vamp before she could stumble to her knees again. “Calm down. This isn’t Maxine’s fault.”

“Not her fault!?” Hunter raged anew, grasping desperately to her anger so she wouldn’t have to feel anything else. Anger was always an easier emotion to handle than grief. “I knew we should have done this in San Francisco. I told you—all of you!”

“Then we’re all to blame,” Jordan murmured, tentatively touching a soothing hand to Hunter’s back. “Maxine did the best she could.”

“I don’t care about that. Addison is gone!” Hunter slapped her hand away, bracing her hands on her knees when her unsteady feet refused to obey. Her accusatory eyes returned to Maxine, brimming with vicious fury.

I edged closer to Maxine, quietly planting myself between her and Hunter and lifting my chin. Hunter could tear straight through me, even in her roughed-up state, but even so, I did my best to shield Maxine from the brunt of her angry gaze.

“It’s going to be okay.” Jordan approached Hunter cautiously, eventually looping an arm over her shoulders. “Addison is going to be okay. We just need a plan.”

I found myself nodding along. We just needed a plan. We needed a plan and then everything would be okay... right? So, what was the plan?

All eyes looked to Maxine and she stared back, folding her arms over her chest. “I—I don’t know. I don’t know what to do.”

A few minutes later Hunter and Jordan were frantically debating our next move. Their voices merged into a muffled roar in my ears as I prowled the edge of the deserted lot, scanning for Maxine. She'd slipped away a moment earlier, so quietly I hadn't noticed her departure.

It was only when I reached for her hand and found empty air that I realized she was gone.

A jolt of alarm shot through me when I finally spotted her near a broken metal fence, moving with quiet purpose toward the shadowy street beyond. She was limping slightly from her earlier injuries, shoulders bowed under a burden of guilt.

"Maxine!" I hissed, trying to keep my voice down. "Where the hell are you going?"

She paused, glancing over her shoulder, eyes widening at the sight of me. We converged at the rusted fence, incessant rain splattering mud around our ankles.

"Where are you going?" I asked again, though I could already guess the answer by the haunted look in her eyes.

"I—" She hesitated, a flicker of conflict crossing her face. "I have to fix this."

I eyed her warily, half-expecting her to bolt like a spooked rabbit. "What are you going to do?"

The rain hammered down around us. Water dripped from Maxine's hair, rivulets streaking down her cheeks. Rain, or tears, or both? I couldn't tell—my own eyes stung with the same mixture of salt and sorrow.

Maxine stood before me, jaw set, her battered body trembling.

“I’m going to give myself up.” She tried to say it firmly, but I could hear the waver beneath the words.

My heart lurched. Anger and dread flared so fiercely I could barely breathe.

“No. No—you can’t do that to me again,” I hissed, stepping closer until our faces were inches apart, the rain plastering my hair against my forehead. “You can’t leave me again!”

Maxine swallowed hard, dropping her gaze. “If I don’t, Gregor will kill Addison. You saw what he did—he’s unstoppable. This is the only way to make him back off, to—”

“No!” My shout cracked in my throat as I seized her shoulders. A fresh wave of raindrops splattered down, trailing icy rivulets along the exposed skin of my arms. “Don’t you dare walk away from me again, Maxine. There has to be another way.”

“I wish there was.” She looked away, tears mingling with the rain on her lashes. “But Gregor’s obsessed. You don’t understand how deep it goes. Ever since my family forced a blood bond on us, he’s been fixated on me. He’ll stay that way until the day he dies.”

I froze, dread wrapping cold fingers around my spine. “Blood bond?”

She nodded, something like shame crossing her features.

“When my parents arranged our marriage, they performed this ritual—mixing our blood with a muttered spell.” Thunder rumbled overhead, matching the anxious thrum in her words. “They said it would bind us so we’d always want each other, no matter what. And if one of us found our real mate—the person whose soul calls to yours—the blood bond would keep the marriage from falling apart. It was meant to

override any actual feelings of love, to forge an artificial attachment.”

A ragged breath escaped her. “That’s why Gregor is hellbent on getting me back. But... the spell—it never worked on me.”

My grip on her shoulders tightened. “Why not?”

Maxine’s lips trembled. She closed her eyes briefly, rain tracing dark paths along her cheeks. “I never understood—until now.”

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She hesitated and I waited, breathing catching in my throat.

Maxine opened her eyes, bright and glossy and brimming with tears. “The blood bond didn’t work because I’d already found my mate. The spell didn’t take hold, because my heart, my everything... it already belonged to someone else.”

I felt my pulse stutter, tears prickling hot in my eyes. “What are you saying?”

“It’s you, Leah,” she whispered, voice barely audible over the thundering rain. “You’re my mate—the one who has my heart. I know it sounds insane, but it’s the only explanation. My parents’ stupid ritual failed because... I was already bound to you.”

Something fragile inside my chest crumbled to dust, the final wall between us caving inward, and I could finally, finally see her. I stared at her, the rain turning both of us into bedraggled specters in the storm. But I could look at her forever.

“Maxine,” I choked out, fresh tears merging with the downpour.

For a moment I couldn’t speak, though a million things came to mind. I loosened my grip on her shoulders, dropping my hands to fist in her jacket, raindrops catching on my lashes. “That’s—God, that’s why he’s so set on getting you back?”

“Yes.” Maxine exhaled shakily. “He can’t understand why the spell didn’t tie me to him, and it’s driving him insane. He thinks I’m his, but I’m not. I never was.”

A bitter laugh escaped me. “You’re insane if you think I’ll just let you go to him. Not

now. Not when I finally—” My voice wobbled, raw with the confession burning to be free.

Maxine’s eyes slid shut, mascara streaking down her cheeks. “I have to, Leah. If that’s the price for saving Addison, for saving everyone—”

“No!” I repeated, desperation turning my voice into a near-sob. My hands lifted to cup her face, forcing her to meet my gaze despite the rain lashing around us. “No. If he won’t relent until the day he drops dead, then we’ll just have to kill him.”

Maxine’s eyes widened. “That’s impossible. He’s ancient, he’s too strong.”

“So what?” I shot back, tears and rain indistinguishable on my cheeks. “We’ll do it together or we’ll die trying.” The vow scorched my tongue, fierce and unyielding. “I’m not letting you hand yourself over. I refuse to live in a world where you vanish from my life all over again.”

A strangled sound escaped her, half-sob, half-laugh. “Why would you go to these extremes for—me?!” She looked heartbroken by the question, like she couldn’t understand the depths of what I felt for her.

“Are you fucking dense?!” I didn’t mean to yell, but the wind was roaring around us and the blood was rushing in my ears and I had to tell her, I had to tell her, I had to tell her. “Because I love you, you idiot!God—how have you not realized that yet?”

For a single heartbeat, everything stopped. The pounding rain paused in the sky, the clouds ceased rushing by overhead, the tears on my cheeks slowed to a crawl. Maxine stared at me, trembling lips parting.

Then she gave a wobbly smile, a crackling laugh. A beautiful sight.

“I love you too.”

Nothing else mattered. Not a single, goddamn thing. I pulled her in, pressing my lips to hers in a desperate, hungry kiss, the cold rain in stark contrast to the blaze in my chest.

Maxine gripped my collar, yanking me closer, and we drowned in each other, oblivious to the torrent of rain whipping down from the sky, and the wind that snatched at our hair, our clothes. I clung to her, welding my body to hers, leaving no sliver of space between us.

Eventually we broke apart, panting, our foreheads steeped together. Every inch of me trembled with adrenaline and raw emotion.

“Okay... Okay. I can’t—I won’t leave you behind again,” Maxine breathed softly, brushing a lock of sopping hair from my forehead. “I swear it.”

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Good.” My voice came out rough, but I soldiered on. “Because if you do, I’ll just come after you. I’ll follow you anywhere. That’s a promise.”

Her sobbing slipped into a broken laugh, and she kissed me again, gentler this time. “That sounds more like a threat than a promise.”

“Semantics,” I muttered, kissing her back. I pressed my lips to her mouth, her cheek, her forehead. I kissed the tears from her lashes and tangled my fingers in her hair. “Now let’s go kill this bastard.”

“Do you see him?” Leah’s shoulder pressed up against mine and she hunched forward to scan the scene.

“No,” I murmured. “But he’s down there somewhere.”

Leah and I were crouched behind a row of rusted barrels near the chain-link fence. Gray clouds skimmed low over the old airport hangar and tension churned in my stomach. Wind whispered across the cracked pavement, stirring loose debris that skittered against the corrugated walls.

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The tarmac looked all but deserted—save for the sleek private jet, silver and glossy in the rain.

My lips still tingled where Leah had kissed me, her confession a constant echo in the back of my mind. I love you-I love you-I love you. The warmth of that moment lingered like a soft ache in my chest, but there was no time to revel in it just yet.

We had a fiancé to take down first. It was the only way we'd ever be free.

Leah inhaled sharply, her voice barely audible over the rustling wind. "This feels like a trap."

"Because it is," I murmured. My gaze flicked between the private jet and the vacant hangar. "Stay low. I'm going to take a closer look, see if I can find where he's keeping Addison."

Leah's brow furrowed but eventually she nodded, gripping my arm and squeezing briefly. "Be careful."

I offered a slight, reassuring smile before slipping into the shadows. Rain patted my hair flat as I crept along the fence line, keeping to the blind spots I'd observed from a distance.

Eventually the hangar loomed before me, a hulking skeleton of metal beams and corrugated walls that rattled in the gusty wind. With my heart in my throat, I slipped inside through a groaning side door, testing the air for Gregor's scent.

My senses prickled and my nose wrinkled as I tasted the staleness of the air, the faint tang of old engine oil, and something else—chemical, almost sweet.

A cold knot tightened in my stomach as I pressed on, trying not to let my footsteps echo in the vast, vacant space. The ceiling soared overhead, rusted girders forming a lattice against the grey sky beyond grimy skylights.

I rounded a stack of abandoned crates, my pulse thudding in my ears and—stopped dead in my tracks.

There, in the back, I saw rows upon rows of perfectly dressed figures, all standing at rigid attention beneath the sparse light that filtered through the dusty windows. My breath caught in my throat. Wax minions.

For a split second fear paralyzed me, and I nearly let a scream slip past my lips. But the line of silent bodies remained inanimate—unnerving, vacant smiles stretched across lifeless faces.

They didn't move. Didn't register my presence. No breath or blinking eyes, just blank stares directed at nothing. After a beat, I forced myself to exhale. They were... puppets, empty vessels without Gregor around to direct them.

I knew that. Back when I had first been promised to Gregor, I had done some digging into his rare vampiric power, the so-called “puppet-master” ability that let him breathe false life into these sculptures. His own wax model army—he'd carved them all himself.

Without my fiancé's influence they weren't a threat. But Gregor was around here somewhere, waiting to snatch me up, and these dapper dolls were his trump card. He could unleash them at any moment.

Not if you torch them first.

My heart pounded, adrenaline spiking. A reckless, range-fueled idea began to take shape in my head.

Steeling myself, I slunk through the rows of statues, refusing to look too closely into any of those empty, smiling faces. The deeper I ventured, the more uneasy I felt, the back of my neck burning like countless blank eyes were tracking my every move.

I spotted a few fuel canisters stacked near what must have been a maintenance area. Perfect. I wedged one canister free, grimacing at the weight. My pulse throbbed in my temples as I carried it back through the wax forms.

Twisting off the cap, I started dousing the line of minions, flinching at the strong reek of jet fuel. I covered row after row, keeping my eyes low as I stood nose-to-nose with those eerie blank figures.

The next step, however, was harder. A surge of panic slashed through me. I had no lighter, no matches—and we were inside a hangar with minimal electricity. Maybe a stray spark? Short-circuit something?—

Footsteps. My chest clenched.

“Hello, bride. Are you ready to come home?”

My heart lurched, dread rushing hot through my veins.

Gregor materialized from behind the crates, posture poised like a cat preparing to pounce. With his sleek black suit and his slicked back hair, he looked every bit the formidable villain. Even the stormy gloom couldn't hide the ominous glint in his bloodshot eyes.

I forced myself to stand tall, clutching the fuel canister in my arms. “You just love theatrics, don’t you, Gregor,” I spat, letting a sneer slip into my tone. “Trying to show off?”

A thin smile curled his lips. “Some might call it showmanship. But you...” He reached out, caressing the air. “You need a lesson in submission, my dear.”

I recoiled, every cell screaming at me to tear him apart. Leah was outside, hidden—safe. My family was nowhere in sight this time. There were no bystanders, no distractions. Just Gregor and me.

And it was about time we ended things.

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“You’re not taking me anywhere.” I squared my shoulders, pinning my focus on the monster in front of me. “And I’ll never be your bride.”

He chuckled softly, a sound that slithered under my skin. “Bravery doesn’t suit you. Though I confess, your defiance is—”

I didn’t let him finish.

In one swift motion, I hurled the fuel canister at his head. It shot through the air and caught him square in the face with a resounding crunch. Liquid splashed his immaculate suit, droplets flecking his oiled hair.

Gregor staggered, a grunt of surprise escaping him. Then his expression turned stormy, rage and wounded pride carving deep lines across his pale features.

I hardly had time to brace before he lunged at me, faster than I could track. His hands found my collar, wrenching me forward. I jerked away, but his grip on my jacket was ironclad.

“You insolent wretch,” he snarled, voice booming in the skeletal hangar. Fuel dripped from his hair, staining the glossy fabric of his suit. He jerked his head back, before hauling me forward, colliding our foreheads with a bone-rattling thud.

I hissed, ignoring the sting, and retaliated, driving an elbow into his stomach. His rumbling growl told me I’d connected and I pressed the advantage, hammering at him with all the strikes I had honed in secret—years spent training for this inevitable confrontation, always hiding the full extent of my ability. Now it was time to show it.

With a vicious roar I swung again, swinging out my fist in a diagonal arc. He tried to dodge, but I'd learned from our last fight. My punch glanced off his jawline, sending his teeth snapping. Surprise flashed in his eyes—he hadn't expected me to move so fast, to strike so hard. Good.

I followed up with a kick that rocked him backward, forcing him off balance. The euphoria of landing solid blows was electrifying.

Gregor let out a guttural roar, swinging his arm out in a wild slash. I ducked, weaving beneath the blow and slamming my shoulder into his battered ribs. He hissed at the impact, stumbling backward, and I landed another quick jab to his temple, snapping his head back.

But Gregor wasn't finished yet. In a sudden burst of speed he blinked out of sight, reappearing to my left, and drove a powerful kick into my stomach. Pain exploded through my body and the wind whooshed out of my lungs as my feet left the ground. The next thing I knew, I was hurtling out of the hangar's wide entrance, skin scraping raw as I skidded across the tarmac.

Rain pelted down from above and the world spun before my eyes, slanting out of view. The pavement scraped my elbows, my knees stinging as I slid, coming to a stop with a trembling gasp.

My head spun and my vision blurred. But I had to get up. I refused to let him see me broken. I forced myself onto all fours, wheezing and cursing while hot blood rushed in my ears.

Heavy footsteps approached and I looked up to see Gregor looming over me. He raised his arm, another clawed blow aimed at my head—one that could very well end me if it hit its mark.

My instincts roared and I coiled my body, diving to the side and springing up behind him.

With a feral shriek, I leapt at his back like a wild animal. My legs locked around his waist and I jackhammered an elbow to the side of his head, a blur of wet hair and furious motion.

Gregor groaned and dropped to his knees, one hand bracing on the tarmac. Air hissed between his teeth and I took the opening, landing on my feet and pummeling him with rapid punches, pouring every ounce of pent-up rage into each devastating blow.

Blood slapped the rain-slicked pavement and Gregor coughed, stunned by the relentless assault.

“Y-you—” he managed between thundering blows, blinking against the downpour. He looked almost... mortal for a moment, bleary and beaten under my clenched fists.

But then his lips curled into a sneer, exposing bloody, pointed fangs. I saw his eyes lose focus, and a pulse of unsettling energy coursed through the air, raising the hairs on the back of my neck.

No. Turning my head, I realized too late—I hadn’t yet burned the minions, rows upon rows of those wax model creatures.

I sensed the sickly hum of supernatural energy crackling through the gloom, emanating from Gregor himself. One by one, the figures came to life, perfect, well-dressed wax forms milling at the entrance like marionettes at attention.

A chill stabbed my spine. Gregor’s trump card.

Mouth twisting in grim rage Gregor shoved me back, scrambling to his feet. I

watched in horror as the wax minions poured from the hangar doors, dozens of them, their glassy eyes vacant, dripping with fuel I hadn't managed to ignite. Rain cascaded over their polished suits and dresses, ties and bowler hats, feathers and scarves, their footsteps clacking on the tarmac.

I staggered back, chest heaving. I couldn't fight them all. And Leah...

"Leah! Run," I shouted, frantically scanning the fence line. "Get out of here!"

I spun on my heel, racing to the rusted barrels where I had left her.

But Leah... wasn't there.

Leah

I tried to be patient, I really did.

I crouched behind the row of rusty barrels, my heart pounding so violently I was sure Gregor could hear it from a mile away. Maxine had slipped off to check the hangar, and I had seen the strict warning in her eyes before she left—hang back, stay out of sight, and for the love of god, don't do anything stupid.

Initially, I obeyed—until the minutes dragged on, and I heard nothing but the wind howling across the tarmac.

Worry gnawed at my insides. She was taking too long. What if something happened? The endless horrible possibilities churned my stomach with dread.

And so, I held out until I couldn't anymore. Eventually, frayed nerves jumping like livewires, I muttered a curse, edged out from behind the barrels and inched across the barren runway, scanning the dark silhouette of the hangar.

At first, I saw nothing. Heard nothing. Then a clatteringcrashechoed from inside, and my pulse ticked up a notch. I pressed myself tight to the battered metal side of a crumblingcrate, peering into the yawning mouth of the hangar. Dim light illuminated the interior, just enough for me to see two figures clashing—Maxine and Gregor.

My breath caught at the sight. They flew at each other in a frenzy, trading blows with savagery that made my blood run cold.

I bit my lip, every single one of my senses screaming for me to rush in and help. But the more I watched, the more I realized... Maxine was holding her own. Every move she made was decisive, every strike nearly toppling Gregor to his knees. If I joined them, untrained, mortal, and already shaky with nerves, I'd only hamper her. I'd become a liability.

But there was something else I could do.

If Maxine was battling Gregor here, then Addison was presumably somewhere else—probably on the private jet itself. If I could get Addison out of there, Gregor would lose all leverage. He couldn't threaten Maxine or hold Addison's life against her if Addison was out of his reach.

Steeling nerves that flickered and sparked under my skin, I crept across the hangar entrance, keeping one eye on the two vamps duking it out inside. The runway spread out before me, slick with rain, the overcast sky crowded with angry grey clouds.

Up ahead lay the sleek private jet, stairs lowered—beckoning me on board.

When I was sure the other two hadn't spotted me, far too busy pummeling each other into the ground, I made a break for it. My nerves jittered as I ran, each footstep sending water splashing up my calves. The roar of the wind swallowed my ragged breath.

Reaching the jet, I hesitated at the bottom of the short stairway. The interior lights were on, and a faint shadow flickered inside—someone was definitely in there. Maybe Addison. Or it might be a trap. I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, conjuring Maxine's face.

She was risking her life for a shot at a better future. She was back there right now, brutally beating back a literal demon of her past, so that we could be together in

peace. I had kissed her, told her I loved her, and she had kissed me right back. Our new life had begun right then and there, and now we had to defend it.

My resolve hardened, and suddenly I was stone. I planted my foot on the staircase.

I crept up the stairs, water streaming down my neck, and inched toward the cabin door. The door stood ajar and I slipped inside, wrinkling my nose at the flashy interior. Plush leather seats, glossy wood panels, and sultry overhead lighting. The epitome of wealth and power. I swallowed hard, padding quietly into the cabin.

The door hissed shut behind me, corralling me in an unsettling hush, and my pulse throbbed in my ears. I scanned the corridor leading to the cockpit, then the small galley. No sign of Addison. Setting my jaw, I moved deeper into the cabin, checking each opulent cluster of seats.

A muffled sound somewhere up ahead made me freeze. A brief rustling, like someone shifting or struggling in place. Heart pounding I advanced, mentally going over what little I remembered about handling a hostage situation.

Call out first or keep silent? In the end, I couldn't bear the thought of leaving Addison unnoticed and alone.

"Addison?" I hissed, balling my fists at my sides. "Are you here?"

No immediate reply. My nerves spiked. I tried again, stepping past another set of seats, eyes flicking around for any sign of movement. "Addison?"

Then, a faint noise—a muffledthump. It came from behind a sliding partition in the back of the cabin. Cautiously, I pressedmyself to the wall and peered around the edge. Through the gloom, I glimpsed a small lounge area, complete with a bolted-down table and a plush sofa—and the hunched figure, bound and gagged, wriggling

on the floor.

“Addison, oh my God!” Addison glanced up at my whisper-scream, wide-eyed and frantic as I dropped to my knees beside her.

I fumbled with the ropes biting into her wrists. They were secured with infuriating thoroughness, the gag cutting into the corners of her mouth. She winced when I tugged at her bonds but tried to help by twisting her shoulders.

“Just, hang on a minute...” I muttered, fingers shaking as I fumbled with the cords. “Come on.”

The bonds at her wrists and ankles refused to budge but I managed to loosen the gag at her mouth. Addison sucked in a breath, hissing through clenched teeth. “You’ve got to find something to cut it with.”

“Okay, right. Something sharp then.” I clambered to my feet, dancing on my toes, glancing around the dim cabin for anything to cut through the ropes.

The jet’s interior lighting flickered faintly, revealing a cramped kitchenette nestled behind a half wall. Nothing more than a slim pantry, but hopefully enough to find something sharper than my teeth.

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The overhead compartments rattled as I rifled through them, muttering curses under my breath. Nothing but napkins, wine glasses, and a half-empty tin of questionable coffee grounds. And a single butter knife.

“Seriously?” I hissed, strangling the air and snatching up the knife. But it was better than nothing.

I returned to Addison. She eyed the blunt utensil with an exasperated raise of her brow. “That’s all we have?”

“Apparently,” I muttered, sinking back to my knees. “At least it’s, uh... a knife. Sort of.”

Addison snorted. “Sure. Just do your best, MacGyver.”

I slipped the rounded tip of the knife under the rope, sawing at the fibers with clumsy fingers. Addison let out a hiss of pain when the cord pressed too tightly against her skin.

“Sorry,” I whispered, trying to be gentler. I met her eyes, shaken by her startling calm considering the dire situation. “Are you—are you all right?”

“Peachy,” Addison muttered, watching me work. “Believe it or not, I have some experience being abducted by supernatural beings. This is... maybe the third time now? So, yeah. I’m not freaking out as much as I probably should be.”

I paused, staring at her. “Third time?”

She nodded with a wry twist of her mouth. “Yeah, I keep meaning to get a punch card or something. One more kidnapping and I get a free latte, you know?”

A short, tense laugh escaped me and I resumed my sawing. “I guess it comes with the territory, dating a vampire and all.”

“Pretty much. You’ll get used to it.” Addison shrugged as well as she could, holding her forearms firm while I worked. “Don’t beat yourself up about this one. We all knew Gregor was bad news, and I’m the one who insisted on coming along for the stand-off.”

I grimaced, picking up speed as the thick ropes around her wrists began to fray.

“Is...” her gaze flicked up to me and her voice cracked slightly. “Is Hunter okay?”

With a sudden jolt, the ropes snapped in two, the knife nearly jerking out of my hand. Addison rubbed at her wrists while I bit my lip and got to work on the ties at her ankles.

I swallowed, my voice coming out steadier than I felt. “Last I saw, we ditched her with Jordan at that power plant. She was...on her feet, but furious. At all of us. I thought she was going to rip Maxine’s head off.”

Addison let out a choked chuckle. “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

At last, the final fibers snapped with a softtwang, and Addison stretched out her legs with a groan. Angry red welts had formed where the rope bit into her skin. I slipped a hand under her elbow and helped her stand.

She wobbled on her feet, then released a shaky breath and shook out her wrists, the rope burns shining raw and red. “Thanks.” She offered me a lopsided smile. “And

hey, not bad for your first hair-brained rescue mission.”

“I think I’m getting the hang of it,” I murmured, attempting a smile to hide my own nerves. My heart pounded a frantic tattoo and I glanced toward the exit. “We need to get off this jet.”

“Yeah, let’s get out of here.” Addison let out a breathy laugh. She raised her hand, palm up. “Go team human girlfriends! Well, fiancée in my case, but you get it.”

I hesitated only a second before high-fiving her. One small, absurd moment of camaraderie in the insane situation.

I caught the glint of that ring on her finger and scratched at the nape of my neck. “Oh, congratulations by the way—for the engagement. Hunter looks like a handful but I’m glad you guys are happy.”

“Aww,” Addison touched her chest in a mock-dramatic gesture. “Thank you!”

I cracked a genuine smile at the absurdity of the conversation, but reality crashed down in the next heartbeat when I caught a blur of motion outside the small windows.

Rain sheeted across the tarmac, and... my stomach dropped.

Wax model minions were pouring out of the hangar, dozens of them, disjointed limbs flapping wildly, scuttling through the storm. A lone figure sprinted away from them, heading in the direction of the rusted barrels near the fence line. Maxine.

“Fuck. Addison, we have to go—now.”

But Addison didn’t answer. She was suddenly dead silent at my side and tugging at the sleeve of my shirt, her eyes wide with fresh terror. Slowly, with creeping dread

prickling at my skin, I followed her line of sight.

Standing near the cockpit door was a grey figure—eerily still, decked out in a dark suit and a velvet bowler hat. The overhead lights glimmered on waxy skin, vacant eyes empty and cold.

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My pulse hammered in my throat and I reached for Addison's hand. The creature stood between us and the exit, silent and still and unfathomably menacing under the blinking cabin lights.

Addison inhaled quietly. "Got another butter knife, by chance?"

My mouth went dry, terror rattling down my spine as the wax minion's head cocked to the side in unnatural, puppet-like motion. "Unfortunately, I think I'm fresh out of kitchenware."

Addison swallowed, unblinking as the creature took a stilted step toward us. "That's a shame."

I backed up a step, and then another, and Addison followed suit.

"We should..." I sucked in a breath, swallowing my panic as the creature crept toward us. "We should—"

Then it moved, lurching into motion, tearing toward us with a piercing mechanical shriek that rattled through the cabin like a death knell.

"Run. Fucking-run!" I whirled Addison around and the two of us took off, scrambling through the narrow cabin to... Where? That thing was between us and the only exit.

There was nowhere to go.

Maxine

“Leah? Leah?!” I spun in circles, scanning the airstrip. Rain lashed my face and my breath came out ragged, fear clawing at my gut. “Leah, where are you?!”

The wind snatched the words from my lips and my gaze darted across the slick tarmac. The gloom of storm clouds pressed low, washing the scene in shades of grey. Panic battered at my chest. Leah was missing, and if Gregor or his wax puppets somehow got hold of her...

My stomach lurched at the thought. Then, in the corner of my eye, I spotted movement near the private jet parked across the runway. My breath caught. A stream of those wax model minions were scaling the short stairway, gliding aboard the plane, an undulating hoard of bodies.

Why would they be heading there?

Realization struck me like a lightning bolt. If the wax puppets were swarming inside the jet, that had to be where she was. Panic and fury surged in equal measure. I tipped my head back, straining to catch even a glimpse. And then I saw her, and Addison—a flash of their silhouettes against one of the cabin windows, lit by the faint glow inside.

I bolted across the rain-swept tarmac. My mind reeled with images of them pinned down by lifeless eyes and plastic smiles. Not happening.

Gregor had been seemingly swallowed in the swarm but I kept my head swiveling, on the lookout for any sign of those bloodshot eyes. A group of four wax minions noticed me, their movements stiff as they lurched off the stairs to intercept. Fine.

I snarled through clenched teeth, adrenaline spiking. For an instant, fear prickled at my skin, but I forced it aside. I've come too far to lose now.

I barreled into the first minion, shoulder-checking it so hard its waxy torso folded over. The second lunged for me, but I dodged and slammed a kick into its side, sending it sprawling with a wet smack. My arms ached, muscles exhausted from the earlier tussle, but sheer desperation kept me moving.

The third and fourth advanced in tandem, arms outstretched like ghoulish dolls. A growl tore from my throat as I hammered one with a hook punch, the other with a swift elbow strike that crumpled its waxen face. They went down, limbs contorting in unnatural angles, but I didn't wait to make sure they were down for good.

I surged forward, weaving among the wax minions that closed ranks on the plane's narrow stairway. But the swarm kept coming. Wax arms, stiff and unnerving, reached for me. I lashed out, elbowing one across the face.

Another seized my sleeve and I snarled, ripping free with a burst of speed. The battered steps became slick with rain and waxy sludge, and my boots nearly slipped out from under me.

My breath hitched as two more grappled me from behind, fingers clutching at my hair, snagging my ankles and clothes. I snarled, desperation firing my limbs, but they dragged me down a step, then two more. A roar of frustration tore from my throat and I forced my weight forward, ignoring the tearing pain in my scalp where a minion yanked a handful of my hair.

My boot collided with one minion's chest and it folded backward, limbs tangling with another grasping creature. Freeing myself, I lunged higher, almost at the entrance.

But there was a commotion up ahead.

All of a sudden the surge of wax models swelled down the stairs, some forced right over the edge of the staircase as something battered them from above. One toppled over the metal railing with a wet smack, another was flung through the air, crushing into the tarmac below.

I stumbled back, losing my footing, and my body tumbled down the rain-slick steps, hitting the tarmac with a bruising thud. I pressed a hand to my aching ribs, then lifted my gaze. Through the dim light I saw a figure standing in the doorway of the jet cabin.

My jaw fell open. “Jordan?”

She wore that signature smile, lips curled up in smug triumph. Sky and Hunter stepped into view behind her, supporting Addison, who had a few nasty scratches marring her face and arms but looked otherwise alive. Addison’s gaze swept the carnage, then locked on me with a tight-lipped smile of relief.

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And lastly—Leah. My pulse hammered. Despite the rain, wax, and exhaustion painting every inch of her, she lit up the moment our eyes met. Her hair was tangled and pasted to her neck and her hand shook when she waved to me, but she was alive.

“How—” My voice stuttered out when the wax minions on the tarmac slithered to their feet and I braced my fists in the air. But there was movement at my elbow, a tall lanky figure in a red coat.

“Of course you’d pull a stupid stunt like this.” To my left, River stepped up beside me, flexing glinting talons as she eyed the wax creatures. “It’s a good thing we got here in time. You think Jordan wouldn’t have guessed exactly where you were going when you up and disappeared?”

“Yeah, enough with the self sacrifice. You’re getting predictable, Maxine.” To my right, Dylan appeared like the grim reaper, decked out in black and unblinking as she surveyed the collection of wax models slowly regaining their footing.

“All right! You can bully me later.” I glanced around. The wax minions, battered but not destroyed, were struggling upright, limbs creaking as they rose once more. “Now help me kick some ass.”

On the staircase Jordan cracked a smile, though her eyes narrowed as the minions collectively turned their attention toward me. Or, more accurately, toward something behind me.

I turned and felt a streak of grim satisfaction upon seeing the state of my fiancé.

Gregor looked haggard, blood staining his bared teeth. His once-pristine suit hung in ragged, fuel-stained tatters, rain slicking his hair tight against his skull. He leveled a venomous stare at me, and I felt a small thrill of triumph at the sight of his blood. He was not invincible.

Across the water-lashed runway the wax minions tottered—misshapen, but continuing to rise at their master's summons.

River cast a glance over the ragged man, snorting a quiet chuckle as she muttered in my ear, "Took you long enough to show your true strength. It's about goddamn time."

There was a knowing glint that lit her dark eyes, and I realized with a start that she must've foreseen this moment.

She'd known I would finally stop hiding what I was truly capable of.

All those early years in a gilded cage, living under my family's thumb, had shaped me. Even after I had escaped them, that small voice in the back of my mind had stuck around. It told me I had limits, that I had to make myself small.

It told me that I was incapable and no matter how hard I tried, I would never be strong enough.

Even when facing my family and my bloodthirsty fiancé back at the powerplant, the voice had remained. It told me I would never escape them, that it was futile trying. That if I were to unleash myself, it would still not be enough.

Now, that voice was silent as the grave. The notion that I had to be what they expected me to be—weak and delicate—was dead in the water, crushed under my heel. Now, there was only stark, crystal clarity. And a roaring fire in my chest that

told me I was capable of more than any of them could ever comprehend.

I clenched my fists, locking eyes with my fiancé who slowly stalked toward us. “Yeah well, better late than never.”

“Then let’s get this over with,” Jordan said grimly, stepping up behind me.

Hunter limped beside her, while Addison hung back, sheltering on the wax-splattered staircase with Leah. Dylan was a silent specter at my elbow, her gaze locked on the incoming tide of nightmares.

A fresh wave of them poured from the hangar entrance, marching across the tarmac with that same eerie synchronization.

“Enough,” Gregor snarled, yanking my focus back. His fangs bared in a cruel sneer. “Your coven can’t save you from me. Nor can they keep you from your duties, wife.”

I bristled, stepping forward. “I already told you, I am not your wife. And I never will be.”

At that, Gregor raised a hand, fisted it, and the wax model minions jerked into motion, heading straight for us. Gregor himself lunged with a guttural roar, but I met him halfway, slamming into him so hard he staggered.

Around us, chaos erupted as the Leyore women clashed with the wax minions in a frenzy of fists, fangs, and curses. Through the tempest of rain and violence, I caught glimpses of Dylan, half-transformed, knocking two minions’ heads together, River slashing with glinting talons, Jordan tackling a horde of mannequins single-handedly, shifting into her true form to tear them apart.

Gregor circled back, hissing, and lashed out at me with lightning speed. My forearm

ached as I blocked his blow but I shoved him back, pounding a fist into his ribs with enough force to send him skidding across the soaked tarmac.

He spat blood, fury etching new lines across his face.

“You’re nothing!” he snarled, lunging again. My claws snapped out and I slashed as his own sharp talons grazed my jaw. With the vampire man momentarily off balance, I twisted around and drove my elbow into his sternum. He stumbled, breath ragged.

From the corner of my eye I caught Sky and Jordan, back-to-back and locked in battle against a trio of wax minions. The wax models buckled under their assault, but more were rising behind them.

I had to end this.

Summoning every shred of power left in my battered body, I rushed Gregor, fangs flashing. He tried to dodge but I was faster this time, hooking my leg behind his knee and forcing him down.

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He landed on his back with a wet smack, and I wasted no time straddling him, unleashing blow after blow, raining my fists down as he writhed and spat. Pain thrummed through my knuckles, but I refused to stop.

I drew my claws, slashing and raking at his chest, his face—releasing every swallowed scream I had clamped down since the moment I'd been promised to him.

Blood spattered across the drenched pavement, Gregor's eyes glazing over with shock. His lips pulled back in a final, hateful sneer. "You... worthless... child," he choked, spitting scarlet in my direction, a final pathetic insult.

My chest heaved, rain and blood mixing in a bitter cocktail on my tongue. "That's quite enough out of you," I hissed, lifting my clenched fists in tandem. With a vicious crack, I landed the final blow.

Gregor's body went limp, and a split second later, so did his minions.

The moment his breath left him a shudder rippled through the swarm of wax models. In eerie unison, they collapsed, limbs folding in on themselves. The hush that followed was deafening, the only sound the relentless rain and my ragged breathing.

I staggered to my feet, clenching and unclenching my fists, claws digging into my palms, reeling as one single thought rang through my head. He's gone. He's finally, finally gone.

The others stood among a sea of fallen wax bodies, drenched and shaking from exertion. Addison sprinted over to Hunter, catching her in her arms as she stumbled

and staggered, kicking at the oozing wax mounds with residual rage.

The others surveyed the mess, shifting back into their regular bodies and tattered clothing, exhaling in relief.

“Maxine!”

I looked up to see Leah running toward me.

She locked eyes with me through the rain and I reached out, arms trembling. She flung herself into my embrace and I pulled her tight, oblivious to the bruises and the aches. Her body was so warm, so alive.

“You’re okay,” she breathed, voice cracking. Her tears mingled with the downpour on her cheeks.

I cupped her face, my own eyes stinging.

And then I crushed my mouth to hers, a kiss of victory, of survival, of a promise that we’d never be separated again. The storm roared on, but nothing mattered in that moment. Nothing except the two of us.

Alive. Together. And at long last, free.

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Leah

“I get that you came to our rescue or whatever, but do you all really have to be here for this?” I narrowed my eyes at the assembled Leyore women, all of them crowding the grand entrance of what Maxine had explained was their coven’s (very fancy)

headquarters.

Jordan leaned against the massive pillar at the entrance, arms crossed over her chest, smirking down at me. “Considering you two ran off on your own and then needed all of us to help you, you know, not die, I’d say yeah, we’ve earned the right to be here for this.”

“Exactly,” Addison piped up, slinging an arm over Hunter’s shoulders and wiggling her brows at me. “Besides, we’re emotionally invested now.”

They had all apparently decided that my business was their business and so, while Maxine and I waited for my grandfather to arrive, the rest of them clustered around us, eager to witness my atrocious acting skills.

Our story was that I’d had a terrible asthma attack and my dear friend Maxine, fearing for my health, had called on her wealthy friends to summon my grandfather to the city. Once he arrived and found me perfectly fine, Maxine would pretend to have overreacted and I would pretend to be my usual disgruntled self.

Sky, River, and Dylan had pulled off the first part of the plan without a hitch. Apparently it had taken very little convincing to get my grandfather on a plane to see me once they explained the “dire situation”.

They had left him in Amara’s care to come and help with the final fight, though I had no idea how that interaction must have gone. Once we were cleaned up, regrouped, and no longer shaking with adrenaline or covered in waxy goop, we all converged in the grand hall of the Leyore coven headquarters, waiting for Amara to arrive with my grandfather.

I rolled my eyes at the other women, casting a quick glance at Maxine who stood at my side. She was looking a little tense, so I took her hand and wove my fingers with

hers. “You all right?”

“Yeah.” She hiked her shoulders up and dropped them again, a nervous little laugh on her lips. “It’s just... I haven’t seen your grandfather in years, what if he doesn’t like me anymore?”

“Oh please.” I nudged her with my elbow, squeezing her hand in mine. “He’s never stopped talking about you and how fucking great you were. God, it was actually awful.”

That earned me a sheepish smile from Maxine, complete with pointed canines—which reminds me.

“As for the rest of you.” I lifted my head to the other Leyore women, barring Addison who was the only one of them without fangs. “No sharp teeth, no claws, and no... transformations—orwhatever the fuck it was that you did out there on the airstrip. My grandpa doesn’t need to see that.”

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I was still reeling from what I had witnessed out there in the rain. I knew they were vampires, and I had thought that meant pointed fangs, pale skin, and a penchant for drinking fresh blood. What I hadn't expected was their alternate forms—giant, sinewy creatures with massive bat wings, all folding neatly back into their skin once the battle was over.

My fingers still trembled slightly at the memory, and Maxine noticed. She lifted my hand to her chest and pressed it there. "We only shift when it's absolutely necessary. Trust me, I've got zero intention of scaring your grandfather into an early grave."

"Well... good." I swallowed and forced a small, teasing smile. "Because I'm honestly not sure how I'd explain that all my new friends are giant bat creatures."

"The anatomy is actually super interesting!" Addison chimed in, nudging at her fiancée. "Hunter lets me run tests on her sometimes, and it's fascinating. Even their bone density changes when they shift."

"I am naught but a lab rat to you," Hunter lamented, touching an overly dramatic hand to her forehead.

I had to snort at the visual—Addison taking meticulous notes while Hunter lay sprawled in some monstrous, half-transformed state. But the laughter died quickly in my throat and a pang of guilt twisted inside me.

I hated lying to my grandfather, but I didn't want him seeing anything that would terrify him. It was hard enough accepting the existence of vampires myself, back when Maxine's family had turned up on my doorstep. They had scared the shit out of

me, and I was still getting used to the idea of the supernatural world. I didn't want that for him.

Maxine noticed my change in expression and she sighed. "I'm sorry. I know it's not easy, having to keep secrets like this."

"It's all right." I stepped closer, leaning into her shoulder and breathing in her scent. "It's for the best, I know that. What he doesn't know can't hurt him."

"By the way," Dylan interrupted—a rarity in her case, I'd come to learn. "Maxine, you didn't shift throughout that entire ordeal with Gregor. Why?"

Maxine glanced up, stark clarity in her eyes. "I didn't need to. I was strong enough to beat him without it."

"Yeah, about that." Jordan folded her arms, raising a brow. "Exactly how long have you been holding out on us? Since when have you been able to dish out a beating like that?"

Maxine shrugged, color in her cheeks. "I've been, uh... training on the side. For a long time now. Believe me, I didn't know I had it in me either."

Sky shook her head, mildly baffled. "You pulled all of that off without a monstrous shift, that takes some serious skill."

Dylan looked like she had something to say but couldn't quite force the words out.

Maxine noticed immediately and batted her eyes at the other vamp. "Yes, Dylan?"

Dylan bristled, glancing away with a scowl. But then she sighed, hung her head, and mumbled, "Just... Show me your routine sometime? I'd like to see how you're

building up that kind of power.”

That had Maxine grinning gleefully, with all the scheming satisfaction of the Cheshire Cat. “Are you saying you want my assistance? Dylan, I’m flattered.”

The other vamp rolled her eyes, throwing up her palms like she was done with the conversation.

River hovered a little apart from the rest, sporting an unmistakably smug grin. “I’ve known you could do it for a while,” she said. “Just needed to believe in yourself or whatever. Now look at you—taking down an ancient vampire with your bare hands.”

She clasped her own hands under her chin like a proud school teacher whose student had finally aced a test.

A chorus of light chuckles rippled around the group and Maxine’s cheeks flushed even deeper, though she tried to hide it by glancing down at my hand entwined with hers. I brushed my thumb against her knuckles, pride swelling in my chest.

We were interrupted just then by the rumble of an engine and a sleek silver convertible pulling up outside. I glanced at Maxine, heart leaping into my throat, before mustering up the nerve to step outside and greet my grandfather.

The rain had eased into a faint drizzle and I approached the sidewalk, where the convertible had just ground to a halt at the curb. The car door opened and a familiar old man climbed out, clad in an ancient hand-knitted sweater, patched elbows and all.

As soon as his gaze found me my grandfather hurried forward, faster than I’d ever seen him move.

“Leah!” Before I could get a word in, he wrapped me in a tight embrace, hands

patting my back as though checking for damage. “Are you all right, dear? I came as soon as I heard!”

I cringed inwardly, guilt biting at my insides. “I’m fine, Grandpa,” I assured him, though my tone came out more squeaky than sorry. “Really, I just—it was more of a sniffle. We, uh, might’ve overreacted a little bit.”

Over his shoulder, I spotted Amara stepping out of the vehicle. My eyes widened a fraction. She looked much better than the last time I’d seen her. She looked sturdier, stronger, though somehow... different.

An odd hush fell over the gathered Leyore women behind me, and then I understood.

I sensed them all quietly absorbing the realization that Amara was now a fully-turned vampire. I could practically feel their curiosity crackling in the air. Questioning eyes flickered to Dylan, but no one said a word in front of my grandfather.

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The old man pulled back. “Sniffles?” he echoed, sounding bewildered. “You were practically on death’s door the way they made it sound.”

At that, Maxine sheepishly butted in, trailing up behind me. “I, uh—sorry, sir. We kind of panicked.”

I stepped aside while my grandfather studied Maxine for a moment, wrinkled frown easing into sudden recognition. “Maxine, is that you? My, you’re all grown up now!”

He glanced back at me. “But why the bloody hell did you send your new friends to fetch me over a case of the sniffles?”

I shrugged, playing innocent. “Better safe than sorry?”

“You could have just said that you missed your old grandpa,” he huffed, ruffling a hand in my hair. “As long as you’re truly all right, kid. Either way, it’s good to see you.”

The other women all tittered at the embarrassing display of affection and I scowled in their direction. My grandfather followed my gaze, eyes flickering between the odd collection of friends I’d recently acquired.

“I must say, I’m quite impressed with your friends over there.” He nodded his head toward River, Sky, and Dylan. “They were so polite—and quite well off, I presume—they paid for my ticket and everything! How did you land yourself with such a fine crowd?”

“She showed off her algae collection and they were all immediately smitten.” Maxine poked at my ribs with a sly smile and I glowered back at her.

“She does love her algae.” My grandfather nodded solemnly like that stupid fucking story made perfect sense. “Has she told you about her work? Leah is a bona fide marine biologist, best in the business if you ask me.”

“Grandpa,” I groaned, steering the old man into the building, mortified when the others cracked up laughing. “Let’s just get you inside, okay?”

Maxine met my eyes over his shoulder, smiling from ear to ear, and it hit me then that we’d made it. After everything that happened between us, after all the lies and betrayals and broken promises, we’d made it.

The monsters were gone and the running was over, and something as simple as reintroducing her to my grandfather—and not dying of pure embarrassment in the process—was the only immediate worry we had between us.

We stood on the precipice of the rest of our lives, and now it was up to us—the two of us, and no one else—to decide what to do from there.

29

Maxine

Leah’s grandfather was a goddamn delight and all the Leyore women seemed to agree.

Even darling Dylan—who kept everyone at arm’s length—was grinning as the old man spun story after story about his life. He’d only been in the grand hall for fifteen minutes, but already, he’d charmed the entire crew.

He was currently chatting with Amara, engaged in a lively conversation via eccentric hand signals and expressions. I recognized the distinct, looping gestures of sign language, and my brows lifted in surprise.

“Where’d he learn that?” I nudged Leah with my elbow, directing my chin at the two new besties, chatting up a storm like they hadn't just met that morning.

Leah laughed, shaking her head. “He had this friend from back in his army days—apparently the guy lost his hearing from some accident in the field. Grandpa learned sign language so they could still swap old anecdotes. I think he’s happy for the chance to flex his skills.”

“Of course.” I giggled, watching the exchange. Though I only understood a few sporadic signs—my knowledge paled compared to Dylan’s or River’s—it was clear they already had their own inside jokes, glancing between the rest of the group and tittering amongst themselves.

Amara was looking better. Well, actually, she was looking like a tried and true vampire. She was grinning, moving her hands through quick motions while she talked, occasionally batting off a hovering Dylan who buzzed around her like a particularly faithful fly.

She’d found her feet in this new life faster than I could have anticipated, and she and Dylan slotted together like a lock and key.

I watched Amara shoot her wife a sidelong look, fingers wiggling through quick signals, and caught the quick quips between them. “Dylan, stop hovering.”

Dylan let out a spluttered exclamation, touching fingers to her eyes as she signed out the words. “I’m not hovering!”

“Yes, you are, go bother Maxine.”

Dylan’s gaze flicked over to me and I offered a snide little wave in response, chuckling when her eyes rolled like they did ten times a day. Amara’s grin was playful, her next sign too fast for me to catch entirely, but I caught the vague mention of “helicopter wife” and Dylan’s delightfully exasperated expression.

Eventually my attention wandered to the side, where Hunter perched, half-turned away from the group. The look she gave me was mildly barbed, arms folded across her chest. Oh right, that.

We hadn’t properly smoothed things over since Addison’s kidnapping and the whole fiasco with Gregor. Hunter blamed me—blamed my secrets—for the danger Addison ended up in. And though we’d all survived, the sting of her resentment lingered. She was fierce about protecting her fiancée and I respected that, even if it meant bracing myself for her wrath.

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“I’ll be right back,” I murmured to Leah, catching Hunter’s eye again and tilting my head toward the corridor to the left in the hopes that the scorned vamp would follow.

I half-expected her to ignore me entirely, but a moment later I heard her clipped footsteps rounding the door before Hunter was standing right in front of me, hands fastened on her hips.

I swallowed, forcing myself to meet her gaze. “Hey,” I said quietly, bracing for the worst.

Hunter let out a breath, almost a hiss, but didn’t speak—for a tense beat, neither of us did.

“Hunter, I...” I hesitated, searching for the right words. “I’m sorry. I know I messed up with the secrets, with Gregor, with... everything. It put everyone in danger, and that’s on me.”

Her jaw tightened, though she said nothing. I prepared myself for scathing remarks, but Hunter only glared for another second or two—just enough to let me sweat—before letting out a resigned sigh.

“You’re an idiot,” she stated flatly, pinching the bridge of her nose. “A well-meaning, infuriating idiot who nearly got everyone killed.”

I hung my head, wincing as her words hit home.

Hunter stepped forward, resting a hand on my shoulder. “But you came through,

too—you and Leah both. You risked everything to get Addison back.”

I blinked, relief rocking through my chest. “If you still hate me, I get it,” I stuttered out. “I did keep you all in the dark, and—”

Hunter barked out a laugh, cutting me off. “I don’t hate you, Maxine. I was pissed as hell, sure—but we’re a team, or a family, or however Jordan likes to put it. We fight, we forgive, we move on.”

A slight, wry curve crossed her lips. “And it’s not like you’re the only one of us who draws trouble like a magnet. We’re all guilty of wreaking havoc from time to time, myself included.”

And then, to my utter shock, Hunter stepped forward and grabbed me in a tight, unexpected hug. I froze, unable to compute the sudden embrace. Hunter was infamous for begrudging every show of affection unless it involved Addison.

“Just... talk to me next time,” she muttered. “I’m always gonna have your back, even if you are doing something stupid.”

A second later she pulled away, cheeks faintly pink. She shot me a narrowed glare, gesturing between the two of us. “If you tell anyone I just did that I’ll kick your ass.”

I bit down a grin, raising my palms. “Understood. My lips are sealed.”

With one last quirk of her brow—a silent warning not to blab about her secret softer side—Hunter strode off to rejoin her fiancée.

I sagged against the wall of the corridor, a weight sloughing off my shoulders.

Across the hall, Leah’s grandfather was in the middle of regaling the group with

some long-winded story about a military prank gone wrong. Leah was standing beside him, both mortified and helplessly amused as the Leyore women leaned in, enthralled.

River asked polite questions that made him beam with pride, and Amara offered affirmative little nods like she'd heard the story before—though I suspected she missed half the anecdote, busy fending off Dylan's fussing.

From my vantage at the edge of the room I watched Addison put a hand to her mouth at a particularly outrageous detail. Hunter had rejoined her side, arms crossing over her chest in that usual bodyguard stance she wore around Addison. Jordan lingered nearby, exchanging eyerolls with Sky every time the old man delivered a dramatic flourish.

Leah caught me staring, her lips curving into a gentle smile that made my pulse flutter. She waved me over, raising her brows in a silent *Everything okay?* I nodded, warmth seeping into my bones, blazing from my heart in waves.

It was better than okay. It was the best it had ever been, though it would take some getting used to.

It was hard to believe it had only been a few hours since that brutal final battle, but a part of me was still raw. Like I'd torn myself open to vanquish my past, and the wound was still fresh, throbbing and aching in time with the beat of my heart.

I closed my eyes—and saw Gregor staring back at me.

I pushed the image from my head, rubbing my eyes. I killed him. He's gone. The thought slipped through my mind, unbidden, sending prickles down my spine. He would never threaten us again, never haunt my nightmares—there was no longer an axe over our necks. Still, it wasn't something I could just shrug off in the span of an

afternoon, I knew that.

I caught my reflection in one of the polished gold moldings. I looked the same, maybe a bit paler, a bit hollow under the eyes. But inside, I felt fleeced open and stitched together again. But you're alive, I reminded myself, and free of him at last. I inhaled slowly, catching a hold of that vow I had made to myself—to live my life, on my own terms, from now on.

A burst of laughter from the group brought me back to the present. Leah's grandfather was spinning a yarn about her childhood antics, to her very vocal dismay.

“Grandpa, they really don't need to know about—”

“Oh, but you were so cute, Leah!” He nudged Amara with one patched elbow, signing alongside his monologue. “She was so cute. She'd put the bucket on her head and run around the garden pretending to be a scuba diver—”

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Leah caught my eye mid-groan, begging with her eyes for a swift rescue. I huffed out a hushed laugh, loping over to add fuel to the fire instead. “She did something similar when we were teens, though I believe that time it was a fish bowl instead of a bucket...”

“That’s right! It was your Halloween costume that year,” her grandfather chimed in and Leah buried her head in her hands, muttering all the swift punishment she planned to enact on the lot of us.

A few hours and many an embarrassing story later, I found myself staring out the window, leaning against a pillar with my arms clasped loosely across my chest. We’d migrated to the sitting area of the grand hall, and everyone was still chattering away behind me.

There had only been a few slip-ups on the Leyore women’s part—the occasional mention of werewolves and one or two brief displays of impossible strength when Dylan caught the marble statue that Sky had knocked from its post by accident.

Leah’s grandfather had simply blinked, thoroughly impressed, and took off on a tangent about how he and his buddies could have used muscle like that back in the army. The werewolf thing he misheard completely, and launched into a detailed review of the story Beowulf—which he’d read recently, and ‘What do you read, Amara?’ And ‘What are your thoughts on the latest Jeff Noon?’—and so on and so forth.

“Hey.” Leah’s voice drew me back to the present. She’d detached from her grandfather, sidling up to my elbow with a soft smile. “You okay?”

I forced a slow breath, leaning my head back beside hers when she slid her arms around my shoulders. “Yeah. Or... I will be. Eventually.” My lips curved, a shaky attempt at a smile. “Killing my fiancé, confronting my family... it’s not exactly a tidy resolution.”

I felt her nod, her voice tickling in my ear. “You don’t have to be fine right away.”

“I’m not,” I admitted, little more than a murmur. “But I’m done dwelling on it. I’m ready to—live. For myself, finally. I’ll probably be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life but...” I stared down at my hands and balled them into fists. “I want to live.”

“And you will.” Leah ghosted her lips across my cheek, not quite a kiss but brimming with affection all the same.

“Leah—I wanted to say...” I sucked in a breath. Blew it out again. “I don’t expect you to put your life on hold for me.”

Leah’s arms tightened on my shoulders. “Maxine—”

“No, just let me say this.” I leaned into her, keeping my eyes on the window and the streetlights flickering outside. “If you want to go back to San Francisco and put this whole thing behind you, I won’t stop you. I won’t even be mad.”

When Leah stayed quiet, I tilted my head to meet her eyes—ocean green and just as deep. “But if you want to stay... If you want to—see where this goes, feel it out...”

Our lips were a hair’s breadth apart, though neither of us moved to close the distance. I forced the tremor from my voice. “If you’ll have me, I’m yours.”

Leah swallowed, ocean eyes teeming with life. I turned fully in her arms, twining my

own around her waist, and waded deeper into those waters.

“I’ve always been yours.”

30

Leah

“All I’m saying is, you need to get to know this woman before you decide to move in with her!”

I folded up another shirt and wedged it into the suitcase on the bed, shooting my grandfather a pointed stare. “I mean, you’ve been on one date and you haven’t even met her grandkids yet.”

My grandfather folded his arms, huffing under his shaggy mustache as he glared out the window. “You don’t get it. I’m in love, Leah—and I’m old. I don’t have much time left.”

I rolled my eyes, closing the suitcase with a snap and a zip. “Does she even have a name, aside from ‘woman-I-met-at-the-grocery-store’?”

“Of course she does,” my grandfather proclaimed, clutching his hands to his chest like a love-sick fool. “Angela. She stole my heart when she stole the last box of pop-tarts from my shopping cart.”

I groaned, hauled the suitcase off the bed, and straightened up with a sigh, glancing around the neat little bedroom he’d been living in for a week.

When my grandfather decided to stick around for a little while after his unplanned trip to New York, Jordan and the rest of the Leyore women had offered to put him up

in a fancy hotel. But my grandfather had chosen this dinky little B&B instead—and I'd taken up residence in the second room considering my mournful lack of houseboat.

Now, my grandfather was preparing to head back to San Francisco. His flight left in a few hours, and Amara and Dylan were on their way over to drive him to the airport.

He'd be going back to San Francisco alone.

"You know," I mumbled, fiddling with the zippers on the suitcase, "I could come with you—I could move back home."

"Why on earth would you want to do a thing like that?" My grandfather shook his head, scratching absently at his beard. "You've done quite well for yourself here, kiddo. You don't need to throw it all away for the sake of your old man."

“But—”

“No buts.” He lifted a wizened finger and wagged it at me. “You may not have a boat any more but you’ve got plenty of people who care for you here. What about Maxine? I’m sure she’d be happy to have you for a housemate.”

I cringed inwardly. When filling my grandfather in on my life as of late, I had neglected to mention that my boat had been burned down—he thought I’d sold it—and I’d also left out the part about Maxine and me being... more than friends.

“I just... worry, you know?” I tugged at the cords of my hoodie, shuffling on my feet. “You’ve taken care of me for all these years and I feel like I’m abandoning you.”

My grandfather turned, a flicker of mild amusement in his gaze. “Leah, that’s ridiculous. I’ll be fine! I’m not exactly helpless, you know.”

I dropped my eyes to my shoes. He would be perfectly fine without me. I knew that. Of course, I knew. But that nagging sense of responsibility remained.

My grandfather exhaled, tucking his hands into his worn coat pockets. “Leah, you need to focus on yourself for once.” He gestured vaguely around the room, eyes drifting to the city line beyond the window pane. “You’ve got a lot going on. A whole future to build. Don’t you worry about me.”

My heart clenched. He was right—I had Maxine now, and the Leyore coven, and all the chaos that came with them. I’d uprooted my life, tethered myself to a love I never would have imagined, and that meant letting go of old obligations and taking on new

ones. But letting him travel back alone still made my stomach twist.

“I’m still gonna worry,” I said softly, a wry smile ghosting my lips.

He chuckled, stepping forward to plant a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Worry if you must, but not too much. I’m older, yes, but I’m not senile.” His eyes crinkled. “Besides, I’ve got a darling waiting for me back home now.”

“Right.” I snorted, dropping my head back with a sigh. “Angela. I hope you know, I want to meet her in person sometime. Need to give my blessings and all.”

“Oh, but of course.” My grandfather grinned, hiking up the suitcase handle as we headed for the door. “You’ll have to pay us a visit sometime. And bring Maxine! I’ve missed that girl.”

I winced. “Actually, about Maxine. I, uh, I’ve been meaning to tell you...”

I trailed off, struggling to find the words. My grandfather paused at the threshold, suitcase bumping his bad knee. He lifted a bushy, grey brow. “Yes?”

“I, um...” I rubbed at the nape of my neck, chewing on my lip. “We’re kind of... more than friends now.”

That was one way to put it. Although what we were exactly, I had no idea. Maxine had essentially let me know that if I wanted to pursue a relationship, she was game. But the ball was entirely in my court.

My grandfather frowned slightly, forehead wrinkling in mild confusion. “More than friends?”

My cheeks flushed bright red. A week had passed since I’d seen Maxine and I still

didn't have an answer for her, torn between my new life and my duties to my grandfather. But now was the time to make a decision.

My pulse hammered. Might as well just spit it out. "We're kinda... together," I said, swallowing my nerves. "As in, we're dating. Or we will be, when I tell her that I want to. She's my—well, we haven't really labeled it yet, but... we're like a couple."

A momentary silence, my grandfather's gaze scanning my tomato-red face. For a fraction of a second I panicked—was he upset, or confused, or just disappointed? But then his lips curved, and his eyes crinkled in genuine delight.

"Oh," he exclaimed, a soft laugh bubbling out. "Well, I'll be. Took you two long enough."

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. "You're... okay with it?"

He huffed, waving off my concern. "Of course I'm okay with it, kid. I've been watching you two dance around each other since you were practically in pigtails. If anything, I'm relieved you finally figured yourselves out."

"You—I—" I stuttered through the words, heart skittering in my chest. "What?"

My grandfather shrugged with a smile, eyes twinkling, like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. "We should get going. I'm sure you're eager to tell her how you feel."

I stared at him a moment longer and then exhaled a shaky breath. I stepped forward to help him with his suitcase, cracking a sheepish smile that I hope conveyed every ounce of love I had for the old man. "Thanks, Grandpa."

A few hours and a tearful goodbye later, I shifted uncomfortably on the landing outside Maxine's upscale apartment, cradling my duffel bag under one arm. The door

stood ajar, warm light spilling into the quiet corridor. She must have left it unlatched, knowing I was on my way.

My heart gave a little leap at the thought of entering her space so freely.

Quietly, I slipped inside, greeted by the soft glow of lamplight and plush furnishings. The place smelled faintly of sandalwood and something sweet. I glanced down at my boots, wet and grimy from traipsing through puddles, and winced. Not exactly Leah-friendly carpets in here.

“Max?” I called softly, leaning my bag against the wall. I tiptoed forward, trying not to leave muddy boot prints on the fluffy rug that sprawled across the floor. “White carpets, really?”

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“In here,” came her voice from somewhere deeper in the apartment, melodic and tinged with tense anticipation.

I picked my way around the rug edges—trying very hard not to mar the soft piles with my boots—and followed the sound of her voice, turning into the living area.

And there she was, perched on the edge of a chaise lounge like a scene straight out of a home decor magazine—except for the anxious way she wrung her hands. The moment she saw me, her face broke into a radiant smile.

Then her eyes flicked to my boots. “Ew.”

“Good to see you too,” I muttered, standing awkwardly among her many—many—belongings.

I’d practiced my oh-so-romantic ‘I want to give this thing between us a try’ speech on the way over after I’d given her a call, but now that I was standing right in front of her, I was at a loss for words.

Maxine, however, was too busy inspecting her carpets to notice my unease. “I suppose I could vacuum tomorrow...” She glanced back at me, smile lighting up all over again. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re here!”

I swallowed, a swirl of emotions tightening my chest. We’d been dancing around this new reality for a week. After all the chaos, it was like meeting her again—for the first time. I was here, on the threshold of a new life, my duffel bag a dead giveaway that I wanted to stay.

I wanted to stay forever.

So I sucked in a breath and forced myself to meet her gaze. “I... I’ve decided,” I murmured, heart thudding against my sternum. “I’m going to stay in New York.”

Maxine stilled, then she rose from the chaise. Then she froze, like she wasn’t quite sure what to do from there. I sucked in a breath.

“I want... I want to be where you are.” My cheeks heated, and I forced myself to keep going. “I want us to finally... be together, the way we always wanted to be. Picking up where we left off. If—if you still want that.”

For a beat, the world slowed on its axis. Then Maxine’s eyes lit up, brighter than the skyline outside her windows.

“You have no idea how long I’ve hoped you’d say that.” She whispered the words and I stepped closer when she reached for me. “Yes, I want that—of course I want that! More than anything.”

A rush of warmth enveloped me, coupled with her arms sliding around my waist. Maxine leaned in, pressing her lips to mine in a slow, reverent kiss that made my knees weak and wobbly. When we broke apart, she rested her forehead against mine, her voice trembling with subdued excitement.

“Stay with me,” she said, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear. “Here—wherever, as long as we’re together.”

Laughter trickled from my lips and I closed my eyes. “I don’t think your carpets can handle me, but... yeah. I’d like that.”

I’ll stay forever.

A moment later, Maxine cocked her head to the side. “You know, you could move in right now. Full-time. I mean, we’d have to figure out the details, but...” She trailed off, glancing around her living area as if mentally rearranging furniture to accommodate me.

I smirked, arching a brow. “You do realize you’re a hoarder, right?”

At Maxine’s spluttered protests, my gaze trailed to the excessive walk-in closet next to her bedroom door, packed to bursting. “You own more shoes than I’ve ever seen in a single store. Where would I even put my stuff?”

But Maxine waved a dismissive hand, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. “I can make space. My closet might be Pandora’s box, but I can definitely—I mean, there’s got to be some old outfits I never wear anyway.”

“Uh-huh,” I teased, edging toward the closet. “You’re so sure you can part with your beloved couture? I doubt it.”

A tiny frown tugged at her lips, and she stomped—quite dramatically, I might add—toward her wardrobe with determined vigor. “Just watch me.”

She threw open the doors fully, rummaging around and pulling out hangers of dresses and jackets, tossing them onto the chaise. In fairness, it barely made a dent in her collection.

“Seriously?” I murmured, flicking through some of the items she’d cast aside. Silk, leather, sequins, fabrics I couldn’t even name. “When would you even wear half of this stuff?”

She turned, an almost coy smile curving her lips. “Everything has a purpose.”

I raised a brow and her voice dropped conspiratorially. “Some outfits are for formal events, some are for lay-low nights, and some—” She paused, eyeing me with a mischievous glint. “Some are for very special occasions.”

I snorted. “I’ll bet.” My gaze lingered on a flamboyant red gown with a slit that went on for miles. “I can’t imagine you wearing this to your day job.”

She gave me a theatrical sigh. “Whatever. Now go wait for me in the bedroom. I need to do some real thinking before I part with anything more substantial. If I’m losing closet space, I’d better do it right.”

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I rolled my eyes, stepping away from the chaos of hangers and shoes.

“Fine, fine. But don’t stress too much about your precious wardrobe.” I pivoted toward her, leaning in for a swift kiss. It was seamless, slipping into this role with her. It was like it was always meant to be. “I’ll gladly live out of a single suitcase if it means living with you.”

Her eyes softened for a moment and her fingers curled in the fabric of my hoodie. Then she ushered me off, shooing me aside with an indulgent wave. “All right—go on, you big softie. Give me a few minutes.”

Shaking my head, I strolled into her bedroom, another lesson in tasteful extravagance. A plush king-sized bed dominated the space, perfectly made with pillows that probably cost more than anything I’d ever bought in my life.

I perched on the edge, glancing at the windows that offered a glittering view of the city. This is real, I reminded myself, pulling my hair out of its ponytail and letting it fall around my shoulders.

In the hallway, I could still hear the rustle of clothes, the occasional mutter from Maxine as she debated each piece. I tried not to eavesdrop, but the muffled curses and small exclamations of “—I forgot about this!” made me chuckle.

A few minutes passed, my mind drifting to the fact that we were truly doing this—just me and her, figuring out how to share a life together. My heart swelled at the thought. Then the rustling quieted, and I heard a soft click of the closet door.

“Leah?” Maxine called from the hallway, voice a notch lower than usual.

“Hmm?” I straightened up, half rising from the bed. But she appeared first, stepping into the doorway with a flourish that stole my breath away.

My cheeks flamed instantly, and my mouth went dry.

Maxine wore... Well, not much. Not much more than a very sultry set of lilac lingerie—delicate lace clinging to her curves. The overhead light caught in her hair, dazzled in her darkened eyes.

She lifted a brow, shamelessly enacting a playful little turn. “So, about me getting rid of my clothes... are you sure about it?”

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head, and I swallowed a surge of hot, molten arousal. Holy hell.

“N—no,” I stammered, the single word stumbling off my tongue. I shook my head, over and over again, bumping back down onto the bed. “Absolutely not. Keep... keep everything. Keep it all.”

Her lips curved into a triumphant smile, and she sauntered forward, bridging the space between us. Every nerve in my body thrummed and my cheeks heated something fierce.

“Thought you might say that,” she purred, hiking a knee over my leg. One and then the other, until she was straddling me, and I had no choice but to slide my hands up her legs, around the curve of her ass. Wouldn’t want her to fall.

I exhaled a shaky breath, hooking my fingers under one of the delicate straps on her hips. “You’re impossible,” I choked out, but the words lacked any real bite.

She pressed her forehead to mine, fangs glinting when she grinned. “You want me to clear space in the closet? I will. But this—” She flicked a glance at the enticing lace. “This, I think I’ll keep.”

Heat flushed through me, and I nodded mutely.

“Good,” I managed at last, tongue leaden in my mouth as my fingers dug into her thighs. “Good plan. Great plan—I am in complete favor of this plan—”

She kissed me, cutting off my rambling words, and heat struck through my body. It shot down my spine, converging in my belly, and left me boneless, brainless, and gasping for breath.

Her tongue danced against mine and my fingers dug into her flesh, kneading the soft mounds of her ass as she surged forward, devouring my mouth with her own. It was overwhelming, it was everything I wanted. It was almost too good to be true.

In an effort to keep my head from spinning off, and driven by a desire to prove to myself that this was really happening—every fantasy coming true at once—I slung an arm around her waist, tipping the both of us until I had her on her back, her bare feet braced on the edge of the bed.

Maxine sighed as I kissed her again, before I pulled back to simply marvel at the sight of her. Spread out on the silken bedsheets, wrapped up like a birthday present in lilac and lavender, she looked every bit the fairytale princess. Her cheeks were flushed pink, her eyes heavy-lidded under long, lustrous lashes, and her hair splayed out like a halo around her head.

I ducked down and sucked a love bite below her clavicle, and drew my lips down her throat, past the thin layers of lace that hugged her body. I moved lower still, kneeling on the plush carpet, as my tongue tracked a path between the valley of her breasts,

down her stomach and over the clasp that held the skimpy garment in place.

When I reached that moist spot between her legs, I curled the fabric aside and went to town.

Maxine arched up from the bed at the sudden sensation, stuttering out a curse as I coiled my arms around her thighs, tongue lolling through wet folds, luxuriating in the taste of her. Her head dropped back against the mattress as I lost myself between her legs, the wet swishing sound of my tongue thick in my ears.

I suckled at her clit, smiling against the slickness of her folds when a groan reverberated through her body and her thighs tightened around my head. Every uttered curse from Maxine sent waves of arousal through my own crouched body, coiling in my belly and urging me onwards.

On and on, I worked her with my mouth alone. Until she was finally on the brink, writhing on the edge of the bed. I could never tire of making her cum, of the sensation of her orgasm rich and heady on my tongue.

When Maxine flopped backward on the bed with a final, whimpered moan, I pulled away, wiped a hand across my mouth and scaled her body again. Her shaking fingers found the seam of my hoodie. She tugged, and I got the memo, yanking it over my head along with my undershirt, seaming my body with hers again.

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I kissed her and our teeth clattered. We tussled together with hungry, frantic kisses—desperate to have every inch of each other immediately, even though we had all the time in the world.

And we did. We had forever together, starting right then.

“I love you.” I murmured it against her mouth, hot and wanting against mine. “I love you so much.”

Maxine’s fingers flitted down my hips, cinching at my sides, grinding us together. She met my eye, hers a brilliant, vibrant ochre, and kissed me again. “And I love you. I’ve always loved you.”

She repeated it, over and over again as we molded our bodies together, a sacred mantra murmured over the rest of our lives.

“It’s always been you.”

31

Maxine

“Did youhaveto wear heels today? Honestly, Maxine.”

I glanced up from the rocky path I was precariously attempting to navigate, scowling when my foot slipped and I nearly fell flat on my face. A few steps ahead, Leah was shaking her head, dirty old boots carrying her over the rocky surface with ease.

“I didn’t think I would be quite so... uneven,” I muttered, stepping gingerly over another jutting outcrop. “You didn’t tell me we’d be hiking along the shoreline for half an hour.”

“Beach, Maxine,” Leah sniped, twisting around to glance at me. “I said we’re heading to the beach. You’ve been to a beach before—did you picture sand in perfect parallel lines or something?”

I opened my mouth to retort, but slipped again, backward this time, and careered right into Rachel who was picking up the rear of our little trio. “Shit–fuck.Help.”

Rachel caught my elbow before I could go plopping down on my ass, laughing as she straightened me out again. She adjusted the pet carrier under her arm. “Not really an athletic one, are you?”

“Oh, she is,” Leah piped up, glancing over her shoulder. “It’s just those goddamn shoes slowing her down.”

“You said ‘beach,’ so I dressed for a beach.” I gestured around us at the rocky pools, water sloshing against the clusters of seaweed and pebbles. “This is not a beach!”

“All right, lovebirds,” Rachel interrupted, waltzing past the both of us with the carrier in her arms. “This spot looks good.”

She sidled up to the water’s edge and lifted the lid from the carrier. Leah helped me down from another rocky ledge, eyeing my wedge heels (beach-themed, mind you), with a smirk and a shake of her head.

Rachel carefully set the carrier down on a relatively flat patch of rock, water lapping at her boots. Leah and I shuffled closer to peer into the carrier and two bright-eyed baby seals blinked back—whiskered faces that made my heart squeeze. Their little

flippers shuffled against the plastic bottom.

“Come on,” Rachel coaxed softly, reaching in to guide them forward. “Time to head home.”

I couldn’t decide what was more precarious—my wedge sandals on jagged rocks or the balance of my pride as I teetered behind Leah and Rachel, trying not to face-plant into the tide pools. But both were quickly forgotten when the pups began to flop their way out of the carrier and a knot formed in my throat.

Leah had spent weeks nursing these pups back to health—Rachel assisting, and me occasionally dropping by with moral support and only the occasional snarky complaint about the smell. Despite not being the fish-loving type like the other two, I’d grown attached to the wide-eyed pups.

“Goodbye little guy,” Leah murmured, coaxing the first pup out with gentle hands. It slid free of the carrier, flippersmacking the wet stone. The second one followed, making soft, indecisive cries. My heart clenched at the sound.

Rachel crouched down, guiding them to the water’s edge. The waves lapped at their bellies, and for a moment they paused, looking back with wide, unblinking eyes. My chest ached, and Leah rubbed a hand across my back. We were all well aware of how uncertain the ocean could be. But it was where they belonged.

With a rush of flippers, the seals eased into the frothing ocean, bobbing up and down amid the swells. We watched, breath held, until they slipped further out, disappearing behind the rocky outcrops. I exhaled a trembling breath.

Rachel’s cheeks lifted in a small smile. “That never gets old,” she murmured, climbing to her feet. “Every time, it’s like sending kids off to college. But we gave them the best chance we could.”

Leah nodded, biting her lip. I saw how her eyes glistened, though she masked it pretty well. “Yeah. They’ll find their buddies out there.” She forced a laugh, blinking fast.

“Still,” I murmured, leaning into her shoulder, “it’s sad to see them go.”

My wedge heel slipped again—a final jab from the slippery terrain—and I stumbled, nearly dragging Leah down with me. “Shit, you see!? This is exactly why you have to specify. Next time, I expect arealbeach with actual sand.”

Leah smirked, linking her arm through mine. Her voice held a teasing fondness. “Come on, tough gal. I’ll make sure you don’t die on the way back.”

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Rolling my eyes, I let her lead, though a tender sense of relief warmed me from the inside out.

We did something good there. Two more lives set free.

“You absolutely cannot wear the same clothes you wore this morning.”

If there was one thing I believed in with absolute conviction, it was outfit changes. A new location? New outfit. It was a point of principle, especially for something as momentous as Hunter’s bachelorette party. And yet here I was, arguing—no, pleading—with Leah to wear anything other than her scuffed boots and sea-splashed jacket.

“Come on, humor me. Just this once.”

Leah folded her arms, lips quirking in a stubborn line. “Sure, we came straight from the beach—ish,” she shot back. “I’m a bit damp, yes, but I’m fine. And no one is going to give a damn about my boots.”

I scoffed dramatically, throwing my palms skyward.

Leah rolled her eyes, but I caught a flicker of amusement in her grin and pounced on it. “Don’t you want to look your best for your dear friend’s bachelorette? We’re celebrating Addison and Hunter. That’s cause for a new set of footwear!”

Leah sighed, though her lips twitched up at the corner, comfortable in our usual song and dance. “I’ll brush my hair. That’s it. My boots are staying, my jacket’s staying,

and you, Miss Overdressed, can just deal with it.”

And deal with it I did, albeit with my nose stuck in the air, all the way to the swanky nightclub where the rest of the Leyore women were waiting for us. We arrived at the venue—a swanky private lounge in the VIP section—only slightly behind schedule.

Leah stuck close to me at first, and people parted like the Red Sea as we found our party. Jordan stood near the bar, chatting with Ethan, sipping something suspiciously bright red with an umbrella garnish, wearing that perpetual titillating smirk. She waved us over, beckoning impatiently.

“About time you two got here,” she said, plucking the tiny umbrella out of her drink. “We’re doing a ‘toast every ten minutes’ rule, so you’re already behind.”

“You’ll have to catch up,” Addison added from her spot on a velvet sofa, grin wide and eyes sparkling. The bride-to-be. She turned her attention to Leah. “Just be careful which drink you pick up. Wouldn’t want to confuse your strawberry daiquiri with a Bloody Mary, if you know what I mean.”

Hunter, the other half of that soon-to-be marriage, was perched beside Addison, and she glowered at me when I blew her a kiss.

“This is Addison’s gig, by the way—not mine,” she insisted, though from the slight pink coloring her cheeks, I could tell she was secretly pleased. A bachelorette party for both fiancées. Because why not?

“Amara is on the dance floor,” Jordan jumped in, jerking her thumb at the small cluster of moving bodies under the swirling strobe lights. “She’s doing pretty well since, you know, everything.” She shrugged. “And Dylan’s over there playing protective wife, obviously.”

My gaze wandered to the dance floor, where sure enough, Amara swayed to the thumping bass that rattled through the floorboards, Dylan with her arms wrapped around her waist. They looked good, comfortable in each other's orbit, a far cry from the stress that had weighed them down weeks prior.

River lounged on a side couch, swirling a martini glass full of something red. She greeted us with a regal tilt of her head, letting out a low chuckle when she spotted my glitzy heels. "How exactly are you meant to dance in those, Max?"

I sniffed, my eyes flicking to Leah, whose boots now felt entirely in place among the dance crowd. Traitor. But the fondness in my chest spiked anyway. "Forget about shoes, River. We're here to celebrate."

Addison clapped her hands. "Yes, we are! I think it's about time for another toast."

Leah shot me a sidelong glance, a mischievous curve on her lips. "You see? My outfit's fine. Nobody cares." She gestured at Addison's relatively simple ensemble. "At least I'm not overshadowing the bride."

I rolled my eyes but grinned back, taking a cherry-red champagne flute from the bar. "You're overshadowing me, though."

"Impossible." Leah laughed, then she tapped her glass to mine, eyes twinkling like bubbly champagne.

"All right, all right, everybody shut up." Jordan announced the next toast, hooking an arm around Sky's waist for good measure. She hiked up her glass. "To Addison and Hunter, who, for some reason, are actually tying the knot, willingly." She shot Addison a teasing smirk. "May you tolerate each other's bullshit on the daily—and with love."

Hunter groaned, Addison giggled, and the rest of us raised our glasses in unison.

At some point throughout the night, I realized that maybe, just maybe, I had worn the wrong shoes for the occasion. My feet hurt like crazy and I eventually had to vacate the dance floor, tottering over to the bar and cursing under my breath.

I left Leah boogying under the strobe lights with Ethan and Addison, and zeroed in on River. The vampire woman was perched on a barstool and watching the scene with a small smile on her lips.

“Hey,” I said, sliding onto the stool beside her. “Got any more visions you’d like to share of my oh-so-bright-looking future?”

River arched a perfectly groomed eyebrow. “Even if I did, I couldn’t tell you. If you know what to expect it might not come true.”

“Fair enough.” I shrugged, leaning back against the bar. “I was wondering though, about that comment you made, how it was about time I showed my true strength. You made it sound like youknewI’d do something big.”

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Her lips curled into a secretive grin. “Because I did.”

“You did—because you saw it.” I peered at her. “In one of your visions?”

She bobbed her head lazily, swirling her drink. “I catch glimpses. It doesn’t always come out exactly the way I think... but yes, I saw you rising to the occasion. Finally kicking your fiancé’s undead ass, as it were.”

My nose wrinkled with a rueful grin. “Well, I guess your prescience turned out right that time. But you can’t deny some of your predictions have been kinda off—or downright hilarious. Remember the one where you claimed Dylan was going to stumble into a marriage of convenience with some random guy from Winchester?”

River huffed with a roll of her eyes. “That was an interpretation error, not a wrong vision. Visions are tricky, Maxine. They show me what could be, not always what will be.”

I rested my elbows on the bar. “So that’s the official line? It’s on us to manifest the outcome—to make it happen?”

“Essentially.” Her expression turned thoughtful, a distant look entering her eyes. “I see the paths laid out—the possibilities. But unless people act in certain ways, it remains just that—a possibility.”

I nodded, letting that settle. In an odd sense it made me feel better—knowing our fates weren’t strictly locked down by someone else’s vision. “So when you said it was about time I demonstrated my strength... you meant it wasn’t guaranteed, but you

saw a future where I did, and you wanted me to push for it?”

River’s grin was strangely proud. “Precisely.”

I snorted softly. “Well, thanks for the cosmic nudge, I guess.”

Before she could answer, her gaze went suddenly unfocused. I recognized the way her eyes glazed over—her body going rigid, stiff as a board. Usually, I’d see this only in fleeting moments, and half the time she’d smirk afterward and spout something cryptic.

This time, though, her face blanched slightly. I frowned, setting my drink down.

“River...?” I waved a hand in front of her. “Don’t tell me you’re messing with me.”

But she blinked, shook her head, and when her eyes snapped back into focus, she looked rattled. Not scared, exactly, but... charged, like she’d just seen something that jolted her.

“River,” I repeated, more firmly. “Are you serious? Was—was that a vision?”

She shuddered, eyes flitting around the room like she was looking for someone. “Maybe.”

“And...?” I prompted, leaning in, half expecting her to spout something ridiculous. But this time, her expression was so intense it made me swallow, tongue clicking in the back of my throat.

For a moment she just stared, like she couldn’t find the words. Then, abruptly, she stood from the stool, nearly upsetting her drink in the process. Her entire posture radiated enthrallment, a sudden rush of adrenaline.

“River!?” I pressed, anxiety bubbling up in my chest. “What did you see?”

But all she said was, “I’ve gotta go.”

My brow furrowed and I tilted my head. “Go where?”

She glanced down at me, a strange spark lighting behind her eyes. “To make it happen.”

“Make what happen?” I asked, utterly baffled. “River—where are you going?”

She was already weaving through the room, not even sparing a glance at Jordan’s raised eyebrows or Hunter’s questioning look. I lifted my hand, about to call after her, but she shot a quick wave behind her back, disappearing out of view.

“What was that about?” Leah was suddenly at my side, jutting her chin to where River had vanished.

“I havenoidea.” I stared through the string of partygoers, trepidation tripling my pulse. “But I think we’re going to find out real soon.”

The party wound down sometime past midnight, the pounding music giving way to the gentle hush of the city’s late hour. My ears still hummed with the echo of bass and raucous laughter as Leah and I stepped out into the cool air. A scattering of guests followed in our wake, but they branched off to catch cabs with happy, murmured farewells.

We headed in the direction of home—our home, just down the road—hand in hand, a faint drizzle misting the street.

I allowed myself a moment of smugness, reflecting on my outfit. The short, sequined

dress that glittered under the streetlights—and how I was walking just fine in my heels, thank you very much. Didn't hurt at all.

Leah, however, was having some trouble with her boots. She claimed they were indestructible, but I'd clocked the fraying laces and thinning soles ages ago. Pride goeth before the fall... or in this case, a literal break.

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“Ow—seriously?” she hissed suddenly, stumbling on a cleft in the pavement. She bent down to inspect her boot, only to discover the entire heel hanging by a thread. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

I couldn’t resist a triumphant little grin. “So, the boots you insisted on wearing day in and day out,” I said in my loftiest tone, “turn out not to be fit for dancing, or apparently, for walking either?”

She glowered at me, then tilted her head back with a sigh. “I guess they’ve finally tapped out.”

“Mhmm.” Smug satisfaction wove through my words. “Well, looks like I was right. Again.”

Leah rolled her eyes, a smile twinging on her lips despite her exasperation. She stood on one foot, bracing herself against a lamppost. “All right, I surrender. Next time, I’ll take your fashion advice seriously.”

“Glad to hear it,” I teased, stepping in to steady her. “We can salvage that boot tomorrow, but for now...”

Before she could protest, I leaned down, sliding an arm under her knees and sweeping her up in my arms, princess-style. She let out a startled yelp, her arms flying around my neck.

“Maxine!” she gasped, eyes wide. “You can’t—I’m a grown woman—put me down!”

“Not a chance.” I tutted, hugging her securely against my chest. “Since your shoe is out of commission, allow me to be your transportation, madame.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she muttered, though I noticed she didn’t try very hard to free herself.

“I think you mean fabulous.”

I took slow, measured steps, ignoring the curious looks from a few late-night passersby. The city’s noise faded to a distant hum, leaving only the soft sound of Leah’s breath in my ear.

“So, I’ve been thinking,” I murmured as we strode along, Leah with her head resting on my shoulder. “I kinda miss living on a boat.”

Leah lifted her head briefly to arch a brow at me. “You do? What about your fancy apartment—you can’t fit a claw-footed bathtub on a houseboat.”

“Our fancy apartment,” I corrected her, then shrugged, adjusting my arm at her back. “But, I don’t know. Myrtle was special. I was thinking maybe... maybe we could build a new one.”

Leah struggled upright again and I slowed to a halt when she twisted to meet my eye. “Are you saying you want to build a Myrtle 2.0?”

I grinned, wiggling a brow. “Are you saying you might be interested?”

Leah opened her mouth, closed it again. Then she smiled, pecking a kiss to my nose.

“I think that’s a great idea.”