



How a Vampire Falls

Author: *Charlotte Vane*

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Description: Only three vampires live in Harmony Ridge, Tennessee: diorama artist Leslie Snow and her parents. Happily single, Leslie has mostly forgotten the matchmaking test she took in college...until the day a vampire she's never met saunters up to her booth at the town art fair. Ryker Maddox didn't forget, and he's here all the way from Virginia to fulfill the test's challenge: because they're both single at thirty (and, of course, made for each other), they should date.

Intrigued by his boldness, Leslie lets him take her to dinner, then offers to show him her dear hometown. Ryker makes her feel seen, not only as a woman and an artist, but also as a vampire—something she's never experienced before. Maybe there was something to that test after all.

With the betrayal of a toxic ex in his past, Ryker is determined to make better choices this time around. From their first date, he is drawn to Leslie. Her contentment both challenges and quiets his striving heart. Maybe she's right when she insists he's worth more than the sum of his achievements.

But the distance between their lives is wider than the miles they have to travel. Ryker has never spent more than a few hours in a small town; Leslie has never lived anywhere else. He's lived his whole life immersed in vampire culture; her knowledge about their kind has always been limited to what her mysteriously reluctant parents were willing to share. If love can bridge all differences, Ryker and Leslie need an extra strong bridge...especially when his ex shows up wielding threats.

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One

If only Leslie could lie out on a flat rock and bask in the sun's lovely rays, but the pleasure of Tennessee's late-July heat wasn't worth a week of slathering herself in aloe. Not that she'd burn the way humans did, much less catch fire as humans once believed. No, she'd just dry out like ancient papyrus.

Sitting behind her exhibit table, she dug into her purse for her organic sunscreen and reapplied to her face, arms, and the tops of her feet. She finished as a young family with two strollers passed on the other side of the dusty aisle. The heat was keeping some humans at home, no doubt. Today's turnout was about two-thirds the usual number for a Harmony Ridge art fair.

But Leslie could count on one person to show up, even when no one else did. That person was now skipping toward her wearing a yellow sundress sprinkled with a blue wildflower print. Her sandals made puffs of dust with every skip.

"Oh wow! It's Leslie Snow, the genius diorama artist! Hey y'all, check out Leslie Snow's exhibit!"

The family with the strollers halted and turned back.

"Oh wow," Leslie deadpanned. "It's my friend Hannah, who has never brought embarrassing attention to me at an art fair before."

"You love me." Hannah stopped and leaned toward the diorama in the center of the booth, a little bigger than the rest—not in scale but in scope. Her black ponytail

brushed the model's highest cliff. "Ooh. The waterfall looks like actual water now."

"That's the goal."

"Is this the one you were trying to finish in time for the fair?"

"Yeah. I may or may not have skipped sleeping on Thursday."

Hannah glanced up, then continued to study the model. "I love the cliff details too."

"Thanks."

"When did you sleep last?"

The family was meandering their way back to Leslie's exhibit thanks to Hannah's beckoning. Leslie lowered her voice. "No worries. It's only been nine days."

"Right, of course, only nine days. But you're one of the few people I know who maintains an actual work/life balance, so I guess you're fine."

"And if I weren't, my bestie wouldn't hesitate to lecture me on self-care."

Hannah flounced her skirt. "You'd best believe it."

The family reached them. The younger girls remained in their strollers. The boy, about eight years old, stepped right up to the display table and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"I'm not supposed to touch anything," he said to Leslie.

"Thank you very much," she said.

“I definitely wouldn’t hurt your stuff, though.”

“I believe you. But this way no accidents can happen.”

He nodded and homed in on a model of a back country road surrounded by trees and populated by a single vehicle, an off-roader splashed with mud and driven by a man wearing a puffy jacket, jeans, boots, and a helmet.

“Cool,” the kid said.

“How many hours does one of these take to create?” his mom said.

As always, the wordcreatewarmed Leslie’s soul. “On average, about ten hours. The waterfall was closer to fifteen.”

“Mom, can we buy one?”

“Not today, buddy.”

“But what if...?” He sidled up to her and leaned against her hip. “What if it was my birthday present, and I got the one with the guy driving on the dirt road, and it went on top of my dresser? There’s nothing on top of my dresser right now.”

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“Well, today, we’re here to look, but that’s a very good point to consider in the future.”

The father had been studying the waterfall since he’d reached Leslie’s booth. “Can we find you online?”

“Absolutely.” She took a business card from the holder at one corner of the table and handed it to him. “I ship, but it can get expensive. We can meet up in town if you’re local.”

“We are. Thanks.”

When they moved on, Hannah beamed. “I make the best publicist.”

“You really do.”

They caught up on random small-town small talk for about an hour between the minutes Leslie spent explaining her work to various fairgoers. Then Hannah’s phone vibrated in her pocket.

“Are you ignoring your texts, or did you not notice your phone just vibrated against your body?” Leslie couldn’t imagine life with such dull senses.

“Oh, thanks.” Hannah tugged her phone from the pocket of her sundress. “Oh! It’s after four. Jake’s wondering if I’m going to stand him up on his birthday.”

“Well, don’t do that.”

“We’ve got a reservation at your steakhouse for 5:30.”

“Then get out of here.”

It wasn’t her steakhouse, but she’d long ago given up trying to tell Jake and Hannah. When she’d been promoted to head waitress two years ago, her parents and her friends had celebrated as if she’d bought the restaurant, though all of them understood her first love would always be art.

If only art could pay the bills.

Fair traffic began to dwindle. Leslie flipped through her sales receipts and smiled. With the lowest price point, her pocket-sized overhead dioramas always sold the most. But today she’d also sold five larger models, including a winter-scape that she’d been bringing to the fair since last January. An elderly couple had proclaimed it the perfect way to defy the July heat and laughed together as they paid for it. Both were so amused, there must be some inside joke involved.

Leslie’s head snapped up, and she lost track of her math. Her nostrils flared. Yes. That was a perfectly balanced scent—equal parts salt and acid—without a drop of sweat. And it belonged to neither of her parents.

She watched the cluster of people heading toward her. All human. She peered past them, and...there. The scent belonged to a man who appeared roughly her age, though age wasn’t determinable from appearance among her kind.

The man approached her with a liquid stride he didn’t bother restraining. He stopped in front of her booth and smiled without his teeth, a slow curve of his mouth that rose higher on one side. His eyes were pure blue, glittering with flecks of silver. Leslie blinked to cancel the appealing effect of him. It didn’t work.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hello. Welcome to Harmony Ridge.”

“Thank you. It’s great to see you, Leslie.” The voice of a vampire was never unpleasant, never clumsy, but this guy should be reading audiobooks for a living. Romance audiobooks.

Wait. “Sorry, do we know each other?”

He cocked his head, and a little crinkle formed between his eyes though his smile didn’t fade. “Don’t we?”

She took a moment to study. He clearly didn’t mind, stood still and held her gaze while she catalogued details and tried to match them to a memory. Those eyes—silver chips dancing in ocean blue, a perfect fringe of lash. Textured like a model’s, his blond hair was parted on the side and made interesting with natural sandy lowlights. His chin was stronger than his jaw, and his jaw was no slouch. He dressed like a model too—a snug beige Henley, attractively fitted light-wash jeans, and pale green boat shoes.

She wanted to keep studying him, but his smile was turning into a smirk. She blinked away the impact of his presence.

“I’m sorry; if we’ve met before, I don’t remember where.”

“I’m Ryker Maddox.” He grinned, a flash of pearl. “Your husband.”

Two

Great. The hot guy was a delusional stalker. Just her luck.

Slowly Leslie parted her lips to show her teeth. “I’d definitely remember that.”

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His eyebrows shot up, and he held up his hands. “Whoa. You really don’t know who I am.”

“Nope.”

“Okay, so not actual husband. Backup husband.”

“Because that’s totally less creepy.”

“From undergrad. You went to college in Virginia.”

“How do you know—?”

“The matchmaker test. I’m your match.” He pointed at his chest. “Ryker.”

She felt her mouth drop open in slow motion like a cartoon, but she couldn’t stop it. She couldn’t stop staring either. This man...was her match? This drop-dead-gorgeous man was her matchmaker match?

“No way,” she said.

“We signed a pledge, remember? If neither of us is romantically attached by age thirty, we find each other and—”

“Have you been internet stalking me?”

“No, no, not like that.” If he’d been human, he would have blushed. “I follow your

artist socials. You make the coolest stuff.” He nodded to her models. “And you turned thirty last month—remember, our birthdays are part of the test results—and unless you’ve got a never-mentioned-online husband or boyfriend, you’re still single too. So…” He spread his hands in a gesture that accentuated their masculine broadness. “Here I am. Shooting my shot. Asking you out.”

“So you are aware we are not married.”

“That was supposed to be a joke.” But he had the grace to grimace as he said it.

“Okay.” She could offer a little grace in return. “But asking me out is for real? You are actually here to ask me on a date.”

“According to the terms of the project,” Ryker said.

“What are you, a lawyer?”

He laughed. The sound was pleasantly rough, a contrast to the satin texture of his voice. “My mom is. She’ll be thrilled to hear I was accused.”

Leslie sank into the camp chair behind her exhibit table. She ought to stop staring at him, but she didn’t really want to. Then reality booted back up in her brain. She shook her head.

“This is crazy,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because you—you kept track of me and—and came here in person—and took the pledge seriously! I mean, who actually took it seriously? Besides you?”

“I remember there were two human couples who got together that way, same anthropology class and everything.” He tilted his head. “You weren’t part of the class?”

“No. My roommate Hannah was. When they needed more participants, she asked me to help her out.”

“Good thing you said yes.”

“I said no.” She kept the smile off her face as his eyebrows shot up. “So she turned the ask into a dare.”

“Interesting.” His mouth turned up in a little smirk. “I didn’t take the class either. A friend of mine told me about it, and I volunteered.”

Somehow volunteering seemed entirely in character for him, despite the fact Leslie didn’t know him at all. She shook her head again.

“You forgot the whole thing,” he said with a curious tilt of his head. “Did you even look at our results? At my picture?”

“Just because I read the results back then doesn’t mean I held on to it or...or held out hope for it. It was a silly personality survey. It didn’t mean anything.”

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He blinked slowly, the rest of his body motionless. He wasn't breathing either, come to think of it. His chest hadn't moved since she'd bared her teeth at him.

"If that hurts your feelings, I'm really sorry. I hope you didn't fly here from Virginia just to meet me."

"I did," he said with a shrug.

"Well, I'm sorry about that too, but it was your choice to go to that trouble."

"It was."

"And...well...I don't know what else to say."

"Can I take you to dinner?"

This guy. "I don't owe you dinner because you got on a plane and—"

He held up his hands again, and the twinkle left his eyes. Without a hint of humor he said, "You don't owe me a thing. Not dinner. Not anything."

"Right. Exactly."

"I'd still like to take you out."

"What would that prove?"

Another shrug. “Nothing to prove. I want to take you to dinner.”

He meant every word. Every micro-shift in his facial muscles proved it.

“I’ll consider your offer,” she said, and the silver in his eyes glittered all the more as he smiled. She raised one hand, palm out. “If you answer one question for me.”

“Sure.”

“Why are you single at thirty?”

“Oh, that. I dated some, but it never worked out. About two years ago I decided to wait for you.”

“Because the test says we’re the most compatible person the other could ever hope for.”

“Leslie, look. If you don’t enjoy the evening, then screw the test; I’ll fly home and you never have to see me again.”

He hadn’t lost his cool confidence for a moment, but she had baffled him. Well, yeah—most single women her age, even vampire women, wouldn’t protest dinner with a hot guy who had flown across multiple states for a first date. Of course he didn’t realize Leslie didn’t need to date. Her twenties had involved pining and self-doubt, but she’d made peace with the wishes of her younger self. She knew plenty of married people, and many of them were far from happy. A few hostile divorces sprinkled into the mix of her coworkers and acquaintances made her even more cautious.

“What’re you thinking?” he said.

“Either the test was totally bogus or...”

“Or?”

“Or maybe it’s worth exploring.”

His smile held real satisfaction. A little too much, actually.

Leslie jabbed a finger at him. “What’s that for?”

“You like routines, but when you work up the energy for an adventure, you’re always glad you did.”

Her mouth fell open. How much of herself had she revealed on that stupid test? “Did you memorize my answers?”

“Nah. This week I went back over them.”

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“Because you kept the test.”

“Of course I did.”

As had Leslie, but he didn't need to know that. “Okay, just to clarify expectations here, I don't know you like that.”

“Clearly. You didn't know my name.”

“Because I took the test on a dare, Ryker. I didn't plan my life around it.”

He shrugged and said no more, just studied her. He'd made his case. Now she had to make the decision. Routine or adventure.

“There's a diner two blocks up, on Main Street,” she said. “Do you eat?”

“I love to eat. But in case this is our only date, I'd like to take you somewhere nicer than a diner.”

Leslie spread her arms. “You're in the wrong town.”

“I found this Italian place that's about twenty minutes from here. Dodie's Garden.”

“Or we could get burgers at the diner.”

He went very still again, as if worried he might annoy her into calling the whole thing off. “You don't like Italian?”

“More than burgers and milkshakes? No. My favorite foods are the ones that shorten human lifespans.”

He laughed, and this time the husky sound sent a little shiver through her stomach. Then he sobered again. He might be confident, but he wasn't taking her yes for granted. She'd give him a point for that.

“If you like diner food, then we'll eat diner food.”

“Good.”

He looked around her booth for the first time. As the sharpness of his focus left her, she let out a slow breath. What was with this guy? Why did she want to know more about him?

“Why aren't you under the tent?” He gestured toward the giant red canvas shading about half the exhibits.

“It's luck of the draw,” she said.

“Everyone else is human. They should prioritize giving you the shade.”

What a weird expectation. Leslie shrugged.

He ambled around her exhibit, examining everything, and eventually halted in front of the waterfall model. “I watched the time-lapse reel you posted on this one, but seeing it in person... Wow.”

“Thanks.”

Wolf.

The gamey odor hit her full in the face. Her nostrils flared. So did Ryker's. His blue eyes flickered toward a slate gray, and the silver flecks dulled. He shifted his stance toward the scent. Leslie did too on force of instinct, but Ryker looked ready for a fight.

"It's just Ezra," she said.

"What?"

Researching restaurants before he arrived was one thing. Ryker would have to dig several layers deeper online to get hints of the wolf pack. They weren't entirely off grid, but you couldn't unearth their presence here by accident either.

"Harmony Ridge has a resident wolf pack," she said. "Just outside town, massive property ownership that goes back a couple generations. Everybody in town—I mean, everybody who's not a lupine denier—knows about them."

"They come into town?"

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“Of course they do. If Nathan had his booth set up today, you’d have caught a wolf’s scent before now. He’s super talented, a glassblower.”

“Okay....”

“The wolves here have never made a problem with the humans, or with my family either.”

Ryker’s slow blink did not restore the color of his eyes. The corners of his mouth twitched as he resisted the obvious desire to bare his teeth. “And the wolf on his way over here...you know him personally.”

“Ezra Sterling. He’s another fellow artist. He loves my stuff. The human walking with him is Willow, his mate. Wife. Mate and wife.” She still didn’t quite get how that worked.

“Uh, okay.”

“So no teeth when they get here. I’m serious. This is my town, and if you—”

Ryker raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “No teeth. Got it.”

If he didn’t heed her, she’d cancel their date.

A minute later, the wolf and his mate reached Leslie’s booth. Both of them smiled. Neither showed their teeth. Ezra immediately positioned himself between Willow and Ryker.

“Hi, Leslie,” he said.

“Hi, Ezra. Hi, Willow. Meet Ryker.” Leslie nodded toward him. The nod he gave to Ezra was stiff as steel.

“This is just a guess,” Willow said, “but the way my wolf’s bristling at the moment, Ryker’s also a vampire.”

Ryker’s mouth fell open.

Willow gave a low, nervous laugh. “Sorry if that was rude.”

“Not rude, more like a surprise,” Ryker said.

As he spoke, his eyes shifted back to their usual color. Willow’s brown eyes grew wider. “Whoa. Do you know your eyes just changed from sort of blue-gray to sort of...blue-silver?”

Ryker tipped his chin at Ezra. “Threat perceived.”

“Same,” Ezra said. To his credit, his voice held no growling undertone.

“Oh,” Willow said. “But now it’s okay? And that’s why your eyes are brighter?”

“Basically, yeah. It’s nice to meet you, Ezra, Willow.”

“Nice to meet you too, Ryker,” Willow said.

For a long moment, the wolf studied Ryker in return, then nodded. He held his position, and Willow didn’t come closer to Ryker or to Leslie. It was custom when she and Ezra visited Leslie’s booth. Both women knew Ezra’s instincts demanded he

stay between his mate and a vampire.

A few months ago, Willow had tried to apologize. “It isn’t personal against you.”

“He’d do this with any vampire,” Leslie had said, and when Ezra growled confirmation and Willow blushed, Leslie had taken pity on the human who was trying to be kind. “I’m fine with it, Willow. I’d do the same thing if I had a human mate.”

At last Ezra turned from his scrutiny of Ryker to face Leslie. “Please tell me the waterfall is here.”

“You know it,” she said. “Pictures always welcome.”

“Great. Thanks.”

A quiet pride filled her as Ezra took out his phone and snapped multiple angles—first of the waterfall model, then of several others. She’d seen pictures of his work—Ezra was far too introverted to book a public booth—so his high opinion of hers was special to her though their media were different. When he’d taken at least a dozen pictures, he came back to her.

“You sold the winter-scape.”

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“I did! Finally.”

He chuckled, and to her ears the rumbling growl of his wolf voice was clear; but as always, he'd restrained it below the level of human hearing. Ryker stiffened again, then relaxed after a few seconds. Ezra kindly didn't point it out, though he must have noticed.

Well. This was interesting.

Ezra and Willow moved on after a few more minutes. When they'd rounded the end of the aisle out of sight, Ryker gave a long sigh.

“Thanks,” Leslie said.

He gave her that funny look again, his mouth a hesitating curve while his brows drew together as though she were a puzzle. “I made that encounter way weirder for you than it would've been without me.”

“You tried to keep chill, I could tell. And you succeeded, mostly.”

He huffed a laugh, then wrinkled his nose. “I never knew they smell gamey like that, like actual wolves. I thought they smelled more or less like humans.”

Leslie rolled her eyes. “Do you know how that sounds?”

“Now that I said it out loud, yeah.”

In fairness to him, no vampire could fail to notice the distinct gaminess of a wolf in contrast to the more common scent of humans. But she'd make her point regardless. "Ever wonder how we smell to them?"

"Uh, no, I guess not."

"We're sour to their senses. So he wasn't comfortable either, outnumbered and hit with the odor from both of us."

Ryker gazed in the direction Willow and Ezra had gone. "I never thought about that. Sorry if I didn't phrase it well." He shook his head. "You grew up with wolf neighbors, and I'm clueless about them."

"I met his little brother in middle school. Funny though, I met Ezra for the first time only about two years ago, one of the town fair events. Took me a few years to get up the courage to bring my stuff here."

"Sounds like the artists I know. Dedicated, talented, convinced you suck."

She couldn't help laughing. "I'm working on it. And I tell Ezra he should too, but I think he's too reserved to exhibit his work."

Ryker nodded, but his mind seemed to be occupied now by something else. Sure enough, without segue he said, "Willow didn't react to us at all."

"Did you want her to fawn?"

He frowned. "I didn't say that. It's the human tendency, that's all. It doesn't surprise me; Willow surprised me."

"To a human who's capable of bonding to a wolf, a vampire is probably much less

impressive.”

“Huh. I’ve never met a wolf’s mate before either.” Ryker’s brows crinkled in thought. Gosh, his face was expressive. Then he flashed his teeth, and his eyes lit up. “A day of firsts. And it’s five minutes to five. Want help packing up?”

They made quick work of it. Ryker collapsed and stacked tables while Leslie secured models in bubble wrap and tucked them in careful self-bracing rows in the back of her parents’ van. Together they wrapped and boxed the pocket-sized models, then nestled the boxes in a row of their own that wouldn’t crush the larger models.

“Is that the last of it?” Ryker said.

“Sure is. Wow, that went so much faster with help. Thanks.”

“My pleasure. So...ready for dinner?” His mouth curved with that annoyingly attractive, slightly mischievous hint of confidence.

“Looking forward to it.” If only to interrogate him and even things up. Right now he had all the advantages.

No. Best to be honest with herself. She was going to dinner because Ryker Maddox intrigued the heck out of her.

Three

Of course Ryker had known what Leslie looked like before today. She’d posted a new reel on social media within the last few weeks. But in person? In person she was stunning. Becoming more attractive with age was a vampire thing. None of them looked their best at twenty; their apex nature wasn’t finished developing yet. Thirty was their prime—a prime they stayed in for the full millennium of their typical

lifespan. And Leslie certainly had reached hers.

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Her lavender top was feminine, a little frilly in places it didn't need to be. Her jeans were embroidered on the sides of her hips with pretty white flowers. Her artfully silver hair and violet-blue eyes were a knockout combination. She was slim the way all vampires tended to be, something about a metabolism that subsisted entirely on blood and took very little energy to keep running at their average body temperature of 68 degrees. Any vampire alive could out-lift any human without effort, but a vampire would never bulk up the way some humans could, even if they weight-trained for the next hundred years.

Leslie was more than attractive, though. She was interesting. And she was his ideal match.

He wished she'd agreed to the Italian restaurant over a noisier, cheaper place. He'd wanted to treat her to something special. At the Harmony Ridge diner, she had the menu memorized.

Oh well. The whole point tonight was to make her comfortable with his unexpected arrival, not to show off. "Slow the roll, son." He'd heard that advice from his dad countless times.

When he set aside his menu, Leslie said, "Questions for the local? Or are you confident in your choices?"

"Hmm, good point. Is the beef grass-fed?"

Leslie cocked one eyebrow at him. Those were silver too, not dark the way some women left them despite dyeing their hair. The uniformity was pleasant. "It's not.

The venison's local, though."

"Can I get a venison steak? Or do I have to eat it ground into hamburger?"

"You'll have to ask about that. I've never ordered steak here."

"Why not?"

"I prefer my meat ground into hamburger. Plus the job that pays my bills is head waitress at a steakhouse in the next town, so I'm kind of over steak."

Ryker blinked. Kept his mouth shut with effort.

"Did you think I'm a full-time artist?"

"Uh...yeah, I guess I did."

"Maybe someday, but probably not. Artists starve, you know."

His thoughts were tumbling down a mountainside, post-earthquake. Would she hate that he had money?

The server came with their waters, and he tried to ask questions without sounding like...well, like an apex predator who liked his meat just so. Venison steak wasn't on the printed menu, but there was a limited supply if you knew to ask.

When the server walked away, Leslie smiled with a hint of mischief. "She probably thinks you're a wolf."

"Why?"

“Venison is the only protein I’ve ever overheard them order.”

He shook his head. “Something you said earlier... It sounded like your family are the only vampires in Harmony Ridge.”

“Yep. Just the three of us.”

“Because of the wolf pack?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s just how things are here. But yeah, when I went away to college, I’d never met a vampire outside my family, and now that I’m back home, it’s just us again.”

“What about your extended family?”

“That’s a touchy subject. I grew up seeing my dad’s people, still do occasionally when we visit Knoxville. But my mom’s relatives are like...off limits.”

Wow. He sipped his water. Stalling? More like contemplating.

“What?” she said.

“Our life experiences are sort of opposite.”

“You have a lot of vampires in your life?”

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“My best friend. My wider friend circle, about a third of my work colleagues.”

Leslie’s mouth pursed around the straw of her water glass, but she stared at him rather than sipping. “That’s so weird.”

He shrugged. “Ditto. Do you actually socialize with wolves?”

“No. My best friend is human. And my coworkers, acquaintances—all human.”

He nodded. That made sense. Everyone knew wolves and vampires were natural enemies, or naturally aloof toward each other at the very least. But Leslie frowned at him.

“I don’t hang out with wolves, but I am civil to them, and they’re civil to me.”

“Huh.” Her frown was fast morphing to a glare, and he lifted his hands. “I’m sorry. I don’t have experience with this at all, and I didn’t know it was possible.”

“Why, because of ‘odor-sensitive’ vampires? That’s nonsense, Ryker. I’ve been surrounded by humans and wolves all my life. I don’t get to be ‘sensitive.’ It’s another form of prejudice if you ask me.”

Ryker sat back in the booth and draped his arms across it. Despite knowing a fair bit about her thanks to her test answers, Leslie Snow was unexpected. Challenging assumptions he’d held all his life, and he’d known her for less than two hours.

“What?” Leslie said.

“I’m willing to rethink the rest of it, but sensitive vampires do exist. I know one personally.”

Their food arrived, and Leslie dug into her diner-signature “messy burger” with the gusto of a starving human. Ryker’s venison steak was better than he’d anticipated, as were his baked potato and crispy brussels, but her ravenous ecstasy was next level.

“And I thought I loved to eat,” he said.

Her hands froze halfway to her mouth, and her eyes flared pure violet. “Should I apologize for enjoying my food?”

“Um, what?”

“Look, this might be my first date in a while, but you need to know now that I’m not going to stuff myself into a box for you. I enjoy food, and I enjoy a whole lot of simple things, and—”

Ryker raised his hands in surrender. “Sorry. I don’t know you well enough yet to tease you.”

The fire banked in her eyes, and she nodded. “Fair enough. I might be the slightest bit defensive thanks to the world at large assuming as a single thirty-year-old woman I must be abjectly miserable.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that too.”

“And just a reminder, I haven’t been waiting for my backup husband. I’ve been single by choice for a few years. You’ve got your work cut out for you.”

“I’m up to the challenge.”

“And so humble.”

He laughed, and she smiled, and he wanted to kiss her. He'd never felt attraction like this before—wanting to take her mouth with his, to talk to her into the next morning, to run his fingers through that abundant silver hair, to show her he was worth her time, to be there for her any way she wanted, any way she needed. It was a multi-faceted bloom of desire in his chest, new and stunning. He had to take care not to make a mistake. He'd shown up uninvited. Now he had to prove himself worth an invitation.

He said, “Will you tell me why you haven't felt like dating?”

“It's nothing dramatic,” Leslie said. “I've dated some, mostly in college. When I moved back to Harmony Ridge, I connected with a few guys via apps, since I don't have local options. But I don't know that it was always for healthy reasons, if that makes sense. I was trying out different relationships, desperate for one to last... When I look back now, I can see the breakups were for the best.”

“And...?”

She shrugged. “And nothing. I'm good now—busy, satisfied. I don't want to go back to that striving feeling, you know?”

No, he didn't. In fact he'd never had such a thought in his whole life. Who would he be if he ever stopped striving, achieving? He shook his head. What a puzzle she was. Or maybe she didn't mean the word the way he did.

Leslie finished her burger with gusto equal to how she'd started it, then said, “Your turn. You said you quit dating two years ago.”

He shrugged. “I decided to wait for the best option. Simple.”

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“What if the test isn’t infallible?”

“I’m sure it’s not, but I liked your answers.”

She cocked her head, and the opalescent flecks in her eyes caught the light. “Is it really that simple, or are you evading?”

“I don’t do that,” he said. Yes, two-year-old memories of a certain ruby-eyed woman flashed through his head, but he shut them off. It wasn’t evasion not to spill the story of his worst breakup on a first date. It was common sense.

Leslie cocked one eyebrow. Were his thoughts visible on his face?

“I don’t evade.” This time he might be convincing himself.

“So you waited for me because you’re incredibly romantic. Or incredibly obsessive.”

“Until I got here, I didn’t realize how it would look from your perspective. But I didn’t spend years obsessing, Leslie. I did the relational math, decided to get in contact with you in two years, and in the meantime stopped wasting my time.”

A small smirk tilted her lips. “Efficiency is very important to you.”

“Sure. Straightest path to the desired outcome.”

“Well, I’m more the type to pause on the path and enjoy the view.”

He knew that. Her test answers had hinted at it. But saying so might weird her out, so instead he nodded.

“Okay, forget the test,” she said as though he’d telegraphed his thoughts. “I’m going to treat this like a normal first date. Tell me about yourself.”

“Want to order dessert in the meantime?” He gestured to his plate. “I’ll be finished by the time it comes.”

“Perfect.” Leslie waved down a server with casual friendliness and ordered a slice of chocolate cake. As the server moved away, she said, “Don’t worry. It’s a massive slice, plenty for two people.”

“I’ll taste it, but I’m a meat-and-potatoes guy. I don’t have much of a sweet tooth.”

“Perfect,” she said again.

When he’d finished his steak and the dessert arrived, he ate two bites, not one. Even to a vampire’s palate, the cake was excellent, the chocolate flavor enhanced with exactly the right amounts of espresso and vanilla. But he ceded the rest to Leslie, and she slid the plate to her side of the table without hesitation.

“So, while you enjoy,” he said with a gesture at the rapidly disappearing cake, “anything specific you want to know?”

“First of all, what do you do, and do you like it, and would you ever want to do something else if you could?”

“I’m a forensic accountant. Started out working for a firm, went independent just over a year ago. I investigate organizations and individuals for evidence of financial crime—fraud, embezzlement, laundering, et cetera.”

The fork froze halfway to Leslie's mouth. "No kidding."

"Nope."

"Do you work with the police?"

"Primarily, yes. I've worked with insurance companies too, with nonprofits that want to verify their donors are reputable... But at this point most of my work is with law enforcement."

"You bust white collar criminals for a living."

"Yep."

"Do you give testimony? In court, as an expert or whatever?"

"That's part of the job, yeah."

"You must be good. Better than average, at least, to go out on your own and also contract with the police."

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He appreciated her conclusion but couldn't quite figure out how to respond.

"Are you trying not to brag right now?" Leslie said.

"It's only our first date."

She gave a quiet laugh. "I want to know. Come on, Ryker, I give you full permission to brag."

"I love what I do," he said, "and I'm very good."

She blinked. "That's it?"

He shrugged, but he couldn't help how the smile took over his face. "I've worked for the FBI a few times."

"A few?"

"I'm only thirty. I'm just getting started. I want to help send bad guys to jail for the next hundred years or more."

"And how'd you get into this? Any connection to your mom's job?"

"It's thanks to her job I found out about forensic accounting when I was still in high school. And I'm definitely further along my career path than I'd be without the family name."

“Maddox?” Leslie took a bite of cake, then nearly choked on it. “Wait. Isn’t there a Senator Maddox from Virginia?”

Here it was. He sighed. “Senator Laurence Maddox. My dad.”

Leslie sipped her water, blinked a few times. “Wow.”

“My dad grew up pretty poor, and he had this vision that I’d have it better. The original plan was that I’d grow up to be a CFO, make a million by thirty. To his credit, when I told him I wanted this, he supported me all the way.”

“So you’re not a millionaire.”

“No.”

She cocked her head. “What are you not saying now?”

If they dated, she’d know eventually. And he’d always believed there was no time like the present—another saying of Dad’s. “I’m financially comfortable. I have investments. Knowing how my dad grew up, I don’t take it for granted.”

“Hmm.” She forked the last bite of cake, then sat still a moment, studying it. She looked up and met his eyes, the final bite still perched on her fork. “It’s nice that you recognize what you have.”

She finished the cake as if the topic were settled. Then she set the fork down and began shaking her head.

“What?” he said.

“Compared to all that... I’m the worst cliché. I’m literally the small-town girl from

every rom-com, making ends meet by day and making art by night, having dinner with the parents once a week, getting along with the town wolf pack.”

“I’ve never seen a rom-com that included a wolf pack.”

“Oh, stop.” A smile tugged her mouth, but the light-indigo of her eyes flattened to an even paler shade that looked somehow dingy, mixed with gray. “It doesn’t bother you that my life is so...small?”

“When you put it that way...”

Leslie cast her eyes down and bit her lip.

“...the main thing I’m worried about is that some human guy wearing surprisingly tailored flannel is going to walk through that door and remind you how smitten you were with him in second grade.”

Leslie gaped at him, then burst out in a musical laugh that made his heart thump hard again. “You’re right. In the rom-com, you lose, impressive city career man.”

“Every time.”

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“You might have a shot, being a vampire. Except then I’d have to be human. If I had a nickel for every rom-com that pairs the human girl with the vampire guy, I’d be financially comfortable with investments.”

“I wouldn’t be here if you were human, Leslie.”

“You have a whole network of vampire friends and acquaintances, but you want to date some small-town girl?”

“I want to date you.”

She studied him for what felt like an hour. At last she said, “Okay then. Let’s go on as many dates as we can before you have to get back to that epic job of yours.”

“I have three days.” But he already knew three days weren’t enough.

“And no doubt you slept eight hours in preparation.”

“Six.”

Her forehead crinkled. “Don’t you need eight?”

“Nope. Haven’t since I was a teenager.”

“No wonder you live such a productive life.” She was trying to hold in the smile, then shrugged and gave herself permission to show it. “But unlike you, I didn’t know I was going to meet my one true match today, and I’ve been awake for nine days getting

ready for the fair between shifts at the restaurant, and I prefer nine hours when I do sleep.”

“But I can take you out again tomorrow, after the fair? Five o’clock?”

“I’d like that.”

Ryker resisted the desire to pump his fist in the air. He was on his way to success in winning Leslie Snow, and he was only getting started.

Four

At three a.m. Leslie said good night though she didn’t want to. Ryker promised to see her at five tomorrow evening, but it seemed too far away. She drove home in the trusty old van, left her exhibits in the back, and waltzed up the walk to her little bungalow. Inside, she dug her phone from her purse. Much too late to call Hannah. Instead she dialed Mom—her other best friend, the one who was definitely awake, who tended to sleep only on Tuesday nights.

“Les? Haven’t you been awake for nine days?”

“Yeah, but it’s fine. Listen, the most unbelievable thing happened at the fair.”

“Ooh, I’m all ears.”

“Remember when Hannah took that anthropology elective and needed more participants for her enormous semester-long group project?”

“Sure, the matchmaker test. Wasn’t it some kind of dare?”

Leslie couldn’t help laughing, picturing Ryker’s face if he could hear her mom’s

response. “Not to everyone, as it turns out.”

She launched into an account of the last ten hours. She didn’t need to be in person with Mom to experience her full reaction, reserved though she always was. Hums and encouraging commentary fueled Leslie’s story the whole way through. A surprised breath close to a hiss came over the line when Leslie mentioned Ryker’s father.

“The man’s a decent politician,” Mom said after a moment. “I don’t agree with him on every issue, but he’s respectful and honest. And I remember Senna Maddox now too; I’ve seen her interviewed after winning a big case. That woman is whip-smart and struck me as really compassionate too, in the work she does with crime victims. If they’re the same in private as they are in public, I’d be fine with them as your in-laws.”

“Mom!” Leslie fell back onto her bed and covered her eyes with her free hand. “I’ve been on one date.”

“Maybe there’s something behind that test though, Les. I’m trying to remember—did you ever meet him in person back then? For some reason I don’t think you did.”

“Nope. I took the test to appease Hannah, and then I went on with my life.”

“Well, that’s all water under the bridge anyway. He’s in town and wants to take you out. The only question is, do you want to disrupt your singleness long enough to give him a chance?”

One of the great things about Mom was how she never second-guessed Leslie’s relationship status. If she wanted to date, Mom would be in favor—but no more in favor than if she maintained happy singleness for the next couple centuries.

“You know,” Leslie said, “there’s something about him that makes me curious.”

“Well then, disrupt away.”

She let out a low laugh. “I love you, Mom.”

“Love you too. Now why don’t you go to bed?”

“I think I will.”

They hung up, and Leslie let her phone fall beside her while she stared up at the ceiling. She was pretty tired now. Ought to change out of her dusty fair clothes, put on some pajamas, crawl under the covers. But first...

She got up, knelt beside the bed, and reached under it to pull out her memory box. It was a glossy cardboard hatbox, pasted all over with cutout pictures of rabbits that ten-year-old Leslie had printed from internet sites. The round lid was held on with a woven blue cord and stiff with disuse as she removed it. Inside the box nestled the most important memorabilia of her second decade of life. These were the things that had survived multiple purges when the need for space required it. She had always pledged not to become a packrat like Dad. To that end she’d restricted herself to three hatboxes total. Everything she cared about but no longer used had to fit beneath her bed.

Ten-year-old Leslie had filled the hatbox before she turned eleven. Then she had parted with and added things over the years. She had pressed a rose, preserved her own fingerprint in plaster as the hand of an artist still growing, rolled her eyes at concert T-shirts and friendship bracelets that had seemed so significant a few summers before. She lifted the tassel from her graduation cap and set it aside. She

slid a silver ring with a garnet stone onto her little finger.

Here was the plaster fingerprint. Her right pointer finger no longer fit the mold, of course. What a sentimental little artist she'd been.

Suppose she was remembering wrong and hadn't kept the matchmaker test results? She'd certainly felt less than sentimental toward them.

A sheaf of papers, folded in half, peaked up from the bottom of the box. Leslie slid it from under a few other items and unfolded it. In the top left corner her alma mater's logo burst off the page—a purple horizon line, orange and yellow sunbeams of promise. And centered beneath that...

Your True Match!

Congratulations!

Her heart gave a solid extra thump. She drew a deep, deep breath the way humans sometimes did. It seemed to fill her body with more than oxygen. She continued reading, unable to devour the words fast enough.

Leslie Meredith Snow

your match is

Laurence Ryker Gould Maddox

Well, look at that. No wonder the name Ryker hadn't pinged her memory. She gnawed her bottom lip. To be fair, if he'd called himself Laurence, she might not have recognized that name either. Of course, as a vampire he hadn't changed much from his undergrad picture, only grown into his good looks.

Now here it was. The test itself. The answers—hers and his.

The first several pages were marked with a header: LMS. She flipped past them without glancing. Who cared what she'd said about herself ten years ago? But here—the next page's header was different. LRGM. Here he was. And his answers... They were fascinating. Some of the questions were set up on a numeric scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Every scaled question also included blank space for comments, and Ryker had commented. Every time. Some were actual fill-in-the-blank, and Leslie wondered who on earth had “graded” that section; but maybe the test was graded based on the scaled questions, and the miniature essays were just another way to get to know your match.

Would you rather give up social media or eat one meal for the rest of your life? What vampire gives up culinary variety in favor of social media? Oh yeah, guess if you're one of the vampires who thinks he's too good to eat food. Insert eye roll here.

Rank these ideals 1-5 in order of their value within your personal belief system.

Truth

Justice

Ambition

Beauty

Affability

I know how this looks, ranking ambition so high. Just being honest (see ranking #1).

Name the one book you would re-read for the rest of your life, if you could read only

one. The Lord of the Rings. In this scenario it's one book. Because I said so. I don't read a lot of fiction but I'd still pick this book over everything else I've ever read.

Would you be willing to relocate for the job of your dreams? Of course.

Would you be willing to seek a new job for a home in your dream location? Of course not.

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Could you be in a lasting romantic relationship with someone whose politics you disagreed with? This question is too vague, because some political issues are secondary and some are primary. I don't want a partner who agrees with me 100% of the time, but some political disagreements would be too big to ignore in a relationship.

The test did then ask a few political questions. Leslie bit her lip again as she read his answers to those, but...wow. They agreed about the most important issues.

Maybe there was more to this test than fodder for a dare. She kept reading. A few true-or-false added even more variety, and here he'd had no opportunity for commentary.

Sometimes revenge is justified. True.

Sometimes a white lie is justified. False.

At a social event, I...

...would rather tolerate bad food than bad music. False.

...am half-hoping no one starts to dance. False.

...am the one giving the toast. True.

Life is chaos. False.

Life is a gift not to be taken for granted. True.

I'm more than the sum of my accomplishments.

Odd. He'd left that one blank. It was the only blank on the entire test.

The final question, a return to the mini-essay, made her blink. Ryker had written a lot.

Describe your ideal date. Oh man, this one's tough. I don't think I have an ideal for myself. I like being active, up for just about any physical challenge. I like using my head too—escape rooms, dinner theater, stuff like that. I'd enjoy dinner and wine and talking, or dinner and a movie, or whatever. Really whatever. As long as she was enjoying it too. I can handle black tie and I can handle trail gear and I'm really happy with either or with anything in between. I hope she doesn't read this and roll her eyes. I'm not trying to play chameleon here. I just enjoy a lot of different experiences, and besides the most important thing on the first date isn't what I'd have fun doing but rather showing up to be worth the second date.

Where had Laurence Ryker Gould Maddox come from? Some alternate universe?

Leslie stood up, paced around her room, then flopped onto the bed again, pages still clutched in one hand. This could be real. This could be worth it. Her bones knew. Her senses thrummed with the knowledge. Everything sharpened around her—colors and angles, scents and sounds. She closed her eyes against the brightness of the ceiling light. She stilled her breathing and listened to her own heartbeat. Slow and steady, a normal thirty beats per minute. Outside her window, a stray cat darted over the grass and up a tree, its claws gripping and scratching bark. Beyond the cat, insects rasped and chirped. A pickup truck coasted down the street, some small unsecured item rolling around in the bed. Leslie smelled the feline odor, the truck's exhaust. She focused her senses and found other aromas seeping around the seal of her bedroom window. Flower beds, mostly.

She forced herself up off the bed and changed into a pink sleep shirt covered with a shooting-stars print. She turned out the light and crossed the room in what humans called “the dark,” a pleasant monochrome that Leslie couldn’t understand as darkness. To her, darkness existed only when she closed her eyes. In her bedroom, blackout shades drawn, everything was visible. Only color was missing. She hadn’t been born with night vision; her memory could vaguely bring back the day she’d first experienced it, a few weeks before she turned twelve. But her brain had so fully adapted to her vampire senses, she was mostly incapable of remembering what the world had been like without them.

She crawled beneath her duvet and let her body sink into the comfort of her bed. Nearly ten days was a long time to stay awake, and now that she’d lain here a few minutes, muscles relaxing, pulse slowing...she was tired.

She’d done a lot today. Sold a lot of art. Chatted with a lot of humans (and one wolf). Met her backup husband.

Her heart gave an extra beat, and she pressed her palm there. Tomorrow she would sell more art, chat with more people. Tomorrow she would see Ryker again. She’d be rested this time. Ready for their second date. For possibilities that had been nowhere on her horizon this morning.

Five

When Ryker slid his key card over the reader and let himself into his hotel room, the clock had passed four in the morning. He hadn’t seen a single human on his way from the lobby doors to his room. He shut the door behind him and pocketed the key card. His eyes darted to the mini-fridge as though by a magnet.

He had forgotten to slake.

As always, the realization seemed to unmute his body's demands. His left hand latched onto his throat as he darted across the room and opened the fridge. The hotel staff had done their job, filled the fridge with enough blood packs to last him a week. The rich, salty scent was like a sucker punch. His thirst increased almost to the level of pain. He snatched up one of the bags and popped the seal so fast he nearly tore the bag. He brought the little nozzle to his lips and drank. It tasted like heaven. His fangs descended in response. Unobserved, he guzzled. He groaned as the thirst lingered for a moment, punishment for ignoring his needs, but as he finished draining the blood bag, his body gave him a break. The thirst faded.

Ryker sprawled across the stuffed chair in the corner. The thirst was no big deal for him, never had been even as a young adult—until he failed to notice it thanks to some task or interest that absorbed his attention too long. His hands shook a little as he dug his phone from his pocket, but he'd be fine in a minute. Ingested blood hit a vampire's system in anywhere from thirty seconds to five minutes; and in addition to his ability to ignore the thirst for hours at a time, he'd always had an extra-quick metabolism. His fangs retracted as he dialed his best friend and set the phone on the table. Out of curiosity he'd once tried to hold it to his ear the way humans did. He'd nearly blacked out from the unbearable volume that pierced his head.

“Well? Did you meet her?”

“Yeah,” Ryker said.

“What's wrong with—? Right. You forgot to slake. Again.”

Ryker rolled his eyes. It was one of the few things a vampire couldn't hear over a phone line. “I was preoccupied.”

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“Uh-huh. Have you taken care of it?”

“Yeah, hotel room’s stocked.”

“Good. Now tell me about her.”

“Leslie. She’s...stunning.”

“How progressive of you to comment on her looks first,” Tai said, and an eye roll doubtlessly accompanied those words too.

“I mean all of her, not just her looks. Her personality. Her laugh. She gets along with wolves. She really gets into what she loves—art, food.” He perched on the edge of the bed while elation hummed in his blood. He wished he had somewhere else to be. Somewhere with Leslie. “I can’t explain her, Tai. She’s extraordinary. One of us, perfectly content in a small mountainside town despite having all this artistic talent and a college degree and...”

“Careful. Your snobbery’s showing.”

Ryker snorted. “I’m not a snob.”

“You’re one-hundred-percent a city snobanda vampire snob.” Tai was laughing now, the pure music that was the laughter of their kind. “Why shouldn’t one of us live on the side of a mountain with her art and her college degree? What makes a city inherently better than a mountain?”

“It’s just a fact. That’s all.”

“It’s snobbery and nonsense.”

“Says the guy who lives in a penthouse.”

“Because I like it, Ryker. Not because it’s a superior lifestyle.”

Tai’s opinion was a clear preference, not a settled fact. But that implied Ryker’s was too. He wrestled for a rebuttal and settled for a sharp hiss.

Tai only laughed at him some more, then quickly sobered. “Look, do me a favor, will you?”

Of course he would. Always. “Sure.”

“Check in with yourself every once in a while. Make sure you’re into her because of her and not because of the stupid test results.”

“Did you not hear a thing I just said about her? I said nothing about the test.”

“Forgive my skepticism.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re disturbingly skilled at self-persuasion.”

“You think I’ll...what? Regret coming? Get bored?”

“No,” Tai said. Not a trace of mirth in his voice now. “But don’t tell me you’ve never convinced yourself you’re happy with something that turned out not to be good for

you.”

Ouch. Ryker pushed his fingers through his hair and fought the reflex to hunch his shoulders. “This is...different.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“You’re the smartest guy I know, and your decisions are solid most of the time. But with Jacqueline, I couldn’t...” Tai gave a soft hiss. “I couldn’t say the thing to make you see it, see her clearly.”

“Leslie isn’t Jacqueline.”

“I believe that much.”

Ryker propped his head in his hand and closed his eyes, which did nothing to stem the tide of everything he didn’t allow himself to wallow in. Confusion and pain, mostly. Her eyes, that arresting shade of magenta he’d never seen before or since. The night they turned ruby-red as she sneered and sliced his heart into ever smaller pieces.

“Ryker.”

“Sorry.” He sprang to his feet and walked it off. Put it away. “You were saying.”

“Look, we don’t have to talk about Jacqueline. I didn’t mean to bring her up, but I can’t have this conversation honestly and ignore what she did to you.”

“My own fault. Won’t happen again.”

Another soft hiss.

“What?” Ryker said.

“It wasn’t your fault, man. She was pathological, and you happened to be there.”

Now it was Ryker’s turn to hiss. He lengthened the sound, a first and final warning. Not even Tai got to tell him he wasn’t responsible for letting Jacqueline deceive him for ten freaking months, flatter and promise and convince him she cared. That he meant something to her beyond his substantial paycheck, beyond the Maddox name. That when he let her see his deepest vulnerabilities, she would guard them as he had committed to guarding hers.

Turned out her vulnerabilities were all fake. And he hadn’t seen it for ten months. Despite the vampire ability to perceive a person’s every micro-expression, Ryker hadn’t seen Jacqueline using him, hadn’t seen the signs of cheating until the night she paraded every sign in front of his stupid face.

“She really enjoyed it.” The words were a dry whisper he hadn’t planned to let out.

“Like I said. Pathological.”

“Leslie isn’t.”

“I want that to be true, man,” Tai said. “And I know it probably is. But—look, if you watched a woman rip my guts out, wouldn’t you worry a little the next time I tried dating? Maybe tell me to be careful?”

He would. Of course he would, because Tai was his best friend. But Ryker wasn’t Tai.

Tai Kristiansen was an outstanding blend of confidence and benevolence that Ryker had admired for years. He was also sometimes plagued by his own nature in ways Ryker couldn’t comprehend. Certain odors drove him to distraction, and the thirst... The irony of such a deeply caring man thirsting so hard for blood was a cruel trick of the universe, if you asked Ryker.

So of course he would act to defend his friend. Tai fought enough battles. Ryker would never let him fight one alone that he could step into and help his friend win.

But Ryker didn’t need the same sort of guarding. Ryker wasn’t overly kind. Ryker wasn’t overly reactive. Ryker was an achiever, a puzzle solver, steel at the core where Tai was secretly cotton.

“I hear you,” he said despite all the ways they were different, all the ways he didn’t need help.

“Sure you do.” Definitely an eye roll there.

“No, Tai, I mean it,” and this time he did. “I’ll keep my eyes open.”

“Okay. Well. Good.”

A comfortable silence spread between them. Ryker had planned to stay in his room until sunup, nothing open and nowhere to be at four in the morning in a town run by humans for humans. But freshly slaked and still buzzing with the thrill of the last few hours, he suddenly couldn’t stand the confinement of four puny hotel walls. He snatched his keys, wallet, and phone from the table and walked out of the room, pocketing the phone carefully to avoid hanging up.

From his pocket Tai said, “Where are you going?”

“Twenty-minute drive back to Harmony Ridge, then thought I’d walk the town.”

“Good call. Keep an open mind. Treat it like a forensic case, try to solve the mystery: what do people love about living in a Tennessee mountain town?”

“Hmm.”

Ryker shut the door and jogged silently down the hall. The exit gave him two options—a small balcony outside and a stairwell to the main floor exit. He stepped out onto the balcony, and the humid night air was like a caress.

“You want to get to know her, right? Apart from a ten-year-old questionnaire. If she grew up there and chose to come back, she’s got reasons.”

Shoot. Tai was right again. “Yeah, okay, that’s not a bad point. Talk later.”

“Yep.”

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Tai hung up first. Ryker secured his phone deep in the pocket of his jeans, sprang up onto the balcony railing, and leaped two stories to the ground. He landed in the manner of cats and vampires—easy, assured, lighter than his body weight should permit. His knees bent reflexively to absorb the slight shock, and then he was back up like a spring and bounding to his rental car.

He loved being what he was. Most of his kind did, at least the ones he'd met so far. He watched humans stumble and shuffle through life and couldn't imagine being trapped in such a graceless body. Human gymnasts had to train for hours a day to flip through the air half as high, half as fluidly as Ryker could do with a mere thought.

Yes, he'd shrivel and eventually die without the sustenance of human blood. No, he couldn't abstain via willpower, couldn't survive on animal blood despite human speculation to the contrary. He couldn't sunbathe. He couldn't enjoy the sensory overload that humans daily inflicted on themselves, which he experienced secondhand in their public spaces—perfume, room spray, scented detergents and lotions, stereos with sub-woofers in tiny sports cars, earbuds shouting audiobooks and podcasts into their heads.

But there were vampire public spaces too in his city. Vampire clubs, bars, restaurants. They kept the music down, the air scent-free, the AC off at the height of summer and the heat cranked to 80 in winter. As he drove to Harmony Ridge in the pre-dawn, the mountainous horizon ahead of him darker than the sky, he wondered how Leslie coped without these spaces. Maybe he wasn't only a snob. Maybe he was a little spoiled.

He parked at the brown-brick library, the only car in view every direction he looked.

Chirping crickets and rasping katydids serenaded him from all directions. The field past the old building was alive with creatures: field mice scampering through dry brush, two or three owls hunting, an opossum or raccoon within a dozen yards of where he stood. It lumbered along as both species tended to do, and its odor made him wrinkle his nose.

Ryker set out along Main Street. At first he kept to the red-dirt shoulder, but as the minutes ticked on and not a single car drove by, he shrugged and strolled down the middle of the street. The only traffic light he passed blinked yellow on two sides, red on the other two.

When he reached the diner Leslie had chosen above pricier Italian fare, he stopped and leaned backward until his shoulderblades touched the rough wood siding. The red paint was in need of refreshment but far from run-down. The window boxes held sweet-smelling red and pink flowers. The sign was hand-painted with care: harmony ridge diner in broad cursive, and below that in block print, est. 1957.

He stayed still for a moment and tried to follow Tai's instructions, but the empty diner held no answers. He kept walking and soon hit the end of the street. Literally. His flawless directional sense told him the wide strip of blacktop leading away from downtown would take him deeper into the foothills. He made an about-face and strolled for a while longer, past the blinking yellow light again, past his rental car in the library lot, until Main Street ended again, this time branching off into various residential neighborhoods. One of those was Leslie's. This was her home. A mile or two from where he stood, she was probably asleep in her bed after nine days of wakefulness.

The first car of the morning coasted toward him, past him, and pulled over ahead of him onto the shoulder. It was at least ten years old, beige and topped with a light bar, marked with an official green seal on the side along with the words harmony ridge police.

The officer stepped out, a lit flashlight in one hand that he kept pointed at the ground between them, out of Ryker's eyes. Ryker approached him slowly, kept about eight feet of distance between them for the human's sake. The officer cocked his head and studied Ryker, utterly calm yet cautious.

"Do you need assistance?"

"No, sir," Ryker said. "I'm in town visiting a friend, and I felt like wandering for a while."

"At this hour?"

"I don't sleep much."

"Huh." He took a few steps closer, then froze. "You're a vampire?"

"That's right. Do you know the Snows?"

"Sure. Good people."

"I'm a friend of Leslie's."

"In that case, welcome to Harmony Ridge." The man didn't drop the professional persona lent by his badge, but his voice warmed. "I'd advise you not to walk in the street, but I guess you could dodge a speeding car if you needed to."

"Sure thing."

"Will you be here long enough to appreciate our town when it's awake?"

"Yeah, for a few days. I'm Ryker Maddox, by the way."

“Officer Dave West. Good to meet you.”

“Thanks for the welcome.”

They didn’t shake hands. For one thing, Officer West was on duty. For another, Ryker had never met a human who voluntarily touched him, and he preferred it that way. Their warmth, their soft skin...no, thanks. He had no idea how the occasional vampire/human couple made it work.

With a single wave of his hand, West got back into his squad car and pulled away. Ryker wandered halfway down a residential street, then turned around. Someone might happen to be awake, spot him from a window, report a prowler. He’d prefer not to scare anyone while visiting Leslie’s home.

And hang it all, Tai was right. The puzzle had taken hold of Ryker’s brain, and like every case he’d ever worked, it wouldn’t let go now until he solved it. Until he could explain for himself exactly why a talented, beautiful vampire had chosen to come home to Harmony Ridge, Tennessee.

Six

By noon the next day, Leslie could hardly concentrate on selling her art. Her senses were tuned for the moment she would smell a vampire’s presence at the fair again. Her mind kept wandering to the results of the matchmaking test. To the surging sense last night that something in her life had changed now that Ryker had entered it.

What was he doing right now? Would he wait to show up until the fair ended at five? That would be disappointing.

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Okay, enough. Focus. On her art. On the lovely people who stopped to study it, often to praise it. Her heart warmed with every word of admiration. Right now a woman around her age was walking up and down in front of her table of pocket-sized overhead dioramas, mouth open and eyes intent. She'd browsed Leslie's work for close to ten minutes and hardly glanced at Leslie.

"So cool."

"Thanks," Leslie said.

"I follow this artist on social media who makes stuff exactly like this. I love it—hers and yours. Maybe you know her? Artists are a small circle, right? And I think she's from Tennessee."

Leslie shrugged though the woman didn't look up. "I'm the only diorama artist I know personally, but I follow a few. What's her name?"

"Leslie Snow."

Leslie laughed. "In that case, hi."

The woman at last met Leslie's eyes, a crinkle between her dark brows. She gasped. "Oh my gosh, it's you."

"Yep."

"This is so exciting. Can I have your autograph?"

That was a first. “It’s not worth anything.”

“To me it is.”

“What should I sign? A business card?”

“Ooh, okay.”

Leslie fished a pen from her purse, signed the back of her card, and handed it over. The woman took it with a grin.

“Can I ask you a non-art-related question?”

“Sure,” Leslie said.

“Where do you get your contacts? I’ve paid an arm and a leg for mine for years, and I still can’t find light-shade indigo like that.”

This just kept getting more surreal. Leslie’s lips curved, though of course she didn’t show her teeth. “I don’t wear contacts.”

“Oh, come on, nobody has eyes that color except...” The woman’s eyes were indeed a plastic sort of purple that might look convincing to humans. They grew wide as she stared at Leslie for three full seconds before blurting, “You’re a vampire?”

Leslie nodded.

“No. Way. You just got so much cooler. And you were already cool.”

She wished she didn’t squirm inside whenever a human stranger realized what she was. She didn’t want to be ungrateful for the support of her art. But she was just a

person like everyone else in this town...a person who happened to eat for fun rather than nourishment. A person who happened to need a daily slaking of blood. And yeah, she could knock them unconscious with her gaze if she really wanted to...could beat them at literally any physical challenge...but she was just a person.

“Thanks,” she said, because no other reply would be polite.

The woman stayed a few more minutes. Meanwhile a delightfully balanced scent of salt and acid wafted to her, and her heart gave an extra beat.

Ryker didn’t approach until the woman moved on to the next booth. “You really are a puzzle.”

His jeans were khaki-colored today, his open-necked shirt a pale sage green and his shoes the same slip-ons as yesterday. His hair was still effortlessly perfect, his mouth a twist of intrigue and enjoyment. His eyes were blue and beautiful, alive with silver sparks.

“What do you mean?” she said as calmly as if he didn’t send her heart rate into overdrive simply by entering sensory range.

“You were uncomfortable with her.”

“Not with her. Just with her awe.”

“Why?”

Leslie shook her head. How could he need an explanation for this? “I’m not worth anybody’s awe, Ryker. I don’t know why that needs to be said.”

He studied her a long moment. The little crinkle formed between his eyes while his mouth remained half-turned up. At last he nodded. “So I was thinking today you could be my tour guide.”

“Haven’t you explored by now?” After all, he’d had all night and all morning. He could easily cover the entire town in that amount of time.

“I walked around, but I didn’t have your perspective on the place.”

She spread her hands. “This is home.”

He shook his head. “I don’t believe that’s all you have to say about Harmony Ridge.”

But it was, in a way. She wouldn’t mind showing him around, of course, but she’d keep her expectations low. She didn’t typically need anyone else to love her town the way she loved it, but she hoped Ryker wouldn’t find it dull.

“You won’t get the full experience today,” she said. “I’m committed to be here until five, and most places close at six or seven.”

“And I assume the entire town is shut up tomorrow.”

“Everything but the diner. They open at one in the afternoon, after the owners are out of church, and they close at seven.”

“Good business sense.”

“Yeah, they’re always packed on Sundays. Where are you staying, by the way?” She should have thought to ask last night.

“The closest hotel. It’s about twenty minutes from town.”

“Oh, okay, good. So you researched our blood supply before you came.”

“Sure.” He cocked his head. “There aren’t a lot of options. Where do you get yours?”

“The hotel.” She laughed at his slow blink. “I’ve got a standing monthly order with them, as do my parents. I think it’s some sort of accessibility law that they have to be stocked at all times, in case a vampire books a room.”

Ryker nodded. “It’s a law.”

Of course he would know. “You’re probably the first vampire guest that hotel has seen in at least a year. I buy from them before their supply expires.”

“What about blood bars? Did my map search fail me, or is the closest one really a three-hour drive from here?”

“No failure. That’s the closest.”

Slowly Ryker shook his head. “Have you ever been?”

“Nah. Not really interested. For me, slaking is necessity. I’ve never thought of it as

some kind of experience.”

“Same here. Food is enjoyable for me; blood is nutrition. I like the social aspect though.”

“Is that why you mapped the closest one?”

“Partly. Plus I like the security of knowing where the closest emergency access would be, no ordering required.”

Leslie had never thought much about the social element of a public space run by vampires for vampires. “Maybe we could go sometime. The cultural exposure might be cool.”

He grinned, and the effect was pure and dazzling. “I’d love to be the one to introduce you.”

For the next few hours, Ryker stuck around. He claimed the second camping chair behind Leslie’s table, which she’d set up out of habit in case Hannah stopped by. They made small talk that nonetheless added details to her picture of him, of who he’d been and what he’d been doing since college. He admitted a few of the cases he’d worked had ended up in the news. His role was one that never got publicity, so she couldn’t simply search his name on the internet to find out which cases he was referring to. But when she pointblank asked about the biggest case he’d ever helped solve, he clammed up.

“Will you tell me someday? When we know each other better?”

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“It’s not that,” Ryker said, lounging in the mesh chair with his ankle resting on his knee, looking like a model again. “It’s only...There are one or two things I’ve worked on that aren’t public knowledge for security reasons.”

“National security.”

“Yeah. It isn’t you. Tai doesn’t know details about them either.”

Tai. The best friend he referred to so frequently, the two men must talk on at least a weekly basis. “Tell me about him, Ryker. How y’all met and why you get along so well.”

“Hmm,” he said, and his eyes gained an earnestness she hadn’t seen in him before. “Tai Kristiansen. The guy is something else. Owns every room he steps into, knows ten times more people than I ever will and knows how to get crap done. But the thing is, he also watches out for people. For their welfare.”

“So it’s a meeting of the minds between you two.”

“What do you mean?”

“How you’re describing him...I would guess a lot of that describes you too.”

“Me?” Ryker shook his head. “I mean, getting crap done, yeah. I’m pretty unbeatable at that.” He gave the low, husky laugh she found so appealing. “But Tai’s next level, Leslie. The world is lucky he didn’t set out to be a con man, not that he ever would. He’s Director of Fundraising for a health research organization, and I’ve seen their

books before Tai and after Tai. They hired him during a financial downturn, and the guy not only kept their doors open; he got them to a level of thriving they didn't know was possible."

"What type of health research?" she said.

"Genetic disorders, some of which are super rare and get hardly any research funding. Tai makes a real difference."

"And it's not only a job to him. He actually cares about the people helped by his work."

Ryker nodded, the silver chips in his eyes glittering with his eagerness to praise his friend. "He comes across when you first meet him as super-efficient and super-detached, but that last one's a front. He's a total softie underneath."

"Would he be mad you're outing his soft side?"

"Probably."

She laughed. "How long have you known each other?"

"About five years... No, six now."

"Don't tell me: you met at a blood bar."

Sudden caution flickered behind Ryker's eyes. "Nope."

Interesting. His eyes had lost some of their blue, dulled toward gray as if... But how could her question threaten him? Or maybe it was a vicarious sense of threat. She tried again, too curious now not to. "If he's the networking genius you say he is,

surely he does all the vampire social things.”

“Most of them, yeah.”

“But not blood bars.”

Ryker tilted his head and studied her a moment. The crinkle formed between his eyes again, and this time the puzzle running through his mind seemed to be how much he could say. Belatedly, Leslie got it.

“He’s the odor-sensitive friend you were talking about yesterday.”

Ryker nodded once, a clipped motion.

And if Tai also avoided recreational slaking... “Are there actually vampires that struggle with control? That’s not a human legend or something?”

“Um, no, not a human legend. It’s very rare, maybe one of us in a thousand. But it’s real.”

“And Tai is one in a thousand.”

Ryker pushed a hand through his hair, and the ruined perfection only looked more stylish. “Hedefinitelywould not want me outing that.”

“You didn’t. I guessed.”

He gave a low hiss.

“I’m sorry, Ryker. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, it’s okay. We sort of stumbled into it.” He shoved his fingers through his hair again. “It’s so easy to talk to you.”

She let the words linger, soaked them up. After a moment she said, “So tell me how you did meet him and how you knew you’d be friends.”

Before Ryker could begin, they were interrupted by a chattering group of high school kids who had visited her exhibit before. The kids had a dozen new questions for Leslie, and one of the girls seemed to touch every last model. She was gentle, though, so Leslie let it go.

When the group had moved on, Tai didn’t need a reminder where the conversation had left off. Without prompting, he picked it right back up again. “We met at a restaurant. Tai was meeting with a potential donor, and I was on a first date, which was going great until she went to the bathroom. When she came back, she was fuming. Said some vampire had blocked her in and tried to grab her.”

“Not Tai,” Leslie blurted.

Ryker held up one hand. “I’m getting there. She said she threw a knee but missed him, slipped past him when he dodged. So I’m like, ‘I’ll be right back,’ and she was like, ‘forget that, I’m coming with you, let’s teach him a lesson. White guy with black hair.’”

Leslie gave a theatrical blink. “That’s not much to go on.”

“I know, right?”

She couldn’t help it. She cracked up. “Mistaken identity.”

“You stole my punch line.”

“Please tell me you didn’t actually hit him.”

“Hit? No. I caught him coming out of the corridor to both restrooms, flung him into the wall with just enough control not to crack drywall, and hissed in his face.”

“And what did Tai do?”

“Next thing I knew, I was the one pinned to the wall getting hissed at. My date got between us like, ‘Wrong white guy with black hair!’ She apologized on my behalf and explained the situation, and Tai understood.”

“How long did you date her?” Maybe this shouldn’t matter. It didn’t mostly. She was curious, that’s all.

“A few months,” Ryker said. “It was a friendly breakup, totally mutual. She got married and she’s got a kid now.”

“Oh wow. A kid.”

Ryker nodded, his eyes suddenly sharper. But it was too early to discuss their respective thoughts on parenthood...right?

“So,” Leslie said, “y’all invited Tai to join you for a drink?”

“Not exactly. When Sophia and I said good night, Tai’s contact had left, and he was paying their check. I found him to apologize one last time. We started talking. Hit it off.”

“Despite his super-detached persona?”

“Oh, that’s never bothered me.” Ryker shrugged. “Even before he let me see through it, I knew I liked the guy. You know how it is. Vampire intuition.”

“Micro-expressions and body language, you mean.”

“Yeah. We’re hard to lie to.” Was that a flinch? “Not impossible, of course.”

“I know what you mean, though. I think only a fellow vampire could lie to me. Humans don’t have the same control of their facial muscles.”

“Exactly. But even among vampires, you can usually tell, right?”

She cocked her head and waited for him to realize what he’d said.

After an awkward second, he shoved his fingers through his hair again. “Right. Not a lot of practice around here.”

“Not a lot.”

“What about college? We were a minority for sure, but we banded together pretty fast, the couple dozen of us. Come to think of it, how did you and I never run into each other in a study group or something?”

She shrugged. Hadn’t given it much thought in the last ten years, but a hint of insecurity poked at her as curiosity crinkled his face. “I didn’t seek out vampires when I got to college. My best friend and I were roommates—she’s still my best friend by the way, lives here in town—and she’s human. And way more extroverted than I am. So her friend group in college became my friend group too, and they were all human.”

Slowly he nodded. “And you weren’t curious about us?”

“At eighteen? No, not really. I was meeting Hannah’s new friends and trying to navigate the massive campus, the class schedules... It was a lot at first, and then once I’d adapted, I had plenty of people to hang out with.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Your college was bigger than your hometown.”

That he listened and understood instead of writing her off... Leslie smiled. “Exactly.”

“I bet you had all sorts of interesting conversations, being the only vampire in their group.”

“Oh yeah. There was this one guy who kept saying I was lusting for his blood,

accused me of fantasizing about ‘turning him.’ I explained over and over again—dude, that is no how it works. It’s genes. You’re born a vampire, or you’re never a vampire. Also I would never bite a human—it would be immoral, illegal... Nothing I said made a dent in his brain-loop.”

Whatever “interesting” anecdote Ryker had expected, his open-mouthed stare said Leslie had just exceeded his expectations by a thousand. “That is disturbing.”

“He didn’t last long in the group. The rest of them got together and warned him to leave me alone, and when he didn’t, they basically kicked him out.”

“Good,” he said. Maybe she was reading into his stormy glower, but Ryker seemed downright protective of her past self.

Over the next few hours their small talk was easy and comfortable, even when it highlighted the differences in their backgrounds. When the fair closed for the day, Ryker again helped her pack up, remembering in detail how she packaged and positioned the various models in the back of the van for their maximum safety. Then they set out on foot. They paused often for her tour-guide descriptions and still covered her entire hometown in less than two hours.

“And there you have it,” Leslie said at the dead end of a final residential street. “The town of Harmony Ridge.”

“I like it,” Ryker said.

“You do?”

His mouth turned up as his eyebrows crinkled. She caused that expression pretty often, come to think of it.

“What’s so funny?” she blurted.

Ryker blinked, cocked his head. “Not funny. You keep surprising me.”

“Oh.”

“In a good way,” he said. “Did you think I wouldn’t like Harmony Ridge?”

She shrugged, but... “I thought you’d be underwhelmed.”

He gave a low hum for her ears only. “Well, I’m not.”

A smile took over her face. Not funny, not underwhelming. “There’s one last place to show you. It’s one of my favorites.”

Seven

Last time Leslie had shared this favorite spot with someone else, she hadn’t felt anywhere near as free. She’d found the place on her own while exploring at full speed along a mountain trail. When she brought Hannah to take in the glorious view, she’d needed to warn her of the steepness and be careful not to endanger her human bestie, whose balance was, well, human.

But she didn’t need to warn Ryker. He wasn’t in danger at all. His excellent sense of balance, his night vision, his ability to course-correct with ease even at top speed—he was a vampire like her. She could surprise him, see his full reaction, have fun, and never have to pause to consider his safety.

“It’s a waterfall,” he guessed as they ran together along the park trail in the monochrome night.

“Nope.”

“But there are waterfalls around here, right?”

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“There’s a really tall one on wolf land, or so I’ve heard. I’ve never seen it, of course. I think I’ve visited all the rest within a few miles of town.”

“We should visit one.”

Together they leaped rocks and roots, never slowed their pace, and Leslie’s heart felt like a rising balloon. She didn’t have to check her speed with him. She didn’t have to conceal her ease of movement with him. She could be a vampire.

She could be herself.

“Okay, here it is,” she whispered ten feet from the edge, then skidded to a perfect stop as Ryker did the same.

“I was running full out like this the first time I came here.” The words poured out of her like one of the nearby waterfalls. “I wanted you to experience it the same way I did. Isn’t it gorgeous?”

For a long moment, she enjoyed the view she had returned to countless times. The sheer drop, the distant mountain slopes, the gently waving treetops far below their feet, and the far slope back up to the road that eventually took drivers away from town and toward the highway. Ryker was so quiet, he must be equally taken with this place. She turned toward him. “So what do you...?”

He stood stiff and motionless. His eyes were too wide, fixed and almost frightening, as if only the predatory part of his nature was looking out of his eyes, instead of the full Ryker. He wasn’t blinking. At all.

“Ryker?”

Nothing. He could have been a wax figure of himself.

“Ryker, what’s wrong?”

She took a step toward him, but his eyes didn’t track her. He continued to stare at the vista in front of them, arms stiff at his sides. He still had not blinked. Leslie set her hand on his arm. No response. What was happening to him? Should she call Mom?

No. No, she had to figure this out for herself. For Ryker.

Leslie slid into the space between him and the ledge. No response. Hoping he would take a step back from the edge, she nudged him with the flat of her hand.

Ryker fell like a tree.

Leslie dropped to her knees beside him. He continued staring, now up at the inky sky. Leslie waved a hand in front of his face. Nothing. She put a hand on his chest and waited for his heart to beat. When she thought it had stopped altogether, that somehow he had just died although that was scientifically impossible—unless this was one more thing she didn’t know about her own kind?—his heart gave a single thump against her hand.

“Okay, good,” she said as tears welled up. “Ryker, can you hear me? Please come back. Please say something. Please move.”

Nothing.

“Ryker, I don’t know what’s wrong. I don’t know how to help. Please.”

His heart thumped again. Then, as swiftly as they'd been running, he sprang up and leaped backward five feet into the air. He landed in a crouch over a hundred feet back from the drop. Leslie darted to him in a split second and grabbed hold of his hand.

“Ryker?”

“Sorry,” he said. The velvet of his voice was shredded, and his eyes still looked half-feral. “Crap. I’m sorry, Leslie.”

“For what?”

“Going away like that.”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“I’d rather not.”

She put an arm around him, unsure how she knew he needed it. He flinched, but he didn’t pull away. “Do you think it’s fair not to tell me?”

He scrubbed his palm up and down his hair until the style was beyond ruined, dark-blond strands now spiked in every direction. At last he said, “No. It just sucks that this happened now, while...while I’m still trying to prove I’m worth your time.”

“Is that what you’ve been doing the last two days?”

He blinked. Finally. His eyes lost their wide, wild stare. After a few more seconds, he shrugged. “Part of the gig, since I showed up here uninvited.”

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“In that case, you’re officially invited.”

“Oh. Good to know.” There it was, the crooked smile and the crinkle between his eyes.

“But don’t think you can distract me from an explanation.”

He ignored the levity in her words; instead his smile flattened. “I know.”

Leslie tugged the hand she was still holding, led him back along the trail until trees sheltered them from any hint of a long-distance view or drop. They sat side-by-side on two boulders that seemed to have been placed off the path for this purpose. Ryker’s fingers wove between hers, and his grip was strong. She ran her thumb along his knuckles, and he watched their linked hands with fixed attention.

At last he looked up and met her eyes. His face was nearly blank, but she focused on every tiny movement, and she saw past the blankness to the humiliation and...shame.

“You can tell me,” she said.

He nodded, but another few seconds passed before he spoke. “Have you ever seen a catatonic vampire before?”

“Definitely not.”

Another nod. “You know how humans do the fight-flight-or-freeze thing?”

“Sure.”

“Our version looks like...um, like what I just did. Statue mode. Playing dead. One or both depending on the situation. I came to flat on my back, so I guess I did both this time.”

“I touched you,” she said. “I nudged you back from the edge, and you toppled.”

He shut his eyes and gave a soft groan.

Gently she said, “You’re afraid of heights.”

“No. I’m afraid of falling.”

She had set him up for the worst possible shock and terror. Her heart throbbed with an extra-hard beat. “I know I couldn’t have known about this, but still—I’m really sorry.”

He opened his eyes and looked at her as if she were speaking Latin. “I’m the one who should be sorry, Leslie. It’s a stupid, stupid fear.”

“Why would it be stupid?”

“Are you serious? I’m a vampire. Last night I jumped off the second-story hotel balcony to the parking lot when I could’ve taken the stairs. So it’s not heights. It’s a height that’s too high. When I know I wouldn’t land on my feet. Even if there’s a guardrail—crap, even if there’s a window or a perfectly sturdy glass floor for tourists—my brain and my body start screaming at me that I’m going to fall and die. It’s so stupid. But I can’t not freak out, no matter how hard I try.”

The gush of words ended, and he closed his eyes again, as if he couldn’t look at her

now that she knew. Leslie used her free hand to cup the side of his face, and his eyes fluttered open, surprise layering over the shame.

“Leslie,” he said, and her name was like a song when he said it this way.

She wanted him to hear the song from her too. She unfurled the lure in her voice as she rarely did, even with her parents. Habit had nearly made her forget how—but only nearly. She said, “Ryker.”

He gave a single shiver, and a strange sort of triumph hummed in her veins.

“No shame,” she said. “Not with me.”

His mouth thinned. “It’s stupid.”

“It’s part of you, and you are not stupid.”

“I’m a vampire who’s afraid of falling.”

She squeezed his hand. He was still clinging hard to hers. “It’s just fear, Ryker. No one’s immune to it. Listen to me,” she said when he shook his head. “I’m here with you. I’m here for you. And there is no shame with me.”

He closed his eyes. He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, so slowly, over the course of a full minute. At last, sounding almost childlike, he said, “I’m not stupid?”

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“Not in the slightest,” Leslie said. “In fact you’re so impressive it’s annoying. Annoyingly attractive too. I’m telling you right now—I don’t want to hear any more about ‘stupid.’”

A slow smile lifted one side of his mouth. “Annoyingly attractive?”

Leslie gave an exaggerated sigh. “Let’s be real here. You belong in a magazine. Or a romcom—and not as the guy whodoesn’tget the girl.”

When they kissed, it was the most mutual decision Leslie had ever made with another person. They leaned in at the same time. Her thumb stroked the line of his cheekbone. He wrapped a hand around the back of her head, and his fingers sank into her hair. Their lips met, and he was delicious, and Leslie wanted to go on tasting him, grazing her fingers over the muscles of his back, savoring the press of his fingers against her scalp, tasting and tasting his kiss.

Minutes passed. They didn’t breathe. They held each other and went on kissing.

Then it ended, the same mutual choice to pull back.

“One more thing you’re good at,” Leslie said, and the melody in her own voice sent another surge of triumph through her. Kissing Ryker had unmuted the parts of her nature she kept from humans.

“You’re better.” Ryker’s voice sang too, and the beauty of it sent gooseflesh down her arms. “You’re perfect.”

Hardly, but right now, her body fizzing with joy like champagne, she'd take it. "That was..."

"Perfect," Ryker said.

"Okay, sure, it was perfect."

She kissed him again, initiating this time. This kiss was brief, and then she nestled into his chest while he wrapped her in his arms. He was solid but careful, not as if Leslie were fragile but rather as if she were something too precious to take chances with. She hummed against his chest, and her voice still resonated in her ears.

"I wish I was better at sounding like this," she said. "You know, um...lusty."

His fingers went still in the act of stroking her hair. "Better? What do you mean?"

"Muting myself is such a habit, you know. Letting go of that...cloak or mask or whatever you want to call it...isn't natural."

His fingers tightened in her hair, then relaxed again. "If it makes me a snob, so be it, but I'm sorry you've spent so much of your life hiding yourself."

"I don't mind, Ryker. Well, not usually, but...do you think it makes me less of a vampire?"

"Absolutely not." He tucked her closer to him, and she leaned in, scooting halfway off her boulder onto his. "And if I gave you that impression, I'm sorry."

She gave herself a moment to think that through, knowing she was safe to mull and decide and just be in Ryker's arms. "It might not have been you. It might have been me."

Around them, the trees rustled and sighed. Crickets, frogs, katydids, cicadas, and a random insomniac mockingbird made a lively chorus.

“The whole forest is serenading us,” she said.

Ryker gave a soft, satisfied hiss. “Apex dating ritual. They’re duly impressed.”

“You’re something else.”

“I thought I was annoyingly attractive.”

She gave a little hum. “At the moment, less annoying.”

“More attractive?” he whispered against her ear, and a delightful shiver swept her body.

“Let’s find out,” she said.

Their lips met again, but this kiss lasted only a few moments. She wanted to talk. She sensed he did too. He tugged her to her feet, and she followed him back along the trail, toward town. As they walked, he kept hold of her hand. He no longer seemed to need contact, as he had when he’d first come out of his catatonic freeze. Instead he swung their hands between them as if he felt somehow lighter. She did too.

“Ryker, who’s the oldest vampire you know?”

He glanced at her as they walked. “Random.”

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“I’ve been thinking about what your life must be like. In the city. Surrounded by our kind. You must know plenty of relics.”

“I worked with one on a case once. She was three-hundred-sixteen years old, and she loved to tell people, even humans. Quite the character and really good at her job. I learned a lot from her.”

Over three hundred. Wow. She shook her head. “The oldest vampire I’ve met is my dad’s great-grandfather at Snow family Christmas. I think he’s about a hundred and fifty. Shows up once a decade or so.”

“Typical relic, aloof and proud of it.”

“Any still in touch with your family?” This was fascinating, a conversation she’d never had before.

“Oldest relative I’ve met is a cousin somewhere on my mom’s side. He’s like...four hundred something? I was just a kid though, the last time he came around. My mom has a great-great-aunt who still keeps in touch—Aunt Donna, she’s a hundred and thirty-three. I see her a couple times a year. Outside my family, everybody in my social circle is a looker.” He darted another glance her way. “You know that term, right?”

Leslie shot him a side-eye.

He lifted his free hand. “Sorry. But I keep assuming you do know something about us, and then you don’t.”

Fair enough. Leslie cleared her throat in dramatic fashion, sounding very like a human, and recited. “Looker: colloquialism for a vampire whose true age matches their looks. Exhibit A: Leslie Snow.” She gestured to herself. “Exhibit B: Ryker Maddox. Or should I say Laurence Ryker Gould Maddox?”

Ryker’s laugh was louder than usual, and he threw his head back to indulge it. “You did look me up. You got out the old test results.”

Leslie couldn’t help grinning back. “I might have.”

“I’m taking the liberty of being encouraged by this.”

“Go ahead.” She shrugged. “Not going to lie, though, I’m a little disappointed you haven’t met dozens of centuries-old vampires.”

“Maybe I have. Martha—the woman I worked with—was an exception to every rule in the book. Most of them don’t advertise their age, and it’s terrible manners to ask.”

“So mysterious,” Leslie said.

“Maybe that’s why they do it. They get a kick out of the mystery. Or maybe it’s just too much life to explain unless you’re super trusted, in their inner circle. But when I’m three hundred years old with this face”—he pointed with a smirk—“I’ll probably be straightforward like Martha. The reactions could be fun.”

She laughed. Even at a thousand years old, she’d never want that kind of attention, but she could picture Ryker having fun with it. They kept talking, kept walking, for another half-hour—well past downtown, now along the blacktop that led to the highway, past a few red-dirt roads.

“I have to warn you,” Leslie said. “If we keep walking, eventually we’re going to

pass Lunar Lane.”

“Lunar...? Oh—as in the moon, as in wolves. Got it. Do you want to turn back?”

“That’s up to you. I just didn’t want you to be startled by the odor of the pack.”

He gave her a side-eye not unlike the few she’d shot at him tonight. “Think I’ll play dead again, huh?”

“Oh—no, of course not.”

“I’m not fragile, Leslie.”

“I know that.” She shouldn’t have said anything.

He was quiet for a minute as they continued walking, but then he shook his head. “Sorry. You were showing care, and...and it’s kind of you.”

She ran her thumb across his knuckles. “But it’s hard to take kindness, sometimes.”

“Yeah. When it’s something you despise in yourself... Yeah.”

“This has nothing to do with your fear of falling. And I know you were fine meeting Ezra yesterday. But you’d never met a wolf before this week, and I’m telling you, the collective scent of a whole pack is a lot.”

“For you too?”

“We all get along fine in town, on neutral ground; but passing their land on foot puts me on edge. I kind of want to run, because I know I’m outnumbered. But I kind of want to...fight them? Like, all of them? At one time? It’s weird.”

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“Another new experience for me,” Ryker said with a broad grin that caught the light of the waxing moon.

“It’s not exactly an old experience for me. I’ve only walked by Lunar Lane a handful of times, and always in broad daylight.”

The grin wasn’t letting up. “Okay, so...about turning back. When I was a kid, there was this empty rundown house on my block. The human kids said a vampire lived there, and he was five thousand years old.”

“Five thousand?”

“In fourth grade, even I didn’t question that detail. Pretty sure at that age I really did expect to live forever. You know, I still feel basically immortal.”

“Same,” Leslie said. “I can’t fully get my head around what it means, living for a millennium. I think thirty is too young to get it.”

“Exactly.” He shrugged. “So anyway about this house—I ask my dad, and he explains how property seizure works via the U.S. Marshals Service. How the house then went through multiple auctions and sales but no one ever occupied it again. Naturally, I try to pass this info on to my buddies, but they’re not having it. Way too dull to be believed.”

Wherever he was going with this story, she relished the peek into his childhood. No surprise Ryker was the kid trying to fact-check suburban legends. “What did you do next?”

Because surely he'd done something.

He nodded as they kept walking, ever closer to Lunar Lane. "One day we're proving our courage, running up onto the porch and punching the doorbell and dashing back to the group. When it's my turn, I'm about to hit the doorbell when a few things click in my brain."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"First," he said as if uninterrupted, "I knew relics don't tell their age, especially to humans. So these kids who've never met this alleged relic—they can't possibly know how old he is. Not even their parents can possibly know. And second, adult vampires have super-human hearing, so if any vampire lives here—never mind a relic—he already knows I'm standing on his porch before I ring the doorbell."

"Sharp thinking for a little kid." She could see him in her mind's eye, tousled blond hair and magnetic blue eyes, bouncing with mischief and studying the world around him with a mind that already sped along faster than most.

"The third thing I realized—this entire game was stupid. I wasn't scared of any vampire, however old he was. But I did want to know for sure, was the house unoccupied or not? And it was way more important to solve that puzzle than to obey my peers on a dare."

"Brilliant. What did you do?"

"I didn't punch the doorbell and run. In fact I didn't punch the doorbell at all. I knocked on the door and waited."

Aha. "And now you're game to knock on the metaphorical door of Lunar Lane?"

“Life’s pretty bland if you spend it avoiding the unknown.”

He sounded game to march straight into wolf territory. He didn’t intend any harm or offense, she knew. But he didn’t know what he didn’t know, so it was up to Leslie to make sure he didn’t accidentally disrespect her neighbors. “Was your dad right about the house being vacant?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, well, keep in mind that Lunar Lane isn’t.”

“Obviously.”

“In other words, we’re not going to trespass, Ryker. Not one step onto their territory under any circumstances, including their private road. It’s a wolf thing, and they’re extremely serious about it.”

He stopped walking for a moment, seemed to absorb what she’d said. He really hadn’t known. At last he nodded. “Thanks for making sure I didn’t do something stupid.”

“Part of my duty as a local.”

Ryker nodded again. Then he kept walking, and Leslie kept pace beside him.

Eight

As he approached the border of wolf territory, Ryker felt exactly like his nine-year-old self knocking on the door of the dilapidated structure that now lived in his memory as the “Marshals House.” He wouldn’t disregard Leslie’s instructions, of course. But he remained half-inclined to march up to the alpha’s house and knock,

just to see what would happen, to see what wolves were like on their own land, where they didn't have to turn their gaze away or whatever the heck they did to keep humans from running away screaming. Which was the alpha's house anyway? Maybe one of the two visible from the intersection, sitting on opposite sides of the red-dirt road. Did the alpha live in one of these as a sort of sentry, or was his property farther back?

Then Ryker took another step, and he forgot all his questions.

Run away. Right now.

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Stay and fight. Prove vampires sat at the top of the apex world and always would.

What? The top of the apex world? What was he thinking? Maybe he wasn't thinking at all, only reacting to the scent of a dozen wolves within a mile of his proximity. He tried to stop grinding his teeth.

"You okay?" Leslie whispered, as though the wolves might overhear them.

"Fine," he gritted out. "I just...want...to beat them."

"Beat them up?" Her eyes widened in the night.

"No, beat them. You know, win at something. I'm good at chess; I could beat any of them at chess." Wow, his thoughts were getting more ridiculous by the second.

Leslie gave a low chuckle. "Okay then."

He shook his head, and the motion helped clear some of his aggression. "My brain's been in competition mode since I was two years old. You can ask my mom. But you said yourself you want to fight them when you get near their territory."

"It's not a contest in my head. It's a weird rage-y aggression that's totally out of character for me."

Her courage was a visible thing, broadcast by the tension of her facial muscles. She was probably braver than he was, because to be truly brave, you had to be a little scared. Ryker had never had much sense when it came to things that were rightfully

scary. Or so his mom said.

His thoughts broke off again. His senses took over. Wolf. Headed this way fast. Really fast.

He hissed. Leslie set her hand on his arm, and Ryker gritted his teeth and tuned his ears, but the incoming wolf didn't crash through brush the way Ryker assumed he would. In fact, the wolf's ability for stealth nearly rivaled his own.

"That's disturbing," he muttered.

"What is?" Leslie said.

He shot a warning look at her.

She shrugged. "He can already hear us, Ryker. He's a wolf."

Curse it all. He'd never needed to know the precise hearing range of a wolf. He had to learn about them—really learn the facts after a lifetime of casually nibbling the legends.

From the nearest house came a woman's low, sleepy voice. "Jeremy? What's wrong?"

A low growl responded, and Ryker nearly cracked a tooth as his jaw spasmed tight.

"Vampires," a wolf growled from inside. "Two of them at the head of the Lane."

"Just standing there?"

"Yeah."

“Should we alert the pack?”

“Not necessary. That scent’s got every wolf on the Lane awake and growling.”

Ryker looped his arm through Leslie’s and tugged her closer to his body for protection. “We’re leaving.”

“We can’t now,” she said. “We woke up the whole pack. We’ve got to explain ourselves. Shoot, I didn’t realize our scent would wake them up. I’d have stayed out of range.”

“What’s their scent range?”

“Farther than ours.”

Crap. Crap. Crap.

When the charging wolf emerged from the overgrown brush along the side of the road, Ryker’s skin crawled. Leslie grabbed hold of Ryker’s hand and squeezed tightly, and he squeezed back, hoping she understood his promise. If this wolf came anywhere near her, Ryker would rip his throat out.

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The wolf stopped ten feet back, keeping to his own territory despite his fighter's stance: slightly bent knees, slightly fisted hands, heart pounding with such strength and adrenaline that Ryker could faintly hear the thumping. The wolf's breaths were measured and slow, yet a little tight. He was riled, all right.

"Leslie Snow," he said. "And a friend."

"That's right," Ryker said. No volunteering information, not even his name.

"We were just walking," Leslie said. "We didn't mean any harm."

"Just walking. At three-forty-five in the morning."

"We don't sleep much."

This was out of hand. Ryker allowed himself a full-on glare that held nearly as much aggression as his teeth, though not quite. "Why do you get to interrogate us, anyway? We're not on your land."

"You're ten feet from our land," the wolf growled.

"Don't tell me—you're the alpha wolf."

A deep growl rumbled in the wolf's chest. "I'm beta."

"Then please," Leslie said, "on behalf of your pack, accept our apology."

How was she talking to this wolf so calmly while her fingernails nearly gouged holes in the back of Ryker's hand?

The wolf from inside the nearest house stepped onto the porch and joined his pack brother—wasn't that what they called themselves?—in the road, their burly frames effectively blocking the way onto their land. He was taller than the first wolf, his curly hair a riot of bed-head, wearing nothing but pajama pants. The first wolf, on the other hand, was barely over six feet, compact where his fellow wolf was simply big. He wore a T-shirt and slick active-wear pants. The buzz cut along the sides of his head hinted at the military, though the top was grown out a bit.

"Go back inside, Jeremy," the beta wolf growled.

"Let me think about that for a minute," Jeremy said. "No."

Ryker stepped in front of Leslie as his heart gave a single, hard beat that almost hurt. He must not bear his teeth. He must not escalate this. Think. Stay calm. But every instinct in his body was in screaming overdrive.

"No, Ryker." Leslie stepped out from behind him with her palms up toward the wolves. "Jeremy, we're really sorry. We'll go now. Right now."

"Probably best," Jeremy said. "Leslie, right? You're the artist Ezra and Nathan talk about."

She nodded.

"Look, we don't mean to be aggressive any more than you do. But you just woke up a lot of wolves, and your scent on our doorstep is going to make everybody edgy. It's not personal."

Ryker blinked. A conciliatory wolf?

“I know it’s not,” Leslie said. “We react to y’all’s scent too.”

“There you go.” Jeremy spread his hands. Then he turned to the second wolf, whose posture hadn’t eased. “Rhett, it’s fine. Let them go.”

Let them go? Ryker would show this wolf exactly how—

A new scent hit Ryker so hard it nearly knocked him down. He coughed once as it registered in his mouth as well as his nose. What was that? Musk and...ginger?

This wolf approached with less stealth than Rhett had. He was a tower, over six-and-a-half feet and layered with so much muscle he looked like a sculpture, not a living man—until his glowing amber eyes rested on Ryker. Fight fight fight fight fight!

“No,” Leslie said. Her nails gouged his wrist. “No, Ryker.”

Fight fight fight fight fight!

“Ryker!”

Leslie’s other hand was on his chest, palm flat, pushing hard although Ryker was standing perfectly statue still. Why...? Oh. He had bared his teeth at...the alpha wolf. This was the alpha. Ryker’s entire body felt like a deep freeze, icicles piercing his skin. He had never felt this kind of wild rage before. His eyeballs felt frozen solid with the depth of vampire rage that tried to take over his body.

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Then his thoughts returned to the here and now, where the alpha wolf was standing beside the beta. He too wore only pajama pants, and his bare torso sported multiple obvious bullet scars. Eight of them. This wolf had been critically wounded at some point in his life. Had he attacked someone? Maybe in his feral form?

The curiosity tingling in Ryker's thoughts proved he was emerging from the rage. The alpha wolf did not move, did not show his teeth, simply stood there in all his power while his eyes burned like fire and he waited...waited. For Ryker to make a move. Or for Ryker to control himself.

"Okay," he said, and the velvet in his voice wasn't something he could help right now. As long as he wasn't allowing his body to attack, its other dominance strategies would kick in. "It's okay, Leslie."

The beta wolf, Rhett, growled low in his throat, and his chest heaved once. The alpha's broad hand settled onto Rhett's shoulder and stayed there, and he seemed to breathe easier after a moment. Something more was going on with Rhett. Something more than Ryker would ever be privy to.

"Leslie," the alpha wolf said. His voice was like sandpaper in Ryker's ears.

"Yes," she said. "I'm sorry. We really didn't mean any harm. We were just on a walk."

"I know that."

"Ryker hasn't known wolves, hasn't lived near y'all. He doesn't know how not to

fight you. I apologize on his behalf.”

“You’ve done no harm,” the alpha said. “You’re free to go.”

“Thank you,” Leslie said.

“Wait,” Ryker said. “I can speak for myself.”

The alpha nodded.

“Can I know your name?”

“Malachi,” the alpha said.

“If I’ve caused offense, Malachi, I’m sorry. We didn’t come here for that.”

The alpha wolf nodded. “Apology accepted.”

Turning his back on the wolves was one of the most physically difficult things Ryker had ever done. Leslie looped one arm around his waist as they retreated toward town. When they’d made half a mile of distance, the wolves at the head of the road turned toward their homes, and Ryker’s body began to relax.

Leslie tugged Ryker’s hand and broke into a jog. They made another quarter-mile of distance before she stopped.

“I’m not sure of their exact sensory range,” she said. “Generally speaking, our hearing is slightly better than theirs, and their sense of smell is slightly better than ours. But we’re definitely out of range now.”

“Thanks for intervening for me.” He had to say this first, though it rankled that she’d

had to step in on his behalf even for a moment. His control was better than that. Or it ought to be.

“I can’t believe you asked his name.” She shuddered.

“Why? Is it some guarded secret?”

“No, but under the circumstances...”

“He knew mine. I had the right to ask his.”

She shook her head. “You’re too brave, Ryker.”

“No. I was mad, not scared. Do you know what happened to him?”

“The scars, you mean?” She looked back the way they’d come as if she might catch another glimpse from here. “I have no idea. All I know is he scares me. The other wolves don’t—well, sometimes Rhett can be unsettling.”

“If we’d trespassed, the alpha might have killed us.” Ryker knew this all the way to his bones. In fairness, though... “But I don’t think he’d kill us for no reason.”

“No, he wouldn’t. I’ve talked a lot to Ezra, and he’s clear that the wolves live by a moral code.”

He cocked his head, trying to parse her contradictions. “Yet you’re scared of the alpha?”

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“He’s beyond massive. His authority is so thick I can taste it. Plus I now know he survived eight gunshot wounds sometime in his past. So I probably wouldn’t be able to kill him if I had to.” She gave another shudder. “Gosh, I hate talking like this. They’re my neighbors. I don’t want to wonder if I could kill them to defend myself. I want to be at peace with them.”

“That’s admirable,” Ryker said.

Leslie rolled her eyes.

“No, I mean it, Leslie. I’d like to be more of a peacemaker, but I’m not. It’s a profound trait to have. Profoundly good, I mean.”

“Well...thanks,” she said quietly.

“So, tour guide...anywhere else you want me to see while the humans are sleeping?”

Nine

Leslie probably shouldn’t have ended their second date around five that morning. It had seemed sensible, going home to shower and slake and recharge for a few hours. They’d agreed to meet again at nine, and Ryker hadn’t seemed to mind. But they had one day left together and no need to sleep, and after he flew home tonight, they didn’t have a plan for the next time they saw each other.

By seven, she was showered and ready for the day. Her aqua-blue trail pants and long-sleeved purple-print athletic shirt gave her a special sort of energy boost, as if

her body knew that in these clothes, she would exert herself, unleash herself. When her thick, silver hair was finally dry, she texted Ryker.

Forget 9:00. If you want, I'll meet you in town as soon as you can get there. All I need to do is slake.

His reply pinged back almost instantly.

Ryker:7:30?

Perfect. Do you have any athletic clothes with you?

Ryker:Sure.

Wear them.

He sent a thumbs-up, and Leslie went to the kitchen. Her bungalow had a lot to recommend it to a single country girl—two bedrooms upstairs, a bonus room she'd turned into her art room, and a cozy living room with a sliding door onto the patio. The kitchen was snug, only four upper cabinets and four below the modest counter space. Perfect for someone who'd rather grab a burger on her way home from work than plan and execute elaborate meals for one. Not that she needed either.

She grabbed a blood bag from the fridge, broke the seal, and poured it into her favorite extra-large coffee mug—a souvenir from the Nashville Museum of Arts, its design a wraparound replication of Monet's Lilies. She drained the mug in a few seconds, rinsed it out, and set it in the sink. She leaned against the counter and stared at the mug.

Did all vampires slake from a coffee mug? Did some prefer a wine glass or slake directly from the bag?

Ryker didn't mean to make her question her own habits. She knew this after spending almost the entirety of the last forty-eight hours with him. Still. He'd made her curious. Questions she'd never thought to ask before now seemed very important.

To give Ryker time to arrive in town, Leslie wandered over to her newest diorama, which was still in the unrecognizable stage of creation but would soon be a sand dune and a section of beach. Tiny details would make this one special: dune grass, wildflower tufts, a shell or two. Leslie studied it and tried to decide... Maybe she should include a few beachgoers and a boardwalk. Or maybe not. Some buyers connected most with the little figures and their poses in the scene; some preferred people-free nature-scapes.

Ah, well. She'd do what she usually did: choose what felt right for the individual model. This one was too new to know.

A few minutes later, she drove to town and parked in front of the diner. Then she followed her nose. Ryker smelled so good, familiar yet distinct from herself. She found him looking like a gym model in all black—trail pants and a long-sleeved athletic shirt with a white racing stripe down each arm—and peering into the front windows of the library.

“And here you'd convinced me you weren't creepy after all,” she said.

Ryker chuckled, and a pleasant dance of icicles ran along her shoulders. “I was going to browse for a minute, but the door was locked. Then I remembered it's Sunday in a small Southern town.”

They began walking along Main Street, and Leslie said, “So obviously, after two days touring Harmony Ridge, we've left no sight unseen. We've walked every street, checked out every store, eaten twice at the diner, met the wolf pack.”

He nodded, matching her deadpan with his own earnest look.

“On one of your longer match-test responses, you mentioned you’re comfortable in trail gear.”

His eyes glittered silver in blue. “Is that a challenge?”

“It’s an invitation.”

“I’m listening.”

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“Growing up here, I get a lot of my art inspiration from nature. I go out all the time and soak up the mountains. I’d like you to see them for yourself.”

“Let’s do it,” he said.

“No more drop-offs, I promise.”

“I trust you.”

Did he? That seemed fast. Did she trust him? She didn’t trust him...

Enough. Analyze later.

“Let’s go then. There’s a lot to show you, and the diner will be open by the time we get back. Any other day of the week, we could grab breakfast now.”

A crinkle formed between his eyes. “Um...breakfast?”

“Um...yes?” Why was he giving her his signature curious look? “Please tell me you eat breakfast.”

“Why would I?”

“Because you enjoy food.” She shrugged. “And breakfast food is magical and unique to all other foods.”

“Is it?”

She threw up her hands. “Okay, I know what we’re eating when we get back. The diner serves breakfast all day on Sundays. You’ll thank me.”

Ryker laughed. “Like I said, I trust you. Lead on.”

She did. All the way out of town, past Lunar Lane—yes, the wolves would wake up, but they didn’t seem to mind this time as she and Ryker darted by without slowing. She didn’t mean to be a nuisance to them. At least they’d be out of bed by the time she and Ryker passed by again.

“Whoa,” Ryker murmured without slowing his stride.

Leslie looked around her, trying to determine what had impressed him. She followed his gaze to the mountains on the far horizon. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

“They’re majestic,” he said.

“Want to hike one?”

He glanced at her as they ran. “Can we?”

“Not even a vampire can reach one of those summits in a day. They’re farther away than they look, the tallest ones. But we’ve got foothills for days. This is what I do, take off out of town and keep going for hours.”

“Let’s get as far as we can.”

Then they ran. For half an hour, nothing registered in Leslie’s body but her unleashed speed and the nature that surrounded her. The rich scents of earth and sunshine and the fresh streams and still ponds that lay out of sight no more than a mile from their path. The unsuspecting wildlife that continued their foraging and hunting close

by—sweat and fur and feathers, and beneath it all the steady course of their heart’s blood. In all of biology, the only creatures that abhorred the scent of a vampire were wolves—both animals and people.

“Hey,” she said, “do you have any pets?”

“Nooo,” Ryker said, a laugh like a melody beneath the word. “High maintenance, low return.”

“Wow, so you’re all about the bottom line even with furry snuggly animals.”

“Pretty much. What about you?”

“I had a rabbit when I was in high school, but no pets since.”

They had reached the base of the first hill, which stretched up toward the sky from their vantage point. The inclined acres were clothed in trees as far as anyone could see. Most were pine trees. The only paths up belonged to the deer.

Ryker slid to a stop and gazed up toward the peak, such as it was. “A rabbit, huh?”

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“In retrospect it’s kind of hilarious. All these aggressions and sensations emerging and adjusting in my body—one minute I’m chill and the next I want to break things. Or I’m accidentally breaking things because oh look, the super-strength is back, oops, that was my dollhouse gazebo. Gosh, adolescence was a lot. Anyway, all that going on and the one pet I wanted was the one that looked the meekest, most innocent, all twitching ears and nose.”

Ryker nodded, looking far away for a moment. “It was a lot.”

“Maybe all the chaos was why I wanted a little bunny rabbit. Maybe I needed her to balance things out.”

“Makes sense,” he said.

“I found out they’re not just meek and flighty. They can kick, and they can bite. Mine didn’t very often, though. Only twice the whole time I had her, and she was scared both times.”

“And you didn’t overreact?”

Leslie stared at him. What an awful thought. “Toward a helpless bunny? Of course not.”

“Some young vampires would have.”

She shook her head. “Was it like that for you?”

“No,” he said. “The only things I ever broke were accidental. Pencils, for one. A lot of pencils.”

He looked entirely serious. “And how often were you writing with a pencil?”

“My mom was old-school about math. Wanted to be sure I could solve problems on paper, show my work.” He tipped his chin upward. “But come on, what do I need to know about this foothill?”

Strange that Leslie would be equally content to perch on a boulder with him and chat for the next hour. “I figured we’d turn around here.”

“What? Why?”

“Well...because...tall height?” She gestured toward the slope that rose in front of them.

“It’s steep, not sheer. I can handle steep.”

She didn’t want to offend by doubting him, but the distinction betweensteepandsheerseemed awfully slim with a phobia involved.

“Really, it’s fine,” Ryker said. “Look, there’s nowhere to fall. There’s just running up and then running back down.”

He wasn’t wrong. Even if a human climber lost their balance, they’d be in for a roll, not a drop. Leslie would trust him to know his own phobia. “If you’re sure,” she said.

“One hundred percent.”

“In that case, how often do you get out into the mountains? I know Virginia has

some, and you enjoy athletic stuff.”

“I’m more of an indoor-courses guy.”

“You mean like a gym?” Surely not.

“Yep. Designed to challenge vampires.”

“But...” No way any indoor course could rival her mountains for a challenge. She shook her head. “Okay then. Let’s see how you like climbing the real thing.”

“Let’s do it.”

Then he was gone, darting up the slope in what humans called a “blur” but was, to Leslie’s eyes, a perfectly clear line of movement. She kept her eye on him and shot after him. The terrain grew steeper, but they didn’t need handholds. They kept running, leaping over boulders and fallen trees, and Leslie relished the feeling of gliding through the air like a low-skimming hawk. Her feet barely touched the soil. Her hair whipped out behind her. The wind rushed against her teeth as she grinned.

For an hour they never slowed their pace. Up, up, up they continued until they emerged from the dense foliage onto the plateau at the top of the long hill. This ground too held a thick forest. Several hundred feet away, a few startled deer fled down a narrow trail. Ryker slid to a halt and turned to Leslie. His nostrils flared, and his eyes glittered blue and silver. He was wholly himself away from the possibility of contact with humans, wholly vampire and wholly Ryker.

He was beautiful.

“The smells are amazing,” he said, and the unfurled melody of his voice brought an answering song to her heart.

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She let herself emerge the same way, released the music in her own voice. “Compared to a gym? I should hope so.”

“It’s not as if I’ve never been in the Great Outdoors before. I’ve been camping plenty of times. But I’ve never...”

Ryker shook his head, then gazed around them at the long-distance views in every direction—lush and green, so many trees, a textured tapestry of varying shades and intricate leaves. He stared up at the endless mostly-sunny sky that was nearly as blue as his eyes. He kept smiling as he looked down the long slope from where they’d come.

“Still okay?” Leslie said. “With the height, I mean.”

“Oh, yeah. No edge here.” His gaze settled on her, still looking...yes, happy, but also somehow moved. “Thanks for caring about it.”

“Of course.” Anyone who cared about Ryker ought to care about this.

“And thanks for a brand new experience, running up the side of a mountain.”

“My pleasure.”

He spread his arms over his head, then crouched and sprang several dozen lateral feet and about ten feet into the air. He landed in the branches of a pine tree. Leslie leaped after him and landed on a branch across the trunk from his perch. This man kept surprising her in the best ways.

“Well? Does this rival your gym?”

“I’m not afraid to admit it: a real mountain definitely outclasses my climbing wall.”

Then he leaned around the trunk of the tree and kissed her.

So many surprises. She kissed him back, but the stupid tree was in the way. Leslie sprang to Ryker’s branch, and he cupped her face between his hands and...and...she was humming. She sank her fingers into his delightfully soft hair, and he gave a low hum too, and they kissed. And kissed.

She murmured against his mouth, “This is...”

But then he pushed his hand through her hair and ran his fingers along her scalp, and Leslie lost her train of thought entirely. Whatever. Thoughts were overrated.

They kissed.

When they finally stopped, Leslie rested her head on his shoulder and continued playing with his hair. Ryker wound a thick strand of hers around his finger and stroked it with his thumb.

“I think this is special,” she whispered, afraid for the birds in the neighboring tree or anyone else in the universe to hear. Wasn’t it too early to know this? But she did.

“I think so too,” Ryker said.

“You make it so easy to let myself...be all of myself.”

“Mmm,” he hummed.

“What?”

“On the one hand...good. I want you to know you’re safe with me. But on the other hand, it sucks that you spend so much time muted.”

“I don’t mind, Ryker. I’ve spent most of my time muted since my vampire traits emerged as a kid.”

“Maybe it’s not as big a deal as it seems from my perspective, how I grew up. But to me...well, to me it sucks.”

“Fair enough,” she said. “I want to visit you too. See your world, you know?”

He gave a low hum that held musical layers of happiness. “I was hoping you’d say that soon, but I wasn’t counting on it today.”

“Don’t underestimate me,” she said with a nudge of his shoulder. “When I put the effort into an adventure, I’m always glad I did.” But reality dulled the sparkle of anticipation inside her. “I mean...if I can. I might not be able to get the time off.”

“If you’ve only got a day or two, we’ll make it work.”

“It’s not that.” She traced circles on the trunk of the pine, unsure why she didn’t want to admit this. “I’ve got a lot more than a day or two, but the restaurant’s really busy. My boss lets me cash out my PTO at the end of the year.”

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She half-hoped he would nod and move on. After all, he seemed fairly driven about his job. He probably didn't take much time either...besides what he'd used to meet her this weekend. The other half of her hoped he wouldn't put enough thought into her admission to realize what she meant.

Instead of either option, Ryker's face furrowed with attention. "When was the last time you took a day off instead of cashing out the time?"

"Um... Well. Three years ago, Hannah and I took a girls' trip to the Florida Keys."

"Threeyears? Leslie!"

He was actually upset? "It's a lot of hassle to get time approved. That's all."

"If your boss owes it to you, then legally he has to let you take it."

"He does. As cash. At the end of the year."

"No," Ryker said, like an emperor making a decree.

"We have an arrangement. It's been fine with me all this time." Mostly fine. "He might not love it if I go back on it now."

In contrast to his forcefulness a moment before, now Ryker's whole face scrunched up with the distaste of a young boy biting into a prune. He shook his head. Then his face smoothed again, and he held her gaze with his. Gosh, sometimes this man's mood was a whole day of Southern weather in a few minutes. Now he was steady,

intent.

“Leslie,” he said. “Please. Talk to your boss, take the time, and come see my city.”

Hours later, after a ridiculous game of tag that involved chasing each other across the plateau, dodging boulders and trees at full speed and laughing more than Leslie had laughed in years, Ryker followed her into the diner. She ordered for both of them: one order of eggs benedict, one farmer’s market omelet, a side of hash brown casserole and a side of cheesy grits. For dessert—because of course breakfast should include it too—she ordered the diner’s one-of-a-kind blueberry ricotta pancakes topped with lemon zest and lemon-flavored syrup.

When everything arrived, Ryker’s eyes widened, and the silver glints seemed to throw sparks. His mouth twisted up in the most adorable attempt not to laugh at her.

“Just taste it,” she said.

“Oh, definitely.”

She scrutinized his face as he forked a bite of egg and muffin that dripped hollandaise sauce back onto the plate.

His eyes widened. “Whoa.”

“See?”

“That’s incredible. I never eat eggs.”

“Life-changing, right?”

“Maybe. Yeah.”

Ryker hardly said another word throughout their meal. Leslie gave him more than half, mostly in order to watch him savor it. And savor he did. When they'd eaten the last two bites of dessert pancakes, he leaned back in his chair and appraised her.

"Thank you. You were right."

"You're welcome." The chilly little happiness danced across her shoulders again.

"I eat at the end of the day, after I've gotten everything done. That's when I slake too."

But that was so...sad. Leslie shook her head. "How do you get anything done without the energy from slaking?"

He shrugged. "We're energized for twenty-four hours regardless of when we slake."

"I know technically we are, but..." She tried to find the words for what felt so true in her head. "You make it sound like you don't get to slake until you've been productive."

"Right. Exactly."

"But, Ryker, that would be like...like a human having to earn water."

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Ryker shrugged yet again. “You use human comparisons a lot.”

“Hazard of living in their culture. Don’t evade.”

“I don’t do that.”

“Slaking is a life necessity, and nobody has to earn those with productivity.”

He gave a low hum of contemplation. “You’re not the first person to hassle me about my slaking habits, but nobody’s ever explained it quite like that.” Before she could push any further, he said, “I’ll think it over.”

She didn’t want to let this go. It was important to Ryker’s health, to how he perceived himself. But she hadn’t known him long enough to earn that place in his life. Then again... “If you can be worried about whether I’m taking PTO, I can definitely be worried about whether you’re slaking regularly.”

A smile pulled his mouth. “Fair point.”

An image flashed before her—herself and Ryker together, laughing and holding hands, their ring fingers tattooed as the vampire sign of...marriage.

“Leslie?”

She blinked. Met his eyes. “Yeah?”

“You okay?”

She was thrumming from the inside out. Strange that he couldn't see it. "Sure."

She wanted to tell him what she'd imagined. He'd grin his face off, no doubt.

But no, not yet. The picture felt strangely real and strangely sacred. For now Leslie would hold onto it and try to decide what it meant.

Ten

Leslie's fingers tingled with adrenaline as she used her phone app to punch out, then slipped down the corridor from the restaurant's break room to Brent's office. She tapped on the open door, and he looked up, unaware of her until she knocked.

"Hey, what's up?" He was grinning, because he had no idea what she was about to say.

"Um, we need to talk, if that's okay." Shoot. Must be more forceful.

"Sure."

Life was so much simpler when she didn't push too hard, when she let day-to-day routines carry her along like a leaf in a mountain creek. But instead here she was, digging into the creek bottom with both heels and forcing the water to part around her.

When she shut the office door, Brent's eyebrows arched. "Everything okay?"

"I think so." Depending on how this conversation went. He motioned her to the chair across from his desk, and she tried to adopt a relaxed posture as she sat. "So...about my request for time off."

“Oh, that.” His signature grin slipped a little. “Of course I’d love to say yes, Leslie, but you know how busy we are halfway into August.”

“Right. And I know how busy we are halfway into every other month of the year, too.”

His face froze. He didn’t blink.

“I’m always here, Brent. I don’t get sick. I take shifts the others don’t want. I’m a really good head waitress, and you know it. And I’m asking that you please approve my request for time off that I have earned.”

The words she’d recited on and off all day. They’d all come out of her mouth in the right order without a single stammer. She’d tried to push herself to this confrontation after Ryker’s encouragement, but instead weeks had gone by while she continued to use the timeclock app to request a long weekend...and Brent continued to ignore the requests. Then, yesterday at dinner with her parents, they’d weighed in too.

“Is that the only reason you haven’t gone to see him yet?” Mom had said with genuine shock.

Dad had shaken his head and said the thing that finally pushed her all the way to this moment, sitting in Brent’s uncomfortable office chair and delivering her speech. “Les, I know sometimes it goes against your grain to make waves, but at this point you’re letting your boss take advantage of you.”

Brent’s face slowly thawed, though his eyes remained a little frosty. “You know I’m not obligated to let you cash out your PTO.”

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“No worries,” she said. “Going forward I’ll be taking mine the same way everybody else takes theirs.”

A blink, a frown. In the silence, Leslie’s body began to prickle with suppressed energy, but she kept still and waited him out. A muscle twitched in his jaw. Brent hated silence.

“I was doing you a favor,” he said.

“Having the extra check was nice.” She had to admit that much. “But ultimately you were doing yourself a favor. Being here with my work ethic is worth more to you than the extra check.”

He gave a stiff nod. “I guess you can apply for time off, and if it doesn’t conflict with anyone else’s...”

“I already checked with the other servers, and it doesn’t. And I already applied for it. I applied three times in the last three weeks. You keep letting my request do that auto-expire thing that happens if a supervisor doesn’t see it in time.”

He shrugged. “Must’ve fallen through the cracks.”

“Okay. I’ll apply one more time. Please don’t miss it this time.”

“Sure, Leslie. No problem. Was that all?”

“Yep.”

She flashed a grin and allowed the baring of her teeth to last a fraction of a second longer than she needed to. Brent tried to cover his flinch with a clearing of his throat.

“Thanks for your time, Brent. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She maintained her brave posture until she sat behind the wheel in her car. Then her hands began to tremble. She’d done it. She sent Mom a text and got a reply in less than a minute.

You can tell Dad I managed to be confrontational today. Going to see Ryker next month!

Mom: Good for you. Still not thrilled how your boss handled it but proud of you for rocking the boat!

She sent Mom a thumbs-up emoji, then dialed her boyfriend, who picked up after a single ring.

“Hey,” was all he said, but the single word held a depth of warmth that made her close her eyes and finally, fully relax. Her breathing deepened, and her shoulders loosened. All from hearing his lovely voice and the smile in it...for her.

“Guess who just got confrontational with her boss,” she said.

“Whoa. And?”

“And in three weeks, I’ll be the one grabbing a flight for a long weekend.”

“Yes!”

“Better plan your tour stops.”

“I’ve had a tour planned since our first weekend together,” he said. “I know it probably stressed you out, but I’m glad you finally asked. That guy owes you.”

“He knows that now. Well—no, let me rephrase. He knows I know that now.”

“Good. He sounds like a jerk.”

Was Brent a jerk? Hmm. She couldn’t rule it out. They didn’t stay long on the phone, and when she hung up, another text had come through from Mom.

Mom: Dad says “Good job.”

Leslie texted back, shaking her head but unable to hold in a smile.

It shouldn’t have been a big deal. I let my boss get away with too much, like Dad said. Until today. Now to plan a weekend seeing all Ryker’s favorite vampire-friendly spots!

Mom sent a thumbs-up, but nothing else as the next few minutes ticked by. Leslie sent a final text before starting the drive home.

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Hey, have you ever been to a blood bar?

This time, she'd been home for almost an hour before Mom texted back.

Mom: I don't remember.

The words were a heavy curtain dropped between them, opaque and smothering. Leslie should have known not to ask.

She wandered around her house, for some reason needing to pace. Then she sank into her favorite stuffed chair in the den, a plum-colored beauty she'd found at a local furniture store. She worked to unclench her jaw. She didn't get to be mad at Mom for once again shutting down a conversation about vampires. Mom had her reasons. But for once Leslie let herself say out loud everything she wished she could say to Mom's face.

"We talk all the time. Woman to woman, mother to daughter, friend to friend. Why can't we talk vampire to vampire? Why, Mom?"

Eleven

If Ryker had been dating Leslie back when his parents had dated, he'd be in debt to the phone company by now. Good thing his generation had unlimited minutes and unlimited texts, because from Sunday night to Friday morning, he and Leslie were communicating one way or the other. Not nonstop, but often. Their video calls could last for hours. When Leslie had errands to run, she slid her phone into her pocket and went about her day, bringing Ryker with her. They both laughed when she told him

about human shoppers who noticed her speaking to “no one,” unable to hear him replying from her pocket without the aid of Speaker mode.

He flew to see her every weekend, counting down the days she’d get to be the tourist and he the tour guide. He bristled every time he thought about the way her lousy boss had denied her time-off requests. More than anything, he wanted to give her the financial option of quitting, of making her art full-time. One day he’d be able to.

They’d been together for six weeks when Leslie got her first real taste of Ryker’s job. He was asked by a long-time detective colleague to tackle a case with an absurd deadline. Five days to be court-ready. Turned out the forensic accountant who’d been working on it for a month had been as dirty as the fraudulent non-profit he was pretending to investigate. Ryker got the call Wednesday evening, an hour before he’d planned to be in bed and a week since he’d last slept, but he couldn’t let his colleague down. Couldn’t let down the three churches who had worked with this fraudulent organization, lost parishioners’ donations to the scam. For the first time since they’d been dating, he didn’t fly to Tennessee for the weekend.

On Sunday at five in the morning, he answered Leslie’s phone call, scolding himself for not letting it go to voicemail. He didn’t have time for a break from the documents and the numbers. But he wanted to hear her voice. “Hey.”

“Hey! I just decided my new lake scene is going to have some people in it. I want a little vampire couple walking around the lake together, enjoying each other’s company.”

“And how will your customers know they’re vampires? Are you going to give them cartoon fangs or something?”

She burst out laughing but quickly sobered. “Ryker?”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t sound great.”

“I’m fine.”

Her pause held a desire to challenge him, but instead she said, “How’s your case coming?”

“I’ve cleaned up the mess that fraudster left behind. And I think I’ve found the bad numbers from the organization itself. Just have to recheck a couple things and then write up the report I’ll give in court tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, that’s great. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” Without seeing her, he sensed when her mood sharpened. He closed his dry eyes and tilted his head toward the ceiling of his study, tilted his body back in his chair. “I’m fine, Leslie.”

“No, you’re not. You never went to bed Wednesday night.”

He pressed his lips together and opened his eyes to engage the ceiling in a stare-down. Couldn’t deny it. Wasn’t about to confirm either.

“Ryker Maddox. You’ve been up for ten days.”

“I have to finish this.”

“You have to sleep.”

“I’ll sleep when the work is—”

She hung up on him. Seconds later, a video call came through. He poked his phone screen but left the phone on the table, pointed upward. Leslie's face appeared, a pucker between her eyes.

“Ryker. Go to bed.”

“When I finish this.”

“No, now.”

“If you’re worried I’ll mess up the math, believe me—I won’t.”

“I couldn’t care less about the math right now. This isn’t about your productivity. It’s about taking care of yourself.”

“I’m a vampire, and I—”

“You’re a person, and you’re not freaking invulnerable. Go. To. Bed.”

Sleep sounded so good he nearly began to cry. Whoa. Maybe he was actually tired. He leaned toward the phone and let his face fill her screen, and she shook her head.

“You look terrible,” she said.

“I...” He pressed his fingers to his eyes, which now burned. “Leslie, I have to get this done. There’s already been a continuance; the judge said she’s not allowing another one. If my report isn’t ready to present at ten tomorrow morning, these people could get away with everything they’ve been doing.”

“I hear all of that. But you’re beyond exhausted. I can see it and I’m not even there.”

“I...”

“If you go to bed now, you’ll wake up at one in the afternoon. That’s plenty of time to be ready the next morning if all you have to do is organize and type everything

up.”

Was it? He could hardly think.

“Does this have anything to do with the matchmaker test question you didn’t answer?”

He blinked. Pressed his palm to his head, which had been aching for a full day now.

“What?”

“It was a True or False. ‘I am more than the sum of my accomplishments.’ It’s the only question you left blank.”

A flash of memory from ten years ago... Reading the question over and over, fighting with the part of him that knew the correct answer was True but feeling deep in his cold un-aging bones that for him if for no one else in the world, this was absolutely false. He was precisely the sum of his accomplishments. He tackled a thing, did it well, finished it well.

“Right,” Leslie said as though he’d responded. “Okay, we’ll talk more about this when you’re not catastrophically depleted.”

A laugh broke from him. “I’m what now?”

“You heard me, vampire.” She brought her phone close to her face. “Sorry I’m not there to say this in person, but you listen up anyway.”

He nodded.

“Ryker, you accomplish a lot, but it’s not all you are. I’m not dating you for your accomplishments. I’m dating you because you’re so much more.”

A salty lump filled his throat, and he swallowed hard. “Okay.”

“Now put the work down and go rest. You get to rest just like everyone else on the planet.”

“I can probably finish it in the next couple hours.”

“No. Trust me on this. Set an alarm if you’re afraid you’ll sleep past one, but do not set it for earlier than one. Promise me.”

He nodded.

“Say it.”

Even his laugh sounded tired now. “I promise not to set my alarm for earlier than one.”

“Good. And good night.”

“G’night, Leslie.”

The call ended.

Well, shoot. Now he had to sleep. He'd promised.

He woke up on his own, no alarm needed, a few minutes before noon. By six o'clock, he was ready for court in the morning. He sent his girlfriend a video call.

Her face filled his screen. "You look much better. Ready for tomorrow?"

"Yeah. It went pretty fast after I woke up."

"Good."

"But I hadn't made any mistakes. For the record."

Leslie rolled her eyes. "Remember how sleep was for you, not for the math?"

"Yeah." He hated to admit it, but maybe he should. "Thanks. I feel...a lot better."

"You don't say." She gave him a smirk meant to tease, but it sent sparks through his blood instead. One of her silver eyebrows lifted. "What are you thinking?"

"I want to kiss you right now."

Her little hum set the sparks inside to exploding. "Well, good news: you get to kiss me in less than a week. Also..." She bit her lip as though he needed one more reason to crave the taste of those lips, but the rest of her body language said she was suddenly

nervous. “Next time you’re here, I’d like to invite my parents over.”

Whoa. He nodded. “If you feel ready, then let’s do it.”

“I’m sorry in advance if my parents get weird about any vampire-related topics.”

He could have laughed, but she was somber. Ready, yes, but worried too. “Nothing they can say is going to bother me, Leslie.”

“Or not say. They’re more likely to clam up.”

“That’ll be okay too. Whatever happens will be okay, and it won’t be your job to keep everything smooth and easy. Okay?”

Her shoulders lowered as she finally relaxed. “You really know me.”

Knowing Leslie was pure pleasure, a gift he couldn’t hope to put into words. Instead he said, “It’s mutual, you know.”

“Hmm. I did send you to bed.”

“Exactly.”

Twelve

Leslie’s house was scrubbed to a shine, and her parents had offered to pick up takeout from the diner on their way over. She’d managed her nerves pretty well until Ryker’s first message that his flight out of Richmond was delayed. His second message regarding a second delay made her clutch loose waves of her hair in both fists and give a little shriek while standing in the middle of her immaculate house. Now, two hours before dinner was scheduled, she was finally driving home with her boyfriend

in the passenger seat. She could only hope the traffic out of Nashville didn't make them late.

Ryker watched her drive in silence, the crinkle between his eyes at an all-time crinkly record.

"It's fine," she said.

He nodded.

"I... Never mind. It's fine."

"Will they be snarky if we're late?"

"Oh, no, it's not that. I just...today I needed everything to go as planned."

Another nod, and then he reached across the console and offered his hand. Leslie laced her fingers with his, and the contact brought her a sense of calm.

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He said, “Do you want a distraction? Or no talking?”

She tightened her grip. “This is good. Thanks.”

The quiet that settled between them was simple and bracing and lasted most of the way home. Traffic wasn’t great, and by the time she drove down Main Street in Harmony Ridge, her parents would be arriving in ten minutes.

“We made it,” Ryker said.

“I guess we did.”

“Hey.” He squeezed her hand until she swiveled in the driver’s seat to meet his eyes. “We made it, and now you don’t have time to stew while we wait for them. Perfect timing.”

In minutes she had parked on her gravel driveway. Within the space of a human heartbeat, she and Ryker were outside, leaving both doors open, darting around the front of the car into each other’s arms. The kiss lasted and lasted as Ryker pushed his fingers into her hair, which she’d worn long especially for him. She ran her fingers down the lean muscles of his back and rested against the solid form of him.

At last they took a step back. Ryker kept a lock of her hair wrapped around his finger, leaned back in, and gave her a second quick kiss. “Missed you.”

“Yeah,” she said and rose on her tiptoes for one more kiss. “Perfect timing.”

In a few minutes they went inside, and Leslie put an Ella Fitzgerald record on her turntable. Ryker's musical tastes ran similar to hers—folk and jazz—but he was tragically unfamiliar with any album older than they were. Leslie was determined to broaden his appreciation for classic artists.

“Guess who,” she said, pointing to the turntable.

“Umm.” He closed his eyes a moment, then opened them. “I don't want to be wrong, but I think this has to be Ella Fitzgerald.”

“Gold star!”

A few weeks ago, she had shown off her little sound system with great pride; it hadn't been cheap, but music was too important to scrimp on. Ryker was appropriately impressed and, like her, preferred vinyl to digital. They'd both winced at digital music since they were teenagers with newly-apex hearing. It sounded squished and artificial compared to the organic depth of sound that came from vinyl records.

After only a few songs, Dad and Mom were walking in the front door. Leslie tried to see them through Ryker's eyes, noting details she took for granted. Dad was an inch taller than Ryker, with wavy brown hair and eyes such a pale blue, humans often glanced twice. Ryker did. Mom was a few inches shorter than Leslie, and her eyes were pure purple, a shade darker than Leslie's own. Her dark-blond hair was Leslie's natural color. But it wasn't only their physical appearance that Ryker would notice. The more noticeable thing to a vampire would be their energy—body language, micro-expressions, the sense of their movements and how they took up space in the room. They were at ease in her home, as always, but their characteristic reserve might not translate that way to someone who didn't know them—especially Mom's.

They both carried takeout containers in rustling plastic bags. For a moment there was no chance for awkwardness as everyone convened on either side of the bar that divided Leslie's cozy kitchen from her dining nook.

Dad handed over a container to Ryker. "Yours, I think? Breakfast sampler with a side of cinnamon chocolate chip pancakes."

"That's me. Leslie's got me hooked on breakfast food."

"By the way," Leslie said as she claimed her burger, fries, and milkshake, "Ryker, meet my mom, Debra, and my dad, Paul. Dad, Mom, this is Ryker."

"It's good to meet you, Ryker," Mom said as she read the handwritten labels on the containers and claimed the one marked `spag/mb/bs`.

"Spaghetti?" Ryker guessed.

"And meatballs and a breadstick."

"And last but not least"—Leslie handed Dad the final meal—"the only thing you ever order: pot roast."

Dad accepted the container with a mock somber nod. "If it's not broken, don't try to fix it."

As they settled around her space-saving square dining table, Leslie's throat tightened. Every cell in her body needed this not to be awkward.

"How was your flight, Ryker?" Dad said.

"Delayed," Ryker said with a shrug. "We just got back."

“It’s really something, the way y’all are making this long-distance thing work so well,” Mom said.

Another shrug. He was really leaning into the calm reserved energy. “Doing what we have to for now.”

Leslie’s shoulders stiffened. For now? Was she missing an implication there?

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But the conversation continued, and she shoved the strange tugging doubt away. Of course everything was fine. Ryker wasn't the type to imply. If he thought something wasn't right between them, he would tell her straight out. She shook off the worry and refocused on the conversation, the relaxed rapport between her parents and Ryker. Dad was asking Ryker's opinion of Harmony Ridge.

"You know, it's funny. I don't look forward only to seeing Leslie anymore. Now it's Harmony Ridge too. The vibe is special."

"We think so." Mom smiled.

"And I'm keeping track of all my 'firsts.' First visit to Tennessee, first climb up a mountain—"

"Foothill." Leslie reached out to poke his shoulder.

"Foothill, of course. First time ordering a breakfast sampler. First time meeting a wolf in person."

She hadn't warned him.

The giveaways were so quick, only a vampire would spot them. Dad blinked once, and his eyes darkened to charcoal. He blinked again, and they were pale as ever, barely blue. Mom's eyes didn't change, but a nearly inaudible hiss passed through her teeth—again, only for a moment before she pressed her lips shut.

In the next moment, or maybe it was still the same one, Mom's smile was perfectly

fine. “You’ve met the wolf artists at the fair, I take it. Nathan Corrigan and Ezra Sterling.”

“Them and a few others,” Ryker said.

Oh no. Leslie tried to glare at him both discreetly and sharply, but even as he noticed, Dad was asking, “Who else?”

The question was casual. Dad was fine now too, of course. But if Ryker gave a full answer, this evening might get worse than awkward.

“Ezra and Nathan are the only ones I’ve spoken much to,” Ryker said. “The others were more of a passing hi.”

Oh, he was good. No lies detected; no details either. Leslie wanted the release of a full, human-like sigh, but she buried it deep inside her along with every other bumpy conversation she’d had with her parents since she was a kid—almost all of them related to wolves or vampires.

The conversation moved on easily, thanks to Ryker’s aplomb and her parents’ skill at avoiding conflict. She had suspected both of them would be fascinated by his occupation, and she was right. He told them about his roots, his family, his early interest in the job he now loved. Then they insisted on singing Leslie’s praises, though she tried to redirect the conversation three times. Soon Ryker asked about her early penchant for building dioramas, and Dad piped right in with more stories that made her sound too impressive.

“Even at five years old,” Dad said, “when we’d go shopping and stop in the toy department, Leslie was most interested in the crafts aisle. First it was modeling clay. Then she discovered papier-mâché.”

“Okay, enough, Dad. Ryker doesn’t...”

But Leslie couldn’t honestly finish her sentence. Ryker’s bright blue eyes shone with interest in her. Well, she’d feel the same, if the childhood stories were coming from his parents instead of hers.

“Never mind,” she said with a smile that felt as if it came from the center of her heart. “Clearly he does want to hear this.”

“Of course,” Ryker said. “It’s you.”

Two hours later, her parents said good night.

“Thanks for tonight, Les,” Mom said softly on her way out the door.

Leslie could have hugged her, but neither of her parents were major huggers. “I’m glad you came over, Mom. It was good to have y’all.”

Mom smiled, and then her eyes glittered amethyst with mischief as she stage-whispered, “Also, Ryker is wonderful.”

Dad gave her a thumbs-up, and Leslie gave a mock sigh belied by her grin. Then they were gone. Leslie shut the door, and she and Ryker went to her living room and settled on the couch with blankets. She nestled up against his side and indulged her sigh at last.

When the sound and scent of her parent’s car had faded from sensory range, Ryker said, “I think that went well, but correct me if I’m wrong.”

“No, it was fine. Better than fine. They like you.”

He gave a low hum and encircled her with one arm. Leslie rested against him. She was sort of spent. She must have been even more anxious than she realized. Ryker said, “I assumed, given they raised you and you’re friendly with wolves... But they’re not?”

“So...you’ve hit on the big mystery of my childhood.”

“I thought estrangement from your Mom’s people was the big mystery.”

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“Oh, there’s that one too. But that one didn’t show up as often as this one. They’re sort of contradictory when it comes to wolves. They never discouraged me from getting to know pups from the pack, but—”

“Hold up. A wolf’s children are called pups?”

He was serious. Just because he’d never met one in person before visiting her town...

“How do you not know this?”

“How would I know this?”

“Let’s see. Pretty sure the entire world knows the normal body temperature of a vampire is sixty-eight degrees. Pretty sure the entire world knows that vampires sleep approximately eight hours a week. Pretty sure the entire world knows that vampires stop outwardly aging around thirty years old, that we can hold our breath for hours—”

“Okay. Okay.” He tightened his arm around her, and his thumb drew circles on her forearm. “Sorry. I did it again.”

“It’s not right, Ryker. They shouldn’t be ignored the way they are. It’s that or they’re misjudged so badly, I can’t... I’ve heard things in town that frosted my blood. One of the worst haters in town is Willow’s dad. Remember Willow?”

“Willow who loves your art? Ezra’s wife?”

Mate, but close enough for now. “Same Willow. Her father says horrible, gross things

about his own son-in-law. My parents aren't like him, but they're... I don't know how to describe it even after all these years. Talking about wolves makes them tense up, and my dad's eyes go gray every single time."

"Maybe they're like Tai, sensitive to scents."

Leslie shook her head. "If it were that, a wolf would have to be in the room to bother them. You saw all it takes is the mention of one."

"True. Hmm." Of course, now he was on the puzzle like a kitten on catnip.

"It's like they're threatened by the simple thought of wolves despite the fact they live only miles from a whole pack."

"But y'all never had a run-in with them, as far as you know? Maybe it happened when you were a kid, and you don't remember."

Maybe. But... "If they really think the pack is dangerous, they should have warned me off or something. It doesn't make sense. They weren't consistent."

"Have you asked them about it?"

"...careless questions."

Leslie jolted up on the couch at the sudden memory of Mom's voice. A shiver passed through her body. Ryker moved with her, kept his hand at her back. "Hey. Leslie. What is it?"

"No," she said. "I don't ask them. I don't ask careless questions."

"Why would this question be careless?"

“I don’t know.” What was wrong with her? She was on the verge of tears for no reason at all.

“Okay.”

Ryker’s arms came around her, and she nestled against him, pressed her cheek to his solid chest. He stroked her hair, and for a few long minutes, they were quiet.

“I have no idea what just happened,” she finally whispered into his shirt.

“I don’t think it just happened. I think it happened a long time ago.”

“And I was remembering...it, whatever it is?”

“Mmhm. Your family’s got a history with wolves, Leslie. Not Ezra’s family, probably, but some of them.”

“If that’s true, then...then I hate it.”

“I don’t know how else to explain what I saw tonight, especially how your dad’s eyes changed.”

“Don’t try to explain it then,” she said, and her fingers curled into his shirt.

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Some questions didn't get answered. She'd known this since...since she was very small.

Thirteen

Hannah Farthering was without a doubt the greatest best friend in the universe. Exhibit A: her kitchen bar, laden with burger fixings and butter buns.

"You didn't have to feed me," Leslie said.

"I know how hard you work. And I know when you're tired, you don't bother eating even though you enjoy it."

"You work hard too."

Hannah shook her head. "Not saying I don't. But I'm the part-time supplemental income in a two-person childfree household. You, on the other hand, work two jobs."

Not many people other than Dad and Mom acknowledged Leslie's art as a second job. Every time Hannah said the words, they meant as much as they ever had. Despite the momentary sensory overwhelm, Leslie hugged her friend. She stepped back quickly, but Hannah's gray eyes shone. As a hugger, she sometimes lamented the physical distance needed between her and Leslie.

"Thanks," Leslie said. "You're right, I haven't eaten since yesterday morning."

She had slaked, of course. Until she'd met Ryker, she'd taken for granted that all

vampires slaked with the same regularity that she did. Funny how easily Ryker had found a place in her thoughts—and in her daily life, despite the physical distance between them.

Nope. Not thinking about the distance.

Tonight was for her and Hannah.

“Question, though,” Hannah said. “Could I ask a favor while you’re here? Before we eat?”

“Of course.”

Hannah led her to the lower-level extra bedroom down the hallway and gestured to a large framed painting leaning against one wall.

“So, we bought this at the art fair.”

“Isn’t this Brooke Lewis?”

Hannah nodded. How good to know that a fellow local artist had made it into her home. The painting featured a blossoming cherry tree, petals falling all around and sun shining from one upper corner. A stone wall stretched into the background, ending at the far left of the painting and hinting at an unseen path to unseen places.

“I love it,” Leslie said. “It’s so you, Hannah.”

“I knew it was the thing I’d been waiting for to complete this room,” Hannah said. “Jake wasn’t sure the brightness and the pink petals would work in here, but once he saw it with the dark furniture he let me say ‘I told you so.’”

“It brightens the room just like you wanted.”

“Exactly.”

“And the favor is...?”

“I misplaced the hammer.”

Leslie laughed.

“That, or Jake used it and left it somewhere only he knows. And I’m super excited to get this beautiful thing up on the wall.”

“No problem, unless you also misplaced the nails.”

Hannah scampered out of the room, rummaged loudly in the kitchen junk drawer, and came back with a thin sturdy nail. “Centered over the desk, please.”

Leslie hefted the painting in her hands, gauging the exact weight. Then she hopped from the floor onto the heavy mahogany desk, which was L-shaped and jutted out into the room. She positioned the painting against the wall. “Here?”

“Perfect.”

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With her fingernail, she marked an X into the dove-gray paint. Then she positioned the nail, tap-tap-tapped to make a small indentation, and pushed it into the drywall at the precise needed angle for the painting's hanging wire.

"Have I mentioned how cool it is that you don't need a hammer?" Hannah said.

"You have," Leslie said.

"Well, it's still cool."

Leslie settled the picture in place and hopped down. "There you go."

"It's beautiful. Thanks, Leslie."

Together they went back to the kitchen. Hannah cooked two burger patties while Leslie sat on the kitchen island, not allowed to help.

"We've got to catch up on the last month," Hannah said. "No, wait, it's been longer than that."

"Almost two," Leslie said.

"I hate how time flies, and I'm not even thirty yet. What's going to happen to me when I'm actually old?"

Leslie never quite knew how to answer queries like this from her human bestie, but she took human aging more seriously than Hannah did. Yeah, it was easy to joke

about now, because Hannah was only twenty-nine. But what would their friendship be like in another thirty years?

“I was kidding,” Hannah said. “Well, not about time flying. But don’t get all philosophical about human life and death, okay?”

“Okay. How’s Jake?”

Hannah grimaced. “Working double shifts at the hospital. He gets home and crashes.”

“Oh, that sounds rough.” She could only imagine needing to spend a third of her life sleeping, but she hated hearing one of her human friends was exhausted.

“I’m not going to lie, he’s got me a little worried. But he says the schedule’s about to get better. In the meantime, I’m taking extra hours at the coffee shop, but...” Hannah shrugged. “I’ve been feeling sort of restless about it. I see you making your art, putting beauty out into the world. And I see Jake going to work every shift to save lives, literally; and I’ve got coworkers taking loans out to go back to school, hopefully to do what they really want to do someday. And I’m just serving coffee.”

“Any job can matter, if you’re kind about it,” Leslie said. She’d seen her best friend brighten the eyes of countless customers with her warm and genuine welcome.

“I know. But...you know that new nonprofit that opened across from the diner?”

Thanks to vampire hearing, Leslie knew more about it than most in town. She wasn’t an intentional eavesdropper; in fact she was the opposite, tuning out most public conversation out of courtesy. But occasionally strangers spoke at normal volume within twenty feet of her, and last week at the grocery store, April Fuller—elementary school teacher and alpha wolf’s mate—had done exactly that while on the phone with Vivian Jones, founder of the new non-profit.

“The concept’s still new,” Leslie said, “but Vivian wants to offer quality clothes at thrift prices. She’s going to upcycle where she can too, and depending on how much business she gets, she might go online and spread the word to nearby towns. But that’s only if she ends up with more product than people. Harmony Ridge is her focus.”

Hannah’s mouth fell open. “Eagle Ears strikes again.”

Leslie chuckled.

“Anyway, they still have a Help Wanted sign in the window.”

Oh, of course. Leslie’s hands came together in a single clap as the possibilities danced like happy icicles across her shoulders. “Hannah, you’d be amazing. You could upcycle the whole store all by yourself.”

“Maybe not quite. My sewing machine runs only so fast.”

“Do it. Apply now, before Vivian Jones hires someone inferior to you.”

Hannah laughed, and Leslie did too, loving the inspiration in her friend’s brown eyes. Serving coffee and kindness was nothing to minimize, but if Hannah wanted to try something new, something tailored to her talent with fabrics and patterns, then she should go for it as hard as she could.

Wow. Leslie almost sounded like Ryker.

“Okay,” Hannah said, “I’ll do it. And now you’re going to give me a full boyfriend update. I can’t believe the last time we talked, you’d known him for a few days. You could be married by now for all I know.”

“You know me better than that. But...well...”

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Hannah pointed the spatula at her. “You’re into him.”

“Yeah.”

“How seriously? And is he on the same page, do you know?”

“Oh, Ryker probably would be married by now if I suggested it.”

Hannah squealed and gave a single hop in place. “Yessss!”

Her enthusiasm remained at record levels as she and Leslie added toppings to their burgers and sat side-by-side on barstools.

“All the feelings are there,” Leslie said. “For both of us, I think. I know I’ve never felt so drawn to someone before. Ryker is... It’s not only that he’s great. He’s great for me. Does that make sense?”

Hannah nodded vigorously. “If I had to sum up me and Jake in a sentence, that’s it. We’re great. Not only in general but for each other. He’s my best choice, and I’m his.”

“That stupid college test was right,” Leslie said. “Ryker is my best choice.”

“Okay, but...” Hannah tilted her head to study Leslie. So far neither of them had tasted their burger yet. “Why do you sound different all of a sudden?”

She hadn’t meant to. She hid behind a bite of her burger, which became an actual

distraction as the delightful sear and juices hit her tongue, complimented by the crunch of lettuce, the acid of the tomato, the sweetness of the mayonnaise. She groaned.

“I’m glad you like it,” Hannah said with a grin.

For a minute they ate in silence. Hannah let Leslie compose her thoughts, but she didn’t want to put this one nagging thought into words. If she never said it—not to Hannah, not to Mom, not to Ryker, not even to herself—then she could ignore it forever. She could continue life without hitting the obstacle.

“Come on, Leslie,” Hannah said at last.

“He’s so far away,” Leslie blurted.

Slowly her friend nodded. “Yeah, that’s true.”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen. If one day he’ll call me and say... This long-distance thing is too annoying.”

“Hmm.”

Now it was Leslie’s turn to wait while Hannah organized her response. Both of them tended to process before they spoke. For years their friendship had been composed of honesty, mutual regard, deep talk, and deep silences. While she waited she tried not to replay Ryker’s words to her parents. “Doing what we have to for now.”

“Okay,” Hannah said at last, when they had finished their dinner and Leslie had taken their plates to the dishwasher. “First things first. Go take a peek in the fridge.”

Leslie shot her a look. “You already fed me plenty.”

“Uh-huh. Go look.”

Leslie opened the refrigerator door, and a human-sounding gasp filled her throat. Her very favorite chocolate cake, the local grocery market’s signature, occupied the middle shelf.

“Hannah! Cake!”

Hannah laughed. “Let’s have some while we untangle your problem.”

Did that mean Hannah thought it could be untangled? Maybe Leslie could hope in this. She got out plates and forks, cut two slices, and soon sat beside her friend again. She savored the fudgy cake and cream cheese frosting for several bites, and Hannah did the same.

“Okay,” Hannah said with the same tone of decision. “I think the only answer for this is...well, one you might not like at first.”

“Tell me anyway. It’s better than subconsciously spiraling about it.”

“For a minute, let’s forget what Ryker thinks of long-distance relationships. What do you think of them? Does it bother you, seeing him only on weekends?”

“For how long? Months? Years? I don’t want to do this for years.”

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Hannah nodded. “Then all that’s left to decide is which one of you has to move.”

For the first time in her life, Leslie knew what humans meant when they said they’d lost their balance. The room seemed to tilt, though it quickly righted itself. She was staring at Hannah, open-mouthed like a cartoon.

“What?” Hannah shrugged. “Plenty of people live in more than one place during their lives, Leslie. Different towns, different states, different countries even. And wait until you visit Ryker next weekend. You might fall in love with his home.”

She hoped shewouldfall in love with it. But... She shook her head. “I love Harmony Ridge.”

“It’s a normal life experience to love more than one place. To hold past homes in your heart.”

No. She wanted to scream it. Her heart gave a hard, painful beat. When she opened her mouth, she didn’t shout all the denials she felt. Instead her voice was quiet. “I don’t know if I can do that.”

Hannah reached out and set one warm hand on her shoulder, then withdrew it. “You might surprise yourself. I know a lot of people who moved someplace new and found an awesome adventure waiting for them.”

Her nod felt wooden. Her chest felt numb. Slowly she nodded.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Leslie said. “I... For some reason I hadn’t even considered one of us moving, but now it’s obvious.” She couldn’t talk about it anymore, not tonight anyway. She tried to smile and hoped she didn’t grimace instead. “I know I’m being weird right now. It feels really big. I have to think about it.”

“Sure. And we don’t have to keep talking about it. Just let me know if you want to process out loud or troubleshoot or whatever.”

“I will. Thanks.”

They enjoyed second slices of cake, a few episodes of their favorite reality show, and lots of good conversation that never returned to the subject of moving. By the time Leslie drove home, her earlier shock seemed like an overreaction. Until she walked in her door, saw her fridge, and remembered its contents—including an ornate box of chocolate-dipped strawberries Ryker had surprised her with this week. When they arrived on her doorstep, she had flooded his phone with chocolate and strawberry emojis before typing coherent words.

Oh my gosh thank you, but what’s the occasion?

Ryker: You are the occasion.

And you are the best boyfriend. I already tasted one btw. The white chocolate is something special.

Ryker: It looked like the shop is about half an hour from you? Have you been there before?

YES. Divinely Sweet. Never tried these though. Ahhhh thank you.

Ryker: It was an impulse gift, honestly. I miss you today.

How's your new and extremely complicated case coming along?

Ryker:Occupying all my brain space.

Chocolate-dipped strawberries being the exception?

Ryker:YOU being the exception.

She was falling in love at a terrifying speed. And he lived in another state.

She could move, couldn't she? For Ryker she could do anything. Couldn't she?

Leslie wandered to her art room and stood before her recently finished beach scene. Among the few carefully placed people were a tiny couple climbing the dune hand in hand. They didn't look like her and Ryker. She never inserted her own physical image into her works. But they represented a couple who climbed dunes and maybe foothills together, and Leslie's private head-canon for the little figures was that they had connected years after a matchmaking test claimed they were perfect for one another.

She wandered the room until she stood in front of her waterfall and the mountain from which it sprang. She ran her thumb over the peaks. She closed her eyes and knew where she needed to be.

In minutes, she was there, having run from her neighborhood to the outskirts of town at full speed. She avoided Lunar Lane, headed straight up into the foothills. She traveled in broad leaps and bounds, up and up and up until she reached a flat ledge that looked back down on her town. Her home. Shadowed with only a few streetlights. Residential neighborhoods lit dimly from the other side of windows.

"I love you," she whispered to her hometown.

Out here under the night sky, everything was clear in a moment. She knew herself. She knew Ryker. And she had to talk to him. Now. Right now. She had to tell him why their relationship had to end.

Fourteen

Claire had threatened to drag him out of his condo if he didn't join their friend group at the blood bar tonight. Ryker had made a counteroffer: he would enjoy a night out as his reward for cracking the toughest case he'd had this year. Of course, she'd refused.

"Tonight, Maddox. If you don't show up, we'll come for you."

He hated admitting it even to himself, but maybe a break would help him think better when he returned to the documents he'd been scouring for three days and three nights. Leslie's words about resting for his own sake, seeing that the world didn't tend that day weeks ago after he let himself sleep before his work was done... It had all sprouted roots deep inside him, made him rethink his need to push himself beyond his limits. Maybe...maybe he was more than the sum of his accomplishments. Maybe he was a person who was allowed to take a break and see friends.

He got in his car and started driving, and he was almost to the bar when his phone buzzed from his car's center console. He swiped to accept the call and set it back in its place. He was already smiling. Regardless of mental fatigue and mathematical annoyance, he couldn't take a call from Leslie without smiling.

"Have a good time with Hannah?"

"Ryker." Unshed tears strained her voice.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

“We have to talk.”

“Are you okay? Are you safe?”

“I’m safe. I’m not hurt or anything like that. But I’m not okay.”

He turned into a bank parking lot, long since closed for the evening, and shut off his car. He would sit here as long as she needed him. But Leslie had gone quiet.

“What do we need to talk about?”

“Us. We have to talk about us.”

Frozen panic gripped his chest. He didn’t breathe. At all. He kept his voice calm and open, but it took every ounce of will he had. “I’m listening, Leslie.”

“Long distance isn’t going to work. Not long-term.”

He’d worked this puzzle as best he could, but pitching his solution to Leslie after dating barely two months had seemed potentially off-putting, so he’d kept it to himself and continued ironing out the details. But now wasn’t the time to pitch either, not while she was so upset. So instead he only said, “I agree.”

“I knew you would.”

“We can work on a plan.”

“No. We can’t.”

The cold fist squeezing his chest seemed to grow claws. He rested his forehead on the steering wheel. His hands curled tightly at his sides.

“I’m sorry,” Leslie said. “I thought I’d do anything for you, Ryker. I thought I’d even move to Virginia. But I wouldn’t be myself. I wouldn’t be the same artist or the same person, and—and I’ve tried to talk myself into doing it anyway, but I can’t.” She heaved a hard, dry sob. “I can’t.”

Ryker fought to regain his own calm. She hadn’t said she didn’t love him. His fists opened a little. He drew in a ragged breath that sounded weak as a human’s.

She said, “I know I’m hurting you, and I’m so, so sorry. But the only way for me to let go of Harmony Ridge is to become someone else. It’s like I’m being torn in half just thinking about moving away.”

The tears were rising in her voice, threatening to break free. Ryker picked up his phone from the console and cradled it in his hands as if he could comfort her this way.

“We’re going to figure this out, Leslie.”

“There’s nothing to figure out. I won’t ask you to do something I’m not able to do. It would be wrong, and—and over time we’d resent each other. Because that’s what always happens when you give up too many pieces of yourself to make the other person happy.”

“When did I ask you to give up pieces of yourself?”

Shoot, he didn’t mean to snap. He nearly crushed the phone by accident, a mistake he hadn’t made since he was sixteen years old. He dropped it into his lap and rested his forehead on the wheel again.

“You haven’t yet,” she said.

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“Yet? I’m never going to do that. Not ever.”

“I know you believe that now, but if someone’s going to move, it has to be me.”

“I’ve never said or implied that, because I’ve never thought it.”

“We both know you can’t move here. You’d shrivel up. You love your city the way I love Harmony Ridge.”

He did love it here. He loved his condo, loved his family and friends, loved his work and all the contacts he’d established locally that ensured he was never between contracts. He loved the walkable areas downtown, the vibrant vampire community’s many gathering spaces. But there was no reason he couldn’t have everything he loved. No reason at all, unless—unless he’d fooled himself this whole time.

“Don’t do this,” he said, and in his own ears his voice sounded...dead.

“We have to be realistic, Ryker. There’s no way around the problem.”

“So you’re breaking up with me.” She had to say it. If she wanted this, she had to say it. “Leslie?”

“I...I’m...”

She didn’t surrender to the tears; but instead of them, a high, musical keening sounded from the phone. Ryker threw open the car door and got out. He had to make distance from the sound. It throbbed in his ears and in his heart, which felt as though

someone had torn it from his chest and stomped on it. He stood half-bent, one hand braced on the roof of the car. He curled his fingers around the edge of the roof and almost left dents in the shape of his fingers.

Over the next few minutes, Leslie's soft cry faded. At last she whispered, "I...I think I should hang up now."

"No." He wasn't doing this right. He had to fight harder to keep her, to tell her, to show her. He had to. "Don't leave me, Leslie, please don't. Please don't."

"I have to. I'm so, so sorry."

The call ended.

Ryker fell to his knees on the blacktop and rocked back and forth. He lost track of time as he huddled there. He'd been wrong. Falling for Leslie had softened him, warped the steel. He should have known better; no, he did know better. No excuse. Jacqueline had shown him, and now Leslie was showing him.

He wasn't worth fighting for, wasn't worth keeping.

This fall hurt so much more than any other kind. He'd rather plunge over the edge of a mountain and break all his bones than fall like this—in love but not worth it, not really wanted.

Wow. He was pathetic.

He got up from his shrunken posture on the ground. He got into his car and turned back toward home.

He dove into his work with a strangely numb aggression. His headache grew. An

hour passed. His phone buzzed and buzzed with calls from his friends. But none of it mattered. He was working. He was accomplishing. He was doing the thing that made him matter.

He smelled the vehicle chock-full of vampires when it turned onto his street. Freaking vampires, what were they thinking?

He'd left the door unlocked. It opened to admit every last one of them. Mackey, Philippa, Nova, Logan, and even Claire. She'd made someone cover for her at the bar. Well, as the owner she could do that.

"Ryker!" Logan hollered at a volume to make all of them wince.

They stampeded into his study one after the other and stood around his desk in a half-circle. The eyes of his friends were flashing jewel tones. They stared at him with varying combinations of relief, worry, and anger—all except Mackey, who as usual appeared merely intrigued. The anger was mostly Claire.

"You said you were coming," Claire snapped.

"I'm working," he said.

"So you lied to get me temporarily off your back? I warned you we'd come for you, dude."

"I need to work."

"That's the opposite of what you need. You look sick, actually sick."

"Go away," Ryker said.

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The twins moved to either side of him and crouched to get good looks at his face. “Ryker,” Nova said, and Logan said as if finishing her sentence, “Talk to us, man.”

Ryker gave them a glare that held nothing back to protect friends. He couldn’t knock them unconscious as he could humans, but a vampire’s gaze was potent against his own kind when he wanted it to be. The siblings flinched and backed away.

Claire brought her fist down on his desk with a force shy of cracking the wood. “What in the world is wrong with you?”

“Nothing. Get out. All of you.”

“Nah.” Mackey leaned in and met Ryker’s glare without a blink. “Claire’s right. Something’s wrong. So spill it, because we’re going nowhere.”

“Then sit here and watch me work. I don’t care.”

He didn’t care about anything. Only about his work. He was good at that. He wouldn’t fail at that. No more failing. No more falling.

“You’re so pathetic, Ryker.” The memory of Jacqueline’s voice was so visceral, it seemed her specter had joined them in the room. Ryker shuddered hard.

“Hey,” Philippa said. She stepped around Nova to stand beside Ryker and rest a hand on his shoulder, and her light touch tried to break him, but he wouldn’t let it. Steel. Toughen up. “Come on, tell us.”

No. He stared at his computer screen. He scrolled the document in front of him, but he couldn't see the formulas he'd plugged in, couldn't add two plus two as his head pounded.

"Leslie," he whispered.

He shouldn't have spoken her name. The moment he did, all the energy drained from his body, from his limbs. He folded forward in his chair, pressed his palms to his burning eyes.

"What about Leslie?" Claire said.

"We broke up."

The words physically hurt. He couldn't think, could only feel no matter how hard he tried to stop feeling.

"Oh," Philippa said with a gentle texture behind her voice that nearly brought him to tears. "Ryker, honey. Tell us what happened."

He did. They listened.

"And then what?" Logan blurted, crossing his arms over his chest. "You called her back, right?"

"No," Ryker said. "I...I came home to work."

"For crying out loud, man. Call her."

Ryker lifted his head. "You weren't listening. I can't fix it."

“It’s not like you to give up. Ever. So why aren’t you fighting for her?” Mackey was watching him with his usual focus, midnight-blue eyes that shone almost black, obsidian when he was engrossed in probing the whys of the universe. He looked like that now, in fact. As though Ryker’s devastation were something to be dissected.

“She hung up on me,” Ryker said. “It’s not worth it. I’m not worth it.”

Crap. He’d said that last part out loud.

Instead of calling him on it, Philippa said, “She thinks she’s stuck in a long-distance relationship forever. That’s why she hung up, Ryker. But you have a solution, honey. You’ve been mulling the long-distance problem since you met her, right? You were just waiting for the right time to share your thoughts on it.”

He nodded. His chest still felt empty and all twisted up. Had his heart given a single beat since Leslie said she was sorry, gave a final sob, and hung up?

“Ryker, come on,” Logan said. “Call her.”

“I don’t think she wants me to,” Ryker whispered.

A low murmuring hiss came from every last one of them. It was enough to pull him up from the quagmire he couldn’t seem to shake. He opened his eyes and met theirs—Mackey’s flashing blue-black, Logan and Nova’s bright teal that gave away their status as siblings, Philippa’s pale purple washed to mother-of-pearl in her distress for a friend, and Claire’s deep purple-blue glittering with challenge.

“What?” Ryker managed.

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“Leslie is not your ex,” Nova said slowly and clearly.

Ryker hadn’t gotten a vote when the five of them unanimously banned Jacqueline’s name from friend get-togethers. All five had expressed various degrees of concern or alarm toward Jacqueline when he’d first brought her along to a gathering.

“She just seems like a mean girl. I don’t know how else to say it, but I’m afraid she’s too mean for you, honey.”

“I don’t trust her, man. Something’s wrong with y’all, between y’all.”

“It doesn’t feel right when she’s around. I think you should be careful.”

“Are you sure you’re happy with her? Does she make you feel safe and happy?”

Claire had been the strongest Jacqueline denouncer of them all. “That woman is a shark, Ryker. She’s going to hurt you.”

“I know Leslie isn’t Jacqueline,” he said, breaking their rule and earning hisses around the room. “But...”

“But your brain and your body forgot,” Mackey said with all the confidence of a professional psychologist. “So we’re reminding you.” He gestured to Ryker’s phone sitting face-down on the desk. “Call your girlfriend. Now.”

“I can’t.”

Philippa slipped from the room and came back in seconds with a blood bag. She tore the seal and held it out. “Ryker, sip on this. I think you need it.”

He knew the theory, of course: after a physical injury or emotional shock, a small amount of blood could fortify a vampire in pain. He wasn’t in pain; he was tough. Yet his hand reached out and took the bag, and he took a small sip. His headache receded almost to nothing. His mind cleared, and he saw the absurdity of ignoring his friends, standing them up, telling them to leave when his distress must be obvious. He’d never leave one of them alone in his condition.

He sipped again, and his twisting chest loosened, just a little.

“Sorry,” he said. “I...I can’t believe y’all piled into Mackey’s SUV for this.”

“Of course we did, you idiot,” Claire said.

“Sorry for the glare,” he said to the twins, and they nodded. Apology accepted, no grudges among friends. Not these friends anyway.

“Now,” Mackey said flatly, “for the love of logic, will you please call your girlfriend.”

Ryker pushed to his feet and scooped up his phone. Five pairs of jewel-tone eyes watched his every move.

“Okay, listen,” Ryker said. “I’m going to call her. Thanks to all y’all. But I need privacy for this. Go back to your drinks and wait for me. I’ll come after I talk to her.”

“Will you, though?” Claire said.

“It’s a promise. However this goes, I’ll meet you there.”

He waited until Mackey's vehicle was no longer in scent or sound range, and then he tapped his phone screen to send a video call. But...wait. Stop for a minute. Think through everything Leslie had actually said, not what he had heard through his panic.

She couldn't give up her mountains for him. Of course not. No one who loved her would ask her to.

She couldn't become someone else for him. Of course not. No one who loved her...

And there it was. He finally saw what had happened between him and Jacqueline. Unlike Leslie, Jacqueline had wanted to be his everything, insisted on it, and claimed he should be hers too. For a while he had done his best to oblige her. He had tried to empty himself for her, tried to become who she said she wanted at any cost to his health, his sense of self. When his hollow insides ached and when the whole of him wasn't enough to fill the bottomless hole inside her, he had blamed himself. When she'd told him he wasn't enough, he had believed her.

And when Leslie had told him she couldn't be the emptying one, he had heard Jacqueline's voice instead of Leslie's. No matter what was actually said, he heard that he wasn't enough, wasn't worth keeping around.

Everything between him and Jacqueline had been wrong. Leslie was right: becoming someone else to make anyone happy was wrong. Sure, he would fail in the long run, but that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that he'd be throwing himself away. He would never want Leslie to throw herself away for him, so he must never do it for her.

"Okay," he said to his quiet study, his file folders and his big mahogany desk and his bookcase. "Okay."

He sent a video call to his girlfriend. Not ex. Girlfriend. Fixing this wouldn't cost his

entire self, wouldn't cost him a thing. Time to fix it.

Fifteen

Ryker was calling her.

Leslie hadn't stopped crying for the last hour. Her head ached, and she'd gone through half a box of Kleenex. Her heart felt like a ratty old dishrag wrung out too many times, and every new twist hurt.

His face filled her phone screen. He wanted a video call.

She couldn't talk to him.

Yes, she could. She knew what had to be said, and she could say it.

If he said, "I think you'll really love city life if you'll give it a chance," she had to say no.

If he said, "I'll move to Harmony Ridge for you," she had to say no.

Leslie swiped to accept the call and let him see her face. Her too-pale, tearstained face and her eyes, which wouldn't stop shifting from gray to indigo to gray again—a weird distress signal she'd noticed when she went to the bathroom for more Kleenex and caught sight of herself in the mirror.

Ryker hadn't been crying, but his eyes were a flat blue, devoid of silver. His mouth was a thin-pressed line in his face. A crinkle formed between his eyes when he saw her.

"Will you hear me out?" he said.

She nodded. She could listen to him now. She wouldn't let him sway her from what she knew was best for both of them.

"I have a plan—just bones right now, but we can flesh it out."

Another nod. Here it was. He wanted her to move.

"The concept is simple. We split our time. Plenty of people do it when their jobs require it. Half the month, we live in Tennessee. Half the month, we're in Virginia. And it can be flexible. If you've got a big art event coming up, maybe I'm there longer. If I've got a tough case, maybe you're here longer. But generally speaking, we make sure we both have time in the place we love."

At the words split our time, her brain nearly glitched out, but she forced herself to listen all the way through his pitch. His incredible, fairy-tale pitch.

"Two houses?" No one got to have two houses. That was a fantasy lived out by the wealthiest of the wealthy. Wasn't it?

"We'll have the financial means to keep both. We don't have to sell one."

"We—we don't?"

"I never expected you to give up your home for me, Leslie. Never."

She had to keep saying it to believe it. "I can keep my home...and keep you too?"

"I know what those mountains mean to you, what that town means to you. I've been thinking this through for weeks now. I just wasn't sure when to bring it up."

"I can keep my home."

He brought his face closer to the screen, and a few sparks of silver surfaced in his eyes. “I promise you can.”

She bowed her head and cried while he stayed on the call with her. She cradled her phone and wished he was here so she could hold him and be held by him. She couldn’t stop crying. She didn’t have to choose between the home she loved and the man she loved. She’d never had to choose. At last she swiped her free palm over her cheeks and looked up, and he was still there, looking like he wanted to come through the phone to be with her.

“I felt like my chest was cracking open,” she whispered.

“Same.”

“I kept thinking of that question on the match test. ‘Would you be willing to seek a new job for a home in your dream location?’ And you didn’t say ‘no.’ You said, ‘of course not.’ So I knew I could never ask you to leave Virginia and the job you love.”

“You’re right.”

She nodded. Of course she was right—about this part anyway.

“Like you and your mountains, giving up my work would break me. It would turn me into somebody else.”

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“Which would be horrible. You’ve got to be you.”

He nodded again. He looked tired, a little guarded, a little hopeful.

“I’m sorry I hung up,” she said. “My thoughts were stuck on this loop—‘I have to end this now, right now, before we care even more, before losing him hurts even worse.’ Those thoughts were looping over and over when I called you.”

“It’s okay. I got stuck on a loop too.”

“What was yours?”

Her beautiful, impressive vampire looked like a little boy when he ducked his head and turned away from the phone. He had waited for Leslie to be ready to talk; now she waited for him. After a long moment he faced her, and his face was all crinkled with whatever he was about to say. “You, uh, you know that test question I left blank? ‘I’m the sum of my accomplishments.’ That’s pretty much always my loop. So I went back to work and tried to...to be worth something.”

“Oh, Ryker. I’m so sorry.”

“Not your fault. Really, Leslie, it’s not. It’s just me. My head’s messy sometimes.”

“How’s your head now?”

“A lot better. Clearer. What about yours?”

“So much better too.”

“So what do you think of my plan?” A tiny smile lifted one corner of his mouth and warmed his eyes. She wished she could hug him.

“Your plan is perfect. I just never thought... I never thought we could have everything.”

“Not literally everything.”

“To me it feels like everything, Ryker. I really mean that.”

He was quiet, thoughtful for a minute. They sat together across the miles, and the quiet wasn't awkward or lonely. It was simple and content.

Then without a segue, Ryker said, “You're wise.”

Leslie chuckled. He was sweet, but... “Hardly.”

“Don't do that. Don't minimize yourself. You've got real wisdom, Leslie.”

No one had ever told her that. Of all the times to tell her, now after she'd hung up the phone and cost him a self-doubt spiral... But she found herself smiling. He meant it.

“I don't know what to do with that,” she said. “But thank you.”

“I hate that we're six hundred miles apart right now.”

“Me too. But I'll see you in less than a week, and I'll see your city too.” She focused past him to his surroundings; he was in his study, sitting at his desk, the place he spent so much time on numbers and data and puzzle-solving. And justice. “Are you

still working? Would you consider giving yourself a break?”

“When I hang up with you, I’m heading to a blood bar with friends who all ordered me to call you and make this right.”

“You’re not the one who messed it up. Sorry for the drama.”

“No. We needed to talk about it, so we could work it out. And I think it made me see some things...some overdue things. Can I make a request, though?”

She shrugged. “Don’t see why not.”

“Unless I turn into a real jerk, please don’t break up with me ever again.”

He said it with a little smirk, and she knew he was okay. “I think I can honor that request.”

They didn’t stay long on the phone. Didn’t need to tonight. They’d said deep things, new things, and anyway Ryker’s friends waited for him. When she hung up, she put her favorite Diana Krall record on the turntable and danced around the house.

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She replayed their words to herself while she sang along with Diana. He had called her wise. “Don’t minimize yourself.”

It was true of more than this moment. Look what she’d accomplished by talking to Brent, refusing to minimize herself.

“We needed to talk about it, so we could work it out.”

There was one more piece of herself that needed working out. One more conversation she needed to have. She slowed her improvised dance steps, then stood still in the middle of her kitchen. Yes. She could do this too.

She called her mom.

“Hey, Les! What’s up?”

The words came out in a flood that had remained behind a dam in her heart for most of her life, inching higher drop by drop for years—now, since meeting Ryker, rising so much faster and overflowing the dam at last. “Mom, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, about all kinds of things lately but especially about us, about vampires, and I want to talk about us, our family, where we came from.”

It would be okay to ask. It had to be. She had waited to ask for her entire life. It had to be okay now, after so many years.

Except...Mom wasn’t breathing.

“Please,” Leslie said, “I really want to know. Why do we live here, isolated from our kind?”

“‘Our kind’? You sound like an anthropologist.”

No deflecting. She wouldn’t let Mom do it, not about this, not anymore. “Why did you choose Harmony Ridge when you moved away from—”

“No,” Mom said. Flat. Dull. The drop of the heavy curtain.

“Why? Why can’t we talk about it?”

“I have nothing to say.”

“But—”

“The topic is closed, Leslie.”

Leslie’s grip spasmed around the phone, but she relaxed in time not to crush it. “Mom, please.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

The call ended. Leslie trudged to her room and fell back onto her bed and stared at the ceiling for an hour, unable to convince herself to move. A slow, dull pain bloomed in the center of her chest. Stupid little girl, asking careless questions.

Sixteen

Where were they hiding the money?

Ryker sat back in his chair, stared up at the ceiling of his home office, and allowed himself a hiss of sheer frustration. He should have found the paper trail by now. He'd gone through so many financial records in the last twenty hours, simple math was beginning to make his head hurt.

He returned his gaze to his laptop screen and clicked the minimized window to look at his email. Sure enough, here was one from Detective Gene Kim, checking in and hoping for progress. Ryker responded that he hadn't found the evidence they needed yet but was still searching. He hissed again as he hit Send.

He should have found it by now. The giveaway document, the manipulated math, the mysteriously appeared or disappeared cash. But so far, this organization checked out. To the penny. And he'd nearly worked his way through to the final document secured in Detective Kim's search warrant.

Nearly. Not done yet.

He had to find it before six o'clock. He couldn't leave any later than that to pick up his girlfriend from the airport.

Ryker's heart gave a single beat of anticipation. His girlfriend. Here in his city in a few hours. He couldn't wait to show her his favorite places, introduce her to the people he loved. To hold her again, kiss her again, of course. But even more than that, simply to enjoy being with her again.

Enough. Focus. Complete the task. The airport pickup was his reward.

He opened a new set of bookkeeping records and got back to work. Careful reading. Mental math. He kept a calculator on his desk, but he almost never needed it even with the longest strings of figures. And note-taking. Constant, copious note-taking on his yellow legal pad, for which most of his colleagues loved to call him "old-

fashioned.” But for the son of Senna Maddox, written work was a deeply ingrained habit.

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He pressed his thumb against one eye. How did he keep doing this to himself? In preparation for Leslie's weekend visit, he'd planned to sleep last night. But he had worked through the night instead. This case had higher stakes than his last one as well as more convoluted paper trails, but Leslie had cared about none of that when he'd confessed this morning. She had cared only about him.

And thanks to her, he could no longer convince himself he wasn't tired.

"But I don't need a break," he said to his quiet condo. "I'm fine."

He kept at it for another half hour. Notes. Math. Cross-references. Looking back over data he'd already checked, just to be one-hundred-percent sure—

"Wait a minute."

The words burst from his mouth as he checked his math against the bookkeeping numbers in front of him. He did the math again.

"That's it," he whispered. Then he tilted back in his chair again and shouted at the ceiling. "That's it!"

Notes. Cross-references. He checked everything a final time, and then he picked up his phone.

"Kim here."

"Detective, it's Ryker Maddox. I've got what you need."

The detective's intake of breath was a little sharp, unguarded. Everyone working this case was wearing thin. "Talk to me."

Ryker filled him in on the numbers, where the money had been funneled and how. "And two of these documents have Angstrom's name on them. He just lost his deniability."

"Maddox, are you sure? Really sure?"

"Sure enough to go to court, sir."

"You've made my month. Maybe my year."

That might not be an overstatement. The organization they'd been tracking had been defrauding people out of supposed insurance payments for years, and the financial damages were high. Families with ill young kids were a primary target, promised bundled deals that only stole more.

"We did it," Ryker said. He couldn't hold back a grin.

"Well, as far as this part goes, you did it, man. I knew you'd find it, if anybody could. Thanks."

"My pleasure."

"I know it's past six, but if you can send me that stuff tonight, I'd really appreciate it. Unless you're at the end of your vampire reserves or whatever."

"Does that sound like me?"

"No, but this puny human still can't figure out when you rest, so I didn't want to

assume you don't need to."

He almost laughed as his mind conjured an image of Leslie overhearing that and glaring at him. "I'll get everything over to you in a few minutes."

"Great. Thank you, Maddox."

"You're welcome, Detective."

The call ended, and Ryker allowed his eyes to close for a moment. Then the conversation replayed in his weary brain, and he sprang out of his chair. After six? No. No. No.

He had to finish the job. He worked as quickly as he could without missing anything. Passcode-protect the documents, attach to his secure email, send to Detective Kim's work email. Send separate email containing the passcode. There. Done for the night.

It was 6:26. On Leslie's first visit, she'd have to wait at the airport. He speed-typed a text.

On my way. So sorry. Was working and lost track of time. ETA 7:45.

Her plane hadn't landed yet, so she'd see his text later. Ryker darted out of the house to his car and did his best not to break any speed limits for the next hour and twenty minutes. He was entering the pickup loop when his phone vibrated in the console cup holder. As soon as he pulled into the arrivals lane, he snatched it up and tapped the new text message.

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Leslie: No worries. Headwinds delayed us a bit, so I only just got my luggage. Heading outside now.

Ryker's tense shoulders lowered a few inches.

Leslie: I'm standing in front of a pillar painted with a pink 4.

She was easy to spot, radiating the vampire aura—chilled vitality and muted power—that his kind could spot in one another from half a mile away. Humans double-glanced at her as they passed, though Leslie seemed unaware of their notice. Her silver hair was loose and full, dipping around her shoulders and falling down her back. Her hard-shell carryon was white, covered in a pink-and-purple floral print.

Ryker pulled his car into one of the parallel spots, and Leslie hurried to him. She tossed her luggage into the back seat, then hopped into the front. As Ryker pulled into traffic, she said, "So much exhaust."

"Yeah, it can be a lot sometimes."

"I still smelled you though. I wasn't sure I'd be able to."

They were quiet a minute as he navigated back to the highway. After he merged on, Leslie turned to grin at him.

"Hi, boyfriend."

He chuckled. "Nice to see you, girlfriend."

“I feel like I should mention again— I’m totally fine getting a hotel room overnight while you sleep. Your parents don’t need to put themselves out for me.”

“Oh, don’t underestimate Senna Maddox. She wants a chance to approve of you. And she probably also wants to tell you at least one story of me as a toddler.”

Leslie’s laughter pealed. “It’s only fair.”

He rolled his eyes, but his grin matched hers. “Parents.”

“Here’s hoping yours like me as much as mine like you.”

“No reason they shouldn’t,” he said. “How was the flight?”

Leslie shrugged. “Close quarters with a whole lot of humans, and a few of them were sweating nervously, so...” She wrinkled her nose. “But overall it was fine. Uneventful.”

“Good. How’s the mill wheel coming?”

“I took some pictures to show you, right before I left. From the right angle, it looks like a real water wheel. It’s super cool.”

Ryker could listen to her talk about her art for hours, especially when she talked about it in terms that valued the beauty she added to the world. She’d been working tirelessly on her new diorama, inspired by the success of the waterfall to create more models with the illusion of moving water.

She pulled her phone from her purse, tapped out a few texts, then tucked it away again. “Sorry. I promised to text both Mom and Hannah when you had picked me up. Mom’s just doing the mom thing, but Hannah wants regular updates.”

“One of these days, she and Jake should come with you. We could do a weekend of double dates all over the city.”

Leslie clasped her hands in front of her as if in petition. “I would love that, and so would they.”

Ryker had met Hannah and Jake twice so far—once at the diner, once at the coffee shop. Hanging out socially with humans felt a little strange at first, but he was more than game to get to know them better.

As he drove, Leslie poked his shoulder. “How’s the Biggest Case of the Year?”

“I cracked it about ten minutes before I headed for the airport. That’s why I left the house late.”

“Oh, Ryker, that’s amazing. Congratulations. I knew you’d solve it.”

“Apparently Detective Kim knew too. I was the only one worried.”

She reached across the console and gave his shoulder an encouraging squeeze. Come to think of it, his shoulders were tightening up again. But he wasn’t anxious anymore. He’d reached Leslie right on time. So why did he feel so...off?

As if in response to his silent question, an ache seized the back of his throat. One moment he didn’t feel it at all. The next it was unbearable. His right hand clung to the wheel as his left hand latched onto his throat.

“Crap,” he said.

“What’s wrong?”

“Got sidetracked. Forgot to slake. And then I was in a hurry picking you up, so I forgot again. Just ran to my car and started driving.”

Leslie’s eyes were wide and unblinking. Her body was entirely still. She whispered, “How many hours?”

He fought to clear his head, but the thirst was attacking him now. “Uh. Twenty-eight.”

“It’s an hour back to your house.”

“Uh-huh.” He tried to swallow, work the muscles that were seizing in the back of his throat, and the ache sharpened.

“Isn’t it at least that far to your parents?”

“Hour and twenty minutes.”

“Can you make it another hour without blood?”

“I won’t shrivel to dust.” But he was growing hoarse already, and his throat was at least trying to close up and kill him.

“Blood bar,” she said. “Is there one between here and your house?”

He nodded.

“Oh good. Stop there then.”

She’d introduced him to diner breakfasts; he’d wanted to introduce her to the blood bar. He hissed.

“Do you need me to drive?”

“No. I just didn’t want...this. An emergency. Not how I wanted to show you one of my official tour stops.”

“I think that’s way down the priority list at this point. Let’s just get you what you need, okay?”

He clamped his lips and gritted his teeth.

“Are we close?” Leslie said.

He nodded and held up one hand, fingers splayed.

“Five minutes?”

Another nod.

“Your eyes are full silver. Are your fangs down?”

“No,” he snapped.

“Okay. Just checking.”

“I’m fine.” Other than sounding like a human with laryngitis. “I’ve never— That’s never happened to me.”

“Me either, but it happened to my dad once. Story for another time.”

How could she be so blasé about something so humiliating? He shook his head, but of course his mind didn’t clear. Wouldn’t clear until his need for blood had been dealt with.

This was absolutely no how the evening was supposed to go.

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Minutes later he turned in to the parking lot of Slake It Off, and Leslie gave a surprised little gasp.

“It’s out in the open. I mean, don’t humans driving by knowslakeis one of our words?”

He nodded, beyond talking now.

Leslie glanced at him, then gave him a second, softer look. She twined her fingers with his and gave a gentle tug. “Come on. Let’s take care of you.”

He squeezed her hand tightly, and she squeezed back, and then they went inside. The smell of the place hit him so hard, his fangs pressed his gums for a moment as his mouth watered. His brain was overrun with a single word that blared in his head like a siren—thirst thirst thirst thirst—and Leslie’s reaction didn’t help. Her nostrils flared, and she went still for a moment.

“Wow,” she whispered.

He tugged her hand, and Leslie let him take the lead straight to the bar.

Behind the counter stood one of his favorite people, and Ryker silently thanked the universe it was her. Claire beelined to him, knowing from his silver eyes or from knowing him too well.

“Got distracted?” she said.

Ryker nodded.

“No worries, I’ve got you.”

She went to the row of fridges against the far wall and opened a blood bag. At the breaking of the seal, Ryker took hold of the edge of the counter. Better not to spring over it and snatch the bag from Claire’s hand. She poured the contents into a wine glass—flawlessly, artfully out of habit. Leslie watched with wide eyes as Claire set the brimming glass in front of Ryker.

Then the glass was at his lips, and he was gulping, gulping, gulping. His gums ached momentarily as his fangs descended. The familiar salty tang filled his mouth, and his throat opened, and his entire body relaxed as the thirst began to fade. He couldn’t hold in the low groan of relief. When the glass was drained, he set it on the bar and tried to hide how his hand was shaking.

“Ryker?” Leslie said.

Shoot. She’d seen. He held out his hand, and she took it between hers as if she could will the trembling away. “I’m okay. The shaking stops within a minute or two.”

“You’ve done this to yourself often.”

“A few times,” he said, then turned to Claire, who watched him with real care despite the perpetual frost in her eyes. “Thanks, Claire.”

“Sure. I wish you’d quit this habit though.”

“No reason to have that conversation again.”

“Fine. I’d rather meet your girlfriend anyway.” She turned her focus to Leslie. “Claire

Vanderlaan. I'm glad to meet you, Leslie. It's about time Ryker dated a good woman."

Leslie blinked. "Um, thanks."

"Claire," Ryker said.

"I said what I said."

Ryker shook his head. Leslie's silver eyebrows were inching farther upward every second, but he wasn't getting into this now. Yeah, he'd been meaning to talk to her about Jacqueline, but...not yet. Claire gave him her signature barbed-wire look, then offered Leslie a smile.

"Can I get you anything, Leslie?"

"Oh, um, not right now, thanks. And it's nice to meet you too."

"Ryker says you're from Tennessee, specifically Harmony Ridge."

Leslie blinked. "Don't tell me you've heard of it. The world can't be that small."

"Do you know Ember Reed?"

"Not well, given she's a wolf's mate, but we've met, sure. She seems cool. But how do you know her?"

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“I’ve known Ember since grade school. She was a lifelong Virginian until she fell for that pesky wolf.”

Ryker suddenly remembered the petite human woman with frank gray eyes whom he’d met once or twice in Claire’s company. “Wait. You didn’t tell me Ember moved to Harmony Ridge.”

Claire shrugged. “I didn’t think to. Y’all don’t know each other well enough for you to track her down while you were there. But yes, my now-long-distance best friend happens to live in your town, Leslie.”

“The wolves would call that fate,” Leslie said with a laugh.

Ryker laughed too, and his girlfriend seemed startled. “What?”

“Not having to hide that your fangs are down. I was taught to slake in private.”

“Even away from your parents?”

“Oh, no, I’ve seen their fangs plenty of times. But home is the only place I’ve ever...”

She looked around the room, and Ryker followed her gaze, tried to see it all through her eyes, new and surprising. On the far side from the bar were the privacy booths with their transparent sound-blocking partitions. Between here and there, the wood floor was spread with rugs to dampen harsh echoes. The tables and chairs were standard as far as bar furnishings went, but the high ceiling was hung with soft

draperies, another method of deadening acoustics that could cause the most sensitive of vampires to wince. The thermostat was set at eighty, and humidifiers added to the pleasantly designed climate.

All around them, vampires moved with quicksilver strides, spoke in tones like melodies, sipped from drinks and showed their fangs. The eyes of everyone in the room reflected light like jewels—everyone but Leslie. Ryker understood, or at least he tried to. Wearing the muted version of herself was more than habit; it was long ingrained, almost a survival skill. He hoped she'd soon see how free she was here. Free to be herself.

“Well?” he said. “First impressions?”

“I think I love it here,” she said.

He grinned some more, fangs and all. Mission accomplished.

Seventeen

It was so nice in here.

Leslie ought to come up with a better word, but nice just fit. Her skin felt caressed by the indoor humidity and warmth. The scent of the bar's primary beverage wasn't too strong, despite many patrons sipping from glasses of deep red that only a human might mistake for wine. Leslie's body felt somehow at home as she tried—and failed—to stop staring at the vampires who moved around the bar with the liquid grace they held back around humans. Their voices were a sweet soundtrack, so resonant and full, yet never loud. If she tried, of course she could tune in to individual conversations, but thanks to common etiquette and long habit she could allow them to slip past her thoughts without registering the words.

She forced herself to stop gawking like a kid at Disneyland and focused instead on Claire Vanderlaan. The woman was calmly impressive in a way Leslie couldn't quite put her finger on. Claire's chin-length hair was thick, lustrous, and the color of coffee grounds. Her eyes were a blend of blue and purple several shades darker than Leslie's own. Her sleeveless dove-gray top revealed toned arms and a tattoo on the inside of her bicep. She hadn't yet extended her arm enough for a full view of the ink, and Leslie couldn't make out what the image was.

"So, Claire, how long have you and Ryker known each other?"

"About four years," Claire said.

"And do you know Tai, too?"

Claire's eyes went pure metallic. "Unfortunately yes."

"Oh. Um." Instinct pushed Leslie a step back from the counter, though she couldn't have said why. "Bad blood?"

Claire laughed. "I see what you did there."

Her own laugh sounded hollow in comparison despite being equally sincere. She hadn't managed to unmute yet. "No pun intended. And you don't have to tell me."

"I'm more than happy to tell you. Tai Kristiansen is arrogant, rude, fake... I could go on, but I won't, because you're dating his best friend, and Ryker and I have agreed to disagree about Tai."

What on earth...? Ryker's fangs had retracted by now, and he was biting his lip as if to keep himself quiet.

Before Leslie could choose her next words, Claire's eyes lost their metallic sheen and returned to pure periwinkle. "Look, forget Tai. He's not worth a conversation. Ryker, on the other hand, is a great friend of mine. I look forward to getting to know you better, Leslie."

After a bit more small talk, Ryker offered to show her around. He led Leslie to the far side of the bar, where a row of cozy booths lined the wall, complete with transparent partitions.

"Check it out." Ryker motioned Leslie behind the partition.

"I don't get it," she said. "If you can see through them, what's the point?"

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“Have a seat and it’ll make sense.”

She slid into the booth, and Ryker slid in across from her. When he tugged the partition shut, the view from inside was still clear, unobstructed. But the sounds...the ambient noises, low conversations at the bar...

“Sound-absorbing,” she whispered.

“Yep.”

“We can talk about anything in here. Vampire hearing can’t eavesdrop.”

“I told you, blood bars are designed for us. This is another way we can be ourselves here.”

“Wow.” A public place where she could slip into a booth and never overhear conversations that were none of her business. A public place where, surrounded by vampires, her own conversation could still be private. “I’ve never even thought about the possibility of having a place like this.”

“That’s why I wanted you to experience it.”

“Can I ask you from in here...about Tai and Claire? Just say no if I’m overstepping.”

He glanced toward the bar, where Claire poured glasses for three women wearing skirt suits and heels. “Claire doesn’t have all the information, and Tai won’t tell her the truth, so...” He shrugged. “Impasse.”

“And you’re stuck in the middle.”

“I tried playing peacemaker once, and I almost lost them both. Claire threatened to withhold all beverages next time I came to Slake It Off. Tai hissed at me for days.”

“But what happened? Or can’t you tell me?”

He was quiet so long, Leslie opened her mouth to retract the question. Before she could, he said, “I’ve never wanted to tell someone everything before. Every last thought in my head, every story that’s ever happened to me or to anyone I care about. You... It’s like...” He shook his head, a furrow forming between his brows. “When I’m with you, it’s like I’ve never been so happy before, but...calmly happy.” He scrubbed his hand through his hair. “That sounded a lot less stupid in my head.”

Leslie leaned across the table and grasped his hands. A shiver of delight ran up her arms as his strong fingers curved around hers, as his thumb stroked the back of her hand. “Not stupid. Not at all. It’s perfect. I’m calmly happy with you too.”

His chuckle held a low, easy melody. “We’re such an edgy pair.”

“Well, this artsy country girl finds edgy completely overrated.”

His grip tightened on her hands, and in a single moment, as if with a single thought, Ryker drew her toward himself as Leslie moved toward him. She propelled herself up and across the table and neatly onto his lap. Ryker’s arms encased her, lean and strong, and Leslie pressed her palms against his fitted Henley shirt, against the muscled planes of his chest. Their lips crashed together, and their kiss told the story of who they were to one another. Everything inside her seemed to surge with icy sparks. They drew apart, mindful of the public setting, and she turned her face into Ryker’s neck.

“Do you feel that?” she whispered.

“Feel what?”

“Us. Me and you. All we’ve had so far is weekend dates, calls, and texts. Oh, and a dramatic two-hour breakup. But it doesn’t matter that we’re so new together. I still feel...I feel us.”

He tilted his head back to study her. He framed her face in his hands, and his thumbs traced her cheekbones. His voice grew hushed. “What do we feel like?”

“Icicles dancing. And electric showers. And...and alive. We feel so alive, Ryker.”

He wrapped a lock of her hair around his finger, absently twining and untwining. It was his go-to whenever they were close—while they watched a movie on her couch, while they perched at the top of a tree and talked until the sun came up.

“Alive,” he said. “Yeah. I feel that with you too.”

He’d never suggested that he sometimes saw some future version of them in his mind—a thing that had now happened three times to Leslie. She wanted to ask if he’d ever glimpsed them this way, but something held her back.

Ryker continued to play with her hair in the unconscious yet earnest way that made her feel treasured. After a moment, he said, “It’s...um...probably too early to say everything in my head.”

“Together forever,” Leslie said.

His eyebrows shot up. His fingers tightened in her hair. “I haven’t wanted to move too fast and put you off.”

“So far, so good.”

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“Hm, good point. So...yes. Together forever. That’s what’s in my head.”

“Centuries together,” Leslie said.

The idea was so thrilling, she could have danced on the tabletop. She pressed a palm to his chest, and his heart gave a hard beat against her hand. His face was crinkled with emotion.

She cupped his jaw in one hand and whispered, “Tell me, Ryker. Whatever it is.”

“You. It’s you. Patient with me from that second night, when you saw my fear of falling. Patient with me when I forget to slake and force us on a detour because I can’t pay attention to two things at the same time.” He gave a brittle laugh. “Heck, you’re even patient when I fight bedtime like an actual toddler.”

She’d sensed this raw place in him before, more than once during their long-distance hours of conversation. Someone had convinced him that basic kindness was remarkable, that a woman who was falling in love with him might not bear with him in his difficult moments. She pressed a soft kiss to the stubble on his jaw, the proof of how hard he’d been working on the case that had kept him stymied for a week.

“I seem to remember,” she said, “that when I broke up with you and hung up instead of listening, you were patient with me too.”

“That was different.”

“No, it wasn’t. That’s the whole point, Ryker. It wasn’t different. It’s all the same.

It's us being who we are for each other. Look, we do need to take some time with this. We've been together barely two months."

He nodded. "I didn't mean to imply—"

"Hush," she said with a finger against his lips. Her dear man went perfectly still. "What I'm trying to tell you is... We need to be reasonable about the timeframe, but not because I don't know yet what I want."

His lips parted against her finger. His blue eyes glittered, continued to grow brighter as she continued to speak.

"Laurence Ryker Gould Maddox, you're who I want. I'm not falling in love with you. I'm already there. I fell for you the weekend you showed up in my life unannounced and called yourself my backup husband."

"Leslie."

His heartbeats were strong against her cheek, almost too strong for a vampire. And they were fast. She counted five of them in ten seconds.

"Shh," she said. "Ryker, listen. I'm with you. I'm for you. I'm not going anywhere. And I love you."

He pressed his face into her hair and took a deep, human-sounding breath. Passersby studiously ignored them.

At last Ryker lifted his head. His smile was pinched with self-consciousness. "So...that was quite a tangent."

"It was, wasn't it?"

“And I love you.”

He kissed her, but they kept this one brief, their emotions too strong for more—at least while they sat in full view of the bar.

“I should...” She nodded across the table. “Retreat?”

“I guess.”

Leslie crossed to the far side of the booth and immediately hated the absence of his arms around her. But it was for the best for now.

“Claire and Tai,” he said. “Your original question.”

“If it’s okay to tell me.”

“She’s not only a bartender here. She’s half-owner, and Tai was supposed to be the other half. For a while they were trying to figure out what to do with this space. Claire bought the building for a song, but she needed a business partner. Tai’s extremely well-off thanks to an inheritance he hates to talk about, and he was looking for a local business he could invest in. They hadn’t known each other long when this all started, but they both knew me.”

Ouch. “And they both trust you.”

“Yeah.” Ryker leaned back in the booth and tilted his head toward the draped ceiling. “So... Claire had talked about something more mainstream in the beginning. But then—it was pretty abrupt, actually—she said no, she’d changed her mind about running a ‘vanilla-friendly business.’”

He winced as he said the words, despite his air-quotes clarification. Leslie glanced

toward the bar. Now Claire was serving a man wearing bike shorts and a bright-yellow athletic tee.

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“I don’t get it,” she said. “Her best friend is human, but she uses ‘vanilla’?” Shortened generations back from plain vanilla human, it wasn’t a slur like werewolf, but it wasn’t a flattering term either. Absolutely no way Leslie would ever use it to refer to Hannah.

“That’s Claire in a nutshell,” Ryker said. Now he was studying her too from across the bar. If she sensed their gazes through the partition, she gave no sign of it. “She can be tough. I’m pretty sure there are things about her I don’t know. But anyway, she changed course overnight. Announced she was opening a blood bar. She already had the name for it.”

“And Tai couldn’t be part of her plans anymore.”

“He honored the monetary contract. But no, he couldn’t join her onsite. Couldn’t help her build a menu. Claire has over a dozen third-party vendors who purchase blood from voluntary human donors. Tai couldn’t even represent the company at their business sites.”

Leslie shook her head. Of course Claire would feel betrayed. “I’m sorry for both of them.”

“I pushed Tai for months to tell her the truth, but he still won’t do it. I told Claire that Tai had his reasons, and if she knew what they were she’d understand. But of course if you don’t know, it sounds like I’m taking his side over hers.”

“Her descriptors were really specific. Arrogant, rude, and fake?”

“Ah, yeah.” Ryker grimaced. “He always tries to look like nothing affects him, and sometimes what comes across is that he’s...above being bothered.”

She didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know Tai or Claire, but she felt so invested in a truce between them, maybe because of Ryker’s eyes as he told the story. “Maybe they’ll settle it someday.”

“I wish they would. Sometimes for my sake as well as theirs.” His laugh held a rusty sadness. “But mostly for theirs. Claire was pretty crushed. And of course refusing to explain himself...Tai made it worse. He kept saying, ‘she’s getting her money, Ryker,’ and I kept saying, ‘it’s not about the money, man.’”

Even if Tai dealt with embarrassment over his struggle, to burn a bridge with a friend in order to keep his secret... It seemed ridiculous. “I hope he tells her at some point.”

“It’s been three years. I’m not holding my breath.” Ryker stretched his legs under the table, and one of his feet bumped hers. “Ready to meet the parents?”

“You know, I was nervous on the plane, but now that I’m here...” Leslie pushed open the partition. “I’m looking forward to stories about Baby Ryker.”

He rolled his eyes. “Let’s do this then.”

Eighteen

As ready as Leslie thought she was, the nerves came back as she and Ryker got out of his sleek silver two-door and headed up the walkway. The stone-fronted farmhouse was adorned with a regal covered front porch and a longer covered porch on one side. The pine-green front door opened as Ryker stepped up onto the porch ahead of Leslie.

Laurence Maddox was the most human-looking vampire Leslie had ever seen in her life. His build was almost husky, and his face defied agelessness with smile lines that crinkled around his eyes as he stepped out onto the porch and engulfed Ryker in a hug.

“Good to see you, son!” His voice was velvet even as it boomed from his chest. He pounded Ryker on the back, then offered his hand to Leslie. “And it’s so good to meet you, Leslie. I’m Laurence.”

“It’s a pleasure, sir.”

“Now, none of that ‘sir’ business. I know you were raised by Southern folks the same as this one was”—he hooked a thumb in Ryker’s direction—“but please, first names are just better. Friendlier, you know.”

“Okay, Laurence.” She wanted to laugh, not at him but with him. He exuded a warmth realer than the politician’s charm she had anticipated.

“Now come inside and meet my lovely wife.”

Laurence motioned them ahead of him, into the house and down a hall hung with family photos. Leslie itched to pause and examine every one, but instead she followed Ryker. “I told her not to fuss, but she thinks she’s got to offer you food. It’s a Senna thing. You’ll get used to it.”

“Oh, I hope she didn’t go to any trouble.”

“She enjoys going to trouble. It’s her love language,” Ryker said with a wink over his shoulder.

The hall emptied into an open concept main level with a cathedral ceiling and

exposed dark beams. The kitchen lay to the right, the den to the left, and ahead of them a wide doorwall onto the covered porch.

At the island that divided kitchen and den, Senna Maddox stood arranging slices of caramel cake on a glass plate shaped like a lotus blossom. The smile she offered Leslie could have held actual sunbeams. Her eyes were so striking, Leslie couldn't look away—brilliant emerald green, sparkled with gold just as Ryker's eyes were sparkled with silver.

“Here she is,” Senna said, and the velvet melody in her voice held a pleasant husky undertone. She abandoned the cake, beelined to Leslie, and took both her hands. “Hi, Leslie. I'm Senna. I'm thrilled to meet you.”

“Thrilled? You already sound like you're conspiring,” Ryker said from behind her.

With a final squeeze Senna released Leslie's hands and wrapped her son in her arms. “You're too thin, honey. You've been working too hard.”

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“Now, Mama. You know I’m fine.”

Senna pressed her hands to his back as if to hold him tighter in defiance of his words. “I know how you drop weight like it’s nothing, and I know how you get when you’re on a tough case, and I get to worry about my child whenever I want. Quit forgetting to slake, son.”

His arms around his mother tightened for a moment, and Ryker rested his chin on top of her head. “I’m working on it.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“And don’t you ignore me far too often when your cases have you tied up in knots.”

“Not like I can ignore y’all when all y’all fuss at me constantly.”

Leslie held back a laugh even as her love for him grew. Her boyfriend could get downright Southern around his mama.

Senna said, “The folks who care fuss at you about this one topic, and you know we’re right.”

“Yes, ma’am. And you’ll be happy to hear I found what I needed today on the case that’s been turning me into a waste of a vampire.”

“Good for you, son,” Laurence said. To Leslie, “I guess you know by now how good he is at his job.”

“I think I do,” Leslie said. “He’s not the false humility type.”

Ryker laughed. “I’m really not.”

“His brain for numbers.” Laurence shook his head. “He memorized the first fifty digits of pi when he was eight. And he can do mental math faster than anyone I’ve ever met, human or vampire. And he sees patterns in data that most people miss.”

“In summary,” Ryker said, “Dad is convinced I’m an actual genius.”

Laurence crossed his arms over his broad chest as if to argue the point, but before he could, Senna stepped in.

“Leslie, I hope you’re in the mood for caramel cake. I wanted something sweet waiting for you.”

“That’s extra kind of you,” Leslie said. “Really, putting me up at all is incredibly kind.”

“It’s our pleasure,” Laurence said.

Senna motioned her toward the cake. “I made this just today.”

Made it...? It could have come from a bakery. Apparently Senna was much more than the stereotype of a prosecutor walking up and down a courtroom a la Law and Order, the only real reference Leslie had. She took a slice of cake and breathed the lovely aroma of caramel and cinnamon before she took a small bite...and delight itself seemed to explode on her tongue.

She let out a groan. “Oh, this is delicious. Thank you, Senna.”

Gold shimmered in Senna’s eyes. “I’m so glad you like it.”

Turned out talking to Ryker’s parents was easy. After about half an hour, Leslie found the music in her own voice emerging, and when she caught sight of herself in the bathroom mirror, her eyes flashed with a pastel opalescence.

She had never questioned how her family functioned in their town full of humans and wolves. She had thought every vampire muted herself out of habit, that for every vampire, existing in the fullness of her nature was a rare occurrence. But now she had seen a bar full of vampires displaying their full selves in public. Now here were Laurence, Senna, and Ryker doing the same from the moment Laurence opened the front door. Oh, how she wished she could talk to Mom and Dad about this, but Mom wouldn’t even acknowledge whether or not she’d been to a blood bar.

Senna and Laurence finished taking turns telling a story of their early dating days, and Laurence announced as if concluding a speech, “Well, that’s it. When you’ve found the one for you, you just know.”

Maybe the ease among everyone was the force that loosened her lips. Without pausing to weigh her words, Leslie said, “Is that what the visions are about?”

Ryker’s parents went momentarily still with surprise; then both of them broke out in a smile.

Ryker, on the other hand, remained too still. His wide eyes threw silver sparks. “Thewhat?”

“The glimpses of future us.”

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“Glimpses of the future? Am I dating the world’s only magical vampire?”

He must be teasing her, except...he wasn’t. Unease slithered down her spine as her boyfriend continued to gape at her. “Um. I know you’ve never mentioned the glimpses, but I’ve never mentioned mine either. But that’s because you haven’t mentioned yours.”

“I haven’t mentioned them because I don’t get them.”

“A lot of the time, I see our hands. We have the tattooed rings.”

“Leslie, this is incredible.”

Laurence cleared his throat. Leslie’s gaze darted to his, and he hadn’t stopped smiling.

Senna’s eyes held both warmth and knowledge. “If you’d be interested in the expertise of two eternally bonded vampires...”

“Yes, please,” Leslie said.

“Wait,” Ryker said. “Y’all know what this is? I’m the only one in the dark?”

“Hush, son,” Laurence said kindly. “Your mama has the floor.”

Senna shook her head. “Not me, not yet. Leslie, why don’t you give us a few more details so Ryker can catch up.”

“Well...” She laced her fingers together in front of her and tried not to shrink against the back of the upholstered chair. Somehow she felt as if she were being inspected, though Laurence and Senna remained calm and accepting. “Since the first week Ryker came to Tennessee, I get these glimpses in my mind’s eye. They’re really vivid. They last only one or two seconds, but I think they’re...us. In the future. Our ring fingers are tattooed.”

Both elders nodded.

“Is it something bad? If it’s never happened to Ryker...”

“Not bad at all,” Senna said. “It’s a vampire gift. Not too rare, but less than half of us have it. It shows up mostly in women, less commonly in men.”

“Why?”

“No one really knows. Apex genes are still far less understood than human genes.” Senna shrugged. “Maybe the probability of future-sighted vampires being female is something like the probability of wolves being male.”

“Except female wolves are less than five percent of their population.”

Ryker shook his head. “One of these days it won’t surprise me anymore when you rattle off wolf trivia with more confidence than you have discussing vampires.”

Leslie couldn’t tolerate further detour from the topic, kept her focus on Senna, who knew. Senna knew what it was to see a flash of a thing that hadn’t happened yet. And Senna was sharing that knowledge with Leslie, trusting Leslie, watering a parched flower in her soul that lapped up every drop of open honesty from Ryker’s mom, a vampire woman like herself. Senna looked back at her, deep understanding in her eyes, because...because Leslie should already have known.

She hardly heard Ryker when he said, “But if y’all have this future-sight thing, why don’t I know about it?”

“I haven’t got it,” Laurence said. “This is your mama’s territory.”

Senna smiled, and Leslie felt it deep inside.

Ryker roughed one hand down his face. “Mama, for real? You’ve seen the future?”

“It’s been much less frequent for me,” Senna said. “Only a few times in my life. Sounds like Leslie is more in tune with the gift. But yes, everything I’ve seen has happened eventually.”

Everything she had seen. Ring tattoos. Hands entwined. Years in the future. No, decades. Leslie got to keep him.

“Then...” Her throat tightened around the words, though she wasn’t sure why. “Ryker...we’re going to be together a long, long time. And we’re going to be really happy.”

With his parents watching, Ryker wrapped his arms around her, swept her off her feet, and spun a circle. Then he kissed her. They kept it light, but Leslie felt his kiss all the way to her fingertips, to the ends of her hair. Electricity and ice. When they pulled apart, Laurence and Senna’s eyes were shining too.

“No more two-hour breakups,” Leslie said.

Ryker rested his forehead against hers, and a smirk pulled his mouth. “Or two-minute breakups, or two-second breakups.”

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“No point. I’ll just end up happily ever after with you.”

Laurence gave a cheer as though he were watching a basketball game, and laughter from all four of them filled the room.

Around ten thirty, Leslie walked Ryker out to his car.

“How am I doing?” she said. Of course his parents could hear her from inside, but she felt no need to keep her question from them.

“As I predicted, you’re amazing.”

Ryker wrapped one arm around her, pulled her close, and kissed her. Not for long, but he didn’t need more than a few seconds to make her toes curl. She leaned into him, her hands flat on his chest.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said.

“Do you have to check in at work first? Because of that big case?”

“I might get a phone call or two throughout the day, but everyone knows I’m off on a long weekend. I was thinking tomorrow I could show you my gym.”

“I brought athletic clothes for climbing your rock wall.”

“It won’t measure up to your mountain. But it’s a lot of fun, and you’ll meet Tai. We spar.”

She leaned back to gape at him. “Spar? You mean fight?”

“Sure. He’s faster. I’m stronger.” He flashed a grin that looked every inch the predatory vampire. “It’s mostly a contest of who can pin who and get them to say uncle.”

He’d never mentioned this pastime before, but it fit seamlessly into the image she had of his friendship with Tai. “What about me? Do I get to spar?”

“Sure, if you want to. Have any experience?” The tilt of his eyebrow suggested he knew the answer.

“Not a bit,” she said, and he laughed.

“I’m not at the instructor level, but I can take you through the basics. I’ve never met a vampire that didn’t pick it up super-fast. It’s mostly about coordination and reading the other person’s moves before they make them.”

Sudden anticipation hummed through her. She wanted to test herself, wanted to experience the rush. She wouldn’t likely beat him unless he let her, and Ryker wasn’t likely to let her. But unlike her boyfriend, she didn’t love competition for its own sake. She wrapped one hand around his neck and pulled his head down to kiss him one final time tonight.

When the kiss ended, she said, “I’m looking forward to losing to you.”

He gave a low chuckle.

“But for real—it sounds like fun. And I’m definitely looking forward to meeting Tai. Is this one of Claire’s hangouts too?”

“Not so much,” he said. “As far as physical pastimes go, Claire would rather swim or ride a horse. Can I pick you up at six?”

“That depends. Will you promise to get a full night’s sleep after all the skipping you’ve been doing?”

“Hey, don’t talk like that. Mama’s got the best hearing in Virginia.”

“Easy solution: go to bed. And I’ll see you at six.”

Ryker was sliding behind the wheel when a sudden worry hit her. She needed to ask him without being overheard. “Can I have your phone for a second?”

A crinkle formed between his eyes as he handed it over. Leslie opened his Notes app and tapped a quick message, then held it out to him.

Do your parents know Tai’s secret?

Ryker shook his head. She typed some more.

I feel weird knowing about it without him knowing I know. But I don’t want to bring it up and make things awkward. To be fair to him, would you tell him before we meet tomorrow?

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When Ryker read her second message, he nodded. “Already did, a couple weeks ago.”

“Oh... Was he okay with it?”

“Not at first.”

Leslie bit her lip. Getting along with Ryker’s best friend was so important, long-term. If only Ryker hadn’t clued her in. If only she hadn’t guessed—or at the very least, kept her guess to herself.

“Hey.” Ryker gave her free hand a quick squeeze. “I’m the one he wasn’t happy with. Not you. And after a day he said, ‘if you two work out, it’ll be fine.’ So...” His smile held equal parts mischief and sincerity. “It’ll be fine.”

They could have talked forever, but she made sure not to introduce any new topics so he could go home and sleep. After he drove away, she tapped a missed text message from Hannah, which she’d noticed when typing the note to Ryker.

Hannah: This is a reminder that you owe your bestie an update, and unlike you, said bestie has a bedtime. Have you met the parents yet?

Leslie smiled as she typed her response.

They’re super cool and super kind. Senna fed me caramel cake.

Hannah’s response was almost immediate.

Hannah:I'm so glad. You deserve the best in-laws.

You know what, I'm not eye-rolling that. He's the one. Ryker is my one.

A row of party emojis came even faster than Hannah's last reply. Then another row, then another row, then another row.

Laughing, Leslie typed while party emojis continued to pop up on her screen.

Woman, stop. Go to bed.

Hannah:I AM SOOOOO HAPPY FOR YOU MY AMAZING FRIENDDDDDD

I'm happy for me too. Love you, friend.

Hannah sent a final row of hearts and party favors, and Leslie returned inside to her future in-laws. Neither Laurence nor Senna asked about the portion of conversation they must have heard between her and Ryker, when she'd done her best to be vague about Tai's struggle.

They offered to let her retire to the room where she'd stay tonight. She wouldn't need to sleep this weekend, but when she'd learned Ryker had skipped last night, she knew the worst thing she could do for him was spend tonight at his place. They would end up talking and kissing while he ought to be sleeping. He'd protested at first, then agreed too quickly, more proof he was wiped out.

"If y'all need to sleep or get work done or anything," she told his parents, "I can entertain myself until six."

"It's really up to you," Laurence said. "No one in this family is an introvert, but we know some folks need social breaks."

That was courteous. “I definitely qualify as an introvert, but I’d love to keep talking, if you want to.”

Senna gave Leslie the slightly mischievous, wholly sincere grin she had passed on to her son. “You’re in the right place, Leslie. Can I get you anything else? Tea, coffee, wine?”

“Oh, don’t go to any trouble.”

Senna pinned her with a gaze of motherly challenge, eyebrows arched and mouth briefly pressing into a line. “I wouldn’t describe pouring you a beverage as trouble.”

“Well, coffee is my preference, but I only drink it cold.”

Senna clasped her hands in satisfaction. “I have cold brew. How do you take it?”

“Black.”

“Good for you.” With a nod so firm she might have been solidifying some court strategy, Senna darted off to the kitchen.

“I did tell you,” Laurence said with a chuckle that managed to boom from his chest despite being low in volume.

“You did,” Leslie said.

Senna returned as quickly as she’d left, moving with speed and grace that didn’t spill a drop of Leslie’s coffee. She handed it over without acknowledging Laurence’s remark, and Leslie took a slow sip.

“Mmm. Colombian?”

“That’s right,” Senna said.

“No kidding, this is my favorite.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

No doubt she would. Leslie followed her and Laurence across the open lower level to the den, where she claimed a black leather chair and Ryker’s parents sat together on the matching love seat. Leslie sipped her cold brew and just...talked.

She told them about her art, shocked when they both said with enthusiasm they’d been following her creator accounts online since Ryker had told them he wanted to fly to Tennessee and meet his “true match.” Laurence proclaimed her recently sold winter-scape his favorite of her works, and Senna praised the creativity and variety of her pocket-sized overhead dioramas.

She told them about her life in Harmony Ridge and forgot to worry that it was too small for this state senator and prosecuting attorney. She forgot that Laurence held political office at all. He was simply Ryker’s dad, tuned in to her small-town stories,

occasionally letting loose a booming laugh. Senna too committed her full attention whenever Leslie spoke. She laughed more often than her husband, an unrestrained sound of easy joy.

“Okay, that’s it,” Leslie finally said through her own laughter, after telling her side of the story from the day she first caught Ryker’s scent at the art fair. “I can’t talk about myself any more tonight. I want to know something new about Ryker.”

“Fair enough,” Laurence said. “But I need a minute to recover from ‘backup husband.’”

When they’d all sobered, Senna said, “Even for Ryker, this was a bold step. We cautioned him about how you might take it, but I’m not sure he really heard us.”

“He didn’t.” Leslie would never forget his surprise when she objected to his phrasing. “But it’s a great story now, and he course-corrected pretty fast once he realized.”

“You know him so well already,” Laurence said. “I wasn’t sure about this long-distance thing, but I guess it’s working for y’all.”

“It is for now,” Leslie said. “Someday we plan to split our time between the homes we love.”

“That’s a wonderful compromise,” Senna said.

“We make each other happy.”

Laurence and Senna were both nodding before she’d finished, and her heart felt the peace of that. This lovely couple made each other happy too. It was clear in every gesture, every warm look toward one another.

“Now,” Leslie said, “so I have some ammunition, because the dude does occasionally need some humbling... Do you have any childhood stories he doesn’t want me to know?”

Nineteen

The happy buzz in Ryker’s limbs had mostly worn off by the time he pulled into his townhouse garage. Skipping his sleep last night was only half the cause. Stress was tiring even for vampires, and thinking Frederick Angstrom was about to get away with defrauding dozens of Virginia families out of their insurance premiums had been weighing on him. Dad would have told him he could only do his best, and the rest wasn’t his responsibility. It was true, but it didn’t feel true when Ryker was on the hunt for proof of wrongdoing.

He’d finished this one, though. Done his part to get justice and stop the criminals. He hoped Angstrom would have to pay retribution and serve a solid term behind bars. He looked forward to his chance at testifying on behalf of the victims.

For tonight though, bed sounded great. Six hours of sleep, then a few hours at the gym with Tai and Leslie...

Wait a minute.

Ryker’s nostrils flared. He had vampire neighbors on one side, human neighbors on the other, but he wasn’t smelling his neighbors. There was another vampire close by. Within a few hundred feet. Sitting on his porch stoop.

Ryker left the garage, stood halfway down his driveway facing the side of the house. “Well? Come at me if that’s what you’re here for.”

She sauntered around the corner into his line of vision, dressed in flowing, wide-

legged black pants and a yellow top. Her heels were the same color as Dorothy's from The Wizard of Oz and equally sparkly. Her hair was even longer than the last time he'd seen her, a snow-white braid that ended past her waist. Why was her hair white?

"Jacqueline," he said, and her name didn't come out in the calm reprimand he'd been aiming for. He had to keep from sounding bothered. She'd feed on that.

"Hello, lover."

"You need to leave."

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Her mouth pursed. She came closer, all but gliding, and her eyes flashed pale red as they caught the streetlights. "I'm in town for the weekend."

Don't ask why. Never ask why. Why was a hook with a barb that he'd swallowed too often, only to have his insides torn out and stomped on. He didn't allow himself to step back, not even when she ran her hand down his chest.

"I figured it was about time to remind you what we had together. What we can still have."

"Not interested," he said.

"I've worked on myself, you know. I have some regrets about us."

"Some regrets?" He couldn't help laughing. "Is that like 'mistakes were made'?"

Jacqueline ought to bare her teeth at being laughed at, but instead her eyes welled up. "I needed to feel like you cared, like I meant more to you than anything else in the world, including that job you love so much."

The old accusations still clawed at him, but his scars were finally growing calluses. "You did mean more to me. But nothing I did was enough to prove that to you."

"Because I was insecure, Ryker. But that's in our past, and now we can focus on our future."

"Is cheating also in your past? How about lying?"

Something burned behind her tears, behind the mask of sincerity she held onto. “You’ve forgotten us. The power couple we were, the potential of us. You’re throwing it all away.”

“No. You did that, single-handedly, and there’s nothing else to say to each other.” But some instinct was tugging at his thoughts. Why was Jacqueline herenow? Why...?

“I’m not giving up on us, Ryker.”

He kept staring at her, his tired mind fighting to make the puzzle pieces fit...and then he got it. “Why is your hair white?”

Jacqueline tugged her braid over her shoulder and brushed her fingers over the woven locks. “It’s silver.”

Yep. Called it. He bared his teeth faster than he could think better of it.

Instantly dry-eyed, Jacqueline bared hers right back. “That’s right. Obviously silver hair turns you on. I don’t love it, but I’ll tolerate it long enough to show you which silver-haired woman in your life is clearly superior.”

“You’re not in my life, Jacqueline.” But his mind raced. How did she know? How...?

And curse it all, she could still read him. She laughed, a hollow sound lacking all warmth. He wondered how he hadn’t noticed the wrongness of her laugh on their first date.

“Should I let you work on the puzzle? Or should I be nice and tell you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Or he hoped he didn’t.

“I’m talking about your little country vampire who makes toys for a living.”

She could poke at him all day and all night, but she would never be allowed to talk about Leslie with derision. Not in his presence. His heart gave an angry extra beat, so hard Jacqueline heard it. Her dark eyebrows shot up toward her ridiculous hair.

“Get off my property, Jacqueline.”

“You don’t even remember, do you?”

“Right now. I mean it.”

“You told me about her, your one true match from a stupid test in college. Leslie Snow.”

A cold drip of dread traveled his spine. He had to know what she meant, how far she was willing to go. But if he asked pointblank, she wouldn’t tell him.

His silence goaded her on. “And there it is, this week on her little social page—aw, a cutesy little post that she’s traveling this weekend. Going to see her boyfriend. And the day after that—a picture of her arrival at a very recognizable airport.”

“So you’ve been following her online for years.”

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Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “Of course I have. I found her online the day you told me about her.”

Maybe he should have expected this, but after two years with zero contact...assuming she had moved on was only natural, wasn't it? “You wasted your time. Knowing who I'm dating isn't going to win you anything. Now go.”

“You're not going to be with her, Ryker.”

“That's not up to you.”

She darted in close and hissed up at him, directly in his face. “I'll take that little girl apart.”

“You'll stay away from her.”

“You don't even know the things I could tell her about you. Things no woman should ever put up with, that I put up with for almost a year.”

She was goading him. It was obvious. It wasn't even a convincing attack. Yet deep in his chest, one of the calloused scars tore and bled a little. His heart throbbed with an extra beat that hurt.

Her eyes threw pink sparks. She'd heard that heartbeat too. “Find a reason to break it off now, before I have to tell her your secrets. And if you think she won't believe me...” Her teeth flashed in the night. “She will.”

“Stay away from her, Jacqueline.”

With a slow smirk, she said, “That’s not up to you.”

Then she was gone. Darted off into the darkness, down the street, her scent out of range within seconds.

Ryker stood staring after her for too long. He tried to think, but Jacqueline’s presence had frozen his brain. He went inside to the den, his favorite room in the house. He sank down on the couch and pulled his phone out of his pocket. Stared down at its dark face. He was fine, right? Long over her. So why did he feel the need to talk to someone right now?

Of course he would tell Leslie about Jacqueline. He didn’t expect her to take it badly. He simply didn’t want to talk about Jacqueline to anyone, for any reason, ever again. For her to show up now, on the first weekend Leslie had come to visit him... It felt like a mean coincidence from the universe, but of course this was Jacqueline, not the universe.

Well, he didn’t have to let her win. He would tell Leslie the whole story later, when she was back in Tennessee. He would preserve his time with her this weekend and keep Jacqueline out of it.

He got up and got ready for bed. In a few minutes he was nestled snugly under his covers, eyes closed. He tried to quiet himself. He focused on the beats of his heart, which were down to a regular thirty beats per minute.

Minutes ticked by.

His eyes shot open. He hissed at the monochrome of night. He hissed at himself for being awake.

An hour after cocooning beneath his comforter, Ryker shot up and landed on his feet beside the bed. He would never sleep at this rate. He'd arrive at the gym tomorrow worn out and lose every match to Tai.

Should he call Tai?

No. He didn't need to talk about this. He didn't want to talk about this.

Across the house, his phone buzzed with an incoming text. He darted to it in two seconds and scooped it up.

Claire: Hey, I know this is going to sound a little weird coming out of nowhere, but are you okay?

Ryker tapped out a reply and sent it before he could talk himself out of it.

I'm fine, but I think I need to talk through something. Can I call you?

Within a few seconds, his phone buzzed in his hand. He accepted the call and set the phone back on the coffee table.

"Thanks," he said.

"You're not fine," Claire said.

He paced back and forth in front of the coffee table. "No, I am, but I... When I got home from dropping Leslie at my parents' house, Jacqueline was on my front porch waiting for me."

Claire's hiss came with force.

“I know,” he said.

“Does she know about Leslie?”

“Yeah, and she knows she’s here in town. Apparently I told Jacqueline years ago about the true match test in college, and she’s been following Leslie on social media ever since. We’re talking for a few years, Claire.”

“You sound surprised by this.”

“Of course I’m... You’re not?”

“The woman is toxic and possessive.”

“Oh.” His chest hurt. He let out a breath that shook, that sounded disturbingly human.

“Am I stupid or naive?”

“Neither, Ry. She’s good at her game.”

He nodded. He couldn’t seem to get any more words out. Was he actually messed up? Did he need to talk about it? Shouldn’t he be tougher than this?

“Ryker?”

“I...” He sank onto the couch, covered his face, and bent forward. Claire waited until he could say more. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’m not in love with her anymore. I didn’t even want her standing on my lawn. I... It’s like all I see in her

eyes now is the coldness. So I shouldn't be freaking out like this. I should be fine."

"Or—and hear me out on this—you're not emotionally bulletproof like you try to be. You have soft spots just like everybody else."

"I love Leslie," he blurted. "I love her, Claire."

"I thought so."

"So this shouldn't still...still..."

"Hurt," Claire said. "That's the word you want. It still hurts."

"Yeah," he whispered.

"Are you going to tell Leslie she's here?"

"I want our weekend together first. I'll tell her after."

"Is that worth the risk Jacqueline will show up somewhere and introduce herself?"

He could see her doing exactly that, if she figured out ahead of time where they planned to be. Maybe he ought to talk to Leslie, but everything in him cringed away from the idea. At last he said, "I don't know."

"Okay," Claire said. "Go try to sleep and decide tomorrow."

"Yeah. I could try that."

"Anything else you need to say first?"

“You’re a good friend,” he said.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

He needed the laugh that filled his chest and began to ease the tension across his shoulders. “Why did you text me? You didn’t know she’d been here.”

“Just a feeling,” she said. “And I always trust my gut.”

Ryker had been trusting Claire’s gut instincts for years, but she’d never seemed to read his mind before. “That’s all? You’re not plugged into surveillance on my place or anything.”

“If you’re spinning random theories in your head, it really is time for bed.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks, friend.”

“My pleasure, friend. Good night.”

He hung up and leaned back against the couch, eyes closed. Then he sprang to his feet before he could fall asleep that way and regret it later. He’d deal with Jacqueline tomorrow. He’d tell Leslie when the time was right. He’d make it all work out. Tomorrow.

Twenty

“Don’t let me win,” Leslie said as she faced her boyfriend across the sparring mat.

“Does that sound like me?”

No, come to think of it. She shrugged. “Just making sure we’re clear. If I beat you, it’s for real.”

Dressed in black athletic pants and tank top, unexpectedly attractive when barefoot, Ryker had spent the last half hour schooling her on the common moves used by sparring vampires. She had underestimated her ability to learn and apply the concepts, but Ryker hadn’t. He’d become even more attractive when she realized what a good teacher he was—never patronizing, clear in his explanations, willing to challenge her, and happily encouraging every time she nailed a new skill.

“Ryker trivia,” he said. “I’ve never let anyone beat me at anything in my entire life.”

She laughed. “Leslie trivia. I totally have.”

“Oh really?”

“Mostly in middle school. Hazard of going to school with humans and not wanting them to hate me.”

He gave the grimace she was becoming used to whenever she mentioned adapting herself to her surroundings. She’d been in Virginia less than twenty-four hours, but already his strong opinions on the topic made more sense than they had yesterday. The gym was another example of why.

Human gyms were intolerable for vampires: sweat and disinfectant, air conditioning, painfully loud music. Ryker’s gym smelled metallic and clean, but even the cleaners used were scent-free. The thermostat was similar to Claire’s bar, humid and hot and invigorating. The music volume was so modulated, most humans probably wouldn’t notice music was playing at all. And the vampires who weight-trained, sparred, climbed the rock wall—all of them did so at full speed, full strength, their eyes glinting jewel tones. When Leslie excused herself to the restroom, she had discovered a vending machine set between the two restrooms. It was stocked with blood bags.

“You can slake here,” she’d blurted when she returned to Ryker, as if he might not know.

He’d nodded. “Have you ever worked out so hard you got thirsty early?”

“Um, that’s a thing?”

“Sometimes, yeah.”

She wondered if she would ever run out of surprise for all things vampire in Ryker’s

town.

Now she widened her stance and got ready to lose her first sparring match.

“First move?” Ryker offered.

Ooh. Yes, please. She’d do her best even if she had no chance at the win. She launched three feet off the mat and spun her body midair, aiming her bare foot at his chest. He dodged. She kept up the onslaught, throwing kicks and chops at him, darting in and out, determined to get hold of an arm or swipe a leg out from under him. When her heel grazed his ribs, she let out a cry of triumph that didn’t sound like her.

Then she landed on her back as Ryker did the leg-sweeping move she’d been trying for.

He didn’t pin her, though he could have, so she leaped to her feet and came at him again. The match lasted about ten minutes, and then she was down on the mat, and Ryker was straddling her hips, pinning her arms to her sides as she tried to wriggle out from under him.

“I don’t concede,” she said.

“You don’t have to, technically.”

He was grinning so hard, creases formed around his eyes, and she saw for a moment how Laurence had gained his own smile lines and how they would look on his son in a few decades or a century.

And then she saw her boyfriend looking as he did now but with a tattooed ring finger, popping the cork off a champagne bottle so that it fizzed onto the grass, laughing with

victory toward the sky.

“Leslie?”

She grabbed the neck of his tank top in both hands and pulled him into a kiss. He scooped her up and cradled her back, cupped her neck and twined his fingers up into her hair under her ponytail. Her bare toes curled against the mat, and she fisted his shirt tighter and drew him as close as she could manage.

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“So I guess this is Leslie,” came a satin baritone from the sidelines.

Ryker leaped to his feet, still cradling her. He set her beside him but kept his arm around her waist. She did the same, and her voice was at its fullest when she said, “And this must be Tai.”

Tai was already barefoot and clad in athletic ware—black pants and an ocean-blue shirt. His eyes were surprisingly not a variety of green, blue, or purple but instead nearly colorless, shiny likepolished metal. His hair was neat and so deeply black, under the gym lights it looked almost blue.

He stepped onto the mat and held out his hand to her. “It’s really good to meet you.”

“Same. Ryker thinks the world of you.”

That made him smile, and his platinum eyes gained a higher gloss. “It’s mutual.”

“I’m glad.”

Tai turned to Ryker, and the two men hugged, complete with a solid pound to the other’s back.

“Congratulations on Angstrom,” Tai said.

Ryker cocked one blond eyebrow. “Did I name names?”

“Nope.” Tai smirked.

“Wait,” Leslie said. “Frederick Angstrom? The fraudster scammer millionaire who got indicted like twenty-six times including on felony charges?”

“Um...” Ryker said. “Well.”

“It’s been all over the news. Nationally. Internationally, probably.” She turned to Tai, who shrugged, then back to Ryker. “The case that’s had you tied in knots—you were working against Frederick Angstrom?”

Ryker lowered his voice. “It’s not public knowledge at this time.”

Right. And unlike her typical day at home, she was not surrounded by humans right now. She glanced around. No one else was near, and she tried to tune into various conversations across the gym to determine if anyone might have overheard her. The voices were so faint, she had to work to decipher every other word. Her shoulders relaxed. No one could have accidentally picked up on what she’d said. They’d have to be listening already.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m not used to the less-privacy thing.”

“I’m sorry too,” Tai said. “It’s going into the public record, so I figured it was safe to comment on now.”

“It probably is, but let’s drop it for now. I’m not in the mood to be approached because a random vampire journalist overheard and wants a quote from ‘an unnamed person inside the investigation.’”

“Has that happened to you before?” she said.

“Rarely, but yeah.” Ryker stabbed a finger in Tai’s direction. “I’d like to know how you even know about it this early.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Another smirk.

Ryker rolled his eyes. “This only motivates me to wipe the mat with you.”

“Let’s see you try.”

“Oh, this is going to be good,” Leslie said.

Tai made a sweeping gesture with one arm. “Do you two want to go again first?”

Ryker said, “Up to Leslie. I’m happy to fight either of you.”

She chuckled at his playful smugness, then shrugged. “There’s time for both, right?”

“Sure, if you want.”

“Then I’ll delay my further losses. Now that I’ve given it a try, I’m more curious to see y’all.”

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“Works for me,” Tai said, “but you’ll want to step off the—”

Before he could finish, Ryker launched at him, full speed and full strength, both feet aiming for Tai’s upper body. Tai ducked so fast, Leslie almost lost track of him. Ryker sailed over his friend’s crouching body and landed on his feet, then spun and charged again about five times faster and harder than he’d come at Leslie. Tai evaded him again, then changed direction and made an offense of his own. His palm brushed Ryker’s back, making the first physical contact of the match.

Their arms and legs were like whirlwinds, their gaits like quicksilver. They leapt and spun and flipped away from one another in moves smoother and more intricate than Leslie had ever seen before. When a heel or hand landed, Ryker or Tai gave a shout of triumph.

At first, Leslie thought Ryker had no chance. His friend was too fast and too wily, choosing evasion most of the time, which seemed to be a solid strategy as Ryker continued attacking. Surely Tai would tire him out or cause him to make a frustrated mistake. But Ryker did neither. He kept coming, his blue eyes sparking with competition and determination, his teeth bared at his best friend in what was only partly a friendly grin. The other part of it was pure predator. Tai’s face, by contrast, was utterly blank.

Twenty minutes into the match, Ryker managed to seize Tai in a full arm-lock. Tai flipped him over his back, but Ryker grabbed hold of him again, and then they were wrestling on their feet, face to face, hands and arms locked, trying to push one another off the mat. Tai hissed as his feet were forced to slide back, back, back—and then he ducked under Ryker’s arm and tugged Ryker halfway around with him. But

Ryker kept hold of him and with sheer strength propelled Tai backward. Tai's back arched as he resisted, and for a long moment he seemed suspended off his feet in the air. Then he buckled, and Ryker landed with his knees on either side of his friend's torso, pinning Tai's arms above his head.

Tai's body bucked like an angry horse, but he couldn't get Ryker off him. He resisted for a long few seconds, then lay suddenly, perfectly still.

"Okay," he said.

At the single word, Ryker was up and pulling Tai to his feet. "Good match."

"Good match," Tai said.

"That was incredible," Leslie said as they joined her beside the mat. "How even is it between you two? Do you win half, lose half?"

"Pretty much," Ryker said.

"He's got me beat with brute strength," Tai said. "But he's slow. So..." He shrugged. "Yeah, it's pretty close to fifty/fifty."

To Leslie's eyes, neither of them could be called slow, though Tai's grace and speed were stunning to watch in a way Ryker didn't quite match. "But if Ryker's stronger, how do you ever pin him?"

Tai smirked. "Want to see?"

"Absolutely."

Ryker rolled his eyes. "Bring it."

The words had barely left his mouth when Tai sprang at him and propelled him back onto the mat.

As if the first match had been a warmup, they went at each other now with even greater fluidity and speed. Watching Ryker and Tai turn sparring into a sort of aggressive dance, Leslie could describe them only with poetry. They were like lightning when it jumped from cloud to cloud without ever striking the earth. They were like water sliding over smooth stones.

They were vampires. This was what their bodies could do, whateverscould do. Pride for what she was swelled in her chest as she watched the two men.

This match was longer than the first. Neither vampire could manage to pin the other for over half an hour. Then Tai feinted and crouched and, with his leg nearly skimming the mat, swept both of Ryker's legs from under him. Ryker was flipped onto his back, and as he began to spring up, Tai hit him with his open hands against both Ryker's shoulders. Using his body weight as well as gravity, Tai brought his friend back down to the mat.

Ryker didn't buck at all. He laughed. "Okay."

Then Tai was on his feet, hauling Ryker up by the hand. "Good match."

"Good match," Ryker said.

Leslie tried to find her words. She wanted them to know how impressive they were, but they likely already did. Or maybe vampires who had lived in community so long weren't awed by one another.

Ryker left the mat to join her. "There you go. That's how he beats me."

“I’ve never seen anything like you two. There’s no point in me getting back out there.”

“Of course there is, if you enjoy it. And there’s no reason you can’t beat one of us, with enough practice.”

To his second point, she shook her head. She could practice for a century and never beat either of them. But on his first point...he was right. She couldn’t care less about being the best. She stepped onto the mat.

“My turn,” she said.

“Tai, will you record us?”

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“Sure.” Tai padded over to their piled gym bags and dug out his phone.

“Wait, why?” She hadn’t been self-conscious until this moment, but now...

“I want you to see yourself,” Ryker said, suddenly somber. “How you move. You’re beautiful, and I want you to see it.”

Oh... She blinked a few times against the emotion that rose inside. “Well...um... Okay, then. Go ahead, Tai.”

But she couldn’t get in a single hit now. No doubt she looked ridiculous up against Ryker’s skill. No doubt she’d cringe as she watched the video Tai silently recorded from the sidelines. No doubt Ryker thought she was laughable even if he didn’t say so.

“Leslie,” Ryker said without pausing his steady forward motion, crowding her toward the edge of the mat, “fight back. You were fighting back before.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Yeah, you do.” He batted away her measly attempt to hit him, then batted again.

“You could hit me before.”

“You were letting me.”

“No, I wasn’t. Come on.” He chopped her upper arm with the side of his hand, but there was no force behind it. “Come on!”

Fine. She'd prove her incompetence on camera. She flew at him, twisted midair and hammered a roundhouse kick toward his face. He ducked, and her foot passed over his head, and with a hiss she launched into the air again, this time trying with both hands to pummel his chest. Ryker leaped back, and Leslie landed short, on her feet but still without making contact.

Now he took up defense. He let her keep coming and made no more attempts to strike. Which was also maddening. Leslie tried to remember how Tai had gotten hold of him. She watched Ryker's moves, calculated when his feet left the mat in a forward spring designed to put her back on her heels. Instead she tried to imitate Tai's feint and crouch. With a thrust of her arm she took out his legs at the ankles. Ryker gave a gasp of surprise and landed on his back.

Leslie was still in motion. He would be on his feet again in half a heartbeat, unless— She tackled and landed directly on his midsection, and Ryker grunted sharply.

"Oh!" Leslie rolled off him. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

Ryker wrapped one arm around her and pulled her close, and this time she landed half-sprawled across his chest and legs. He was laughing, the full musical sound she had grown to love so much.

"I didn't hurt you?"

"If I were human, I'm pretty sure you'd have knocked the wind out of me."

"Sorry."

"Leslie, I'm fine. And you were fantastic." He sprang to his feet and brought her with him, both on their feet in a moment. "Let's watch it back, and you'll see what I'm talking about."

No, no, she wouldn't. She bit her lip as Tai angled his phone toward her. His thumb tapped the screen, and the video began to play.

On Tai's phone screen, two vampires sparred. The man was blond and gorgeous, skilled and smooth and strong. The woman had a silver ponytail and wore Leslie's workout clothes, black leggings and a magenta top with a floral print. But she couldn't possibly be Leslie, because she moved like lightning when it danced among the clouds. Her kicks, her springs, the way her body left the mat as though gravity weren't the last word for her. And then she ducked so fluidly the phone's camera hardly kept up with her. And then she came at Ryker so fast, she really did become a blur.

The recording ended when Ryker drew her toward him. His laughter was cut off, and the image that went still on the screen showed his arms around her back, her head on his chest, their bodies sprawled in casual togetherness. A chill of pleasure danced in her chest.

"Oh," she whispered.

"Told you so," Ryker said. While she had watched the video, he had watched her.

"At first I thought I looked like someone else," she said. "But no. That's me. That's all me."

"Yep."

And Ryker was right. She looked really good. Fully alive, unguarded, fast and strong and herself. Leslie Snow: Tennessee girl, diorama artist...vampire.

Twenty-One

“There’s one vampire perk that’s not talked about enough,” Leslie said as they sprang from one handhold to another on their way up the gym’s rock wall, “and that’s not having to shower after a workout.”

Ryker chuckled and vaulted his body upward to the next handhold, which was only a narrow slit in the wall. He held on with the tips of his fingers and enjoyed exercising his strength. “Except it is talked about.”

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“What? Who talks about it? I remember precisely one discussion about it when I was a kid, and that was mostly my mom letting me know that if I showered as often as the human kids did, my skin and hair would start to feel like sandpaper.”

“How old were you?”

“Thirteen.”

When he was thirteen, his parents had been passing on vampire history via oral tradition. He shook his head. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

He didn’t want to hurt her, though. Maybe he shouldn’t ask. A few seconds later they both reached the top and landed lightly on their feet, side by side.

“I win!” Leslie raised her fists toward the vaulted ceiling, and her eyes glinted with opal tones. “By less than a second, but still.”

The dream from last night—the dream he’d tried to remember when he woke in the middle of the night shaking—slammed back into Ryker like a blow to his chest. Leslie standing at the top of the rock wall, Ryker gazing up at her from the floor, cheering her success. And from behind her, from nowhere, Jacqueline stepping up to shove her off the wall, and Ryker screaming as the woman he loved fell like a human, didn’t catch herself at all, didn’t land on her feet, simply fell and fell and fell—

“Ryker.” Her hand was on his shoulder, squeezing hard. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“Haven’t you climbed this wall countless times?”

“Yeah. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Leslie took hold of both his hands, stepped in close, and wrapped her arms around him. “No. You’re not. Take a breath.”

He wanted to resist, but maybe that was stupid. He drew a deep breath, let it out, then did it again. He felt like a puny human, but Leslie was right. Breathing helped ease the sharpness of his increased heartbeat.

“There. Good,” she said when his pulse had gotten back down to thirty beats. She let him go, stepped back, and now they stood facing each other on a thin ledge twenty feet in the air. “What now? You obviously need to get down from here, but if you can’t jump or rappel...”

“It’s not the height, Leslie, really.”

“Then...what?”

He sighed. He sat on the ledge and dangled his feet, leaving plenty of room for other gym members to stand and enjoy reaching the top. Leslie sat beside him and bumped her shoe against his.

“Spill it,” she said.

“My ex is in town, and last night I dreamed she pushed you off here and you...” His throat tightened, and the last word came out rough. “Fell.”

Leslie's eyebrows arched, and her lips parted. She stared at him for a long moment, then shook her head. "Sorry, would you repeat that, but from the beginning?"

"My ex is—"

"Nope, that's not the beginning."

He shoved a hand through his hair. He was steady now. The freak-out had lasted only a few seconds, but it had exposed him. Stupid dream.

For a little while they sat quietly. At the moment they were the only ones up here, and looking down from a manageable height felt sort of calming.

When he was ready, he said, "Her name's Jacqueline Hargrave."

"Is she a lawyer? With a name like that, she ought to be. Or a writer maybe. Historical mysteries."

"She's in finance," he said.

"Is that how you met?"

He nodded. "Her company contracted my firm—well, my firm at the time. She was newly promoted, on her way to becoming the first female CFO in her company's history. We hit it off, and I asked to take her to dinner."

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Ryker watched Leslie's face for the micro-expressions vampires never missed. She wasn't angry with him, at least not yet. But she was worried, and he was the cause.

"I wanted your first visit, meeting my parents and all... I didn't want Jacqueline to be part of this. I was going to tell you about her after."

"That's fair," she said. "But clearly she's not a normal ex, so...shouldn't you have already told me? Before I came this weekend?"

He'd known that the whole time, had no excuse. He dropped his chin to his chest. "Yeah. But that's...not how it feels."

Leslie laced her fingers through his and tugged his hand into her lap. "How does it feel?"

He shrugged again. "We parted badly."

"How long ago?"

"Two years ago."

She blinked. "You said you quit dating two years ago. She's the last person you dated before me?"

"Yeah."

"How long were you together?"

“Ten months.”

Her slow nod gave nothing away. Her face had smoothed out as she pondered, grown harder to read. “I’d like to hear about her, Ryker.”

“But I’m over her.”

She poked a finger at his chest. “You dreamed about her last night.”

“I had an nightmare about her.”

“Which means she’s still in your head somewhere.”

“No. Not anymore.” Until she showed up on his porch, he hadn’t thought of Jacqueline in months. “There’s no part of me that misses her, not a single part of me. Please believe me.”

“Oh, Ryker.” She leaned into him and rested her head on his shoulder. “You don’t have to defend yourself because you had a bad dream.”

Was that what he was doing? He twined the end of her ponytail around his finger.

“We need to talk about this,” Leslie said. “It’s past time. We can do it here, or we can go somewhere private if you want.”

“Slake It Off?”

“Perfect.”

They stood together, and as he bent his knees to leap to the ground, Leslie took his hand. She gave it a squeeze, and then they jumped. They landed lightly on the floor a

few feet out from the wall. Leslie kept hold of his hand as they left the gym and headed to his car. The blood bar was only a few miles from the gym, and they didn't talk on the way over.

When Ryker had parked, Leslie took his hand again. "Ready to talk?"

He looked out the windshield, through the plate-glass window of Slake It Off. Behind the bar, Claire darted around pouring drinks. The line was longer than usual. But the crowd size inside didn't matter for his and Leslie's purpose here.

"I've wanted you to know about...her. I just haven't wanted to put it into words again."

"Again?"

"Let's see. First there was Tai. He knows the most; he was my first phone call after it all blew up. Then there was Dad and Mom, then a few close friends including Claire. You'd think by now it would be easy to talk about."

She gave his hand a slight tug. "Let's go inside. Settle in. Maybe by then you'll have the words you need."

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Not likely. But he nodded again and let her lead him inside to one of the booths. Leslie was right. It was past time for her to know...everything.

Twenty-Two

Slake It Off was more crowded today than it had been the evening before. Apparently lunchtime was a common slaking hour. The rich, salty aroma coming from behind the bar and from glasses on a serving tray that passed by them—Leslie swallowed hard, half thirsty despite slaking that morning.

“Before we settle in, I think I want a drink,” she said.

Ryker gestured her to the bar. “My treat.”

“I guess sparring and vertical climbing take more physical effort than hiking my mountains.”

“Sparring definitely uses more energy, at least for me.”

“Are you thirsty too?”

Ryker shrugged.

“Have you slaked since last night?”

“Nah.”

At the bar, Claire poured her a glass. Ryker got out his wallet, and Leslie gave him a look she hoped was both clear and persuasive. She didn't want to be pushy, but she couldn't forget Senna's reprimand about ignoring his thirst.

"Okay," he said with an eye roll. "Two please, Claire."

"Any type?"

"Whatever."

Claire rolled her eyes right back at him. "I do not understand how you don't have a preference."

"A preference?" Leslie said. "Blood's blood."

"Not at all," Ryker intoned with a professor's somberness. "Claire Vanderlaan is among the elite vampires whose palates detect the most subtle differences."

No way. "That's a thing?"

"I prefer type A," Claire said. "The tang is sharper, and it's less earthy than O."

"You're serious."

"She is deadly serious," Ryker said. "She can taste all sorts of subtleties I've never even heard of."

"No wonder you have a type tasting on the menu." Leslie had wondered about it, written on the chalkboard behind the bar. But last time they'd been here, she had been sidetracked from asking by Ryker's urgent need, then the tour, then the enjoyment of privacy behind the partition.

“When someone orders my sampler, I know they’ve got a palate like mine.” The flash of Claire’s teeth held a bit of predatory glee. “It leads to some great conversations.”

Claire poured a second glass for Ryker, and then he and Leslie took their beverages to one of the private booths. They sat a moment, sipping. Leslie’s gums ached as her fangs descended, and she sat absorbing the wonder of being here in public, not needing to conceal herself. Energy flooded into her as she continued to sip.

Ryker took a long gulp from his glass, then seemed to need a breath as his cheeks flushed with the same energy that had filled Leslie’s body.

“Youwerethirsty,” she said, her fangs bringing a soft hiss to the last word.

“I guess I was.” Ryker hissed his s’s too, and his husky velvet voice in combination with the effect of his fangs was...kind of sexy. “I didn’t notice until now, when I tasted it.”

“Your mom’s right. You’ve got to work on this.”

“I know I should, but...” He shrugged, self-deprecation in his fanged grin. “I never remember.”

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Leslie took a few more sips, and the energy sang through her whole body. She couldn't remember the last time she'd slaked twice in a day. It felt good. Really good. "Wow. If I let myself slake multiple times a day for too long, I might end up like Tai."

Ryker set his glass down, and he met her eyes with a laser focus. "No. You wouldn't. I wouldn't either."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think before I said it." She traced the rim of her glass with one finger, then met his eyes again. "I don't like the way they put you in the middle, but I just did it myself."

"It's okay," he said. "After he left the gym, Tai texted me. Now that he's met you, he gave me permission to...um, elaborate. A little. If you brought it up."

"He told you to tell me about his private life?"

"He doesn't want to have the conversation with you, but you might need to know at some point when there's not time to explain."

If Tai had given permission... She couldn't deny her curiosity toward a vampire whose experience was so different from her own. Asking questions felt wrong, though. She took another sip while Ryker drained the rest of his glass.

"So," he said, then stared at his empty glass for a long moment before continuing. "For Tai, the rush of slaking is only part of the battle. There's also the thirst."

She nodded encouragement when he hesitated.

“Okay, for example... When I picked you up yesterday after not slaking for twenty-eight hours, the thirst sort of clobbered me. My throat started aching and I couldn’t talk.”

She nodded. She’d never experienced what she’d seen happen to Ryker last night, but she’d also never forgotten to slake for four hours past her usual schedule.

“For Tai, the thirst is like...ten times stronger than that. If he had to last twenty-eight hours without slaking, his fangs would descend, and he’d be dangerous.”

Wait. What? “Dangerous—you mean to humans?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my gosh, Ryker.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the thing I might need to know. Without time to explain.”

“Look, he’s extremely responsible about this, Leslie. There’s never been a situation like that since I’ve known him. He gave me permission to tell you out of the overabundance of caution that is how Tai lives his life.”

His reassurance quelled the worried visions that had begun filling her head. Still, though... “I thought vampires slaking from humans was like our bite ‘turning’ them. You know, pure Hollywood. I thought it wasn’t something we did—ever, at any time for any reason.”

“We don’t now. Previous eras were different, until it became a major taboo and then, eventually, a crime.”

Of course, Leslie knew some humans spun conspiracies about the topic—take the creepy guy from college study group as only one example. But some humans also denied that wolves, whom they called lupines despite wolves’ distaste for the term, even existed. And Ryker wasn’t describing this in human conspiracy terms. Clearly, typical vampires knew about this dark practice in their past; so here was one more thing her parents hadn’t taught her.

Leslie sipped from her glass and imagined herself so driven by thirst that she would threaten to drink this very sustenance from the vein of a helpless human. She imagined not merely enjoying the taste and the energy but craving it, controlled by the need for it.

The idea was terrifying.

“So...if Tai has never actually threatened anybody...he can live here. In a city surrounded by humans.”

“He has contingency plans with their own contingency plans. I don’t think for a minute that he’ll ever hurt anybody.”

She shook her head. “I can’t reconcile it in my head—all of this with the man I met this morning. He was so calm, Ryker. Not a mask of calm but the real thing.”

“No, that was real. He had a good time with us.”

“I felt that.”

Ryker nodded. “On the other hand, his self-control is...intense. Mentally, he’s the

strongest person I've ever met in my life.”

“And this is what he wanted you to tell me—so I wouldn't worry about this when we get together?”

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“More or less. He’d glare at me for painting him in a good light, but whatever. He’s not here to accuse himself.” Ryker’s shrug came with a mischievous smirk and a thoughtful crinkle between his eyes. She loved the combined expressions that were so uniquely her vampire. Her match.

Her match.

Fingers twined. Not tattooed yet, though they would be. A glass spilled, an unmistakable red stain on a lace tablecloth. Laughter.

“Leslie?”

She blinked. “Here. Just saw...”

“The future?” His eyes sparked with invitation, with a reminder of how they’d behaved behind this partition last night.

“Very briefly. Somebody tipped a glass over, and we laughed about it.”

“That’s all?” But rather than disappointment, he looked fascinated.

“This time, yeah. And we’ve sidetracked from our purpose long enough, Mr. I-Don’t-Evade-Anything-Ever.”

The crinkle formed between his eyes again, less mischief now, more uncertainty. She wanted to hug him.

“Does it feel unsafe to tell me?” she said, instinct hushing her tone despite their soundproof environment.

“No. I’m just a coward, I guess. Talking about it’s going to suck.”

She couldn’t stand the dread in his eyes, dulling their blue toward charcoal. In a discreet, fluid motion she vaulted the table and landed beside him. She tugged his hand into her lap and held it between both of hers.

“Better?”

“A little,” he said. “Thanks.”

“I’m here.”

“I know. Um...to summarize...Jacqueline cheated the whole time we were together. Her favorite game is getting someone to trust her so she can betray them. I shouldn’t still care about the things she said when we broke up. I don’t most of the time. But then sometimes something pokes at me and...and it still...um, it still almost kind of...hurts a little.”

He was statue-still, and his eyes had gone charcoal gray. Leslie wrapped her arms around him, and he leaned into her, rested his chin on top of her head.

“Can you tell me?” she said.

“I just did.”

“Can you tell me what she said to you?”

“Oh.” He was quiet a long time. At last, barbs snagging the velvet of his voice, he

said, “If I didn’t want her to cheat, I shouldn’t be so devoted to my job. If I didn’t want her to cheat, I shouldn’t be so boring. She needed someone interesting. She needed someone worth being faithful to. I’m...I’m a useless coward who plays dead for attention.”

“Oh, Ryker.” Leslie cupped her hand around the back of his neck when he gave a shudder of pure emotion. “She isn’t only a cheater. You know that, don’t you?”

“I know. She’s a liar too.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s not all. She’s an abuser, Ryker.”

He flinched. “Nah.”

“Yes, she is. Verbally and emotionally abusive. Women can be too, you know.”

After a long minute, he lifted his head. “I don’t like to think of it that way.”

“Of course not. Our stupid culture says men have to be the toughest all the freaking time.”

He gave a broken laugh against her hair, and she tightened her arms as though that could be enough to show him the truth of how valuable he was.

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“Now you listen to me,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am.” That was a grin. Good.

“Ryker Maddox, you are a stellar boyfriend. You see me, you hear me, you care about my art and my family and my little town because they’re me and what matters to me, matters to you. I love your devotion to your job, your intelligence at solving convoluted money crimes and getting justice for victims. You have never made me feel second-place because of the work you do, not once.”

He heaved a hard breath as she held him. Leslie held on and kept going. More to say. Things he had to hear from her and no one else.

“You’ve also never been boring a day in your life. In fact I’d be fine with it if you were the tiniest bit boring, but that’s not who you are. You’re a math wizard, a sparring expert, an outgoing risk-taker willing to hop on a plane to meet a woman who might have told you to get out of her town.”

Now the slightest chuckle shook his frame. That was good too. Leslie leaned back and took his dear face between her hands.

“Last but not least,” she said. “Your fear is real. It’s out of your control. It doesn’t make you a coward. It’s just a crummy thing you have to deal with, the same as all of us deal with crummy things in life. You’re a strong, smart, gorgeous vampire and I’m madly in love with you because of you.”

Silver tears sparkled unshed in his eyes. Leslie cupped his neck again, brought his

face down to hers, and kissed him. She kept her lips soft and gentle, kept her fingers gentle as they pushed up from his neck into his hair. When they drew back from the kiss, Ryker's eyes were wholly blue again and dancing with silver. His tears were gone.

"There," she said. "I hope you can keep her garbage out of your head from now on."

"I hope so too," he whispered. "I think maybe I can."

"And if she ever has the misfortune to run into me, I will fight her."

He gave a low chuckle. "Not necessary."

"If I had an ex that called me the things she called you—?"

Ryker hissed.

"Exactly. And you said she's in town, so I might get a chance."

His mouth formed a taut grimace as he studied her. "Leslie, I...I don't want to, but I think I should tell you."

"Then you should."

"Jacqueline has been following you on social media since I mentioned you years ago."

Whoa. "Okay, consider her blocked. Does she use her real name?"

"Usually, yeah. She's probably got more than one handle following you. But that's not all." He blinked, but his eyes remained charcoal-gray. "Jacqueline's a brunette,

and I've never known her to dye her hair before. But right now... The dye job she got is closer to white than silver. But she called it silver."

"She copied my hair." That was...creepy. And weird. And creepy. "Let's see how many versions of her are following me."

"Look for Jacqueline Hargrave first. Then try Hargrave Money or Vamp CFO."

Across Leslie's social platforms, Jacqueline Hargrave had followed her three times, and Vamp CFO had followed her twice. Hargrave Money showed up only once. She blocked every last account, then put her phone away with a hum of satisfaction.

Ryker, on the other hand, was grimacing though his eyes were finally blue again.

"What?" Leslie said. "Yeah, she'll figure it out, but the worst she can do is create another profile, and now I'm on the lookout for her."

"It's not that. Leslie, when I told her to get off my property, she left. It felt almost..." He shook his head.

"Too easy?"

"Yeah. It's been more than twenty-four hours. I mean, yes, this is a moderately big city. But she knows my favorite places. She should have run into us by now if she's been trying to."

"Maybe she's not."

"She said she was going to track you down and let you know...why I'm crap."

“I hope she does.”

Again he hissed, but his eyes began to dance.

Leslie angled her face up to his, and their kiss filled her with icy pleasure and certainty. She pressed her fingers tight to his back and murmured against his mouth, her voice at its fullest texture. “This is us.”

Ryker’s mouth hardened on hers. He pulled her closer to him in the near-privacy of their booth, and if someone happened to walk past and glimpse them through the glass...well, whatever. But then he pulled back. He pushed his fingers into her hair at her temples. He kissed the top of her head and whispered, “Us. You and me.”

She rested against him, and his heart gave a single gentle beat. Her own heart beat a soft answer. Ring tattoos. Two homes. City adventures and country comfort. She felt it all from the deepest core of her being. This was who they were and would be. This was their beautiful future.

“Centuries together. That’s what we’re going to have, Ryker.”

“I believe it,” he said.

She pressed her palm to the heartbeat that was dearest to her in all the world. After a few more minutes, she felt sure he was okay. He seemed somehow lighter.

“So,” Leslie said as they finished their drinks, “I want to say for the record, if you ever need to talk through this again, you can. I’m here to listen. Okay?”

Ryker nodded. “Not today, though. Today I want us to...to get back to where we were before.”

“Before she so rudely interrupted? Let’s see. We were climbing the rock wall and enjoying ourselves and talking about...” Leslie walked herself back through the conversation directly before Ryker had remembered his dream. “Hey, you had a question to ask me.”

“I did?” His forehead crinkled, then smoothed into a slightly too blank expression. “Oh, that. Never mind.”

“What? Why? Go ahead and ask me.”

For a long moment, he didn’t. Then he said, “Have you ever seen your parents’ birth certificates?”

Twenty-Three

Leslie’s head swiveled, and she stared at him. “Excuse me?”

He might regret this. He hoped not. “Sometimes the things you tell me about what they didn’t tell you... Relics tend to be cagey like that. They’ve lived so long and seen so much, a lot of them develop this weird secrecy. Even with people they trust.”

“Secrecy? I’m their daughter.”

“They barely taught you vampire-specific hygiene. They didn’t teach by example how to unmute your nature. They didn’t settle among fellow vampires—and yeah, our social scenes can be prickly on occasion. We’re not like wolves, all die-for-the-pack. But the way your parents isolated with you isn’t...”

“Isn’t what? Normal?”

The musical depth of her voice had begun to tighten, like guitar strings tuned too far. Ryker reached to take her hand, but she snatched it away from him and vaulted back to her side of the table, snatching her empty glass before it could tip and roll to the floor.

“My parents love me,” she said.

“I don’t doubt that.”

“They love our home. They love the mountains. They’ve lived in Harmony Ridge since before I was born.”

He nodded. He didn’t doubt those things either. But as friendly as they’d been to him, interested and approving, and as much as he’d genuinely liked them, their responses to certain conversation topics didn’t make sense. For weeks now, his brain had worked the puzzle of Leslie’s parents. By now he had a few theories.

“What?” Her tone was straining further, close to snapping now.

“I think you should ask them,” he said.

“Ask them what?”

“Whatever you want to know, everything you’ve wondered about for years.”

“Who said I’ve wondered about anything? Who said I have questions?”

“Um, you said it. A few times.”

“They love me and they raised me in a safe, beautiful place.”

“I know.”

“And I don’t have any questions.”

“Okay,” he said.

Somehow it was the wrong thing to say. Leslie shrank into the corner of the booth. Her shoulders tensed. She was a turtle, pulling into her shell. But her words kept coming.

“My parents are not hundreds of years old, Ryker. If they were, I would know.”

“Okay.”

She hissed at him, teeth bared, eyes flashing.

Ryker kept quiet, and she remained curled in on herself. She wasn’t relaxing. The next few minutes felt interminable, but she had been patient while he found words for Jacqueline. He waited for Leslie to find words too.

Except...she didn’t. She simply sat there. The minutes wore on while she sat motionless, didn’t blink, didn’t breathe.

“Leslie?”

This time, his voice seemed to puncture the bubble of stress around her. Her shoulders fell, and she covered her face. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I overstepped.”

“You didn’t, though. You made a suggestion, and I...I don’t know why I got so worked up. Except I do know.”

He held out his open hand, and Leslie reached across the table and took it between both of hers. She traced his knuckles with her thumb, then wove her fingers between his. He curled his fingers only slightly. He didn’t want her to feel trapped, not in any way, not even one of her hands.

“I never thought about it before we met, Ryker. Not really. Just here and there, over the years. But the last few weeks... I keep wondering new things. You and I will talk about something random, but it trips up my thoughts and then I’m comparing your experience to mine, and... Well. Some of my upbringing was a little weird.”

He nodded. There was a but coming.

“But the thing is...I did ask. I thought about it for a while and then I called my mom and asked.”

“What happened?”

“She hung up on me.” Her shoulders hunched up for a moment, then relaxed again. She had been studying their linked hands, but now she peeked up at him. “Sorry I hissed at you.”

“You know, sometimes I have that effect.” He squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry for pushing, and I’m sorry your mom wouldn’t talk to you.”

He couldn’t imagine it, not really. Couldn’t put himself in her place. His own mom would hang up on him only if their house had caught fire, and before she did she’d say, “House on fire, call you back later.”

Leslie tilted her head, and the skin tightened around her eyes. “You can do it.”

“Do what?”

“Find out the truth. About my family. You have the resources to do it. I bet you know at least a few private investigators.”

Slowly he nodded, seeing the plan form second by second on her face. “Leslie, I don’t know if—”

“Well, I do. Could you get in trouble, legally?”

“There’s limits to what I can look up myself, but I can hire a P.I. for personal use any time I want. They’re free agents, generally speaking.”

“Perfect. So first of all, try to find their birth records. Let’s see if your hunch is reliable.”

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He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Maybe your mom would tell you now. Maybe you should ask one more time.”

She set a hand on his arm and held his eyes with the intensity behind hers, the glimmer of opal. Her voice gained its full vampire resonance with her next words, and for once she didn’t seem startled by the emergence of her own self.

“I have known my mother for thirty years, Ryker. She will never tell me. Not unless I bring some leverage.” Her mouth twisted into a grimace.

It had to hurt to be shut out by her parents. It would crush Ryker if Mom or Dad did this to him, if he had no idea where he’d come from, if they wouldn’t speak of the vampire generations that composed his own history.

“Now that I’ve started really wondering,” Leslie said softly, “it’s going to be a gaping hole for the rest of my life. Until I know.”

She was right. She’d tried to be respectful toward her parents, and their silence had cut her off from that route. So yes, of course he would help.

He said, “You said your dad’s people are in Knoxville. Is that where he was born?”

“Yeah. My mom’s from Missouri originally, but that’s all I know until they met in their thirties. She was working for a local art gallery. My dad came in one day, and they started talking about the works that were for sale, and then about other random art stuff. They exchanged email about a piece he was interested in—it’s this fiery orange blown-glass sculpture with colors worked in that only we can see. To humans,

it looks plain orange.”

“Sounds like you’ve seen it.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s beautiful, don’t get me wrong. But it’s been the centerpiece of our dining table since I was little, and I’ve heard the story countless times. How he was smitten with her from the day they met, how he asked her to dinner the day he picked up the sculpture from the gallery, how she’d been planning to ask him if he hadn’t asked her. I love how much they love each other, but if I never hear the story again, I’ll still remember every detail for the rest of my life.”

Ryker nodded and tried not to let the puzzle-solving corner of his brain take over the rest of it. He’d work on this another time. Really, he would. “Did your mom ever name a city in Missouri?”

Her lips parted, and she blinked at him. “Actually...no. It’s always just been Missouri.”

“What are their full names?”

“Debra Renee Wilkins Snow and Paul Quentin Snow. Mom spells her name the shorter way, D-E-B-R-A.”

“Got it.”

“All of it? Do you want to write it down?”

“Nah.”

“Showoff.” She smiled, but it didn’t last. “Thanks.”

“Whatever there is to find, I’ll find it.”

He felt the promise take root inside him. Leslie deserved answers, needed answers. He wouldn’t rest until she got them. Then again, maybe he would rest if he needed to. Maybe that was the better path to sustained productivity.

Or maybe it was the better path altogether, because he was a person, separate from his accomplishments, deserving of rest like everybody else. Yeah, maybe so.

Twenty-Four

They left Slake It Off a little quiet, a little spent. Back at Ryker’s condo, they didn’t immediately pick up their conversation, but Ryker didn’t mind the silence. In fact he never minded silence with Leslie. Her silences were thoughtful, safe, and soft. He never wanted her to leave. When she got on a plane in the morning and flew back to Tennessee, he was going to lose his mind.

Not literally, of course. He was steel. Being in love hadn’t changed that. But dear Hades, as Claire liked to say, living six hundred miles apart had to be the worst dating method in the history of dating. And they were stuck with this arrangement until...well, at least until he proposed to her. Which he couldn’t do yet. Because they’d been dating only two months.

Was two months long enough?

“Wow. You’re off on another planet somewhere.”

He glanced up from his phone, which had gone dark at least a full minute ago after a text from his mom that they’d bring dinner over within the hour. “Just thinking.”

“Of course.” Leslie sank down next to him on his gray leather sofa. “When are

younotthinking?”

He shrugged. “I’m nevernot. But that’s true of most people, isn’t it?”

Her laugh chimed with its full vampire resonance. Her eyes were the same right now: opalescent cast over their usual light-indigo. She wasn’t muting herself, and seeing her so at ease in his home made his chest feel almost warm, despite the perpetual chill of his body.

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“I think if you had to spend time in a few random minds, you’d be disappointed,” she said. “The nature of people—human or apex—is that sometimes we lose touch with reason and act on instinct or emotion instead.”

He was fairly sure he’d never done that in his entire life. Then again, two days ago Claire had accused him of having a soft side, and his friends and family sometimes proved to know him better than he knew himself. He could only shrug again.

“So what had you so immersed in your thoughts?”

“The reality that it’s going to suck when you fly home,” he said.

“Oh.” She wilted a little beside him, but then her mouth tipped up on one side, and her eyes sparked. “I know what. Until your parents get here, we could pass the time testing your theory. You could watch for patterns and solve the equation.”

“Wait, what theory?”

“That you’re never not thinking.”

“And how are we going to test—”

Leslie gave his chest a gentle shove against the couch and seized his mouth with hers. Dang, she was attractive when she took hold of what she wanted, especially when what she wanted was his kiss. Not that she wasn’t also attractive when she stopped along the path of life to absorb and appreciate and encourage him to do the same. Really, Leslie was never not attractive—

Fingers in her hair, mouth greedy against hers, other hand cupping the back of her neck, her hands on his chest, palms flat and pressing, and the humming cold vitality in their bodies, the strength of his beautiful truest match, his Leslie. Leslie, Leslie, kissing Leslie...

Against his mouth, she let out a giggle. Then she withdrew a few inches, and he groaned. "So...thoughts?"

"Kiss me," he said.

"Ooh. Deep analysis there. Did you observe any patterns of—?"

He cupped her face and kissed her hard. Then she was straddling his lap, returning his kiss while her fingers gripped his shoulders. He pressed kisses to her jawline, behind her ear, along her neck, and she gave a soft gasp, then playfully grazed her teeth over the top of his ear on her way to his neck. Ryker froze. If she bit him...

She kissed his neck hard, but she didn't use her teeth. Then he lost his thoughts again as her lips pressed his collarbone, as she found his mouth again and seemed to be proving something with the movement of her lips on his. Matching her intensity was easy, instinct and desire and maybe a proving of his own, how precious she was to him. He twined her hair in his hands. It was so soft. She was so soft, so deliciously cool to match his own coolness. When they finally drew apart, he kept hold of one of her hands. They sat side by side, heads tilted against the back of the couch, angling slow looks at one another. He felt a smirk take over his face. They'd nearly pushed each other over an edge this time, and knowing he could bring Leslie such pleasure was at least as much a physical high as what she did to him.

"So, um," she said. "Wow."

He gave a low hum that said everything, and she gave a little shiver beside him. Her

eyes were wide and luminous. Even her skin seemed luminous, or maybe that was due to the leftover rush inside him. His blood wasn't only flowing—it was fizzing,sparkling, electrifying him. He felt as if he could actually fly right now, the way the oldest legends said vampires could do.

A few minutes later, Leslie stirred on the couch. The carbonated feeling had begun to dissipate, and Ryker sat up straight to face her.

“Have any thoughts yet?” she said with a little smirk of her own.

“You. That’s all.”

She leaned in and kissed him, but briefly. “Ryker, I... When we were, and I...”

Ah. “You wanted to bite me.”

“You noticed?”

“It was noticeable.”

“It was really sudden. I’ve never wanted...to do that before.”

“Do you know what it means?”

“I thought it wasn’t real.”

Based on the gaps in her knowledge so far, she might be referring to any random human legend. “What do you know about it?”

“Vampires aren’t necessarily monogamous for life. Unless they taste each other’s blood. Once they have, it’s a covenant bond—the bloodbound covenant. It binds their

life-forces; they become one another's eternal.”

He nodded. That was the gist of it.

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“What if I’d bitten you? Would I have accidentally bound us together for life?”

“Would you have accidentally bitten me?”

She gave it a moment of consideration, then shook her head. “We can’t bite by accident. It’s always a choice.”

“Right. But if you had decided to bite me, then I’d need to bite back. The second bite seals what the first bite begins.”

“Oh my gosh,” she whispered, suddenly statue-still, her mouth twisted in a grimace of horror. “That means if a vampire wanted to force himself... If he bit me...”

“No, no, no. It doesn’t work like that.”

“The second person has to bite back and seal it.” Her fingers dug into his forearm with such strength she might bruise him. “Oh, Ryker, that’s horrible.”

“No. Hey. Take a breath, Leslie. A literal physical breath.”

She did, and it rasped in her throat. She breathed again, and this one was deeper, silent.

“Good. Okay, now listen. The bite doesn’t override your will. We can’t do that to each other. Shoot, we can’t even do that to humans; the worst we can do is knock them out with our gaze. You know all this, right?”

She nodded, still shaky but focused.

“If a vampire off the street walked up and bit you, what would you do?”

Her face crinkled up, then smoothed out in sudden knowledge. “I’d tear him to pieces with my bare hands.”

“Exactly. The bite between lovers is different. The bloodbound covenant is always, always mutual. I promise, Leslie.”

“Okay.” Slowly the frozen statue began to melt. She caved into him, and he held her in his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder and sank her fingers into his hair, and he hummed with pleasure at her touch. “Okay. I’m okay now.”

“Can I ask you a question?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“You reacted as if...as if you might have been...”

“Oh. Not me. But, Ryker, my friends at home are humans. Of course I know women who’ve been hurt like that. Every woman knows women who have. It’s different for vampire women, because we can crush a human guy who tries it. And if a vampire guy tries it, it’s more or less a fight between equals. But for human women... Anyway, that’s what I was seeing in my head. The ones I know who couldn’t fight back, the ones who tried to fight back and lost.”

“And you thought the bite might put you at the same sort of risk.”

“Yeah.”

No wonder she had been so scared. He looked away as his eyes must be throwing sparks right now.

“I’m glad it makes you angry,” she said.

“It does. I hate it, Leslie.”

“That’s good. Keep hating it, and keep your eyes open for ways to stand against it. Like the night you met Tai.”

His laugh was a little too harsh. “That turned out not to be helpful.”

“You went into action, Ryker. Tons of men wouldn’t have. Even when you don’t know the outcome, as a man you can always choose to act when other guys are predatory, and that’s what you did, and I’m proud of you for it.”

His actions shouldn’t be outstanding. They should be simple decency. He rested his head on the back of the couch and resettled his arms around her. They stayed that way until his parents arrived for dinner.

Time with Dad and Mama was enjoyable as always. Every time she met them, Leslie seemed more at home in their presence. He’d be glad for this in any case, but the strain of the questions she couldn’t ask her own parents made her ease with his feel even more important. The conversation meandered over Asian fusion delivery cuisine—Dad’s favorite, Mama’s second after Indian.

“Y’all have plans tonight?” Dad said halfway through the meal.

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“I get to meet Ryker’s friend gang,” Leslie said. “I’ve heard about them, but this will be my first time meeting in person. They’re all coming over here to hang out.”

“And to meet my girlfriend,” Ryker said.

He couldn’t explain how significant the evening felt. Maybe it had to do with their unanimous caution toward Jacqueline. Did he need their approval? Not exactly. But he wanted them to see his happiness with Leslie. He wanted them to know he was truly healed and healing, that they no longer needed to keep an eye on his romantic wellbeing.

“I hope they like me.” Leslie smiled, but her eyes held a metallic cast of worry.

“Of course they will,” Dad said. “You’re clearly good for this one here”—he nodded at Ryker—“and you’re a great conversationalist too.”

As usual, she had no idea what to do with a compliment. She ducked her head a bit, but the smile grew. “Well, um, thank you, Laurence.”

Then Leslie went statue-still. Vampire-still. When she lifted her head, a single silver tear rolled down her cheek, though her eyes were shining.

Ryker reached across the table to brush the tear away with his thumb. “What is it?”

“I just saw...” she whispered.

“You saw what?” Ryker said.

“A baby. Someday we’re going to have a baby, Ryker. You and me.”

Mama gave a tiny cry, leaped up from her chair, and threw her arms around Leslie right where she sat. Leslie was pulled all the way to her feet for a good long Senna Maddox hug.

“Are you sure?” Dad said. It was a ridiculous thing to say, but sometimes Dad’s thoughts poured out of his mouth when he was overwhelmed. Ryker understood in the face of news like this.

“I saw it,” Leslie said around Mama’s arm, still engulfed in her hug.

“Boy or girl?” Ryker might as well know now, even if they didn’t have the child for a few more decades.

“I don’t know. I saw him or her...wrapped in an ivory blanket...in your arms. And I knew you were holding our little one.”

“We’re going to have a grandchild.” Dad’s voice turned husky.

“You were in the room with us; I didn’t see you, but I sensed you there.”

Mama finally released Leslie and stepped back. Her eyes were nearly pure gold. “Thank you. Thank you so much. I’ve wished for this.”

His parents stayed another hour. The conversation never waned, but Ryker couldn’t stop mulling the life-altering news, bristling a little that he didn’t get a timeline to plan by. Which was kind of stupid. Against all odds where vampire fertility was concerned, he would someday be a father.

He’d take a page from Leslie’s book. He didn’t need a timeline. Most vampire

children were conceived after their parents had been together at least ten years, and he wasn't ready to be a dad today anyway. And of course it would be up to Leslie, whenever she wanted to plan and try.

Still, all evening his mind kept drifting toward the promise of it. Someday.

When his parents at last drove off down the street, he shut the door and darted across the room to scoop Leslie off her feet and spin around the room with her. She leaned back in his arms like a kid on a swing.

Then they snuggled on the couch, and he tried to figure out if it was too late ever to ask the question filling his head.

"You've got your curious face on," she said.

"My what?"

"You get a little crinkle right here." She pointed between her eyes.

"I'm not sure it's a fair question now."

"Did you want to be a dad? Before tonight, I mean?"

Of course they could still talk about it. Knowing their future didn't cancel the importance of knowing Leslie's thoughts and feelings. "I guess you figured out that's what I wanted to ask you."

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“I’ve always been indifferent about having a child,” she said.

“Okay.”

“But that’s when it was an abstract child, you know?”

“Um, sure.” He’d never thought of it that way before.

“On the other hand, do I want our child? The answer’s yes, Ryker. A thousand percent yes.”

“Oh, good.” He closed his eyes as emotion settled heavy on his chest.

“Hey. What is it? If you’re not sure...” Her voice quavered.

“I’m sure. When I imagine being a dad, it makes me really happy.”

She relaxed against him, resting her weight against his arm and shoulder. “Okay.”

“I didn’t know if you were sure,” he said. “And your opinion weighs more, you know?”

“Um, you mean because of the notoriously difficult fertility of female vampires? That’s not really up to me.”

“No, Leslie, I mean what you want for us. About parenthood, I’ve always wanted whatever my future spouse wants. You’re the one who has to be pregnant and give

birth, so you get to decide if we try to have a baby. It's just reasonable."

Her eyes sparkled with deep emotion. "You totally reasonable, totally good man. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that's your take."

"Moot now." He grinned. "Because we're going to be parents someday."

"Weare." She twined her arms around his neck and kissed him, and he let his thoughts grow quiet while he kissed her back. At last they drew apart, and Leslie said, "When's the next group of guests arriving?"

"We have about half an hour."

"Perfect."

They kissed and talked and kissed and talked. And kissed. He wrapped a lock of soft silver hair around his finger and stroked it with his thumb.

"You really like my hair," she said.

"I love your hair. I hope you always want it long."

"Would you really be sad if I cut it?"

"It's your hair, obviously. If you wanted to cut it, that would be up to you. But I'd miss..."

She laughed. "You'd miss playing with it."

"Yeah."

“You’re probably in luck, because I’ve worn it this length since I was twenty.” She shrugged. “Now for a more serious topic.”

“Oh?”

“I’m your eternal, and you’re mine. But we haven’t sealed it yet. But we could seal it...anytime.”

His skin prickled with pleasant ice. Their gazes locked, and her expression spoke of everything he felt. Desire, devotion, eagerness and utter calm. He wanted to be with her in every possible way. But he knew they had time. So much time. Only a few months so far. Barely gotten started.

Didn’t change that he felt ready now for all of it. For Leslie. For day one of their centuries as two eternally bonded vampires.

“Ryker.” She cupped his jaw in her palm. Their eyes didn’t waver from one another. “I want us to seal our bond on the first night we spend together. I want it to be a night we never forget.”

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“I can kick my friends out early. Hey, I can text them all right now and tell them to stay away, you’ll meet them some other time.”

She gave his shoulder a mock shove. “Not a chance. I want to meet them.”

“And tonight’s too soon,” he said.

“Not exactly. But I...I want it to be momentous. Let’s choose the day, not fall into it. Let’s mark a beautiful day with a beautiful night.”

“What if tomorrow is a beautiful day?” He wagged his eyebrows, and she rolled her eyes. “Okay, I get what you’re saying. The tasting bond is sacred between vampires. We have to treat it as sacred.”

“Exactly.”

“Yeah.” Once again, his girlfriend was being wise. “Okay. I want to do this the best way possible. So...I can’t believe I’m saying this, but...yeah, let’s build a plan.” Then he smirked. “See? Still thinking.”

Twenty-Five

Ryker’s friends all arrived within ten minutes of each other, and for those first minutes, Leslie put all her effort into meeting and greeting. Five people in ten minutes stretched her social capacity, but she’d had busier days at the art fair at home. She could certainly handle getting to know five people at once if they were Ryker’s closest people.

First came the twins, Nova and Logan Anderson. They looked as identical as fraternal twins possibly could. Their teal eyes were like the lagoon water Leslie had admired in Florida. Their faces were spattered with freckles that, combined with their corn-silk-blond hair, made them look somehow more mythical fae than real vampire. Nova's hair was cropped into a pixie cut, while Logan's trailed in a ponytail a few inches past his neck. They were friendly, outgoing, funny and articulate. They finished each other's sentences in a way Leslie had thought was only a twin legend.

Philippa Gill followed them a few minutes later. Of medium complexion, with heavily highlighted brown hair and strikingly pale lavender eyes, she exuded a soothing energy that balanced the exuberance of the twins. She clasped Leslie's hands in greeting, and something passed between them, as if Philippa had absorbed Leslie's mood into herself and read all the way to her heart.

"What...?" Leslie couldn't find her words, could only feel a sense of being wholly seen.

"Oh!" Philippa released her hands. "Vampire empath, honey. Sorry to be a lot."

"No, it's okay, really."

"I don't usually touch new people until I've gotten to know them, but with you I forgot. You've made Ryker so happy."

Leslie could have asked her a dozen questions, but before she had the chance, another vampire stepped into the house.

Ryker nodded from the newcomer to Leslie. "Mackey, this is Leslie. Leslie, meet Thomas Beckett Mackey, who refuses to answer to anything but his surname."

Mackey gave a low hum of confirmation. He was starkly pale like the twins, his hair

a rich mahogany-brown, his eyes a deep, dark blue that seemed black in the light of Ryker's den. His expression was so reserved, even a vampire would have difficulty reading it. But an intense intrigue crackled underneath. He studied Leslie with force until she broke eye contact first.

"Hey," Ryker said. "Chill, Mac."

Mackey blinked, nodded, and held out his hand. "Good to meet you, Leslie."

Grasping his hand didn't result in any connection like the one she'd shared with Philippa. Mackey wasn't a vampire empath. Yet his handshake seemed to offer her something more, because everyone in the room went still.

"Whoa," Logan said. "Mac the Key has given his approval."

Nova clapped. "Welcome, Leslie."

Leslie laughed, somehow not feeling awkward at all. "Mac the Key? As in Key to welcoming doors?"

"Gatekeeper, more like," Logan said. "He's more guarded than the rest of us put together."

They were all so different, yet they interacted with the genuine ease of years of friendship. Now Leslie had more questions. How long had it taken them to collect each other?

Just then the last car parked in the street, and Claire came in carrying a cooler full of blood bags. Leslie hardly knew what to say at the sight—and the scent—of it.

"To celebrate Leslie," Claire said, and while the rest of them cheered, Ryker went to

a kitchen cupboard and brought down wine glasses for all.

Was this okay? Indulging in a second slaking without the excuse of a hard workout or a dire injury? Maybe she should abstain, but that might offend Claire.

Ryker set the glasses out, then went to her and leaned down to whisper against her ear. “Perfectly safe. I promise.”

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Now the entire roomful of strangers was studiously ignoring them. Without context, they must think her the oddest vampire ever.

She could let it go. They were already moving on, filling glasses with the rich, red liquid that kept them all alive...and it appeared, on occasion, also helped them celebrate.

Perfectly safe. Okay. Leslie cleared her throat, and as one Ryker's friends turned to her. "I, um, I wasn't raised among our kind. I keep learning all sorts of new things about vampire culture. That's why I wasn't sure about this." She nodded to the cooler on the floor.

Their eyes brightened with questions. Philippa said, "Were you adopted?"

"No, but my parents weren't always forthcoming with information about us."

"For real?" Logan balanced his full glass on his palm and seemed to forget it was there. "Most vampire parents are an nuisance with all the culture-passing and oral history and blah-blah-blah. I wonder why yours were different."

"I'm hoping to find that out."

Ryker had meanwhile broken the seal on another blood bag and poured its contents into the last empty wine glass. "Pause on the questions, y'all." Then he held out the glass to Leslie. "Start with a sip. See how it feels to slake when you're not depleted at all."

Leslie brought the glass to her lips and took a small sip. Her fangs descended with the familiar passing ache, and then... Whoa. She was alive. She was awake. Pure energy surged from the center of her body to the tips of her toes and fingers, raced across her scalp, buzzed back to her center. She bounced from one foot to the other, and the liquid swirled in her glass; of course, she didn't spill a drop. She bounced again, sipped again.

"Wow," she said.

"Doesn't it feel amazing?" Claire said.

"So amazing."

"Okay." Ryker was grinning. "Now we can keep talking."

As if Ryker hadn't paused the conversation, Mackey said, "Ryker told us you live in a town with a population below a thousand people."

"Harmony Ridge," Leslie said. "I love it."

"How many vampires live there?"

"Three. Me and my parents."

She had rendered all of them speechless. A moment later she was answering a volley of questions about her life experience, but in no way did she feel like an outsider. In fact their interest had the opposite effect. Leslie felt accepted as she never had before, not by a group anyway. Coworkers, acquaintances, neighbors—she could chat it up with the best extroverts, but this was different. Maybe because they were vampires. Maybe because they were getting to know her out of their friendship with Ryker.

They drifted into Ryker's den, which was Leslie's favorite room in his condo. Unlike the dark wood and coffee-brown walls of his study/workroom, his den was bright. The wall of windows showed the last ebbing glow of the sunset past his modest green strip of backyard and, past that, a reassuring privacy fence. The walls were a faded sort of blue like light-wash denim. The furniture was pale-gray leather; the bookcases were unstained, natural pine. His pine-green throw pillows and blankets all popped as the only dark things in the room.

Less than an hour ago, Laurence and Senna had sat here with them. Now Ryker's friends sprawled or perched on his furniture or the floor and made easy conversation, peppering Leslie with more questions.

She answered while continuing to take little sips of her drink. The vigorous rush didn't last long, only a few minutes past the first sip. After that her body settled into a more relaxed enjoyment of the company as well as the liquid in her glass.

At last, when everyone had at least half-finished their beverage, Leslie said, "My turn. I want to know how y'all met, how this friend-group happened."

"Ooh, memories," Philippa said.

"So," Logan said, "obviously we should tell this chronologically. First of all, I became friends with Nova when we were very, very small."

"Roughly the size of limes." Nova nodded with mock gravitas.

"We spent two-and-a-half decades growing our friendship."

"And then about three years ago we met the rest of these apex predators."

Leslie nodded along with the ping-pong of the story, each twin taking up a line as if

they'd scripted the whole thing. Leslie was willing to bet they hadn't.

"Hold up," Claire said. "You said chronological. You skipped a few years."

"True," Nova said. "We're the newest additions—or we were until you, Leslie."

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Logan made a broad motion toward Claire, giving her the floor.

Claire nodded acknowledgement but didn't maintain the twins' dramatic delivery. "Right, so about five years ago, Pippa and I hit it off when she cut my hair."

Before Leslie had to ask, Philippa said, "I'm a licensed stylist."

"And we had a ton in common. We both like to ride horses. We like the same music, the same movies. We value a lot of the same things." Claire still had over half her drink left. She kept taking deep breaths over the glass, seeming to savor the scent as much as the flavor. She took a longer sip before continuing. "Then for a hot minute, she tried to convince me and Mackey that we were a perfect match."

"Mmhm," Mackey hummed, the first thing he'd said in a while.

Leslie looked from him to Claire, alert for tension, but they both appeared at ease with their history. "Did you date?"

"Three dates," Claire said. "We really got along, but not romantically."

"The three of us got together a few times after that," Mackey finally chimed in. "Then I brought Ryker."

"We"—Ryker gestured from himself to Mackey—"had connected when I bought the desk in my study from his cousin, an acquaintance of mine, and Mackey was the one who delivered it. Again, same thing—we started talking and just clicked. The four of us kept meeting up for drinks, dinners... And that kept up for about two years, until

Claire met Nova.”

“How?” Leslie leaned forward. This was a fascinating saga.

“Online at first,” Nova said. “I’m a conservation grant writer by trade, but I’m also just a stupidly prolific writer with adecent online following. Claire read an article of mine, and she messaged me, and then we figured out we were local to each other. Pretty soon I was introducing everybody to Logan, as twins do.”

“Okay, wait.” Leslie pointed around the room to each of them in turn. “Nova—grant writer. Philippa—hairstylist. Claire—Slake It Off’s bartender and proprietor. Obviously I know what Ryker does.”

When she pointed at Logan, he raised one hand and, with the other, brushed back a few pale flyaway hairs that had escaped his ponytail. “I’m a sous chef, hoping to be an executive chef one day.”

“Nice,” Leslie said, then pointed at Mackey. Gosh, he was quiet. “Last but not least.”

Mackey nodded to her as if conceding something. “Trauma nurse.”

Leslie had to blink, to replay his words. “I’m sorry...what? Can one of us even do that job?”

“Obviously yes.” The left side of his mouth lifted slightly. If that was a smile, it was his first since arriving.

“But...how do you...” She couldn’t imagine it. No, she wasn’t tempted by the scent of blood while it still circulated within a human body. She wasn’t even tempted when Hannah or Jake or any of her other human friends got a paper cut. But to work in an emergency room... That was a whole different world, a whole different level of

physical contact with humans.

“How? Why?” she said.

“I can help,” Mackey said with a shrug. “Vampires are really useful in human medicine. I can work longer shifts without sleeping. I save lives every single day, and sometimes it’s because I catch something the humans missed. Or because my hands are stronger, faster.”

“And you don’t find it difficult?”

He didn’t answer her for a long moment, instead studied her with the same piercing look he’d leveled before shaking her hand. At last he said, “I have coping tricks when my senses get overwhelmed. For me, the rewards of my work outweigh the challenges.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Mackey’s one of a kind,” Ryker said.

Mackey shot him a disapproving look that seemed well-worn. “I’m a vampire like the rest of you. I chose a job where I could do some good. So did you, man.”

“Yeah, but I get to sit behind a desk in my office downtown—or in my home office, where I munch on snacks, sip my coffee, and put on a jazz record.”

“And fry your brain with endless screen-time and math. No thanks.”

“It doesn’t fry my brain. It energizes my brain.”

“Until you refuse to go to bed and forget to slake,” Leslie said.

The room rang with the laughter of Ryker's friends.

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“You know him better than I realized.” Nova was still laughing. “Gosh, this man and his one-track brain.”

The group didn’t leave until after two in the morning. The conversations flowed so easily, Leslie lost track of time. As everyone headed for their vehicles, Philippa took her aside.

“You know about her,” she said. “Don’t you.”

“The person who got her name banned from your group?”

“That’s the one.” She bared her teeth in an expression that proved even empathic vampires were ultimate predators. “And you know how she treated him.”

“I do. He told me.”

“Good. He worried us for a while, but he came through it. And now here you are, and I wanted to say...I’m really happy for both of you. Thanks for treating my friend well, Leslie.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

On impulse, she drew Philippa into a hug. Nothing extraordinary conveyed between them this time, only the sense of a new friendship that would keep growing from tonight on.

When only Leslie and Ryker were left in the house, they wrapped in blankets and

snuggled close on the couch. For maybe fifteen minutes they rehashed highlights of the evening with his friends. Then Ryker kissed her with something close to desperation.

“I don’t want you to go home tomorrow,” he said against her hair, his hands immersed in it.

“I don’t want to either.”

“Maybe you could...”

A heavy vehicle turned onto the street. For a second, Leslie ignored it, but—

Threat. The vehicle smelled wrong. Then it parked across the street from Ryker’s front door.

Her brain and body coiled for action. The power of the vampire built in her, freezing cold and intensely alive. She glanced to Ryker. Neither of them had risen from his couch yet, but he looked the way she felt. He was statue-still, gaze trained toward the street, fists curled tight at his sides.

“Threat,” she whispered.

He nodded.

Leslie’s senses widened, stretched out to pick up every possible detail. Six men inside the vehicle. Their sweat smelled of human nerves. The vehicle’s interior smelled of gunpowder; a weapon had discharged inside within the last week or so. And of course, they were armed now too.

And they were discussing Ryker.

“You know how to take one of them down, right?”

“I heard only a perfect head shot does it.”

“Right. It’s got to be instant brain death or they’ll kill you and they’ll survive whatever wounds you give them.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, they’re like roaches, keep jumping back up for more.”

They knew how to kill a vampire. They likely didn’t know that no human was fast enough on the trigger to manage a perfect head shot unless the vampire was already restrained, but their ignorance didn’t change their intentions.

They wanted to kill her Ryker.

“Angstrom?”

“Has to be,” he said.

“But how do they know it was you?”

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“I’d love to know, but first we should neutralize them.”

“I’ll call 911.”

He seized her wrist when she reached for her phone on the coffee table. “No.”

“Ryker—”

“We don’t need human cops, Leslie. We’re vampires.”

Yes.Yes. Time to be exactly everything that she was. Her fists curled tightly again, and when she spoke, the words came with a breathy undertone that sounded like the hiss of a serpent. “We are vampires.”

Twenty-Six

Leslie’s body felt like a deep freeze as she waited, as she hated the waiting. She could hardly believe she was going along with Ryker’s plan, but there hadn’t been time to argue, so instead she’d chosen to trust he knew what he was doing and wouldn’t get himself killed.

He was letting the hitmen break into his house.

She crouched out of sight around the corner from the bedroom where Ryker pretended to be asleep. She was backup, but if Angstrom’s henchmen didn’t have to see her, Ryker didn’t want them to know she existed. They were human. Ryker would take them down in seconds.

She still hated the waiting. She listened as hard as she could, took in every scent, and her senses painted the picture she couldn't see from here.

The window screen across from his bed fell to the ground outside, and then the window slid open. It had been locked until less than a minute ago, a wide low window easily stepped through. Ryker had flipped the lock open and dove into bed as she darted to her corner out of sight.

Two henchmen climbed into the house. Then three. A buzzing noise smacked her senses. She flinched. What—?

A Taser. She and Ryker hadn't sensed it because it had been powered off. The three humans outside the window were powering up Tasers too.

Ryker sprang out of bed. A dart struck him. She heard it pierce and latch on. He hissed in pain.

Then Leslie was in the room. She struck out, knocked one of the henchmen to the floor, glared with all her might at the one who stood frozen halfway inside the walk-in window. In seconds he toppled over, dizzy from the assault of her gaze. She stared him down as he lay there, and in another two seconds, he passed out.

In those two seconds, the other four assailants were down as well, unconscious on the floor. Ryker had restrained his punches so as not to kill them, but he still needed only one per man. Of course he could beat them all, even with a Taser dart in him. He yanked the dart from his side and tossed it onto the floor. His blood seeped from the torn wound in his side, thicker and darker than human blood, nearly black. The scent was different too, more fragrant.

“Oh,” she blurted.

“It’s nothing. They only got one jolt in. Lucky hit.”

He was right. Barely bleeding, flesh wound. He pressed his palm to it and winced, but the attack was over, and he was okay. She shuddered and pressed against him.

“I didn’t want them to see you,” he said.

“I had to help when I heard the Taser.”

“Hey, you’re shaking.”

“They—they hurt you.”

He cupped the back of her head and stroked her hair. “Shh. I promise it’s nothing.”

But she couldn’t stop trembling. Hearing his hiss of pain, knowing six men were here to end his life if they could... It didn’t matter that he was a vampire, that he’d never been in danger. She wanted to rip the throat out of every last would-be murderer sprawled on the floor.

One of them twitched as he began to wake up. This was the guy she’d stared into unconsciousness. A vampire’s gaze was supposed to be able to knock a human out for up to an hour, so hers must not be very potent. Maybe practice could strengthen it. She needed to be the strongest vampire possible, because she was in love with a man who fought battles on behalf of those who couldn’t fight, who might get Tased again by would-be assassins and need her help.

At the very thought, a strange purring hiss came from the back of her throat. She pressed her lips tight to silence the noise of rage.

“Leslie?” Ryker said.

“No one touches you. Not ever again.”

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“Hey.” Ryker held her for a long minute until she no longer felt the desire to hurt the humans on the floor. “There you are,” he said, somehow knowing when she was okay again.

Slowly the henchman woke up. He blinked up at her and Ryker in the soft lamplight, another prop Ryker had employed to draw them to this room.

“Hi,” Ryker said.

The man flinched.

“Care to explain yourself?” He sounded almost friendly.

“What...happened?”

Ryker darted to the man with unchecked speed. The man shrieked as Ryker grabbed his shirt by the collar and lifted him off the floor with one hand, forcing him to make eye contact while Ryker’s eyes sparked, so much silver moving through them they appeared like two disco balls. The man whimpered.

“What’s your name?” Ryker said.

“John Doe.”

Ryker shook him by the collar, and a few threads snapped in his shirt. “Try again.”

“Okay, okay! It’s Billy, Billy Ellis.”

“Did Frederick Angstrom send you to kill me, Billy Ellis?”

“No, no, we were just going to scare you.”

Ryker brought his face close to Billy’s and gave a long, loud hiss. With a yelp, Billy began kicking and clawing at Ryker’s iron grip on his shirt. After about half a minute, during which Ryker let him struggle like a fish on a line, he went limp. His body was hot and rank with the sweat of terror, which always smelled worst of all human odors. Leslie wrinkled her nose, but she stayed put and kept an eye on Billy’s cohorts. None of them had moved yet.

“Please don’t bite me,” Billy wailed. “Please, vampire, don’t bite me and kill me.”

“Then don’t lie to me,” Ryker said.

“Okay, okay. Yeah, Angstrom wants you dead. We were supposed to tase you, keep you immobile while we tied you up, so you couldn’t dodge the bullet. Then we were supposed to wreck the house. You know, to confuse the motive.”

Of course it never would have worked. A vampire could snap ropes without effort, and a human-strength Taser—or even two or three—wasn’t likely to stop them either, though Leslie didn’t know the precise voltage required for that. But hearing the plan put into words, imagining the man she loved lying dead... The deep-freeze rage seized her body again. She fought it, didn’t allow it room to control her, though everything inside wanted out, wanted to unleash at Billy in hisses and snarls and blows. Terrifying Billy Ellis to death might be satisfying right now, but it would be revenge, not justice.

Ryker glanced toward her, sensing her struggle. He gave a slight head shake, and she nodded. She was okay. She wouldn’t interfere.

Billy noticed their wordless communication and began to flop around in Ryker's grip.

"Stop it," Ryker said.

"Please don't bite me."

"Nobody's going to bite you, idiot. How did Angstrom identify me?"

"It was in the news."

Ryker brought him in close again, face-to-face, inches apart. Billy was on the verge of hyperventilating when he extended his arm again, giving the human a break. "It wasn't in the news, Billy. It's probably not going to be; I'm a behind-the-scenes role. So how does he know me?"

Billy stared past Ryker, making eye contact with Leslie for the first time. "I don't know. I swear I don't know."

Why was he talking to her now? She stepped closer. Maybe Ryker had scared him too badly. Maybe speaking to her would calm him, get him to talk. She said, "You're not a very good liar."

"You want me to come clean to him?"

What? "Obviously."

"You won't bite me? We didn't know you're a vampire too."

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This was getting weird. “Just tell us everything you know.”

“Okay.” Billy drew a shuddering breath that whimpered on the way out. Then he focused on Ryker again. “She told us.” He nodded toward Leslie. “She contacted Angstrom about you.”

Time froze into an icy cocoon. Leslie’s limbs were encased in it. She stared at Billy, then at Ryker. If he believed the man’s lies, she couldn’t prove otherwise. She had no idea where to start. He would hate her for something she hadn’t done.

But...no. She knew better. He’d never fall for this.

Ryker shook Billy until the man’s teeth clacked together. His voice was all lethal velvet and dangerous music as he said, “She wouldneverdo that. Stop lying before I forget I promised not to bite you.”

“I swear! I can show you! She made a video and sent it to his guys!”

“Liar,” Ryker growled.

He lifted the man over his head and drew his arm back as if to hurl him out the open window. The man screamed. Leslie laid a hand on Ryker’s back. The muscles there were taut and strained, ready to fight.

“Ryker. Hey.”

When he met her eyes, his were a riot of silver lights and blue fire. The lethal beauty

of him caught her breath.

She squeezed his shoulder. “Take a breath.”

He did. He lowered Billy to the floor and let him go, and Billy scrambled into a corner and drew up his knees. He was hyperventilating, blubbering, and had begun to reek of sweat. His pulse was pounding so fast, Leslie could vaguely smell his blood pumping—something she smelled in humans only when they were in acute distress.

Ryker darted into the corner, crouched in front of Billy, and got up in his face again. “Show me the video.”

“On m-my phone. R-right here.”

The man dug his phone from an inner pocket of his jacket. His shaking hands dropped it into his lap, and then he managed to pick it up and find the video.

“G-got this from Angstrom’s right-hand g-guy. He’s the g-guy who paid me.”

Ryker snatched the phone from his hand, stood up, and motioned Leslie over to share the view. He tapped an attachment, and the video began playing. It was...Leslie. Her face was blurred with a filter, but that was her hair.

Wait. No. It wasnother hair. A few inches too long. A shade too close to white.

The blurred woman flipped her hair over her shoulder and began speaking.

“Mr. Angstrom, my name is Leslie Snow, and I’ve been dating the forensic accountant who’s working your case for ADA Spencer. You can look me up online if you want proof of my identity. I’m very active there. I make toys and sell them.”

“Jacqueline, you...” Ryker’s low purr was laced with fury.

Onscreen Jacqueline kept talking. “Anyway, this accountant’s name is Laurence Ryker Maddox, son of the senator. He lives at 3579 Woodland Pass Drive.”

The screen split, Jacqueline’s feed on the right and a clear, recent picture of Ryker on the left. It stayed up for about ten seconds while she continued talking.

“Yesterday this man, my boyfriend, told me he was ready to go to court against you, that you were going down in a big way, that he couldn’t wait to see it. He hates you, Mr. Angstrom. While we were on our date, all he could talk about was taking you down and getting you as much jail time as he could. He’s a real danger to you, and he loves his job, let me tell you. Last but not least, he’s a vampire.”

Leslie hadn’t thought she could feel the same cold rage again tonight, but it gripped her stronger than ever. It crushed her chest and shredded her thoughts. She wanted Jacqueline’s heart in her hand so she could squeeze for a long, long time.

And Jacqueline was still talking.

“I hope you find this information helpful. I don’t need a reward, honestly. My reward is knowing I was able to help someone like you, a true businessman who’s doing his best to make it in the world and is being persecuted by our ridiculous justice system. I hope you’re able to scare some sense into my boyfriend. I think it’ll make the world a better place and him a better person. And who knows, maybe it’ll make him a better boyfriend.” She laughed. “Bonus points if you pull that one off!”

The video ended.

“I’m going to kill her,” Leslie said.

“Shh,” Ryker said.

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“No, I mean it, Ryker. Tonight. I’m going to kill her tonight.”

Ryker’s hands settled on her shoulders, and he brought his face in close to hers. The wild blaze in his eyes had banked and left them their usual, beautiful blue. The silver sparks weren’t a wildfire anymore. “Okay, my turn. Take a breath, Leslie.”

She couldn’t if she wanted to. Her chest was a lead block. “I don’t want to take a breath! I want to kill that vampire!”

His arms wrapped around her. She pushed against his chest, but he held her close. He was breathing like a human, slow regular breaths. Leslie pressed her mouth to his shirt and screamed. He held onto her until slowly, slowly, her body began to relax. The deep-freeze fury began to thaw. She began to think again. She clung to him. He wasn’t shot or dead. Jacqueline’s scheme had failed. Leslie matched her breaths to Ryker’s, and slowly, slowly her chest opened.

“You okay?” he said after another half-minute, during which time Billy remained curled up and whimpering in the corner and none of the other assailants stirred from the floor.

“Yeah,” she said. “Time to call the police?”

“Definitely.”

The next hour was a blur of giving her statement, watching and listening from a distance while Ryker gave his. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so relieved as when the perpetrators had all been placed under arrest, carted off in

various squad cars, and the whirling blue and red lights drove away. Those lights had been too much for the last hour, not to mention the frequent squawking from police radios.

When the final officer finished verifying their contact information, looking over their statements, and bidding them good night, the time was close to five in the morning, and the birds had begun waking up. Gray light had appeared on the eastern horizon. Leslie and Ryker sat on his front porch stoop and watched the sunrise.

“I’ll call Kim in the morning,” Ryker said. “I mean, later in the morning.”

She had called and spoken briefly to Mom and Dad, then texted Hannah, who wouldn’t be awake to see her text for another hour or two. None of them would accidentally find out about last night’s events from some news site. The headlines wrote themselves. Senator’s Son and Girlfriend Victims of Attempted Murder. Frederick Angstrom Targets Vampire Accountant Who Will Testify Against Him. But Leslie couldn’t think about Detective Kim or Frederick Angstrom or Billy Ellis anymore.

Eyes on the sky, she blurted, “She tried to have you killed.”

“I don’t think so.”

Wait, what? “It’s pretty obvious, Ryker.”

“She didn’t expect them to succeed.”

“Are you freaking serious right now?”

“I know her, Leslie. She wanted to complicate our lives, make us miserable, edgy...keep us from enjoying our time together. That’s all this is to her. A game of

petty revenge.”

“Do you still need to hear me say she’s abusive?”

He didn’t immediately answer, but when he did, the confidence in his voice was absolute. “No. I know she is.”

“And not a single thing she ever said against you was reliable.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah.” He draped his arm over her shoulders, and she leaned into his side. His wound had stopped bleeding almost immediately, would scar over in a day. Leslie tried not to hate the stain that marred his shirt. “I’m free now, Leslie. Free for good.”

“Maybe this was worth it then.” Maybe. Probably not.

“What about you? Are you okay?” he said.

She snuggled into him, pressed her palm to his chest, and waited to feel a beat from his heart before she answered. “I’ve never been so angry in my life. It was...too much for a minute. If she’d been standing in front of me, I might have tried to kill her, Ryker.”

“Well, in case you didn’t know this...” The smirk in his voice was audible for a moment, but then he sobered. “Vampire rage is deadly. If you can actually get one of us mad enough, we’re...kind of unhinged for a little while.”

“I felt unhinged.” She shuddered.

“I think that’s why it’s so hard to anger us. If we had short fuses like some humans I’ve met, we’d be too deadly to the world around us.”

“Are they going to arrest her for conspiracy?”

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He was quiet a moment. “Seems like I should be able to answer that, but I don’t know.”

“She made a video!”

“But she sicced humans on me; my life was never in danger. Plus it’s Jacqueline. She’ll tell them it was a prank, and if they’re human they’ll believe her.”

“Tell them that, Ryker. Tell them to get a vampire officer to do her interview.”

“I don’t know if it matters. She won’t do this to anyone else, you know? She’s not a danger to society at large.”

“This sucks. I want justice for you.”

“I don’t need it, Leslie. I don’t need revenge either, for the record.”

She hissed. “I didn’t say revenge. Although right now...I might not be the best person to decide the difference, where she’s concerned.”

“If you need to talk out the finer points of justice versus revenge, feel free to ask Mama. She’s got a really clear eye for those things. Because of her work, I think, but also that’s just who she is.”

“I like your mom a lot. And your dad.”

“I could take you over there, if you want some space. From all this.” He made a wide

gesture encompassing his house...and him.

“Absolutely not. I’m here.”

Instead of the usual crinkle between his eyes, this time sudden emotion crumpled his whole face. Leslie wrapped him tightly in her arms.

“I’ll keep telling you, Ryker. I’m here.”

“I know.”

“And you don’t have to be okay right now.”

“I want todosomething.”

“Like what?”

“I feel...itchy, like I need to crawl out of my skin. It’s still sinking in, I guess. That she’d do something this drastic. And how did she know I was working on the Angstrom case anyway?” He shook his head. “I want a puzzle to work on, but maybe not that one. Not today.”

Could she do one more stressful thing today? For him, she could. And with him, it would be okay. “There’s another puzzle, you know. Instead of you looking into my parents after I fly home...let’s do it now instead. Together. Just to see what we can find on our own.”

“Are you sure?”

“If you tell me over a phone or video call, I think it’ll be harder. And if it’ll help you too, then I’m game.”

“We have morning and afternoon before your flight. If you’re really sure.”

“I’m sure.” She drew a long breath, let it fill her chest with calm and strength. “And I’m ready.”

Twenty-Seven

The week had been strange, passing both fast and slowly. Ryker now had two trials in his future: as an expert against Frederick Angstrom, and as the victim of Billy Ellis and his fellow henchmen. Angstrom was denying he even knew their names, much less that he’d sent them to get rid of an inconvenient vampire accountant. In the second trial, Leslie would testify too. She had expected this to happen within a few weeks, and Ryker was reminded that not everyone was familiar with the slow grind of the court system.

Now another weekend had come. In three hours, he could start driving toward the airport. He was departing at two a.m., and Leslie was picking him up at the airport at three thanks to the hour he gained when visiting. The red-eye was a vampire’s favorite flight—less likely to be booked, and the humans he did have to share a plane with tended to sleep or keep their voices down, which in turn kept everyone’s nerves down, which in turn kept odors down as well as noise.

Killing three hours felt like a monumental task. All he wanted was to see his girlfriend, kiss her, talk to her face to face, enjoy her presence, taste some new foods with her. Ryker bounced off his apartment walls for half an hour before texting his faithful friend, who would surely help him out.

Let’s hit the gym.

Tai:LOL

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You can make fun of me all you want if you'll spar with me so I don't accidentally kick holes in my ceiling.

Tai: See you in ten minutes.

Tai refrained from teasing him. Much. Instead they sparred as if a real reward were at stake rather than simple bragging rights. Maybe Tai had something egging him on too. Ryker couldn't catch hold of the guy for what felt like a year. When he finally did, Tai did his usual twisting-like-a-landed-fish thing to get away and nearly threw Ryker off him.

Then, as always, he went still and said, "Okay."

"Good match."

"Good match."

Ryker extended a hand to his friend, and immediately Tai was gone, across the gym to the vending machines. Ryker had hardly seen him grab his wallet from the pile of their shoes, wallets, phones, and keys. He grabbed his own wallet, then darted barefoot after Tai. When he reached the corridor, Tai was staring at the unopened blood pack in his hand.

"Tai?"

"Shh." Tai held up one finger. He stood statue-still for another five seconds. Then he nodded to himself, tore the bag open, and drained the whole thing without a pause.

When it was empty, he pitched it into the trash and walked back across the gym without a word.

Ryker knew not to take it personally. And now that Tai had reminded him, his throat began to ache. That match had been a lot of work. He fed his credit card to the vending machine and gulped a blood bag of his own. Slaked and energized, he darted back to the sparring area. Tai was performing what would be an Olympian-level floor routine if he were human. He tumbled and sprang, leaped and twisted, made his way all around the mat with multiple forward and backward flips, changing direction in midair. At last he stopped and walked over to Ryker.

“Thanks,” he said.

Ryker shrugged. “For what?”

“You never make it weird.”

“You never make me feel like a coward when I think the world’s going to fall out from under me, so... We’re even. And you know that.”

“Yeah. It’s easy to forget though, when...when it hits me like that.”

“Tai, I couldn’t even tell. You talk like you go slavering mad, but to the rest of us, you look like any other slaking vampire.”

Tai nodded, half-convinced. At last he said, “That was a good match, man. You made me work for that.”

“Same.” Ryker decided a question would be okay. “Before you broke the seal, were you actually counting in your head?”

“It’s a habit, counting to ten before I let myself open the bag. When I’m extra thirsty, I count to twenty.”

“Of course you do.”

Tai slanted him a warning look, and Ryker raised his hands in surrender.

“You have time to go again?” Tai said.

“Hmm.” Ryker glanced to the oversized clock on the wall behind the service counter. Past midnight. “I’d better get going.”

They walked out together, and they froze simultaneously at the sight of a certain brunette leaning against Ryker’s car, her gaze already pinned on both of them.

“I should’ve anticipated this,” Tai said.

“Nah. Go on, man. It’s fine.”

When Tai hesitated, Jacqueline’s teeth flashed. She didn’t move toward them, of course. She waited for Ryker to come to her.

“I mean it,” Ryker said.

He didn’t want to say more in her hearing, but he didn’t have to. Tai’s iron grip landed on his shoulder and stayed there until he made eye contact. Then Tai studied him for a long moment that Jacqueline was watching too. He nodded at last. “Take care, man.”

“We’ll talk soon.”

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“Yeah,” Tai said. He gave Jacqueline a short nod, to which she rolled her eyes. Then he walked away.

For a moment Ryker wondered how this would go. He waited for the old shame, the self-doubt, the confusion and hurt. But now he was only curious. Was she here to try to suck him back into her world again, had she given up on that, did she plan to take any sort of responsibility for sending people to murder him? He approached his car, stopped a few feet away, and crossed his arms loosely over his chest.

“Well?” he said.

She blinked. “Well, what?”

“No. This meeting was your idea. You have five minutes to say whatever you came to say.”

“That’s not fair, Ryker. I came here to apologize.”

“I heard the ADA elected not to charge you with conspiracy. I assume the detectives ignored my advice that a vampire should conduct your interview.”

“Not entirely. There were two detectives, partners. One vampire, one human.”

“Okay.” She was a better liar than he’d thought.

“I explained that the whole thing was a prank, and no one was ever supposed to get hurt. I was very credible. That’s how they both described me, you know. Very

credible.”

“If they only knew.”

Her laugh was loud, but she broke it off when she realized he wasn’t reacting. She took a long moment to stare at him, and Ryker stared right back.

“Even the vampire liked me by the end of my interview,” she said. “He advised me to work on awareness of consequences. I promised I would. He found me very attractive, by the way.”

At the end of everything she’d ever done or tried to do to him, she was simply flat. No interest beyond herself, no concern beyond her image in the moment.

In the flash of an instant, Ryker thought about the things that motivated the people he knew and loved—about Claire working to create a place of community for vampires, Nova writing grants to help preserve the natural world she loved, Logan putting so much care and art into his dishes, Philippa turning her salon chair into a place of self-care and safety, Mackey coping with uncomfortable proximity to humans in order to save their lives. And then there was Tai, battling to make the humans around him safe from himself. There was Leslie, holding tight to the peace her soul loved, not so she could keep it all to herself but so she could offer it in handfuls to him, show him the great worth of simplicity and home and rest. There was Dad stepping into a place of power so he could listen well to the people who’d privileged him with that power, and there was Mama battling for victims of all kinds, forcing the bad guys to face their reckoning.

Yeah, sometimes Ryker got up in his head; sometimes he got lost in the drive to achieve, to prove he could come out on top. But ultimately he valued a lot of the same things. Things his friends and family had taught him, and things that were born into the core of who he was.

Now here she stood in front of him, the woman who had made him doubt himself and, at one time or another, all of them. And she looked empty.

“Why did you do it?” he said.

“I was bored.”

“With what, your hair?”

She flipped her shiny brown locks over one shoulder just as she’d flipped them on the conspiring video a week ago, when they were dyed a shoddy imitation of Leslie’s gorgeous silver. “I hated that look. I made it look decent, but on average women it’s awful.”

“Did you want to complicate my life? Was that all?”

“I told you, I was bored. I wanted to see what would happen to her.”

“To...her?”

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “If your life was threatened because of your job. What would Toymaker do? Would she record an embarrassing hysterical reel for her socials? Would she break up with you for being too much trouble?”

Too much trouble. How those words used to bite into him, but now they’d been defanged. Because he was steel? Maybe not. Maybe he’d never been steel at all. When he thought of the woman he loved, waiting in her snug mountain bungalow for him to land in Nashville, waiting to kiss him and touch him as no one else ever had... The roaring anticipation that spread from his core all the way to his fingertips wouldn’t be possible in a man made of steel.

And now, when he wasn't trying to solve the puzzle, the puzzle solved itself.

“You were here,” he said. “The day Tai congratulated me about Angstrom. You were here, deliberately listening to everything we said.”

“Are you just now figuring that out?”

He made a show of taking out his phone and checking the time, then shoving it back into the pocket of his gym pants. “It's been six minutes, so you got an extra one. Get off my car.”

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In the space of a human heartbeat, Jacqueline was in his face. “You will never be over me, Ryker. Not ever.”

He lifted her under the elbows, ignored her glare, and set her down a full arm’s length away from him. When he let her go and said nothing else, she stared disbelieving, maybe panicked. He turned toward his car, his back to her, and that seemed to break something inside her.

“You’re pathetic,” she yelled. “A coward. You play dead like a little vampire baby who wants its mama.”

“I sure do.” He got into his car and shut the door. As he turned the key, she kept shouting.

“I told every man I was with while we were together—you know what I told them? That you were boring and pathetic. That you play dead like a needy baby!”

“Okay.”

“It wasn’t three men, Ryker. It was so many more than three.”

“Okay.”

He put the car in drive and allowed it to creep toward her, crossing his fingers that she wouldn’t leap on the car and kick his windows in with sheer strength and high heels. Maybe she didn’t want to mess up her wardrobe, or maybe she was too stunned. When his bumper was a foot from her shins, she stepped aside. He held in the

sigh of relief that she would be able to hear.

“Don’t you want to know how many more it was?”

In the flash of his headlights in her eyes, the last unknown piece of Jacqueline lay bare and flat. This was the way to beat her. This had always been the way. All he’d ever had to do was stop caring what she thought of him—a true full stop. Without that, she had no hold on him; and finally, after two years, she wasn’t the only one who knew it.

“Bye, Jacqueline. Have a nice life.”

He drove away, and she didn’t shout after him, because she could have said anything, anything and he’d have kept driving.

Finally they both knew it.

Twenty-Eight

She couldn’t sit in her car all day. After all, Dad and Mom knew by scent and sound that she and Ryker were out here, parked in the driveway. Yet Leslie couldn’t seem to move beyond sorting and re-sorting her handwritten notes. Yes, the notes were mostly unnecessary. Ryker had everything printed, highlighted, and organized in a file folder. But Leslie had needed to see the same facts in her own handwriting.

She looked up from the pages in her hands and stared at the house she’d grown up in, the house she returned to for Sunday dinners—now usually with Ryker. The modest Cape Cod sported pale-gray siding and blue shutters on the gable windows. When she was little, those shutters had been green, but Dad and Mom had decided on a change about five years ago. In her earliest memory, she was taking a tumble down the hill in the backyard, and then Dad was scooping her up and holding her while Mom kissed

her skinned knee. She had been safe here.

Always safe. Sometimes confused.

“We don’t have to do this.”

Ryker’s voice punctured her paralysis. He’d said the words half a dozen times between the minute Leslie had picked him up at the airport and...now. Right now. Sitting in her car, endlessly re-sorting her needless notes.

“I tried asking,” she said. “I tried ignoring. Now it’s time to try rocking the boat.”

“Okay. If it helps, I’m with you all the way.”

“Oh, it does. Thanks for doing this with me.”

He nodded, but she knew no thanks was needed for this. When she’d asked him to be present at the confrontation, his relief had been obvious. He wanted to be here for her...because he loved her. That fact still tasted new and sweet.

Unlike the facts on the papers in her hands, which tasted new and bitter.

“I’m ready,” Leslie said and opened her car door.

Ryker got out too, and they walked up to the front door together. Her mom opened the door as they reached it, typical vampire hearing and timing. She wished this thought didn’t also taste bitter. Maybe after today, it wouldn’t have to.

“Hi, Les! Ryker, nice to see you again.”

“Thanks, Debra. It’s good to see you too.”

Mom motioned them in ahead of her. “Paul’s in the den working one of his jigsaw puzzles. I told him you two had something to discuss with us.”

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Ryker's hand found Leslie's, and he gave it a gentle squeeze. She squeezed back with barely checked strength, and he tugged her closer to him, pressing their hands snugly against his thigh as they walked side-by-side. No matter how her parents reacted, she would be okay, and Ryker would be with her.

“Hey, you two. Come check this out.”

They crossed the room and stood over Dad's puzzle table, where a two-thousand-piece puzzle lay half-completed. When finished, it would depict a scene that could have come straight from Harmony Ridge's downtown fifty years ago, complete with a single traffic light and old brick shopfronts. The single car parked on the street, a red pickup truck with rounded fenders and giant round headlights, was the biggest giveaway of the historical setting. The wardrobes of the few pedestrians crossing the street was another clue.

Hey, maybe she should create a diorama series—same place, different decades.

Was she so dreading the coming conversation, her brain tried to distract her with art? Well, art would have to wait.

“Not that we have anything dire going on at three in the morning,” Dad said, “but we might as well get to your very important conversation. Your mom's been trying all night to guess what it is.”

Mom settled into one of the stuffed chairs and tugged a throw blanket around her shoulders. “Should I tell you my top three guesses?”

“No,” Leslie said. “I mean, I’d rather just tell you, if that’s okay.”

Mom’s smile faded. “Of course, honey.” She glanced from Leslie to Ryker and back again. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t think so. But I’m not sure. I need to ask you...a few questions.”

“Come and sit.”

Leslie kept hold of Ryker’s hand as she sat on the love seat, and he sank down beside her. He offered his neat folder to her, and she took it but set it on her lap without opening it. She didn’t need his notes. She didn’t need hers either. She had every piece of their investigation memorized.

“Leslie?” Dad said. He stood up from his puzzle table and moved to the other stuffed chair.

Now they all faced one another, Dad and Mom from one side of the den and Leslie and Ryker from the other side. It was the last thing she wanted, to face down her parents like the opposing army in a battle for family secrets. But she didn’t know how else to do this, and she shouldn’t have to do this, because they should have told her the truth years ago.

“I’ve been wondering about our family,” she said. “Our history, my history. Where I came from and how we got here—as vampires, I mean. Why we’re living apart from other vampires.”

Mom went statue-still. Dad gave a slow blink, and his pale-blue eyes shifted to charcoal gray. Beside her, Ryker stiffened. Leslie wanted to run out of the room, to take the words back altogether, to restore to this house the harmony that had greeted her and Ryker only minutes ago. Ryker wrapped one arm around her, and his defense

fortified her enough to keep going.

To her dad she said, “Do you know I asked Mom about this, and she wouldn’t tell me?”

Dad nodded but said nothing.

“Okay, so I looked into it myself. That is, Ryker and I looked into it. I wouldn’t have been able to find much on my own.”

Dad began shaking his head before she finished, and his eyes remained flat and gray. “Our past is a family matter, Leslie. If we’re going to discuss it, then it needs to stay with the three of us.”

A few months ago, she would have surrendered then and there, asked Ryker to honor her dad’s wishes, squashed the frustration and hurt and never brought it up again. But she knew so much now that she hadn’t known a few months ago—about vampires, about herself, about the man she loved and about her parents.

“No,” she said, and her parents’ faces tightened in surprise and displeasure. “Ryker is going to be part of this family, Dad. He’s my boyfriend, and soon he’s going to be not only my spouse but also...my eternal.”

“Oh...” Mom’s voice was resonant, her full self unmuted by her surprise. “Congratulations, both of you.”

“This isn’t how I wanted to tell you.” Leslie glanced to Ryker. “Sorry to ruin the big reveal.”

Ryker shrugged. A smile tugged his mouth, but it didn’t last while Dad continued to frown at him.

“Stop glaring at him,” Leslie said, and her parents flinched again with surprise. “And stop acting like I’m a mouse who just came out of her hole for the first time in her life. Didn’t y’all just a month ago encourage me to take on my boss, to go after the things I want? Well, I want this. I want to know the truth.”

“You found enough on your own,” Mom said. “Whatever you found, why can’t that be enough?”

“Because stories matter, Mom. Our story matters.”

After a moment that tightened and stretched itself out, Dad sat back in his chair and nodded. “All right, Les. Show us.”

It was time. She knew all the way to her bones, though the conflict in the room threatened to squeeze her heart dry. She slid her notes from Ryker’s organized folder into her lap. She looked from Dad to Mom, back and forth, as she told them everything...and hoped they would understand.

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“Okay, um... Dad was pretty straightforward. He was born in Knoxville, which I knew. I’m assuming how he got to Missouri is a true story—that he went to visit a cousin, met Mom, and stayed.”

Both her parents nodded. Mom’s fingers were laced in her lap, so tight they had turned white. Her jaw was clenched tight, and she seemed to be grinding her teeth.

Keep going. No quitting now. Ryker’s arm tightened around her. She glanced down at the notes she didn’t need, then back up, focusing on Mom, who would not look at her.

“Ryker found Mom’s birth certificate in the county records of Meredith, Missouri. So I know both of you have the birthdays you’ve always claimed to have. You’re not relics.”

“Of course we’re not,” Mom blurted.

Leslie shrugged. “I wanted confirmation.”

“Because we’re not the type of parents to spill all our early life experiences to our child, you assumed we must be relics?”

“That one was me,” Ryker said. “My speculation based on what I know of older vampires. They tend to hold a lot of secrets, which you’ve been doing with Leslie all her life.”

Why did he have to be so direct all the time? Leslie held Mom’s gaze with every

ounce of effort she had. While she did, Mom's eyes turned charcoal.

"I'm sorry," Leslie said. "But I needed to know, Mom."

"You should have asked me."

"Would you have told me the truth?"

Mom flinched. "I wouldn't have lied to you."

"But you wouldn't have told me. You would have hung up the phone or...or told me not to ask careless questions."

It was a solid memory now. Leslie had been no older than seven when she asked about Mom's parents, why she'd never met them. After all, she'd met Dad's parents, Meemaw and Papaw. She'd even met Papaw's papaw.

"Some stories aren't safe to tell," Mom had said. "Don't ask careless questions, Leslie."

Leslie had walked away in confusion, held onto a sort of murky guilt. She never wanted to be careless. Disturbing to find out she could be careless by accident.

As Mom held Leslie's gaze, the memory seemed to flash between them. Quietly she said, "I might not have explained very well back then."

"You can fix that. You can explain now. There's a lot of detail I couldn't find."

"Tell us the rest, what you did find."

"I know you were nineteen and Dad was twenty-two when y'all got married. I know

you lived in Meredith for the next ten years, and then your residence transferred to Harmony Ridge. So you were pregnant when you got here. I was born eight-and-a-half months later.”

“Anything else?” Dad said.

She was suddenly pinned down by the weight of the story. She couldn’t say the rest of it. She couldn’t see them shut down in front of her, couldn’t bear to hear them stonewall her or blame Ryker for investigating. She wrapped her arm around his and leaned into him. Please do the talking for a minute.

He squeezed her hand. Message received. “I found some old news articles from the Meredith Chronicle that included the name Wilkins, including the deaths of two vampires named Derek Wilkins and Edmund Wilkins. The articles claimed they’d been attacked by a bear.”

Mom closed her eyes and began to wring her hands in her lap. Dad got up and went to her, and Leslie fought tears as he sat on the arm of her chair and pulled her into a protective embrace. He was glaring at Ryker with flat eyes and bared teeth.

“I’m sorry,” Ryker said.

“If you’re sorry,” Dad said, “then let this go. Let it go, Leslie.”

Maybe he was right. Maybe she was wrong to ask. These things had happened before she was born. She couldn’t possibly carry the weight of them.

Except...she did. She carried the uncertainty, the loss, the disorientation every time she collided with an experience she’d never had, a factoid she’d never learned, a story she’d never been told. She carried the hurt of only partly knowing who her family was, who she was.

She held Dad's gaze. Mom wouldn't look at her at all now. Leslie reached out blindly with her free hand and found Ryker's knee. She held onto it while he squeezed her other hand in his. He understood, and he was here.

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“I can’t let it go,” she said. “I can’t. I need to know where I came from, why I’m here, why y’all can’t even walk past a wolf in the grocery store without going on high alert.”

Now Dad looked away from her too, and the severing was a knife twisting inside her. She held her tears inside, but her throat tightened around them.

“Please,” she said, but the word came with a sob. “Dad, please.”

Dad met her eyes again and seemed to see her for the first time since she’d ventured the topic. Slowly he began nodding. His final nod was firm and short. He had decided.

“Debra,” he said to Mom. “It’s time.”

“We weren’t going to do this,” Mom said. “Not ever.”

“When we didn’t know what it was doing to her. Now we know. Now it’s time to break the silence, Deb. For Leslie.”

Mom hid her face in her hands, then lowered them and finally, finally met Leslie’s eyes. Her frostiness had melted, and she looked smaller somehow. She leaned against Dad as though her whole body was trying to bear up under the weight of the story, many tons heavier for her than it ever could be for Leslie.

Mom said, “Derek was my cousin. Edmund was my uncle, my father’s brother. They were murdered by a wolf pack.”

Twenty-Nine

Mom's words seemed to punch straight through Leslie's chest.

When they dissected the news stories, both she and Ryker had concluded the "bear" must be wolves—and not the kind that were part of the animal kingdom. But at the time, despite seeing Mom's maiden name in print, the victims that shared it had felt sort of removed from Leslie. She'd never even known this extended family existed. Now, though, the names of the victims came with a long-buried sadness in Mom's eyes, in the bowing of her posture.

"Do you know what the motive was?" Ryker's voice was kind, though he wouldn't back down from the details.

"A land dispute," Dad said. "The vampires were there first."

"The wolves were so aggressive." Mom's voice gained a little volume as she spoke in facts. "They broke laws all the time, any time they wanted something, even little things like parking regulations. For generations my family shunned them, and they shunned us back, and that was that."

When she didn't continue, a tense hush settled over the room. There was so much more to tell. But Leslie bit her lip, forced herself to wait without pushing any further than she already had.

Ryker didn't follow suit. "That was that, until...?"

Mom nodded as if checking in with herself, that she was okay to tell the rest. "A new alpha took over the pack a few months before Uncle Edmund and Derek were killed. He'd grown up there, and when he came of age, he killed the pack alpha. He was vicious, violent."

She hesitated again, and Dad took up the narrative. “Under his control, the pack became vicious and violent too. He wanted to expand their territory, and who would a wolf pack most want to get rid of?”

The resident vampires, of course. In comparison, humans were weak opponents for a wolf pack who didn’t bother following human laws.

“When those wolves murdered my cousin...” Mom shook her head. Her hands were still tightly clenched in her lap. “We knew then it wasn’t about eliminating only the vampires who held land deeds. Derek was barely twenty years old, and he owned no property at the time. But he would’ve inherited Uncle Edmund’s.”

“Was that the only violent incident?” Ryker said.

“Far from it,” Mom said. “They liked arson. And they liked to gang up on a single vampire.”

Dad was nodding, and something flickered in his eyes, the candle flame of a difficult memory. “They really do track and chase down their prey like wolves in the wild. If you got caught out alone and they picked up your scent, you were in trouble.”

Leslie tried not to picture his description like a movie scene, but she couldn’t help seeing it, and in her imagination, the targeted vampire was... “Dad? Did they hurt you?”

“Took their fists to me one night,” Dad said. “Your mother had been asking me to move, but after that, she was determined.”

“I was stubborn,” Mom said. “But so was your dad.”

“No wolf pack was going to run us out of our own home. I wanted to stand strong.

Thought I could outlast them, which was pretty stupid now that I look back.”

Yes, Leslie could see it all. How very like Dad, to dig his heels in against a lawless threat; and how very like Mom, to value his safety more than he did.

“I know I’m jumping ahead here,” Ryker said, “but after what you’d been through, why did y’all settle in Harmony Ridge of all places? I’d expect you to stay far away from wolves.”

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“We didn’t know if they’d come after us, given how much we knew about them. We chose the last place they would expect vampires to go. Plus wolves are so territorial, we thought they’d be less likely to invade a town already inhabited by a strong pack.”

Ryker nodded. “Smart.”

“First thing we did here was meet with the alpha. William asked if we expected more of our kind to join us, and we said no, it was only the two of us—soon to be three. We were all pretty cautious of one another at first.”

“Wait.” Ryker held up a hand. “Leslie and I met the pack alpha, and his name isn’t William. It’s Malachi.”

Dad’s shoulders drew back as though the wolf were in the room with them. “Malachi? You met him in town?”

“Story for another time,” Leslie said before they could sidetrack from the important story. To Ryker she said, “Malachi has been the pack alpha for only about five years. William was killed in an accident.”

Ryker looked about to ask for more information about the Harmony Ridge wolves. No doubt his brain was working multiple angles, weaving multiple threads of the stories andquesting for every last detail. He must have seen from Leslie’s face that her interest was still back in Meredith, Missouri. He nodded. “What was the final straw then, for y’all deciding to move?”

While they’d told their story, both her parents regained their eye color along with

their composure. Leslie braced against the back of the love seat, sure this particular question would push them back to their edginess. Instead...they smiled.

“It was you, Leslie,” Dad said. “We found out you were on the way, our very own child after so many years. And that was it. We wouldn’t risk you.”

“After all my persuasive arguments failed for months, when I told your father about you, I didn’t even have to ask. The first words out of his mouth were, ‘Our baby can’t be born here.’”

Leslie’s shoulders caved as the weight fell on her again. They had surrendered the place they loved for her sake. She had upended their lives, ruined Dad’s plan to stand against the corrupt wolf pack.

Ryker’s arms came around her along with a soft, soothing hiss.

“We never regretted it for a minute,” Dad said. “We love Tennessee, and we love our town.”

“But you loved your first town too.” She sniffed back tears. “You called me Meredith when I was a baby, I remember you did.”

“We did,” Mom said. “But we phased it out pretty quickly. We preferred your first name, and after we gave ourselves time to miss our old home, we embraced our new one and never looked back.”

“Are—are you sure?”

“Leslie, look at me.” After a moment, Leslie looked up. Mom’s gaze was firm now, no longer avoiding Leslie’s. “You changed our lives for the better. You filled rooms in my heart I never knew were there. Yes, we left Missouri to keep our child

from dangerous wolves. Yes, we missed Meredith for a while, and it felt sort of...poetic, I guess, to give the name to you. But you are my daughter. You have always been worth a hundred times more than what we left behind to protect you.”

“Oh,” Leslie whispered.

As if with a single thought, she and Mom sprang up from their respective seats and met in the middle of the room. Mom’s cool arms enwrapped her, and Leslie leaned her head on Mom’s shoulder. She would never be as tall as Mom.

“I haven’t always known what to do as a parent,” Mom said. “I’m sorry our silence about the past was hard for you. I’m sorry, and I love you.”

“I’ve never doubted that, Mom.”

“We didn’t deal well with the aftermath of Meredith. Neither of us did.” Mom shuddered and tightened her arms around Leslie. “The wolves broke six of your father’s bones, and if they’d learned I was pregnant... I don’t like thinking about it.”

“And you can’t separate what those wolves did from our neighbors here?”

“It isn’t fair to them,” Dad said. “I know that, and it’s easier now to keep the past separate. When you were younger, it was still hard not to see any wolf as a threat.”

“You should have told me.” If today was a day for full honesty, she couldn’t leave this part out.

“Maybe we should have. It was...incredibly painful to talk about. All of it.” Mom gave Leslie a final, gentle squeeze, then let her go. “I’m sorry I hung up the other day. I’m sorry for what our pain cost you.”

“I’m sorry too, Les,” Dad said. “I’m sorry you were left wondering all these years.”

“Sometimes it felt...” Leslie’s shoulders tried to hunch up again, but she straightened and faced her parents and her history head-on. “It felt like vampire topics were off-limits.”

Dad got up from the couch and drew Leslie into a hug of his own. She couldn’t remember the last time Dad had hugged her, and she pressed her cheek to his shirt just as she had as a girl. His hugs were never long; he stepped back a second later, regret deepened in his eyes.

“We tried too hard to fit in here,” he said, “to get along with the wolves and the humans in ways that didn’t call attention to what we are. We never meant for you to feel like less of a vampire, but at the same time, when we saw how well you adapted in school to your human and wolf classmates... We felt you were safer.”

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Leslie had never seen her parents so clearly before. So many memories clicked into place and suddenly made perfect sense. They had been acting on barely-healed wounds, and over time their wounded actions formed habits. And it sucked. Losing out on her own identity, culture, and pride—it all sucked, and she couldn't turn back a clock and give these missing pieces to her childhood self.

But she was a vampire, for goodness' sake. She had centuries to catch up on what that meant, to cultivate new layers of herself—not only as a vampire but also as a woman, as an artist, as an eternally bonded spouse.

“I understand,” she said. “You were hurt and scared, both of you.”

“It's not an excuse,” Mom said.

“No, but you were trying to keep us safe the best you knew how. What you went through—stalked, threatened, physically attacked...”

The full truth of it finally struck her. Tears filled her eyes, and she couldn't help it—she rushed to Dad and threw her arms around him. She imagined his fear and pain, ambushed and beaten by violent wolves.

“Oh, Dad. I'm so, so sorry they did that to you.”

She imagined Mom too, witness to the pain of the person she loved most in the world. If a wolf pack had nearly killed Ryker, Leslie would be hurting too, terrified it would happen again. And then to find out a tiny new life grew inside her, a life those same violent wolves wouldn't hesitate to destroy...

She reached out and grasped one of her mom's hands. "I know it was awful for you too, Mom. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for both of you for everything the Meredith wolves did."

Mom's eyes sparkled with tears, and Leslie lost her breath. She'd never seen her mother cry before. Never in all her life.

"Thank you, Les," Mom whispered. "Can you forgive us for...for passing some of this down to you?"

"Oh, Mom. Of course I forgive you, both of you, one hundred percent."

Then she was sandwiched by both of them as they all hugged. When they resumed their seats, Leslie pressed into Ryker's side, and he put his arm around her again. She needed a good cry in the safety of his arms, a final release of the history they'd heard today. But now wasn't the time.

In the ensuing quiet, Leslie had no idea what to do next, yet the sorrow of her parents' story didn't settle over them. Somehow the very house felt brighter, more open, as though it had known all these years that this conversation was needed, that the secret past needed to be known.

Suddenly Leslie needed Mom and Dad to know something too. She needed them to know what Senna and Laurence already knew. She looked toward Ryker and could only hope he guessed what she was trying to ask. He must, because he nodded with a smile that held both pride and joy.

"Um, Dad, Mom... Do you know about future-sight?"

Dad chuckled. "Do we ever. Your mother is on top of it."

“Well, it turns out, so am I.”

“Oh!” Mom beamed, but then her face shadowed. “I never told you about this either.”

“My mama never told me until last week.” Ryker shrugged.

“That’s different,” Mom said. “You’re not a daughter.”

“Aha.”

“Not that we can’t inherit it,” Dad said. “We’re just less likely to, and it doesn’t carry the same...traditions? Ceremony? Something like that.”

“Okay, listen up,” Leslie said. “I’m trying to tell you something.”

Her parents both went still, anticipation in every line of their bodies as they sat forward.

“One of the glimpses I’ve seen for Ryker and me is...a child.”

Her mother actually screamed. It was the most demonstrative moment of Debra Snow’s life as far as Leslie knew. Never in her life had she heard her mother shriek for joy, but it was happening now. All of Mom’s caution, all of her reserve, evaporated in a single instant. She was on her feet, dancing in place. Dad was too, swooping her around in a circle and then grabbing Leslie by both hands to pull her up and into a hug much longer than the last one.

“Hey,” Leslie laughed against his chest. “Hey. Y’all. Calm down. I’ve got zero timeline on this. Y’all might be two hundred by the time this happens.”

“Oh, fiddlesticks,” Mom said. “A grandbaby—oh, Leslie, I don’t care if I’m double

that!”

Mom gave her a final hug—three in one day, surely a record—and Leslie let a few tears wash away the old confusion and hurt. Here were all the hidden truths, finally spoken, finally out of the dark corners and into the light. Like this dear old house, Leslie’s heart was bright and open.

Thirty

Ryker had never seen Leslie so at peace. Not that she'd been a conflicted mess before, but the conversation with her parents seemed to have filled her with an ocean of settled confidence. He loved to see it. He loved to see her—his true love, his beautiful artist—thriving and happy. Friday's early morning hours and the entirety of Saturday flew by. They trekked up into the foothills outside town and spent hours talking, kissing, and chasing each other from tree to tree in leaps and bounds, their laughter startling birds and squirrels.

On Sunday morning, breakfast at the diner was an unspoken default. Traditions were easy to build in Harmony Ridge. It was one of the things Ryker loved about Leslie's home. The flurry of his city was energizing; Harmony Ridge was restful. And at his best, he could admit now that both energy and rest were valuable.

A tradition didn't have to become a rut, however. Ryker scanned the menu for something he hadn't tried yet. "I'd like the eggs-and-cheese scramble with bacon and green peppers. Oh, and a side of cinnamon roll French toast."

"Got it," their server said. "And for you, Leslie?"

Leslie hadn't opened her menu, of course. "Farmer's market omelet and a side of blueberry ricotta pancakes."

"Got it. Coming right up."

As the server moved away, Ryker shook his head. "Do you ever not order those two

things?”

“No.” She folded her hands on the table in a serene gesture that was ruined by her smirk. “I might occasionally order additional things. But I never don’t order those two things.”

From outside, two people got out of a recently parked vehicle and headed toward the door. Based on their scents, one of them was human; the other was a wolf. When the little bell chimed above the door, Ryker looked over his shoulder. He couldn’t help needing to track a wolf’s entrance to a location with only one door.

The wolf in question was Rhett, the pack beta. He met Ryker’s eyes as he entered the diner ahead of his companion, then gave a brief nod of acknowledgment, which Ryker returned. The human who followed Rhett was a woman with short black hair. She wore a flattering black skirt, a royal-blue top, and low heels. Ryker might not have noticed her wardrobe if it hadn’t contrasted so much with the wolf’s clothes: practical trail pants and a camo T-shirt with the arms cut off.

The dude had some arms on him. As if Ryker needed the reminder of brute wolf strength while he was trying to be chill sharing a thousand-square-foot restaurant with the beta who had growled at him out on Lunar Lane.

“Ryker?” Leslie stage-whispered.

“It’s all good,” he said.

“Neighbors, remember?”

“Yeah. It’s fine.”

He gave himself a moment of self-check-in and realized...he was actually fine.

Instinct kept him watching as Rhett and the woman made their way to a booth on the far side of the diner, but Ryker didn't feel the need to pummel the guy or even to beat him at chess. Yes, he was a vampire. Yes, Rhett was a wolf. But as long as any wolf proved himself a good guy...did his gamey scent or his ability to growl from his chest really matter?

"Would you mind if I talked to them for a minute?" Ryker said.

Leslie looked as surprised by his words as he was. "Want me to come with?"

"Nah. I just want to clear the air."

"Ah, okay. I approve."

Of course, the wolf had heard every word. As Ryker approached, Rhett leaned across the table with a stage whisper of his own. "Vampire incoming. He wants to clear the air."

"Oh?" the woman said. "What did you do to him?"

"You know, you could try having a little faith in me sometimes."

"Sure, but there's you, and then there's your diplomacy skills."

Ryker halted next to their table, and Rhett's date smiled up at him, snark replaced instantly with sincerity. "You're Ryker Maddox, aren't you? I'm Vivian Jones, Rhett's mate."

"Pleased to meet you, Vivian."

"Same."

“I won’t take much of your time,” Ryker said. “But you’ll be seeing me around all the time now, and I’m hoping we can be...” What did he hope for? They’d never been at war, so calling a truce seemed dramatic.

“Civil?” Rhett’s mouth twisted in a smirk. “Sure, why not.”

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Vivian rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Rhett, you take the anti-social cake.”

“More than civil,” Ryker said, and then he knew his hope. Leslie had said it best. “I’m hoping we can be good neighbors.”

“Absolutely,” Vivian said. “Thanks for making the first move. Wolves tend to play social defense outside their pack.”

“Not without reason,” Rhett said quietly.

Ryker had only the slightest idea what those reasons were. He looked forward to living here part-time and learning more. He nodded acceptance, and Rhett’s carefully blank face slowly relaxed.

After a long moment, Rhett nodded back. “Good neighbors sounds good to me.”

Ryker nodded. “Okay. Good.”

“But try not to wake my pack again in the dead of night for no reason.”

Ryker gave a low hum of acknowledgment, and the wolf’s eyebrows arched. His hearing must pick up at least some of the musical layers. Well, he didn’t bristle or growl. That seemed promising.

“Waking y’all was thoughtless, and I apologize.”

“Yeah, it was,” Rhett said. He waited a full beat, then gave Ryker another, final nod.

“Apology accepted.”

“Now I’ll let you get back to your breakfast.”

Before he could step away from the table, Vivian said, “So, Ryker, will you be moving to Tennessee?”

“Part-time. And Leslie’s moving to Virginia part-time too. We both love our homes too much to let them go, and we’ll have the means to hold onto both of them.”

Vivian’s brown eyes brightened. “That’s great.” She cocked one eyebrow at Rhett. “Hey, wolf, why didn’t I keep my condo?”

“Did you want to keep it?”

She sat back in the booth, folded her arms, and studied Rhett for a long moment. Then a smile took over her face as though against her will. “You know... I didn’t really care.”

“There you go.”

Ryker wanted to laugh, but he didn’t know them well enough yet to show his amusement at their constant parrying. Funny how couples interacted so differently. Based on the easybody language between these two, conversations like sparring matches worked well for them.

He was heading back to his table a minute later, pondering what he and Leslie looked like from the outside. They weren’t verbal jousters, that was for sure. Maybe the words they’d found to describe themselves so far were still the best. Calmly happy.

“That went well,” Leslie said as he slid back into their booth across from her.

“It did, didn’t it? I’m glad I went over.”

“I was just thinking about it...about the life we’re going to have. Two homes to love, a little town and a medium-sized city, and a whole lot of people. Vampires, humans, wolves. It’s going to be so full.”

“Full in a good way?” he said.

“As long as you don’t forget I’m an introvert, unlike your whole family and most of your friends.”

Ryker reached across the table, and she set her hand in his. “My memory’s pretty flawless.”

“Good point.” Leslie traced a slow circle on his palm with her thumb. “So, that said... Yes, full in a good way. I love your friends and family, and I love your home, and I love exploring our culture for myself. The last few months, my life has gotten so much bigger. I guess yours hasn’t, though.”

“Hmm.” He sifted his memories, took stock of how it felt to be here with her now, ordering their favorites from the only open restaurant in town, knowing every inch of Harmony Ridge like the back of his hand, knowing this wise and beautiful woman had chosen to be his. “Not bigger. Slower.”

Leslie’s thumb went still halfway around the next circle. “Slower? That sounds disappointing.”

“Nah. The opposite. I catalogue scents in the woods now. I savor food on my tongue longer. I even remember to slake most of the time—before I get thirsty. That’s all you, Leslie.”

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Her eyes turned opalescent for a moment despite the public setting. “Will you look at us.”

“Right? We’re killing it.”

Their food arrived, and they were quiet as they enjoyed it. Leslie closed her eyes and groaned in happiness at the same omelet, the same pancakes she’d enjoyed the first weekend he met her—as if she were tasting them for the first time. It was all Ryker could do not to vault the table and steal a blueberry kiss from her tempting lips.

This would be his life. He didn’t see it the way Leslie did, but he knew. Countless flights between Tennessee and Virginia, countless meals like this one. She would create new dioramas, and he would help solve new cases. One day there would be a child. They would keep growing, learning, changing, adventuring and resting by turns...and one thing would remain the same all the centuries of their lives. They would be together.

Thirty-One

Rain poured down the windows of Leslie’s bungalow. The birch tree by the house bent to the wind, then sprang back up again, over and over. She had always loved that tree, loved the textures of its peeling bark and its compromise with the weather to bend but never break. She liked to think of this as the tree’s unconscious wisdom.

Wrapped in her favorite purple blanket, she opened one arm to Ryker, and he joined her on the couch. “I turned the heat up, but it’s hard to get rid of the bone-chill on days like this.”

“No problem,” Ryker said, though he shivered every so often just as she did.

“Just once I’d like to experience what humans mean when they talk about sharing body heat.”

He chuckled. “On days like this, I don’t think I’d mind it.”

“I’m surprised your flight wasn’t delayed. The last twenty-four hours, it’s like our weather is throwing a toddler tantrum.”

“Worst case scenario, everything gets grounded for a day.” Ryker pressed a long kiss to her lips. “Or should I say, best case scenario?”

“Do you know what today is?” She almost hadn’t brought it up, because if he didn’t know, it was really fine. Not like it was a true anniversary or anything.

“Four months of us,” he said.

Hedidknow. Leslie rewarded him with an even longer kiss.

She played Tracy Chapman on the record player at the lowest volume above mute. They made hot cocoa together, sipped their mugs and sat on stools at her little kitchen bar. They played board games from the stash of classics under her coffee table: she won Scrabble, he won Clue. The man who lived and thought at a hundred miles an hour was utterly content to spend a rainy day inside with her, and she loved him for this as well as all the other reasons.

Tracy Chapman’s album ended, and Leslie hopped up to switch it out for Norah Jones.

They were planning the next weekend she could fly to Virginia when “Come Away

with Me” began to play. Leslie stood and tugged his hands until he did too.

“I’m guessing,” she said with velvet in her voice, “that you’re a first-rate dancer.”

“I am.” Together they began a slow waltz across the den carpet. On the chorus, they sang it to each other. Come away with me.

“Will you?” Ryker said, halfway through the song and not missing a step.

“I will.”

“For centuries.”

“As many as we can get.”

As the song faded to its end, Ryker took her face between his palms and kissed her. The kiss was gentle, calm, happy, exactly like them together. But then it wasn’t. It caught icy fire that danced in Leslie’s veins. It brought her body to attention. It curled her toes into the carpet, her fingers into the back of his shirt.

Taste. She wanted his taste. She wanted to join their souls forever, today, unexpected and perfect, this day of blankets and board games, wind and rain outside and Ryker with her. Home with her. Being her home. Leslie drew his head down, exposed the dip between his neck and his shoulder, opened her mouth, set her teeth, tried to feel if he wanted this, if he wanted today.

“Yes,” Ryker hissed.

She bit down. She tasted. She sipped a little—cold from the vein and darkly flavorful, nothing like the human blood that kept her alive. She sipped a little more, but this wasn’t about sustenance. This was about their joined souls, and hers shivered in

delight that exploded into a joy so strong and deep she could hardly hold it in her body. Her head flung back. She met his eyes. He stared, his body taut, holding himself motionless with effort.

“Ryker.”

“Can I?”

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:00 am

“Yes.” She wanted him to feel it, this freezing-shouting-dancing-sparking elation.

His lips were cool against her skin, the same place she had found to taste him. His teeth broke the skin but didn’t hurt her at all. He took a single long drink, then lifted his head. His eyes had gone pure silver. They sparkled like a galaxy before slowly shifting back to blue.

“Leslie.”

“It’s me.”

“I know. I felt you. I felt us. I felt...”

“We really are bound together. It’s like our hearts beat in time now, or...or our souls do, or something.”

“That’s it. That’s what it is. And I saw something. I got to borrow your gift for a split second, and I saw our anniversary cake. It had those cheesy number candles on top, so Mama will definitely be there.”

“Ooh, which number?”

She latched her arms around his neck and kissed him before he could answer her. He lifted her, arms under her thighs, and she straddled his hips as he carried her back to the couch, as the record kept playing and they kept kissing. He kissed the place he had bitten, and Leslie kissed the bite she had left in turn. The mark had already turned into a silver scar, a perfect mold only her bite would fit. At last they drew apart, but

Leslie knew today was the beautiful day that would proceed their first beautiful night.

“Ryker, what was the number?”

He grinned. “A two.”

She rolled her eyes, and he kissed her.

“And a five.”

“Oh, twenty-five? That’s a respectable start—”

He kissed her again, and when he pulled back his eyes held glittering mischief, shining joy. “And a zero.”