



Hunting My Vampire

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Description: A vampire stole my heart.

As a vampire assassin, I never cared for love.
My job was my passion.
Until an injury forced me to stop hunting vampires.
I thought I was done with danger.
But then I meet Jack Beaufort.

Two-hundred-year-olds, he's one arrogant vampire.
If he thinks his charm or wealth will impress me, he's deadly wrong.
Taking him out was my last job.
At which I failed.

I do my best to avoid Jack, which is hard given his persistence.
I never believed that opposites attract...
But being near Jack makes my body tingle with desire.
Hate quickly turns to passion.
And the more I learn about Jack, the more I fear that I might be falling for him...
As Jack helps me discover who's responsible for killing my family, I need to make a tough decision.
Run to protect myself or face the monsters?

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

Chapter One

Kaya

I was not prepared for love. I know that sounds crazy. But that was not my life.

I existed in a world where I had always had to be ready to fight off attackers and to spot suspicious people. I was able to take on men twice my size without weapons. Within seconds, I could see who represented danger in a room, where the best exit route was and how I could get away quickly and efficiently if I needed to.

But love? That was something that I had not trained for and I certainly did not see it coming.

The night of the school concert was cold and miserable and most of the parents came in huddled in coats and scarves with their hats pulled down low. I stood at the back, ready to slip out when the music got too much. I'd warned Princess that I couldn't handle school concerts. I would stick it out as long as I could, to support her, seeing that her mother couldn't make it and her gran was sick. But I couldn't be expected to sit through the whole thing. Seriously.

She understood. The kid was sweet that way.

She'd already been through so much in her 11 years. She'd lost her father in a fishing accident, then saw her mother battling alcohol and drug abuse, before finally going to rehab. Because her mother was my friend, I offered to help look after Princess even though I was barely able to look after myself.

That meant going to school concerts.

Gritting my teeth when they started singing hits from the musicals, getting the songs horribly wrong. I waited until I saw Princess come onto the stage in a neon pink tutu shaking her little fairy wand as she belted out the notes at the top of her voice.

She was a terrible singer but they all were. The parents laughed and clapped their hands, delighted at the performance of their children. I shook my head and left to wait outside.

There was a foyer and a stall selling refreshments. I bought some popcorn and wandered down to the classrooms, pausing to look at pictures. I wondered what it would have been like to have been a normal girl, going to school in a place like this, to have played hockey or maybe done drama. I couldn't imagine it. This kind of life was never meant for me.

I didn't hear him sneaking up on me.

Maybe I would have before the accident but vampires are quiet and I was distracted, lost in thought. I had reached the end of the way and was about to turn a corner, when he suddenly stood in front of me.

I gave a little yelp of surprise and dropped my popcorn.

"I'm so sorry," he smiled. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I knew who he was right away.

Jack Beaufort, the hotel tycoon, an important community member in these parts. Also a vampire from a very powerful family. He was not someone to be messed with.

But I was Kaya Lee and I stood back for no one.

“You didn’t scare me,” I snapped back at him.

He gave me a huge grin, movie star style, all white teeth. His hair was a bit long and his eyes bright blue. He was extremely attractive and he knew it. He annoyed the shit out of me.

“Do you mind?” I barked at him, motioning for him to stand back.

“I know you have people to clean up your messes but I’m not like that.”

I got down to pick up the popcorn.

Maybe I wouldn’t have if he wasn’t there. I might have gone to look for a broom or maybe just kicked it out of the way but I wanted to make a point.

I got onto my hands and knees to pick up the popcorn and he knelt down next to me.

“Do you mind?!” I said to him. “I’ve got this!”

He laughed, flashing that confident grin at me again.

“I’m just offering to help pick up popcorn! I’m not proposing marriage or anything!”

“Thank goodness for that,” I said sarcastically, sweeping up a whole lot of popcorn with a piece of paper and shoveling it back into the bag.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

He was staring at me now, an intense and unnerving gaze.

“Are you always this friendly towards people who want to help you?”

His voice was low, seductive.

My heart was beating faster. I had to stop this.

“Only when they are possibly out to rip my head off and drink my blood!”

His eyes narrowed and I could see my message had hit home.

I wanted him to know that I knew who he was. He didn’t have to know how well I knew him, that we had history he wasn’t even aware of.

“I don’t do that,” he said slowly. “Drink human blood, I mean. I only drink synthetic blood and have done that ever since it’s been available.”

“Give the man a medal,” I sniped again.

I thought I was doing well here but then something happened.

I’m not sure how it came about but I moved back and he moved forward, then our arms touched. A current of electricity ran through my body, burning my blood and searing my skin. I had never experienced anything like that. I was frozen to the spot, unable to move, hyper aware of my surroundings and of him.

He was staring at me and I saw his eyes drop down to my breasts which were on display in my tight black T-shirt. It didn't help that my nipples were hard and I was aware of the incredible attraction that I was feeling towards him.

I forced myself to break away from him.

This was what vampires did, I told myself. They seduced you and overpowered you, and then they killed you. I stumbled to my feet breaking the energy between us and walked away.

I was aware of him watching me. I could feel the way his eyes burned into my back, willing me to turn around and go back to him. But I walked back to the concert, melting into the crowd with the parents and keeping my head down.

I didn't hear much of what was going on anymore. I was too busy trying to figure out what had just happened.

I'd met vampires before, of course, and had killed my fair share of them too. Not all of them were bad but in my experience, most of them saw humans as a weaker species, less than themselves. I knew there were some who did not fit this mould but I'd never met any. In most species, whether human, shifter or even the more magical creatures, the powerful male had to be watched out for.

Jack Beaufort may have seemed young and drop-dead gorgeous but he would not think twice about sinking his hundred-year-old teeth into me. I would be the one to drop dead.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more here.

I knew I couldn't trust myself, though. After the accident that had forced me to quit my job as an assassin, I'd been advised to take things easy. I'd had a brain injury and

was lucky to be alive, the doctors said. They told me to stay away from any physical exertion or stress.

I'd found work in a car repair shop, working on engines and repairing dents and scratches. It was work that I enjoyed, rather surprisingly. You could lose yourself in it, the steady spraying of paint onto a new car part, the tightening of nuts and bolts. It had been a few months, and I was finally beginning to feel like myself again.

My body had healed and my head was much better too but I knew it could play tricks on me sometimes. I still had the headaches and the nightmares. The flashes to my childhood and the night my family was killed; dreams that I could not quite explain.

I knew I had to be careful.

Looking after Princess and taking care of the cars at the shop were all I had time and energy for. I couldn't afford to let anyone in, least of all, the ancient heir to the throne of a dangerous vampire family.

Jack Beaufort was my enemy. I needed to stay as far away from him as possible. But I could not stop thinking about him.

For the rest of the show, I sat slumped in my chair, forcing myself not to look around for him, to see where he was.

As soon as the concert was over, I went looking for Princess, finding her in the classroom with her teacher. I took her hand and listened to her excited ramblings about who had forgotten their lines and who'd been singing off key.

We made our way outside to my truck, which was parked down the road. We got in and before I drove off, I glanced at the rearview mirror. I couldn't see him but I knew he was watching me from somewhere. In the shadows, perhaps, behind some cars.

I could feel him watching me. And I liked it.

Chapter Two

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

Jack

The moment I met her I forgot about everything else.

The proposed merger with the Colorado hotel group, the resorts we were looking to acquire around Aspen and the staff issue we'd been having at the Luxury Suites in Brayer.

After laying eyes on Kaya Lee, I could not unsee her and I didn't want to.

I had been waiting for her for over a hundred years. It had gotten to the point where I was beginning to give up, to think it would never come my way. That I would never again meet anyone whose company I could stand for longer than a few hours.

I had noticed her arriving at the concert, of course.

I had been in a foul mood, not wanting to sit through a bunch of schoolchildren making a racket in aid of fundraising but I had promised the school principal I'd attend. As CEO of the Topaz Group, I had social responsibilities. Our business sponsored many of the school activities and I was supposedly a guest of honor.

It was important to be seen to be friendly and gracious, as warm as possible. My family has tried to be conciliatory and welcoming towards humans and, in return, we have had access to business dealings that many of our kind have not had.

It was important to nurture these relationships even if only for appearances.

I was tired that day though, fed-up with dealing with one business crisis after another.

Then I noticed her arriving. Dressed as though she was about to do some yard work, or cleaning, unlike the rest of the audience who had made some effort to dress up. She wore jeans and a work shirt with her hair scraped into a ponytail but the way she walked, graceful yet powerful, brought to mind a panther moving through the shadows and I was determined to meet her.

I had noticed her slipping out early on and followed her.

Our little interaction had been delicious, her aggressive, cold behavior was a huge turn-on. I could only imagine what she would be like in bed. I pictured her fighting me, trying to push me away. I was more turned on than I had been in years.

As she walked off, I motioned to my driver, Zoran, who was standing by.

“Who is that?”

“Do you mean Kaya?”

Kaya. What a wonderful name, I thought, it suited her beautifully.

“Details!” I demanded.

“That’s Kaya Lee,” said Zoran. “She works at an auto shop in town. Fixes cars.”

“That’s unusual for a woman, is it not?” I asked.

Zoran laughed. “She’s not your typical Hawston kind of woman,” he said.

No surprises there.

There was something very different about her, the fire and the energy she had shown in our interaction had sparked a kind of desire I could not and would not ignore.

“I want to know everything about Kaya Lee,” I said, watching her disappear into the crowd. “Where she lives, works, who she is with. Her family, her past. Everything.”

“Yes, sir.”

I could tell Zoran wanted to say something but held back.

“What is it?”

“She’s...uhm...different,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged and I impatiently pushed him for the truth. “Spit it out, man!”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

“She has a reputation,” he said, uncomfortably. “Some guys tried to mess with her... she put two of ‘em in the hospital. She’s trouble. Probably unstable, violent.”

Wonderful, it gets better and better, I thought.

The last thing I wanted was a pushover, some boring little bird twittering on for hours about clothes and parties. Human females were unfortunately often prone to this kind of behavior.

I went out to the street, my eyes scanning the crowd and I spotted her walking down the street, holding the hand of a little girl. Was this a complication? I couldn’t quite picture her as a mother. Not that this would scare me off. At this point, nothing would have been able to hold me back.

We drove back to the castle, which these days, was called the house, even though it had twenty rooms and five reception areas, most of which were unused these days. In my father’s day, there had been parties and dances, huge gatherings with entertainers and music, dancing until the early hours of the morning. My father had died a few months ago, I was still busy taking over and was head of the family business. My brother had some responsibilities, but working was the last thing on his mind. I had inherited all of this.

All of it was mine.

We all knew it.

But times had changed.

The car drove to my lodgings at the back of the castle.

As I went in, my assistant, Natania, rushed out to meet me.

“Charlotte has sent me a message,” she said, a little out-of-breath. “She is coming for the weekend after all.”

This was annoying. I had forgotten that I had tentative plans with her. Charlotte Deane was an actress with whom I had a casual relationship. Our agreement was loose and unspecified, we saw each other when we could, no strings attached. She was beautiful but unpredictable, which was part of her appeal for me. Human beings tended to be so predictable.

But Charlotte had told me she wasn’t coming.

“She’s changed her mind,” said Natania.

“You’ll have to meet her at the airstrip and let her know I had to go out of town.”

“What?” she frowned. “What do you mean?”

Irritated by this new development, I raised my voice.

“Just tell her I’m not here, ok?”

I could see Natania didn’t like this. She got on well with Charlotte and thought she was good for me. Natania was young and I thought of her as family more than an employee. She was one of the human staff members that I had appointed to help us interface with the mortals. People preferred to deal with humans when they had business with vampires, I’d found. She took her job seriously, rather too seriously, I sometimes thought. She could be meticulous in arranging my schedule, sending me

endless reminders of meetings and dinners. When I blew her off, or told her to move appointments, she could become tetchy, which I usually treated by putting her in her place. But she was very efficient, which I liked. I could become distracted and disliked being bothered by details. I liked to think of myself as a big picture and vision kind of person.

“Did something happen in town?” She asked. “You seem... different?”

I often ignored her when she pried too much into my affairs. She needed to learn some boundaries, I sometimes thought, or get a life. She had her own room in the castle and was off only over weekends. She could be like a little chihuahua, I thought, annoyed.

I went inside and closed the door behind me, quickly.

I needed to think.

My senses were sharp, heightened. I felt a keen awareness of everything around me and I knew this was because of Kaya. It was intoxicating, this desire I felt for her.

I opened the window and enjoyed the cold bite of the wind. Winter would soon be here, bringing a thick layer of snow to the fields and roads. I took to the air, heading for town. I didn't know where she lived but I knew what her truck looked like and Hawston was a small place. It didn't take me long to find it parked on a quiet road outside a modest house.

I went closer, saw the unkempt garden, the slightly neglected air of peeling paint and cracked windows. I snuck up through the bushes and saw Kaya on a couch in the living room reading a book. I stared at her and she looked up, not right at me but behind her. The way one does when you feel yourself being watched.

She closed the book and got up looking at the window.

I stood back, melting into the darkness.

She had sensed my presence, I realized.

Her senses were sharp too, which was not common in humans.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

I wondered if she was perhaps another kind of creature but her smell had been unmistakably human.

I wanted to go up to her door, knock, and sweep her off her feet but I knew I had to wait. These things took time and I couldn't rush it.

Even though I knew that behind her hostility and her dislike, she had been hiding her attraction to me. I could feel it, I knew it was there. She would only be able to resist it for so long.

Meanwhile, I had to wait a little longer.

What was one day when I'd already waited so many years for this?

But I really struggled to walk away from the house, to leave her there. I wanted to stand outside her house all night long and watch her sleep.

I didn't want to risk being caught out though. Here was Kaya coming outside to check that everything was all right. She opened the door and peered into the night. She turned her head and stared straight at where I was hiding in the bushes. I was sure she couldn't see me but it seemed like she was able to sense I was there.

For a moment, I thought she would call out to me, tell me to come out. I would have done that without hesitation, going to her, walking into her arms. Nothing could have given me greater pleasure.

She seemed to hesitate, unsure of what to do but then she turned around and went

back inside, locking the door. She drew the curtains to stop me from looking at her but I already had her etched in my mind. I could hear her walking through her house, restlessly going up and down, back and forth.

I know what you need, Kaya, I thought, feeling myself harden at the thought. Soon, you will get it.

Chapter Three

Kaya

I slept badly and woke up the next morning in a bad temper.

I nearly overslept and had to rush to get Princess ready for school and drop her off before the teachers locked the gates. I then went to open up the auto shop and checked our book for the day.

Things were slow at work, lately.

The owner, Fuzz, had taken off some time to be with his family, leaving me in charge. It had been a quiet month so far and this was not a good thing. People needed to be paid and Fuzz had kids to feed. He didn't pay me much but I was counting on that pay cheque too. I was grateful for the job. After I had come out of the hospital with a weak back and a mind that seemed to wander at weird times, it was clear to me that I needed to slow down and take time to recuperate. But I've never been one for slow walks and peaceful swims at the public pool. I needed to keep busy. I had some mechanical auto work skills, that I'd picked up, mostly from the sheriff who had been like my foster dad. We used to spend our weekends fiddling with car engines in the shed. He liked to say that cars don't talk back, which I learned to appreciate.

Fuzz didn't really need extra hands as business was often slow but his other

employee, Roberto, was often in late, reeking of booze and was not that reliable.

That day I was alone in the shop and was about to close early when the light started fading. I was about to lock up when I saw a gorgeous Lamborghini Huracán drive up to the shopfront.

When the driver's door opened, it was Jack Beaufort getting out of it.

I had been expecting him to be honest.

All night long, I'd been rolling around, unable to fall asleep. I kept waking up, dreaming of him putting his hands on me.

I wanted him and I knew I had to fight it. But I was not the girl I used to be and I didn't know if I was strong enough to resist him.

"We meet again," he said, taking off his designer sunglasses.

I was too tired to come up with a snappy response.

All day long, I had tried to keep my thoughts away from him, focusing on my only job for the moment, an old Chevy that really had only needed a tune-up. By the time I was done with it, the engine had basically been overhauled.

"I would like to know if you have the capacity to check our fleet of cars for the Topaz Group," he said.

"You know we don't," I said. "We're a small shop, we can take maybe five cars at most and it will take a few days to work through them."

"Then we do that," he said graciously, smiling his big grin at me. "When you're

finished with those, we send in the next few.”

He leaned over the counter. “I hear you have excellent hands.”

His voice was low, sexy.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

I felt a twitch in my groin, my body ignoring my mind.

I decided to ignore it.

“On second thought, we can’t do it. I’m here alone, it’s too much. Please take your business to Richmond or Burlington.”

He was still smiling.

“How about the Lambo?” he asked. “Could you look at it for me?”

I looked over to the car. “What’s wrong with it?” I asked in spite of myself. It was a beautiful machine and it looked like it was in perfect condition.

“There is a bit of a leak, I think,” he said.

“Could be a worn seal? You should really have a qualified technician look at it though,” I added quickly.

“I trust you,” he said, this time without a smile. He stared into my eyes, his blue eyes turning dark. I found myself unable to breathe, swallowing with difficulty. The air was thick with desire and sexual attraction.

I stepped away from the desk, trying to break the tension.

“Bring it into the workshop,” I said, slightly breathless, motioning for him to bring the car round.

I walked into the office at the back to get some of my finer tools and when I turned around, he was there in the office with me. He closed the door behind him. We were alone in the workshop and he knew it.

“What are you doing?” I asked him, breathless.

“Kaya.” He only said my name and I felt my pulse quickening.

“No!” I said, firmly. “This isn’t happening!”

I pushed him aside, opening the door.

He didn’t try to stop me but as I opened the door he almost whispered, “Why are you fighting me?”

I wanted to say that he knew why; that I couldn’t allow him anywhere near me, that he was dangerous. But his presence was overpowering, it was making me dizzy. He was filling the space with his presence and I couldn’t think clearly anymore. I knew giving in to him was bad but I couldn’t remember why. It seemed like my body wanted this too, why wouldn’t my mind just let it go?

“Stop this,” I said to him, pleadingly.

“Only you can stop it,” he said to me, his voice barely audible. “I can’t help it, I want you, I can’t think of anything else.”

He stepped forward and there were mere inches between us. I closed my eyes but I could feel him standing so close to me. I felt myself drawn to him, trying to hold myself back but it was impossible.

I wouldn’t allow myself to give in though, I wouldn’t tell him it was okay. He was

waiting for a sign from me. For some reason, he wasn't going to make the first move. I could hardly believe it. It seemed almost gentlemanly. I hadn't expected such courtesy from him, a vampire, of all things. Suddenly, with a bit of a shock, I realized I wanted him to push me up against the wall, I wanted him to be rough with me. I'd never been one for romance and soft candlelight. I liked a real man and the feel of hands that were rough and knew how to work.

I felt something come over me, a shift in my mood, my guard coming down. I moved closer to him, almost touching him, but not quite.

It was all the invitation he needed.

He slammed my body against the wall, kissing me with such ferocity that I was stunned and immediately felt incredibly turned on. I couldn't believe this was actually happening but he was warm, not cold as I'd expected. The heat that radiated from him enveloped me and I was kissing him back, hungrily. His hands were all over me, squeezing and stroking, hard and rough.

God, it felt good.

It had been so long since I had been with a man. These were not the kind of feelings I usually indulged. I didn't like to get too close to people, especially men. I never invited anyone home. Casual flings, drunk one-night stands, these were the sorts of hook-ups I generally went for. And it had been a long time since I had been with anyone like that.

He unzipped my overall, slid it off my shoulders and it collapsed in a heap at my feet. He kissed me again, his mouth hot against my neck and for a moment, I braced for the teeth, I wondered if this was the moment when he would drink my blood, but his lips moved down to my breasts, his hands cupping and caressing them.

I heard myself moaning and groaning, wanting more. My longing for him was so intense it took me by surprise. I felt myself pushing my pussy against him, begging him to touch me and he lifted me onto a workbench, spreading my legs as I leaned back, giving myself to him.

He was kissing my legs, his tongue trailing my thighs, sucking and licking the skin, while I was whimpering with delight. I couldn't believe how good this felt, how much I wanted this. I no longer thought about anything else but having him inside of me as soon as possible, I wanted nothing else.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

Then he moved up the inside of my legs and I could feel his tongue, butterfly light, flicking and licking inside, probing deeper. It was agony, I felt myself calling out to him to fuck me, not to keep me waiting.

He stood back, pulling away, looking at me with his hair disheveled, his eyes dark with lust.

“You want this?” he asked me and I nodded.

“Yes,” I said, “Yes, please.”

“How much?” he asked me, daring me to beg him.

I leaned forward and grabbed him, pulling him closer, felt his huge cock straining against his pants. I loosened the belt, pushed his pants down and took hold of his cock and put it in my mouth. I heard him gasp above me.

I leaned back and he came closer, turning me over in a fluid, quick movement. I was lying face down on the dirty surface, oil and grease smearing into my skin. Jack Beaufort opened my legs and entered me from behind. I felt an exquisite burst of pleasure as he moved inside of me, thrusting deeper and deeper. Waves of pleasure built higher and higher, coursing through my body and I couldn't think of anything besides the unbelievable pleasure I was feeling.

I could feel the climax building and our bodies were moving in rhythm, dancing together, slick with sweat and exertion. When the release came, it was like an explosion inside of me, a wave crashing down and wiping out everything inside of

me. I felt my body shake and convulse and our bodies were moving together, falling through space, tumbling back to earth.

I had never had sex like this before. Explosive and rough, almost animal-like.

This was incredible.

It was unbelievable.

It was a while before I could think clearly and form coherent thoughts. The first thing I did think, was how tired I was. I had not felt this tired in ages. All I could think of was how I had to get to my bed. I wanted to sleep forever.

I couldn't get away from him fast enough.

Chapter Four

Jack

As soon as I came through the door I was confronted by Charlotte.

“Where have you been?” she asked me in her clipped, British voice.

She was draped over my living room couch, elegant limbs arranged artfully for maximum effect. She wore a white pant suit, her golden hair cascading in perfect waves over her shoulder. Everything was a drama production with Charlotte. I was used to it by now and didn't fall for it, walking straight past her to my dresser, for some of my special refreshment.

I was on a high following my encounter with Kaya. I wouldn't let anyone bring me down.

Not even Charlotte.

“Did Natania not get hold of you?” I asked casually. “I asked her to let you know that I had other plans.”

I heard Charlotte walk up to me.

“I hoped you would change them,” she said in a pouty voice I hated. She put her arm around my waist, leaning her head against my back. I had to resist the urge to shake her off like a wet towel.

Gently extricating myself from her, I said, “I thought you couldn’t come this weekend?”

She gave an exaggerated sigh “Oh, Jeremy said he wanted me to meet some producer friend of his but I decided to blow him off. I would rather be with you.”

She looked at me expectantly but I did not respond.

“I thought we could go to Molton, book the penthouse and the spa, have a party?”

No, I thought, that wouldn’t work at all.

All I could think about was Kaya and seeing her again.

After our wonderful coupling she had rushed off mumbling something about having to go. It didn’t give me cause for concern, really. I was aware of some women being emotional afterwards, wanting their own space, being overwhelmed by the intensity of these experiences. They usually came round rather quickly. I was anticipating the same behavior with Kaya. Once she replayed our tryst in her mind, I had no doubt she would want more and come back to me wanting.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

This had always been the case in the past.

It is intoxicating to experience so much pleasure, such incredible intensity. The human mind cannot fathom it, does not know how to process it. Even our minds struggled with it sometimes. The truth was that because so few physical pleasures were still available to us, sex became almost of paramount importance. But finding someone that could light that fire was not as simple.

Our tastes become more eclectic as the years go on.

We become particular about the kind of person we are able to be with, that we want to become intimate with.

For me, it had been a long stretch of being alone.

Too long.

I met Charlotte at a party. We started talking and found we had a lot in common. She was not the typical Hollywood starlet; she didn't want relationships and commitments, and didn't trust anyone from her world. She liked that I had my own life, my own money and an entire world that was as far removed from her world as possible.

She also hated daylight, which suited our arrangement.

She liked to stay up at night, sleeping until late into the day.

She was a demanding actress, known as a diva and many producers refused to work with her. But her beauty and star power was unaffected. Her mere name was enough to draw huge crowds to the cinema. Ironically, she played a vampire in one franchise. It was a ridiculous fiction in which the vampires were either monsters or pathetic romantic types. The reality was more complex, I tried to tell her. Vampires were as diverse as people were. Some were evil, others were not. It wasn't as simple as the old stories made it out to be. She wanted to know details but I wasn't keen to tell her about it. This was my life, not material for some Hollywood show.

"Do you have no feelings at all?" she'd asked me.

Oh, we have feelings.

As I stood there, my head was in turmoil, all I could think about was Kaya. I wanted to get over to her house and check in on her. Something was telling me that I needed to be with her.

"I'm afraid this weekend won't work," I said to Charlotte. "I have to go out again now."

"Now?" She frowned.

"And I'll be busy all weekend. I'm sorry you came out all this way. You should have warned me."

She put her hands on her hips.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you weren't happy to see me," she said in a low voice.

I was in no mood for games, though.

I walked past her. “If you like, go to the Molton and take the penthouse suite. I’ll let Natania make the arrangements.”

I didn’t wait for her response.

It was time to end things with her, I thought.

Now that Kaya had arrived in my life, I had no time for anyone else.

The night air was delightfully cold and I enjoyed gliding through the darkness, finding Kaya’s house on the street behind the woods. I walked up to the house and when I saw the dark windows and drawn curtains, I wondered if she was home.

I had hoped to find her awake, to perhaps surprise her.

Women liked to know you were thinking of them afterwards.

I couldn’t leave anything to chance with her.

I sensed that Kaya was not like other women, she did not look or dress like them and she had been very hostile to me initially. Our sexual attraction had been strong enough to force her to drop her guard but perhaps she would put it up again. I was prepared for that. I was willing to work on this relationship, to wait for Kaya.

She was worth it. I had no doubt about it at all.

She was that rarest of creatures that came into your life only once, perhaps twice in a life. A true partner who could be a mate in every way. Unlike Charlotte, who was superficial and artificial, Kaya’s beauty came from inside, from a fierceness at her core. There was a natural wildness to her that spoke to my more animal side, the predator in me recognized that she was not a victim or a weakling but a potentially

strong ally. She could be more than a lover or a girlfriend. She could be a wife, a true companion.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

This was what I wanted most of all.

I already knew that we were sexually compatible and well-suited to each other, able to sate each other's needs. I was almost sure this was no infatuation that would burn itself out either.

"Can I help you?" I heard someone say behind me.

I turned to see an old lady coming up the street with a small dog on a lead. The dog was shivering badly but growling at me.

"I was coming to see Kaya," I said.

"At this time of night?" the lady asked disapprovingly.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"It's after eleven," she said, lifting her chin haughtily.

I could have snapped her neck with my left hand, while snuffing out the life of that little mutt of hers. Easily. But I was above such petty behavior.

"We look out for each other around here," the old lady said. She walked up to me, as close as the little dog would allow her too. She was staring me down, willing me to leave.

"That's nice," I said with a big smile and walked off.

I called Zoran and told him to get all the red roses he could find, in this town and the next and bring them over to Kaya's house. I gave him the address and waited for him in the shadows.

I wanted it to convey the depth of my feelings while at the same time the extraordinary nature of our relationship.

I knew a normal bouquet wouldn't do the trick.

It took Zoran a few hours, but he arrived with a small truck, packed to the brim with red roses in vases.

We stacked Kaya's porch with vases filled with red roses, even placing some on the narrow steps leading up to the house. It took hours but I had nothing better to do.

Winning Kaya's heart was the most important job I now had. Something told me it was necessary to pull out all the stops, do whatever was necessary. This was a first step. I would give her a call tomorrow, maybe stop by the workshop and pretend the Lambo needed an oil leak fixed. It hadn't leaked a drop since I bought it a year ago after our successful acquisition of the ski lodges in Canada.

That deal had sealed my succession in terms of our family business. My father had said as much when I came to see him to report on the outcome of the negotiations. I was already running the business by then but he liked to be kept informed. He passed away soon after, at more than three hundred years old. In his life, he had weathered many foes and enemies, had built and lost fortunes, and had seen lovers come and go. This wasting disease he had contracted a few years ago was probably the result of contaminated blood. This happened sometimes. It could have been accidental or intentional. I was not quite sure. I had wanted to introduce him to my future wife but, unfortunately, the time for that had passed. I had never been married which had bothered him. He had wanted to see me settled, like my so-called brother

Simon. But he had come to see that this could also work against us, especially if, as in the case of Simon, the family that he was married into had an agenda of its own. I had always been more focused on the business and had been able to help him raise the profile of our brand. Especially, over the last fifty years since the war had ended, when vampires were often seen as enemies of humanity. I projected a warmer, friendlier image. Simon was haughty and superior, never even pretending not to find humans boring.

When Zoran and I had finished arranging the roses, I stood back to admire my handiwork.

Surely no woman could resist such a sight, I thought.

Of course, I did not yet know Kaya or how much she was able to resist.

Chapter Five

Kaya

I opened my front door and thought a bush had fallen down on the porch. Or some kind of flowering tree. Then I saw the roses and the vases and realized these had been placed here on purpose.

“What the fuck?” I couldn’t believe my eyes.

I have never been the kind of girl who liked flowers and candy, and ten thousand messages a day.

I stared at the multitude of flowers. There was no card, but I knew who had sent them.

There was only one person who would have gone for such overkill on a simple call-the-next-day message.

I was totally disgusted.

If he thought this kind of cheap trick would work on me then he clearly didn't know me at all.

“Oh, someone has an admirer!”

It was my neighbor, Mabel, coming up to admire the flowers.

“Please!” I snorted, looking away to hide my discomfort. “This is some mistake. I’ll ask the hospital to send someone over to collect these, maybe hand them out to patients.”

“It’s no mistake, dear,” Mabel said, telling me she’d seen a man outside my house last night. She crinkled her nose, “I think he was one of those,” she said, with an emphasis on the last word.

I knew what she meant.

The War had ended not that long ago and many of the older generation, especially, remembered that terrible timewhen vampires were at war with human beings and the other creatures on the planet. We were close to losing when a large part of the vampire population was destroyed by a huge bomb. The remaining families had to swear off drinking human blood and sign an agreement to agree to universal laws of respect and courteous behavior that did not include killing for food.

I couldn’t believe that I had slept with him. How could I have been that weak?

I was extremely disappointed in myself.

He was handsome and he had turned on the charm, sure, but I was stronger than that, surely! Had my mind really become this feeble? I couldn’t believe it.

Princess was staying with her grandmother, Tina, and I drove over to their house down the street. The place was almost as familiar to me as my own house. I had spent a few years there, after Aunt Stephanie died, before I went off to military training. That was how Pearl and I became friends, she was like a sister to me.

As soon as I came into the house, I got the smell of coffee and fried eggs. This was what a home smelled like.

“Hey guys,” I said, finding Princess and Grandma Tina sitting at the kitchen table. There were pancakes, waffles and strips of bacon on a plate. I grabbed one of these and sat down at the table.

“Ready for school?”

Princess stuffed the last of the toast in her face and ran off to get her school bag.

“I thought I’d go visit Pearl today,” I said. “You need me to take anything to her?”

Pearl had been in rehab for over two months. She was currently at a kind of step-down facility where she was allowed visitors. She would soon be released and come back home.

“Oh, yeah, I’ve got some cookies for her,” Grandma Tina got up with difficulty, on account of her arthritis. This was why she couldn’t look after Princess full-time and I’d offered to help out.

“Don’t you need to work today?” Grandma Tina called out to me over her shoulder.

“The shop is quiet, Roberto can handle it for a few hours,” I said.

“Are you sure?” Tina chuckled. Roberto could barely handle a tooth brush, never

mind the shop.

“He has to learn sometime,” I said with a shrug.

I took a bag with cookies, some clothes and books and then dropped Princess off at school. Afterward, I made sure that Roberto was coming in so that I could switch my phone off for the day. I didn’t want to get any calls from Jack.

I knew he’d call at some point to ask me if I’d gotten the roses. He’d probably go round to the shop to see if I was there too.

I wanted him to get the message quickly. The other night was a mistake. It was not going to happen again.

I was not in the business of sleeping with vampires. I was going to write off that one incidence as a sign that my head was still not completely healed. It was a momentary lapse of reason.

Vampires were vile creatures and I distrusted them. I also suspected that a vampire was behind the attack on my family when I was a little girl. Both my parents and my brother were killed, and I had been left for dead. I had survived the massacre but I remembered very little apart from the sound of beating wings and screaming.

It was not long after the end of the Wars, during which my father had taken us into the wilderness where he thought he could protect us better. He had been wrong about that.

I could be wrong too. Nobody was always right.

That was okay too. Mistakes happened.

I was not as hard on myself as I used to be. People made mistakes, but you learned from them.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

As I drove to the rehab center, I started to feel better about myself. I was going to be able to move on from this.

Especially as I knew about Jack Beaufort and his family. His father had built a huge empire of resorts that extended all over the country and also overseas. It was wealth that had been accrued over hundreds of years and much of it was wrapped up in tales of murder and stolen land. Many fingers had been pointed towards the Beaufort family over the years.

But Jack Beaufort in particular, was a bad one. He had been the last assignment on my list and I was finalizing my plan when someone put a stop to it. I was doing the research on how best to do it, driving around the castle area where he lived. This was where I had the car accident that had almost killed me. It put an end to my career as an assassin but I remembered enough of the brief about him. Jack had been accused of killing the head of a consortium in the Caribbean to weaken the competition and ensure Topaz Resorts could take over the properties they had an eye on. Witnesses had seen his henchmen on the scene where the businessman was murdered and in a court of law, one of the henchmen, who'd later been found dead, confessed that Jack Beaufort had told him to kill the target.

There might have been good vampires but he was not one of them. No matter how much he had sweet-talked me the night before, I had to accept that I had allowed my guard to slip. The only way I could live with this was if I never allowed it to happen again.

I turned off to the Still Waters Rehab Centre near White Mountain and parked outside the log cabin building, gathering Pearl's gifts from her mother. There were people

about, talking in groups and laughing. It was a peaceful place and I had seen Pearl do well here. I went looking for her in her room and was told she was outside with the horses. I walked to the paddocks where Pearl was stroking a beautiful mare.

She smiled when she saw me walking towards her

“Kaya! I didn’t know you were coming!”

She gave me a warm hug, holding on tightly. I felt myself absorb the love of the embrace, felt myself relax for a bit.

“I brought some cookies and a few things from home,” I said, leaning against the wooden post and gazing out over the field.

“Choc chip?” she asked, eyes gleaming. “I’m getting a bit tired of the spinach smoothies here.”

“I can imagine,” I chuckled, thinking of Tina’s bacon.

“Ready to come home?”

She lifted her eyebrows. “I better be, right? Can’t stay here forever...”

Pearl sounded wistful and I knew why. She missed her daughter, of course, but coming back to her old life with all of its temptations was always a challenge. This was her third stint in rehab. She always left with the best intentions not to relapse but at some point, she lost the battle again. She was fighting her own demons and when the stresses of life got too much, she was unable to manage them.

“This time will be different,” I assured her, “You’re looking so much better.”

She was too. She'd picked up weight and her eyes had the old sparkle again that I remembered from before.

She smiled at me. "What's new in your life, I can tell there is something you're dying to tell me."

Of course there was.

I didn't know where to begin.

"Just spit it out," she said, punching my arm playfully.

I didn't know how to tell her.

"Is it a man?" she teased me. "It is, isn't it!"

"Well, not strictly speaking," I said, avoiding her eyes. "Not in the living, human sense."

Her eyes widened. "A vampire!"

There was a reason why I picked Pearl to confide in. She wasn't easily shocked and had a pretty wild past. She'd run away from home as a teenager, before I had come to stay with her family. She'd wound up in a club where she had done pole dancing for money. Eventually, she'd come home and made up with her parents but every so often she'd disappear, go on benders with men she'd met at the pub downtown. I didn't approve of her lifestyle but I knew better than to criticize. My own life was no fairy tale and I'd had my share of monsters. We all dealt with life in our way, some of us were better at it than others.

"I shouldn't have done it. But I was so attracted to him," I admitted.

“How was it?” Pearl’s eyes sparkled. “I bet you it was fantastic! They can be wild in bed!”

“Well, yeah... but...”

“What?” Pearl wanted to know. “No-one is saying marry the guy, just have some fun! You deserve it!”

I shook my head.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

Pearl insisted. “You are so closed up, so guarded, Kaya. You need to trust people. Or vampires. Whatever. You’re too young to act this old.”

“That’s harsh,” I said, a bit stung. “My head is only just feeling back to normal.”

“You’re fine,” said Pearl firmly. “But you got burnt. Shit, I know all about that but I have to try to be a normal human being for Princess, as do you. We depend on you.”

I smiled at that. I had come to depend on them too.

But if I was going to learn to trust others again, I had to start with someone who was less dangerous, less of a risk.

But who?

I didn’t like most of the people I knew, and most men annoyed me with their silly pick-up lines and dumb jokes.

Jack Beaufort was the first man to spark my interest in a long time and he wasn’t even a man.

I didn’t know what that said about me.

Chapter Six

Jack

Kaya was not taking my calls.

I had lost count of the number of calls I had made, the text messages I had left for her. I was becoming annoyed that she wasn't returning my calls. It was rude and I liked good manners. I called at her place of work and was informed that she had taken a few days off work. The man at the shop didn't appear to know why or where she was. He seemed like a dim-witted fellow.

I dropped by her house a few times and scouted the neighborhood for her truck but she wasn't around. I sensed that she had left town.

But three days of this was enough for me.

I established that the child was with her grandmother nearby and decided to pay them a visit as soon as the sun set.

I knocked on the door and the little girl opened it. She was a pretty little thing, with sharp blue eyes that didn't miss a beat. I picked up a heightened awareness around her.

"May I help you?" she enquired politely.

"I am a friend of Kaya's and I'm looking for her," I said with a smile, trying to look friendly but not too friendly. "She doesn't seem to be at work or at home?"

"If you are a friend, how come I don't know you? I know all Kaya's friends," she said, frowning.

"I'm kind of a new friend," I said.

We were still standing at the front door but she had not invited me in. She appraised

me carefully through narrowed eyes.

“Are you a vampire?” she then asked.

I chuckled. “I am, yes.”

“Kaya hates vampires,” the girl said, crossing her arms.

“She does?”

“They killed her entire family; she says they are all killers.”

This was news to me but it did explain her behaviour in a way.

“I am not a killer, Princess, I promise you that,” I said in my most sincere voice.

She looked at me for a while.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

“Did you send all those roses to the house the other day?”

I nodded.

“She didn’t like that,” Princess said.

I was beginning to see that.

“Who’s at the door, honey?” I heard an older woman call out from inside the house. There was the sound of scraping chairs and heavy footfalls and then the door was opened wide. Princess stood aside while a huge woman, stooped over on account of some illness, filled the doorway.

“What do you want?” she glared at me, very hostile. “Kaya isn’t friends with the likes of you! Go away!”

She slammed the door in my face.

I turned around to walk away when I heard Princess calling from behind me.

“Wait!”

She came running towards me. “She went away for a bit but she will be back tonight.”

I thanked her and gave her a bag of candy that I had bought earlier for this purpose.

“Did you know I had these?” I asked with a wink.

She grinned, “Well, a girl can hope, right?”

I decided to wait for Kaya outside her house.

In the early evening, her truck stopped outside her house and I saw her getting out with the little girl. They went into her house and I watched them in the kitchen making dinner, then heard as Kaya sent Princess off to have a bath and get ready for bed.

I waited for the house to quiet down and then I went up to the front door and knocked quietly. I had to knock a few times before Kaya would come to the door.

She looked so cute, dressed in cut-offs and a vest, her hair falling over her shoulder.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

“I just want to talk. You’re avoiding me,” I said.

“The other night was a mistake,” she said, looking away, embarrassed. “I would like to pretend it never happened.”

“I can’t do that,” I said quietly. “There is absolutely no way that I can do that.”

The atmosphere between us was charged, conversation was difficult. I wanted to take her into my arms and kiss that luscious mouth of hers but I could see this would not go down well.

“I think you don’t really want that either.”

“How do you know what I want?” she snapped and was about to slam the door shut

in my face when I called for her to wait.

“Can we talk, please? Just talk?”

She didn't want that but, reluctantly, she held the door open.

“You have a problem with our kind, I understand that. But I'm not like them, I have been trying to live with humans, running a legitimate business. I have not tasted human blood in many decades.”

“You're lying!” she accused me, her eyes burning.

“I swear I'm not!”

She gave a grimace. “I know for a fact that you had Juan Marco Albarelllos killed.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

“Who?” The name sounded vaguely familiar but I couldn’t place him.

She gave a snarky laugh. “Please! Now you can’t even remember him? You’re too much!”

Then she told me how she had been tasked with assassinating me after I’d been found guilty of killing this man Albarelllos in the Caribbean. Apparently he was the head of a consortium opposing a takeover by Topaz. Witnesses had seen me talking to the henchmen and the State Court had investigated and found me guilty. I was to be eliminated. All of this was news to me. She was not able to fulfill the assignment because of a car accident but as far as she knew, the hit was still out on me.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it,” I said to her. “We did have a takeover with Las Capitas in the Caribbean and I signed the deal but I wasn’t part of the negotiations. I didn’t meet with this man, Albarelllos.”

She stared at me, unconvinced.

“I’ll get to the bottom of this,” I promised her. “Someone is trying to set me up. But I won’t let it come between us. Give me some time, I will find out what is going on.”

She bit her lip, and I felt a glimmer of hope. This was the way to this girls’ heart, I saw.

There was a slight nod and then she was gone.

I went back to the castle, trying to remember the Las Capitas deal, which was over a

year ago. As far as I could recall, there had been a group of us; Simon as well as my father. We had flown over to the Bahamas for a week of partying and indulgence, while sorting out the finer details of the deal. I didn't recall any hitches, however.

There was no point talking to Simon. I decided to visit the chairman of the Topaz Group board. I knew he was at his wine farm in California, which meant taking the private jet.

I arrived just before sunrise, which didn't give me a lot of time to get to his estate. I had my PA warn him of my arrival and the gates opened as my car entered the gated enclave. We drove up to the Italian-inspired villa on the slopes overlooking Napa Valley. The grounds were immaculate and I could see the vines were drooping with fruit.

Things were looking well for Marcello Montenegro.

The car proceeded along the driveway and then went round the back to the underground parking area. From here there were lifts to the inside of the fortress, which echoed medieval castles from Europe, where Marcello was from, originally, of course.

"Jack!" he greeted me warmly, once the elevator door opened into the foyer.

"What a lovely surprise!" He was dressed in a cravat and embroidered slippers, looking like a member of the old aristocracy rather than a modern businessman.

"Would you care for a refreshment?" He nodded at a servant in the distance. "Let's go into my study."

I had never liked the man and didn't trust him.

The study was a beautiful, oak-paneled room with heavy bookshelves and expensive carpets. There was a fire for effect, as we of course, didn't feel the heat.

A beautiful woman came to hand us a drink in crystal glasses, and I took a sip, immediately feeling a rush to the head.

"What is this?" I asked, holding the glass at a distance. "Is this human?"

Marcello laughed. "That would be illegal, dear chap, no, of course not! Just a very fine blend of synthetic substitute with a drop of dopamine, a truly rare and expensive product."

I nodded, not believing him for an instant.

I put the glass down and leaned forward.

"I need to talk to you about the Las Capitas deal. Do you remember Juan Marco Albarelllos? He was killed right before we inked the deal. He was opposed to the takeover and threatened to stop us."

I had read up on the deal on the plane. After the only opposition to our deal had conveniently disappeared, the takeover had proceeded smoothly.

"I recall it vaguely," Marcello said, looking at me with calculating eyes.

"Did you know that I was accused and tried of the murder by the State? There were even witnesses? There was an order I be eliminated!"

Marcello licked his thin lips. "I believe that order was rescinded. Your father intervened."

“My father?”

I could see Marcello was trying to buy time.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

“Let me make myself clear,” I said in a low, and bitingly cold voice.

“Unless you tell me the truth right now, I will be informing the other board members that you lied to me, the chief executive officer on a matter of vital business pertaining to the Topaz Group. I will call for an emergency vote and you will be removed as chairperson.”

The fire in the room went out, just like that.

The air was cold and dangerous.

I stood up and assumed a position of strength.

“Tell me the truth now or suffer the consequences.”

There was a moment of tension before Marcello bowed his head and motioned for me to sit down.

“Please, calma,” he tried to assure me.

“The whole business was so unfortunate. We, your father and I, had hoped you would never find out. But, alas, you have and of course, I will tell you.”

I sat down and the whole sordid story came out.

Kaya

I went back to work the next day.

Roberto was delighted to see me. I thought he was going to give me a hug but he came up to me and stopped, awkwardly shifting his weight.

“Hey...” he said, rolling his hands and grinning like a madman. “I’m so glad you’re back! Some seriously banged up cars in here! I’ve been rackin’ my brains but this calls for your expertise!”

I looked at the workshop and he was right, it was filled with cars. I couldn’t remember the last time this had happened. “What brought this on?!” I asked.

“Some kind of accident in town,” said Roberto. “Bozo jumped the light, crashed into Mrs. Faber’s Ford and then two other cars got banged up too. They towed them here.”

“Has Fuzz taken a look?” The cars would need to be appraised and the seriously damaged would probably be totaled. The insurance guys would be round as well, inspecting and making their sums.

Focusing on engines and cars was right up my alley. It gave me no time to think about Jack and our conversation the other day. But as soon as there was a break in the routine or when I straightened up to take a breath, he would pop straight back into my head, as if he had never been gone.

I hadn’t heard from him at all since he’d been to my house two nights ago. No texts. No calls.

But something told me he wasn’t gone at all.

Didn't I want him gone? It seemed not. I would never have admitted it out loud to anyone but I wanted him to find something to prove that he wasn't lying about the whole Caribbean murder thing. Unless he couldn't and that was why I hadn't heard from him again.

Enough.

I forced myself to think of something else, like my visit to Pearl. I had decided to stay over at hers and since she was in her own little cabin, I could. I'd slept on the couch and we'd gone for long walks and talked a lot. She had said to me that maybe there was a reason that I was so attracted to a vampire.

"I mean, maybe your body knows something your mind is not aware of yet."

This was all a bit over my head to be honest.

"Maybe my head is still messed up after the accident," I said.

But Pearl shook her head. "You know, when I ran away to New York as a teenager, I did a lot of weird stuff, hung out with a wild crowd. One of them was a vampire, he went by the name of Fire, we saw a bit of each other. I was known in the club because of this dance I did? They called it the hurricane." She laughed and I was surprised to hear this story.

"It wasn't a particularly good dance but I sort of whirled around the pole and it was different and a little wacky, I guess. People would come to the club to see me."

"So... wait... you were dating a vampire?" I was shocked. "You never told me this!"

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

She shrugged. “I knew how you felt about them. And... I never thought you were open to talking about them. I mean, I hung out with a lot of people, not only vampires. There were shifters and witches. I even had a friend who was a faerie.”

She paused. “The thing is: these friendships allowed me to explore different parts of myself. After growing up here living with my parents and everything that happened, I needed to find my own feet but then, I did.”

Pearl came back but often left again. Her father had a temper and it didn't make it easy being around the house. It made my decision to leave for training so much easier too. When Pearl became pregnant, unsure of the father, she moved back with her mom to have help with the baby. By then, her father had been jailed for assault and things had quieted down at home. Tina eventually divorced him and told him he was not welcome at the house anymore. She hoped this would help Pearl settle down but it didn't. She would stay at home for months on end, then get restless, go out to bars and meet men, have drunken orgies that sometimes lasted days.

I didn't know why I was so attracted to Jack Beaufort. But when he appeared at my door the other night, I almost couldn't breathe. It was like all the air had been sucked out of the room. He had such a powerful effect on me. I remembered our encounter in vivid detail, the way he tasted, how he felt inside of me.

I'd never been one of those pathetic girls who pined for a man, maybe that is why I reacted with such hostility towards him. I didn't want to be the kind of woman who went weak at the knees over some guy but here I was, that was exactly what was happening.

That night after I came home and put Princess to bed, I felt that he was outside even before he knocked on the door.

I felt his presence. How weird was that?

I opened the door, and he came out of the darkness.

“Are you inviting me in? Finally?” he asked with a teasing smile.

I shrugged, too tired after working in the shop all day.

We sat down in my poky living room on the lumpy sofa.

I listened while he told me the story of how his company’s executive had gotten rid of Juan Marco Albarelos because he had threatened to stop their takeover deal. He’d known nothing about the order for assassination and before he could find out about it, it had been rescinded.

“But what about the witnesses who saw you with the shooter?”

“I’m working on that,” he said in a cool voice. “The company, Topaz Group, is full of people loyal to my father and to some of the board members. There are lots of hidden agendas. I don’t know the half of what is going on. I keep finding out new shit all the time.”

He sounded angry, bitter.

“Here I was thinking you lived the high life,” I said, teasing him a bit.

He leaned back against the upholstery.

“I want to change things at Topaz, but I keep hearing new accusations. I think I have more enemies than I realize.”

“You have enemies?”

He snorted. “More than you know! The world is run by powerful families. My family is one of them, but there are many others and we are all at war with each other, constantly. You can never take your eye off the ball.”

He sighed. “I want to change things, make the company completely above board and legal, but then this sort of thing crops up.”

He sounded like he meant it, like he wanted it to be true.

I wanted to believe him but I didn’t know if I could.

“I could ask around, you know?” I said slowly. “Find out who placed the order. The name of the witness.”

I was offering to help him but I didn’t know why.

“You would?” His eyes lit up.

Seeing him smile again made my pulse race and my heart beat faster. He had such an insane effect on me. I tried to ignore it, pretend it wasn’t happening but I was curious about his story. I had the feeling he was telling the truth. Maybe I just wanted it to be true but that was good enough for me.

“Sure,” I said, casually.

He sat up and his knee accidentally brushed mine. There was a charge of electricity

between us as our legs touched.

I had a vision of us the other night, of his hands on my body, of me pushing myself against him, arching my back. The feel of his skin against mine.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

The power of this memory completely freaked me out. It was like I was helpless against him.

My mouth was dry, I swallowed and got up.

“I... it’s late. I have to go to bed.”

“Of course,” he got up right away and headed for the door.

“Thanks for listening,” he said, smiling at me as he bid me good night.

Only once the door closed behind him, did I realize that I regretted him not even trying to kiss me, not making a single move on me. I knew I would not be able to resist him if he touched me again.

I went into the kitchen and drank two glasses of water, forcing myself to calm down. Then I took a cold shower, shocking my brain into numbness, washing away the memory of Jack Beaufort.

The next day, I called the agency and spoke to one of my handlers.

Josie owed me some favors and I asked her to look into the file of Jack Beaufort.

She called me back. “It’s weird, his file has been deleted,” she said.

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t know, the folder is still there but the content is gone.”

“What about the murder of Juan Marco Albarelllos?” I asked. “I’m looking into finding the witness.”

“Hang on,” she said, while she did a search online.

“Here it is,” she said. “According to this report, the murder investigation was closed. It was ruled an accident in the end. Guy fell off his boat and drowned.”

“I thought he was shot?” I said.

“Not according to this report. The last filed note says there was a party, people took drugs and hallucinated. Someone thought he’d seen a shooter but later retracted his statement. The autopsy showed water in the lungs of the body, so that made it simple.”

Not to me, though.

“Oh, this is interesting,” she said suddenly.

“What is?”

“The case was closed following an executive order.”

“What do you mean?”

“The governor...” she said. “That’s weird. Why would he get involved?”

Why indeed?

Chapter 8

Jack

“Jack!”

My thoughts were rudely interrupted.

“Are you listening? Jack!”

It was Natania, my PA, trying to get me to pay attention to work.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

“Yes, what is it?”

“We need to decide on the campaign we want to run for Topaz in California! Which of these do you like?”

She was holding up cardboard mock-ups with different designs and colors. They all looked the same to me, though.

“You decide,” I said, distracted.

“Me?” She looked at me like I was losing the plot. “You told the graphic designers last week to start again from scratch and insisted only you make the final call!” She was exasperated by me and not hiding it very well.

“What can I say?” I pulled a face, “They’re all fine, okay?”

With a sigh, she put down the boards.

“There is a girl, right? That’s why you’ve gone off Charlotte and have lost all interest in work?”

I denied it but I could see Natania didn’t believe me. I didn’t care though.

I had more important things to think about. Like the fact that Kaya was softening in her attitude towards me. I was picking up on a very subtle change in attitude and I had to think about my next move. Kaya was unlike any woman I had ever been interested in before. Where others liked to be treated like ladies, Kaya was almost the

opposite. She wanted no special consideration, no doors to be opened for her. She obviously did not think of herself as the weaker sex.

I had gone to her place the night before. The place was messy but comfortable. She didn't try to apologize for it either. Not a homemaker, clearly. I didn't mind at all but it did seem out of the ordinary.

They were having a late dinner and I sat with her and Princess at the kitchen table, observing the two of them together. Afterwards, Princess went to bed and Kaya was able to spend time with me.

She was more relaxed around me now but there was still distance between us. She was a long way off from trusting me.

She shared the information she had found out about me and I told her how my family had been at war with the ruling elite in New York for centuries. After a violent clash between families almost a century ago, my family had agreed to stay as far from the city as possible and I had honored this agreement, wanting to focus on growing the business and staying alive.

So far, it had worked.

"I couldn't locate the original paperwork with details about how you were found guilty and the transcripts of the trial," she said, clearly troubled by this information.

"That suggests tampering. A serious offense."

I could tell she still believed in the system, which I had stopped doing long ago.

She made herself some coffee and I asked her for information about herself.

“Not much to tell,” she said, clearly unwilling to share details from her life.

“That can’t be true,” I said, coming to stand perhaps a bit too close to her.

“And why not?” she whipped around to face me. She was gorgeous when she got furious like that, her eyes flashing like smoldering coals.

I had to fight the urge to smile.

“I’m just saying, your reaction to vampires feels personal to me.”

She bit her lip and clearly decided to give an inch.

“It is, I guess.” She paused. “My family was killed when I was young, I was the only one to survive. I never found out what happened to them. The sheriff who found me said it looked like a vampire. But I never remembered anything about it, I was too young. He took me home to his wife Stephanie. They ended up raising me.”

I listened closely.

“What made him think it was a vampire attack?”

She frowned. “I don’t know. It was... very violent, that’s all I know.”

“I’m not saying that isn’t what happened,” I said gently. “But it doesn’t really sound like one of us,” I said, carefully.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

“Why?” her arms were folded, her tone suspicious.

“Well, killing a whole family? Why? If it was about feeding, you would wait for someone to be alone. You don’t attack a whole family, especially if there is a man there. Bad hunting practice. You risk getting hurt.”

She leaned against the kitchen counter and crossed her arms, deep in thought.

“Maybe,” she conceded. “There are many things I have questions about,” she said. “Not only my family and how they died but also later. I was in a serious accident a few months ago. Actually, it was when I was looking into your case. It didn’t feel random.”

She paused. “I was very seriously injured, I had to quit my job to focus on my recovery.”

“You don’t think I had something to do with it?” This was a whole different turn of events. It struck me that Kaya and I could have met earlier. I may have even seen her before now. Our relationship was meant to be, it was destiny, I was convinced of it.

“That’s the thing,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t know anything. My life is a mess and I have more questions than answers!”

Her voice broke and I wanted to take her in my arms but I had to be careful.

An idea occurred to me.

Before Charlotte, I had briefly dated an Argentinian model called Camila. She was volatile and unpredictable, and our relationship had not lasted, but she'd told me about a medicine man who had helped her work through some childhood trauma. I had to listen to her go on and on about this medicine man and how he had managed to get her to the root of her anger.

I wondered if this medicine man could help Kaya face her fear of vampires. I was pretty sure Kaya's family was not killed by a vampire, unless it was both the stupidest and strongest of all of us, which I doubted. The world was full of idiots walking home alone at night. No vampire went into the mountains looking for an armed human family to attack all at once. Vampires were highly intelligent and calculated. They were about minimum effort and maximum results. But I needed Kaya to see that.

When I told Kaya about the medicine man, she stared at me, clearly unsure.

"I have Native American blood, actually," she then said. "I don't know a lot about my parents, though. I was traumatized by the attack and for years, I was quiet and withdrawn. The sheriff and his wife decided to raise me and we were quite isolated. I only came to the town after I was a teenager."

She turned around and finished making her coffee.

I could sense the turmoil and confusion inside of her. So much emotion.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had so many feelings churning inside of me. It must have been around the time I had to make the decision to give up my human existence and truly join my father's family. My mother had been human and I had lived my first twenty years as a mortal, when my father told me it was time to choose which side I wanted to be on.

My father told me that humans were wonderful but weak. Our kind was strong but

had to watch for loneliness, he said. In return, we gained knowledge and wisdom and became superior beings on earth.

Not much of a choice, I thought. I had chosen my father, wanting to be like him.

“You’re not happy,” I suddenly said to Kaya. “You will deny it, of course, but it’s all over you, you are drenched in it; this anger, this fear, this uncertainty. All your attitude, your wildness, that is a defense. But it is keeping you from who you could be.”

It was a gamble, of course, talking to her like this but it was worth a shot.

I already knew roses wouldn’t win her heart, but perhaps this was how.

“Think about it, let me know.”

I turned to walk away but she called out to me.

“Wait a minute.”

I turned back.

“I’m thinking, okay? This is... hard for me.”

I nodded. “Change is hard. Facing the past, that is hard.”

She looked me in the eyes. “What do you know about change? And facing the past?”

I had to laugh. She was like a child sometimes.

“I have been on this earth for over one hundred years, Kaya. I have seen so many

loved ones come and go.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

Some I'd killed myself but there was no need to go into any of that. "Trust me," I said. "I have regrets."

"Tell me about one. Tell me about one regret."

I paused.

I didn't know how to tell her that my kind didn't feel regret the way humans did. Our emotions were different, practically non-existent. We had desires but it wasn't the same.

But this was about trust. I knew enough about humans to realize that she felt I needed to give her something.

"All right," I said, slowly, trying to buy time.

I had to think of a memory that didn't incriminate me too much or make me look too calculating in her eyes. It had to be true though. I didn't want to risk being caught out in a lie.

Still, I had to give Kaya something, so I dug deep.

"My sister."

Kaya smiled.

"You had a sister?"

I nodded slowly.

I had not thought about Flora in a long, long time. But we had been close, in my time, before I was turned. We had grown up at the castle and we had spent all our free time together, roaming the woods, going horseback riding. We had the same tastes, disliked the same people. When my father gave me the choice of immortal life she had begged me not to do it. I tried to persuade her to come with me but she would not.

“I told her nothing would change between us but it did.”

I hadn't even realized how soon. The Eastern War broke out and my father, Simon and I had left to fight for our family. We were away for many years. In that time, my mother passed away and my sister had gone on to marry a wealthy farmer up north. By the time I saw her again, I barely recognized her. She had changed and we had lost our way with one another. I didn't even know how to talk to her. She had become an old woman, talking of the weather and the ailments of her children. She was lost to me and she hadn't even died yet.

“So... what is your regret?”

“I suppose I regret losing her,” I said.

It struck me that my words were true. Flora had been more than a sister; she had been a partner. Her world had been my world. My father was much older than I was, and Simon and I had never gotten along. I didn't want to talk to Kaya about him yet. But when I lost Flora, I lost my first real friend, and I hadn't had that many since then either.

“Do you regret... turning?” Kaya asked.

“No,” I said. “It was always who I was going to be. I will say that I didn’t know at the time what lay ahead but, looking back, I do understand the decision I made and I’m glad I made it.”

Kaya looked at me pensively, I had a feeling that she knew there was more to the story but she nodded slowly, and said nothing else.

“Okay,” she said quietly, after a while.

“I will go and see your medicine man.”

Chapter 9

Kaya

Princess didn’t like me going away. She tried not to say anything but I saw how she hung her head and stuck out her lip. I felt sorry for the kid but this was something I needed to do. I couldn’t tell her that I’d had this rage all my life, never knowing what to do with it. Becoming an assassin had been the perfect outlet for this anger but it was never enough. Others had commented on it, how I zoned in on targets, how focused I became on total annihilation. I knew no mercy. Each time, I was avenging my family, the deaths of my father, mother and brother.

What if it hadn’t been a vampire?

Jack’s questions had opened a snake pit of questions in my mind. Things I had started wondering about too. My father was no coward and he had been heavily armed. Why attack all of us together?

Princess asked me, “Are you going with him?”

I nodded. I didn't have to ask who she was referring to.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

“He knows someone, a medicine man, from one of the tribes down South. He may be able to help me with some of the things that have happened to me.”

I didn’t want to tell Princess too much. She knew that I didn’t have parents and that I’d been in an accident but she didn’t know the nature of my childhood or about the close shaves I’d had with death. I wasn’t exactly going around sharing those stories with people. However, she did know about the bad dreams I sometimes had at night. She had often come to wake me up, worried about my screaming.

“You should be careful,” Granny Tina warned me when I told her about my plan. “You may not like the answers you are seeking.”

I looked at her. “Well, I sure don’t like having all these questions either. Strange things have been happening all my life to me. Weird dreams that feel like they mean something, but I don’t know what.”

Pearl’s mother shook her head and muttered to herself.

“I see white crows sometimes,” I suddenly said, just to see her reaction. “Do you think that means something?”

Tina sighed and muttered more but wouldn’t say anything else.

“What if you don’t come back?” Princess whined.

“I will come back, I promise,” I said.

I gave her a hug and felt her arms tighten around my back.

I realized that I felt hopeful, that I was looking forward to this trip with anticipation.

Jack came to pick me up at my place soon after dark. He drove us to a private air strip where we took his company plane and flew across the desert to a remote location I had never heard of. I had never seen such luxury as on the plane, it made me uncomfortable. There was a hostess offering me drinks and food, but I kept saying no. I couldn't think of food at this time. I was feeling nauseous, surrounded by all this wealth and then flying away somewhere strange with someone I didn't really know.

Jack was watching me intently but said little.

I could tell he was intrigued by the fact that I had been tracking him before, planning on killing him. I bet he was thinking about how I would have confronted him and what would've happened then. I had to admit, it felt like too much of a coincidence. There was something between us, but I didn't yet know what.

At least, he was giving me my space for now.

I was grateful that he wasn't much of a talker. I'd never been one for small talk.

I wanted to get into the mental framework for what lay ahead. I knew I had some Native American blood in me and I wondered if that would help me, if a part of me would recognize the ritual or ceremony or something. I knew so little about it though.

My mother had been Native American but had left that part of her behind when she married my father. For some reason, he had decided to move the family into the wilderness, where we lived like survivalists. He trapped and poached, and my mother made clothes for us from animal skins. My brother Danny was three years younger than me and I remember loving him dearly.

Then it all came to an end. One night of unimaginable violence, screaming and blood. It was all mixed up in my head, a horrible nightmare of which I had relived parts many times in my life. But as far as I could say anything about that night, it was one attacker and he'd seemed intent on killing all of us. I was found a few days after the attack by the sheriff out looking for suspects in another crime. I was curled up around my little brother, covered in blood. He thought I was dead too, until he saw me moving. He took me back to his home, looked after me and once he saw how wild I was, decided it would be better to keep me away from the town. I ran from people and seemed overly sensitive to noise. A few unfortunate incidents in town had led him to believe I would not fit in easily in society. He was right. Even though I learned to be better, I never liked people much. Eventually I trained as an assassin, a job I was ideally suited for. I had no fear of blood and no problem with inflicting violence. I wouldn't have admitted to it, but I enjoyed it. I had a lot of fury to vent.

The plane landed in the middle of the night. I had fallen asleep and was a bit disorientated. A car was waiting for us on the tarmac but the driver got out and Jack told me he would be driving. I was relieved that it was just the two of us again. All these extra people waiting on us was odd. Jack punched the co-ordinates into a sat-nav and we drove off into the night.

Anticipation was beginning to build in me. I didn't know what to expect but this felt right, like what I should be doing in my life. For years, I had told myself that I didn't need answers, that things had happened to me that were beyond my control and that I should learn to accept it. But things kept happening and I was beginning to think there might be a reason for it.

After about two hours, there was a turn-off into the mountains and the road became rocky. He slowed down to navigate the terrain better.

We didn't talk much but I was grateful when the car came to a halt.

“Let’s wait for some light,” he said. “So we can see where we’re going.”

This was for my benefit, I realized. He could see well enough in the dark.

I must have fallen asleep, because when I woke up, he was standing outside the car, talking to an old man wrapped in blankets.

I got out of the car, and he introduced us.

“This is Kaya. Kaya, this is A’rr’a.”

He held out a hand and smiled a toothless grin. I took his hand and was surprised at the firm grip.

“Come, come,” he said, taking us to a small shack at the bottom of the mountain. There was a fire and some rocks to sit on.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

I sat down but Jack remained standing.

“I’m going to leave you here with A’rr’a,” he said. “You will be perfectly safe, I assure you. A few days and I’ll be back.”

“But...” I started to protest.

“This is your journey. You must go it alone. Besides, the sun here is too harsh, I need to find some shelter.”

He came up to me to say goodbye and there was an awkward moment where he kissed my cheek, his lips lingering a moment longer than was strictly necessary. There was the wonderful smell of him, of cinnamon, coffee and powdered sugar, and then he was gone.

The old man brought me a tin cup with a bitter kind of tea.

“Drink, drink,” he said, nodding at me with a smile.

I drank it, grimacing all the way.

But oddly enough, I didn’t feel scared. It felt like I belonged here, like I needed to be here.

It was cold outside, and he brought me a blanket.

He came to sit next to me at the fire.

“I’ve been seeing white crows,” I said. “Does that mean anything?”

He nodded.

“Very good sign, very auspicious.” But he didn’t say anything else.

“Take you long time to come here,” he said. It felt like an admonishment.

“I didn’t know,” I said.

He laughed. “You know! You know!” he wagged his finger at me, like I was a naughty child.

“No,” I said softly again, “I didn’t. My head...” I shook my head, unable to put my thoughts into words.

He leaned forward and put one of his hands to the side of my face, just off the top of my head.

“Here,” he said. His hand was hot, it almost felt like he was burning me.

I knew I had a scar there but I couldn’t remember if it was from the night of the accident or the attack in my childhood.

“And here,” he got up and put his other hand over my eyes.

Immediately, I had a sensation of icy cold, like cold water washing through me. It was a very strange feeling.

The old man removed his hands and muttered to himself. It sounded a lot like what Pearl’s mother had been mumbling to herself. Or was I imagining this? Was I

hallucinating? Probably.

I felt myself slipping away into darkness, into a kind of dream world. I was vaguely aware of being led to a bed next to the fire. It was made up of blankets and furs and was incredibly soft. It reminded me of the bed that I had slept in as a child. I nestled into it, feeling completely safe and protected.

What came after that was hard to describe later on. Visions or dreams came to me. I was in some of them and, in others, I could see my family. I saw my mother and my father as they had been. I saw my brother as he died. I saw the creature that had attacked us. It looked like a bear but it wasn't a bear.

I also saw the crows, watching us in the trees.

They were white and their eyes were friendly. They were on my side, yet they did not intervene.

Then there was the accident. I saw myself driving along the intersection where there was another crow sitting on a pole by the side of the road. A dark shape came towards me to push me off the road but a bolt of lightning struck the car, which spun back into the road, hitting a barrier.

This was what I remembered when I woke up. These were the images that filled my head.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

I had no idea how long I had been unconscious but there was a sense of it being a long time.

The old man came to check on me.

“You okay?” he asked me, helping me to sit next to the fire again. He brought me some bread to eat and tea to drink.

I told him what I remembered, a jumbled mess of confusing images.

“Now is time for catching fish,” he said, encouraging me. “Soon, will stop. You must catch as many fish as possible.”

He nodded and in the middle of telling a story, he suddenly held up his hand.

“No, not right.”

I was talking about the night my family was attacked. I was trying to describe the attacker.

“This about you,” he said, his eyes suddenly very clear. “Only you, not them.”

His words sort of made sense but I could not quite grasp it.

“And the accident?”

“Not your time,” he said, shaking his head.

“That was... why the crow was there?”

He nodded his head.

“Your work, not done.”

My work? What was he talking about?

She doesn't seem to get many answers from the old man.

When the sun slipped behind the mountains, Jack appeared and took me home.

Chapter 10

Jack

When I saw her I was taken aback. She was so pale and weak. She struggled to stand up straight. She needed supporting and I was about to demand to know what happened to her. Camila had warned me that the experience was grueling but I had not expected this.

The old man told me that her journey had been hard and that her soul was tired. She needed rest. I carefully led Kaya to the car.

She didn't talk at all on the way back. Her eyes were open but it was like she was in a trance.

The old man had warned me of this. He had told me to take her to bed. To keep her warm and feed her good food.

He said her memory would be particularly clear for the next 24 hours and that I

needed to get her to talk about it as much as possible, when she was ready.

But she was definitely not ready. Her pupils were wide and dilated.

We checked into the hotel where I had been staying the past three days. Fortunately, I'd thought ahead, booking a suite with a private elevator so that we would have privacy and comfort. The bathroom was spacious with a huge tub sunk into the ground. I drew a bath for her, made her go into the bathroom and told her to undress.

She nodded but it was like she was somewhere else. I feared she wouldn't come out of this trance.

After a few minutes, I heard the sound of water splashing and knew she had gotten into the water. I thought of the old man's words to me when I had come to fetch her.

He'd tapped the spot between his eyes and kept saying words I didn't understand.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

He struggled to find the right words.

“Special,” he finally said. “Her mother too.”

Then he said, “Sho’qa’i”.

“Some say, witch. Powerful female energy, ... can defeat darkness.”

I didn’t know what that meant.

The one thing I did realize was that there was something about Kaya and where she came from, her background. Everything that had happened to her, had been for a reason. The acts of violence, the accident even, nothing was coincidental. She was on some kind of mission, although she didn’t seem to know it yet.

After about an hour, I knocked on the door and asked if she was all right.

“You can come in,” she said in a quiet voice. I opened the door and found her sitting on the steps outside the bath, dressed in a robe.

“What can I get you to eat?” I asked. “The old man said you must eat.”

She waved her hand, dismissively. “Anything, whatever.”

I went to order room service and then went back to her, leading her to the bedroom and tucking her into an enormous four-poster bed. I wanted to get into bed with her, to put my arms around her but I didn’t want to scare her. It was clear to me that she

had not fully returned from her trance world.

“Can you talk about it yet?”

She nodded.

I sat down on the foot end of the bed.

“It wasn’t a vampire,” she said slowly. “That attacked my family? It was... a skin walker.”

“What?”

“It was... sudden... and vicious. Like a wild animal that jumped and ripped us apart. It didn’t want to eat us. It wanted to kill us. I saw this shape transform into a person, who walked away.”

“Someone walked away?”

She nodded. “He had changed into this... thing... to do this. But I had survived. I was not meant to survive.”

“How do you know?”

She appeared to be thinking. “I don’t know but I do somehow.”

I said, “The old man said you were sho’qa’i. Do you know what that means?”

She shook her head. “But I will find out.”

“Your parents don’t have family you know of?”

“They were estranged from their families. I don’t even know where we came from before the time in the wilderness.”

When the food arrived, Kaya tried to eat but she was weak. She took a few bites and fell asleep.

I lay on the bed next to her, thinking about what she’d told me.

When she woke up in the night, screaming, I took her into my arms and comforted her, stroking her hair and telling her everything was going to be all right.

“What do you mean?!” she called out, crying wildly. “Nothing is all right! I am remembering all these crazy things. I don’t even know what to do with all of it!” I kept stroking her hair until she fell asleep again.

When daylight came, I closed the curtains and checked in with Natania. I had a few emails to answer and to look into. I spoke to some of our teams around the country, checking in on various projects.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

Around mid-day, I looked in on Kaya. She was still asleep. She was clearly exhausted.

I decided to google the term sho'qa'i.

I found out that it was a native American word that meant different things in different tribes. It basically was someone who had supernatural powers or abilities. A witch. But also, a protector. Someone who was strong enough to stand up to evil forces.

It fitted with everything that Kaya had told me about herself. Except for her special abilities. I had no idea what these could be.

I wondered if the trauma that had befallen her as a child had somehow blocked this gift, put up a kind of wall.

My phone rang and I picked it up.

“Hey, stranger,” came Charlotte’s seductive voice. “Long time no hear?”

I thought we’d broken up and couldn’t figure out why she’d call me.

“I thought maybe you wanted to go away over the weekend?”

Before I could say anything, she interrupted, “I know we’re not together or anything but we can still have fun, right?”

She sounded flirty and upbeat but I detected the desperation behind the cheerful tone.

“I’ve met someone else, Charlotte, it’s over.”

When I put down the phone, Kaya was standing in the doorway, watching me.

“You’ve met someone else, have you?” she asked with a small smile, lifting one eyebrow. It was the first time that she seemed a bit more like her old self.

“Well,” I said. “Sort of, you know.”

She walked up to me, still dressed in her robe, her slim feet bare on the tiles

“And who might this mystery lady be?”

She sounded completely normal, well-rested and calm, but I had to be careful.

“I think you have an idea,” I said.

She was right in front of me, close enough for me to see the tiny mole on the swell of her breast as it disappeared into her robe. I was beginning to lose focus on the conversation, aware only of an incredible urge to slip that robe off her shoulder and kiss her.

But then she walked past me to get some grapes off a fruit platter on the table.

“Thank you for looking after me these past few days,” she said. “You really have been amazing.”

I gave an exaggerated shrug. “Anything to please the lady.”

“But you’re a busy man and I have been anything but nice to you,” she reminded me.

"You're worth it," I said to her, meaning every word. "You really are. I'd do anything to prove it."

The mood between us changed. The flirty vibe, the sexy talk, it all disappeared. She flopped down on the sofa and dropped her head in her hands.

"I'm a mess, Jack, you don't want to get involved with me."

I sat down next to her and put my arm around her shoulders.

"But I do, don't you get it? I don't care who you are or what happened to you. I want us to be together, to give this a shot. We'll figure it out along the way."

She looked up at me, tears swimming in her beautiful black eyes.

“We will?”

“Of course! Life is so messy; it is so fucked up. You never know what is coming your way. But there is something between us, something real, you can feel it too, right?”

She was kissing me then. Her soft mouth on mine. Those luscious lips seeking me out and her delicious tongue darting in and out of my mouth as my arms closed around her in an embrace that I did not want to leave. Ever.

Chapter 11

Kaya

I felt different, somehow. My head was clearer and it was as if a weight had been lifted off me.

I could hardly believe how well-behaved Jack had been, keeping his distance and never even trying anything with me. Even my usual paranoid self couldn't come up with a nefarious reason why he would do so much for me. If he had wanted to get his teeth into me, so to speak, he could have done that at any point over the past few days. He didn't have to go to all the trouble of setting up the meet with the medicine man or of taking time off to help me sort out my life.

There was no way around it. He had helped me more than anyone else had, ever before. He'd taken time out of his life to fly me across the country, put me up in a hotel and wiped my face when the night sweats came. In the hotel afterwards, he had been so sweet, so attentive.

I slept most of the way back and Jack dropped me at the house, asking me if I was up to coming over to his house later. He wanted to show me the castle, apparently. Words I never thought I'd hear, to be honest.

But I did want to see it. Or rather, see him.

Something had happened between us on this trip, a kind of connection that went beyond the physical attraction. I was beginning to think there was something between us, though I couldn't imagine what. After what I had been through, he was the only one I really could handle seeing and that had to mean something. I agreed to see him later that evening.

He dropped me off at Grandma Tina's house.

It was still early but I wanted to see Princess, to show her I was all right.

I knocked and went inside; the house was unlocked as usual.

Princess and Aunt Tina were in the kitchen. The radio was on and some pop music was playing. There was the usual smell of a proper fry-up breakfast and I smiled at the cozy scene. Princess looked up and saw me.

"You're back!" She jumped up and ran towards me, giving me a big hug.

Tina looked on from the table.

"You good?" she asked me, giving me a sharp look.

I nodded.

"You look tired," she said, almost accusingly.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you,” I said. “Can I come back for coffee after I’ve dropped Princess at school?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said, shrugging.

I took Princess to school and on my return, found that she had made breakfast. Again. Realizing that I was starving, I wolfed it down, thanking her. It was different to the hotel food, somehow. Home-cooked food, made with love and plenty of real butter.

Then I told her about the old man in the desert and the experiences I had out there. She listened attentively, not interrupting me once. When I got to the end of the tale, I took a big breath.

“I wanted to ask you, did Steph ever talk to you about me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did she tell you about my family, about what happened to me?”

Tina looked down. “She was worried about you, about what would become of you. She loved you, you know.”

I did know. Steph couldn’t have children of her own so when I came to stay with them, she lavished affection on me. After what I’d been through, she had helped to make me feel safe. But she had only wanted to talk of happy things. She never wanted reminders of my family or what had happened to me. When I did ask her about them, she was vague and I had learned to stop asking.

“Did she ever say anything about my parents? I knew so little of them.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

Tina looked at me before answering. I had the feeling she was considering whether to tell me the truth. I had never realized that she knew so much about me.

“Your mother was from a tribe up north. The Wak’aha’a. They kept to themselves, didn’t mix with others. When she fell in love with your father the tribe didn’t like it. He was an outsider and she ran away to marry him.”

“They didn’t want her to go. They went to fetch her one time, against her will and brought her back. After that, Tommy decided he was going to go into the mountains to hide her.”

She leaned closer to me. “She was sho’qa’i.”

There was that word again.

“What does that mean?”

“It is the one who protects the tribe. Their instinct to keep safe and to guard is strong. When the tribe is under attack, the sho’qa’i receive special powers from the ancestors to defeat the enemy.”

This was the first I’d heard of it.

“Steph thought that maybe, you had inherited your mother’s powers. That you were sho’qa’i too.”

I felt my pulse quicken.

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Small things. Things you said when you were asleep sometimes. The way you were so serious sometimes, so fierce. You were different from other children. I saw this when you came here too. My Pearl? Always going out, wanting to be with the boys? Not you!”

She laughed.

I knew what she meant; I had always felt a little apart from others my age.

“Why didn’t she talk to me about it?”

Tina shrugged. “She was afraid, I think. She hoped it wasn’t true, I think.”

She went on. “That is why she supported the sheriff’s idea for you to go into training to work for the State police. She didn’t want that life for you but she thought it would be good to get those skills in case you needed it.”

“I did like it,” I said.

The program had really suited me with the rigorous physical training, weapons instruction and hand-to-hand combat. I didn’t find any of it challenging. Others dropped out and gave up but I couldn’t get enough of it. I wanted more. When I was selected for the assassination special training, I couldn’t wait to get started. I wanted to get rid of enemies of the world, to punish all of those who had done wrong.

“Do you know if I have any family anywhere?”

Tina shook her head.

“I don’t know if Tommy had family. He was always a lone wolf but you could look up your mother’s people. I think there is a woman down by the supermarket, Tamara, I think? She once lived with the Wak’aha’a, and may be able to tell you more.”

I nodded.

“But, honey, you’ve got to be careful,” Tina said, taking my hand.

“All of this stuff, I worry it is going to make you ill again and pull you back into danger. You’re getting better now.”

I had a feeling she was trying to warn me off Jack. I knew she was looking out for me, though.

She was the closest thing I had to family now. The sheriff had had a heart attack a few years ago and there was nobody from my past. I could count my friends on one hand.

It wasn’t a great feeling.

That evening, I headed out to the castle.

I knew where it was and yet I was impressed by the large iron gates and manicured grounds. There was an intercom and I pressed the button announcing my arrival.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

The gates swung open and I drove up to the huge façade with the gravel driveway. It looked like something from TV. I expected butlers to come and greet me. Jack had told me about the castle, that it was old and grand, but I had not quite expected this level of grandeur. It looked like something out of a fairy tale, belonging to a king or a prince of a country. I wasn't exactly dressed for visiting a prince nor did I even have anything like that at home. Did I even own a dress? I had to think carefully.

I didn't like feeling uncertain of myself so I walked determinedly to the front door and knocked. After a while, a doorman of sorts came to look at me like I had found the wrong place by mistake. Like I was supposed to enter via the servant entrance.

"Yes?" he looked at me, very unfriendly.

"I'm here to see Mr. Beaufort," I said, rather amused. Was I really supposed to go through all this every time I wanted to see Jack?

"Just a minute, do you have an appointment?"

"Yes," I said with a laugh.

Then he closed the door in my face, leaving me outside.

I was stunned by his rudeness.

A moment later the door was opened again by a pretty young girl in a tight skirt and very high heels.

“May I help you?”

“I’m here to see Jack,” I said, less amused by the whole drama now. I wanted to go in and see the man, not talk to a million minions.

“Yes, only I don’t see you in his appointment book? What is your name?”

She had a kind of Filofax open and a pen, supposedly trying to find my name.

“He told me to come by tonight.”

“Did he now?” She gave me a sarcastic look, her perfectly plucked eyebrows shooting up over the green eyes.

“Yes, he did.”

She folded her arms and looked condescendingly at me.

“If I had to let every girl in here who claimed to have a date with Mr. Beaufort, he’d be overrun by groupies.”

“Oh, really?” I said to her. “Overrun by groupies, is it?”

Our conversation had deteriorated into some kind of stand-off.

“Would you just call him already? He will confirm our ‘appointment’.”

“I will not. He has other engagements tonight.”

“Does he? Really?”

I took out my phone and dialed his number.

Unfortunately for me, it just rang and then went to voicemail.

I gave her a long stare.

“Here’s how it’s going to go. You let me in, right now or I make you let me in. Which will it be?”

I saw a lot of fluttering of the eyelids, and I’d had enough. I moved quickly, pushing past her, grabbing her wrist but not twisting it.

“Hey!” she yelled out in shock but I was already inside.

Jack came down an elaborate staircase and beamed when he saw me.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“You’re here!” he came to kiss me on both cheeks.

I turned to face the green-eyed bitch and she gave me a cold stare back.

It wasn’t over, whatever it was.

Just great, I thought, as Jack started to give me a tour of the castle. Yet another enemy. Life was just a blast.

Chapter 12

Jack

“Who was that?” Kaya asked as soon as she came in.

“Oh, Natania? My assistant?”

“She wouldn’t let me in,” Kaya said, sounding pissed off.

“She’s just protective,” I said dismissively.

Kaya gave me a cool look. “She basically chased me away. She said you were mobbed by ‘groupies’ and refused to call you.”

I teased her. “Are you jealous? Of Natania?”

Not a good move with Kaya

She pulled a face.

“You know, I’m glad this amuses you but I don’t enjoy being treated like trailer park trash so make fun of me all you like, I’m going home.”

She turned around to leave, and I couldn’t believe how quickly she had again taken offense.

“Wait! Don’t go yet, I will have a word with Natania, it won’t happen again.”

She gave me a sarcastic look.

“Look, I’ve had some dinner prepared.”

“You don’t eat dinner.”

“But you do, come on.”

I led her into the dining room where the table had been set for a feast.

She stared at it, but in an impressed way.

“Look, I’m not dressed for this,” she finally said. “I mean, I don’t do fancy dinners. I am a pizza and beer girl.”

This was not going as I had planned at all.

Exasperated, I threw my arms in the air.

“All I wanted to do was to plan a nice evening for us,” I said.

The dining room table had been laid with lace tablecloths and flowers overflowing in vases. Candles lit up the room. I hadn't seen it like that in longer than I could remember. I'd asked the housekeeper to prepare a small dinner and they had overdone it. It wasn't who she was and it wasn't who I was either.

But then, just as I thought the evening was lost, Kaya gave me a strange look.

"I will tell you which room I am interested in," she said, winking at me. Her voice dropped. "How about you show me your bedroom?"

I almost couldn't believe my ears.

I held out my hand.

"Do I need to be led there?" she asked me, but her tone was playful.

"Oh, yes," I said. "The castle is huge. I don't want you getting lost."

I took her up the staircase and down the carpeted corridor, leading to the back of the house where my rooms were. I knew Simon was away, so I didn't worry about running into him. I had my own wing at the back of the castle, with its own entrance and receptions rooms. I had lived here for years, even before my father's death and even though I could have moved into the main castle now, I still preferred my rooms, which overlooked the lake and forest, and were more intimate.

I stopped outside my room and bowed deeply.

"M'lady," I said ceremoniously, opening the heavily carved door.

We entered my suite, which had been prepared for the evening with a cozy fire in the fireplace, which I didn't need for heat so much as atmosphere. The large bed with its ornate four-poster platform was enough to give anyone pause but Kaya took it all in her stride.

"So, where's your room?"

"Uh..." then I saw she was laughing and I took her in my arms and kissed her. I had

been waiting for this moment for so long, I couldn't bear to be teased any longer.

She drew back, laughing. "It's beautiful, the room. It really is."

I shrugged. "It's just stuff. Nothing compares to you."

She gave a small smile and kissed me again. I loved the feel of her in my arms, soft and compliant. After the bad start to the evening, the mood was completely restored. It was as if all of that unpleasantness was gone, like a foul smell cleared by clean air. Perhaps it was the trip to the medicine man, or maybe, hopefully, she really was warming to me.

My hands slid over her body, taking off the leather jacket and slipping into her jeans.

"Let's take it slow, this time," I said, my voice throaty.

She nodded and didn't speak.

I took off her top, unclasped her bra and took in the sight of her shapely breasts. Her nipples were small and a rosy pink, like pomegranates. I longed to put them in my mouth and suck them until they became hard. I touched her breasts and cradled them in my hands, my thumbs caressing and brushing over her nipples, feeling them tighten.

I kissed her neck and trailed my tongue down it as I felt her arch her back. She took off her jeans, kicking them away and stepped out of her underwear. I stepped away to look at her. I marveled at the strength of her body, the muscles underneath her skin. I could see the strength in her legs and her taut abdomen.

"You're so beautiful," I said in a breathy voice and she laughed, moving towards the bed, teasing me to follow her.

She lay on her back and I watched her for a moment, this flower of human beauty, lying on my bed, ready for the taking. I wanted to savor every moment. She spread her legs open, watching me the whole time, holding my gaze.

“Come here,” she said, slowly trailing her hands over her body. “I want you to come here.”

I lay down next to her, kissing her face gently, moving closer to her mouth. She waited for me, making no move to meet me halfway. When I reached her mouth, she responded quickly, her arms reaching up around my body, pulling me on top of her.

Her kisses were hot and hungry. I could feel her groin pushing against me, asking to be taken. I wanted to wait, make it last as long as possible. I took off my clothes and rubbed my erection against her skin. She moaned as I touched the tip of my cock against her stomach, pubic bone and inner thigh.

I loved the sound of her whimpering, wanting me.

I wanted to make it last as long as possible, to etch this moment in my mind.

I opened her legs wider and leaned in with my head, inhaling her warm, earthy scent, the musk of her, ready for me, a flower waiting to be picked. I kissed her inner thighs and felt her moving towards me, movements of desire and wanting. I licked and sucked and teased her, the inside of the flower, trembling with lust. I found her nub of pleasure and rolled my tongue over her. I heard her moans as she pushed herself into me, demanding more pleasure.

I drew away but her legs closed around my back, pulling me closer, refusing to let me go.

I straightened up, my cock painfully hard, wanting her, wanting to be inside of her.

Her legs drew me close, and I slid up over her skin, holding back before I entered her.

“Oh, God,” she moaned.

Her eyes were half-closed, her black hair spread out over the pillow. I drank in the sight of her like this, the beads of sweat on her skin, the heat that came off of her. Her hands clenched, grabbing the sheets as she fought the rising desire.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I held the tip of my cock against her, teasing her, feeling her warmth.

She let out a whimper of longing.

“Please,” she begged me. “Please, don’t wait, don’t wait!”

But I held back, loving the power over her body and her pleasure. There was a part of me that enjoyed this almost more than anything.

Then the moment became too powerful and I couldn’t hold back any more. I slid inside of her, the warm wetness of her engulfing me as I felt all control slip away. It was a fire of want and longing and I had waited so long for this, for her.

Our bodies became as one and an intense current of energy ran between us as our limbs rocked in synergy. She pulled me down, her tongue seeking mine, drawing me deeper into her being as the waves around us built higher and wilder, the heat intensifying.

Then she screamed. I had never heard anything like it. It seemed to pierce the air and shatter the night around us. I wouldn’t have been surprised to see glass shattering and mirrors breaking. It was a scream almost of agony, of a release so deep and white hot that there could be no mistaking its raw, primal source.

As the sound ripped from her, my body corresponded as if it was called to war, rearing up to meet the feverish pace of our blood, rising as one as the tide of ecstasy washed over us, annihilated us.

It was incredible.

I collapsed next to her, exhausted, completely spent.

When I looked at Kaya, her mouth was slightly open, she didn't appear to be breathing.

She blinked once, then again.

Turning to face me, a slow smile spread over her face.

"That was... amazing," she said. Then she winked at me. "How long before we can go again?"

Music to my ears.

Chapter 13

Kaya

I had never experienced anything like that night before.

After the first time, we had sex more times in the night.

Again.

And again.

Each time, I was blown away by the intensity of our sexual connection. The effect he had on me and the way we were together was unlike anything I'd felt before. It was the sort of thing you saw in movies or read about in books. The way a man was

supposed to understand your body and focus on the woman's pleasure. I had thought that was the stuff of stories.

At some point in the night, I became ravenous and asked Jack if he thought there was still some food left from dinner. I put on one of his shirts and we snuck through the castle like naughty children, giggling and whispering in the corridors, finding our way to the kitchen and the fridges, where there was loads of food put away.

I took out some fried chicken and roasted potatoes, what looked like a leg of lamb and creamed beans, as well as a chocolate dessert with whipped cream and cherries.

"Oh, my God!" I exclaimed, stuffing my face. "This is so good!"

Jack was smiling at me, his hair tousled and looking so handsome, so relaxed.

"Go for it," he said. "Watching you is good enough for me."

After a while, I asked him who all the food was for. As far as I knew, it was only him and his brother in the castle and neither of them had much use for food, did they?

He leaned against the kitchen counter and explained to me that there were a number of people not only working for the household and the business but living on the estate. The food would probably be distributed to them.

"It's not like we prepare this kind of feast every night, you know," he said with a wicked smile.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

Afterwards, he took me through the castle and gave me a quick history tour. At the large portraits of his family, he stopped and explained.

“That is my father.” A clever-looking man, with piercing blue eyes and a regal manner.

“He was the Duke of Saxonbury. He came here from Ireland in the 18th century. He made a fortune on the railroad and met my mother, a society lady in Boston. They got married and he brought her out here. He built the castle and I grew up here with my sister, Flora, and... Simon.”

The portrait of a Flora depicted a pretty young woman with lively eyes and a quick smile.

“I was very fond of her,” Jack said in a softer tone. I could hear the affection in his voice.

“This was my mother, Lady Anne,” he said, and we moved on to another portrait of a very attractive woman with large eyes, a generous mouth and a straight nose.

“Good looking family,” I said.

Jack probably left out a few details along the way in his family history. I understood that. We were getting to know each other, and he probably didn’t want to share stories of blood slaves and vicious killings right off the bat. He told me that when he became a vampire, he chose to live off animal blood, not liking the idea of killing humans to survive. It was the way back then until synthetic blood was created in the

19th century. He had to hunt down his food.

“You never drank human blood?”

He hesitated. “You come across it sometimes, it is available in many circles.”

I knew that was true. Not all of it was illegally come by, even though killing for blood had been outlawed. Some people donated their blood and sold it at high prices on the black market. There were stories of chemists who added drugs to the synthetic blood, to increase potency and its effect.

“You can taste the difference?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jack smiled, a bit sadly. “It’s almost like a drug for someone used to other sources. The pure blood vampires are stronger, they are more tolerant of the light and they can be more aggressive.”

He told me how his father had been at odds with the older vampire families because he liked humans and wanted to have good relationships with their communities.

“Many of our kind keep to themselves, seek others like us and look down on anyone else. Not my father. I grew up like that. In the 20th century, he wanted our business to be legitimate. This meant having a good reputation and winning people’s trust. We have always employed people to manage our affairs during the day, when we are unable to travel and interact freely.”

There were stories about dishonesty as well, as Jack admitted that when his father first came to the country, “things had happened”. He didn’t want to talk about it and said his father had mended his ways afterwards. Whatever that meant.

I had noticed that Jack did not go outside when the sun was high. But I’d known of

vampires who were able to do so.

Jack nodded. “There are blood cloaking products available. After the War, many hid their true nature as hatred and distrust was high. There are still many hunters out there, people like yourself, I might add.”

I knew he was right, but it wasn’t easy to hear. I had thought badly of vampires for a long time. I had never had an ounce of sympathy for them. But I was beginning to see that Jack might be different.

We went back to the room and I lay in his arms, enjoying the warmth of the fire and simply being with him.

“Our lives are very different,” I said to him. “In so many ways.”

“None that matter,” he said, kissing the top of my head.

I wondered if he was right. I could tell that he believed this, that he had given this plenty of thought. But I wondered how we could be together, someone like me who was not cultured and classy, and him, who had bells for servants and feasts prepared for dinner.

“We’ll figure it out,” he said. “Wouldn’t it be fun to try?”

I sat up in the bed suddenly, as I realized something for the first time.

“I’ve never had a relationship before!”

He laughed. “What? Never?”

I laughed too. “Not a real one!”

It was true.

There had been a few men scattered rather thinly in my life. I had not encouraged it either. During training, there was another recruit that I'd occasionally hooked up with. Jason was attractive, quiet and the best sniper of our group. He wasn't intimidated by me, didn't want to arm wrestle me the whole time. He was also not interested in date nights and family outings so it suited me. But he'd then gone off on assignment and I hadn't seen him again.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

After that, I sometimes went to bars, got drunk and found someone easy on the eyes, good for a few hours.

“I’m not good with what comes after,” I admitted. “Men want to see you again, they want you to answer texts, come out with them to football games, play games with their friends, meet their mothers.”

“I don’t want any of that,” Jack said, his eyes intense.

“What do you want?” I asked him, playfully, to lighten the mood.

“This,” he said, pulling me close. I could feel desire stirring in me again. I wondered how long this would last, this attraction we felt for each other. Surely, it would fade in time?

He kissed me, deeply, tenderly.

“All I want, is this, right now.”

I smiled. “But I’m not always like this either.”

“I will take what I can get,” he said, refusing to make light of the situation.

“I’ve been waiting for you for so long,” he said. “I don’t want to let you go.”

I couldn’t imagine being alive for centuries, having lived through different kinds of wars in a time before electricity and cars, when horses and carts were the only means

of transportation. When some people had no rights and were seen as slaves, where life was short and people who came in and out of your life were with you for a short time only.

I could tell Jack didn't like talking about his mother and sister, who had not changed like him. They had died, as human beings do, after a brief life though it sounded like it had been happy enough.

"Maybe, we just see how it goes," I said to him. "No expectations, no demands?"

I had a feeling he didn't quite like that but he nodded and agreed.

It seemed to me that moments like these were perfect. We spoiled them by trying to recreate them, trying to preserve and keep them, trying to pin them down like a dead insect in a glass box.

I may not have lived for centuries but I did know this, happy moments didn't come around often and you had to appreciate them or you missed out.

I didn't know what the future held for me and Jack Beaufort but I was willing to see where this would take us.

Whatever this was.

Chapter 14

Jack

I hadn't told Kaya everything about my family.

Of course not.

I didn't tell her that Simon had come with my father from Europe and was not my real brother. He was related to my father, a strange relationship that went back many centuries. But Simon looked young and it made sense to call him my brother. He'd come out with my father and they had been slave traders. They made a fortune supplying workers from Africa to the American cotton plantations. During a brief stay in Boston my father met my mother, a society lady and daughter of a prominent local physician. She agreed to marry my father on the condition that he gave up slave trading and drinking human blood. It was not an easy decision but he loved her and agreed to her terms.

He sold his stake in the slave ships, opened a hotel and then another. He built Clover Castle to remember his Irish roots. Simon was meant to help him with the business but secretly continued the slave trade, even keeping blood slaves in a dungeon at the castle. When this came out there was a huge scandal and my mother briefly left my father. Simon was banned to France.

In time he wheedled his way back. During the wars he came to fight alongside my father and after my mother's death he moved back into the castle. My father reinstated him in the business even though he clearly had no interest in anything but power.

But my father would not turn his back on him. Even when he saw how Simon tried to undermine me as I rose in the company. When my father fell ill after consuming a contaminated blood product, I was convinced Simon had something to do with it but there was no proof.

There had been several attempts on my life and my suspicions had grown over the years. At Simon's wedding to Ulrika, a member of a wealthy Scandinavian aristocratic family, I was attacked by a vicious monster on my way back to my room. I had been badly injured. It came shortly after I had convinced my father to demote Simon to a less visible role in the business. He was still on the board. But in these

modern times it was important that the company had the right look and came across as family friendly, honest and decent.

Simon was everything but.

I knew he was still consuming real blood and combined with his age, it made him a powerful and dangerous enemy. I had always known I would have to get rid of him, sooner or later.

At my father's funeral, he tried to take over proceedings. He made a speech in which he announced he was taking over the company. I had to mobilize the board to have him removed, pushing him out as much as possible, even though he still had a role in the business.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

Marcello convinced me to keep him in the business. He said Simon was too powerful and I needed to keep him close, to keep an eye on him. I allowed him quarters in the castle but he didn't come often.

He was in charge of the entertainment part of the business, as well as some night clubs in a seedier part of the Topaz Group portfolio. I would have liked to dump our shares but it was a source of not inconsiderable revenue and it kept him occupied.

I appointed Zoran, not only as my driver but a guard and strongman. He came from Eastern Europe, a survivor of many wars and battles. He was loyal to me and completely reliable.

It was Zoran who warned me that Simon was back in Hawston.

He had his own plane and had apparently flown in from Vlätnavaaarn earlier in the week.

This was bad.

I didn't like having him around when Kaya was at the castle.

I had extra security appointed on the castle grounds and would have liked to have someone look after Kaya too. But her senses were too acute, she would have picked up on that and I knew she wouldn't like it. I was beginning to know her better and realized she would find it patronizing.

But Simon was more than she could handle. I was sure of that.

Now that things were beginning to happen between us, I wanted everything to be perfect or as close to perfect as possible. Kaya trusted me and she believed my family was above board. I had no doubt she would find out about Simon sooner or later but I wanted to prolong their meeting as long as possible.

I did not trust him at all.

I was right not to, as I soon found out.

A few evenings later, I heard voices outside.

I was in the former stables, a space we now used as storage space. Simon was talking to someone on the phone.

Something about his tone of voice caught my attention.

I could tell he was talking to a woman, and not his wife.

“You shouldn’t worry your pretty little head about this, my dear,” he said in cajoling tones. “I assure you; I have everything under control.”

I wondered what he was talking about.

I had a bad feeling.

My so-called brother was always plotting and scheming.

“Charlotte, darling, be patient. It won’t last. It can’t.”

Charlotte?

And what wouldn't last?

What was he talking about?

I could not believe my ears. Why was he talking to Charlotte, my ex-girlfriend? I had not had contact with her in weeks, had not spoken to her since the phone call in the desert.

I tried to imagine if they had ever even met. I couldn't recall a time when Charlotte and Simon would have been in the same room.

Simon ended the call and I went to look for Zoran, taking him outside for privacy. I asked him if he knew of any reason why Simon and Charlotte would be talking to each other like this.

"The other day, he took her to the airport, after you left."

"When?"

It turned out that when she had come to visit me unannounced, right after I had met Kaya, Simon had offered to look after her because I had apparently abandoned her, her words. They had gone to the resort she had wanted to go to with me. They had spent the weekend together.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“The two of them?” I frowned. I couldn’t quite picture it. Even though I had no feelings for Charlotte, I felt betrayed by her spending time with Simon. She knew I didn’t like him, that we didn’t get on. Why would she seek him out?

It was likely, of course, that he had used his charms on her, that he had been trying to use her. That made sense. Now she was calling him, I didn’t like that at all.

“There is another thing,” Zoran said.

“He has been opening clubs in New York.”

“How?” I demanded to know, exasperated. He knew about the family ban and I would have thought he wouldn’t get licenses.

“I think he has made a deal with the mayor,” said Zoran.

“Who is it now?” I asked. It was sometimes hard to keep up with all the new appointments. The mayors came and went so quickly.

“A Mexican, I think,” said Zoran.

“Vargas?” The name came to me somehow.

“Could be,” Zoran said.

“I need more information,” I said curtly.

I had waited a long time for evidence of his wrongdoing and this phone call was a sign he was plotting against me.

I was sure that he had meant Kaya and my relationship with her. Why wouldn't it last? What was he planning?

I felt a terrible fury building up in me. I wouldn't allow him to interfere in my happiness. Simon needed to leave right away. I had to get him as far away from Kaya as possible.

She needed to be protected.

I had to keep her safe.

We were seeing each other now, taking it slowly, spending time a few nights a week but I couldn't get enough of her. Making love was electrifying, every time. I couldn't get enough of her body. Our relationship was still very much physical but it was more than that and she was beginning to see it, I was sure of it. I was winning her over, slowly but surely.

I wanted her with me at the castle, to marry her and for us to be together as long as possible.

We were meant to be together. I was sure of it and I was convinced she would see it too, eventually.

But I would have to deal with Simon first.

Chapter 15

Kaya

When I arrived at the auto shop, I found Fuzz and Roberto in the workshop.

“What’s up, guys?” I asked, because something was clearly going on. They were both smirking like teenage boys and I wanted in on the joke.

Fuzz nodded in the direction of the street, where a young woman in a tiny skirt and ridiculously high heels was heading towards the auto shop.

“We were just watching her trying to park,” grinned Roberto. “It was hilarious!” He moved forward, “I take first dibs!”

“No,” I said sternly, “I’ll handle this.”

Miss Prom Queen came in, looking flustered and upset, complaining of her car making a “funny sound”. She tried to copy the whining sound, making all kinds of noises that did sound rather funny.

“I’ll bring it in, shall I?” Roberto offered, taking the keys and driving the car into the workshop.

While Fuzz took the young woman’s details, I established that it was part of the car’s exhaust that had come loose.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“I’ll fix it for you,” I said. “It should be done by the end of the day.”

“Thanks so much,” she gushed. “Madison said you were the best! I thought she was joking about there being a girl mechanic in town!”

“Nope, no joke,” I said.

We watched her sashaying out of the workshop, all smiles and giggles.

“Oh, you’re so pretty, are you really a mechanic?” teased Roberto, batting his eye lashes. I gave him a dirty look and Fuzz told him to get a move on with unloading some new car parts. He went to the front of the shop while I put Miss Prom Queen’s car on the lift and took a closer look at the exhaust system. I had barely started working, when I felt a shiver down my spine. I turned around, instinctively and noticed someone walking into the workshop.

I immediately realized that I was alone and that this was a bad thing. The man’s gait was slow and measured but there was something threatening about him. I felt it right away.

“Can I help you?” I asked, taking a rag to wipe my hands as I turned to meet him.

“I do believe you can,” he said, smiling at me. He was tall and thin, with icy blue eyes and an almost reptilian air about him. I had an urge to run as far as possible, as quickly as possible.

“I’ve heard so much about you and I’ve wanted to meet you for some time but my

brother keeps hiding you away. I can see why, of course, you are absolutely gorgeous!" his smile widened and I couldn't help but think of a snake, hissing at me, baring its fangs.

"You must be Simon, pleased to meet you," I said, but I didn't go any closer.

"The pleasure is all mine," he said, his voice seductive. "Unfortunately, I have been called out of town on some business but when I get back we must do dinner or something. With Jack, of course," he said after missing a beat.

I nodded, mumbling something about how that would be nice.

He nodded courteously at me, turned around and left.

I noticed that the sun was quite high and wondered how he was able to walk around without consequence. The malevolence that was coming off him was unmistakable. He meant me harm; I was convinced of it. Was this the reason why Jack always seemed to invite me over to the castle when his brother was out?

He had convinced me that his family was clean and the business was legal. I had no reason not to believe him. The family name was known in town and he was well-liked generally, but his brother was something else entirely.

My gut feeling was something I trusted instinctively and I knew I needed to watch my step. Simon's dropping in was not a friendly visit, it had been a warning of sorts. I wanted to speak to Jack about it but I knew he was away on a business trip; it would have to wait.

In the meantime, I would get my weapons out of the bag in the back of the closet, where I had shoved it out of sight after quitting my job. I'd started this job, wanting a quiet life, trying to start over. I had a feeling that now that Simon knew where I

worked, I would not be rid of him quickly. He did not look like the type who would let go easily. It was as if he had my scent in his nostrils now.

I finished up work as quickly as I could, knocking off early. I had been meaning to go to the supermarket to look for that woman who used to be in my mother's tribe but I'd been too distracted with work and my new relationship with Jack. I was surprised by how well it was going; how easy it was to be together. I still didn't know what to make of it but I was enjoying being with him. On nights when Princess was with me, he'd come over and help me tidy up the house, even helping her with homework. I watched them carefully but there was never anything to raise my suspicion. The girl appeared to be comfortable around him and he seemed to really like her. I felt more relaxed and couldn't say if it was because of all the sex I was having or because of the experience in the desert but I was feeling less angry, that much was true.

When I reached the supermarket, I asked for Tamara and was told it was her day off. "She lives over there," the girl behind the cash register offered, pointing across the road to an apartment above a clothing store.

I walked over, found the stairs and walked up to a door, knocking on it.

A heavyset woman in her fifties opened the door.

"Yes?"

"Are you Tamara?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm Kaya Lee, my mother was..." before I could continue, the woman opened the door wide and threw her arms around me.

“Monica!” she finished my sentence. “Your mother was Monica and your father was Tommy Lee! My God, you look just like her, come in! Come in!” The earlier hostility was gone and now she was falling over her feet to find me a place to sit. Her apartment was awry and could’ve used a good cleaning.

“I’m sorry about the mess,” she said with a shrug. “It’s my day off...” I saw the half-full bottle of whiskey and I could guess what she did all day. “How did you find me?”

I explained to her that I was trying to find out more about my family; that Tina had told me about her.

Tamara looked at me shrewdly. “I’m guessing there would be a reason for that. Tina is usually tight-lipped.”

I nodded and told her a brief overview of my history and the time I’d spent in the desert. How I was beginning to remember things and wished I knew more about my family.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“It is a sad story,” Tamara said, offering me whiskey and fetching me a glass.

“Monica was my friend,” she finally said. “I knew the day she met Tommy at that horse fair that I’d lost her. They’d fallen instantly in love. Nothing would keep them apart but the tribe didn’t want her to go.”

“Why?” Tamara shook her head but didn’t answer.

“Is it because she was sho’qa’i?”

“She was supposed to protect the tribe,” Tamara said, her voice urgent. “She knew that, but Tommy wanted her to leave, so she left.”

“Why did she have to protect the tribe?”

Tamara sighed and shook her head. “The Wak’aha’a kept horses and goats but our main work was mining the occillite.”

I had heard of occillite. It was a kind of mineral found in a specific mountainous area. When forged and mixed with steel, weapons of great strength and power could be crafted. I had learned about it during training. It killed the most savage beast, including the uber vampires; the oldest and most powerful creatures known to exist. The occillite rapier was one of the most expensive and rare weapons on earth and I had only seen one once.

“It was secret work, understand? We didn’t talk about it,” said Tamara. “We made blades, knives, that sort of thing and once every couple of months, someone would

come to the city to sell them.”

“Who bought them?”

“There were special traders, weapons people, I don’t know who. We had to keep the work secret from the vampires who were always looking to destroy the mines.”

Tamara said, “After your mother left, we kept going for a while. There was a woman who was said to have some gifts. She was supposed to cast a spell of protection on us but it didn’t work.”

Tamara told me that some years after my mother left, she had accompanied the man taking a load of the occillite to town. When they returned some days later, the entire tribe was gone. Where their community had been, there was a huge mound of earth, like a rockslide. They had searched the ground, digging in the soil, but it was like the Wak’aha’a had disappeared without a trace. Their huts, their paddocks, even their animals, had all gone without a trace.

“We left as soon as we could. I came here because I had some friends here. They helped find a job for me.”

“And the man?”

“He’s gone, I don’t know where.” I had a feeling she was lying.

“What was his name?”

She looked at me. “Why do you want to know?”

I told her how my family was attacked, and my mother was killed. She had tears in her eyes when I told her how I had survived for days surrounded by dead family

members. Then, later, how I almost died again and how I feared I was in danger again.

She nodded slowly. “You have the mark on you.”

She got up, signaling that our visit was at an end. “I will ask around, and I will let you know but you must be careful.”

“But things are quiet now?” I meant after the Wars, there was no more conflict; no bloody battles between vampires and humans.

Tamara shook her head. “Evil is everywhere,” her voice was barely louder than a whisper. “It hides in the dark and moves when no one sees. Don’t draw attention or make a noise. If they see you, they will pounce.”

I didn’t know what she was talking about.

Even though she sounded irrational and was probably drunk, I had a feeling she was not delusional.

She knew something and she was afraid.

Chapter 16

Jack

Perhaps I had been too distracted.

Kaya and I had started spending time together, some nights at the Castle when I knew Simon was away but also at her place. I wanted her to see that I didn’t mind the child, that I could make myself useful. Not that I was particularly fond of the child but she

was sensible and quiet and this I could handle.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I found myself enjoying our evenings of explaining basic mathematics or literature to her. Perhaps this is what it would be like to have children, I mused, thoughts I hadn't had in a long time.

There were a few calls from the office, which I ignored.

I thought I'd pick them up later or call back but then I didn't.

Natania wanted to schedule catch-up meetings but I kept coming up with excuses. I was enjoying my new romance with Kaya and after so many years of solitude and loneliness, I thought I deserved it but it came at a price.

When I arrived at the castle early one morning, Natania was waiting for me, anxiously rushing to my car as I arrived.

"Why haven't you been answering my calls?" she demanded to know.

"I've been busy," I replied haughtily.

"Meantime, everything has been going to shit!"

I rolled my eyes. "Must you be so dramatic?"

She pursed her lips and I realized that she was trying to control her temper.

"You have to call Max van Patten," she said. He was the daytime head of the Topaz Group. "He called me because he couldn't get hold of you."

I had left my phone at the castle days ago, annoyed by all the pinging of messages and notifications of the Dow and share prices. Who cared about all of that when Kaya was willing to let me kiss her where and when I wanted to?

But I had let things go too far. It turned out that my enemies were plotting against me in my absence.

The board meeting, which was due to be held in Austin later that day, was to review a motion to have me removed as CEO. The board members had been sent an email that I had allegedly sent to one of our biggest recruitment agencies, in which I cancelled all the contracts of the shift workers at our hotels. Thousands of people had been sacked because I supposedly was unwilling to pay the expected and negotiated fair pay increase.

I called Max and told him the email had not come from me.

“But it was sent from your account!”

“I must have been hacked. I will sort it out.”

However, it was easier said than done. The message had been leaked to all our hotels and resorts and it was chaos. I had to talk to all of the hotel managers and assure the head of the recruitment agency that the email was not true and that the pay increase would be honored. The staff were only placated when I agreed to pay a bonus to all of the shift workers.

This bonus was not part of our budget and I knew the board members would not like it as it cut significantly into our financial projections for the quarter.

I called Marcello, the board chairman and his tone was cold.

“What the fuck, Jack? Is it true, have you let a bit of pussy lead you astray like this?”

I had to take a deep breath to calm down. I couldn't let him get to me.

“It's a cheap trick, Marcello, and I've sorted it out,” I assured him.

“And where are the funds for these bonuses coming from?”

I told him I was willing to put up my salary for a few months to pay for it.

“Are you insane?” he asked, incredulous.

I had other income, that he didn't have to know about and I had decided to put up some of my cars for sale but I knew it was important to make this show of sacrifice to get us through this crisis and convince the board of my commitment to the company.

I was also going to find out who had done this. Although, I had a bloody good idea.

“Let me worry about the details,” I told him. “Do you think this will keep the board on my side?”

“I think so, yes.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

For a brief moment, I wondered if Marcello was behind all of this or working with whoever was behind the email that had almost sunk me.

“It would help if we could find the culprit,” he said.

I was already on it.

An IT specialist was able to tell me that the email had been sent from my home laptop the night before, at exactly the time that I was at Kaya’s house, googling romantic getaway destinations while she slept for a few hours.

I interrogated our security team and Simon was at the castle at that time. I asked for a full list of everyone at the house at that time. By the time I was ready to leave for the flight to the board meeting, I knew who it was.

As the car stopped outside the private jet, I turned to Natania.

“Didn’t take a lot for you to betray me?” I said coldly.

She didn’t try to deny it, tears spilled down her cheeks.

“I had no choice! They kidnapped my parents and threatened to kill them unless I did as they say!”

“Who did?”

Natania shook her head. “It was a woman, that’s all I know. She said she would give

me half a million dollars if I forwarded the mail.”

“Even though you knew it would ruin me?”

She was crying uncontrollably now. “I didn’t know what else to do! They sent me pictures of my father, all beaten up. They’d cut off one of his fingers!”

She grabbed my arm, “I knew you would be all right, you always are!”

I shook off her hold on my arm.

“You’re fired,” I said, looking away. “Get out.”

Zoran looked in the rearview mirror.

“You want me to take care of her?”

I shook my head. I had known Natania for too long. She had been blackmailed into her actions and as much as it pained me to say it, she was right. I would be all right. But I needed to know who was pulling the strings.

“Trace that money,” I told Zoran.

“By the time I walk into the board meeting, I want to know exactly who is behind all of this.”

“One more thing,” Zoran said and told me about Simon dropping by Kaya’s workplace that morning.

I had organized a work crisis to get him out of town temporarily. But the fact that he stopped by the workshop was worrying. He must have known that I would find out

about the visit.

I got onto the plane with a heavy heart.

I called Kaya's phone and was relieved when she picked up.

"I heard Simon came to the workshop today?" I said.

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yes, but... how did you know he was here?"

I had to come clean. "I had someone watching the shop, just to make sure you're safe. I didn't want to tell you but I was worried."

“Why?”

I didn’t know how to tell her my fears about Simon. But she knew what was happening at work, that I was in trouble at work.

“Simon is not just another vampire, is he?” she asked.

I had to tell her something.

“No, and he’s not my brother either. I guess the closest he would be as a relative is an uncle.”

She described his visit and his words. “It felt threatening,” she said. “I’m not the kind of person who scares easily but I felt a little something.”

“Won’t you come with me to Austin? I can have you flown in later?” I said quickly. “Get out of town for a day or two? I’ll book us a nice hotel?”

“No,” she said. “I have to look after Princess. Tina has a medical procedure, and she can’t mind her tonight.” She went on, “I’ll be fine, Jack, he’s left town now, hasn’t he?”

But I knew it wasn’t beyond Simon to get someone else to do his dirty work for him. I was convinced that was what was going on with Natania.

“I’m going to ask Zoran to stay outside your house tonight.”

“That’s really not necessary,” she said, a note of annoyance creeping into her voice now.

“Then do it for Princess, not for yourself,” I said.

“Oh, that’s clever,” she said, laughing. “All right, for Princess but be careful in Austin.”

I loved the fact that she sounded worried about me. This was a big step in the right direction for us, making me feel like we may have a future after all.

It also gave me the confidence I needed to be ruthless.

Chapter 17

Kaya

I dreamed of the white crows again that night.

The next morning, I stopped by the supermarket and waited for an opportunity to speak to Tamara.

“I need to get my hands on some occillite,” I said in a low voice, leaning over to ensure that only she heard. The store was empty but you never knew. “I have an uber vampire threatening me and my weapons aren’t going to be enough!”

Tamara’s eyes widened.

“If you really don’t know where that guy is who came back with you, you’ve got to help me get in touch with someone who has the stuff!”

Tamara bit her lip, then nodded.

“Okay, I’ll see what I can do.”

I couldn’t shake my nervousness all day.

I had the feeling the crows had been sent to warn me and I kept looking over my shoulder, checking behind me, jumpy as all getout. For the first time in weeks, I thought of the medicine man’s words; the ones that had confused me so. About me having a mission and having work to do. What was he talking about? I knew it meant something but not what it could be.

In the late afternoon, Jack called me, triumphant.

“I did it!” he said.

He had managed to win over the board. He was able to show how one of the board members, Dominique Le Bruin, had conspired with Natania to hack into his email and frame him. Le Bruin had not shown up for the board meeting and was later found in her bathtub, drowned. In a suicide note found at herhouse, she apologized for the hack, saying that she’d made a mistake and couldn’t face up to it.

“I don’t think she acted alone, though,” he mused. “She wasn’t the sort of person to have come up with this by herself. I can’t see the motive. I need to dig deeper.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

But for now, the board was satisfied that he had fixed the error and was able to make up for his lapse in attention.

“One of the other board members had a go at me, saying that I had missed a few things at work, hinting at me being distracted.”

“Bastard,” I said, as the dig was aimed at me too.

Jack laughed. “I think Natania was hiding other things from me too. I thought it had been quiet! Meanwhile, there was a scandal at one of our Italian branches that was lighting up on social media.”

“We have to be more careful,” I said, and Jack told me not to worry. He was going to appoint a new daytime CEO as well. He felt Max should’ve taken care of the problems.

“I’m going to spend another day or so out here, then we are going away for the weekend, what do you think?”

“Away?” I wasn’t sure about that.

“Can Princess stay with Tina for one night? I want to take you to a restaurant in Martha’s Vineyard. We’ll fly in for the weekend.”

“Fly in for the weekend?” It sounded a bit much to me. “You don’t even eat in restaurants.”

“I like to go places with you, see you happy,” he said. “Besides, they have a delicious clam linguini at a place I’d love to have you try.”

I didn’t feel like going away but the town was beginning to feel a bit claustrophobic to me. I kept jumping at the smallest sound and movements from the corners of my eye. I used to have nerves of steel when I was still in the business of hunting down criminals. I was never like this. I didn’t like the change that had come over me.

Then again, I’d never had an uber vampire like Simon threatening me.

I took out my weapons one night, inspected them and cleaned them. I strapped on my knives because they made me feel better. Safer.

I went by Tina’s house to ask if she could look after Princess so that we could go away for the weekend.

“You’re going with him?” she asked me, raising an eyebrow.

There was no mistaking who she meant.

“Yeah,” I rolled my eyes.

“I don’t like him,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

“He’s nice, grandma!” Princess chimed up. “He helps me with my homework and everything!”

“Uh-huh,” she said, clearly not impressed.

To change the topic, I asked her about the War and what she remembered about it.

“That was bad,” she said, shaking her head. “We were all living in our basements, never coming out. The men were off to war, most of them dying,” she shook her head. “Bad, bad, bad.”

She said it had lasted for many years and human beings had been suffering the most casualties. The supernaturals were gaining the upper hand and humans had started building tunnels and bunkers underground, preparing for a life away from the outside world. Then they heard the news that a bomb had been dropped on a vampire stronghold near the far northern lands. It destroyed an entire mountain range and caused huge landslides and tsunamis, which rained damage across Northern Europe. There was fall-out from radiation as well as well secondary damage that almost meant an end to all life on earth. It had permanently damaged the earth and many ecosystems but it had turned the balance in favor of the humans.

“Most of us were living underground anyway at the time so it didn’t matter that the air was toxic. We had our masks and we could sit it out.”

Eventually, the poisonous clouds lifted and the air was clear to breathe again. Most of the survivors were human. The vampire population had suffered the biggest losses, as did the shifters and some of the other creatures not able to seek shelter fast enough.

As victors, the humans were able to set the terms of the peace treaty, according to which human beings would occupy positions of power and authority in the Free World and killing creatures, human or otherwise, was unlawful.

“We all came out of our bunkers,” remembered Tina. “Many of us had never seen mountains or trees or rivers. We couldn’t believe the threat was over.”

Some never did, I thought.

“For many years, we had all kinds of natural disasters, related to that bomb.

Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, whole islands flooded by tsunamis.”

She shook her head.

“But that was the price we paid for life.”

Jack had told me his family had not been fighting on behalf of the older vampires who had been wiped out by the bomb blast. They had been in favor of peace negotiations, and his father had been in France at the time, one of the representatives of the more liberal branch of vampires. But there were many left who didn't agree with the new world order, he told me. Of the older families, many had elected not to fight in the war, sitting it out in private enclaves across the world.

These were the dangerous families, who were loyal to no-one but themselves and would kill their own kin if it suited their purposes.

Like Simon, I thought, thinking again of his serpentine eyes, glittering with evil as he smiled at me.

But then Jack came back, all eager to go away for the weekend.

I'd never been to Martha's Vineyard, not to mention, a ride on a private jet plane.

Even though I wasn't one for dressing up or indulging in luxuries, I allowed myself to be picked up in the limousine. Jack was in high spirits, clearly enjoying himself. We hadn't seen each other in a few days and I liked seeing him again.

“I've missed you,” he said, his voice husky.

“I know,” I said, winking at him and he pretended to grab and tickle me. We were in good spirits all the way there, where a car waited to pick us up from the airport and

take us to a huge mansion on the edge of the ocean.

“This is yours?” I asked, my mouth hanging open. It was a palace and much nicer than his castle, actually. Clover Castle was all stone and dark corridors, where this house was light and airy, inviting the sun and sea air into every room.

“It belonged to my mother’s family,” Jack said. “I bought it from them and fixed it up. I haven’t had much time to come here or anyone to come with me, to be honest.”

He pulled me close and as he kissed me, I felt my fears melt away. There was something about being in his arms. I felt safe with him, even though I would never have told him that. For the first time in my life, I was with someone who was probably stronger than me. A real match for me.

That evening, a car took us to a romantic restaurant on the pier of one of the scenic coastal villages. The maître d’ took us to the best table in the room, with a view over the ocean. It was breathtaking. I had never been in a restaurant like this, never had anyone want to take me anywhere special like this before.

I had a dress on for the occasion, which was unusual for me, and high heels that I could barely walk in. But the look on Jack’s face when he saw me, more than made up for it.

It was only for a few hours anyway.

It would have been the perfect evening. It could have been.

But then something happened that I should have been prepared for, something that almost cost me my life. We were waiting for dessert, when I saw a movement from the corner of my eye.

“What is it?” Jack asked, noticing my behavior.

I got up to take a look, I thought I had seen something suspicious. Jack followed me to the front of the restaurant and just as I stepped outside, seeing someone running away; a huge blast ripped through the restaurant, shattering the entire structure. The impact threw me across the pier and the last thing I remembered seeing, was a white crow, circling overhead.

Chapter 18

Jack

The explosion flattened the restaurant, killing six people and injuring twenty-four. Almost everyone at the restaurant suffered some kind of injury. Kaya and I had been outside when the blast happened, but the impact had caused her to hit her head against the pier. She was taken to the hospital with most of the injured and after some wrangling with the local doctors, I had her flown to Hawston.

Even though her head injury was not deemed severe, she was given sedatives to allow doctors to evaluate the situation once the swelling had gone down. The fear was that some of her old injuries could have been aggravated.

I had not known the extent of how badly she’d been injured before.

I was wracked with guilt, seeing her lying in the hospital.

She had been jumpy all weekend, not really wanting to go away, as if she’d known something might happen. I’d been trying to get her to forget about everything, as if our romance was more important than anything.

The last thing she’d said had been to draw my attention to a suspicious movement

outside. She'd gone to investigate and I followed her. I was annoyed by the interruption, it felt to me like she wouldn't, or couldn't simply relax and enjoy the evening.

Now, it seemed she had been right to be concerned.

I summoned every member of the castle security team and told them to find out who was behind that blast. Initial reports indicated a gas explosion but it was not accidental.

I sent two men to Martha's Vineyard to follow the police and try to find out more information from there. I told Zoran to watch over Kaya in hospital but discreetly.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I'd already been told in no uncertain terms that I was not welcome there.

Kaya's friends blamed me for her getting hurt and I understood. I also blamed myself.

I went to tell them about the explosion the night she was admitted to our local hospital.

"How come she's hurt and you're not?" the grandmother asked me, suspiciously.

I had fractured my arm and had scratches on my face but these were of course minor compared to what Kaya was going through.

"She knew something was coming," Tina said. "The last couple of days she's been restless and agitated. Didn't sleep."

She glared at me. "This is your fault!"

Even Princess turned away from me.

"Don't you dare show up at that hospital," Tina warned me. "I don't want to see you anywhere near Kaya, ever again! Filthy blood sucker!"

I left, angrier than I had ever been before.

I had to know who was behind this!

My first suspect was Simon but I was quickly informed that he had been traveling to

Hamburg to attend some party. He could've ordered the whole thing though; I was not convinced he wasn't behind it.

The pilot of the private jet told me that he had received a call a few hours before take-off from someone wanting to know if the plane had a destination yet. After he gave the caller the details the person had simply put the phone down.

We tried to trace the call to the airplane but it was a dead end. It was a burner phone, and all that this told me, was that the whole thing was planned.

When I tried to visit Kaya that evening, a big man blocked my way.

"You are not welcome," he said to me, in a very hostile and aggressive tone of voice.

I recognized him from the auto shop. It was the owner, Fuzz.

"I just want to see if she's all right," I said, trying to look past him.

Kaya was still lying with her eyes closed. When I'd called the hospital earlier, I'd been told her condition was unchanged.

"Man, you just never learn, do you?" He gave my chest a hard shove, forcing me to take a few steps back.

Take it easy, I told myself, the man is upset. I didn't want to lash out at him.

"You motherfuckers think you own the world, ain't that right? Death follows you every fuckin' where you go and you just don't give a shit, do you?! Why would you, dead asshole that you are! But Kaya wasn't that lucky, was she?!"

I bit my tongue.

“When she wakes up, tell her...”

He interrupted me, “I’m tellin’ her your fucked up ass isn’t coming near her ever again, if I have anything to do with it. Now get out!”

I didn’t want to fight him. He cared about her and was concerned for her.

I retreated, checking on Zoran who was sitting at the entrance of the ward, pretending to be visiting another patient.

“I’ve been watching her,” he said. “Only friends coming to visit, don’t worry.”

But I did worry. I didn’t know if she had been the target of the gas explosion or if it had been me. Perhaps it was both of us.

I knew it wasn’t a good time to take time off work, especially considering the problems I’d been having recently but I couldn’t think of anything else now. I called Max and told him he had to step up and make sure nothing like that happened again. I needed to be able to rely on him. I had not fired him after all and this was his chance to show me his loyalty.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“You can rely on me,” he assured me. He told me of some tensions on the board following Dominique’s death and how he’d been looking into the whole hacking situation.

“Did you find out anything new?” I wanted to know.

“Not as such... but I have to say, Mr. Montenegro has been acting strangely.”

I knew Max didn’t like to gossip and speculate. If he was bringing this to me, he must have serious concerns.”

“In Austin, after the board meeting, I overheard him talking to someone on the phone, discussing a meeting. When I asked him about it afterwards, he denied it.” He paused, “But I checked his calendar, he had changed his flight to go to New York that night.”

“How were you able to access his schedule?”

Max sounded uncomfortable. “I pulled some strings. His assistant... owes me a favor.”

“Well done!” I approved of such renegade actions of course. I realized that Max felt guilty about the whole hacking drama, he must have known I was thinking of replacing him. Perhaps this would incentivize him to work harder for me. In which case, the whole situation could be turned to my advantage.

He went on, “I’ve been trying to figure out what his interest might be in New York. Considering that our business is prohibited from operating there, it doesn’t make

much sense. But as you know, the entertainment sector of our business has somehow been given licenses to operate.”

“How?”

Max hesitated, “He has some understanding with the city. Mayor Frank Vargas has a lot of power there.”

“Enough to sway the old families?” I couldn’t quite see it.

“Perhaps Mr. Montenegro was helping him, somehow?” he said.

“It seems both he and Mr. Beaufort are able to travel and do business in New York. I have also heard that Mrs. Ulrika Beaufort was at a party on 5th Avenue.”

“Keep digging,” I told Max. I didn’t like the sound of this but I had another appointment.

I headed out to a ranch in Pennsylvania, where I knew Natania had gone to spend some time with her family. I had not spoken to her since I had fired her following the hacking scandal.

I had heard that her father had been paralyzed after the incident and was now confined to a wheelchair. The parents were living on a farm, which was being run by Natania’s brother.

It was near Allentown, a scenic area of rolling green farmlands and picturesque trees dotting the landscape. I struggled to see Natania here though, with her tailored suits and painted nails.

I drove up to the house, parking the Lambo under the tree.

I gave her a few minutes to notice my arrival, then I got out and slowly approached the house. I didn't want to make her family uncomfortable but I also needed answers.

As I thought she would, Natania came out to greet me. She wasn't exactly friendly but not unfriendly either.

"What are you doing here?" she asked me, her arms folded across her chest.

She wasn't wearing make-up and was dressed simply in jeans but she looked good. Natania was the kind of girl who would always look good no matter what she wore.

I asked after her parents and she said her father was improving slowly. I told her about the gas explosion and she said she was sorry to hear about us getting hurt.

Then she said, "But what has this got to do with me?"

"I want you to think about who could be behind this. You must have some idea, some feeling about the forces at work here?"

I could see her struggling with her feelings.

"Natania, I need your help here. Someone is trying to kill me, destroy me. Don't you have any idea where it is coming from?"

I felt sure that underneath it all, she was loyal to me and I was proven right.

She bit her lip.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“There was one thing that was strange,” she said. “You know, after Mrs. Le Bruin told me to send that email and I told her that you would find out and kill her...”

“Yes?”

“She said... it didn’t matter. That she was dead anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s just it, I didn’t know what she meant. But when I thought about it, I realized that she meant she was just like me, being used like a pawn by someone.”

I had suspected as much.

“She wasn’t behind the attack on my father though,” Natania added. “My mother said the people who had kidnapped them and beaten my father had told them it wasn’t personal. That they were only collateral damage in an ancient war.”

“The men told them that?” I felt a sudden rush of energy.

Natania nodded. “Does that mean anything to you?”

I barely had time to thank her, squeezing her arm and telling her I would send money to help with her dad’s rehabilitation.

I jumped in the Lambo and drove home at the speed of light.

I thought I knew exactly who my enemy was.

It was all starting to make sense to me now.

Chapter 19

Kaya

“How are you feeling?” the nurse asked me, as she held a glass of water to my mouth.

Terrible, I wanted to say. Like shit. Like death warmed over.

The doctor had already been by to see me and told me how lucky I was to be alive. He said that the X-rays showed no lasting damage. He was upbeat and told me I could go home soon, that I was recovering very well, but I didn’t feel well at all.

I was struggling to talk and to think clearly. This was on account of all the medications they’d been giving me. At least, that was what they told me. They were weaning me off the sedatives now and seemed ready for me to go.

During visitor’s hours, Fuzz stopped by with Princess, who brought me a Coke and some candy. She was eyeing me carefully and I felt awful for upsetting her like that.

I was furious with myself.

I’d known someone was after me but I let myself be distracted by a man.

I was no better than the silliest, dumbest high school girl doodling pink hearts on her pencil case. I was the worst kind of fool; someone who should know better but chose to ignore her common sense.

I knew I shouldn't have gone away but I let Jack talk me into it. All he wanted to do was to spend money, flash his wealth around and fuck me when he felt like it. I was disgusted with myself. I'd let myself be taken in by his charms, by the way he'd made me feel, knowing full well that as a vampire, he could make himself irresistible to women.

The following morning, when the doctor told me I could go home, I didn't call anyone to pick me up. I got up slowly, getting used to the feeling of my limbs feeling a bit like jelly, all wobbly and unstable. This was because of the head injury and would eventually go back to normal, the doctor assured me.

As I gathered my things, I spotted a familiar face in the corridor. I went out and recognized Jack's head henchman, Zoran.

"What are you doing here?" I asked crossly.

"Making sure you're safe," he said.

"Bit late for that, don't you think?" I shot back.

He had the decency to look a bit abashed.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“Go home,” I told him. “Tell your master I don’t need anything from him anymore.”

It was over between us. I had come to my senses and seen the light. Whatever. I wanted nothing to do with him anymore.

I went straight to bed, sleeping until Princess was dropped off in the evening, bringing some of Tina’s macaroni and cheese with her.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, her eyes big with concern.

“Much better, pumpkin,” I said, ruffling her hair. “What do you say, we watch some TV and eat popcorn?”

She nodded eagerly. We hadn’t done that in a while. The last couple of weeks I had spent all my free time with Jack, even when he was with me at my house we would do activities with Princess. I hadn’t spent much time alone with the little girl. I felt a stab of guilt.

My phone buzzed. Messages from Jack. I ignored them and pushed my phone away.

“How are you feeling about your mom coming home?” I asked.

Princess did a sort of shrug and I knew she must have been thinking of all the previous times she’d come back, trying to make things work.

The little girl looked at me. “Is being a grown-up hard?” she asked me suddenly.

The question took me by surprise.

I found myself nodding. “Yeah, it is rather,” I said. “Harder than we even realize.”

She pulled a sad face. “But you know your mom loves you, as do I and Tina. Even when we make mistakes, we love you.”

She didn’t react and I knew that it seemed like empty words. What did love mean anyway when it wasn’t enough to keep your mom home and your friends safe? I didn’t have an answer to that question but I did have ice cream and I knew that could fix a lot of problems, so I made sure to give her a big bowl of caramel crunch and was rewarded by her smile.

I knew Jack would drop by and not long after Princess had fallen asleep, I felt his presence outside. I opened the front door and went out to meet him, even though it was freezing outside.

“How are you?” he asked, rushing forward to take me in his arms.

I stepped back and held up my hands.

“No,” I said, quickly, hating how my heart was beating.

“No more.”

I could see hurt in his eyes.

“Why?”

“I’m not willing to die for love,” I said sarcastically. “We have too many enemies, too many people wishing us harm. Not to mention, the world of difference between

us.”

He stepped forward, his voice cajoling. “But our difference is what makes this work, it is what makes us so great together.”

I looked at him, sadly. “We are not great together. We have great sex, that’s it, but I’m not willing to die for sex. I told you people were after me and you insisted I was seeing things. Before that, you almost lost your job because you weren’t paying attention. You could’ve ruined your business!”

“I don’t care about any of that!” he said, the power in his voice scaring me a little.

“But I do!”

He seemed to hear me.

“I thought I could do this, but it is too much. This is the third time I have come close to dying. I won’t be so lucky next time. I need to figure out what I’m doing with the rest of my life. I need to find out who killed my parents and why someone is trying to kill me.”

“You can’t do that alone,” he said.

I gave a harsh laugh. “I was alone for years. But my senses have become dull, I’m slower than I ever was before. I just need to get back into shape.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“Let me help you,” he insisted. “I think I know who is behind this attack.”

“Who?”

“I’m not sure yet but I’m close to finding out.”

I shook my head.

“I don’t want to do this,” I said, suddenly tired. “I can’t be with you. It’s too much. My head hurts and things have changed.”

There was pain in his eyes but it affected me less than I thought it would.

“I need to rest,” I said and went inside.

I went into Princess’s room and lay down next to her on the bed.

Pearl would soon come home and then Princess would be able to live with her again. I would miss having the little girl around but a part of me was also looking forward to being on my own again, responsible for no-one but myself.

I could feel Jack out there, watching the house. Watching me.

He wasn’t the kind of person who would take well to rejection but he would get used to it. I wasn’t going to change my mind.

What he wanted was an idea of me. Not who I really was.

The real me was not a girl who wore high heels and dresses and flew in private jets to fancy restaurants for clam linguini. The real me could be bitchy and mean and liked to arm wrestle men in bars and win.

I stayed home for a few days, then went into work.

“Should you be here?” Fuzz asked me anxiously when I showed up one morning.

“I can’t hang about the house anymore,” I told him. “I’ll wash cars, anything.”

I cleaned out the workshop and helped him re-spray a little Ford that had been done over for an 18th birthday present.

The thought gave me a lump in my throat.

My 18th birthday had passed without any kind of celebration. Nobody knew when my birthday was but such was my life. I had never allowed myself to get all teary-eyed about it. I had been marked by tragedy, it had made me hard and tough.

I had liked being like that. Being alone was part of the territory.

Love wasn’t for everyone, certainly not for me. But there was some sadness about the end of the relationship and Fuzz picked up on it.

“You liked that bloodsucker, huh?” he asked with a small smile on his face.

I shrugged. “I like dogs too; doesn’t mean I have to get me one.”

He grinned. “You’ll get over him,” he said.

“Probably,” I answered, keeping my voice light.

“Been a lot of them around, lately,” he said, telling me about seeing vampires around the workshop.

“Were they asking after me?” I asked.

He shrugged. “They’d came in, looked around, I don’t know. Maybe.”

I didn’t want to go away and leave Princess but if I was in danger, then perhaps leaving town was a good idea, for her sake as well.

I thought about it and mentioned it to Fuzz.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“Maybe you should,” he agreed. “Take the heat off you. Even if it is only for a week or two.”

“What about you?” I said. “Can you handle being without me?”

He punched my shoulder. “Please, who do you think was doing the work around here while you were away?”

I arranged for someone to come in and help Tina with Princess while I was away. Then I packed a bag and told nobody where I was going. Not even Fuzz.

I wanted to get as far away from vampires as I possibly could.

Chapter 20

Jack

Chelsey Manor was the estate of the Fitzgeralds; the family that the Beauforts had been feuding with for centuries. The peace agreement came after numerous battles between us, which had ended with my father killing one of the family heirs. This had followed their sinking some of our ships, at the time causing irreparable damage to the family fortune. My father negotiated with their family matriarch, Beatrix Fitzgerald, fondly called Bee by those who knew her. I remembered her as a soft-spoken lady, with eyes of cold steel.

But I hadn’t been to the estate in sixty years and I was shocked to see how much it had changed since then. The gates needed paint and were rusted. Weeds grew all over

the grounds and the lawns were not recently mowed. The house, once the family's pride and joy, had windows that were boarded over with broken window panes.

I drove up to the front of the house, having been let through at the gate.

This meant Bee knew I was coming. A bit of a gamble, but this was the game I was playing now.

A servant led me into the house and to the back patio, where Bee was seated at her rose garden.

"Jack, my goodness, it's been a while," she said, with a polite smile.

"You'll forgive me not getting up."

"Of course," I said, not believing for a minute that she was frail or elderly. I told her she was looking well and she acknowledged the compliment with a gracious nod of her head.

"Shall I order us a snack?" she asked, calling a maid over.

I couldn't help noticing the disrepair on the patio as well. Broken cobblestones and cracked fountains from which water once gurgled delightfully.

"I must say, I've been expecting you," she said, giving me a shrewd look. "But you took your time."

"Have I?"

She nodded. "I thought perhaps you thought the time for talking was over?"

She left the question hanging in the air.

“What do you mean?”

She pointed at a newspaper lying in front of her. There was a report of a hit-and-run accident. A young woman, gruesomely decapitated. I recognized the name, it was her granddaughter, Ellen Fitzgerald.

“My condolences,” I said.

She narrowed her eyes; the accusation was obvious.

“That was not me,” I said.

“No?”

“I swear it,” I said.

“I thought... perhaps you thought we were to blame for the gas explosion at that restaurant?”

Again, the shrewd look.

“You were not?”

She gave a cough. “Indeed, no. We were not.”

“But you see how I might have thought you were.”

“My dear boy, if relations between our families have deteriorated, the fault is entirely on your side.” Her voice was cold as ice.

“What do you mean? I have kept your end of the bargain now for decades.”

She pursed her lips. “But your brother has not.”

“Simon?”

She looked sharply at me. “He has opened ten clubs in the past three years, most recently a casino complex.”

“But that is outside state lines,” I said.

She shook her head. “No, indeed, it is the other way around. It falls neatly in on the other side, quite within the city boundary.”

I pondered this information, which was new to me.

“How did he get the license?” I asked.

“It appears he has friends in high places,” she said with pursed lips. “Very high places, indeed.”

“You could have come to me,” I said.

“Oh, we tried! Bernard has contacted you several times, only to hear how busy you are,” she said, contemptuously. Bernard was her son and the face of the family, even though she was in charge. I couldn’t pretend I hadn’t received the messages from Bernard; however, I had not returned them as I didn’t think them important enough.

“As you see, our fortune has waned in this new era and the political will has not been on our side,” she said, waving over the grounds.

“You should’ve called me,” I said. If I knew Bee was trying to get hold of me, I would have made the time to talk to her. It was in my interest to keep the peace with the Fitzgeralds, I didn’t want to go back to a time of backstabbing and dirty dealings in the dark.

“Oh, it wouldn’t have made a speck of difference, dear boy,” she said, getting up slowly from her chair. I saw that she moved with difficulty and wondered if something was ailing her after all. She was older than my father, must have been almost four hundred years old.

“What do you mean?”

“There are new forces at play in the world today. We are the least of your worries. My family is on the way out and I have accepted the ruin of my house. You may want to do the same.”

She hobbled to the edge of the garden and stared out at where the river used to be. Now the trees and shrubs had overgrown the hedges, blocking the view.

“Your brother is mixing with some dangerous folk.”

“Speak plainly, madam, I beg you.” I found it easy to slip into the courteous manners of the past, which I knew Bee appreciated. She came from another time and sometimes, I knew, the elegance and courtesy of those times were missed dearly.

She turned to face me and made sure she had my attention.

“Governor Leo de Salle,” she said. “He has become the most powerful man in the country. Wealthier and more powerful than the president even. They say, he controls the White House now. I don’t doubt it.”

“De Salle?”

I didn’t know much about him but I had heard of his growing power. I had wondered if he was one of the Hidden Ones. The vampires who pretended to be human in order to win people’s trust. They would never elect a vampire to office. We were still not trusted. But the Hidden Ones were dangerous, because they drank human blood to become stronger. They could be out in daylight. They even used products to darken their skin, to make it look more human. Even more frightening, their agenda was secret. They saw vampires as superior to human beings and believed they were a master race, who had a duty to manage others and be in control. They sought to bring back power to vampires and to subject human beings, either into slavery and captivity, as in the old days, or into poverty and a miserable existence, as in recent times.

I thought of the homelessness and criminality I’d heard of in the city, the streets lined with tents of people unable to get jobs. People eager to donate at the many blood banks that offered them a pittance.

“Do you think he...”

“Is Hidden?” she guessed my thoughts.

She nodded. "I do."

She told me how Bernard had a meeting with the governor and was kept waiting for hours while Da Salle was supposedly held up on a call to a Senate Committee. Then later, he found out Da Salle was out playing golf. He had called Da Salle to complain and was told to stay in his lane. He had been outraged. The following day, all of their building permits were rescinded. Then they started having trouble with utilities at the factories and strikes at their plants. It was the beginning of their businesses failing.

"You think it's Da Salle?"

She nodded. "He wants us out of the way."

She looked at me shrewdly, "You too probably."

I thought about it. A partnership with Simon would help Da Salle to worm his way into my company and push the Fitzgeralds out of the game. Perhaps Simon had made a deal with him to replace me.

"I have noticed that family of his all over town," Bee said. "Ute? Is it?"

"Ulrika," I corrected her.

Pieces were falling into place.

I saw wild geese flying past, fairly low in the sky. Only a few years ago, the landowners would've shot them for sport. Now such actions were frowned upon.

Times had changed and were changing again.

“You don’t want to take Da Salle on?” I asked Bee.

For the first time, I saw the fatigue in her face.

“I’m tired, my boy. I’ve been around too long. I’ve seen husbands die; children die, now grandchildren. What am I doing any of this for? Bernard?” her voice was contemptuous. He was known as a weakling. Her eyes fell on the newspaper clipping.

“You should have seen her, my Ellen,” her voice softened. “She was so beautiful, so pure.”

I wanted to ask what happened, but I could guess.

Anyone wanting to get to Bee, would do it by targeting those she loved. That was her weakness.

Just like Kaya was mine. I couldn’t bear the thought that anyone was targeting her. I was grateful that I’d put guards in place to watch over her.

I didn’t think our relationship was over. Not for one minute. I let her think that, because she needed space and I was willing to give her that. But in time, I would win her back again. Time was the one thing I had and I was patient. Had I not waited years for her to appear in my life, to become the partner I wanted?

I wasn’t going to give in now and let her go.

I would fight for Kaya with all the strength I had, every ounce of it. Nothing mattered to me like she did, not the family business or all of the wealth my family had amassed.

The only thing that mattered, was her.

Kaya.

Chapter 21

Kaya

I've never been the holidaying kind, exactly. Sitting around and doing nothing does not come naturally to me.

I flew out to California, thinking the sun and beachy vibes would be good for me. Instead, I got annoyed by the people in their flip-flops and fake friendly smiles. It had to be fake, right? Nobody could be that friendly all the time? Or maybe they were stoned, that could be the only other reason.

I got myself a board and went surfing a few times but I got bored lying on the board, waiting for the waves to come in.

After a few days away, I called Josie, my friend at the agency and asked if I could see her. I'd been thinking about it and I didn't want to ask over the phone.

"You want to come see me? Why?" she sounded very suspicious and I couldn't blame her.

"I'm in the neighborhood, anyway," I joked. The flight to Washington was not nearly as far now that I was in California. "I'd love to see you, seriously," I said. "I'm going to lose my temper with these surfer dudes. I'm close to decking one of them."

“Bro...” she teased me. “That is so uncool, man.”

We laughed and she agreed to meet me the next day.

I was glad to get out of the Golden State, which had held very little shine for me. Even though there were definitely less vampires, I still could not shake the feeling that I was being watched. I had booked rooms in a cheap motel and even though I stayed in most nights, I would occasionally slip out for pizza and a beer. One evening, I'd gone to a bar where I felt someone watching me all night long.

I looked over my shoulder constantly, jumping every time someone touched my shoulder. I'd thought maybe to hook up with someone to get the thought of Jack out of my mind but nobody came close to him.

These surfer boys looked like pretty toys compared to him. They didn't have his intensity, his presence. I hoped this didn't mean that I now had a taste for vampires. As an experiment, I let my eyes wander over the bar, checking out the men, so to speak. I caught someone's eye, a tall, bearded fellow who was my type, macho, rugged, all testosterone. He didn't have the pale vamp look but I knew by now that this could be deceptive too. He saw me looking and nodded in my direction. I lifted my beer to acknowledge him.

Minutes later, he came over, introduced himself and asked to buy me a beer.

I said yes and regretted it in the space of ten minutes.

He started telling me about his new fake fish product that tasted JUST LIKE fish but

was really compressed lentil and onion. It sounded disgusting. He was all about saving the fish and the oceans, the pollution and the blah-blah. I stopped listening when he got into the details of drying the lentils and pressing them into fish shapes. Seriously.

I finished my beer and got up to go.

“Where are you going?” he asked me, clearly thinking we were onto something here.

“We’re done here,” I said and walked out of the bar.

The whole way back to the motel, I felt someone was behind me but even though I turned around a few times to check, I couldn’t see anyone. I knew there was a chance that I was imagining it. That is why I went to bed that evening, put out the light and lay there for a while until it was really quiet, then slipped out of bed, crawling along the floor and sidling up to the window to carefully peek outside.

It took me a while and it wasn’t what I expected but, finally, I found the shape on the other side of the street. I could make out the red eyes in the dark. Something was definitely watching the motel but was it threatening me or guarding me?

I got out my knife and quickly opened the door but as soon as I was out in the parking lot, the animal was gone. I crossed the street to where I’d seen it but there was nothing there.

The next day, I checked out early and made my way to the airport to get to Washington. I’d arranged to meet Josie for lunch at a place near the office. We knew each other back from when she’d worked at the agency, giving me assignments and processing my pay cheques. She was wheelchair-bound but that didn’t stop her from getting around and she refused anyone’s pity.

I liked her no-nonsense approach to life. She knew that life was unfair and shit. And so what.

I felt the same way.

When I arrived at the café, she was already there, looking just like she did last time I'd seen her five years ago. She had spiky hair, rings through her nose and lips, and a twinkle in both her eyes.

“What's up, bitch?” she asked me.

I got right to it.

“I need to get my hands on occillite. Do you know what it is?”

“Woah, girl? Seriously?”

Of course she knew what occillite was but it was very scarce these days and most sources had dried up. People who had it tended to hide it in safe places.

I told her about the explosion and Simon and the time with Jack, and all she wanted to know was what the sex was like.

“Bloody good,” I said, and she slapped the table, laughing at my pun.

“But seriously, I need some big guns to help me in my next fight. Because there will be one and I'm not the girl I used to be.”

Josie said she would try to find the stuff for me.

“Another angle could be to track down this guy. Only name I have for him is Big G.

That might be Greg. He is a Native American from Wak'aha'a. He came to Hawston and said he was going to try and disappear. The Wak'aha'a mined the stuff. The entire tribe was wiped out about the same time as my family was. I'm not sure if anyone else has found a way of making this stuff."

"It would be worth a fortune," said Josie thoughtfully. "Let me make some calls. I'll get back to you."

That evening, I got a call from Tina, asking me to come back. Princess was ill and asking for me. I got the next plane back, going straight to Tina's house. I found Princess with a raging fever and mumbling incoherently. I took her to the hospital, where they admitted her and gave her something to break the fever.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“Something’s been going on in town for the last few weeks,” Tina told me. “I think it’s the water, so many people have been sick.”

I called Fuzz, he said he was down with the bug as well and wanted to know when I could work.

“I thought you could handle being without me,” I said, jokingly.

“Ha-ha,” he said weakly. As it turned out, Roberto was off sick too.

I spent the night with Princess in the hospital and the following day, she was released. After making sure she was tucked safely in bed, with some snacks and a movie on, I decided to check on the shop.

There were some cars booked in for small jobs, a fender repair and an oil leak, which took a bit longer to trace. Then I got a call from someone needing help with a flat tire.

The guy asked me to bring a tire and gave me directions to where he was stuck by the side of the road. I didn’t think twice. I took the workshop truck and headed out to his location.

It was late but not yet dark.

I found the truck, saw the flat tire and, as I was about to get out, saw a text from Tina. She asked me to look in on Princess. I got out, thinking about her, not paying attention to the man at the car.

“You called for help?” I asked without really looking at him.

“Sure did. Thanks for coming out so quickly,” he replied. “If you’ve got the tire, I can put it on myself,” he said.

I turned to take the tire out of the back of the truck and an instant too late, I saw the movement coming towards me. The man jumped on my back, the glint of the knife in his hand coming towards me.

I managed to twist out of his grip and punched him in the face but I had no weapons on me. I knew I couldn’t take weapons to the hospital, so I had not been armed that day. I needed them now.

I didn’t have much time, I had only my keys, so I took aim for his eyes, sticking one deep into his eye socket. He screamed in agony and I ran around to get back into the car to drive off but I wasn’t fast enough. He was at the window, clawing at me, when I saw someone or something rip him away from the car and throw him against a tree like a rag doll. The man slumped on the ground.

“Jack?”

I saw Jack walk over to the body on the ground and stick something into it, to make sure the guy was dead.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“What are you doing here?”

I had not seen him in almost two weeks. My heart was beating fast and I could barely breathe.

“I could feel you were in danger. I came as soon as I could. Fortunately, I wasn’t far.” He pointed in the direction of the castle, which was not far away.

“Who was that?” I asked, looking over at the man who had attacked me.

“I’m going to find out,” Jack said, darkly.

There was an awkward silence.

“Well, thanks for... that,” I said.

“Any time,” Jack said, smiling at me, that killer smile that I found so hard to resist. I quickly turned around and drove off, forcing myself not to look in the rearview mirror.

I couldn’t deny it, I still had feelings for him. Lots and lots of feelings I had no idea what to do with.

Chapter 22

Jack

My father had told me to expect a backlash from our kind.

After the last War, when the final negotiations were signed, he warned me that this wouldn’t last. There would be a pushback, he told me. The vampires may have been vanquished for now and thrust into submission but they would not stay there.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

History taught us this, he told me. I had a feeling he was right.

The tide was turning, and it felt like the vampires were rising slowly and carefully, in the dark and out of sight, but undeniably so. At the forefront was Governor Leo da Salle, a charismatic businessman who had risen to power after coming from humble beginnings.

He had studied law and gone into local government, climbing the political ladder until he was elected governor of the most powerful state in the country. My investigations revealed that he had an interest in almost every big business and company in the state, from building and manufacturing to banking and finance. It was incredible to me to see how much his influence had grown and how even in Washington at the top tiers of government, he was linked to influential people.

The bastard who had attacked Kaya was working for Da Salle.

It wasn't information he gave up willingly, or easily.

But after a few hours in the castle dungeon, being worked on by Zoran in his many creative and imaginative ways, he started singing.

It wasn't the prettiest tune I'd ever heard, though.

He told us that Da Salle had taken a hit out on Kaya and had been trying to get rid of her for a while but that she kept evading him. The explosion had been aimed at getting rid of both of us, two flies with one stone.

I told Zoran to press the guy on Simon but it seemed he didn't know anything about him or any so-called arrangement. I wondered how much anyone on the board knew about Da Salle and I was suddenly suspicious about Marcello. I decided to drop in on another board member, an accountant from Nevada, who had so far proven to be a big help when it came to manipulating the books.

Troy Brandt lived on an estate outside Las Vegas with his ex-showgirl wife, Shenelle and her two children from previous relationships. He came across as clean-cut and straight-laced but I'd heard about his wild side and a gambling habit that had, at times, been a problem.

The company had helped him out, getting him help for his addiction, for which we had demanded only his loyalty. I had never needed to call on him before but the time had come. I made a few calls and found out that Troy was playing in a high stakes poker game that evening at a private venue.

I made sure to be at the house near Reno, that evening.

It was a black-tie event, with expensive cars pulling into the driveway from the late afternoon. The host was a former football player and Hollywood actor. He'd made a fortune in sports betting. I had no intention of playing cards but I wanted to get hold of Troy when he was not expecting me to ensure he didn't have time to prepare or blindside me.

The set up was almost professional, with blackjack, poker and roulette tables operated by croupiers who managed the house funds. I found Troy fairly quickly and kept to the background, watching him, noticing how his intensity increased as the stakes went up. He was spending vast amounts of money, I noticed, losing more than he was winning as the evening went on and he kept drinking.

I had checked his bank accounts earlier in the day and had traced substantial

payments that came his way each month courtesy of a supplier identified only by the initials A.R.D. It didn't take me long to establish that this stood for Aaron Rand Development, one of the companies owned by Leo Da Salle.

I found Troy's car, a smart Bentley, quickly enough. His driver, a timid man, was scared off easily once he realized who he was dealing with. I got into the driver's seat and waited. Then I called Troy from his own car, telling him his ride was ready.

"What do you mean?" he yelled, rather drunkenly into the phone. "You're waiting for me, not the other way around! Asshole!"

"I think you'll find that is incorrect. You will come down to your car or I will come up there and drag you out by your collar. You have been spending my money and let me tell you Troy, straight-up, things are not looking good for you right now."

"Who-who is th-th-this?" he stammered.

"I think you will find your questions answered imminently."

I waited for him outside the house, watching as he came out with two bodyguards I had seen earlier in the evening. Why would my man Troy need bodyguards? As they came running down the stairs towards the car, I hit them with the stun gun, then I grabbed Troy by the collar and shoved him into the back seat of the car.

The man was shaking and crying now, a pitiful example of shame and guilt.

"Please Mr. Beaufort, I beg you, please, spare my life!" He begged me over and over. I tied his wrists and then drove him out into the desert.

By the time I had stopped the car and opened the back door, he was whimpering and ready to tell me whatever I needed to know. Basically, the board belonged to Da

Salle. He had bought out every single board member through bribery and blackmail, getting rid of those who stood in his way. Others, like Dominique were pawns in his game for power. He intended getting rid of me and putting Simon in my place.

“My brother knows of this?”

Troy shrugged, his cheeks wet with tears. “Nobody says no to Da Salle, he is like the devil! Whatever he wants, he gets, nothing is impossible for him!”

He told me that over the past year Da Salle had found ways of dominating almost every sector of the company. He was careful of not breaking the law, as this could harm his image. That was why he was using other means, like the strikes and the hacking scheme, to get rid of me.

“The explosion?”

Troy nodded.

“And nobody came to me with this information?”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I found it hard to believe that none of the board members had been able to talk to me about this.

“He threatened us, made us promise to keep everything secret,” Troy said. Even the chairman, Marcello, was in on it, as I’d feared.

“You must be careful,” Troy said, urgently. “He knows you are onto him and he wants to get rid of you before the next board meeting.”

I decided to let Troy go, making sure to erase his memory of the evening and my meeting with him.

I checked in on Kaya but she was safely at home.

I knew now that we were in more danger than ever before. I flew back as soon as possible and as the sun was beginning to break in the east, I arrived in Hawston.

I found my way to her house straight away.

She opened the door, dressed in a T-shirt, her hair tousled, looking adorable.

“We need to talk,” I told her.

“I think I’ll need coffee for this,” she said, but didn’t sound surprised to see me. I didn’t want to talk in the house in case it was bugged but, at this point, I didn’t trust anyone any more.

When she was dressed and she'd had her coffee, we went for a drive. I took us down to the coast; we watched the sun come up over the rocks and the deserted shore. I told her what I had found out about Da Salle and she listened to all of it.

"I know you asked for some space after the explosion," I said to her. "I understand that and I'm willing to give you all the time in the world. But I can't walk away from us, even if I wanted to, I just can't do it."

She looked down and didn't answer.

"I was working in the city when I felt you were in danger. It was such a strong impulse, it was like I was being attacked myself. I had to get to you, I couldn't have stopped myself even if I'd wanted to."

She nodded.

I took her hand, and she didn't pull away.

"I still have feelings for you," she admitted, refusing to look me in the eye. "I don't want to have them but I do. I think about you all the time and when you were there yesterday, I was relieved."

"Kaya," I said, pulling her close.

There were tears in her eyes, as she bit her lip.

"I don't want to love you but I do," she said. "I've been fighting it for weeks but it's useless."

"Then stop fighting me," I said. "Let's fight Da Salle instead."

She looked at me and before she could say anything, I kissed her.

Chapter 23

Kaya

After the incident at the side of the road, I felt nervous and on edge. I kept going over the incident, wondering how that vampire had been so fast and why I had struggled to fight him, even without weapons. This worried me. Either there was a new drug out there or I had become weaker and lost my edge. I didn't like either of these scenarios. Then there was the way I had felt about seeing Jack again. I wanted to think about him even less but sooner or later I would have to deal with him too.

I drove past Tina's house on the way home and saw a strange car outside. I decided to drop by for a quick visit, in case Pearl had come home. I knew she was due back any day now.

I parked in the street and walked up to the front door, which was open. I could hear voices laughing and chatting from inside. It sounded like a party. Pearl was obviously back home.

Tina's tiny living room was full of people I didn't know. Pearl was sitting on the sofa and Princess was on her lap, looking very happy. Pearl was telling stories, grinning from ear to ear, very much in her element. I couldn't help looking around for bottles of beer, or whiskey but I couldn't see any.

"I know what you're thinking," Tina said, suddenly next to me. "But they're all sober, for now. They came by to drop Pearl off an hour ago."

I knew that we were thinking the same thing, wondering how long this spell of sobriety would last.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“Hey!” Pearl called out to me. “Kaya, come meet Bobby and Rick from the center!” She pulled me into their group and told me how they were all going to work on a ranch in Texassomewhere. I wondered how long Pearl would be able to stay put in Hawston.

“What about you?” I asked. “Do you have any plans?”

She glanced at Tina. “My mom says they need waitresses over at the diner. I thought I’d go over later and ask about that.”

I wondered how long that would keep Pearl happy, serving eggs and coffee to the townspeople but I didn’t want to spoil the mood. I told her I was happy she was back and prepared to go home.

I was almost at the door when Tina called me back.

“I want to show you something,” she said, calling me over. I followed her into her bedroom. Her gait was slow and cumbersome, I could tell her back was hurting her even more today. She had picked up even more weight recently and I knew this made her arthritis worse.

“All that talk about your mother and Stephanie set me to thinking,” she told me, out of breath from the exertion of walking to her room. “When you came here, all those years ago? You had a bag of things with you. There are some things from your family in there, remember?”

I vaguely recalled taking a few things with me when the Sheriff took me away. He’d

asked me if I wanted to take some things and I realized I might not be coming back. There was a book of my father's and a toy of my brother's. I'd gone to my parents' room and taken things from there too, which I had put into a drawstring bag. That bag had gone with me everywhere I went the first few years but then I had left it at Tina's and, at some point, I'd forgotten about it.

She held out the drawstring bag to me now.

"I think there is something in there that you may want," Tina's voice sounded strange. I didn't know what she meant. I opened the bag and looked through its contents, feeling my heart tighten at the sight of some of these objects that held so much sentimental value for me.

I was about to close the bag and give it back to Tina, when I saw something among my parents' things. I took it out.

It was a black stone.

Occillite.

I couldn't believe it; my mother must have taken it with her when she left her tribe. I looked at Tina, "Did you know about this?"

She nodded. "I was looking for some shoes a while back. The bag fell out of the bottom of the cupboard. I'd forgotten what it was, so I looked inside. I realized it must be your things and put it aside to give to you."

She looked carefully at me. "I figured you'd want that stone."

I gave her a hug. "Thank you!"

I rushed out to the supermarket and found Tamara packing shelves.

“I want to show you something,” I said. “Tell me if it is what I think it is.”

I took the black stone out of the bag and looked over my shoulder, making sure we were alone.

I showed it to her. There was a sharp intake of breath as she covered my hand over it.

“Put it away,” she hissed, looking around to make sure no-one saw us. “People would kill for it,” she warned me.

“Even like this, unprocessed?”

“You can’t find it anywhere anymore, I asked around for you, nobody has it or knows of it. I don’t know how many are still in existence,” she hissed.

“But it’s raw,” I whispered to her. “It’s not cut or anything... does it still have power?”

She nodded quickly. “You will have to charge it but you can do that by wearing it against your skin. You charge it with your own energy. You will have to find a way to wear it.”

She told me how to wrap some wire around it and then showed me the sharp edge on one side.

“This will cut like a knife and for vampires, it will be fatal.”

I bought the thinnest wire I could find and went home to fashion a kind of necklace with the stone, hanging it around my neck. It felt heavy and uncomfortable. I wasn’t

used to wearing jewelry in the first place. I tried to do some cleaning and laundry, ignoring the strange weight against my chest. After a while, I felt it becoming hot against my skin and realized it was me charging it. I found myself often touching it, folding my hand protectively around it. I couldn't recall ever seeing my mother touch it but she must have. I felt closer to her somehow, wearing it.

Lying in bed, I was unable to sleep that night.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

Perhaps it was the stone keeping me awake but the moment I closed my eyes, I thought of Jack and how he had come to my rescue at the car. I'd wanted to hold him, I remembered that too. It was like the weeks we'd been apart had simply faded into insignificance. None of what I'd said mattered, I realized. I still wanted to be with him no matter how much danger it put me in. I wanted to be with him even if it put me in mortal danger. It took all of my will power not to call him.

In the middle of the night, I felt hot and sweaty and got up, even though it was cold outside. The pendant was so warm it was almost burning my skin. I took it off and saw that it appeared to be glowing. I went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face and chest. I saw the old man's face and heard his voice in my ear again, telling me how my work was not done.

What had he meant?

I stood by the window and looked out over the garden. I longed for Jack and closed my eyes, thinking about him.

When I opened my eyes, he stood in the garden, looking at my bedroom window. We just stood like that for a moment, looking at each other. Then I opened my window, and he was inside, right next to me, in an instant.

We didn't speak.

Words were not necessary. I melted into him or he melted into me. I am not sure who moved first. His mouth was on mine, and I kissed him back, my arms holding him tightly, pulling him closer. We fell onto the bed and he held my face, tenderly,

kissing my eyes, my cheeks, my ears. I felt desire coursing through my veins, an almost painful ache between my legs as my sexual want awakened. He was kissing my neck and my collarbone when suddenly, he jerked back.

“What... the...” he pulled away from me, his hands to his mouth, touching his lips. He jumped off the bed and stumbled back.

“Jack?” I sat up, uncertainly.

“What... Your skin... something burned me?”

I looked over at my dresser where the pendant was lying. Any proof I had wanted about its potency, I had just received.

I got up and walked over to him, touched his mouth with my fingers, where I could see a light red swelling on his lips. Even though I had washed my skin some residue must have remained.

“What is it?” he asked me.

“Have you heard of occillite?” I asked him.

There was a sharp intake of breath. “You have occillite? Where? Do you know how dangerous that is for me?”

“I’m sorry, I touched it,” I said, kissing his lips tenderly, as if to make it better. I could feel him softening to my touch, giving in.

“But... what..” he drew back, and I said, “Shh...let’s talk later...” I pulled my T-shirt back on and felt between his legs, the powerful erection throbbed in my hands. He was groaning as I caressed it with my hands, guiding it into my mouth. He forgot all

about the occillite as I licked and sucked his cock. His erection growing even bigger as I teased and played with him. Finally, he couldn't take it anymore and I actually giggled as he pushed me onto the bed, opening my legs and entering me, sliding into me with a shudder of delight.

I was deliciously wet and wanting him with every fiber of my being. His hand slid in under my top but I playfully took his hands and held them. I saw his eyes widen in surprise as I came up and turned him onto his back. I sat on top of him, taking more of him even deeper inside of me and I felt myself riding the waves of pleasure that were becoming bigger and stronger. I held his arms to keep him from touching me as I tightened my pelvic muscles, tensing and releasing my hold on his cock. Then I leaned back and felt the forces of our sexual energy take over my body as we rocked together riding the current that was coursing through us. I moved up and down, rocking back and forth, moaning loudly as each thrust took me closer to heaven and I could taste the joy that was coming.

I wanted to hold back, to tease him some more but I found myself unable to control my body at this point. Even if I'd wanted to, I was not able to pull away. I wanted him so much and when I rocked back his body came up with me so that we were almost in a seated position.

I had never had sex in this position before and it felt wonderful. We were face to face, kissing each other, our tongues probing deeper while our legs were intertwined and he thrust once more. We climaxed together in an incredible burst of ecstasy that elicited a cry from me that was piercingly loud, again, ripping through the night air.

We collapsed in each other's arms and he held me tightly.

My skin was covered in sweat and I felt utterly exhausted and unbelievably happy.

Chapter 24

Jack

Afterwards we lay in bed, Kaya snuggled up against my chest.

I was stroking her hair and even though I didn't want to spoil the mood, I had to know. Few words struck the fear of death into the soul of a vampire but the mention of occillite was one of them.

It was the only substance known to be lethal to vampires, so much so that even a few micrograms was enough to kill them. It was extremely rare and very expensive, and I knew that almost every powerful human authority had some special occillite artifact, whether it was a knife with a blade of the black crystal or a sword of solid occillite, as found in the East.

I knew that our community had sent out hunters to find all the sources and destroy them and had thought it had become extinct.

Now, Kaya told me she had found a pure occillite stone that had belonged to her mother. When I heard that it had been around her neck, activating, I grew cold with apprehension. I had probably come into contact with the faintest charge of it remaining on her skin and I had lesions on my face. No wonder she wouldn't let me take off her T-shirt while we were having sex. But didn't she realize how exposure to such a weapon endangered me?

"I need it Jack, there is a powerful vampire after me and I can't be sure than you will be there to protect me."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I understood that and yet, I was worried.

I told her that I thought I finally knew who our enemy was.

“The Governor?”

I nodded.

“He won’t rest until both of us are out of the way. For different reasons, though. In my case, he wants control of the company. In your case, it is slightly more complicated.”

“I think I am supposed to kill him,” Kaya said quietly.

“What?”

Kaya sat up, her voice serious. “I have had this dream ever since I was a child of a huge bear wanting to kill me. As I grew up, the bear became bigger, the forest darker and more dangerous but it was always the same, I had to confront it and I had to kill it.”

She said she’d told the healer in the desert about the dream but he could not explain it to her.

“Sometimes in the dream I can’t see the bear but I can see his eyes in the darkness, glowing red. It’s like he is there but not there.”

I asked, “Do you ever fight him?”

Kaya nodded. “I do. Sometimes I win, and sometimes...I wake up before I know the outcome.”

“I think he knows I have the occillite and the ability to kill him. Perhaps that is why he went after my family, to get to me?”

I didn’t like the direction this was going in.

“You can’t go after Da Salle, it is too dangerous!”

“That is why I have to go,” Kaya said. “He is not expecting me and I will have the element of surprise.”

“For the breadth of a second,” I countered.

She jumped up and fetched something from the other side of the room.

“Enough time for me to cut him with this,” she said, holding out the occillite towards me.

I had to avert my eyes, it was like staring into black fire.

“Take... it ... away,” I said and she hid it again.

I closed my eyes but I could still see it, the malevolent glint in the stone, the promise of death. I knew that Kaya could kill me at any moment, over a whim or a tantrum. Anyone else picking up that stone would be able to snuff out my life with a flick of the wrist. I couldn’t be in the same house as it. I got up and started getting dressed.

Kaya seemed to know what I was getting at.

“I will only use it on Da Salle, ok? Then I will lock it away somewhere safe. I would never expose you to it.”

I looked at her, wanting to believe her.

“I love you,” she said, coming close to me, whispering the words I so very much wanted to hear. But I was concerned now.

“I love you too,” I said. “That is why I am worried for you.”

“We can’t be together until we have removed this threat,” she said. “I will wear the pendant and charge it to maximum strength. I will rub myself with it before I enter his house. My hands will be weapons of death.”

I was still not convinced.

“This is what I was trained to do,” Kaya reminded me. “I’m out of practice and I have slipped in my skills but the occillite gives me the edge I need. Don’t you see?”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I didn't want to see. I thought maybe it was too late for us already. Perhaps we could flee the country, let Da Salle take over the country while we went to live somewhere else but Kaya shook her head.

"Leave my family behind? Pearl and Princess? And your company? Everything you've worked for? You would just let it go, just like that?"

"I don't want to lose you," I said.

"You won't," she said, with a confident smile.

I had lost so many loves over the course of my life, beginning with my mother and my sister. I thought of how, as a young man, I'd met Constance in Boston and we had become engaged. It wasn't the same kind of love that I felt for Kaya now but I was very fond of her. She'd come to the castle and my father had approved of her too. During our feud with the Fitzgeralds, we had been attacked one night and she had been killed. I had been devastated. Our relationship had been so young, I'd had so many dreams for us.

Just like now.

Da Salle was a far bigger and more dangerous enemy. I felt we should plan our approach together, I wanted to help Kaya but she was adamant.

"I will do it alone, working the way I've always worked. This is how it must be," she said firmly. "I can feel it's right. This is what I was always supposed to do."

I thought of what Bee had said to me about Da Salle being too big now to be taken down. Was this the next cycle? Was Da Salle and his power circle going to take over the world, subject the world to misery again? If so, he couldn't allow Kaya and the occillite to remain. They would have to be removed.

"Once he is out of the way, we can be together," Kaya said. "But now, I don't have a choice."

I hardly recognized her, the way she spoke all of a sudden. She was like one of the ancient warrior women I had heard of. She put the pendant around her neck and it seemed to glow darkly as it came into contact with her skin. I realized this was who she was meant to become, what the medicine man had meant with her coming full circle.

I went back to the castle, my senses heightened by the threat of imminent danger.

I was so pre-occupied that I didn't notice Simon waiting for me outside as I arrived.

"Hello, dear brother," he said.

He was dressed flamboyantly, as usual, in an embroidered coat with a silk scarf around his neck.

"You've been difficult to get a hold of," I said, wondering what brought him here. I had tried calling him over the past few days, never getting an answer from him.

"I've been waiting for the right time," he said, slowly. I could hear the violence underneath his words. Finally, he was challenging me outright.

"And the time is now?" I asked nonchalantly.

“Indeed.”

He moved quickly, but I was faster, jumping out of the way. He came after me again and this time, he had me on the ground, his claws around my neck. His face was distorted with hatred and bloodlust. I could see how long he had been wanting to kill me and how badly he wanted to do it himself.

“Your time is over, little brother,” he spat at me. “Now, it is my turn.”

I couldn’t speak as he tightened his grip on my throat. He was so much older and stronger than me and I had little time left to outsmart him. Fortunately, I had Kaya’s t-shirt in my pocket. I had put on gloves to handle it, aware of the incredible risk I took but I’d had a feeling it could come in useful and she had not objected to me taking it.

I now took the t-shirt and rubbed it in Simon’s face.

He gave a shriek of horror and fell back, taking his hands from my neck as he tried to get the cloth with the traces of occillite off his face. I had very little time, grabbing my custom-made pistol with the silver bullets, pointing it at his heart and pulling the trigger.

Simon fell down, an expression of shock on his face.

He had not expected this.

“You won’t... win,” he muttered. “She... has to die.”

“What?” Did he mean Kaya?

“She is too... strong. Her child...rule...all worlds.”

These were Simon's last words. I had to burn the body to ensure he was not able to regenerate. I carried Simon into the woods, then set fire to his body. I stood back and watched it burn, feeling the weight of my actions, the taking of a life, even though I'd had no choice.

Page 59

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I pondered his words, finally understanding that it was Kaya that Da Salle was after. The powerful female line, going back to her mother, the Native American witch who had fled with what could be the last occillite her tribe had. Did Da Salle have a vision that she was going to come for him? Had he tried to get rid of her before?

All of this struck me as likely.

I needed to help Kaya. No matter how powerful she was. I couldn't let her walk into all of this alone.

Chapter 25

Kaya

As soon as Jack left, I took a bottle of whiskey over to Tamara's place. It was the middle of the night but I needed to talk to her. It was urgent.

I banged on the door until she opened.

"What's going on?" She opened the door, looking disheveled. She had obviously fallen asleep on the sofa. She reeked of alcohol and was clearly still drunk.

"What do you want?" she asked me. "It's the middle of the fucking night!"

"I need your help," I said. "There is literally no-one else I can ask. There is no single member of the tribe left. You are the only one."

Tamara stared at me with bloodshot eyes.

“Ah... fuck off,” she said, trying to push me out the door.

Something came over me. It had something to do with this woman, the last known member of my mother’s tribe refusing to honor her people and our tribe. She was the only one with the knowledge I needed. I couldn’t search for this stuff on the internet.

“Who are you to turn me away?” I thundered at her.

“Who are you to refuse me knowledge?”

“Why are you denying your ancestors?”

I am not sure where the words came from, but they must have worked because she stopped moving, and started staring at me, her mouth slack.

“Who... who... are you?” she asked in a small voice.

“It’s Kaya, Tamara, you know me,” I said impatiently. “Look, I’ve got the occillite, I am wearing it as you told me to,” I took the stone out from under my top to show it to her.

She was muttering words now that I didn’t understand but knew to be from the tribe language.

“You’ve got to help me, Tamara, I don’t know the ways of my people. You are the only one who knows.”

She blinked, I wasn’t sure she understood.

“When the sho’qa’i had to take on some bad people or spirits. What would they do? To prepare? To plan?”

“The sho’qa’i?”

Tamara sat down on the sofa, sinking away into the cushions. She muttered again to herself.

“Tamara, think!”

“They would wait for the dark moon,” she said. “Best time to deal with evil spirits, to banish darkness.”

The dark moon? When the hell was that?

“They fasted, didn’t eat anything and went away to be alone to focus the mind.”

That sounded a lot like how I prepared for my work as an assassin when the time came to execute a plan. I would withdraw to some quiet place, go over the details and plan out all eventualities.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“Sometimes, they drank a special potion, to talk to the spirits,” she said.

But I didn’t want that. I needed my senses sharp.

“I am going after a very bad man,” I told her. “He may be a vampire pretending to be human.”

Tamara shook her head and muttered more. “Too strong,” she said. “Too strong.”

I nodded and got up. “Maybe, but I am going to try.”

“Wait!” she said and went off into a drawer, looking for something, handing me something slim. It looked like a letter opener.

“Silver knife,” she shrugged. “Could come in handy.”

The knife was dull and ornamental. It hardly inspired confidence but I took it anyway.

As I opened the front door, she said, “It is dark moon in two weeks. That is the best time. Good luck.”

I went home, packed a few things, got my bags with weapons and headed north.

I bought supplies at a small shop along the way, then had breakfast at a spot off the highway. I needed to make a few calls before I turned into remote mountain country. I left messages for Fuzz and Tina, apologizing for my sudden disappearance.

Then I called Josie.

“Hey, what’s up?” she asked.

“I need you to get me everything you can on Leo Da Salle,” I said.

“Why?”

I trusted Josie but the less she knew about all of this, the better.

“It’s dangerous,” I said.

“I’ll say,” she snorted. “He’s just about the biggest prick in the West and East, pretty much all over,” she paused, “I’ve heard a rumor he may be running for president.”

Jesus, I thought.

“Just get me whatever you can find on him,” I said, “and his movements for the next month. I’ll call again in a couple of days.”

“Kaya? What’s going on?”

I didn’t want to talk much more but I couldn’t leave my friend hanging.

“Look, there is more to him than meets the eye, ok?”

“How?”

“I think he’s one of them,” I said.

“One of...oh..” she said, catching on. “But... how is he able to act, all human-like?”

Go out in the middle of the day, eat food, all that?”

“But does he, eat? I mean, he could be pushing food around on a plate,” I said. “And you know there are things they can take for that.”

Jack had told me about this.

“I did see a dossier recently...” Josie’s voice trailed away. “All about power dynamics in the US and how things are changing politically. Just like elsewhere in the world. Shifting away from the moderates,” her voice was uneasy. “There is talk of greater regulation from the state, taxes and stricter controls.”

“What’s been happening in New York?”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“It’s the wealthiest city in the country in the most prosperous state,” Josie said.

“Some people say it is like a country, all independent-like,” she laughed uneasily.

“I’ll call again in a couple of days,” I said, ending the call.

My last phone call was to Jack. He didn’t pick up.

I simply sent a text: I love you x

Then I headed off the highway and into mountain country. It had been a long time since I had been back here but everything still looked so much the same. When I came to live in the town, I still sometimes went back by myself, but it was never the same. There were so many memories here. I found the dirt track that led to Sheriff and Aunt Stephanie’s place and had to slow down because the track had become so bad, full of boulders and ditches that could wreck the car. I parked my truck out of sight in a grove of trees behind the house.

Then I headed to their place to see what was left of it.

It was a ruin, though.

The roof had fallen in. Most of the furniture was gone and what was left had rotted through or fallen apart. There were signs of animal habitation and there were insects everywhere. I carefully walked around the place, not wanting to step through a hole. My room had been the little space at the back, not so much a room as a kind of closet space but it had been big enough for a bed. There was nothing here now.

I remembered the red crocheted bed spread that Aunt Stephanie had made for me and the bright curtains she'd hung here. She had tried so hard to create a happy space for me and it had worked. It was all because of her that I had managed to turn out not completely messed up.

I headed back outside, heaving a heavy pack onto my back.

Then I headed into the mountains, via a track that had completely overgrown in the years since I'd been there last. I had a tent with me and some provisions, not a lot, because I wanted to stay sharp and focused. It was cold but there was no snow and I fell into a fast rhythm, walking up and around the ridge, through the valley. I made a campsite next to the river and slept by the fire, holding the occillite all night long. It was warm in my hand, like a living thing.

The next day, I crossed the river, holding the pack over my head, losing my footing once and getting completely drenched in the process. But I kept walking and at the end of the day, I was on the slopes of what my father used to call Second Peak.

Home.

I looked for any sign of our shack but there was nothing. I knew the view from the front porch and kept turning around every so often to compare my memory to what was there, but I couldn't seem to find the place. Finally, I realized that the trees must have grown in the twenty odd years since I'd been there last. I needed to go down and to my left, and that was when I found it. Our little cabin or what remained of it.

Like Sheriff's house, it was pretty much ruined but the walls still stood and the porch was sound. My mother used to sit here peeling potatoes while my brother played in the dirt and I made little dolls of grass.

I put down my pack and walked around, immersing myself in my memories. Things

came back to me, like my father chopping wood and giving me the axe, showing me how to split the logs, telling me that girls were as strong as boys were.

It felt like I was walking on hallowed ground.

I walked inside and saw the walls were blackened from the smoke of the fire. Twenty years later, the memories of that night could still be seen seared into the walls. Had our attacker set our house on fire or was it the stove that had fallen over? I couldn't remember but everything had been burnt.

I went outside to look for a good place to camp. I set up my tent and got wood for a fire. Then I made coffee.

"I am here," I said out loud. "I am back."

"Talk to me."

Chapter 26

Jack

It was quiet on the castle grounds.

After I burned the body, I called Zoran and summoned my security detail to meet me at my car. I established who was inside. Ulrika along with two guests and three bodyguards. I told my guards to go inside and get rid of the guards as quietly as possible. Zoran and one of the others were to come with me.

I caught expressions of surprise on their faces.

They weren't used to me as a man of action, of violence but I had been reasonable

and sensible for long enough. The time had come for me to be ruthless and face my enemies. They were coming for Kaya and I was not going to sit back and let it all happen to us.

I entered the living room and as soon as Ulrika saw me she jumped up. The expression of shock on her face was unmistakable.

“Where is Simon?” she gasped.

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“Good evening, Ulrika,” I said pleasantly enough. “I am fine, thank you. How are you?”

Next to her sat her brother, Thern Gustafson and another family member. I took out my weapon and killed Thern with a shot to the heart. The other one leapt into the air, but Zoran felled him quickly.

Ulrika stared around her in shock.

My guards came in to take the bodies out. “Burn them,” I said.

“Where is Simon?” she demanded to know.

I walked over to her and sat down.

“Please sit,” I invited her courteously.

“What is going on?!” she cried, a note of hysteria creeping into her voice.

“Simon is dead,” I said, in the same tone of voice.

Her eyes narrowed in hate. “You fucking bastard!” She sneered at me. “You killed him!”

“Well, it was me or him,” I said.

“But how did you... I mean...”

“No,” I said. “That is not what I want to talk about.”

She stared at me. “My father will...”

“I don’t care about your fucking father or his stupid, fucking family!”

That shut her up.

“All I want to know is what Da Salle promised you.”

A knowing look flashed through her eyes.

“It’s too late. Nobody can stop us now. It is our time again. Soon, we will have all the power!”

Ulrika couldn’t help herself. She started gloating about how the world was slowly being taken over by vampires, while the humans were busy worrying about climate change and carbon footprints. She said all the major organizations and institutes of power would be taken over by vampires, most of them hidden and, soon, laws would be changed to allow blood servitude again.

“Not here,” I said. “I’m going to stop Da Salle.”

“You can’t,” she gloated. “He’s already stronger than even the oldest of us. He has been taking a specially formulated protein steroid that has increased his intelligence and mind control. Nothing can stop him!” her eyes sparkled with glee.

“Perhaps occillite can?” I said, to see her reaction.

She blinked a few times. “You don’t... I mean you wouldn’t...” then realization dawned. “Ah, of course, that girlie of yours, that witch! She’s got her hands on some

has she? It won't work."

"Why not?"

"She won't get in the door. He's had people watching her for years," she smiled nastily at me. "She's like a cockroach, hard to kill but not impossible. He's come close, hasn't he? The moment she enters New York, the monitors will pick her up and she will be neutralized."

"You underestimate her. Like you've underestimated me, for years," I said, taking out my gun, holding it casually.

"You've been trying to get rid of me for years," I said.

"Please!" she spat out the word. "If we'd wanted that, we'd have done it. But we needed to keep you occupied here, so we could play in Europe. Simon was supposed to take over now but I could do it, I guess," she said with a shrug. I saw that she hadn't cared about him at all. It was all a game to her, a chess board of pawns and pieces. You lost the bishop, no bother, you simply employed the horse.

"I don't think so," I said, pointing the gun at her face and pulling the trigger. The bullet entered between her eyes and she collapsed in the chair.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I would deal with the Gustafson family later.

The Gustafson clan could be a problem, but I would take care of them. I told Zoran to get more men to protect the castle and to add additional cameras to the peripheral areas. I didn't know what Da Salle was planning and if he was thinking about finding me here, I wanted to be prepared.

After the castle was clean and tidy again, the bodies removed, I had some blood to replenish my system. I actually asked for ethically sourced human blood this time, as I could feel my system lagging. I needed as much strength as possible. All of this was stressful.

I worried about Kaya and what she was walking into.

I had no idea where she was, but I could feel that she was far away. I had gotten her message and while it reassured me in terms of our feelings, I was by no means certain that she was up to this fight.

The fact that Da Salle was building himself up into some kind of super being was deeply worrying.

My phone rang.

It was Marcello. I had not spoken to him in some time, mindful of his compromised situation but it would be good to get a lay of the land.

“Ah, Jack, good to hear your voice. You had me worried!”

“Oh?”

“I spoke to Van Patten yesterday, he said you had some private issue that needed dealing with? Nothing serious, I hope?”

He was fishing, I thought, trying to find out what was going on.

“Some personal business, that’s all.”

“Of course, yes. I was wondering if you had a chance to look at that proposal that Martin had about the merger in South America?”

“Not yet, no. But I don’t think it’s the time to think about mergers. We need to calm the markets. I think we’ll be taking a hit in Europe due to the floods. I have asked for a report on cost estimates for rebuilding the hotels in the Mediterranean.”

“But the revenue coming in from the entertainment sector outside New York this quarter is significant. It does paint a different picture, don’t you think?”

I didn’t comment on that. I wasn’t going to be pulled in on the New York situation.

There was silence on the line.

“Are you quite all right?” Marcello suddenly asked.

“Of course, why do you ask?”

“You sound... a little different,” he said.

“Mmm...” I said, as if I found his comments interesting. “I have to go, is there anything else?”

“Eh... no... I suppose not.”

It occurred to me that he had not expected me to be alive.

He had called to check if everything had gone according to plan with their execution of me. My entire board had been turned against me.

I told the guards to search the rooms for anything suspicious, and to sweep for listening devices and anything out of the ordinary. Including the garages and cars.

I went into my father's study and switched on the light.

I never came in here.

It was always the place where my father had worked. My office, on the other end of the castle in my own quarters, had been where I had worked ever since I needed a desk and my own computer.

My father's study had huge bookshelves and deep carpets, leather sofas and a fireplace, that right now, was cold and dark. My father had liked a fire, even though he could not get physical comfort from it.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I could see him sitting in his chair now, playing with his favorite fountain pen. He'd not liked the computer age, the cellphones and the internet, preferring to go old school, as he put it.

But he had been on earth for three hundred years and he had seen a lot of change happening in his lifetime. Even though he'd agreed with the view that vampires were superior, he did think that human beings were more than food or a source of sustenance. "They are our former selves," he had said, "ones we need to protect."

He was old-fashioned but he believed that human beings, like children, were subjected to strong feelings and desires that clouded their minds and rendered them incapable of thinking clearly.

We were unencumbered by such weaknesses, our minds remained sharp and nimble. But we needed humans as much as they needed us, he always said. "They bring the joy," he would say.

I had been influenced much by my father's thinking but I had also had my own opinions. Before the War, life had been violent and tumultuous. The families had always been at each other's throats, feuding across centuries. There was never any peace and no one could afford to lean back and rest for fear of a knife in the back. In addition, human beings were being sacrificed and treated inhumanely, causing an uprising by some of the stronger humans, which eventually escalated into full-scale war.

After the War, I enjoyed the peace that came to the world. I liked being able to run my business and build our empire, and I enjoyed the company of humans. Whenever

I encountered the arrogant and haughty old families, like the Gustafson's, I felt unease, knowing full well that they did not like the new order of things. I suspected they would break the law if no one was watching.

When my father told me that Simon was to marry into that family, I could see he did not approve but he said it would help us strengthen our family's rise in the new world.

He'd also been more ruthless in his younger days.

As he'd grown older, he wanted to see us settled. He thought Simon's match was a good one, strategically.

"But for you, my boy, I see a love match."

It was unconventional talk for the times. He'd told me, though, that he'd made a love match and that he wouldn't change a thing. Even though she had grown old and died, all in the wink of an eye.

"Wait for love," he said. "Even if it takes a lifetime."

It hadn't taken quite that long but, now that I had found Kaya, I didn't want to lose her. Especially not to a power hungry beast like Da Salle.

I needed to put some steps into place.

I called Van Patten and told him of my new idea.

"Oh, and Max?"

"Yes?"

“Get some more security for yourself and your family. You’ll need it.”

Chapter 27

Kaya

Da Salle was almost impossible to get to.

Almost.

It took me a while to come up with a plan and it was by no means infallible. In fact, there was a big chance I wouldn’t succeed. I had only two days to execute the plan, if I wanted to act according to the Native American astrological chart.

And I did.

When I came down from the mountain, slightly light-headed from the lack of food and the vast amounts of coffee I’d been drinking, the only person I talked to was Josie.

She had to be my back-up on this.

“You’re right,” she told me as I drove away from the place I’d called home for the first fourteen years of my life, a landscape that had shaped me in more ways than I’d realized.

“If you’re going to do this, you’re going to need help.”

She had accessed Da Salle’s diary and was able to tell me when he was going where. Basically, he would only leave the building where he lived and worked, to go to the airport to fly to Washington on Friday. The two days before that would be the best to

get hold of him.

But that meant breaching the Skyline, one of the city's most impenetrable buildings.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

It was over 100 stories tall, with the bottom floors rented out as offices and workspaces. Then there were private apartments and a hotel, which Da Salle used to put up his business associates. The top couple of floors were his private residence with an indoor pool, gym, cinema complex and a golf driving range, as well as a helicopter pad.

He never had to leave the Skyline and rarely did.

Security was tight, there was a whole floor with his private army, who were on standby at all times. In the control room, there were monitors watching every exit and entrance with individual guards scrutinizing them. It would be best to try to confront him outside the building but I couldn't risk being in too closely confined spaces with him.

Da Salle had a wife called Deborah and two daughters, Crystal and Danielle. They lived with him, each with their own floor. They also worked for him, Crystal was in charge of a construction business, and Danielle ran a fitness and health racket. She was married and had two small children, with their own nannies. My plan was to take the place of one of these nannies, a young woman called Esti. She came in every morning with her own key card and went up to the 70th floor, after which Danielle would take off. Esti looked a bit like me, she had dark hair and a small frame, and Josie had established she was from an immigrant family that was dependent on Da Salle for their residency.

If Da Salle was as powerful as I thought he was, I would not have a large window of opportunity. I would have to strike when I had an opening. I may not make it back alive.

This didn't bother me. Part of my training had prepared me to live in the moment and focus all my attention on the task at hand, going all in, no matter what the cost was. I had spent my days in the mountains, training and strengthening not only my body, but also my mind. Clarifying my mission and my commitment to the plan. Which was one hundred percent.

There was no room for error and I was prepared to accept that it would take all I had. This was acceptable to me. In many ways, this was what my life had been for, I realized. This was the job I was meant to do. The task I was kept alive for. The white crows had been waiting for me to see this, I was convinced of it.

I drove to New York, stopping outside the city to switch cars and change my appearance. I needed to take precautions. I didn't know if he was watching me but I had to act like he was. This is why I didn't take the usual measures. Instead, I went into a parking lot and stole a random car, switching the plates with a car from the workshop in Hawston.

I put up my hair and pulled down a baseball cap, then I drove into the city, ready to keep my head down for any security cameras. I left my phone behind. I had my backpack and, around my neck, the occillite pendant.

On Tuesday night, I arrived in Brooklyn, outside Esti's parents' house. I waited for her to exit the subway and convinced her to talk to me in my car. She listened to what I had to say and reacted as I thought she would, with fear and shock. I showed her the money and took my biggest gamble so far.

"You know he has to be stopped."

And she knew. She bowed her head, tears running down her cheeks.

"Only he will be harmed, I promise you. I won't hurt the children or anyone else but

you will have to help me.”

So, she did.

She gave me her access card and told me how to get in the building, how to act once I was on the 70th floor, she warned me about Da Salle’s head of security, who I may walk into.

The next morning, I entered the Skyline, dressed in clothes that Esti usually wore. My hair was cut shorter like hers. I scanned her ID and smiled at the security the way she always did. All went well as I got into the elevator, when a man got in also, looking at me sideways, saying, “Hola Esti.”

My Spanish is rudimentary at best, but I gave a big smile and said “Hola!” He said something else in Spanish, and I smiled and nodded, making affirmative sounds. He got off on the 50th floor and I made my way to the 70th. The elevator opened on Danielle’s floor. Esti had told me Danielle was often on her way already, I made sure to be a few minutes late, to minimize the amount of time she would have to chat.

“There you are!” The tall, well-groomed woman came tottering towards me on high heels. “She’s real crabby, be warned!” A waft of perfume greeted me as she grabbed a handbag and sunglasses, babbling about baby formula and I went to the baby’s room, seeing the crib and the little girl standing up, holding onto the rails.

She is a cute little thing, I almost thought. Then I remembered she had the monster’s blood in her veins.

Danielle came in, blowing kisses to say goodbye and left. I made sure she was gone, then checked on the housekeeper in the kitchen doing dishes. Then I went back to the nursery, picked the baby up and took the dropper with the sedative from my bag, a few drops is all it took to knock her out right away.

I put her down in her little bed, covered her carefully and made sure she was safe and warm. Then I called out to the housekeeper, “Just popping out to the store, she’s sleeping!” and left before the housekeeper could say anything.

In the elevator, I got the weapons ready, turning my back on the camera. It was just before seven and I went up to the gym, where Da Salle starts his day with a workout. He should be finished by now, I wanted to surprise him if possible. When the elevator door opened, I had my dart guns ready and fired at two men standing right outside. They crumpled right way, incapacitated for at least a few hours. I made my way through the large gym, which was empty.

I ran past the rowing machines and treadmills ignoring the magnificent view of the city. Before I walked into the bathroom, I took the pendant and rubbed the occillite all over my hands and arms, even my face. I heard the sound of a bag being zipped, some words were spoken that I couldn’t make out; I took out my favorite handgun and stepped into the bathroom.

It was filled with steam making it hard to see anything. It threw me for a moment and that was all it took for me to lose the upper hand. As I adjusted to the low visibility, he came at me, throwing me against the tiles. It knocked the wind from me and I slumped to the floor, momentarily stunned.

He came out of the steam, completely naked, grinning like a maniac.

“Kaya, we finally meet! What a pleasure!”

He knew I was coming, I realized.

“God! Do you know how long I have waited for this moment?”

I could only stare at him as he took a towel and started rubbing himself down, taking

elaborate care with his prick and making sure I took in the sight of his body. I was too disgusted to pay attention.

“I must say, you are gorgeous. Of course, you were pretty even as a little thing. But tough! Fucking hell, I didn’t realize you would be such a fighter. Even more so than your father! He was a puppy compared to you!”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I was trying to make sense of his words. “Then later, I tried to get to you in Vermont, but the magic was already growing stronger in you, the forces aligning. I knew I had to wait for you to come to me and here you are! Finally!”

I didn’t have a lot of energy to move but I had been prepared for this eventuality. I managed to slide my silver-tipped dagger into my hand, releasing it from the wrist hold. I waited for his attention to slide, as he turned to put on his clothes and summoned all my energy, I pulled myself up and threw the silver letter opener into his back.

He jerked upright and flew around. His face darkened in anger, I saw his eyes turn red, his skin became mottled.

“What?! What have you done? You bitch!” He fell to his knees, but he wasn’t dying, I could see it wasn’t enough. He was too strong for the silver or perhaps not enough had entered his bloodstream. I grabbed hold of the pendant, getting ready to throw it at him, but he held up a hand.

“Wait,” he said, his breath ragged. He fumbled in his pants pocket and held up a phone screen.

“You touch me, he gets it,” he said, bringing up a picture of Jack on his phone. He had been tied up and looked unconscious.

I was shocked and confused by this development.

“Jack?”

Da Salle gave a lopsided smile, contorted by pain. “He came after you, tried to help you, I suppose. Fool. You were the only one who ever stood a chance in stopping me. Did you know that? I have been waiting for the chance to do it for decades and now, here you are. It’s our destiny.”

There was a gun in his hand and he fired it at me before I could grab hold of the pendant. Before my eyes, he transformed into the bear of my dreams, bringing only darkness.

Chapter 28

Jack

Kaya called me after about a week, asking me how much cash I could come up with at a short notice. I told her about the safe at the castle and the stacks of money that had been stored there for centuries. She told me of her plan and I met her with a bag of notes outside Hawston.

She looked better than ever, lean and strong. Her manner was focused, almost distant.

I didn’t ask what she had been doing in the mountains, I could see she had been preparing for the mission.

“I wish you’d let me help,” I said, as I handed over the money.

“It’s easier this way,” she said.

She gave a little smile. “But if you want to help, it would be good to keep Da Salle distracted, give him some work problems or something, so he doesn’t see me coming.”

This aligned perfectly with my own thinking.

I was in the process of dissolving the Topaz Group board, using some fine print in the company bylaws to stake my claim. I had put a plan in place that accused all of the board members of conflict of interest and legal breaches, not acting in the best interests of the company and undermining me. I had sought meetings with the remaining shareholders of the company, of which there was now only one. With Simon and Ulrika gone, the only shareholders were myself and Flora's granddaughter, Elizabeth, an oncologist in the city, who had very little interest in business. She always supported me in the business no matter what I did. With her backing, I would have the legal backing to kick all of the board members out and if that didn't get Da Salle's attention, I'd be surprised.

It felt good to take action. It almost felt like going into battle, although this was a different kind of fight.

Max gave me a call and said he had some papers for me to sign, and asked if he could come to the castle. He came within the hour and I let him in, excited to see my plans coming to fruition.

He parked his car and came towards me.

I noticed that his gait was somehow different.

As I was watching him coming towards me, his outlines started to blur and his shape changed. Right in front of me, he became someone else.

To my shock, the man standing in front of me was far bigger and more muscular.

It was Da Salle.

“Not expecting me, then?” Da Salle said and laughed.

I couldn’t believe he’d mastered the skinwalking skills, which had always belonged to the dark arts, the others.

“What do you want?” I asked, keeping my voice loud and firm.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

“Oh, I think you know,” Da Salle said, coming closer, slowly. “But I’ve had enough of your games. I kept you around, to keep tabs on Kaya but you’re becoming annoying.”

“The board...”

“Oh, please!” Da Salle became irritated. “The board is fine, nobody knows anything of your hair-brained schemes!”

“But...” I thought of how he had become Max van Patten and wondered how long that had been the case.

“When I spoke to Max earlier?”

Da Salle laughed. “Yes, not him, obviously. Glad to see you’re catching on. Not so stupid after all! Now, it’s time to get back to the city.” Da Salle looked at his watch. “Almost time for Kaya to set her plan into motion. We don’t want to be late for that!”

I tried to get away but he was too fast for me, pinning me down and tying me up with silver wire, which burned into my skin with searing pain.

“I am sorry about this,” he said, sounding genuinely sorry. “But it will be over soon enough. I just need you to distract Kaya, then I’ll put both of you out of your misery.”

“It’s... all... about her?” I was struggling to speak due to the pain. Da Salle easily dragged me to the boot of his car.

“Of course! The only thing that can stop the Waná?ca is the sho’qa’i,”

“The what?”

“The Waná?ca? The beast or the bear.”

Da Salle told me he had gotten rid of every Native American medicine man or woman over the past fifty years to ensure there was no one able to stop him. Once he transitioned as a vampire, he started taking extra drugs to make himself even stronger and more indefensible.

“I am going to do to the country what I did in New York,” he said. “It is going to be the finest empire in the world. The richest, the most prosperous and the most fabulous!”

“What about the humans?”

“What about them?” Da Salle shrugged. “If we left it to them, our world would become uninhabitable in ten years! The atmosphere would be unbreathable and the earth would be barren. The world is heading for extinction anyway!”

He banged the boot closed and we drove off.

I found myself growing weaker and I must have lost consciousness because suddenly the car stopped and the boot was opened.

Da Salle appeared with a camera and a flash went off.

“Smile for the camera!”

Then he slammed the boot shut again.

I heard him talking to others and they walked off.

I had to get out of here and warn Kaya somehow.

The silver was burning into my skin but I was able to loosen the hold on my wrists and ease my hands out. Opening the boot was less problematic, a good couple of kicks did the trick. I clambered out of the car and saw I was in a parking lot, presumably in his building, the Skyline.

I went over to the elevator and saw the numbers going up all the way to the top. I figured that was where he was heading.

I pressed the elevator number and waited for it to come down. When it opened, it was filled with guards and I was unprepared for the fight that ensued. My head was still jumbled and my limbs were slow but I managed to grab one of their handguns and shoot them, even though I took a few hits as well.

These were mortals though. The shots killed them, while my injuries were less severe. I had a bullet in my shoulder and another had passed through my right arm. It was painful but hardly lethal. I gathered the guns and dragged the men out of the elevator, then headed up.

It opened at one of the top floors. The place was empty and looked like a gym. Two men were lying on the floor. They appeared to have been shot. I could feel Kaya's presence as well as an urgency that meant something was happening to her. She was in danger. When I heard the shot I was on the other end of the room inspecting the weights section. I ran over in the direction of the gunshot sound as Da Salle came from the bathroom. There was blood on his shirt and he seemed to be limping but he was walking.

He stopped when he saw me.

“You, again,” he said drily. “I was just about to finish you off.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I shot him with one of the guards guns and he simply laughed as if I was a fly.

“Those can’t hurt me anymore,” he laughed and flew over to me, taking out a thin, silver dagger.

He was about to fling it at me when he froze mid-air, his face a mask of horror.

A strange gurgling sound came from his mouth and I watched as his face changed color and started to bubble and melt. He fell to his knees, his arms contorted. Behind him, I saw Kaya, covered in blood, leaning against the doorway.

“Kaya!” I ran towards her, catching her as she fell into my arms. I could see she’d lost a lot of blood and needed medical attention right away.

“Get... that...” she pointed at the occillite pendant that had rolled away from Da Salle. It had burnt into his back like acid, dissolving everything in its wake. I took a towel and covered my hand, as protection to pick up the pendant by the leather strap.

“Scared of a little stone?” Kaya smiled weakly at me, taking the stone from me.

Then she asked, “Is he... gone?”

I smiled, “It’s over. You did it.”

“You helped though,” she said, hobbling over to me, holding her side. “Clearly, I’m no longer a one-man band.”

I managed to carry her to the elevator. We made our way down to the parking lot and I hotwired Da Salle's car, driving right through the boom and dodging his army's bullets as they rained down on us.

I knew we wouldn't be able to get out of the city without help.

Glancing over at Kaya, I was shocked to see that she had lost consciousness.

"Kaya, Kaya!" I kept shaking her arm but she didn't wake up.

I didn't have much time.

I called Elizabeth and asked her to help me.

"I'm a cancer specialist!" she said, horrified. "Did you say she's been shot? She needs a trauma physician."

"She has just defeated the biggest cancer of our time," I said. "But I think it has spread all over the city. We can't risk going to any of the hospitals around here. Please, help us."

She didn't hesitate. "Of course, I'll text you an address."

"Hurry!" I said and ended the call.

Chapter 29

Kaya

It was a freezing cold winter.

I couldn't get warm, even though there were huge fires in the fireplaces. The doctors could not explain it. Jack had brought in every specialist to look at me but still he was stumped.

My stomach wound had healed but some kind of poison had leaked into my blood and the infection kept spreading. I was vaguely aware of the conversations going on around me. I could see the worried faces and was aware of people coming to visit. I saw Pearl and Princess, even Josie had come by.

I knew I was at the castle in Jack's quarters.

In moments of lucidity he told me about how the world had changed all because of me. The fall of Da Salle had led to all kinds of investigations and tribunals, uncovering infiltration of the highest level of government. The president had been impeached and the vice-president had been sworn into power. She had ordered an overhaul of the whole political system.

"She?"

"We have a female president," Jack laughed and held my hand.

He was worried though. I could see new lines on his face, even his hair was going gray, which I hadn't known was possible.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

One evening as I woke up from a slumber, I heard one of the doctors talking to Jack and it was his voice that caught my attention.

“No! I will hear no more on this! I will not talk to her about it! That is the last time we’ll talk of this!”

I asked him about it later.

“What don’t you want to talk to me about?”

He tried to laugh it off and I saw the desperation in his face.

“I’m not getting better, is that it?”

He couldn’t lie to me.

“The doctors worry because your infection count keeps rising. We bring it under control but then it goes up again.”

It was a kind of blood infection and the blood infusions I was getting were only bringing temporary relief.

“What did the doctor suggest?” I asked

Jack didn’t want to tell me.

“It’s a procedure but it’s too dangerous.”

“What is it?”

He shook his head.

“Jack!”

“If you... turned into a vampire...” he turned away unable to finish his sentence.

“Then... I’d live?”

He nodded.

“But you would no longer be human. Do you understand? That part of your life would be over.”

“But we would be together until the end?”

He nodded and I could see it in his eyes, his secret wish for us never to be parted.

Since coming back, he’d been by my side every day.

He’d resigned as CEO of the company, handing over control to Max who knew the business inside out anyway. He was still a shareholder but he had lost interest in the running of the company. He told me he could not think of anything else. That he wanted to be with me as much as possible, for as long as possible.

He didn’t say it but he meant until the end. It seemed that wasn’t far off at this point. I could feel the life draining away from me and I didn’t like it.

I had liked feeling strong and powerful. The kind of woman who could take down a monster like Da Salle. After his death, a special inquiry had found that there were

several like him in positions of power, not only here, but in the rest of the world. The new president had asked Jack to help in identifying and monitoring individual behaviors to ensure nobody, vampire or otherwise, was able to rise to such power again.

I could see Jack wanted to become more involved at this political level of government. The new president had talked about a special seat, perhaps a cabinet role for him. This was what Jack was born to do, to be a part of the new world order and I wanted to be by his side.

I had seen myself there in visions that had taken over my dreams at night, in which we had children, our own offspring. I wanted to continue my mother's line and I had a dream of a little girl, very much like myself, who had the sho'qa'i blood. Because even though Da Salle had been defeated, we didn't know if there were any others like him. It seemed likely, even probable.

One day, when Jack was out, I went looking for the one doctor I liked best. I said I wanted to speak to him and told him of my wish to become pregnant.

He shook his head.

"I don't know if I'd recommend that at this time. Your body is very weak and a pregnancy could be life threatening."

Page 70

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I told him I wanted to conceive naturally and try to carry the child as long as possible. Hopefully, giving birth, before becoming a vampire.

He seemed intrigued. “We would have to have plenty of blood stores to keep you going.”

Jack was not crazy about the idea either.

“What if you die in the process? Then I lose both you and the child?”

“I am dying, anyway,” I said. “But this way, at least we try for a child. Wouldn’t that be something?”

Of course it would.

I knew he wouldn’t deny me this.

We waited for my body to grow a bit stronger, then monitored my cycle and on the best possible night for fertilization, I had our bedroom turned into a romantic haven.

We’d not had sex since I’d been shot, not because I didn’t want to but I had been too ill. But I was feeling stronger, possibly because I was excited about what could happen. I dressed myself carefully and combed out my hair. I had roses and candles set up in the room.

Jack came in, longing and want in his eyes.

“This will be different,” I said. “But it can still be wonderful, which is how it’s always been, right?”

He nodded and I knew he was thinking that this could be the last time we made love. I didn’t want to think about that though. I lifted the night dress over my head and reveled in the look of desire I saw in his eyes. He touched me gently, caressing my skin.

“Don’t,” I warned him. “I’m not dead yet.” I put my arms around his neck and pulled him close, kissing him and he responded even though I could feel him holding back. I bit his lip, hard enough to draw blood. He pulled back, confused.

“Don’t you dare be gentle with me!” I said, slapping his cheek, just sharply enough to wake him up. “I want you to fuck me the way you used to.”

I could see him responding to my words, the way I was talking to him.

“I don’t want gentle lovemaking. I want you to ride me, to spread me open, to put your seed deep, deep inside of me, where it can grow and flower.”

A cry of desire escaped from him as he kissed me then, his tongue seeking mine as he pushed me against the wall. It had the urgency and the passion of our earlier couplings. It felt the way we used to be with each other. He lifted me up onto a table and I wrapped my legs around his waist. His hands cupped my breasts, rough and hard, his thumbs rubbing my nipples, sending ripples of agonizing delight through my body.

“Yes, yes, yes!” I cried out as his hands slid over my skin and he kissed my neck and shoulders, moving down my body, his hands slipping up my thighs, opening me up like a flower. He kissed the inside of my thighs, licking and biting, tickling me until he found my pearl of desire, pulsating in eager anticipation of his touch. He licked

and sucked, flicking my clitoris with his tongue as I writhed in agony, loving the pleasure that was building inside of me, wanting it to last as long as possible. He slid up against me, pressing soft kisses on my belly then sucking on my breasts until the nipples were hard as little pebbles. He continued kissing me slowly as he entered me, his cock mirroring his tongue, probing deeper and deeper as I was riding the waves of pleasure, until, cresting at the top with a moan of bliss, I came and he moved with me, climaxing at the same time.

“Oh, my God!” I said and he looked at me, anxiously.

“You all right?”

“That was...wonderful,” I said, feeling sated and content. He carried me to the bed and crept in next to me, holding me.

“Not too much?”

“Oh, Jack, too much is never enough.”

We laughed and I didn’t even notice when I fell asleep.

It was only later that I heard that my blood pressure fell during the night and I almost slipped into a coma. I was given several units of blood that night and a drip had to be inserted as well.

But a couple of weeks later the pregnancy was confirmed.

It had taken.

The next few months were difficult. Growing a new life was more strenuous than I’d realized it would be. I felt weak most days and was too weak to get up. Towards the

second trimester, I was getting daily infusions of blood.

Jack was anxious, desperate for me to receive the vampire blood. He felt my life was more important than the baby's but I would not, could not, let go of my belief in the child.

The last few weeks, I was hardly conscious, unable to eat.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

The baby was growing though. Her heartbeat was strong and she was thriving. She was taking all of me to live and, in a way, I thought that was right. I could have died to let her live and I would have but I couldn't do that to Jack.

The doctors wanted to wait as long as possible but Jack had a neo-natal station installed in the room next to mine and when the time came, I was induced and the baby was born. I knew little about it, regrettably. By this time I had almost no energy left.

I saw them lift the tiny body and place her in the glass cage. I heard the beeping and the medical devices and then Jack's face came closer.

"Are you ready?" he asked me. "Are you sure?"

I couldn't respond except to squeeze his hand as hard as possible as I felt him lying down next to me, kissing my neck. Then I felt the cold, sharp edge of his fangs as they touched my skin.

I must have passed out then because when I woke up next, I felt completely different. I blinked my eyes and Jack was there in the room, rushing towards me.

"Kaya?"

"Where is she? Where is my baby?"

I couldn't think of anything else. "Is she okay?"

The doctor appeared behind Jack with our little girl, beautifully wrapped in the softest baby blanket.

“She’s perfect,” Jack said, placing her in my arms.

Our baby looked up at me with beautiful brown eyes, the same as my mother’s and I knew I was going to give her the same name. Jack sat down on the bed and looked at both of us with a look of adoration and love.

“It worked then?” I asked him.

He nodded. “As all your plans do, my darling. I don’t think I will ever doubt you, ever again.”

He kissed me and I felt a rush of enthusiasm for our new life, together, the three of us. I felt the strength in my new body, the energy that was flowing through me, like light. I was stronger and I felt more alive than ever before. This was what I had been meant to be all along, I thought. I no longer felt broken or sad about my family and what had happened to me.

I had been transformed from that sad little girl into this, a mother and a lover, my best self. I had finally become what I was meant to be all along.

Happy.

Bonus chapter

Jack

I had everything, well, almost everything.

In many ways, my life was perfect now. I had a family; a beautiful daughter and a woman who loved me. We had more than enough money. The business was thriving in my absence and I was doing work that I truly enjoyed as a Special Advisor to the president.

But I did not have a wife. Kaya and I weren't married.

"But it's like we're married!" she'd laugh whenever I raised the point. She was right of course. It wasn't about our relationship either.

Since she had become a vampire after giving birth to Monica, our life together was wonderful. She was stronger and all the issues that had plagued her as a human were gone. There were no more headaches or nightmares. She was born to be a vampire, truly, the lifestyle suited her. She became more vital and energetic. She became even more athletic and chose to hunt animals for her blood supply. Our estate was overrun with deer and she kept the numbers down.

Kaya was more beautiful than ever.

She was a great mother and Monica was so much like her. She had the same willfulness and the stubborn streak that I'd loved in Kaya from the beginning but Monica also had a watchfulness about her that did not come from Kaya, who was too impetuous and impatient.

Now that Kaya was no longer human, Monica was the last of the female bloodline on her mother's side. She was the last sho'qa'i of the tribe. Monica had Kaya's dark hair and her almond eyes. Her Native American heritage was evident for anyone to see.

We had to protect her from those who would try to kill her, as they'd tried to kill Kaya and murdered her mother.

The sho'qa'i were powerful protectors and in times of danger they came into powers that helped them protect their tribe. Kaya had been able to tap into it when we needed to take down the evil New York Governor Leo da Salle. Since then, there had been no drama at our castle but that didn't mean it wouldn't come. Some uber vampire could want to get their hands on the occillite that we had sealed away in the hidden chamber at the back of the castle. Someone could want to kill Monica because of her lineage.

Zoran kept a tight hold on security and we monitored all visitors. Kaya and Monica never came with me when I left for Washington.

We were careful.

After what we had gone through to get Monica, nothing seemed worth the risk of losing her. But then one day, it was her who asked us, “Why aren’t you married?”

She was only five, but she’d overheard the kitchen staff talking.

Kaya could laugh it off but it bothered me.

I was a bit old-fashioned like that. I wanted to call her my wife, the queen of the castle.

“Am I not the queen of your heart?” she teased me but then she relented and said perhaps we could have a small ceremony, inviting only our dearest and closest friends. It would not be a big fancy affair but we would hold it outside, in the glade by the river, where the daffodils bloomed in spring. I had always thought it would be ideal for a wedding and had hoped that I would one day be able to marry there. The dream had never died, no matter how many obstacles presented themselves.

As our wedding day approached, I became nervous and Kaya was anxious too. We worried about skinwalkers inhabiting one of the guests’ bodies or of vampires sneaking in through the tunnels, one of Simon or Ulrike’s family members coming to avenge their deaths. The Gustafsons had told me they would not forget and a wedding was just the kind of venue they might choose to launch an attack.

I ordered extra security for the castle grounds.

Kaya kept Monica with her at all times, as if she thought faeries might steal her away at any moment, which was not unheard of, of course.

Finally, the day of the wedding arrived.

My company CEO, Max van Patten arrived, along with Kaya's nearest and dearest, her best friend Pearl, whose daughter she had helped raise. Princess was sixteen now and close to Monica. She had almost forgiven me for turning Kaya into a vampire. Josie flew in from Washington and even Elizabeth, my sister's granddaughter, attended.

The guests took their seats as the sun set.

Kaya was a vision in a white satin dress that clung to her figure and shimmered as she moved. Her hair was swept up and she wore no jewelry, just a thin leather band that had once held the occillite that had saved all of us. The leather band was a reminder of who she was or used to be.

We stood in the field of daffodils and said our vows, holding hands.

Then I kissed her, probably our most chaste kiss yet, as the wedding guests clapped and cheered.

It was a moment of pure joy.

And then, Kaya said suddenly, "Where's Monica?!"

She'd been there moments ago, standing with us, dressed in a lovely flower girl outfit. Now she was gone, nowhere to be seen.

"Monica! Monica!" Kaya started screaming, looking for her.

The guests jumped up from their chairs, all looking and calling for Monica.

Everyone knew how precious she was.

I found Zoran, who said he'd go check the security cameras but there had been no breach, no incident from security's side.

I joined Kaya searching for Monica, calling her name and then I saw her, standing at the river.

"Monica!" I swooped down and swept her into my arms.

"Where did you go? We were so worried about you?!"

The little girl seemed unconcerned about the fuss she had caused.

"Grandpa was calling me," she said earnestly.

"Grandpa?" Kaya asked, frowning.

I asked what he looked like and she described my father. But there were pictures of him all over the castle.

Then she said, "He said he wanted to show me his bridge. It was made for children like me, he said."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:48 am

I looked at Kaya. “That’s true. My father did build a bridge and dam with lilies for children. He’d told me he’d done that hoping that it would bring children to the castle. He’d loved children.”

He would have loved to have known his granddaughter.

Although I looked for him, I did not see him, not then or thereafter.

But I could feel his presence every springtime when the daffodils flowered. I felt him smiling when Monica ran through the fields of the castle as I had as a child.

Finally, I had settled down with a family and wife.

It was what he had always wanted for me.

I had Kaya to thank for all of that and I’d never forget it.

She had brought me the greatest happiness on earth and that evening, after we had tucked Monica in bed, I waited for her on the roof while she went out hunting. She came back and found me, looking over the grounds.

“What are doing up here?” she asked me.

“I am waiting for my queen,” I said.

“Here I am,” she said in a husky voice, sliding into my arms.

“What will you do with me now?” she asked me in a teasing, sexy voice.

I could feel myself becoming aroused by her proximity, wanting her as much as I had right in the beginning. Our sex life was as wild and passionate as it had been then, it showed no signs of abating.

“What will I do with you?” I pretended to think. “Only absolutely everything,” I said, leaning in to kiss her.

Her eyes sparkled in the dark. “Just what I was hoping for.”
