



Incandescence

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Category: Romance, Adult, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: Escaping the nest of their vampire master is an amazing triumph. Surviving will be the greatest challenge of all.

Alexander.

I've been a blood slave to my vampire master for forty-six years. My rare blood makeup gives my master the perfect nutrition. My addiction to the couple of drops he feeds me in return ensures I have no compulsion to leave. I'm a willing blood donor, an immortal slave. Then my master brings yet another blood slave to his nest, and I can't tear my eyes away from her.

Maya.

I can't believe I've been kidnapped. I definitely can't believe vampires are real. But I soon learn they're not just real, they're cold and brutal, and will do anything for their bloodlust. Everything within me burns to escape, and if I have to use the other blood slave to do just that, I will. If I'm all too quickly seeing past his addiction and good looks to the man beneath, that's just too bad. Survival is my focus. Love and desire have no place in this nightmare I'm living. Do they?

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Chapter One

Alexander

A deep, base hunger stirred inside me. My master had brought another woman into his nest. I tamped down the ceaseless ache to feed as I stared at her with a spark of interest, this one wholly unrelated to the blood craving the vampire had cultivated in me.

This woman didn't scream or cry out. She didn't even struggle. But her big green eyes flashed abstract terror as the vampire laid her on the floor, where a weak bubble of wintry dawn sunlight filtered through the dark-tinted window.

Even had she screamed, no one would hear her. We were isolated on the top floor of the Sydney high-rise apartment my master had made his own, living in a world that was as distant from the human ants I occasionally glimpsed far below as Mars was from Jupiter.

My master's soft chuckle set my teeth on edge and caused my veins to itch and crawl, and my stomach to gurgle with hunger. His voice was congenial and smooth, his features pale but unremarkably pleasant, a perfect foil to the monster beneath. "Your new plaything, Alexander."

Alexander wasn't my real name, but my master always renamed his donors. What seemed like a lifetime ago, I'd been Jake Reynolds, a normal human with normal human aspirations. Not that I recalled much of anything about my past life these days.

“Over time,” my master continued, his voice unusually smug, “I believe Maya’s blood will be as sweet as your own.”

If I lived that long.

“I believe, too, that I’ve finally found the female counterpart to you. Maya’s mental strength should also extend her life expectancy.”

I put a careful hand on my forehead, covering what felt like a vein throbbing to life. Yet another innocent woman sentenced to a hell of the vampire’s making. But I couldn’t show any emotion, couldn’t let him know I cared. Nor did I answer. I never answered unless I was asked. And mostly I was too weak or consumed by my craving.

Even had my master allowed me to sip from his vein right now, I’d still want more. He’d trained my addiction to an exacting standard. And he’d do the same with this latest recruit.

I forced aside the mental image of my master’s blood dribbling down my throat to focus my attention on Maya. I wondered what her real name was—her identity was just the start of what my master would take from her—even as I ran an appreciative stare over her long dark hair, which was pulled back into a ponytail. Bright pink runners encased her feet and sweatpants partially hid her long, legs. A bright pink Lycra top covered the swell of her breasts and exposed the taut, quivering plane of her tan belly.

Gym clothes?

My master really had raised his standards. He wasn’t just looking for mental strength and those super-rare humans whose distinct hormones and blood type would sustain him. He ensured the donors were physically stronger, more resilient.

Less likely to die.

“I ordered the usual breakfast to be sent up. I expect it all to be eaten.”

His mild voice held the threat of reprisal if the food was left untouched. He knew I couldn't care less about eating and could easily have foregone a normal human diet and lived from those few drops of blood he allocated me. Except my health was to be at its most optimal when he fed from me, both for the nutrition he ingested and to ensure I survived the feeding.

Once a week, or thereabouts, he drank from me, and at times I think he almost drained me dry. But my reward was worth the near-death that I sometimes craved as much as the tiny sip of vampire blood that sustained me and kept me permanently youthful.

But though he drank from me, I was never to take too much in return. My master had informed me more than once that even one extra drop of his blood would kill me, in the same way too much crack would kill an addict.

I was worse than an addict. I was a blood-slave whose single goal in life was to taste a couple of bright crimson drops from my master.

“Eat the food. Then I'll ease your craving.”

My master's fangs glinted behind his thin lips, sharper than a razor, his soulless brown eyes glowing red for just a second before he blinked and masked his bloodlust. He'd subdue his own craving before I'd get to alleviate my utter dependence, just for a little while.

With a smile that contained no humor, my master turned and strode to the door that opened into his private chambers. He'd sleep now, through the day's heat, allow his

slumber to rejuvenate his centuries-old body before he fed from me tonight and became fully invigorated.

The door clicked shut behind him. The woman, Maya, pushed herself into a seated position. I'd bet shock and blood loss was to blame for her eyes that were glassy and empty of life.

My master had already sampled her.

She pulled her knees to her chest. "It's not real," she said in a broken whisper. "None of this is real."

I didn't move, though every instinct told me to go and comfort her. I'd seen enough women enter the nest to know not to get attached. Despite my master's assurance, I doubted she'd last long. None endured it here. Most didn't even make it past my master's second or third feeding.

Possibly because they preferred to die rather than face the reality their world had become.

The elevator dinged and a mountain of a security guard stepped into our nest to stand watch by the elevator doors, while the chef from the ground floor restaurant pushed his catering trolley inside.

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Even before I looked up to meet the chef's unblinking, light blue eyes, I knew he was in a trance, the same as the guard. My master cultivated humans to whatever best suited his purpose. And the chef's weak mind and phenomenal cooking were more than beneficial.

The chef delivered our meals like clockwork three times a day, seven days a week. I could only assume he had no wife, no family to answer to and staff who didn't question his odd behavior. Or maybe the staff, too, had been hypnotized by my master.

The chef paused beside the thick wooden slab of a table, where twelve could have comfortably dined. He took no notice of us—indeed, I doubt he even registered we were there.

Maya didn't say anything more. She didn't even move. She mustn't have come willingly.

My master must have brainwashed her as well as drained her blood in order to subdue her. It was why he hadn't yet partaken of my vein. He'd had his appetizer. He was saving main course for tonight.

I didn't shudder with the revulsion I once did. I'd had years—forty-six of them, if my calculations were correct—to get used to being a meal on legs. Years to want only the crimson drops I was given in return. Besides, my attention was currently preoccupied by master's latest food source.

I mightn't be able to drown out her silent screams, but I could distract her for a little

while.

I waited until the chef had unpacked his trolley and retreated with it into the elevator. Once the doors closed behind him and the guard, I peeled a plastic lid off its container. The scented steam of mushroom omelet with a serving of fried rice saturated the air.

Maya turned her head and blinked. “Is...is the food for us?”

I nodded. “Yes. Help yourself.”

Her mouth set, she pushed to her feet and staggered. I saw her determination and I understood her foolish logic. She was weak, but if she could eat and restore her strength, she could try to escape.

I stepped toward her and closed my hands over her upper arm. My mouth dried at her soft, feminine skin, her soapy, vanilla scent. And the buzz of instant attraction.

I mentally shook off my groin’s kick of sexual need. It had been some time—too long, obviously—since my master had provided a plaything. A sexual partner to relieve those other needs that at times plagued me.

I wasn’t stupid enough to believe my sexual appetite wasn’t right on the bottom rung of the ladder compared to my master’s blood cravings. In my master’s mind, Maya was simply a vessel to be used and abused. But guilt had long ago evaporated from the part I played. These days, survival was all I knew or cared about.

I guided Maya to the table even as I recounted my past playthings’ names. Sophie. Gemma. Tabitha. Carla. Danielle. Amy. Tania. Rose. Elizabeth. Martha. Louise. Charlotte.

Each one had lasted between three-and-a-half weeks and four years. Each one had been a pleasant diversion from my crippling blood hunger.

Maya sat and reached for the food. A fork clattered—she ignored the chopsticks—before she clamped hold of the cutlery and began shoveling food into her mouth.

I sat opposite her, intrigued by this latest arrival. I only hoped she would survive the incarceration. Survive the constant blood loss. Survive the mental toll.

“So tell me about yourself?” I leaned forward. It was nice to hear about normal lives. Nice to imagine a place where vampires only lived in fairytales and humans weren’t little better than cattle. It was even nicer to pretend my master wasn’t one of god only knew how many other vampires there were scattered around the planet. “Where are you from?”

She chewed and swallowed audibly, before clasp the bottle of white wine and glugging it down. There was no sign of enjoyment, just a need to refuel, recharge. She was certainly a fighter. The bottle clanked as she put it back onto the table, before she wiped her mouth on her sleeve and focused on me. Her green eyes were no longer void of life—they were shrewd, assessing.

I wondered absently if she liked what she saw, if my appearance was still relatively pleasant to behold for this generation. Women had always been attracted to me, but tastes changed over time. My master occasionally sent up a barber and tailor to attend to my needs.

I’d never had need for a doctor, but guessed the vampire blood I craved counteracted any ills.

“That’s none of your business.” Her eyes flashed. “You know my friends and family

will be looking for me.”

I sighed, seeing through her lies. My master would have looked long and hard for the perfect target. Maya wouldn't just be healthy, she'd also have no family and few friends. “Say goodbye to whatever life you once had.” I swept out a hand. “And say hello to your new one.”

She shot to her feet, her chair clattering back onto the marble floor. “I refuse to be stuck up here with that...monster!” She lifted her head. “And with you.”

I nodded. Better to be honest now and get the hysterics out the way. “Unfortunately, you don't have any say in the matter. My master is also your master now. You're his latest food source.”

Her eyes widened, her hand automatically drifting to her throat, touching the healed puncture wounds. I was impressed. Most women fell to pieces, even if they'd blanked out being fed on. Maya clearly had a very strong will and mind.

“So...what happened to the last food source?”

“She didn't make it.” I dulled my senses to her shocked gasp in just the same way I dulled my mind to the memory of Sophie's demise. I cleared my throat and added, “She killed herself.”

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Chapter Two

Maya

I stared at the man who seemed so eerily self-possessed. Like a prisoner from a concentration camp who'd survived the war and wouldn't—couldn't—examine or recount what he'd lived through.

Even with my brain screaming denial and weakness dulling my senses, I noted every inch of the man standing before me. A man I despised, but who I sensed just might be the key to getting out of this hellhole.

He was fit and honed, not to mention tall. He had to be at least six foot three. His hair was a shade lighter than dark chocolate and curled at the ends, an inch away from being scruffy. His ever darker stare was sharp with intelligence, if one discounted the apathy I'd glimpsed. He looked young, but his eyes told a different story.

I mentally shook my head. I didn't want to dwell on a man who'd watched other women die, and who probably expected me to die too.

Not in this life.

I blew out a slow breath. "Are you that thing's accomplice?"

He looked shocked, as though he played no part in whatever tragedy had occurred. But of he'd seen other women trapped here and taking their own lives, he wasn't innocent of the crime.

“That ‘thing’ is our master, and you’ll soon discover that thinking or calling him by any other name in his presence...well, you won’t be feeling too great afterward.”

I glowered, hating his strangely accented, honey-smooth voice that hinted of warmth even as I was all too aware of the coldness beneath. “He’ll never be my master.”

He shrugged. “Then you’ll die.”

He didn’t look too perturbed, yet I sensed his unease, just as I’d sensed an unexpected frisson of desire the moment he curled his warm hand around my arm.

Blood loss, nothing more, I told myself. The man might be good-looking in a hard, world weary kind of way, but he was far from my type. No, I didn’t go for murderers.

I stood straighter, determination flooding through me. I wasn’t waiting around for whatever hell the so-called master had in store for me. I had to find a way out of here. I wouldn’t end up like Alexander, or worse, the women who had died up here. I wasn’t being a victim of circumstance again.

I forced myself not to touch my throat again, though the twin punctures continued to burn. “So...Alexander, what exactly is your master?”

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Chapter Three

Alexander

I raised my eyebrow. Maya mustn't be as completely out of it as I'd suspected, if she'd absorbed my name when my master had brought her to the nest. She also had to have more than a fair idea of what our master was, but it seemed she needed to hear it.

I withheld a sigh. I guess I'd been in denial for some time too after I was captured. But even the memory of that event had been diluted over the years, right along with my willpower.

"He sucked blood from your throat," I said drily. I wouldn't let sympathy for her plight color my words or my emotions.

"So he's a leech?" she retorted, even as an undertone of terror leaked through her sarcasm.

"You know as well as I do what he is. He's a vampire, I suspect one of the oldest and most powerful of his kind. You'd do well to revere him."

An open and scathing disgust washed away her disbelief and fear. "I'll do no such thing! I don't care who or what he is. He didn't respect me or my life when he brought me here and I'm not about to lie back and let the monster suck me dry. Not a second time."

She might have offended sensibilities now, but she had no idea how much living the way I did changed a person. She also had no idea how far a human was willing to go to survive even while wishing for death. I arched an eyebrow. “And how do you intend to stop him?”

She shook her head, her face pasty and eyes glittering. I mourned for her, or at least the girl she used to be. My master’s bite had already infected her. Soon she’d be craving the blood in my master’s veins more than she would a desire to escape. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that the hunger pains would never cease, and that only sheer brute willpower overcame a perpetual state of being half starved.

I blew out a slow breath, my belly cramping with both blood hunger and rejection for the food on the table. “We eat, or suffer the consequences.”

Consequences that wouldn’t only involve my master drinking her blood. Now that my master’s infection was inside her, the moment he drank from her again, she’d succumb to her deepest sexual yearnings.

I didn’t understand the science behind it, but I’d witnessed the event enough times to know what to expect.

My dick stirred at the thought. But despite my physical needs, mentally, I hated that sex with my ‘playthings’ happened not because of a genuine attraction, but because they needed physical release almost as much as they needed my master’s blood.

I took a seat and distracted myself by scanning the sumptuous spread. My belly gurgled, but not with appetite. It felt hollowed out at the unwanted calories I’d be forcing into it. I looked up at Maya with a half-smile and murmured, “Bon appétit.”

Half an hour later, Maya pushed away her empty plate before I swallowed down the last mouthful of the breakfast spread. I would have devoured this food in my long-

ago normal life.

Now, it could have been sawdust.

Maya stood, her face showing a little more color. The food had lent her some strength, but I gave her a couple of hours at most before she threw it all back up when fierce hunger overcame her.

An unquenchable need for my master's blood.

Ourmaster, now.

I swept a hand toward a door at the far end of the dining room, opposite our master's chambers. "There's a shower through there. I'm sure you'd like to freshen up."

Once the hunger pains hit, a shower would be the least of her concerns.

She sent me a scathing look. "I'll only feel clean again once I get out of here." She turned and marched purposefully toward the elevator. Her steps faltered and slowed. It was like watching a straight-backed and disciplined soldier morph into a wilted flower.

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Still, she got farther than any other of the previous women, despite the fact my master's mind control was even stronger when combined with the influence of an infected bite. Maya got within a meter of the elevator doors when her whole body sagged and she stood trembling, unable to go even one more step.

I sighed. She'd learned a hard lesson. Self-defeat and powerlessness were stamped all over her. My master didn't particularly need to drink from his subjects to make them weak.

The hopelessness and complete lack of control were soul destroying.

I stepped toward her, but knew better than to touch. "Go have your shower, Maya—"

She twisted toward me, her movements slow and methodical. "My name is not Maya."

It took great strength to move from the force field of my master's mind control. She really was mentally tough and resilient. Every other woman had crumpled to the floor. I pulled in a deep breath then slowly released it, wishing I had the right to touch and console her. But I'd never have that right, not while I was in league with the devil. I cleared my throat. "Like it or not, it is now."

"Why are you doing this?" she whispered hoarsely. "What's in it for you?"

I blinked. Her words stung and shame suffused me. "I was brought here, the same as you. I didn't choose this life. Didn't choose to stay and become addicted to my master's blood."

She looked...sickened. “So you’re a blood whore?”

I inwardly recoiled. I’d never thought of it in that way, but that was exactly what I’d become. I’d fallen to the lowest of the lows, my willpower sucked out of me along with my blood.

I crossed my arms. “You’re quick to judge. And yet you’ll be the same as me very soon.”

Her voice shook. “That will never happen.”

“You won’t be able to stop it. It’s a compulsion. A need.”

She lifted her head and crossed her arms, any and all vulnerability shoved aside. “I’ll fight it and your master with everything I have.”

I admired her spirit, but it wouldn’t last long.

I exhaled heavily and said nothing more than, “We’ll see.”

Chapter Four

Maya

I glared at Alexander, while my belly gurgled sickly and pinched with hunger, despite the huge meal I’d devoured minutes earlier. “Where is your master now?”

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“In his private chambers.” His expression stayed neutral, as though he forbade his thoughts to dwell on the evil of the monster who sustained him. “In the heat of the day he sleeps. At night, he scopes the city from his chambers for his next quarry.”

Before I could ask exactly how the vampire knew which victim was next, he added, “The perfect combination of our blood type and hormones apparently reveals itself through auras only vampires can see.”

Alexander was so matter-of-fact, so careless that his master spent his time looking at potential humans, I wanted to slap some sense back into him. He had to be brainwashed and conditioned to the lifestyle he now lived. I wouldn't—couldn't—think that any other scenario was possible, and that he liked this way of living. Not that it could possibly be called living.

Alexander was doing nothing more than scraping out an existence.

I glanced around the huge, open living and dining room, and the pristine stainless steel kitchen that looked as if it'd never been used, along with the big black leather lounge. Little wonder. There was no television, not even a radio, from what I could see.

Bloody hell. What did Alexander do up here aside from worship the bloodsucker? A mental image filled my mind of Alexander pacing the floor, even as I realized his master ensured he was mentally locked away from the world as much as physically.

He was little more than a prisoner in an ivory tower.

I squashed a surge of sympathy for the man. I wouldn't allow tender sensibilities to blind me to the truth. He was living with the devil and I had no doubt that at least some of the vampire's evil had rubbed off on him.

I kept my tone bland. "Then I guess he's not expecting me to live all that long?"

Alexander shrugged. "My master likes to cover all bases."

I shuddered with revulsion. It didn't take much of an imagination to understand that the bloodsucker ensured a perfect donor didn't slip past his notice. I pushed away from the elevator. My muscles suddenly unlocked and I stumbled. It was like being released from a force field.

When Alexander once again fastened his hand around my arm to keep me from falling, I jerked out of his grasp at the electric current of awareness. It was bad enough I was drawn to him. I refused to let him touch me and reveal an even deeper awareness.

Yet if I'd met him outside this building and under normal circumstances, I would have been fascinated by him. I couldn't even conceive what he'd seen up here, what he'd lived through.

I sucked in a ragged breath, reminding myself not to feel sympathy for him. I wouldn't justify his way of living. "You mentioned a shower?"

He nodded and I walked stiffly past him before opening the bathroom door. Snapping it shut behind me, I leaned weak-kneed against the cool wood. Of course, there was no lock on the door, but I wasn't stupid enough to imagine the vampire who'd kidnapped me would have any trouble breaking it down.

He'd certainly had no trouble carrying me away from the alley where he'd found me.

A shortcut I'd taken on my way home to the train station from a late shift at work.

I shivered. Both at the memory and at the monster who'd forcibly brought me here. Was the bloodsucker even now aware of my every movement? Did he have enhanced hearing and senses, or was that just in the movies?

I tugged off my clothes with jerky, uncoordinated hands. Hell, my whole body trembled and shook, flushing hot and cold. I gripped the towel rail and took a long look at my reflection.

Fuck. I look like shit.

Men had always found me attractive. A face and body, nothing more. They'd run if they saw me now. Perhaps the vampire would be turned off, too?

Yeah, except he wouldn't simply let you go. He'd dispose of you. Dump your body in a river or dumpster. And no one would even know or care that you were gone.

Shivers racked my body now, my eyes glittering wildly, my face shiny with sweat and my hair tangled even in its ponytail. I looked physically sick and mentally deranged.

My belly cramped, as though a giant fist had reached inside and squeezed hard. I gasped, clutching at my middle.

What had that leech done to me?

I spun away from my reflection and reached for the tap lever, opening the spray full pelt and adjusting it to scalding before I stepped under its heat. The water could have burned away my skin and I wouldn't have noticed. Every molecule of my body was snapping and snarling with need.

I. Would. Not. Succumb.

I squeezed my eyes closed and focused, single-mindedly centering on anything but the yearning tearing me apart inside. Building walls around my emotions where nothing could reach me.

I shouldn't have been surprised when it worked. Lord only knew I'd had plenty of practice. I'd withdrawn into myself and slipped into my own world enough of times in the past. Locked myself away as my mother shot up yet again, or screwed another man in the bedroom near to mine in order to score her next hit.

How many times had I blocked out the grunts and groans, the hiss of a junkie rush, and gone someplace else in my mind? Until my apparent complete disregard of my mother's drug dependency and lifestyle had caused her to send me packing.

It was only after she'd died from an overdose that I'd wondered if she'd sent me away to protect me. Not because I retreated into my own mind. I hadn't seen her final downfall, hadn't had to fend off the johns she'd fucked for money.

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The bathroom door crashed open. I jerked back, crossing an arm over my breasts as I covered the triangle of my pussy with my other hand.

Alexander stood staring at me, at first in confused relief, then for a fleeting moment, in undisguised lust.

My shocked gasp was more from the stirring of my own desire than the hunger in his eyes. “Get out!”

He didn’t move. “What the hell is going on with you?” he muttered. His frown dulled the glint in his stare by the barest amount. “Why aren’t you screaming for my master’s blood?”

A sudden cramping pain knotted in my belly, as though he’d reminded me of a base need. I resisted pressing a fist against my midsection and focused on my breathing. In. Out. In. Out. I stared back at him. “Get out,” I repeated coldly.

He dragged a hand over his face, weariness evident in his pinched features. “If only it was that simple,” he conceded softly, making me aware he too wished he really could walk away and never come back. Making me also aware he wasn’t wholly brainwashed. He didn’t just crave his master’s blood—he craved freedom too.

I quashed any sympathy for him, like he’d quashed any for the victims his master had ruthlessly exploited and killed. He didn’t deserve my pity or my compassion.

He exhaled roughly and placed neatly folded clothes on the basin. “Something for you to wear.” He stared at me again, as though I was a beautiful mystery he’d yet to

solve. Then his eyes dulled, sadness radiating from him as he rasped, “Master will be pleased with you.”

I gaped. And as he closed the door behind him with a decisive click, I screamed out,

“Master can go fuck himself!”

Chapter Five

Alexander

I watched the zombified chef stack the empty dishes and cutlery onto the food trolley before he wheeled it back into the elevator. The huge guard who’d acted as the lookout at the doors then stepped inside with him.

I felt almost as indifferent when the doors closed behind them. I’d long ago been rid of any desire to escape. Even less so now that my thoughts were centered on Maya.

I ran a hand over my face. She was a little more than a stranger and yet she was already worming past my defenses, already making me long for things I could never have.

A relationship. Mutual desire. Love.

I’d experienced nothing close to those yearnings for my other playthings. I frowned at the word I’d adopted so easily from my master. They hadn’t been my playthings. They’d been women with mothers and fathers, with families who would never know what fate had befallen them.

Perhaps it was best they didn’t.

Guilt shafted through me. It was those same women I'd experienced little more toward than physical release, along with a vague despair at what I'd become. But survival was all I had known. I couldn't afford to get attached to someone I'd likely lose all too soon.

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Like Maya? a cutting voice asked.

I blew out a slow breath. Though Maya's strength of mind was impressive, I had no doubt she'd soon fully succumb to my master's demands. She wouldn't live through the ordeal much longer than the other women who'd been abducted and taken away from the world they'd known. Except, if she did outlast the longest survivor of four years, how much deeper would my feelings for her grow?

I paced back and forth. Usually I was resigned and numb to whatever my master devised, but now I was worked up and restless. I hardly knew Maya, and yet already she affected me on a level I could scarcely comprehend.

I paused as the bathroom door thrust open and she walked through it with her chin tilted as high as her ponytail and her eyes flashing. She wore the moss-green wrap dress, soft white cardigan and low-heeled sandals I'd chosen for her from the closet of the guest bedroom. My master kept a good selection of apparel for his donors, mostly seductive wear that would titillate my senses.

Maya's outfit had been the most demure I could find.

I resisted licking my lips. I wouldn't think about the matching cream underwear set I'd chosen. Instead, my breath caught at her alert gaze and rigid jaw. My pulse accelerated at her natural grace and elegance, which were irresistibly seductive.

"Where is your master?" she demanded.

Maybe she wasn't charming, but damn if I didn't find that even more appealing. Even

so, I frowned. Did she think she could demand an audience with him? “He’s in his chambers. You cannot disturb him there.”

“Why not?” Her eyes narrowed. “Is he asleep now?”

There were no clocks in the nest, just the same as there were no calendars and no news from the outside world to keep me informed. I’d even been reduced to using my fingernails to scratch out a tiny mark beneath the tabletop for every day that passed.

I automatically glanced out of the window to guesstimate the time. The sun had climbed high in the sky. It was a few hours shy of midday. I nodded. “Yes.”

She inhaled sharply and stepped closer to me, staring into my eyes. “Then now is the perfect time to escape.”

I couldn’t stop a bark of mirthless laughter. “You can’t be serious?” At her furrowed brow, I sighed and said, “You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

“But you do, right?”

I frowned, hating the direction the conversation was headed. In my previous life, I’d been a lawyer, a fearless go-getter, ready to take on the universe. In this life, I knew better. I was a realist living in a powerful vampire world. My reality was having my blood sucked out right along with the breath in my body if I showed even a sign of disobedience.

She swung a hand toward the elevator. “When the chef next comes up with our food, we’ll get into the elevator and out of this building.”

I gave her points for courage. But she wasn’t thinking straight. Not one bit. “You’ve already tried to escape once today, and failed. Remember?”

That wasn't even to mention the security guard, who'd been chosen specifically for his brawn and lackluster willpower. No captives would escape via the elevator.

She didn't seem deflated. If anything, her mind ticked over all the faster. "How deeply does the bloodsucker sleep?" She blinked. "What would you need to overcome his mind control?"

Her enthusiasm and belief almost buoyed me with hope. I suppressed the emotion. She knew nothing. Her blood addiction hadn't yet kicked in and made her dependent...a slave to my master.

But it would soon enough.

I squeezed my eyes closed, fighting against a surge of rebellion. But it grew inside me, a dark shadow that'd been hovering out of sight, snapping and snarling, just waiting for the right moment to emerge. The same shadow that I had no doubt Maya had glimpsed.

She'd read me all too well, and known exactly how to bring it out of me.

Warmth flowed through me and centered in my groin. She was more skilled than a lawyer in the courtroom. Not that I disagreed. With her by my side, this might truly be the one and only time we could escape. Before my master again drank from Maya's veins and the excessive intravenous bacteria from his fangs wiped out any remaining scrap of her willpower.

Even if she by some miracle fought the infection, the moment my master fed her a drop or two of his blood, she'd be an addict just like me.

My stomach cramped and I pressed a fist against the gnawing, ceaseless ache. "I can't go anywhere," I croaked hoarsely. "I'd die without my master's blood."

She marched toward me, face drawn but determined, eyes flashing. “That monster isn’t your master. You’re not his trained dog, nor are you his slave. Whatever life he’s forced you into is no longer relevant. You can fight this...fight him.”

She lifted her hands and clasped my shoulders, and I inhaled sharply at the rush of warmth and the jolt of instant connection. It was that same touch that sent rebellion hurtling through my body, shredding my doubts and ripping the blinkers from my eyes.

Passion and self-belief now pulsed through my veins, drowning out any lingering weakness. I stood straighter, shoulders back, hands clenched. I didn’t have time to tell her everything I’d learned and observed, but I’d tell her everything that might aid in our plans.

“The vampire will be sleeping his deepest at midday. Nothing will rouse him then.”

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I'd never call the vampire my master again.

She nodded. "Good. Can we access his private chambers?"

I pushed an unsteady hand to my forehead. Whatever she was planning didn't bode well. But I'd been a sheep for so long I no longer had the right to be the wolf. For the moment I'd go along with her plans.

I nodded. "Yes. He trusts me."

Why wouldn't he? I'd cooperated in every way to ensure my survival. It was a bitter pill to swallow. "I can freely enter." Though there'd be consequences I didn't want to think about if our escape failed.

She blew out a slow breath. "Good. I have a plan."

Chapter Six

Alexander

Ifollowed Maya intothe bathroom, my stare meeting hers in the reflection of the mirror. Her beautiful emerald eyes flashed with defiance even as she chewed her lower lip. "We need something to break the glass."

I nodded. I'd come too far to back down now. I was only glad the vampire had allowed my one vanity of having a mirror while there were no 'playthings' around. Of course, the mirror would be taken away the moment the vampire wasn't wholly

fixated on his latest prize.

I grabbed the nearest hanging towel, wadded it behind my elbow and lifted my arm, thrusting it back. My elbow thudded against the towel. A satisfying crack sounded and I let my arm fall away, the towel dropping to the floor.

The splintered glass made us look like some kind of hall-of-mirrors trick, distorted, almost manic.

Our appearance was the least of our problems.

Maya retrieved the towel and gently pried off a piece of glass shaped like a spearhead. “Perfect,” she whispered, voice awed. She looked up at me. “Now we enter your master’s chambers.”

“He’s not my master anymore,” I said, voice low.

She smiled, warmth for a moment superseding her rebellion. “I’m glad.”

We stood still, staring at each other. Her mouth parted in a slow smile, her skin flushing. When she darted her tongue out and touched her lips, I suppressed a groan and forced my mind out of the gutter. Except my cock thickened to bursting and the air fairly crackled with intensity and repressed sexual need.

If—when—we made it out of here, I’d fuck Maya every which way until she was screaming my name and panting for more. Fuck her until all thoughts of the vampire dimmed into the recesses of her mind. Fuck her until I too forgot about everything but this woman who already crowded my head and had me questioning my morals.

My mouth dried and my voice emerged as a croak. “If you’re thinking of killing him, think again. He hasn’t lived this long by being weak. He’s immortal, a powerful

vampire.”

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I had no real idea how many other vampires there were, but I'd concluded from the bits I'd learned and unwittingly picked up from the bloodsucker that the vampire race was a rare breed. Of course, being an eternal being, one probably didn't need progeny to continue the genetic line.

Her smile dimmed. "I never thought to kill him. I just want to cut him so you can drink all that you need. At least until we get to a hospital."

The only hospital we'd go to if we told humans the truth was a mental hospital, but I'd save that argument for when we got out of the nest. Still, I was suitably impressed she'd realized no cutlery was stored here, no glasses or cups. Nothing that could be used as a weapon. Everything was taken away with each meal.

But there were some things Maya didn't know. "Too much of his blood will kill me," I rasped, my belly roiling and cramping with hunger at the thought of sustenance.

"Is that what the monster told you?"

"Yes."

"And you believed him?"

She had a point. Whatever else the vampire was, he wasn't a saint. Evil lived inside him, a darkness that left him unable to care for humanity. What were a few lies to keep me even more under his control?

Then she blinked, as if clearing her head, and said, "Lead the way."

Something flared inside me. Excitement. Hope. Emotions that had too long been dormant. I stepped outside the bathroom and stilled at the vampire's door. I looked at her. "And if we succeed, what is your plan for the security guard and chef?"

She shrugged, though her eyes gleamed with inner fire. "We'll wing it. Stab them both if we have to."

Something beat faster inside me. My heart. It had been too passive, too dreary for too long. Maya's fierce passion tugged at something deep within, an answering passion and desire to be free. To break away from this forced existence I'd grown accustomed to living.

I nodded and opened the door. I'd been in here before. Of course I had. Someone had to clean the room. Though I'd long ago realized it was the vampire's way of keeping me busy and out of trouble. After all, it would have been effortless for him to groom another weak-minded mortal to do his dirty work.

Still, I'd only entered once before when he had been sleeping. I'd known it was sacrilege to enter without invitation, but I'd burst into the room anyway, panicking about Sophie slowly dying in the bathroom, her wrists hacked and slashed by a knife the chef hadn't noticed was missing.

I hadn't been able to wake him, despite my shouting and swearing. But when the vampire had woken hours later he'd known I'd entered his chambers. There'd been no need for violence. Instead he'd withheld his vein from me, watched dispassionately as I'd writhed on the floor, clutching at my belly.

I had no idea what punishment he'd dealt the chef for the missing butter knife, but the man no longer showed any personality. He was as devoid of life as Sophie had become.

I shrugged away the horrid thoughts and focused on the moment. The room was huge, a master bedroom where the mattress had been removed from its base so that my master could lie comfortably on his back on a pallet. No coffin for this vampire, though I suspected that was another myth.

A telescope sat idle at the huge tinted windows, which were presently blocked by thick, heavy curtains. I knew the sun wasn't fatal, but it certainly wasn't comfortable for the vampire, not with his albino complexion and an inability to drink water to rehydrate.

Blood was his one and only staple.

The wall behind his bed had inbuilt shelving that was crammed with old books. Many of those books, I guessed, were even more ancient than the vampire himself. But though I'd often wondered what the books contained—there were no titles on the colored spines—I was forbidden to open and read them. I was only ever allowed to touch them with a duster.

The vampire would know if I opened one, and he'd taken great care to explain I'd face a slow, torturous death if I read even a single page of the tomes.

I stopped at the pallet and stared down at the vampire who'd been my master for so long. The same vampire who'd changed my life dramatically, made me his living, breathing slave and blood donor.

He lay asleep with the smooth, relaxed features of a little boy. I compressed my lips.

Awake or asleep, the vampire's evil was hidden behind an innocent mask.

Maya handed me the wedge of glass, her voice inflexible. "Don't overthink it. Just do it."

I clasped the shard, hatred for the vampire coiling through me, almost as powerful as my hunger. I wondered then if the glass could do more damage than just a little blood loss.

“We need to hurry,” she urged beside me. But it was the giveaway tremor in her voice that made me realize she too suffered from desperate hunger and more than a little fear.

I nodded and clutched the vampire’s arm, slicing a long incision across his wrist. Blood beaded in a thin line and I dropped the shard, careless that it shattered across the floor as I bent and sucked the crimson drops down my throat. I groaned at the flavor that danced across my tongue, savored the trickle that had my synapses snapping to attention and my taste buds rejoicing.

Strength flooded through my system, tearing away the ever-present weakness that had become a part of my everyday life. I’d only had a few sips at most, yet already I felt as if I could take on the world. Conquer it. The rush of power swept away my hunger, even as I was greedy for more.

But, the moment I heard Maya groan, I stopped and turned to face her. She was white with need. I held out the limp wrist that could easily lift a man of my height by the throat. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

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As long as the vampire didn't feed from her again, her will wouldn't be broken, nor would she be desperate for sex. She'd be physically and mentally stronger, at least until our next blood craving.

She fell on the vampire's arm like a starved dog attacking a meaty bone. She took as much as I had, then dropped his wrist and backed away, her face blanching whiter still even as her lips were smeared in contrasting red. She shuddered. "I didn't want this—"

"You needed it."

She swiped her arm across her mouth, smearing blood. "That's no excuse. I'm not addicted. Not like—"

"Me?" I finished drily.

She took another step back. "I need to get out of here."

I grabbed hold of her arm to keep her still. "And if our brainwashing prevents us from leaving?"

"Then I'll use a chair to break a window and jump to my death."

I grasped both her arms, fury of a totally different kind burning through me. After the vampire had captured me, I'd survived by becoming a human husk, empty of emotion and feelings. I wasn't that person anymore. "That won't happen, not while I'm alive. We will escape this place. Escape it together."

Chapter Seven

Maya

I looked up at the man I'd once thought was indifferent, and saw fire and passion blaze through his dark eyes, along with a whole bunch of other emotions I knew weren't there just from his recent feeding. He clenched his big hands and he stood taller, his posture confident and strong.

He was becoming the man I guessed he used to be. The man I'd glimpsed behind his apathetic stare.

His fervor increased my own and dizzying relief pushed away the horror of what I'd done. I swallowed the last of the metallic flavor in my throat, which tasted too much like rapture, before I nodded. "Even monsters have weaknesses. We can defeat this. Together, we're stronger."

Despite the roiling disgust that filled me from the inside out after feeding from the vampire, it'd also made me feel invincible, as though I could achieve anything. Jumping out of a window had become the least likely conclusion and the very last resort.

Alexander cupped my face, his voice low. "Together we will."

He bent his head and kissed me, his lips warm, his breath tainted with the blood we'd shared. But somehow that didn't matter. If anything, it made me want him all the more.

I pressed closer to him, his cock a thick wedge against his jeans, his kiss deepening and his groan tingling my lips and making my belly quiver with need.

I pulled back and looked up at him, seeing him through new eyes. He was a survivor first and foremost—he knew what needed to be done to live. His mental strength would see us through this ordeal.

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I managed a smile. “No turning back now.”

His stare glowed with arousal and need. “No turning back,” he echoed.

We both knew this was do or die. We had nothing more to lose. I had no idea if wood through the heart killed a vampire or even if beheading one would destroy it once and for all.

But if glass was our only weapon, I wasn’t about to spend the next few hours speculating or doing our best to kill the monster when escape was within our reach.

I only hoped drinking the vampire’s blood hadn’t mentally bound us to him even more. An invisible link we wouldn’t be able to break.

The elevator dinged and my thoughts tuned out. I turned to Alexander and he nodded before we moved silently out of the vampire’s chambers and into the living and dining room.

It was oddly thrilling to be so ultra-aware of the man I’d kissed, to sense him near me even without seeing him. The chef pushed his trolley toward the dining table while the big guard stepped just outside the elevator and crossed his arms.

Though Alexander and I hadn’t exchanged plans, we seemed to know exactly what to do. He moved toward the guard while I approached the chef, who was retrieving the hot, fragrant dishes from his food trolley and carefully placing our meals onto the table.

I picked up the nearest metal serving dish by its stub handle. “So sorry,” I murmured politely, before I swung the dish hard. Meat and vegetables in some kind of gravy flew through the air and splattered across the marble floor before the metal dish clanged loudly against the chef’s head.

He fell like a sack of potatoes.

I turned just in time to see the guard step forward, his fist flying at Alexander. I heard the smack of flesh, stood transfixed as Alexander bent forward with a grunt at the impact to his gut. Then he looked up and caught the guard’s other flying fist in his hand.

“Time to knock some sense into you,” he said congenially, before he punched the guard’s jaw. The big man crumpled like deadweight.

I frowned. It couldn’t be that easy, surely? But then the vampire blood we’d ingested had filled us with physical strength as well as mental sharpness. Was that why the vampire hadn’t wanted Alexander or any of his donors to drink more than a few drops?

I strode toward Alexander, determination filling me. “Come on,” I urged.

He held out his hand and I clasped it before we ran together toward the elevator. I expected the same barrier to stop us going all the way. When nothing happened, and Alexander pressed the button and the doors slid closed behind us, I turned to him and began to giggle uncontrollably. “We did it!”

His face turned white. “I don’t fucking believe it.”

“Believe it, Alexander! We’ve just escaped the bloodsucker’s nest!” I pressed a hand to my mouth, my eyes wide. “I thought the vampire’s blood would increase our bond

to him. I was so wrong.”

Alexander tipped his head back, his voice breathless with elation. “It’s why he never wanted us to drink more than what we needed to keep us alive. The blood makes us not just physically stronger, but mentally too, immune to his brainwashing.” He looked back at me, his jaw taut. “He’ll come after us. We have to be prepared for that.”

The elevator dinged before its doors slid apart, revealing the carpeted foyer of the ground floor. Glass sliding doors were invitingly close. I turned to him and clasped his hands. “Then we run and we keep on running. Because nothing will make me come back here. Ever. Again.”

He squeezed my hands. “Agreed...on both counts.”

Chapter Eight

Maya

It was surreal walking through the lobby amongst everyday people with their mundane, everyday lives. People who barely spared us a glance. The same people who were totally clueless about the monster who resided in the very same building.

A monster who'd soon wake and undoubtedly seek revenge.

The sharp ping of cutlery and the scent of grilled onions and steak, along with other tantalizing smells, wafted our way. Lunch appeared to be in full swing, and I wondered how long it'd be before restaurant staff noticed their chef was missing.

We stepped out onto the street, hurrying through the humans who were busy going about their day. Suited businessmen, blue-collar workers, and moms pushing prams. I sucked in the exhaust-fumed air. Smog had never smelled so damn good!

But I wasn't going to get too lost in the moment. Wasn't ever forgetting what I'd escaped.

"How long have we got before the bloodsucker wakes?" I asked.

A muscle in Alexander's jaw flickered, his mouth tightening even as he glanced at the clear sky. "It's after midday. At a guess, I'd say we have between three and four hours."

“Shit.” I pulled him to a stop and he turned to face me. “But we do have time to head back to my share-house to grab some clothes, money and supplies. One of my housemates is around your height and build. I can grab some things for you too.”

He nodded, though I could see he was both fearful and distracted by everything around him. I had no idea how long he’d been locked away, but imagined the technology had dramatically changed. It would be a lot to take in.

Like he’d been in a time warp.

Two policemen in full uniform strolled past and I turned to stop them. Alexander clasped my forearm and whispered, “They won’t believe us. And unless you want to be admitted to a psych ward, I’d suggest you don’t say a word.”

I blinked back sudden emotion. Was he right? Would anyone believe us if we told them the truth? Hell, before I was captured I wouldn’t have believed it either. I bit my bottom lip until I drew blood, then nodded acquiescence. “You’re probably right.”

He released my forearm to carefully blot away the blood on my lip with his thumb. “I wish I wasn’t.”

I managed a smile, my skin tingling and my emotions dancing at his gentle touch. “My only wish was to escape from the bloodsucker’s nest. Since that came true, I refuse to push my luck wishing for anything else.”

His eyes glinted. “You’re amazing, you know that, right?”

My throat dried, my entire being responding to him. “I only survived a few hours up there,” I said hoarsely.

How he’d survived for so long in the nest I had no idea.

I turned away from the seriousness of the moment and hailed a taxi, before directing the driver to the suburb of Maychim. There was not a moment to waste on being poignant, our future wasn't secure now we'd escaped the vampire.

It was a relief turn back and see the building we'd escaped recede into the distance. I shivered. Though I knew the vampire still slept, I almost imagined the bloodsucking monster was watching our escape through his telescope.

Fuck you, vampire.

I leaned forward in the seat, directing my attention to the driver. "Can you go any faster? We're in a bit of a hurry."

Twenty minutes later the taxi pulled beside the curb of the house I had with two other housemates. The driver read out his fare. But for a moment I didn't move. It was as if shock had caught up to me and I couldn't quite believe I'd made it home.

No, not home, I reminded myself. Nothing would ever be the same again.

I managed to smile at the driver. "I left my money inside the house. Give me a minute and I'll be back outside with your fare."

Before the driver had a chance to react, I climbed out with Alexander right behind me. I pushed open the front door, thankful for my housemates' total disregard for security as I headed to my bedroom, then flung open the top drawer of my side table. From inside a textbook I grabbed the notes I'd stashed for emergencies, and ran back outside to pay the fare.

Alexander was still standing in the doorway of my bedroom when I returned, his expression more than a little bewildered.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

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He scraped a hand over his face. “Only that we’re on the run from the most powerful being on Earth and you’re preoccupied by paying the driver out there his fare.”

I shrugged, before I pushed past him back into my bedroom. “He probably has a family to feed, bills to pay. I’m not going to deny him what’s rightfully his.”

I grabbed an overnight bag and tossed in the things I thought I might need. Two T-shirts, two pairs of jeans and shorts, a jumper, shoes and socks, and lots of underwear. I was stripping off the dress and shoes Alexander had given me, when I looked up to find his burning stare still on me.

I swallowed. How long had it been since he’d been with a woman? He looked like a predator, ready to take me down and have his wicked way with me. I grimaced. I’d been foolish enough to imagine myself in love with my ex, Jeremy. I’d almost given away my precious virginity to him. But I’d soon discovered he was a player, his love of pussy exceeded only by his drug habits.

Yet never once had Jeremy’s stare made me feel all hot and cold at once, like Alexander’s did. My womb clenched with need even as I cleared my throat. “Second bedroom down the hallway on the right is Pete’s. Grab what you need. I’m sure, under the circumstances, he’d be okay with you taking some things.”

Alexander nodded and I stared after him, trying to clarify my emotions. I was drawn to him as much as he was to me because of circumstance, nothing else. I had to remember that was our one and only connection. If only my body realized it too.

I dressed in jeans, a dark, long-sleeved cotton T-shirt and runners, before I grabbed

my little cosmetic bag and jammed it full with soap, deodorant, toothbrush and toothpaste, a hairbrush and some painkillers. I threw it into a backpack, along with a little pen flashlight.

I stuffed the remaining notes into my bra and slung the overnight bag over a shoulder, at about the same time as Alexander returned. I looked up at him. Damn. Those jeans and that checkered shirt hadn't looked half as good on Pete.

I managed a smile. "That was quick."

He shrugged, gesturing at his much smaller backpack. "I don't need much. And I saved enough room in the bag for food and water."

I nodded, relieved not to be alone in all this, even more relieved that Alexander was first and foremost a survivor. "Good thinking."

Ten minutes later, after raiding the fridge for bottled water, some energy bars and a few apples, I scribbled a note to my housemates asking them to find a new tenant to share their living costs. They wouldn't question my leaving or be concerned for my welfare. I'd always been a loner and had never conformed to society's expectations.

As for the rest of my meager possessions, I wouldn't miss them. My housemates' girlfriends could take what they wanted of my personal effects.

We left the house behind. I didn't own a car. I save money using public transport. For that reason, Alexander and I had to leg it.

It could have been a beautiful autumn day, with gold and red leaves scattered across the pathway from deciduous trees, the loamy scent of fresh-turned earth and a fried chicken smell filling the air. But all I could focus on was evading the monster we'd escaped. The monster who I had no doubt would pursue us both.

I glanced up at Alexander. "Please tell me you have some kind of grand master plan?"

He turned my way. "Get as far away from the nest as we can, and keep on getting as far away from it as we can."

I stopped and twisted to face him. "That's your plan?"

He cocked his head to the side, his dark eyes searching mine. "I lived with the vampire long enough to know I don't want to be captured ever again."

"Just how long ago were you captured?"

He blew out a slow breath. "Forty-six years...five weeks...three days."

I gaped. "This is no time for jokes."

He didn't waiver. "I'm not joking."

"You're human."

"Yes, sustained by vampire blood."

I pressed a hand to my mouth, barely able to face the truth. "The blood kept you young?"

He frowned. "Of course."

When he spun around and strode down the sidewalk, I hurried to catch up. "You don't get to tell me something like that and walk away!"

“Why not?” he growled, as though already wishing he hadn’t said so much.

“Because you should be—”

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“Dead?” he interjected softly, flicking me a dark look.

“I was going to say geriatric.” I looked at him with narrowed eyes, calculating the numbers. “You look no older than thirty.”

He smiled. “I doubt I’ve aged a day since I was abducted as a thirty-five-year-old man with nothing more to worry about than keeping my impulsive twenty-two-year-old wife happy and proving myself in court.”

My belly dropped a little at knowing he had a wife, a woman who had aged while he hadn’t. The same woman who’d undoubtedly thought he’d been murdered or who’d maybe even left her for someone else.

His breath shuddered out. “I also have no doubt Clara—my wife—never once entertained the thought I was kidnapped or murdered. In her mind, all men were cheaters. She was just waiting for the day I would leave her for someone else...waited for the day to have her suspicions confirmed.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, hating that my worst conclusions had been confirmed.

He shook his head. “Don’t be. It’s a wasted emotion. I loved her, but I think that sentiment would have died at some point had my life continued on its course.”

“What about your parents?”

His mouth tightened, as if to suppress his pain. “I was an only child of proud parents

who wanted the best for me. I don't doubt for a minute my disappearance sent them to an early grave. Unlike me. Without the vampire's blood, I would now be an eighty-one-year-old man, probably crippled by arthritis, with my good health fading as fast as my eyesight."

I blew out a slow breath. "You sound as if you feel bad you've outlived everyone you knew." I cast him another look. "In reality, you lost all those years locked up in that vampire's nest. Years you'll never get back."

He nodded. "I would've really liked to have said goodbye to my mom and dad—"

Not his wife, then? I wasn't sure I was entirely pleased by the frisson of delight that one thought induced.

"But I guess, if there's an afterlife, my parents will see me again soon enough."

I stepped in front of him, forcing him to stop even as a heat-wave of emotion poured out of me. "You are not dying on me. Not now. Definitely not in my lifetime."

It was only then I realized I was doing the same thing he'd done to me after I'd mentioned jumping out of a window to my death. He wanted me around just as much as I wanted him around.

Something shifted behind his eyes and I wondered if his suppressed feelings were now returning after blocking them for so many long years.

God, what had he been through?

"Without vampire blood, if I don't die from the pain of withdrawal first, I suspect my great age will catch up with me soon enough."

I stared up at him, willing him not to give up, not to surrender to what lay ahead. “I don’t want to face this alone. I want—need—you by my side.”

His lips pulled into a smirk. “I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’m not exactly a vampire slayer. You’d be better off finding your protection elsewhere.”

I glared. “You might be running from the vampire, but you don’t get to run away on me. We’re in this together, remember?”

His stare darkened, and he lifted his hand to stroke along my jaw and leave behind a trail of blistering awareness. His smirk morphed into a smile that revealed dimples I’d had no idea existed. “How could I forget?” he said huskily.

Chapter Nine

Maya

Alexander bent his head and I tilted back ever so slightly. He captured my mouth with his own, his lips soft yet firm, skilled in the art of kissing. I didn't dwell on the fact he'd kissed possibly dozens of donors. I wanted only to focus on the here and the now. After all, even that small moment in time might be taken from me—from both of us—all too soon.

He broke away first, his stare fierce and his jaw set. "I won't let you die. Not now. Not ever."

"I believe you," I said softly.

It took an hour to walk to the train station, where I purchased two tickets to the next suburb. Of course, we'd be going a lot farther north than that, but, with the funds I had, I wasn't about to pay for the privilege.

We took the first carriage, and Alexander stared around and took everything in like he'd never seen a train before. Perhaps he hadn't. I sighed, allowing my head to droop. He put his arm around me, his shoulder pillowing my head. I was too tired to argue, the adrenaline of the last few hours fading into bone-deep weariness.

I breathed in his dark-spiced scent even as I pretended to ignore how right it felt being in his arms. My eyelids fluttered closed about the same time my belly gurgled. My next breath tore a sharp pain through my midsection and forced my eyes open.

I leaned forward, biting back a gasp.

Alexander moved his hand up and down my back, a steady, reassuring touch. “Push through it,” he said gently, “the pain will be intermittent for a while yet.”

I twisted to glare his way and froze at his somber expression. I swallowed back denial. It was hardly his fault my craving was only going to get worse. I squeezed my eyes closed. I’d distanced myself from these hunger pains before. I could do it again.

Eyelashes fluttering open, I asked, “How do we overcome this?”

“More vampire blood.”

The train slowed, a tinny-voiced announcement of the next station dragging my attention away from the plight of my health. The pain subsided even as I glanced at my ticket. “Let’s get off here.”

His eyes gleamed speculatively. “What happened to running and keep on running?”

“There’s an internet café just around the corner.” I yearned for my cellphone, which would have enabled me access to the internet. “We need to see if there’s any real information out there, anything that can help us overcome the bloodsucker, and find a way for our bodies to safely detox.”

“Internet?” he asked.

Sadness filled me, overriding the last of the cramping and pinching in my belly. Never mind that the world had advanced technologically at a staggering rate—it was nothing compared to knowing his parents were dead while his wife might still be alive somewhere. I cleared my throat, but my voice cracked. “I’m sorry you’ve been locked away for so long.”

He shook his head, strength flashing in his stare. “If it wasn’t for you, I’d still be a prisoner in the nest.”

I took his hand. “We got out of that hellhole together. And together we’ll keep out of it.”

A smile warmed his eyes. “I believe we just might.”

We alighted from the train, pushing through the crowd of people at the station before finally stepping out onto the street. The yeasty aroma of a bakery made my mouth water while my belly clenched with rejection. Was I already halfway addicted to vampire blood?

No. I sniffed appreciatively. There wasn’t a better smell or taste than fresh bread, cakes, slices and tantalizing coffee. But even if we’d had the time and money to stop, we had enough food and water to stave off hunger pains for the moment. I forged past the shop, gaining strength from the warmth of Alexander’s hand on the small of my back.

Ten minutes later, we stepped into the internet café before I logged in and searched for anything related to vampires in Sydney. I ignored most of the trivial stuff that popped up to browse whatever might give us at least a clue of what to do next. But nothing even slightly correlated with the vampire who’d abducted me and changed my life forever in such a short time.

I chewed my bottom lip. I could only imagine what Alexander must be going through after having been incarcerated for so many years. Exhaling softly, I tuned out all introspection to focus on the task at hand, dragging the mouse down to scroll through dozens of subtitles until one caught my attention.

Vampires live amongst us.

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I clicked on the link and read the passage of information with a quickening pulse.

Critics mock the claims of once-distinguished academic Doctor Lester Newry, who believes vampires and the supernatural world actually exist. Those same beliefs have forced him into early retirement. But he stands firm on the subject and has safeguarded his house against the ‘blood sucking predators’.

There wasn’t much more to the article, but excitement filled me even as I clicked on the directory listings of anyone named Newry. There was no Lester recorded, but there were two others with the same surname who I hoped were family and who’d give me Lester’s phone number for my troubles.

Scribbling them on my wrist, I then counted my change and walked back outside for the nearest public phone, Alexander right by my side. We strode three blocks before we found one. Again, I wished for my cell phone, and that the convenience of everyone having one hadn’t almost made public phone booths extinct.

I pushed in some change before pressing the numbers and turning to Alexander, who waited outside. He peered up at the sky like a man constantly glancing at his watch. I frowned. I knew time was a precious commodity, and contacting Lester was a long shot, but it had to be better than running all our lives.

The money clattered and a voice answered. “Hello, Amy speaking.”

I swallowed any further anxieties and doubts, and put on my best friendly voice. “Hi, Amy, this is...Sally. I was a student of Lester’s and wondered if you might know how I could get into contact with him.”

I almost felt Amy's tension leaking down the airwaves. "Oh, my god. Please tell me my father's not brainwashing yet another student with his supernatural theories?"

I forced a chuckle out of my sandpaper-dry throat. If only Amy knew! "No, far from it." My brain whirled. I needed to evade the truth and quickly, before Amy decided I was as deluded as her father and disconnected the call. "If you could give me his number—"

"He doesn't have a phone. He's hidden away in his little apartment with his cats and his research. Little wonder my sister ran away." She sighed in disgust. "Look, if you really want to contact him, you'll have to go see him. Don't expect him to answer the door, though."

After she'd rattled off the address and hung up, I leaned my brow against the phone booth glass with a soft exhalation. My eyes involuntarily looked skyward. We really were running out of time.

"Maya, is everything okay?"

I turned and stepped outside. "I have his address." I smiled. With all but a couple of dollars left, luck was shining on us. "It won't be any more than a twenty-minute walk."

He frowned. "In twenty minutes the vampire will be waking from his nest."

I resisted shuddering and instead nodded, saying briskly. "Then we'll get there in ten."

Chapter Ten

Alexander

Though the sun was sinking slowly down the sky, its brightness hidden by big buildings, I couldn't help but appreciate every second of being free.

The world was a vastly different place from the one I'd known, and seeing it from up high had given no perspective to how crowded and advanced human society had become.

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I breathed in the outside air that was now saturated with pollution. I recalled an air that had been much cleaner and sweeter before I'd been taken away. But there were still familiar scents.

We passed a little florist shop and I slowed to smell the roses.

When I looked up, I saw Maya approach a buff, shirtless man with a shaved head who walked out of a liquor store, a carton of beer hoisted over a tattooed shoulder.

"Excuse me, sir." She smiled up at him. "I hoped you might be able to help my friend and I out." She twittered nervously, and waved an absent hand my way. "My car is getting fixed and we really need a lift. It's only ten minutes away, and we wouldn't ask except for a family emergency."

The man gave her a frank, appraising look that showed his approval. I dropped the rose and stepped forward, my gut churning for a whole different reason.

Then the man nodded. "Yeah, sure. I'm a sucker for pretty ladies." He jerked his head to the old sedan parked nearby. "'Course, you'll have to put up with my obnoxious little brother. He's eighteen today and hasn't yet learned how to handle his alcohol."

She nodded. "That's fine, we're just thankful to get a ride."

The man looked my way. "Shame your friend there doesn't look half as happy."

She laughed. "Oh, don't worry about Jack. He's the strong, serious type."

Jack? I hid my surprise at the name she'd christened me. Guess I should tell her changing our identities was all but useless at this point. At least until the vampire's blood cells died off and our systems created our own. In the meantime, the vampire could still track us, no matter what name we went by.

I rubbed vaguely at the tense knot in my belly. I also had no idea how soon real hunger pains would cripple me. I'd never consumed so much vampire blood and didn't know if that meant I'd go longer without needing another drink, or quite the reverse.

The man clucked his tongue. "Yeah, I just be he is. " He strode toward the car and opened its trunk. After placing the carton of beer with a dozen others already inside, he pulled open one of the cardboard cartons and dragged out a six-pack. Slamming the trunk down, he cocked a brow our way. "The backseat is free."

Maya told him the address before we settled into the backseat. I tried not to wrinkle my nose at the smell of weed and filth that permeated the car. Tried not to think of what drug the driver might be on behind the wheel. But mostly I tried not to think about what I'd wanted to do to that same man after the way he'd looked at Maya.

I snapped my seatbelt into place, my hands fisting even before the driver's brother turned in his seat with glassy eyes and a goofy grin. "Now this is a party," he slurred, before he guffawed and said, "I've never had a threesome before."

I leaned forward, my blood—and the vampire blood—pumping hard through my veins. "And you're not about to today."

The driver handed his brother the beers then fired up the engine. "Chill out, little brother, there's a hooker waiting for us both when we get home."

The birthday boy hooted, "Hell yeah!" and ripped open the six-pack to free the beers.

Using a lighter as a bottle opener, he pried off a cap, then gave a beer to the driver even as the tires screeched and the car pulled out onto the road. He then pulled free the rest of the beers and uncapped each bottle before offering us one.

I looked at Maya, who shrugged and accepted. With a nod of thanks, I took one too, relishing the yeasty, cold brew as it slid down my throat. The fact that it wasn't the blood that sustained me for once didn't seem to matter.

I frowned. Did I enjoy the beer because I was no longer in the nest? Normally I had to force myself to swallow anything other than blood.

"So you two live around here?" the driver asked, taking a long draft of his beer before glancing at us in his rearview mirror.

"I do," Maya conceded.

Birthday boy slurped back his beer. "If you've got some free time, you should come party with us." He sniggered. "I'm sure the hooker will be long gone by the time the real party starts."

I was about to reject his offer when Maya leaned forward in her seat and asked, "Where's the party?"

He gave us the address and I frowned at the uncomfortable feeling of anxiety pushing through me like barbs. I'd never been the possessive type, maybe because my wife had been the jealous one.

Clara had assumed I screwed other women like a gigolo. She had no reason to believe I'd kept my dick in my pants and my conscience clean.

In many ways, I believe my wife had helped harden my heart toward the donors in

the nest. Aside from physical release, I'd never once wanted to lay claim to any of them.

Until Maya.

I turned away from the beautiful woman next to me and stared out of the window as shops, tall buildings, apartments and townhouses whizzed past. Everything was so incredibly different. The houses, cars, fashions, even hairstyles.

And everyone appeared to be in a hurry, rushing from one place to the next as if they too were being chased by a deadly vampire, even as many of them had tiny, cordless phones pressed against their ears.

I exhaled softly, wishing I had nothing more to worry about than a career, a wife and family, and that I'd met Maya under any other circumstances than we had. But mostly I wished vampires had stayed in folklore and not reality.

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The car slowed. “This your place?” the driver asked with a raised eyebrow and a closelipped smile.

Jesus, even this man felt bad for us. Little wonder. I stared out at the shabby house with a heavy heart. I didn’t hold out much hope that whoever lived there would be able to help us. It looked like someplace a junkie would reside.

Maya thanked them and the birthday boy reminded us to join them at the party, before they peeled away in a cloud of fumes and burned rubber. Maya coughed and adjusted her backpack before she looked up me with a serious expression. “Are you okay?”

I nodded and swiped a hand over my face. “Better than I’ve been in a very long time.”

We walked toward the front gate when she hissed sharply and bent over, clutching at her belly. “Fuck.”

I rubbed her back, about as powerless and useless as a two-legged dog. “It will pass soon.”

“So. You. Keep. Telling. Me.”

I waited patiently for her cramps to fade. Not even ten seconds later they did exactly that as she straightened and pushed back her shoulders. Though her face was a little pale, she managed a smile and croaked out, “Let’s talk to this doctor and see what he knows.”

I adjusted the backpack on my shoulders and led the way along the lopsided pathway before I rapped on the door. I wasn't about to allow thoughts of the growing afternoon to enter my head.

"I saw a curtain flick in the window to the right," Maya whispered. She cleared her throat and yelled, "Doctor Newry, we know you're home! If you want us to leave you alone, then I suggest you open the door so we can talk."

Another minute ticked by. I frowned, and resisted glancing behind us at the sky. It was my turn to negotiate. "We think you might be able to help us, maybe even save us from the vampire we escaped."

I didn't much care who heard my words. It was imperative the doctor answered his damn door.

Footsteps scuffled our way, and the rattle of at least three locks slid free before the door opened. A grizzly faced man peered out at us, his light blue eyes glittering shrewdly behind wire-framed glasses. "Either you're both freakin' mad, or you're trying to get us killed."

Chapter Eleven

Alexander

I stepped away from Maya and closer to the doctor. "You've hardly kept things quiet. If you wanted to be all secretive about vampires, you wouldn't have gone public."

"Yeah, well, now that everyone thinks I'm a crazy old man, I don't vocalize my ramblings anymore."

Maya moved close beside me. "We believe you," she said quietly. "We're hoping

you'll believe us too, and that you'll help us."

The doctor pushed back his glasses. "And just how do you think I'll be able to help?"

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Maya brushed a hand over her throat. “The vampire didn’t just take us to his nest and feed from us. His blood made us addicts too, and now we need something to neutralize the cravings.”

The doctor blinked. “He fed you his blood?” he murmured. Then he focused on us and said, “Why would you believe I know how to stop these cravings? I’ve learned little to nothing about vampires except in fairytales, and I know even less about their blood.”

“Yet you claim they exist!” Maya burst out.

The doctor’s face flushed. “Because I saw one of them take my daughter from her bedroom.” He swallowed convulsively. “I saw his fangs drip with my daughter’s blood after he’d pierced her throat and drank from her.” He pushed a hand over his face. “I just...stood there and watched as he jumped from the opened window with her in his arms.”

Maya’s eyes widened and I shrank a little inside. One of the vampire’s donors—my so called playthings—had been this man’s daughter.

Sophie. It was more than possible. The doctor’s article had been released nine months ago, around the time Sophie had been brought up to the nest. The same woman who’d chosen death over being a vampire’s meal.

Rest in peace, Sophie.

Maya flashed me a questioning look and I shook my head. I wasn’t one hundred

percent certain and wondered if it was better the doctor was spared from the truth. I had an unshakeable gut feeling the man lived only to find his daughter.

The doctor subsided into silence and, though he looked haggard, his eyes suddenly gleamed. “You said a vampire had taken you to his lair—”

“Nest,” I corrected automatically.

The doctor inhaled sharply. “You didn’t happen to see my daughter, Nancy, did you? Tall, long blonde hair, honey-brown eyes and always smiling—”

Sophie had been Nancy. Knowing her real name and meeting her father made the woman I’d lived with for a short time more real to me, even though she’d never been deader. Made me want to quietly mourn for the woman she should have been. I shook off anguish for her and all the women who’d died in the nest, and said sharply, “No, sorry. I didn’t see her.”

The doctor pushed his glasses into place yet again and sighed resignation. “Then our conversation is over.”

I stuck a foot in the door as he went to push it shut. “Wait.” He glowered at me and I said quietly, “You’re a doctor. You must know of some way we can neutralize the addiction.”

“A blood transfusion is the only thing I’d suggest,” he said sharply. “Now get out of here before you get me killed too.”

My heart pounded with a surge of adrenaline and I moved my foot away before the door slammed shut. Maya turned to me. “Do you think he might be right?”

I nodded, deliberately toning it down. “Maybe.” All that mattered to me was that a

blood transfusion might also see the vampire blood cells die off quicker, making it all but impossible for our host to find us.

But as we walked back down the path, I couldn't help but notice that the shadows were growing longer and the sun was falling all too quickly toward the horizon. Maya followed my stare skyward, her face pinched and lips tight. Danger would be closing in soon.

The vampire wouldn't allow us simply to walk away. We were...his.

I blew out a slow breath. "We need to figure out a place to stay. Somewhere we can hide for the night."

"We already have one." Maya turned to me. "The eighteenth birthday party. It will probably be crowded with people. I can't think of a safer place."

I wasn't about to stand around and argue. We weren't exactly flush with options. "How far?" I asked.

The Sydney suburbs weren't familiar to me anymore and I had no way to gauge distances.

She bit her bottom lip and glanced skyward, adjusting her backpack as she said, "If we speed-walk we'll get there before nightfall."

I clasped her hand in mine, taking a small moment to savor the perfect fit, the zing of connection. I squeezed her fingers before I released hold. "Then we'd better run for it."

The party was already in full swing when we arrived, out of breath and uncomfortably hot. But at least we'd made it a good fifteen or twenty minutes before

nightfall...at least we'd made it at all.

I turned Maya toward me and cupped her chin so that she looked up at me. "We can do this," I murmured, and pressed my lips to her silky soft mouth, kissing her with a tenderness I wouldn't have thought I was capable of just a few days ago.

She sighed, and I flicked my tongue between her opened lips, tasting her vanilla sweetness. My dick jerked involuntarily even as she pulled back, her eyes glinting. "We can. We're survivors."

My lust dimmed a little as I wondered about her past. I knew so little about her. But I had no time to dwell on it. I only hoped that sometime soon, I could find out everything there was to know. Instead I nodded, and took her hand in mine before we walked through a crooked wire gate and along a path toward the opened front door.

I guided her around a couple making out, the man's buttocks white in the growing shadows, the woman's blouse unbuttoned and her breasts exposed. Maya looked up at me with wide eyes and I sensed her unease, along with a shiver of desire.

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I swallowed a groan. Our first time together would be in private, her gasps for my ears only, her nakedness for my eyes alone.

We entered a crowded living room, my stare meeting the older brother's. He grinned on seeing us and lifted a hand before he turned toward his younger brother and shouted, "Hey, Daryl, look who just showed up!"

Daryl pulled himself away from a knot of semi-adults drinking beers and passing around a bong. A goofy grin lit up his face at seeing us. "Well, fuck me, this is unexpected."

He approached us in a swaggering and unsteady gait, then leaned down and kissed Maya on the lips. Before I could react, he turned and planted a kiss on my mouth too.

I swiped at my lips and he barked out a laugh and said, "Don't worry, mate, I might be partial to both." He grabbed his groin and gave it a gleeful rub. "But my birthday gift left me completely drained." He twisted around and said, "You've met my brother, Rory, and these here are my mates—bozos the lot of 'em, but I wouldn't be without them."

I followed him and stayed polite as he introduced us to one friend after another, one of whom nodded even as he blew a thick plume of smoke our way. I clamped my lips at the bong smoke. How high would we be by the end of the night?

At least it might hold off our blood cravings for a little longer.

"So grab yourselves some beers and enjoy the party," Daryl ended, somehow

speaking clearly while sucking down the last of his own beer and looking as if a breeze would blow him off balance.

When he disappeared through a haze of smoke and music which was louder than tolerable, we grabbed a beer each and walked freely through the house. We needed to check out its layout and try to formulate some kind of plan.

But it was a ground-level house, with nothing to shield us from a vampire who could brainwash possibly everyone in the room—particularly when they were high on weed and numbed by alcohol.

I turned to Maya. “This won’t work—”

My words froze as I watched one of the partygoers lift a hatch that was concealed in the hallway floor, before the man disappeared underground to what I assumed was a cellar.

Maya noticed too, her face relaxing just a little as she twisted back to face me. “Maybe it will work?” she suggested.

I looked around. No one was taking much notice of anyone else. If we could slip inside the cellar and stay there the night, without anyone seeing us, even a vampire’s brainwashing wouldn’t matter. He might sense we were around, but the cloying scents of smoke and sweat might put him off our trail.

I turned to Maya. “See if you can grab some blankets, anything clean. I’ll get the party distracted somehow.”

When she went to do as I asked, I caught her arm and murmured, “Stay where there are people.”

“I will,” she said, before disappearing through the crowd.

I watched her go, reassuring myself she’d be okay, even as the hatch lifted and the guest climbed out, a bottle of rum in one hand and a bag of something else in the other.

I blew out a slow breath and stepped toward the brothers. It was time to make a distraction.

Daryl was now fighting to stand, but I gave him full marks for lasting the distance with so many toxins in his body. I turned to his older brother, Rory. “Hey, great party.”

He nodded. “Fucking oath it is.”

I grinned. “Only one thing’s missing...”

Rory swayed. He looked as though he was catching up to his younger brother in the drinking stakes. His bleary stare focused on me. “Yeah?”

“You had a hooker.”

Rory’s face split into a wide grin. “Yeah, I shared some pussy with my brother.”

“So, where’re the strippers?” I leaned close. “Or is one of these gorgeous women going to put on a show?”

He nodded, a light in his eyes. “You’re fucking right!” He looked around the room, his voice booming over the music. “I need a beautiful volunteer.” Everyone turned to him. “Which sexy woman wants to perform a striptease?” He held up a bag of weed and shouted, “With this as the prize!”

At the cheers and hoots of encouragement, I faded back into the crowd. When the music changed into something hot and seductive, I smiled. No one would notice us disappear into the cellar.

Chapter Twelve

Maya

I slinked out of what I presumed was a guest bedroom with a pillow and two blankets folded under an arm. Everyone who'd lingered in the hallway was now part of the knot of people in the living room avidly watching the show.

I smirked at seeing the buxom blonde woman on the dining table in her underwear, swaying seductively to the music. When she unclipped her bra and tossed it into the crowd, her big breasts bobbing to the movement, everyone roared with approval. The roar amplified when she used one hand to pull at her pink nipples and slid her other hand inside her panties.

Alexander stepped toward me, glancing around before he lifted the hatch. "After you," he murmured.

I nodded thanks and said, "Great distraction."

He waited until I'd climbed down the stairs before he climbed in after me, then closed the hatch to complete darkness. But the sudden panic I swallowed back wasn't just from the impenetrable blackness. It was as much from the all-too-familiar vile scent of something between cat urine and ammonia.

I dumped the blankets and pillow on the floor before peeling off my backpack and riffling through it in search of my pen flashlight. Alexander stepped onto the concrete floor beside me as I flicked on the beam that sliced through the darkness.

My heart rate steadied only a little as I moved the light over the row upon row of shelving in front of us that was filled with dusty bottles of booze. I moved the light farther along, to where the shelves ended, leaving a small gap between them and the concrete wall.

I led the way, squeezing through the gap, my stare going wide and my belly sinking at what I'd suspected.

"What is it?" Alexander asked from behind me.

I swallowed past my dry throat, a little nauseous and dizzy from the smells...and the memories. "It's a meth lab." I turned to him. "They're making drugs. If they find us down here, we're as good as dead."

"Fuck." He stared past me at the table filled with common household items.

Aluminum foil, pressure cookers, a camp stove, two blenders, dozens of empty milk bottles, latex gloves, funnels, chemistry glassware, paper towels, pH test kits, coffee filters, cotton balls, duct tape, jugs, thermometers and plastic tubing. That wasn't to mention the bleach, gas cans, pool chemicals and propane tanks lined against the wall.

I backed away from the toxic scents that were dangerous even to inhale. "We need to get out of here."

But when I turned and headed for the stairs, Alexander clasped my arm.

"Wait."

I stilled at his hoarse order. "The music's stopped." He tightened his hand. "Turn the flashlight off."

I flicked off the light to complete and utter blackness. Alexander was right. Music no longer throbbed through the floorboards, but the faint cadence of voices became clearer as my hearing attuned.

It was Rory's voice that came through loudest. He sounded belligerent and more than a bit pissed off. "I don't care who invited you inside. You can't just come in here searching for my guests."

"Can't I?"

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I shivered at the voice I already knew all too well. The vampire's tone was smooth and modulated, with undertones of power. "I'm looking for a dark-haired, slender woman and a tall, well-built man." His voice changed, almost smoky with persuasion. "You will tell me where I can find them."

The floorboard overhead squeaked a little as they walked closer to the hallway trapdoor.

"I saw them only fifteen minutes ago." Rory's voice had also changed. He sounded passive, his last bit of resistance worn thin. "But I think he might have left with the female. Probably went back home to that dump where they live."

I held my breath, too scared to move for fear the vampire would pinpoint us.

"Where they live?" the vampire asked in a mild voice, though the threat of violence simmered.

When Rory blurted out where he thought we resided, the vampire drawled, "I know the place. You're certain that's where they've gone?"

"Not really," Rory admitted. "I was enjoying Amelia's strip show."

Silence reigned for perhaps a minute, and I sensed the vampire deepening his brainwashing of Rory, and probably anyone else in the room.

"If you see either of them again, you will bring them to me when the sun is down."

As the vampire told them his address, I went hot then cold, giddiness assailing me and my belly cramping hard. I bit into my lip to stop from crying out, sweat beading on my brow at the effort. If he took us back to his nest, we'd never leave again. The leech would chain us to the walls if he had to.

The floorboards creaked again, a tread that moved toward the front door. Alexander put his arm around me, balancing me while my whole world slowly spun on its axis.

"Sorry for troubling you." The vampire's voice pierced the air like an arrow, smooth and well-modulated. "Enjoy the rest of your night."

The door slammed shut and I sagged against Alexander as he turned me in his arms and said in my ear, "Let's stay here until morning. We'll sleep behind the stairs...the toxic fumes shouldn't be anywhere near as strong there."

I nodded. I didn't have any better ideas. I was too numb to do anything more than wait in the blackness as he fumbled around making up our temporary bed. I heard his soft footfall before he clasped my hand in his and he led me to the blankets.

"This is never going to end," I whispered bleakly as I shrugged off my backpack and lay on the blanket he'd folded to better protect us from the hard concrete.

The music throbbed back into life in the house as Alexander lay beside me. I turned to him, needing the comfort of his arms around me. Needing the man who not only understood my fears, but had lived through more than I imagined any human should.

A jagged pain through my belly pushed the breath from my throat in a wheeze. "The hunger pains are coming back," I said through gritted teeth.

He drew me to him. "Fight through them, distract yourself with other thoughts."

I sucked in a shaky breath that filled my lungs with dark-spiced male. I touched his face with my hands and pressed my lips to his. Awareness danced through my nerve endings. I wanted more than his arms around me. I wanted all of him. “I need you to be my distraction,” I whispered hoarsely.

Chapter Thirteen

Alexander

Ididn't have to seeMaya to know she wanted me. Not only because she'd kissed me with quiet desperation, but because her breaths had quickly become shallow pants and the fear seeping through her pores quickly intermingled with lust.

My dick swelled, the dread in my belly receding as physical need overpowered all else. I captured her mouth this time, and I leaned into the kiss, swallowing her moans and drinking in her breath.

We only broke apart as I climbed over her and pulled her shirt up her arms and over her head. Then I kissed her throat, lingering on her pulse point before circling my tongue around the twin nicks from where the vampire had drunk.

She shuddered and gasped before arching closer. I had no doubt her sensitized skin had been made even more so by the memory I'd triggered, and which I refused to skirt around. I wanted our lovemaking to override the terror of the vampire drinking from her vein. Wanted her to forget about the nightmare inside the nest.

I wanted her to focus on nothing but us. And if lovemaking was the only way to do that, I was more than happy to oblige. More than happy to lose myself in her too.

I kissed my way down the length of her throat, light butterfly kisses that moved to her breasts and the lacy cream bra my memory recalled with precise detail. When I'd seen her in the bedroom wearing nothing but the bra and panties I'd selected, she'd

looked even sexier than I'd ever imagined.

I'd wanted to go all Neanderthal on her and throw her on the bed, tear off her underwear and fuck her until she screamed out my name. It'd taken every ounce of my considerable willpower to turn and walk away.

There'd be no walking away now. And although I'd imagined our first time together would have me ogling every detail of her body, it pleased me to touch every inch of her, to taste her and hear her little gasps.

I sucked her breast through the material of her bra. She arched her back and her nipple pebbled to attention, before I gave her other breast the same treatment. My dick swelled at her mewls of ecstasy, then jerked at the touch of her hand between my thighs.

My balls tightened, the pressure intense. Fuck. Perhaps it was the intensity of the moment, with danger still thick all around us. Or perhaps it was the attraction I'd felt for this woman from the moment she was brought into the nest.

Not that I wanted to second guess myself now. What we had was powerful and real and I wasn't going to fight it even one second longer.

I froze when Maya moved her palm up and down the thick wedge in my jeans, triggering every cell in my shaft into pulsating life. A deep, throaty growl inched up my throat, and I slid my own hand down her silky soft skin to stop between her thighs.

Her breath hitched even before I pushed my hand inside her lacy panties and spread her core open. She was already wet, her musky scent filling my nostrils and making my mouth water. Even the crisp triangle of curls down there caused my dick to throb all the harder.

I wished I could see her pussy, even as I knew my other senses had taken over and intensified the experience. I slid a finger into her tightness and swirled my thumb around her clit.

Her gasp hit the central nerve to my dick, tightening my balls and swelling my shaft until the crotch of my borrowed jeans felt as if it was choking me.

My groan was part torture, part thrilling need, and I dragged her panties down with more haste than skill, tossing them aside and pushing her thighs apart so I could sample her delectable pussy.

I licked her from the bottom of her slit to the top, before focusing on the little fleshy clit already swollen with anticipation. Her fragrant scent filled my nostrils, and my breath quickened, my desire kicking up to a whole new level of need.

In the forty-six years of living in the nest, sex had been the one thing that'd kept me sane.

But not one of those women had triggered anything other than lust. I'd pleased them in the same way I'd once pleased my wife, a skilled performance without the involvement of my heart.

I stilled between Maya's thighs.

I'd never really loved a woman before, not even Clara. Not the way she'd wanted. I'd thought I'd loved her, but mostly I'd stayed with her out of habit. Despite Clara's insecurities, we'd both been comfortable in our relationship. It was a pity it'd lacked the chemistry I had with Maya.

I inhaled her sexy scent. Being with Maya was like being awakened for the very first time. She'd taken off my blinkers and made me see the truth, made me realize the

true extent of my loneliness even before I'd been taken to the nest.

Warmth flooded through me and settled in my chest. I wanted to please Maya like I'd never pleased another woman before. I wanted to pour my heart and soul into her along with my seed.

I licked and sucked her little bundle of nerves, then rhythmically drilled into her with my tongue. Her writhing body stilled, then jerked, her mewls morphing into a raspy groan.

I lapped at her until my tongue was coated in her essence and she had nothing left to give.

Warmth radiated through me as I crawled up her beautiful body and kissed her again so that she tasted herself on my tongue. I unclasped her bra strap and pulled it over her shoulders. I might not have been able to see her, but I wanted her bared breasts against my chest. I wanted to imprint her every crevice against my body and into my mind.

"You have...too many...clothes on too," she whimpered.

She helped me strip off my shirt, and we broke into fits of giggles and half-strangled moans when my jeans snagged on my dick and refused to be dragged off my legs.

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Kicking free of the denim and boxer briefs, Maya reached up and pulled me to her mouth. Our kiss was as fierce as our bodies rubbing together, her legs wrapping around my hips even as I fisted my dick to center it at her core.

I pushed my tongue deep into her mouth and plunged even deeper into her tightness.

She hissed with pain.

I froze and my voice cracked with tension and disbelief. “You’re a virgin?”

“Not anymore.” Her voice was about as taut as her body.

Shame swelled inside. “Shit, if I’d known I would have been more gentle—”

She reached up and kissed away my reservations, her lips an insistent brush over mine before she pulled back and said, “No more talking. I need you to make me forget...everything.”

I cupped her jaw, loving her smooth velvety skin, her silken hair that’d come free of its ponytail. But most of all I felt honored I was her first and only lover. “It will be my pleasure,” I said hoarsely.

It took every ounce of my willpower to move in and out of her with slow and careful strokes. But my resistance melted away faster than icecaps in the Sahara when she grasped my hips and urged me on. Faster. Harder. Until the slap of my balls hitting her flesh and our grunts and groans echoed in the damp, dark room like a primal sonata.

Her breath caught, and I knew she'd been caught unawares by the orgasm that caused her body to stiffen and her inner muscles to clutch at my cock. I didn't even try to hold back. I groaned loud and long at the primal ecstasy that shook me to the core and sent me to some other plane even as my seed shot inside her in pulsating jets that drained me dry.

I folded over her, limp as a wrung-out cloth yet buzzing with joy.

I kissed her one more time, savoring the slow return to earth and the taste of her tongue and breath that lingered with the musky pussy essence that I'd shared earlier.

She splayed her hands and outlined my face, and I wished I could see her stare when she said in an awed voice, "Wow."

I grinned smugly. The darkness allowed me that freedom at least. "I hope your first time was as good as you imagined?"

"Better," she breathed. "Much, much better."

Satisfaction careened through me and took away all my weariness, at least for a little while. "You don't know how glad I am to hear it."

I could almost sense her smile even before she said. "I can only hope round two will be as pleasing." Her sated and relaxed body suddenly stiffened beneath me. "My God, we didn't use protection."

"There's no chance of impregnating you. Not with even the minutest vampire blood in our veins." I'd learned that much, at least, when I'd been in the nest and fucking women as if it was my right. Of course, I'd told myself I was doing my so-called playthings a favor. They were desperate for sex thanks to the vampire's blood exchange.

“Really?” she breathed, her relief patently obvious.

I ignored the strange tightening in my chest and added, “We’re also immune to any mortal disease.”

Her whole body relaxed, and I chose that moment to disconnect and lie beside her, tugging her around to face me so we could share breath and intermittent kisses.

She sighed. “If we were to die tonight, tomorrow night, next month...or whenever in the future. At least I understand now why some women throw their whole lives away to be with the one man who makes them feel this good in bed.”

“Well, you’re not dying anytime soon,” I said with a certainty that defied the weariness settling into my bones. “Not on my watch.”

I nuzzled her neck, inhaling her scent of lavender and musk deep into my lungs. Would I ever get enough of this woman? We might carry the perfect blend of blood for vampires, but we shared more than just that.

I’d never been a spiritual man, but I was drawn to Maya with a soul-deep connection that’d roused me from the very start. Like she’d poured icy cold water over my sleepy senses and braced me for the future I could have. And now my heart beat again with something other than the formality of existing.

“Then it looks like we’ve got each other’s backs,” she said sleepily, not even trying to suppress a yawn.

I smiled against her neck, wanting only to press myself even closer to her curves and her warmth. “It’s been a hell of a day. Get some sleep. We’ll need our wits about us in the morning.”

“Night,” she murmured.

“Goodnight, Maya.”

““Night, Alexander...and my name’s Charley.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 7:09 am

I might not have been able to see her right then, but I knew without a doubt she didn't look like a Charley. She looked more like a Lara Croft ready to take on the world. "Night, Charley," I said to her soft little snores.

My smile widened. "You could call me Jake, except I'm not that man anymore."

Chapter Fourteen

Maya

I woke with Alexander wrapped around me, keeping my back warm, while goosebumps peppered my front from the damp cold. Even worse was the oppressive darkness that revealed no hint of night or day outside.

Yet somehow I felt safe with my lover's arms around me. Not just any lover. Alexander. He made my last boyfriend—if Jeremy could even be called that—look like a young punk with fluff between his ears and the self-discipline of a gnat.

Jeremy wouldn't have lasted five minutes in the nest. Alexander had endured forty-six years of hell on Earth.

Cold fingers of fear stilled my breath, before I inhaled jaggedly and blinked into the bleak gloom. Now we just had to stay alive and free from the vampire.

I strained my ears for any sound upstairs. The music had probably been long silenced.

Now nothing stirred and I reached for the flashlight and flicked it on, sensing Alexander wake even before I turned the light his way.

Though I was glad to hear no movement upstairs, I worried it was too quiet. Like maybe someone or something was waiting for us the moment we left the cellar and entered the house.

If the vampire didn't get to us first, the humans would either kill us for seeing their drug lab, or take us to the vampire who'd compelled them to do so.

Alexander sat, looking instantly alert and awake. "Good morning, Charley."

"Morning," I said in return, somehow warm inside by him using my real name.

"We should go."

I nodded, unwilling to ask his real name in return. "Yes." While we still can.

We could lie in the dark and plan our next move for hours, but it wouldn't make any difference. We had no way of knowing what we might face, if anything, and the longer we waited, the more likely we'd be caught. With any luck the partygoers would all be sleeping off their night of debauchery.

We dressed quickly before hauling our backpacks off the ground and heading up the steps. I tied my hair into a ponytail as Alexander carefully lifted the hatch. I sucked in the stale beer and cigarette scent that was somehow fresh in comparison to the drug-laden, unventilated air we'd been breathing, before I blinked against the weak morning light while trying to see or hear anything at all.

A raspy snore in the lounge room indicated at least one person was sleeping off their chosen poison. I followed Alexander out of the cellar before he carefully shut the

hatch then held my hand as we moved with stealth through the house and toward the front door.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 7:09 am

Daryl lay sprawled on the sofa, his snores increasing in volume. Evidently, he'd been too drunk to make it to his own bed.

“Going somewhere?”

I looked at Alexander, his expression revealing nothing more than mild irritation. He turned to face Rory. “Actually, yes. We’re leaving.”

Rory stepped closer, along with three of his dazed-looking mates. “Not without my permission you’re not.” He lifted his hands, his stare glassy but his intent all too dangerous. “We invited you into our home, showed the utmost hospitality and generosity, and now you’re both leaving without even a thank you or a goodbye?”

Alexander arched an eyebrow and repeated drily, “Thank you and goodbye.”

Daryl’s snores cut off. He woke and stretched. When he saw his brother and mates held us up, he immediately pushed off the couch and stepped behind us. Alexander and I half turned to keep both brothers in our sight.

The younger brother looked more bleary-eyed than everyone else put together, yet it was obvious he wasn’t under any compulsion. He’d probably slept through the brainwashing. He was obviously hungover and apparently mystified by the tension. He put out his palms, signaling us to stay put. “What the fuck is going on?”

Rory barely noticed his brother. “We can’t let these people go.”

Daryl shot us a frown. “Why the fuck not?” His mouth dropped open and his body

stiffened. “Holy shit. They saw our lab, didn’t they?”

My gasp gave us away even without trying. Daryl charged toward us, quicker than a striking snake. “I’ve got them!”

Alexander shot his arm out, his clenched fist thumping Daryl’s jaw. The brother flew back and landed on his ass with a muffled grunt even as I saw the glint of Rory’s knife. I grabbed Alexander’s arm and said hoarsely, “Let’s get out of here.”

He nodded and we leaped over Daryl and sprinted through the door, our tread snapping across the leaf-littered pathway before we raced out of the front yard and along the sidewalk, past dingy houses. My pulse jerked erratically as the roar of a loud engine started up behind us.

Alexander cursed and grabbed my hand, pulling me into a driveway and all but dragging me past a dilapidated, fibro house. He jumped a wire gate and I managed to stumble over it.

He caught me and guided me behind the dirty house, where a weedy yard showcased an aged hills hoist with clothes hanging limply from its lines.

A black Rottweiler trotted around the corner, his big silver collar glinting along with his bared teeth. The dog moved slowly toward us, growling and nervous, his undernourished body giving him a dangerous edge.

The brothers’ car roared past, its engine subsiding fast into the distance. I held out my hand and called the dog to me. I needed to calm the animal. I had no doubt the brothers would return, and any barking or vicious growling at this early hour might alert them to our whereabouts.

But the dog didn’t move. His chest rumbled with a menacing snarl before a

succession of deep woofs sounded like a neighborhood alarm.

The back door of the house banged open and a skinny, stringy-haired, older woman dressed in flannel pajamas, yelled out, “Shut the fuck up, you stupid dog, or Freddie will beat the shit outta ya again.”

I gritted my teeth as the Rotty slinked low, his fear apparent. The dog was only doing his duty. The owner was clearly the stupid one when she didn’t even glance our way before she slammed the door shut and stomped back inside.

“The poor dog,” I whispered. Not only was it starved, it was beaten too.

Alexander nodded, but I noted he was more preoccupied by the desiccated clothes on the washing line. The sorry-looking shirts, pants and underwear appeared to have been pegged up at least a month earlier.

I called the Rotty again, and he watched us with unblinking, assessing eyes before he finally slunk toward us. He snuffled my hand, then whined when I gently stroked his head.

“Good boy,” I murmured, my heart melting for the dog that’d probably never known a kind word in his life.

I opened my backpack and fed the dog my energy bars even as Alexander stalked toward the washing and unpegged two shirts and a jacket. Carefully unclasping the dog chain that’d been secured to the hills hoist, he moved back to the house and away from its windows.

His eyes gleamed as he handed me a shirt and jacket. “Put these on.”

I nodded. “Good plan.”

After he'd unlatched the gate and carefully opened it, I snuck through with the dog on his lead, our backpacks abandoned so as not to give us away. Ten minutes later we were walking down the street, the Rotty dragging against his lead with an eagerness that belied his starved condition.

The energy bars were probably more than the dog had eaten in a week.

I pulled my borrowed jacket around me even as Alexander adjusted the hood of his red and black checkered shirt. His face was shadowed in his hoodie, and I fell back a little to conceal myself next to him.

The brothers wouldn't be looking for two poorly dressed people out walking their dog. I grinned at Alexander. His tall body was at least one size too big for the shirt and pants, while my pants were loose around my waist and tight on my ass, the jacket a couple of sizes too large.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 7:10 am

He raised a dark eyebrow. “We look like hobos.”

I nodded. “Good.”

I stayed in his shadow when the brothers’ sedan throbbed past twenty minutes later. Not one of the passengers or the driver looked at the down-and-out couple walking their half-starved mutt.

We turned a corner of the block and my breath whistled through my teeth. I bent and ruffled the Rotty’s ears. “Good boy...Jasper. I’m going to buy you the biggest bone I can find.”

“Jasper?” Alexander queried with a wry smile.

I shrugged. “I can’t keep on calling him dog or Rotty.”

Alexander tightened his arm around me and I rested my head against his shoulder. “You did great.”

I smiled up at him. “The clothes and dog worked a treat.”

“They did. Now we just have to keep out of sight.”

In unspoken agreement, we headed to the doctor’s house. It was risky, but we were certain the brothers would have looked there already and discovered we didn’t live there. The doctor would have set them straight.

I looked up at the man I craved to be with more than anyone else in the world. If my wish had half a chance of coming true, now was a time to think clearly. I blinked, ignoring the sexual thrill pulsing through me. This tough, smart, gorgeous man had been my first ever lover. I couldn't have chosen better if I'd tried.

I cleared my throat, forcing my mind back on survival. "You've lived with that vampire leech for forty-six years."

His lips tightened. "Yes."

"Aside from sunlight, does he have any other weaknesses?"

He shrugged. "Everything has a weakness." He drew a hand over his face. "Our strain of blood is extremely rare. And he'll grow weaker every day that he doesn't drink."

"Until he finds us or another donor," I finished for him. "What are the chances he'll find someone else?"

"Slim to none. It's why he'll do whatever it takes to get us back. It's also why he spends so much time looking through his telescope. He can see the auras of people, and different blood types show different auras. Our blood type gives off a distinct aura all of its own."

I stored away the information, not even thinking beyond the fact that other vampires might well see that same aura and kidnap us. "In all the time you were in the nest, how many donors did the vampire procure?"

Alexander didn't hesitate. "Twelve." Clearly those numbers were branded into his head, no matter how much he undoubtedly wished he could forget every one of those women.

“So, fourteen, counting you and me?”

“Yes.”

I did the calculations. “In the forty-six years of searching for donors every night, he’s only found one suitable candidate every three years.” I stared up at him. “If he found no more donors with our blood type, would he survive?”

He shrugged. “For as long as I was in the nest, I was always his main blood source, so I have no idea how long he’d survive without me.”

Hope swelled inside. “If you were his primary food supply, what were the women? His appetizer? His dessert?”

I couldn’t think about those same women also being Alexander’s sexual release, not if it replaced hope with despair and bitter jealousy.

His face drained of color. “Yeah. I think keeping the women in the nest was his insurance against me dying. Those women prolonged the vampire’s need for my blood. If something happened to me, then his own mortality was at risk.” He blew out a slow breath. “But you were different. The vampire was excited about you and I think...”

“Yes?”

“I think your blood might be as pure as mine. A perfect and potent vampire food.”

I frowned, my mind spinning. But I wouldn’t be distracted by the shudders of revulsion filling me, knowing I was a vampire’s ultimate meal ticket. Instead I concentrated on the possibilities to outmaneuver the vampire. “So he’ll be expecting us to run and hide. He’ll also expect our own hunger will flush us out long before he

starves.”

Alexander scraped a hand over his face. “Without a doubt.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 7:10 am

I pulled on his arm and he stopped before turning to face me. Jasper snuffled in the grass beside the sidewalk while my pulse galloped like a runaway train, my squeaky voice giving away my excitement. “So the leech wouldn’t contemplate the idea of us going back to his nest to destroy him?”

Alexander’s eyes widened even as he compressed his lips. “Bad idea. I watched one woman in the nest commit suicide. There’s not a chance in hell I’ll let you die too.”

I squeezed his hand. “We’re in this together. You won’t let anything happen to me, just the same as I won’t let anything happen to you.”

He blew out a harsh breath. “You don’t understand what we’re up against. Fighting the vampire is like trying to injure smoke. It’s just not possible.”

It was my turn to shrug. “So then we suck the smoke into a vacuum and never let it out again.”

Alexander’s eyes crinkled at the corners despite his stern look. “We talk to this doctor again first. Only then do we even consider the idea of returning to the nest.”

I nodded, my belly churning with what we had yet to face. “Deal.”

Chapter Fifteen

Alexander

I approached the frontdoor of the doctor’s house with far more caution this time

around. Who knew what the brothers and their mates had threatened the man with when they came here looking for us?

Because of them, Charley and I might get the muzzle of a gun in our faces.

I rapped on the door and yelled out, “Doctor Newry. Sorry to disturb you again, but we really need to talk.”

No sound came from inside, but Jasper whined, as though sensing something amiss. I tried the doorknob, shocked then wary when it turned and the door swung open.

Charley seemed just as surprised. “The doctor wouldn’t leave his door unlocked.”

She didn’t need words to voice the rest of her thoughts. The doctor was profoundly paranoid and suspicious of just about everyone. He’d have his house locked up tighter than Fort Knox.

I stepped inside, the dog slinking to one side of me and Charley gripping my hand on the other. The floorboards were dull and echoed woodenly underfoot, the walls a faded dirty cream. The house was musty and smelled of damp and cat. My voice echoed as I called out,

“Newry, are you home?”

A wind chime tinkled lazily in the screened kitchen window, the sound eerily loud in the thick silence. Charley tightened her grip as she whispered, “I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 7:10 am

A cat hissed in the corner of the shadowy kitchen, its ginger fur raised into hackles and its green eyes almost luminous with dislike. Probably as much because Jasper was straining on his leash and vibrating with excitement than us human intruders.

Another cat, a big tabby, bounded off the kitchen table and slinked underneath one of the vinyl chairs. I strode toward the stove and lifted the lid on a saucepan of congealed soup.

I exhaled heavily and turned to Charley. “It looks like our doctor left in a hurry.”

“Do you think the brothers took him?”

I shook my head. “No. Their only goal is to find us. The vampire has planted that suggestion in their mind and nothing else matters now.”

“But Daryl wasn’t—”

“He knows we saw his lab. That’s more than enough motivation for him to come looking for us.”

“So where’s our friendly doctor then?”

I looked around, a little sick inside. “The brothers gave the vampire this address.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, curling her hand in mine. “I hope he’s okay.”

I glanced at the untouched saucepan of soup. “I’m sure he is. He hadn’t eaten dinner,

which means he left before the vampire visited last night.”

The tabby crept toward us, meowing pitifully. Charley squatted and encouraged the cat closer. When he pushed against her legs, purring in ecstasy, she looked up at me and said, “These cats will starve if we leave them like this.”

I nodded, the cogs turning in my mind. “Then we stay here. At least until we can think of a better option.” The house had also supposedly been safeguarded against vampires.

“And if the doctor’s daughter turns up?”

I shook my head. “He lives the life of a hermit. I imagine even his own daughter visits on only on rare occasions.”

I wouldn’t think about the fact his other daughter would never come home again.

She nodded, then released her grip on my hand to look in the pantry. After retrieving a can of cat food, she released the tab and poured the meat into a dish. Two more cats, a white longhair of undetermined breed and another tabby, came out of hiding. All four of the felines circled Charley’s legs, squawking as though they hadn’t been fed for a week.

When Jasper whined and licked his chops, Charley grinned at him and said, “I’m sure I’ll find something here for you to eat, Jasper.”

I unclipped his chain and he trotted forward, ignoring the cats now, to focus on begging for food. The cats were of the same mind.

I laughed at the comical sight of Charley surrounded by adoring and hungry animals, and she looked up with a grin and asked. “What’s so funny?”

“You. Us. And our readymade family.”

“Not to mention our readymade house. Let’s hope Doctor Newry doesn’t get too upset with us—”

One of the cat dishes dropped to the floor, all four cats scattering as Charley pushed a hand to her belly and folded over, gasping for breath.

Shit. I raced toward her. It’d been so long since she’d had any cravings for vampire blood, I’d almost forgotten it would happen again. I’d yet to experience it myself since leaving the nest. In fact, for the first time in forty-six years, I felt almost normal. Human. Not the blood whore I’d become.

I turned her to me. “Try to relax, go to another place.”

She looked up, her face pale and her eyes glittering almost maniacally. “You need to help me forget again.”

My dick shouldn’t have instantly hardened in agreement, but the invitation was more than enough to remind me of the passion we’d shared. And if our lovemaking got rid of her pain, I was a selfish enough bastard not to want to take that away from her.

I nodded and took her hand. Jasper was busy licking the floor clean of some kind of seafood mix. He’d be fine for a little longer.

When Charley struggled to straighten, I bent and lifted her into my arms. Striding down the dingy hallway, I ignored the obviously rumpled bed of the main bedroom and stalked into the guest room, which looked quite a bit cleaner than the one the doctor used.

I laid her onto the bold red comforter and followed her down. Already her eyes

glinted with need as much as pain, her breathing still heavy, but for a far different reason.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 7:10 am

I removed her too-big clothes with quick hands and removed my own clothes in record time. My dick was harder than steel at seeing her naked in full daylight, her breasts luscious and her waist trim. Her long legs quivered, drawing my eyes to her gorgeous little pussy with its fine strip of dark hairs. She drew her belly in before she splayed a hand across the taut flesh.

There was no time to enjoy the scenery, or even to ask her to take her hair down so I could see it fall around her shoulders and breasts. I needed to take her pain away.

“Just fuck me,” she whimpered.

I climbed over her, my cock throbbing in sync with my racing heartbeat. I wanted Charley more than anything else in the world, but I’d have to save making love to her for another day.

Right now, hard and fast was her only stipulation.

“Please,” she gasped, compressing her lips as her eyes glazed over with pain.

I kneeled between her thighs, pushed her legs up and over my shoulders and guided my cock to her beautiful pussy. I sank balls-deep into her tightness with a deep groan.

I didn’t give her time to adjust to my size. I rocked in and out of her without any preliminaries, ensuring her mind focused on the sex, and on the chemistry that burned between us hotter than a lightning strike.

Her eyes glinted, her pain evidently fading as moistness covered my shaft. I stroked

harder and faster. Her head fell back, her neck arching as she gasped and moaned.

I growled, my balls tightening painfully. I wouldn't come until she'd gotten off first. No way in hell.

She jerked, and I sensed a hunger, which pain had coalesced into a fiery climax. She cried out, her muscles clamping like a fist around my cock.

I pumped one last time and roared as my seed gushed out, flooding inside her and leaving me drained.

I closed my eyes for a moment, needing to shield my visual of Charley, who'd softened my heart and hardened my cock to steel without even trying. I'd fought for so many years against my blood craving, yet I had zero willpower against this woman.

I wanted her with a greater hunger than I had ever had for anything the vampire could offer me.

Her legs fell from my shoulders and I opened my eyes and disengaged from her wetness.

Moving to lie beside her, I then gathered her close.

"Thank you," she said hoarsely, her eyes glinting with moisture. "Whatever you're doing works. Most of the pain evaporated the moment you slid inside me."

I stroked over her hair, my skin warm with the afterglow of sex. "I'm thinking we should try it once just because we're in the mood for it."

She brushed a hand down the side of my face, her lips curling at the corners. "We

should, shouldn't we? Luckily, I wanted you from the very start."

Euphoria pushed through my system, leaving me lightheaded and incapable of speech. Instead I leaned forward and kissed her, a tender merging of lips that conveyed so much. I pulled my head back, my voice cracking with emotion. "I wanted you from the start too."

She smiled. "I know."

I pushed some loose strands of hair behind her ear, wondering absently how anyone could be so beautiful, inside and out. "My feelings are...intense considering I've learned so little about you."

Her smile dimmed, even as she said brightly, "Maybe it's my mystique that attracts you."

I cocked my head to the side, my gaze holding hers. "Seriously, I'd love to learn some more about you, Charley."

She blinked. "I've told you my real name. It's more than I know about you."

I exhaled softly. "I was Jake Reynolds a lifetime ago, but I'll always be Alexander now."

She frowned. "You'd give that kind of power to the vampire?"

"He might have named me, but he doesn't own me. Not anymore. After everything I've been through, the name fits me now. I'll never go back to being the Jake I remember."

She nodded, blinking tiredly. "You've been through hell and back. I'm not about to

pretend to understand how you survived. And you're right, the bloodsucker doesn't own you, he never did. Not like he wanted to. If he had, you'd never have wanted to leave the nest."

I turned inward for a moment, thinking back even as I had to shake away the memory of the death of each woman who had. I cleared my throat. "A pity it took forty-six years and you to make me realize I really could leave."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 7:10 am

I was talking to myself. Her eyes were closed and her breathing was deep. I resisted touching the silken softness of her skin. I didn't want to wake her. I knew firsthand how much hunger pains took out of the body. Sleep was the only way to fully recover.

I stifled a yawn. The danger of being on the run was almost as tiring. But I wasn't about to go to sleep. I left the bed and the too-inviting warmth of Charley, before I dressed back in my 'borrowed' clothes and headed into the lounge room.

Jasper's toenails clicked on the faded linoleum floor as he followed me around while I triple-locked the front door and secured all the windows. I had no idea how the doctor had gone about safeguarding his house, but it would have been all for nothing if he'd opened the door to the vampire.

I had no doubt the bloodsucker would have compelled the doctor to step outside.

Satisfied the dark and rather dingy house was as secure as possible, I retrieved the bowl on the table and filled it with the soup. Placing the full-to-the brim container on the floor for Jasper, I watched with a half-smile as he wolfed down the food then licked his chops as he looked up for more.

"Guess you want what's left on the stove then," I murmured, before spooning out more.

The ginger cat pushed against my legs with a pitiful meow, as though we were now the best of friends, even as it glared menacingly at the dog.

I unlocked the back door and glanced outside to the warmth of mid-morning sunlight and a small backyard that had been recently mown. It wasn't much, but at least the dog and cats had somewhere to relieve themselves.

The ginger cat raced outside first, followed by Jasper, who sniffed the yard suspiciously while the feline sharpened its claws on the rickety wooden fence. One of the tabby cats slid outside next and I sat on the step, watching the animals.

I managed a smile. It was a beautiful winter day, the sun warm on my face and the animals making me yearn once again for a normal life.

Charley's sudden scream dissolved the fantasy quicker than ice dropped into boiling water.

Chapter Sixteen

Maya

"Charley?"

I jerked my head up at the sound of the too-familiar cracked voice that was quickly followed by a curse and the staggering tread of my mother. She'd woken midafternoon yet again.

Sleeping off another drug high.

I suppressed my need to lecture her and instead used my 'everything is fine' voice. "Hi, Mom. I made you a late lunch. Your favorite. Corned beef and pickle sandwiches."

She dragged a hand over her face. "I'm not hungry, Charley. You know I never eat

first thing in the morning.”

Another reason my mother was thinner than a beanpole—aside from her drug addiction.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 7:10 am

I couldn't help but sigh. "It's four o'clock in the afternoon."

"Give it a rest, Charley," she chided in a raspy voice. "I've already got a stinking headache."

"Coffee, then?"

"Yeah, sure. Why not."

Another footfall sounded from the bedroom and my eyes widened at the tattooed little weed who was one of my mother's drug dealers.

She flipped a graying piece of dark hair behind her shoulder and added coyly, "You'd better make it two coffees."

My stomach dropped to my toes, my skin crawling with revulsion and my despair all but wiping out any lingering trace of hope that my mother would kick her self-destructive drug habit.

Be thankful you didn't wake up and hear them fucking.

I stared hard at my mom. "You're screwing your dealer now to get your drugs? Could you get any lower?"

"Watch your mouth, Charley," she snapped, her eyes cold with anger.

Yeah, because you're such a great role model. I bit back my thoughts even as the

dealer—Johnny or Jimmy, I wasn't sure and didn't care enough to know his name—grinned at me with leering, bloodshot eyes and rotten teeth.

“You climb into bed with me, little spitfire, and I'll give your mother all the blow, bud and pingers she'll want for a month.”

My lip curled even as my mother broke out with a gleeful, “Really?”

My whole world bottomed out, my mother blurring in front of me. “You can't be fucking serious?”

Her eyes flashed with something between shock and guilt, then her face crumpled. “No! Of course not!” She blinked rapidly, her voice rising. “You know my addiction is an illness. But you must also know I love you more than anything else in the world.”

My throat burned right along with the backs of my eyes. “Yet you seriously considered selling your only daughter to get your fix.”

The dealer stepped in. “You're of age. What's the problem here? Lynette is your mother, you should be willing to help her out.”

Tears threatened to spill, but I refused to show any weakness to them. “Yes, she is my mother, you piece of shit, which is why I don't want you in her life, ruining whatever chance she has of being a real mother.”

My mom pressed a hand to her mouth. “Charley, don't speak to Jimmy like that. If it wasn't for him—”

“If it wasn't for him,” I interjected hoarsely, “you might be clean and not fucking men for drugs!” I swiped at the tears pouring down my face, not even trying to stop

them anymore. “I can’t watch you kill yourself like this even a minute longer. I really can’t.”

My mom squeezed her eyes shut, and opened them again with a steely resolve I hadn’t seen for years. “Then leave my house and don’t come back.”

I gaped, inwardly reeling. “You don’t mean that.” But she did mean it. I’d never seen her more determined. I swallowed hard. “Who’s going to look after you?”

Jimmy put a limp arm around her waist. “I’ll be looking after Lynette, don’t you worry about that.”

Bile rose in the back of my throat. The drug dealer would probably move into the house and set up shop for free. The bastard.

I fisted my hands. “You can both go to hell.”

I ran to my room to pack my few clothes and belongings, my mind screaming rejection and curses and everything in between. My mother would die without me, I had no doubt about it. But I also had no doubt she wanted only to join my father in the afterlife, even as she used those same drugs to make her forget about him.

My inner screams rang loud in my ears when hands pressed down on me. I woke with a gasp, the hands on my shoulders gently shaking me awake.

I blinked up at Alexander, my blurry vision making me realize I’d cried in my sleep. What the hell?

“I woke you?” I asked him in a scratchy voice.

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He nodded. “Yeah. I heard your screams from outside.”

I dragged a hand over my face. “Sorry. I had another damn nightmare.”

“You have them often?”

I looked back up at him, seeing his concern, his need to comfort. Bloody hell. How had I ever thought he was unfeeling? How had I ever thought he was a monster like the bloodsucker we’d left behind? My heart softened and warmed. He was more human than most of the people I’d ever known in my life.

I cleared my throat. “I haven’t had that one for a while.”

“So...it’s a recurring nightmare?”

I exhaled a shuddering breath. “Yeah. A memory I seem to like reliving from time to time.”

“I’m sorry,” he said simply.

I shook my head. “Don’t be. It’s hardly your fault.” I sat up and rubbed a hand over my face. “My upbringing wasn’t exactly stellar.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, not right now.” I smiled up at him, touching the bristles of his jawline and falling a little more for the man who’d taken me from girl to woman. I inwardly

sighed, melting under his heated stare. “There’s something else I’d like you to do.”

He covered my hand with his own, leaning into my touch as he asked, “You want to replace that memory with a better one?”

My smile turned wobbly and all too heartfelt. “Yes.”

He gathered me in his arms and I sank against him, soaking up his tenderness like a dry husk did rain. I needed this side of him more than I did the warrior I’d glimpsed beneath his detachment, needed the gentleman who’d take me to the place where new dreams could be made.

I helped him strip off his clothes and we kissed even as we rolled over so that I was on top, his cock pressing along my mound and belly, my breasts flattened against his chest with its soft scrape of manly hairs. I pulled my head back, losing myself in his dark stare.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” he said thickly.

I shivered with yearning, with a deep emotion I didn’t want to dwell upon, not yet. “You’re not half bad yourself.”

He curled his hands over my shoulders even as our mouths merged again as one, and I dragged my core along the flat of his cock, groaning into his mouth at the friction that wasn’t quite enough. I could all but feel my clitoris swelling against the ripple of veins. But I was desperate for more.

I sat and gyrated along his rock-hard shaft, his taut jaw and glittering eyes revealing the willpower that’d helped him to survive for so long in the vampire’s nest.

I closed my eyes momentarily, blocking out the thought. I needed to lose myself

completely in this man. I slid down his body until I was straddling his thighs. I looked up. “I want to taste you.”

He thinned his lips and his nostrils flared. “You don’t have to—”

I took the tip of this cock into my mouth and sucked him to the back of my throat.

“Jesus,” he groaned.

I inwardly smiled. I loved being in control while watching him lose control. Loved the sticky pre-cum on my tongue, the heavy weight of his full-to-bursting ball sac in my hands. I moved my head moved up and down, swirling and flicking my tongue over his ridged shaft and the tip that seeped a little more of his fluid.

The salty-sticky essence tasted divine and I sucked his cock even harder, making his back arch and a throaty growl escape his compressed mouth. I might be new to oral sex, but going by Alexander’s moans, I was doing a fine job. And damn if I wasn’t drenched knowing how much pleasure I was giving him.

His balls tightened under my hand and I released him before I missed out on all the fun. I climbed over him, and he stared at me as though I was a feast for his eyes. I grinned and said huskily, “I’ve always wanted to know what it’s like being on top.”

His stare fairly glowed. “I hear practice makes perfect.”

I bent and clasped his shaft before I sank inch by slow inch onto him, my inner muscles wrapping around him like a glove and pushing a growl out of my throat at the pleasure-pain of his sizeable cock.

“Fuck, that feels amazing,” he groaned, the cords of his neck sticking out and his jaw locking tight.

I waited until my muscles adjusted, and said, “It’s about to get better.”

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Moving my hips forward and back, then lifting up and down, I soon got into a rhythm, one that pushed me toward that special place Alexander had already taken me and that I wanted to experience again and again.

He growled approval and placed outspread hands on my hips, leading me into a choreographed dance that had me grinding against him. Pressure built and built, an intensity that made me tremble even as I was just seconds away from the release I sought. I cried out his name at the climax tearing through my body, taking away my breath as I spiraled to dizzying heights.

Alexander's seed exploded inside me. His guttural groans pushed me to another climax that left me weightless for a long, out-of-body moment, before I finally collapsed on top of him.

His arms surrounded my sweat-slicked body, keeping me in place with his wilting cock still embedded inside me. I breathed in his musky, sweat-moistened skin, running my hands over his glorious, masculine body.

Emotions churned through my gut, tears pricking my eyes. I didn't ever want this moment to end. I never wanted to be apart from this man, even though our odds of being together for much longer were slim to none.

Breath shuddered from my lungs. Luckily for me, I'd never been a betting woman.

"Want to talk about it now?" he asked gently, stroking my nape and reaching out with his other hand to caress my buttocks.

“About how splendid it is to fuck you?” I asked, hoping my shrill voice didn’t give away how little I wanted to relive my nightmare...my past.

“You can talk my ear off about that if you want,” he said, voice smug. “But sometimes it’s also good to discuss the things that are locked away in your head.”

I swallowed, before pushing up to look him in the eye. “And sometimes it’s better to bury them as far away as possible. Besides, the vampire chasing us is enough of a nightmare to handle for the moment.”

He sighed, his hands stilling on me. “Maybe one day you’ll trust me enough to share your past.”

I smiled at him and murmured softly, “Yeah, maybe one day I will.”

Chapter Seventeen

Alexander

I woke alone in the bed with Charley’s imprint beside me cold to the touch. I shot bolt upright, scanning the room and listening for sound, then immediately relaxing at hearing her voice in the living area of the house.

I released a long, slow breath. I didn’t recall falling asleep, but clearly I’d done so soon after our lovemaking.

Lovemaking?

I squeezed my eyes closed. There was no other word for the intimacy I’d shared with Charley. Sex had never felt so right, not just physically, but emotionally too. And I’d been aware of that connection from the very start.

I was certain Charley had experienced that same bond.

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I ran a hand over my abs, both exhilarated and mystified as to why I'd not once felt the sharp stomach cramps of blood hunger. I'd become so conditioned to being permanently hungry, it was almost a high to feel so normal. I only hoped that when the pains came once again, I'd be able to handle them.

What if you never get them again?

My breath hissed, my mind spinning with possibilities. What if the vampire had kept me under control by giving me only a few drops of blood to have me craving more, when a decent amount of his blood would have satisfied my body once and for all?

I pushed onto my feet and walked out of the bedroom. I guessed that time would tell if my assumptions were anywhere near correct. I wasn't going to jump to any conclusions if it meant huge disappointment in the not too distant future.

My thoughts evaporated as I stilled at the visual of Charley on her knees, rumpling Jasper's ears and crooning to him as if he were her baby. My heart skipped a beat as yearning for a family and a normal life with someone like Charley filled my head.

Be honest, you only want Charley.

She turned then, her smile gleaming and her eyes bright. I swallowed. She looked for all the world as though we weren't running from the most powerful being on the planet and there was nothing more to worry about than what to get on the next grocery order.

"Alexander, hey. I hope I didn't wake you."

I shook my head even as I tried not to overthink things. “No. Actually, I never meant to fall asleep.”

She smiled. “It’s been a rough couple of days. Little wonder your body—and your mind—needed some rest.”

I stepped forward and crouched in front of her, Jasper panting happily as he watched us. I cupped her chin and used my thumb to brush gently back and forth across her softer-than-soft skin. “Making love to the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever known might have something to do with it too.”

Her lashes fluttered and her cheeks heated. “So I’m not just another woman in your bed?”

I leaned forward and caught her mouth under my own, a tender scrape of lips that instantly heated my blood and made me want to possess her yet again. I leaned back, my eyes catching hers. “Not a chance. You know as much as I that we share something more than amazing sex.”

She looked down, everything about her demure and self-conscious. “Yes, I wasn’t sure if you felt the same way.”

I tilted her chin back up so that her gaze again met mine. “I’ve never felt anything like this before with a woman...not even my wife.”

She gasped sharply, her eyes widening. “I... I don’t know what to say to that.”

I smiled. “Then don’t say anything. Let’s just enjoy the rest of today.”

She nodded and I straightened before I strode to the back door. Pulling it open, I noted the sun heading fast toward the horizon, casting long shadows across the

ground.

Jasper sniffed my hand and whined, and I gave him an absent pat even as dread slowly built. “Not long now before nightfall.”

I sensed Charley behind me even before she spoke. “The bloodsucker will be out looking for us again.”

I turned to her. “Without a doubt.”

She didn’t appear to be nervous. In fact, her tension leaned more toward pent-up excitement. “I want to show you something.”

She pivoted and I locked the back door before I followed as she strode to the end of the hallway. She reached up and pulled a cord from the ceiling, and a ladder clattered downward.

“An attic,” I murmured as I looked up. “You’ve already been up there?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

I drew a hand across my brow. I must’ve been dead to the world to have slept through the racket of the ladder dropping down. Bloody hell, some protector I made. The vampire could have brainwashed any number of people to come find us, then take us to his nest...and I wouldn’t have even heard them break and enter the house.

While I stood there with thoughts chewing up my head, Charley climbed the ladder and disappeared into the attic. I sighed and followed. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, she flicked on a switch and the whole attic lit up like an inferno.

“Holy shit,” I rasped, shielding my eyes while staring up in awe at the thirty or forty

light bulbs that shone hot and bright on us. “They’re infra-red lamps.”

She clapped her hands and giggled. “Flick these on and the vampire might think twice before trying to capture us.” She turned and plucked a compound bow hanging from the wall. She nocked an arrow and drew it back on the bowstring like someone who knew their way around the weapon. “And this shoots wooden arrows.”

“You look like an archer.”

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She shrugged. “Before mom got addicted to drugs and moved into town to feed her addiction, we lived on a farm and often hunted for our meat.”

I stored away yet another little tidbit of information about her, even as I moved forward and fingered one of the many sharp arrows. “Looks like cedar,” I murmured. The so-called nutty doctor had been prepared for all eventualities.

Her eyes glowed. “So all the stories are true, then? A wooden stake through the heart will kill a vampire?”

I only wished I knew for sure. “The vampire never told me his weakness. He wasn’t that stupid. All I know for certain is his vulnerability to sunlight and his need for a certain human blood type.”

“Ourblood type.” Her voice cracked at the reminder, her face more subdued. Then she blew out a slow breath, wisps of dark hair lifting off her face. She swung a hand toward the door. “At least the doctor covered all bases.”

I turned and took in the bunch of garlic hanging above the door, then eyed the bundle of stakes stacked in the corner of the room. “The good doctor told us he knew little to nothing about vampires except in fairytales, so I’m guessing he built this room in the hopes that some of the myths were true and a vampire could be killed.”

She stepped toward me and I pulled her into my arms even as she said, “All that’s missing is the holy water.”

I kissed the top of her head, my heart shifting with emotion. “I won’t let the vampire

take you. Not for anything.”

She lifted her head. “I won’t let him take you either.” She bit her bottom lip. “I can’t imagine a future without you in it.”

I cupped her face, my pulse thumping like a drum in my ears and my heart melting at her words. “I feel the same way,” I whispered.

Chapter Eighteen

Alexander

We kissed then, a desperate mating of tongues and clashing of teeth. At the back of our minds we knew if the vampire came for us tonight, this might be our last time together.

We tore off each other’s clothes.

No matter how much we wished otherwise, and fought to stay free, there was a good chance the vampire would still take us, or kill us. A good chance our lives would again change once the day gave way to night.

I picked her up and she wrapped her legs around my hips. In two strides I had her against the wall. Her breasts quivered with her little gasping breaths, her nipples tight with arousal.

She looked up at me with bright green eyes and her dark hair drifting out of its ponytail. I swallowed hard. “You’re so damn beautiful.”

She didn’t seem to want to talk and I wasn’t in the mood for a one-sided conversation.

Anyconversation.

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And neither of us wanted foreplay. Without any formality, I aligned my cock between her folds and, holding her stare, I drove into her.

She gasped, tensing for a moment. But she was already wet enough to take my all, and I didn't hold back. I kissed her again as I thrust inside, and she counter-thrust, her breasts jiggling with every motion, her lips parting to give my tongue full access.

When she drew back to inhale, I pumped all the harder, heat and electricity blowing through me like a furnace. I groaned and kissed my way down her throat, my tongue swiping across the little puncture wounds in her neck.

She stilled with a gasp, clearly startled by the intimate contact. She seemed even more startled by the climax that shuddered through her, and her inner muscles clamped hold of my dick even as my breath stalled, shockwaves of pleasure coursing through me.

I shouted out her name as my seed poured into her, along with my heart, my soul. But I didn't care. If I lost her, I'd lose a giant part of myself anyway. I'd take every second of time I had with her and cherish it for all I was worth.

She unknotted her legs from around me, forcing disconnection. She slid to the ground with a little mewl of loss. But it wasn't until she winced that I realized we might have overdone the sex.

Guilt stabbed at me. For crying out loud, she'd been a virgin before I taken advantage of her unchecked hormones yet again. I put a hand under her chin and tilted her stare back my way. "Are you okay?"

She gave me a reassuring smile. “Honestly, if it wasn’t for the fact a vampire wanted us more than anything else alive, I’d be the happiest woman in the world right now.”

I wanted to keep her that way and planned to do everything in my power to do exactly that. I kissed her with all the gentleness I hadn’t shown her against the wall, revealing my deep affection in the best way I knew how. When we finally pulled away, her eyes shone with wonder, with hope.

I trailed a hand down the side of her face, drinking in her shiver of awareness. “Just know that you’ve already made me the happiest man alive.”

We didn’t speak much after that. What more could be said? Instead, we dressed in silence, and as daylight turned to dusk, we grabbed some snacks, a bunch of blankets and pillows from the bed we’d shared, before we rounded up the cats and took them into the attic.

Jasper whined as he watched us disappear up the ladder and Charley turned to me. “He doesn’t want to be down there by himself. Do you think he’d let you carry him?”

“Only one way to find out.”

I stepped onto the ladder rungs. I was still stronger than I’d ever been, a strength that seemed to have actually intensified since leaving the nest. Not to mention the fact I hadn’t once had hunger cramps.

Night was already upon us when I dropped to the floor and bent for Jasper. About to pick him up, I froze at the bang of the front door and the wood that skidded across the faded linoleum.

Shit.

“Well, well, well, look who we finally found,” Rory drawled as he stepped into the hallway, a slight limp to his walk.

I straightened, my heart in my throat at seeing not just the younger brother follow Rory inside, but their brainwashed friends too. As they walked down the hallway, I pulled the cord above my head so that the ladder snapped back out of sight. “Don’t let anyone up there,” I shouted.

I didn’t have time to see if Charley was listening. The brothers moved fast. But I was faster. I distantly acknowledged the vampire blood had given me not just extra strength, but extra mental clarity too.

I turned sideward to make myself less of a target. Throwing a punch to the jaw of Rory, I then spun and kicked Daryl in the nutsack. Rory fell back and Daryl crumpled with a strangled scream, holding his groin.

Two more came at me at once, jostling past the brothers curled up on the floor to get to me. I squatted, then kicked the legs out from under one man, before surging up to punch into the gut of another, driving the wind out of his lungs.

The last man came at me with a knife, but adrenaline burned away any fear. I’d taken out the other men with relative ease and I didn’t doubt for a second I couldn’t do the same with this skinny teenager with lank hair, red eyes and a prominent Adam’s apple.

He raised the blade and it arced toward me. I caught his wrist and stayed his arm before I kned him in the groin. The knife dropped to the floor and he followed it with a grunt. I kicked the blade out of sight even as Jasper growled.

I turned to the Rotty. “Now you’re the vicious guard dog?” I asked drily. But any and all sarcasm faded as the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and my senses

prickled with foreboding.

“Alexander, behind you!”

I didn't need Charley's high-pitched warning to know who'd arrived. I spun around to the vampire's slow clap of hands. My heart missed a beat at seeing his glowing red eyes that gave away his blood hunger.

The vampire didn't attack. Instead, he somehow withheld his base need and he ambled forward, stopping with a curled lip at the first human writhing in agony on the floor.

He looked back at me. “Isn't this a surprise,” he said with his modulated voice. “Not only have you conquered your blood hunger, you've managed to also hang on to some of my power.” He smiled, not bothering to hide his long, sharp fangs. “A pity you'll never be as strong as me.”

I shook my head. “You're wrong. You're the weak one here. You need the blood of someone like me to survive. I. Don't. Need. You.” I cocked an eyebrow. “Or your blood.”

The vampire's face paled with barely suppressed rage. “You forget yourself, Alexander. Forget that I fed you and looked after you. Forget that I gave you a longevity most people only dream about.”

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My pulse pounded in my ears, my mouth drying with the wrath I forcefully swallowed. “I wanted a normal life. I never once asked to live in a never-ending nightmare.”

Except hadn’t those forty-six years been worth it just to meet Charley in my future?

Without a doubt.

It was odd, the settling of emotion as I realized the truth. And suddenly I was unmoved by the creature who fed on fear as much as he did blood, because in the end, love was all that mattered. I smiled. “But I guess you’re right—I should thank you for that longevity—without it, I would never have met Charley.”

The vampire’s eyes flashed, my goodwill clearly not what he wanted or expected. “Her name is Maya.”

“No. Her name is Charley.” I stepped over one of the brothers and moved closer to the vampire. “And you’re not my master anymore. You’re a bloodsucking freak who can’t ever experience what it is to be human.”

“You’re right about one thing,” the vampire interjected smoothly. “I am a bloodsucker.”

He didn’t deny that he wished to be human. I didn’t doubt for a second he’d sell his soul just to feel any other emotion aside from the burn of antipathy I’d witnessed just moments earlier. I guessed no donors had ever escaped the nest before.

The vampire uncurled his hands, no longer bothering to hide the evil behind his eyes as he added, "But I'm also your bloodsucking master."

I sensed him reaching into my mind. "Don't listen to him!" But Charley's shout barely penetrated my subconscious. It was as if a fog clouded my brain, sinking deep into my defenses.

"Offer me your throat."

I couldn't fight the vampire's honeyed voice of persuasion. Though my mind screamed no I was compelled to obey. I was a mindless marionette.

My head turned and the vampire's twin fangs slid into my throat even as Charley's scream slid into my head.

I groaned and everything blurred while ecstasy and despair, yearning and horror, became a new symphony in my head.

I vaguely heard the brothers and their mates stagger to their feet before they stumbled toward the door. Then the vampire's icy cold hands that burned my skin held my attention while he kept me in place, siphoning my lifeblood...perfect vampire nutrition.

I swayed, quickly lightheaded by the feeding. In some distant part of my brain I knew he was taking too much, yet I couldn't fight, couldn't even form the word 'stop'.

Was this what the vampire had planned? Drain me lifeless and make Charley his next eternal blood-slave?

I stiffened. No! I wouldn't let him touch her.

The vampire never expected my surrender to morph into rebellion. Before he grasped my intent, I jerked away from him, his fangs sliding like icy blades from my throat.

I heard Jasper's vicious growl, registered that the dog had latched on to the vampire's leg. The vampire didn't have time to acknowledge more than fleeting shock at my strength of mind, before he turned his attention to the irritation chewing on his limb.

He kicked the dog free and Jasper yelped as he hit the floor hard. The vampire turned back to me at about the same time as a distinct whoomp filled my senses. I fought to stand even as I distantly realized that the vampire was clutching at an arrow that'd pierced his brow, the arrowhead sticking through the back of his head.

Another whoomp sounded and an arrow cleaved through the vampire's chest.

I blinked, staring in confusion at the powerful vampire frothing at the mouth. The creature had lived for centuries and Charley had managed to give him pause. Oh, he wouldn't die, but I had no doubt it'd take some time to recover.

Charley's hands were suddenly around me, supporting me. "Alexander, can you hear me?" Her voice came from a great distance, but I managed a nod even as she said, "You've got to drink his blood and regain your stamina."

I swayed, blood loss depleting me of every bit of my strength. But not my strength of will. I looked up at the vampire. His eyes were crimson, rage radiating from him at being bested by a mere mortal. He wrenched the arrow from his head and blood gushed from his wound as he bellowed with pain and all-consuming wrath.

"We don't have much time." Charley's voice quavered with raw fear and her own desperate hunger.

It was her fear that pushed adrenaline through my veins and gave me temporary

power. If I didn't drink, I couldn't protect Charley. And I wouldn't let the bloodsucker hurt even a hair on her head. Not while there was still breath in my lungs.

The vampire was paler than parchment, but had already worked half the long, wooden arrow from his chest.

It was now or never.

I stumbled forward, using all my remaining strength to clamp hold of the vampire's shoulders and sink my teeth into his throat. Warm, metallic blood filled my mouth. It no longer tasted like ambrosia. I choked and forcibly swallowed the thick syrupy blood, managing a couple of mouthfuls before the vampire yanked the arrow from his chest. As it clattered to the floor, he turned to deal with me.

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His cold hands encircled my throat before he thrust me back. I crashed into a wall, the wind knocked out of me. But energy was already beginning to burn through my body, his rejuvenating lifeblood giving me all the power I needed and then some.

I pushed back, my eyes wavering between an intensity of super vision and an aura of red that for a moment blinkered my sight.

“Alexander.”

It was Charley’s strained, hollowed-out voice that caused my stomach to drop with foreboding. Something wasn’t right.

Chapter Nineteen

Maya

A scream of denial built in my throat, but the sound froze before it could escape. Alexander was now a vampire. The red shadowing of his eyes betrayed his inner monster as surely as the bloodsucker who’d made him that way.

“Charley, what is it?” Alexander asked, sounding alarmed, yet somehow defeated too, as if he knew the awful truth.

“It’s...your eyes,” I whispered.

He stepped forward, but stilled as I retreated from him. He shook his head. “I’m not like him. I’m nothing like him.”

I glanced at the vampire who'd ruined so many lives. Who'd killed even more. But only the good died young. Already the hole in his head was closing over, his chest wound no longer bleeding. Even his pasty look of death was nowhere near as pronounced. Only when the vampire looked at me, a lazy smile of triumph curling his lips and his eyes deader than a snake's, did I realize Alexander was right.

He wasn't anything like this bloodsucker. Alexander still had a soul. A heart.

I drew my gaze away from the centuries-old monster to lock my stare on Alexander. "I believe you."

The residual red in his stare disappeared, replaced by whatever powerful emotion he was feeling right then. My mouth dried and hope fluttered deep. If I didn't know better, I'd say love shone from his eyes.

From his soul.

If only my belly wasn't churning and quivering with need at the scent of vampire blood. It'd taken monumental effort to block my hunger, to deny the scents that pulled at me. It was only my focus on Alexander that kept me grounded.

Jasper limped toward me, pushing his big, black head under my hand with a whine of doggy need. I stroked his soft fur, my stare not once leaving Alexander as I said, "And now we need to finish this."

Understanding flashed across his face even as the bloodsucker broke out with a belly laugh that chilled me to the bone. "Do either one of you really think you can defeat me?" He smirked. "If it wasn't for the fact your blood is far superior to any I've ingested before, I'd have hunted you both down and enjoyed killing you as effortlessly as an ant stamped underfoot."

Alexander straightened, facing the vampire with unflinching vitality. “Power isn’t from how many people you can kill with your bare hands, or how strong you are physically. True power comes from here.” He tapped his heart. “Real strength is the love shared by two people. Love that you’ll never know, no matter how much you might wish for it.”

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“I don’t want or need love,” the vampire snarled. “It makes a person weak, not strong.”

Alexander stepped forward. “And yet love is one of the reasons you brought me those other women, isn’t it?” Certainty filled his face. “You watched me fuck them, hoping I’d fall in love with at least one of them, even as you wished it was you who had the power to feel something...anything.”

My pulse skipped a beat. If what Alexander was saying was true, the vampire would have been elated at the instant connection I’d experienced with Alexander. The bastard had undoubtedly fed on their emotions as much as their blood.

Alexander took another step. “When you first brought Charley into your revolting nest and saw our chemistry, you craved it too, didn’t you? Except you’ll never have that. You’re not even human. You’ll never experience anything but emptiness, despair and hunger.”

My mouth dropped open. The vampire almost looked...beaten. Like every word wounded him deeply, infecting his power.

Alexander shook his head. “Good God, little wonder you only gave us drops of blood. You didn’t just want to keep us weak, you wanted us to also experience the same emptiness as you every single damn day of your cursed eternity.”

The vampire didn’t bother denying it. “Enough talk. If you think I need you, you’re wrong. It’s past time I killed you both...I’ll search the whole planet if I have to for new donors.”

He opened his mouth, his fangs lengthening, his eyes growing crimson.

The monster Alexander had known in all his forty-six years in the nest had probably never revealed this side of himself, his true side that he hid with such horrible ease. His whole face changed, from the almost cherubic placid man everyone saw, to a hard malevolence that made him look like someone else.

A someone who could almost have been handsome if not for the evil shining through, his corrupted soul that was beyond repair. A man—vampire—on the verge of a mental implosion.

A vampire so intent on finishing off his prey once and for all, he didn't appear to hear the silent tread behind him. His eyes sharpened a microsecond before Newry cut the sword through the air. An expression of relief crossed the vampire's face, before his head dropped and rolled along the floor, his body crumpling lifelessly alongside.

"The first time you visited my house you took my Nancy. Now it's my turn to take from you." Doctor Newry didn't drop his long silver blade, which dripped with vampire blood. Instead he gripped it as if it was his lifeline, one that might appease his daughter's death.

I stared at the vampire, whose body didn't even twitch in final death throes, and whose blood was turning a sludge-black. It was odd, the sense of nothingness filling me. But then all my remorse and despair had been saved for those women who'd died at the bloodsucker's hands.

Women like Sophie.

I turned to the doctor, nothingness falling aside for gratitude. Newry had made a life, a future between me and Alexander possible. I stepped toward the older man simultaneously with ferocious, stabbing pain lancing through my belly.

I fell to my knees with a strangled hiss.

Alexander shouted my name and I looked at him with wide, terrified eyes, before I surrendered to the darkness that took away all my pain.

I woke gagging on the blood streaming down my throat. I swallowed convulsively and pulled my head away, sucking in a startled breath. My agony was gone. My eyes flew open and I turned back, meeting Alexander's stare.

My head was draped on his lap, and as he withdrew his wrist I saw the telltale crimson line, which told me exactly whose blood I'd been drinking. My eyes widened even as I glanced at Newry, who stood looking down at us on the floor. My horrified gaze returned to Alexander. "What have you done?"

He didn't look even slightly repentant. "I saved your life."

I shook my head. "I can't drink human blood...can I?"

The doctor sighed. "Who said he's human?" At my gasp, he added, "No human lives to his age without gray hair, wrinkles and health ailments."

I blinked at Alexander, and he said, "I'm not a vampire, but I'm not a mortal anymore either."

"So...what are you?" I bit into my bottom lip. "What am I?"

Alexander stroked my hair. "That's what we're hoping to find out." As I struggled to sit, he put a hand between my shoulder blades and assisted me up, adding, "But not right now. Tonight we sleep, and tomorrow, in full daylight, we enter the nest and find out what we can."

“The vampire’s library?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes. With luck we’ll find our answers there.”

He pushed to his feet before offering his hand to me. I accepted, noting his ease of strength, and my own surge of energy. I frowned. “How is it that your blood took away my pain?”

He looked at Newry. “To be honest, we had no idea if my blood would be an acceptable substitute. Turns out it was...not that I was left with any choice.”

I shivered with realization. I’d been close to death. Alexander really had saved my life.

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He brushed the back of his hand down my face. “We stick together, okay?”

I stared at the black blood stains on the floor. The vampire who had ruined so many lives was nowhere in sight. “You buried him?” I asked.

Alexander shook his head. “Not even minutes after you blacked out, his whole body dissolved. His vile blood is all that is left behind.”

I shuddered, hardly able to believe such a powerful being was dead. “He’s really gone.”

“Yes.” I turned to the doctor. “Thank you for coming back here and saving us.”

He smiled. “No thanks necessary. It was my honor to rid the world of the monster who claimed the life of my daughter.”

Alexander turned to him. “I’m so sorry for your loss. I really am.”

The doctor nodded. “Yeah, not half as sorry as me.” Newry swung away to head into the kitchen. “I think I’m in need of a strong drink.”

I brushed my lips over Alexander’s as he watched Newry walk away. I took Alexander’s hand to lead him to the guest room. After so much pain and suffering, we needed to celebrate being alive.

Alexander slipped under the covers then reached for me, taking me into his arms and nuzzling my throat, my hair, my breasts as he murmured sweet nothings that warmed

my heart even as his touch warmed my body.

“The doctor—”

“Won’t hear a thing,” he said against my ear.

We took our time taking off each other’s clothes, and I moved across the mattress so that my legs draped over his hips as he lay on his side facing me. The satin head of his cock was already wet with pre-cum, and I shivered with need at the hot, pulsating length of him as he aligned himself to my center.

We couldn’t kiss in this position, but in that moment, I didn’t care. He slipped inside me in one careful thrust, then moved slowly back and forth in a rhythm that felt all kinds of right.

I lay spread open for him, my breasts jiggling and my womb warming with pleasure. I didn’t know much about sex, only what this intensely passionate man had taught me. But I didn’t need to be experienced in the sexual arts to know that this rightness every time we joined wasn’t typical for couples.

I closed my eyes, pleasure singing through my body in a growing chorus that I knew would reach the heights sooner rather than later.

Alexander growled as though holding himself back, even as he increased his rhythm, the pace only fast enough that our flesh gently slapped and wouldn’t be heard by anyone but ourselves. Not that I cared anymore. He could have lifted me in his arms and slammed me against the wall before fucking me like a primal alpha and I wouldn’t have stopped him.

Nothing was more important in that moment than reaching the orgasm steadily building inside me, a pressure so intense I knew it’d be next to impossible to hold

back my—

I clapped a hand over my mouth and screamed into my palm as pleasure imploded inside me. Starbursts of wonder rippled through my body and made me arch against him.

The moment I let go, Alexander followed suit, his breath hissing at his climax, which pulsed deep inside me, his eyes bright with ecstasy and more than a little bit of awe.

Chapter Twenty

Alexander

I took my weight off Charley to lie on my back beside her, my hand clasping hers and our breathing in sync as we stared up at the ceiling.

I didn't doubt for a second that Charley was as awed as me, knowing that we could make love without fear tainting the act. We no longer had to run and hide, no longer had the vampire in the back of our minds.

Charley tilted her head my way. "I can barely comprehend we now have a future to look forward to together."

I squeezed her hand. "Amazing, isn't it?"

She smiled, her gorgeous eyes glowing even as she squeezed my hand in return. "Incredible," she agreed.

"But?" I asked, sensing more than just happiness behind her stare.

"But, I believe to move forward, we need to put the past behind us."

I searched her stare. "Sometimes it's good to share what has defined us. What made us who we are."

She nodded. "And to go into a relationship with the blinkers off and everything out in

the open.”

I brushed my thumb along her lower lip. “Are you volunteering to go first?” I asked.

She blinked. “I am. Just don’t...judge me.”

I shook my head. “Believe me, my days of judging people are way behind me.”

She pulled her bottom lip into her mouth, as though unsure where to start. I lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Take your time. There’s no hurry. Not anymore.”

She nodded. “I guess I’ll start from when my childhood was a happy place. Before my father died in a workplace accident on our farm and my mother went off the rails.”

“How old were you when he died?”

Her eyes fluttered closed for a moment, as though masking her pain. But when she focused on me next, there was a quiet strength in her stare. “I was almost thirteen. I remember that much, at least, because my thirteenth birthday was a non-event, when our birthdays used to be such a celebration.”

My heart squeezed with love for her. As if it wasn’t bad enough she’d lost a parent, she hadn’t had her father either to celebrate her becoming a teenager, and guiding her through those formative years.

“My mother was too drunk to even acknowledge my birthday. She was too deep in her own grief to acknowledge I was also grieving.”

I fingered a piece of her hair that’d escaped her ponytail, before I brushed it behind her ear. “She must have really loved your father.”

Charley sighed. “Yeah, she did. He was her life. I was just the kid who reminded my mom of the man she missed every single day.”

“That should have been a positive for her.”

“Believe me, it wasn’t.” She exhaled softly. “Alcohol might have helped her to forget my dad, but it didn’t stop the bills from coming in. The farm went into debt and mom sold it dirt cheap before we moved to Sydney. It was there that drugs became her amnesia of choice. It was also there that she began to use her body to get her fix, fucking strangers and even her drug dealer to afford the habit.”

“I’m sorry, Charley.”

She managed a smile. “Not even six months after she kicked me out of our dingy home, she overdosed, finally getting her wish to join my father in the afterlife.”

I shook my head. “You should be proud of yourself and how you’ve turned out. I don’t know many people who would have survived that kind of childhood.” And I had no doubt there was a whole lot more to the story. I only hoped she’d tell me all about it one day.

She arched a brow. “Yeah, in my case it was a matter of either getting on with my own life or turning into my mother. And if dad really was watching me in spirit, I wanted to make him proud.”

I kissed her then, needing her velvet-soft lips against mine, to touch her as much as to reassure her. “I’ve never met a stronger, more courageous and beautiful woman in my life. Your dad would have been beyond proud of you.”

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Her lashes fluttered and she sighed against my mouth, for a moment clearly losing herself in the kiss. Then she pulled back, a determined glint in her stare. “What about you? I know so little about you.”

I shrugged. “Honestly, there’s not a lot to tell. My childhood wasn’t anything to complain about. I had strict but loving parents who provided me with everything I could want materially. They were proud of my good grades, of my rising star in the law firm where I worked.”

She seemed to process the fact I had once been a lawyer, before she asked, “How did the vampire get you?”

A sigh shuddered from my lungs at the memory. “I was working late at the firm. Everyone but a couple of cleaners had gone home hours before I finally finished working on a case. I made it as far as the car park before the vampire intercepted me. I have vague recollections of his voice washing over me, and not much else.”

“He brainwashed you into following him into the nest,” she whispered, clearly appalled that the vampire had been able to mislead us with such ease.

“Yes, though I don’t recall following him like a dumbass sheep. I think he must have oversaturated my mind with his command, because I’ve never experienced that level of persuasion since, not to the point of having big memory blanks.”

It was her turn to touch my face, her fingertips gently grazing along my jaw. “I’m glad you had a wonderful childhood. You would have needed to draw on that while living in the vampire’s nest all those years.”

She was right. At first I had drawn on my childhood memories to endure the vampire and his nest. But at my lowest point I had despaired at having known such happiness, and had done my best to forget my old life. The only way I'd survived was to neutralize my emotions, ensure nothing touched me and made me yearn for what I'd once had.

"Oddly enough, I blocked out my childhood memories, while the most recent memories of my marriage and my career faded without even trying."

"Maybe all those women the vampire brought to the nest had something to do with it?"

I didn't like the thick lump of grief sitting deep in my belly from the women who'd arrived then died at the nest. I'd played my own part in not once trying to help any of them to escape. After all, I'd been stuck there for so long, I'd never once entertained the thought that it was remotely possible to leave.

"Maybe," I said hoarsely.

She smiled, but there was more sadness in her face than joy. "Let's sleep on it. Things always make more sense in the light of day."

Chapter Twenty-One

Alexander

Bright sunlight hit my face when I woke, Charley's soft warmth and womanly vanilla scent filling my senses. My dick stirred, but I resisted waking her. She'd been through hell and back these last few days and only sleep would truly soothe her soul.

But as I stepped through the bedroom door, I almost wished I'd stayed in bed.

Jasper lay on his belly on the hallway floor, blinking up at me and licking the last of the black blood off his muzzle. Jesus. I scanned the rest of the floor. There was no more of the black sludge to be found.

My gut clenched with unease. I had no way of knowing how this would affect the dog.

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Would it kill Jasper? Or would it do quite the opposite and see the dog's lifespan greatly increased?

The bathroom door opened and Doctor Newry stepped into the hallway in faded jeans and a navy flannelette shirt. He was toweling his shaggy gray hair when he caught sight of me. "You're awake. Good. I'm about to get some breakfast together and then I was thinking we could discuss where we go from here."

"Good idea," I murmured before I nodded toward the dog. "Any idea on how this dog lapping up all the vampire blood will affect him?"

The doctor frowned, a faint tinge of disgust in his stare. "We probably should've got rid of that before we went to bed." He slung his towel over a shoulder. "Nothing to it now other than to keep an eye on the dog and hope he'll be okay."

I sighed and followed Newry into the kitchen, ignoring the stickiness left underfoot. Ten minutes later I sat at the dining table, tucking into a bowl of cornflakes with milk and honey.

When had normal human food ever tasted this damn good?

The doctor outlined a plan. "We should probably go to the nest today, read those books you saw in the vampire's chambers, and see if we can find any of the information you're looking for." The doctor pushed a hand over his lined face. "And I'll concentrate on finding any evidence of where my daughter might be...or even if she's alive."

I stopped chewing, the cornflakes suddenly sawdust in my mouth. I forcibly swallowed, my belly churning.

“Alexander.”

I turned at Charley’s voice. She stood in the hallway behind me, looking sleep-rumpled and sexy. It was only her sad eyes and troubled expression that confirmed what I knew even before she said, “You need to tell him the truth.”

“The truth?” Newry repeated, his voice shrill. “What do you mean? What’s going on?”

I turned back to the doctor, noting his tight shoulders and blinking eyes. My heart sank, but Charley was right. Newry needed to know his daughter was now at peace. He needed to know he could finally say goodbye. I cleared my throat. “Nancy was brought to the nest where I was taken.”

The doctor’s eyes brightened. I hated that I’d be the one who’d dull his stare. “She’s not there anymore...she’s...gone. She couldn’t live the way I had.”

“Live like what?” the doctor scraped out.

“Like a blood bank for the vampire.”

Newry dragged a hand over his face. “So you’re saying my daughter killed herself?”

I nodded and managed a raspy, “Yes.”

His stare looked haunted. “And what did you do to try and stop her? Were you a part of her death?” He banged his fist on the table. “Tellme!”

I could do little else but stare wordlessly back at him, guilt gnawing at me inside. In some ways, I had been a part of his daughter's death. I'd never once tried talking Nancy down from her high-pitched ramblings, where she'd told me she'd prefer spilling her lifeblood on the ground to giving it to the vampire.

How could I have talked her out of something I'd privately agreed myself countless times? In the end, I'd wondered if she'd been the strong one, not me, ending her life on her own terms.

Charley stepped forward and placed her hands on the doctor's shoulders in a show of support. "I'm so sorry for your loss." She looked up at me, her face understanding. "We're both sorrier than you can imagine."

Newry didn't answer, but his anger seemed to abate into shock. He was white-faced, and his voice trembled as he said distantly, "When Nancy decides to do something, no one or nothing will get in her way." He exhaled, when he added, "She must have known there was no other option."

I shoved away my cereal bowl, my appetite now non-existent. But I felt compelled to reassure him. "Living in the nest makes a person constantly question their mortality. Death was an endless tugging of the subconscious, especially when survival guaranteed the vampire's longevity."

The tabby cat jumped onto the doctor's lap and pushed against his chest, as though it too wanted to reassure the doctor. Newry ran an absent hand over the cat's head, before the tabby purred like a motor.

Newry's hand stilled. "Yesterday I visited Amy. I had an epiphany that it would be best that I cleared the air between us, said goodbye to her in the off-chance the vampire returned."

I stared at the older man. At least now I understood why the doctor hadn't been home, and had left his food congealing on the stove. After our visit asking about the vampire, Newry had evidently had an attack of fatherly conscience, or maybe fatherly love and devotion, and gone to see his one remaining daughter.

"I'm so glad we've reconciled. But I have no idea now how I'll tell Amy that her only sister won't ever be coming back home."

Charley squeezed his shoulders. "I'll make a pot of tea."

It was a somber atmosphere, with the doctor taking grateful sips of his sweetened, hot tea, and Charley and I unsure of what to do or say next.

"Perhaps it would be best if we left," I ventured.

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Newry jerked up his head. “And go where?” He put his cup down and it clattered on the table. “Please don’t go on my account. In fact...I’d prefer not to be alone right now.”

“Then of course, we’ll stay,” Charley hastened to reassure him.

The doctor’s shoulders slumped. “Thank you.”

Jasper chose that moment to trot into the dining room and head straight to the front door. When he sat and whined, Charley looked at me and said, “I think Jasper is hinting for a walk?”

I nodded. “I’ll come too.” It would be a relief to get outside and clear my head. Get away from the jarring feeling I was jailed all over again. I turned to Newry. “We won’t be long.”

He nodded, and I clipped on Jasper’s lead before he all but bounded outside, vibrating with energy.

“Wow, the dog’s fired up,” Charley said with a smile, clearly as relieved as me to get out and do something normal.

Of course, she had no idea the Rotty had consumed a good amount of black vampire blood. And I wasn’t about to spoil the mood and tell her. Not when our walk was meant to destress and relax us after breaking the terrible news to Newry. News that had involved me, whether I liked it or not.

I pushed away the ever-present guilt and sucked in the mid-morning air. Despite it being the coldest season of the year, the sun was warm on my head. A magpie warbled from the branches of an overgrown eucalyptus tree in someone's front yard.

Despite Newry's grief and my own role in it, my step had a spring to it. Despite not having any money in the foreseeable future, I'd never felt more secure. Charley and I had more than a fighting chance now to make a life together. And I for one couldn't wait to leave my past behind me.

Brakes screeched and I looked up at an old, faded sedan that'd pulled to the curb ahead of us. A man climbed out of the driver's side before the passenger door opened. I narrowed my eyes. It was the same lady from the house we'd taken Jasper.

"See, Freddy! I told you that was our dog!" the woman screeched, her thin frame quivering with rage.

I felt Jasper's tension seconds before his hackles raised and his top lip pulled back. When he growled and lunged toward the couple approaching, the lead almost slipped from my grasp.

Freddy stilled and his partner in crime stopped beside him. Freddy was a big man, with big arms, a huge beer belly and a receding hairline. He curled his fists but he didn't come any closer when he snarled, "What the fuck have you done to our dog?"

Charley pointed a finger at them. "Shouldn't we ask what you did to your dog for him to hate you this much?"

"Give him to us before we call the police!" the woman shouted, jabbing her finger right back at us.

I moved toward them, holding the leash out for them even as Jasper's vicious growls

and snarls amplified to the next level. The Rotty looked ready to tear the couple from limb to limb.

I had no idea if the vampire blood had given him the extra courage, or if he'd decided he liked being with us a whole lot more. Possibly both. I hid a smirk. "Go right ahead. Take your dog."

The woman stepped forward and Jasper leaped at her, his teeth glinting and his mouth drooling. "Bloody hell." She stepped back. "Keep the mongrel away from me!"

I shrugged and stalked toward Freddy. "Hey, he's your dog. Don't try palming him off to us now."

Freddy stumbled back, palms out. "He's not our dog. Never seen him before." He fled to his car.

When the sedan roared back into life and took off down the road, I turned to Charley with a grin. "Don't suppose we'll have to worry about them anymore."

Her grin reached her sparkling eyes. "Great job scaring them away."

"Hey, Jasper did all the work. I was just a humble bystander."

She kissed me on the cheek anyway, a chaste touch that left me softer than a marshmallow inside.

Then she dropped to eye level with Jasper. "Hey, they're gone now. You got rid of them. Good boy." Jasper's whole body relaxed, and he whined before pushing his big snout into her hand. Charley giggled. "Relax, buddy, we're not going anywhere without you now."

My heart swelled. It sounded as if we were already a family. My stomach dipped. All that was missing was a child. But I wasn't foolish enough to imagine that might be a possibility.

The vampire blood might have changed our DNA forever.

We really needed to study those books.

As if reading my thoughts, Charley straightened and said, "We probably should take Jasper home. I think he's had enough excitement for a while."

I nodded. "I agree."

It was only as we headed back that I told her what Jasper had consumed. She shook her head. "Imagine that, our dog living a long life with us." She giggled. "I know I shouldn't laugh, but right now I can't help but see the funny side of it."

I squeezed her hand, loving her so much it hurt. "I think it's safe to say we can afford to laugh now. Just promise me you won't ever stop laughing and smiling."

She looked up at me. "That's one promise I'd love to keep."

After being on such a low, I returned to Newry's house on a bit of a high. Though I knew the doctor was far from moving on from his grief. There was at least a determined glint in his eyes as he pulled on his socks and boots at the dining table.

Charley stilled just inside the doorway. "Doctor Newry, is everything all right?"

He shook his head. "Nothing will ever be right again, will it? But it don't mean I'll be sitting around crying in my hands. I need to find out all I can about the vampire. See that there are no more out there. Make sure no more 'missing people' are reported to the police and never found."

I nodded. "You're right. We should go." I let Jasper off his leash and called him into the fenced back yard. I made sure he had plenty of water and returned inside.

Charley assessed me. "Are you sure you're ready to face the nest again?"

A shiver of doubt for a moment took hold. Then I forced a smile and said, “The vampire is dead and gone. I can face my demons knowing that.”

Newry stalked into the kitchen and retrieved a set of keys. “Well then, no more faffing about. Let’s put this nightmare behind us.”

As I followed the doctor out to the tiny garage at the side of the house, which I’d never once suspected was there, and saw his bright red beast of a car that only just squeezed into the garage’s tight dimensions, I couldn’t stop a smile from spreading over my face.

“Could this get any weirder?” Charley whispered.

I shook my head. “Guess every man’s got one love in his life.”

As the car fired up, Charley leaned close and asked, “So what’s yours?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m looking at her.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Maya

I looked around the lobby of the apartment building where I’d been taken against my will. I brushed a hand down my faded shirt, decidedly drab and ugly compared to the women strutting past in high heels and power suits. The ground floor didn’t just feature a restaurant—there was a real estate and building society too.

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Guess I'd been a bit brainwashed to have noticed when I'd been ushered through the lobby and into the elevator.

I could only imagine how things must have changed in the years Alexander had been kept here. Many of the people who'd once lived and worked here forty-six years ago would now be dead.

I turned to Alexander. I couldn't even try to conceive how he must be feeling. But his stride didn't falter as he headed toward the elevator, Newry following right behind.

No one took notice of us as we stepped into the elevator and pressed the button that'd take us to the top floor. It was almost as though we didn't exist, or, more tellingly, the penthouse suite that was the nest didn't exist.

The elevator slowed to a smooth stop and its doors slid apart. My pulse beat loudly in my ears, my palms clammy. Alexander stepped out, his spine straight and his jaw tight. "Let's get this over with."

I nodded. "Sounds good to me."

Alexander didn't once hesitate, until we got to the door of the vampire's former chambers. He paused, sucked in a breath, then swung open the door before he stepped into the room.

My nose wrinkled. Already there was a pervasive musty scent, as though the vampire had died half a century before, not less than twenty-four hours ago.

Newry stepped purposefully toward the bookshelves before he slid a huge volume free. The red cover was dulled with age, but the doctor easily read its title. "History of an Alien Species." He chose another. "The Truth behind the Myth."

Alexander took down a different volume, his lip curling with distaste as he read its title. "Grooming a Donor."

I drew one off the shelf. "Finding Your Blood Source (and Keeping It)."

I sank onto the pallet, queasy. "Those books make us sound no better than cattle. They could be a farmer's manual."

The doctor was scanning the inside of one of the huge books. "According to this history book, vampires are an alien species who came to Earth for its bountiful food supply." He looked up. "I'm guessing they're not talking about our orchards and corn fields."

My heart twisted in my chest. "So there are more of them?"

"Enough to write these books," the doctor murmured, before he continued to read for some minutes. He shook his head. "From what I gather, they're a dying breed. Something about our atmosphere makes them impotent, so they're unable to procreate."

At least now I fully understood why the vampire had never tried anything other than to drink from my throat. It was obvious these blood-sucking aliens weren't meant to be a part of our world, and I thanked Mother Nature for that mercy at least. It must have been hell for the vampire to want to recall the pleasure of lovemaking.

Alexander pulled free a smaller volume. He scanned through the chapters until he found what he'd been looking for. "This volume suggests vampires either took their

own lives after decades of feeding from humans, or returned to their own planet to take their chances with a dwindling food source.” He looked up. “It would seem our vampire is now only one of a handful of vampires left on the planet.”

The doctor clucked his tongue at some scientific textbook he was reading through. “A pity those few who are left on this planet are able to communicate telepathically.”

My belly did a slow roll. “So you’re saying, whatever the vampire was thinking, he relayed it to others of his kind who live on Earth?”

“It would seem that way, yes.”

“Shit.” I squeezed my eyes closed. “Then we have no choice but to leave here as soon as possible. Evade any vampire who might decide on retaliation and slay the people who killed one of their own.”

Alexander studied some more text, too intent on learning what he could before we had to leave. “Drinking enough of the aliens’ blood will make their donors powerful and turn them immortal. But the immortal human will never take on alien characteristics. In fact, a small amount of blood keeps the donors addicted and alive, but doesn’t give them more than token strength.” He looked up. “It doesn’t give donors enough strength to fight back.”

My body tensed. “Not to mention keeping us starved and in enough pain that we’d be too preoccupied to think of anything else.”

The doctor stroked his chin. “You know, if those aliens have a hive mind, they won’t waste your donor blood. They’ll arrive here not to kill you, but to claim you.” He sighed. “It looks like you two will have to leave either way, and I won’t be having you as guests in my house for much longer.”

“Come with us, then.” I was already attached to the feisty old man.

He shook his head. “No, I’m too ancient for that sort of excitement.”

Alexander looked up from the book he was speed reading, and gave Newry a considered stare. “Then drink some of my blood. I might only have scratched the surface of this book, but I already know that my blood is only slightly diluted of vampire power. It will give you many more years of life.”

Newry smiled at Alexander. “The offer is a kind one, but no. I’ve had enough of this world. I’m ready to leave behind the daughter who doesn’t need me to meet my daughter waiting for me in the afterlife. Until that time, I have more research to do with these books.”

“If the vampires come while you’re here?” I asked, sick at the thought.

He dug into his pocket and held a lighter aloft. “Then I’ll ensure this entire level will be gutted by fire.”

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I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “Thank you for everything you’ve done.”

Alexander nodded. “We’ll never be able to repay you.”

Newry shook his head and stared hard at Alexander. “I believe you were there for my daughter, whether you’re willing to admit it to yourself or not. It comforts me to realize that much, at least.”

I faced Alexander. He exhaled carefully, then nodded at the doctor and said, “We’ll find a way to keep in touch.” As he took my hand and we turned to head out of the chamber door, he stilled, focused on the doctor and added, “If you uncover whether two donors who’ve ingested vampire blood can have children, I’d be grateful to know.”

The doctor nodded, and said brusquely, “I’ll do my best to find out. Just...take care of yourself, and of this wonderful woman you’ve found.” His smile warmed his craggy face. “And never forget that sometimes fate drags us through the worst trials and tribulations to get to the biggest prize.”

I released Alexander’s hand and stepped toward the doctor, hugging him before I whispered, “Say hello to Nancy for me.” I pulled back, ignoring the doctor’s watery eyes to kiss him on his leathery cheek. “Goodbye, Doctor Newry.”

I turned to Alexander. He took a final look around the nest, as though he was trying to exorcise his fears so that he could leave them at the door on the way out.

“Are you ready?” I asked gently. After all this was over, I owed Jasper a big, juicy

bone.

If we couldn't have children, we'd have Jasper, at least.

He turned to me, his eyes losing their vacant look as he focused on me. He inhaled then said huskily, "I'm ready."

I reclaimed his hand and, as we walked to the elevator and stepped inside, he faced away from the nest and stared at me as if I was the only thing that existed... The only thing that mattered. "I love you," he said hoarsely.

I smiled. "And I love you too." I squeezed his hand. "We're in this together. For always."

Want more paranormal/science fiction stories by Mel Teshco...?

His Asset

My name is a number, or at least it had always been that way until Adam, my master, brings me to his home and calls me Bella. He almost makes me feel human—almost—but I'm as much animal as I am person, a travesty to nature according to the vile scientists who created me. That Adam also makes me feel desired, a woman he wants as his own, sends me into a tailspin I can't control.

But then, I distrust everyone, especially men. I plan my escape, making use of my untried wings to get away. I'm exhausted when I land in a grungy part of a strange city. When a feral gang of men try to overpower me and have their wicked way, I use my powers to overthrow them, but ultimately it's a stranger, a street-toughened man named Reuben, who saves me.

I willingly stay with him. He's known as Chief in the underground fighting world, where he battles against other hardened men for glory and cash prizes. But behind

closed doors he shows me his tender side, and he makes me feel again, filling some of the void Adam left in my heart.

Or so I thought.

It isn't until I'm captured again by Adam that I question everything I've resisted. How can I want to be with this brilliant man of science even as I want to be with a man who rules the streets?

Which of them should I trust? Who do I love?

I guess I'm about to find out.