



Pleasantly Undead in Dark River

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Category: Romance, Adult, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: Raine and her guys are back!

It's time to settle down, get into the swing of her eternal life. No more life or death-death situations. No more almost kidnappings. No more drama. She's going to reopen the Immortal Cupcake and become a boring member of Dark River for real. Except she can't bake. And there's an ancient vampire leaving her heads and other undesirable body parts on her front step. And don't forget the ancient dragon shifter king who seems convinced that the great love of her life is one of his progeny. Whatever. It's just another day in paradise.

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Chapter One

Sitting beside this morning's newspaper delivery was a dick.

Well, that's new.

Next to the weird, mangled piece of flesh was yet another head, but this was one I vaguely recognized. The cops had been looking for him in relation to a string of murdered prostitutes in New York. I didn't think I'd ever get desensitized to dismembered body parts, yet here we were. I wasn't horrified anymore, I was mostly just annoyed that some of the drying blood had gotten onto my newspaper.

Fucking Lucius. He was worse than a cat leaving dead rats on my doorstep.

As always, I looked around the surrounding houses, hoping to catch sight of him, but he was a ghost. Walker was going to be pissed. This was the sixth head we had to bury in the woods in the last three weeks.

I jammed my hands on my hip and scowled. "This is great and all, and I'm sure the prostitutes of New York City thank you, but enough is enough already!" I shouted. I knew he was out there. I knew he liked to watch me receive his 'gifts'. "If you want to like, woo me or some shit, heads are not the way. Or anything that oozes for that matter."

A faint gust of wind flicked my hair into my eyes. By the time I'd pushed it back, there was Lucius standing right in front of me, looking hot and completely fucking crazy.

He looked so much like Nico, except for the insanity that colored his eyes.

“You do not like them?” I might have imagined it, but he seemed a little sad that I didn’t like his gifts.

Call me soft, but I kind of didn’t want to hurt his feelings. Faced with a crazed stalker with a penchant for violence, keeping him appeased probably wasn’t a bad plan anyway.

“I like the uh, thought behind them. But I’m not particularly fond of hosing brain matter off of my stoop, you know?”

“So you don’t like them?” His brow creased, his primitive tattoo disappearing into frown lines. Nico and Lucius, and by extension their older brother Titus, were from a Pictish tribe from god-knows how long ago. The tribal markings were faint but the fading evening light seemed to wash out the paleness of his skin, making them stand out more than usual.

I shook my head. “No, I do, uh, like them. It’s the thought that counts, right? But I don’t exactly know what you’re trying to achieve here?” I asked softly.

He stared at me, his eyes unnerving as they dived right into my soul. Still frowning, he reached out hesitant fingers and brushed them down my cheek. I stood stock still.

Running from a predator is bad. Running from a predator is bad, I repeated over and over in my head, though my body seemed frozen in this one position anyway. Then he was gone. He was so old, so powerful, that his speed was beyond incredible, almost invisible even to my baby vampire senses.

A low chuckle came from the driveway, and I held in a sigh. It was going to be one of those days. Alexander; Shifter Representative in the Convocation, Dragon King and

the current plotline in the soap opera that is my life, strolled up to my door, staring down at the dick and the head on my doorstep.

“Want me to eat that?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

My jaw unhinged and I just stared. “You want to eat a dick?”

He shrugged. “In my dragon form, it’s all the same. The skull is extra crunchy though.”

I blinked rapidly. It was too early for this shit. The sun had only just set, I was still in my pajamas for God’s sake. “Tex!” I yelled over my shoulder. Alexander had been here for a couple of weeks now, generally just loitering around town and making people uncomfortable. Not that he did anything but be a perfectly polite guest. But he was so big, his energy so crushing, that if he was in Bert and Beatrice’s diner, everyone else suddenly wasn’t hungry. If he sat down and watched the birds in the park, everyone had things to do elsewhere.

He seemed to have that effect on everyone but Tex and Brody. Even X had seemed uncomfortable around him, and I thought X was too crazy to have any good sense.

X, naked as the day he was born, appeared behind me, a pair of fluffy pink handcuffs clenched around his wrist. He had been uncomfortable around Alexander, but apparently familiarity lessened the effect. But I had no doubt that if Alexander was in his dragon form, he would still be absolutely petrifying.

“What was that, Love? Did you call?”

Yeah, for Tex, and I had no doubt he was faking his mishearing. X had exceptional senses, being an old vampire. When I walked past him sleeping on the couch moments earlier, he’d been dressed in a pair of sweats and there were no handcuffs in

sight. This little display was to needle Alexander, and I wasn't completely sure that the dragon wouldn't just snap one day and eat him. Dick and all.

X finally noticed the member in question. He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me back against his body as he scraped his fangs down my neck, making me shiver with lust. Not. Cool. "Didn't we agree you had enough dick in your harem, Love? Though I gotta admit, I'm more amiable to the idea if they come detached."

I shook my head. Nope. It was too early for the X show. I turned, keeping my eyes focused above his neck, because the last thing I needed to do was to look at his gorgeous tattooed body and get all hot in the nether-lands in front of the freaking King of the shifters.

"For the sweet love of cheese fries, please go and put some pants on and find Tex." I mumbled under my breath, herding him back into the house. "Come in, Alexander. I'll make you coffee."

Thankfully there was only Tex and X here this morning. Judge was at his apartment, Brody was with the Pack, and Walker was already at the station. Right now, I needed more coffee and less machismo.

I looked down at the mug I still had clutched in my hand, its contents cold. Another coffee for me too. X winked at me, swaggering away and I couldn't help but look at his muscular ass, bare of tattoos except a giant butterfly. His tattoos were beautiful, but his ass was a fucking masterpiece.

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Tex stumbled out of my bedroom, looking adorably ruffled around the edges. His pale, lithe body rippled as he walked across the room, his many tattoos looking almost animated. Apparently I was a sucker for a hot guy with tattoos. Sue me.

He rubbed at his eyes, and his feet stilled as he scented the other shifter in the room. Unconsciously, he ran his fingers through his hair, like his bed hair was the only thing stopping him from being respectable right now.

My mouth watered as his sweats hung precariously low, showing the deep V of his hips. Tex's nose twitched, and a small smile curled his lips. He strode over to me, his footsteps as sure as the sighted, until he was close enough to grab my hips. "Good morning, Mate."

My heart did that strange flip-flopping thing it did every time he uttered those words. He leaned forward and kissed me hard, despite the fact his grandfather or sire or whatever the fuck he thought he was, was standing less than six feet from us. I knew what it was. It was a claim. It was a statement that despite whoever Alexander thought he was to Tex, that Tex already had a pack. A mate. A life in which he was happy.

I bit his lip softly, a warning or an invitation, not even I knew the answer to that one. Still, he chuckled low and stepped away from me. He turned toward Alexander, and nodded respectfully. "Good morning, Sir," he said formally.

Yeah, Tex had decided to be a little sassy with his alleged long lost family member. I couldn't really blame him. The whole thing had fucked with his head. I wasn't convinced that this wasn't some crazy mistake; Brody pulling Tex being Alexander's

progeny out of his ass to protect him when we'd been surrounded by Raul and the Enforcers. However, apparently the reason that Raul was so ready to believe it was because there was a rumor that Alexander's only living child, a daughter, had been stolen by vampires. When I pointed out that Tex was a huge fucking snake and not a dragon, Alexander had said it didn't matter. The dragon gene was recessive.

And apparently there was no Shifter equivalent of Maury Povich. No quick DNA test and monotone "Alexander, you are not the sire." However, there was a whole witchcraft ritual that could only be done under the light of a waning crescent moon or something. Neither Alexander or Tex were eager to give their blood over to witches just yet, so they were doing a series of super awkward breakfast dates until an epiphany beat them both over the head.

I looked at the dragon standing awkwardly in front of my dining table. He looked young, in his mid-twenties, his body lithe and almost serpentine when he walked, his dark eyes scary and his energy terrifying. When he stood next to Tex, well, I could see the similarity between them. They looked like distant cousins, maybe. It wouldn't be a big leap for them to be related.

"I'll just go and get changed," he murmured, kissing my forehead. "I won't be a minute."

As Tex strode from the room, the muscles of his back taut, there was a collective sigh behind me. Alexander looked exhausted, his ancient eyes filled with frustration and regret. X looked horny as fuck. I hadn't even seen him come back into the room. He was scarily stealthy when he wanted to be.

I frowned in X's direction. He just shrugged. "What? Snakelet has a great arse."

Alexander gave him a withering look. "How Titus didn't smother you in your sleep as a fledgling is completely beyond me."

I couldn't help the snort that exploded from me. "How about I make that coffee?"

Chapter Two

I stood in the doorway of my doom yet again. No, that was dramatic. It just felt that way. It was, in fact, my happy place until a few months ago. Now, standing on the threshold of The Immortal Cupcake just instilled an exhausting wave of feelings, from remembered happiness, to real pain. But mostly, I felt guilty. I didn't want this place, but I didn't want it to sit empty and unloved either. Every time I walked past, it seemed even more forlorn, like it missed the life, or almost life, that used to bustle through its doors. But if I reopened it, I'd feel like I was somehow stealing Angeline's life. If I left it closed, it was like I was letting her dream die a slow death and that seemed disrespectful too.

After talking it over ad nauseam with Walker though, we decided I should reopen it. Half the town had been there when Angeline had handed me the keys, and the other half knew about it before I got home.

Except I had two problems.

Problemo numero uno: I didn't know how to run a business.

Problem number two: I couldn't bake. Scratch that, I couldn't cook at all.

I was going to destroy Angeline's legacy even more than I already had. My chest started heaving. Could vampires have panic attacks if they didn't really need to breathe?

"You look like you are freaking out," a soft voice said behind me. I looked over my shoulder at Nico. He was wearing a neon pink 'I Woke Up Like This' shirt, and my lips curled in a laugh. His light hair was shining in the sun. His lips were soft as he

dragged the bottom one between his teeth. Damn. I couldn't resist. No matter how much my head said to take it slow, the rest of me wanted to jump into his arms and lose myself in his kiss. Instead, I turned and kissed his cheek.

"Just first day jitters."

I pushed the big skeleton key into the heavy wooden door, and it swung open with a squeak in the silence. Overlaid against the dark background was the memory of what it looked like the first time I'd stepped through its doors. Filled with people and sweet smells. Angeline's happiness had infected every corner of the room. How could I ever replicate that?

As if he could read my mind, Nico put a hand to my lower back, urging me further into the room. "No one expects you to recreate what Angeline did. You are Raine. You are not Angeline. Put your own stamp on this place; no one will begrudge you that."

I let out a shuddering sigh. Fucking Nico. Always knew what I was feeling. "Nico," I whispered. "I can't bake."

He threw back his head and laughed. Damn, I loved that sound.

"Well, that might be a problem considering this is a bakery." He stepped closer and brushed an errant piece of red hair out of my face. I was probably going to have to go visit Cresta to get the red touched-up soon. It had been low on my priorities for the last couple of months but I was determined to claw back a little bit of normalcy, kicking and screaming if I had to. When his fingers brushed across my cheekbone, his eyes sparkling with something alive, my fangs dropped.

I slapped a hand over my mouth. Shit. I thought I'd grown out of the accidental fang-boners. Nico smirked, and the look he was giving me was pure sin. "Perhaps, Raine, I

can be of some assistance," he said in a low voice that made my skin tingle.

I swallowed hard, not even trying to hide my fangs now. "Really?"

"Uh huh," he whispered, stepping closer until his body was tight against mine. His lips touched the spot his fingers had just traced. "You see, I'm an expert." He placed whisper soft kisses down my cheek to my jaw, then down my neck.

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"At what?" I squeaked out, panting, about ready to throw the ancient vampire on the ground and climb on top of him, public decency be damned.

His fangs pressed into my carotid and you could almost hear the la-sploosh noise of my panties getting soaked. "I'm an expert-" A tiny nip made my knees shake. "Pastry chef."

Hang on, what?

I pulled back. "Seriously?" His grin was wide and even though I tried not to, my eyes shot down to the front of his shredded jeans and the very hard outline of his cock. He looked smug as hell.

"Yep," he said, popping the P. "An eternity is a long time, Raine. You have time to master a lot of skills. Some you remember. Some you forget." He stepped close again, his mouth near my ear. "Some skills come as naturally as breathing." Then he nipped my ear and I melted into a puddle. I hope I didn't create a slip hazard for the sanitation workers who'd have to come and scrape my overheated body off the floor.

I let out a wildly inappropriate moan, and his low chuckle didn't help a bit. Dear fucking god. I wanted him to lay me out across the counter and feast on me. But Nico and I, we were complicated. We hadn't reached that stage yet and the last thing I wanted was to rush things with one of the Town Council members and then fuck it up. Slow. Easy.

Still, I couldn't help but lean forward, giving him a soft, tender kiss full of promise. "Will you teach me to bake, oh Ancient One?"

He screwed up his nose, pulling back to give me a pained look. "As long as you never call me that again. In fact, it would be my pleasure." The way he said the word pleasure should probably be illegal. "Let's see what we are working with?"

He led me back into the kitchen, and I tried not to think of Angeline at the ovens, tasting her random cupcake recipes while sitting on the stool in the corner. I would make new memories here and The Immortal Cupcake would live on, just like the name suggested. Nico bustled around, opening cupboards and ovens, looking through the fridge and freezer. The power had remained on, so nothing should be spoiled unless it had expired.

"Angeline was well equipped. You should have everything you need to start except the perishables. I can take a run to Calgary and go to one of the larger hospitality supply stores this week and pick up everything you need. Most things should freeze, so we won't need to get things delivered too often."

I raised my eyebrows. "We?"

He turned, tilting his head to the side as he appraised me. "You do not want me as your partner?"

The question had a hint of his power in it, and I knew he couldn't help it, but when I said, "More than you know," I was kind of disgruntled as it passed my lips. That was the thing about Nico. You could never tell what you were telling him of your own free will, and what was just a side effect of his power. I didn't hold it against him though. I shook off the remnants of his power. "What about your job as town counsellor?"

Nico shrugged. "Unless someone petitions to join, my job is pretty non-demanding. After your arrival, however, the Council has decided that a bit of a, err, hiatus may be necessary in regards to accepting new members."

I winced. My turning had brought a shitstorm, I couldn't deny it. First by outing the town's doctor as running a human farming racket. Which in turn brought the Enforcers, and then Lucius. No one liked it when the Enforcers had arrived, and they liked it even less when Lucius turned up.

Ughh, that reminded me. "Uh, I got another present from your twin this morning." Nico raised an eyebrow. "Yep, a dick and a head this time. Must have been a two for one special at Psychos-R-Us." I shifted so I was looking at him from the corner of my eye. "When I told him I didn't want any more heads, he stopped by to ask why."

Nico went completely still. "He was there?"

I nodded.

"With you alone? Are you okay?" Again, I nodded. Nico's body was frozen, like he didn't know if he should find Lucius and fight him or check to see if I was in one piece. Of course I was okay. Lucius was a crazy person, there was no doubt about that. But crazy or not, he didn't give me the feeling that he wanted to hurt me anymore. I didn't understand why not, what had changed his mind, but I wasn't fighting it.

Nico stepped closer to me, his hand resting on my spine again. "He's dangerous, Raine. I don't have to tell you that. Would you like me to go talk to him? To tell him to leave you alone?"

I shook my head. "Could you do that without one of you being maimed in some horrific way?"

He lifted a shoulder and that was enough of an answer for me. They would fight, and there would be blood and injuries, and I valued Nico too much to let that happen. And despite what Nico said about his brother being nuts, about not wanting anything to do

with him, I think that seriously hurting Lucius would kill something inside Nico. That last glowing part of his humanity that he'd hung onto all these years would be extinguished, because fratricide wasn't something you just got over.

Did I really want to be the cause of that, just because I didn't want to get the heads of murderers and pedophiles on my doorstep every other day? No.

Honestly, and I'd never tell the other guys this, but I thought it was kind of sweet. That probably made me all sorts of fucked up, but I like the symbolism.

X was right though. There was only room for one psycho in my life and the crazy Brit was it. I had a heated flashback to X tying me in literal knots. We hadn't gone any further, X and I, but sometimes I caught him watching me with so much heat in his eyes I thought I was going to cook from the inside out.

I pushed the thought away and stepped closer to Nico. "It's fine. Lucius doesn't seem to want to hurt me or abduct me and keep me chained as a sex slave in some Siberian ice cave. I don't know what he wants, but I guess eventually he'll tell us all and then we'll figure it out. Until then, I guess we let him clean up the streets of predators and scumbags until he gets bored and moves on."

Nico wrapped his arms around me, pulling me closer until I could lay my head on his chest. "That's the problem, Raine. Lucius doesn't get bored. He gets obsessed and then he gets dangerous." He squeezed me tightly, his voice dropping to that scary tone that sent shivers down my spine. "I will not let him harm you. I love my twin despite the hate that has festered between us for centuries. They are intertwined in a way. But, you're precious to me. The most precious thing I've held in my hands in a long time. I will kill him if he harms you."

Unease skittered down my spine, but I shrugged it away. I don't know what I'd done to deserve this kind of devotion from Nico. Hell, from any of them. Judge, Walker,

Brody, they all loved me unconditionally. Even X wanted me, and he seemed like the kind of guy who'd murder a room full of people before he considered sharing a girlfriend. But they saw something in me that I couldn't see in myself, no matter how hard I stared in the mirror. The only one I was sure of was Tex. Tex had loved me when I was Mika. He'd loved me when I had two scraped knees and a permanently dripping nose in the third grade as they worked out I was allergic to the tree in the backyard. He'd stuck by me even though the sniffing must have driven him insane.

Tex was my mate. That I knew in my soul would never change. But even after all this time, all the declarations, all the crazy hot sex, I still wondered why? Why me?

As if sensing my inner turmoil, Nico nodded. "Let us test your pastry chef skills? Maybe you will be a natural."

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I scoffed, but I was willing to give it a go. I wanted to make this work, and I would try my hardest to master the art of baking. After all, you just followed a recipe? How hard could it be?

Chapter Three

As I stared at my creation, I was a little in awe of it.

Nico stood beside me, his arm brushing mine. "I've never seen anyone with that much natural skill." He paused as we both gazed down at the tray. "That much natural skill at destroying something that should be foolproof."

I shook my head, poking at the burnt edges of the brownie, then swirling my finger around the still uncooked batter of the middle. It basically defied physics, and Nico was right, that was pure talent. I flopped forward, folding my arms on the stainless steel workbenches then pressing my forehead against them. This was a mistake. A massive, epic, failure. They'd write children's rhymes about how shitty I was. I'd kill the undead at this rate and a major case of Salmonella seemed like a bad way to go.

"What am I going to do?" I mumbled into my arms. "This was stupid. Maybe I should get someone else to reopen the store. Maybe you could do it and I could be counsellor?" I could work in that pop-culture horror show that Nico called an office.

He pulled me up, resting his hands on my shoulders. "You just need practice, and I am happy to do this over and over again until you get it right. First brownies, then a croque-en-bouche."

"Cock-in-what-now?"

Nico blessed me with another one of those smiles. "Not cock'n, croque en- you know what, don't mind that. You are going to master this, Raine, because you have conquered every other thing life has thrown at you and I know this is not even half as difficult as becoming a vampire and trying not to eat everything in sight."

Well, when he put it like that.

He stepped closer, his eyes so mesmerizing, I couldn't look away if I tried. "Raine, I'm going to kiss you. Would that be okay?"

Hell yes.

I didn't know if I said it out loud or just in my head, but I closed the gap between us. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine in what was an almost innocent gesture. Until his fangs scraped against my lower lip, the sting making me hiss and the taste of my own blood setting something off in my brain that I couldn't control. I deepened the kiss, purposefully piercing his lip with my own fangs. The taste of his blood hit me like a bus, knocking the breath from my lungs and flooding my veins like a shot of the 100 proof vodka that one of my classmates had snuck home from the Ukraine. My eyes crossed and I let out a ridiculous noise between a moan and a whimper. I wanted more.

More of his kisses.

More of his blood.

More of his body on mine.

My hands slid under his shirt, tracing the lean lines of his body, the slow taper of his

waist into the hard muscles of his back. I pressed my nails into his shoulders.

"Raine," he gasped, dragging his lips away, and something about him being as breathless as me from our kiss made me preen. I caught his lips with mine again, sliding my tongue into his mouth, tasting him, teasing him, daring him to take more.

He growled low in his throat, his hands sliding down my back to grab my ass. Then he tore himself away. "Raine, I-" his body seemed to shudder. "I want to court you properly."

Ugh, I'd just had this issue with Walker, my sexy, yet upstanding, Sheriff lover. He had wanted to do it properly and I'd almost died without ever knowing exactly the depth of his love. I wouldn't make that mistake of waiting around with Nico, but I could respect his need to take it slow. So I dragged my hands from under his shirt and nodded. "Okay. We can do it slowly. We have eternity, right?"

A sad smile tugged at his lips and I desperately wanted to kiss it away. "It seems like I've been waiting for eternity already." He straightened, and pushed the tray of brownie monstrosity toward me. "Do you want to take these home or should we..."

"Trash them? Yeah, let's do that. I love the guys. I wouldn't want my cooking to be the thing that sends them permanently to the grave."

Nico laughed, cleaning up all the ingredients, still staring at the brownie like the failed cake would tell him where it went wrong. I could tell him where; the moment he put a wooden spoon in my hand, the whole recipe had gone wrong. I picked up the pan and took it to the trash can. Angeline had taken the time to empty it on her way out of town. She was considerate like that. Damn I missed her.

Wiping down the surfaces of the kitchen, because somehow I'd managed to get flour in places that I hadn't even been cooking, I shook my head. How was anyone ever

going to forget that this had been someone else's dream that I'd stolen? Hell, if you added my friendship with Ella and Cresta, owner of the Boutique and Beauty Salon respectively, I sometimes felt like I'd stolen Angeline's life.

When the place was sparkling and untouched again, I stood back. This was mine now. Beneath the guilt and dread, a trickle of excitement bubbled against my ribs.

"Let me treat you to lunch," Nico said softly, bringing me out of my thoughts. I nodded and walked back out through the shop. I threw a quick look at the library of books, looking glorious even in the dull street lights. I locked up the doors, pocketing the huge skeleton key.

Nico held out his arm, and I wrapped my hand around his bicep. "We will come back tomorrow and try again. Don't be disheartened." It was hard not to be a little disappointed that I wasn't a baking goddess straight away, but anything worth learning was worth the time.

We strolled across the square human slow, enjoying the full moon on a perfectly clear night. Apparently everyone had the same idea today because the diner was almost filled to capacity with the lunch crowd. I spotted Judge at the counter, but I hesitated, looking over my shoulder at Nico. He smiled warmly, motioning me forward. "Let us go sit with your lover."

"You don't mind?"

He shook his head. "On the contrary, Raine." He left it at that.

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Judge looked up when he heard us approach, and his smile when he looked at me was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. It was pure temptation, like sex and sin in one expression. "Hey, Rainey Day. You hungry?" His eyes told me he didn't mean for cheese fries.

I leaned in and kissed him, because I would definitely be taking him up on that later. But right now I wanted cake.

Well, maybe a little.

I sat beside Judge and Nico took the other side of him. Despite the fact that he'd pledged to the town, people still hadn't warmed up to my drifter, probably because it had gotten out that he'd been an Enforcer once upon a time. The fear of the Enforcers had only doubled since Lucius' little foray into town.

But Nico didn't have that standoffishness. Nico was more powerful than anyone really comprehended, except for Judge and X who were almost related to him, and me because I had tasted his blood and I knew deep in my soul he was powerful. Even now, the small taste of his blood was a vivid memory. I wanted more, but the idea scared the shit out of me too.

I looked over at the man in question, who was perusing the menu like he hadn't seen it every day for the last hundred or so years.

Beatrice bustled over. "Hello, Lass. I saw your young man in here earlier with-" she lowered her voice. "Alexander of the Shifters." I nodded. "It's why it is so busy now. Everyone was waiting for them to leave."

I winced, and she must have read the apology on my lips because she waved a hand at me. “Don’t even think of apologizing. You have no control over the people of this town. But this good-for-nothing has been warming my counter watching over him like a mother hen.”

I raised an eyebrow at Judge, who just grunted. “He’s fucking old and a shifter. I don’t trust him with Tex.”

He may as well have taken out a huge billboard that said “I love Tex” in flashing neon colors. I didn’t press it though, because Judge was more skittish than a manwhore at a shotgun wedding.

“He’s got Tex’s best interest at heart,” I said to Beatrice.

She scoffed. “Yeah, I’m sure it’s just altruism he has in heart.” She gave Judge a soft look, and then cleared her throat. “What can I get for you, Nico?”

Nico got a steak, and I got one too, plus cake. “Bert has been experimenting with deep-fried cake pops for you, Lass. I’ll let him know you’re here.”

I groaned and made literal heart eyes. “I love him so much.”

Beatrice laughed. “Don’t tell him that, or he’ll be petitioning to join your harem.” She wagged her eyebrows and I blushed a ferocious shade of red. Judge laughed, and even Nico was grinning as she bustled away.

“Don’t you laugh,” I said to Judge, nudging him in the ribs.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Rainey Day.” I leaned my head on his shoulder and he didn’t disappoint me. He kissed my forehead. “You smell like smoke.”

I nodded, giving Nico the stink-eye when he chuckled. “I was over at The Immortal Cupcake. I was trying to bake.”

Because he had excellent survival skills, he didn’t acknowledge the fact I said trying. Definitely not succeeding. I told Judge about the dick on my doorstep, and my visit from Lucius, both of which made him frown and look at Nico, who looked equally perturbed. Logically, I knew it was a problem, but it was hard to think of him and be horrified when I wanted to hump his mirror image into next week.

We demolished our food in companionable silence, talking about how Lewellyn over at the recycling plant had reattached his finger himself with fishing line rather than go see the new doctor in town. Apparently, having the Executioner as a doctor was freaking the townspeople out, which was concerning to Nico but amusing as fuck to Judge.

Eventually, Bert emerged from the kitchen with little balls of deep-fried goodness dusted with powdered sugar.

They smelled amazing. When he placed the whole bowl in front of me, I didn’t hesitate to taste one. Bert loved creating me deep-fried amazingness, and I enjoyed eating the guilt free food. Coronary disease? Didn’t matter when your heart hardly beat.

The crunchy outer coating gave way to the softest, fluffy center and I moaned out loud. Holy shit. What was this amazingness? “Holy hell, Bert. I’m leaving all these assholes for you, and we can run away together and you can make me deep-fried foods and really test whether vampires can get diabetes.”

Bert blushed and Beatrice cackled. “You like them? Good,” he grunted, and then hurried back to the kitchen. Beatrice patted my arm and went back to taking orders. I ate another cake ball and groaned. Honestly, these were amazing.

“You want to be alone with your deep-fried bakery goods?” Judge whispered in my ear. “Because if you don’t stop making that noise, I’m going to bend you over this counter and fuck you until my cock makes you mewl like that.”

My body shuddered as pleasure raced down my spine. He’d do it too. Judge gave zero fucks about propriety. I caught the same hot look in Nico’s eyes, and I bit my lip. He looked like he’d be happy to throw his reputation to the wind too in that moment. Instead of screaming yes like I really wanted to, I stuffed a cake ball into Judge’s mouth.

“You can’t understand my pleasure until you’ve had one of Bert’s sweet, sweet balls in your mouth,” I growled back, barely keeping my face straight.

Judge screwed up his nose and Nico threw back his head and laughed. I grinned, happy as hell in that moment. Nico would fit in with us fine. I didn’t have to worry about him tipping the fragile balance of our little love nest too much.

Chapter Four

My eyes shot open in the middle of the night, and it took me a moment to orientate myself. I was wrapped around Tex’s body, Walker at my back. I could hear the faint thud of his heart over Tex’s more rabid one.

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But something still wasn't right. I sat up and a hand slapped over my mouth. No, it wasn't a hand. It was magic.

In the corner of the room, Miranda stood, dressed in a flowing blood-red dress. Her face was shadowed, but she lifted a finger to her lips. "Shh."

I looked at her like she was fucking crazy. She was in my bedroom in the middle of the goddamn night and she thought I was going to be quiet about it? She'd lost her damn mind. Miranda must have read all that on my face because she rolled her eyes and pointed to the living room. Then, without a word of a lie, she levitated me out of the room and into the living room. I flailed around, but it made no difference. With the magic sucking my voice from my lungs and my body suspended in mid air, I was useless. When we got to the living room, she placed me back on my feet but didn't remove the magic covering my mouth. I mean, I didn't really need to breathe but my body still wanted to panic about it.

"I'm going to remove the silencing spell now. Don't scream. I just want to talk. I have news."

I narrowed my eyes at her. Miranda and I had a complicated acquaintance. Still, she hadn't openly made any moves against me or the guys, despite their history with her. I nodded but she was nuts if she didn't think I was going to scream my head off if she made one more shit move.

Miranda sat down on my couch, and motioned for me to do the same. I shook my head and she rolled her eyes again. "Fine. I just thought it would be better if we had this conversation without any of your... consorts." She took a deep breath. "I did

some magic on your blood. I wanted to know what it was about you. Even I can admit there's something different about you. I do not like unknown factors.”

Fair enough, I wasn't a fan of loose ends either. “Okay?”

“Let's just say your blood revealed something surprising. It explains a lot though.”

My heart started to pound, my fingers going tingly as they chilled even more. “What?”

“It's unusual, because as a race they died out so long ago. But it was undeniable. Blood doesn't lie. You should know that more than most.”

Gah. I wanted to scream at her to stop with the foreplay and just get to it already. But on the flip-side, I knew whatever was about to come out of her mouth, whatever she deemed important enough to sneak into a house of vampires in the middle of the night, was going to change everything. Again. Goddammit.

‘You are part succubus. No more than a tiny drop in your blood, that if you had remained human would have meant nothing. But I believe that when you were turned, the vampiric essence acted like a booster to your succubus bloodline. To anyone who has... tasted you, you become irresistible. Especially your blood, but other bodily fluids too would probably be enough to enrapture a person against their will. Even without the fluid transfer,” even Miranda screwed up her nose at that, “you would be extra captivating to someone who is sexually interested in you.”

I blinked. My mouth hanging open, gaping like a fool. What? Literally what the fuck?

A knife appeared out of nowhere and pulled tight to Miranda's throat. X appeared in the darkness, his face the cold mask of a killer. “What are you doing here?” he growled, and the sound made the primordial part of my brain go haywire.

“Let’s not pretend you weren’t in the shadows listening to every word, X. You know why I’m here.”

X laughed, and it was a cruel, inhuman sound. “Spreading your poison.”

Miranda curled her lip. “It isn’t poison if it’s the truth. Raine has the right to know. I was leaving the decision about whether she told you assholes about it entirely up to her. ”

The light switched on and Walker was there, naked as the day he was born except the gun in his hand.

“I think it might be too late for that now,” she grimaced.

My eyes flicked between them all. The word succubus went around and around in my head, echoed by the word enrapture. Then I burst into tears.

Fifteen minutes later, everyone was in my living room. X was still playing with his knife, scraping the tip beneath his nails and generally looking menacing. Even Brody had managed to make it here; he’d been on his way home already, but when Tex had called him, coupled with the fear and distress flowing through our bond, he’d broken several hundred road rules and made it here in record time. Now, I was cradled on his lap, his body curled protectively around mine. The bond was like a blankie I wanted to clutch close.

I felt numb. These guys and their unequivocal love for me had been the cement that I’d been holding myself together with and now it was crumbling. There was a life lesson that my mother had tried to teach me, probably directly after the one that said don’t hitchhike in foreign countries, even if it is Canada. That lesson had been not to use a man to determine who you are.

Apparently, I'd failed Feminism 101, and now it was coming back to bite me in the ass.

Even Nico was here, oddly dressed in pajamas with dachshunds on the pants. It was fucking adorable and it just made me want to cry more.

"Start from the beginning, if you please, Miranda," Nico said, taking control of the situation.

Judge glared at the witch, and X looked like he was planning where to hide her body, so neither of them were of any use.

Miranda, despite the fact she was surrounded by dangerous vampires, looked more annoyed than scared. "This was meant for Raine's ears only. What she did with the information would have been up to her. So before these two-" she pointed at X and Judge, "say I'm trying to undermine their relationship out of jealousy or some othersranje."

X looked over at me and grinned. "Sranjemeans bullshit in Croatian. Miranda is intimate with the word because it's the only thing she produces."

The witch flipped him off and Nico cleared his throat. "Please, continue."

"I couldn't possibly be the only one who wondered about Lucius' complete turn around regarding Raine, right? He is thousands of years old, and what, Raine is so pretty that she somehow turned a raving lunatic into a lapdog? Makes no sense. No offense," she said to me, and I snorted.

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“None taken.”

“I could almost believe it of Judge, who was a confirmed bachelor but deep down, he wanted love. I knew it.” Old hurt flashed across her face, “so I was willing to let that go. But both X and Lucius? The odds that she’d enamored so many damaged bachelors was a little unrealistic, even to me.”

Well, when she put it like that, it did sound improbable.

“So when I got some of Raine’s blood, I ran some incantations on it. Never voluntarily give your blood to a witch,” she told me sternly, then looked at the guys. “They should teach you better.”

I bet they were all regretting leaving that little fact out of the ‘How to be a Vampire’ handbook now. “It showed me that there was a little bit of succubus in Raine’s bloodline, and when your Doctor turned her, it coalesced with her vampire DNA to make her a hybrid. A weak one, but one all the same. Enough to enamor you all, but not enough that she must feed from you to survive. Though I’m sure she feels extra peppy after a good roll in the sheets.”

Yep, that was definitely jealousy. I didn’t feel bad. I would be jealous if I was in her position too.

Nico frowned. “Succubi have been extinct for centuries, Miranda.”

She nodded, “I was surprised too, Nico, but the magic doesn’t lie. It is merely a drop, but you know there's conjecture that both the succubi and the vampire descended

from demons, yes?”

Nico nodded and I frowned. Say what? Miranda wasn't looking at me now though. “Well my theory was that the demon DNA melded and there you have it, a baby Vampcubi.”

I sounded like a mixed breed dog. A mixed breed dog that had forced others to love her. “So you are saying, until I became a vampire, this succubi DNA was just dormant?” Miranda nodded. “And everyone who thinks they love me is just enraptured by the succubi blood?” She frowned but gave me another tight nod.

I tried to wiggle my way off of Brody's lap, but he just held me tighter. “And this would affect all supernaturals? Not just vampires?” Like shapeshifter Alphas that ignored their duties when they should have been running a Pack. Brody's arms squeezed me as if he could sense the destructive direction of my thoughts.

Tex was right beside me in a moment, sensing my distress. He reached out, grabbing my hand and placing it on his cheek. “I've loved you since we were kids. Long before any vampire blood or vulcan mindmeld.” He moved my hand down over his heart. “You can trust in that. Lean on that.”

Brody reached for me and pulled me back down. “The mate bond is determined by the ancestors, not your blood. It is a soul connection, not something created by lust. Maybe your succubus traits made me eager to get in your bed, but this, what we have? It has nothing to do with DNA.”

I shuddered against him and blinked back big fat tears.

X growled. “So what? I say we kill the witch.” The way he said witch definitely had a silent B in it. “Then we forget this conversation and go back to happy naked orgies.”

I snorted a sad laugh. Miranda rolled her eyes. “I don’t care what you do with the information. As I said, this was only meant to be between Raine and I. It will go no further than this room. You have my word. Now I will be going. You guys can work out your own relationship drama.”

Nico eyed her a moment too long, and I saw her body subtly tense. But eventually he sighed. “Thank you, Miranda. We appreciate your discretion.” She opened up her interdimensional vagina slit and disappeared from the room with a pop. Then I was left in a room with all my lovers.

Walker had been mostly silent, a frown line between his brows as he listened and contemplated. It was Walker’s way. He was hard to rattle, but he looked shaken.

I didn’t blame him. I too was shooketh.

Judge still looked pissed, but underneath all that, I could see the doubt. I could see him running through every scenario, every emotion he’d felt for me, every interaction we’d ever had, trying to decipher if it was my powers or his own genuine need.

I didn’t want to see his face when he decided which side of the fence he landed on. Didn’t want to witness the moment he realized the same thing I was realizing right now. As a human, I wouldn’t have been able to make even one of these guys fall in love with me, except maybe Tex, who was my mate which was a different kind of unintentional bond. I needed him as my rock. My one certainty in the latest shitstorm of my life.

I climbed off Brody’s lap and he reluctantly let me go. He was hurting for me, I could feel it through my bond.

“You guys should all go home. It’s late.” They all hesitated, and I stuck my hands on my hips, shoring up my broken heart with a little bit of inner bitch. “I want you to go.

I want to be alone.”

I wasn't surprised when Judge was the first to stand to leave. He came over and kissed me softly. “What I feel for you, Rainey Day, is more than just lust. It might have started that way, but my feelings outgrew that pretty damn quickly.”

Then he was gone.

Nico came and kissed my cheek, silently nodding to the rest of the room as he left. Walker came over, bending slightly so he could look me in the eye. “I am only leaving because I can understand your need for space. This means nothing, Raine. I will be back again tomorrow, and I will still love you so much my heart feels like it's going to explode.”

I let out a choked sound, but the door clicked quietly behind him. Brody and Tex turned toward X who shrugged. “I don't give a flying fuck. I already knew you must have had a magical vagina when I signed up. Confirmation of the fact means nothing to me.”

I couldn't help but laugh. Fucking X.

I swallowed hard and nodded. “Thanks, I think.” I sighed, the shitstorm of my turning squarely back on my shoulders. “I really am tired. I just want to go to sleep for eternity.”

Brody stood, lifting me easily into his arms. Tex squeezed my hand and X grinned. “Fair enough. Lead on Macbeth. I'll make sure no witches sneak back into your room tonight.”

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For once, I appreciated the crazy killer more than I ever thought possible.

Chapter Five

The following morning there was no head on my doorstep and I didn't know if I was relieved or disappointed. Brody came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist as I picked up today's newspaper. A newspaper delivery in a town that voluntarily isolated itself seemed odd, but if my disappearance and untimely death taught me anything, it was that keeping track of what's going on in the real world was important.

Brody nuzzled my throat. "You seem disappointed. I can't get you a head, but I can give you head," he purred and I laughed half-heartedly. Any other morning I'd take him up on that, but this morning, it felt wrong. Still, I appreciated the effort.

I turned in his arms and kissed him softly. "Thanks for the offer, but I better get to The Immortal Cupcake. It needs a lot of work before I can reopen."

Brody's hands travelled up my spine beneath my t-shirt and he deepened the kiss, his tongue tracing the sharp points of my teeth until the kiss was flavored by his blood. I moaned and curved into him. He gripped my ass and pulled me tight against his thigh, and I couldn't help but grind. He dragged his mouth away, grinning. "You don't have to close yourself off, Red. Give them the opportunity to make up their own minds. They know now, and by shutting them out, you run the risk of taking their choice away for real this time." He squeezed my ass cheeks and stepped away. "Okay, I'll make you coffee. You go do whatever it is women do in the mornings."

I scowled at him. “I really hate it when you do that wise old wolf thing.”

He grinned over his shoulder as he headed to the kitchen. “No you don’t.”

After a deliciously long shower, I was dressed and ready to face another day. What I didn’t expect was all three of them standing by the door, my two shifters and my crazy Enforcer. “Umm, did I miss something?”

“Well, I was going to walk you to work, and debauch you somewhere on the way, but apparently Snakelet and your Alpha want to come as well. I’m still okay with that though; public orgies are my second favorite type of orgy.”

I didn’t dare ask him what his first favorite orgy was. Tex blushed, probably remembering the last time we played with the sexy Brit vampire, but Brody just raised an eyebrow. “I’m game. No crossing sausage though.”

I threw my hands in the air, but the smile on my face was wide. “No public orgies. I’m a respectable business owner now.”

X sighed dramatically, but he left the house first, his eyes taking in the area surrounding us. He might be the town doctor now, but he was an Enforcer first and foremost. A mercenary. A soldier.

He held out his arm, ever the dapper gentleman. I scoffed internally. Gentleman, my ass. He was more likely to fuck me against a door than open it for me. I can’t say I minded though.

We hadn’t made it to that stage yet. X was a voyeur, and sometimes he’d watch and give an entertaining running commentary, but he was yet to make a move. It was probably a good thing; I hadn’t been able to ensnare him with my demon vagina.

Tex came up and wrapped an arm around my waist, uncaring that he brushed against X's abs. "Don't be sad." He nuzzled against my cheek as he walked along beside us. I could feel the weight of Brody's eyes on my ass, and I gave it a wiggle. I was rewarded with the quickening of his pulse and a low chuckle.

It seemed so damn obvious now. My little sexual revolution. All the hot guys suddenly panting after me when I'd struggled to have more than a one-weekend-stand in college. I'd put it down to my new sexy vampire confidence, but I was obviously an idiot.

We walked through town, and I smiled and waved at people like I wasn't completely heartbroken. We got to the Doctor's office first, and X leaned over to kiss my cheek. "I will see you in a few hours." He leaned closer so his lips were inches from my ear. "I will talk to Judge. It'll be fine, Little One."

I didn't even try and give him a fake smile. "Thank you, but don't pressure him. I don't..." I sucked in a deep breath. "I don't know if I can live with myself knowing that I'd basically forced him to love me."

X rolled his eyes. Then he captured my lips with his, startling the shit out of me. His tongue slid past my teeth, stroking my tongue lasciviously. Then he pulled away. "Don't let it go to your head, Love. You aren't that irresistible." His grin was wide and teasing. Then he disappeared into the Doctor's office. I didn't know what he did in there all day, because he had no patients, but he dutifully went in every day and didn't leave until the town closed down for the morning.

I began walking across the town square towards a bakery that didn't have a baker. I'd google foolproof cupcakes and work up from that. I mean, even if my cakes sucked, people would still come in for the books, right? I could get better at cake making. I needed something if I was going to live here forever.

And if Walker, or Judge, or Nico didn't want anything to do with me now they knew it was my blood they loved, and not me, well then I needed to stay busy. Me and YouTube were about to become best friends.

Today I would dust everything down and wash it, get the month of disuse cleared up. Then I'd go through Angeline's paperwork and hopefully find her suppliers. I'd have to work out how I could go into town and pick up the stuff I'd need without Walker. Maybe Brody would do it for me. I looked over at my Alpha. He was watching me with those dark eyes, his sharp cheekbones looking almost razor-like in the low evening light.

Was it fair to depend on him so much when he had his own pack to run? He'd already had a near mutiny because he'd been here, panting after me, when he should have been caring for his people. Maybe it would be better to cut them all free. If you loved something, let it go? Isn't that the saying?

Brody leaned toward me and licked my cheek in one long lap.

"Brody! What the hell?"

He rubbed his stubbly cheek against mine, smearing the shapeshifter slobber. Gross. "I could see you overthinking shit. Snap out of it."

"Fuck off, I'm allowed to have my feelings."

Tex may have muttered something like, "Ohhh you done fucked up now," under his breath, and I was once again disappointed that he couldn't see me glare.

Brody stopped and tugged me into his arms. "Of course you are, Red. You are allowed to have all the feelings. But what you aren't allowed to do is decide for them what their feelings are. They love you, Raine. That has nothing to do with what flows

through your veins and everything to do with what is up here.” He tapped my forehead. “And what's in here.” He tapped my chest and then grabbed my boob. “But boobies certainly help.”

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I slapped his hand away, but I rested my head against his chest. “I’m scared. I was happy.”

He nodded. “I know, baby girl. And you will be again.” He lifted me into his arms and I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. “Now I’m going to carry you like this the rest of the way, and we’ll see if we can shock the shit out of Lorraine at the dry cleaners. Or I can turn into an elephant and we can have a science experiment to see if an elephant cock is bigger than Pup over there.”

Tex gave Brody the finger and I couldn’t hold back the laughter in my chest. God, I loved them. I pressed my face into his neck and breathed deeply. “I love you so damn much. Thank you.”

He squeezed my ass and kissed my ear awkwardly. “Anytime, babe. I love you too. I want you to be the happiest mate in history, and if I have to kick each of their undead asses to help you achieve it, I’ll do it with a smile.”

I let Brody carry me all the way to The Immortal Cupcake, just because it soothed me. I loved having my mates close, the closer the better. But when he plopped me down at the front door, it was already open and the lights were on inside.

Brody sniffed the air, frowning. He walked in before me, and Tex came up close behind me, his body all but wrapped around mine. He held my hip and his eyes did that thing where they slitted like a snake. He was getting so damn good at that.

Nico was in front of us in a whoosh of displaced air. I jumped and screeched. “Holy fucking Flapjacks, Nico. You scared the shit out of me!”

His lips curled. “Apologies, Raine. I thought I’d get the ovens preheated before you arrived. Maybe we could talk?”

I swallowed hard, scraping my lip between my teeth. “Okay.”

Brody stepped back, kissing me gently on the cheek. “Me and Pup will be over at the diner if you need us.”

Tex stepped up, kissing me hard. “You belong to me, no matter what, okay? You’re stuck with me until the day I die, and then even longer if I can help it. I love you.”

I ran my fingers through his shaggy black hair, in desperate need of a cut. “Love you too.”

Brody slapped Tex’s back. “Come on, we’ll gross out Beatrice and have a hot dog eating competition.”

“Fair warning, I have no gag reflex,” Tex quipped back and I snorted a laugh.

Brody reared back. “That is way too much information, Pup. Let’s go.”

I watched them wander off, and then turned back to Nico. He led me back into the kitchen, which was already warming from the huge industrial ovens.

“Raine...” he started, his eyes searching my face for something. If he wanted to know my feelings, he could compel them from me easy enough. But instead, he sighed and dragged me into his arms. “I’m going to kiss you.”

I didn’t know how the French did cooking school, but I was pretty sure it didn’t involve tongue. Or maybe it did. It is called french kissing after all. Ooh la la.

I kissed him back, pouring everything into the embrace. My frustrations and fear. My desire for him, and my hesitancy that I was somehow going to bewitch him.

Nico and his lips burst right through all my doubts, and when he sucked on my tongue, I moaned. "If it's okay with you, Raine, I would very much like to make love to you. I want you to know the depths of my feelings. That Miranda's news means nothing to me." He leaned over and sucked my earlobe into his mouth.

My brain fritzed. It was my weakness. The Kryptonite to my blue spandex. The heel to my knock off Louboutins.

I launched myself at him because he was right. I didn't want to wait. I didn't want to wonder what it would have been like to make love to him when they inevitably kicked me out for being a fox in the hen house.

Mentally humming the words to *You Can Leave Your Hat On*, I slowly peeled off my clothes. However, skinny jeans weren't invented for a striptease, especially when you had thick thighs. I kicked out of my boots, peeled out of the jeans like I was slicking off a sausage skin, my boobs kinda hanging in the breeze. The sound of Nico's chuckle was quickly followed by the feel of his lips placing soft kisses down my spine.

I stood up, taking a half a step away from him so I could judge his response. My nipples pebbled in the cool night air despite the warmth of the oven. Or maybe my hard nipples had nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with Nico. I tried not to feel awkward as I stood there in front of him, bare.

Nico's eyes seared my skin as he looked at my underwear-clad body. It was like he was memorizing me, or plotting the course his tongue was about to travel. He stepped toward me, his fingers tangling in the long red strands of my hair.

“You are so beautiful. Like a ray of sunshine after a century of darkness,” he purred at me, his lips so close to mine that if I poked my tongue out enough, I would lick his full lower lip. So I did.

He growled low in his throat. “I know you don’t understand. Your heart is so pure that you worry about little things like free will. But I promise you, Raine, that it matters not to me. Whether this feeling is real or artificial means nothing. Because you’ve given me something I never thought I’d have again.” His fingers ran down my cheek and I sucked in a shuddering breath. “But I’m going to give you something now. I’m going to give you freedom. I am going to give you all the love I possess.” He gripped my chin in his fingers and tilted my head back gently. “I’m going to take control, and you are going to let me. If you want me to stop, you only have to say the words. Do you want me to take control, my love?”

God, I wanted that more than anything. Ever since Miranda had returned to town and dropped her little bombshell, I’d been strung tighter than a mankini. He must have seen the relief in my eyes, because the corner of his lips turned up. “I’m going to need the words.”

I shuddered. “Yes.”

The smile he gave me then was definitely predatory, but it was the grin of something that stalked and conquered. Something you knew you should run from, but you were drawn to instead. Maybe the Twilightfangirls were onto something.

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He kissed me, a soft caress of his lips on mine, and then a small scrape of fangs to make me whimper. He pulled away. “On your knees, Sweetness.”

I dropped to the floor, the gentle scrape of the tiles on my knees barely registering as I stared up at him. Standing above me like this, his tattoos almost glowed in the bright lights, and he looked like a pagan god.

He bit his lip, his eyes hooded. “Good girl.”

Fuck. Me.

I eyed the front of his flamingo printed shorts. I wanted them gone, and not just because they made my eyes bleed with their awfulness. I wanted to unwrap my present. I wanted to touch, taste, devour every inch of him.

He peeled off his shirt, showing me his trim, muscled body. His swirling tattoos spread down his body, the blue-green ink vibrant over his chest, down over his abs. I knew the patterns must mean something, and one day I would ask. One day, I would know everything there was to know about Nico. But for now, I’d settle with tracing the swirls that ran down over his hips and below the waistband of his shirt with my tongue.

“Take off my shorts,” he said, his voice with the edge of command that made my skin prickle with heat. I grabbed the waistband of the awful shorts. He stilled my hands. “When I ask you to do something, I want you to reply with ‘yes, Sir’. Can you do that for me?”

You know what, I was going to apologize to all the Fifty Shades fan girls too. This shit was hotter than Hades. “Yes, Sir.”

He nodded, leaning forward to reward me with a kiss. It was hot, filled with tongue that plundered my mouth with desperation. He wasn’t as cool and unaffected as he was pretending. This was seriously turning him on, like the hard outline of his cock didn’t give it away.

When he pulled away, I was gasping, but my hands went back to the edges of his shorts and I dragged them down, underwear and all. I slid them right to his ankles and he stepped out of them, kicking them away with his toes.

He stood in front of me in his naked glory and I swear, I was glad I didn’t need to breathe. He was glorious and wild. His body was lean marble, the swirls looking like veins beneath his pale skin. My eyes traveled down his lean abs, over the deep grooves of his adonis belt, to the cock in front of my face.

“Do you want to taste me, Sweetness?” he asked me softly, but I was already leaning toward him eagerly. I wanted to taste and touch. To make him as weak as he made me.

Again, he stilled my head, an inch away from his cock, wrapping his fingers in my hair. Seriously, Nico had cast iron restraint. “I asked you a question.”

“Yes,” I breathed, loving the way his muscles rippled as my hot breath blew across the precum on his dick.

“Yes what?” he groaned.

“Yes, Sir.”

He loosened his grip, but left his fingers tangled in my hair. I leaned forward and licked from the base of his cock to the tip in one languorous stroke and he moaned. I smiled smugly, then swirled my tongue around the head before sucking him between my lips. I slid him deep, and I might be a vampire but I hadn't turned pornstar yet, so when he hit my gag reflex, I pulled back. I reached up and wrapped my hand around the base of his dick and went deep again.

He growled something low in a language I didn't know, and tightened his hand in my hair, but he didn't control my movements. He let me set the pace, the depth. Maybe it was because he knew I wanted to please him so bad because some twisted part of me wanted him to forgive me. But he thrust gently with my movements, and I moaned around his dick because it was perfect. When I reached up and rolled his balls in my hand, whatever he was saying turned guttural. "Fuck, Raine," he growled. He pulled away, panting. "I am going to come like a, what do humans call them, a two-pump-chump?" He looked down at me and he shook his head again like he couldn't believe his eyes. "On your feet, Sweetness."

I obediently got to my feet, and he bit his lip. "I did not think I could get harder, but looking at you right now, I feel like I will explode." He traced a finger down my throat and between my breasts. "Take off the rest of your clothes. I want to see all of you."

I gave him a cocky grin. "Yes, Sir." I reached behind me, my breasts jutting out as I unclasped my bra. I let it fall to the floor and stood there. Vampire perk #206, literal perk. My boobs were going to stay this wonderfully gravity resistant forever. Nico would look at them with those hungry eyes forever.

The thought made my heart race as I hooked my thumbs under the lace of my panties, and slipped them over my ass and down to my knees. When they pooled around my feet, I stepped toward him. He was fucking me with his eyes, and I loved it.

His fingers curled like he was resisting the urge to reach out and grab me, and I wanted to scream, ‘Do it!’ Instead, I stood there with a restraint I didn’t know I possessed.

“Hands on the table,” he murmured in my ear, and let out a breathy sigh. I slammed my hands on the table like the stainless steel top was magnetized. “Now don’t let go. No matter what, Sweetness.”

I swallowed hard. “Yes, Sir.”

He pulled my hips back until I was stretched out trying to hold on. Then he spread my feet wide. I could feel my wetness cooling on my thighs. Holy shit.

Then Nico dropped to his knees behind me, his breath cooling the heat between my thighs, and my legs shook. He wrapped his large hands around my thighs, angling me forward more, running his tongue from my clit to my entrance, swirling his tongue there.

“Sweet pagan god of tongue fucking!” I panted, and I heard him huff out a laugh.

“What? No Jesus fucking a frog?” he chuckled.

“Jesus has no place here,” I moaned. “Please, Nico.”

He made good on his new name and tongue fucked the hell out of me. I writhed against his face as he sucked, swirled and stroked until my thighs were shaking and I was screaming out my climax. I wanted to fall to the floor as the pleasure rode my body like I was possessed, my body quaking, but Nico’s hands squeezed my thighs. “Stay still. Do not let go of that table,” he commanded, and I swear I had a mini-orgasm.

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He stood behind me, nestling my not-so-small ass against his hips and his still hard cock. Then he leaned over me and placed small kisses along my spine.

“You mean everything to me, Raine.” He pulled back and notched his cock against me, and I squirmed, desperate to have him inside me. “Everything.”

He slammed home, our bodies thudding together.

The noise I made was no longer human. It was feral. Nico curled his body over mine and gave me his wrist. I hesitated, but only for a moment. His blood was like pure alcohol. Intoxicating to the point of deadliness.

But what a way to go.

I latched onto his wrist and the first taste of his blood had me coming hard. My body felt like it was on fire as Nico fucked me with a desperate abandon. I sucked him down like I was starving, the power of his blood heady.

I moaned with each thrust, clinging to his wrist as my arms no longer held my body. I was more alive than I had ever been. I felt like I was high. Like I’d tasted heaven.

His arm banded around my waist, pulling me back hard as he rolled his hips into me and I came again. Then my eyes rolled back into my head and I swear I whited-out for a moment. Long enough that his wrist fell from my mouth.

“Nico,” I moaned, my voice was hoarse.

He moved his still bleeding hand down my side, slipping it between my thighs, and then he flicked my clit and I lost coherent thought.

At some point later, moments or hours maybe, he came on a roar, pulling me up and biting the curve of my neck as he slammed into me balls deep.

He held us both for a moment as my legs shook. We panted even though neither of us needed to breathe. “Good girl.”

He lifted me in his arms and laid me on the floor on top of all our clothes, then curled my body into his. “I am keeping you for eternity, Sweetness.” He nuzzled my neck as I tried to regain the oxygen I didn’t need but seemed to have made me breathless anyway. “I love you, Raine.”

I bit my lip and resisted the urge to cry. I didn’t doubt his words at all. He loved me, because I had forced him to feel it. He worshipped me because I had consumed him.

All the pleasure of the moment deflated from me like a balloon. This wasn’t real. It was an illusion, a dream, and as he licked the tears from my cheeks, I wasn’t sure it was one I was strong enough to break.

Because I loved him too.

Chapter Six

Iskulked home after making love with Nico, making vague excuses about a headache I could no longer feel. It was really hard to fake an excuse when you could zip anywhere at super speed and you never got ill.

Still, Nico was the consummate gentleman and let me go without a word, his sad gaze watching me as I raced out of The Immortal Cupcake like Van Helsing was on my

ass. I burst through my door, glad that both Brody and Tex were still out, and then guilty that I was glad about it. I was never alone anymore, not truly. Up until yesterday, that had been bliss. There was always someone to distract me from my thoughts of my family, or to kiss me until my eyes crossed. But they wanted to fix this, I could see it in Nico's eyes and Brody's gentle touches. Tex wasn't that subtle.

Suddenly, even the house seemed too claustrophobic. I pushed through the backdoor, vaulting over the porch railing and landing on the lawn like a cat.

I laid down in the dew damp grass, staring up at the moon, still fat and bright. The nights were no longer quiet; rather they were a cacophony of night creatures, both animal and vampire. I let myself process what Miranda said. Up until this moment, I'd buried my head in the sand. Well, in between Nico's thighs but close enough, right?

I would lure men to love me. Sounded like a dream, but honestly, how could I ever trust myself or them? Is this how billionaires felt?

Did I just equate being a succubus to being rich?

I groaned and just counted stars until I felt like I could sink beneath the earth and never reemerge. How fucking dramatic. Apparently my succubus blood made me a little bit of a diva. So instead of a pity party for one, I tried to think what my Mom would tell me to do. Write a list. Make a plan. Apparently her organizational genes skipped me completely, and I blamed that for the fact that I was now an undead person making lists about whether or not I should break up with my basically non-consensual boyfriends.

Plan number one: I break up with them all, except Tex, because he is the only one that I know for certain loved me for me. Because he loved the girl I used to be. We slink off into the sunrise and hide alone in some dank Canadian cave, avoiding the

Vampire Nation, all other vampires and any possible humans. A blind shifter and a baby vamp walk into a cave. I didn't think I'd like the punchline of that joke though. Sounded like heartbreak.

Plan number two: I track down Miranda and ask if there's some kind of Beauty and The Beast style mythical spell which would limit my influence over them. Then, we start again from the beginning and I date them all, slowly this time. If they walked away, then it was the blood and not me they were in love with anyway. This option kind of gave me heart palpitations, and a gnawing sadness chewed at my gut, but it was also the most morally ethical.

Plan number three: I kept them and we continue on with our happily ever after because we deserved it, dammit! Succubus blood or not, it wasn't easy getting to where we were today.

A pair of feet appearing in my vision was the first indication I wasn't alone. I looked up, and Not-Nico looked down at me. "You managed to still your heart rate completely. I thought you were dead. Impressive in a vamp so young," Lucius said conversationally. He leaned down, his hands on his knees, and breathed deeply. "You smell like sex and my brother's blood. I guess I know why you are suddenly powerful enough to still your body to complete silence."

I frowned, and willed my heart to beat again. It thudded against my ribs and I let out a relieved sigh. I clung to my heartbeat like it was the golden thread to my humanity.

Lucius didn't seem mad or jealous that I'd just banged his twin. He was the Boogeyman of the vampire world, yet he didn't instill any kind of fear in me. I wondered if it was because I was malfunctioning, or because he was.

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“Sit down, Lucius?” I asked super politely. Because he was crazy and fickle, and old as dirt. It would be beneficial for my undead health if I resisted pissing him off. To my surprise, he laid down on the grass beside me, looking up at the moon.

“Do you know, it is rumored that we were gifted our immortality by the moon? The story goes that the Moon goddess, a goddess so old that she didn’t belong to any pantheon, got jealous of the creatures her sister made which frolicked so happily in the sun, becoming beautiful colors, growing strong and tall, that she decided she needed creatures of the night. But colors couldn’t exist in the darkness, and nor could humans. So instead, she stole a particularly attractive couple from her sister, The Sun, and turned them into vampires. Then she stole from them their lives, or the essence from within them that needed the sun. She said that all they’d need to survive was to steal that essence back from humans through their blood. She blessed them with the gift to create others of their kind. Then she let them run rampant in the night.

“The Sun was mad. Not just because The Moon had stolen her favorite human couple, but because in the light of the sun, she could see the crimson streets of blood from where those early vampires had gorged themselves on whole villages. So she created other supernaturals to keep us in line. Shapeshifters. Weres and shifters. Djinn. Demi-Gods so powerful that they could unmake the world.”

I scoffed. “Seems like a bit of an overreaction, but okay.”

Lucius grinned, his pointed fangs pressing into his lower lip. “Indeed. Humans began to worship these supernaturals, some creating whole religions around them. Others hunted them into extinction. This is why humans are food and not friends,” he added derisively. “While The Sun created creature after creature, The Moon only ever made

one. Her perfect creation.”

I looked over at Lucius, this rabid vampire. “I’m part-succubus. What you feel for me isn’t real. You should go home.”

Lucius snorted. “I know.”

I scrambled up onto my elbows. “Wait? What do you mean?”

Lucius leaned back, looking more like he was bathing in the sunlight than the moonlight. “I killed the last succubus centuries ago. I remember the feel of being in thrall.”

Oh fuck. Oh shit, oh fuck, oh shit. I edged away, trying not to startle him into attacking. He looked over at me crab walking away. “Ah, be still. I am not going to hurt you. Do you know why I stay?”

“My great ass?” slipped out of my mouth before I could curb my tongue.

He turned his head from side to side like he was considering my answer. “A little, yes. But mostly, because when I kissed you, it was the sanest I had felt in centuries. I know I am in thrall, but before, I was rabid. It was what they called me, though no one was brave enough to say it to my face, except The Executioner. And I stabbed him in the back for it, literally. This close to you, smelling your intoxicating blood, I can feel bad about that. He didn’t deserve it. He was only saying what everyone was thinking, because he is far too brave, and perhaps a little too stupid, to hold his tongue. I should have been put down decades ago, but the only people who could undertake a task like that and not die are my brothers. Nico loves me as much as he despises me, and Titus... “ he trailed off and shook his head. “Titus is overrun with guilt for turning us to start with. I have no doubt that I would have tipped his hand eventually though.”

He rolled onto his stomach, crawling toward me, and I was too stupid to run away. “But like fate or the Moon Goddess had ordained it, you fell in my lap. Or into my twin’s lap. You, with enough succubus blood that I would rather live for your happiness than the casual pleasure of torturing my own kind. But not enough succubus power that I chafe under the bonds of your control. You are the perfect solution.”

I stared at him hard. “Are you saying I’m a walking, talking antipsychotic med?”

Lucius shrugged. “Maybe?” He smiled and it was somewhere between sexy and sinister. “Then again, it may just be your ass, as you say.”

What the hell did I make of that? Honestly, let's add a psychotic co-dependent onto my list of problems. “So if I fed you a little of my blood every now and then, you’d be fine?”

Lucius threw back his head and laughed, the sound seemed to suck in all the noise in the area, like the animals knew the call of an apex predator. “Sweet Raine. No. I must taste you, yes. But not your blood. One day soon, I will bury myself between your thighs and pleasure you until your juices soak my face. It is not your blood that is my drug. It’s your pleasure.” I clenched my thighs together at his words, because my pussy shouldn’t light up like Christmas lights in July at the thought.

“You want me to be a booty call.”

He nodded slowly. “I will not even be upset by the fact that you have six other men in your bed.”

I rolled my eyes and hoped he couldn’t see it in the darkness. “Benevolent of you.”

Shit. I didn’t know what to do. I found Lucius attractive of course, and not just

because he was a carbon copy of Nico. Can you imagine that twin sandwich? I bit my lip. Dammit. Lucius nostrils flared and I realized he could smell how turned on I was.

On the other hand, no one trusted Lucius and there was no way that it wouldn't cause drama. X and Judge strongly disliked him. Nico loathed and loved him. Walker wanted to run the other way if he saw him. He'd massacred countless shifters in his rabid rages, so Brody and Tex were probably out too.

Then I remembered what Judge had said about him having a harem of witches. "Err, won't your witch harem be mad?"

He shook his head. "I released them from my service. All of them. I am unbound from obligation."

Well, shit. I didn't have any other arguments for that.

I nodded and stood. "I will talk to the guys, and see what they say. We are a democracy, so if they vote that you'll be bad for the group, then that's all there is to it." That is if I had them at all.

Lucius reached out, stroking my blood red hair. "They will come around. If they say no, I will respect your decision. But I may petition to stay in town." Ha, good luck with that. "Your physical nearness is enough to keep most of the demons at bay. But Raine?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm not much of a spectator. I'd rather taste than smell," he said with a wicked grin. I didn't know if that was sexy or gross. Lucius stepped toward me quicker than my eyes could track, his hands suddenly tangled in my hair and my face tipped up towards his. "One for the road?"

His lips captured mine. He kissed differently to Nico, unsurprisingly, but they were both still dominant. While Nico tempted me into submitting, Lucius took without remorse.

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The dichotomy of them was going to make my brain explode. Even as all this churned over in my head, I felt myself sinking into the kiss. His kiss was like a drug, like I was doing something bad for me but helpless to resist.

His free hand skimmed down my back, grabbing a handful of my ass as he pulled away. “Hmm, maybe it is this ass. It is delectable. I really would like to take a bite,” he purred against my lips, and then disappeared back into the night.

I stared out into the darkness, completely awestruck. Every time Lucius left, I was always left wondering what the fuck happened, and tonight was no different. I wandered back to the house, the sun beginning to light the very edges of the horizons. Tex and Brody would be home soon, and so would X. For the first time, I wondered if Walker would stop by, if Judge would come over to sleep curled around my body, with a leg thrown over Tex’s like he couldn’t even contemplate leaving while he slept.

If Judge cut and run, would Tex be heartbroken? Tex would never leave me, that was something I was more than sure about. It was my one foundation. My hearthstone. Tex loved me with enough passion that he followed me to Canada even when he thought I was dead. Although he was held with a different supernatural bond, that of the Mate Bond, I had no doubt that he had felt something for me before that. At least I hoped so. I needed to hang onto that one small certainty.

As if summoned by my thoughts, Judge was sitting at my breakfast bar as I walked back in. His beautiful midnight blue eyes softened when they saw me, and I resisted the urge to run into his arms and wrap myself around him the way he’d wrapped himself around my heart.

“Walker said to give you space to come to terms with everything, but I think we need to talk it out. I know you are going to be freakin’ out the most over me, because I was The Drifter. Can’t hold me down, a fucking floating vigilante. I was a parody of The Judge. We both know that if it hadn’t been for your blood, I would never have stayed.”

I had suspected it, but to hear him say it was like a knife to the heart. I prepared myself for what was going to come next, for him to tell me that it was over. He took a deep breath and gulped back his beer, his Adams apple bobbing as he swallowed. “I would like to keep seeing you and Tex, if that’s okay with you. I know you are freaking out as much as I am, if not more, because you are you. Sweet, but with morals that will do you no good in the supernatural world.”

As if it was now too much for him, he reached out and grabbed my hand, tugging me close to his body. “But what we have, no matter how it came about, is something good in a world that has always been a steaming pile of bad. What we have with the other guys, especially with Tex, is important to me.”

I pulled away, trying half-heartedly to escape his embrace.

“Regardless if you continue your relationship with me, I would never stop you from seeing Tex. He loves you as much as he loves me, and making him choose would break his heart. I would never do that to my mate.”

Judge kissed my cheek. “I know. That’s how I know what I feel for you isn’t some stupid obsession because of a tiny drop of succubus blood in your DNA.” He kissed me again, this time on the corner of my mouth. “Let’s forget Miranda ever visited. So you stopped me wandering from place to place, lost. So fucking what? I wasn’t happy.” He pulled me in close so I was pressed against his chest, and I let out the breath that I didn’t realize I’d been holding. “I went to bed alone last night, and I hated every second. Don’t make me sleep alone again tonight, Rainey Day.”

I rested my forehead on his chest. I might be the succubus, but I was just as helpless to resist these men.

“You never have to be alone unless you want to be.” I reached up and kissed him and he responded with a scorching passion that left me breathless, pulling me onto the kitchen counter with him. I wanted to be so close to him that we were basically one person, and I rolled my body against his, listening to him moan.

He pulled away slightly, groaning. “This is not what I had planned. I was going to take you to my apartment. I was going to spend some time alone with you, so we could do normal couple shit like watch a movie or make stir fry.”

I blinked and then blinked again. “Stir fry?”

He nodded. “That's what they always make in those rom-coms. Though maybe mac and cheese might be better.”

I looked him dead in the eye so he knew this was serious. “Mac and cheese is always better. Always. Repeat it back to me, Judge.”

He leaned in and kissed me again, obviously not taking me seriously at all. I reached down and tweaked his nipple.

“Ahh,” he laughed. “Okay, okay. Mac and cheese is always better. Jesus, woman!”

Chapter Seven

The next night I was bleary eyed and a little despondent. Walker hadn't shown up at my house, probably giving me the space he'd ordered Judge to give me. It was a pity Judge didn't believe in following anyone's rules. Still, even though I logically knew this, Walker's lack of presence felt like a betrayal. Damn Walker and his need to be

the good guy.

As if sensing my bad mood, Tex made the wise decision to stay home for the day with Judge, and Brody had to go back to the Pack for a business meeting.

I kissed him goodbye before I went to work. “Come up to Nîso for a couple of days soon. I have an envoy of preternaturals coming at the end of the week to talk about setting up some school on the edge of the territory and it would be good to have my mate beside me,” he said as he snuggled my chest. “I was going to pass it by Nico. As a representative of Dark River, he might want to be there too. We’ll kill two birds with one stone then.”

I murmured something that might have been agreement, but then I kissed him like I'd miss him. Which I would, because being apart from him was always like chopping off a limb and sending it to a different state. When he roared away in his Impala, I turned to today's walking companion. X had turned up at my house again after work, parked himself on my couch and fallen asleep. I was beginning to find his presence more soothing than disquieting, maybe because I was beginning to get to know the vampire beneath all the flash and reputation. He liked piping hot tea in the morning out of his favorite teacup. He peeled bananas from the bottom, and if that didn't say psychopath nothing did. He made crude jokes at the guys' expense, but there was a gentle way in which he teased me. He hadn't pushed for more than watching our little sexploits, and I had a feeling he was biding his time. I just didn't know for what.

Because I was a little pissy today, I turned to him as we walked. “Why haven't we had sex? Do you not want me like that?” I kept the accusation out of my tone. Despite my succubus blood implying otherwise, I wasn't under the misconception I was irresistible to everyone. X had made his interest known, but maybe it wasn't me he was interested in? Maybe it was someone else amongst my lovers. Maybe Judge or Tex?

“Theres more to sex than just sticking my dick in your magical vagina, Love.”

I rolled my eyes even as I grinned. “I know that.” I had a very vivid flashback to being suspended from the ceiling. “Can I not, err, offer you what you need?”

X was a man of distinct tastes, that was obvious. Maybe he needed me to spank him and tell him how bad he was for him to get off? I mean, it wasn’t really my thing, but I’d try it if it would bring him pleasure. I mean, I could even buy a latex catsuit from the internet.

He was grinning when I looked over at him. “I desperately want to know what you were thinking right then. You had the funniest, perplexed look on your face,” he chuckled. We walked in silence for a little longer, and then he answered my question. “I don’t know why. I guess I could sense that there was something off about my attraction, even though outwardly there isn’t anything different about you, not even in the taste of your blood. But I don’t fool myself often. My attraction for you was too instant for it to be natural. Plus, Judge was a fucking confirmed bachelor. I’d tried to get him into bed for years, then you came along, not his normal type but adorable all the same, and snared him? Seemed hinky.”

It did seem so obvious now. A man like Judge would never look at me normally. Hell even a man like Walker or Nico, both handsome and magnetic, wouldn’t have looked at me. Yet they fell into my bed like it was nothing.

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X went on, like I wasn't having an emotional crisis. "But still, you were on my brain. I couldn't stay away. I needed to be near you. I managed to hold myself back from fucking you, even when the opportunity arose." He stopped, grabbing my hips and pulling me tight to his body. He leaned down so his lips were close to my ear. "There's something extremely pleasurable about delayed satisfaction, Love. One day I will show you exactly what I mean," he purred. I shivered as my core clenched. He let me go, tucked my hand back into the crook of his elbow and continued on, dragging my lust-frozen body with him.

"I guess we know why now. But I also know that while your succubus calls to me like a siren, it doesn't control my actions. Now there's nothing stopping me from taking you to that park bench, sliding up that pretty little skirt, and driving you down on my cock until you scream my name."

I swallowed my tongue. "I... uh..." My brain scrambled to find something sexy to reply, but I was blank, so I followed along on his heels like a puppy. I shook my head, stuffing the sexy suggestion deep down into my psyche to explore much, much later when it was just me and my pulsating shower head. "It doesn't bother you? The fact you were almost compelled to my side?"

X grunted, and then suddenly I was in his arms and my back was pressed against the wall of the Doctor's office. The rough brick scraped against my shoulder blades. X's face was so close to mine when he said, "No one controls me, Love. Not you, not my maker. No one. So when I do this..." he kissed me hard, a rough bruising kiss that made me gasp and rock my pussy against the front of his black utility pants, moaning as I kissed him back.

Damn, kissing X was like drowning. I pressed my nails hard into his shoulders and held on for dear life. His hands gripped my thighs and he rolled his hips against my core like the only thing holding him back was the brief strip of underwear. We both knew he could probably tear that off with no effort at all, but somehow he resisted. He kept the barrier of our clothes between us and the nudge of his hard dick against my clit was making me pant. He pulled back. "So when I do that, you know it's because I want to, not because your sex voodoo compelled me into it."

"X..." I whimpered. "Please."

His hand slid between our bodies and he dipped a finger into my panties. He let it brush lightly against my clit and then slide between my lips and inside me. I rocked against it, and when he pulled his hand away, I wanted to whine and bite him all at once. Instead, he took his finger, glistening with my juices, and sucked on it. "Mmm, delayed satisfaction, Love. I promise you. It'll be worth it." Then he let me slide down his body until my feet were back on the ground. He kissed me softly again, just so I could taste myself on his lips. "Have a good day."

He stepped around me, opened the door to the clinic and winked as he closed it in my face. I stood there alone, gaping at the door. I was hot and horny, and so very tempted to track down Nico just to soothe the lust buzzing under my skin. But in some weird way, I wanted to please X, so instead I walked back to The Immortal Cupcake. Today I would conquer fucking cupcakes and tonight I would conquer The Executioner.

Nico clapped his hands, a little bit of flour creating a cloud around him. "Well done, Raine."

I grinned and gazed lovingly at my first batch of unfailed cupcakes. They were perfectly golden, not too high, not too flat. It only took me seven batches but I got there. I put them on the cooling rack gently like they were precious. Which they kind of were. They were a turning point, and you had to appreciate even the small

victories.

On the other side of the table, Nico had baked several batches of perfect baguettes and bread rolls, three trays of cupcakes and was in the middle of creating the perfect French meringue buttercream frosting. I scowled in his direction. “Do you really have to be so good at this? You’re making me look bad.”

Nico’s low chuckle echoed around the kitchen, and he wiped his hands on his tight, checkered pants à la Sid Vicious in the glory days of UK punk. He’d teamed them with boots and a shirt that was hot pink and had a sleeping kitten on the front. Nico was a law unto himself when it came to fashion. He once told me that he wore whatever made him feel that way. When he reached me, he scooped a finger through his bowl of frosting, and then ran it along my jaw and over my lips. Then he licked it off me in one, long stroke.

I am only human. Or, I was only human. But that shit? It’s like pure foreplay. I attempted to climb him like a tree, but a single hand on my hip kept my feet firmly planted. “No, we have cakes to make, and what kind of teacher would I be if we kept ending up on the floor, hmm?”

A damn fine one. Instead of saying that, I pouted and went back to filling my piping bag. Nico walked back to his side of the counter. It was easier if he was on the other side of the room.

I squeezed the piping bag how Nico had shown me, and grabbed a cupcake. Then the frosting exploded from the tip, spurting all over the counter.

“I swear, that never happens,” I said quickly, trying in vain to keep a straight face.

Nico laughed. “You must have had an air bubble. Remember what I said about massaging it down.”

Gripping the long frosting bag in my hand, I pornographically ran my hand up and down it. “Like this?” I purred, wagging my eyebrows suggestively. Nico shook his head, his grin wide, but pointed back at my sacrificial cupcake.

Fuck it. How hard could it be?

The answer is not hard if you want it to look like a five year old did it, but perfection is the work of a true artist. It was kind of like doing your eyeliner for the first time. You end up poking yourself in the eyeball and looking a little like the Lone Ranger, but eventually you get there.

I sprinkled it with copious amounts of edible glitter. As any stripper will tell you, glitter is like magical pixie dust that hides all your sins.

“So, Lucius came over last night,” I said nonchalantly. “Said he knew I was a succubus because he killed the last of my kind a couple of centuries ago.”

Nico’s hands stilled, his fingers curling into his fists. “Oh? Did he threaten you?”

I scoffed. Lucius didn’t threaten. If he wanted me to be dead, he could have murdered me a hundred times over by now. “No. He said that being obsessed with me keeps him sane.”

Yeah, because those were the words of a sane person. But it was hard to argue with the results. “He said my succubus kind of keeps him focused, chasing away the insanity for a little while.”

I cleared my throat as I sprinkled tiny yellow stars on top of the blue glitter. “He said that if he went down on me every now and then, that my pleasure would keep the crazy away.”

I mean, it was a new line, but it wasn't that much different to frat guys convincing girls that ejaculation cured cancer, right? Men have been using the old 'sex will save my life/your life/the whales' since forever.

Nico looked back down at his bread, kneading it with sure fingers. "And what did you say?"

"That I'd talk to you guys about it." I put a giant red fondant heart on top of the icing. "Taa daa?" I said, doing wild jazz hands.

He pulled out his phone and took a photo. His thumbs flew across the screen and then he stuffed it back in his pocket.

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I narrowed my eyes at him. “You just sent that to the group chat, didn’t you?”

He grinned and came over. “It’s absolute perfection, Raine.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and we both looked at my cupcake. It leaned a little bit to the left and was coated in fluro blue glitter. The swirl was a little uneven, but I bet it tasted good.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t think a career as a cake decorator is for you,” he laughed as the fondant heart fell off the side. He was definitely right.

“Maybe I’ll just take care of the front of house?” I suggested, resting my head on his shoulder as I reached out and scooped some frosting onto my finger.

Nico grabbed my hand before I could put my finger in my mouth, instead redirecting it to his own. He wrapped his lips around the base and sucked as he slowly pulled my finger out.

Goddamn. When he grinned, his teeth were blue and I snorted. “I think that might be a good idea, Rainey.”

“And the other thing?” I asked, my heart starting to pound a little in my chest.

Nico looked down at me, his eyes assessing. Then he shrugged. “We are a polycule. We’ll put it to the group.”

Then he picked up my cupcake monstrosity and slammed it into my face.

I gasped, covered in delicious frosting and yellow fondant stars, my eyes wide. “You didn’t just do that.”

I scooped out a handful of frosting and smeared it down his cheek. I squealed as he gave me a fangy grin and turned. “Better run,” he said in a low voice that made my heart race.

That afternoon I learned that I cannot bake and that French meringue frosting tasted better when licked off the abs of an ancient vampire who loved me.

Chapter Eight

I was a shitty girlfriend, because while I was having my Harry Potter ‘Yer a Succubus, Raine’ moment, I almost forgot that Tex was having his very own Star Wars ‘Luke, I am your father’ Darth Vader moment with an impossibly old Dragon.

At least until said Old Dragon turned up on my doorstep with a bottle of Fireball and several pounds of what smelled like raw meat. When I stared at him blankly, he only looked minorly annoyed, and I sent up a thank you to whatever god decided that I should be the mate of his ‘possibly’ only progeny.

“You invited me over to grill.”

Shit. I had. Like last week before Miranda and the succubus thing and Lucius and taking things to the next level with Nico and, and, and. My life was more hectic than was warranted in a town this size.

“Of course I did!” I said with more enthusiasm than I felt. “Come on in, I was just about to get started on the cooking.”

I sent a quick text to Nico to pick up some stuff to grill. In that moment, I felt the

absence of Walker more than anything. It seemed like a weird time, but Walker was my rock. He would have remembered that I'd invited Alexander over, would have been outside grilling already, or would be handing Alexander a beer. As it was, Judge stumbled out of the bedroom, half awake and dressed only in sweats, his hair messy and his lips swollen. He looked like he'd been fucked into oblivion.

When Tex strode out after him, his facade equally as disheveled so there could be no doubt about what they'd been doing inside the bedroom, his face was set to a stubborn angle.

Judge swaggered over to Alexander. He gave a single head nod. "Alexander."

"Judge."

With that out of the way, Judge got Alexander a beer out of the fridge and tossed it to him, grabbing another two for him and Tex. He stopped beside me and kissed my head. "I didn't realize we were having dinner guests," he murmured against my temple and I kicked him in the shin. He might not have known we were having guests, but he knew Alexander was here before he walked out looking like sex and sin.

Judge was eyeing Alexander, and I wasn't going to lie, so was I. I was looking for even a hint that he disapproved of Tex's orientation because I would stomp him into next week. No one hurt Tex's feelings. He was my mate and I would protect him in the same way he would protect me.

Alexander shrugged and turned to me. "Are we expecting any more of your lovers? The Brit with the shitty attitude perhaps?"

As if he was waiting off screen for his name, X slammed open the door, a huge grin on his face. "Honey, I'm home." He strode over, wrapped his arms around my

shoulders, dipped me backwards and kissed me like we were in a black and white movie. “Mmm, delicious,” he murmured against my lips as he pulled me upright. “Hello Puff. Snakelet.” He nodded his head toward the shifters in the room. Then he looked at Judge. “Evening, Cocksucker.”

“You would be so lucky,” Judge growled. X wagged his eyebrows, eyeing Judge’s half naked body in a manner that could only be called lascivious.

“It looks like perhaps Snakelet was already that lucky.”

Alexander just shook his head, a mixture of disbelief and disgust on his face. “Do you want me to eat him?” he asked me, and I tapped my finger against my lip as I pretended to think about it.

X gave me a wounded look and I laughed. “Thanks for the offer, but I’m kind of fond of him now. Besides, he’d probably like it.”

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The vampire in question nuzzled my neck. “I only like it when you swallow, Love. Doesn’t apply to the big lizard over there.”

Alexander’s eyes narrowed and it was time to save X from himself. I threw Judge a desperate look and he chuckled under his breath. “Come on, Alexander. Let’s go sit out back. The sunrise from there is something to behold.”

Tex kissed my cheek on the way out the door and I held X’s hand as he went to follow. I dragged him towards the kitchen. “Ah, Love, you’re meant to be dragging me toward the bedroom. Though I’m good to eat you on the table too. I like my buffet spread far and wide.”

The brief flash of X’s smug grin between my thighs momentarily made me trip over my feet, but I shook it off. Now was not the time to indulge in all the dirty fantasies that floated around my head.

No one told X that though. He leaned forward, lifting me onto the table and sliding his tongue over my pulse point. An involuntary moan echoed around the kitchen and my thighs squeezed around his waist. He nipped the corner of my jaw with his teeth and I considered how fast we could have sex on the kitchen floor and if anyone would notice. Then I remembered everyone was a supernatural and they probably already heard me moan embarrassingly.

“Dammit, X. Now is not the time. Tex’s maybe-grandpappy is out there and you are in here trying to make me spontaneously come on the table,” I hissed and I’ll be damned if he didn’t just look more smug. When he grinned, I was fucking helpless to resist. “One more kiss and that’s it, okay?”

He dragged his lips over my cheek until he could dip his tongue into the corner of my mouth. “I make no promises, Love.” Then he kissed me hard. I avoided his fangs with my tongue. Yeah I hadn’t forgotten the orgasm venom. You didn’t forget that kind of all-consuming pleasure. I pushed him away and he took a step back, his eyebrow raised like he could read my mind and knew that I wanted to drag him into the nearest bedroom.

Instead, I pointed to the fridge. “Make a salad.”

He bit the tip of my finger. “Are you getting all dominant on me, because I’m not sure if that makes me hot or not?”

My tongue darted out and wet my lower lip. I grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him closer. When he was inches from my face, I whispered, “Get in the kitchen and make me a sandwich.”

He made a happy rumbling noise low in his chest. “Yes, Mistress.”

We stood there for another moment, staring, this electric thing pulled tight between us. Then laughter bubbled up in my chest until I was twisting my lips to stop myself from smiling.

“Fuck me, girl, you are so fucking cute I just want to eat you,” X grumbled, and stepped away toward the fridge. He pulled out a limp cucumber and some lettuce that had shriveled and died in my crisper.

“Unless you want to convert this to vampirism, I think it's dead, Love.”

Damn. There was no way I could pretend I remembered Alexander was coming for dinner now. I wondered if I had time to make macaroni and cheese?

Nico knocked and then let himself in, and with his arrival came the heavenly scent of lasagna.

“Nico,” I groaned. “You’re a lifesaver.”

I helped as he juggled all the food into the kitchen, then wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed. “You are legitimately my savior right now.”

X made a rude noise behind me. “Food is cheating, Old Man.”

Nico just gave him a crooked smile and then kissed me. “I’ve got you, Raine. One day you’ll trust in that.”

For the next fifteen minutes, X and Nico helped me set the table and lay out the food; it was beautiful and domestic and scary all at once. I was officially the pied piper of hot guys. They snarked at each other, and I sometimes forgot that they both had their own histories. Along with Judge, they all had ancient history with Lucius too. That might be the insurmountable obstacle right there, and I had to remind myself that I didn’t owe Lucius a damn thing. In fact, if I was smart, I’d say no and send him on his way.

But I couldn’t.

I sighed as I set down the last knife. That was a problem for tomorrow. Tonight, I was going to try and impress Brody’s super boss, and Tex’s actual blood relation. No pressure though. I missed Brody, who seemed to be a calming influence on them all. Maybe it was his natural Alpha aura, or maybe he was just a super nice guy who was personable as fuck. Either way, I wish he was with me, helping me navigate this weird shifter dynamic.

X kept eyeing the ring on my rafter, and every time my gaze drifted up to that shiny

gold ring, I had a vivid flashback that set my body on fire. I was beginning to think it was on purpose. I gave him the stink eye, and his cocky look told me it was definitely on purpose.

Such an asshole. A sexy, psycho asshole. Apparently, I had a type.

When everything was laid out and pretty, I called the guys back in from where they'd been grilling on the back porch. It smelled like cooked meat and summer heat, and if I closed my eyes, I could almost imagine I was back home, human and a carefree teenager again. I could see my parents and my brother chatting around the big old picnic table. Tex's family would come over from next door and his mother would make that truly awful potato salad that we were all forced to eat just to be polite.

I looked at Tex, and his eyes were on me, unseeing without his python vision, but he didn't need to see my face to know what I was feeling. He didn't say anything as he came over and wrapped a tattooed arm around me.

We all took our places, and Alexander poured out shots of Fireball. I grinned at the irony, but I was fairly sure he did it on purpose. He raised his glass.

"To long lost family," he said as we all saluted and I swallowed back the burning liquid. "And to the newly discovered succubus that enchanted my grandson."

Alcohol sprayed all over the table as I snorted it out my nose, and when it hit the candle in the center of the table, it lived up to its name as it went up in a fireball. Alexander patted the spots of burning tablecloth in front of him, his face amused. Shit. Was I going to have to run? X looked casual as he took another sip of his drink, but I could see how tense his freehand was where it rested on his thigh.

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Alexander threw back his drink and poured himself another one. “Relax. I just wanted confirmation of the rumor. I know that Tex fell in love with you as a teenager. All his stories while growing up involve you.”

Judge was tense as he assessed Alexander as a threat. “How did you find out?”

“Trust me when I say there is very little that I do not know about. Very little.” He gave Judge a hard look and Judge’s jaw tensed. Well, that was interesting. “It is safe to say that if I know, all the other Convocation heads know. It won’t be long until everyone knows.” He looked between X, Judge and Nico. “You should be prepared for that.”

Tex frowned. “What the hell does that mean?”

Alexander smiled pleasantly at Tex. Indulgently even. “As you have probably noticed, Raine attracts attention. She will continue to do so, especially from older vampires with certain existential disorders.” He lifted his head and inhaled deeply. “Such as your twin. I can smell him out there in the woods. I bet he has approached you about becoming one of your lovers.”

I glared at Alexander. Way to out me, asshole. How he could possibly have known that was beyond me, but I didn’t doubt his omnipotence anymore. Both Judge and X were looking at me, something like betrayal on their faces. “I was going to tell you guys. I was waiting for Walker and Brody to come back so we could discuss it as a group. Nico will back me up here.”

Nico nodded. “It’s true.”

Yeah, so stick that in your snout and smoke it, Alexander. The dragon in question shook his head. “So many different species as Mates, Raine. One would almost think that you were The Collector.”

I raised my eyebrows. “The who now?”

Alexander waved a hand. “Someone on my watch list. A purveyor of shifter flesh who collects only rare shifters, at sales or by force. We have looked for him for decades but he is hard to catch.” He frowned and I could see the hard glint of the dragon in his expression. He looked at my mates, his eyes settling on Nico. “I do not envy you even a little. Dragons do not share.”

I rolled my eyes and stabbed a piece of steak, maintaining eye contact with Alexander the whole time. “You don’t say?” I purred.

He threw back his head and laughed. He downed another shot of Fireball and topped up my own shot glass. “You’ll do well for my progeny. But if you get him hurt, you will not like the results.”

Judge gripped his glass so hard it shattered. “No one loves Tex more than Raine. No one, not even me. She would burn down the world for him, and if you are indeed his grandfather, you will be happy that he has found that kind of Mate. He has her heart, and she has ours, and that means we will protect him as well.”

Both Nico and X lifted their glasses, nodding their agreement. The lump in my throat expanded as I held back all the emotions. I loved them so damn much.

“That’s all I need to know,” Alexander said, lifting his glass. “Now let’s eat. I’m starved.”

The tension fled the room, but I reached beneath the table and held Tex’s hand. He

squeezed it gently and I smiled. He fed me little bits off his plate, always unerringly knowing where my mouth was so he could press the morsel against my lips. Alexander told us he intended to bring a witch to the edge of town to perform the ancestor ritual to see if he and Tex were indeed related, though he didn't trust the head of the witches within the Convocation.

Nico raised his eyebrows at me, and I sighed. Yeah, I knew what was coming, and hell, I agreed but I didn't really like it. "Perhaps the Witch Miranda may be a good choice? She has connections with this town, Brody's pack, with Raine." He looked over at Judge and X. "She seems to hold a few of us in esteem so I trust her as much as I'd trust any witch with my blood."

Alexander frowned. "I've heard of her, the prodigious witch." I saw the moment he realized why she would hold Judge and X in such high esteem. "Ah yes, the Jury to the Judge and the Executioner. I see. Well, perhaps I will reach out to her. Thank you for the suggestion, Nico."

The rest of the evening passed almost pleasantly, and eventually Alexander excused himself. "I have to leave for a week or so to attend to some business, but I will return before the moon wanes. Tex, would you mind showing me out?"

Tex stood, leaning down to kiss my cheek. "I'll be right back."

I watched them walk away, and from the back, I could see how they could be related. They swaggered the same. Maybe it was just a reptilian thing, but my gut said that perhaps Brody hadn't been talking out of his ass when he'd said that Tex was related to Alexander after all. Perhaps some part of his Alpha recognized an underlying scent or something.

I guess we'd see, but whichever way it went, I could already tell that Alexander was fond of Tex. I didn't know if that made things more complicated or not.

I looked at Judge and X. “I swear I was going to tell you.”

“I’m sure, Love.”

Judge sighed. “I trust you, Rainey Day. More than I trust Lucius, that’s for sure.”

Nico leaned back on his chair. “We should wait until Walker comes around to the idea she is a succubus and Brody comes back from the Packlands. This decision, although ultimately Raine’s, will affect us all.”

Well, no pressure or anything, right?

Chapter Nine

I was cleaning the dust off the books at The Immortal Cupcake the following morning when a chill made goosebumps race across my flesh. This was disturbing for two reasons; one, I didn’t feel the cold, so this biological reflex should no longer exist. Two; my grandmother used to say that it only happens when someone walked over your grave, and now that I was the Undead, this seemed a lot creepier than when my wrinkled old granny had said it.

I looked up and standing less than three feet away from me was a man that I hadn’t heard enter, hadn’t sensed at all other than the raised bumps on my arms. My hindbrain warning.

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I screeched and jumped back, but the vampire didn't move. "Can I help you?" I asked in a voice that was high with panic. I was alone here today, Nico had Town Council jobs to do.

"You are Raine."

It wasn't a question and he delivered it in monotone that made me want to gag a little. He was like the embodiment of the undead. Like his body was alive, but his soul was buried six feet down. "Yes?"

The vampire was suddenly in front of me faster than even my eyes could follow. He was old, so old that my bones ached just being in his presence. He had his hands on my arms and his fangs at my throat before I could even scream. As the tips scraped my flesh, he was yanked away.

Lucius stood before me, crouched down like an animal, hissing with his fangs bared. The other old vampire snarled back and I wondered if they had devolved to animals.

"You are not welcome here, Louis. Leave."

This Louis growled. "That is not your decision to make, Lucius. It is the decision of the succubus."

Ah shit. Alexander had warned me about this. "Nope, I'm with Lucius on this one."

Louis' eyes flicked to me with annoyance. "I wish to court you, Succubus, in hopes that we will become a nested pair."

I shook my head. “Yeah, no, that’s a hard pass, thanks though. I’m truly flattered,” I rambled. Lucius’ lip twitched in what could have been a smile, but might have been another snarl too.

“You heard her. Now leave.”

Louis’ shoulders tensed. “I do not need to court her to have her. I can take her.”

His eyes went wide when a blade pressed into his spine. If this Louis moved quietly, then my killer was like a ghost. “You can try, but it would be the last action of your long, miserable bloody life,” X whispered in the older vampire's ear. The vampire remained still, which proved he was wise. “She is taken, and you should pass the word around. Any who wish to take what belongs to me by force will find me over their beds with their hearts cut out before they can so much as lay a feckin’ fang on her. Now leave before I let Lucius skin you like the vermin that you are.”

The older vampire snarled and disappeared with the same stealth as he came. X followed him out, probably ensuring he left town for good. Maybe to kill him outside the city limits and bury his body in the forest. Who knew?

I looked down at my hands and realized I was shaking, so I stuffed them into the pockets of my jacket so Lucius didn’t see. He raised an eyebrow. “I can smell your fear, Raine. Hiding your distress from me is useless.”

I swallowed hard and pulled them back out, and he did something that shocked the hell out of me. He grabbed my hands with his own and squeezed them. I didn’t know if that was meant to make me less fearful, but it didn’t calm my racing heartbeat at all.

“Thank you for, uh, saving me, I guess?”

Well, this was weird. Up until a month ago, people had been saving me from Lucius. This flip-flop from bad guy, to good guy, to bad guy again was making my head spin.

“I put forth my suit first. They can wait until you’ve rejected me, and then it’s open slather. Until then, you are mine and therefore under my protection.”

There was so much wrong with that statement, I wasn’t even going to bother to unpack it. “Uh, well thanks again. I don’t particularly like being someone’s unwilling snack and I don’t think I could have fought him off.”

Lucius was shaking his head. “You’d stand less than zero chance against a vampire the age of Louis. He is ancient, only slightly younger than Nico and I. But when you get to our age, the power difference between us is infinitesimal. I could take him, but it would be a messy, bloody battle that would not be pleasant. Luckily, Louis is a coward and that is why he fled. But there will be more. Word of your succubus nature has escaped into the wider paranormal community. They will come in droves, the ancients who want to use you as an anchor to their sanity.”

“Like you?”

He grinned at me and it was all fang. So heart-rendingly beautiful though. “No one is like me, Raine Baxter. Not even my twin.”

On that we could agree, and when X reappeared, he eyed Lucius the way one might eye Voldemort if he was sunbathing in a mankini on the beach. Fearful, but with more than a little incredulousness. “We all thank whatever deity spat you out for that small mercy every day, Lucius.” I frowned at X, and given our chat last night, I wanted to know where X stood. What better way than viewing the vamps in their natural habitats?

X must have seen my expression because he sighed. “Given the interest in Raine and

her magical vajay-jay, we will have to start a schedule to ensure someone is always nearby. Because Louis was not wrong. If he'd taken her instead of trying to woo her first, she would be gone, stolen from us. And no offense to the Sheriff, but he would stand no chance against a vampire of Louis' age. Even Judge and I would struggle." It seemed like it pained the tattooed giant to say so, which it probably did. "I will talk to Nico, but when we cannot be with her, either you or Nico will need to be."

Lucius nodded like this was a perfectly acceptable course of action. I put my hand up, and X pointed at me. "The pretty lovey with the great boobs in the front row. You have a question?"

"Umm, no offense to Lucius, you are honestly my favorite slightly deranged stalker, but shouldn't I get a say in who babysits me?"

Lucius shook his head. "No."

X shrugged. "Sorry, Love. The nays have it on this one. Your safety is paramount, and I think that perhaps this psycho fucker might have your best interests in his black, dead heart."

"You are not as dumb as you look, Executioner," Lucius snarked back.

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Dear Lord, was this what it was always going to be like? “We should at least put it to the group. Besides, Nico will be with me most of the time, and he is more than capable of smacking down some old vamps who get a little too fangy, right?”

Lucius seemed a little hurt again, and I sighed. “I talked to the guys. We are going to discuss your proposal when Brody returns so I can give you an answer. I’m not trying to string you along, I promise.”

He looked into my eyes, doing that weird soul searching expression he did that always made me feel naked. “That will be fine. I will leave you with your lover.” With that, Lucius left in a small movement of air.

I stepped into X’s arms, and he held me gently. With more tenderness than I thought any man with so much blood on their hands could possess. “I didn’t need this, you know. I was just getting used to my life as it was. Not perfect, but I could have done without the sex magic juju and the weird creeper version of Succubus Bachelorette.”

He chuckled low, his chin resting on the top of my head. “Word will spread, and both Nico and Lucius have reputations that precede them. Eventually word will get out that they have both claimed you as theirs, and while some might take on one of the original twins, no one would dare take on them both. We just have to ride out this craziness.” He kissed my temple. “You know what else is fun to ride?”

Heat flooded to my core, and he chuckled low. “Walker’s motorcycle. Raine, what were you thinking, you dirty girl?”

I curled my body against his. “Well, sure the bike is hot, but I’m pretty sure I can

wrap my thighs around something that's just as growly but much more pleasurable."

He growled, bending forward to capture my lip. He bit it hard, piercing the skin, and then sucking my lip into his mouth. Then he released his orgasm venom, and my knees went weak. Oh, that was cheating hardcore, I thought as I moaned, my legs turning to jello.

"You know, I quite like you like this, Love, all wet and lax in my arms. I bet you would taste amazing," he said, his lips scraping at the column of my throat.

A throat cleared from the front door of the bakery. "Am I interrupting?"

Walker's smile told me he was glad that he could give X a taste of his own medicine. X was notorious for waiting in the wings and interrupting me pre-coitus. Asshole. As his venom continued to course through my body, I bit my lip to hold back the moan. X grinned down at me.

"Not interrupting at all, Sheriff. I could actually use your handcuffs and baton if you have them? Raine here has been very naughty, and I'm pretty sure she wouldn't mind a good caning." He smirked at Walker. "Though you are welcome to join. I bet you'd enjoy a good spanking too, am I right?"

Walker actually flushed and I held back a laugh. "Thanks for the offer, but I was wondering if I could borrow Raine for the rest of the night."

My heart thudded in my chest. X squeezed me closer, as if he could sense my anxiety. "Well, that sounds ominous. Do you want to go on a date with Mr. Tall, Dark and Pouty?"

I nudged him with my elbow, but kissed his cheek. I appreciated the hell out of the irreverent Brit, who saw more, felt more, than any of us gave him credit for.

“Maybe we could three-wheel it? I’ll even let the Sheriff be top. I’m generous like that,” he growled and I shook my head. Okay, maybe not.

I stroked my hand down his tattooed bicep. “Maybe next time. Can you tell Nico that I’ll have to raincheck lunch, but I’ll see him tonight?”

X wasn’t really done though. He kissed me hard, his tongue tracing my lips like he was trying to savor my pleasure. When he dipped my body backwards, I knew he was just showing off for Walker and I pushed his chest. “Later.”

He chuckled as he stepped away, tipping an imaginary hat at Walker. He turned his face to me, his eyes serious now. “We’ll talk about the Succubus Bachelorette situation tonight.” His voice was pitched low, but Walker would have heard.

Then he was gone and it was just me and Walker in the empty bakery.

Chapter Ten

Walker indicated the door. “Want to take a walk?”

No. No I didn’t. Louis could still be out there, lurking in the shadows. I didn’t think that either X or Lucius would permit that, but the whole thing had shaken me. “Can we just stay here?”

“Sure.”

I dimmed the lights and locked the doors, leading Walker to the big couches in the bookstore area. I sat on the leather couch, tucking my feet underneath my butt. Walker sat opposite me, not too close, and I tried not to overthink what that meant.

“You smell stressed. Are you okay?”

I waved a hand. I didn't want to add more drama to the situation. Let him deal with one Raine-orientated disaster at a time. "I'm fine. I'll explain later." I took a deep breath. "Look, Walker, if this whole thing is too--"

"Raine, stop. It's not like that at all. I was just giving us both space to... process. My feelings for you haven't changed. Whether they are real or a byproduct of your DNA doesn't matter. I fell in love with your smile, and that's a product of your DNA too, right?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat, my eyes grazing along his sharp jawline and pouty pink lips. He was so fucking hot, like three alarm, call the National Guard because the heat is out of control, kind of hot. He was kind, and thoughtful, and dependable as hell. He cared about me. And I didn't deserve him.

He shifted on the couch and his shirt stretched precariously across his chest. I was a little worried that one of the buttons would burst off his shirt and I'd lose an eye. Maybe he should take it off. As, you know, a workplace health and safety issue.

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“Raine Baxter, are you undressing me with your eyes right now?”

I grinned, because I totally was. Mentally, I was down to his underwear and he was doing those body rolls that made your abs go all crunchy.

“Uh, no?” I cleared my throat. “It’s a little different than my smile, Walker. I don’t want you to get a decade down the track, be sick of X’s bullshit, or Judge and Tex going at it all the time, and then resent me for trapping you in a relationship you didn’t want in the first place.”

He reached over and grabbed me, dragging me into his lap, and gripping my cheeks between his palms. “No. It’s not like that at all. Jesus, Raine.” He grabbed my hand and put it on his chest. His heart was beating human fast, thundering in his chest. “Do you feel this? I feel so damn alive with you. You make me feel things I haven’t felt since I was alive. Nothing is going to change that. One guy or ten. I don’t give a shit if you are the last purple fucking people eater on the planet. I love you, Raine. That’s all there is to it.”

I kissed him because how could I not? I made love to him with my lips, my teeth sinking into the plump flesh. I wanted it to be swollen with the force of my kisses. I wanted the world to know that I loved Sheriff Walker Walton. I finally gave his chesticles a hand, and I gripped the edges of his shirt and popped them open. Buttons flew off and bounced around the cafe, but I didn’t care. I ran my hands down the broad planes of his chest, the slight scrape of hair tickling my palms. He slid his hands under my short leather skirt that I never would have worn in a million years as a human. I would have worried that my thighs were too chunky, that I’d look too slutty. Now? I didn’t give a shit. I had seven, let me repeat seven, guys who wanted

to crawl between these thunderclouds every damn night of the week and eat me like I was a happy hour at the buffet. I was sexually exhausted, but I felt sexy as hell. Knowing that I was a succubus had removed a little of the shine, but Raine Baxter was a liberated woman who wanted to dress like a rock goddess and a hooker had a baby and she was fabulous as fuck.

When he hit the lace of my panties he groaned so loudly I was glad the door was closed. “It’s like you are trying to re-kill me.”

I gave him a smirk, but I was already trying to get his gun belt off. Why was this so damn hard? Was it like a chastity belt? As I was working out how mad Walker would be if I tore it off, the man himself helped me out, lifting his ass so I could undo his tac belt, his pants belt, his pants and his underwear all in one swoop.

When his dick, hard and ready, slapped against his abs, it was like a starting gun. We were all hands and desperation, his tongue plunging into my mouth as his hands tore at my underwear until it was gone. I was taking up shares in Victoria’s Secret just to make back some of the money I spend every month on destroyed underwear. He ran his hands over the globes of my ass, gripping it in his hands and making a happy groaning noise that made me grin against his lips.

I gripped his hair, tipping his head back so I could kiss my way down his neck, across his pulse points. I tasted his heartbeat on my tongue, nipping his Adams apple before I kissed the hollow at the base of his throat.

I could feel the vibrations of his pleasure as I soaked his lap. He ran a hand between our bodies, holding his dick so I could push back onto it. I pressed my head to his chest as we both groaned. “Walker,” I whispered as he stretched me wide. Walker had the good dick. I mean, all the guys were good in bed, because after a few centuries of experience, or in Tex and Brody’s case a direct link to my emotions, you just knew how to play a woman. But Walker had the perfect dick. Like you could

make a cast of his dick and make the world best dildos. If a Ken Doll had a dick, it would probably look like Walker's. It hit all the right spots. It was long, thick and made me come like it was an inevitability every damn time.

He dragged me upwards until just the tip was still in, and then slammed me back down. His big hands gripped my ribs as I bent backwards, pushing my breasts up, begging for attention. He didn't disappoint. He never disappointed. He flicked his tongue over my left nipple before sucking it into his mouth hard. With every upwards grind, I rubbed my clit against his pubic bone.

While sucking on my breast, he moved his other hand down my body, pressing the hard ball of his palm against my clit until I was coming all over his cock and his hand. But Walker didn't let up his punishing pace. Instead, he doubled his speed, his strokes hard and sure. He grabbed my head, pulling me close so our bodies were mashed together like we were one person. One monster of pleasure and limbs, and when he pushed my head into his neck, I didn't hesitate. I bit him, the pounding of his heart making his blood gush into my mouth and I moaned as I suctioned my lips around him. I sucked in time with his thrusts, both of us inside of the other. His hands helped me grind on his cock, his head thrown back against the backrest of the couch, his neck stretched.

I came again as I glugged on his blood, my pussy milking him with the same intensity as my mouth pulled his blood from his vein. He wrapped his arms around my body, pulling me so tight that if I'd been human he probably would have cracked a rib, as he came on a roar right behind me.

I pulled out of his vein, licking the wound closed and then let my head flop onto his shoulder. He didn't let go, his arms holding me close to his chest. "I love you, Raine."

I kissed his skin, slightly salty with sweat. "Love you too, Walker."

There was a knock on the front window and we both froze.

Holy shit.

We just had sex in the front window of The Immortal Cupcake. Shit, shit, shit. I looked over my shoulder at Brody's grinning face. I let out a relieved sigh, sitting up in Walker's lap. Instead of looking embarrassed that we'd almost done a peep-show for potentially the entire town, he looked... turned on?

I narrowed my eyes at him, but he just grinned, leaning forward to give me another quick kiss. "We better go before the rest of the guys arrive and we have a proper audience."

He didn't sound as off put by that idea as I thought he'd be. Still, I shifted from his lap and looked at Brody.

He adjusted the front of his jeans and looked pained, fanning his face and panting. The dirty bastard had watched the whole thing. And Walker had liked it. Had he known he was there the whole time?

I squinted at him and he just grinned back. Hmm, sometimes I didn't think I'd ever be able to mine all of Walker's hidden depths, but I was glad I now had time to do it. I ducked off to the bathroom to clean myself up. I looked at the couch. Soon, someone in town was going to sit on the couch, and all I will be able to think about is fucking the town sheriff right in that spot.

Yeah, I probably wasn't about to win businesswoman of the year anytime soon.

Chapter Eleven

Having them all in my house, sitting around my kitchen table, fixed something that

had been damaged by Miranda's revelation. It was tenuous, but they'd all stayed. Unfortunately, I couldn't just let the moment settle, couldn't let us all cope with this new information. No, that wasn't the life of Raine Baxter. Apparently, I no longer did mundane.

We ate and the guys chatted, the sound of their combined voices as soothing as rain on the roof to me. I just settled into the moment as the guys talked supernatural politics and human sports. I sat on Brody's lap, my head resting on his shoulder. He kissed my forehead unconsciously as he spoke, and being pressed against my Mate was like being home. He finished the rest of his beer, and instead of pushing me to my feet, he passed me over to Walker like I weighed nothing.

Walker took me with ease, settling me onto his lap and kissing my lips softly. "I missed this," he whispered, and I kissed him back. I did too, more than I could probably explain to him without sounding like an insanely possessive psycho. Instead, I pressed my face into his neck and sighed happily. When Brody returned with the beers, he didn't try and take me back from his friend. He just reached out and put a hand on my thigh as he argued about ice hockey with Tex.

X looked at me and raised an eyebrow. Nico was also looking at me intensely, though probably for a different reason. Which possible problem to blurt out first?

"So, a strange vampire turned up at The Immortal Cupcake today and tried to bite me. Wanted me to become his consort, or the queen of his castle, or something like that."

The silence around the room was the type that could only happen in a room of supernaturals. "What are you talking about Raine?"

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“Um, apparently the word of my succubi-ness has gotten around the Vamp grapevine, and X thinks that they are about to try and woo me from the town so they can keep me as their own personal happy pill?”

All eyes turned to X, and Nico’s fangs lengthened in his mouth. It was simultaneously scary and hot as fuck. “Who?”

“Louis De Ja’an.”

Nico’s eyes slitted like he was planning how to peel the skin off this Louis asshole. “He is old and powerful. How did you escape?” he asked both me and X.

I swallowed hard, because this was bombshell number two wrapped in the same packaging as bombshell number one. “Lucius saved me. He did this truly terrifying animalistic thing that seemed to deter that Louis guy. But he thinks that I will need either you, him, or X and Judge together with me at all times.”

Walker was tense under me, probably because he’d been left out of my protective detail. I snuggled closer to his chest. “He said it was because all the vampires who were coming for me would probably be ancients, for the same reason he hung around. Senile mania. He said even X or Judge separated would get their ass kicked.”

Judge snarled at the insinuation that he couldn’t protect me, but X looked far more pragmatic. The Executioner was a scary bastard, and I had no doubt that today I caught but a mere glimpse of him. What had he been like in his glory days, when he’d earned his moniker?

“As loathe as I am to do it, I agree with Lucius. Louis is strong, and when you are as old and as powerful as us, the battleground is pretty even. We have gone full, er, Super Saiyan?” Nico asked, and looked at Tex, who nodded sagely. Apparently, Tex was trying to get Nico into anime, and Dragon Ball Z was probably the best place to start. Still, it made me snort-laugh. Nico gave me an indulgent expression that was laced with heat. “I guess that would lead into your other problem,” he said softly.

Walker groaned underneath me. “You are never boring.” He kissed the spot on the back of my neck that always sent shivers of pleasure down my spine. “I leave for a couple of days and you have twelve new problems.”

“And one new lover,” X chimed in, and I glared at him.

Walker tensed. “What?”

I hoped the expression I shot X really communicated the fact that I was going to eviscerate him slowly and in ways he wouldn’t enjoy. But the asshole just wiggled his eyebrows and grinned. Did he need both testicles? Would they grow back? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

“It’s not like that. Lucius knew I was a succubus this whole time. It was why he, uh, persevered with the heads even though I was obviously not interested then.”

His arms squeeze me tighter. “Then?”

Ah shit. “Well, Lucius came to me with a proposal the other day. Apparently, succubus blood has a calming effect on the chaotic minds of the ancients who’ve lost their sanity. Apparently, the obsession that comes with succubus blood overrides everything, even the urge to shed blood. It calms the predator, I guess.”

Walker hadn’t untensed under me, so I barreled on ahead even though my heart

screamed to stop, that we'd only just got Walker back and we didn't want to lose him again. But I couldn't live tiptoeing around him either. This was my life, and he'd had the option to stay or go. He chose to stay, and that meant that all my bullshit problems came with it.

"So Lucius wants to take some of my blood and uh, I guess, come over for a booty call and get some succubus essence every now and then to calm his mind."

Brody spoke up. "What did you say?"

I bit my lip as I looked around the table at the rest of the guys, who all looked varying degrees of concerned. Brody didn't look indignant or enraged or anything like that. If anything, he merely looked contemplative. "I said I would discuss it with you guys. My mates. My life partners. The decision is as much yours as it is mine. It has to be unanimous or I can't. I won't have that distance between us again," I said to Walker.

Walker heaved a sigh, but his body loosened. "Do you want him in that way? Do you want to let him into your bed, not for anyone else's benefit, but simply because he is someone you want?"

I worried at my bottom lip until I scraped it with my teeth. X leaned over, pulling my lip from between my fangs, and then licking at the fat blood drop that he caught on his finger tip. "Waste not, want not, Love."

I took a deep breath and hoped I wasn't going to lose them with my next words. "Yes. I feel this attraction to him that I'd like to explore. At first I thought it was because he looked so much like Nico, but you only have to spend a minute in either of their presences to know that they are so different they may as well be night and day." I let out a shuddering sigh. "No. For better or worse, Lucius calls to something inside me. Something wild and dangerous. And she wants him bad."

The silence around the table this time was almost deafening. They watched me and Nico, but most of all, everyone was watching Walker. I wasn't the only person who'd felt his distance. He'd been a stalwart in my life for so long, not having him at my back had seemed wrong to us all.

Walker squeezed me and I held my breath. "As long as he is what you want, what is one more, right? You are a succubus. It's in your makeup to desire the things you need. And I'm not going to stand in the way of that. But as soon as you are doing it solely for him, and not because you want to, he's gone. If he won't go quietly, I'll kill him myself and bury his body with all those goddamn heads."

He looked at Nico as he said it, but the vampire in question merely held up his beer. "Agreed. Raine comes first, always."

I looked at Brody. He shrugged. "I'm with Walker. If it's what you need, it's what you need. I can't say I understand it, but I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. I just want you to be happy, Red. I can share you with one more vamp, but I don't think we'll be having any orgies anytime soon. I'm not sure I will ever trust him with my back."

I leaned over and kissed him lightly. "I can take that."

He ran his fingers through my hair. "But make him work for it, Raine. Let him know that you are the one in control, because beings like that? They will take your free will before you know it."

I looked at the guys, and wondered if maybe someone should have given them the same warning about me.

In a way, I was unsurprised to find Lucius at my front door a few days later. In the dwindling daylight, he looked handsome and mysterious, but the craziness in his eyes told me that he'd been away from me for a little too long.

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“I have brought you a gift.”

I automatically looked at the ground. I couldn't see any heads with love notes stuffed in the mouth, and nothing seemed to be oozing. But there was a box with a big pink bow on top. “Lucius, we talked about decapitated bodies, right? There's not a head, or foot, or dick or anything like that in there?”

He grinned wide. He looked so damn proud of himself as he shook his head. “Nope. I meant what I said. I want to woo you, Raine Baxter. When you said you didn't like my previous gifts, I listened.”

He picked the box up off the ground and handed it to me. It was heavy, about the size of a microwave. I highly doubted it was an electrical appliance. That would be way too easy.

I pulled the lid off the box with trepidation.

I nearly dropped the box when I saw what was inside.

“What the hell?” I screeched, and Lucius' face went from pleased to confused in the space of a second.

A puppy sat in the bottom of the box, looking up at me with eyes that were so fearful there was no way it was a domestic dog. It was a shifter pup. There was a human being in wolf form in the bottom of a box in my arms. My brain nearly exploded all over the stoop.

“Lucius is this...”

“A wolf shifter pup? Yes! An omega at that. Super rare. I got it from one of those black markets in the New York City underground. I don’t normally frequent those places because the people who do are...” he trailed off and lifted his lip in disgust. “But you didn’t like heads, so I watched one of those human film clips and the women always squeal when they get a pet. And I thought as you and your Alpha will never be able to breed, that maybe a wolf shifter pup would be even better. Her littermate was an alpha, which was tempting, because they are also rare, but I thought that might cause issues for your Alpha later down the track.”

My brain was whirling as I tried to decipher everything he said. They were selling kids in an underground marketplace like persian rugs and stolen art. That she had littermates, siblings, still stuck in that hell hole where they could be sold off to god knows who.

“You say she had, uh, littermates? Were there any other young shifters there?”

His face fell a little. “You don’t like her either?”

Hell, what did I say to that? “No, that's not it at all. I’m glad you brought her to me, Lucius. Thank you.” I leaned forward and kissed him softly on the lips, and he froze. “But I need you to bring me her litter mates as well. How many were there?”

“Only the Alpha and a Beta. There was much interest in the Alpha. They like to train them to fight from a young age.”

Fucking hell. “Lucius! I need you to get me her littermates. I, uh, I’d like the whole set? And any other shifter young that are there. Can you do that?”

Lucius raised an eyebrow. “I am crazy, Raine. Not a simpleton. You don’t like that

they are selling the young. You want me to rescue them.”

I nodded. “Very much so.”

“Would you like her seller to die also?”

This time I grinned. “Yes. In the most painful way possible.” This time, when he kissed me, he slid his tongue past my lips. I flicked my own tongue over his fang, letting a hint of my blood swirl around his mouth. He moaned softly. “When you get back, we should talk. Lay down some ground rules.”

His eyes lit with fire. “They said yes.”

I nodded, and his smile was so wide and devoid of the craziness that usually permeated his expression, I felt my heart thump in my chest. “I shall return by this time tomorrow.”

Then he was gone.

I looked down at the pup in the box. She was scared and shaking so bad that my heart broke into a thousand pieces. I turned and rushed back into the house. “Brody!” I screeched, and I must have sounded crazy because Tex, Judge and Brody all appeared in an instant.

“Raine what's...” his nose twitched. I put the box on the ground and pulled out the wolf pup. “Holy shit,” he breathed.

Yeah, you could say that again.

Chapter Twelve

The pup took one look at Brody and burrowed into my body like she was trying to dig her way into my chest. Brody stepped back, as the scent of her fear flooded the room. I held her closer, securing her in my arms like I could wrap her up and keep her safe.

“How?” Brody asked from the opposite side of the room. “My alpha energy should calm her, not make her panic more.” His face looked stricken at the thought he was distressing her.

“Hey, hey. It's okay. You're okay. You're free of that place now, okay. You're safe,” I cooed to the pup, and then looked back at Brody. “Lucius. He gave me her as a, um, gift. Bought her from the black market in NYC.”

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Brody's growl was nothing short of terrifying and the pup began to whine. I gave Brody a furious look and he cut the noise off. "He bought her like she was a stuffed toy? Like a domesticated pet?"

He sounded mad at Lucius, which I totally got. "He didn't mean it maliciously. He was trying to be... sweet, I guess? He didn't realize that selling a human being is wrong. I'll, uh, work on it with him. But I sent him back to get her littermates." I stroked my hand down the back of the pup. "Hear that sweet thing? I'll get you your siblings back. Just be strong."

She looked up at me, caught sight of my fangs, and tried to scuttle out of my arms. Whoops, guess she just worked out I was a vampire. Tex stepped forward and grabbed the pup out of my arms before I dropped her on her head.

"Hush," he whispered, and there was a distinct hiss at the end. He was letting his snake out a little. "You are safe here. You have my word. My Alpha will protect you. My mate will protect you. I will protect you. You are safe," he murmured to her, stroking her head. The pup whimpered again, climbed up his chest and buried her head under his chin, as if this stranger could protect her from the horrors of the world.

My heart broke into a million pieces.

At some point, the poor baby fell asleep in Tex's arms as he sang her soft songs from our childhood. Frank Sinatra had a song in there, but then so did Lady Gaga. If it hadn't been such a serious moment, I would have teased him for singing Paparazzi like it was a lullaby. She wouldn't eat, wouldn't shift. Brody said he could force her to shift back to human, but sometimes the wolf was protecting the human side of the

shifter, and it would be traumatic, especially as he wasn't her Alpha.

I didn't know if I was thankful to Lucius or mad as hell that he dropped this in my lap. What the hell did we do with a wolf shifter pup? It occurred to me that we knew the perfect person to deal with this problem, and he just so happened to be related to my main squeeze.

"We should call Alexander. Shifters are his thing. He could shut this shit down in a heartbeat, right?" I whispered furiously.

Brody just looked at the pup sadly. I think it broke his heart that she was so scared of him. My Alpha Mate was a softie, especially when it came to children. "We will tell him, of course. He has the resources to raid the auctions and burn that shit down, probably literally. We can take them back to Nîso until we can track down their pack." He turned to me, and the sadness was mixed with rage now. "The way she reacted to my alpha scent? I have a bad feeling about her Pack. They aren't all like mine."

He'd said as much when Tex had turned up on my doorstep. How some of the American packs would have taken a blind shifter kid and torn him apart. "You think they weren't abducted. You think they were sold?" The very thought made bile rise in my throat.

Brody gave a sharp nod. "Yes. Omegas are very coveted. They are rare, and are known to breed Alphas. Ironically, they aren't treated very well. They basically have zero dominance and the animalistic hierarchy makes them the bottom of the power structure in a lot of Packs. Shapeshifters are different from normal two-natured shifters in that way. We don't breed omegas. That's purely a two-natured trait."

I cursed Lucius again as the front door opened and X strolled in. "Honey, I'm home," he drawled in a truly awful imitation of an American accent. "Come over here and..."

he stopped and inhaled. “Love, why does it smell like wet dog and mortal fear in here?”

Ah shit. If the pup was scared of me, she was going to be terrified of X. He was like six and a half feet tall and covered in tattoos and scars. He was built like a fridge and just oozed crazy.

I zipped toward him, hushing him. “Lucius gave me a omega wolf shifter pup as a present. You’re going to have to stay with Judge until we figure out what to do with her. Them.”

His eyebrows hit his hairline. “I really have to have that talk with Lucius about dating in the modern age before he tries to buy you with two oxen and a head of cabbage. Though I guess he got the head bit right? Though, if we are talking head, there's definitely a better option there too.” I just stared at him, and he reached out and dragged me into his arms. I inhaled deeply and breathed in the wild scent of X. Like blood and gun smoke. “What do you say, Love? Want me to buy you with a little head?”

I pushed him away. “Be serious.” But I was grinning. Asshole. “What am I going to do? She won’t eat, doesn’t want to be anywhere near Brody because he smells like Alpha. I’ve managed to get her to drink a few sips of water, but that's it.”

He rolled his eyes and sighed. “Fine, serious it is.” He walked over toward Tex, peeking over his shoulder. “What have you got there, Snakelet?”

The pup was awake and she was staring up at X with fearful eyes. X squatted down until he was eye height with the pup. “Well, aren’t you just fucking adorable,” he cooed, and a small white ear twitched. “But you look a bit skinny? Do you like pancakes? My girl here loves pancakes and I bet I could make cute ones that look like elephants and then we can drown it in bacon and maple syrup. What do you think?

Ever tried to eat a stack of pancakes bigger than your body?"

The pup shook her head, but crept forward a little. X put out his hands and the pup crawled across Tex's chest until she stood close enough for X to lift up. My mouth hung open, as did Brody's, and I wanted to yell, "But he's a vampire too, why do you like him better than me?" But I resisted. One, because it didn't matter as long as she ate. And two, because I kind of liked the big, scary monster with the soft voice too. I got it. He was pretty damn compelling.

He set the pup on the kitchen table and then went to work. Brody came to stand beside me. "The hell?" he whispered.

Apparently it was a day for surprises. It hadn't finished just yet though.

X made pancakes, talking to the pup like she was helping him in the kitchen rather than sitting on the table top with a faint tremor. But when he asked her for an egg, she nosed it over to his hand. When he put out the first pancake, she devoured it in seconds.

"Easy," Brody warned. The pup looked over at him, and her body cowered in an instant. "I just mean you don't want to be sick." Brody's fists clenched and unclenched. I stroked my hand down his back as his distress flowed down our bond. He hated that she was so fearful of him. "I'm going to take a walk. I'll be back later," he said softly, and I could sense the underlying rage from him. Not at the pup, but at whoever made her react like that.

"I'll text you when she's asleep." I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him close to me. "You know it's not you, right? We'll help her. We'll show her that you aren't like whoever hurt her."

He gave a sharp nod and kissed my forehead. He had shifted into a fox before he was

even out the back door.

Tex came over and wrapped himself around me as I watched the scene before me. I softly explained what was going on in front of me to him, the way X was trying to make pancakes that looked like elephants, but accidentally looked like dicks instead. Well, at least I think it was accidental. By his grin, I was probably being a little too optimistic.

The pup was curled up on the couch, asleep with her bulging belly filled with pancakes when there was a knock at the door. It was almost nightfall again and Walker should be over before he started work. Jesus, how was I going to explain a damn human trafficked shifter pup to Walker?

Hey baby, so you know how I'm a succubus and have just allowed a crazy person into our love-nest? Well guess what? We're now the proud owners of a traumatized kid my psycho admirer bought from a supernatural auction in a different country. Do you want lasagna for dinner?

I ran my hand over my face. Yeah, that probably wouldn't go down well. But Walker was a pragmatist, plus he was in the best position to work out if the pups were stolen from their parents or if it was their Pack that sold them.

Instead, it wasn't Walker, but a blood covered Lucius. Beside him, was a small boy about five. He was holding a little brown pup in his arms. Lucius grinned, and it was all fang. "Raine! I have returned with the rest of the litter. You may kiss me again," he said imperiously.

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I looked down at the boy with the big blank eyes and back at the crazed vampire with a smile on his face. “I think you better come in first.”

Chapter Thirteen

As soon as the boy walked through the front door, the pup in a food coma on my couch was awake. She was up over the back of the couch, and the boy bent down to hug her tightly to his chest. A tear slid down his cheek, and I blinked back my own.

“Uh, hey,” I said softly, not wanting to scare them. “I’m Raine. I’m a vampire. This is my mate, Tex,” I said softly as he came over to join me, placing my hand on his back. Shit, what did I say now? These were kids. I felt for my mate bond to Brody and sent my need for him down it. I didn’t know how to talk to kids, especially not shifter kids. “My other mate is an Alpha, and it seems to freak out your sister a little bit. Is it okay if he comes back? I promise you he’s safe. You are safe. Nothing and no one will hurt you again. You have my word.”

The boy stood tall again, well as tall as he could given he was less than four feet. “Alphas are bad.”

Tex looked at the kid, his face soft. “That’s not true. You’re an Alpha. Are you bad?”

The boy gave me a solemn nod. “Yes.” He swallowed hard. “We’ll be good. Carmen is hungry.”

I was speechless. Damn. I didn’t know what to do with this kind of trauma. The little white wolf pup was licking the face of the brown one.

“I’ll, uh, find you some food.”

Tex rested a hand on my arm. “They are going to need something to change into when they shift back,” he whispered. Dammit. I would not cry.

I nodded. “Of course. Let’s go and find something for them to wear. What’s your name?” I asked the boy.

“Christopher.”

“And their names?”

He pointed to the brown pup. “Carmen.” And then to the little white pup. “Enit.”

I nodded. “Raine,” I told him again. “The big scary guy with the tattoos is X. And that’s...” I looked over at Lucius, who was still covered in blood. “That’s Lucius.”

The boy blinked his big, blue eyes up at me. “I know.”

“He introduced himself?” Well, that was surprisingly thoughtful.

Christopher shook his head. “No. That’s what my owner yelled when he ripped out his heart. ‘I’m sorry, Lucius’.”

I couldn’t help my gasp and I gave Lucius a look over my shoulder. He seemed confused at my response again, like it didn’t occur to him that brutally murdering a man in front of a five year old was bad. Goddammit, he was going to be hard work.

“Uh, okay. Come on, let’s find those clothes, then we will grab you something to eat, hey?”

I quickly found some of my smallest t-shirts, and judging by Christopher's height and frame, they would probably be swimming in them, but they'd work as dresses until we could find something better for them. I laid them out and left them to it. "I'll just be right out here."

When I walked back into the living room, there were four vampires and two shifters. Judge had arrived and was snuggled up against Tex, but it was a careful move, because if you looked close enough, he was in the perfect position to defend Tex in case Lucius went insane and decided to attack. In fact, even X was standing slightly closer to Tex than he normally would. Brody paced back and forth near the front door, one eye on the still bloody vampire. Walker stared at him from his place on the couch. I moved toward him, seeking the comfort of his steadiness right now. "Uh, do you want to use the shower to clean up or something?" I asked Lucius as I sat on Walker's lap.

Lucius looked down at his white dress shirt. It was splattered with arterial spray. "Oh this? The owner of the Alpha pup did not take my first offer. So I gave him a rather final offer." His grin was wide and more than a little sinister.

I was a little fucked up because I found him seriously attractive in that moment.

X snorted, his shoulders shaking with laughter. I gave him a stern look and he shrugged. "What? That was funny!" He came over and slapped Lucius on the back. "Maybe I'm going to enjoy having another psychopath in the harem after all. But, we have to talk about your gift game. Nothing that was ever alive. Flowers are good. Bitches love flowers."

"Hey!" I protested, but X just winked.

"Flowers were alive once?" Lucius asked, and I wondered if he was just fucking with X or if he really didn't understand that my problem with dead bodies and trafficked

shifter pups was an actual thing.

X made a giggle wheeze. “You know what, let’s just rule out anything that once had a heart, okay? Keep it simple.”

We all stood around, not knowing what to say or do. Damn, this was pretty awkward. “So, you uh, had a little trouble retrieving Enit’s siblings?”

Walker stood, keeping me in his arms, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, hanging on like a spider monkey. He walked to the fridge and grabbed a beer, one for me, himself and an extra. When he handed it to Lucius, I kissed his neck. God, I didn’t give him enough credit. He was always there for me, without the drama of Tex’s revelation, or X’s craziness, or these new complicated feelings for Nico and his twin. Nope, Walker was just there, steady and sexy as fuck. As he plopped me on the table, standing between my thighs, I rested my head on his shoulder. “Love you, Walker Walton,” I whispered in his ear.

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Lucius watched the whole thing, his face screwed up. Not in disgust or anger. But he seemed... perplexed maybe? He met my eyes, and looked at me like he wanted to open up my chest and see what made me tick. It was terrifying, but earnest all at once.

My feelings for Lucius were a bit of a mess.

“Yes. The Beta was easy to collect. Most have no interest in a Beta wolf. They are a literal dime a dozen. I bought her from the dealer without much trouble.” I tensed my jaw, but he held up a hand. “I just wanted to get her papers. Then I followed him to his car and painted the interior red. You told me to make it hurt, so I tore him limb from limb. Started with his tootsies. Then I set the car on fire.” I couldn’t help the smile that spread over my face at this unhinged killer calling toes ‘tootsies’. “I thought perhaps you’d like that.”

Oh. He thought I liked the dismembering part. Well I didn’t not like it, but it didn’t fill me with glee. Actually, the idea of ripping a person apart made me feel a little queasy but I didn’t say so. Instead, I said, “Uh, thank you?”

Lucius grinned, showing actual dimples. Good Lord. “You’re welcome.” He looked so pleased with himself, I kind of wanted to hug him.

“And Christopher? The Alpha?”

Lucius frowned, the levity leaving his face. “He’d been sold to an organization who runs underground cage fighting matches. They get them young and teach them to be inhuman. Like the gladiators of old, they teach them nothing but pain and winning.

They were a little more, hmm, recalcitrant. Did not want to give up an Alpha pup. They are quite a rare find to come across so young. Normally they are stolen from the packs. From what I can see from the Omega and Beta's papers, the Alpha of their pack happily sold them to the dealer. He was also their father. Dam is listed as deceased."

"Their father?"

Christopher appeared. "Our father is our Alpha." Behind him were two small girls, an inch or two shorter than Christopher. Enit, the tiny omega was the smallest, and her hair was as white in her human form as it was in her wolf form. Carmen was a little taller, and her chin jutted out as if she was daring one of us to come for them. She was tough, Beta be damned. Christopher stood in front of them, like his five year old form could take on a room full of vampires and an Alpha shapeshifter.

Brody stepped forward. "Not any more. That man might be your sire, but that is all. He is not an Alpha. He is a disgrace to the label."

Christopher's eyes shot to Brody, and though his body shook, he didn't look away. He held Brody's eyes longer than most would, but eventually his eyes shifted toward the ground. He subtly tilted his head, baring his throat.

Brody knelt down, but he was smiling. "No. I will earn your respect as your Alpha. Or I'll find you a Pack where you'll be happy. No one will force you to do anything again. I swear it."

The last part of his statement was filled with power, which made Enit shake until Carmen wrapped her arm around her sister's shoulder. Christopher looked at Brody, and then around at the rest of the room.

I don't know what he saw, but he nodded. "Okay. Carmen is hungry." But even as he

said it, I heard his stomach rumble.

The front door opened again. Nico walked in and looked at all the people filling out my living room. He held up a bag. “I heard we are having tiny house guests. I made a trip to town.”

God. I could have kissed him in that moment. I didn’t know who told him, probably Brody, but Nico always knew what to do. Accidentally inherit a bakery? Nico was there. Accidentally get gifted three children? Nico knew what to do.

I mouthed, “Thank you,” from where I stood and then when he zipped back with a stack of pizza piled ten high, I knew I was going to kiss the hell out of him later. Maybe I could thank him properly, with my mouth on those sexy fucking ridges on his stomach.

My body clenched, and every adult in the room’s eyes swung toward me like sharks smelling blood in the water. I found Lucius’ eyes, and if anyone embodied the shark analogy, it was him. So different from his twin, but also similar. Not just in looks, but in mannerisms. The way he smiled with his whole face. The way his eyebrows drew together when he was trying to work out something complex, namely me. The way he spoke. The way he gestured with his hands. It was all so like Nico. But he was like the darkness to Nico’s sunshine. You couldn’t have one without the other, and that kind of scared the hell out of me.

I dragged my eyes back to Nico, and he was looking between me and his blood splattered twin with that frown on his face. “Lucius,” he said softly, and there was an incredible amount of past hurt and history in the way he said his twin's name.

Lucius cocked his head to the side, still more animal than man, but something there was more human than when I first met him. Back then, he’d been a monster trapped in a beautiful body like Nico’s. He was cold and only that monster had stared back

out at me.

Now, there was something else in there. Like the Lucius who had once been a human, once had emotions and love, was peeking back out from behind the monster. If he tasted my blood, my pleasure, who would stare back out at me then?

“Nicolai. It is good to see you.”

I saw the tension flow out of Nico. “Good to see you too, Lucius. More than you know.”

Lucius nodded, but his eyes slid back to me. Well, that was tense.

“As much as I am loving this Lifetime Movie moment, can we eat the pizza already? I’ve worked hard and I have a hunger that will not be tamed,” Judge interrupted.

I didn’t think he was talking about pizza either.

Chapter Fourteen

I watched Christopher load up the plates of both his sisters, pushing them close to their bodies so no one could steal it, before he placed even a single slice on his own plate. Even then, he watched them, making sure they ate, and watched us in case we made a move to take their food. I don’t know what it was like before, but this was an ingrained behavior and it broke my heart.

We all chatted like there weren’t three small children at the table ravenously consuming a pizza each, at least until Brody whispered, “Easy. You don’t want to throw up.” There was the tiniest touch of Alpha power to his voice, but then, it could have been the normal way you spoke to children. How was I to know? But Christopher looked at him, frowning, before slowing down his chewing. Carmen

glared at Brody, her little chin lifting as she chewed with deliberate slowness.

Judge's lips twitched. "I like this one. She's gonna raise hell, aren't you?"

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The little girl swallowed deliberately and grinned. Damn she was cute, and it changed her face completely from a small shadow to a normal, happy kid. I was determined that they would all smile again, or so help me, I was going to track down their alpha and castrate him.

We put them in Tex's room, all together in Tex's queen size bed, and streamed Disney movies. Nico had bought them a week's worth of outfits, pajamas, toothbrushes and combs, and then thoughtful things I would have never thought of: backpacks and soft teddy bears. Flashlights to keep away the monsters in the dark.

I settled them in, and they continued to watch me with wary eyes. "If you guys need anything, we're right outside. We'll be awake because, well, we are vampires and we are night creatures. So just yell, okay?" I paused at the door and looked at Christopher. "Is there, uh, anywhere you actually want to go? Family? Grandparents or Aunts or something?"

Christopher shook his head. "No. We belong nowhere."

I smiled softly at him. "Well, that's not true anymore."

I shut the door most of the way, though left it cracked a little. The guys were all seated around the living room. Judge was sitting on the couch, running his hands through Tex's hair as he sat on the floor between his knees. Lucius was giving him a weird look. I tensed, wondering if he was going to have a problem with it.

He turned to me and raised an eyebrow. "Is the snake shifter an Incubus too? Because I think he has broken one of vampire-kinds most feared killers."

Everyone turned and stared at him, and X got the giggles again. “Did Lucius the Bloodletter just crack a joke? Maybe you’ve broken him too, Love, with the power of your magical vagina.”

I flushed bright red and glared at X, who waltzed over and kissed me like he had every damn right. Which I guess he did. I curled into him and he moaned. “Soon, Love. Soon I’m going to wrap this beautiful body in ribbons and fuck you in every position I can think of.” He gave a put-upon sigh. “Might be hard now we have kids, and all that.” He thrust his hard dick into my lower stomach. “Who am I kidding? It’s already hard.”

Judge rolled his eyes. “X, it’s too fuckin’ early for your dick jokes.”

Nico sat beside Walker, so I went over and smooshed my butt between them. “Is it bad I just want to put this problem on the back-burner for like a month?”

Nico stroked his hand through my hair and I tried not to purr. “Not at all. But it probably isn’t in their best interest to be in limbo that long.”

Lucius came around, standing with his back to the wall, even as X walked over and laid down by my feet, his head in Tex’s lap.

“Pet me, Snakelet. That looks nice.”

Tex looked from me to Judge, and then back at me. Then he shrugged and started scraping his nails down X’s scalp. The man in question moaned loudly and closed his eyes. It was pornographic. My pussy throbbed and then the shifters all groaned. Brody sighed heavily from his place in the armchair. “Seriously, Pup. Don’t make him feel good or he’ll be pushing for an orgy instead of working shit out.”

X muttered something under his breath that sounded like “Killjoy,” but Brody was

right. Though, I briefly wondered how an orgy with seven guys would actually work. I mean, Judge and Tex would be fine, because they were as into each other as they were into me. And X would flit anywhere there was pleasure. Would I be trapped between the bodies of Brody and Walker, or maybe between Nico and Lucius. The idea of two identical bodies fucking me at the same time made a shiver of pleasure run down my spine.

“Rainey Day, whatever you are thinking about, I need you to either stop or get naked and let me fuck you over the back of the couch. Your choice.”

X rubbed the front of his tactical pants, his dick tenting them. “I vote option two. And then that orgy.”

My eyes dropped to Lucius, whose fangs were out, and his mouth was open a little as if he was eating the lust in the air. Would that be enough to keep him sane? I didn’t think so.

But it was enough to bring me back to the present. “Sorry. You’re right, Brody.” I took a deep breath and told my errant vagina to calm her flaps because we had responsibilities now. It wasn’t just a twenty-four seven fuckfest.

“What is the problem?” Lucius asked, frowning.

Judge rolled his eyes. “You dropped three children onto our doorstep, Lucius. Three shifter children. The problem is what do we do with them?”

He frowned again. “They are a gift. You said you liked the omega.”

He really didn’t get it. I stood, and Nico’s fingers lingered on my spine, a small warning. I smiled over my shoulder at him as I walked over to his mirror image. “I do like them. But they are people, Lucius. You can’t give people as gifts.”

He frowned. "People have been giving other humans as gifts for centuries."

Well, I couldn't argue with that. It was reasonably recent in human history that slavery was abolished. To a vampire? That would have been like yesterday. "You're right, but it's kind of frowned upon now. They have feelings like you and me. They deserve to be free, not treated like a hamster or something."

He bit his bottom lip. "So you actually don't like them."

I stepped forward, and put a hand on his arm, stepping into his body. I could feel the tension in the men behind me, but I couldn't explain it to them, but this Lucius? He didn't make me feel scared. I didn't think he would hurt me purposefully. Was I still going to tread carefully so I didn't get Carol Baskined?

Fuck yeah.

He looked down at me, his eyes watching me carefully. "I think you giving them to me is the best thing ever. It was a noble thing to do, even if you didn't mean it to be. They will have a life now that isn't one of servitude, and that's a gift without price. So thank you." I lifted my hand and pulled his face down toward me, and then kissed him softly. He tasted like strawberry bubblegum, and I was so surprised I almost pulled away. When his hand slid into my hair and he deepened the kiss, I felt like he was drinking me down. He could really kiss, and it left me breathless.

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But I was very aware of the men behind me, my lovers. The men I'd given my heart to. I wasn't going to make them watch me tongue fuck a former enemy.

When I pulled away, Lucius' eyes looked a little clearer, the wildness receding a little to the edges. "I think you might be the gift. I am going to get clean. I will see you tomorrow, Raine Baxter."

He stepped back, but his eyes caught on Nico. "Brother."

Then he was gone.

Well. Okay then. I took a deep breath and then turned around. I always felt like I was jumping out of a plane when I was close to Lucius. I wondered if that's how people felt when they swam with sharks. Like I was one accident away from being chum.

X was grinning, so I focused on him. I couldn't look at all the angst on everyone else's face right now. "That was hot, Love. Like watching a pretty girl put her head in the mouth of a lion."

Walker sighed. "He's not wrong, Raine. I don't think you should, uh, be with him without one of us around. And always in a controlled environment."

I couldn't argue with that. Nico shook his head. "If Lucius went rabid, none of you would stand a chance."

Judge looked over at Nico. "Are you volunteering for voyeur duty?"

X raised his hand. “No, pick me, pick me.”

Nico tilted his head. “I think he would be fine around her during an everyday setting. But I can’t guarantee he wouldn’t drain her dry if he got a taste of her blood. It is... enchanting.”

Well, that was a nice word for it.

“So he can babysit her so none of this year's Vampire Bachelors get any funny ideas, but if they are going to do the beast with two backs, either Nico or several of us need to be there too. You know what that sounds like to me?”

Judge kicked him with his boot. “If you say a good excuse for an orgy, I will crush your balls.”

X just grinned. “Maybe he’d let me tie him up. Can you imagine having a predator like that caught in my ropes?” He seemed to grow harder and I wasn’t going to lie, the idea of having Lucius bound beneath me was making me pretty goddamn hot.

“Well, uh now that’s settled, what do we do about the pups?”

I went over and sat on the armrest of Brody’s chair. He grabbed me and pulled me across his lap. He buried his face in my neck and licked. I think he was scent marking me or something, because the bond pulsed with possessiveness. My Alpha had a rough day.

Walker cleared his throat. “I can reach out and see if anyone listed them as missing. Three kids can’t just up and disappear right?”

Brody nodded his head sadly. “They are too young to be enrolled in school, so I doubt there is any record of them anywhere. If what Christopher said is true, they

were sold off by the very people who'd list them as missing. Maybe we can ask some questions tomorrow and dig into their background a little, into their pack." He looked down at me. "I can take them back to Nîso with me. Someone will adopt them within the Pack."

I nodded. Maybe that would be the way to go. But I wanted them to have a choice. I want them to know that they have options, that they aren't just objects we can move where we want them.

Tex hummed his agreement. "The other option is we keep them. Adopt them. They'd be safe here, they could grow up however they want. We wouldn't force them to do anything or be anything they didn't want to be." There was a thread of pain in there, because he'd hidden his sexuality from his conservative Catholic adoptive parents for a decade.

When no one immediately protested, I looked around at them all. "Are you guys serious? What do any of us know about raising children?"

Judge shrugged. "I had kids in my human life. Doubt they've changed that much in two hundred odd years, right?"

I looked at X and he shrugged. "The little Omega likes me anyway?"

My eyes flicked to Brody who shrugged. "It is up to you and up to them, I guess. It is a lot of responsibility, raising three shifter pups. Would they be safe here? Perhaps. It is a town filled with vampires and shifters are like candy. But I believe that the fact they are under the protection of some of the Boogeymen of the vampire world would be a deterrent to just about anything with any goddamn sense."

Walker and Nico seem a little more hesitant. Mostly because they are the responsible ones. "We'll see if they do not have any family that aren't sociopaths. If not... I

mean. Kids would be nice, right?” Walker asked.

I blinked. Shocked would be an understatement. A week ago, he was worried about my succubus traits compelling him into loving me and now he’s like “Let’s adopt a bunch of traumatized shifter kids, ‘kay?”

What even was my life? Nico was the last voice. Well, the second last, but I wasn’t sure Lucius counted just yet. “I am content with whatever you choose, Raine. With whatever the shifter pups would like. It is a hard decision for a five or six year old, to decide, but they do not seem like children in the classic sense. They have seen too many things to properly be children. They deserve a choice, and some autonomy.”

I nodded my agreement. That was it. We’d ask the kids, and if they wanted to stay, we’d become a family of eleven?

When did life get this complex? I almost preferred being blown up.

Chapter Fifteen

I paced around the house for most of the night. The kids remained asleep, and both Nico, Judge and Walker left to go to work. X lay on my couch, watching me pace, deciding not to go into work today. Who was going to call him out on it? Brody and Tex also stayed home, and I was pretty sure they both wanted to be close by just in case another shifter was needed. They could take the kids out in the daylight to play. Kids needed daylight to grow. They didn't belong in a town filled with night dwellers.

On the other hand, they would grow up loved and so damn protected here it would be like getting past Fort Knox with a Dragon and a troll bridge. Impossible. They could visit Nîso with Brody and Tex and meet other kids.

I'd have to pass it by the Town Council, and I was worried they'd say no. I mean, could they say no to Nico if he said this was what he wanted? I didn't think so. They were more likely to say no to Lucius remaining in the town's limits. Ugh. Problem part B.

Finally as the sun was just lightening the horizon, Christopher poked his head out the door. Judging it safe, he stepped out and his sisters followed behind him. They were all dressed in fresh clothes, and looked more like normal kids and less like orphans picked up from an underground skin market.

"Hey guys. Did you sleep okay?" I asked, and Christopher nodded.

"Yes. Thank you." He was painfully polite.

I pointed to the couch. “We just want to have a quick chat with you guys and then we’ll take you to the diner for breakfast okay?”

Honestly, I was excited. I’d been testing myself in the early morning sun. If I went out in a big hat with huge polarized sunglasses, I could stay out for a short amount of time. It was a tiny thing but it felt like something monumental. Like a baby vampire taking its first steps.

I could be out long enough to take the kids to breakfast anyway.

They obediently sat on the couch, all huddled together. “So, we wanted to know how you guys are feeling? Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

Enit looked up at me with blue eyes like her brothers, except hers seemed too big for her face. “I like my new dress.” Carmen put her hand on her sisters, but didn’t say anything. Enit just smiled at her and then back at me. “We’ve never had dresses.”

Ugh. Not gonna cry. Nope. Damn onion chopping ninjas sneaking into my house. “I’ll buy you some more. Do you have favorite colors?”

They looked at me like I was crazy. Carmen cocked her head.

Enit frowned, looking a little panicked when she couldn’t think of a favorite color.

“It’s okay. You can think about it. There’s no rush.”

Christopher didn’t answer, but he did say, “Carmen likes black.”

Okay, tough crowd.

“Look, I’m going to level with you guys. We don’t know what to do with you. We

want to give you a choice though. We are trying to track down some relatives of yours, so you can return to your family.”

“No!” Christopher snapped, then flinched like I would hit him. When no blow came, he straightened his shoulders. “No, thank you. No family.”

I lifted up my hands in the most non-threatening gesture I could muster as an apex predator. It didn’t hurt that I would forever look like a nineteen year old college student. We weren’t scary most of the time.

“Okay, I’ll tell Walker to stop looking. Are you sure you don’t have any family outside your old Pack? Cousins or something?” Christopher vigorously shook his head. Okay. I wasn’t going to make him return to them if he didn’t want to. They sounded like assholes.

“Option number two is that you return to Nîso with Brody and live with his Pack. They are Shapeshifters, not two-natured, so you shouldn’t have any problems. I’m the Alpha Mate, so I swear it on my life. You’d be safe there.” With this, Christopher wavered, and Carmen whispered something furiously in his ear. Still, he shook his head. “No packs. No family.”

Ah, that wasn’t the same out and out no. We’d work on that one. I looked at Brody and he nodded. We were on the same page. The kids needed other Shifters, so maybe we’d introduce them to Nîso slowly.

“Fair enough. Option number three is you live here with us. Me and Brody and Tex, but also X, Walker, Nico, Judge and sometimes Lucius. This town is filled with vampires, which is probably a little scary, but they aren’t like regular vampires either. Tex and Brody are the only shifters here. There aren’t any other kids or anything like that.” Shit, there were no schools. No nothing. How were we going to raise three kids in a town that had no infrastructure for children.

Christopher looked at his sisters, and Enit leaned forward and whispered in his ear. He nodded, and Carmen nodded.

“We want to live here with you. No family. No packs.”

I frowned, and looked at Brody. “That’s not technically true. Raine’s mates, we are all kind of a Pack. You would be joining us, and we are a family. But we aren’t the kind that would ever hurt you,” he said.

Christopher shrugged. “Enit likes you. That’s good enough for me.”

Well, okay then. I guess we had now adopted three kids. Just another Wednesday in the life of Raine Baxter.

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Walker or Nicomust have stopped by the diner and worded up Beatrice and Bert, because when we walked in, no one freaked out. It was a nice change really. But still, there was an eerie silence through the room as we walked in. The vampires watched the youngsters with a mix of wonder and, well, I was going to say it was with awe and not hunger because I liked to believe that my neighbors weren't sociopathic kid killers. Still, X glared like he would happily take every single one of their hearts if they so much as looked too long.

“Lass! Come, I saved you a booth.” Beatrice was grinning so wide I thought her face would crack. “Aw, look at the wee bairns. Aren’t they just precious?” She gave us menus needlessly as she fussed. “You tell us what you’d like and Bert will make it for you. I’m Beatrice, but you can call me Beatie if you want. Bless me, look at their blue eyes!”

I just stared. What the hell? It was like Beatrice had been body-snatched by a stereotypical Scottish Granny.

“The hell, woman? Are you feeling okay? Have you had a stroke?” X teased, and she scowled at the big Enforcer.

“Hush your face, Sassenach.”

She smiled toothily at Brody and Tex. “Hello, Boys. The usual, or will you be having bread and water like this one?” She tilted her head at X, who was grinning at her like he always did. Honestly, Beatrice was the only one that wasn't scared of X, and I felt like they had a history that started long before Dark River, but neither of them would talk about it when I asked.

“What’ll it be today, Lass?”

“French toast and bacon.” My mouth was already watering.

Beatrice came to the kids, none of whom had touched the menus. I wondered if they could read, but Beatrice was on it. “You tell me whatever you want, and Bert out the back will make it for you? Walker said you were wolf shifters?”

Christopher nodded and Beatrice beamed at him. “How about waffles and sausages, bacon and eggs?”

Their tiny mouths dropped open and they stared. Finally, Christopher spoke for the three of them. “Yes, thank you.”

His voice was high and clear, and I swear Beatrice was about to burst into tears. “Fine manners, young man. I’ll make you chocolate shakes as well, how does that sound?”

Enit made an excited squeak, but didn’t speak. Beatrice cooed once more and then wandered off to make the wee bairns some breakfast. I shook my head as she left.

Judge strolled in and spotted us at the back. He strode toward me like he hadn’t seen me in a month, and my heart raced. He leaned over me and kissed me like I was the greatest thing he’d ever seen. He was so touchy feely with Tex, I sometimes worried that he was here for Tex and not me, but I shouldn’t have. Tex was much more touch orientated, being a shifter. When he whispered, “Missed you, Rainey Day,” against my lips, I knew I didn’t need to worry. Judge was the type of man who was hard to pin down, but once he was yours, he was yours forever. “Why don’t you come over today?”

I raised my eyebrows because in all the time we’d been together, I’d never been to his apartment. I was even a little convinced that he had a red room of pain in there. But

Tex had been there, and if there was something weird going on, I was pretty convinced he'd tell me. I grinned back, resting my head against his lips. "You're on."

Beatrice came out with overflowing plates of food, her wide smile still intact and all fang. She laid a plate in front of each of the pups and then Bert came out with the last plate. The soft look he gave them as he placed the last plate in front of Enit, and gave each of them a milkshake, made me think that maybe these two had kids, or grandkids in their human life. The kids began to inhale their food, and this time, I knew they weren't starving hungry. It was obviously a condition response, and Brody sighed as he murmured, "Slow," to them again, making them freeze.

I wrapped my fingers in his, sending him reassurance through our bond. He hated being the bad guy.

Beatrice returned with the rest of our food, and we talked quietly as we ate. I let the kids eat without trying to engage them in too much conversation. We just pretended everything was normal for a bit, letting them get used to us as a group.

Judge ate his steak, slicing off a bit for Carmen when she eyed it hungrily. She stared at the steak on her plate, then at the man beside me, like he was an alien. Judge seemed oblivious, chatting softly with X about some vamp from their past who'd apparently gone broke because he started buying and smashing Faberge eggs as a pastime. Apparently crazy came in all forms.

But I saw Carmen's eyes go wide as she looked from the steak on her plate to Judge disbelievingly. I gave her a soft smile. "Eat it, it's okay."

Christopher eyed the steak on her plate like it might bite him. "Wolves don't share their food, unless it's mothers and real young pups. It's every wolf for itself, and you live and die by how strong you are and how much you are prepared to fight for your food." He said it with no inflection, like he was reciting the words of an adult who'd

repeated it to them often.

Enit's eyes got real wet. "You always gave me your food," she whispered, laying her head on her brother's shoulder.

Christopher dipped his cheek to her head really quickly, then shrugged her off. "That's different."

I gave him a sad smile. Brody's hand gripped mine even harder, but his voice was soft. "We don't work like that. We provide for the whole Pack. We'll feed you when you're hungry. We'll care for you when you are sick. We'll love you even when you crash your car into a ditch at fifteen because you were trying to impress a girl." He laughed softly, and I had the distinct impression that was something Brody had done. "We aren't like your old Pack, I promise."

They all watched Brody warily, but Enit reached out and touched the back of his hand quickly. It was a rushed gesture, but I felt like it was a wolf thing. By the way Carmen glared at her, it obviously had some significance. Still, Carmen reached out and did the same. Just a quick touch to the back of Brody's hand. Brody sat so still I thought he was a statue.

Finally, Christopher sighed heavily. He reached out and deliberately pressed his hand to Brody's.

My strong Alpha looked a bit like he wanted to cry, but he nodded. He reached out and stroked each of their foreheads in quick succession.

Judge leaned toward me. "What's happening right now?"

I shrugged. Tex leaned forward from his other side. "It's scent marking. Enit touched him so his Alpha scent was on her skin, and now he's doing it in return. If they came

across another Pack, they'd smell like him and people would know not to fuck with them."

Oh. Well, here comes those damn tears again. It also explained why Brody was clinging to me like he was about to have a very unmanly breakdown.

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Judge cleared his throat. “So, what do you guys like? Barbies? Toy trucks? Thomas the Tank Engine?”

They all looked at him like he was crazy, but at least the heaviness of the moment was dispersed. Apparently, Carmen liked motorbikes, Enit liked kittens, and Christopher didn’t know what he liked. His tiny face screwed up in frown while he was thinking. “Music?”

The grin on Tex’s face was massive. “Me too! I could teach you to play the guitar. Would you like that?”

Christopher’s face turned up in the first smile I’d ever seen on his face. “Thank you.”

Tex grinned. “Anytime.”

We’d finished our food, except Enit who looked at the food left on her plate with something like fear. I reached out and touched her arm. “Hey, it’s okay. We’ll take it home and you can have it later.” She smiled at me almost happily then, though the fear still lurked in the back of her eyes.

I got Beatrice to wrap up the remainder, and she also sent them home with chocolate cake, a jar of chocolate chip cookies that apparently Bert had just whipped up while we’d been eating, and an entire casserole for the family.

I was pretty sure Bert and Beatrice had been possessed. As the kids skipped out of the diner, less timid than when we walked in, the guys on their heels, I stopped to grab the bags from Beatrice, who handed half to me and the other half to Judge.

She looked at me hopefully. “Are they staying, Lass?”

I took a deep breath in, knowing that every set of ears in the room was listening. “Yeah, for now. They were, uh, sold by their previous Pack, and they don’t have any relatives that they can think of, though Walker is looking into it. They don’t want to permanently go to the Packlands with Brody, so I guess they’re staying with me.” I cleared my throat. “I hope they will be safe and happy here, because if anyone so much as looks at them funny, X will make your intestines your noose and swing you from the nearest tree. And Lucius will probably flay you alive while you hang there.”

There was an audible inhalation around the room, but I figured it was better to make it clear now. You fuck with my kids, you weren’t just going to get expelled from Dark River. No, you were a dead vampire walking.

A feral look passed over Beatrice’s face, and suddenly gone was the loving grandmother and in her place was a pure predator. “I so much as hear a hint of that behavior, and it won’t be the Boogeyman of vampire-kind they should fear.” Her words were a low growl that sent shivers down my spine.

Welp. That was terrifying and reassuring all at once. “Thanks, Beatrice. I better go. Thanks for all the food.”

She smiled again, the predator gone. “No worries, Lass. Let me know if you need anything. They make me miss my bairns. It’s been so long since children have been around and it’s a blessing.”

I gave Beatrice a quick hug and then raced out the door after everyone.

Maybe Lucius hadn’t just given me a gift. Maybe, just maybe, he’d given this whole town a gift. But first, I had to convince the town council to let them stay forever.

Chapter Sixteen

After we left the diner, we took the kids home. Brody and Tex were going to take them for a run in the woods around the house while the daylight chased me inside for the day. Just before the sun got unbearable, I raced to Judge's apartment, up the stairs and under the alcove. Judge opened the door before I'd even lifted my hand to knock.

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me inside his apartment, slamming the door and then pressing me back against it. "Is it just me, or does it feel like eternity since I've been between your thighs?" he groaned against my mouth.

I laughed, wrapping my legs around his waist. "It's been like five days, Judge."

He groaned and kissed me harder, moving us into the apartment. I didn't even get to look around as he walked me toward the bedroom.

"Like I said, an eternity. Don't worry, darlin', I'll give you the grand tour after I give you at least three orgasms."

Well, I wasn't going to argue with that. He peeled clothes off of me as we walked, my shirt ending up on the hall floor, and his mouth on my breast, biting either side of my nipple, so his lips suctioned around it, sucking my blood and my nipple all at once and I swear, my vision went white.

"Judge!" I curled my body into his and he chuckled low. He sat on the bed, my body still curled around his, but now I had better purchase to roll my body against the hard line of his cock in his sweats.

My short denim skirt was pushed up around my waist and he tore off my underwear like it was nothing more than an inconvenience. Right now, I didn't even care. I rolled my hips against his, and the rough fabric of his sweats stroked across my clit,

making my whole body shudder.

“Well, damn, Love. We are having a party and no one invited me?” A voice said from the doorway. Judge looked up at X from where he was sucking my blood from my breast. “Must have got lost in the mail,” he murmured around my nipple.

X tsked. “It’s rude to speak with your mouth full, my friend.”

Judge gripped my hips, rolling his own up and pressing hard into my clit, making a moan burst from my lips. He disengaged his fangs, licking at the punctures with his tongue, but sucking my nipple fully into his mouth, the pressure making me so wet, there was a darkening patch on the front of his sweats.

“Rainey Day doesn’t seem to mind if I’m rude,” he growled smugly, grinding against me hard once more.

I let my head fall back, so I could see X, his pants unzipped and his hand pushed down them. “Get naked or get out, X. This isn’t a spectator sport,” I teased.

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He wandered in, leaning forward to kiss my lips softly. “Are you sure about that, Love, because I could watch Judge fuck your sweet, tight body all day long.”

I shuddered at his dirty words. I looked up at Judge, not wanting to take liberties. “Is it okay if X joins us?”

Judge froze, looking between us. There was simmering lust in his eyes, but also a bit of uncertainty that wasn't normally there. “Uh, sure, Rainey Day, but X and I have never shared a woman.”

X shrugged, but the gesture didn't come off quite as carefree as he intended. “Or each other.”

I sat up on Judge's lap. “What? Like, you spend all that time together, decades, hell fucking centuries, you're both uh, bisexual?”

It was a question, because I wasn't really sure with X. He shrugged. “Sure, I don't like labels though.”

I nodded. “Okay. But you mean to say never in all that time you thought, hey, I'd like to fuck this sexy ass guy.”

Judge laughed, kissing my lips. “You gotta understand, darlin', that X was pining after Miranda for most of that like a lovesick fool.”

X flipped Judge the finger. “And Judge was a whore with commitment issues. Would not make for good team dynamics, Love.”

Well, when they put it like that. “How do you feel about it now?” I asked tentatively. I mean, if they never wanted to share the bedroom together, I was totally cool with that. But did the idea of being squished between the long, lean, strong body of Judge and the muscled, heavily tattooed bulk of X make me wetter than Splash Mountain? You bet your ass it did.

They watched each other, having a silent conversation. X leaned forward, nipping my ear. “Watching you ride the cock of my best mate, moaning his name, turns me on so bad that I’m harder than a rock. Touching you both? Becoming one big knot of hands and mouths and cocks?” He shuddered, his gasp sending a hot puff of air fanning across my cheek. He grabbed my wrist and pressed my hand to the front of his pants. I felt the hard rod of his cock and bit my lip so roughly it drew blood. Which made him twitch against my palm.

I drew my hand back and climbed off Judge’s lap. They both watched me warily. “Everyone needs to be naked right now or I might lose my mind,” I breathed and they both bounced into action.

I undid my skirt and slipped it off my hips, launching myself at Judge who was naked first. He let out a whoosh of air as he landed on his back on the bed. I kissed him savagely. I didn’t want slow and teasing. I wanted to completely lose control of my predator. I wanted to be free and violent because I unequivocally knew that these two men could take it.

His hands ran down my body and when I struck at his neck with fangs, the first taste of his blood made me moan so loudly that a little trickle of his blood leaked over my bottom lip and down my chin. A strong hand pulled my face away, and X was there, his tongue licking Judge’s blood from my face.

“Sit on his face, Love. I want him to eat you while you suck my cock with that pretty, pretty mouth all coated in his blood.”

Oh shit. Judge groaned, gripping my hips and dragging me up his body until I was perched over his face, my thighs on either side of his head. I leaned toward X, my body tensing in pleasure as Judge slid his tongue down my slit.

“Oh my fucking God,” I gasped, and X took the opportunity to slide his dick into my wide open mouth. Damn he was huge and hard, and my whole body clenched at the idea of having him inside me. I sucked hard, moaning around the head of his cock as Judge sucked my clit.

X had one hand cupping my head with a gentle touch, and the other hand sliding down my body, tweaking my nipples as he slid in and out of my mouth. When Judge thrust his tongue inside me, it was too damn much. I came hard, a whining moan echoing around the room as I choked down X’s cock. He ripped his dick out, breathing heavily as he leaned down and caught my screams with his lips.

“Damn, Love. I could listen to the sound of you coming over and over. As a matter of fact...” he trailed off as he plucked me off Judge’s face and into his arms. His cock lined up with my pussy. With confident hands, he dropped me onto his dick and pushed up inside me. He held me like I weighed nothing, contorting my body until he was hitting the perfect spot. I screamed as his big dick stretched me so good. He moved my body with confident hands, fucking me like he knew my body intimately.

In the aftermath of my orgasm, it didn’t take me long until I was coming around his cock again, my fingers scraping at his shoulders as I held on, taking the pounding he was giving me. When his lips nestled against my neck, my body was prepared for what was about to happen. Fuck it was more than prepared, it was eager. His fangs pierced my neck, combining with his venom until the pleasure was too much. I screamed it out, my fingers scrabbling for purchase. Suddenly, Judge was there and I wrapped my fingers into his hair and pulled him toward me roughly, kissing his pretty lips with enough force that they split beneath my teeth. He groaned and stood behind me, supporting my body as X continued to slam home.

My head flopped back onto his shoulder as X drank, until he tore his mouth roughly from my skin. He looked up, his lips coated in my blood and his eyes hooded with so much pleasure I thought I would come just from staring at him. He met Judge's eyes over my shoulder. "Want to taste?" His eyes flitted back to mine. "Your blood is so fucking sweet, Love, it's like a drug."

Judge groaned and leaned over my shoulder, his tongue darting out to lick some of my blood from X's lip. I whimpered, moving again even though my body was wrung out from an absolute flood of endorphins coursing through my veins.

Watching Judge kiss X though? That's the kind of thing dirty dreams are made of.

Judge moaned and then pushed closer, his mouth catching X's as they smashed together in a battle of a kiss. Pressed between their bodies, X thrust into me in short, sharp movements until I was writhing in his arms.

X dragged his lips from Judge's and kissed me. The taste on his lips was an ambrosic combination of the two of them, and I moaned. I gasped as he slid me off his body, flipping me into Judge's arms. "Look how hard he is for you, Love. He's looking at you like he wants to eat you as his last damn meal. It's heady, isn't it?" He slid his hand down my spine. "Ever had one of your lovers back here?" he asked, grabbing my ass cheeks in his hands and pulling them apart. He lifted me slightly, and Judge lined up his cock. When he dropped me onto Judge's cock, I came around him like a tsunami.

"Fuck!" I screamed, panting as wave after wave of pleasure ran through my body. X lined up his cock with my ass, pressing the fat head against my ring. I tensed in Judge's arms and X tsked. "Mmm, maybe you aren't ready for me there yet." He rubbed his dick down my ass cheeks until it was butting up against Judge's cock where he was thrusting in and out of my body.

“What about you, Judge? Are you ready for my cock?”

Judge stilled, holding me with his dick hard inside me. He cocked an eyebrow at the other man. “What makes you think you’re the top, hmm?”

I mewled and rolled my body against him, urging him to keep going. Holy hell, I just needed a little bit more, needed him to move. X scraped his fangs down my spine. “Because Raine likes it when I tell her what to do, don’t you, Love? And you? You just want to give up control for just a moment. I know you, Judge. You can top with Snakelet. But with me, I know all your fucking secrets, even the ones you don’t want to admit to yourself. Now get on your fucking knees.”

Judge tensed beneath me, and for a moment I thought he’d tell X to fuck off. But instead he pulled out of me and laid me on the bed gently. My arms were wobbly, but X was there. “On your hands and knees, sweet, sexy Raine. Judge is going to fuck you until you are screaming his name.”

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I struggled onto my hands and knees, my arms shaky, but Judge was quickly there, his arms under my hips. “Face down, ass up, Rainey Day.”

I eagerly complied, my face in his soft comforter, his hands holding up my body. When he lined himself back up and thrust back into me in one snapping movement, I screamed into the bedding. Judge groaned along with me, his body curled over mine.

“I love you, Raine,” he moaned, his body rolling into mine.

I couldn’t summon any higher thought processes as the bed dipped again. “Look to your left, Love,” X’s voice washed over me, making my skin pebble as pleasure rode me hard. I looked over, and realized that Judge’s room had mirrored built-in robes. I sucked in a breath as I looked at us. The leanly muscular body of Judge as he thrust in and out of me, and the huge body of X behind him, his tattooed hand around Judge’s throat. As he squeezed, Judge moaned, thrusting into me in a ragged pattern. X pulled him back toward his body so they were chest to back, and then X was sliding into him, his other hand reaching past Judge’s hips to grab mine. When he pulled back out, he thrust back in with a controlled, forceful thrust that had us all rocking forward.

....I had no fucking words for how hot that was. I couldn’t drag my eyes away from them, from X’s mouth devouring Judge as he rode him hard and Judge holding my hips like I was his last lifeline.

I came and came again, my whimpering screams being expelled from my body as I became just a mass of sensation, pleasure nearing pain, until Judge’s ragged thrusts got wild and he gripped my hips as he came on a silent gasp, filling me with his cum.

My knees threatened to buckle, but X held us both steady as he pumped his cock in and out of Judge, their combined grunting the most gloriously perverted thing I had ever heard. Finally, he tore himself away, leaping off the bed and coming around to kneel beside me, dragging his hand over the angry head of his cock until his hot spurts of cum released on my back. His face thrown back, his face a mask of blissful agony. My legs collapsed and Judge folded on top of me, uncaring that he was lying on X's release.

X flopped down beside us, panting hard. "Jesus H. Christ, Love. You guys have the best parties." He laughed to himself, leaning over to kiss me first and then Judge, before pushing him off my body.

He looked at the glistening pool of his cum on my back, swirling his finger through it before drawing a giant, sticky X on my back. "Guess X marks the spot, hey?"

I groaned. "You're crazy," I murmured. But still, I lifted my face for a kiss, and X didn't even hesitate. He pressed his lips to mine softly. "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, Love," he whispered and I closed my eyes, a small smile on my lips. I snuggled my ass back toward a panting Judge.

He dutifully rested his hand on my hip. "Let's shower. I don't want to be crusted in X's cum when I wake up tomorrow. That shit is hard to get out of your body hair," he grunted and X grinned. He disappeared, and I heard the shower run. He was back in an instant. "Come on, Love. I'll wash your front and Judge will wash your back."

I groaned, but let X pick me up. "Fine, but you broke my vagina so no funny stuff."

X held up three fingers. "Scout's honor."

Unfortunately, I kept forgetting that X was no boy scout.

Chapter Seventeen

The practicalities of a night creature raising day creatures was that when I was awake, the pups were asleep. Other than those few hours of dawn and dusk where we could all be together, a lot of the parenting went on Brody and Tex. Neither of them complained though. Brody taught them shifter things during the day, how to track in the forest, how to find food in your animal form. He shifted into a wolf every time, even though he preferred the fox, but he thought they'd be more comfortable. And on a whole, it did make them more comfortable. Before too long, my house was filled with the sounds of kids playing, thundering feet and soft whispers.

Only Enit and Christopher spoke to us though. Carmen wouldn't speak to anyone, instead letting her siblings speak for her. It wasn't that she couldn't speak, from time to time I would see her whispering to Enit, or having a cross word with Christopher. But she wouldn't talk to anyone else.

My gut churned at the reasons why that could be, but we didn't push her. Maybe when she was more comfortable she would open up, but until then, as long as she was getting everything else she needed, I was happy enough. I would take them to the diner for breakfast and one of us would cook dinner. We tried to have everyone there, the entire "Pack", so everyone got used to there being kids around, and it gave them time to bond with everyone. The most surprising one was X. You would think a man who killed for a living up until a few months ago would have zero interest in children.

But Enit loved him. I don't know what it was about the former Enforcer, but she was basically his shadow. He, in turn, walked around cracking lame jokes just to make her laugh. He taught her how to make a proper cup of tea, because he 'wanted there to be hope for the next generation of barbarians'. Honestly, I just think he liked that someone else would participate in his tea parties. Even Carmen joined in, but I was learning she was the most rough and tumble of the kids. She liked being outside, and

she seemed more comfortable following Brody around. I wasn't sure if it was because he was her Alpha now, and she found some kind of security in that, or if it was because he was so often outside.

Christopher however, watched us all warily, tense all the time, as if he was waiting for us to snap. Except when he was playing the guitar with Tex. Tex had ordered him a kid sized guitar from the internet, and when he'd presented it to Christopher, he'd run out of the room. I'd heard his tears as he hid in the forest behind my house, but we'd all let him go. The kid had so much dignity for someone who was still a baby. Which is why I found myself hugging him more often.

Enit was the most amiable to hugs. She seemed to crave affection like she'd been starved of it, and she was often clinging to X's back like a baby opossum as he went about his business. Or she'd tug Judge's hair until he grabbed her in a bear hug and squeezed. Or last night, she'd spent fifteen minutes trying to teach Walker how to do some intricate clapping game.

Even Christopher, and it was always Christopher and never Chris, would allow the guys to pat him on the back, and even let me wrap my arms around his shoulders.

Carmen however, shied away from any physical contact that wasn't from her siblings. I know it worried Brody.

He'd sounded worried when he'd told me, "Wolves are pack animals, Red. Their whole structure is based on touch and togetherness. I'm worried that her wolf will get restless if she isn't getting what she needs. We just have to hope that we can earn her trust and until then the affection she gets from her siblings is enough." Did they have therapists for shifters? Because whatever these kids went through, they probably needed buttloads of help.

Now, I tucked the kids into the backseat of Brody's car. I'd spent the week getting

The Immortal Cupcake ready for its reopening with Nico, and the place shone so brightly it hurt my eyes to look at it. Nico had finalized the menu and I was kind of glad I couldn't put on weight anymore because I'd eaten enough cake this week to cause the diabeetus.

I looked out into the woods, searching for Lucius. I hadn't seen him all week, since he'd dropped off Carmen and Christopher and that kiss. I was beginning to worry, but I didn't mention it to the guys. Maybe he'd cut and run? Dropped me the kids, realized I was more committed to my guys than he guessed and now he was gone?

I probably should feel relieved, but strangely enough, I didn't.

Maybe it wasn't just the kids that needed a good therapist. Maybe I needed to see Nico in a more professional capacity.

As if summoned by my thoughts, Nico appeared beside me. We were heading to Nîso for a meeting with some other supernaturals. They wanted to start some kind of school between Nîso and Dark River, and they were meeting with the leaders of both. It was a good opportunity to introduce the pups to the Pack up there too. Nico was coming as a representative of Dark River's Town Council. We couldn't all fit in Brody's car, so Nico and I were going to run there. We'd probably make it there well before the car, so we were taking it easy. A casual fifty mile run, that's all. My inner P.E. hating teenager snorted. Nothing casual about fifty miles.

But first, I made sure everyone was belted in properly, and leaned into the car window to kiss Tex. "Drive safe." Brody blew me a kiss and I smiled as I grabbed it from the air. I looked at the kids in the back. They looked like they were being driven to their execution. "You're going to love it, I promise."

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I waved as Brody rolled away, stepping back beside Nico. He leaned over and kissed my forehead. "I have to say Raine, you've taken to this parenthood thing well."

I couldn't tell if he was teasing or not, so I shrugged. "I'm making shit up as I go along. I figure if I don't screw them up anymore, that's a win right?"

He laughed as he nodded. "It certainly is in my opinion. Are you ready?"

"I just want to catch up with the guys first. Kiss them goodbye." It sounded a bit pathetic, seeing I was only going to be away a night, but still. If my little foray into Nîso a couple of months ago taught me anything, it was that you never knew when you might be kidnapped by fanatics and staked in the sun.

Nico smiled softly, his patience basically boundless as he kissed my cheek. "I'll meet you in the town square when you're ready." He darted away and I shot off in the other direction.

First stop, the doctor's office. I couldn't look at the front door without flushing, remembering X's hot kiss. There was a light flush on my cheeks as I strolled in, stepping through the waiting room and into the office in the back. My feet stilled when I pushed open the door.

X was on his knees, his lips wrapped around Judge's cock. X looked over his shoulder, his tongue darting over his moist lips. "Hey, Love. Wanna stay and play?"

Judge was looking at my face, trying to determine if I was upset about them hooking up without me in the middle probably. I frowned as I thought about it. They didn't

bounce it off me first, which was annoying but not devastating. They were adults. They were keeping it in the Pack. I had no problem with Tex doing it, and quite frankly, if I had to appease their every sexual desire, I'd be perpetually on my back and exhausted.

So I bit my lip and shook my head. "Not today. I've got a long run ahead of me and I'll need all my energy. But maybe next time?" I asked hopefully.

"Always, Rainey Day." Judge's voice ended on a breathy moan as X seemed to take him all the way to the back of his throat. I was stuck to the spot, unable to look away, let alone leave. It was both soft and brutal. Judge face fucked X, his hips snapping almost violently. But his hands held the other man with such gentle reverence. I had a feeling I'd never understand their dynamic. Judge held my gaze as X swallowed his cock with happy hums, his hands gripping Judge's muscular ass in a bruising grip.

I was nearly panting by the time Judge roared his release, his cock stuffed all the way in X's mouth, his eyes finally closing as his head fell back, his face contorted in pleasure.

It was so goddamn beautiful.

X swallowed down his cum, removing him from his mouth with a pop. He grinned in my direction. "He's awful pretty for an asshole," he murmured to me, and I couldn't help my chuckle. I strode into the room, bending down to kiss X, to taste Judge on his tongue. Then I leaned up and kissed Judge, who was still catching his breath.

"I'd tell you guys to behave while I was away, but that ship has well and truly sailed. So just, uh, have fun and don't break anything."

X nuzzled between my thighs from where he was kneeling and I groaned. Fuck, why did they make it so hard to leave?

I grabbed his ear and pulled him away before I caved. “Stop that, or I’ll be late.” I ran my hand over his cheek. “Gah, why are you guys so addictive? My coochie needs a break okay?”

Unperturbed, X nuzzled the aforementioned body part. “I can kiss it better? Yes, I can. Oh yes I can,” he cooed to it.

Both Judge and I looked at him like he’d lost what little sanity he had left. Judge slapped the back of his head, and X growled. I needed to get out of here ASAP or I was going to be naked on the examination table before I could say, “Please Sir, can I have some more?”

I stepped out of their reach. “Okay guys, love you. Be good!”

I ran out of there and slammed the door, because willpower was not one of my newfound vampire gifts, as evidenced by my seven damn boyfriends.

I raced down the back alley over to the Sheriff’s office, and pushed open the heavy wooden door with a creak. Walker was sitting behind the table, staring at his computer. His brows were drawn down in a frown, his hair standing up at odd angles from wearing his hat.

Honestly, his uniform never got old. Like, you’d think after the hundredth time seeing how the sleeves of his tan shirt tightened over his bicep, I’d become immune, but no. Even now, I wanted to climb into his lap and fuck him on his swivel chair until we were both spinning and dizzy.

“Raine, if you don’t get over here and kiss me, you aren’t going to like the consequences,” he growled, not looking up from the computer screen.

I grinned and sauntered into the officer, my hips swinging a little more exaggeratedly

than usual. “Anything you say, Officer.”

He looked up and smiled, his dimples flashing in the artificial light of the computer screen. “Mmm, say that again and I’ll get out the handcuffs.”

This time I huffed and crossed my arms under my breasts. “Why do you always threaten me with a good time when I’m on a deadline?” I pouted and he laughed as he dragged me onto his lap.

“Because your life is hectic and all the time is a bad time,” he joked, and my lips turned down. Was that true? Seeming to realize he fucked up, he kissed the corner of my mouth. “Raine, I wouldn’t have it any other way so don’t you dare get inside your head about it. I promise that when you get back from Nîso, I’ll cook you dinner and we’ll do all sorts of terrible, perverted things with my handcuffs.”

One side of my lips turned up in a grin, even though I was trying to maintain my pout. “Promise?”

He caught my chin, pulling my mouth towards his. “I’ll even bring the baton,” he whispered.

Well, damn. Who knew that was a fantasy I had until now? My errant vajayjay was making it very known that it wanted to crawl all over Walker’s nightstick. He kissed me then, his tongue diving into my mouth, branding me. Walker always made me feel consumed. Like he wanted us to be one person and he was going to do that by playing my body so well, it came to heel like a faithful puppy.

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After a slow, languorous kiss that made me mewl happily, I drew back and sighed. “I’ll miss you while I’m gone. And I’ll try to do better about giving you one on one time.” He went to protest, but I covered his lips with my finger. “I want that time with you too. If we are going to do this seriously, I need to carve out one on one time with you. Nico has time with me at the cafe, and Tex has me at home. Judge has me, but he also has Tex, so he doesn’t feel like he’s missing out. Brody isn’t here as often, so when he is I always make time for him. And X...” I shrugged. “X makes his own time whether I want it or not. But you?” I kissed his cheekbone. “You just stand by me in the background, not overloading me but ensuring that I feel safe and supported. You don’t demand anything and I’m guilty of not giving you what you need despite that.” I kissed his lips. “So prepare yourself, Walker Walton, because I am going to woo the shit out of you until you are perpetually horny every time you look at me.”

He laughed and squeezed me in a hug. Held tightly to his chest, I let out a contented sigh. This. This was why I loved Walker. “Too late for that one. You walk into a room and I’m hard as a rock.” I wiggled on his lap to make sure he wasn’t lying to me and he groaned as he pressed his hard cock into my ass. “See?”

He pushed me off his lap. “You better go before I fuck you over my desk. It would scatter all my case files and you know how I feel about filing.”

He did love everything to be filed neatly. I eyed the stacks of paper wistfully. I wanted to throw them in the air and let him fuck me on their scattered corpses. He nipped my lower lip. “I don’t like that devious look in your eye.”

I grinned. “Liar. You love it.”

He laughed and stood, tipping me off his lap but keeping me in his arms. “Nope. I just love you. Every cheeky, mischievous part of you.” With one more kiss, he let me go. “Be safe up there in Nîso.”

He seemed a little hesitant and I couldn’t blame him. My last foray to Nîso had ended, uh, not so great. “I promise no more houses will explode on me. Besides, Nico will be there too.”

Walker nodded. “That’s reassuring. If there is any being that I trust with your welfare, it’s Nico. He loves you more than he should.” Because of the succubus blood. It went unsaid, but it hung between us. He leaned forward and nuzzled my neck. “Just... take care of yourself, okay? And take care of our pups.”

My heart swelled and I moved toward the door before I could do something embarrassing like throw my naked body at him, or worse, cry.

“Look after Judge and X for me?”

Walker snorted. “They are big enough and scary enough to take care of themselves.”

He wasn’t wrong. “Well, apparently they are having sex. So make sure they don’t have some kind of lovers quarrel and demolish half the town?”

Walker blinked in surprise. Then he shrugged. “Makes sense. Those two have enough sexual tension to suffocate a mermaid.”

He was not wrong. Except maybe about the mermaid thing, I hoped.

I put my hand in the crook of his elbow as he walked me down the front path and across the road into the square. Nico was sitting on one of the benches, staring at the stars. The soft fairy lights shone down on his blond head, making him look a little

like a fallen angel. He turned his face towards us as we approached, his smile so heartbreakingly genuine. “Ready?”

I nodded, leaning up to kiss Walker’s cheek one last time. I stepped away “Yep. Thanks for waiting for me.”

He pulled me into his arms. “I’d wait for you forever, Raine Baxter,” he said, kissing me softly.

Walker snorted. “Smooth bastard.” He looked at his watch. “I better go and get X. It’s time for lunch and I can keep an eye on him better if he’s in the diner causing havoc.”

I grinned. “I’d, uh, make sure you knocked.”

Walker screwed up his face, but blew me a kiss goodbye and headed toward the Doctor’s office. Nico laughed. “Brave man.” He looked down at me, his dark brown eyes like sinking into the abyss. He held out a hand. “Are you ready?”

“Always.”

Chapter Eighteen

The run to Nîso was the most fun I’d had in weeks. Just running as fast as my legs could go, testing my limits, was exhilarating. Throw in Nico, whose playfulness meant that we got sidetracked climbing trees and racing up sheer rock faces, and it was just freeing. The wind in my face, my hair streaming in a tangled mess behind me, I just felt... alive.

We made it to Nîso only a little ahead of Brody and Tex, and we raced the car for the last half a mile, making the pups laugh. I stopped out the front of Brody’s temporary

house. His was being rebuilt after the explosion. I stroked my hand down my hair, running my fingers through the silken red strands. I didn't appreciate it until I was rocking a Sinead O'Connor, and I do not have the face shape for that.

Brody and Tex climbed out, but the back doors stayed firmly closed. I walked over and opened the rear door. The pup's eyes were wide and fearful, heartbreakingly so, and I reached in and held Carmen's hand. It was a testament to how scared she was that she didn't pull away. "Come on now. I've got you."

Christopher climbed over Carmen's lap, exiting the car first, looking around for threats. Always the Alpha that one. He was going to make a great one, one day in the distant future. First he was going to live, and love, and do whatever he wanted.

He looked over his shoulder and nodded at Enit and Carmen, who was still holding tightly to my hand.

Brody stepped toward them. "Welcome to Nîso, guys. You are safe here." He walked toward the front door, but before I could usher the kids inside, two people walked around the side of the house.

Ghost and Annie.

Annie grinned widely when she saw me. "Raine! It's so good to see you." She raced toward me before she halted suddenly. "Uh, Brodes? You seem to have three wolf pups. Is there something you wanna tell me?"

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Ghost was searching around the perimeter, although when his eyes caught on Nico, he lowered his head quickly in deference. That made Christopher eye Nico curiously. Yeah, nothing got past the little Alpha pup. Ghost, Brody's mute snow leopard shifter best friend, signed quickly.

Brody cleared his throat. "Guys? I'd like you to meet my kids, Christopher, Carmen and Enit. Guys, this is my cousin Annie and my best friend Ghost." He looked down at Carmen. "Ghost doesn't speak either."

A look passed between the huge, pale shifter and the tiny beta pup. Although Ghost seemed too stunned to do anything but look terrifying, he gave the pup a tiny finger wave.

"Kids?" Annie looked perplexed. She placed her hands on her hips and frowned. "Brody, what did you do?"

I waved my free hand, still holding on tightly to Carmen. "Uh, my fault actually."

Annie frowned. "Well, I know you didn't accidentally knock up some poor female wolf shifter."

I snorted a laugh. "I'll tell you guys all about it, but how about we go inside first?"

Annie nodded, then seemed to notice Nico. "Uh, sorry, Sir. Welcome again to Nîso," she bowed formally, and Nico bowed back.

He grinned as he straightened. "No need for such formalities. I am the consort of your

Alpha Mate, so I guess that kind of makes us family, correct?”

I nearly choked on my own tongue and even Tex chuckled softly behind me. Annie’s eyes went even wider, if that was possible. “Uh. Okay?” She motioned for us to go in, and I led the pups toward the front door. “I have a feeling I’m going to need vodka for this conversation.”

I laughed. She had no idea.

Tex took the kids out the back yard to stretch their legs, and Ghost hovered out of sight to watch them for threats. I wanted to pretend that there were no threats in Nîso but that was naive. There were people who hated that I was the Alpha Mate. People with vendettas against Brody himself. Then there were purists who believed that Nîso should be a place for shapeshifters only and not the two natured shifters like Ghost, Tex and the pups. Then there were just people who hated vamps in general and therefore wanted to kill me on principle. But I trusted Ghost implicitly. He’d pulled me from a burning wreck of a house, and if that doesn’t say loyalty, nothing does.

It was probably better he wasn’t here for this conversation. Brody had gone down to see the Elders, and Nico was reclining with deceptive ease in an armchair. The night animals were starting to roam, and I could hear Tex telling the kids to come back inside.

Apparently, the meeting with the Elders and these outsiders was happening at ten, out of respect for me and Nico. Well, at least they were getting off on the right foot.

“So, wait, you have how many lovers now?”

I’d told Annie about Lucius and she was literally worried for my mental capacity. I couldn’t help but laugh, and even Nico’s lips twitched. However, she’d passed that over almost immediately for the fact that I now had six, full time lovers. Yeah. When

you said it like that, it did sound a bit nuts.

She downed the rest of her drink. “I don’t know if you’re a genius or absolutely insane. Six lovers. Think of all the orgies!” I could hear Ghost clearing his throat outside the doors. Yeah, shifter hearing was a thing.

Tex led the kids through the house and back into the room. They continued to eye Annie warily, coming to stand near us naturally. Annie, bless her, didn’t push. She smiled at them happily. “Have a good time? There’s an awesome hot spring a little ways down. You should get Brody to take you.”

Tex cleared his throat, his cheeks going pink. Ah yeah, we’d totally had sex in that hot springs. This was awkward.

Nico stood, saving me from the weirdness. “We should be heading to the meeting,” he said softly. I nodded, giving the kids a soft smile. “I’ll be back soon. Tex is here if you need anything.”

Annie walked into the kitchen, searching through the cabinets. “I’ll stay and help Pup. Oh shit, can we still call him that now there’s actual pups?”

I shrugged. “X calls him Snakelet, but I don’t think, uh, that would be appropriate.”

Tex’s face flamed even more, and his eyes promised me sweet, sweet retribution. Annie shook her head. “You guys are disgustingly sweet. I’m going to hard pass that endearment. Guess I’m just going to have to call you Tex,” she laughed. “What do you guys think of popcorn and movie night?” The kids already had heavy eyes and I doubted they’d make it through one movie, but they all seemed to perk up at the idea.

Christopher squeaked out, “Yes, please,” making Annie chuckle.

“My heart. You are just the sweetest little things.” She shooed me and Nico. “Go. Me and Tex have this under control.”

Ghost followed us to the door, before stopping to look over his shoulder. He signed something to Annie and she rolled her eyes. “I can walk home without you, Ghost.” He continued to sign furiously. “Fine, I’ll wait. You sure you aren’t a mother hen shifter?”

Enit giggled, making Annie smile even more. They were streaming Disney movies even before we were down the driveway, I could hear the distinctive intro music. We walked toward the Meeting House, Ghost a little behind us, watching the houses carefully for things that should not be there.

“Did Brody put you on babysitting duty?” Ghost gave me a small grin and a nod. I sighed. “He must realize I’m probably the most deadly thing in this town? Except Nico right now, I guess.”

Nico nuzzled my cheek. He watched Ghost sign. “He says that the outsiders are an unknown. Better to be safe.”

I sighed, but they were right. Still, I couldn’t help but needle Ghost. “So, have you asked her out yet? Annie, I mean.”

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Ghost frowned, giving me a disapproving look but shaking his head. “Don’t worry. Nico is a vault. But still, quit pussy-footing around already. You need to grab your chance by the balls, on the off chance she’ll grab your balls back.”

Ghost snorted, but he didn’t reply because we’d reached the steps of the Meeting House. All the lights blazed as usual, and Brody stood on the steps, the Matriarch with him. She smiled at me and Nico, beckoning us closer.

“Nico! It is good to see you,” she said, her eyes twinkling.

Nico leaned forward and kissed the old woman's hands. “It is nice to see you, Matriarch. You look as ravishing as ever.”

She slapped his shoulder. “Damn sly vampires. Keep your eye on this one, Raine. All smooth words and a pretty face.”

I grinned. “Might be too late for that one, I think.”

Brody’s grandmother, Nell, wiggled her eyebrows and I resisted the urge to giggle like a schoolgirl. I nodded respectfully to all the elders, and Nico seemed to be in his element. Nell grabbed my arm and walked me down the middle aisle. “So, my grandson tells me your consorts have adopted a litter of wolf pups.”

I swallowed hard. “Uh, it was a bit of an accident, but keeping them and protecting them is the right thing to do.”

The Matriarch was nodding, but her eyebrows were drawn together and fire blazed in

her eyes. “He gave me the condensed version. If I ever lay eyes on the children’s parents, I will personally wring their very last gasp of air from their poisoned body.” The words ended on a growl, and honestly, she was terrifying. You couldn’t let the wrinkled exterior fool you. She was fierce.

The group waiting for us were an odd assortment, and my senses struggled to define what they were. To my vampire senses, they felt like shifters, but they were something more. Two men and one woman stood at the front, the woman’s face pleasant as she took in our group walking toward her. She was a pretty little blonde thing, almost dainty in comparison to the men next to her. One was polished, his thick rimmed glasses and navy suit jacket making him look like a doctor, his sharp eyes assessing us as we approached only adding to the impression. The other one was bigger, sandy brown hair and slavic cheekbones. His expression was cool, but neutral. A fighter for sure, you could see it in his eyes.

The woman stretched out her hand and I took it. She was warm and alive, and definitely supernatural. But I couldn’t decide what. She shook hands with Brody and Nico as well, though the big one watched Nico with sharp eyes.

The supernatural with the thick glasses shook everyone's hands too. “Thank you for meeting with us on such short notice.”

Brody held his gaze, and neither looked away. Hmm, so not Pack animals anyway. Brody inclined his head, but didn’t drop eye contact until the other man looked away. “I am Brody, Alpha of the North Western Pack and Nîso. This is the Matriarch,” he said, indicating his grandmother. “This is my Alpha Mate, Raine. And this is the Founder of Dark River, Nico.”

“Your Alpha Mate is a vampire?” the girl squeaked out, and the man shot her a look. “Uh, sorry. Hi, I’m Layla, and high pressure situations make me lose track of my tongue. This is Alistair and Micah. My, uh, boyfriends?”

“Mates,” the burly one, Micah, corrected.

Alistair just rested his hand on the base of his spine. “We thank you for meeting with us on such short notice. But when word came back of your location, we thought it would be perfect for what we want to create. You see, we run a sanctuary down in Boston, called Eden. But it’s no longer as secure as we’d like, especially for the young ones, so we wish to start an academy for Preternatural beings. More than that, we want to create a refuge for them. And sandwiched between a powerful shapeshifter pack and the only non-predatory vampire colony in North America seemed almost too good to be true. It was like fate placed you in our lap as a solution to an issue that was very quickly spiraling out of control. We thought we found a place, but anywhere in the US is too close to the... threat.”

I raised my hand like this was high school, but seriously he just gave off sexy professor vibes. It was hard to resist. “Uh, excuse us newly undead types, but what's the difference between supernatural and preternatural?”

Layla raised her hand back. “Oh, oh, I know this one. It’s basically just an umbrella term, you know, meaning beyond ordinary? It would include people who are physiologically different, either born that way or changed, like you supernaturals, but it also includes humans with a few extras. The extraordinary, if you will.” She grinned as she said it and her smile was a little infectious.

“So your school would take everyone who isn’t a run of the mill Joe?”

Alistair nodded. “We just wanted to create a safe place for everyone.”

I could almost scent his desperation. Nico tilted his head. “What are you running from?”

I knew Nico well enough now that I could sense when he was using his vampire gifts,

and even though the question was innocent sounding, I could feel the underlying thread of power.

“Bounty hunters. They hunt down supernaturals, selling most on the black market, but more unique beings,” he slides a quick look at Layla, “they keep for themselves.”

So they would be delivering significant trouble to our front door. I looked between Brody and Nico, trying to judge their response. They both seemed hesitant, probably following the same thought processes as me. But I knew both Nico and Brody. Despite the risks, they wouldn’t let kids be persecuted when they could offer help.

“What would you need from us?” I asked softly, and Layla’s shoulders visibility relaxed.

I could have told her that wasn’t even close to agreement yet, but it was a good step toward it. “Just land between your two townships, but probably just outside of Nîso. We have a lot of shifters in our group.”

The bigger one, Micah, looked down at me with eerie gold eyes. “And your offer of support, if we are ever raided by the Hounds.”

The Matriarch slumped in a chair. “I speak for us all when I say we aren’t likely to let children be persecuted if we can offer them a haven. So it is best you tell us everything.”

We all sat, and as they spoke more and more, I wondered if the universe didn’t actually provide.

Chapter Nineteen

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We spoke long into the night, and although we didn't outright agree and draw up blood contracts there and then, as it would have to at least go to the Town Council in Dark River first, it was generally understood that we would help any way we could.

When Layla's mates shifted into some horror film version of a werewolf, my mouth swung open and stayed there. The fuck?

Nico leaned toward me and whispered in my ear. "Lycanthropes. I thought they'd all died out."

I didn't doubt it because they were scary as hell. Like, literal hell. I mean, we were all monsters, but these guys looked like it. But the way Layla looked up at the two of them, you'd think they were kittens frolicking through a field. They stood on their hind legs, growing immensely in size and a full coat of fur spreading down their limbs. Well, shit.

"That's fucking awesome." I leaned even closer to Nico. "Do you think their dicks grow too? I mean, out of scientific curiosity."

Nico gave me a stern look, his lips turning up at the edges. Layla, however, just looked over her shoulder and winked. Whoops, so maybe not quietly enough but I guess she answered that question. Kinda.

They ran off into the night, choosing not to stay in Nîso but head back to their organization, which was currently hiding in the backwaters of Montana. Apparently, they had a rich human benefactor with a shifter wife, who was willing to pay for the academy to be built.

Honestly, meeting the guys from Eden had just blown my mind. For some reason, I didn't even consider that there were more supernaturals out there than I could even comprehend. There were fucking angels. Angels!

When Nico had told me that on the way home from the meeting house, I'd almost fallen on my face. There was a whole world out there that had been hiding just under the surface, who'd stood behind me in the line at the grocery store, who'd sat beside me on the bus. Who'd gone to school with me. And I'd lived amongst it for decades, oblivious to the whole thing.

Mind. Blown.

When we crept inside, I was sandwiched between Brody and Nico, and I could hear the television still playing. Ghost waited out on the porch for Annie, and I smiled. I was going to shake up the mute shifter one day soon. He needed to make his move before it was too damn late.

Tex was lying on the couch, three small pups curled up on his chest, and all four of them were sound asleep. Annie sat on the other end, a block of chocolate beside her and the television remote in her hand.

"I think your guard snake needs some work," she whispered.

I looked down at my heavily tattooed, rock god mate. I smiled at the way he had his arm lifted, across his torso, making sure none of the pups could fall off in their sleep, though Enit looked perilously close. "No. I think he's absolutely perfect."

Annie gagged a little, but she was grinning. "I should be getting home. Everything went okay?" she whispered and Brody nodded.

"I'll tell you all about it later."

She nodded, and blew me a kiss. “I’ll talk to you later, girl.” She kissed Brody’s cheek and whispered. “Your new Pack is beautiful, Brodes. You guys will make amazing parents.”

I looked down at the sleeping pups as Brody hefted two into his arms. I grabbed Christopher gently, and instead of snapping at my fingers like he normally would if I woke him, he stayed asleep and snuggled into my neck.

Oh shit. I was definitely going to cry. I followed behind Brody and put them in the spare bedroom, surrounding them by a nest of pillows but close enough to each other so they were all in a puppy pile. Brody stroked all their heads softly one more time, and then tiptoed out of the room, and I followed behind him. By the time I got back to the living room, Tex was awake, yawning and talking softly to Nico.

I walked over and sat in his lap. I nuzzled into his neck and I just wanted to love on him. I wanted to curl my body around his and whisper to him how much I adored him. It was a scary feeling really, this overwhelming emotion that fills your chest and feels like it has nowhere to go. A terrifying fragility.

He wrapped his strong arms around me and held me tight, like he just knew that's what I needed. He traced my lips with his tongue. “Let’s go to bed.”

It was essentially the middle of the day for me, but I couldn’t resist. I would curl my body around Tex’s and Brody’s until they fell asleep, then I would sneak back out to Nico. I mouthed, “I’ll be back,” to my ancient vampire and he winked.

Brody’s room didn’t look much like his old room. All the items that could be salvaged were in boxes in storage, and so this was like a placeholder room. I hated it. Hated that because of me he’d lost his home. Hated that because of me, there was dissension in his pack. But I was too selfish to give him up.

He came over, pulling me against his golden chest. His long, dark hair brushed around his shoulders and his sharp cheekbones cast his face into darkness in this light. “What are you thinking about?” he whispered softly, dragging me into his arms as Tex got undressed.

I shrugged, not wanting to voice my thoughts because I knew exactly what he’d say. He would say I’m not responsible for other people's actions. Logically, I knew he was right, but emotions were rarely logical.

Instead, I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him, sucking his lip into my mouth. “Just thinking about how lucky I am, and how much I appreciate the hell out of both of you.”

He ran his nose up the side of my face, marking me. “Ah, no, Red. We are the lucky ones. I wake up every morning and thank the Ancestors they put you in my path. I know Pup feels the same way.”

Tex climbed into bed, and lifted the blankets invitingly. “Come here and let me love you, Raine. I just want to hold you.”

Well, how could I resist that? I climbed in, pressing my body along Tex’s and my cheek against his chest. Brody climbed in behind me. Pressed between my Mates, in the safety of my Pack, I fell into a contented sleep.

I ended up sleeping through the night and into the late morning. When I woke, Brody was gone, but Tex was still snoring softly. I kissed his shoulder and crawled out of bed to pee. However, the sound of metal clanging had me halting in the hall. I looked out into the open plan living/dining area, and my mouth fell open.

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There were pirates everywhere. How the hell had I slept through that?

Nico was dressed in a striped shirt that came from god knows where, and he was sword fighting with Carmen, who had an eyepatch made of aluminum foil and string, a shirt wrapped around her head like a bandana.

Christopher was walking the plank off the edge of the table, and Enit was holding a stick and apparently catching a fish off the back of the couch.

“Uh? Permission to come aboard?” I asked, poking my head around the door jamb. Nico straightened, grinning at me, until Carmen took advantage and stabbed him with her spatula.

“Oh no, I’ve been stabbed. Tell Raine I love her,” he gasped dramatically, sinking to his knees. He toppled to the side, arm outstretched. “Rose. Bud,” he gasped, which made me laugh and confused the hell out of the kids. But luckily I dated a film major in my freshman year, so I got theCitizen Kanerreference.

Carmen giggled as Christopher leaped from the kitchen table to the back of the couch, and I zipped across the room before he landed on his sister, catching him mid-air like a football.

I put him in the air, leapt over Nico’s now prone body, yelling, “Touchdown!”

His body was shaking in my hands, and I swore to myself. Shit. I fucked up. When I lowered him down though, he was giggling silently, his face stretched in a grin.

I swear, a happiness I didn't know existed swelled in my chest. I squeezed him tight and then put him down. "I gotta tell you, Christopher, you're a wolf shifter, not a bird shifter. You can still go splat on the tiles, you know."

He just grinned and headed over to Enit on the couch.

When I looked up, Tex was standing at the edge of the room, his eyes slitted like a snake. "I felt your happiness. I wanted to see what made you feel like that." He wrapped his arms around my waist. "But I get it. I've been there."

I rested my head on his chest. "This is weird. Can you imagine when we had such a meltdown about safe sex before I went off to college, we'd still end up twenty with a bunch of five year olds?"

Tex snorted. "Not even in my wildest nightmares."

Eventually, the kids got too wild to be indoors any longer, and Tex took them outside, shifting to his python form while the kids shifted to wolf, jumping over him as he wrapped them up. I stayed inside with Nico, curled up on the couch, listening to them play.

Nico pulled me onto his lap and kissed every inch of my skin he could get at. Not like he wanted to get into my pants, which let's face it, we all wanted, but like he was just happy to worship me as some kind of goddess. I all but purred as we sat there talking about the opening of The Immortal Cupcake. Everything was almost done. The menu was locked down, and I thanked whoever the patron saint of the undead was that I could no longer get fat. We were set to reopen next week, and I was so damn nervous. But at least no one was trying to kill me.

I knocked on my skull superstitiously, and Nico looked at me like I was insane. "What are you doing, Raine?"

“Knocking on wood.”

He laughed and kissed where I’d just tapped. “You are the strangest, most wonderful thing that ever happened to me, Raine Baxter.”

He kissed me again until I was panting. I’d never been to Nico’s house in Dark River, but I was suddenly seeing the joy of not all living together now that we had three kids. I snorted at the idea again.

“Hey, do you think Dark River will say yes to Eden’s request?”

Nico shrugged. “I will push hard for it, because I believe it is the right thing to do, but there are far more conservative members of the Town Council. However, I think Catherine will go for it, and that will help sway the other members.” Catherine was the chairwoman of the Town Council, and she was simultaneously warm and terrifying. I didn’t know that was a thing until I became a vampire. “Why do you ask?”

I shrugged. “Maybe we could send the kids there for school. Because you’re an ancient vampire, I’m a college dropout, Tex is far more musical than book-smart. X and Judge could teach them how to dismember bodies, but probably not algebra. I thought we’d have to ship them up here to Nîso for school, but it would be kind of good if they could go to school with, I don’t know, other kids. Not just shifter kids, but all kinds of kids.”

I shrugged. Nico kissed my forehead. “We haven’t passed having the kids by the Town Council yet either, but considering Brody is their Alpha and I am, uh, a father figure, I do not think they’ll protest too much. Besides, Beatrice seems to have adopted them as unofficial grandchildren and she holds more sway over the town than you’d think.”

Oh, I didn't doubt that one little bit. The diner, and Bert's food, was the heart of Dark River. It wouldn't be the same without it.

What would I do if the Town Council said no? Would I ship the kids up here to someone else? They'd be happy, even if they didn't like the idea of being in a Pack right now. But I was kind of attached to them as well.

I swallowed hard. I'd cross that bridge if we came to it. Or maybe I'd just burn it down.

Chapter Twenty

As the sun set, the kids got more and more agitated. Why? Because Brody's grandmother had invited us to a cookout. That meant other kids. Nell was a canny old bat, and as soon as word had gotten around that we adopted three wolf pups, she of course wanted to meet them. And she was the Matriarch. You didn't say no.

So the kids were scrubbed of dirt and freshly combed, but they were nervous. Enit was in a pretty dress, Carmen was in black leggings and an oversized hooded sweatshirt, and Christopher was in jeans and a plain t-shirt, his hair combed and perfect. He'd done it himself but I could still sense their anxiety.

I resisted the urge to hug him, because I knew that's not what he needed right now. But it was tough. "We are just going to go, and if you want to leave at any point, you just say the word. We'll show our faces and then skip town if we have to. No Pack dynamics. Just meat and good times." I wasn't sure if that was reassuring or not. "Besides there'll be other kids there, so you guys can play. It'll be fun."

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Christopher looked unconvinced, but then Brody and Nico emerged from the bedrooms, looking breathtakingly handsome. Nico kissed my cheek, and ruffled Christopher's hair. I winced and the boy glared before combing his fingers back through it.

Enit walked over to Tex and tugged on his fingers. "Can you piggyback me there?"

Tex's face softened. "Will you tell me where I need to go?"

Enit smiled up at him brightly. "Yep. I won't let you walk into trees, or holes, or onto the road, or anything."

She climbed up onto the couch and then jumped, trusting Tex to catch her. None of the kids had said anything about him being blind, or about him being a snake. You'd think they would be more curious, but they seemed to take everything in their stride. They saw Tex as just another person, not his disability. Kids were great like that sometimes, and these three kids were already unique enough.

Carmen held my hand, and I gave it a reassuring squeeze. Brody's temporary lodgings weren't far from his Grandmother's house, and it was easy to tell which one was hers as soon as we walked up. The faint sounds of children squealing came across the yard, as well as a small child sprinting across the front lawn as naked as the day he was born. I recognized the man chasing after the naked toddler. Tye, Brody's cousin and Annie's brother. I waved as he finally caught up to the fleeing nudist and he waved back as he spoke to the boy in a low, stern tone as he shucked him back into a diaper.

Christopher tensed beside me, his eyes wide and fearful. But when Tye kissed the toddler's pudgy cheek and then set him back on the ground, pointing him toward the backyard, Christopher relaxed. Was he worried that Tye was going to hurt the baby?

Tye ambled over, smiling down at the kids, though Enit had her face jammed into Tex's neck, and Carmen was hiding behind me. "Hey Brodes. Hey Raine." He bowed respectfully at us both. He smiled at Tex. "Good to see you Pup," he inclined his head again at Nico. "Deathdealer." He didn't say it in the usual derogatory sense, but rather as an honorific.

Well, okay then.

"Come on. Uncle Terrance is burning the burgers and won't let anyone else near the grill. I need you to use your Alpha cred to make him go drink beer and talk about beat up trucks with Steven."

Brody laughed and they walked off, and Christopher hung back a bit until he was walking just in front of Carmen. Still protecting her.

Tye looked over his shoulder. "Pretty Alpha for a little guy, aren't you?" he said to Christopher, making the boy's feet still. Brody murmured something softly, and Tye's face flashed between sadness to anger to purposeful gentleness. "That's a good thing, kid. Bet you protect your sisters like you are supposed to, even when they drive you crazy?"

Christopher just blinked up at him, not saying a word. I leaned down and grabbed his hand, pulling him to my side. "I got you," I whispered. I looked down at Carmen. "Tye is Annie's littermate."

That seemed to relax them both. Annie was easy to love.

Speaking of which, the woman herself was strolling across the yard, her gaze switching between Tye and the kids, her eyes narrowing. “Is this guy giving you a hard time? I could beat his ass when I was five. Pretty sure I can still do it now.”

Tye snorted and shook his head. “You wish.” Just then, the toddler he’d been chasing before was back, his diaper still on, but with a bottle of ketchup in his hand, his face smeared and a grin as wide as Texas across his face. “Do something about your nephew, Annie.”

Annie held up two hands. “No way, man. That’s all you. I’m taking these cuties up to meet Grandma Nell. Come on.”

Tye sighed. “I’ll catch up with you guys later. Ryan! Come back here! Drop that bottle right now!”

Annie sniggered as she waved us over. “Let’s go. The Matriarch is dying to meet you guys.”

Enit refused to hop down, but Tex seemed content to cart her around like a backpack for the rest of the night. Carmen had begun to shake at the mere mention of the Matriarch. Shit.

Nico picked her up, swinging her into his arms and she clung to his shoulder like a barnacle. But as soon as he wrapped his arm around her, she quit shaking. “Don’t worry, I am scarier than anything you’ll ever meet. I’ll chase away all the other monsters.” I wasn’t sure if that was particularly reassuring, but it calmed Carmen almost instantly.

Christopher tried not to hide as he walked up the stairs behind Brody, looking every bit as regal as a five year old could look.

Nell was chatting with a couple of the other elders, a baby propped on her knee. “Tex! Come here and kiss me, Pup. It is good to see you.”

Tex grinned, leaning down to kiss Nell’s cheek, his hands holding Enit on his back so she didn’t slip forward. Nell tsked. “Tex. You seem to be growing something on your back. Have you had the physicians check it out?”

Tex laughed as he straightened. “No, Ma’am. I’m kind of fond of it. I think I might keep her and call her Lumpy, what do you think?” He shimmied his shoulders, making Enit giggle a little on his back. I went forward and bowed my head, kissing Nell’s cheek. “Bless them,” Nell whispered to me. “I can smell their fear. It breaks my heart.”

I nodded, pulling back. “Mine too.”

Nico stepped forward and kissed Nell’s hand again. “Welcome, Nico. I hope to see you at many more of these family gatherings now that you are the consort to our Pack’s Alpha Mate.”

Nico inclined his head. “I’d like that, I think. It would be nice to converse in a less formal setting.” Nell flushed, and I held back a smile. To hear Brody tell it, Nell had had quite the crush on Nico before she married the previous Alpha.

Nico tilted Carmen toward Nell. “Matriarch, may I present my new nest member, Carmen. She makes a mean pirate and has a parry with a spatula that would impress even Black Beard.”

Carmen peeked out from Nico’s shoulder, showing so much bravery.

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Nell gave her the softest look, so full of love and acceptance I wanted to cry. “Welcome, Carmen.”

Finally, Brody stepped aside and Christopher was under the scrutiny of the Matriarch. He held her gaze, and then dropped his eyes, tilting his head slightly to the side.

Nell reached out, and caught his chin. Christopher flinched, but looked up. “You are part of the Alpha Pack, Christopher. You bow to no one unless they’ve earned your respect. I hope that one day, you’d like to consider us part of your Pack too, but until then, welcome future Alpha.” She nodded at him, showing him that she respected him.

Gah. Tears. I loved Brody’s pack before, but I think I could hug his grandmother for a month after this.

Nell straightened. “Well, now we’ve gone through all that, are you kids hungry? Brody, please go and save our food from your uncle, because otherwise we are all eating rubber tonight. Bobby?” She called, and all the kids playing on the lawn stilled and looked up at the deck. Bobby, the brave little dude from my last visit, who Brody had slated to be the next leader of Nîso, trotted up the stairs. He smiled at Christopher, and waved at Enit and Carmen.

“Yes, Gran?”

“These are Brody’s new pack mates. Do you want to take them and introduce them to the other children?”

Bobby grinned and nodded. "Sure I can." He looked up at Carmen in Nico's arms. He didn't even shy away from the powerful ancient vampire. He held out a hand. "Hey, wanna come and play hide and go seek? Only, we play it blindfolded and you gotta use your nose to sniff people out."

Carmen stared at his hand, and then at Christopher. Bobby looked at Christopher, his face so hopeful and reassuring. Finally, Christopher nodded, and Carmen reached down and grabbed Bobby's hand as Nico lowered her to the ground.

He smiled sweetly at her. "I'm Bobby. What's your name?"

She blinked up at him. "Carmen," she said so softly I thought maybe I imagined it. Bobby's smile got bigger. "Cool name. Let's go play!" He looked over to make sure Christopher was following. His feet stilled when Enit slid from Tex's back. "Oh, you're an omega! I've never met an omega before. Suze is going to be so excited. She's never met an omega before and she thinks you guys are just the most amazing..." I couldn't hear what he said as they all walked down the stairs, the pups following along behind him. He still held onto Carmen's hand.

Brody looked over at me. "She spoke."

I shook my head. I couldn't believe it either. "At least we know her silence doesn't have a physical cause." That was reassuring. I remembered Ghost's story about his pack cutting out his tongue, and that being the reason he didn't speak.

Brody kissed my cheek and walked off to remove the tongs from Uncle Terrance. Annie grabbed my hand and dragged me away to talk to a bunch of the other women, including Brody's sister Kelly. She looked between the kids and me, a single eyebrow raised, but didn't mention anything. They talked about starting a food co-op here, sending out buyers to get certain items wholesale and lowering living costs in the town. I settled into the pleasantness of the whole thing, so different from the first

time I was here. Everyone seemed to accept that I was Brody's mate now with little to no upset. Or at least none that anyone voiced. If anything, the pups helped that too, because if we could have three small kids around and we hadn't eaten them yet, then we couldn't be the savage monsters that we'd been painted as for centuries.

I thought about the heads on my doorsteps. Well, most of us anyway.

I kept one eye on the pups, but after a little while, and much coaxing from Bobby and his friend Suze, they began to play, and their smiles made my heart swell.

Arla, Tye's wife, nudged me with her elbow. "I know that look. Kids are a wonder. They will likely send you to an early grave-" Kelly snorted and Arla realized what she'd said. I laughed as her cheeks flushed bright red. "Uh, you know what I mean. They are stressful. But they are so worth it."

I could see what she meant. She seemed perpetually stressed, juggling one child or another, and passing them back and forth between their father and other relatives, but when she looked at them, it was with such heartwarming love.

Eventually, Brody called to everyone that the food was ready, and I went and gathered the pups. I got them all hotdogs and juice, sitting them down at the same picnic table as Arla and Tye's kids, Bobby continuing to talk a mile a minute, and Enit happily conversing for all of them. Christopher even seemed more relaxed.

I had a sudden moment of self doubt. Maybe raising them here among the Pack was the best option? Maybe with someone who'd parented shifter children before. Who hadn't been considered a baby themselves less than a decade ago.

Nico's eyes found mine across the grassed area, where he was talking to one of the Elders. And when I said Elder, this guy was older than dirt. But he laughed along with Nico, who looked eighty years his junior but was in fact thousands of years his

senior. What did age matter in the end? If I loved them, kept them safe, provided them with a home filled with love and support, wasn't that enough?

Tex wandered over, kissing the top of my head. "You okay?"

I shrugged. "Parental doubt."

Tye laughed from where he was cutting up the errant toddler's food. He was sitting perfectly still now. Strange that. "Ah, we had that with Bobby. Pretty sure we did everything wrong but he still came out okay, didn't you Bud?"

Bobby snorted. "You fed me gummy bears in my cereal."

Tye shuddered. "I learned that lesson the hard way. Unless you want four hours of demon possessed children, do not feed them candy in their breakfast cereal."

Chapter Twenty-One

The rest of the night was gloriously normal. Eventually we said our goodbyes. Brody was driving back to Dark River tonight, and he'd spend a couple of days. I was looking forward to my run back with Nico. I said goodbye to everyone, promised to come back soon, and the idea that they even wanted me back still blew my mind.

I put the sleepy kids into the back, knowing they'd probably sleep the whole way home. I kissed Tex and Brody, and watched their tail lights disappear down the road. I started to jog a little with Nico, who held my hand. Once we got over Nîso's warding, I pulled him closer and kissed him. "This was nice."

He cupped my face, tracing his thumbs over my cheekbones. "It was. I'm glad I came." He kissed me softly. "I'll race you back to Dark River?"

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“Hmmm,” I said, kissing him softly, my tongue tracing over his fangs. I pulled back and bit his lip, making him moan. Then I darted away, yelling over my shoulder. “You’re on! Last one there has to give the other one head!”

I could hear Nico’s laughter as he half-heartedly ran behind me. “Sounds like win-win to me,” he called, and I laughed as I hurdled a log. I was running as fast as I could, but I wasn’t under any delusions that Nico was slowing his pace to match mine. I’d seen Lucius at full speed and it was terrifyingly fast. Still, I wasn’t going to protest him letting me win. It really was win-win.

When we leapt over the creek outside Dark River, I waited behind a tree and then pushed him in, laughing as I took off even faster as he spluttered and cursed. I could hear his laughter as he stopped playing around, catching up to me easily.

I could hear his footsteps right behind me, and I looked over my shoulder, laughing.

But my laughter died in my throat when I realized it wasn’t Nico chasing me anymore. It was Lucius. My feet slowed, because you do not run from a predator. He pouted, but he didn’t stop until he was just in front of me.

“Lucius. I was worried about you.”

He frowned. “Worried? About me?” He seemed confused that anyone would be worried about him, which is probably fair considering he’s a pretty damn scary being.

Still, I nodded. “I haven’t heard from you in a week. I thought...” I didn’t know what I thought, but still, I was worried.

“You thought what, Raine Baxter?”

I squared my shoulders and looked him in the eye. Even now, I could see the predator pacing back and forth, the craziness just making his eyes a little too bright. I stepped forward, kissing him again. It was just like the first time. Electric. Dangerous. Head. “I thought you’d want to solidify our agreement as soon as possible.”

His arm wrapped around my waist, but he held me loosely. “I was not prepared for the, hmm, intoxicating quality of your lust. I had to put safeguards in place should I lose myself to you completely.”

Nico stepped out of the forest behind me, still damp, his clothes clinging to his lean body. “What kind of safeguards would they be, Lucius?”

Lucius gave Nico a toothy grin that wasn’t entirely pleasant. “That is none of your business, Brother. Needless to say, Titus approved everything, so do not despair that it’s something horrible and sadistic.” He pulled me closer now, until my torso was pressed against his, the tips of his fingers pressing hard into my hips. “But I am prepared to negotiate terms with you now.” His lips ran up my neck, and the harsh scrape of his fangs against my pulse point made me shudder. I wanted to climb him like a tree. But if he was a tree, he was wrapped in poison ivy and I had to remember that.

“We need a safe-word.”

“Bacon,” he murmured, breathing me in deeply.

“Uh okay?”

His hand slipped up my spine and it spanned my back, trapping me so close that I could feel the hot breath across my face. “What else, Raine Baxter? I can’t imagine

that is your only provision.”

“One of the guys is with us at all times, but preferably Nico. He has the strength to restrain you should you get too, uh, overzealous.”

Lucius looked up at Nico, his eyes blazing. “I see. I agree with that term. It would not be the first time Nico has watched me fuck his lover.”

Hurt flashed across Nico’s face, though he quickly chased the emotion away. I thumped Lucius on the chest with my fist, hard enough to make him oof. “I will not take you attacking my mates. Not physically or psychologically. They agreed to this, and if they suddenly decide that it's no longer what they want, I will rethink our arrangement.”

Lucius tensed, then ran his tongue up my neck, making me moan. “Normally, I would tear your throat out for speaking to me as such, but with you, I find it quite... arousing.” He pressed his hard cock against my lower body and I sucked in a breath as my core clenched. “Is that all?” he panted, and I realized he wasn’t as unaffected by our closeness as he pretended.

“While you’re in Dark River, you follow the town’s rules. That's a no brainer.”

My vampire eyesight let me see his eye roll in the darkness, but he nodded. “Sure. Boring and on my best behavior. Got it. Is that all?”

I nodded. “Yep, for now.”

Lucius groaned and dropped to his knees. He tugged at the edges of my shorts violently, popping the button and I watched it fly off into the woods somewhere. Faster than I could follow, he had my bottom half stripped of clothes, and his face buried between my thighs. He lapped at my core in one long stroke and my knees

shook.

“Holy shit,” I moaned, and Nico was there, his hands on my arm.

He watched his twin lift my thigh over his shoulder, his nose nudging my clit as he lapped at my pussy like a cat at cream. “Do you remember the safeword, Raine?” Nico asked softly.

“Yeah, bacon.”

Lucius, fucking bless his demented little heart, stopped and looked up at me, the anguish on his face searing my soul. “You wish to stop?”

I grabbed his pale hair and pulled him back to where he was. “God no. Just Nico giving me a pop quiz. For all that’s fucking good in the world. Do. Not. Stop,” I gasped as his tongue swirled around my clit.

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Where did these guys learn to tongue fuck? Because this wasn't oral sex. I was getting owned by Lucius' mouth, grinding against his face as his tongue flicked into my channel, rolling like a boat on the ocean. My orgasm beat down on me, coming out of nowhere until I was roughly gripping Lucius hair to keep him where he was.

But when it came to Lucius, I was not in charge. He tore his head away, biting my thigh, and I came hard, my juices coating his cheeks as he drank from me. His arm banded around my other thigh kept me upright as my knees buckled. He tore his fangs from my thigh, letting me go and catching me just before my knees hit the forest floor.

He flipped me so I was facing Nico, and Lucius was pressed along my back, his dick pressed between my ass cheeks. He tore off my shirt, throwing it over his shoulder, until I was naked before him. He lifted my hair, wrapping it in his fist and tugging my head to the side. He licked up my neck again, sucking my pulse point into his mouth as he sighed happily. "Do you want to kiss her, Nico?" he whispered, and the sound of his voice had me wanting to turn to look at him. It had lost the hard edge of mania.

Nico's face softened. "Yes."

Lucius tilted my face up. "Then do it."

As Nico knelt before me, he looked at me with eyes filled with emotion. "I love you," he whispered. Then his lips slammed into mine and I was squashed between them. Lucius lined his cock up with my pussy and slammed home in one hard thrust. I let out a feral moan that was muted by Nico's lips. He tore his mouth from mine and glared at Lucius. "Easy."

I could feel more than hear Lucius' manic laugh. "She knows the safeword. I think our little Raine likes rough hands, don't you?" As he said it, he pulled out and slammed home again, and I could say nothing but a whimpering yes.

We all knelt there in the leaf litter, and I could feel the rocks and twigs tearing at my knees as Lucius fucked me like my pleasure was his drug. Which I guess it was.

In contrast to his brother's rough hands and punishing thrusts, Nico made love to my mouth, his hands soft and gentle where they cupped my cheeks, his tongue teasing and exploratory. My mind wanted to shatter, and when Nico reached down to play with my clit, I wondered if it was possible to explode with pleasure.

Lucius pressed his fangs to my neck once more, piercing the artery and drinking me down in large gulps that dribbled out of his mouth and down over my overheated skin. It ran down, over my collarbone and onto my breast. Nico groaned, breaking our kiss to lap it up, following its path back up. Lucius moved away, lapping at the wound but not cleaning up his mess. He'd taken a lot of blood because I was a little woozy, but my body hummed as he continued to fuck me raw. Nico followed the path up my throat, cleaning up the mess his brother had made.

He pulled back, his lips rouged with my blood. He tipped his head to the side. "Bite me, Raine," he whispered. Guess he realized that Lucius had taken too much too. I was too weak to resist, the blood loss bringing up the predator from the depths where I stuffed her. I struck hard, sucking my lips around the wound as the warmth of his blood flowed down my throat. It was everything. Powerful. Hedy. Imprinted with centuries of power. I came again, my body bowing between them as I chased the high from their blood and body. Lucius yelled into the darkness as he emptied himself inside me.

I slumped forward into Nico's arms, unlatching from his throat, lapping at the wound, panting hard.

But Lucius wasn't finished. He pushed me and Nico forward until I was on my hands and knees over Nico's torso. My red hair still wrapped around Lucius' hand like a wound, making it tug at my skull and the pleasure pain had me shuddering. Finally, he let go of my hair and buried his face between my thighs again. As his cum leaked from me, he lapped it up. Holy shit.

Finally satisfied I was clean enough, he wrenched me back up by my shoulder and kissed me hard, passing a bit of saliva into my mouth. He still tasted like my juices and his cum. "Do you like it, Raine Baxter? That's what our combined pleasure tastes like. Ambrosia." He shuddered, and then he was on his feet, disappearing into the darkness before I could blink.

I collapsed into Nico's arms, a mess of emotions and the aftershocks of pleasure. Nico kissed my face, helping me stand and get dressed.

"Are you okay?"

I shrugged. Yes? No? I didn't fucking know how I felt. My body was humming, overloaded. My heart was wondering what the hell just happened and if I was sad that he just used me like that and then disappeared into the night. On the other hand, I was relieved he didn't hang around for this awkward aftermath. It was bad enough that Nico was here, looking at me with worried eyes.

I just gave him a shaky smile. "I just had like four orgasms and I feel, content? Satisfied?"

Nico frowned at me. "Then why do you look so sad?"

Did I? I shrugged and then tried to do up my shorts, belatedly releasing my button was gone and that my hands shook.

Wrapping strong arms around me, Nico picked me up, and I wrapped my arms and legs around him. “Come on, Sweetness. You can come back to my place. I’ll message your mates to tell them that you are staying the night with me.”

I nodded and buried my face into his neck. I wasn’t ready to tell them that Lucius and I had sex, or quite how much of my heart was invested in it.

Hiding in Nico’s arms was a much better idea.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Nico’s house was grand, but not quite in the way I thought it would be. It was a little like his office, eclectic and mismatched, but somehow it was more like the man himself rather than like someone threw up a thrift store. Small artifacts of a long life dotted the living rooms, ancient urns and a renaissance painting of three men, and when I looked closer, I realized that it was Nico and Lucius, either side of a slightly older man. When I say older, he looked in his late twenties rather than early twenties like the twins. But he was undeniably their brother, his face a little harder but he could have easily been a triplet. My money was on Titus.

But then, some things were quintessentially Nico. Beside the picture of the three of them that was in the style that looked really close to a Rembrandt, was a pop art Llama with “No Time For Your Drama” graffitied under it. The rug wasn’t anything old or prestigious like a Persian. Nope, it was fluffy and electric green. But boy, it looked good enough to roll in. There were Kraken cushions on his couch, and a velvet painting of a sad kitten. The whole place made me smile.

He tugged on my hand, and walked me up the stairs. We passed through a huge bedroom with a bed big enough for me, all my lovers, and half the Canadian National Hockey Team.

My mouth dropped open. “Holy shit, what size bed is that?”

He shrugged. “A huge one?”

I couldn’t imagine why a single man would need a bed that big so I asked. “Do you hold orgy nights here or something? Where’s my invite?”

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Nico laughed, as he led me into an ensuite bathroom which, again, was huge. There was a shower head in the middle of the room, and a single drain. A vanity ran along one wall. A small partition which I could only assume hid the toilet sat at the back. Underneath what I can only assume was a custom made shower head given the size, was a stone bench, that curved ever so gently like a wave. So you would just legit lay under the rain shower head?

I looked at Nico. “You definitely have orgies here. This bathroom is made for sex.”

Nico laughed and turned on the shower, and soon steam was heating up the room. “I promise you I’m not having orgies here. I just come from the times of Roman baths, and this seemed like a good alternative.” He tested the water on his hand. “Lay down. You’ll see why. The chair is made of lava stone. It warms quickly.”

I shed my clothes and climbed up on the stone bench which was surprisingly smooth and warm. Honestly, it was like lying on a giant tongue. The water poured down, just missing my head but coating my body in a steady thrum of pressure.

It was bliss. Pure, unadulterated bliss.

“I’m never leaving this shower,” I groaned. Nico laughed, but didn’t join me. I just laid there, letting the water wash away the night, loosening my muscles.

I looked over and Nico was gone, so I just closed my eyes and relaxed. I would track him down later. First I had to make love to this beautiful, beautiful shower.

I must have dozed off, because when I woke up, I was naked between silk sheets. I sat

up on my elbows, and beside the bed was a travel mug of what smelled like coffee, and a perfect little cupcake.

Under the travel mug with a picture of David Hasselhoff giving the thumbs up on the side, was a note.

Raine, you snored so sweetly I let you sleep. Rest. I have just gone to speak to the Town Council about our issues. Relax. Try the cupcake. The TV is in the base of the bed. Here is the remote.

A little arrow pointed to a small remote control.

I will tell the others that you are having a rest day, but I wouldn't rely on them staying away for long. They are as anxious for your affection as I am.

Always yours, Nico x

God.No man should be that sweet and give oral sex with such abandon. That's how you catch feelings. Throw in cupcakes and I was screwed six ways to Sunday. Actually, I was probably screwed on Sundays too.

Following Nico's orders, I sipped my coffee and ate my cupcake, which was orgasmic. I watched a cheesy chick flick about bounty hunters falling in love, and then finally dragged my lazy ass out of bed.

I slipped on one of Nico's shirts, a tee that said, "Love Bites, But So Do I." I laughed and decided I was keeping it forever. I slipped on my broken shorts, and my Converse. Just as I was stepping up to the front door, someone knocked. I pulled the door open, but there was no one there. I automatically looked down, because Lucius had conditioned me to expect heads. But there was no one there either. Unease crept down my spine, but I ignored it. Maybe I imagined it. Maybe it was a bird hitting the

door. That all sounded stupid, but there wasn't any kids to blame it in town except mine, and they were well and truly asleep right now.

I locked the door behind me, keeping my senses open. It was probably Lucius. It was definitely something he would do. Still, I zipped my way to the sheriff's office to pick up the key to The Immortal Cupcake that I'd left with Walker. As I pushed open the door, I stiffened. An unfamiliar vampire was talking to Walker, Judge sitting idly behind his desk, but it was a deceptive stance. I could sense that he was ready to pounce. Walker's eyes flicked to me, and his face was purposely blank.

Judge, however, walked over to me and kissed me with a shitload of possessiveness. "Raine. It's good to see you."

I couldn't tell what the hell was going on here, but I was on edge. "Hey, I just came for the key." I looked between Judge and Walker, the latter walking over to me, kissing me softly on my lips. "Here. I'll be over there in a moment. I am just walking our guest out."

I took in the stranger. He was average looking, plain brown hair combed over, a warm expression on his face, and eyes that made my blood run cold. Eyes like a serial killer.

"You are the succubus?" The man said, his accent heavily European. He inhaled deeply. "Barely a trace, but that is a good thing, no? No one wishes to be trapped. A slave."

He looked between my guys and his expression said it all. He thought they were slaves, disdainful of the town.

I edged back toward the door. "Apologies. I can't stay."

The man gave me a cool smile. “You can always come with me. I will shower you with jewels.” And pain. I could almost foresee the pain he’d inflict.

“I’m not up for sale. You can tell that to your peers too. I’m not interested.”

This time his smile was more like a shark. “Perhaps you just don’t have the right incentive yet.” The threat wasn’t even veiled.

“Leave,” I growled.

Judge walked me out, his face folded into a frown. When we were halfway across the square, I saw X striding in the direction of the Sheriff’s office. He looked like violence that was barely contained. Judge grinned. “We will see how they feel faced with their nightmares.”

I shook my head, my hands still a little trembly. “Who was he?”

Judge shrugged. “No idea, one of the European nests. Never heard of him, but he has obviously heard of you.” He sighed, pulling me closer. “We are going to have to make it clearer that you are not for sale. Something big.”

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I unlocked the cafe and looked it over. Everything was in its place, ready for tomorrow's grand opening. Still, the stranger had thrown me off. We set about putting the finishing touches on the cafe in silence, each caught up in our own thoughts. But when he brushed past me on the way to the kitchen, he stopped, grabbing my arm and pulling me close to his chest. "Don't worry about them, Rainey Day. You're ours and we will protect you with savagery that they have never experienced." He grabbed my shoulders and faced me to the cafe. I could almost imagine the people in here tomorrow. "Concentrate on this. You're going to be amazing, and I can't wait to see you kick some serious ass, then bring it home and let me take a bite out of that cake myself." He squeezed my butt cheeks and I laughed, whacking him over my shoulder. He was right. There was nothing I could do about the suitors who seemed to be gathering. I'd hoped the guy from last week would be the last of them.

That was naive of me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

As if the universe wanted to prove a point, two strange vampires stood on the doorstep of The Immortal Cupcake the following morning, and their whispered conversation didn't seem overly pleasant. Nico stepped in front of me.

"Can I help you?" His words might have been polite, but his tone was terrifying. Although he only just hit six feet, power emanated from his body that was so ancient that it was almost painful to me. He stepped forward, and the two vampires unconsciously leaned away, though the younger looking of the two halted himself before he could take that step. He put two hands up and gave me a congenial look.

“No harm meant, Nico. We heard that there was an available succubus, and some of us can feel the madness creeping in. We just want the chance to meet her,” he looked at me and flushed. “Uh, you. Sorry. I’m Ashar.”

I smiled and shook his hand. “Nice to meet you, but I’m afraid you have heard wrong. I am not available, and nor will I ever be.” I looked at the man beside Ashar, who didn’t offer up his name. He was glaring at Nico like it was all his fault, but didn’t even cast a sideways look at me. Ashar gave me a disappointed look, and slid his eyes toward his companion. “That’s disappointing, but understandable. Unfortunately, I can’t guarantee we will be the last. Actually, I guarantee we won’t be. The news of a succubus so young has riled up not only the American Nests, but those in Europe too.”

Nico sighed. “Walker has already found the remains of an older vampire in the woods. It’s missing a head, but just be aware that Lucius has claimed Raine, and coming for her will not be particularly healthy. Plus both the Judge and the Executioner are her mates.”

The other guy spoke for the first time. “And then there is you. It seems to me like you are monopolising her for your own gain. Are you so unwilling to share?”

He still didn’t look at me and I growled. “You will not speak about me like I am an object. Get the hell out of Dark River before you are cut into small pieces.” There was power in my voice, I didn’t know if it was my own vampire power or something I’d gained through my connection with Brody as Alpha Mate. But the man just slitted his eyes at me, and left.

Ashar sighed. “I guess I better be going too. Unless I can stay for the grand opening?” He looked so hopeful I almost agreed, but Nico growled low in his throat. “I would not suggest it. It wouldn’t be good for your health.”

Ashar grinned, and I thought he was quite handsome. Unfortunately, or fortunately, I was at my quota for dick. Seven days. Seven dicks. There was a reason for that. “A pity. Well, Raine. It was lovely to meet you. I wish you the best of luck balancing so many Alpha consorts.” His smile was infectious and I grinned back.

“I’ll manage. Good luck finding what you are searching for.”

Ashar gave a deep bow and then flashed to the other side of town. Nico didn’t remove his eyes from the man until he’d passed over the border.

I turned and unlocked the door to the cafe. Today was the day. The Grand Re-Opening and I was shitting proverbial chickens.

Nico had been up since three baking, so when I stepped inside, the smell of hot bread and sugar hit me like a wave. It was the most magical smell in the world, and wrapped around me like a reassuring hug. Despite the little hiccup on the sidewalk, today was going to be a good day. I could feel it.

Nico grabbed an apron from the back of the kitchen door and put it on. It was covered in kittens fighting with lightsabers, and was actually pretty cool, if a little kooky. Well, that was Nico in a nutshell, and I loved him for it.

I wandered in, putting on my own plain apron, The Immortal Cupcake logo on the top. Nico iced his concoctions, and I moved them to the front display case. I made sub sandwiches, wrapped in brown paper and tied with brown string, and stacked them high in the case too. We couldn’t do all the bread for the diner like Angeline had, but Beatrice had agreed to up her bread order so only one delivery had to be collected each week.

I’d found out that an old vampire with red freckles and bright orange hair, who looked about twenty but was actually closer to five hundred, did all the produce

collection every week, and we had to order and send him the delivery dockets for his trip into the city by Wednesday.

Dark River was a well oiled machine. I had to respect what Nico and the Town Council had created here. I'd thought I'd chafe, being forced to remain in the same place all the time, but how often had I ever left my hometown anyway, at least until I went off to college and then my doomed trip to Canada.

Finally, at nine p.m., I was ready. There was a knock on the front door. Brody and Tex stood out the front with the kids. Behind them, Walker, Judge and X were talking softly. Walker looked up, his face lighting up with a smile that made my heart thump wildly. He looked so damn proud and I was going to cry.

My family. My guys. They filled up the small front area of the shop, and the kids walked up to the cabinet with wide eyes. "Do you want one?" I asked softly and Enit nodded excitedly. "Which one?"

As they all chose their cupcakes, the guys grabbed a table. That was the only difference between my layout and Angeline's. I'd gotten a couple of large farm style tables so everyone was forced to eat together and they could accommodate my growing tribe. I sat down on Judge's lap, and he held me close to his body. "You're gonna do great."

X leaned over and kissed me, biting my ear softly. "You smell good enough to eat. Get the old man to bring home a bowl of that icing. I have some creative uses I'd like to experiment with."

I grinned even as my cheeks went red. I waggled my eyebrows at him and he laughed. Being with them relaxed me even though the butterflies in my stomach hadn't let up. They kept me distracted until it was finally time to open the doors to the rest of Dark River.

Flicking the sign from closed to open made my heart thunder in my ears.

Cresta and Ella were the first through the door, and something swelled in my chest. “Hey, thanks for coming,” I said softly. It was unexpected, really. They’d been best friends with Angeline for decades and my friends for such a short period of time. If anyone thought I was stealing Angeline’s life, it would be them.

But they hugged me on the way in, and seemed genuinely happy for me. “It looks great, Raine,” Cresta gushed. “Who knew that Nico was such a clever baker. Dessert and the dick. Best combination ever,” she whisper-shouted. Cresta was loud and had almost zero filter. It was one of the things I liked about her. Ella rolled her eyes.

I ushered them in and moved behind the counter. Townspeople slowly poured through the doors, and a weight lifted off my shoulders. Sure, it could have just been morbid curiosity, or maybe even the fact that it was the reopening, but it still felt like it was a good omen.

About half an hour in, Brody and Tex came over and kissed me goodbye, taking the kids home. Tex squeezed me tightly, pressing kisses to my face. “You’re killing it.” He nipped my lips. “Bring home the leftover cupcakes?”

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I laughed. “You got it.” Then because I couldn't help it, I dragged him into the kitchen and kissed the hell out of him. The pups and the store had consumed all my time, and I missed my Mate. Both of them.

“We'll get someone else to watch the pups tonight. Me, you and Brody will go for a run in the sunrise, what do you think?”

He kissed me one last time, bending me back a little over the arm banded tightly around my lower back. “I'd go anywhere with you.”

I believed him with my whole heart. Soon enough, all my guys had hustled off home or to their own jobs, and it was just me and Nico, and the town of Dark River. It felt good to have a purpose. Like I belonged somewhere.

I was Raine Baxter, Business owner and citizen of Dark River. And for the first time, I was completely happy with that.

The next week went too fast. There were three more suitors who wanted to ride the succubus bus, but they all left easily. Though one guy with eerily pale hair and eyes glared at me the whole time. It was seriously off putting, but Nico was enough of a deterrent. I'd gotten used to the strange vampires turning up on my doorstep, but I hoped it ended soon.

I was exhausted, waking up early and going to sleep late, I barely saw anyone outside of the bedroom. Brody had gone back to the Packlands for a couple of days to deal with some things, which meant Tex was in charge of the kids during the day, although both X and Judge had taken a day off to help him out. I was completely

jealous of their ability to daywalk.

When Brody had returned from the Packlands, he'd had a teenage girl in tow.

She looked a little like Brody, with his high cheekbones and full mouth. I'd briefly wondered if he had a love child, until he introduced us.

"Raine, this is Everly. She's Kelly's daughter." Well that explains the resemblance. "She's moving here to help you in the shop, and to help us with the pups during the day."

I looked between Nico, who'd come to stand beside me, and Brody. "Surely the Town Council couldn't possibly be happy about that?"

Nico nodded. "You need some free time from The Immortal Cupcake, and having more connections to the pack is never a hardship. It's good for public relations."

I looked back at Brody. "Kelly okayed this?"

It was Everly who spoke. Well, snorted. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life in Nîso. They won't let me go to the city by myself, so this was a compromise. Though how a township of vampires who want to eat me could possibly be considered safer than the city is beyond me."

I couldn't help my smirk, because she wasn't wrong. "She makes a decent point. You guys smell delicious. Are you sure you want to take that risk?"

Brody shrugged. "They are fine with Tex, and now the pups. I have faith in them, and if not, well, Everly is Kelly's daughter after all."

I didn't know what the hell that meant, but I let it go. I let out a shuddering sigh.

“Thank God. I don’t think I could handle working from sundown until sun-up for the rest of eternity.” Everyone looked relieved then, and I realized they thought I was going to throw a tantrum about it. They didn’t appreciate how exhausted I was. How much I missed everyone. “Welcome aboard. Are you going to live above the cafe?”

In my old apartment. The one where I’d nearly killed Walker. But it was still warded against vampires. Well most vampires. The only one that was a threat to Everly was dead though.

The girl looked excited, and I realized she was probably a year or so younger than me. I just felt a million years old. Dying will do that to a person.

Brody scruffed her hair and she looked wildly annoyed. “She can help out with the pups too, so we can have a bit more free time. Babysitting her cousins, so to speak.” Everly groaned, but there was a smile on her face.

“Hell, I’m in. Welcome to Dark River, Everly.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

It was my date night with Walker, and he’d come over straight after work. He was mouthwatering in his uniform, and I grinned at the handcuffs still on his belt. Handcuffs in a town of vampires seemed kind of redundant, right? But apparently they were magic infused silver that sapped the strength from any paranormal being.

Tex and Judge sat on the couch, Nico was at his house, and X was doing God knew what. Probably building a Frankenstein in his clinic. Brody was back with the Pack, again. Apparently there was shit going down in the Shifter world that needed his attention, but I missed my Shapeshifter Alpha.

We went to Walker’s house and he ran me a bath as he cooked dinner. I mean, not the

typical definition of a date, but I needed it all the same. The time alone to just relax. I floated in the hot water, its cloud of bubbles tickling my nose, I let out a shuddering breath. Yeah, I definitely needed this, and Walker knew it.

When I emerged an hour later, Walker was in a pair of low slung jeans, his hair combed back and his feet bare. He'd decorated the dining table with candles and there was wine chilling in a bucket. It was romantic as hell, and it made me a little misty. Even though we were committed, he still made the effort to be romantic.

Okay, so maybe having seven mates wasn't all bad. I was only dressed in one of his button down dress shirts, the sleeves rolled up, but he looked at me like I was the most amazing thing he'd ever laid eyes on. I tried not to think about how much of that was me and how much of that was my succubus blood, instead taking it as what it was. Two lovers staring at each other in awe.

"Raine..." he breathed. "I made food, but suddenly I'm no longer hungry for marinara."

I flushed. "It smells delicious though."

He was in front of me in the blink of an eye. "Not as delicious as you," he groaned as he swept me up into his arms and walked me toward the couch. He sat down, his hands running up under his shirt over my lace covered ass.

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I kissed his lips, letting him consume me like I was his last meal. I ran my hands up over his abs, tracing the indentations with the tips of my fingers, memorizing his feel in case I lost my hands tomorrow. The soft glow of the streetlight cast his face in shadows. “We should close the blinds,” I whispered against his lips and he groaned.

“Let them watch.” He flipped me around so I was facing the windows, and with the light behind us from the kitchen, you would be able to see us easily from the darkness outside the windows. He slowly unbuttoned the shirt, until his hand could slip inside and cup my breast. “Let them see how fucking beautiful you are when I touch you here, and your eyes close, your lips parted just enough that I want to bite them.”

One of his hands slipped down my ribs, over the swell of my stomach to the line of my panties. I sucked in a breath as his fingers brushed over my mound to my clit. “They don’t get to hear how pretty your breathy moans are when I touch you. When I soak my fingers in your juices.” He pushed his fingers inside me and my head fell back against his shoulder. “But they can see the way your hands are curling on your thighs. They way you are riding my hand. They know it's me bringing you this pleasure, know that I’m making you feel good enough to come all over my hand. Are you going to show them how much I love pleasuring you, Raine?”

His dirty words, whispered just behind my ear, were making me pant, my heart thundering. I ground against his palm, just like he said I would. Holy shit, the good Sheriff was a goddamn exhibitionist. I already knew that, kinda, after our talk and er, other things in The Immortal Cupcake. Plus he had no problems watching me have sex with the other guys, so it made sense that he would like to show me off like this, when it was his body making me writhe.

I whimpered as the heel of his hand put the perfect amount of pressure on my clit. “Let them see you come, Raine. Let them see you fuck my hand as you chase the first of the dozen orgasms I’m going to give you tonight,” he growled, scraping his fangs down my spine. As if his words had a direct link to my vagina, I came on his fingers, both of us groaning as my body clenched around him.

“Do you think anyone saw? Do you think they are still out there, waiting to see you slide up and down on my cock?” My eyes raised to the window, and though it was dark and still outside, I couldn’t help but wonder. My body clenched around his fingers again. “You like the idea of someone out there watching me fuck you, don’t you?”

Where the hell did my fine, upstanding, chivalrous Sheriff get such a filthy mouth? “Have you been body-snatched?” I moaned as he scissored his fingers against my g-spot as he removed his hand and shifted me forward. I heard the quick whisper of his zipper coming down, and I lifted my hips so he could push them down.

When his jeans were around his knees, I pressed backwards, feeling the hard length of his cock pressed against my ass. I felt his hand stroke it, his other hand urging my hips up and back.

When he sank into me, I moaned so loud that they probably heard it from my house. “Walker,” I moaned and he thrust himself up until he was seated all the way inside me. He pulled me back turning my face so he could twist around and kiss me. I rolled my hips, seeking even the tiniest bit of movement. “Are you ready to give them a show?”

“Yes,” I breathed and then he was grabbing my hips and moving me, rolling my hips with his strong, broad hands. The position had his cock hitting every happy part inside my body, and I slipped my hand down to rub my clit as well. The pleasure was too big. Too much. But I wanted more. I wanted it all, right now. I rode him hard, or

he rode me hard, I couldn't be sure. Either way, I was a sweaty, panting mess and his fingers were flexing so hard I worried he was going to accidentally break something.

He grabbed my hips, pulling me up and down with barely contained violence until I screamed my orgasm for the world to hear. And see. "That's it, Baby. Scream my name. Let them see you come." He growled as his strokes got ragged until he slammed me down, coming with a guttural roar.

I collapsed back against him, and he grabbed the edges of his shirt, gently buttoning them back up even though I was still impaled on his cock. It was like closing the curtains after a stage play. Eventually, he slipped me from his cock, and spun me around. He kissed me gently, reverently, back to my respectful, chivalrous Sheriff. "Well aren't you full of surprises, Walker Walton."

He chuckled, and kissed my cheek. "Hmmm?"

I nodded. "And I thought the bike was the most surprising thing about you. Apparently, I was wrong."

He grinned and kissed me again. "Hungry?"

I kissed my way down his jaw. "Not for food."

He groaned, and we provided the rest of the street an encore performance.

My body ached in all the best ways when I sat down for the meal that Walker had cooked. Everything was a little chewy, but that would teach him for looking so sexy. I couldn't be held responsible for my actions.

We were on the second glass of wine, and I was soaking up the last of the garlicky sauce with freshly baked bread when Walker's phone rang. He screwed up his nose

and sighed. “Why do they always ring on date night?” he grumbled and I mock-pouted at him.

Whoever’s name was on the phone had him frowning though. “Nico?”

My hand stilled. When his frown turned to shock, I dropped my bread. “When?” Whatever Nico was saying on the other end of the line had him standing, buttoning his pants and pulling on a shirt. “We’ll be right there.”

I stood. “What is it?” My heart was my throat. “Tex? The pups?”

He shook his head. “Someone tried to decapitate X.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

I didn’t even put on pants. I was out Walker’s front door, going as fast as I could on bare feet as I raced toward the doctor’s office. I burst through the doors and Judge was there. X was spread across the stainless steel surgical table, his head hanging at a grotesque angle.

No. No, no, no. “X!” I launched myself toward him, and Brody caught me around his waist. “Wait Raine. He’s alive, but barely. Lucius interrupted whatever was happening, and probably saved his life.”

My eyes moved wildly around the room until they landed on Lucius. His face was grim, none of his normal craziness in his eyes. But still, could he have done this and created some kind of crazy story to cover it up?

My gut said no. When he met my eyes, there was a rage in them, a thirst for vengeance. Considering he’d been the reason X was on this very table less than three months ago, that seemed a bit preposterous. But the clear eyed Lucius was nothing

like the crazy psycho I met when he strolled into town. Judge was there, spattered with blood, his hands staunching the bleeding as Nico stitched. I was worried about Brody being here because vampires with a significant loss of blood could be... not in their right mind. But I needed X to live. I shucked myself out of Brody's arms. "You need to get out of here, in case someone comes for Tex or the pups. Get Everly and take her back to my house, just in case." I lowered my voice. "I have a bad feeling about this." Brody nodded, leaning down to kiss me quickly. "He'll be okay, Red. He's tougher than an old tan hide. He'll make it."

He stepped out of the operating room and shifted into a fox, racing into the darkness. Panic lodged in my chest. What if someone had lost it? What if a vampire had lost control, they could all be in danger?

"Feed him, Raine," Judge said gruffly and I stepped forward, offering my wrist up to his mouth. His eyes were closed and his skin incredibly pale. He looked properly dead.

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Blood oozed between the stitches with every slow thud of his heart. I bit my wrist, tearing open a vein and holding it above his lips.

“It was close to severing the spinal cord. He’d lost so much blood by the time Lucius got him here that I thought it was too late.” I noticed Judge had his own ragged gash in his arm and was deathly pale. Walker moved toward him, severing his own wrist and holding it to Judge’s mouth. “Drink. We need your medical expertise.”

Judge was a field medic in the Civil War, so he knew how to handle battlefield wounds. He said he didn’t have X’s finesse, but I wouldn’t know because the only time any surgery had happened in Dark River, it had been X on the table.

My blood pooled and dribbled over his lips as he didn’t swallow. I could see his body trying to heal itself little by little, as Judge cauterized wounds and Nico stitched flesh back to flesh, muscle back to muscle. I wanted to throw up, but more than that, I needed X to swallow down some of my blood so he’d heal faster.

“Come on, you stubborn bastard. Drink,” I whispered in his ear. “Drink!” There was power in the word, and then he was wrapping his lips around the wound on my wrist, sucking in deep mouthfuls. Thank God. “That’s it,” I cooed softly. “I need you, so heal good because otherwise I’m going to nuke all my tea in the microwave forever. And drink it way too hot. And cry because you mean too fucking much to me to just die.” I whispered the words, but by the way Nico leaned down and kissed the top of my head, everyone heard.

Judge stood, and Nico did the last few stitches. “Hopefully that’s enough,” Judge said, his mouth still smeared with Walker’s blood. Lucius walked to the fridge and took

out half a dozen blood bags, passing me two and I downed them like a shotgunned Bud.

X's eyes popped open, but there was none of the funny Brit in their dark depths. Just feral predator. Faster than I could follow, and too fast for a being that had been on the brink of death a moment ago, he had dragged me onto the operating table, pulled under his body and had his fangs in my neck, drinking straight from the carotid artery in my throat. Nico stepped forward to peel him off, and my eyes caught on Lucius. His face was set in a snarl, like he was prepared to tear X apart. I held out a hand, and it was still dripping blood onto the floor.

“Wait. Leave him,” I croaked out, the pressure in my throat insane. “He’ll come back. It’s okay.”

Lucius stepped forward and licked the blood from my wrist, healing the wound. When it was clean, he didn’t let it go though. I ran my other hand over X’s short hair, so soft against my palm. “X, you gotta come back to me now. You’ll feel like a right shit if you murder me,” I said in a terrible British accent and someone snorted. X didn’t stir, just continued gulping me down in huge mouthfuls. “Come on, Baby. Ease up now.”

Someone held another blood bag to my lips and I sucked it down. X clung to my body, holding me to his chest like a feral animal guarding its food. But his hips rocked against mine, and my body responded despite the fact that X was probably trying to kill me. And when his venom coursed through my body, I no longer cared if he exsanguinated me completely.

“Holy Queen’s balls,” I gasped as I curled my body into the rough material of his pants. “X, I need you to come back to me so I can fuck you properly, you pain in my fucking vagina!” I gasped as another orgasm washed over me.

His body was responding to mine, but he didn't hear me. I could feel it in the hard way he held my body. I stuck my finger in my mouth, slobbering it up good, and then poked it in his ear, swirling it around good.

He reared back, looking down at me with horror. The cut around his throat was puckered and scary, the skin tightly held together with stitches, the ends poking out like tiny spider legs. It was gruesome, and made me want to cry. X blinked several times, orientating himself.

“Love? If anyone should be poking damp things repeatedly into any hole, it should be me.” He rasped, and leaned down, licking my face. It was then I realized I was crying. Just then, another orgasm rocked my body. A crying orgasm is not as fun as it sounds.

I grabbed X's shoulders and pulled him down to me, holding him close as the adrenaline finally started to hit me, my hands shaking. “You're okay. You're okay.” I whispered it over and over again, and X grunted as he saw the mess he made of my neck. His tongue lapped at it repeatedly until the wound closed. “Sorry. That was a little rough, even for me.”

He sounded guilty, and I squeezed him tighter. “I would have taken more if it meant you didn't die.”

He nipped my chin. “It sounds like you care, Love.”

I wrapped my arms around his chest and buried my face in his neck. “Of course I care. I love you, you giant asshole.”

X stilled, hell maybe the whole room stilled, but he pulled back and looked down on me, his face more serious than I'd ever seen it. “And I am the luckiest fucker in the world for it.”

He kissed me again, his hold on me no longer territorial, his hands gentle and searching. We were about to have sex right here, on an operating table coated in his blood. Walker cleared his throat.

“If you’re good, I’m going to see what I can find out about X’s attacker before the trail runs cold.”

Judge murmured something into X’s ear even as he kissed me, and I thought for a moment that X would drag him into this crazy near death sex fest we were going to have. But Judge just ran a hand across my hair, and Nico leaned down and kissed my head. X worked his way down my jaw, unbuttoning Walker’s bloodied dress shirt as he went.

“I’m pretty sure you’re every vampire’s wet dream right now,” he murmured against my nipple.

That was the moment I realized Lucius still had my hand clasped in his.

Lucius’ eyes looked wild; not with madness, but with lust. “I don’t trust him not to bleed you dry,” he muttered.

X rested his head on my sternum, his eyes narrowed as he stared at the older vampire. Then he shrugged. “Fine. But I get to tie you up one day.” It wasn’t a suggestion. It was a statement of fact.

I moaned softly as I pictured this ancient vampire, wild and violent, tied to my bed head. At my mercy. A man who hadn’t been vulnerable in centuries.

They both inhaled deeply. “Done.”

X’s grin was pure wickedness. “Then the top half is all yours.”

With that, X was pantless quicker than it took me to suck in a breath as Lucius sucked my nipple into his mouth, his teeth scraping the sensitive flesh. As he bit down, X sank inside me, his cock impossibly hard considering he'd just leaked most of his blood over the floor. I had a brief moment of indecision about whether we should be doing this, considering he was so close to being dead-dead ten minutes ago, and almost drank me dry, but then he pulled out and slammed home. My morals and ethics got subsumed by the pleasure burning through my blood.

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Lucius bit down around my nipple, sucking my blood through small puncture marks on my areola and I rocketed up against his head.

“She likes that, Old Man. Maybe you should do it again because,” he grunted, “She’s gripping my cock like a vice and I love it.”

He was slamming in and out of me and my orgasm hit me once more. My body was wrung out. I hadn’t had this many orgasms in a night since the Shibari incident. Lucius’ hand cupped my cheek and when he slid his finger past my lips, I sucked it into my mouth, scraping my own fangs over it, until I made a small cut in his skin. When Lucius’ blood hit my veins it was like being hit by a train that you didn’t see coming. So much terrifying power, so addicting. I sucked harder, drawing more blood from his finger, and moaned around it, unwilling to let it go for even a second, even as X came in bruisingly hard slams. Lucky my pussy had that vampire healing, otherwise I’d be walking funny tomorrow.

He collapsed against my body, his head resting on my abdomen, his huge torso pushing my thighs wide. He panted even as he kissed my stomach.

Lucius pulled his finger from my mouth with a pop and kissed me. A tentative but possessive kiss, and when he stood, he was hard as a rock. Instead of insisting that it was his turn, he nodded to X. “I am glad you are okay, Executioner.”

X gave him a thumbs up. “Thanks for saving me, you old psycho.”

Lucius grinned, and I shook my head. Maybe crazy spoke crazy, who knew?

The look Lucius gave me was strangely vulnerable. “Until next time, Raine Baxter.”

And then he was gone. I had to give it to Lucius, he made an impressive exit. X looked along my body, staring into my eyes like he wanted to say something important.

I should have known better.

“Do you think if I had a cup of tea, it would leak out of the holes in my throat?” he joked, and I whacked him, injuries be damned.

I was glad he lived, because I didn’t think I could go through life without him.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Walker and Judge came up frustratingly empty. We took X back to Judge’s apartment, so he didn’t scare the kids with his still healing throat. It was as terrifying as it was awe inspiring. It healed slowly, but I could watch it knit together if I stared for long enough. It would take a couple of days to make a full recovery, but I didn’t think we’d be able to get him to rest that long unless I hopped into bed with him. Even then, he wouldn’t be resting.

Still, I wasn’t ready to leave him yet, so when he climbed into Judge’s bed, I climbed in after him. And when he went to sleep, it was with me wrapped around his back like a limpet. Judge climbed in behind me and we could already hear X’s soft snores. Apparently healing yourself back from the brink of death followed by fucking the ever loving hell out of a girl really sapped your energy.

“You okay, Rainey Day?” Judge murmured into my hair.

I sighed and snuggled into his back. “Yes. I’d feel better if they knew who did this.

What if they come after Tex or Brody next? They aren't as strong as X. As stubborn. I'm not sure even Walker could have survived that level of decapitation."

Judge hushed me. "It might not have anything to do with you, Darlin'. You might not know this because you seem to only get the charming side of his personality, but X is a fucking asshole with a lot of enemies that would happily mount his head on their wall. You are making kissy face with one of them. He stands to gain a lot with X gone."

Lucius. My gut said it wasn't him, and I was going to follow that instinct. "It's not Lucius."

Judge made a rude noise. "You don't know him, Raine. I once watched him dissect a vampire who'd wronged him just to see how he worked. He is certifiable, even by vampire standards."

I understood that, at least on a fundamental level. But there were layers to Lucius, as there were to all of them. They were men, but they were also predators. Did I really know Lucius' mind? I was a fool if I thought I did. But the look in his eyes as he watched me come beneath X's body wasn't one of jealousy or even possession. So I shook my head. "I don't think it's him."

Judge squeezed me closer. "Okay, Rainey Day. I'll trust your instincts. But there are very few creatures in this world that can get the jump on someone like X, even if he is going soft in his loved up state."

I snorted. Yeah, like Judge could talk. But instead of saying anything, I let myself doze for a few minutes. I'd have to get up in a moment, give Everly a tour of the cafe and explain what I needed her to do. Maybe I should close the shop for the day, because I was fairly sure that Nico hadn't had time to bake.

With all these thoughts whirling in my head, I fell into a fitful sleep.

Nico was a good man. Even though we were both exhausted, he'd been up since the middle of the day baking. When I strolled in, the pups were watching a Disney movie on the projector screen in the bookstore part of the cafe, bowls of what Nico called cake scraps in their laps. It was just basically the bits he cut off cakes so they sat nice and flat, mixed with leftover frosting and whatever sprinkles they wanted to add in there. I was glad shifter kids burned energy faster than normal, otherwise they'd look like corgis instead of wolf pups when they shifted. I wandered in, sitting on the edge of the couch. "What are we watching?"

"A movie about a fish shifter who falls in love with a guy she saw once and decides to permanently maim herself so she can stalk him to his house and then gaslight him until he falls in love with her." Brody said from where he was sitting on the floor.

Enit looked over at him confused. "We're watching *The Little Mermaid*?"

I giggled and kissed Brody. "Prince Eric was so dreamy," I teased and he harrumphed.

"But what example are they setting?"

I shook my head. The guy had been someone's guardian for all of three seconds, and already he was worried about Disney setting unrealistic examples for children. It was kind of adorable and kind of weird.

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“Hey, I grew up on Disney, and I turned out okay?”

He raised an eyebrow and I snorted. Fine, maybe okay was a bit of an exaggeration. I did end up dead in a ditch and then with seven boyfriends, so maybe Disney didn't have quite the desired effect. I scruffed Christopher's head. I leaned down and kissed Enit's snowy white hair and fist-bumped Carmen. We'd settled on that as an appropriate form of affection without pushing her boundaries.

See, I wasn't fucking up this parenting thing completely.

I walked back into the kitchen, turning on more lights as I went. It got dark earlier this time of year and I for one was happy as hell. Bring on winter to block out that burning ball of pain, so I wasn't trapped in my house for so long every day.

Nico was icing cakes as Tex sat on the stool beside him, softly talking. I smiled at the domestic scene. Nico and Tex were worlds apart. Probably the most distant of my lovers. But Nico loved pop culture and Tex was a bit of a closet nerd, so they got on damn well.

Everly was carefully decorating a cake on the other side of the counter, apparently lost in the task, though her head was cocked slightly like she was half-listening.

“All I'm saying is that how do we know the trolls aren't the bad guys? If they hadn't told her that her powers were terrible, she would've still known love. Her parents wouldn't have locked her in the basement and thought she was some kind of horror. She wouldn't have had a complete meltdown,” Nico was arguing softly.

I frowned. Trolls? What the hell were they talking about?

Tex threw his hands in the air. “Without the trolls, Queen Elsa would have lost control of her powers and maybe done some serious damage to Anna.”

I cleared my throat. “Uh, are you guys arguing about Frozen right now? Or am I hallucinating?”

Tex grinned in my direction. “Sorry, the kids watched Frozen earlier and Nico is convinced that the trolls are evil.”

Nico pointed a spoon at him. “Not evil. But they stole that boy and his moose.”

“Reindeer,” Everly corrected automatically.

“Whatever. They decided to keep him and then he got Stockholm Syndrome. They mightn’t be evil, but they are definitely more malicious than cute.”

Tex huffed. “I can’t argue with him. Come kiss me and tell me I’m right.”

I laughed as I walked over to him, stepping between his knees so I could hug him properly. He kissed me softly. “How’s X?”

I shrugged. “Healing. He doesn’t remember anything, but I’m worried. What if it has something to do with me? What if it has something to do with you-know-what?” It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Everly, but the less she knew about my succubus bloodlines, the better.

Tex shrugged. “Maybe? But it makes no sense. Why X? He’s not the strongest, that would be Nico or Lucius. And he isn’t the weakest, that would be me. It seems more targeted to me. Someone has a grudge against X in particular.” He nuzzled my cheek.

“I love X, but the guy would be on a hundred hit lists. Even Lucius wanted to kill him at one point, and we both know his fondness for decapitation.”

Nico stiffened, but Tex couldn't see that. “Do you think it was Lucius?” I asked softly.

Tex stopped and considered it. “No. I don't think so. If Lucius really wanted X dead, he'd be dead. That vampire is scary as fuck and I'm not too proud to admit it. But he seems to really like you, and in a weird way, seems to like us too. I mean, he didn't have to ask permission to, uh, sleep with you? He could have easily killed us all off and then stolen you for himself. Instead, he tried to woo you with severed heads and stolen kids like that shit is romantic.”

Everly sniffed from where she was putting the final touches on a giant pink cake. “I think the heads of your enemies are kind of romantic.”

“See!” I exclaimed, and Nico groaned. I grinned at Everly. “Just don't let Brody hear you say that.”

Tex chuckled, gripping me tighter to his chest. “Women are crazy.” He looked over at Nico. “What about his maker? I know he's one of Lucius' progeny.”

Nico bared his teeth in a look that was completely feral. “Antoine is vermin. But he knows better than to breach the barriers of my town.”

I cocked my head. “Do you think he wants to kill X?”

Nico nodded. “There is no doubt in my mind. But he is a coward first and foremost. He and Lucius had a falling out a few centuries ago, and it is only due to Lucius' sense of duty that he still walks the earth. If he came for you, or for X, I am pretty sure Lucius would end him out of spite.”

Just another enemy we couldn't see. What was one more, right? I sighed as I stood. It was time to start getting things ready to open shop.

Tex stood with me. "I better get the pups home. Don't forget tomorrow night is the waning crescent moon. Both Alexander and Miranda will be here to perform the ancestry ritual."

This time I hadn't forgotten. I just didn't know which freaking moon was the waning crescent moon. I might be a creature of the night, but I wasn't a shifter. I wasn't ruled by the moon.

I tried to judge if Tex was nervous about the whole thing, but he seemed okay. "No matter what, your family has your back, okay?" I whispered to him, and he smiled as he nodded.

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“I know. If it turns out I’m not Alexander’s progeny, I would feel sadder for him than myself. He’s so fucking lonely, Raine. So many centuries with no one. I can sense the hope inside him that it's true.”

My heart went out to Alexander, but I didn’t have the capacity to heal his centuries-old hurts as well as juggle all my own baggage. I was one woman, not JFK Airport.

I kissed him once more and went to work. The routine was becoming calming, and these quiet moments before we opened were kind of cathartic to me. Enit came over and started fixing the little jars of flowers in the middle of the table, working beside me, and it became even more special as I talked to her softly about all sorts of nonsensical stuff that kids loved.

The door opened and I looked up, smiling. “Sorry, we aren’t-” A strange vampire was across the room and had his hands around my throat in the time it took Enit to scream. My hand reached out, finding the pup and pushing her as far from me as I could in one movement. My other hand tried to work its way up under the vampires forearms and dislodge his grip, but he held on too tight. Still holding me by the throat, he dragged me from the cafe. My feet didn’t touch the ground as he sprinted away, dodging my swinging hands. He got to the edge of the town before Lucius stepped in front of him.

Any semblance of sanity was gone from his face now. There was only a crazed predator.

“Drop her, and I will make your death quick, Kevin.”

If I wasn't about to die, I would probably laugh at a vampire named Kevin. As it was, I felt his fingers dig under my windpipe.

The vampire bared its teeth. "She is not yours, Lucius. If you can't hold her, you cannot claim her." That made no fucking sense, but I couldn't protest as he squeezed my throat.

"SHE IS MINE," Lucius screamed, and everything that was alive in the forest around us scattered.

"I will kill you and take her. Then I will come back and kill all the others who think they have a claim. I will relish in it. You and your family think you can take everything and the rules do not apply. But she will be mine!"

He sounded eerily sane, despite the fact his words were absolutely nuts.

Nico appeared behind us, a blunt icing spatula held against Kevin's throat. Honestly. Who would ever think I'd have to witness this moment without laughing?

I knew that Nico had enough strength to cut off Kevin's head with just a wooden spoon. A spatula may as well be a katana in his hands.

"Kevin, it's out of respect for our previous friendship that you aren't dead already. But threaten my consort again, and I will hack your head off and piss on your cold, dead corpse," Nico growled, and a shiver ran down my spine at the death in his voice.

Holy shit.

"I have none of your ethics, Brother. Kill him," Lucius spat.

Kevin's hand tightened around my throat, his nails piercing my skin. I wasn't even a

year into my undeadness. Would I survive having my throat torn out? His eyes flicked between the twins, one who basked in death and asked for no forgiveness, and the other always desperately clinging to the last of his humanity. He sneered in Lucius' direction, and I sensed the moment that his vengeance for whatever wrong Lucius had committed outweighed whatever friendship he'd previously had with Nico. I began to choke as his nails dug into my throat, and he flung me.

At the last minute, his hand went lax, and I gasped for air on the ground. Walker was there, his gun aimed toward us, and half of Kevin's face was blown away.

Bits of brain matter had landed on my face, and I saw a chunk caught in my hair.

Nico was quickly on his knees in front of me, prying my fingers from around my throat.

When he saw the damage, or just the fact that my throat was still in my body, he sighed with relief. He bundled me into his arms, squeezing me tightly, until Lucius wrenched me away, snarling at this brother.

"Your hesitation could have gotten her killed," he yelled at his twin, and Nico's face went paler than it already was. The blue of his tribal tattoos stood out in bright contrast.

He looked panicked more than angry at the accusations. "I would never, ever let harm come to Raine."

Lucius sneered. "We both know that is a lie, Brother. She has almost died too many times on your watch."

Nico's face contorted into rage. "One of those times was on your orders," he spat back.

It was like a bubble came over the forest, sound drifting away as if we were suspended in time. Then the twins burst toward each other, Lucius dropping me as he launched at his brother with bared teeth and clawed hands.

Walker raced across the clearing, wrapping his arm tightly around my waist as he dragged me back towards the edge of the town. Nico and Lucius leveled ancient trees in their fight, their blows echoing around the clearing.

They were yelling at each other in a language that was probably long dead, as their fists and bodies tried to wrestle for control, for the ability to cause the most pain. I needed to stop this.

I opened my mouth to shout at them, but Walker slapped a hand across it. “They need this. It is a century overdue.”

When Lucius’ fist cracked a bone in Nico’s jaw, I turned away. I needed to be here, I needed to make sure no one went too far, but I couldn’t watch them cause injury to each other.

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Eventually X stumbled into the clearing, his eyes widening at the cataclysmic disaster unfolding. “I had to get Judge to stay with the shifters. Couldn’t leave them unprotected,” he muttered, looking between the fighting twins and the vampire with half his head blown off at our feet.

“Kevin,” he muttered, shaking his head. “He isn’t dead, but it would probably be more humane for him if he was. These brain injuries heal, but something is lost in the process,” he muttered. He stepped forward, his gaping wounds in his neck like a morbid grin, and he knelt beside the body. “He campaigned for the creation of the Enforcers.” The Enforcers were the police and Boogeymen of the vampire world. “He said that an apex predator left unchecked for too long would raze the world. He was correct. But the madness started to set in a century ago, and his maker went first. His maker was as old as Titus, and possibly the only being more powerful. He killed an entire city in Italy. We passed it off as a plague to the humans, but the Enforcers knew that he was the reason Kevin had pushed for our creating. Lucius led the hunt. They found him in the catacombs beneath the city surrounded by bodies. Lucius tore his heart out in front of Kevin.”

He gently closed the healing vampire's eyes, and then punched his hand into the man’s chest. He dragged out his heart and laid it beside him. I watched as it thumped one last time. X dug a hole and buried the heart deep in the earth.

Walker shook his head. “I’ll bury him away from here. Lucius has created quite the collection.”

He leaned over and kissed my cheek, and I grabbed his chin, searching his face for something. Walker hated violence and killing people. He didn’t thrive on blood and

conflict. It was why he lived in Dark River to start with. I worried that killing the ancient vampire was going to torment his conscience. Walker just smiled sadly. “I don’t have any regrets, Raine. I’d do it again in a heartbeat. You mean everything.”

The admission seemed to pain him a little, and then he scooped up the body of Kevin and disappeared into the forest.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Xcontinued to stand with me, a silent vigil as centuries of pain and anger were finally released.

Nico finally overpowered Lucius, pinning his body down and punishing him with hard fists. “I loved you, and you betrayed me over and over. You killed everyone I ever had a chance to love, and for what? So I couldn’t love anyone, but you? So I would come dance in your depravity with you? Centuries of loneliness without my other half because you were still flagellating yourself for her death!” Nico screamed.

Her death? Who the fuck was her?

Lucius went limp, taking Nico’s blows without resistance. He’d given up and it was like he was preparing for Nico to tear his head off. Like he wanted it.

“Nico, stop!” I yelled, and his fist halted mid-movement. Even I felt the power behind those words, and my heart thundered. Lucius turned toward me, his brows drawn together. “Compulsion? Interesting. You are a little young to be showing such gifts, Raine Baxter.” He looked back up at Nico. “You may want to release him though, because you have stopped his heart as well. We are undead, but it still needs to beat occasionally.”

I was too stunned to do anything but gape at him. Shit, what? “Uh, Nico unstop?

Go?” Lucius laughed. Actually laughed. “Say it like you don’t want him to die, Raine.”

“Nico, unstop!”

Nico’s fist fell limp against his stomach and he just stared at me. He climbed off of his brother, and leaned down to pull him to his feet like he just hadn’t been intent on murdering him with his bare hands.

X shook his head. “This makes me glad I was an only child,” he muttered and I smiled.

Nico came over, looking deep into my eyes like he could see the power lying there dormant. “Have you used this compulsion before?” he asked softly, no accusations in his voice.

“Uh, twice, maybe?” Once when I’d made all of Brody’s pack shift. Once when I’d made X drink when he was near death. But what about when I made my abductors all turn to sheep? “Maybe three times. But twice was with Shapeshifters accidentally and I thought maybe it was an extension of Brody’s mate-bond.”

X was nodding sagely, until he screwed up his face. “You made me drink your blood? When I was dying? Are you mad, Love?”

I shrugged. “You can be mad about it later when your head isn’t being held on by a couple of threads.”

He grabbed me up in his arms and kissed me. “I’m never going to be mad about drinking your delectable blood,” he purred. Then his grin faded. “But I don’t like to be forced to do things either.”

I shook my head. "I promise I'll never do it on purpose."

Nico was looking at me with sad eyes, and I remembered what he said about his power being a burden. His power was a form of compulsion too, only it was to compel the truth from someone. Was my power like his, but with more juice? I tried thinking about all the conversations I'd had, all the people who had done what I'd asked without question. Had they wanted to do it, or were they doing it because I compelled them to?

"Must be because of her succubus blood. Her vampirism has enhanced her compulsion abilities to be more far reaching," Lucius said, his eyes not even holding a slither of the others' hesitation. "Try making me do something?"

I blinked at him. "Uh, quack like a duck?"

Nothing happened. I wasn't sure if that was a relief or a disappointment. Lucius frowned. "The other times, were they life or death situations?"

I nodded. Well, except forcing everyone to shift. But I'd almost died a few hours before, so maybe.

"If it's an extension of her succubus compulsion, maybe it has to be sexual in nature? Or life and death to protect herself or those she loves?" Nico said, his eyes still wandering over me.

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "Give it a go?"

I frowned. "Uh, Lucius kiss X."

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X turned toward me, his eyebrow cocked but he didn't protest. Even Lucius seemed more amused than appalled. Did he want to kiss X? I didn't blame him. X oozed his sexuality like a wound. Lucius stepped closer, his eyes on X's lips. He leaned forward, their lips so close.

"Lucius stop," I whispered, and he halted, a mere whisper away from X's.

Nico raised both eyebrows, shaking his head in disbelief. "It's unheard of for one so young to have such power. Usually it takes several centuries. Walker doesn't even have his abilities yet."

Lucius was still perched there, inches from X's mouth. X leaned forward and ran his tongue along Lucius' bottom lip, nipping it with a fang. Then he pulled back and grinned at the deadly vampire.

"Er, Lucius unstop?"

Lucius rocked back on his heels, giving both me and X a hot look. "I look forward to holding up my end of last night's bargain."

Then he was gone. Always with the dramatic exits.

Nico sighed and shook his head. "Let's get back. I will have to tell the Town Council. And the rest of our family will be worried."

Even as he spoke, the bruises and cuts that littered his body healed, much faster than mine or X's. It was like he was just regenerating. Benefits of being an ancient I guess,

your mind deteriorated but your body decided it was now indestructible. The irony was real.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I understood what a waning crescent moon meant now. It was the one that looked like a sickle, so thin that it was barely there in the sky, looking like Death's Scythe. With it, Alexander returned.

He'd looked so confused when he knocked on my front door, it had almost been funny. "Raine. Why does it smell like three infant wolf pups in here?"

I shrugged. "So I adopted kids while you were gone?"

"I've only been gone two weeks."

Brody stepped up behind me, reaching out to shake Alexander's hand again. "That's the way it is with Raine. Be prepared for the unexpected. It's good to see you, Sir," he said, nodding respectfully.

I stepped back so Alexander could walk in. "You too, Alpha. Where is my grandson?"

"Out back playing with your, uh, great grandkids?" The last word was barely a squeak when it passed my lips, and I don't know who looked more incredulous, Alexander or Brody. Either way it was hilarious. As I walked him out I filled him in on how the pups came to be here, the underground shifter market, Lucius destroying the fight ring to retrieve Christopher. With each sentence, Alexander got angrier and angrier. He said some not very nice things in Russian before he stopped and shook his shoulders, visibly calming himself.

“Thank you for bringing it to my attention. I believe, perhaps, I am indebted to the vampires for this. I am glad that the pups have found a home with you, but if you wish, I can find them a safe home with a wolf pack I trust.”

I was shaking my head before he’d even finished. Christopher said no packs, no family, and I would trust his wishes, at least until they were older.

I looked at Brody, but his jaw was set in a stubborn line too. “The pups are fine with us. We are quite taken with them even after this small amount of time.”

Alexander inclined his head. “So be it. Take me to meet my great grandchildren.” I didn’t say maybe-great grandchildren; tonight would reveal if that was the truth or not. Tex’s words about how lonely he was echoed around my head.

I reached out and grabbed his arm, stopping him before he stepped outside. I nodded my chin, indicating that Brody should continue on. “Alexander, I just wanted to say that no matter what tonight's ritual says, you are still welcome here. I know Tex was a bit of a shithead about it at the beginning, but we’ve all enjoyed having you here. Even if Tex isn’t your grandson, I’m sure the pups would still like a great grandfather, and none of us can provide that.”

Alexander swallowed hard, giving me a quick nod. “I thank you, Raine. My grandson picked you well. I will perhaps take you up on that offer, if my gut is wrong about Tex being my grandson. But my gut is rarely ever wrong.”

I grinned. “I hope not for both of our sakes.”

“Now it is time for me to return the favor. I got a call from a Bear Alpha in the US. He undertakes some less than savory work for me sometimes. They said they heard through the grapevine that The Collector has put a bounty on the head of the new succubus, and that there is an extra reward for the destruction of her mates. I do not

believe in coincidences of this magnitude, Raine.”

I felt ill. Neither did I.

Maybe The Collector was Kevin? It would explain the bounty for my mates, considering we hadn’t kept it a secret that the powerful twins were my mates in the hope of keeping other suitors away. Could this problem already be dealt with?

The burning ball of acid in my gut told me I wasn't that lucky.

Alexander slapped me on the back. “Do not panic, Raine Baxter. In your extremely short second life, you have managed to amass some powerful friends, myself included. You can call on me if you need me.”

I gave him a tight smile, but I didn’t feel any better. “Thank you, Sir. Now go and see the pups. They are seriously cute.”

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He inclined his head and stepped out on the back deck. I watched Tex's head snap up, and the smile on his face appeared genuine. I kind of hoped for both their sakes that tonight's ritual went in their favor. Judge stepped up behind me, his earthy scent calming me. "Did you hear all that?"

He wrapped his arms around my waist, resting his chin on my shoulder.

"Yep."

"Do you want to run away from me and all my problems, Judge? Be honest."

He pressed his face into my neck. "I'm afraid you are stuck with me now, Rainey Day. I'm going nowhere and neither are the rest of your men. We'll overcome this challenge like we do every other. You're worth all of it. You make life worth living and I have no regrets, Darlin'."

I sighed as I sank back against his strength. I hoped he was right, otherwise I might be the black hole of trouble we all die in.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

We unanimously decided that X was going to stay home and watch the pups during tonight's ritual. One, because inexplicably the pups loved the gruff, sarcastic former Enforcer. Secondly, he couldn't be around Miranda without wanting to murder her a little. It was definitely better for everyone if he just stayed home.

We had to leave the town's limits to do the ritual, so with a few minutes until the

clock struck midnight, we all trooped to a natural circle in the forest. I held Tex's hand, and Alexander strode out in front with the absolute self-assurance of an apex predator. Brody walked behind me, and Judge was on Tex's left.

Walker had to work, because while the witching hour was quiet for most people, for Dark River it was the peak of the day and the middle of the lunch shift. The Immortal Cupcake was closed again until we worked everything out.

When we reached the clearing that Miranda had indicated, the witch herself was nowhere to be seen. "I can't sense her," Tex said in a low voice and I squeezed his hand.

"She'll be here."

Alexander looked over his shoulder at me. "She better, or else."

Miranda appeared through the slit in reality. The red one. The one that looked like the birth canal. "Or else what?" she asked, an eyebrow cocked and her arms crossed over her chest as she glared at Alexander.

Most people would be embarrassed by getting caught out, but not Alexander. "I would be displeased."

His tone insinuated that displeasing a dragon would have very unpleasant, yet lasting effects. Miranda snorted. "We wouldn't want that, now would we, Sir?" she said sarcastically, bowing at the waist in an exaggerated manner.

Judge cleared his throat behind me, stifling a laugh. Both Miranda and Alexander gave him a sour look.

Intervention time. "Miranda. It's good to see you again." Look at me, I'm downright

pleasant.

She raised a perfect brow. “Is it, Raine Baxter?”

I grinned. Well she was a bit of a harbinger of bad things, but I didn’t think it was her fault so much as coincidence. “Of course. It’s especially nice when I’m not the reason you're here.”

Miranda chuckled, lifting her shirt to pull some cotton bags from a belt. I watched Judge for any interest, but he was distracted by Tex.

Alexander, however, was looking at the exposed strip of her stomach like he wanted to feast on her innards. Eesh.

She pulled a bowl from a tote bag she had over her shoulder and stepped into the center of the clearing. “It’s a reasonably easy ritual, once you get all your ducks in a row. Or dragons as it would seem.” She chuckled softly at her own joke.

She put the heavy bowl on a top of a log, running a hand over it and making it glow a deep blue. She poured the contents of the bag into the bowl and chanted something softly again. “Okay, so both of you just need to bleed a little in there. Then the smoke will either turn red or black. Red means you are direct blood relations, black means you aren’t. The more vivid the red, the closer the familial connection. Just like a pregnancy test, but like twenty-odd years too late.” She smiled softly at Tex, though he couldn’t see it.

“And I have your binding word that you will not use our blood except for the express purpose discussed here tonight?”

“A witch's ethics are sacrosanct to our practice, and I resent you insinuating otherwise. However if it appeases your eminence, I vow that any blood shed here

tonight will be used only for the ritual of which you demanded and nothing more. All traces will be destroyed afterwards. Happy?"

She was gritting her teeth, and Judge seemed positively gleeful. Miranda was ridiculously powerful for someone so young, and therefore when she walked into a room, people justifiably feared her. But Alexander had no fear, and apparently neither did Miranda. And the sexual tension between them? It was off the charts.

The smile Alexander gave the witch was all teeth. "Then let's get to it, shall we?"

Miranda waved Tex forward and I let go of his hand. "I just need your hand, Tex. I will cut across it with the ceremonial blade and drip it into the bowl," she explained gently, grasping his hand when he offered it. "Ideally, we'd do this in your shifted forms, but I for one do not want to be in the presence of a pissed off dragon, wouldn't you agree?"

Tex murmured something softly that I missed, and Miranda laughed. She really was beautiful. I definitely hated her.

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She sliced the blade across Tex's palm, making him hiss a little. Then she clenched his fist shut and his blood dripped onto the powdery substance in the bowl, making it crackle and sputter. She let go of his hand and he stepped back toward me. I grabbed his waist and pulled him closer to me. He held out his hand, and I licked it, stemming the bleeding and letting the taste of my mate soothe the part of me that hated to see someone I loved injured.

"You're up, Sir," Miranda said, not even trying to hide her snark. She was going to end up a snack in a moment, and not in a cute way. In the literal way.

Alexander's nostrils flared in a distinctly dragonish fashion and now Judge's body was all but shaking with restrained laughter.

He held out his hand, and Miranda grabbed it not very gently. She sliced his palm a little deeper than Tex's and the blood flowed freely into the bowl.

"She's pretty liberal with the knife when she's pissed," Judge muttered, and Miranda must have heard because she scowled and pointed the knife in his direction. I was too busy focusing on the smoke starting to curl up from the bowl to referee. So far it appeared white, but as it climbed further up, becoming a serpentine twist of smoke, the white tinged red and I let out a whooshing breath.

"It's red," I whispered, and Tex huffed out a relieved sigh. Up until that moment, I didn't realize how much he wanted Alexander to be some kind of family for him, which made me feel like shit. How had I not known he wanted that connection? As the smoke whirled, it got redder and redder until it was the vivid color of blood. Alexander's arms rippled with scales as he chased back his change.

“She’s alive,” he breathed. The pure relief on his face was for more than having a new grandson. It meant his daughter, the one that had been missing for centuries, had been alive twenty years ago when she’d given birth to a blind half-blood snake shifter.

Brody stepped forward, putting his arm on Alexander’s shoulder. Pack solidarity. It was something all shifters possessed, yearned for. Even Dragons, who were apparently the most solitary of all shifters, probably because they were also the longest lived.

Tex was shaking his head. “I didn’t think it would be possible in a billion years. It didn’t make sense. How could I be a python shifter, with a dragon shifter for a mother and still be so weak in the blood that I’m considered a half-caste?”

None of us had answers, but Miranda shrugged. “Sometimes that's just the way it happens. You have strong bloodlines, but your python was weak. If you permit me, I can search it for magical influence. Or maybe you just manifested more of your human DNA than that of your shifter traits. As much as the supernaturals of the world hate admitting it, humans aren’t any weaker than us because they don’t possess magic, or two-natures. They are just a different breed, and when it comes to bloodlines, theirs are stronger. More dominant. Even with a little human blood, there is a chance you may have ended up an everyday, average Joe.”

“Kaida’s mother was human. She is a half-blood herself,” Alexander muttered, and I froze. Alexander had never said her name before, always referring to her as ‘my daughter’. Never by her name, like it was too painful. But there was an aching hope in his eyes now that made my own sting with tears.

Alexander turned back to Miranda, bowing low to her. “Thank you, Witch Miranda. You have given me something today that I never thought I would have again.”

Miranda's face softened as she looked down at the dark head of the Leader of the Shifters.

"You're welcome. I'm glad it had a happy ending." She held out the bowl that still contained a blood stained paste. "If you would permit, I'd be glad for cleansing fire to clear the energy from my scrying bowl."

Alexander inclined his head, gently taking the bowl from her hands and sucking in a deep breath. When he exhaled, white hot fire poured from his lips, pooling in the bowl like it could catch its power and hold it. When he inhaled, the flames went with it, but the metal bowl remained red hot. Alexander held it easily, waiting for it to cool to an acceptable level before handing it back to Miranda. She gave him a tight smile as she tucked it back into her tote. "My work is done here. An honor, Your Eminence."

Alexander smirked. "You may call me Alexander."

Miranda raised her brows and nodded. Then she stepped back into her vagina portal and was gone.

Judge slapped his thigh in an exaggerated manner. "If there was any more heat between you and the witch, you could have cooked a hash brown in this clearing," he said to Alexander, a shit eating grin on his face.

Alexander waved him away, but there was a slight pinkening of his cheeks. Was a Convocation member, one of the most powerful people on the planet, blushing?

He walked over and pulled Tex into a tight hug. "Deep down, I knew. My dragon knew. But I had to be sure. Had to know that she was still out there, that my gut wasn't wrong."

Tex was nodding, slapping Alexander's back as they embraced. "We both needed to know."

Alexander pulled back, and I might have imagined it because it was dark out here, but his eyes seemed a little wetter than they normally were. "I have to go. The trail is already twenty years old, but I have to find her one way or another." He looked between me and Tex, and I smiled, coming forward and hugging him too.

"I've got him. Go do what you need to do, but don't be a stranger, okay? There's no point having a grandson if you never visit."

He gave me a toothy smile as he stared down at me. "And great grandchildren."

I shook my head, because a month ago when he turned up outside my door, I never would have thought those words would have been passing his lips.

He stepped back and nodded to Brody and Judge. "Look after them." The 'or I will eat you,' was subliminal.

He strode to the other side of the clearing and shifted. Unbelievably quickly, a huge, twenty foot long dragon with coal black scales stood in the clearing with us, making us all step back a little so we didn't get swiped by its swishing tail. The dragon puffed smoke in our direction and then lifted off with huge flaps of his wings.

I watched the dragon disappear into the darkness of the night and shook my head. "It's weeks like this I wished I could still get plastered."

Brody leaned forward and kissed me softly. "Your wish is my command. Pup, crack out the tequila. Our girl is getting wasted tonight."

Chapter Thirty

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It was decided as a group, that given the incident with Kevin and X, perhaps it would be safer for the pups to be on Pack lands until we figured some way to get the random crazy vampires to stop turning up on my doorstep. It also meant temporarily shutting The Immortal Cupcake down until my life was under control.

I didn't tell any of the guys, but it broke my heart a little. That afternoon when I put up the sign about our temporary closure on the front door, and then waved Tex, Brody and the kids off in the car, I went into the bathroom, filled the tub, and cried. I didn't know why I was crying really, maybe for the happiness that was just out of my grasp. Every time it was torn away at the last moment by some asshole who thought I owed them something. It was like history repeating itself, and I was worried that I'd doomed myself to a life of this. A life of always getting so close to perfect but never quite reaching it.

The guys seemed to know to leave me to my misery spiral, but after a few hours, the water had gone cold, I had turned into a prune, and apparently they'd had enough.

Nico walked into the bathroom without knocking, and I frowned, swiping at my face.

Instead of saying anything, he shed his clothes and hopped into my ice cold bath behind me. He pulled me back into the hardness of his body, only a little warmer than the tepid water. I rested my head on his chest and sighed.

“Sorry.”

His hands ran up and down my arms gently. “For what?”

I didn't know. Crying? Having a meltdown? Bringing all this shit into their life? It was all of the above so I just shrugged.

"You don't have to be sorry for feeling, Raine. I don't know about the others, but it's one of the things I love about you the most."

A small smile curled my lips, but I didn't turn towards him. "It's just been a hell of a week, you know? Or a hell of a year, if you want to be specific. I just want to feel normal, even if this is the new type of normal. I don't want to live in fear every day for the rest of my eternal life, you know?"

"Hmm." He kissed my jaw and my cheek, his hands continuing to run over my thighs. "Your feelings are entirely valid, Raine. It tears me up that I can't give you what you so desperately crave. Normalcy. But I promise you I will continue trying until you wake up every morning with a smile on your face and no regrets."

I turned my head and kissed him softly. "I don't want to sound like I'm ungrateful. I got so fucking lucky, Nico. I know it. That I ended up here in particular. That I have your love. The love of the other guys. A family. I'm so thankful for all those things. I just want to be able to enjoy them without waking up every night wondering which one of us is going to be hurt, or killed, or if someone will try and blow me up or snatch me from my own damn place of business." My self pity was turning to rage.

"I know. We will get there, I promise. If I have to kill every threat to you myself, we will get there." He squirted some body wash that smelled like vanilla and man onto a washcloth, and slowly cleaned me for the next ten minutes as I just let all the thoughts whirl around in my brain, trying not to let the doubt and fear take root in my mind.

Finally, he rinsed me off and climbed out of the tub, holding out a hand. When I stepped out, I was more raisin than humanoid, and Nico laughed.

I slapped his chest with the back of my hand. “Take a good look, because this is what you’d be holding if you dated someone your own age.” I stroked my hand down his naked chest. “Or if you were dating someone with ball sacks for fingers.”

Nico leaned forward and kissed me softly. “Never change. I love you, Raine Baxter.”

The words had the same effect they always did. They lit my insides on fire, warming up my chest until I thought I would explode.

“Love you too, Nico,” I murmured against his lips. The smile he gave me was worth every moment of heartache and uncertainty. All the doubt I’d soaked in for the last two hours circled the drain with the dirty water. Nico was worth it. They all were.

Dressed and in a better frame of mind, I walked out into my prison, I mean house, dressed for action. Well, maybe not an entirely better frame of mind. Instead of a pity party of one, I was ready to kick ass and get my life back. Walker sat on my bench, his face furrowed with concern. “Are you okay?”

I nodded and moved toward him, stepping between his knees so he could lean down and kiss me. I sank into the warmth of his arms, and he dropped a kiss on the top of my head.

“Are you sure?”

I leaned back so I could see his pretty green eyes. “Yeah. Right now, I’m more than okay.” The look of love on his face was comforting. He was like a security blanket. A sexy security blanket that gave me dirty orgasms.

Bet Walmart didn’t stock those during their Valentine’s Day sales.

X passed me a glass of wine and I smiled gratefully, trying not to stare at the still raw

wound around his neck. He leaned forward like he was going to kiss my cheek, but turned at the last minute to poke his tongue in my ear.

I pushed his face away. “Ugh X, that’s disgusting.”

X kissed me fast and hard on the lips. “Payback’s a bitch, or so they say, Love. Besides, I want to put my tongue in every orifice on that delectable body.”

Judge snorted from where he sat on the recliner. “That’s not as sexy as you think it is.”

“Yours too,” he purred with a wink.

“To paraphrase Raine, Jesus Christ fucking a frog. I’m happy for you guys, I am, but I don’t want to hear about your sex life,” Walker grumbled.

He may as well have waved a red flag at X. I was pretty sure he was going to drop it into conversation whenever he could now. I gave X a stern look and he just grinned back.

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Nico cleared his throat, and it was then that I noticed Lucius in the corner. They were still a little banged up, which was a testament to how hard their fight had been. “As interesting as X’s exploits are, I think we need to talk about what to do about ‘The Collector’.” He made air quotes with his fingers.

“You don’t think it was Kevin?”

Nico shrugged, but Lucius scoffed. “Please? Kevin was a bleeding damn heart. No way he was collecting anything, even a bit crazy.”

Walker pulled me closer to his body. “All we can do is prepare for The Collector to be a completely new threat, and hope that it was actually Kevin and it's been dealt with.” He looked down at me, his face softening. “That means going nowhere alone until we figure this out okay. Even if it isn’t The Collector, there's an uncomfortable amount of crazy vampires out there waiting to take a bite out of you. We need a way to keep you safe in a more permanent way.”

“What do we know about this guy?”

Nico shrugged. “Not a lot. He’s a bit of an urban legend among the Convocation. Whenever a shifter goes missing, we always blame The Collector. That siren that disappeared a few years ago?” he looked at Judge and X. “They believe that was The Collector. He is the Boogeyman; he takes what he wants and none of the authorities have been able to determine who he even is, let alone find him and bring him to justice. The vampires haven’t had much incentive though. He hasn’t been stealing vampires and we have always been a bit... lax in our views on forced cohabitation.”

X snorted. “We like to take things without permission as well, higher powers be damned.”

There was silence around the room, and then Nico looked at Lucius. “Hmm, I’ve got an idea.”

Lucius raised his eyebrows, like they were having some kind of silent conversation. But that wasn’t possible, right? Surely not.

They both turned to me, their expressions eerily similar. I’d noticed it more and more, with Lucius’ insanity being kept at bay by my weird love drug, that their similarities were more than skin deep. Their mannerisms, their laughter, their scary face, were all the same. Still, their personalities were as different as night and day, Nico’s maintaining a humanity that Lucius had lost a long time ago.

Judge snorted. “Well, don’t keep us in suspense?”

Nico shook his head, walking toward me, his dark eyes burning intensely. “I don’t know if it will work. It will be a surefire way to keep her safe, and if this unfolds how I would like, I will share the whole plan.” He stepped between Walker’s long legs too, leaning forward to kiss me softly. “I will have to leave town for a few days, but I’ll return, hopefully with a solution. Please be safe.”

He still smelled of the body wash from my bath. “You’re taking Lucius?” He nodded, and I clenched my jaw. “No more fighting?”

Lucius chuckled from behind Nico’s back, and a small smile curled Nico’s lips. “We will try.”

I pouted and leaned around his shoulders, eyeing Lucius. “No fighting. Or I swear, I’ll become a nun and buy an iron chastity belt.”

X actually gasped in horror. Lucius solemnly crossed his heart. “You have my word I will return my twin in the condition he is in now.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and he grinned back. Nico grabbed my chin. “I believe we’ve begun to heal our differences. It will be fine.” He stepped back and then Lucius was in his place, still between Walker’s knees. Walker tensed, less comfortable with the proximity of our former enemy. But Lucius just kissed me, sliding his tongue into my mouth and pressing me back into Walker’s body until I moaned. “Be good, Raine Baxter.”

Both Nico and Lucius disappeared between one blink and the next.

The house was too quiet. I hadn’t realized how much noise five living people in a house made. Not just the general noise the kids made, but the collective sounds of their heartbeats, their breaths, the low rumbling of Tex and Brody’s voices. They’d only been gone a day and I missed them already. The Mate bond tugged, letting me know they were there, but I wanted to be wrapped in a pile of limbs with them.

Judge came over, standing between Walker’s knees as well. Walker had long, muscular legs that were made for shorts. Hell, he was made to stand around naked and look like a Greek statue. He huffed when Judge brushed against his thighs, but my sexy Drifter just grinned. “You know, you can always let her go and I can hug my girlfriend over there on the couch instead.”

Walker growled low and held me tighter to the apex of his thighs.

Judge rolled his eyes, and leaned closer, uncaring that he was all up in Walker’s personal space. “We haven’t been to the diner in a while, Rainey Day. How about we go and fill you with carbs and cholesterol, top it off with cheesecake, and then come home and watch a movie?”

It had been awhile since I'd had Bert's cheese fries. I nodded, tilting my face up for a kiss that Judge happily supplied. With tongue.

Even Walker groaned as I was pressed against his crotch, and I could feel the hardening cock beneath his tan uniform. Flicking his tongue along my bottom lip, Judge sucked it between his own and bit down gently.

I could hear X's groan from behind Judge. "How about we just stay home and have a threeway?" He cleared his throat. "Hell, maybe a four way? I've been dying to see what the good Sheriff can do with that night stick."

Walker slapped at Judge's hands, until he stepped out of his personal space. "Let's have dinner first before I violate anybody with an illegal cavity search."

I stepped back and we both stared. Judge leaned closer. "Did Walker just make a risqué joke?" he stage-whispered. I nodded, but I wasn't so sure it was a joke? My straight laced sheriff was a lot more x-rated than I'd given him credit for.

Walker just cocked an eyebrow and strode toward the door. I trailed after him like a horny house cat, and I made no apologies about it.

Chapter Thirty-One

Two days into my self-imposed isolation, I hated the four walls of my house. I missed my guys. Missed The Immortal Cupcake. Missed being able to walk out my front door without worrying if I was going to be snatched by some ancient douche. Missed being a non-whiney bitch.

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But I couldn't argue with the logic behind staying inside my wards, especially not when two vampires turned up on my doorstep today. For a moment, I thought they were Mormons, as they were both dressed in crisp white dress shirts and black dress pants. They'd even combed their hair to the side. All that was missing was a Bible clutched in their hands and a name badge. Instead, one held flowers.

"I can't help you," I said when I opened the door. Two days of being stuck inside had taken my empathy and compassion for these vampires and crushed it into the dirt. I did not owe them anything further than a no thank you. Hell, I didn't even owe them that, but my good upbringing told me to at least say that much.

The guy with the flowers pushed them towards me, his face desperate. "Please, just hear me out."

I shook my head. I couldn't. I couldn't have their stories on my conscience, their cry for help forever rattling around in my brain. Since word had got out that I was a succubus, fifteen vampires had come forward to try and woo me. Some by good manners, and some by force. According to Walker, some had never made it to the town's limits. There were shallow graves all over the forest with the now decomposing corpses of vampires that hadn't taken no for an answer when Lucius had told them to go home. If they did make it across the town's borders but not to my door, it was usually because X had sent them home a little more broken than when they'd come. I had been blissfully oblivious to this, of course, until Catherine, Town Leader and scary ass bitch, had informed me of it like X and Lucius were errant dogs, causing mischief. Or maybe I was the errant dog. I'd pledged here, and they couldn't kick me out unless I broke one of the chief tenets of the town according to Nico, but still, I'd felt censured.

X had glared at her, his lip curling, and I swear she growled back. Luckily, Beatrice had interrupted the moment with food, but still, I was skating on thin ice and I knew it deep in my soul.

So now, when the Not-Mormon looked at me imploringly, I steelled my heart. “I’m sorry. I can’t. I wish I could but there’s just nothing I can do for you.” I begged him to understand with my eyes, and he dropped his flowers to his side in defeat.

My iron resolve cracked a little, but then X came up behind me, his fortifying hand steeling my spine where it rested on my lower back. “The lady said no, chaps. Go home, before I rearrange your faces.”

He cracked his knuckles, and Not-Mormon number two physically gulped. But the flower guy threw the bouquet on my step, and his cheeks went pink with rage. “Why should you have a monopoly on her, Executioner? She is the last of her kind. She should be kept and available for any of us who are in need. It is for the good of our race. For all races.”

Did this guy just suggest I should be a sex slave because I acted as some kind of anti-psychotic med for old, crazy vampires?

A knife appeared out of nowhere and sliced off the guy’s head. It landed with a sickening thud on my doorstep. As his body fell after him, Lucius was revealed, a feral sneer on his face. He turned to Still-Living-Not-Mormon and growled.

X stepped over the body on the doorstep and got in the other guy's face. He looked like he was about to piss himself now. “Do you share your compatriot’s feelings?”

The vampire shook his head, his clean white shirt now speckled with blood.

“The difference between us is that I do not see Raine as a commodity. I love her. Not

her blood, but her as a person. And you can tell any fucker that feels the way your friend does,” X kicked the decapitated corpse with his boot, “that that is the difference between what I have and what you want. If they keep coming, they will keep dying.”

A throat cleared, and I turned away from the head on my doorstep - was it weird to feel nostalgic about that? - to the other two people standing at the edge of my yard. One was Nico, and I bounded over the body and into his arms. I kissed him hard, wrapping my arms around his waist and holding him tight.

He kissed my forehead reverently. “I missed you.”

I was smiling widely when a finger tapped me on the shoulder. “I just slew your enemy, and he gets the first kiss?” Lucius complained, his voice a little petulant. I tried to hold in my laugh as I turned in Nico’s arms. “Thank you, Lucius. I’m making an exception to the no body parts rule, because that guy was kind of talking about making me some kind of glorified glory hole. I don’t like that idea.”

An unfamiliar laugh echoed from behind me. “I didn’t quite believe it, but it seems to be true. Someone actually loves these miserable bastards.”

I turned quickly and a young man stepped toward the light from my front room windows. I knew who he was instantly, because I’d seen his picture on Nico’s living room wall.

Titus.

If that wasn’t proof enough, X went down on one knee, as did the shit-scared vampire, even though he was kneeling in the blood of his friend. It made me feel a little squidgy thinking about it really.

“Your Honor,” the scared vamp said with a shaky voice, and X just had his head bowed.

Lucius rolled his eyes as only a younger brother could do. “Always so much fanfare,” he muttered, then leaned forward and kissed me. Not with the passion he normally did so he could taste my blood, but with a soft reverence, like he actually missed me. I eyed him carefully, trying to judge what was going on in his head, but that was my first mistake. You couldn’t guess what was going on in a brain like Lucius’.

I didn’t know what to do, because Nico was still holding me solidly in his arms. Was I supposed to drop to my knee too? Instead, I inclined my head. “Uh, hey. Sir. I mean, your Honor?”

He huffed a laugh. “Is that a question?”

“Uh, no?”

A slow smile was spreading across his face. “What about that?”

I winced. “Okay, that may have been a slight question. You’ll have to excuse me, because I still have no freaking idea what I’m doing.”

He shook his head, and I marveled at how young he looked. I knew he was Nico and Lucius’ older brother, but he didn’t look that way. He had a baby face, but the power that surrounded him was staggering. I obviously had a malfunctioning sense of self-preservation, or an overactive sex drive, that I hadn’t noticed him before I made out with Nico. Well, there was significant evidence that I had no good sense, so that was on trend for me.

He gave me a genuine smile this time, and nodded. “It is fine. I’ve heard a lot about you, Raine Baxter, from all sorts of people. I thought it would be best to come down

and see who has stolen the hearts of my brothers, especially if it was not by their own free will.”

Nico opened his mouth to protest, but Lucius beat him to it. “If you think that anyone makes me do anything without my express permission, Brother, you are sorely mistaken. Not even you, Oh Mighty Ruler.”

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Snarky sibling relationship? Check.

Titus shook his head. “Be that as it may, I feel like I should get to know Raine personally. Perhaps inside?”

I nodded, because it wasn’t like I could say no, right?

“Excellent. But first, let us tidy up.” Titus waved a hand, and black clad enforcers appeared out of the darkness. They picked up the body of the decapitated Not-Mormon, and another hustled the still alive one onto the street. I wondered if the guy would ever reappear somewhere or if he’d add to the pile of shallow graves in the woods. I kind of felt sad for him. Another one grabbed the head and moved in the direction of the road. None of them looked at me.

When my step was clean, they disappeared into the darkness again. So freaking weird.

Titus waved me forward, and X got to his feet. I didn’t miss the fact that he put himself at my back, and neither did Titus.

“You too, Executioner? The lure of this young vampire too much for even the deadliest of my Enforcers?”

“My Enforcers,” Lucius muttered under his breath, and Titus laughed.

“What’s yours is mine, and what's mine is mine. Isn’t that the saying, Brother?” I eyed Titus, and he truly was the most terrifying being I’d ever met. He felt so, so old.

So powerful. He scared me even more than Alexander, and the Dragon had terrified me when I first met him.

But it was Nico who put a hand on Titus' arm. "Not everything, Titus."

His meaning was clear. I was not up for the offer, and I tried to judge the sanity of vampirekind's supreme leader. But he didn't have any of that craziness I associated with the vampires who had darkened my doorstep for the last few weeks. His eyes were calculating, and his power was shiver-inducing, but he wasn't insane in the way that Lucius had been. I wondered what made him different?

That was a question for someone way more learned and philosophical than me. I got to my doorstep. "Sorry. I'm going to need a little blood to get you across the threshold. I had a, err, witch put a ward around the place."

Titus nodded. "Smart. But that won't be necessary." Then he just strode on in like the ward meant nothing. He didn't flinch or show any sign whatsoever. What the actual fuck?

I stared at X and he shrugged. "He's old as dirt. Probably pissed all over the place and marked it as his territory when dinosaurs still roamed the earth," he whispered, but not softly enough. Titus gave him a look that chilled me to my very bones. X though? Totally unaffected. The dude has no self-preservation skills whatsoever. Sure, he knelt, but I was beginning to think that X had allegiance to no one.

He guided me to a part of the room that was easily defensible and had clear access to the rear door.

Okay, so maybe he had allegiance to one person. To me. I grabbed his hand, halting him from taking a seat between me and Titus. "Hey, I didn't miss what you said out there." He'd told the scared vamp, hell he'd told the world, that he loved me. My

heart thudded harder in my chest as I thought about it. “I love you too, you know that right?”

He grinned at me, making him look boyish standing, even against the tattooed darkness of his neck. “I never had any doubt. I’m pretty damn lovable.”

Lucius snorted, and X slid him a violent look. No one wanted to see that fight. “Oh hey, would anyone like some coffee? Or we have bagged type-O in the fridge if you’re hungry?” I offered Titus, who looked at me like I’d just offered him a four-course dinner of Spam.

Oh yeah, I’d forgotten briefly that Dark River was an anomaly.

“Thank you for your hospitality, but I am fine,” he said respectfully. “The world has been buzzing about you. First your making, then you are mated to the grandson of the Convocation Leader for the Shifters. Now you have enamored my brothers, arguably two of the most powerful vampires in the world.”

“Don’t forget the fact that she has the Alpha of the North West Shapeshifters and your best two former Enforcers. And the Sheriff of the world’s only vegan vampire community,” X added completely unhelpfully.

I shot him a glare. “Thanks for the summary, X.”

Nico was also glaring at him. “We aren’t vegan.”

“Pacifist? No Fang Zone?”

Lucius snickered, and I squeezed the bridge of my nose. This was going badly.

Titus was smirking again. “Indeed, Executioner. Are you planning to start a coup for

world domination, Raine Baxter?”

I couldn't help it. I felt it welling in my chest and couldn't keep it down. I honked out a surprised laugh. “Are you kidding me? I can't even bake brownies. There is zero chance I could muster a damn hostile takeover.” I visibly shivered and Titus actually smiled.

Not gonna lie, and it was probably impolite to mention, but his fangs were huge. Like massive. I know it's not the size of the fang but the motion of the ocean, but dude. Those bad boys were like a walrus. Okay, that might be a slight exaggeration.

Lucius frowned. “Stop staring at his fangs, Raine Baxter.”

X laughed. “Jealous, Crazytrousers?”

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Titus was trying not to smirk, but failing miserably. “Children, can we get back on track?” He shook his head and eyed me seriously. “Are you sure you aren’t being held against your will? Because I can’t imagine why anyone else would want to keep these two in the same room on a regular basis,” he sighed. “Blink twice if you need help.”

I actually giggled. Shit, this was going so badly. Nico cleared his throat. “Can we move onto Raine’s problem?”

Titus nodded, all mirth slipping from his face. “Raine Baxter? I’d like you to join the Convocation as the Representative of the Succubi.”

What in the freshly fucked fingerbun did he just say?

Chapter Thirty-Two

“What did she just say?” Titus looked somewhere between amused and horrified, and I realized I’d said that last part out loud.

X was belly laughing, and Nico grinned. “It’s part of her charm.”

I put up a hand. “I need you to hold up and just go back a step. You want me to... what?”

The slight smile didn’t leave Titus’ face and he looked between Lucius and Nico. “I see what you like about her.” He turned back to me, his face turning serious. “Nico is right. The threat against you is real. You live in this Utopia of my brother’s making,

but vampires on the outside aren't restricted by the rules and morality that keep the townspeople of Dark River in check. They could steal you and keep you chained up in some dank basement as a blood slave for eternity and they'd get no recourse from the Convocation."

I frowned. That was fucking bullshit. Surely he knew that, right? Just in case he didn't, I told him. "That's fucking bullshit. What are we, animals?"

Titus looked solemn. "Some of us are very close to it. The senile mania is a very real problem in vampiric society. Lucius, pre meeting you of course, was a prime example. He had lost sight of what made him human. He became a slave to his baser instincts. Blood, death, sex, sometimes all three at once. He was not always like that, but it was a spiral he started getting pulled into a century or so ago. And Lucius is a very old vampire. Soon, we will see more heading that way unless we can come up with a real solution. So far, you are the best we have, Raine Baxter. If we had known, the succubi may not have been exterminated with quite so much ferocity."

I snorted. "Really shot yourself in the foot with that one."

Titus inclined his head. "You're correct. But it wasn't just us. No creature likes to be a slave. The succubi of old were not like you, Raine. They were goddesses of pleasure and pain. They ruled over nations, legions of mortals and immortals alike. They took what they pleased and there were never any consequences. To even look at a full blooded succubus was to be in her thrall. The world would have a very different landscape had their race thrived."

Well, I guess he made a good point. "But back to my point. The vampires will never stop coming, because for some, you represent the final hope. And the number will grow and grow. So I am willing to offer you a seat on the Convocation in order to protect what remains of the succubi, no matter how weak in the blood you may be." I wasn't even going to take that as an insult. "You would be untouchable. To harm a

member of the Convocation is considered treason of the highest order. As you are mostly vampiric, I will give you a small detail of Enforcers as further protection.”

My mom had always said that if an offer seemed too good to be true, someone was probably trying to rob you blind while they flashed you their fake gold. “What do you want in return?”

He grinned, and his giant fangs glinted in the overhead lights. Seriously. Huge. “You are clever as well. I would like your cooperation in creating a cure by harvesting some of your blood and, uh, other secretions.”

X growled. “No one will be collecting any of her bodily fluids.”

I looked at Nico, who was frowning but not protesting. “How?”

“Witches would regularly return and collect, uh, samples of your blood, and we would try and replicate the chemical balance that helps even out the mania of the ancient vampires.”

“Nico said that giving blood to witches was dangerous because they could do all sorts of rituals with it. I’m not sure that’s a good idea?”

Titus nodded. “It would be a witch I trusted implicitly. Even the Representative for the Witches owes me a favor. His magic is strong and powerful.”

Lucius slammed his hand down on the table. “Wilde goes nowhere near her blood,” he hissed. Well, I guess that was a no on that front.

“What about Miranda? I trust her.” Miranda had already had my blood. What was a little bit more?

Titus raised his eyebrows. His blue tattoos were darker, more prominent than his brothers. “The Witch Miranda? She is young, but powerful. Possibly the most powerful the Witches have seen since Wilde himself. I agree to this.”

I shook my head. “What would I have to do as, uh, Representative for the Succubi?”

“Come to Convocation Sitzings. Vote on matters. Make rulings regarding your race.”

Well that shouldn’t be hard seeing how there was a whole one of me. “How did you pass this by the rest of the, uh, Representatives?”

Titus shrugged. “I’ve lived a long time and I am owed a lot of favors. This is an easy way to expunge some of them for the other Representatives, especially seeing as the Succubi always had a seat on the Convocation, historically speaking.”

Fat lot of good it did them though. Genocide could be a real bitch like that. “And I could stay in Dark River?”

Titus nodded. “It’s not like you have any pressing racial issues.” He smirked and then sighed. “Life would essentially not change that much for you. You would have a few more bodyguards, and have to make a trip to Roswell a few times a year. Otherwise, there is nothing pressing to undertake.”

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I narrowed my eyes at him. “I won’t just be an extra vote for you. A vote stuffer. Is that a thing?” Nico shook his head. “No, Sweetheart.”

Titus looked heavenward. “I wouldn’t expect my brothers to both fall for a girl who would just follow orders. No, you do not owe me anything greater than hope for the future of vampirekind. That is enough.”

I thought about it a little longer, but I didn’t have a better solution. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Well, Mazel Tov, Love. Now, I need a damn drink,” X said from behind me.

I shook my head at how insane my life was. But hopefully this was it. This would give me the protection I needed to just live. To create my best afterlife. “Better make that a whole round,” I murmured to X as I turned back to Titus and we nussed out the logistics.

Someone should have told Alice that her rabbit hole was filled with quicksand.

With my agreement written in blood, Titus left soon after, the Enforcers melting back into the night as he strode down the path. Vampires came out and knelt on their front stoops as he walked down the street. Like he was a god. It was super weird, and Judge and Walker turned up with panicked looks on their faces. “Titus is in town?” Judge gasped out, searching me for injury or like scarlet letters, or something.

“Yeah, he came to give me an offer I couldn’t refuse.” I did my best fat Marlon Brando impression, but they all seemed to miss the point. Ugh, I missed Tex. I looked over my shoulder at Nico. “Remind me to do The Godfather marathon at The Immortal

Cupcake.”

I filled Judge and Walker in on the whole Succubi Representative thing, and Walker’s eyes got wider and wider. Judge just shook his head. “Only you could go from a ditch to a Convocation seat in the space of a year, Rainey Day.”

Walker held me tightly to his chest. “When will it be announced?”

I shrugged. “Titus seemed to think it would take a week to gather all the Representatives together to vote, but he was confident by the end of next week, you’d be holding the brand new Representative for the Succubi in your arms. Then I’ll be safe, you’ll be safe and we can go back to normal.”

Judge kissed my cheek. “You don’t do normal.”

Well, he wasn’t wrong. I’d give it another week, and then I’d have my shifters back. I missed them so damn bad.

Nico kissed my other cheek. “I best tell the Council about this new development. And the introduction of more Enforcers.” He looked over my shoulder at Lucius loitering near my front door. “And probably about Lucius’ continued presence. I do not think they would let him pledge into the town, but they may let him stay if he adheres to the rules, as they did Judge.”

I winced. “Lead with the fact I’ll be an all-powerful Convocation ruler of the Universe.”

He kissed me once more and left. Walker got a call soon after, a domestic disturbance between nest-mates on the other side of town. Judge went with him, wearing a deputy badge even if he refused to wear the uniform. I briefly wondered if I could get them to frisk me later.

“Well, this is interesting,” X said, wandering into my personal space. He smelled so damn good, and a tattoo of a crying girl on his chest caught my eye. I traced the tear that was rolling down her cheek. He really was a work of art, considering when he got these tattoos done they didn't have the inks and machines they had now.

I looked up into his dark eyes. “What’s interesting?”

He picked me up so we were eye to eye. “I’ve got you alone, except for Crazytrousers, who owes me.” His grin was distinctly predatory. My eyes grew wide. Surely he didn’t mean...

I looked at Lucius, but there was heat in his eyes.

Oh shit.

“I always pay my debts,” he growled. Well, la sploosh. It was on. “But do not call me Crazytrousers or I will rip out your tongue and eat it.”

X made a rude noise. “Way to prove my point, Lucy. Let's go, Love. I need to taste you on my tongue. I’ve been starving and you are the only thing that can satisfy my hunger.”

I leaned forward and kissed him hard. “That was cheesy, even for you.”

I looked over my shoulder to make sure Lucius was following. I could pretend it was just because I wanted to give him a hit of my pleasure to keep him balanced, but I’d be lying. I must have been consuming his craziness, because the fact there was still a bloodstain on my stoop where he had cut the throat of a man who wanted to do terrible things to me, well, it made me wet as hell.

X groaned and kissed me again, focusing me back on the other insane person in my

life. I was obviously nuts too, because I was about to jam myself naked between two of the most crazy people I had ever met. And the idea made me so freaking hot I was going to combust.

We strode through the living room and into my bedroom.

X threw me on the bed with a bounce, peeling off his clothes at a rapid pace, and then stripping me naked too. His eyes traveled over my soft curves and he sucked his lip between his teeth. “Feck me, Love, you are the most gorgeous creature who has ever ridden my cock.”

“You romantic,” I teased, but I crawled up the bed, just to hear him hiss out that pained noise. Lucius stood in the doorway, his pupils blown wide as his eyes ate me alive. X opened a drawer and grabbed out several lengths of rope.

“On the bed, Lucy.”

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Lucius' top lip peeled back, his expression vicious, but X was completely unfazed. I was silent. I wanted to see what decision he would make. This was going to be well and truly out of the comfort zone of the ancient vampire. To not be in charge? Unheard of.

So when he started peeling off his clothes, my eyes were glued to each inch of skin he exposed. The swirling lines on his chest were like soft waves as he breathed heavily. I moved forward quickly as his hands reached the button of his black chinos.

"Let me," I whispered, dropping to my knees before unbuttoning the waistband and sliding the zipper down torturously slow. I didn't know who I was torturing though. Me? Lucius? Given his heady groan, even X.

I slid down the loose cotton boxers that seemed so at odds with the dangerous vampire. Who would have thought he'd wear plain old white shorts?

Still, they may have well been lingerie with how much my mouth watered as I slipped them down his thighs. His cock was hard already, and I couldn't resist the urge to stroke my tongue along the thick vein that ran down the top of his cock. Could I drink from that?

Lucius gave me a knowing look. "I doubt that would be enjoyable for either of us, Raine Baxter." He grabbed my chin, lifting me higher, until I was nestled a few inches below his navel. I could feel his blood moving beneath my lips. "Bite me there."

You didn't have to ask me twice. I sunk my fangs into his lower stomach, hitting the

big vein that ran just below his skin. His blood burst into my mouth, making me moan, the heady pleasure of the taste on my tongue making me so wet, I was slick between my thighs.

Too soon, a finger was slipping between my lips, releasing the suction of my bite. X was looking down at me, his face disapproving. “Uh uh, Love. There’s plenty of time for that. Let’s make Lucy more comfortable first.”

His grin was near manic as he indicated that the now naked ancient vampire should get on the bed. Unbelievably following orders, Lucius slid onto the bed, never taking his eyes off X like he was a viper ready to strike. He was probably not wrong.

“Ever heard of the art of Shibari, Lucy?” X crooned. “Ah, I see from your face that you have. It's really quite a beautiful art form, and it's not often I have a canvas like you two. On the bed too, Love. Give him a taste of the joy that is to come.”

X didn’t have to tell me twice, and I slid my body up Lucius’, my tongue running over that delicious vein once more, then further up his torso, over the hard lines of his abs, between his pecs until I got to his lips. My skin was pressed along his and he shivered.

“So fucking beautiful. Bewitchingly so,” he grumbled, and leaned up to kiss me. I crashed into his lips, tasting all his passion and sending it back threefold. My thighs bracketed his hips, and the head of his cock brushed softly over my folds, making Lucius hiss even as I whimpered softly. But he didn’t break the kiss, instead taking control of it, his tongue plundering my mouth, his fangs lightly scraping the tender flesh.

I felt him tense as X grabbed his arm, but slid my body down a little, distracting him with the wet heat of my body until he moaned again. X was fast, because too soon he had Lucius’ left arm restrained above him on the headboard.

As he moved to his ankles, Lucius tensed again. “They are just silk. If you needed to escape, you could do it in seconds,” I whispered against his lips. “But just let go and feel.”

He used his remaining free hand to grip my hips, grinding me down against his dick.

X was back up at the headboard, grabbing Lucius’ wrist. “Uh uh. Not yet,” he chastised gently, his voice so close to my ear. “We aren’t ready yet.”

I watched as he grabbed Lucius’ other arm, intricately binding his forearms, right down over his wrists and palms. Then he ran the end through the bed head. I leaned forward and kissed Lucius again, before standing back to admire X’s handiwork.

He was definitely a boy scout in a past life because it was beautiful. Both of Lucius’ arms were bound in intricate criss-crossing knots, and secured to the headboard. His feet were shackled together, but spread a little apart.

He looked like a feast, his lips parted and his body hard and ready. “You look so damn beautiful,” I whispered, and I didn’t know if I was complimenting X or Lucius.

X was never shy in accepting a compliment though, whether it was meant for him or not. “Thank you, Love. Your turn.”

I didn't even have time to squeak before he’d pulled me off the bed and stood me in front of him. “I have fantasies about this,” he whispered, his hands a blur across my body as the soft silken ropes wrapped around my torso. “Wrapped like a present, open and vulnerable, as you look up at me with those big trusting eyes that beg me to fuck you.” He grunted as he thrust his angry, hard dick against the softness of my stomach.

Then he was binding my hands to my torso with more ropes, and I frowned. “But I

wanna touch.” I pouted and X chuckled darkly. “I promise you’ll touch. Now hop back on the bed. On your knees, Love.”

I met Lucius’ eyes and they were filled with lust. Apparently the ropes did things for him too. His cock dripped precum and I groaned. “It looks like Lucy is getting more than one hit of your love juice tonight,” X whispered in my ears. Then he leapt, slipping the rope through a heavy ring on the ceiling that I hadn’t even noticed

I gave him a mock stern look. “When the hell did you put that in?”

X grinned completely unapologetically. “Last week. Didn’t know I’d get to use it so soon though.” He pulled on the rope and I was suspended into the air. I swung above Lucius’ body, my knees just brushing his abs.

“Mmm,” X grunted, lowering me slowly until I was poised over Lucius, my knees not quite touching the bed, but when Lucius thrust up, his eager cock slid down my slit.

I moaned, and X made a satisfied noise. Then he quickly lifted my heel to my ass and bound my legs as well. I was completely immobilized, my body just suspended above Lucius.

The happy noise coming from X was somewhere between a moan and a hum. “Fecking beautiful. I knew it would be.”

He knelt behind me, running his lips down my nape. “Excuse me, Lucius, but I’m about to grab your cock. I promise you’ll be happy about where it’s going though.”

I watched Lucius’ eyes, looking for any discomfort. But instead they burned with passion so hot that it was a wonder I wasn’t seared to the bone. When X grabbed his dick, he stroked it a few times, I could feel his fist against my thigh, and Lucius’ eyes

rolled back. Then he lined the head of his cock with my entrance and Lucius didn't hesitate. He arched, burying himself in me, and I moaned.

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Holy shit. This was too much. No, not too much, just this side of perfect. X did something with my ropes so I was hanging at the perfect height that my knees couldn't get purchase, but Lucius could thrust shallowly inside of me, hitting all the good spots.

"Oh my God. Oh my God," I panted as my orgasm hit me like a Louisville Slugger to the side of the head.

I panted, X's hands on my hips, moving me up and down Lucius' cock, and I swung freely. The man was a goddamn genius with ropes. A Da Vinci of rope bunnies.

I must have whimpered the words, because X chuckled. "Oh, I know."

He slid me off Lucius' dick, lifting me slightly and plunging his own cock inside my aching core. I screamed something incoherent as he thrust inside me hard, pushing my pleasure higher and higher with his hard, quick strokes. Then he pulled back out, grabbed Lucius' cock again, and I was back to riding the bound vampire. Lucius' eyes rolled back in his head and I knew the feeling. We were puppets of pleasure, and X, he was the fucking master. When a wet cock slid against my ass, I sighed softly. X bit my shoulder, releasing his venom, making me relax as he pushed into my tight hole.

Suspended between these two completely insane vampires, I think I found Nirvana. When X moved, swinging me along Lucius' cock even as he thrust up inside me, I knew we had because nothing, nothing could compare to this. This complete vulnerability, the bite of the ropes warring with the flood of pleasure in my veins. It was heady, addictive perfection.

X drew back and pushed in again, grabbing my hips and setting a punishing pace that had me screaming between them. Lucius' muscles trembled as he moaned with me, his abs contracting as he tried to get higher, deeper. X reached around and flicked my clit, and I came apart again. When he loosened the ropes so I was impaled on Lucius' cock, the ancient vampire took advantage, slamming in and out of me in time with X, creating a dance that had my face scrunched tight in pleasure.

Lucius came on a roar, his body bowed against his ropes, but he didn't break them. X bent me over Lucius' body until my rope bound breasts were pressed against his chest then doubled his efforts, his cock rubbing against Lucius still buried deep inside me.

Gripping my hips hard enough that I would have bruised if I still could, he came deep inside me with a satisfied groan. Pulling gently out he collapsed to the side.

"Well, that was fun."

If I had the brainpower to argue, I would have said that what just happened wasn't just fun, it was life-altering. Instead, I let my head flop to his chest.

"Love you, asshole."

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Tell Kelly I'll get her home even if I have to hog-tie her and bring her myself," I said to Brody over the phone, not even trying to hide the grin on my face as I stood at the apartment door above The Immortal Cupcake, a pissed off Everly tapping her foot on the other side of the threshold. Judge chuckled low from where he stood down the hall.

She popped her gum. "Tell Mom that it's fine! The apartment is warded and I'm not even working. I don't want to go back to Nîso," she shouted toward the phone and I

shook my head as Brody sighed at the other end of the line.

“Fine. But stay inside unless Raine and the guys are with you. Do not go out at night alone.”

Everly actually rolled her eyes. “I thought I’d take up night jogging, on my period, in a town full of vampires. I better change my plans.”

Oh boy. The sass was strong with this one. God, I loved her already. “You should be my best friend,” I mouthed to her, and she threw back her head and laughed.

“You’re on!” she whispered.

“Raine,” Brody whined, and I grinned.

“Okay, okay. Like I said, I’ll try.” I told him I loved him as I hung up the phone. I shrugged at Everly. “This is me trying to get you home. Okay?”

She reached out and dragged me through the door. “Thank God you are here. Don’t tell Uncle Brody, but damn I’ve missed the pack this week. You smell just enough like Pack that my shifter isn’t pacing around inside my head. I say we have a girls night and have some platonic snuggle time.”

I blinked at her, and blinked again. “Uh, okay?”

She sighed and hugged me. “Yes!” She looked past me at Judge. “No offense, but girls only. Mom would murder me if she knew I was inviting vampire guys inside my warded apartment. It was the only reason she’d let me stay in the first place.”

I didn’t tell her that Judge was exempt from the ward on this place. In fact, Judge and I had sex on just about every surface in this apartment.

All the furniture was brand new, the couch where I'd nearly killed Walker gone, the dining setting that I'd smashed to use as a stake to drive through his heart also gone. If I didn't think about it too hard, I could get past the anxiety being here produced.

Everly helped. The apartment had lost the scent of my life now. It smelled completely of Everly; the black coffee she liked and her citrusy body wash. Overlaying even that was the scent of burnt popcorn and some kind of curry she must have eaten last night.

I looked over at Judge, who was watching my face carefully. "It'll be fine. We won't leave the apartment."

"I solemnly swear it. It will be margaritas and macaroni and cheese. That's it," Everly said with the seriousness of swearing on the Bible.

Judge narrowed his eyes at the pair of us. "Please Judge? I haven't had a girls night since..." Since Angeline. Since I'd found Tex in that nightclub. Damn, had it been that long?

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I gave him my most pathetically hopeful look and he sighed. “Fine. But you don’t leave here for anything at all. Swear it?”

We both crossed our chests and he sighed. “If Walker chews me out for this, I’m saying you beat me over the head and threw me in the dumpster.”

I squealed and leapt into his arms in the hallway. I needed this. I’d been chafing under their always watchful gaze. Don’t get me wrong, I loved the shit out of all of them. They treated me like a goddess that walked among them. But sometimes, I just need to shovel popcorn in my face and extol the virtues of Scott Eastwood’s ass in Wrangler jeans in that bull riding flick. Oh yeah, we were definitely streaming that one.

He squeezed me tight, sliding me down his delicious body and kissing me with such intensity that I was beginning to think I didn’t need that girls night after all.

Then Everly cleared her throat and I pulled away. “Take your sexy man mojo somewhere else. I need time with the Alpha Mate,” Everly growled, and I chuckled.

With one more quick kiss, Judge let me go. “Not a single step,” he reminded me, and I nodded vigorously.

“I promise, Judge. It’ll be fine.”

He walked away slowly, making the call me sign with his hands as he turned the corner. Everly squealed as she herded me into the apartment. Maybe her favorite form was some kind of sheep dog?

“Yes! What’s first? I say we have a teen rom-com movie marathon, as much popcorn as we can gorge ourselves on and mac and cheese straight out of the pot. We can top it all off with margaritas.” She opened her fridge door and winced. “Okay, tequila and uh, apple juice? What are your thoughts?”

“Hell yes! But I’ll make the popcorn.”

I looked at my belly bulge. We’d watched two achingly hopeful teen movies where the slightly awkward main character discovered how to love herself and the hot guy of her dreams at the same time. I’d eaten a double batch of mac’n’cheese, and two bowls of popcorn. It was all churning around in my stomach, and we were about to find out if vampires could actually explode.

Everly, however, was on her fifth ‘margarita’ and she could not hold her booze. “Like I get that Mom wants me to follow her in her footsteps and become a Protector, but I don’t want that. I love the Pack, but I want to see the world. I know it’s dangerous, but I want to live. I want to mingle in human society. Go to college, you know? I don’t want twenty-four hour self defense training and following Uncle Brody around making sure he doesn’t get assassinated, like Ghost does.”

This was my Alpha Mate moment, the time when I was supposed to have the answers, and it should be something profound and wise. Problem was, I might be immortal now, but I had twenty years of life experience. That was it.

Still, I frowned and gave her my best contemplative look. “Well, what do you want to do with your life?”

She worried at her bottom lip with her teeth. “I think I’d like to be an architect. I like designing houses for Nîso, new sustainable homes that use what nature gives us to cut our resource consumption.”

Well, shit. “That sounds fucking awesome. Do that.”

“Maybe I’ll just snag me some right immortal vampire sugar daddy and spend my life traveling the world and having a billion orgasms. They must learn a few tricks in all that time, right?” She waggled her eyes at me and I mock-zipped my lips.

“A lady never kisses and tells.” I picked up the remote and flicked through the options. “Okay, this one about the girl who fakes losing her virginity? Or this one about the hot art nerd with glasses who suddenly turns into a hot art nerd without glasses, and catches the attention of the most popular boy in school?”

Everly ponders this way too hard, like I’m asking her which endangered species we should save, forsaking all others. “The first one. It’s funnier.”

I loaded up the movie and picked up my ‘cocktail’. Everly sat with her head in my lap, and I absentmindedly stroked her dark hair. The shifter need for touch was still something I was getting used to. Both Tex and Brody touched me at any opportunity they got, but I always thought in the back of my head it was because they loved me, not because their inner shifter craved it. But, in a way, I kind of liked it too. This platonic closeness.

I challenged anyone to stroke any part of my guys without wanting to ride them. It was freaking impossible.

Someone knocked at the door, and I sighed. Well, at least they’d given me this long. It was about time for Walker’s lunch break. There was no way I could eat another thing though. I wandered over to the door and opened it, a smile on my face.

But it wasn’t Walker and my smile fell a little.

Ashar stood on the other side of the door, an embarrassed blush on his cheeks.

“Hello?”

He gave a guilty wave. “Sorry to interrupt. I went to the store and it was closed, but I could hear movement up here and thought you might live above the shop?”

I shook my head, and he smiled sheepishly. “Whoops?”

I cocked my head. “What can I do for you Ashar?”

His eyes lit up. “You remembered my name?” Jesus, it was like he’d just won the lottery.

I gave him a soft smile. “Of course.”

Everly walked over, her steps a little staggered. Way too much tequila. “Oh, I’m sorry. You’re busy. I just wanted to ask one more time, if you’d reconsider? I mean, I don’t want to take you away or anything? I’m happy to come and visit you every other week. I’m not too far gone, but it’s like a shadow sitting on the outside of my mind, and every day it lurks closer.” He sounded desperate, and my heart constricted with pity.

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I felt like the worst person in the world. “I wish I could help, Ashar. I do. I’m working on something with Titus, and hopefully we can find a cure for everyone soon. But I can’t. If it was just my blood...” Hell, I wouldn’t mind feeding him every other week. He really was sweet. He had dark hair and eyes that sat too huge in his face. He reminded me of the geeky kid next door and I didn’t want him to suffer. But it wasn’t just blood he needed, and I wasn’t ready to pimp myself for the greater good.

His face fell a little, and I felt fucking terrible. “I’ll talk to Titus? Maybe they’ll put you in the first trials?” He brightened a little, and I smiled back. I’d do that. I had sway now, and I could use it to help people like Ashar. His eyes drifted past me, and his eyes went from happy to something a little more interested.

“I don’t think I introduced myself. Hi, I’m Ashar. Sorry to interrupt.”

Everly flushed bright pink and I grinned. Oh shit, they would be so freaking cute together. I stepped to the side so they could introduce themselves properly.

“Asher, this is Everly. My friend.”

I was one of those people who never really learned from their mistakes. I would always touch the flame twice to check it was really hot. Always binge eat Chinese food even though it made me want to puke.

Always trusted the friendly face.

As soon as my foot crossed the threshold of the apartment, Ashar reached out and

snatched me from the doorway.

I grabbed at the wall, my nails tearing off as I scrambled for a hand hold on anything. But he dragged me down the stairs and into the alley without slowing his steps.

No! No fucking way. Not again. Instead of dragging against him, I leapt and wrapped my body around his head like a damn spider monkey, slamming my fist into the base of his neck. He grunted, stopping suddenly, and the motion threw me forward onto the hard gravel. It scraped my skin and Ashar was on me in a moment, licking at the wounds and drops of blood.

No semblance of the sweet kid was left. It was all the darkness.

“Fight, Succubus. I love it when they fight. It makes breaking them so much more delicious. My collection of broken toys.”

Well, that was fucking creepy. I was on my feet and running away, but he was so damn fast. He grabbed the back of my neck, halting me and tossing me into the side of the brick wall with enough force to make my brain whirl. He was on top of me in an instant, his hands around my throat. I gripped his wrists, squeezing hard, trying to break his hold, or hell his wrists. I’d take either option now.

“Get the fuck off me!” I screeched, scrabbling backwards, aiming a kick at his head. I got him in the nose, but he was feral now.

He moaned deep in his chest. “Make it hurt.”

Well, he was fucked. No kink shaming, but I was strongly against the whole non-con in my fiction, let alone in real life. He stepped back though, looking confusedly at his hands. My compulsion. Why hadn’t I thought about that shit before now?

His words finally penetrated my brain. “Wait, your collection? You’re the damn Collector?”

Ashar grinned, the charm leaking back into his eyes. “That’s what they call me in the darkened alleys, where only the diseased can survive. I like it though. It sounds kind of badass, right?” His earnestness was back, and I realized that Ashar wasn’t on the edges of madness at all. He was fully damn unhinged.

I threw my head forward, landing a headbutt to his face. I’ve said it once, and I’ll say it again. No one wins with a headbutt. My teeth rattled in my skull, but it had the right effect. He reared back as blood gushed from his nose and down his chin.

A high pitched whistle had us both turning to the mouth of the alley. I barely had time to comprehend what was happening before there was a huge hunting knife lodged in Ashar’s right eye.

He went down like a dead weight as the knife did damage I didn’t even want to think about. Everly stood at the end of the alleyway, panting hard. I looked at the incapacitated vampire at my feet, and I vomited up popcorn and macaroni and cheese all over him.

Everly was beside me inhumanly fast, checking me for injuries. She heaved, and I heaved along with her.

“I’m sorry,” I moaned.

She waved me away. “I’m a sympathetic puker,” she groaned as she dry heaved again.

Putting a hunting knife through someone’s eye hadn’t fazed her but half-digested mac’n’cheese? That was her hard limit. A hysterical laugh bubbled up my throat but

came out as a sob.

So I did one thing I never thought I would. I slid down the wall and buried my face in my knees. I tugged on all my connections at once. It would bring them to me, my lovers, my heart. Until they got here, I was just going to cry a little instead.

Chapter Thirty-Four

No one had been able to stop Lucius from chopping the now re-dead Ashar into a thousand pieces. Literally a thousand. He counted as he chopped. When his knife had grown dull, X was there to hand him another one.

Judge was in a rage, but I don't think it was aimed at Ashar. It was aimed at himself, and apparently the guys shared his rage. "She should never have been alone," X repeated for the hundredth time.

"I know," Judge growled back.

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I was curled against Walker's chest on the back deck. I was smearing vomit and blood on his work uniform, but the predator in me wanted to see our enemy die. The human couldn't watch, so I struck a balance by hiding my face in Walker's shirt and just listening.

Brody and Tex were on their way back. They'd been frantic when they'd felt my distress, calling all my other guys. They'd found Everly puking behind a bush and me sobbing in a pool of chunky bodily fluids.

X had slit his throat in an instant. Unlike Walker or even Nico, he didn't ask questions, didn't want to know what had happened. He just cut his head half off and then dragged his corpse to where it now sat, fully dead, in my backyard.

I'd told Nico what he'd said, about his collection, and Nico was on the phone to Titus, trying to work out where his captives might be right now. They needed help too.

When Lucius was done, there was nothing left of the vampire formerly known as Ashar. There was a pile of tiny pieces. X pulled out his dick and pissed on it, then Judge doused it in gasoline and set it on fire.

I learned two things today. You couldn't trust a smile even if it said it was your friend. And vampires burned like tinder. The pile went up in a huge whooshing flame. It had taken three hours to do, and Lucius was covered in blood splatter from head to toe. But it was done, and my vampire sighed contentedly. Our enemy was dead and I could relax. How the hell could I relax though? The Collector wasn't the only crazy ass bitch who thought I belonged to them. Titus couldn't give me

Convocation Representation status soon enough.

There was a squeal of tires from the front of the house, and then the steady thud of quick feet through the house. I was wrapped in Brody's strong arms, Tex pressed into me from behind, as soon as their feet hit the deck.

"Red. I demand you stop this shit before I die prematurely of old age," Brody huffed. I laugh-sobbed as their warmth centered me like nothing else. Their aliveness. But the idea of Brody dying at all, old age or not, had me crying a little more.

Tex growled low, pulling me closer like he could meld us together. He didn't say anything, but our bond pulsed with his fear for me.

I extracted myself from them then, mostly because I was covering them in gore. "Sorry. I made you guys gross," I hiccuped. Nico stood, scooping me up in his arms and walking me into the house. "Let me wash this off you. We will wash all this badness down the drain, Raine, and then we'll live like the universe owes us happiness. What do you think?"

I nodded against his chest, and brushed my knuckles across the wooden door frame on the way past. Knock on wood to ward off bad luck. It was an old habit of my grandmother's that I'd picked up but hadn't done in ages. Might explain a few things.

I noticed Brody and Tex following behind us, but Nico didn't seem to mind. He put me down in the bathroom and peeled off his clothes. When I realized my hands were shaking, Brody stepped forward and helped me. Tex turned on the shower, the steam quickly filling the room. They worked in perfect synchronization, moving around me like they'd been together for decades. Finally, Nico picked me up and lifted me into the shower. I curled my body around his, just wrapping myself in his strength and power. The shower was quite a big one, old style without boxed glass screens. Instead there was just a single long glass wall separating it from the bath and the sink.

Nico just held me as the water cleansed me of the death that clung to me. Washed away the badness of the whole last month. Brody and Tex just sat on the vanity, watching Nico hold me, not saying anything just being silent sentinels of support, ready to help me in any way I might need it. I was so fucking lucky.

I just clung to his body, my face buried in his neck, my arms and legs wrapped around him. There was nothing sexual about it, no there was more to it than that. It was silent support. A love deeper than anything physical. They were all telling me their feelings without words today.

“Love you,” I murmured against Nico’s skin.

He slid me back to my feet, tilting my face up and kissing me so softly it was barely there. “And I love you.”

Brody had left the pups with the Matriarch when he felt the call, Annie coming in as back up, and I was a bit anxious for them to be home. Would Christopher think we’d just abandoned them? Would they be scared being back in a Pack setting after we promised that they had a family with us?

I was glad they weren’t here, because I needed this moment to recompose myself before I could put on a brave face. But tomorrow, I wanted them home. It was weird how quickly they’d become a part of the patchwork of our lives. Even Tex seemed a little lost.

I didn’t know what to feel really. Relieved that the threat was gone? Sad that a vampire, who was probably a perfectly nice person before the madness took him, was now smoldering in my backyard?

Judge had sequestered Everly back in her apartment after she’d saved me. Jesus, I owed her everything.

When I told Brody what happened, he'd smiled. "She's Kelly's kid after all. She knew how to kill a man with a crayon and a hair tie from the time she was three."

I made Brody go around there. She might be a badass, but she would need the Pack right now, as much as I needed mine. Lucius had disappeared almost as soon as he'd finished dismembering the body in the backyard, and I didn't know when he'd be back. I don't think this was exactly what he'd signed up for, but now he was bound to me whether he liked it or not. Otherwise, it might have been him with his throat cut.

Nico's phone rang, and he stood as he answered it. I laid on Judge's lap, even though he practically stank of regret.

I looked up into his tortured, midnight blue eyes. "It's not your fault. You told me not to leave. I should have known better."

Judge shook his head. "I should never have left you alone. This will be my cross to bear, Rainey Day. Maybe one day I'll forgive myself, but not today, so don't ask it of me, 'kay?'"

I nodded and closed my eyes as he stroked his hands through my hair.

Word must have gotten around town, because a lasagna turned up on the doorstep, better than a dick I guess, and I wondered if people thought it was me. That I brought this shit to their town. They weren't wrong, in the short time I'd been a vampire, I'd caused an unbelievable amount of drama.

Judge stroked his hand over my face, his thumb stroking away my frown. "Stop that. This isn't your fault either."

Nico strolled back into the room, shaking his head. "That was Titus. Enforcers raided Ashar's house and found sixteen different types of rare supernaturals. Even humans

with extraordinary abilities apparently. They were all being kept in cages in an underground compound. You saved their lives. Raine. Because you're brave."

I shook my head. "No, Everly did that. All I did was get captured by a deranged vampire."

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Nico shrugged. “If it wasn’t for you, they’d all be still captive or worse.” He kissed my cheeks. “Also Titus wanted me to tell you that the Convocation passed the motion to make you the Representative for the Succubi.”

Happy fucking day.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The Immortal Cupcake was packed, Dark River coming to my re-reopening in droves. It was the way they showed support, or maybe they thought that perhaps something outrageous would happen if they stayed long enough. You never could tell with small towns. Everly bustled around at the end of the counter, making coffee and tea, then bussed the tables. I handled the food, and takeaway orders.

Nico had finished baking early in the morning, and was now relaxing on the couch in the bookstore section. He sat talking to Walker and Judge, who were on their lunch break. X stood in front of me, Enit on his shoulder like she was a boombox from the eighties. “I want a pink one, but I also want a yellow one.”

X nodded solemnly. “Why choose, am I right, Love?” he said to me, waggling his eyebrows. I don’t think he was talking about the cupcakes. “We’ll have one yellow one and one pink one please, you sexy wench.”

“What’s a wench?” Enit asked, and I gave X a stern look.

He just grinned, placing the pup on her feet. “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

I thrust two cupcakes at him and he smiled back. Then he took a bite out of each, eating half the cupcake each time. He got the two, mashed them together, and then handed it to Enit. She smiled up at him like he told the sun to rise each morning, and skipped back over to her siblings.

The front door opened and it was like all the sound got sucked right out. I looked up as everyone went entirely silent.

Six black clad vampires walked into the cafe. X was beside me, his knife in his hand in a moment. Judge was up and on my other side in an instant.

I looked to where the kids were, but they were all huddled around Walker's legs, Nico standing in front of them all. Thank goodness.

The black clad warriors stood around me, and then dropped to their knees. The one in the center, a dark haired vampire with a jagged scar across his face like the Mariana Trench, spoke.

“Representative Raine Baxter of the Succubi. We come with an official announcement and to pledge ourselves as your guard.”

I blinked, then blinked again. “Uh, okay?”

I heard a strange low pitched whine, and looked over to see Everly eye-fucking the stuffing out of one of the Enforcers. He had bright silver hair and purple eyes. Eesh, he was like catnip for horny shifters, that one.

Great. Kelly was going to murder me in my sleep if her baby fell in love with an Enforcer. It would be like telling her that her daughter fell in love with Ted Bundy or something.

An almost elfin man stood and cleared his throat. He unfolded a wax-sealed sheet of paper. “The Convocation hereby votes that, given the circumstances, the Representative Raine Baxter of the Succubi be upgraded to the Representative of all Endangered Preternatural Creatures. This was passed into motion last night. Please find the document signed.”

“Uh, excuse me?”

Judge just grunted. “Think you just got a promotion, Rainey Day.”

The elfin man passed me the paper, and I snatched it from him. There, in impossibly fancy handwriting, was a proclamation. I’d been drafted. Majority rules. My eyes shot to Nico who looked just as shocked as I did. Lucius strolled into the cafe, standing behind all the Enforcers. As one, they tensed in his presence.

He smiled, and somehow that put them even more on edge. He waved a hand. “At ease, Men. I’m not in the Enforcers anymore. I’m just a civilian.”

He wandered over, looking completely sane, even though they watched him warily. When he stopped beside me and kissed my cheek, and craggy-faced Enforcer sucked in an audible breath. “We’d heard that he’d regained, er, what he’d lost, but we didn’t believe it.”

I shrugged, holding my hands up. “Magical vagina?”

X snorted, but smothered it quickly. I shot him a quick smirk, and then I looked back at the group of six. “Do I have any choice?”

The leader shook his head. “I’d say not, Ma’am.”

I frowned. I hated not having choices. “Why’s that?”

Lucius nibbled my ear. “Probably because there's a group of displaced rare paranormals standing in the middle of the Town Square?”

I reared back. “What did we say about people as gifts, Lucius?”

He grinned, and it was almost sweet in its sinisteress. “Not me this time.”

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Craggy Face cleared his throat again. “He’s correct. The Convocation sent them. You are their Representative now. It is your duty to care for their wellbeing.”

“Fuck. Me.”

The leader stepped forward and all the mirth fled from X’s face. He threw his knife and it landed between the leaders feet. “Let’s get one thing clear. Her dance card is full. If one of you even so much as wanks in the shower over her, I am going to cut off your cocks and reattach them to your forehead.”

A wildly inappropriate snort burst out of my mouth. X wasn’t joking though. “And once that’s done, I will chop you into a thousand pieces. Am I clear?”

The leader nodded, and then he grinned at X like he hadn’t just threatened to geld him or something. “I’ve missed you, you fucking psycho bastard. You too, Judge. It hasn’t been the same without the Judge, Jury and Executioner.”

Judge gave the dude a wry smile. “Good to see you too, Buddy.”

I blinked. Craggy Face’s name was Buddy? I must have asked the question out loud, because he was nodding. “Yes, Ma’am. At your service.”

What even was my life? “Grab a seat. I need to make a few phone calls.” One would be to Titus. He promised me that I would just be able to get on with my life, but how was I meant to do that when there were a dozen people standing like scared sheep in the middle of town?

I looked through the plate glass window at the group. Their body language was all fear, and I could almost scent it from here. They smelled like prey, even to me. I was screwed and not in the fun way. Yep, I was going to phone Titus and give him an earful. But first, I pulled out my phone and pressed the call button.

It rang six times before someone answered. “Hello?”

“Layla. It’s Raine Baxter from Dark River. I’m going to need a favor. I’m going to need Eden.”

It was good to have friends in weird places.