



Sunshine and the Vamp

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Description: Best intentions can go suck it.

I walked into a dark alley with the best of intentions and look where that got me. Drugged, kidnapped and thrown into a world I didn't even know existed.

Now I'm being held captive by a hot as sin vampire, whilst trying not to be killed by his wife and, oh yeah, he's the leader of the Russian Mob and I'm suddenly a target. Go me.

Safe to say, I'm not sure I'll do anything for anyone ever again.

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Chapter One

Benji

The barrel of a gun stared straight at me. I was going to die. Right here in the back of this alley that smelled like week old sashimi and stale piss. My brain was going to decorate the wall behind me because there was no way that I could dodge a bullet from a gun that was aimed right at the middle of my forehead.

Maybe I could do that thing in the movies where they slap the gun and make a run for it. How far away from the main road was I? I glanced over the shoulder of the guy holding the gun.

“Don’t,” the man said. “Please, don’t.”

His voice was smooth, dark and way too nice for a murderer. How was I supposed to survive this? I’d just wanted to help Charlie. The guy had seemed like he could use a friend, and I was trying to be a decent human being and look where that got me. In a shitty alley about to die at the hands of some smooth-talking bastard. Maybe I shouldn’t have had all those shots. I think they’d given me a misplaced hero complex.

Besides, I’m sure Charlie shot this guy. He should be dead.

Why wasn’t he dead?

Maybe Charlie didn’t really need a friend after all.

Fuck.

Wait a minute.

Was I bait?

Oh my God. I was, wasn't I?

Thatasshole.

I'd bought him a drink and tried to help. And after the worst day of my life, I'd just wanted to have a good time and forget all about Dr Kingsly, his ego, and his manipulative ways. Maybe I should have just sucked Kingsly's dick. I'd have no self-esteem, but at least I wouldn't be staring at the barrel of a fucking gun.

"I'm sorry for this, but I need you to come closer," the man whispered.

Why didn't he sound like some archetypal villain? He just sounded so...polite. Like he was asking for a coffee and was sorry to be putting me to the trouble of making it.

"Why?" I asked.

He huffed a breath. "Because I'm asking you to."

Probably had something to do with the fact that he was in the shadows, and I was standing in a bright shaft of moonlight. But fuck it. He could get as frustrated as he wanted. If I only had a few minutes left with the ability to make decisions, then I was going to make some.

"If you want to kill me, then you're going to have to come closer to me." I folded my arms across my chest.

“Fine,” he growled, and it set the hairs at the back of my neck standing to attention. Maaaybe I shouldn’t have pushed him.

He shifted forwards into the shaft of moonlight and holy fuck.

The guy was too pretty to be a murderer. His eyes were a beautiful shade of blue, like the ocean bathed in sunlight, and his face was all angles with a jaw sharp enough to cut glass. Damn, I think I’d lose a finger tracing those lines. The only thing that took away from his prettiness was that there was no expression on his face. Nothing to give away what he was thinking. What kind of person had no emotion — Wait.

A psychopath.

Fuck.

Fucking fuckity fuck.

I really was going to die.

“I’m not going to kill you,” he said softly and lowered the gun.

“Ha! Like I’m going to believe that.” I was actually really hoping I could believe that.

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Dark tendrils of hair fell over his bright blue eyes as he shook his head in disbelief. “I’m not going to kill you.”

“Riiiiight. And the gun is for what? Shits and giggles?”

His eyes flashed. For a second, I thought they had turned silver, but that must have just been a trick of the light. The bright blue orbs stared straight at me with a steadiness that made my stomach churn.

“No, but if I wanted you dead, I would have killed you the second you set foot in this alley.”

“What about Charlie?”

His lips pulled back in a snarl. “I will find him, torture him and then watch the life bleed from his eyes.”

Wow. Okay. That was kind of aggressive. And why was he telling me this if he wasn’t going to kill me? “I have a question—”

“Why am I telling you all this?” He cocked an eyebrow and damn if that didn’t make him look like he’d stepped off the cover of a magazine. “Because, whilst I might not be killing you, I cannot let you go.”

“Wh-what?” My heart lurched in my chest and the man’s eyes dropped to my throat.

“You’ve seen too much.”

His eyes stayed trained on my throat, and I suddenly felt self-conscious. Was there a mark there or something?

“Come here. Now.” His voice dropped to a throaty rumble that went straight to my cock. But I was going to ignore that because this wasn't the time or place to be thinking about getting laid. Jeez, there must be something wrong with me if I was thinking about sex whilst staring death in the face. It had to be adrenaline. Right? Either that or I was discovering I had a kink I knew nothing about.

Again. Not the time or place.

I swallowed, my mouth drier than the dessert. “No. Please, just let me go.”

A frown dipped over his narrowed eyes. He stared at me for the longest time, his gaze dark and assessing. And God, it was quiet. And I was nervous. And shit, I could feel the word vomit about to explode from my mouth.

“Please don't kill me. I don't want to die. I was just trying to help, and I didn't mean to interrupt. I'll just pretend I didn't see anything. I mean, who am I going to tell? There's only old Mrs Mickles who lives next door, and she never leaves the house and—”

A hand slammed over my face, cutting off the tirade of shit spewing from my mouth.

The mystery murder man grunted. “You talk too much.”

Only when I was nervous.

Or about to die, apparently.

I took a deep breath through my nose, trying my best to calm my beating heart. Not

that it did me any good. I'm sure the guy could feel it vibrating through my chest where he was pressing me against the wall. Oh God, I think I stepped in something disgusting.

I whimpered against his hand.

"I know," he said calmly. "This won't hurt."

He'd lied to me. I was going to die.

I kicked my feet out, but he deflected the blows and pressed his knees into my legs and locked his hips against mine. I couldn't do anything but struggle. My breath came fast and shallow, my skin turned clammy. I clawed at the hand over my mouth, but he was surprisingly strong.

The pretty psycho brushed a curl off my forehead, the soft gesture at odds with the manhandling the rest of his body was doing. "It will all be over soon."

Another whimper escaped.

"Hush now," he soothed, his eyes impossibly bright. Then he grinned like a wolf, all teeth and voracious.

This was it.

He lunged towards me and a sharp pain lanced through the side of my neck.

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I didn't even have a chance to scream.

Chapter Two

Benji - 12 Hours Earlier

I loved my job. It was hard work, intense, soul shaking at times but the most rewarding thing I could ever hope to do.

That was until today.

Until this moment.

"I don't understand," I said as I stared blankly at the Board.

"We've received some allegations that we can't overlook," Professor Beech said, her salt and pepper hair piled on top of her head in a mass of artful curls.

"Allegations? What kind of allegations?" My stomach turned sour. I hadn't done anything, other than... "That asshole. This is Kingsly's doing, isn't it?"

That slimy, creepy, egotistical prick.

"We can't share the name of the person who made the allegation of sexual harassment," Ms Raymon said, her beady little eyes narrowed. She'd never liked me, and I bet, between her and Kingsly, they'd cooked this whole thing up to get rid of me.

Professor Beech took a deep breath. She was the head of the Board, and I thought she would have had my back. “I’m sorry, Dr Barrett, but we are going to have to terminate your residency with us.”

My blood ran cold. “What? You can’t be serious?”

I looked at all the faces on the board, people I’d seen passing in the corridors of the hospital for the last few years and not one of them held eye contact with me.

“This is ridiculous. There is no way that any kind of allegation, sexual or otherwise, was made against me. This whole thing is bullshit.”

Ms Raymon stood, her plump frame shaking with anger. “May I remind you, that—”

“No,” I cut in. “If you’re going to terminate me without even giving me the chance of an explanation, then shame on you. I am a damn good doctor, and I thought I had earned the respect of my fellow peers and the Board. This has all the markings of Dr Kingsly’s hand, and I know he’s a brilliant surgeon. I know he’s been blessed with a skill that has saved countless lives and brought serious revenue into this hospital, but do you know what that doesn’t excuse? Wandering hands. Sexual propositions. Making anyone beneath him feel beholden to him and belittling them. I’ve seen it, hell, I bet you’ve all seen it, too.”

A blush rose to Professor Beech’s face, and she sat up straighter. I fuckingknewit. “Benjamin—”

“He asked me to suck his dick, and do you know what I said? I said no. And here I am, stood in front of you like you’re the jury, judge and fucking executioner.”

“You don’t have any proof of those allegations,” Ms Raymon said, her skin paling slightly. “No one does.”

I snorted. “And I bet you’ve ensured that. I guess money really is the answer to everything here. Well, you can take your residency and shove it up your goddamn assholes.”

I ripped my pass off my scrubs and threw it down on the table. Then I turned on my heel and left.

“They fired you?” Maya said.

“Yep,” I said as I packed my shit into a box I had scrounged from the canteen.

Maya paced the locker room, her amber eyes burning bright with indignation. “Those fucking bastards.”

I shrugged. “It’s done, and there’s nothing I can do to change it. I can’t go up against the Almighty Dr Elliot Kingsly. I’ll be fine.”

“But what are you going to do? You’ve got your last year to complete, and who the fuck knows if Elliot can blacklist your name for other hospitals.”

Tears burned the back of my eyes, and I blinked rapidly to dispel them. I wanted to scream, in frustration, with rage, at the fucking impotence of my situation. What was I going to do now? What if Maya was right and I couldn’t get a position at any other hospital? Was I going to have to move cities? This place was my home. I’d grown up here, set down all my roots here. The thought of leaving Mithaven filled me with dread.

“I’ll go back and reason with them. Surely, they will give me a fair hearing.”

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Maya grabbed my shoulders, blocking the way out. “Babe, if you go back there, you’ll probably end up punching them in the face.”

I groaned. She was right. Maya was always right.

“But how can I just walk away? I’ve given everything to this place; my blood, sweat, and tears.”

“Well, I’ve just about finished my shift, so let’s go out, get drunk and try and come up with a plan.” She grinned wide, her amber eyes flashing with mischief. A night out with Maya never ended with sensible choices.

But maybe that was just what I needed today.

Misthaven was a large city in the centre of the country. It should have been the capital, but when the three main crime families took over, the monarchy moved out and relocated to the coast. The Morozovs, the Lavaeux, and the Rowans controlled Misthaven. Considering we were all under the thumb of criminals, the city was well run and surprisingly, had a low crime rate. Seemed like most of the shady shit was done outside of the city.

We had a great underground network rail, which was improved when the monarchy left, and it was only a five-minute walk from the hospital to the tube station that I needed. It was a walk that took me past several buildings owned by the Morozov family, the biggest of the three ruling families. Most of downtown was owned by

them, including all the nightlife spots, one of which Maya and I would be attending tonight called The Crypt. It was a nightclub under the old cathedral, and it was creepy as fuck, but they also had the best music and drinks of any club in Mithaven.

But this building, the Morozov Monolith, was intimidating. It towered over the surrounding buildings and was all dark glass and steel. I always wondered what could go on in a building like that, but I probably wouldn't want to know. It was most likely murder and mayhem, and I was probably better off not knowing.

A shiver of apprehension ran through me. The things the walls in that building must have seen.

I hauled my box of shit higher on my chest and took one last look at the building. I turned toward the tube station but stopped when a loud crash sounded from the gap down the side of the building. A door was flung open, and a figure raced out of the building. He ran straight towards me, looking over his shoulder as if he expected someone to be behind him. He crashed into my side, knocking my box of crap to the floor.

"Hey!" I shouted after him, but he didn't stop. He just kept on running as if the Devil himself was following.

I bent down to pick my stuff up off the ground and a flash of something flew by, followed by a gust of wind. Paper flew in all directions, and I scurried to snatch them before they blew away and disappeared completely.

What the heck was that?

I groaned in frustration as I watched some of my research fly away on the breeze. Thank the Lord I had some of it stored in the cloud. I'd just have to rewrite some of my notes again. It was a ball ache, but at least I hadn't lost everything. I reached out

for one of the pages, but a leather clad hand beat me to it.

My skin turned clammy as I realised this man probably came out of the Morozov building.

Oh, God.

Fuck.

Was there a mobster stood behind me?

“Be careful, little bird,” the man behind me said, his voice a deep rumble. “There are monsters lurking in the shadows here.”

I shivered at his words and slowly took the paper from his hand. I didn’t want to make any sudden movements.

A whisper of a breath brushed the back of my ear. “Better run, now. Or someone is going to think you want to get caught.”

I hissed in a breath, the anticipation of something coiling in my gut. I just wasn’t sure what it was, but one thing I knew, was that I wasn’t being spoken to like that. Like I was there at the whim of someone who thought they were higher in the food chain than me. I didn’t care if he was the mysterious Morozov leader himself, I was not taking another person trying to belittle me. Not today.

I shoved the papers in my box, suddenly over that moment of fear as indignation took its place. I jumped to my feet, turned around and saw nothing but the empty street behind me.

“What the hell?”

Where had the guy gone?

Probably some secret tunnel that ran under the building so he could lurk in the shadows like a fucking creeper. I hauled my box back up again and continued my way to the tube station. This day could go fuck itself.

I crossed the road and continued with my journey, the spike in adrenaline from earlier leaving an edgy feeling curling in my stomach. It lingered, churning uncomfortably. I'd had it with today. I couldn't wait to go out tonight and forget about it all.

Fuck Dr Kingsly.

Fuck the Board.

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And fuck the guy who told me to run.

I turned down Jackson Avenue, which ran between some of the high rises and was more like an oversized alleyway than an avenue. It connected the main road to the tube station and the underground car parks that serviced the flats and offices here. It was usually busy when I walked down here but, in the middle of the afternoon, it was pretty deserted. And dark. Unnaturally so.

Maybe it was that lingering edginess from earlier, but my steps slowed down. Something felt wrong. It was quiet.

Too quiet.

Fuck. I was going to end up like the hapless jock who died in the horror movie.

“Hello?” I whispered shakily.

A loud crack assaulted my ears, reverberating down the alley with the power to stop me in my tracks. There was only one thing that sounded like that.

A gunshot.

Followed by a cry of pain.

Someone was getting attacked.

I dropped my box and ran towards the sound, hoping it wasn't too late.

Two figures appeared in front of me, grappling against the side of the building.

“Hey! Stop that!” I shouted as I got closer.

Both the men turned towards me, but it wasn’t bright enough to see what they looked like. The one pinned against the wall used my distraction to knee the other guy in the groin and shake off his attacker. He turned and fled down the street, but the other guy strode purposefully towards me, one hand pressed against his side.

“A-are you hurt?” I asked, eyeing the growing blood stain on his crisp white shirt.

“Oh, little bird, you should have run.”

Run. My muscles quivered with the need to flee.

The guy from earlier stalked towards me, his eyes bright in the low light, looking for all the world like a lethal predator.

Come on. Run, dammit. I needed to run.

I took a step back, and the guy grinned. “It’s too late for that now.”

He lunged towards me and my body seemed to snap out of the paralysis, holding it still. I spun around and raced towards the end of the alley. If I could just reach the main street, I could—

Something smacked into my back, pitching me forwards.

Nope. Fuck this.

I wasn’t dying in this alley.

I rolled over and got an up-close look at the guy. Hair as black as pitch and he had cold, dead eyes the colour of ice. His face was all sharp lines, with dark, angry brows low over a straight nose and a harsh mouth. There was no doubt that I was looking at a man who probably killed people for a living.

Rage built in my chest, overtaking the terror that had made me flee. I had to fight. Had to survive. I bucked and lashed, threw my hands out to scratch at his face. He laughed as he blocked my pathetic attempts to break free.

“Enough,” he snarled. His hands pinned my throat, and his knees clamped around my chest like a vice.

“Byron, don’t kill him,” someone drawled from nearby. “You know the boss doesn’t want us killing innocents.”

The guy choking me, Byron, rolled his eyes. “Fine, but you need to do the memory thing.”

A shadow fell across my vision, but I was struggling to see anything with the world turning hazy around me. My brain was being starved of oxygen, and it wouldn’t be long before I died. Less than five minutes, probably.

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The weight of the guy above me vanished. Air spluttered from my lungs as I coughed and tried to breathe, but I wasn't given a chance to recover. A large hand gripped my face and all I could see was sandy blonde hair and eyes that looked like the moon.

"You didn't see anything." His voice reverberated around my head, buzzing against my brain and making my skin hum. "We weren't here, there was no gunshot, and no one was fighting. You will pick up your things, go home and then carry on with the rest of your day."

Something vibrated under my skin, and my brain turned foggy. Why was it so hard to think?

"Hush now. Close your eyes and count to ten."

My eyes fluttered shut. "One... two... three..."

Chapter Three

Benji

My apartment wasn't much, but it was home. Two bedrooms, a spacious living area with an open-plan kitchen and a dining area made up the space. I'd lived in this place since I was nineteen. When my nan had died, I'd used my inheritance to buy this place. There was only me. I was an only child, and my parents died in a car accident when I was five. My nan had taken in me in and cared for me, but she'd passed away six years ago now. I'd put myself through medical school and six years later, here I was, stood in my apartment with a box of my shit from work and wondering what the

hell I was going to do next.

I dumped the box on the kitchen island and took a deep breath, exhaling heavily. I let the events of the day wash over me, but I couldn't seem to wrap my head around the fact that I wasn't going to work tomorrow. That was going to be a problem for tomorrow. There wasn't much I could do about it today and besides, I had a night out at theCrypto to get ready for.

But first, I was going to treat myself to my favourite meal.

I grabbed my phone and wondered over to the sofa, disturbing my sleeping Birman as I dropped into the soft cushions. Maurice looked at me through narrow eyes and sent an irritated flick of his whiskers my way. He was such a moody puss.

"Golden Dragon, how can I help?" a soft voice drawled down the phone.

"Hey Maddie," I said as I scratched Maurice's ear.

"Ah, the lovely Benji. Want your usual?"

"Please, but can I have a double helping of prawn crackers?"

She laughed. "Bad day?"

"The worst."

"I got you, babe. Double prawn crackers, coming up."

"Thanks." I ended the call and scooped Maurice up into my arms. He complained at being manhandled, but soon settled against my chest when I stroked through the long white fur on his back.

I told him all about my day, about how Dr Kingsly used the hospital like his own little playground and about my walk home that I don't actually remember making.

Huh. That was weird. I remember leaving the hospital and making it to Jackson Avenue, but then nothing until I walked through my front door.

A sharp stab of pain lanced through the front of my brain, making me cry out in shock. Maurice fled my embrace as I pitched forward, images flashing before my eyes.

Ice-cold eyes.

Leather gloves.

Bloodstains.

Two orbs like the moon.

You didn't see anything...

Then, as quick as it had started, the pain disappeared, and with it, the lingering images.

What the hell was that?

What didn't I see?

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I tried to pull the images back to the forefront of my mind, but the harder I tried to remember, the more my head hurt. I couldn't quite seem to grasp any of the images firmly, and it was like chasing smoke that was caught on a breeze. Impossible and frustrating.

I grunted and fell backwards into the soft embrace of the couch. This day was turning out to be the worst.

A knock sounded on the door and relief flooded me. I was so ready to eat my weight in delicious Chinese takeaway. I plodded over to the door. "Hey Maddie. Thanks for—"

Maya stood on the other side, takeaway bags in hand and a grin curling her elfin features. "It's time to partyyyyy!"

I winced. I loved this woman, but sometimes, she was a lot.

"What's the matter?" she asked as she crossed the threshold.

"Nothing. Just a bit of a headache."

She dropped the takeout bags on the side in the kitchen and dished them out into a couple of bowls. "Do you want to stay in tonight instead?"

"No. I want to get something fun out of this shitshow of a day."

"Speaking of shitshows," she said with her eyes brim-full of delight, "Dr Kingsly

ispissed.”

My eyebrows raised. That was an interesting development. “Why? The Pampered Prince not having his needs met?”

Maya giggled. “Word has got out about your meeting in front of the Board and people are starting to challenge Dr Kingsly.”

“Good.” And it was. If there was going to be anything good to come out of me leaving Mithaven Hope Hospital, it would be that Dr Kingsly was knocked down a peg or two. I just hoped that it didn’t make him a worse human being.

“You should have seen his face when one of the nurses told him to get something himself,” Maya said gleefully, her cheeks round like a hamster as she stuffed her face full of food. “I thought he was going to burst a blood vessel.”

I wish I could have seen that. Still, I worried that antagonising him would make him worse. “Just be careful. The guy is a slimy prick, but I wouldn’t put it past him to do something really horrid if pushed too far.”

Maya slammed her chopsticks down. “Well, then the Board won’t be able to look away. They’d have to do something about it.”

“At the expense of someone else?” I snapped and instantly regretted it. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to shout. This headache is just a bitch.”

“Are you sure you want to go out?” Maya asked softly as she placed her hand over mine.

“Yeah, I want to. This day has just been... weird.”

“Weird?”

I frowned and fiddled with my chopsticks on the table. “Have you ever done something but not remember doing it?”

Maya stared at me, concern knitting her brows. “What do you mean?”

I pursed my lips for a moment, debating whether to tell her everything. “I don’t remember how I got home.”

Guess I wanted to tell her everything.

“Okay...” Maya looked worried.

“I remember leaving the hospital, getting to Jackson Avenue and then nothing until I walked through my front door.”

“Everyone feels disassociation at some point, like driving somewhere and suddenly realising you’re at your destination. It’s not uncommon.”

Trust Maya to go into doctor mode. “I know, but this feels different. There are these flashes—”

“Flashes?”

“Of images. Things I’m trying to remember, but I just can’t quite seem to remember them.”

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“Is that what’s causing the headache?”

I gnawed my bottom lip and nodded.

“That’s it.” She pulled her phone out of her back pocket. “I am calling Liv and ordering you a CT scan right now.”

“No, Maya. Please. It’s fine. I’m fine. I think I’m just tired and worried and stressed over today.”

She eyed me warily.

“Look, let’s go out and if it’s still bothering me in the morning, I’ll call Liv myself. Okay?”

“Fine,” she snapped. “But if you die, you better come haunt me so I can say ‘I told you so’ to your face every day.”

I laughed. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Now eat up, because then we are going toThe Cryptto get shitfaced.”

“You can’t get shitfaced,” I snorted. “You’re on shift tomorrow.”

“Then I’ll watch you get shitfaced whilst I have a few measly shots.”

I had a feeling she was fooling herself with her commitment to those few shots. Sober

Maya made good, solid decisions. Alcohol laced Maya made impulsive, wild decisions that usually landed us in some trouble, and someone had the potential to lose an eye.

Tonight was going to be fun.

Chapter Four

Damyr

I pinched the bridge of my nose and tried to focus on tuning out the noise that was currently invading my office at The Crypt. I understood why Vlad and Aleksey were arguing. There was still no sign of Charlie or my ledgers and fuck knows whatever else the guy stole as leverage. He'd got cocky. Skimming off the top and Vlad had found out when he did a check on the accounts for me. Something had been bugging me the last couple of months. Maybe it was the new suits. I didn't pay Charlie enough to afford a custom three piece. One I might have overlooked. But three...

I didn't know how long Charlie had been skimming, and I think that was what pissed me off the most. That it was going on right under my nose and I had no fucking clue. Now the guy had somehow stolen my fucking ledger and was no doubt going to use it to blackmail me.

Maybe I should just leave. I had enough money put away to last me several lifetimes. Did I really want to spend the rest of my life dealing with problems like this?

Had the world finally lost its flavour?

"You're the one who let him get away," Aleksey growled. He was tall, lithe, with blonde hair pulled back into a messy bun, and chiselled features permanently pulled into a scowl. If he smiled, the guy looked like an angel and far too pretty, but he was

always frowning or looking like he was chewing glass, which harshened that soft elfin face.

Vlad was built like a fucking tank. Broad shoulders and back, tapered waist and muscles always coiled and ready for action. “I wasn’t the one who was careless enough to get shot.”

No, that idiot was Byron. The other man in the room. As silent as a shadow, and just as dark.

“Dear Lord,” I muttered, running a hand down my face. I needed to get a handle on this, or there would be blood everywhere. These guys were loyal to the family, but they were hot-headed, violent, and prone to impulsiveness. We might not all be brothers born, but we were brothers in blood and that meant a hell of a lot more.

We were also all vampires. Except Byron. He was human and a complete psychopath. Probably why he fit in with us so well, to be honest. He’d come recommended by an old friend and I had yet to be disappointed by the guy. He was very good at taking out the trash, just not so good at interacting with people. Which was why he was sitting at the table watching Vlad and Aleksey fight with a wolfish grin on his face. The guy got off on violence.

“Don’t stop them, Boss,” he said softly and adjusted himself in his pants. “It’s about to get to the good bit.”

Vlad glared at Byron. “Oh, fuck off.”

Byron simply grinned wider. “Don’t forget to tell Damyr about the little bird.”

My ears perked up at that. “What’s he on about, Vlad?”

“Just some human that was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Vlad grunted.

My jaw involuntarily clenched. “A human?”

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“It’s fine. I wiped his memory,” Vlad said, brushing off my concern. I was right to be concerned. Vampires and other supernaturals had been undiscovered for centuries, thanks to Three Families. All of whom were supernatural. Mithaven gave us the space to be who we were, what our natures made us, and we’d survived here for a long time with humans none-the-wiser. It was part of the deal with the monarchy. They gave us the city, and we remained in the shadows. Naturally, Mithaven became a safe place for all supernatural creatures, but they all had to follow the rules. Otherwise, we might find ourselves on the receiving end of riots and pitchforks.

“Good. I don’t want to wake up tomorrow to stories of vampire sightings.” I turned to Byron. “Did you get patched up?”

“Yes, Boss,” he replied with a grimace. “The doc smelt like cheap beer and whisky. Couldn’t even put my stitches in properly.”

“Well, we don’t have much choice.” Our resident medical man was a drunk, but he was well versed in both human and supernatural anatomy. “You find me someone to replace him with, and I’ll get rid of him. Until then, you’ll have to deal with him.”

“Or not get shot,” Vlad crooned.

Byron bared his teeth like an animal. I was already in a shitty mood, and this wasn’t helping. I needed a distraction, and, luckily for me, I had a nightclub full of them. “I’m going for a drink. Vlad, reach out to Dara Rowan and see if she will help us locate Charlie.”

“I don’t think you’ll need a spell for that,” Aleksey said.

“What? Why?”

Aleksey peered closely at the CCTV monitors on the back wall. “Because he’s sitting at the bar.”

“Nobody’s that stupid,” Vlad said, his eyes widening.

But clearly Charlie was because he was sitting at my bar, glass in hand, chatting away to a guy and smiling like he didn’t have a care in the world.

I fixed Vlad with a firm stare. “Let’s go have a chat with him.”

Chapter Five

Benji

Music pulsed all around me. The rhythm of a hundred bodies moving and swaying alongside mine as we lost ourselves to the pounding thud of the music. Lights flashed in time with the beat in an array of colours. Pink. Green. Blue. The Crypt was heaving with people. But I didn’t care. I grabbed Maya and pulled her closer, bringing my lips to her ear.

“I’m going to grab a drink. You want one?”

“No,” she shouted back before pointing to the hulk of a guy behind her with a waggle of her eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes and blew her a kiss. “I’ll be back in a few.”

Elbowing my way off the dance floor, I headed over to the bar. I hitched myself up onto an empty stool and ordered myself a Long Island Iced Tea. I took a long sip and

enjoyed the tart zing that the drink left on my tongue. Despite the promises of getting shitfaced with Maya tonight, I actually hadn't drunk that much. I'd had just enough that I could feel the buzz of the alcohol in my system, but not enough that I was wobbling everywhere. I was definitely at the happy-go-lucky stage where anything was possible, and life was great. If I didn't think about today too much.

"Is this seat taken?"

I turned to my right and found a man pointing at the stool beside me. "Um, no."

He was good looking in a preppy kind of way. Brown hair swept back from his forehead, neatly styled, a soft blue jumper paired with navy slacks and eyes the colour of chocolate. But there was a tight pinch to his mouth and a frown curving his neatly trimmed eyebrows. "Thanks. It's just for a minute. I..."

"That's okay. Have a seat."

He gazed at the stool for a moment before scanning his eyes over the crowd. Maybe he was just waiting for someone. After a long moment, he finally sat down and got himself a drink. Not that he drank it. He just traced the lines of condensation on the glass.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"What?" His eyes met mine, and they were blown wide.

"I asked if you were okay. You seem on edge."

"I'm fine." He smiled tightly. "Just waiting for someone."

"First date?" I asked, leaning on the bar top. That would explain the nerves.

He huffed a laugh. “No.”

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“Ah, breaking up with someone, then.”

“Something like that.” He gnawed at his bottom lip for a minute as he scanned the crowd again.

“Well, why don’t I help take your mind off it for a bit?” God knows I could use the distraction.

“Sure,” he replied with a half-smile.

“Tell me about yourself.”

“Right. Um, I’m Charlie and I work in finance. I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Yeah,” he said, his brows drawn down and his lips pinched.

“Well, Charlie, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Benji and I’m a doctor.”

“A doctor?”

I snorted. “Don’t sound so surprised.”

“Sorry. You just look too young to be a doctor.”

“Well, I was finishing my residency so I could become an emergency med specialist,

but an asshole surgeon got me fired because I wouldn't sleep with him."

"I'm sorry, that sucks."

"Yep. So now I'm here, drinking my troubles away."

He smiled, and two little dimples appeared by the side of his mouth. He was kind of cute when he wasn't fidgeting and frowning. "How's that going for you?"

I shrugged. "I decided getting shitfaced probably wasn't the best decision. I'm enjoying dancing, though. Do you like to dance?"

"Not really. I was born with two left feet. Besides—"

His face paled as he stared across the sea of dancers. Guess the moment he'd been waiting for had arrived. I had to admit, he seemed really nervous about this breakup. Jeez, maybe it was a divorce.

I stared out over the dance floor to track what he was looking at and spotted two guys walking towards us. Both of them were tall, standing a head above the rest of the crowd. One was dark-haired, with a grimace, and the other was blonde and all muscle. Damn, the guy was built. No wonder Charlie was nervous about breaking up with one of these guys.

A sense of recognition fluttered through me when my gaze connected with the eyes belonging to the dark-haired man. *Déjà vu*, maybe?

Ice-cold eyes.

A blood-stained shirt.

Hands grabbed my face, and Charlie was looking at me with fear lurking in his eyes.

“This isn’t a breakup, is it?”

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. “I’m sorry. I thought I had more time.”

“More time for what?”

“To come up with a plan. I didn’t think they’d find me so soon.”

“I don’t understand.” I was totally regretting letting the guy sit next to me.

“Have you ever regretted doing something? Something you wanted to fix but didn’t know how?” His fingers dug deeper into the side of my face, and I could sense those two men getting closer to us.

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Wow. This was a heavy conversation to have with a stranger at a bar. “Yeah, I guess.”

“I’m sorry for this, but I don’t have another choice.”

Then he kissed me. He pressed his lips firmly against mine, and I was too shocked to do anything.

“Charlie Kent. You need to come with us.”

That voice. I knew that voice.

I looked to my left and found the guy with hair as black as pitch focussing his eyes intently on me. He took a step closer to me and I could feel his gaze against the contours of my face like it was a physical thing.

“Have we met before?” I asked.

“No.”

Something buzzed at the back of my skull. Something familiar.

Before I even realised what I was doing, my hand was reaching out, sneaking under his jacket and touching his waist. He winced in pain and grabbed my wrist.

He was wearing black leather gloves. I’d seen those before.

I'd seen him before. But where?

"Shit," he muttered. "The Boss is not going to be happy about this."

As if a lightbulb had popped in my brain, my missing afternoon flashed through my mind. The walk home, the guy bumping into me. The gunshot. Everything.

"You were shot," I said to the guy. Wait. I knew his name. "Byron."

"Well, fuck. Jimmy, keep an eye on this guy," Byron said to the bartender. "Make sure he's here when I get back."

"You got it," someone from behind me replied, but I was too dazed to really pay attention. Too caught up on the fact that I'd seen Byron attack someone, that he'd had his hands around my throat and — wait. Why didn't I have any bruising? How did I lose my memory?

And where were they taking Charlie?

I watched as the two guys led Charlie along the edge of the bar and through a doorway at the back of the room. Whatever was going to happen to him next didn't look good. The blonde guy was holding Charlie's arm high up his back, and they were all definitely marching at a brisk pace.

I tried to catch sight of Maya, but she was too busy grinding her ass on someone's groin to notice my panicked hand gestures. Fuck it. I shouldn't go after those guys, I knew it was a bad idea, but I wasn't going to be able to live with myself if I saw Charlie's face on the news in the morning alongside a headline about murder.

I waited until Jimmy the Bartender's back was turned and I slipped off my seat and headed to the door the others had disappeared through.

It was quieter back here. Must be the staff area or something. The walls were a deep crimson red, and the carpet was black and soft beneath my shoes. Guess the boss liked his décor fancy.

There were a number of doors along the corridor, but I had a feeling those men hadn't gone into any of these rooms. I kept on walking and ignoring the sinking feeling in my stomach that was getting heavier the deeper I went into the belly of the building.

I turned a corner and heard some muffled cries and a scuffle of feet. I picked up my pace, following the sounds, foreboding pebbling my skin.

What the fuck was I doing?

Alcohol was definitely helping me make bad choices this evening.

I turned another corner, but there was no one there. God, how big was this place?

It was no use. I was lost and now I couldn't hear those guys anymore.

Should have just stayed at the bar like a good boy, the voice of self-preservation chided.

Fuck you, I snapped back and pushed the bar on the emergency exit door that I managed to find.

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The door swung open in a wide arc. There was a thump as the door hit something solid.

The grunt that followed suggested it was a someone rather than a something.

“Don’t move,” someone said. I didn’t recognise that voice, but I recognised the guy I’d hit with the door.

Navy slacks and a blue jumper. “Charlie? God, Charlie, are you okay?”

“Benji?”

I took a step forward but stopped when I realised Charlie was holding a gun. Nope. This couldn’t be happening. I couldn’t be caught in the middle of a standoff.

“Shit, I hadn’t meant for you to follow me,” Charlie groaned. “It doesn’t matter. It’s too late now.”

“Just put the gun down, Charlie,” the other guy said. I had no idea who he was or even where he was, but I could sense him just beyond my peripheral. Like a monster waiting to strike.

“No!” Charlie cried. “The bullets are silver. Don’t come any closer, I’m warning you.”

“I just want to talk, Charlie.”

There was a sound of a footstep, and my heart leaped into my mouth as I saw the moment Charlie made the decision to fire the gun. His jaw clenched, his eyes narrowed and then his finger, ever so gently, squeezed the trigger.

This close to the gun, the sound was deafening. It shook me, right down to my bones. I didn't even think. Didn't even stop to consider my safety. I just launched myself towards the man Charlie had pointed the gun at.

"Stop!" the man shouted and my feet ground to a halt.

I heard Charlie make a run for it, using the distraction to escape the alleyway and on to freedom. Leaving me behind to face whatever this was.

Shit. I was going to die.

I threw my hands up in the universal I'm-not-armed way and tried not to puke. My skin felt clammy, my heart was beating so fast I could feel it pounding against my ribs and my breaths were leaving my lungs that quickly I thought I was going to pass out. How was it I could deal with anything in the emergency room as calm as you please, but someone points a gun at me and I'm about to faint like a fucking damsel in a fairy tale?

Chapter Six

Damyr

It took in the guy in front of me. Hands held aloft. Quick breaths. Even quicker heartbeat. The rapid thud of it was distracting, reminding me I hadn't fed for a while. It made me edgy. Impulsive. Dangerous.

Charlie had vanished again. Slipperier than an eel, that one. But I'd find him

eventually and then I'd cut him into tiny pieces for all the trouble he'd caused.

"Please don't kill me," he said, his voice strained.

The guy was human. I couldn't kill him. But I couldn't leave him here. I didn't know if he was in league with Charlie, or if this was just the worst case of wrong place, wrong time, but there was no way I could leave him here.

I watched as his eyes flicked between the gun I was holding and the entrance of the alley. "Don't. Please don't."

I was not in the mood to chase him. Not that he'd get very far, even with the bullet sitting just above my hip. The pain was manageable, but I really could do without having to move fast. I didn't want to feel it rip apart my insides and Charlie had indeed used silver bullets. The bastard. A normal bullet wound didn't do much damage to a vampire, but a silver one felt like I was burning from the inside out. "I'm sorry for this, but I need you to come closer."

"Why?" he asked, his green eyes narrowing and his hands coming to rest on his hips. Feisty.

I huffed a breath. "Because I'm asking you to."

"If you want to kill me, then you're going to have to come closer to me," he said, folding his arms across his chest.

Who the fuck did this guy think he was talking to? I had to admit, my curiosity was piqued. No one usually had the balls to talk to me like that. No one in my world, anyway.

"Fine," I growled, and enjoyed the moment he flinched. Good. He should be wary.

I stepped forward into the shaft of moonlight and lowered the gun. I didn't miss the way his eyes roved my face, or the puzzled expression that overtook his. I'd spent centuries learning to school my features to give nothing away, so he wasn't going to get anything from me unless I offered it.

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“I’m not going to kill you,” I repeated.

“Ha! Like I’m going to believe that.”

I shook my head and flicked my eyes upwards. Give me strength. “I’m not going to kill you.”

Maybe this time he’d believe me.

“Riiight,” he drawled, his eyebrows raising high above his emerald-green eyes. “And the gun is for what? Shits and giggles?”

Clearly, he did not believe me.

A flash of anger burned hot under my skin, and I could feel my restraint wearing thin. “No, but if I wanted you dead, I would have killed you the second you set foot in this alley.”

“What about Charlie?”

Yes, what about Charlie? That good for nothing, backstabbing petty thief. A snarl crawled out my throat before I could hold it back. “I will find him, torture and then watch the life bleed from his eyes.”

If Vlad were here, I’m sure he’d be giving me some cocky, sarcastic line about how stupid I was for going without feeding for so long, but there was nothing I could do about it now. It was forbidden to feed off humans without consent, or without a blood

contract. And as good as this guy smelled, I wasn't about to break the rules for him.

His sandy blonde brows pinched in an adorable little frown. "I have a question—"

"Why am I telling you all this?" I cut in, cocking my eyebrow. "Because, whilst I might not be killing you, I cannot let you go."

"Wh-what?" His heart lurched in his chest and with it, the most wonderful scent hit my nose. Spices and fire and sex. A concoction that reminded me of long nights wrapped in sheets by an open fire. Familiar. Warm.Home.

My eyes dropped to the curve of his throat and fixated on his pulse point. His heart thudded so loudly that it was like a drum in my ears, calling to me. Interesting.

"You've seen too much," I gritted out, but I wasn't really concentrating on what I said. I just wanted him closer. "Come here. Now."

His nostrils widened, his pupils dilated, and a subtle blush crept up his neck. Fuck. I wondered if he blushed like that everywhere.

"No. Please just let me go."

I wanted to, but something was bursting to life in my veins. Something unquenchable. Something dark and obsessive. Something that just wanted him.

Mine.

Hmm... that couldn't be good. Perhaps I was becoming delirious.

Not that I'd ever been delirious a day in my life.

“Please don’t kill me. I don’t want to die. I was just trying to help, and I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’ll just pretend I didn’t see anything. I mean, who am I going to tell? There’s only old Mrs Mickles who lives next door who has loads of cats and—”

I shot forward and slammed my hand over his mouth. God, his scent was even more powerful this close to him. I wanted to lick the length of my tongue along his neck, just to taste his skin.

I grunted. This was ridiculous. I needed to get away from him. I needed to feed and clear my head. Maybe this was just a result of malnourishment or something. Or perhaps a bad batch of blood.

Or maybe I was finding excuses.

“You talk too much.”

He whimpered, and the sound went straight to my cock.

“I know,” I said. “This won’t hurt.”

A spark of defiance flashed in his eyes, and I had to admit, there was something captivating about that little spark that burnt brightly in those green depths.

He kicked his feet out, aiming for my shins, but I blocked his hits. I thrust my knees against his thighs and slotted my hips against his, pinning him to the wall. His fingers clawed at the hand I had over his mouth, but it wasn’t enough to stop me. He was coming with me, whether he liked it or not.

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One of his pretty blonde curls had fallen over his eye and I had the urge to brush it back. It was soft and silky between the pads of my fingers, and I didn't want to let it go.

He whimpered again, and damn, that sound was delicious.

"It will all be over soon." I carded my fingers through his hair, revelling in the feel of it beneath my hand. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been this fascinated by anyone. This close, I could see golden flecks in his irises. They reminded me of a meadow caught in the sun. So bright. So full of life.

I tugged on his hair, pulling his head to one side to expose his throat.

He whimpered again and started to struggle against my hold. Fighting until the end. How noble. How deliciously defiant.

"Hush now," I soothed, but I don't think it had the desired effect. If anything, his efforts to escape doubled. But it didn't matter.

My skin hummed as my darker side rose to the surface. My canines lengthened, and I lunged, sinking them into his carotid artery and getting my first taste of him.

It was beautiful.

Breathtaking.

Exquisite.

And a huge fucking mistake.

I stared at the man I'd stolen through the one-way window. Something uncomfortable stirred in my gut the longer that I stared at him. I didn't understand my reaction to him. It was disconcerting, to say the least. The mouthful of blood I'd taken from the man I'd stolen was enough to quench my hunger and help heal my wound. I was also thinking more clearly, but I still didn't understand it.

I looked down at the driver's licence I'd pulled from his wallet. Benjamin Barrett. That was his name. The man sat unconscious in my basement, with his head bowed, sandy blonde curls tumbling forwards, was Benjamin Barrett. A med student with a sizeable chunk of debt, who lived on his own with a cat, in an apartment paid for with an inheritance he received from the death of his grandmother. So how did this normal human end up embroiled with Charlie Kent?

"Boss," Byron said in a clipped tone as he came to stand next to me.

I'd been so focussed on my human that I didn't even hear him come in.

"Either you're getting better at hiding your nature, or I'm not as sharp as I used to be," I mused.

Byron tucked his hands into his trouser pockets. "Perhaps you're just distracted."

Perhaps indeed. "Have you found the erstwhile Mr Kent yet?"

"No. Vlad is reaching out to a few contacts, but no one has come back with anything positive."

Well, that was frustrating. “How is it possible that this guy can hide so well? I mean, he’s an accountant, for fuck's sake.”

“An accountant who has worked for you for the past decade,” Byron pointed out, a dark brow raised in a mocking arc.

“If you’ve not got anything helpful to say, you can fuck off.”

“Yes, sir,” he said with a wide grin. It was unsettling. I was so used to Byron having little to no expressions, that when something took over his face, I was unsure as to whether it was real or not. I wasn’t sure I was ever going to understand Byron. He was a mystery wrapped in a dense shadow. Impossible to see through and even harder to figure out.

The man could interact socially, but it was like a cloak. Superficial and unreal. The only time I knew he was feeling anything was when he killed someone. Or when he looked at his phone to stare at the live feed of his twin. I had a feeling he’d be asking for time off again soon. He was getting twitchy, and I noticed that always coincided with his need to be near his twin. I didn’t know the whole story between those two, I doubted I ever would. All I knew, was that the length of time between visits to his twin were getting shorter. Which meant it wouldn’t be long before Byron left on his own and came back with a plus one. But would it be a willing plus one?

“Huh,” Byron said thoughtfully.

“What?”

“Let me see his picture.”

“Why?”

“He looks familiar.” Byron took the ID and peered at it intently. “Well, hello, little bird.”

“What?”

“This is the guy whose memory Vlad had to wipe. I told Jimmy to keep an eye on him at the bar, but I couldn’t find him when I got back.” He smirked up at me. “Seems your little human has a bit of a hero complex. Pretty neck, too.”

A muscle twitched in my jaw at the way Bryon hummed in pleasure.

“That’s the guy you nearly killed.”

He rolled his bottom lip between his teeth and nodded.

Something in me snapped. Before I could stop myself, I had him pinned to the wall by his throat, papers from Benjamin’s file fluttering to the ground around me. My claws extended and pushed into the fragile column of his neck, and I so very much wanted to sink them into his skin. I was usually so in control, so aware of my actions, and I never did anything without reason. This man though, this Benjamin Barrett, had me all out of sync.

Byron just stared up at me, unphased. A smirk curled the corner of his mouth as he patiently waited for me to do something, as if I didn’t have the power to rip the guy limb from limb.

“Well, this all looks a bit cozy,” a voice drawled from behind us.

“Acheron,” I spat as I pushed away from Byron. “What have I told you about portalling in my house.”

“Not to do it, blah blah blah. You’re no fun, Damyr.” He wriggled his fingers, and the papers twirled themselves from the floor and back into the file. “Who’s the blonde guy sleeping off a kidnapping?”

Acheron was a wizard, and a damn powerful one too. He had a penchant for bold colours and prints that clashed, and an uncanny ability to get under my skin. After half a century working together, you’d have thought I’d gotten used to it, but nope. The guy still managed to piss me off in new and inventive ways. Today he was dressed in a neon pink shirt with orange trousers and his hair was electric blue.

“That’s Damyr’s new pet,” Byron said. “He’s pissed at me because I tried to kill him.”

“Ooh, poor you,” Acheron taunted as he perused the file. “Interesting.”

“What is?” I asked, coming to stand next to the wizard and look at Benjamin through the window again. It was as if I couldn’t keep away from him.

“He’s a medical man. I wonder if he’s related to the Brackley Barretts.” Acheron turned his silver gaze towards me, curiosity stirring in their depths. “I’m going to research his family tree.”

The silver in his eyes turned molten as he drew on his magic. “Don’t—”

Acheron snapped his fingers and disappeared with a grin.

“—portal in my house! Dammit Acheron!” It was only then I realised he’d stolen the file Roxie had put together. For fucks sake. I had no idea where Acheron went to most of the time. If I couldn’t see him in the room, he could be anywhere in the world. I’d never find him unless he wanted to be found.

I dragged my phone out of my pocket and sent a text over to Roxie.

ME

The wizard stole my file. Send me another one.

ROXIE

Coming right up. Don't know why you didn't want a digital copy in the first place.

Because I was incredibly old school. I had lived with paper a lot longer than I had with technology and, whilst I got on with modern technology, I still enjoyed having a physical copy of something over a damn email.

"I'm going to wake him up. Byron, go and find Vlad and make yourself useful."

"Yes, Boss," Byron said, a dark chuckle following him out of the room.

I took a moment to drink in the sight of Benjamin. I couldn't figure out what it was about him that kept drawing me in. I wanted to own him. The desire was so twisted into my very core that I wanted to burrow him under my skin. I didn't just want to be close to him. I wanted him to be mine, in all ways. I wanted to break him. To pull all the pieces of him apart and keep the shards to myself.

I dragged a hand down my face. What the fuck was wrong with me? I was never this out of control. Never this close to losing my grip on reality.

Benjamin groaned and rolled his head back. He was starting to come around.

It was time to find out what made Benjamin Barrett tick.

Chapter Seven

Benji

I came to with a jolt but groaned as my head pounded, my brain seeming to ricochet painfully around my skull. What the fuck did I have to drink last night? Everywhere ached and my head felt like it had been stuffed with cotton wool. What the heck was that smell? It was dank and musty. I peeled my eyes open and instantly regretted it.

Bright white light assaulted my eyeballs, and I blinked rapidly to try and bring the room into focus. Shit. This wasn't my apartment. I didn't know where this was. I looked around but couldn't really make anything out beyond the circle of light I was situated in. There didn't seem to be any natural light, so maybe it was a basement? I tried to look behind me but something tight tugged on my wrists. I looked down and saw cable ties around my arms and ankles. Fuck. My heart pounded in my chest, my breaths came short and sharp. Nope. I wasn't going to have a panic attack. Not in some crazy guy's basement that smelt like dirty water.

"Hello!" I shouted as I pulled at my restraints, but they wouldn't budge. "Is anyone there?"

"Welcome back."

I flinched. Well, as much as I could considering I was tied to a chair. It was the guy from the alley, the one who was too pretty to be a psycho. Not that I could see him. I could barely see anything beyond the white light. Just shadows.

“Where am I?” I asked, my mouth dry and my words sluggish.

“What’s your name?” he replied, completely ignoring my question.

I licked my dry lips. The guy probably already knew, I’d had my wallet on me and now my jacket was nowhere to be seen. “My name is Benjamin Barrett.”

Footsteps echoed around the room as the mystery man stepped forwards out of the shadows. He was taller than I remember, or maybe that was a trick of the light, but he definitely looked taller than me and I was six foot.

He squatted in front of me, his face just as cold as I remembered. “Charlie Kent.”

Huh? “I don’t—”

“Do you know him?”

“No.” I shook my head and regretted it. “Did you drug me?”

“Yes. Do you know who I am?”

“No. Have you forgotten?”

A low growl rose from his throat. Probably wise not to antagonise the crazy guy who’d kidnapped me.

“Sorry,” I said quickly. “My thoughts don’t seem to be... organised. Wait, you drugged me?”

“Yes. I already answered that.” He cocked his head to one side, his gaze assessing.

“Why?”

“Would you have come willingly if I’d asked?”

“Probably not.”

The guy continued to study me in silence. It was weird, like he was waiting for something, or for me to do something but what, I didn’t know. He just watched me, those impossibly blue eyes tracking every movement, hell, every frantic breath that escaped my lips. There was no doubt that I was looking at someone who was way beyond an ordinary person.

“What are you going to do with me?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. He’d said he wasn’t going to kill me, but maybe that was going to be better than any alternative this guy could think of.

A long slender finger reached out and brushed a damp lock from my forehead. “I haven’t decided yet.”

I swallowed, the sound a loud gulp in the empty room. “Who are you?”

The smile that spread across his face was unsettling. “Damyr Morozov.”

Morozov. I knew that name, but I couldn’t quite grasp why. Stupid drugs. Making everything foggy and—

Damyr traced his finger between my brows. “The drugs will wear off soon.”

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I hoped so because I could barely string a sentence together. It didn't help that he was still touching me. Which was doing something to me, and my dick was starting to take notice. On a normal day I'd probably ask him out, but this was as far from normal as possible. And besides, he'd kidnapped me and tied me to a fucking chair. I mean, who did he think he was?

Well, shit. Cue light bulb moment.

Damyr let out a low chuckle, but it was anything but warm. "Figured it out, pretty boy?"

Morozov. One of the current ruling Three Families. "Russian mob."

His nose wrinkled in disgust, and it made him look kind of cute. "I don't like the word 'mob'. It makes it sound sleazy."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't take the mobster etiquette class."

He looked at me curiously. "There's no such thing. You're being sarcastic."

I rolled my eyes at him. Who was this guy?

His hand shot out and grabbed my chin, his nails sharp against my skin. "If you worked for me, you'd lose your eyes for that."

Thick black lines swirled over the skin on his hand, and it made me wonder how much ink covered him. I couldn't see any tattoos anywhere else, and his black shirt

didn't give me any clues as to what was hiding beneath. But hell, if his hands were heavily tattooed, I bet the rest of him was too.

I gulped, my throat brushing against his hand. Damyr's gaze dropped to my neck, his eyes darkening as he leant closer. He forced my head to the side and brought his nose to the spot just below my ear. My heart fucking raced.

He hummed, the sound low and predatory. Throaty.

Aaaand there went my dick again.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

When Damyr pulled back his eyes burned like fire. “You have no idea what world you've wandered into.”

I didn't know. I had the feeling it was pretty dark due the fact that he'dfucking kidnapped me! Besides, everyone knew that the Morozov's were more than just dangerous. They were deadly. And shady as fuck. No one ever really saw them as they kept to themselves, but they had fingers in many pies across the city. Hell, there was a 'Morozov Family Wing' at the hospital I'd worked at.

“From my limited knowledge of criminal activities that happen in this city, I am guessing your world is a lot darker than mine.”

Damyr smiled wide and it was like looking at the Devil who had found a new toy to play with. He reached out and traced a long, tattooed finger over the arch in my upper lip. I'd always thought my mouth too pouty, too feminine, but most guys had liked it, and it seemed like Damyr was a fan of it too.

Even if it was incredibly rude that he was touching me without permission.

But also, kind of hot.

“What are you doing to my face?” I asked with a sharp intake of breath.

“You talk too much, Benjamin.”

“It’s Benji,” I snapped. I hated my full name. It was too long and stuffy.

Damyr’s smile widened, and his eyes flashed in the low light. “Will anyone miss you, Benjamin?”

“Ex-fucking-scuse me?!” I gasped. The gall of this guy. What kind of person even says that to someone? “Look, I was being a decent human being and trying to rescue someone. I thought I was doing the right thing. That doesn’t give you the right to drug me and take me off the street. Just because you’re some high and mighty mobster, doesn’t mean you can swan around doing whatever the fuck you’d want. In fact—”

Strong fingers gripped my chin, halting my tirade.

“Pretty boy, I’m not just some mobster.”

“I don’t give a shit. If you’re not going to kill me, you need to let me go,” I spat.

“And don’t call me pretty boy. I’m not your boy. I’m not your anything.”

“I’m not letting you go,” he said simply. As if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Why?”

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He traced my bottom lip, rolling it beneath the pad of his thumb.

Don't suck it into your mouth, Benji. However much you want to.

"Have you ever looked at something and just wanted it."

I froze for a moment, not sure I'd heard him right. He'd kidnapped me because he wanted me? What the actual fuck? A laugh burst from my mouth at the ridiculousness of his words. "I'm sorry, but that's the most absurd thing I've heard. What are you? Twelve? I'm not a toy or a possession. Now untie me or—"

"Or what?" he interrupted, his eyes giddy with excitement. "Are you going to gut me? Pluck out my eyes? Break my knees?"

"Those are all oddly specific," I muttered. "No. I'm not a violent person. I don't think. But I've never been in this position before so there's no knowing what I might be capable of."

Which was true. Who knew what they were really capable of when push came to shove?

He stared at me for another long moment, his frigid eyes boring deep into mine. He seemed to be having some sort of internal war with himself, the muscle along his sharp jawline twitching every so often. He must have come to decision because he sighed and pursed his lips. What did that even mean?

"So, Charlie Kent," Damyr said, standing up and, thankfully, taking a step back.

Guess he wasn't killing me just yet.

“What about him?”

He pulled a chair from the dark void behind him and sat down opposite me, rolling his sleeves up and putting his forearms on display. My mouth watered instantly. What was it about a guy's forearms that was so delicious? And fuck me, Damyr's were gorgeous. They were covered in ink. A mix of black and bold colours. Roses, skulls, knives, everything that was dark in theme. But I couldn't take my eyes off his hands. He had the outline of a snake's head on each of his hands and I could see the body of it wrapped around his wrist before disappearing down his arm, weaving between all the other tattoos. The snake on his left hand was alive but the one on his right, was a skeleton. I wonder what it meant.

Dammit, this guy needed to stop giving me things to make me curious about him. He'd kidnapped me and tied me to a chair. Doesn't matter if he's hot, he's crazy.

“How do you know him?”

Huh? Oh, right, Charlie. “I don't. The first time I saw him he was fleeing your building. The second time I saw him he was being attacked and then he shot Byron – who I'm guessing works for you — and the third time was in the bar. Although I didn't realise that was the third time because I'd forgotten I'd met him.”

And I still didn't know how that Byron or the other guy had managed that.

“Yes,” Damyr said thoughtfully. “Vlad is usually so reliable.”

“Vlad? Is that the name of the tank?”

He snorted. “Yes.”

“So, did he drug me?”

Damyr pursed his lips and nope, I wasn't looking at how soft they looked. “In a fashion.”

In a fashion? What the hell was that supposed to mean? “Look, could you just not talk in riddles? My head still hurts, and I want to go home.”

Damyr's eyes flashed. “You're not going home, Benjamin. You need to get comfortable with that.”

“What about my cat?”

“Don't worry about that.”

Oh my God. “You've killed my cat?!”

“What? No.”

Oh, thank the Lord.

“I've had one of the men bring him here. Along with all your things.”

“The fuck?!” I shouted. “You can't do that!”

Damyr frowned, genuinely puzzled. “Why not?”

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“Because...” Fuck, why couldn’t I think of a reason. “Because it’s not normal.”

He shrugged and relaxed back in his chair. “You’re in different world now. My world. What’s normal to you isn’t going to be normal here. Best get used to it, pretty boy.”

No way. No fucking way.

“Did Charlie say anything you about a ledger?” Damyr asked, as if he hadn’t just turned my life upside down.

“No.”

He’d kidnapped my cat.

“Did he give you anything?”

“No.”

He’d packed all my things.

Fuck, I hope he hadn’t found the things in the bottom drawer of my bedside cabinet. That would be embarrassing.

“Well, what did he say?” Damyr growled impatiently.

“Nothing much. That he worked in finance and regretted doing something, but didn’t

know how to fix it.”

“What did he regret?”

“I don’t know!” I cried out. This really was the worst day of my fucking life.

“But you two were talking at the bar for a long time.”

“It was just small talk; I don’t even remember half of what we spoke about. He seemed really nervous, and from the way he was talking I assumed he was about to break up with someone. I tried to be a decent person and help calm him down. Then Byron and some elfin looking dude turned up and he freaked. Told me about regrets and how he wished he hadn’t done something. Next thing I know, I’m staring at Byron and having a massive sense of déjà vu. Images of my lost afternoon flood my mind, and I grabbed Byron’s waist to prove to myself I wasn’t imagining things and then bam, Charlie had disappeared.”

“You touched Byron’s waist?” Damyr said through gritted teeth.

“Seriously, dude? Out of everything I just said, that’s what you take away?” God, this guy was a piece of work. “I knew Byron had been shot, and I knew it was above his hip. All I did was touch him to see if I was having a hysterical episode, or if what I’d seen had actually happened. Where is that blue-eyed maniac anyway?”

“Why?”

“I kind of want to punch him in the face for strangling me.”

Damyr snorted. “And you say you’re not a violent person.”

I blanched. I had said that.

Damyr stood up and frowned at me. “Besides, I wouldn’t be violent around Byron. He thrives on it and will probably think it’s foreplay if you hit him.”

“Jeez, the guy sounds like a psycho,” I muttered.

“I think he prefers the term ‘creative’ but yes, he is a psychopath. Among other darker things.”

“Creative? Really?”

“Yes,” Damyr said with a shrug. “Byron is the kind of monster you send to kill other monsters. I’d recommend steering clear of him. I also don’t like that he has a pet name for you already.”

“Why?”

His ocean blue eyes held mine with an unblinking stare that had my squirming in my seat. “Because a pet name implies that he’s interested in you and trust me, you don’t want him interested in you. The last person to hold his interest, ended up in a ditch in pieces. Stay away from him.”

He didn’t need to tell me twice. I already knew what it was like to have him hold my life in his hands, I wasn’t about to go back for seconds. I nodded in agreement. “I’ll stay away. What about the others?”

“Others?”

“Vlad and the other guy, the one who looks like an angry elf.”

“Ah, Aleksey. They aren’t as volatile but still dangerous.”

“And you?” I ask pointedly. “Are you more or less dangerous than the others?”

Damyr leant closer to me, a blank expression on his face as he levelled his gaze with mine. A shiver zipped up my spine as a small smile curled his beautiful mouth.

“I play by my own rules, Benjamin, and the people who work for me, dance to my tune. So, you tell me, do you think I got to where I am by playing nice?”

“No,” I said a little breathlessly, suddenly feeling like I’d been caught in the sights of a predator. The conversation we’d been having had seemed almost normal that I’d forgotten about the cable ties, forgotten that I was here unwillingly. I was all too aware of it now though. Damyr Morozov looked at me like I was prey and something about the way his eyes darkened intently, had my blood pumping faster and my breath coming quickly. And it wasn’t all down to fear.

He dropped his hands to the top of my thighs and leant closer still. “Do you like that I don’t play nice, Benjamin?”

I couldn’t think past the feel of his breath whispering against my throat, or the way his hands dug into the muscles of my thighs. I could feel the sheer fucking power radiating from him as he completely obliterated my personal space, like he had every

right to it. Like he fucking owned it. This was a man who'd done things I probably couldn't even comprehend. Fuck, had those hands killed someone? Were they going to kill me? Did I even care?

"Damyr," I whispered, the syllables cracked and full of need.

He purred, a deep and throaty rumble that I felt all the way to my toes. "Say my name like that again, Benjamin. Like it's a goddamn prayer."

His hands rose higher, and my legs spread wider of their own accord. Higher, I needed him to touch me higher. "Dam—"

He pulled back. "What's this?"

I blinked rapidly, the moment shattering around me as the fog of desire and bad decisions cleared. What the fuck was I doing? I'd been seconds away from letting the guy who'd kidnapped me touch my dick.

Damyr tucked his hands into the front pocket of my jeans and pulled out a small flash drive. It was black and had some kind of silver logo on it that caught in the light.

"That's not mine," I said immediately. I'd never seen that thing in my life. I wouldn't even know when I would have gotten it. "The kiss."

"What?" Damyr hissed, looking every bit the dangerous man he claimed to be.

"When Charlie kissed me, he must have slipped it into my pocket."

"Well, isn't that convenient. I thought you said you didn't know him."

"I don't," I protested. "I've never seen him before today. I swear it."

Damyr held my gaze, his stare unrelenting and uncomfortable. It felt like he was searching the depths of my very soul for the truth.

“Fine,” he huffed. “Say that’s true—”

“It is true!”

“—why would Charlie give you this?” He held up the flash drive and I caught the monogrammed ‘M’ on the side.

“Damyr, I don’t even know what that is. Why would I know why he gave it to me?”

“Something isn’t making sense here,” he mused aloud, his gaze taking on a far-off look.

“Maybe you should plug it into a computer and look what’s on it?” I said in a smart-ass tone.

He threw me a withered look. “No shit.”

“Look,” I said through gritted teeth, my frustration starting to get the better of me. “What have I got to do to persuade you to let me go?”

“We’ve been over this, Benjamin. I’m not letting you go.”

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“Fuck you!” I spat. Rage burned through me like a knife. How dare he think that he could uproot my life based on a whim. I was so angry. At him. Myself. Charlie fucking Kent. This situation. At everything. I wanted to scream at him, punch him, dosomething, but I was tied to this chair, a fucking prisoner being held at the pleasure of the Morozov King himself. “Fuck you.”

Damyr looked away, a muscle ticking along the edge of his jaw. Then he turned on his heel and walked to the door. “I’ll be back,” he said over his shoulder.

“Don’t fucking bother,” I replied softly, defeat and exhaustion finally curling around my bones. Maybe the better choice was sucking Dr Kingsly’s dick after all.

Chapter Eight

Damyr

I tried so hard not to be impulsive, to make calculated moves and informed decisions, but occasionally my volatile nature broke the surface, and I ended up doing something completely reckless.

Like kidnap a twenty-five-year-old med-student and move him into my house. Even now, I still wasn’t sure why I’d taken him. Was it his connection to Charlie? Or was it because I wanted to sink my teeth into that plump bottom lip?

I kept telling myself that I needed to question Benjamin, that he was there purely because he had something to do with Charlie, however slight their interaction, but it didn’t seem to fully justify why I was still keeping him here.

The truth of the matter was, that I wanted him here. I wanted something from him I wasn't quite ready to admit to myself, and until then, Benjamin would stay here. With me.

What the hell was wrong with me?

Benjamin Barrett was an innocent human, and I'd dragged him into my world of monsters. I wasn't even sorry for it. Perhaps the blood loss from the bullet wound and the fact that I hadn't fed had caused this impulsive decision.

Which was bullshit, but I was trying to cling onto any justification for my actions that I could.

The computer came to life in front of me and I slotted the flash drive into the side of the screen. Snapshots of my ledgers and files filled the screen but something was wrong. The information was incomplete. Why did Charlie only give me half back?

Wait. There was something else in the files. A video.

I reached out through my Coven Connection to Vlad and called him here. As leader of the coven, I was linked to every member by a telepathic connection. It was my responsibility to protect and care for them all, and with the connection, I knew where every member of the coven was at any given time. Usually, I just left it running in my subconscious. It was there, and I could feel the connection with everyone, but I wasn't actively engaged in wherever they were or whatever they were doing. As much as I like stalking my prey, I didn't like stalking my family.

There was a curt knock on the door and Vlad entered.

"What's up, Damyr?" he asked, his voice a deep baritone. He was dressed in a crisp white shirt, charcoal slacks and had a tie hanging loose around his neck.

“Am I interrupting something?”

He shook his head, a wry grin curving his mouth. “Not yet, but family comes first. What do you need?”

Right, back to business. It was one thing that I loved and hated about Vlad. He was loyal, to a fault, but sometimes it was at the expense of his own happiness. One day, I was sure there’d be someone he would make me wait for.

I pointed to the flash drive. “Found this on Benjamin.”

Vlad’s brows dipped over his chocolate-coloured eyes. “He still in the basement?”

“Yes.” What was he getting at?

“Hmm,” he mused with his lips pursed.

“What?”

He went to say something but stopped himself. “Nothing.”

Now I was getting twitchy. “Tell me, Vlad.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “But don’t cut my head off.”

“When have I ever—”

“I could give you a list either alphabetically or historically of people with missing heads,” he cut in with an asinine smirk.

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That was probably a fair remark. I was impulsive. Almost predictably so. “I don’t like to suffer fools.”

Vlad snorted but some of the tension left his broad shoulders. “There are murmurings in the ranks about you kidnapping a human. It’s made some of the men uncomfortable.”

“They aren’t paid to be comfortable,” I barked. Clearly, I was more on edge than I thought.

“I know,” Vlad said, his hands held out placatingly. “But you can’t fault them for being concerned. It’s not everyday a human is dragged into our world.”

“Well, you can tell them that his memory will be wiped, and he will be dealt with.” Just saying those words had my heart clenching uncomfortably in my chest.

“Even though my memory wipe didn’t hold?”

“Fuck,” I growled, my hand rubbing the spot on my chest over my heart.

“We already know you’ve moved his things in here. You’ve had Aleksey go for fucking cat litter.”

“I know, I know.” I rubbed my hand down my face. “What’s happening to me, Vlad?”

He opened his mouth to answer.

“Wait. Don’t answer that,” I snapped. I wasn’t ready to hear what he was going to say. I was doing my best to avoid it at all costs. The last time I got involved with a human ended in bloodshed, grief and a broken heart that took centuries to heal.

“Why don’t you show me what you found?” Vlad said softly, taking pity on the fact that my mind seemed to be fracturing.

I pointed at the screen and the images of the screenshots of my ledger.

“I don’t understand,” Vlad said. “It’s only half the data.”

“That’s what I thought.” I clicked on the file with the video. “This is what I brought you to see. Wanted to make sure I wasn’t the only one who watched it. Just in case.”

Vlad stood behind my chair, arms folded across his chest, stance resolute. “Click play, and let’s find out what’s going on.”

An image of a hooded figure filled the screen. It was nothing more than a silhouette. There was no face. Nothing recognisable in the image, just a vague shape of a hood and shoulders. Nothing more.

“Hello, Mr Morozov. It’s a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance.” The voice was low and rough. I was surprised he hadn’t tried to disguise it, not that it mattered. I didn’t recognise it. “I’m sure you’re wondering who I am and why I’ve disguised myself, but that’s not important. What’s important is that I have something of yours, thanks to your employee, Charlie Kent. Don’t feel too bad for him, he didn’t know he was working for me. I like to keep to the shadows and I’m patient, but I’m finally ready to put my plan into action. I won’t bore you with all the details but, suffice to say, the world will change and I’m starting with you and all your other leeches.” The guy spat the word out like it was poison on his tongue. “Don’t bother looking for Charlie, you won’t find him. There’s something I want you to do for me Damyr. I’ve

sent you a gift. Deal with it, and I will give you back your ledgers. Fail to do so, and there will be consequences.”

I gritted my teeth. My entire world was contained in those ledgers.

Money runs.

Port details.

Contacts.

Safe houses.

Drug routes.

It wasn't just money Charlie had stole for whoever the fuck this was. It was my entire world.

“This guy's got some balls,” Vlad mumbled from behind me.

I ran my finger along my top lip and looked at the shadowed figure who was threatening to tear my world apart. I'd spent too long building the Morozov name until it stood for something more than the dirt my father had left it to wallow in. I wasn't about to let this asshole drag it back into the mud.

The hooded figure leant closer to the camera, and I could almost feel the person smiling.

“I think you'll like my gift, Damyr. I'll be seeing you soon.”

The video ended and left my screen in darkness. I sat back in my chair, an

uncomfortable sense of foreboding unfurling under my skin.

“I don’t like this,” Vlad grumbled.

Neither did I. “Put an extra team on the house and send Aleksey to all the locations to see if there’s anything unusual going on.”

“Sure thing, Damyr. I’ll go with him.”

I shook my head. “No. You have plans. Let’s keep to business as usual for now. I don’t know who this guy is, but he knows enough that he chose Charlie to manipulate. Means he’s got eyes on us somehow.”

“Understood. Continue as normal.” Vlad tucked his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “And our guest?”

I pursed my lips. “I will deal with him.”

“You can’t kill him, Damyr.”

“I’m not going to kill him,” I said, a burst of rage burning in my gut.

“Okay,” Vlad replied softly, his hands held out placatingly. “Just don’t do anything stupid. Well, more stupid than moving him into your mansion with his fucking cat.”

“Not a fan of cats?” I asked, amused by the pinched frown over Vlad’s eyes.

“No,” he snarled. “They hiss and throw up furballs.”

I snorted. The thought of Vlad, who was built like a brick shithouse, running from a tiny cat was ridiculous. “I’m sure the cat will grow on you.”

Vlad growled. “I don’t fucking think so.”

“Alright, be off with you. Tell Aleksey to let me know if anything crops up.”

“Yes, Boss.” Vlad nodded his head sharply and then left my office, his large frame making no sound.

I stared at the black screen. Who could this possibly be? I racked my brain but beyond the usual culprits, I couldn’t think of anyone who had the power to pull off this kind of stunt. The three ruling families had always had a good alliance and we ran this city relatively peacefully, keeping our trades outside the city walls. There were always threats to our rule, but they were low level and sporadic at best. This felt calculated. Purposeful.

Personal.

I dug my phone out and fired a message to the Council.

ME

I have a problem. Need to meet.

MARCELLE

Need someone to help you hide the human?

Fucking Lavaeux. How did that guy always know everything? Fucking shifters and their network of secrets.

ME

Don't know what you're talking about.

DARA

Stop teasing the poor boy. The Julian. 11pm.

MARCELLE

Fine. Your time to buy the drinks, Damyr.

ME

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You drinking already, Marcelle?

The guy was a maniac which, paired with a ruthless streak as bold as my own, always made for chaos. There was no way I was adding fuel to that fire by way of alcohol.

ME

See you all later.

I had a human tied up in my basement to deal with. A human that was quickly becoming my entire focus.

Poor Benjamin.

Chapter Nine

Benji

My arms ached where they were bound to the chair and my feet had long since fallen asleep. I wriggled my toes in my boots, but it did nothing to alleviate the numbness. I had no idea how much time had passed. There was nothing that marked the passing of seconds and I struggled to even estimate at what time it was. There was no natural light, no sounds. Just the damp walls and this bright, artificial light I was sat in. And of course, the chair. The rock hard, uncomfortable chair. Jeez, my ass was numb.

“Hello!” I shouted. “Damyr! You come back and untie me, right now!”

It was probably useless to shout. I hadn't seen anyone other than Damyr and there was every possibility I was in a shipping container, on a boat in the middle of the Baltic Sea. The whole damp walls and mildew smell could all be a fabrication.

“Fuck you, Damyr. You goddamn fucking asshole!”

Moving my cat and my clothes like he had a right to them. Wait until I tell Maya about this.

Shit. Maya. Would she even know I was missing? I had no idea how long I'd been gone. Had it been two hours, or ten? Was it more? Fuck. She'd probably gone home with that beast of a guy she'd been dancing with, and she probably wouldn't realise I'm missing until morning.

Why couldn't I be more selfish? Less decent? More of a jackass? If only I'd looked the other way and left Charlie to his fate, then I wouldn't be here, trying to squeeze some life into my butt cheeks.

I could have left him, but I'd have hated myself for it. Just like the whole thing with Dr Kingsly. That monster. Why was the world so goddamn frustrating? And now I was here, rotting in some shipping container, or whatever this room was, and trying my best to keep it together.

I wasn't succeeding.

I pulled my wrists against the cable ties, yelling out as they cut into my skin. I pulled and pulled, not caring that my skin was shredding. I wanted out. I wanted to go home. I wanted—

“I wouldn't do that, if I were you,” a musical voice said cheerfully from the darkness.

My chest heaved as I tried to get a grip on my sanity. “Who’s there?”

No one responded. Had I imagined it?

My skin stung where the cable ties had sliced into my wrists and blood pooled beneath the black bands. I was a fucking idiot. Now I had a numb ass, and I’d cut myself.

I pulled at the restraints one more time for good measure, but nope. They still held firmly. They really were a good tool for a kidnapper.

“They’re as bad as sharks, this lot. I’d suggest you stop injuring yourself.”

I jolted as the guy started speaking again. Shit. Was this another psycho joining my little kidnapping party? How did he even get in here? I didn’t hear the door. “Who are you?”

“That’s a loaded question, love. There are many answers and I’m not sure I know which is the truth anymore.”

The fuck was that supposed to mean?

“Do you scream that loud when you come?”

“What?” I spurted.

“Just curious,” he said, his tone smooth and calm. I could hear something tapping, like fingernails on a table.

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“Why?” I asked, before I could stop myself. Why the hell was I entertaining this conversation? Probably because it was better than sitting here in silence and trying to find a way to escape. If escape was even possible.

“Your screams made my dick hard. Just wondered if it was possible to make you scream that loud whilst being fucked. Would you like to find out?”

I huffed a nervous laugh. “No, thank you.” I wanted to get as far away from this guy as possible. Was it wrong that I wanted Damyr to come back?

“Shame.” I swear I could hear the pout in his voice. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

That wasn’t going to be likely.

The sound of swishing silk echoed around the room as the mystery guy stepped forward. “Has anyone ever told you that your mouth is utterly, fucking, biteable?”

A cacophony of colours swarmed before my eyes as I finally got my first look at my mystery visitor. An old fashioned, floor length red and gold brocade house coat sat atop a neon pink mesh top and luminous tangerine trousers.

“I know, love. It’s a lot to take in.”

I trailed my gaze from the tips of his purple pointed boots to the top of his electric blue hair. He was glorious. There were no other words for it. Silver eyes lined in gold stared at me with the same frankness that was in my own gaze.

“So,” he said, his lips pursed. “You’re Damyr’s new pet.”

I scowled. “I’m not a pet.”

He laughed musically, throwing his head back and showing off his long, elegant neck. “Oh, darling, you have no idea, do you?”

“About what?”

His grin was wide as he closed the distance between us. Bending at the waist, he brought his face close to mine. Close enough that I could see flecks of lightning shimmering in his silver eyes. He gripped my chin between his finger and thumb and electricity zipped along my skin. “He will never let you go.”

I scowled. “Well, he’s going to have to.”

Another musical laugh. “The only way you’re leaving here is in a box.”

I jerked my chin out of his hold. “Is that a threat?”

“Why? Did it sound like a compliment?”

“I have people who will miss me.”

He stroked a finger over the curve of my cheek. “I’m sure you would. If they knew you were missing. Unfortunately for you, I’m good at fabricating tales.”

My blood ran cold. “What?”

“Right now, sweet, darling Maya thinks you’ve decided to go on a spur of the moment cruise to re-evaluate your life. You just couldn’t handle being fired from

your residency and thought some fun in the sun would help bring back perspective. You'll be gone for two weeks. At least. You might even decide to extend your vacation and tour the world on some soul-searching venture. Who knows."

"But you can't do that." A sheen of sweat coated my skin as the realisation hit that no one would be missing me. Not a single person would know where I was. Tears burned the backs of my eyes. Was this all my life had resulted in? That I was utterly alone enough that my one and only friend would believe I'd just cut and run because I'd been fired.

"Oh, but I can. And because Damyr told me to. Trust me, you don't want to disobeythatguy," he said with a chuckle. "One of his goons did and he lost a head."

I blanched. "His head?"

"Yep," he said gleefully. "It was pretty epic. Byron used a Samurai sword and everything." The blue haired guy tilted his head and narrowed his eyes at me, his gaze assessing. "I can see why Byron calls you 'little bird'."

"Can you?" I replied in a clipped tone.

"You're just so..." he rolled his bottom lip through his teeth. "Fragile."

"What?"

"Oh, don't be upset, darling. There's nothing wrong with being breakable. In fact, I think that's part of your charm."

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“Well, if you’ve finished gawking at me, you can go.” I’d rather sit here and stare at the walls than listen to whatever else this guy had to say. I also, maybe, wanted to throw myself a pity party for one.

“Oh, you’re no fun, Benji,” he said with a pout as he flounced himself over to me and dropped his ass on my knees. “You know, you really should try and keep the crazy ones happy.”

I scowled at him and tried to wriggle him off my knees but it was no use. He wrapped an arm behind the back of my neck and got himself comfy, crossing one long leg over the other.

“It would make me happy if you got off me,” I grumbled. It wasn’t likely but a guy could hope.

“What’s that? You want me to get you off?” he said gleefully, before thrusting his hand between us and going for my dick.

“No!” I yelled and squirmed my hips back as far as I could. “Absolutely fucking not!”

He laughed manically, throwing his head back and arching his long neck. “I’m just playing with you. You’re not my type anyway. I like my lovers big enough that they could throw me around and fuck me into the mattress until I think I’m dead. Know what I mean?”

I hummed in agreement before I could stop myself. Heat rushed up the side of my

neck at his rueful smile.

“I knew it!” He tucked his head under my chin, and I got a waft of old leather and sandalwood. It reminded me of an old library and was oddly comforting. “I bet Damyr will fuck you into the mattress if you ask nicely. He’s the kind of guy that’s full of pent-up rage. I’m almost jealous that he won’t be taking it out on my ass.”

I snorted at that. Damyr was good looking and incredibly seductive, but I wasn’t letting him anywhere near my ass. Now or ever.

But those hands...

Nope. Stop it, Benji.

Those dark lines that swirled to make those intriguing snake tattoos...

I’d be lying to myself if I didn’t think the guy could charm his way into my pants. Hell, I’d nearly let him touch my dick already. I wasn’t going to let that happen again. The guy had kidnapped me, tied me to a chair and left me.

But he had also brought my cat so Maurice wouldn’t be left on his own. Which was kind of sweet, in a really fucked up way.

Wait. What was I thinking?!

No, Benji. Damyr is a crime lord. He probably kills someone before breakfast every day and has his own personal cemetery full of dead people. No custom three-piece suit is going to hide the bad guy, even if it does make him look fucking delicious. And those damn forearms...

Fuck, my mouth was watering.

Was I drooling? I swiped my chin with my shoulder just to make sure.

Nope. We were good. No dribble.

The door creaked open with an ominous screech. Slow, purposeful heels clacked along the floor before the outline of a body emerged from the shadows. I swallowed and flexed my fingers, nervousness flooding my system.

“Acheron, you really are tempting fate sat there, aren’t you?”

Byron stepped out of the darkness and into the halo of light surrounding me. His eyes still as cold and frigid as I remembered. Something about the way he looked at me made my blood shiver. It was like he was dissecting me, little by little, and figuring out the best way to kill me. It was damn uncomfortable and I’m sure I’d be squirming if I weren’t tied down.

“Oh hush, Byron. I’m only having fun,” Acheron – who I’m guessing was the blue haired rainbow in my lap – said with a smile.

“Get out of the little bird’s lap, or I’ll make you,” Byron said coolly. “I don’t want to have to cut up your body into little pieces for the bears to eat.”

Acheron unfurled himself and stood gracefully. “Promises, promises.”

“The boss wants his new pet upstairs.” Byron stepped closer and pulled a knife from somewhere. The movement was so fast I didn’t see where it come from.

I flinched at the sharpnickas the butterfly blade unfolded and Byron smirked at me.

“Don’t worry, little bird. I’m not here to kill you.”

“Oh, good,” I replied with more confidence than I felt. “And don’t call me little bird.”

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The psycho's grin widened as he slipped the sharp edge of the blade under the cable ties. He didn't reply, just pulled the blade through the thick plastic like it was cutting through butter. Jeez, those things must be sharp.

"On second thoughts, call me whatever you like," I mumbled. Was probably wise to keep the psychopath on side, right?

He cut through the other cable tie and then knelt slowly at my feet, his eyes maintaining unrelenting contact. I gripped the arms of the chair, unsure as to whether I was about to lose a limb or something. This guy made me nervous. No, beyond nervous. This guy terrified me.

There was an audible snick as he cut through the ties around my ankles, and I felt blessed relief as I stretched my legs. It was painful at first, but the extreme pins and needles thankfully drifted away as I wriggled my limbs.

"Would you like something to eat?" Byron said as I stood shakily from my chair.

I felt the colour drain from my face as I watched the guy lick his lips. "Um, no thank you."

Acheron laughed and swatted Byron in the chest. "Stop teasing the poor guy. We have actual food upstairs, sugar. I promise there are no body parts in the freezer. Come on, I'll take you."

Thank God. For a moment there, I thought the absolute worst.

Delightful smells of tomatoes and garlic assaulted my senses as Acheron led me to the kitchen. My stomach rumbled loudly as I stepped across the threshold, but my feet halted when I saw who was cooking.

Damyr stood in front of the hob, frilly apron tied around his waist, stirring sauce in a pan. I couldn't quite reconcile this image of domesticity with the seductive mobster I'd interacted with in his basement. Turns out, I wasn't in the middle of the Baltic Sea but an ordinary basement beneath the Morozov Mansion. I was almost disappointed with how cliché that was, but I decided to count my blessings instead and be grateful for the fact I was still on solid ground in a city I knew well.

"Is he cooking?" I heard Acheron whisper behind me.

"Yes," Byron whispered back. "Weird."

I turned around to comment, but found they'd both vanished, leaving me alone with the mobster boss. How the fuck did those two manage to move so silently? But I suppose it was a useful skill in the criminal underworld, to be able to manoeuvre undetected. I was definitely not stealthy. I think that's what ultimately led me to medicine, so that I could patch myself up when I needed to because I was so damn clumsy.

"Sit," Damyr commanded, that low tone brooking no argument. He didn't even look at me, the asshole.

I folded my arms across my chest. "You could ask nicely."

I swear I could hear his teeth grinding as he clenched his jaw. He turned to face me, and I was hit again by how gorgeous this guy was, but nope, I wasn't going to think

that.

He'd kidnapped me.

He'd kidnapped my cat.

He'd tied me to a chair.

But... he was cooking for me. Did that cancel out some of the bad?

Guess it depended on how good the food was.

"Benjamin, sit. Please." The guy looked like he'd chewed glass as he said that last word and it almost drew a laugh from me. This guy was something else.

I sat in one of the bar stools on the island and looked around the room. There were large, arched windows that looked out onto the garden. It was still dark out so I couldn't have been gone that long. Unless I'd somehow lost a whole day, but I didn't think I had. The moonlight streamed into the kitchen through the windows, framed by heavy thick black curtains. All the appliances in the kitchen looked brand new, like they were either really well looked after or hardly ever used.

"Do you cook much?" I ventured.

"No."

I waited for him to continue but he gave me nothing.

"I like cooking," I offered. "I would always cook with my Nan on Sundays but I don't really have the time anymore. Well, I might now that asshole got me fired." I supposed I would have more free time. Perhaps I could get that Caribbean recipe

book Maya was always raving about. It would be good to try something new.

“You were fired?” Damyr asked with a frown. “That wasn’t in your file.”

“My file?”

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He waved a hand dismissively at me. “Don’t worry. I have a file on everyone I meet.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?”

“No, why should it?” Damyr cocked his head, and looked me with a curious expression.

Maybe this guy did have some psychopathic tendencies if he couldn’t get sarcasm. A shiver ran through me at the thought. Was I about to have dinner with a psychopath?

“Never mind,” I mumbled and looked for a change of subject. “How come you have a top notch kitchen if you don’t use it?”

“I have a chef,” Damyr replied with a shrug. “He likes to use it. Besides, he cooks for the whole family and I can’t be bothered with that.”

I sniffed the air again, dragging the scents of tomatoes and herbs deep into my lungs. “What are you making?”

“One of my favourites.”

Okay, so I guess this guy was hard work when he wasn’t interrogating someone. Got it. “And that is...?”

“Penne al’arrabbiata.” He turned to chop some peppers with a precision that was a little unsettling actually.

That was one of my favourites too, but I wasn't sure I should tell him that. I carried on watching him work until he was plating it up and placing a dish in front of me. He sat on the stool next to me and I noticed he didn't get any for himself.

“Are you not eating?”

He shook his head. “No, I ate earlier.”

When I was tied to a chair in his basement.

An awkward silence blossomed between us as he looked at the marks on my wrists.

I picked the fork up and let out a little nervous laugh. “This looks good. You didn't need to go to the trouble of cooking for me. I'd have been happy with a piece of toast.”

Which was pretty normal fare for me. It was rare I got to sit and eat a meal, so I was actually impressed that he'd gone to the trouble for me. It was definitely a big tick in my books. Not that I'd tell him that. I didn't want to give him a chance of getting on my good side.

“It's no trouble and I wanted to... um...”

“Apologise?”

“Yes. That.”

I chuckled. “Don't say sorry often then?”

He straightened his back, and a sneer curled his lips. “I do not need to.”

“I can imagine,” I mumbled before finally taking a bite of the delicious smelling pasta.

Holy moly.

Flavour exploded along my taste buds. Tomatoes and spices and fuck me, that was so good. A guttural moan passed my lips as I swallowed the food.

“Fuck,” Damyr mumbled under his breath.

I shot my eyes over to his and watched the blue darken to a colour as rich and deep as the darkest night. His reached out his hand and swiped his thumb along the corner of my mouth. My pulse skyrocketed.

“You missed a spot,” he rasped before licking the pasta sauce off the tip of his thumb.

I felt that lick of his tongue along the length of my cock. Fuck me. This guy wasn't playing fair.

His eyes still held mine. Unblinkingly. Like there was a wolf lurking behind the blue and I knew I should be afraid. I mean, he might eat me, but that didn't make me want to run away. Nope. It was the most thrilling feeling I'd felt in a very long time.

Bad Benji.

What happened to the Benji who made sensible choices? Clearly, he'd taken a hiatus when I'd thrown my badge at the hospital board and now all I had left were impulsive decisions and lust for a guy who'd kidnapped me. Man, a psychologist would have a field day with me right now.

"Um, thank you," I managed to get out.

"You're welcome."

I went back to my pasta and carried on shoving the delectable treat into my face. It really was good. Damyr kept his gaze fixed on me as I moaned and groaned my way through my meal. If I were at home, I'd be licking the plate clean but that probably wasn't going to give a good impression.

"That was delicious," I said as finished my last mouthful.

"It was," he replied, his voice a hoarse whisper. The guy looked at me like he wanted to devour me, and I had to keep reminding myself that he was a bad guy.

I turned in my seat to face him. "Are you going to kill me?"

Damyr cocked his head like a German Shepherd. "No. We've already been over this. Why are you asking again?"

I shrugged and propped my elbow on the islands surface, cupping my chin in my

hand. “Just curious. Seems an odd thing to do, to kidnap me then cook for me. I guess I’m just trying to figure you out.”

“You’d be here for a long time trying to do that.” Damyr looked almost wistful as he spoke, his eyes taking on a far off look for a moment before snapping back to mine with the dark intensity that seemed to pour from him.

“Do you still want to keep me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

His dark brows pinched. “I... I’m not sure.”

That seemed honest. “Don’t I know too much?”

“What?”

“In the movies, the guy who’s seen the bad guys’ faces always ends up dead.”

“This isn’t a movie, Benjamin. There’s definitely more danger here.”

I should be worried, should be looking for an escape but I couldn’t seem to take my eyes away from Damyr. It was like something was holding me captive.

He leant closer and his palms cupped my face. His skin was cool against mine, a soothing caress that I wanted to sink into. I reached out and mirrored him, dragging my fingers across those razor sharp cheek bones. “What power do you hold over me, Damyr? Why am I not running from you?”

It was a valid question and one I couldn't seem to find any logical answer to. The last twenty-four hours had been the weirdest, most upheaved hours of my entire existence. Maybe this was just a dream. Perhaps I was experiencing psychosis. Whatever it was, it was madness.

"I don't know, Benjamin," he replied with a small smile.

I couldn't help but notice how pointy his teeth were. I stretched out my finger towards his mouth.

"Careful. I bite."

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly drier than the desert, and my hard cock pressed uncomfortably against my zipper. I knew this was wrong, knew it was mad, but I pressed my finger against one of his sharp, sexy, pointy incisors.

I gasped as Damyr bit down, not hard enough to pierce my skin, but hard enough that my dick certainly took notice.

He took my finger into the coolness of his mouth and wrapped his tongue around it, sucking it like he probably would my cock. With long hard drags of his tongue and suction I'd most likely feel all the way to my balls.

He released my digit with a pop, and I spotted a small indent on the tip of my finger where he'd bitten me. The guy had marked me, like an animal, and I'd willingly let him. God, there was something wrong with me because I liked it. I wanted him to mark me any way he could.

"Are you real?" I asked breathlessly.

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He leaned into my personal space, so close that the tip of his nose brushed my cheekbone. “Does this feel real?”

“Yes.”

His teeth nipped my earlobe. “And this?”

“Yes.” I gasped at the sudden, sharp sting.

He pulled back, his eyes locked on mine. “You belong to me, Benjamin.”

“Are you going to hurt me?” I asked with a nervous swallow.

“Yes, but only in the best way.” His grin was feral, and that smile did something to me.

It fucking broke me.

I surged forward and crushed my lips against his. He reacted instantly, thrusting his hands into my hair and gripping it hard enough to hurt. Pain lanced across my skull and desire zinged straight to my cock.

He yanked my head backwards, forcing me to bend to his will as he loomed over me. He controlled the kiss completely, pushing my lips open wide so he could explore every inch of my mouth with his tongue.

Heat flushed my skin as he pulled me onto his lap, and I groaned as his hard length

pressed against mine. Fuck. He was big. Bigger than me. This must be a fever dream. There's no way I'd do this under any circumstances. I was kissing my kidnapper, and it was absolutely ruining me.

Damyr kissed me like he owned me, like he was entitled to every gasp, moan and sigh that he wrung from my body and damn if I didn't want to be owned by him. To be bent over and fucked at this island. To be marked and branded by him.

"This is madness," I growled against his lips.

"Or brilliance."

"Huh?" I couldn't string a coherent thought together, not with how he was rolling his hips beneath me and sliding his hard cock between my ass cheeks. I kissed him again, frantic and wild. It was all teeth and tongue before Damyr pulled back and sucked hard on my bottom lip. There was a sharp sting as he nipped at my over sensitive lip, hard enough to break the skin. Blood dripped into my mouth, not much, but enough that I could taste the copper tang.

Damyr's tongue darted out and swept across the cut, soothing the pain away. That shouldn't be hot. I shouldn't enjoy the way he groaned, deep and guttural, as he tasted my blood, but I did. Fuck me, but I did. How could something so wrong, something so depraved, make me feel alive in a way I never had before.

"Benjamin."

My name sounded like a goddamn prayer rumbling from his lips and I couldn't stop myself if I wanted to. I dragged his mouth back to mine and gasped as he sucked even harder on my bottom lip. Fuck, I felt that all the way to my balls.

I ground my hips down into his, loving the way he hissed deep into my mouth. I

wanted to know what other sounds he made. Could I make him—

Nails scraped along my skull and a cry of outrage filled the room. Someone jerked me backwards and off Damyr's lap. I fell to the floor with a thud, my hands scrambling to keep me upright as my brain tried to process what was going on.

A foot slammed into my chest and pushed me down, my hands slipping out from under me with the force. I tried to move but the sharp stiletto point of a red-soled shoe dug further into my chest.

"I wouldn't move, if I were you."

I trailed my gaze from the shoe threatening to end my life, up to the face of a woman who stared down at me with eyes dripping with venom.

Clad in a tailored black pant suit, she towered over me, her bright red lips pulled back in a vicious snarl.

"Damyr, who is this?" I asked with a curious glance over to him. The guy looked dishevelled and it kind of made him look adorable. If it weren't for the pinched grimace twisting that mouth that had just been on mine.

"My wife."

Excuse me?! What the fuck?!

Chapter Ten

Damyr

Fury and rage like nothing I'd ever felt before made my skin crawl and my fangs

ache. I really needed to revoke her invitation and get my keys back because this was getting ridiculous.

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“Your wife?” Benjamin seethed through a clenched jaw. “You’re married?”

“In a fashion,” I said. I hadn’t really been married for a while, but Lucia seemed to have a hard time letting go. “We haven’t been together for a long time.” Almost eighty years, in fact.

“Come now, darling,” Lucia purred, her sugary voice grating on my skull like a knife. “Don’t minimise what we have.”

I wanted to pull her off Benjamin and assert my dominance, but I didn’t want to frighten him. For some reason, I didn’t want him to see what I was capable of.

“Had, Lucia. What do you want?”

Her green eyes met mine. So dull in comparison to Benjamin’s. “I wanted to chat, to see if we could... rekindle something.”

She only ever came here when she wanted money or if she needed help digging herself out of a hole. I glanced at Benjamin, his hands held wide, his lips still swollen from my kiss. I could still taste him on my tongue. I shouldn’t have bitten him, but when it came to Benjamin, resistance wasn’t possible.

“Let’s step into my office,” I said curtly. I wanted to get her away from Benjamin as soon as possible.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Benjamin muttered under his breath. He probably didn’t think I’d hear him, but vampire senses were sharp.

“Lucia. Remove your foot from him, or I’ll remove it for you.”

“Oh, Damyr, I love it when you give me orders.” She lowered her voice and flicked her long red waves over her shoulder, exposing her neck. I’d loved her once, but now all I wanted to do was snap that pretty little neck.

“My office. Now.” I didn’t like that I was pandering to her, but I wanted a moment with Benjamin to explain myself. For some reason, I didn’t want him to think badly of me but judging by the hate seeping from his eyes as he watched the exchange with Lucia, he already thought less of me. My heart lurched uncomfortably in my chest. I didn’t understand it. I’d never been one to feel but all I could do at the moment was feel. Turmoil churned in my gut and for the first time ever, I felt unsure of myself.

Lucia giggled like a schoolgirl, and I tried my best not to flinch.

“I’ll be waiting,” she hummed as she strode past me and I held my breath, not wanting to catch her scent.

I waited until she’d left the room before releasing that breath.

“You didn’t think you should mention the fact that you were married before sucking my face?” Benjamin hissed as he sat up.

I held my hand out to help him up, but he slapped it away.

“I don’t need your help, Damyr. I don’t need anything from you.”

There was a venom to his words that made me frown. “Lucia is my wife in name only. She hasn’t been part of my life for a long time. I didn’t think I needed to mention her.”

“What? Are you serious?” he said, jerking his head back. “You think it’s okay to hide the fact that you’re married?”

“I don’t consider myself married,” I shrugged. “It’s just a piece of paper now.”

I didn’t understand his anger. It almost too long in the past to remedy, practically a lifetime ago, and the world currently saw Damyr Morozov as an eternal bachelor.

“You’re a real piece of fucking work. You know that?” Benjamin had his hands on his hips, his shoulders tight and bunched up under his ears.

“Why are you angry?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and muttered under his breath. He spoke so fast that I couldn’t catch all his words, but I did hear words like ‘idiot’, ‘madness’ and ‘jackass’. I guessed the last one applied to me.

“Look, I’ll deal with Lucia and send her away; then we can talk.”

“Great,” he drawled.

I didn’t think he actually meant that but maybe I should leave him to it for a few minutes. Perhaps it would give me a chance to figure things out as well. I didn’t get humans anymore. Apart from Byron, but he was a lot easier to deal with than normal humans. Give him someone to torture and kill and he was happier than a pig in the proverbial shit. Benjamin was something new and I wanted to pick him apart until I understood everything about him. I wanted to burrow under his skin and worm my way into his brain until I understood him completely.

“I’ll be back shortly,” I said as I tried to get my obsession under control. I didn’t want to deal with Lucia, I wanted to ask Benjamin to march his ass to my room so I could

make bend him to my will.

“Whatever,” was the reply I got. Fucking hell, his sass was like catnip to my soul. My hands itched to scare that brattishness out of him, but now wasn’t the right time. Now he needed space, and I needed to deal with my wife.

Lucia lounged gracefully in one of the chairs and I'd never hated her more than I did at this moment. She'd put her hands on Benjamin. No one was allowed to touch him but me. Possessive much? Absolutely, but he was mine to protect.

"What do you want?" I said sharply as I sat behind my desk. My skin started to crawl the longer I looked at her. She'd never been this much of a problem before. But then again, I'd never had Benjamin before.

"Who was that boy, Damyr?" she asked with a pout.

"No one you need to concern yourself about."

"But he's so pretty." She trailed a finger over her ruby red lips. "Can I have a turn?"

"No," I said, my expression taut.

She leant closer, pushing her cleavage towards me. "Does he taste as sweet as he looks?"

"Lucia," I growled but she just laughed.

"You always were so easy to wind up. Keep your toy, Damyr, I'm sure you'll get bored of him soon."

That wasn't going to be likely, but she didn't need to know that. The less she thought

of him, the better.

“Is it money you want, or are you in trouble?”

She flopped back into the chair. “Straight to business, then? I don’t need money, Damyr. I earn enough keeping criminals like yourself out of prison. I may have found myself in somewhat of a tense situation with the Lavaeux clan.”

“What kind of situation?”

“I may have fucked Marcelle’s brother.”

“What?” Rage flushed my body. How could she be so fucking stupid? We didn’t piss in our own back yards, and fucking Remy Lavaeux was the epitome of that.

“It was a stupid mistake, but someone saw us, and he started to get handsy with me. I tried to get rid of him, but Remy jumped to my defence, and you know what wolves are like near the full moon.”

Oh, yes. They were aggressive, impulsive and highly volatile. Throw in someone trying to encroach on a shifter’s lover and it was a sure-fire way to start a massacre.

Lucia sighed deeply. “Now they’re dead and—”

“Dead? You killed him? Please tell me it wasn’t someone important.” Save me from fucking incompetence.

“No!” she snapped. At least she had the grace to look sheepish. “At least I don’t think so. He didn’t have any ID on him, but he didn’t look familiar.”

Well, at least that was somewhat of a bonus. Lucia tended to know everyone who was

anyone so if she didn't recognise him, he probably was a nobody.

“Okay, I suppose that's a good th—”

There was a sudden knock at the door and Vlad stepped into the room, his stride determined. “There's something you need to see, Boss.”

He dropped a manilla envelope on my desk and flicked a glance at Lucia.

The word ‘ENJOY’ was written in an elegant script across the front and someone had drawn two ‘x’s’ in blood beneath it.

“What is this?” I asked.

“It's not the only thing to arrive,” Vlad said ominously.

“Where's Benjamin?” I had to know. Was he safe? I ignored the curious look from Lucia and turned to Vlad.

His brows were drawn down in a disapproving frown. “He's in the library with his cat.”

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Okay. Good. The tension left my shoulders as soon as I knew he was far away from whatever this was. I turned my attention to the envelope and opened it. Inside was a collection of photographs but they weren't just still images. They were time stamped like they'd been taken from CCTV footage.

It took me a minute to figure out what I was looking at but by the third image I'd worked it out.

This was evidence of the shitshow Lucia had just walked into my office. It was picture after picture of her and Remy fucking in some backwater motel and then the incident that occurred after. Remy attacking someone outside the building. What a fucking mess.

It wasn't that we couldn't have interspecies relations, it was more that we'd forbidden any kind of sexual relations between the Three Families to keep things on an even keel. Hopefully I wouldn't have to reveal this mess to Marcelle, although, knowing him, he already knew anyway. That guy always knew any secret worth knowing.

"What else was delivered?" I asked.

"A box," Vlad said simply.

I stood up and headed out of my office. "Where is it?"

"The foyer."

I stopped short. "You left it in the foyer?"

“It’s a large box.”

I could hear Lucia’s heels clacking on the hardwood floor behind me as I picked up my pace. I didn’t care that she was following Vlad and me, I just wanted to prove myself wrong. That my mysterious hooded figure hadn’t delivered what I thought he had.

I could smell it before I could see it. Rancid and like old pennies.

A black box wrapped in a gold bow sat in the middle of my entrance hall. It stood at waist height and there was a tag hanging on the front. I reached out and flipped it over.

Damyr, I hope you like my gift. Make sure you do the right thing. Ronin xx

“Ronin. Who the fuck is Ronin?” Vlad growled.

I had no idea. “Guess we’d better open it.”

I undid the bow and lifted the lid. The smell intensified as the sides of the box fell to the floor with a soft thud.

There, right in the centre, was a body.

“My God,” Lucia gasped.

I didn’t need her reaction to realise this was the guy from the CCTV footage. And he was human. Fuck.

I stepped closer and crouched over the body. His head was twisted at an unnatural angle and bruises marred his face, arms and hands. He was mid-forties, well dressed

and clearly came from money. There was a twinge of recognition as I stared at his face. There were three jagged slices across the apple of his cheek. Remy's handiwork, no doubt. The flesh was cut right down to the bone.

Why did he seem familiar?

Something was taped to the man's forehead. I peered closer and realised it was his drivers license, covered in bloody fingerprints.

"Who is it?" Vlad asked.

The only word that was easy enough to read was his surname.

My blood ran cold. "Montgomery."

"Impossible," Vlad mumbled.

"It's Theo Montgomery." Vlad was right. It was impossible for this man to be decomposing in my entrance hall.

"Who is that?" Lucia asked.

The black sheep of the monarchy and I'd killed him over ten years ago. Or so I'd thought.

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“Why is there a dead body in your house?”

Everybody spun towards the voice in the doorway and my heart sank.

“Benjamin, I can explain.”

Chapter Eleven

Benji

There was a body.

A dead body.

On the floor.

It smelt like he’d probably died a few days ago and he looked like he’d been mauled by a bear.

“Is this a normal occurrence for you?” I asked. “To have a corpse delivered with a bow?”

Damyr stood and turned towards me, uncertainty crossing his features. “You shouldn’t have to see this.”

I snorted. This was not the first time I’d seen a dead body and I’d seen worse injuries than what this poor guy had been through. “Oh, honey, I worked in the emergency

department. I've seen worse."

He frowned at me and clenched his jaw, as if the thought of me seeing something so distasteful pissed him off.

"He shouldn't be here, Boss," Vlad the tank said, his deep voice carrying as he eyeballed me intently from behind Damyr's shoulder.

"Let the little bird stay," Byron said as he ruffled my hair with a grin on his face that was a little unsettling. I didn't think it was with affection, judging by the playful glint in his frigid eyes.

"Don't call me that," I said as I elbowed Byron in his chest.

The maniac huffed a laugh and swatted my ass. "Careful now, or I'll think you want to play."

I saw Damyr's left eye twitch as he watched Byron. Interesting.

"Maybe later," I said with a waggle of my eyebrows.

Byron's manic grin widened. "Are you sure—"

"Benjamin." Damyr hissed my name with a sharp warning. "Come here."

"Looks like someone's in trouble," Byron crooned in my ear.

"Fuck you," I muttered, and stepped towards Damyr.

Byron latched his fingers into my hair and twisted the strands, pulling me to a stop. My head was yanked backwards, and Byron's breath tickled my ear. "I'm not into

that. I'm more like the kind of guy who will chase you and fuck you where I find you."

I gulped. That sounded... intense. And a little scary and definitely not my cup of tea.

Maybe teasing the maniac wasn't the safest thing for my health.

"Are we seriously going to watch Byron hump this guy's leg?" Vlad drawled as he turned his attention back to the dead body.

"I wouldn't mind watching," Damyr's wife said, her eyes trained on Byron with a hunger that looked a little dark.

"Enough!" Damyr growled. "Byron, let him go."

Byron immediately released me, a soft laugh tumbling from his lips. "Sure thing, Boss. He's too pretty for me anyway."

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“Byron, go and find me Acheron,” Damyr ordered. His fists clenched at his sides and he looked like he was one second away from murdering someone. Probably Byron. I wondered why Damry kept the guy around if all he did was wind him up.

“No one ‘finds’ Acheron,” Byron said, tucking his hands into his trouser pockets. He looked far too casual considering the way Damyr was looking at him. “But sure, I’ll see if I can find him. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Well, that’s not a long list,” Vlad scoffed. He was crouched over the body, his shirt and waistcoat stretching tautly across his broad shoulders. He looked like he’d been on a night out. The last time I’d seen him, he’d been dressed in black combat gear.

“Benjamin,” Damyr said quietly, drawing my attention back to him. “You should go.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Benjamin, the more you see, the more you’re at risk.”

“Well, I guess you should have thought about that before you kidnapped me.”

Vlad sniggered before trying to hide it with a cough but when I looked down at him, he was completely focussed on the body. Probably wise.

“Benjamin—”

“Damyr, you can growl my name all you want. I’m not leaving.”

His lips pinched into a tight grimace and his nostrils flared. Damyr was probably used to everyone doing whatever he wanted at the drop of a hat, but I wasn't going to fall in line. I wasn't one of his little minions he could bend to his will, no matter how many times he said my name with a growl. Although, I did happen to quite like the sound of it. All deep and throaty. It made goosebumps ripple along my skin.

"Fine," he eventually said.

"Fine," I snapped. "Besides, your victim here didn't die of his wounds."

"What?" Vlad asked, his chocolate eyes finding mine.

Yeah, I might have had a bit of a smug look on my face as I stared at Damyr. "There's a slight blue tinge on the lower half of his face and you can just about see the petechiae in his eyes. Those point to asphyxiation. I'm sure if I got a closer look, I could probably tell you that most of the wounds on his body were done postmortem."

"Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to make this look like Lavaeux killed him." Vlad's brows were drawn down in a sharp arch as he stood next to Damyr. "This smells like trouble."

"It seems personal," I added. Damyr raised a brow in question. "It was clearly delivered to your address, and it came with a bow. You seemed to know who the guy was which suggests you're being targeted for a reason."

"Not just a pretty face then," Damyr's wife said sweetly. I'd forgotten she was there. Well, tried to. It was hard to ignore the gloriously beautiful, well-dressed supermodel that was married to the guy who'd recently had his tongue down my throat. The wife he'd failed to mention. Still wasn't sure how I felt about that. I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but the guy was a criminal. Not sure I should be giving him anything really.

“Do you still need to be here, Lucia?” Damyr said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, don’t be like that. It’s starting to get fun,” she replied with a pout.

God, her voice was annoying. There was a false sweetness to it that had me wincing.

Damyr beckoned Vlad closer and whispered something in his ear. It was too low for me to hear what was said, and Vlad’s blank expression gave nothing away.

“Lucia, why don’t you come with me?” Vlad said, his voice as smooth as silk. There was something familiar about the tone he was using and something uncomfortable churned in my gut. Lucia giggled softly and followed Vlad, over to the main entrance and out through the door. Huh. I didn’t think she was going to leave that easily. Weird.

“Tell me what you see,” Damyr said, pointing towards the body.

“You could say ‘please’,” I muttered under my breath and knelt closer to the man in the box.

“Please,” he grumbled, catching me by surprise.

I looked up at him and his tongue darted out to wet his lips. My heart lurched in my chest and desire zipped along my skin. He stared at me for a long, hard moment and held me captive in his sultry gaze. The world could burn down around me, and it wouldn’t distract me. I’d never felt anything this intense, this terrifying.

This goddamnsoul shaking.

“I like the way you look on your knees, Benjamin.” He reached his finger out and traced my bottom lip. This wasn’t the place for this, with a corpse right next to me,

but I couldn't resist, even if I wanted to. This wasn't like me, I could be impulsive, but not normally like this. Fuck, I had a sudden urge to rip my clothes off and let Damyr fuck me next to a corpse. A fucking corpse! This was madness. It had to be. It was the only explanation I could come up with for parting my lips and letting Damyr sink two fingers to the back of my throat and hold me there. My mouth open wide, saliva pooling and running over my chin.

Damyr's nostrils flared as my throat constricted around his fingers. He dragged them back and forth along my tongue and shit, my dick was instantly hard in my pants.

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“Yes, Benjamin. Just like that,” he hummed as he fucked my throat with his fingers. I could do nothing but gag and take it, imagining all the while that it was his cock I was sucking on. “That’s it, pet.”

I whimpered at the term of endearment. It took me by surprise, but I didn’t hate it. Damyr’s other hand settled on the top of my head, his fingers weaving through the soft curls and gripping them tightly.

“Such a good boy for me,” Damyr said, his voice a hoarse whisper, his restraint thin.

Holy fuck. Why did that sound so hot?

My hips started to roll as I tried to find some relief, anything, something to take away the ache, the burning need, the complete and utter—

“Well, this wasn’t what I was expecting to walk into,” a voice drawled from somewhere behind me.

The fog of desire in my brain dissipated faster than a snow cone in Hell.

“Acheron!” Damyr barked. “What have I told you about portalling in my house!”

I must still be out of it, because I couldn’t have heard Damyr right. Portalling?

Acheron snorted and stepped into my line of sight. “I wasn’t even sneaking around, sugar. You were just distracted. Can’t say I blame you, though. That was hot.”

His silver eyes were blown wide with desire and heat flushed over my skin. What the fuck was I doing? I scrambled backwards and tried to put some distance between Damyr and me, but the further I moved away, the more I felt like I was losing something. Maybe I should have gone for that CT scan like Maya had suggested.

“What do you want?” Damyr growled.

Acheron chuckled. “You sent for me. Remember?”

“Of course I remember,” Damyr snapped, and I had to bite back a laugh. Guess I wasn’t the only one whose brain was affected by that sudden surge of lust.

I looked down at the unfortunate man who’d been delivered to the Morozov Mansion, hoping that I could distract myself from the man currently looming over me with an intense, unrelenting lust-filled gaze pinned on the side of my face. I could feel Damyr’s stare like it was a physical thing and I didn’t know what to make of it. I couldn’t believe how close I’d gotten to making an acquaintance with Damyr’s dick. Again. Fuck, even now I still wanted to wrap my lips around it and choke on it.

Man, I needed help. Like real serious help.

This wasn’t sane. I wasn’t sane.

I needed to think about something else or I was going to crawl back over to Damyr and suck his dick. Acheron be damned.

Right. The body.

He was in his early fifties, and I could see by the ID taped to his head, that he was a Montgomery. Now that I was looking at his face closely, I could see the resemblance to the Royal Family. Hmm... hadn’t the King’s brother disappeared a decade ago?

What was he doing in Damyr's entrance hall? Dead and looking like he'd been mauled by a bear. Except the only claw mark that had been inflicted when he was alive was the one on his face. The ones across his abdomen and chest didn't show signs of blood flow so he couldn't have been alive afterwards. Why go to the trouble of gutting the guy after strangling him? The only thing I could think of was in agreement with what Vlad had said. That someone was making this murder look specifically like something else. But why?

I tentatively prodded the man's neck and felt the telltale sign of a broken hyoid bone. There were a number of fingertip shaped bruises around his neck. The guy was definitely strangled, but judging by the state of his hands, he fought back. A couple of his fingernails were broken and his palms showed signs of trauma.

"What do you see?"

I jumped and yelped as Damyr suddenly appeared in the space next to me. The guy almost cracked a smile.

"Jesus, Damyr. Warm a guy before you sneak up on them."

"But you scream so prettily for me." His voice was low and husky and made my knees weak. Fuck, this man was too much.

I looked away, too caught up in the man that was Damyr Morozov for my brain to function. There were sparks and signals firing in all sorts of directions and I had the unfortunate feeling that my mouth was bobbing open and closed like a fucking fish.

"Are you okay there?" he asked, a knowing smirk on his handsome face.

"Um... y-yeah." Fucking hell, Benji. Get it together. I coughed and pointed to the dead guy. "I was right. The guy was strangled. All these other wounds were inflicted after

death.”

Damyr’s expression hardened, and I had a sudden urge to ask what he was thinking but I stopped myself. Did I really want to know? Did I really want to delve deeper into this underworld that I had already been dragged into?

I couldn’t deny there was something drawing me to Damyr, but it felt dark and dangerous. I wanted him in a way I’d never wanted anyone before, and it scared me. Not because I was terrified of him, but because I was terrified that I wasn’t terrified. My mind rebelled at the very idea of running away and I couldn’t rationalise that. That’s what scared me. That I wanted the danger and that I wanted to surrender to the dark. That those million red flags were just going to be completely ignored, and I was probably going to end up dead in a ditch somewhere.

And that was if I was lucky.

I stood back up and took a step back from the body and away from Damyr. If I wasn't careful, I was going to do something stupid.

Like fall for the guy.

Damyr pulled his phone out and dialled a number. I wondered if I'd ever get my phone back. Acheron was probably having too much fun demolishing my nice and orderly life via the wonder of social media. I just hoped that when I got access to my phone again, he hadn't turned me into a wandering, philanthropic hippie that only visits random places in the back of beyond.

"Hey, doll face, what's up?"

The female voice was ridiculously bright and chirpy considering it was like stupid o'clock in the morning.

"You're on speaker phone. I have a... guest."

"Okay," she replied, drawing out the syllables. "That's unlike you. Does your guest have a name?"

"Yes," Damyr said with a frown.

Jeez, this guy but, heaven help me, I was starting to find that frown utterly adorable.

"It's Benji."

There was the sound of a keyboard clicking. “As in Benjamin Barrett?”

“Yep,” I said, popping the ‘p’.

“Weren’t you tied up in the basement?” she asked.

“Yep.” I could see Damyr’s expression tightening.

“But now you’re a ‘guest’?”

“Apparently so.”

Damyr growled impatiently. “Can we move on?”

“Sure thing, Boss,” she said cheerfully. “I’m Roxie by the way. Nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

Damyr huffed. “Roxie, I’m sending you a couple of pics.”

“Ooh, lucky me. Are they at least interesting? The last time someone said they were sending me pictures, Acheron sent me images of his dick.”

“Sorry about that,” Damyr grumbled.

Roxie snorted. “Did I sound like I was complaining? He has a great dick. Those images totally went in my wank bank.”

“Roxie. Speaker phone.” Damyr looked like he was about to burst a blood vessel.

“Sorry, Benji. But if you’d seen his dick—”

“He will never see that imbecile’s cock,” Damyr cut in and I couldn’t help it. A laugh tumbled out of my mouth before I could snatch it back. His eyes narrowed to sharp slits as I tried unsuccessfully to reclaim my giggle.

“Can we get back to the dead body?” Damyr snapped.

Roxie groaned. “That’s not nearly as exciting as talking about dicks.”

I definitely agreed with her on that one.

“I’ve sent Acheron to a dead drop location for you. There’s some evidence in there I’d like you to process. Can you do that for me?”

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She snorted. “Does a bear shit in the woods?”

Damyr frowned. “I don’t know what that means.”

The sound of fingernails clicking away furiously on the line halted. “You know, I sometimes hate this job. You vam—”

“Roxie,” Damyr hissed. “Speaker phone.”

“Sorry. This is just a really late call, and I’ve finally got the baby to sleep. I don’t think I’ve slept for like twenty hours at this point.”

My jaw dropped. “Damyr! Are you telling me that you have this woman working for you when she should be sleeping?! Are you insane? Do you know one of the leading causes of depression in new mothers is due to lack of sleep and you have her working on this for you?!”

The clicking fingernails paused again. “Oh, Damyr. Can we keep him?”

“Not up to you,” Damyr grumbled. “And I don’t answer to you, Benjamin. I need Roxie because she’s the best.”

“Aww,” she sniffed dramatically. “I knew you loved me, Damyr. And don’t worry about me, Benji love, I’m used to working long days with little sleep. Caffeine is my best friend. Oh, and energy drinks and self-help books. They get me through the day.”

Well, that wasn’t healthy but who was I to judge? A few minutes ago, I’d been about

to fuck a mafia don next to a corpse.

Damyr clicked his phone a few times. “I’ve just sent you the pictures. Can you identify what order the injuries were made?”

“Holy shit,” she muttered. Guess she got the pictures. “Is that Theo Montgomery?”

“Yes. Can you identify what order—”

“Yeah, yeah, give me a few minutes, doll face.” And with that she disconnected.

Well, she was a bit of a whirlwind. And interesting.

“I like her,” I said.

Damyr sighed. “Everybody likes her.”

Was that a touch of jealousy I detected? And why did I care?

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. What the fuck was I doing?

Oh, God.

I was the naïve girl in the rom-com movie who ignored all the signs and fell in love with the bad guy only to get their heart broken and trodden on a million different ways.

I’d always had good instincts, but a few hours with this intense, brooding man, and I didn’t know which way was north. What the hell was I going to do?

Chapter Twelve

Damyr

I was worried.

It was an alien sensation. I wasn't normally burdened by it, but there I was, watching the emotions play across Benjamin's beautiful face and I was unsure of what to do.

It wasn't the dead body, he seemed comfortable with that. So that just left me that he could be uncomfortable with. I didn't know why I cared, just that I wanted to care. About everything to do with him. If I was being brutally honest with myself, the whole dynamic between Benjamin and I unnerved me. I'd never had this kind of visceral reaction to someone I'd fed from before, so what made Benjamin so special?

"Look at this," Benjamin said, holding the gift tag in his hand. He rubbed it between his finger and thumb. He had such lovely hands. Long, elegant fingers. Soft and caring. Not like mine which were scarred and showed signs of a brutal life.

Benjamin held out the gift tag. "It's made from a thick parchment, and the ink looks like it came from a fountain pen or something. Doesn't look like a biro made this. It kind of reminds me of old love letters you'd find in a museum."

I took the tag from him, a shock of electricity zipping through my fingers as they brushed his. He was right. The tag looked old and there was something familiar about it. I couldn't quite pinpoint what though. Why deliver Theo's body to me? What did this Ronin want me to do with it?

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Theo Montgomery had been the black sheep of the Royal Family since he'd been old enough to legally buy alcohol. Continuously getting into political scrapes and scandals, he'd been a thorn in his brother's side for too long. I'd been approached to make the guy 'disappear'. At the time, the Morozovs had been climbing the ladder of the criminal underworld and that hit had gained us some notoriety. So the fact that Theo was in my entrance hall begged the question: where the fuck had he been all this time, and how did he end up finding Lucia and Remy at some shady motel?

"Who would have sent this to you?" Benjamin asked, interrupting my thoughts.

Another question I didn't have an answer for. "I don't know."

"What are you going to do with him?"

I had to dispose of the body, but did that mean I had to expose Remy and Lucia? Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to frame them and send me all the evidence. If I publicly exposed Lucia and Remy, a divide would appear between the Three Families. They'd broken the rules and would have to be punished. It would undo many decades of hard work, stability and prosperity in the city. If I exposed the fact that Remy had seemingly killed a human, and a royal one at that, we'd be fucked.

"For now, I'll have him stored in the morgue."

Benjamin snorted. "Of course you have a morgue."

"Don't all mafia mansions?"

His gaze snapped to mine and there was a spark of confusion in those green orbs. “Wait, did you just make a joke?”

I shook my head. Maybe I was too old for this. Too old and too out of touch. “Let me take you to your room. It’s late and I’m sure you’re tired.”

Benjamin’s jaw tightened as he pinched his lips. “Sure. What’s on the cards for tomorrow? Light torture and another interrogation?”

I sighed. I wondered how long he was going to be mad at me for. I still needed to figure out why that bothered me so much. I didn’t say anything back to him, just held my arm out towards the stairs and hoped he didn’t fight me. Although, I wouldn’t mind throwing him over my shoulder.

I wasn’t so lucky. With a harrumph and a little stomp of his foot, Benjamin headed up the stairs. His eyes roamed everywhere as he followed me, perhaps I could give him a tour of the place later. It was a large place and full of interesting things. All my history intertwining with the original family that owned it. I’d lived for nearly 500 years and today was the first time I’d ever wanted to walk someone through my past. Not even the man I’d thought would have been mine forever, had made me feel that.

We came to a stop outside the room I’d allocated for Benjamin’s use and I was on the cusp of making up an excuse to keep him with me a little longer.

“You’ll find all your things in here.”

He scowled at me, his eyes darkening to a deep mossy green. “Of course I will. What about my cat?”

“He’s in there too. Just keep him away from Vlad.”

“Is he allergic?”

A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. “Not exactly.”

I watched him for a moment, not wanting to say good night. The silence extended between us but it wasn’t strained, it was just... there.

“Damyr, I—” He huffed a breath and looked at his feet. When he met my gaze again, there was a determination in his eyes. “I know I’m new to this world of yours, but you can’t keep me here against my will.”

“Are you saying you’re going to escape?”

“If I have to.”

I stepped closer, using my height to loom over him. “Benjamin, let me make one thing clear. There is no escape. You’ve put yourself here by trying to be a good man. I could have killed you, but I didn’t—”

“Lucky fucking me,” he hissed. “Way to go on not committing murder, Damyr.”

“Oh, Benjamin,” I said with a harsh laugh. “The sooner you realise that life has no meaning in this world unless you have something to barter it for, the sooner you’ll understand how easy murder is.”

“And what do I have of value for you to keep me alive?”

I ran my finger along his jaw. “Right now, you have my attention, and that’s a dangerous thing in deed.”

He slapped my hand away, turned on his heel and slammed the door in my face. The

lock clicked, but that wasn't going to keep me out if I wanted to get in. But I'd allow him his privacy, even though my fingers were splintering the doorframe with the effort of staying on this side of the door.

"Good night, Benjamin," I called through the door.

“Fuck off,” he shouted back.

I made it back to my office without breaking Benjamin’s door down and dropped into the sofa, exhaustion creeping into my bones. The sun was up, and I was always weaker when the day came. I wouldn’t burn up in the sun if I decided on a midday stroll, but I’d be closer to human and easier to kill. Newly turned vampires couldn’t stand the sun at all. It took decades to adjust to letting sunlight touch your skin again. For me, it was just over half a century, and even then, I only managed to watch the sun rise for twenty minutes but it was the most glorious sun rise I’d ever seen.

The door clicked open, and Vlad walked into the room followed by Alice. She was on our staff as a donor, and we had strict rules for becoming one. You could only be a donor for six months and you had to have regular health checks with the doctor. We paid well, but at the end of the six months, your memory was wiped, and you were returned to your normal life. Sex was not expected, but feeding was an intimate thing and quite often sex was a natural follow on.

“Good evening, Damyr,” she purred, and I grimaced.

Vlad chuckled at me. “Do you want someone else?”

“No,” I snapped. “It’s fine.”

I beckoned her forwards. She was clad in a gown that draped over her body like silk and her dark hair was pinned on top of her head, artfully exposing her neck.

“Which vein would you like?” she asked, her tone sultry and seductive.

The thought of drinking from her neck repulsed me and I almost blanched. I was a vampire, and I didn’t want to drink blood? The fuck was wrong with me.

“Your wrist,” I said sharply which earned me another chuckle from Vlad. Alice’s brows dipped into a frown, but she didn’t say anything else as she sat next to me on the sofa.

“You probably shouldn’t do that, boss.” Vlad stood casually with his hands in his pocket, a smug little grin across his sharp face.

I just threw him a scowl and sank my fangs into the soft flesh of her wrist.

Alice screamed and I recoiled instantly. The blood tasted like ash in my mouth, putrid and rotten. I spat it out and retched. I was vaguely aware of Vlad scooping Alice up and getting her away from me, but I couldn’t focus on anything but the pain. Shivers consumed my body, and my muscles convulsed.

“Damyr!” Hands grabbed at my face and pulled at my limbs. Vlad’s features swam in front of my eyes as fire seared my veins and stole my breath.

And then, just as suddenly as the pain had started, it faded, leaving my skin feeling clammy and my heart thundering in my chest.

Blood splattered my shirt, and my stomach still churned uncomfortably. “What was that?”

Vlad grinned at me, his smile broad and garish. “Congratulations, boss. You’ve got a mate.”

Fuck.

“I’ll get Benji so he can feed you.” Vlad stood to leave but I grabbed his arm to stop him.

“No.”

“No?” Disbelief sat heavy in his eyes.

“I can’t.” I could tell Vlad didn’t approve, finding a mate was beyond rare, but fear held me back. “I can’t risk losing him.”

Not when I’d just found him.

“Damyr,” Vlad said softly, his hand grabbing mine. “He might not understand what’s happening, but he will still be able to feel it. You’d be doing him a disservice by keeping him in the dark.”

He was right. Vlad had an uncanny knack of always being right. “I will tell him. Just not yet.”

I just needed some time.

Vlad patted my hand. “Okay. But what are you going to do about feeding?”

I pursed my lips. That was definitely a tricky one. Once you’d found your mate, it was impossible to feed on anyone else. “I’ll be fine.”

The big guy snorted. “Of course you will.”

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Well, I'd be fine for maybe a week. The mouthful of Benjamin's blood I'd had earlier would have to be enough.

Vlad handed me a glass of bourbon and sat next to me. I swallowed a large mouthful, glad that the burn of the alcohol removed the awful taste of Alice's blood. "Is she okay?"

"Who? Alice?" Vlad undid his tie and the top few buttons on his shirt. "She will be fine. The doc is tending her wound. I've asked Aleksey to wipe her memory and send her home."

I rubbed my hand down my face. At least that was one problem solved. "What are we going to do about Theo Montgomery?"

Vlad frowned. "That's a tricky one. As far as I can see, we have two options. Hide it and risk the wrath of your mysterious Ronin or deliver him to the cops and risk breaking apart the Three Families and all the work you've done together to get where you are."

"My thoughts exactly." Money runs and drug trades could be rebuilt but the power of the names of Morozov, Laveaux and Rowan were worth more. "Bury him."

I just hoped the repercussions were worth it.

Chapter Thirteen

Benji

I awoke with a start and panic had my heart thundering in my chest. I shot up, the immediate surroundings unfamiliar. This wasn't my bed, or my room. Where was I?

Maurice mewled at me in disapproval and shot off the bed. The events of yesterday came flooding back to me as I took in my surroundings. It was twilight beyond the window, the sky glowing softly as the sun disappeared. I'd managed to sleep all day which was weird. Even when I had night shifts at the hospital, I'd always struggled to sleep when the sun was up. Then again, it was every day I got kidnapped and held in a basement.

I ran my hand through my hair. What the fuck was I doing? I wanted to escape, to get back to my life and find a new hospital position. Yet why did the thought of leaving him hold me back? Was this Stockholm Syndrome? Had Damyr somehow brainwashed me into staying? Or drugged me?

Now that I came to think about it, I couldn't think of a drug that could cause such a gap in my memory. I knew there were side effects to some that tampered with short to long term memory retention, but how did I lose a whole chunk of my afternoon? And where did those bruises around my neck go?

I jumped off the bed – ignoring how glorious and bouncy the thing was – and headed for the en suite. I'd been expecting at least new toiletries but nope, Damyr had literally had everything moved from my apartment. My toothbrush and partially used toothpaste sat in my little cup holder on the side by the sink. I hadn't had the courage to check the bottom drawer of the bedside table yet. I think I'd die of embarrassment on the spot if all my toys had appeared too. But, if Damyr had said to bring everything, I'm sure my things would be waiting for me when I was ready to look.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror above the sink. I expected to look worse than I did. There weren't any dark circles under my eyes, and other than the red marks around my wrists, which were self inflicted, I looked... normal. I wasn't sure why

that bothered me so much. I'd been kidnapped and I was fine. Absolutely fine.

I braced my hands on the white marble vanity unit and looked deep into my eyes hoping to find all the answers but all I saw was confusion and longing for a man I should be running away from.

It was like an itch under my skin. Irritating and raw. A niggle at the back of my mind that I couldn't seem to ignore, however much I wanted too.

I looked at the large walk-in shower with the rainfall shower head. The thing looked like heaven. I'd been too exhausted to jump in the shower last night, choosing just to strip to my boxers and get straight into bed. I'd been asleep before my head had even hit the pillow, but I was definitely going to make use of it now. I walked over and turned it on, the room quickly filling with steam.

I shucked off my pants, stepped under the spray and instantly melted. Holy fuck. I needed this. Hot water pummelled my neck and shoulders, and I stood there for a few minutes just enjoying the sensation.

I went to grab my body wash but noticed it wasn't mine. Neither was the shampoo. They must be the only two things in the whole room that weren't mine. In sleek, unassuming black bottles, they looked expensive and when I opened the body wash a familiar scent hit my nose. Dark and spicy with a citrus undertone. This must be Damyr's. Why was it here? The scent was intoxicating up this close to it and I lost myself to it for a moment, my cock hardening the longer I dragged that scent into my lungs.

There was definitely something wrong with me if I was getting off on the way the guy smelled. I shook myself from my stupor and squirted the gel into my palm. Working it into a lather, the smell of it intensified and Jesus fuck, I was obsessed. I ran my hands over my body, my eyes closing as my head fell backwards. I was

surrounded by Damyr, and it was like I was lost to a fever dream. It must be psychosis or hallucinations because it wasn't me touching my dick. It couldn't be.

But it was.

However much I wanted to deny it, Damyr had a hold on me that was impossible to deny. My cock was hard and aching beneath my grip as I pumped my hand up and down my length. Pre-cum pooled at my tip and I rubbed my thumb over my slit, imagining it was Damyr's tattooed hands instead of mine. I dragged my other hand up my torso, across my chest until my fingers reached my nipples. God, they were so hard. I pinched one, my body squirming as I wondered if Damyr would bite them, those sharp canines digging into the sensitive bud.

"Fuck," I whispered, my hips rocking as I pushed my dick into the grip of my fist. Faster and faster, chasing the sensation as that dark and spicy scent coated my skin.

With a wavering cry, I exploded, cum coating the shower stall. My back arched, my legs trembled, and I said one word with a hushed reverence that set my soul on edge.

"Damyr."

After cleaning up the mess I'd made in the bathroom, I dressed in my skinny black jeans and a bright red hoody. To be honest, I'd forgotten I even owned clothes other than scrubs, so it was nice to rediscover them now that someone had arranged all my clothes in a ridiculously large walk-in closet. It was nearly the size of my apartment and I my clothes barely filled the space.

I left my room, surprised that there wasn't someone stationed outside the door, and headed down the stairs. The house was quiet, almost eerily so. I'd seen so many

people about yesterday, that finding myself alone in this big space was a little unnerving. At least the body was gone from the entrance hall. I wasn't sure how I would feel if I came across it still lingering there. I stared at the spot on the marble tiles where Theo Montgomery had lay and wondered where he'd ended up. At the bottom of the river with bricks tied to his feet, or perhaps he'd been chopped into tiny little pieces and fed to the pigs. Did people even do that? Where acid baths a thing? And why was I so curious? I supposed I did have a mafia guy that I could ask those questions too. Maybe he'd surprise me and answer them.

Or maybe I was better off not knowing.

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I tucked my hands into the big pocket at the front of my hoodie and headed deeper into the house. I couldn't remember where the kitchen was, but I was sure I'd come across it eventually. The Morozov Mansion was huge with loads of features that I'm pretty sure were original to the house. Huge white walls, solid oak doors, high ceilings and the massive columns in the entrance hall. I'd already seen the library, but I wondered if there was a ballroom. Did Damyr ever have parties? I snorted. The guy seemed too uptight to go dancing. Although, I wouldn't mind seeing him in a tux.

Nope. I wouldn't allot anymore time to thinking about Damyr. Heat flushed up my neck as I thought about what I'd done earlier, and a shiver zipped up my spine. Would he be able to tell that I'd touched myself to thoughts of him, that I'd cum moaning his name?

Fuck. I needed to stop thinking about him or I'd end up with an erection in my very tight jeans and that wouldn't be comfortable at all.

My feet stopped outside a dark wooden door, something tempting me to open it. There was a tugging behind my solar plexus, pulling me towards something that felt good. It was strange, and a little unsettling but underneath that, it felt like coming home.

I reached for the handle, curious to know what was on the other side, and pushed the door open.

There was a muffle of voices that instantly stopped as the door opened wider, and I found five pairs of eyes looking at me from across the room. My gaze immediately found Damyr's, and warmth settled in my stomach. Comfortable and familiar.

And completely weird. What the hell was that all about?

“Oh, sorry,” I muttered. “I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“You didn’t,” Damyr replied, as he stepped out from behind his desk. Relief flooded through me as he came closer, but I didn’t understand why. It confused me and I found myself frowning as he closed the distance between us.

He stopped as he reached me. His nostrils widened and his eyes turned a deep blue. He leant forwards slightly and drew a breath through his nose.

“Did you just smell me?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, his voice low and husky. “You smell... good.”

“My things didn’t seem to be in the bathroom, so I used yours. I hope that’s okay?” And then I came whilst saying your name all because the scent of you turned me on, but he didn’t need to know that bit.

“Yes,” he growled, and the hairs stood up on the back of my neck. He stared at me for the longest minute, his eyes holding mine unrelentingly.

“Damyr?” I whispered.

“Benjamin.”

I swallowed, and his eyes tracked the motion. “Everyone is watching us.”

I could see them all out the corner of my eye. Vlad seemed to be looking at us fondly, Byron with his usual manic glee and Aleksey just looked like his normal angry self. Acheron, however, had somehow managed to find popcorn.

“This is hot, right?” Acheron said around a mouthful of kernels.

“Fuck yes,” Byron said. “Think they’ll let us watch?”

Aleksey let out a derisive snort and I clocked the sneer curling his lip. I don’t think the angry elf liked me very much.

“Absolutely not,” Damyr snapped, his eyes never leaving mine. “Forgive me, Benjamin. We are just in the middle of a meeting.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know why that made me feel disappointed.

Damyr frowned, his dark brows casting shadows over his eyes. “Let me walk you to the kitchen.”

Joy burst through my veins, all warm and fuzzy and what the hell was happening to me? I never let a guy affect me this much but I seemed to have more emotions than the main character in a bad teen movie. It was giving me whiplash.

“What about the meeting?” Aleksey said, his voice barely more than a grumble.

“I’ll be back,” Damyr said as he placed his hand on the small of my back to lead me out of the room. I nearly fucking swooned. Fuck, I needed my head checked.

Aleksey stood from his chair. “Damyr—”

“I said I’ll be back!” Damyr shouted as he whipped around to face Aleksey. I couldn’t see his face, but I could hear the hiss in Damyr’s words.

Aleksey stared back, his face as hard as stone, the muscle along his jaw twitching. I didn’t fully understand the dynamic between these men, but I had a feeling I’d

unwittingly done something to upset the balance.

Chapter Fourteen

Damyr

I shut my office door behind me with a snap. Fucking Aleksey, questioning me in front of everyone like that. Who did he think he was?

I was seething. Rage boiling under my skin. Shoulders tense. Fists clenched. Back—

Cool hands framed my face, startling me out of my spiralling anger.

“Damyr?”

Serene green eyes filled my vision, and my anger faded away with the soothing motion of his thumbs across my cheeks. My chest heaved for a few more breaths, but that too, dissipated under Benjamin’s touch.

I watched him for a moment, caught in his green gaze and I felt all those harsh, angry edges of mine soften. He had no idea of the power he had over me, with just his touch. The world could be burning around us, and I’d be completely, utterly oblivious.

I blinked and stepped away, breaking our connection.

A flush crept up the side of his neck, the same shade as his jumper, and he looked away from me. I missed his eyes on me, but perhaps it was for the best. With everything going on with my mysterious benefactor, adding a mate to the list didn’t

seem to be the right thing to do, right now. Soon though. I'd have to, otherwise I ran the risk of my body starting to shut down, but if Benjamin was averse to my world, would I have the strength to let him go?

"I need to go out this evening and I would like for you to join me," I said.

Benjamin looked up at me with a confused expression. "You want to take me out of the house? Where I might run away or be seen by someone I know?"

I knew the risks, but I had to believe that the strength of our bond would keep him near me. The fact of the matter was that I just didn't want to leave the house without him. I still had the meeting with the Council to attend and I could leave him at the bar with Acheron for company. On second thoughts, Acheron would probably get them into some trouble. Maybe I should leave him with Aleksey.

"We aren't going far, and besides, if you run away, I'll just hunt you down and recapture you."

He glowered at me, and I had to suppress the urge to smile. The scowl looked so odd on his pretty face that it was almost comical. "You're an asshole."

"I know," I said, heading towards the kitchen. I had to walk away just to breathe something other than the scent of him. He was covered in my body wash, no doubt Vlad thinking it a huge joke to leave Benjamin's behind, so he'd have no choice but to use mine. He smelled too good, too tempting, and the fact that I could smell an undertone of cum as well... There was only so much restraint I could muster. When Benjamin had walked into my office, it took everything in me not to launch myself across the room and take him right there on my goddamn floor.

"So," Benjamin said as he sat at the island. "What is it you're doing tonight?"

I plated some of the fresh fruit that my chef, Roy, left in the fridge for Benjamin.
“I’m going to meet with some people for a conversation.”

“That’s a cute name for a shoot out.”

“It’s not a shoot out, Benjamin. It’s a business meeting.”

“Where?” he asked as he wrapped his lips around a strawberry.

I had a hard time recalling the name of the hotel as I watched his teeth sink into the flesh of the strawberry. “The Julian.”

“Ooh, fancy. I’ve never been there. Is it true they serve everything on solid gold plates?”

“That’s ridiculous.” The Julian was the fanciest hotel in the city, and it probably cost more than the average person’s monthly salary to stay for one night, but there weren’t that many gold plates. It was also the only building that the Three Families owned together, and it was managed by someone we’d vetted together. It was our neutral ground, and everyone was on even footing there.

“Is the hotel a secret location for nefarious doings?” He waggled his eyebrows as he ate another strawberry.

“No, Benjamin. It’s just a hotel.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Sounds like something you’d say if you wanted to keep it secret.”

“Eat your fruit. There’s plenty in the fridge if you want something else.”

“Who are you meeting?”

“The Council,” I answered.

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His eyebrows twitched a little higher, as if he was surprised that I'd actually answered his question. "You going to talk about the dead body?"

"Among other things, yes."

"How much danger am I in, Damyr?"

There was such vulnerability pouring from his eyes that all I wanted to do was wrap him in my arms and hide him away from the world. It was such an alien feeling, this need to protect, but it was as if every atom of my being screamed to be closer to him. I was drawn to him in a way that I'd never experienced before. I wanted to crawl under his skin until there was nothing separating us. Until we were one.

I walked around the island and took his face between my palms. "As long as you are under my protection, Benjamin, I promise I will do everything in my power to keep you safe."

"Can't you just let me go?"

My heart squeezed at the thought. My first instinct was to scream 'no', but I found myself saying something completely different. "If, after I've finished dealing with this mess, you still want to leave, I'll let you go."

His face lit up like the brightest ray of sunshine. "Really?"

"If it's safe, yes." I just had to hope, that when the time came, he'd choose to stay with me. Perhaps I did have a conscience after all and wasn't that a novel thing to

think.

I left Benjamin to finish his meal and get changed into something more fitting of the Julian hotel. I'd said that he didn't need to change and that he could wear what he wanted but he said something about wanting to look the part and feel like a million dollars so who was I to spoil his fun?

However, as I stepped back into my office, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd done something wrong. Had I just made the biggest mistake in agreeing to let him go? A pain that was jagged and raw cut through my heart at the realisation that he might not stay. That he'd turn his back on me, and I'd never see him again. I couldn't let that happen. It might be selfish of me, but I wanted Benjamin to choose me. To want to be with me, and if I had to woo the pants off him, then that's what I'd do.

I just had to find the person trying to manipulate me and wipe them off the face of this fucking earth first.

"Is Benjamin okay?" Vlad asked as I sat behind me desk.

I nodded. "He's getting ready to go out. Acheron, will you keep him company whilst I meet with the Council?"

"You're bringing him with you?" Aleksey sneered.

"Yes." I slammed my fist on my desk, the wood splintering with the impact. "What is your fucking problem?"

Aleksey looked at the others. "Please don't tell me that none of you fail to see how this human is going to become a problem?"

“A problem?” I said, my voice a deadly whisper.

“Yes. A problem. You’re distracted, Damyr. You should be tearing this city down looking for Charlie Kent and instead you’re feeding some human and letting some hooded asshole tell you what to do.”

“Aleksey!” Vlad cut in. “Back down.”

“No,” he shouted. “Damyr needs to get his head out of his ass or he’s going to look weak.”

I exploded from my chair, leaping over my desk and slamming Aleksey into the floor. My fangs descended and I wrapped my hands around his throat, my sharp talons pressing precariously into his skin.

“Weak?” I spat. “Does this look weak to you?”

Aleksey’s nostrils flared but he didn’t say anything. Probably wise.

I squeezed his throat harder, rage pouring through my veins as I watched the vessels start to burst in his eyes. I was going to rip his fucking head off.

A hand slipped over my arm and Vlad stepped into my peripheral vision. “Damyr, stop.”

I snarled, watching Aleksey’s skin turn blotchy as the oxygen failed to reach his brain.

Vlad squeezed my arm. “He’s not fighting back, Damyr. You need to stop.”

He was right. Aleksey’s hands were relaxed against the floor in submission.

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I let go of him and stood up. “Benjamin is not a distraction, he’s my mate.”

Silence descended in the room. I suppose I had just dropped a bombshell. Finding a mate in our world was rare, and for a mate to be human, it was even rarer.

Aleksey leant up on his elbows. “Damyr, I didn’t—”

“No, you didn’t.” I snapped. “Get out, Aleksey. Get out of my sight.”

I couldn’t bear to look at him. Not once had I felt like this. So disappointed in the attitude of my brethren that I had to turn away. I knew it was animalistic of me, that my base nature was dragging itself to the surface to protect Benjamin, but the rational part of my mind was taking a backseat when anything to do with my mate was concerned.

The door to my office closed with a soft click and I caught Vlad looking at me with a raised eyebrow and a hint of laughter in his eyes.

As soon as Aleksey left, it was like a fog cleared from my mind and rationality came back with the force of a freight train.

“I know, I know,” I muttered as I sat back in my chair. “I’ll apologise later.”

“He was right to challenge you,” Acheron said, still munching on some popcorn. The wizard was dressed in an electric blue jump suit to match his hair today. It made his pale skin seem to shimmer like moonlight.

“Probably shouldn’t have called the Boss ‘weak’ though,” Byron added with a shrug of his shoulder.

Vlad scoffed. “That wasn’t very wise, no. But we do need to prepare for the meeting with the Council and they are going to ask questions if you take your Benjamin with you.”

I knew that too. “If any of them make a comment then I will challenge them on it. And since I am leaving Benjamin in Acheron’s hands, if any harm comes to him well... I know wizard’s blood fetches a high price on the black market.”

“Cold, Damyr. Cold,” Acheron said with narrowed eyes.

Byron leant forward. “Ooh, can I drain him? I’ve always wanted to have a go at exsanguinating someone.”

Acheron threw a handful of popcorn at Byron. “You’re fucking weird.”

Byron just grinned that unsettling smile and chucked some popcorn into his mouth.

“Be ready to leave in an hour. We will take two cars but travel light.” We couldn’t take firearms into the hotel, but I didn’t want to leave the house without some protection. “Silver bullets. Just in case.”

One could never be too careful where supes were involved.

Chapter Fifteen

Benji

It took one final look at myself in the mirror and nodded. I looked good. No, better

than that, I looked fucking hot. I was in a pair of black wide leg trousers that hugged my ass, and I'd paired that with a mesh black shirt and a black corset vest. I'd also ringed my eyes with thick black liner and they looked like two emeralds sparkling in the shadows. My curls were freshly washed, and I'd managed to get one to sit artfully above my left eyebrow.

It had been a long time since I'd been anywhere fancy, and I wanted to look like I fitted into Damyr's world. For some reason, it felt important. As if I wanted to make him proud to be seen with me, which was ridiculous because I'd met the guy yesterday. But I couldn't deny that there was something there, something primal, something instinctual that drew me to him.

Surely, it had to be more than his good looks and brooding personality. Or maybe I was just a sucker for a good-looking guy. I shook myself. Had it really been that long since I'd had sex? Was I that desperate that I was pining after my kidnapper?

No, I didn't think that was the answer, but I couldn't seem to put my finger on why I was bothered about how I looked tonight. I mean, I was probably going to sit at a bar whilst Damyr met with the Council. The other families that ran the city.

It was a little bit daunting to be honest. All that power in one tiny room. It was going to make the hospital Board look like fucking pussy cats.

There was a soft knock at my door. Time to go. I cast a final look at myself before turning on the heel of my patent black loafers and leaving my room.

As soon as I reached the top of the stairs, there was a sharp intake of breath. Damyr looked at me like he wanted to devour me and I had to admit, there was something quite enjoyable about having another man look at me that way. Like I was his entire focus. It was a completely heady feeling and one I could certainly get used to.

He met me at the bottom of the stairs and held his hand out like an old timey gentleman. His eyes darkened to two pools of obsidian as they raked over me from head to toe. “Benjamin, you look... ravishing.”

His voice was a low rasp, and a flush crept up my skin at the compliment.

“You don’t look too bad yourself,” I said as I took in his outfit. It was all sharp lines and fine tailoring. He was in a black three-piece suit with a blood red tie and pocket square. Simple and elegant. Rings dotted his fingers, and the top buttons of his black shirt were open revealing a hint of the tattoos beneath. I tilted forwards, a sudden urge to lick the spot where his collar bones met at the bottom of his throat. I want to sink my teeth into the spot as he threw his head back with a cry of ecstasy.

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I really needed to give some consideration to escaping this man. There was some kind of chemical reaction happening in my brain and my judgement was clearly clouded when it came to Damyr.

Perhaps I should reconsider asking Liv for that CT scan. She'd probably find something in my brain responsible for my poor judgement when it came to fantasising about my kidnapper. I just couldn't entertain the fact that I was acting rationally. It wasn't possible. It had to be a psychotic break or some other medical reason.

But, as I walked with Damyr to his car, I knew I was completely, utterly obsessed.

There was a sleek black sedan and a large black SUV waiting for us. Damyr led me over to the sedan and I heard the others laughing and joking as they climbed into the bigger vehicle. Damyr held the door open for me and I slid into the plush leather interior.

Jeez this car was luxurious and as the engine roared to life, I could feel the subtle purr of it through the car. I'd never been around this kind of money before. Everything I owned was either second hand or gifted and I'd had to save up to purchase it. I bet Damyr had the kind of money at his fingertips that meant he could be frivolous on a fucking whim.

"What's the matter?" Damyr asked as he sat next to me, his thigh pressing close to mine.

"Oh, just wondering how rich you really are."

“I have more than enough to keep you comfortable for several lifetimes, Benjamin.”

I turned to look at him. The shadows in the back of the car playing about his features and seeming to make his eyes glow brighter. “You say the strangest things, Damyr.”

He leant closer, eradicating my personal space. “I love it when you say my name. You say it with such conviction that I feel owned.”

A little thrill of desire shivered up my spine at his words. There was something extremely potent about the thought of bringing this powerful man to his knees. And nope. Wasn’t going there. That was a potentially addicting thought, and I was supposed to be looking for ways to escape.

So why couldn’t I look away from him?

As Damyr held my gaze captive, I felt hot, my nerves tingling with anticipation. My whole body was on high alert as he watched me, unblinkingly. Like I was his entire focus.

“Put up the partition,” Damyr ordered his driver, his words tense and clipped.

The sound of the blacked-out window rising in the middle of the car filled the silent space and Damyr unfurled slowly out of his seat toward me. He moved towards me like I was his prey, forcing me to submit to him in the confined space.

He slid his hand around my waist and up the length of my spine, splaying his fingers wide between my shoulder blades. “Did you wear this for me?”

I swallowed. “Yes. I wanted...”

“Wanted what, Benjamin?”

Fuck, it was hard to think as he pulled me closer, slotting his hips against mine and I felt the press of his hard cock along my hip bone. His other hand ran down the outside of my thigh, curling around it and hiking it around his waist.

My heart hammered in my chest. “I wanted to look good for you.”

“Benjamin.” He said my name like a warning. Or maybe it was a threat. I couldn’t quite tell.

Damyr leant closer still, eradicating the space between us. “Are you going to stop me?”

I should. I really should, but this pull between us was gravitational. Like stars colliding. It seemed inevitable.

I shook my head.

“Thank fuck,” he said in a rough whisper. And then he pounced.

His mouth collided with mine in a kiss that was explosive. Like striking a match to gasoline a fire erupted deep inside me until I was burning hotter than the sun. Damyr’s tongue demanded entry, and I submitted. Body and soul, I submitted to him. The man who stole me and the man who made me feel more alive than I ever had before.

There was fire everywhere his hands touched me, even through the fabric of my clothes. God, how I wished I was naked. I wanted to feel his touch on my skin, feel the roughness of his fingers as he dragged them over my body.

I was so far gone, I wasn’t even thinking anymore. I surrendered to his touch, to the feel of him until all that I was aware of was him.

Damyr pulled away and something inside me screamed at the loss. But as my eyes regained focus, I realised he wasn't stopping, just moving down my body. He fumbled with the buttons on my trousers, cursing as he undid them, but then the wet heat of his mouth was around my cock, sucking me from root to tip.

I cried out, the sound raw and feral. I rolled my hips upward, forcing Damyr to take my cock deeper. He gagged, and fucking hell, I think that became my new favourite sound.

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Whatever this connection between us was, whether I understood it fully or not, I could feel it snapping tighter around me with every drag of his tongue across my slit. I thrust my hands into his dark hair, holding him in place as I worked myself in and out of his mouth, those sharp canines of his catching my sensitive skin and making me shiver.

I sped up, pushing my cock deeper into his throat, forcing him to take it. Some part of me wanted to punish him for kidnapping me. “Fuck, fuck.”

And he let me. He took every one of my thrusts and fucking revelled in it. His fingers dug into my hip bones hard enough to bruise, and spit dripped down his chin. The sight of him between my thighs made my head reel.

Damyr Morozov was on his knees.

For me.

And he looked like he was revelling in it.

Heat started to build at the base of my spine along with tingles of toe-curling pleasure.

“Gonna come,” I managed to gasp out as I held his stare. I wanted to watch as I flooded his mouth, watch as he swallowed my cum.

I shouted as my orgasm hit, my body tensing beneath his as he kept sucking my dick until it was oversensitive. I released my hold on his hair and Damyr looked up at me,

a wide grin on his face, those pointy canines lending his smile a touch of wickedness.

Damyr climbed back up my body and pressed a kiss against my lips. I could taste myself against his tongue as he wrapped it around mine, but I didn't care.

"Can I return the favour?" I asked, tracing the curve of his hip and aiming for his belt.

He shook his head. "We don't have time."

I frowned, my hands pausing in their task.

Damyr laughed softly. "The car has been stationary for a few minutes."

It was only then that I realised that the engine had cut out and we were, in fact, stood still. Heat rushed up the side of my face as I wondered whether anyone outside could have heard me. I wasn't exactly quiet.

I scrambled out from under Damyr and hurried to put myself back together.

"There's no rush, Benjamin. They will wait as long as I want them to."

When I next looked at Damyr, the guy looked perfect. There was no evidence of the way I'd been pulling his hair or that he'd been gagging around my cock. If it wasn't for the hum of pleasure still zipping through my veins, I might have persuaded myself I'd imagined the whole thing.

"Asshole." I scowled at him as I opened the car door only to hear his laugh follow me out of the vehicle. A flush crept up my cheeks as I met the knowing smirks of Acheron and Byron.

"I see you do scream prettily," Byron said, looking like a lethal shadow in his all-

black suit.

“Shame it will never be for you,” I replied and swept passed him. I was not going to let that maniac use me for fun.

A shimmer of blue appeared beside me and Acheron slipped his arm through mine. “You know, you really shouldn’t taunt the guy.”

“Well, how else am I supposed to get rid of him? I’d shoot him if I could, but I think he’d enjoy that.”

Acheron’s silver eyes glimmered with mischief. “Aww, you’re starting to understand him already.” I tried to pull my arm away, but he clung to me like a sparkling blue sloth. “Benji, if you want my advice, the best way to disarm Byron is to ignore him. The guy thrives on attention and the more you give him, the more he will play with you.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and took a deep breath. If I didn’t escape, I was pretty sure the Morozov Mafia would be the death of me. “I need a drink.”

“You and me both, sugar.” Acheron pulled me towards the bar, and I sat on one of the stools.

The bartender came over and gave me a quick look up and down. “Well, hello there gorgeous, what can I get for you?”

He was wearing a white tuxedo with a black bow tie and his dark blonde hair was slicked back in a smart bun at the back of his head. Warm brown eyes held mine with a glint of mischief and he had a scruff along his gorgeous jaw line. He was tall and broad and kind of reminded me of a teddy bear.

“I will take a Martini please. Extra dirty.”

Acheron leant closer, trying to get the bartender’s attention. “I’ll have the same please, doll.”

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The guy glanced at Acheron and seemed to realise I wasn't on my own. "Sure thing, Acheron. Coming right up." He turned back to me with his hand held out. "I'm Jace by the way."

"Benji," I said, returning his handshake.

"Let me get you those drinks." Then he winked and disappeared down the bar.

"Benji, darling, don't look now, but I think the boss wants to kill the bartender," Acheron said in a hushed whisper.

"What?" I looked over my shoulder and Acheron was right. Damyr stared my way with a look so intense, a shiver of fear crawled along my skin. His eyes were dark beneath his brows and the muscle along his jaw twitched. There was something a little thrilling about seeing Damyr jealous. Something that made my blood sing, just a little bit.

"Acheron?"

"Hmm?"

"How much trouble do you think I'd be in if I tortured Damyr?"

He propped his elbow on the bar top and placed his chin in his hand. "Depends if you want Jace to live. But I am always up for causing trouble."

Somehow, I didn't doubt that for a minute. Acheron exuded mischief. From the glint

in his eye to the cheeky curl of his lip. He was in a stunning jumpsuit made from a midnight blue velvet and covered in sequins. His hair was darker shade of blue to match his outfit and the gold eyeliner around his eyes seemed to be thicker and hold more glitter today.

I took a quick glance over my shoulder again and watched as Damyr eyeballed Acheron from across the room. “Guess you’re stuck babysitting me tonight?”

Acheron snorted. “I’d rather be here drinking cocktails with you than stuck in that meeting with the Council.”

“Are they awful?”

“The Council?”

I nodded. From what I’d heard, the Morozovs were the most dangerous, but the Lavaeux dealt in secrets and the Rowan’s loved drama and politics.

Acheron cocked his head to one side in thought. “No, they aren’t awful. Intense, but there’s more to them than meets the eyes. Just like with your Damyr.”

“He’s not mine.” A blush crept up my cheeks as I thought about our interaction in the car. He wasn’t mine, but I wondered whether a part of me wanted him to be.

Chapter Sixteen

Damyr

I was on the cusp of cancelling the meeting and telling everyone to fuck off so I could go home and fuck Benjamin into the mattress until he screamed for me again. I couldn’t get that sound out of my ears or the taste of him off my tongue.

He was a vision tonight. Delectable. Beautiful. Goddamn fuckingsinful. Where the hell did he get that corset vest from? The way it hugged his waist and accentuated his ass... fuck. My dick was still hard, and it was going to be an uncomfortable meeting if I couldn't get myself under control. It didn't help that I couldn't take the edge off by drinking someone else's blood. It had to be Benjamin's, but I couldn't feed from him until I'd told him the truth. And fuck knows how I was going to do that. The last time I revealed myself to a human, it had ended in disaster.

Benjamin laughed at something Jace said and my hands tightened into fists. If that wolf didn't back off from flirting with my mate, I was going to cut his balls off and wear them as a pair of earrings.

"You might want to stop growling, boss," Vlad whispered in my ear. "You're getting some strange looks."

"Fuck," I snapped. I took one last glance at Benjamin, my left eye twitching as Jace made him another drink, all smiles on his smug little face.

Fuck this.

I stormed over to the bar, my strides determined. As soon as I reached Benjamin, I spun him around on his stool, thrust my fingers into his hair and yanked his head backwards. He gasped in surprise, and I took my chance to sink my tongue deep into his mouth. I licked the roof of his mouth and plunged my tongue down his throat in the dirtiest, filthiest kiss I could muster. Jace needed to know Benjamin was mine.

I brought the kiss to an end and was relieved to see that Jace had made himself scarce. Good. I didn't want him anywhere near Benjamin.

I could hear Acheron sniggering but my focus was drawn to Benjamin as he blinked rapidly, his eyes losing their dazed look as the world came back into focus.

“Behave, Benjamin.” I traced his plump bottom lip with my thumb.

“If that’s your brand of punishment, I’m not sure your words are much of a deterrent.” His voice was breathy and low and there was a blush making its way up the side of his neck.

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I wrapped my hand around his throat and pulled his face up to mine. I loved the sharp intake of breath that crossed his lips and the way his pulse fluttered beneath my thumb. It seemed like Benjamin liked a little bit of adrenaline flooding his system.

“Then why don’t you find out what happens when you push me.” I placed a soft kiss against the corner of his mouth and then released him, an adorable, confused expression tugging at his brows.

Then I turned on my heel and headed back towards the meeting room. Vlad fell into step beside me.

“Finished pissing all over your territory,” he drawled, a smirk curling his mouth.

I just growled at him in response and moved deeper into the building.

By the time I got to the meeting room, I was the last one to enter. Marcelle was sat with his brother, Remy and Dara sat with her wife Genevieve. Vlad and I took our seats, and a hush settled over the room.

This was going to be awkward whichever way I looked at it so I just cut to the chase. “We have a problem.”

“With your little human pet?” Marcelle asked. His dark brown hair was tucked behind his ears and his beard was getting longer every time I saw him. Soon he’d look more like a lumberjack than a wolf.

“No. With the fact that Remy fucked Lucia and then I got a dead body dropped at my door.”

Remy’s face paled slightly as Marcelle turned to look at his brother.

“You did what?” Marcelle hissed. Remy went to answer but he cut him off. “Nope. Actually, I don’t want to hear it.”

“I do,” Dara said cheerfully from across the table. “It’s been a while since we’ve discussed anything quite as remotely juicy as this.”

Genevieve leant forward, a perfectly manicured hand propping up her runway worthy face. “Pray tell, Remy. What scandal have you gotten yourself wrapped up in now?”

“He was a nobody!” Remy shouted. “Just some asshole that started mouthing off to Lucia.”

“You killed someone?!” Marcelle barked as he rose from his chair. “The fuck were you thinking?”

Vlad leant towards me, bringing his mouth to my ear and speaking in a low tone. “Perhaps it would be wise to intervene before hell breaks loose.”

I nodded my agreement and stood. “Marcelle. Your brother did not kill anyone. Maimed and injured, yes, but he didn’t kill him. And whilst I’m not here to condone his choice of lover, I can’t deny that he has crossed a line.”

“Who’s the dead guy?” Dara asked, her dark eyes watching me closer than I’d like.

I clenched my jaw and tried to think of something that might stop me from revealing a failure of my past, but I couldn’t. “Theo Montgomery.”

Genevieve let out a surprised laugh. “Wasn’t he already dead?”

“I thought so.” I sat back down and crossed one leg over the other with an attempt to portray a calmness that I certainly didn’t feel. “I don’t know where he’s been for the last few years, but somehow, he managed to stumble into Remy and Lucia and now I’m being blackmailed.”

“Well, this just keeps getting better,” Marcelle grumbled as he stroked a hand along his beard.

“Blackmailed by who?” Dara asked as she leant back in her chair. She was always calm, like nothing ever phased her. I sometimes wished I had less of a temperamental personality. I was more likely to shoot first and ask questions later whereas Dara was more reserved. Definitely a cooler head on her shoulders than I had. The Lavaux brothers were just hotheaded.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t seem to know very much, Damyr,” Genevieve added unnecessarily before leaning back to converse with her wife.

“Look, all I know so far, is that someone called Ronin delivered a corpse that he intentionally made to look like Remy had murdered him. There is CCTV footage of Remy attacking Theo and I was advised to, and I quote ‘do the right thing’.”

“Which was what exactly?” Remy asked, a nervous expression flitting across his face.

Vlad shot him a serious look. “What do you think, asshole?”

Remy sank back into his seat after that which I was grateful for. The guy was a whiny

little bitch at the best of times but throw some adversity into the mix and he was an absolute pain in the fucking ass.

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“And that’s not the worst of it,” I added. “He used my numbers guy to steal from me, so this mysterious Ronin has a copy of my ledgers.”

“The fuck?” Marcelled growled. “Do you know how much risk this carries for the rest of us?”

“Of course I do,” I snapped. “I’m not a fucking idiot. Which is why I buried the body instead of giving into his demands. I chose to protectyouand our partnership over the whims of some half-baked blackmailer.”

“I appreciate that,” Marcelle said through gritted teeth while casting an angry look at his brother.

“I have money, and I have time. Rebuilding a criminal underworld is easy when you have those, but I hold the value of our partnership a lot higher. The only thing I ask of you all, is that you offer me the same faith if this Ronin reaches out to you.”

Dara stood and bowed. “You have the word of the Rowans. We will advise of any rumblings we hear. I will also send one of our witches to aid you.”

“I appreciate the gesture, but I already have—”

Genevieve scoffed. “Your charmer, Acheron, is nothing compared to one of our witches.”

Well, we could agree to disagree on that one. Acheron was one of the most powerful creatures I had ever come across, and I’d been around long enough to see a few. He

was classed as a ‘Charmer’, a creature who weaved charms, but he was capable of much more than that. I had an inkling that he was of a similar ilk to the legendary powerful wizard, Merlin, but not even Acheron seemed to know the extent of his power. However, I wasn’t going to turn down the offer of help. “Thank you then. I would be glad to have them.”

“Perfect,” Dara said with a sly grin. “I’ll send my brother Wilder to you.”

I winced. Wilder Fucking Rowan. Exactly as his name suggested, he was as wild as they came. He was unlawful, unbiddable and clearly Dara wanted him out of her way for a bit. At least he was loyal to his family so he’d do as she said, but fuck knows what trouble he’d get up to under my roof. This was definitely a headache I could do without. Especially since Wilder liked to spend far too much time and energy trying to get a rise out of Byron. “If my house blows up, I’m sending you the bill, Dara.”

She laughed, a musical lilt to the sound. “I’ll tell him to play nice.”

I snorted. Wilder’s version of ‘nice’ didn’t line up with everyone else’s.

“I will also aid you with any additional men or weapons. Should you need them,” Marcelle said as he got up from the table. He walked around it, his hand held out. “I know what you’ve risked for us, for my brother, so thank you. Whatever you need, just ask.”

I shook his hand, and a sense of relief settled on my shoulders. This meeting could have taken an unexpected turn and ended with violence, but I was glad that I had invested time and money and blood into this partnership. “Thank you.”

“Know that Remy will be suitably punished for his slight against your name.” Marcelle’s honey-coloured eyes burnt fiercely. It didn’t bother me that Remy had slept with Lucia, we were spouses in name only now, our marriage having ended

many decades ago, but it was against the rules we set up when we first started this partnership between the Three Families. Perhaps the time had come to change some of them, but that wasn't a discussion for today.

The meeting room door burst open, and Byron rushed in, his face blank and his stare deadly. "Boss, we need to leave."

"Why? What's happened? Is Benjamin okay?" Panic started to bubble in my chest as a hundred equally awful situations flashed through my mind.

"Benjamin's fine," Byron said quickly, easing my worry. "It's the warehouse at the docks."

"What about it?" Vlad growled.

"It's exploded."

Rage erupted in my veins at Byron's words. "That fucking asshole!"

The warehouse was one of my many storage locations that housed everything from drugs to guns. I excused myself from the room, promising an update to the other families as soon as I knew more.

"What's the damage report?" Vlad asked Byron as we headed out of the hotel.

"Nothing appears to be stolen. Looks like someone set it alight just for the fun of it." Byron almost sounded impressed.

I pulled my phone out and texted Acheron

ME

Warehouse explosion. Get Benjamin home safe.

He texted back almost immediately.

ACHERON

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Yes, Boss. Leaving now.

Good. That meant I could focus on the problem at hand without worrying about Benjamin. I dialled Roxie next.

“Hey, doll face, what can I do for you this fine eve?”

“Roxie, the warehouse at the docks is compromised. Get me footage of the area and find out what happened.” I ended the call, not in the mood for idle chitchat. “Let’s go.”

I jumped in the car with the others. Vlad drove, the wheels squealing on the tarmac as he left the hotel behind.

My phone pinged with a video from Roxie. It showed a hooded figure casually leaving the building with a wave up at the camera. I couldn’t see under his hood but I knew it was him. My mysterious Ronin. A few seconds later my screen filled with the bright light of the explosion and the camera feed went blank.

Chapter Seventeen

Benji

“What the hell is happening?” I asked Acheron as we returned to the Morozov Mansion.

“Nothing,” he replied, his voice a little higher pitched than normal. Nothing, my ass.

I followed him into the lounge where he went straight to one of the cabinets and poured himself a drink. “Don’t lie to me, Acheron. We were having fun and then all of sudden we had to leave. Where’s Damyr? Where are the others?”

He drained his glass and turned to face me, his expression suspiciously blank. “Just looking at something.”

“Are they in danger?” Fuck, why did my insides feel like they were being pulled out in different directions?

“They’re always in danger,” he said, his words clipped.

Urgh, this was ridiculous. “Enough with the fucking riddles. Just tell me.”

“It’s not my place, Benji. There are secrets here that I can’t—”

The door burst open, and Vlad rushed in, Damyr in his arms covered in blood.

“Holy fuck!” I scrambled towards them. “Put him on the sofa.”

He did as I asked and Damyr grunted in pain as his body hit the couch. My God. My stomach dropped as I got my first close look at his injuries. His chest was in ribbons, completely cut to shreds.

“He needs a hospital,” I said, my training kicking in as I catalogued the damage.

Several shrapnel wounds.

Gunshot wound to right shoulder and upper thigh.

Possible stab wound to lower abdomen.

“No,” Damyr gasped, his face contorted with pain. “No... hospital.”

I brushed his hair from his forehead as I knelt next to him. “Damyr, please. You need a hospital.”

Aleksey stormed into the room, gun waving in his hand, his blonde hair tumbling around his face in a tangled mess. “Where the fuck is the doctor?”

“I’ll live. It’s just a scratch,” Byron grumbled as he hobbled into the room, his hand clutching his side. I could see blood seeping through his fingers.

“At least your scars will match,” Aleksey stated with a sly grin whilst Byron tentatively perched on one of the armchairs.

“Fuck you, Aleksey,” Byron hissed.

I zoned them out. I couldn’t focus on anything other than the way Damyr was bleeding all over his sofa. There was so much blood.

Too much blood.

“You need a hospital, Damyr. I can’t... I don’t...” Fuck. Why had this guy got me so twisted inside? I should be using the chance to run, not kneel here and hold vigil by his bedside.

Damyr’s bloody hand squeezed mine. “You should go.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “If you think I’m leaving whilst you’re dying, and the rest of these guys are injured, you’re ridiculous.”

He chuckled, well, tried too. It was more of a wet rasp which meant there was probably a load of fluid in his lungs.

Fuck, fucking, fuck.

His eyes flickered and started to lose focus.

I tapped his cheek. “No. Damyr. Stay with me.” I looked at Vlad over my shoulder. “Call an ambulance, dammit!”

The big guy just stood there, staring at me and chewing his lip. Acheron had vanished, probably to find this doctor that Aleksey was complaining about and the others all had grim expressions.

“Why aren’t you doing anything?” I yelled.

Damyr's hand brushed my cheek, and I turned back to look at him. He was so pale. "Because the only one who can save me, is you, Benjamin." There was a sadness in his eyes, a resignation to the fact that he was going to die, and it affected me more than I ever thought possible.

"Then let me help," I pleaded, tears brimming in my eyes.

He shook his head then winced as another bout of pain waved over him. "No."

And then he was gone.

What? No. That couldn't be it. This guy couldn't kidnap me, threaten me and torture me and then check out because he got shot.

Not today.

Adrenaline had my body kicking into action. I ripped open his shirt and peeled it carefully away from his chest. Jagged wounds littered his torso, but the biggest one was across the centre of his abdomen. I went to put pressure on the wound, but before I could, large hands wrapped around me and pulled me away.

"No. Let me go," I said, trying to wriggle free.

"That won't save him," Vlad whispered softly as he hugged me tightly to his chest.

"He said I could save him. Let me try," I begged, tears rolling quietly down my cheeks. "Please."

Vlad's eyes were soft when they met mine. "It's not what he meant, Benji."

"Then tell me!" I yelled, my heart breaking in a way I didn't understand. I couldn't

seem to get my thoughts in order. I wanted to run and scream, but I also wanted to curl up next to Damyr just to try and save him with my touch. “Just fucking tell me.”

I was falling apart, and I couldn’t seem to catch the pieces to put them back together.

Vlad exchanged a look with Aleksey that was filled with pity and something else. Worry? Anxiety maybe?

“Just tell him,” Aleksey finally said. “We can deal with Damyr later.”

And still Vlad remained stone-faced. I wanted to the shake the guy even though he looked like he was going through some internal crisis. He sighed and the tension left his shoulders. “There’s no going back after this, Benji.”

Jesus fucking Christ. Were they trying to kill me?

“You guys are fucking idiots,” Byron said, surprisingly calm for someone who’d clearly been shot. Again. He stood from his chair with a wince, and I went towards him to help but he threw his hand out with a stern expression, bringing his eyebrows down in a sharp slant. Okay, noted. Byron didn’t like help. “They’re all vampires and you’re Damyr’s mate so he can’t feed from anyone but you to heal.”

What.

The.

Fuck.

I blinked. Then laughed. “You can’t be serious.”

No one jumped in with a ‘kidding’ and jazz hands.

Fuck.

They really were serious.

Nope.

“Is this some kind of blood cult or vampire wannabe group or something?” I asked, clinging to the hope that maybe they were just deluded.

“Sorry, but no,” Byron said bluntly. “Took me a while to process the idea and I’d been with them two fucking years before they told me.”

“But this isn’t possible...” And yet... something niggled in the back of my mind telling me that maybe it was.

Maybe, just maybe Vlad had some kind of compulsion skill that had wiped my memory. Maybe I’d brushed passed the possibility that they moved faster than I could process when they’d been chasing Charlie.

And maybe my world had just got a whole lot bigger.

And scarier.

And holy fucking hell.

“Vampires are real.”

“Yep,” Byron said as he wandered towards me, blood dripping onto Damyr’s plush rug. I hoped the guy had a good house cleaner. “I’m still human though. Acheron is a glorified wizard and—”

“Shut up,” Aleksey growled at Byron.

Jeez, those two squabbled worse than a pair of teenagers.

I looked at Damyr as he lay on the sofa. He was deathly pale and looked more like a fresh corpse than a vampire. Was this really possible? Was the man in front of me a blood sucking creature of the night?

Fuck. Did he sparkle? That I definitely couldn’t get on board with. I also couldn’t get past the way my heart felt like lead in my chest. Like it had sunk to the bottom of the ocean without Damyr there to help me navigate whatever this was between us.

I looked up at Vlad and swallowed past the nervous lump in my throat. “What do I need to do?”

He smiled warmly. “Well, first you need to—”

“Stop pussyfooting around the fucking details,” Byron groaned. He lunged for me, knife in his hand. I instinctively stepped back, but he grabbed my wrist and sliced through the black material, cutting my skin in the process. Blood instantly began to pool from the cut, bright against my pale skin. It was a few moments before I even

felt the sting which meant Byron's knife must be wicked sharp. Couldn't say I was surprised.

"Byron!" Vlad shouted.

I was thrust toward Damyr and Byron manipulated me until my arm was dropping blood onto Damyr's lips. It was almost like I was in a daze, watching myself from somewhere else.

Time stood still as I waited, my heart in my throat, my body trembling with anticipation. There was still a part of me that thought this was all madness. That it couldn't possibly be real and the fact that I was feeding someone my blood was evidence of my own psychotic break.

But then Damyr twitched, and my heart soared.

"Lower your wrist to his mouth," Vlad said, pushing Byron away and helping me get more comfortable. He got me a chair to sit on, so I wasn't knelt on the floor, and he came to sit next to me. I had to admit, having the giant next to me was oddly comforting. There was a strength about Vlad that was quiet and unassuming. Like he was in your corner and ready to help if you needed it. And boy, did I need some support right now.

"Will it hurt?" I asked.

"Possibly," Vlad answered. "I don't know how far gone Damyr is. Normally, when we feed it's a pleasurable experience for both, but he's badly injured so I can't say how that will affect him."

"Oh." My stomach churned. Was I doing the right thing?

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“I will stay, Benji,” Vlad said. “I won’t let him hurt you or take too much.”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, and a little relieved.

“Aleksey, help Byron find the Doc and if you see Acheron, tell him to stay away,” Vlad ordered. They grumbled and groaned about it, but they followed his orders.

Aleksey looked over his shoulder at the doorway. “Let me know he’s okay, Vladimir.”

Vlad nodded and Aleksey closed the door softly behind him.

“Why did you send them away?” I asked with a frown.

Vlad’s warm eyes held mine. “Because feeding is an intimate thing, and I didn’t think you would appreciate the others watching.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure what to make of that. “I have so many questions.”

“I know and I’m sure Damyr will answer them all. And if he doesn’t, I’m sure—”

I yelled as pain beyond anything else erupted in my veins. It was like lava travelled through my blood, searing my insides and I was surprised, when I looked down, that my skin wasn’t melting off.

Damyr had sank his fangs into my wrist and his hands held me in place. His gulps as he swallowed my blood were loud. How much was he taking?

I threw a pleading look at Vlad, and I was glad to see that he was perched on the edge of his seat, ready to intervene if Damyr took too much.

I watched in horror and fascination as the jagged wounds on his chest knitted back together. “Holy fuck.”

“It shouldn’t be much more now,” Vlad said.

But it didn’t seem to hurt as much now. The pain started to fizzle out into a warm buzz that thrummed along my skin. Like small vibrations setting my very core alight.

It was unsettling and delicious all at once. My clothes felt too tight, hell, my skin felt too tight. My mind started to float, and I wasn’t sure if that was from the feeding or the blood loss, but I could see why people could be obsessed with the idea of a vampire’s bite. The whole sensation was intensely blissful.

Damyr slowed down and eventually stopped. He swiped his tongue along my wrist and let go of me. He was looking a more normal colour now and the only sign he’d been injured was the blood that had dried on his skin. When I looked at my wrist, there wasn’t even a mark. Guess some vampire lore was true. I suddenly wondered what else was true.

I rubbed the spot on my wrist absentmindedly as I watched Damyr sleep.

“He will probably be out of it for a while,” Vlad said as he texted someone on his phone. Probably Aleksey to let him know Damyr was alright. I envied them all a little. I didn’t have anyone besides Maya, and I couldn’t even reach out to her because she thought I was on a fucking cruise.

“Can I stay?”

A warm smile curled the tanks face. “Of course. I’ll get you something to eat and drink.”

“Do I get a cookie for making a good donation?” I said with a snort.

“Something like that,” he said with a grin. He patted my shoulder as he went past. “Thank you, Benji.”

I nodded, but almost without conviction. Had I done the right thing? Or had I doomed myself? As I looked at Damyr, something seemed to hold my gaze. I couldn’t look away and I couldn’t convince myself that I had done the wrong thing by saving him. Now that I’d saved his life though, perhaps I finally had some leverage.

Chapter Eighteen

Damyr

I came to with a jolt. One second there was nothing but darkness, the next my eyes flew open, and the world came bursting back into focus.

Oh, no.

No, no, no.

My eyes instantly sought out Benjamin and I breathed a sigh of relief as soon as I saw him. He had his head bent, shoulders arched, and gaze focussed on Byron’s hip bone as he fastidiously tied a suture into his skin.

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I hated it. It made my blood boil the way my Benjamin was touching Byron and, judging by the way Byron was grinning at me like a maniac, he knew just how much it was affecting me. It was annoying that Byron was so good at his job, otherwise I'd cut his smug little face off.

"Benjamin," I said, my voice hoarse. How long had I been out?

He paused for a moment, but he didn't look at me. His jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth. Fuck, he was mad. Even worse, he knew.

Benjamin knew everything. He must, because I was here. Alive. Breathing. Saved.

"I'll go," Byron said wisely as he started to get up.

Benjamin placed his hand on Byron's chest – his naked chest – and pushed him back against the other sofa. "No. You will lie there until I've finished working."

Pissed Benjamin had my blood pumping in my veins. I gingerly sat up. I was still feeling like I'd been blown apart, which was almost accurate. As soon as I'd arrived at the warehouse, it had exploded again, almost like someone was watching and waiting for me to arrive. Then we'd had to fight our way back out. Whoever had hired those goons though, needed to hire better. They were shit. They'd only managed to put a bullet in my shoulder because I'd just stepped away from an exploding building. They hadn't even used silver bullets which meant either they didn't know about vamps, or they were expendable.

The tension in the room was thick. I could almost feel every harsh, sharp breath

leaving Benjamin's body as he set more sutures into Byron's wound.

"Benjamin?" I said softly. No answer. "Benja—"

"What?" he snapped, as he spun to face me, eyes blazing fire. "What, Damyr? Are you going to tell me the truth? Or are you going to carry on keeping me in the dark?"

"I'll tell you the truth, and I'll answer any question you have." I might not want to, but we were beyond controlling my wants now. Whether he liked it or not, Benjamin was going to be part of the world that ran beneath the veneer of his own and it was dangerous down here. He needed to know what he was getting involved in, and a selfish part of me hoped that he chose to stay.

He didn't say anything, just turned back to finished patching up Byron. I watched in silence as he worked, his head bent, blonde curls tumbling forwards. He was so beautiful. The angles of his face were soft, his eyes sharp and that mouth... that mouth of his would be my undoing.

"Done," he said as he looked back at his work. "Try not to tear your stitches. I'm sure you know this but keep them dry for 48 hours and then see your doctor in about week to take them out."

"Can't you do it?" Byron asked as Benjamin placed a dressing on the wound. I had to admit, he'd done a fine job at stitching him back together. Better than our guy ever would.

Benjamin frowned, as if the thought of stepping on someone's toes professionally pissed him off. "Don't you have a doctor on staff?"

"Yeah, but he's not as good as you, little bird," Byron said as he slipped his shirt back on, flaunting his well-defined abs in front of Benjamin's face. I was going to skin the

guy alive.

I'd never been the jealous type, but every interaction Byron had with Benjamin made my blood fucking boil. "Byron, if you ever want to see your brother again, you'll leave Benjamin alone."

His eyes flashed and I knew I'd hit my mark. Byron's whole world centred around his brother, Bishop. It was an easy mark to pick, and normally I wouldn't threaten family, but Byron needed to back the fuck off and know I was serious when it came to Benjamin.

"Cold, Damyr," he said flatly. "I'll leave, but I'm going to make plans to see Bishop soon."

"Fine," I said. I knew this had been on the horizon for a while. Byron liked to torment his brother every few months, and while I didn't fully understand their dynamic, I knew if he didn't go, he'd become feral. "Just see me before you leave."

He nodded, then turned to look at Benjamin. He gently grabbed his hand and brought it to his lips, placing a kiss against Benjamin's knuckles like some dark prince from a fairy tale. "Thank you, little bird."

A blush crept up Benjamin's neck at the gesture, but he managed to stammer out, "You're welcome."

Byron left the room, silent as a shadow, leaving Benjamin glaring at me with a mixture of fury, sadness and anxiety sparking in those magnificent green eyes of his. He'd washed the eyeliner off and changed his clothes, which was a shame. He'd looked gorgeous and I'd been looking forward to peeling him out of his corset vest.

"So," he said as he folded his arms across his chest. "You're a vampire."

Okay, so we were going straight to the point. “Yes.”

“And I’m you’re mate.”

Wow, my guys had been busy spilling secrets. “Yes.”

“And you were going to die, rather than tell me?”

Well, when he put it that way... “Yes.”

“Jesus,” he muttered under his breath. “Is this why you kidnapped me?”

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“No.” I dragged my hand down my face. This was going to take some explaining, but I didn’t want to put Benjamin in anymore danger than he already was. “I kidnapped you because I thought you might have had something to do with Charlie and the information he stole.”

“But I’d only met the guy that day.”

“I know that now, but at the time I couldn’t risk it.”

He cocked his head to one side. “What did Charlie steal?”

“Everything. He took a copy of my ledgers and gave it to the guy that sent me the corpse.”

Benjamin’s eyebrows shot up. “Shit. Is that why you went to the Council?”

I nodded. “Then the warehouse blew up. I think my mysterious benefactor did that because I buried the body rather than frame Remy Lavaeux.”

“As in the supermodel Remy Lavaeux?” Benjamin’s eyes were wide with shock.

“Yes,” I replied, a little bit annoyed at the breathy way he’d said Remy’s name. “But I spent too long building the partnership with the Council, just to throw it away on the whim of some maniac.”

“Why would someone frame Remy? Why target you? Has the rest of the Council received any threats?” he asked as he leant forward, his curiosity seeming to

outweigh his anger.

“No, no other threats. Only me.” Now that he’d mentioned it, that did make it feel entirely too personal. It was my ledger that was stolen, the body of a man I thought I’d killed was dumped at my door, and it was my warehouse that was destroyed. Although that was a result of my unwillingness to capitulate to some asshole’s demands. Perhaps someone from my past was catching up with me, but who?

“Smells like revenge to me,” Benjamin said and I frowned at him. “If it was a play for power, he’d be going after everyone, the fact that it’s only you, Damyr, suggests that it’s a personal vendetta.”

He was right, and deep down, I think I already knew that. The burning question though, was who could it possibly be?

There were so many people from my past who could have a reason for going after me. You didn’t become the head of a criminal organisation by making friends.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Damyr?”

“About what?”

“About everything,” he said irritably. “About vampires and me being your mate. I mean, what does that even mean? How are vampires real? What else is real, huh? Demons? Angels? Jesus fucking Christ!”

“I don’t know about Jesus, but I’ve met a demon before.”

He shot me an angry glare. Right. Probably best not to make a joke. He jumped up from his chair and started pacing, one hand on his hip, the other running through his hair until his curls were flying in all directions.

I stood up and walked over to him, halting his pacing. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Benjamin. I wanted too, but with everything else going on, I didn’t want to put you in more danger.”

“So you kept me in the dark instead,” he growled. “I’m not a child, Damyr. I’m perfectly capable of handling myself and—”

I cupped his face in my hands, interrupting his angry tirade. “I know you are, baby. You’re strong and resilient, beautiful and light. I didn’t want to drag you into my world of darkness, Benjamin. You deserve better than that.”

“But you didn’t give me the choice, Damyr. You decided you knew better, that dying was better,” he spat as tears filled his eyes. “I thought you’d died, and I didn’t understand why that had me so twisted up inside. You didn’t even give me a chance to understand.”

Pain lanced my heart as I watched him fall apart. He’d been feeling the connection between us, even though he was human, and I’d pushed him away. “I’m sorry. I should have told you, but I also didn’t want to lose you.”

“You’re an idiot,” he said with a snuffle.

I wrapped my hand in his hair and pulled him into my chest. I needed to feel him close to me, to let his touch ground me. “I know. I just thought you’d run away if I told you everything and that terrified me more than anything.”

He pulled back and looked up at me, tears clinging to his lashes like tiny diamonds. “I might not have believed Vlad at first, but then Byron took away all my doubts. Maybe this way was better. If you’d told me, I might have run.”

“One thing I know for certain,” I said as I brushed my thumbs against his cheeks, “is

that I would never have let you run far.”

He scoffed, but there was a hint of a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. “You’re so full of yourself, Damyr.”

I shrugged. “Comes with the territory of being the boss.”

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Benjamin ran his hands down my chest and over where the shrapnel had ripped my abdomen open. I'd nearly been eviscerated with that wound.

"Are you really okay?" he asked, worry furrowing his brow.

"Yes, I'm really okay. Because of you."

"How does that even work? I mean, Byron said you couldn't feed from anyone but me. Is that true?"

I took a deep breath and pulled him towards the sofa. The one I hadn't bled all over. "Why don't we sit? We will be more comfortable, and you can ask me anything. I'll answer what I can, but some secrets might not be mine to share."

"Damyr," he growled in warning.

"Benjamin," I said as I pulled him onto my lap, tucking his head under my chin. "Ask anything about me, or vampires in general, but I won't answer questions on the men in my family, if that's okay?"

"That's fair," he replied as he settled himself comfortably. A waft of my body wash hit my nose and a primal rumble vibrated through my chest. "Damyr?"

"I just like the way my scent smells on you. Makes me feel... possessive." I tightened my arms around him and held him closer. "But, to answer your earlier question, no. I can't feed from anyone but you."

“So what have you been doing since finding me?”

I didn't answer straight away.

He lifted his head from my chest and fixed me with a hard stare. “Damyr?”

“I, um, haven't been feeding.”

“What?” he shrieked, and it was adorable that he cared so much.

“Well, I can go a week without feeding and it had only been a couple of days. I really was trying to find a way of telling you everything.”

“You're ridiculous,” he said as he rolled his eyes before curling back up on my lap.

“What is a mate? I'm guessing it's not just another word for buddy.”

“No,” I said with a chuckle. “It means that you're my other half. A perfect match for me, and I am for you. It means we belong together, for eternity.”

He swallowed. “Eternity?”

It was a daunting word, eternity. It meant forever, for always, and the only way to break a mate bond is with death. “Don't worry about that for now. Let's just take some time to learn about each other and we can go from there.”

“Okay,” he replied with a quick nod and a deep breath. “Wait, how old are you?”

“I was turned at about thirty but I was born in 1525.”

“Holy fuck. You're 500 years old?” Disbelief had his jaw dropping and his eyes blowing wide.

“500 this year.”

“I can’t even begin to comprehend the things you’ve seen. The people you’ve met.”

His eyes met mine and they were full of wonder and brimming over with questions.

“I’ve certainly met a few, but they all pale in comparison to you, Benjamin.”

He practically melted in my arms. “You say the nicest things.”

“Only to you.” Then I pressed a soft kiss against his lips and marvelled in how lucky I was. Benjamin knew my secrets, had risked his own life to save mine, and here he was, sat on my lap, kissing me back. I’d never felt this way. Not even when I had thought I’d been in love before.

Chapter Nineteen

Benji

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 2:55 am

Damyr was going to be alright and I was okay with that. More than okay considering I was kissing him and fuck, it wasn't enough. I needed more. I wanted him to pick me up, because to him I probably weighed nothing and there was something thrilling about that, and throw me beneath him, pinning me to the sofa before ploughing into my asshole like it was some kind of punishment.

He threaded his fingers through my hair, fisting the strands tightly and controlling the angle of my head. I was crazy. I must be. Crazy enough to need him and want him despite the fact that my view of the world has just been shattered. Crazy enough to let him own me, body and soul, because I think being part of his world with him, might just be the closest to sane I've ever been.

I kissed him back greedily, thrusting my fingers into his hair and clinging on with everything I could muster. I couldn't put a single thought together. My mind was focused on Damyr and only Damyr. It didn't matter that I couldn't think, all that mattered was me and him. This moment. Damyr was a hurricane, and I didn't fight him. I let him sweep me up and destroy me completely.

I turned in his lap, barely breaking the kiss. I couldn't stop, even for a moment. I wasn't willing to break this connection. Now that I knew what this was, I wanted to surrender to it. To surrender to Damyr.

I settled my thighs on either side of his, locking our hips together. The feel of his cock against mine had me groaning deep into his mouth. He swallowed that sound like it belonged to him. Like he'd commanded it from my body on a fucking whim.

I broke the kiss, but only to create a bit of space so I could reach between us and free

us both from the constraints of our pants. The moment my cock touched his, it was fucking electric. My head rolled backwards as I submitted to the sensation and when I finally brought my eyes back to Damyr's, I saw in them a spark of obsession.

And it thrilled me.

I wrapped my hand around both of us, torturing us with the slow glide of my hand up and down our lengths.

"Benjamin," he groaned, as he rolled his hips up to meet my thrusts. I wanted to make him fall apart, and to see him writhing beneath me, gave me a power that felt completely addictive. Damyr's mouth latched on to my throat and I felt the sharp points of his fangs scrape across my skin.

"Do it," I whispered. "Please."

Damyr paused, his tongue swirling against my throat. I knew what he was doing. He was giving me a moment to rethink, but I didn't need to. I wanted everything and however much it scared me, or however many questions I had yet to be answered, I knew I was meant to be right here.

I carded my free hand through his dark locks, and held him firmly against my neck, giving him permission to take what he needed.

There was a momentary sharp sting and then the most blissful sensation flooded my system. It was euphoric and intense, nothing like the bite he'd given me before. It was the most vivid, powerful feeling I'd ever felt, and I was pretty sure I died for a split-second. I sure as hell came the moment he took his first pull of blood from my veins. My cock erupted, causing my body to tremble and quiver. A strangled whimper escaped me and I shuddered almost violently in Damyr's arms.

It was a few moments before the room came back into focus and I had a front row seat to watching Damyr come undone. I took over pumping his cock -- I must have zoned enough that I'd stopped -- and I used my own cum as lube. There was something hot about watching it coat his skin.

“More,” he rasped, his voice raw. “Faster.”

I did as he asked, tightening my hand and moving quicker up the length of him. He was bigger than me and I couldn't wait to feel his cock stretching my hole.

His hips bucked wildly beneath me as he grew closer to the edger. His eyes were full of heat, blazing as they trailed the contours of my face.

“Fuck, Benjamin—” A growl left his lips as he came, cum spilling from his cock and hitting his chest with the force of his orgasm. God, he was gorgeous. Even covered in dried blood and cum.

I traced a finger up his heaving chest, scooping up some of his release. He watched me with curiosity as I brought my finger to my mouth and then I licked it clean.

He breathed in sharply, and his fingers pressed harder into my hips. “Benjamin.”

Fuck, my name sounded good in his mouth, like he was whispering it with reverence.

I thrust my hands into his hair and crushed my mouth to his. Any doubts as to what this was between us evaporated in that moment. I could feel it click into place, a partnership, a connection, a link between us. It my blood sing and my heart fucking soar. He was my addiction and a vice I didn't have the strength to resist.

Even if, in the back of my mind, I knew he might be the death of me.

**

“It smells like sex and death in here. Kinky.”

I jolted at the sound of Acheron’s voice. How did he even get in here? I didn’t hear the door open.

I lifted my head from Damyr’s chest and saw Acheron standing next to the sofa with a wicked grin on his face. His hair was a dark midnight blue, and he looked like some hot shot out of a Japanese comic. Dressed all in black with combat boots and harnesses all over his chest. Jeez, how long did it take for him to get in that thing? There were so many buckles. Looked hot though. Maybe I could borrow it?

“Acheron, stop portalling in my house,” Damyr grumbled.

“Portalling?” I asked. I’d heard Damyr say that before, but I’d ignored it in favour of looking at the dead body.

“I’m a type of wizard so I can go where I want by portalling.” Which he proceeded to do by disappearing before my eyes without even a sound.

Holy fuck!

A couple of seconds later he reappeared just as silently, a buttercream covered cupcake in his hand. He handed it to me. “Here you go, doll. Freshly made from the kitchen.”

Ooh, cake. I loved cake. I swiped my finger through the chocolate frosting and was just about to pop my finger in my mouth when Damyr captured my wrist and licked the frosting clean off.

“Hey!”

He smiled wolfishly at me and my insides turned to goo. “Doesn’t taste as good as you.”

“Urgh, you guys are too cute,” Acheron grumbled as he folded his arms across his lean chest.

“What else can you do?” I asked with a mouth full of cake – which was delicious by the way – and waited for Acheron’s answer with boyish wonder.

“Sorry, Benji, but we don’t have time for that.” His expression turned serious. “You’ve had another delivery.”

My stomach dropped and with it, my appetite. I put the cake down and turned to Damyr. His lip twitched in agitation, and he got quickly to his feet, all traces of softness disappearing until the harsh edges of the Mob Boss remained.

“Might want to shower first, boss,” Acheron said as Damyr made to leave the room. “It’s just a small box so I doubt it’s a dead body this time. It can wait.”

I chuckled. Damyr definitely looked dishevelled. He threw a scowl at me like it was my fault he forgot that he was still covered in blood and cum. I mean it was, but I liked it. Put together Damyr was hot. Dishevelled and post-orgasm Damyr was sex on fucking legs. “Maybe you should take that shower.”

He quirked an eyebrow, calling me out. I shrugged, trying to be nonchalant, but the thought of anyone else seeing Damyr like that turned my insides green with envy.

“I’ll shower,” he finally said, and I breathed a sigh of relief. “Benjamin. Do the same.”

Guess the feeling was mutual.

I met the others in Damyr’s study about thirty minutes later. Byron and Aleksey were exchanging knowing looks, and I was going to ignore them. The unknown face staring at Byron from across the other side of the room though, he caught my attention. He was eye catching in a rugged sort of way. Broad shouldered, but lean, like a swimmer. He was in a band tee and loose fitting jeans that hung low on his hips. Soft brown waves were tucked behind his ears and there was an innocent look to his smile. But his eyes... those violet orbs screamed 100% mischief. Like he knew he could commit murder and get away with it.

Vlad came to stand beside me. I was learning that he was the sort of guy that was entirely capable of breaking a man in two with his bare hands, but he was also a giant teddy bear at heart. “Are you alright?”

“Yes. I think so.” And I was. There was no doubt I still had a lot to learn and figure out, but I felt more like myself now, than I had in a long time. “Who’s the guy in the corner?”

Vlad sighed heavily. “Wilder Rowan. One of the witch clan and part of the Three Families. Very powerful and very temperamental.”

Noted. Leave the mischievous looking witch alone. “Thank you, by the way.”

“For what?” he asked, his head cocked slightly to one side.

“For staying with me. You know. With Damyr.”

His face softened and a small smile let up his face. “Benji, what you two have isn’t just special, it’s rare.”

“What do you mean?”

Vlad pulled me deeper into the corner of the room, away from listening ears. “Vampire mates are the rarest in supernatural breeds. We usually form alliances or mutual connections that will benefit us in power or money, preferably both.”

“Sounds archaic.”

He snorted. “And then some, but we’ve evolved believing that kind of marriage or partnership is normal. Vampires like power and money, why wouldn’t we marry someone with those?”

“Is that why Damyr married Lucia?”

“No,” he hissed. “That woman was manipulative and wanted to climb to social

ladder. When she had approached Damyr, he was lost. Heartbroken. She sunk her claws into him and made him think he loved her. I'd kill that bitch if I could."

Wow. There was some serious vehemence in those words. "Why do you say Damyr was heartbroken?"

Vlad looked at the floor, his lips pursed.

“Tell me,” I said softly. “Please.”

He ran his hand down his face and cast a quick glance over at Damyr. He was deep in an animated conversation with Acheron. Probably something to do with the extra witch. Maybe he saw it as invading his territory having a witch here. But what did I know about hierarchy in the supernatural world, I’d only just learnt about vampires.

“Back when Damyr was newly turned, he met someone. Edwin Thomas Morley. They were inseparable, the best of friends.”

“They became lovers?”

Vlad nodded. “They kept it secret, meeting in the dead of night, but Damyr fell in love.”

I could tell by the way Vlad’s expression soured, this tale didn’t have a happy ending. “What happened to them?”

“Damyr told him what he was.”

“And he freaked?”

“No. Even worse. He agreed to be turned.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The fool bragged about it to his family, and he caught the attention of a clan of Hunters.”

My heart clenched. “Poor Damyr.”

“They strung Edwin’s body up as a warning for everyone else. Damyr was forced to go on the run, and he ran for over half a century. Losing himself, becoming more violent and chasing down Hunters as revenge. He was angry and volatile when Lucia met him and, at the time, she spoke to the darkness in him. They agreed to marry, and the rest is history.”

I looked at Damyr and almost cried for him. All that pain and anger he must have felt. All that suffering he went through.

“Sorry,” Vlad mumbled. “It’s because of your connection that you feel things about him a bit more viscerally than you would normally.”

“Is it the same for him?” It would be pretty rubbish if this thing was all one sided.

Vlad chuckled. “Not as intensely as you, the guy is as old as dirt, but he can definitely feel it.”

Interesting. Now I had even more questions, but they were probably best kept for a private moment with Damyr.

“Enough,” Damyr shouted and everyone in the room froze. “He’s staying and that’s that.”

Acheron threw a dirty look at Wilder, who just returned one of absolute mirth. He was definitely enjoying how uncomfortable Acheron was, but I found it odd that he kept glancing at Byron. Almost like he was checking the maniac was still there.

“What’s the deal between Byron and Wilder?” I asked Vlad.

He snorted and followed it up with a groan. “Those two are like gasoline and fire. A dangerous and explosive combination that always ends up in destruction.”

“So why is he here?”

Vlad gave me a flat look. “Because it’s Dara’s idea of fun. And annoyingly, he’s a really good witch so he will actually be helpful.”

Damyr sat at his computer and pulled a USB out of a sleek little black box. A mini version of the one that delivered the dead body. Whoever this guy was, he certainly had a flair for the theatrical.

Vlad moved to stand by Damyr’s shoulder. I went to sit down in one of the armchairs opposite the desk, but Byron grabbed my arm as I walked past him, and dragged me onto the sofa with him.

“Sit with me, little bird,” he crooned in what I could only describe as the filthiest, huskiest tone I’d ever heard.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I gasped.

“A long list of things, pretty boy.” Byron propped his arm along the back of the sofa and wriggled closer, casting a sidelong look at Wilder.

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I leant in, my head angled to one side as if I were contemplating kissing him. I could feel Damyr's hard gaze burning a hole in the side of my face, but I remained calm, hoping he could feel it through our connection. Considering he hadn't jumped over his desk to manhandle me like a caveman, I was taking that as a yes.

"Byron," I groaned as I wrapped my hand around his waist. I left it a moment before I squeezed hard against the wound on his hip. He winced and pulled back, a sneer on his face. "Don't play games with me. I'm not a toy for your amusement."

I dug my thumb into his hip bone again but the guy just grinned. "That's a shame. You've got more backbone than I'd given you credit for, little bird."

"It wasn't you I was trying to distract."

I laughed as I leant back against the sofa, I knew the only way to really get Byron to piss off was to play him at his own game. Byron looked at Wilder and found the guy grinning at him with an unsettling smile. The people around here were fucking weird.

"If you've all quite finished," Damyr said, his words clipped. But there was a warmth in his eyes when they met mine, and I almost preened a little.

Damyr clicked his mouse and sound started to play from his monitor. It was like a hum, the buzz from a microphone picking up faint background noise.

"Well, Damyr, we aren't off to a great start, are we?"

The voice was like a low rumble with a harsh edge to it, his words laced with anger.

“I hear there was a little explosion down at the docks yesterday. Oops. My bad. But can I let you into a little secret? I’ll do much worse before the week is through. I’m going to take everything from you. Just like you took everything from me. You were warned, Damyr. Time to pay the price. Oh, and Byron? Say hello to your brother for me.”

“What did he just say?” Byron said as he shot to his feet and strode behind the desk to look at the screen. “Motherfucker!”

He turned on his feet and headed out of the room.

“Byron, wait,” Damyr called.

“No, Damyr. He’s got my brother.”

“No, he hasn’t,” Damyr said sternly, his hand halting the door. “Look at the picture. It’s a grainy snapshot of some CCTV footage. I’m sure your brother is fine.”

The look on Byron’s face was murderous. “No one stalks my brother but me.”

Excuse me, what? Did I just hear that right?

I glanced around the room but the only one who seemed remotely perturbed by Byron’s comment, was Wilder. Guess this was normal for the psychopath then.

“I need to go. I need to check. It should be impossible to find Bishop, and somehow this guy’s managed to get a shot of CCTV from across the fucking street. I don’t like it, Damyr.” Byron looked at the floor and I realised this was the first time I’d seen a hint of real emotion from him. The guy looked panicked. Seems like he did have a heart where his brother was concerned.

Although I'm pretty sure stalking was probably Byron's love language.

"Okay, go." Damyr opened the door for him. "Be careful."

Byron nodded on the way out and then he was gone.

Silence descended and Damyr's eyes met mine across the room.

Worry churned deep in my gut, and it made me feel a bit nauseous. Had I got in too deep? Was I in over my head? It was moments like this I really wanted to speak to Maya. She always had good advice and always knew how to make me feel better about any situation. She fought in my corner and was on my side. I needed someone like that right now. Someone who wasn't a part of all this criminal underworld bullshit.

"What now?" Aleksey asked.

"Acheron, Wilder. Check all the wards. Every property, every location we own."

The blue haired wizard looked pissed, but he grabbed Wilder and vanished without another word.

"Vlad, reach out to the other Families. Let them know what's going on."

He nodded his agreement and left the room, phone already by his ear as he made a call.

"And me, Boss?" Aleksey asked, his face hard and eyes cold.

“Gather the men. We’re going hunting.”

The grin on Aleksey’s handsome face made a shiver run up my spine. His stony-faced expression was intense at the best of times, but that smile... fuck. It made me want to run.

Chapter Twenty

Damyr

Benjamin had a bit of a look similar to a deer in headlights. I could have kept him out of this, but I wanted him to be a part of it. He needed to know what he was getting involved in with me, and the best way to do that was involve him in everything.

Well, maybe not quite everything. I wouldn’t be able to focus if I had to bring him on a hunt.

It had been a long time since I’d really hunted as a vampire. Usually, I brought my dirty work home with me and tortured people in my basement and if any hunting needed to be done, I sent Vlad and Aleksey. I’d done my fair share; I was the Boss now and I didn’t need to do the running around after targets.

This was different though.

This was fucking personal.

I grabbed the USB that the mysterious guy had sent and put it in my pocket. I was

going to ask Dara to perform a tracking spell so I could see whether I'd be able to find some hint of this asshole who was determined to turn my life upside down.

“Benjamin, I'm going to see if I can find this man. Vlad will keep you safe here.”

Tension tightened his brow. “What about you? Will you be safe?”

I cupped his face in my hands. “Benjamin, I will do everything in my power to come home to you.”

And I meant that. There was no way I would allow anyone to keep me from him. Benjamin was mine and I was determined to see what an eternity with him would be like.

I pressed a kiss against his lips. “Have some dinner and I'll be back before you know it.”

“You'd better,” he said with a scowl but there wasn't any heat in it. “Can I ask something, before you go?”

“Of course. Anything.”

“Could I have my phone back? I just want to speak to Maya, to let her know that I'm okay. I also want to talk to someone for ten minutes who isn't a Morozov.”

I didn't like it. Not because he was wanting to talk to someone on the outside, but because it might put him at risk.

“I'll only call Maya, I promise. And I won't tell her anything about vampires or witches, not that I'm sure she'd believe me anyway. I'm not sure I believe what I'm seeing most of the time. I just want to chat to my friend and—“

I clamped my hand over his mouth. “You talk too much.”

He huffed a laugh, no doubt remembering our first encounter. How things had changed in such a short space of time. If someone had told me when I’d met Benjamin in that shitty alley I’d have found my mate I’d have laughed. But here I was, basking in the warmth pouring from his green eyes and feeling my heart thud loudly in my chest.

“I trust you, Benjamin,” I said as I lowered my hand. “Just be careful. That’s all I ask.”

He nodded and I walked over to the top drawer of my desk, pulling his phone out of the lock box. I didn’t think he would do anything stupid, he didn’t seem the type. I understood his need for speaking to his friend. As much as Vlad and the others have tried to make him feel at home, I could tell he was pining for something familiar. For someone who knew him on a level we didn’t yet.

I passed him his phone and placed a kiss against his temple. “Have fun. I’ll see you soon.”

“Stay safe, Damyr. I mean it.”

I chuckled as I left the room and headed towards the entrance. Aleksey and a handful of men were waiting for me, all dressed in black with weapons attached at various locations on their bodies.

I walked over to the side table and grabbed my gun and a couple of knives, strapping one to my ankle, and one to the loop at the back of my trousers. My gun I kept in my hand. I wanted to be ready for this motherfucker if we were lucky enough to find him. I doubted the USB would lead us directly to him. The guy was too smart for that, but I’m sure he’d left me another clue at whatever location we ended up at. I just hoped

there wasn't another explosion. I really didn't feel like getting blown up again.

Dara Rowan lived in a penthouse down town in the centre of Misthaven. It was the highest point in the city and she always said it put her closer to the moon. The Rowan's drew their power from Mother Nature and the moon was a strong source for them. They had a summoning circle on the roof of the building for when they needed a major power boost but a tracking spell only needed a tiny bit of magic.

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Dara's apartment was, for want of a better word, shiny. Everything was sleek and modern from the marble floors to the large windows that spanned the entire south wall.

"Damyr, welcome," she said as I stepped off the elevator. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I wondered if you might help me with a tracking spell."

Her eyes took in Aleksey and the several guns about his person. A sly grin curled her mouth. "Going hunting, Damyr?"

"Hopefully. We just need some help with a location." I held out the USB to her. "Can you use this?"

"Of course. Follow me." She turned on her heel and headed towards the back of the penthouse. Aleksey and I followed she led us deeper into the house. Her spell room was surrounded by windows on three sides and full of all sorts of plants. The singular wall was covered in shelves full of jars and urns, all containing ingredients that would help with all manner of spells and potions.

Dara moved gracefully around the space, collecting bones and powders and a map of the city. She placed them all on the central table, on old oak piece littered with the scars of her ancestors, and started chanting under her breath.

Aleksey stood by my side as we watched her work. "Do you think we'll find anything useful?"

“Hopefully,” I muttered, but I didn’t know what we’d find. I just had to hope there was something worth finding. Or killing. Preferably killing. I really wanted to sink my claws into some flesh and rip some throats out. This Ronin had got me worked up until all I could see was red.

“The location is Mist Abbey,” Dara said, interrupting my spiralling anger.

“The Abbey? But there’s nothing there,” Aleksey said as he stepped towards the map. “Are you sure?”

“Are you questioning me, boy?” Dara hissed, the veins beneath her eyes darkening.

“He’s not,” I said quickly, before Aleksey could piss her off even more. Dara wasn’t the sort of witch to get a basic tracking spell wrong. She was also older than she looked.

Much older.

Like dawn of time old.

“Thank you for your help, Dara. It’s much appreciated,” I said.

“I apologise, Mistress Rowan,” Aleksey said with a bow. “I meant no disrespect.”

“You are forgiven,” she replied, all traces of magic leaving her face.

At least I could trust Aleksey to rectify a mistake. He was rarely at fault, but he was always the first to apologise if he’d crossed a line.

“Perhaps as a penance you could do a little task for me? Once you’ve helped solve Damyr’s little problem of course.” Dara smiled as she spoke, her eyes sharp as she

backed one of my fiercest vampires into a corner. For fucks sake, I didn't have time for this. Goddamn politics.

"Of course," Aleksey said through gritted teeth.

"Good," she said. "I'll be in touch. You may go."

We said our goodbyes and headed back to the elevator. I fixed Aleksey with a hard stare. "What have I told you about thinking before speaking?"

"I know," he snapped as we stepped into the lift. "I was just surprised."

"And now you've gotten us embroiled in witch business."

"I know." His eyes flashed silver as he fought to contain his emotions. Seemed I wasn't the only one on edge tonight.

"We'll figure it out later," I said as we got off at the ground floor. "For now, let's go and see what's at the Abbey."

Mist Abbey was a ruin that sat on top of a hill overlooking the city. It had been a pile of stones for as long as I could remember, there was no roof and no real place of cover up there so I had no idea what I would find. To be honest, I don't think anyone ever came up here anymore anyway.

Using my speed, I flew up the side of the hill, Aleksey and the others following behind. As soon as I reached the top, I paused and listened for a moment. There was nothing beside the noise of animals hunting in the undergrowth. I couldn't smell anything beyond what I was expecting, no humans, no other supernatural creatures.

Nothing but us.

“Fan out,” Aleksey said to the others. “Goal is capture, not kill.”

There was a grumble of assents and the men split off in pairs around the perimeter of the abbey. It loomed over us, a dark structure backlit by the light of the moon, watching over the city below like a ghost.

I headed straight up towards the abbey, Aleksey at my six. The thrill of the chase had adrenaline starting to pump through my veins. I had my gun ready, silver bullets loaded, and my finger on the trigger. As I got closer to the abbey, a sense of foreboding has the hairs on the back of my neck standing to attention. Something was wrong.

The crack of a gunshot ripped through the quiet night.

I immediately turned in the direction of the sound. “I didn’t think there was anyone else here.”

“Come on. Stay behind me.”

I crouched low to the ground and followed behind Aleksey. As we got closer, there were another couple of gunshots. One after the other in quick succession. Whoever was shooting was killing executioner style. One to the head followed by one to the heart. Pop, pop. Swift and efficient. There wasn’t much that would kill a vampire but a silver bullet to the head and heart was a pretty effective way to do it.

We took cover behind a low wall and risked a glance at the action unfolding. I couldn't quite make sense of what I was seeing.

One of my men was stood in a field of dead bodies, gun in hand. He pulled the trigger on the last body and then looked right at me.

I launched over the wall and sped over to him. I grabbed him by the throat and slammed him into the ground. "What the fuck, Donovan?"

Blood splattered his face and fear had his eyes blown wide. "I'm sorry. He didn't give me a choice."

"What do you mean?" I growled.

"He has my family. I had to kill them or he'd kill my family."

Aleksey knelt next to me. "Who, Donovan?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. But he has a message for you."

"What?"

Tears brimmed over Donovan's eyes leaving pink lines over his cheeks as they trickled through the blood. "I'm everywhere, Damyr. Tell me, are you looking over your shoulder yet?"

And then, before I had time to blink, Donovan brought the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger.

"Fuck!" I yelled as I fell back on my ass. I roared at the sky as anger and rage coursed through my body. My hands shook with it as I looked at the decimation Ronin had

caused. He'd picked one of my men to turn on the others, just because he could. Was this all a game to him? If it was, I didn't want to play anymore.

"We will get him, Damyr," Aleksey said, his voice cold as ice.

I hoped so. I really fucking hoped so.

I dragged my phone out my pocket and called Roxie.

"What's up, boss? Need help with another body?"

I sighed. "Sort of."

The clicking of computer keys stopped. "Seriously?"

"Donovan just took out the five members of his team before turning the gun on himself."

"Holy shit," she gasped. "Why?"

"My mysterious benefactor threatened his family. It must have been serious for him to turn on us. Can you check on them and let me know that they're okay? Then do a deep dive on him to figure out how he was targeted."

"Sure thing. And I'll send a clean-up crew to your location."

“Good.”

She snorted. “You could say ‘thank you’, you know.”

“I know,” I said before hanging up.

Aleksey huffed a laugh and held his hand out to help me up from the ground. “This is starting to become one hell of a mess. How are we supposed to trust our own men now?”

It was a valid question and one I didn’t have a satisfactory answer for. I couldn’t just get rid of everyone, that would be ridiculous. And if my understanding of Ronin was right, the guy probably didn’t do the same thing twice. He was right, though. I was going to be looking over my shoulder until I’d ripped his fucking throat out.

Chapter Twenty-One

Benji

“Benji! Baby!” Maya screamed down the phone. “What the fuck are you doing talking to me, when you should be getting waited on by those sexy sailors?”

I laughed at her. God, it was so good to hear her voice. She was clearly having a good time somewhere. Her voice had that high-pitched, alcohol laced brightness to it and there was some thumping bass coming from whatever building she was in.

“I miss you!”

“Whyyyy?” she whined and I could just imagine her face scrunching up in disapproval. “You should be too busy to be missing me! I’ve seen those pics, you look happy.”

“I am,” I replied, and it surprised me that it wasn’t a lie.

“Ooh, you’ve met someone, haven’t you?” She sounded giddy as she moved somewhere with less music coming down the line. “Tell me!”

Where did I even start? I couldn’t exactly tell her that he was the head of a notorious crime family, that he’d kidnapped me and I was unfortunately involved in some plot to ruin his life. “He’s... nice.”

“Benjamin Barrett,” she huffed. “You did not just use the word ‘nice’. What does he look like?”

“Fine, he’s gorgeous.”

“Iknewit! Tell me more.”

“He’s a bit taller than me, black hair and just about the bluest eyes you’ve ever seen. Lotsof tattoos.”

“Oooh, sounds like he’s a bit of a bad boy.”

Pfft, and didn’t I know it. “He was a bit standoffish at first, but he warmed up eventually.”

“Good. Just let loose and enjoy yourself. I’ll be here when you’re ready to come back.”

“Thanks,” I said softly as Maurice clambered up onto my lap, stretching his back as I stroked through his fur. I hadn’t seen him for a little while and I wondered where he’d been disappearing off to.

“Where’s he from?”

I didn’t think there was anything untoward answering that. “Misthaven.”

“Get the fuck out of here! What are the odds of meeting someone from the same city on a cruise around Aruba?”

Aruba? Was that where I was supposed to be? Fucking hell, Acheron. Could have picked somewhere a little more believable. How was I supposed to afford that on a medical resident’s wage? “I know, right? What are the odds?”

“Slim to none, babe,” she said with a laugh. It was probably a good thing that she was a little bit buzzed from the alcohol. Sober Maya was as sharp as one of Byron’s knives. “Ooh, wanna know a secret?”

“Always.”

“Dr Kingsly is gonna be fired,” she stage whispered.

“Really?” I couldn’t keep the surprise from my voice. I thought Dr Kingsly would have to be wheeled off the premises in a coffin before leaving on his own two feet.

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“Really. The medical staff haven’t been doing what he wants so he’s started getting angry at everyone, including the Board. Guess he ran out of free rides.”

“I guess he did,” I murmured.

“But, enough of talking about that twat, tell me more about this new guy you have in your life.”

“Have you ever just felt an instant connection with someone? That perhaps you didn’t fully understand, but felt it anyway?”

She let out a musical little laugh. “No. Are you high, Benji?”

Could you be high on just being around someone else? If so, then yes, I was definitely high on Dmyr.

“Maybe,” I conceded. “He just speaks to a part of me that I didn’t know existed.”

“That sounds good, Benji. I’m glad. Just be safe. Now fuck off and enjoy Aruba, baby!”

“Yes, ma’am,” I giggled, unsettling Maurice. He looked at me with a narrowed eyes and I tickled his chin by way of apology.

“Love you, Benji baby.”

“Love you too, Maya.”

She blew me a kiss down the phone and then she was gone. No doubt back to having a good time wherever she was. I had expected that to bother me. That she could go out and have fun whereas I was imprisoned here in this gilded cage. But it didn't. I realised that, for all my demanding to go home when I first got here, the fear and panic had settled the stronger this connection with Damyr had become.

But what did that actually mean? Damyr had mentioned eternity, but I couldn't even comprehend what that would even look like. I was human, I didn't get eternity. How was this even supposed to work between us? What would happen when I got older, and Damyr stayed the same? It terrified me to think that I was rushing into this, that I was jumping headfirst into whatever this was between us, but when life was so short, what was the point in waiting?

I had always made good, solid choices. I studied hard, worked hard, and when I got the chance, I partied hard. I just didn't party that much. With my work at the hospital, I didn't have time to do much of anything other than sleep. And it was usually Maya dragging my ass out so that I could let loose once in a while. But Damyr... he made me want to tell the world to get fucked. That I was jumping off the cliff and into the unknown, hoping that I didn't crash and burn when I reached the bottom.

The door opened and Vlad walked into the room. Maurice immediately got to his feet, stretched and padded over to the giant vampire.

"So, you're where my cat's been sneaking off too," I said as Maurice weaved between Vlad's legs, begging for attention.

"I don't know why," he grumbled. "I hate cats."

He leant down to stroke Maurice between his ears, getting my cat to purr in seconds as he hit his sweet spot.

“Sure you do,” I said with a chuckle. It was amusing to watch the giant teddy bear of a man pay attention to my fluff ball of a cat. Especially since the guy had a scowl on his face as he did it.

He huffed a breath and walked further into the room, Maurice hot on his heels.

“Any news?” I asked as Vlad sat down opposite me.

“Not yet.” Maurice jumped up and settled on his lap, much to his chagrin. He muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like ‘goddamn furball’.

“Is it always like this? The waiting?”

“It can be,” Vlad replied.

I was a little on edge with how I felt about that. Damyr was off doing God knows what, while I sat at home patiently waiting, trying not to twiddle my thumbs and worry myself into an ulcer. What if he came back with a hole in his stomach again? What if this time, he didn’t come back at all. What then?

I ran my hand through my hair, tugging the strands a little to ground my thoughts and stop them from spiralling.

“Can I ask you something? If it’s too personal, don’t worry, I—”

“Benji,” Vlad cut in with a raised brow and a warm smile. “Ask me anything. If I don’t like the question, I will tell you.”

Right. Okay. “Um, how do you become a vampire?”

Vlad froze for a moment, his hand hovering above Maurice. “Why do you want to know?”

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“Just curious, I guess.” I shrugged one shoulder, trying to play it cool while inside I was dying to know.

“I can’t answer that for you, Benji. You need to speak to Damyr.”

“Oh.” I tried not to be disappointed, but I don’t think I quite managed it.

“What I will say, is you have options. You don’t have to turn into a vampire to remain in a relationship with one. And besides, you don’t have to make any decisions now. You’ve only just met the guy and found out that vampires exist.”

He was right. I knew that, I guess I just wanted all the answers straight away. “What about folklore and legends? Are they true?”

He chuckled. “Which ones?”

“A crucifix?”

“Nope. No effect.”

“Garlic?”

“Can’t cook without it.”

“Holy water?”

“I could bathe in it every day if I wanted to.”

I leant forward and dropped my voice to a stage whisper. “Do you sparkle in the sun?”

“Fuck no,” he said with a deep laugh. “That’s absolutely ridiculous.”

“Thank God.” Wasn’t sure I was going to be able live with that one if it were true.

“The only way to kill a vampire is to cut off our head or shoot us in the heart with a silver bullet. That won’t kill us on its own, but it’ll give you a chance to get close enough to take off our head.”

“What about feeding?” I asked. “Why does it change with a mate?”

Vlad quirked an eyebrow. “You’ve experienced how intimate it is, would you want Damyr to feed from anyone else now?”

A surge of jealousy rushed though me at the thought of Damyr’s mouth touching anyone but me. It was probably completely unhealthy and a massive red flag, but fuck, I was possessive over that.

Vlad laughed at me. “I think you have your answer, but to be honest, mates are supposed to perfect for their other half in every way. Damyr will give you what you need just like you will give him what he needs.”

Doubt crept in. What could I give a man like Damyr? He was powerful, rich, had a strong social standing. He was dominant, self-confident and didn’t seem to want for anything. “What could he possibly want from me, Vlad?”

“Love,” he said simply, as if that was the answer to everything. Maybe it was. Only time would tell.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Damyr

By the time I returned home, I was angry and frustrated. Roxie couldn't find any hint of Ronin in Donovan's history, so I had no idea how he'd been targeted. This guy was like a ghost, leaving no trace behind anywhere. How was that even possible?

How could someone like this fly under the radar for so long? Where did he come from? Why was he targeting me? What had I done? I couldn't figure it out and the fact that I was just going around in circles made me feel incompetent and useless.

I knew Benjamin had gone to bed and I didn't blame him. I'd been out hunting for a while and I'd for nothing to show for it. Nothing but more damn questions.

I should have left him alone, but I didn't have the strength to resist him. Benjamin lay on his side, his hands tucked under his chin. He looked so adorable, his curls a little wild like he'd been tossing in his sleep.

I stepped closer to the bed and Benjamin's eyes flew open. His cat darted off the bed and scurried away. Benjamin jolted upright and slammed his hand on the lamp, bathing the room in a sift yellow glow.

"Damyr? What are you doing?"

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Admittedly, it probably looked like I was watching over him like a creeper. “I wanted to see you.”

He rubbed his eyes sleepily. “Isn’t it like four in the morning.”

Still early by my standards. “Yes.”

He watched me for a moment, curiosity and annoyance warring in his eyes. I was aware that this whole thing between us was most likely intense and unnerving. I’d turned his world upside down and put it through a blender, but I couldn’t stay away from him. I had this need burrowing inside me and there was no way I could keep my distance from him, even if I wanted to.

Which I didn’t. I wanted to be pressed against him, skin to skin.

It was only then I realised he was clad just in a pair of boxers. I roamed the contours of his torso, his well-defined lithe torso that I suddenly wanted to get acquainted with.

“Damyr, why are you looking like you want to eat me?” he said, his voice husky from sleep.

I gave him my best puppy dog eyes. “Because I’m hungry.”

Benjamin frowned. “I thought you didn’t need to feed for a week.”

I smiled. “Not hungry for that, Benjamin.”

It took him a moment to realise what I meant, but when he did, a flush crept up the side of his neck and his heart started to race. “Oh.”

I slipped my boots off and quickly removed my shirt and trousers before slipping under the covers next to Benjamin. I pulled him close, tucking my arm beneath his neck and he placed his head upon my chest.

“You’re so warm,” Benjamin said softly.

“Vampires tend to run at a hotter temperature.” I hooked my leg between his, wanting to be as close as I possibly could. He fit perfectly against me, and I hoped I could hold onto this feeling of being home forever.

“Thought you were hungry,” Benjamin mumbled, fighting sleep.

“Go to sleep, Benjamin. There’s plenty of time for that tomorrow.” I pressed a kiss against the top of his head. “Good night.”

“Good night, Damyr.” He snuggled in closer and within five minutes, he was snoring lightly.

**

I awoke with my arms around Benjamin, his body still tucked against mine, his back against my chest. He must have rolled over in the night at some point, but I didn’t mind. Spooning Benjamin might become my new favourite hobby.

I nuzzled my nose against his neck and inhaled deeply. He smelled so good. A mixture of my body wash and something that was all him. Spices and sex and something that just smelled like home.

“Are you sniffing me?” Benjamin asked sleepily.

“Yes.” No point denying it. My nose was buried in the spot beneath his ear.

His body shook with laughter. “You’re weird.”

I grinned. “People actually tend to find me quite intimidating.”

Benjamin turned around to face me, without leaving my arms. “You’re not that intimidating, once you get to know you. In fact, I think there’s a high probability that underneath all that domineering bravado, you’re actually very sweet.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You take that back. Do you have any idea what that kind of comment will do to my reputation?”

He giggled and the sound was beautiful. I searched his face for a few moments, drinking in his happiness and feel it settling in my soul. I’d forgotten what this felt like. This warmth. I liked having Benjamin here with me. I liked the way he fit beneath me and looked up at me with wonder in his eyes. I could get lost in them for hours. Those bright green orbs with flickers of gold that drew me in and held me captive. I’d never understood what it meant to get lost in someone’s gaze until that very moment.

He leant forwards and pressed his lips to mine in a whisper of a kiss. It wasn’t enough to settle the fire that was rapidly growing in my blood. I rolled him beneath me and captured his mouth with mine. It was greedy and consuming. I wanted to devour him because I couldn’t get enough. I’d never get my fill of Benjamin, not even in a hundred lifetimes.

He whimpered as I deepened the kiss, and I couldn’t stop the near feral growl that left my lips in response. There was something about the softness of Benjamin that called

to me. I wanted it to smooth out all my harsh, jagged edges and I just had to hope he didn't get cut in the process.

I bit his lip, and his hips rocked up into mine.

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“More,” he groaned. “I need more, Damyr.”

Fuck. The desperation in his voice had me wild. I pulled away, just enough to rip his underwear off before doing the same to mine and then settled back against his hips.

He gasped as I pressed my erection into his. “Do you feel how hard you make me, Benjamin? I want to be buried in you, so fucking bad right now. I want to fuck you until all you can scream is my name because you’ve forgotten everything else but the feel of me. I want you coated in my scent. Do you know why?”

“Why?” he whispered.

“Because I want people to know that you’re mine.” I wrapped my hand around his throat, squeezing just tight enough to drag a shuddery gasp from him. “I want them to know you belong to me. Only me. Do you want that, too?”

He nodded and whimpered. The sound shot straight to my cock. Fuck, I wanted to hear more of those sounds. I wanted to drag them out of him as I fucked him. Every whimper, moan and sob. I wanted them all.

“You want me to fuck you, Benjamin?”

He stared up at me for a moment, his eyes wide and dazed, drunk on me. It was a heady feeling to have him submitting to me, surrendering to me.

“You want me to fill you up?” I crooned, licking up the side of his neck. “Make you take me? All of me?”

He shuddered and his hips flexed up against mine. “Yes. Fuck, yes. I want it all.”

I couldn’t wait any longer. I slid down his body, nipping and kissing his skin. I hooked my hands around his thighs and spread them wider, making room for my shoulders. God, I wanted to do everything to him, all at once. I bit the ridge of his hip bone hard enough to make him hiss in pain.

“Hold your knees,” I demanded.

He did as I asked without hesitation and a low rumble vibrated through me as he opened himself to me. I skimmed my fingers over his balls and down his taint with a barely there touch.

“Damyr, please,” he begged.

Fucking perfect.

I dragged my tongue over his entrance before burying my face in his heat. I licked, sucked and swirled my tongue over him until his legs were shaking.

I pressed a finger into him, and he moaned. “Fuck.”

In and out I worked my finger until he was rocking his hips and pushing back. I pulled my finger free, loving the sound of his frustrated sob, but I wasn’t finished with him yet. I leant over to the bedside cabinet and pulled the lube out of the bottom drawer. I slicked up two of my fingers and poised them at his entrance. His eyes drifted closed in anticipation.

I wasn’t having that. “Look at me, baby.”

Benjamin slowly opened his eyes and met mine. His pupils were blown so wide, he

looked high. I knew the feeling. Benjamin was in my veins, a pretty poison that I was completely, utterly addicted to.

Slowly, I sank my fingers into his heat. Benjamin's eyes widened at the invasion and a gasp left his mouth as I stroked against his prostate. I did it again. Just because I could and because I wanted to hear that sound again. I wanted it burned in my memories. "You feel so good."

Benjamin shivered beneath me, working himself on my fingers as I opened him and made him ready to take my cock.

Fuck, I couldn't wait anymore. I needed to be inside him.

I grabbed the lube and slicked up my cock, then pressed the head of it against his entrance.

Bracing one hand by his head, I held his gaze once more. I wanted to watch every expression that played about his face as I entered him.

"Damyr," he said, his voice raw. "Please."

He was just as desperate as I was. I sank into him, groaning as I was enveloped in the tight heat of his body.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Benji

Isucked in a sharp breath as Damyr breached my body. I winced at the brief flash of pain as the head of his thick cock sank deep inside me, past that tight ring of muscle with a slow, steady thrust that robbed me of coherent thought. I squeezed my eyes

shut as I waited for my body to relax, focussing on anything other than the burn as Damyr seated himself inside me fully.

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When I opened my eyes, I found Damyr watching me with an intensity that robbed me of my breath. It was too much. I didn't know if I wanted to bathe in it or run away. I pulled his mouth down to mine, kissing him to distract me from my tumbling thoughts. I didn't think blurting out 'I love you' was the right thing to do even if I was slowly starting to realise this guy was stealing my heart the way he stole me.

Damyr had said I was his and that he wanted everyone else to know it too. He said it like it was inevitable, like it was something I had no hope of fighting or running away from. I was his. Forever. I should be running in the other direction, should be scared out of my mind, but I wasn't. I just felt overwhelmed by it all. I didn't want to fight it; I wanted to surrender to it.

I knew it didn't make any sense, knew this whole thing was madness, but I wanted to be his. I wanted everything about him. His passion, his brooding darkness, all his violence. I wanted it all because deep down, I knew he'd do anything for me. Even burn the world if I asked it of him, and that was a fucking thrilling thought.

My cock was leaking between us, leaving a sticky pool against my skin. Damyr buried his face against my throat, his mouth sucking hard against my skin, marking me. My eyes rolled backwards as he drove into me, his cock hitting that spot that sent fireworks zipping along my spine. "Harder. Fuck me harder."

Damyr growled and hooked his arms around my thighs, pushing them higher and sinking his cock deeper. I didn't think it was possible to feel this full, but fuck, his cock hit so deep within me. I couldn't think about anything else. I didn't want to. Damyr was giving me what I wanted, pounding into me with a speed that should have been lethal. It was relentless. Brutal. Driving all thoughts away until the only thing I

could feel was him.

“Yes. There. Right there. More.” I was a babbling mess as I grabbed my cock, jerking myself in time with Damyr’s thrusts. Fuck, it wasn’t going to take me long to fall over the edge.

“I’m going to come,” Damyr snarled as his eyes dropped down to watch his cock disappearing into my hole.

“Fuck. Yes. Come inside me.” I was rambling, but I didn’t care. “I want to feel it.”

“Beg me,” he demanded, his eyes returning to mine, his gaze fierce.

I couldn’t even muster up a sliver of embarrassment. “Come for me. I need it. Please, Damyr. Give it to me.”

His hips stuttered and he ground his hips into mine, hard enough to bruise. The feeling of him throbbing deep inside me was all it took for me to follow into bliss. I spilled my release between us, fisting my cock until my entire body trembled with over stimulation.

“Are you okay?” Damyr asked as he lay down on top of me, resting his chin on his folded hands.

“Yeah. I’m good. More than good.” I smiled lazily at him, my energy completely depleted. “Are you?”

He grinned at me, those pointy canines winking at me through his smile. “Yes. I want to stay inside you forever.”

I was okay with that. Especially if it meant he was going to fuck me like that again. “I

wouldn't mind that."

He kissed my chin. "Good. Because you're mine forever."

Damyr slipped free and it made me feel empty. Disconnected. Until he wrapped me in his arms, and I snuggled my head under his chin. I liked this, being skin to skin but I couldn't help the doubt that crept in again. My brows knitted together. "Do you mean it?"

"What?"

"That I'm yours forever?" It was such an alien concept. Forever. Eternity. It sounded so final. "What would happen if you got bored with me? or when I get old, and you no longer want me?"

"Benjamin," Damyr said in a tone that brooked no argument. "This isn't a game to me. I have waited lifetimes for you, and if I told you half the things I think when I look at you, you'd probably run screaming."

My heart leapt in my chest, my pulse raced and my breath hitched. "Like what?"

His gaze met mine, searching my eyes for doubt. I didn't have any. I wanted to know. All those dark, violent thoughts he might have, I wanted to possess them.

"I want to slide into your skin, just to be as close to you as possible. Until there's no way to tell where you start, and I end. I want to tie you to my bed just to keep you away from everyone else. And I will never, ever let you leave."

I smiled. "Not ever? Not even to take me on a date?"

Damyr scowled. "If I take you somewhere on a date, I will make sure there will be no

one else there to see you.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I said warmly. I couldn’t stop my grin even if I wanted to.

“I can’t help it.” He shrugged a shoulder. “It’s just the way I’m wired. I’ve lived for a long time, and you’d think that would make me able to move through society with ease, but it doesn’t. The older I’ve gotten, the less human I’ve become.”

“Well, maybe you’ll have me for another seventy or eighty years. Perhaps I’ll rub off on you.”

Damyr cupped my chin and dragged my gaze back to his. “I can give you eternity, Benjamin. All you need to do is ask.”

“How?” I asked, my voice a little breathless. “How does it work?”

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“Well, there are a couple of options. I could turn you, which would make you exactly like me, or we can do a blood bond which means you’d have to regularly feed from me, and I’d keep you young.”

“So I wouldn’t have to become a vampire if I didn’t want to?”

Damyr’s brows knitted together. “No. I’d be disappointed, but I’d understand, and I would never pressure you into making that decision. It’s not one to make lightly.”

I couldn’t deny that the idea was appealing and terrifying in equal measure. But the fact that I had options settled some of those doubts and I had time. I didn’t have to make a decision now. Hell, I was still only twenty-five. There was plenty of time to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. And until then, I’d take each day as it came.

“How do you become a vampire? I asked Vlad, but he wouldn’t tell me.”

Damyr stroked his hand through my hair and I arched into his touch. “I’m glad he didn’t. He’d probably have sent you running for the hills. It’s a simple process but there’s a lot of risk. Essentially, I bring you to the point of death by draining your blood, then I feed you some of mine and hope that your body doesn’t reject it. If we mate first, the risks are lower, but we don’t have to.”

“And, um, how do we mate?”

He chuckled. “Exactly how you’d imagine. Popular culture at least got that right.”

“So lots of sex and blood then?”

“Pretty much,” he said as he rolled me beneath me.

I yelped in surprise. “Damyr.”

“And when I’m buried deep inside you, I’ll sink my fangs into your neck.” He nipped the soft spot over my carotid artery. “And then you do the same to me.”

“I have to bite you?”

He hummed, a deep and throaty rumble that I felt vibrate through his chest. “Yes. And then we have lots of sex. It’ll take a while.”

“Really?” He wasn’t putting me off. If anything, I was coming around to the idea the more he talked about it.

“Oh, yes. Three days at least. Think you could handle that?” he asked as he rocked his hips against mine, stirring my cock back to life.

I swallowed audibly. “Yes.”

A hundred percent. Absolutely. Where did I sign?

Damyr laughed softly. “Well, that’s good to know. Now, I’m going to suck your cock until you scream my name, and then we’re going to shower, okay?”

I nodded, my ability to speak vanishing as he moved down my body. The minute his mouth closed around my aching cock, I was lost. Completely, fucking lost.

And I didn’t think wanted to be found.

After a shower and bringing Damyr to another orgasm whilst I washed him, we met the others in Damyr's study. Vlad and Aleksey were clad in their usual black combat gear, heads close as they had an animated conversation. Acheron stood pacing the room whilst Wilder just sat there watching the others.

"Well, don't you two look happy," Acheron said with a knowing grin as we moved further into the room. His hair was back to a bright electric blue and the outfit he wore today was a black leather skirt and a neon pink mesh top.

"They don't look happy, they look well fucked," Wilder deadpanned. He was sprawled out on one of the sofas, looking completely at ease in someone else's space.

Acheron threw the witch a scowl. "Nobody asked you."

The witch just smiled in response. I really hoped he was worth the trouble of having him here. At least Byron was gone so there weren't any serious fireworks, if Vlad was to be believed. Although, a part of me wanted to see what a flustered Byron looked like. The guy seemed to either want to make you dance to his tune, or he showed no emotion, seemingly unbothered by anything.

Apart from that moment when he thought his brother was in danger. I was still curious about that, too. Did he really stalk his twin? I wasn't going to ask him, though. I kind of liked my head where it was.

"Have you checked the wards?" Damyr asked, bringing the conversation back to the matter at hand. The fact that this Ronin wanted to take his world apart, piece by piece.

"Yes," Acheron replied.

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“And I improved them,” Wilder added. “You’re welcome.”

“You didn’t improve anything,” Acheron snapped, his brows drawn and his mouth turned down in a grimace. “You just spent the entire time wiggling your fingers and trying to look pretty.”

“You think I’m pretty?” he asked with a cocky grin.

“I said ‘trying’, asshole.” Acheron pinched the bridge of his nose before giving Damyr a flat look. “Can I kill him? please?”

Damyr sighed heavily. “Like it or not, he’s here as a guest to help us. So you’ll just have to play nice.”

Wilder blew a kiss at Acheron which made him snap. He hurled what looked like a lightning bolt which struck Wilder right in the middle of his chest. The witch fell forwards, his hand clutching the spot above his heart.

“Acheron!” Damyr snapped, but I was already lunging towards Wilder.

I rolled him over onto his back. He wasn’t breathing. I checked his pulse. Shit. I started chest compressions.

“What the fuck was that, Acheron?” Vlad demanded.

“Just a few thousand volts of electricity.” At least he had the grace to look sheepish. “I didn’t think it’d stop his heart. I thought he was more impervious to magic than

that.”

I paused the compressions and checked for a pulse. Nothing. I started up again. He’d be lucky if I could get his heart started again. I needed a defibrillator to shock it back into a rhythm.

Fuck it.

I curled my hand into a fist and thumped it hard onto his sternum.

“What the hell are you doing?” Damyr asked.

“Trying to save his life!” I thumped Wilder again. “Come on. You will not die today.”

Another thump.

His eyes shot open, and he flew upwards with a jolt. His chest heaved deep breaths into his lungs and his eyes were wild.

I grabbed his shoulders and soothed him like I would a wild animal. “Easy, Wilder. Easy.”

“Where is that fucker? I’m going to kill him.” He took another few rapid breaths.

“Hey, look at me.” Wilder’s violet eyes met mine. They were full of anger and rage, but there was a little bit of fear buried in their depths too. A brush with death would do that to a person. “Breathe with me.” I took a slow, deep breath, encouraging him to copy me. “That’s it.”

When his breathing returned to a more stable rhythm, I checked his pulse again. It

was a little elevated, but nothing that worried me.

“Thank you,” he muttered, his fingers flexing against his thighs.

“Don’t mention it. Let’s get you up and into a chair.” I helped heave him off the ground. He wobbled on his feet a little, which was understandable since he’d just died for a few moments, but he made it to an armchair without incident.

Acheron, on the other hand, looked like he was chewing glass. Guess, I’d missed something in the commotion of saving Wilder. Now I understood what Vlad had meant about Wilder being a spark of chaos.

“Well, that was all very entertaining.”

I turned towards the door and saw Lucia standing there looking hideously glamorous and gorgeous with none other than Remy Lavaeux.

Holy fuck.

Warm, golden skin and eyes the colour of honey. The man looked like a sweet treat just waiting to be unwrapped. He was always stunning in his photoshoots, but up close, the guy was impossibly beautiful.

“Stop drooling,” Vlad whispered in my ear.

I brushed my thumb against the corner of my mouth, double checking I hadn’t actually managed to drool over the guy. I looked at Damyr, but he just looked pissed that his wife was here. With her new boy toy.

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Now that Vlad had told me that Damyr had married her so long ago, it didn't bother me quite as much that they were still technically married. It only bothered me a little.

And by 'a little' I meant a fucking lot.

I never knew I could be quite so possessive.

"Lucia. What do you want?" Damyr snarled.

"Damyr," she said with a pout on her perfectly plump red lips. "Is that anyway to greet your wife?"

My left eye twitched.

She cast her eyes over me, and I felt her gaze slither over my skin. "Has your little human got bored of you already? Turning to a witch for fun now, Benji?"

I slowly stood up, facing her head on and mustering the haughtiest expression I could. "You can say what you like, Lucia. I know where I stand in Damyr's affections and it's certainly higher than you."

Her eyes narrowed and her upper lip curled back in a sneer.

Remy stepped forwards, his nails lengthening into long claws. "Be careful, boy. If you say another word, I will slice you into a million pieces."

I cocked my head to one side and tucked my hands into my pockets, trying to become

the embodiment of nonchalance, when inside I was terrified. I was well aware this guy could probably tear me apart with his bare hands, but I was not being spoken to like that. No matter how good someone looked. “Wasn’t it that kind of attitude that dropped us in this mess in the first place?”

Remy’s eyes flashed bright amber, and he made to lunge towards me. I instinctively took a step backwards. Maybe pissing him off wasn’t the best idea.

There was a blur of movement before Remy was slammed into the wall behind him. One second Damyr was behind his desk, the next he was stood in front of Remy as he pinned him a foot off the ground by his throat.

“Nobody threatens what’s mine,” Damyr said, his voice low and steady. “Do you understand?”

He was so calm, and I think it was that cool delivery that had the hairs on the back of my neck standing to attention. He sounded like a cold-blooded killer.

Remy hissed as Damyr’s nails lengthened against his skin, the sharp points sinking into his neck slowly. God, watching Damyr threaten someone on my behalf... my dick was definitely taking notice. It shouldn’t be hot, but the thought of Damyr burning the world for me set butterflies tumbling in my stomach.

Lucia took a step towards Remy, but Vlad stepped in her path. “Ah-ah, you stay there.”

She spat at him like a pissed off kitty.

“Do I make myself clear?” Damyr commanded softly, pressing his sharp nails, deeper into Remy’s neck. Blood trickled down his skin, staining the collar of his white t-shirt.

“Yes,” Remy finally said and Damyr let go. The supermodel fell to the floor in a heap and Vlad moved out of the way to let Lucia tend Remy’s wounds. She swiped her tongue along the half-moon crescents, instantly healing them, and helped the guy to his feet.

But by this point, Damyr had turned his back on the whole thing and come to me. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” I said a little breathlessly.

Damyr curled his hand around the side of my neck and his brows drew together. “Are you sure? Your heart is racing.”

A flush crept up the side of my face. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just been a bit of an intense few minutes.”

Damyr quirked a dark eyebrow, but he didn’t call me out on my shit. Watching Damyr flex his muscles had turned me on.

“Okay,” he said and pressed a kiss to my temple which surprised me. Not sure, why. I guess I’d assumed he wouldn’t be affectionate in front of other people, but I definitely liked that he was. It seemed the more time I spent with him, the more I liked who he was.

“Now then,” Damyr said as he turned back to Lucia and Remy. “Cut the theatrics and tell me why you’re really here.”

Lucia swiped her hair over her shoulder with an angry flick of her hand. “I received a letter.”

“A letter?” Damyr asked. “What kind of letter?”

Lucia pulled a single crisp sheet of paper out of the inside pocket of her jacket. She unfolded it and began to read. “My dearest friend, had we more time and world enough to share, I wouldst still not have enough words to describe thy beauty. I have no world of mine own to offer, merely a heart that would love thee for all days if thou wouldst be mine. You stir a passion within my soul that—”

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“Stop,” Damyr whispered, his face pale. He looked like he’d seen a ghost and it had slapped him in the face.

“What is it?” I asked, anxiety turning my skin clammy.

“Where did you get that?” Damyr demanded, ignoring me.

Lucia looked flustered. “It was delivered to my chambers. It came with a note that said I needed to bring it to you.”

“Who signed it?” Vlad asked.

“The same guy that sent you the body,” Lucia said. “Ronin.”

“Let me see it.” Vlad pulled the letter from her fingers, his eyes scanning the page for any secret it might hold. “It’s just a love letter.”

“Out,” Damyr shouted suddenly, making me flinch. “Everybody out.”

I’d never seen people move so fast.

Acheron disappeared instantly, Remy and Lucia practically ran, and Aleksey strode out the door. I’d forgotten he was in the room, to be honest. The guy barely said two words together.

I exchanged a look with Vlad. He seemed just as confused as I was. I helped Wilder out of his chair and made to walk with him. I figured if they had a doctor on site,

there must be some sort of medical equipment somewhere. I needed to get Wilder on a machine to watch his heart for a bit. I didn't want it arresting again.

"Vlad, take Wilder to the doc. Benji, you stay."

I bristled a little with his command, but I didn't rise to it. Damyr was clearly upset, and I could always mention it later.

Vlad gave me the letter and went to pick Wilder up to carry him.

"I can walk, asshole," Wilder said as he batted Vlad's hands out of the way. It was a little concerning that Wilder was still rubbing the spot over his heart, but whether that was because of the brutal way I hit him, or his heart spasming, I didn't know. He seemed to be managing the walk out of the office fine, though, so as soon as they closed the door behind them, I turned all thoughts to Damyr and the letter in my hand that turned him whiter than the sheet of paper it was printed on.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Damyr

I hadn't heard those words for more than three centuries. But when Lucia started reading them aloud, everything came crashing back to me. The agony, the pain, the love. The loss. As clear to me today as it was all that time ago.

"What is this, Damyr?" Benjamin asked as he came around the desk with the letter in his hand. It wasn't an original. It couldn't be. The paper was too new, too crisp.

How could Ronin have gotten his hands on these? I thought they'd been lost to time, or burnt to ashes after Edwin had died.

Hands cupped my face, dragging me back into the present.

“Talk to me,” Benjamin said softly.

I looked up into his green eyes, trepidation running through me at telling Benjamin about my past.

“Is this about Edwin?”

My stomach dropped. “How do you know that name?”

He sighed. “Vlad told me. Not everything, but he mentioned it. Don’t be angry at him, I kind of pushed him to tell me when we were talking about how rare mates were and how marriages traditionally worked between vampires. He said you’d been heartbroken.”

I scoffed. That was one way to put it. I pulled Benjamin onto my lap, seeking the comfort I knew that only he could give me. “You mean you were digging for dirt on me and probing my second in command for gossip?”

“When you put it like that, it sounds seedy.” The smile that Benjamin gave me was warm, and it fed my soul with something I hadn’t felt in a long time.

I sat there with him in my arms for a few minutes and soaked up his touch. He ran his hands through my hair and hummed a song that I found soothing. This whole moment with Benjamin was soothing, and I could feel it softening the rough edges of my soul.

“I met Edwin when I was a lot younger,” I started, my voice rough as the ghosts of my past clawed at my memory. “I’d been a vampire for just over half a century. I was young, arrogant and naïve.”

“You paint a lovely picture, Damyr.”

I poked him in the ribs, loving the bark of laughter that escaped him. “I thought I knew it all and then I walked Edwin. The first time I met him was at a ball his parents were hosting for his birthday. He was dressed in gold brocade with so much lace around his neck he looked more like a peacock than a man, but there was so much merriment in his eyes. As if he knew that he looked ridiculous but didn’t care. I was the mysterious visitor from the East, dressed in black and with a thick accent. I was paraded around parties as a prized jewel. Life back then was very different to what it is now, but Edwin and I struck up a friendship.”

“You became close?”

“Yes,” I said with a nod. “We were inseparable. I remember the first time he kissed me. It was so chaste, so pure, I felt unworthy of it. Nobody knew, and we made plans to go travelling the world. His parents didn’t approve of the idea, but I was wealthy. I’d keep him in comfort and they were hopeful that Edwin would find a bride with lots of money.” I paused, knowing that the worst of the story was coming.

“What happened?” Benjamin asked as he stroked a thumb across my cheek.

“I thought I was in love. I wanted to keep him with me, always and I promised him forever. We exchanged heaps of love letters. He agreed to be turned and then, the night before we were due to leave, he went drinking with his friends. They had a farewell gathering but he didn’t know that one of his party was with the Hunters. He told them what I was and what he was going to do, that he’d never be the same again and most of his friends brushed it off as drunken idiocy, but word got back to the

Hunters.” I fixed Benjamin with a gaze full of sorrow. “I waited by the docks for him, but he never came and when I went searching for him...”

Words failed me, the horror of seeing him cut open and eviscerated, strung up in the town square like a common thief flashing before my eyes as the memory resurfaced.

“I’m sorry, Damyr.”

My brows knitted together as I looked up at him. “Why?”

“No one should have to go through something like that. No one deserves that.”

I had to look away, unable to bare seeing the sorrow in his eyes on my behalf.

“You wrote beautiful letters,” he said as he reread the page. “I would love to read the rest.”

“I don’t know where they are, or how Ronin even got hold of them. I didn’t think they existed anymore.”

I traced the printed script on the page with a bit of fondness. For all his foolishness, I still wish Edwin had had a better chance at life. He didn’t deserve the death he got at the hands of people that were only there because of me.

Huh. I leant closer. “That’s odd.”

“What is?”

“These words at the end... I didn’t write them.” They were in the same style of script and, had I not read them, I wouldn’t have noticed.

Benjamin peered over the last few lines of the letter. “Does love die when the object of thy heart is forgotten? I pose the question to thee, old friend, and wonder if new love trumps a love of old. Mayhap we should put it to the test.”

Oh, God. He meant Benjamin. Panic bloomed under my skin, and I dug my fingers into his hips on reflex.

“What is it?” he asked sharply.

“He’s coming after you.”

The realisation was a slap in the face. He’d been watching me, watching us. He must have if he knew about Benjamin.

“Okay... so what does that mean for me?” Benjamin asked cautiously.

“I need to get you somewhere safe.” I stood up, putting him down on the ground as I did and sped towards the door. I catalogued all the safe houses I knew about. Were any of them compromised? Ronin had everything. How was I going to keep Benjamin safe if I didn’t have anywhere safe to take him.

“Damyr, wait. Slow down.”

I stopped as I reached the door. “I can’t, Benjamin. I can’t risk him coming after you.”

He slotted his hands on his hips and scowled at me. “You can’t just move me around like some possession.”

Yes, I could. He was mine. I was going to do whatever I wanted. “This isn’t up for debate.”

He folded his arms across his chest. “Oh, really?”

We didn’t have time for this. “Benjamin.”

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“You can growl my name all you want, Damyr. I’m not going.”

If I wasn’t so worried about him, I’d find his defiance charming. “Look—”

The door swung open behind me and Aleksey burst in. “We’ve got a problem.”

What the fuck was happening now? “What?”

Aleksey threw a glance at Benjamin. I didn’t care that he was here listening to this, if he was going to stay with me, he needed to know what he was getting into.

“Tell me,” I ordered.

“We’re being raided at all the warehouses.”

“Fuck.” This was turning into a mess. “Aleksey, fly to this address and make sure it’s secure.” It was an old property I’d owned, and I didn’t think it was listed on my books. It was the best bet for somewhere to keep Benjamin until I had dealt with this fucking asshole. It was also warded to the hilt. I’d been paranoid in my younger years.

“Fine,” Aleksey grumbled. He snatched the address out of my hand and disappeared to do as I asked.

I summoned Vlad along the Coven Connection and felt his immediate response.

“Damyr,” Benjamin said, my name sounding like a warning. “You can’t just ship me

out of the way.”

“I can and I will.” I knew he probably had an argument for everyone of my reasons for wanting to move him somewhere safe. Was I being overbearing? Probably. Overprotective? Definitely. But I needed to deal with this mess and I couldn’t do that while worrying about Benjamin.

I walked over to him and cupped his face with my hands. “Benjamin, please. Let Vlad take you somewhere safe and as soon as one dealt with this, I’ll come and get you.”

He placed his hands on my chest and looked up at me with the biggest, saddest eyes he could muster. “Come with me.”

I smiled. “Are you trying to manipulate me?”

“Maybe? Is it working?”

“No,” I chuckled. “Just trust me. Please.”

“But I don’t want to go without you.”

His words hit me in the chest and I almost caved. “I don’t want you to go, but do this. For me. Let me solve this and we can talk about what we do next.”

His shoulders sagged and he let out a defeated sigh. “Okay. But you better come back to me in one piece. If I have to patch you back together again, I’m going to be pissed.”

“Yes, sir,” I said with a chuckle. “I’ll do my best.”

I pulled him into a searing kiss, putting my promise to come home into it. It started out chaste, but it soon turned into something else. Benjamin moaned beneath me and opened his mouth, letting me thrust my tongue past his lips. I lost myself in the taste of him, encasing myself in the bliss of his touch.

The door creaked open behind me and Vlad groaned. “Can you two not keep your hands off each other for five minutes?”

Benjamin threw a scowl at him over my shoulder, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Perhaps you should knock,” Benjamin said.

Vlad had the grace to blush, but wisely kept his mouth shut.

“Keep him safe,” I said to Vlad and then I handed my heart to him as Benjamin left the room.

I just hoped I’d done the right thing.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Benji

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We left the city limits some time ago and the skyscrapers morphed into trees. Vlad was constantly on the phone getting updates from the various teams. Seemed like all hell had broken loose at every location Damyr owned.

Vlad hung the phone up and slammed his hand on the wheel. “Fuck!”

I eyed him warily. I’d only ever seen Vlad as cool and put together so this tense, angry version had me on edge.

“Sorry,” he gritted out. “It’s just Ronin has attacked everything. The warehouses, the clubs, nothing has been left untouched. We’ve got police combing the legitimate businesses and gangs trying to raid the warehouses. He’s attacking us on every front and we’re stretched thin. It’s only a matter of time before he does something that we can’t overcome.”

“What about the other Families? Will they not help?”

Vlad pursed his lips. “They’ll do what they can, but we can’t ask them to risk everything for what seems to be a personal vendetta against Damyr.”

That was a fair point. Still, I didn’t like that Damyr was being pulled in all these different directions. At some point, he was going to get hurt.

I turned to stare out of the window, watching the rain drops travelling down the glass and wondering what Damyr was doing. I’d never thought I would be so consumed by another person, but there I was, continuously thinking about him. In my head, I knew that was a major red flag. It was probably on the verge of co-dependency, but I

couldn't seem to bring myself to mind. It was as if all sensible thought patterns just disappeared around Damyr. He was what I wanted and that was it. To hell with everything else.

When I next sat down with Damyr, we were going to have a serious conversation about the future. I wanted to make this work, although how I was going to tell Maya, I didn't know. But that was a problem for future Benji.

"Can I ask you something?"

Vlad looked at me, a curious brow raised. "Of course."

"Being away from Damyr feels... alien. Every thought I have is around him and what he's doing. Is that normal?"

"It might be because you're human," he said with a small shrug of his shoulders. "Vampire mates have the ability to connect telepathically so maybe, because you're human, the mate bond is pushing your brain into overdrive."

"Vampires communicate telepathically?"

"Only some. Damyr can send thoughts to everyone in his Coven because he's the alpha, and mates communicate because they create their own bond during the mating process."

Interesting. "So I wouldn't have to be a vampire for that to work?"

His brows knitted together. "I don't think so, but I can't remember the last time a vampire mated with a human."

"Oh. So, will mating with me work?" Doubt started creeping in at the thought that

maybe I'd have to walk away from Damyr.

"Benji," Vlad said warmly. "I have no doubt that if you are Damyr's mate, the bonding process will work. It is easier when you're the same species, there is less risk but the risk is still there."

Okay, I could live with that. When I was ready, I guess I'd have to think about becoming a vampire. "Is there a good age to become a vampire?"

He chuckled. "My, you are full of questions today."

"I'm just trying to understand. I'd ask Damyr, but he's not here. You are."

Vlad dragged a hand over his jaw line, the rasp of his stubble scraping against his fingers. "No, there's no perfect age to turn, but we do have laws. You have to be between the ages of twenty-one and fifty."

I guess that made sense. Turning children and older people wouldn't be a sensible choice. "Can vampires have children?"

"It's rare. Very rare. We can, but it takes time. They only come from mate bonds, and you already know how rare they are. So, most people adopt and raise human children and, when they are old enough, they are brought in on the big family secret. It's then up to them if they want to turn or remain human."

At least that meant I could look at children in the future. I wondered how Damyr felt about kids. I had always wanted some, but with med school and everything else, having them would have been too difficult. I always thought I'd have them when I was older though.

"Do you think Damyr will let me finish med school?"

“Benji, if you don’t know this already, you’re going to have that man eating out of the palm of your hand,” he deadpanned, and I had to chuckle. The picture of an overbearing Damyr giving into my demands seemed ridiculous.

“I’m not sure I believe you but thank you.”

Vlad went to answer but the car lurched, as if the brakes had been slammed. The sound of metal crumpling hit my ears and then we were flying through the air, rolling until we hit the ground with an almighty thud.

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My head hit the dashboard and a high pitched ringing filled my ears. I blinked. There was glass everywhere. The trees were upside down. No. that was me. I was upside down.

“Vlad?” I croaked. I couldn’t see him. My vision was foggy and there was a dull ache behind my eyes. That would be a concussion. I tried to take stock of my other injuries but I couldn’t sense anything too serious. Couple of broken fingers and my chest hurt where the seat belt had dug into my skin. Bet that would be a hell of a bruise later.

The passenger door was ripped open and Vlad crouched into view. “I’ve got you.”

Blood trickled down the side of his face from his temple, but I couldn’t see any open wounds. Benefit of being a vamp, I guess. Super quick healing time.

He supported my weight and then unbuckled my seat belt. I fell from the seat and Vlad placed me down gently. “I’m going to call Dam—”

Something barrelled into his side, and he flew out of my view. “Vlad!”

I tried to move my head but it felt heavy, like it was full of stone. Glass crunched beneath someone’s feet as they moved slowly. Instinctively I wanted to shout for help but I knew that whoever this was, felt way too convenient for them to have just happened upon the car accident.

Flashes of colour went hurtling around the car. I couldn’t process it. They moved too fast and made me feel nauseous. There was a loud groan and then the ground shook.

“Vlad?”

Feet stopped outside the door. Feet clad in expensive loafers not the combat boots Vlad would have been in.

The owner of the shoes crouched down towards me, and I got my first look at the mystery man. Long silver white hair and bright red eyes. Sharp nose, sharp jaw, sharp gaze.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Benji.”

That voice, I knew that voice. “Ronin?”

He wrapped his hands under my shoulders and pulled me from the wreckage as if I weighed nothing. “Do you know what a Ronin is?”

My body felt broken. I didn’t think it was, just shook up a bit, but I couldn’t muster the energy to roll over, let alone escape. And where was Vlad? I looked around and spotted a body laying still on the floor. Oh God, was he dead?

“Don’t worry, I’ve just knocked him out,” Ronin said, answering my thoughts. Jesus, this guy must be something if he could disarm and pacify Vlad in seconds. What would he do to me? Probably best not to find out.

Ronin dropped his weight on my hips, his thighs straddling my waist, and I hissed as the movement jarred my body with pain.

“I understand what Damyr sees in you, Benji.” He leant closer, burying his hands in the dirt by my head. “You’re quite beautiful, and that mouth...” He swept his thumb across my bottom lip. “That mouth in something else.”

There was a wicked gleam in his eye that I found unsettling. Fear traipsed its way up my spine as his gaze roved over the contours of my face. I could feel it like a physical thing, slithering over my skin like a snake.

“To answer my earlier question, a ronin is a samurai without a master.”

“And that’s you?” I asked casually, trying to keep the fear from my voice.

“Of a fashion.” He kept tracing my bottom lip. His thumb going back and forth, back and forth, over and over again. The repetition was maddening and I was tempted to see if I could bite his thumb off. “My master died and left me to wander. Your precious Damyr killed my brother and left me with no one.”

“You’re a Morley.” Damyr had never mentioned Edwin had a brother. It was a long time ago, perhaps he’d forgotten.

His smile widened. “Yes, I am. Silas Morley at your service.”

“What now, Silas? What do you want with me?”

“With you, Benji?” he taunted with a pout. “Nothing. You’re just a means to an end. As is the tank of a vampire over there. It’s not personal, I just need you to get to Damyr.” He leant closer, bringing his mouth to my ear and dropping his voice to a whisper. “First though, I’m going to make him suffer until he begs for death, and then I’m going to let him watch everything he loves burn to the fucking ground.”

Then he lifted my head and slammed it to the ground. The last thing I saw was the venomous rage in his ruby red eyes before I surrendered to the blackness that had been waiting to claim me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Damyr

Something was wrong. Why hadn't they called? They should have been there. I pulled my phone out and called Vlad. There was no answer. I called again, and I was pissed that it went straight to voicemail. Again. Where the fuck was he?

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I rang Benjamin. Straight to voicemail.

Panic had an icy claw sinking into the back of my neck.

I rang Aleksey.

“Boss? I was just about to ring you.”

That didn’t bode well. “Where are they?”

“They haven’t arrived.”

Holy shit.

Fuck.

Dread made my stomach sink like lead. “What? What do you mean they haven’t arrived?”

“I’ve waited here for over an hour. I thought they’d perhaps got caught in traffic, but they haven’t shown up.”

“Son of a bitch!” I seethed.

“I’m coming back,” Aleksey said suddenly.

“No. Stay there. They might turn up. I’ll go after them and call you if I find

anything.” I really hoped I didn’t find anything. I hung up, my stomach churning and making me feel like I was going to be sick.

As soon as I hit the road, I realised it had been raining pretty hard. The roads were covered with water and thick mud, washing away any hope I might have had of tracking them.

What if they’d gone off the road? What if there’d been a collision?

What if it was Ronin?

Questions flew around my mind and I had to force myself to focus on the road in front of me. The rational part of my mind was trying to remind me to stay calm but the part that was wholly obsessed with Benjamin, was flying into a full blown panic.

When I’d been on the road for about thirty minutes I was considering turning around and finding another way of finding them when something caught my eye in a ditch by the side of the road. Something that reflected the glow of the headlights.

I pulled the car over and saw the telltale sign of a car wreck. The bumper of black SUV stared up at me from the mud. I followed the trail like breadcrumbs until I saw the vehicle, flipped on its side and wrapped around a tree.

I froze. My blood ran cold. I didn’t want to go any closer, afraid of what I might find. What if Benjamin was dead? What if Vlad was dead? I couldn’t bare it.

Fuck. What if they were lying there injured?

My legs started to move and I flew towards the wreckage, hoping against hope that I wasn’t going to find the corpses or my mate or my brother lying in the mud.

Something was playing through the radio, I could hear it on the wind but I hadn't picked up on it until now. It was a voice speaking words that sounded familiar.

I threw the door open but the car was empty. Glass littered the ground and there was blood coating the interior. No bodies though. I couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not.

Dread washed over me as I realised what the words coming through the radio were. Someone was reading aloud my letters. The letters I wrote to Edwin.

"...a smile as bright as the stars in the night sky. I would wish thee to sit with me, by my side as equals."

I didn't recognise the voice speaking those words I wrote over three centuries ago, but it didn't matter. The ghost of those memories were enough to haunt me.

Where were they? I couldn't see any footprints in the mud. I couldn't see anything but blood and metal and glass.

He must have taken them. Ronin must have some reason for wanting them alive. To use them against me? If that were the case, he'd be keeping them alive.

I was still debating the problem when my phone rang. It was so loud in the quiet night that my entire body jolted. I looked at the screen but it just said, 'No Called ID'.

I answered the call.

“Hello, Damyr. Took you long you enough,” Ronin taunted. “Too busy and distracted with those pesky little raids I organised for you. Sorry about that by the way. I did need your attention elsewhere. Tell me, how does it feel to have a weakness? You know, you really should take better care of your things.”

I clenched my jaw. At least I knew he had them now.

He chuckled darkly. “How about a little game? Everybody loves a game, don’t they? And what’s a game without a little risk. I’ll make you a wager, Damyr. And don’t worry, I’ll make it generous. You can have one of them, but you have to come and collect them. How do you know they’re still alive, I hear you ask. Well, allow me a moment to provide you with proof of life.”

Muffled screams came down the line. Benjamin. All of a sudden, they became louder as if Ronin had moved the phone closer.

“Damyr, don’t. Please,” Benjamin said, his voice hoarse and his words seemed a little slurred, like he was a bit out of it. “No. Stop—” His words cut off with a blood curdling scream.

That sound had a profound effect on me. My entire body twisted with rage and pain, and I could barely see through the anger.

“Benjamin!” I cried, crumpling the frame of the SUV beneath my fingers.

I'd been stabbed, shot, blown up but all that was nothing compared to the pain that hearing his agony caused me. I was going to lose my fucking mind if I had to hear that sound again.

"Let's hear Vladimir now," Ronin continued, sounding almost bored.

There was a sound of a knife plunging into flesh followed by a strangled hiss.

"Fuck you," Vlad shouted.

"Not my type, sweetie," Ronin said with a laugh. "So, who are you going to choose, Damyr? I'm curious. But I suppose you have to find them first. Don't worry. You've been here before. It's my old family home, or what's left of it. Morley Hall. Be seeing you soon."

Ronin hung up and the sound of Benjamin's screams echoed in my ears.

Ronin was a Morley? How? Edwin didn't have a family. Or did he? I racked my brain, but I couldn't recall anyone. It had been so long ago.

I dialled Roxie.

"Oracle of truth speaking, how may I help you?"

"Edwin Thomas Morley. Born circa 1650 at Morley Hall, died 1673. Can you talk me through his family tree?"

"Why?" she asked, her nails clicking over keyboard.

"Someone related to him has Benjamin and Vlad."

Roxie's silence spoke volumes. "Right. Give me a minute." There were more rapid clicks on the keyboard and still my mind replayed those screams. I think I'd be hearing them until I had him back safe in my arms. I wasn't going to chose between them. No fucking way. I'd have them both and then I was going to pull this Ronin apart, limb from fucking limb.

"Okay," Roxie said. "Edwin Thomas Morley, born 8thJune, 1650. Son to William and Mary."

"What about siblings?"

"I can only see one."

One was all I needed. "Who?"

"Hmm, that's strange. He seems to have just disappeared."

"Who?" I paced in front of the car wreck, trying to hold myself together long enough to hunt this fucker down.

"I can't see a full name or birth, but his name is Silas."

I froze, the name striking recognition in my bones.

Silas William Morley. Edwin's younger brother.

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I dialled Byron but it went straight to voicemail. Shit.

Shit!

I sent a quick video message, hoping he'd make it back in time. I needed him. I needed all the help I could get.

I sent a message to Aleksey telling him to gather the rest and meet me at Morley Hall. He replied with a thumbs up and I headed back to my car. I put it into drive and sped towards a place I hadn't seen in centuries. A place i thought I'd left behind in my past with all the other ghosts.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Benji

I must have passed out at some point, the pain becoming too much. Ronin – or rather Silas as he'd introduced himself – had bandaged my thigh. At least he didn't want me to bleed out. Meant he wanted to keep me around for something.

My brain felt foggy, and I was struggling to put two coherent thoughts together. Silas had probably drugged me as well. Not sure why though, considering he was a vampire. Pretty sure I wouldn't be able to outrun him. Maybe he'd just done it for fun.

I had no idea how much time had passed. Had it been hours? I didn't think it had been days yet but there was no real light here. No windows. Just a large space with a

few chairs, a table and what looked to be a bed in the far corner. Had Silas been sleeping here?

“Are you alright?” Vlad asked, his voice a wet rasp.

I was glad to see he was still awake, but he barely looked like he was clinging to consciousness. He was covered in tiny cuts and at some point, he’d stopped heeling.

“Looking better than you,” I said.

He huffed a laugh, then winced. He didn’t look in good shape at all. Silas must have sliced him repeatedly to bleed him and keep him weak. He’d be unable to fight back unless he fed and I doubted there were any willing donors in the vicinity.

“Where’s he gone?” I couldn’t see Silas but that didn’t mean he wasn’t here.

“He’s not gone anywhere,” Silas crooned from the shadows like a monster from a bad horror movie. He stepped into the light, and I got to see his face again. I’d never forget it for as long as I lived. The guy was handsome, in an ethereal way. Platinum white blonde hair and the brightest ruby red eyes. They looked at me like he was looking deep into my soul. Like he saw everything in one tiny blink.

He also looked a couple of inches shorter than me, but he was definitely skinnier. His clothes looked like they drowned him, but maybe that was just the way he liked to wear them. It made him look fragile which I knew he wasn’t. He was a vampire, and he’d managed to catch both of us unaware. Bet Vlad was pissed at that.

“How are you feeling?” Silas said as he dropped into a chair in front of me, his tone bright and cheery. God, I wanted to slap the smile off his face.

“Confused.” I looked at him and held his stare, despite how uncomfortable it made

me feel.

Silas pouted but there was a mockery behind the way his lips pursed. “We can’t have that now, can we? What do you want to know, pretty boy?”

There was really only one question that was circling around my mind. “Why?”

Silas cocked his head and slow blinked like he didn’t understand the question. “You’ll have to be more specific than that. Why is the sky blue? Why do some birds mate for life? Why are you still alive?”

I scowled at him. “Why kidnap me? Or Vlad? Why try and take apart everything that Damyr built? For what purpose.”

He leant forwards, a wide unsettling grin on his face. “That’s a lot of questions but I’m going to tell you a tale. Are you sitting comfortably?”

My ass was numb, I had a stab wound in my thigh and I was pretty sure I had a cracked rib and a few broken fingers. “Not really.”

“That sounds like a ‘you’ problem so tough shit. Now, once upon a time there were two brothers. One was perfect, but the younger brother wasn’t. He was ugly and unloved. Unwanted by his parents and cast aside to spend his days in the shadows. The only person who loved him was his perfect older brother. Which was fine, until his older brother fell in love.” A flash of pure, unadulterated hatred crossed his features.

Realisation dawned on Vlad’s face. “You’re Edwin’s brother.”

“Ding, ding we have a winner,” Silas said, shooting finger guns at Vlad. “But this love story didn’t have a happy ending. After an idyllic summer spent together, Edwin

agreed to spend eternity with Damyr. Only, they caught the attention of Hunters, and it was Edwin who paid the price.”

“Only because your brother was stupid enough to mouth off to anyone who’d listen,” Vlad drawled.

“That’s not true!” Silas shouted.

Vlad just scoffed. “Believe whatever you want, Silas. I don’t care. Telling you the truth now isn’t going to make the blindest bit of difference. Your brother was a fool.”

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“No, he wasn’t!” Silas shouted as he backhanded Vlad across the face hard enough that Vlad’s head snapped backwards. Vlad just laughed and spat out a mouthful of blood.

“Do you know what they did to him?” Silas said to me, his eyes burning with fire. “They strung him up and cut him open from taint to throat and left him there for all to see. They murdered him for loving your precious Damyr and for what? So he could go and marry some whore a few decades later, cast her aside and then fall for some pretty boy. So now I’m going to take away something precious of Damyr’s. Rather poetic, don’t you think?”

“Don’t touch him,” Vlad seethed. I’d never seen the big guy so angry. “I don’t know how you managed to get someone to turn you, I don’t really give a fuck. But if you lay a finger on that boy, you’re going to wish you’d never been born.”

“Touching,” Silas taunted. “But you aren’t exactly in a position to make threats, let alone carry any out. Not that it matters. When Damyr arrives, I’m going to kill you and pretty little Benjamin over here. It’ll be slow and painful and I’m sure there will be lots of screams. Then I’m going to destroy everything Damyr built, piece by fucking piece. And then, when I’ve finally had my fun, I’ll rip his fucking heart out.”

“You won’t get away with this,” I said. “Damyr will make sure you never see another day.”

“Oh, honey,” he said mockingly as he climbed onto my lap. I hissed as his weight fell on my injured thigh. “Damyr will do anything to save you. Even give his life. There’s no way that I don’t win here.”

Vlad scoffed.

“You think that’s amusing?” Silas said.

“I think you underestimate what Damyr is capable of,” Vlad said matter of factly.

“Well, only time will tell.” Silas turned his attention back to me and I flinched under his gaze. There was something unnerving in his eyes, something that hinted at madness wrapped in a cool gaze. Like he was calm on the surface but a raging tempest beneath his skin.

“How did you become a vampire?” I asked, hoping to distract him by getting him to talk about himself.

His lip curled into a smirk that told me he knew exactly what I was doing but he was going to indulge me anyway. “I followed the Hunters that slaughtered my brother. They were good at hunting vampires, just not so great at killing them. They stumbled on a solitary old vampire and tried to take him out. They failed and it gave me an opportunity to strike a deal. And here I am.”

“Here you are,” I echoed.

Silas ran his hand through the curls on top of my head. “You really are pretty, Benjamin. Seems such a waste.”

“You’re pathetic,” Vlad said in a dry tone. “Pining after a dead man who probably gave you attention out of pity.”

Silas’ eyes darkened with hatred. “You know nothing. You weren’t there.”

“No,” Vlad replied with a dry laugh. “But I’m here now and all I can hear is a

pathetic little sob story. So you weren't loved? Well, boo-fucking-hoo."

Silas got up and struck Vlad hard enough across his face that the force of it sent him barrelling to the floor. Vlad just laughed and Silas was on him immediately, his fists pummelling any part of Vlad he could reach.

"Stop!" I screamed. "Stop, please."

Silas froze, his bloody fist poised to slam down into Vlad's face again. He looked at me over his shoulder, his white hair brushing his eyelashes. All I could see was madness staring back at me. I was absolutely fucking petrified.

He stood slowly and moved towards me, his steps predatory. "Oh, Benjamin. You really are something."

"You don't have to do this, Silas." I was relieved I had managed to drag him away from Vlad before he did any more damage. I wasn't going to get through to him, I knew that. But I had to try. Everyone was worth being given the chance. No matter how far off the moral spectrum they'd fallen. I took a chance on Damyr, and it was the best decision I ever made. Maybe Silas just needed someone to do the same for him. "Just let Vlad go. You can still walk away and find something good to live for."

"Sweet, Benjamin," he said, his voice soft. He brushed my curls from my forehead with a bloody finger. I flinched, my stomach churning as Vlad's blood brushed my skin. "You really are precious. For what it's worth, I am sorry you have to die. You probably have some potential to thrive in my world if I could spend the time to shape you into something lethal." He tilted his head to one side, considering something. "Maybe I will keep you. You'd be such a lovely little pet."

"Don't do this, Silas. This can't be your reason for living. It won't satisfy you. All this killing and all this revenge. It might feel good in the moment, but after? You'll

just be empty because you'll have nothing left to live for."

Silas stared at me for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then he threw his head back and laughed. There was no reaching him. No way that I could appeal to his better nature. He either didn't have one, or it was buried so far beneath the madness that he was beyond saving.

Silas wasn't a psychopath like Byron, or brutal like Damyr and Vlad. He was chaos in its extreme. Pure, angry, violent chaos. An intense concoction of emotions, flipping from one to the next so violently, I couldn't predict what emotion would come my way next. I saw it now. The jealousy, longing, lust, and pain. For Damyr and the brother he'd lost. It fuelled him like gasoline.

"You'll never be satisfied," I said. I almost felt sorry for him. I certainly pitied him. After everything, when he finally got what he wanted, he'd be empty. A mere hollow husk of a man.

"You really are something," Silas said as he wiped away the tears streaming from his eyes. "If you somehow make it out of this alive, I'll keep you."

I sighed. There was no hope for him. "Answer me one question, before you inevitably kill me."

"Sure," he said with an indulgent smile. "Why not?"

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“Are you more pissed that you lost your brother, or that Damyr never loved you back?”

The smile fell from Silas’ face and a sneer curled his top lip. “You know nothing!”

I huffed a pathetic laugh and shook my head. “Sure. Whatever you say, Silas.” At the root of all this madness was unrequited love. “You’re a walking cliché.”

That earned me a backhand from him. My head snapped backwards, and my vision went blurry for a few moments. I blinked. Something wet dripping into my eye. Pain sliced through my left eyebrow where he’d split my skin, and I was pretty sure he’d cracked my orbital bone. Fucking asshole. I hoped Damyr ripped him limb from fucking limb.

I could hear Vlad shouting something from his spot on the floor, but my ears were ringing too loud for me to make out what he was saying.

Silas’ face swam in front of me, a wide manic smile splitting his handsome face. “Time for the main event.”

My head spun, and the last thing I thought as the darkness came to collect me, was that I hoped Damyr saved Vlad. He was going to need him when Silas killed me because I was fragile compared to them. I was breakable, and I was convinced that Silas was going to enjoy breaking every single part of me.

Damyr

The ruins of Morley Hall sat proudly on a hill. Still looking serene despite the dilapidated state that the roof was in. My heart clenched as I thought of the summer I'd spent walking the gardens here with Edwin by my side. Looking back on it now, I knew that what I had felt for Edwin was a mere puppy love compared to absolute obsession I felt for Benjamin. I'd been infatuated at a time when my life had lacked any kind of direction, and I'd clung to Edwin like a life raft.

Aleksey and Byron were waiting by a blacked out SUV at the bottom of the driveway with someone I assumed was Bishop, Byron's twin. He looked exactly like Byron, albeit with longer hair and lots of tattoos. All three of them were dressed in full black combat gear looking lethal as fuck.

"I don't know what's waiting for us in there. Silas has either got an army of people or he's on his own." I hoped he was psychotic enough to believe that he could do this on his own, but just in case he thought putting an expendable army in my way was his idea of fun, I'd brought back up.

Byron cocked his gun and eyeballed his twin. "I don't want you going in there."

"Fuck you, Byron," Bishop said with a laugh. "I'm going wherever I want."

Byron scowled. "Nope. Not happening."

Bishop checked his own gun, a smile splitting his face. It was odd seeing Byron seemingly out of his element. He was usually so put together, but he seemed to be hovering around his twin like a little mother hen.

"At least wear a bullet proof vest," Byron chided.

“You’re not wearing one,” Bishop said flatly.

“Perhaps you should,” Aleksey said with a snort. “Might stop you getting shot.”

I had no clue what was happening here, but I was grateful Byron came back. “Thank you, for coming back.”

Byron scowled. “It’s not me you should be thanking. Bishop persuaded me to come and he’s here because I haven’t finished with him yet.”

I held my hand out to Bishop. “Then thank you. You’re more than welcome to stay, as long as you like.”

“Thanks,” he replied, shaking my hand. “Maybe it’s time to stop running.”

Byron barked a laugh. “Like there was ever any chance of you running from me.”

I turned to Aleksey and found him watching the twins with a confused expression knitting his blonde brows. I knew the feeling. Their dynamic was unusual. “Where are Acheron and Wilder?”

“Imminent,” Aleksey replied, not taking his eyes off Byron and Bishop.

There was the sound of a twig snapping and we all turned, guns aimed and ready to shoot.

“Jeez, you guys are on edge,” Wilder drawled as he stepped closer.

Acheron swatted him in the chest. “Have some tact. We’re on a fucking rescue mission.”

“And hopefully a murdering spree,” Byron said gleefully.

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Wilder scoffed in disgust at Byron's words but paused when his eyes clocked Bishop. A tell-tale flush crept up his skin as he stared at him.

Fuck, I didn't have time for this. "I'm going in. Aleksey, you're in charge. Take the team around the perimeter. Take out anyone you see."

"What about you?" Aleksey asked as he tied his long hair up in a messy bun.

"I'm going through the front door." I had to believe that Silas wanted me alive. He wanted to play a game, that meant, he wanted me walking through the front door.

Aleksey gave me a final nod and disappeared into the shadows with the others.

I walked up to the front door, my heart trying to escape up my throat. It was taking all my restraint to keep my pace leisurely. To walk like I had all the time in the world when really, I wanted to fly through the house and slaughter the ghost from my past.

I wasn't surprised to find the door unlocked. It was barely hanging onto the door frame, but I kicked it in all the same. I could hear the faint thud of Benjamin's heart echoing from somewhere deep in the house. It was louder than the others but that was only because it was familiar. As I listened, I counted at least twenty other human hearts. Silas was a fool. Those men would be dead in seconds. I was almost disappointed he hadn't given my men something more worthy of their talents.

Floorboards creaked beneath my feet as I climbed the staircase, following the sound of Benjamin's heart. It was beating fast, a rapid rhythm that had panic flaring in my chest. Vlad's was steady and slow, but he was always calm under pressure.

“Come out, come out wherever you are,” I called into the darkness.

“Always so impatient, Damyr,” Silas taunted, his voice as soft as I remembered, and I wondered how much of the quiet, shy boy remained. “Why don’t you come and find me?”

I knew I was walking into a trap. Knew that his plan was for me to lose everything so, as I stepped deeper into the dust filled depths of Morley Hall, I asked myself, what choice did I really have?

The door to Edwin’s old chamber was propped open.

Yep. Definitely all the hallmarks of a trap.

I pushed the door open and struggled to wrap my head around what I was seeing. Two glass coffins lay side by, both positioned on long tables to keep them off the ground. I wasn’t expecting any of this. Benjamin was in the left one, Vlad in the right. Both were bound with black gags over their mouths, and their hands tied to their chests. They looked peaceful but that was probably because there was no room for them to kick and scream.

My heart lurched as I continued to listen to Benjamin’s heart. It raced, panic and fear speeding it up. I never thought I’d ever be so affected by a human, but there I was, staring at him and deciding what was the quickest way to get him out just so I could hold him and never let go of him ever again.

His eyes met mine for a brief moment and a surge of anger ripped through me as I saw the injuries on his face. My beautiful Benjamin, what had he done to you?

“Hello again, Damyr,” Silas said as he stepped out of the shadows at the other end of the room. I was struck by how similar he looked. He still had his boyish features and

white blonde hair, but his eyes were different. When he was alive, they'd been the palest blue. Now, they were a bright ruby red. He'd been sired by a Master Vampire. Fuck. That meant he was more powerful than I could probably imagine.

Madness stared back at me from the shadows. Madness and manic glee.

"Silas. It's been a while."

He laughed, but there was a harshness to it. "Let's get started, shall we? Some of us don't have a lot of time." He tapped his nails on the glass coffins.

The sound of gunshots filtered through from somewhere deep in the house.

"I see your friends have found the welcoming committee." Silas walked closer, his red lips pulled back in an evil smile.

"You didn't think I'd come alone, did you?"

"Of course not. I'd have been disappointed if you spoiled all my fun."

From what I could tell, Silas wasn't armed. His charcoal grey shirt and black slacks didn't exactly leave a lot of room for hiding weapons.

"I'm not armed," he said, confirming my thoughts. He tucked his hands in his pockets, looking far too at ease for someone who had kidnapped two people and caused havoc.

"Cut to the chase, Silas," I managed to get out through gritted teeth. "What's the catch?"

His grin widened. "Catch? There is no catch. I meant what I said, Damyr. You can

choose one. Both of them are lying down on a pressure sensor. You move one, the other person in the other coffin gets stabbed with something lethal. For Vlad, there is a solution of tiny silver particles in a syringe poised just beneath his back that will shoot through his ribs and directly into his heart. For Benjamin here, same thing but a syringe filled with potassium chloride. Basically, a lethal injection but without the sedative. You've got ten minutes to choose, or they both die."

I pulled out my gun and aimed it at him. "I could just shoot you."

Silas pouted. "You could, but then you're running the risk of losing both. Save one, and I'll release the other. Kill me, and you'll lose them both. Tick tock, Damyr."

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I looked at both the cases, trying to find a weakness in them but there was nothing I could obviously see. I fired a bullet at the one with Vlad in but only a web of fractures appeared in the surface. I should have guessed that the glass would be bullet proof, but it was worth a shot.

“Tut tut. Do you really think I’m that stupid? Come on now, you’re running out of time.”

Vlad looked at me through the side of his coffin, his eyes conveying more than words could ever say. He already knew my choice and he was okay with that. He knew it long before Silas had put him in the box.

He nodded and closed his eyes. Ready to surrender to death.

I rushed forward, ignoring the way Benjamin’s eyes widened. There was a small black rectangular pad at the base of the coffin. I’d missed it when I first looked at the coffins, too distracted by trying to save Benjamin.

“So predictable, Damyr,” Silas drawled as he pressed his thumb against into the pad. As soon as the lid opened, I ripped the gag from Benjamin’s mouth.

“It’s a trap,” he shouted as I unfastened the ropes around his wrist and chest. He wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t already know. I lifted him up and out of the coffin, releasing the mechanism in Vlad’s coffin. A sinking feeling had the pit of my stomach dropping like lead. Vlad cried out in pain and I couldn’t look. I was too much of a coward to see what my decision to save Benjamin had cost me.

I turned to the door and found Silas blocking the exit with his gun pointed at us.

“It was never about us,” Benjamin said as his clung to my jacket. “It was always about you.”

“What?” I said, struggling to put the pieces together.

“Your little pet is right,” Silas spat, his anger making his hand tremble as he aimed the gun at us. “All these years I’ve waited for this. Did you really think I was ever going to let you go? Come on, Damyr! Think! I hate you for what you did, for what you stole from me. My family was murdered. I was an outcast, forced to beg for scraps on the side of the road until I managed to find the Hunters who had killed Edwin. I was lucky enough to find a vampire willing to make a deal and he tortured me for years as his plaything. He didn’t even see his death coming, the fool. Now, it’s your turn to suffer.”

The next few seconds happened in a blur. Silas pulled the trigger, intent on hitting me with a silver bullet. I prepared to fly towards him, to tackle him to the ground, knowing that I was probably going to get shot in the heart. But I didn’t care. I was taking him with me.

Except that didn’t happen.

The gun fired and, at the same time, I heard a sound that made my blood run cold.

One minute Benjamin was behind me, the next he was stood in front of me, his eyes wide with shock as he fell to the ground with a thud.

No!

Time froze. It couldn’t have been more than the smallest portion of a second, but it

felt like a lifetime.

Feet pounded into the room but I couldn't take my eyes off Benjamin. What had I done?

I surged towards Benjamin, not caring if Silas had the power to shoot me or not. Without Benjamin there was no point in living. He was my everything.

If he died...

He was breathing. Thank God. But there was so much blood. I pushed down on the wound in his chest, but the blood just kept seeping through my fingers.

I looked around in a panic. The others had made it into the room and were taking in the chaos in front of them. Silas had been forced to his knees as Bishop held a gun to his head. The bastard was still smiling as he watched me fall apart.

"Damyr," Aleksey said as he knelt down beside me. "Turn him."

I shook my head. He wasn't sure what he wanted, I couldn't take that choice away from him. "No. I can't. We... I... We haven't..."

Silas laughed bitterly. "Poor Damyr. Too afraid to turn your precious love?"

"Get him out of here!" Aleksey barked.

"Wait," I said, my voice sounding distant. "His thumb opens the case."

I heard the twins move Silas around the room and the soft hiss as they got into the coffin holding Vlad. I'd think about all that later, though. I needed to save Benjamin. I knew I had to turn him, knew it was the only way to save him, but I had hoped we'd

do this differently.

“Benjamin,” I choked out. He was barely conscious. His eyes fluttered and they rolled back into his head. “Stay with me, just long enough.”

Just long enough for me to save you.

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I slammed my fangs into the side of his neck and prayed I was doing the right thing.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Benji

I thought that when I'd closed my eyes, it would have been the last time I ever saw Damyr's face. So when I opened them to a bright light that burned the backs of my retinas, relief like nothing else flooded through me. The second thing I felt, was a large warm hand wrapped around mine.

Damyr lay in the bed next to me, his eyes fixed on my face. There were some dark circles under his eyes, and he looked like he hadn't slept in days.

"Hi," I said, my voice cracked and hoarse.

"Hi," he replied. I winced. His voice was so loud. "Sorry, you'll get used to that."

"Used to what?"

Sorrow filled his gaze, and he stroked a finger along my jaw. "What do you remember?"

I thought back to what happened. I remembered the car wreck, Silas and the coffins. I remembered Silas aiming the gun and the pain as I jumped in front of the bullet. "Did I die?"

“Almost.”

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach. “Did you turn me?”

He nodded. “I had to, or I would have lost you and I wasn’t ready for that. Not when I’d just found you.”

I thought I’d be mad, but actually I didn’t feel anything other than acceptance. “To be honest, before the car wreck, I was thinking I’d probably make this decision anyway.”

Damyr’s face lit up. “Really?”

“Yeah. I’d accepted that what I felt for you, whilst unhealthy, still felt right. I just wasn’t sure that I was quite ready to become a vampire, but I guess Silas made that decision for us. Where is he by the way? Did you kill him?”

“No, I didn’t. He’s in the basement.”

“And what about Vlad?”

“He’s fine. Turns out, Silas had planned to make me watch him tear him apart so there was never any silver in the syringe, just a sedative.”

I rolled over and curled into Damyr, content to be wrapped in his embrace. “Good, I’m glad.” I really would have been sad if the big guy had died. I definitely counted him as a friend and would have missed him if he wasn’t here anymore.

“So where does that leave us?” I asked, my nerves feeling like the edges were fraying.

Damyr took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Well, it will take you some time to adjust to your new life, but I’m hoping that you still want to be with me. That I can teach you and help you learn how to be a vampire.”

“That sounds perfect to me.” And it did. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with this man who barraged into my life with a gun and a kidnapping. It was crazy, but I knew I was right where I wanted to be. I was home.

“Good,” Damyr said as he placed a kiss on the top of my head. “Now go to sleep and get some rest.”

“Stay with me?”

“Benjamin, nothing would ever drag me away from you. You’re mine and I am not letting you out of my sight ever again.”

Absolutely fucking perfect.

A week later and I was already zooming around, trying to sneak up on Vlad and failing miserably. I was definitely learning to hone my skills though. According to Damyr, I’d taken to being a vampire like a duck to water. He was probably biased, and I was merely doing okay, but I didn’t care. I was loving my new life. The only thing missing was Maya and finishing my residency. Damyr had finally fired their previous Doc, and I was filling in for now. I thought I would have found it difficult to be around blood but because I was Damyr’s mate, the only blood that I went crazy for, was his.

We hadn’t mated yet, but I was ready. I was going to surprise him tonight. I had already told Vlad to clear Damyr’s schedule, and he’d looked at me with a knowing

grin. I didn't care if everyone knew what we were doing, I wanted the world to know he was mine. Guess his possessiveness was rubbing off on me.

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Bishop was settling into the mansion life as well. He was sharing a room with Byron, but I was beginning to see the effect it was having on Byron. He seemed less impulsive, more measured and calmer when his twin was nearby. When he was on his own it was, well, it was definitely noticeable. Turns out, Bishop was handy with computers and technical stuff, so he was helping Roxie with some things so she could focus on the baby. Wilder had also stuck around, which was admittedly odd. I thought that after the business with Silas, he would have wanted to return home, but it seemed like he'd found a new calling in pissing off Acheron and winding up the twins.

Aleksey was still moping around like an angry elf, but he'd sort of adopted my cat. Between him and Vlad, I never saw Maurice anymore. I didn't mind. That cat was getting more attention than ever, and he was certainly putting on some timber. He was going to be a fat little pampered cat soon and I don't think he'd ever been happier.

I tracked Damyr down in his office and smiled when I saw his head bent over some paperwork, a frown drawing his brows down as he scowled at whatever was on there.

I cleared my throat and he looked up at me, his scowl instantly melting away. God, he was gorgeous. Those blue eyes that were impossibly bright and that jaw that was sharper than one of Byron's precious knives.

"Benjamin, what can I do for you?"

"Well," I said, dropping my voice to a low rasp. "I was thinking about going to bed for a few days and thought you might like to join me?"

His eyes widened and flashed silver in the low light. “You mean...?”

I nodded, curling my bottom lip between my teeth. “I’m ready.”

Damyr shot out of his chair and grabbed my hand, racing towards his chambers. I laughed as he used vampire speed to get us there quicker and as soon as the door was shut, my back was against it and his mouth was pressed against mine. I was so ready for this. For our future together.

I was ready to claim that eternity he promised me, and I was going to stand by his side for the rest of my days.

Damyr ripped me out of my clothes and I did the same to him, eager to get my hands on his skin. He trailed his mouth down my throat, his fangs nipping at my skin and sending shivers down my spine. I hopped up and wrapped my legs around his waist and he walked us towards the bed.

“Damyr,” I groaned. “Please.”

I couldn’t wait. My body was itching to be connected with his in the most intimate ways.

“Don’t you want this slow and romantic?” he asked with a smile before sucking two of his fingers into his mouth.

I shook my head. “No, I want you to fuck me into the mattress. You can make that romantic if you want, but I definitely don’t want it slow. We’ve got plenty of time for that.”

“God, you’re fucking perfect,” he rasped as he sank two fingers into me.

I hissed as he breached me, the burn sharp but he found my prostate with ease and I moaned. “Fuck.”

“That’s the idea, love,” he said as he stroked my spot. My dick was so hard, leaking pre-cum on my stomach as Damyr worked his fingers in and out, opening me up ready to take his cock.

He kept going for another minute or two until I was writhing beneath him, my body trembling with absolute fucking need. My gums itched as my fangs started to lengthen, needing to sink into his neck and complete the bond. I could feel the urge to mark him burning under my skin. Like an inevitable thing I couldn’t ignore. This was going to happen, and I wanted it to happen now.

“I need it now, Damyr,” I begged. “Please.”

He lined his cock up with my entrance and he paused to look down at me. His own fangs were peeking beneath his top lip and my skin tingled with anticipation. This was it. There was no going back after this. Not that I wanted to. I wanted forever with him.

“I love you,” I said, and my heart soared as I said the words aloud.

His smile was warm and his eyes shimmered as he gazed down at me. “I might have stolen you at the beginning, but you’re the one who’s stolen my heart.”

Oh my God, that was so cheesy, but I loved every word. “Damyr, please.”

Then he entered me in one smooth thrust. A gasp left my lips, and my eyes rolled back as the feeling of fullness settled deep inside me. Damyr’s rhythm was fast and brutal from the start, clearly as eager to start the mating bond as I was.

His mouth claimed mine in a open mouthed kiss that was more an exchanging of moans and gasps than it was anything else.

“More, please. Damyr. God, I need you.”

He growled and snapped his hips quicker, his cock brushing against my spot and pushing me closer to the edge. My toes curled, and pleasure started to unfurl at the base of my spine as the tell tale signs of my orgasm started to build.

On instinct, I thrust my hands into Damyr’s hair, yanked his head sideways and buried my fangs into the side of his neck. His blood instantly filled my mouth, a sweet nectar that I drank down. I exploded as the first drop of it hit my tongue, my release shooting from my dick without me even touching it.

A sharp sting sliced registered somewhere in my brain as Damyr bit into my neck and bliss zinged through my veins, extending my orgasm and making my body tremble and shudder.

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As my orgasm faded, I felt the bond weaving into my core like a living thing, tying me to Damyr in a way I never could have ever imagined. I could feel him in my soul, like a thought in my mind and a sensation under my skin. Tears pooled in my eyes as joy spread through my body. Joy and love and euphoria.

I gasped a breath as I let it all sink in, amazement and wonder filling my brain. Damyr brushed my tears away with his thumbs, a sappy smile tugging his mouth into a beautiful curl.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. More than okay.” I felt as high as a fucking kite. “I’m going to need a minute.”

Damyr rocked his hips, pushing his dick against my prostate. My entire body spasmed. “I’m only going to give you a minute. I need to do that again, but slower. I’m going to make love to you, Benjamin. Then I’ll fuck you against the wall, in the shower. Anywhere I want to, because you’re mine.”

I smiled up at him. Pretty sure it was a goofy smile because I was drunk on him. “Always and forever.”

“Absolutely. There’s no escape from me. And even if you tried to run, I’d just kidnap you and tie you up in the basement again.”

I pulled him in for a kiss, smiling against his lips. “You know that makes you sound like a psycho?”

“Oh, I’m not a psycho. Violent and obsessive maybe. And besides, you’re the one who’s just tied themselves to me for all eternity. I think that makes you the crazy one.”

I laughed and kissed him again, feeling happier than I ever have before. “Let’s just call it a draw.”

The End.