



The Vampire's Mate

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Description: Ryder never imagined he would settle down. His life was nothing more than a blur of parties and nameless faces traipsing in and out of his bedroom. A year later, his whole world had been flipped on its axis.

Working at his boyfriend's bar, Ryder's putting together his newest signature cocktail, the Flight Risk: one ounce booze, two ounces of being bound by fate to a vampire, a splash of things going horrifically wrong, served with a violent, flaming garnish. Salt rim optional.

A hangover is the least of his worries.

The Vampire's Mate is Book Two in the Neon Moonlight series, and should be read in order following The Vampire's Kiss.

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Chapter 1

With a smile, I ushered out the last pair of customers. Liz had officially reopened a month ago, and people flocked to the pub, wanting to see the famous bar that rose from the ashes. Despite the long, exhausting shifts, I was happy to be back in business—I didn't do well with idle hands. But even I was ready to admit we could use some extra help. There was just too much for the two of us to handle on our own, which led to minimal alone time—and I was certainly feeling the effects.

We fell into our usual roles easily enough: James was in the office tending to paperwork, and I started cleaning the bar. I filled a basin with dishes and moved toward the kitchen, stopping in my tracks when the sound of soft, twangy country music filtered through the speakers.

Luke Combs.

James rounded the corner into the front of house, and my stomach did a flip. I set the basin down and ducked my head to hide the flush creeping up into my cheeks. "What's this about?"

He came to a stop in front of me. His black hair was disheveled, as if he'd been running his fingers through it. "You could use a little Luke Combs time."

He placed a hand on my hip and tugged, closing the space between us. "I could use a little you time."

My arms found their place around his neck as we started swaying in time to the

music. My tongue darted out to wet my lips and his eyes tracked the movement.

I kissed him, feeling him smile against my mouth. Tension melted from my body, and I relaxed into his touch, welcoming his tongue when it prodded for entry. His hand flattened on the small of my back and pulled me closer, sliding under the hem of my shirt. I moaned, the contact tingling my skin. Goosebumps trailed after his fingers, my heartbeat skyrocketing.

We stayed that way for ages, swaying to the soft rhythm of the music, trading lazy kisses and shameless touches. The twang of the guitar and Luke's smooth baritone combined with the soft buzz I had lulled me into a sense of comfort that felt... dangerous. I didn't often let my guard down, but trapped between the warmth of James's palm on my back and the way he heated his body to warm us both—well, I was drunk off those sensations alone.

I rested my chin on his shoulder, letting him tuck me in closer. One song faded into another until I no longer recognized the words. I turned my head, nose grazing along the cleft of his ear. "Come home with me."

James's reaction was little more than a slight twitch of his fingers. He pulled back, giving me a glimpse of that intoxicating red swirling around his beautiful brown eyes—a dead giveaway that hereallyliked that idea. With a raised brow, he asked, "Is that an invitation or an order?"

I held him tighter. "Does it matter?"

He snorted. "Fuck, no." He whispered his next words in my ear. "You've got me wrapped around your little finger, you know that?"

"I'd rather have you wrapped around something else."

He laughed, the sound warming my chest, then pulled back and held his hand out. “Keys.”

I fished them from my pocket and dropped them into his palm, then yelped as he snatched my fingers and pulled me along behind him. James led me to my car sparing no chivalry as he opened my door and closed it behind me after I was safely buckled in. A year ago, those small acts would’ve made me feel nothing short of smothered. They would have made me run for the hills. Now though...

As he drove, I found myself tugging on his hand, wanting him closer.

James was on me the second we stepped out of the car, grabbing my waist and moving in close. His lips trailed up the back of my neck as he rolled his hips, letting me feel the hard bulge against my ass. He fumbled with my keys to find the one for my front door. When it finally swung open, the unmistakable sound of a sassy Husky rang out through the dark house.

“Do something with that beast,” James growled, taking away any ability to do so by pinning me against the doorframe and sealing his lips to my neck.

“The sooner you move, the sooner I can.”

With obvious reluctance, he pulled away and paced the length of the living room while I freed Carlos from the kitchen, where he was restrained by a baby gate. In a lucky turn of events, I’d adopted a Husky that hated the cold, so he did his business quickly and snuggled under his blanket.

Five minutes later I was leading James down the hall to my bedroom. There was something different about our dynamic tonight. Normally, we’d be furiously ripping at each other’s clothes and fumbling toward the bed, eagerly chasing release.

Tonight, we were content to take things slow. As I turned and locked the door, James approached me and wrapped his arms around my waist. A soft kiss to my lips, then he was on my neck. My head fell back, my lips parting in a sigh. He sucked, pulling blood to the surface. I think I'd had a permanent hickey since the first time he bit me. Not that I minded. I treasured having that physical memory stamped on my skin every time I looked in the mirror.

Fangs tickled my flesh. I speared my hand through his hair to hold him in place. He licked and nibbled, waiting for permission to drink. "Do it," I whispered.

The words had barely left my lips when I felt the sting, then I was floating. With one short draw, he licked over the bite to seal it shut, then popped off my skin. "I want you to do something for me," he whispered against my mouth. He stole a quick kiss, sharing a hint of my own metallic taste. "But you can say no."

"What is it?"

James hesitated. He was nervous, vulnerable. He pressed his forehead against mine, and his skin shimmered in the moonlight streaming through the window. "Take me," he finally said, voice quivering. "I know we've never done it that way before, but I?"

"Hey." I felt a sudden need to comfort him. "You don't have to explain. If you want to take me for a ride, I'm here for it." My smirk faded as I brushed his cheek. "Is everything okay?"

He nodded. "I want you, love. All of you."

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Something lingered in the air between us, a lilt to James's voice that told me he was hiding something. But now wasn't the time to overthink.

My vampire needed me.

I stroked his cheek with my thumb. "Lay down on the bed for me, gorgeous."

I pushed him back until he collapsed onto the mattress. I pounced, capturing his mouth once again. His lips parted, inviting me in for a deeper taste as he slid back, allowing me space to crawl onto the bed between his legs. With a knee grinding against his thick length, I lowered myself on top of him.

He bucked against my thigh, thanking me without words. I deepened the kiss, hands mapping out every ridge and groove of his toned body. If the sweet little sounds and quiet pleas for more were any indication, he approved.

I knew what it meant for James to hand control over—to submit to me. The act triggered something deep within me, something primal that had been lying dormant. His hands glided down my back, cupping my ass. The drag of his cock against mine pulled a growl from deep in my chest.

I slid my fingers under his hoodie, working the fabric off and tossing it aside. My hands worked his belt open with a satisfying sound. I popped the button, and his zipper fell down easily. I yanked the rest of his clothes off all at once, and paused to admire his form. Moonlight poured in through the blinds, playing across his pale chest and highlighting his abs. He watched closely as I undressed over him. First my hoodie went flying to the floor. I kicked my shoes to the side, then started to work at

my jeans. They were so tight I practically had to peel them down my thighs, but James's intrigued eyes never left mine.

Silently, I nudged James into place: on his back with his head on the pillows. As he shifted into position, I climbed back onto the bed. My heart was racing like it was our first time again, and I fought like hell to keep my breathing under control. He had a way of bringing out the things inside of me that I never knew were there—like nerves.

But as I knelt between his legs and his eyes raked over my body, I shoved it all aside. I'd never seen such uncertainty in those eyes, such insecurity. He needed me to be the strong one right now.

"You're sure about this?" My voice, though barely a whisper, was loud in the quiet room.

James gripped the mattress above his head, shifting his hips to allow me better access. Electricity crackled in the air. Every hair on my body stood on end. He nodded. "Please, love. I need you."

Fuck.

The lube fell to the bed. I leaned over, swallowing his moan as our bare cocks met. James released the mattress, tangling his fingers in my hair. He tugged and I hissed, my cock jerking at the sharp sting.

I loved it.

With expert finesse, I snatched the lube bottle and drizzled cool liquid over my fingers. James blessed me with another beautiful sound when I paused long enough to share the lube with him. I rolled his balls softly in my palm before feathering my

touch lower. Finally, I slid between his cheeks.

He warmed beneath me, heating the lube for both of us. I broke the kiss, ducking out of the way when he chased me for another. “Do you know what I need you to do?” He nodded quickly, and I circled his hole with the pad of my finger, feeling his skin twitch under my touch. He eased back into the pillow and his muscles relaxed more with each passing second. “That’s it, baby. Let me in.”

James sighed and adjusted his hips. A drop of precome glistened in the moonlight on his belly. I pushed into him, coaxing him open with one finger and adding a second when he begged for it. He grit his teeth and bore down, impatient, and I felt the ring of muscle squeeze around my fingers.

I chuckled, reaching for the bottle and drizzling lube over my cock. “Touch yourself for me?”

He surprised me by shaking his head. “If I do, I’ll lose it and—ah!”

I’d curled my fingers, grazing over his prostate. “Come on, vampire,” I coaxed. “Let me see it.” I watched him, a shuddering breath escaping as I finally fisted my own aching erection. I smeared lube and precome over my shaft and waited.

One of James’s hands crept south. He cried out and I added a third finger, squeezing the base of my cock to stave off my own orgasm. Now with my fingers fully submerged to the knuckle, I settled between his legs. “Are you ready?”

“Yes. Ryder, fuck. Fuckme.” His hips jerked, pushing his cock through his fist. “Please.”

I withdrew my fingers and lined myself up, pausing to cool myself off a notch. James rocked over my cockhead, and I clenched my jaw. I wouldn’t be able to take my time

with him the way I wanted to. It'd been a long time coming—for both of us. Desperate, I pushed through and nearly lost it when James's hole fluttered around my shaft. I paused, but his hand quickened, spurring me on.

With gentle rocks of my hips, I worked him open inch by inch. His warmth enveloped me, his body the right kind of tight. I bottomed out, forcing my eyes open. He thrashed, hand pumping furiously. "Ryder," he moaned, sheer desperation coating his voice. Each pass of his palm over his shaft milked clear, delicious liquid onto his stomach. My mouth started to water.

I stretched out, fitting us together. "I won't last long," I warned.

"Me either. Move!"

He punctuated his plea with a cry, my cock punching into him. I'd fantasized being inside him more times than I could count, but even the wildest dream couldn't hold a candle to the real thing. I wanted to savor it. I wanted to pause time, capture that feeling and store it away in my memories to cherish forever.

But James keened, solidifying my imminent climax. His hips worked, fucking himself on my cock. I cursed and brought my mouth to his. "Don't worry, baby. I've got you."

I pinned his hands beside his head, letting our fingers twist together. James couldn't touch himself, but before he could protest, I snapped my hips back and caught his sweet spot again as I rocked forward. He grunted into my mouth before breaking our kiss, sputtering and crying. I picked up my pace, each thrust timed with the beats of my heart. Sweat drenched my hair and trickled down my temples.

The knot in my stomach tightened, my spine tingled, and my pace became uneven. "I'm close."

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“Fuck!” James threw his head back against the pillow. Hot, sticky spurts of come splashed his chest and stomach, slickening our skin.

I eyed the mess, drooling so much that a drop of saliva fell and mixed with his release. With a smile, he swiped two fingers through the small puddle and brought them to my lips—which I accepted like I hadn’t eaten in days. His venom altered the flavor, and I hummed as the now familiar sweet taste of honey spread over my tongue.

That tipped me over the edge. James gasped as my cock pulsed and erupted, spilling inside him. I groaned around his fingers. I knew what he was feeling right at that moment, and my heart warmed knowing it was ~~me~~ who was making him feel that way.

I rode out my orgasm, holding myself in place until my arms threatened to buckle. I wasn’t about to move until he signaled he was ready. When he finally gave me a nod, I pulled out of him and rested back on my knees, shaking feeling into my arms before climbing off the bed.

I froze when he captured my hand with his. Pleading eyes looked back at me. “Stay.”

“I’ll be right back,” I promised, sealing it with a kiss to his knuckles.

Reluctantly, he let go. I went to the bathroom and returned with a warm, wet cloth. When he saw what I was holding, he looked bashful. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.”

I kissed him again, wiping him clean as I did so. I discarded the cloth before climbing under the blankets. He curled into my side and half on top of my chest, tracing lazy circles around the crescent-shaped birthmark on my ribcage.

I squirmed. “What is it with you and that mark?”

“I was actually hoping we could talk about that. How does tomorrow afternoon sound?”

I raised a brow. “Tomorrow afternoon? How... specific.”

“Well, yeah.” He rested his chin on my chest, giving me a lazy smile. “The morning after is your favorite, after all.”

Fuck.

My heart hammered against my ribcage.

I was tired. Scratch that; I was exhausted. But as I looked into those sparkling eyes of his and fumbled for something—anything—to say, one phrase balanced on the tip of my tongue.

Three words that could change everything.

Three words that scared the shit out of me.

Three words I wasn’t entirely ready for.

So instead of uttering those three words, I clenched my hand in his hair and hauled him into a blistering kiss as I went in for round two.

Chapter 2

It couldn't have been more than a few hours later that my eyes peeled open. The room was still submerged in darkness, save for the soft glow of the moon through the sheer curtains. I faced away from James, but I felt his attention on me.

Every now and then he'd force himself to doze but that night, there was a certain edge to the energy in the room—an uneasy charge that almost made me roll over and press him for information.

But as I turned and tucked myself into his neck, his arms fell around my waist and that plan went out the window. The only thing I wanted was him.

“What time is it?” I murmured against his skin.

“Too early,” he answered with a kiss to the top of my head. “Go back to sleep.”

I grimaced and forced the next words out of my mouth. “Are you sure we shouldn't have that talk? You seem unsettled.”

He chuckled, the sound vibrating my skin. “Don't worry about me. We'll talk soon enough. Get some more rest.”

I nuzzled deeper into his neck, and the combination of his hand in my hair and his lips on my skin sent me right back to sleep.

The next time I woke up, it was the sun's fault. Shading my eyes with one hand, I reached out for James with the other, but I only found cold sheets. I pried my eyes open, rubbing the sleep away as I looked around the room for him.

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The bathroom light was off, so he wasn't in the shower. He wouldn't have left without saying goodbye.

The coffeemaker in the kitchen started gurgling. I smiled, dragging myself from the bed.

Once I was washed and dressed, I followed the country music floating down the hallway. James always knew when I entered a room, but he let me pretend to catch him dancing in the kitchen—in nothing but his underwear. I leaned against the doorway, inhaling the aroma of coffee and watching him until the song faded away. Only then did he look over his shoulder and give me that heart-stopping smile. The ridiculous grin on my own face was completely involuntary.

“Morning, love.”

I shivered, goosebumps pebbling my skin. Damn, the man's voice alone did things to me I couldn't explain. “Morning. Someone's in a good mood.”

His eyes raked over my body. “How can I not be when you're standing there looking like that.” He approached, fingering the hickey on my neck. “You look so damn good with my mark on you.”

I preened under the praise. James leaned in, and I tipped my head back in invitation. I hummed, and his tongue darted out to swipe across the tender skin. “Don't get me riled up,” I groaned, though my cock was already rising in interest.

James chuckled. “Doesn't take much with you, does it?”

His fangs elongated, eager to play, and I wriggled out of his grip. “I’m serious, James.” I took a long pull from my coffee, letting it burn its way down my throat and distract me from the pressing need hanging between my thighs. “I can’t fall victim to your spell right now. The Jenkins clan gets in this morning and I promised I’d pick them up at the airport.”

He continued peppering my skin with kisses—lighter ones, thankfully. Those I could handle while I drank my coffee. “I’d forgotten. I guess we’re postponing that talk?”

Was that hope in his voice? I was starting to think that maybe James was avoiding the conversation as much as I usually did. “Well, they’ve been flying all night.” I arched toward his touch. “Th-they’ve probably b-been awake with—fucking hell.” That damned tongue! James was shaking with laughter. “I’m glad you find this funny!”

He pulled back, hooked a finger under my chin, and tugged me in for a chaste kiss on my lips. “Simply a reminder of what’s waiting for you tonight. You’ve got breakfast in the microwave. I have to open the bar.”

“Cocktease,” I muttered under my breath, knowing he heard me clear as day.

I pushed away from the doorframe, tending to Carlos and finishing up my morning routine. In Hannah’s room, I made one last sweep to make sure it was clean. Not that Raleigh cared much for cleanliness, but Angel had enough trouble sleeping as it was. He didn’t need anything adding to his stress.

Boston Logan International Airport was about an hour away, and I was buzzing in my seat the whole drive. After they’d had to postpone their trip by a month because the baby got sick, I was ready to see them. Raleigh and I hadn’t seen each other in over a year, and I almost couldn’t believe how much had changed. I wasn’t surprised in the slightest when they eloped—astronauts in outer space could see that the two men were in love—but now they were dads. Even more outrageously, I’d abandoned my

partyphase to do the same thing, moving to a cozy little town to be closer to my daughter.

And James. God, he was one thing I never saw coming. I didn't want to panic too much by overthinking our situation, but we were comfortable. I didn't see why it had to be any more complicated than that.

To save everyone the trauma of jumping into the car with the baby, I parked and went inside. I scanned the crowd of people, knowing that I had no chance in hell of missing Raleigh anywhere. At 6' 4", the man towered over the other passengers—and his husband, Angel, who barely touched his shoulder. Both men had the most striking blue eyes I'd ever seen, and they seemed to shine in the crowd as they met mine. Angel's hair was a little shorter, Raleigh's a little shaggier, but for the most part they looked the same as the last time I'd seen them. As they cleared the crowd and stepped closer, the newest member of the Jenkins family came into view. Raleigh minded the luggage while Angel carried their precious cargo close to his chest.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were excited to see me, Mr. Clark," Raleigh said, stepping close and wrapping me up in his big arms. He crushed me tight against his broad chest, squeezing the breath from my lungs.

"Don't get your hopes up, big guy." I shoved him away playfully and turned to his husband. Or more specifically, the bundle in his arms. "I'm only here for her."

Genevieve, Evie for short, was sleeping soundly, so I didn't dare touch her. It was a conscious choice. Not because Angel was giving me a look that could put me six feet under.

"Good to see you, Angel." I gave him a quick squeeze on the shoulder. He'd never been one for physical contact—unless it was from Raleigh.

He made a show of ducking around me and looking over his shoulder. “I thought we’d get to meet your boyfriend. Raleigh can’t shut up about him.”

Raleigh grinned and shrugged. “I mean, have you seen him?”

Angel’s glare shifted from me to him.

I took the rolling suitcase from him. “He’s at Liz’s. Our new bartender doesn’t start for a few more days. Don’t give me that look, you’ll meet him tonight.”

“I don’t think we’ll be up for much socializing.” Angel said, ever the anxious one.

Before I could get a word in, Raleigh pulled his husband close. “It’s not socializing if they live together, darling.”

“We don’t live together!” I called, refusing to let him see the lie on my face.

We crossed into the parking structure and I hit the button on my key fob to unlock the doors. Once I’d tossed the luggage into the trunk, Raleigh perched against my vehicle while Angel installed the car seat.

I thought we’d moved on, but Raleigh’s grin told me otherwise. “So when’s the last time James spent any time at his own home? He’s at your place almost every time I call you.”

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“Okay, well, it was nice to see you and lovely meeting Evie. When’s your flight home?”

Raleigh laughed, the piercings in his cheeks swallowed by his dimples. “Missed you too, Ryder.”

Thankfully, even he wasn’t about to risk Angel’s wrath if Evie woke up early from her nap, so we drove most of the way home in silence. He took a note out of his daughter’s book and leaned his head against the window to sleep.

Angel, however, stayed wide awake, his eyes on his daughter the whole ride. With every little hiccup or gurgle she made, I started. By the third or fourth, Angel snickered. “She’s fine,” he assured me. “Trust me, the entirety of the Northeast would know if she’s upset.”

“I missed this phase, remember?”

“How is she?”

I couldn’t help the smile that tugged at my lips. “Hannah’s doing great. She loves school. Loves the independence even more. She’s been spending more time at Kian’s place, though. Her roommate turned out to be a bit of a slob.”

Evie gurgled again, and Angel distracted her with a rattle attached to the handle of her seat. “Does she get along with James?”

“A little too well. I think they might gang up on me soon.”

“Count me in on that,” Raleigh mumbled groggily. “They’ll need muscle.”

Oh, if he only knew...

All I could do was laugh and roll my eyes. As infuriating as he could be, I was happy to have my best friend back.

It was nearing noon by the time we arrived at the house and despite the hour, I was expecting the three of them to head straight to bed. Instead, Raleigh fell to his knees with Carlos, who was happy to have the attention. While he rubbed the dog’s muzzle, my eyes fell to the carrier that Angel set on the sofa. He lowered the handle, unclipped the buckle, and lifted the little pink bundle out.

“Ready to hold her?” Angel asked. Tucked into his arms, her tiny head nuzzled into his neck while he supported her under her legs.

I nodded, but kept my arms crossed to hide how much my hands shook. “Should I sit down first?”

“You might want to,” Raleigh said from the floor, where he’d engrossed himself in playing with Carlos. “She’s a heavy little sucker.”

Raleigh’s fingers slipped, and Carlos won.

Shaking my head, I turned back to Angel and held my arms out. “What if I drop her?”

“You won’t.”

“Besides, she’s a Jenkins!” Raleigh offered. “We’re tough.”

“Says the one who just lost tug of war to the dog.”

Angel saved me from whatever retaliation Raleigh would have exacted by handing over Evie. She stirred, aware that I wasn't one of her dads. I must've been cleared as a threat, though, because she settled quickly. Her big, bright blue eyes blinked open and stared up at me. My heart melted.

"Hi, princess," I cooed without thinking.

I'd never been one for babies, not that we ever had a lot of them around the bars I always worked. Evie was different. Holding her in my arms and smiling down at her, I imagined this was what it would've felt like to hold Hannah.

I held that little girl all day. Through the tantrums, the feedings, and even the constant teasing from Raleigh. Oh, I didn't miss that gleam in his eye when he thought I wasn't looking. The two of them were exhausted, practically falling asleep while sitting up. With their arms free, they curled up on the two-seater together. Evie had fallen asleep again when I felt that familiar chill that told me my vampire was home.

Sure enough, I looked up as the front door opened. James had time to notice the sleeping baby in my arms before Carlos struck, so he barely managed to cover his mouth and stifle his yelp.

"Aw," Raleigh snickered to me, "is your big, bad boyfriend scared of a little puppy dog?"

Angel giggled, arresting James's attention. "And here I was thinking the big one would be the threat."

"Oh, please," I said, accepting the peck on the lips James offered me. "Raleigh couldn't hurt a fly."

Raleigh stood, barely taller than James himself. He gave James a very obvious once-

over, and I rolled my eyes. Then his shoulders slumped. “I’m too tired to keep up the tough guy act right now.”

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They shook hands, and based on Raleigh's grimace, James used a touch of his vampiric strength. "Better rest up so I can give you a fair shot, then. It's good to meet you, Raleigh. You too, Angel."

Angel gave a noncommittal grunt, annoyed that his pillow had moved. He stood, curling his hand around Raleigh's massive bicep. "Can we go to bed now?" Never mind that he could've gone to bed hours ago. Maybe it was his way of showing me he was interested in meeting James.

Or Raleigh had made him.

Raleigh wrapped his arm around his husband, pulling him close to his chest and pressing a kiss to his hair. Something in my chest ached, but I shoved it aside. Raleigh glanced back at me. "You okay to keep holding her while we get her playpen set up?"

Of course I said yes. I shifted, relaxing into my seat and settling Evie on my chest. Sensing eyes on me, I looked up. James was watching me with an expectant look. "What?" I asked, crooking a brow at him.

His mouth curled into a grin. "Just when I thought you couldn't get any more adorable.

"Adorable? Pfft." Evie stirred, and I lowered my voice. "Hot, sure. Sexy? Definitely. But never adorable." James nodded sagely along with me, but the sparkle in his eyes said I'd only proved him right. Damn him.

Raleigh re-entered the room, eyes going to James again. Was that suspicion in his glance? I rolled my eyes, shrugging it away. Of course he'd be curious, protective even: James was the only person I'd spent more than a couple of nights with since I'd met Raleigh. I listened to him mutter to Evie as he took her from my arms, and I couldn't help but smile at the tenderness in the big man's movements. Raleigh had always been a spectacle on his own. Angel made him even better. And now we had Daddy Raleigh—and this version was my favorite yet. Evie brought out a gentler side to the giant.

“Goodnight, guys,” he said softly.

“Goodnight,” we both echoed quietly.

Before he disappeared down the hallway, Raleigh turned back with a smarmy grin. Uh oh. “By the way,” he said, a sly note in his voice, “we sleep like the dead these days. Use that information however you see fit.” Then his eyes sank pointedly to the hickey on my neck. By the time I snapped out a retort, he was already gone.

I shook out my tired arms and stood up, happy when James pulled me to him. I wasn't sure when I'd begun to crave his close proximity, but I wasn't about to question it. Having him pressed against me felt good—that was all I needed to know.

“Hi,” he whispered, giving me a much more passionate kiss now that we were alone.

I hummed when we separated. “Hello to you too.”

Then he stiffened. “We don't have to talk tonight if you don't want to.”

A spike of panic threatened its way up from my stomach, confirming my suspicions: he was avoiding this conversation. Things between us were good—really good. I wanted to stay in our little bubble forever, blissfully unchanging.

“We should,” I said. “We’ve put it off long enough. You want a drink?”

James immediately moved to pull away. “I’ll make them.”

“You’ve been slinging cocktails all day,” I protested. “Let me do it.”

“You just think you’re better at it,” he accused. But he smiled and relented, sitting back on the couch. I’d never seen anyone sit so rigidly before in my life.

Grateful for a moment to myself, I headed to the kitchen and prepared myself for the conversation ahead.

Chapter 3

I re-entered the living room with two glasses of scotch and handed one to James.

“Thank you, love,” he said, accepting it from his perch on the couch.

I scanned the suspiciously quiet space. “Where’s Carlos?”

“The Hellhound is outside, playing in a pile of leaves and refusing to come in. I thought it best to leave him to it.”

I gave him a flat look. He hadn’t even tried to let him in. “He knows you’re scared of him, you know.”

“I’m not scared!” He paused, a thoughtful look on his face. “And good.”

I settled onto the couch next to my vampire. “I’ll leave him for now. As long as he’s quiet.”

My hand found his thigh and he twisted our fingers together. With the other I gripped onto my drink like a lifeline. I could hope all I wanted that he couldn't sense my nerves, but I knew better. Next to me, James scrubbed his free hand over his face, floundering for words that didn't come.

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“Just start talking,” I finally said, exasperated. “You’re making me nervous.”

He gave me a soft smile. “You’ve been nervous since the day we met.”

“A fact I hid from nearly everyone else for thirty-some years. Sometimes I hate that you know me so well.” I took a sip, the alcohol burning through my system and grounding me. Slightly. “Now spill.”

With a sigh, James brushed the back of his hand along my shirt, right where my birthmark sat. “I need you to promise me something first.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.” If I squeezed my glass any harder, I was sure it would shatter in my hand.

“I knew you wouldn’t. And this might be a hard ask, but I have to at least try.”

“Um. Okay.”

“Don’t run.” He picked his eyes up to meet mine. “I know you’ll want to, but I need you to hear me out. I need you to talk this through with me.”

“I’ll try.” It was all I could promise in the moment.

“I need to explain this, don’t I?”

“Before that, you need to stop poking my ribs because I’m ticklish and if you keep at it, I can’t be responsible for any injuries you might sustain.”

He smiled and pulled his hand away. Wordlessly, he turned on the couch, brushing his hair back along his neckline. At first, I didn't see anything on the skin he exposed, but he shifted and the light changed, and there it was.

A scar I'd never noticed. Small and pink, maybe the size of a quarter, and perfectly round—almost. There was a clear crescent shape missing from it. A space where something all-too-familiar would fit like a glove.

“Why have I never seen that before?”

James settled back into the couch. “You’ve spent the last year up close and personal with every other part of my body, love.”

“Test me on any of it. I’ll pass with flying colors.”

He laughed, and the sound warmed me more than any buzz ever could.

So I ventured, “What is it about that scar?”

“It’s more than a scar. And this,” —he feathered a touch over the splotch on my ribs again— “is more than a birthmark.”

I swallowed against a suddenly dry mouth. “What is it?”

“With some supernatural beings—vampires and werewolves, mostly?—”

“Werewolves?”

He gave me an amused smile. “There are so many more species coexisting than you realize.”

“You think I’d be less surprised.”

“With some species, fate decides who we’re destined to be with.”

My heart pounded against my ribs. “How does that work?”

“No one really knows. It’s decided by someone—something—that’s much bigger than you or I.”

I squirmed. My body itched, my muscles spasming. It felt like something sat on my chest. That familiar urge to bolt crept up my spine, but I had promised I’d at least try to fight it. “Where are you going with this, James?”

The tension in the air was thick and heavy. With each passing second it became harder to breathe.

“Ryder, we...” He sighed. “When Luke said you were my mate, he meant it literally. We’re bound together by fate.”

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I sat forward, setting my drink on the table before I spilled it. I adjusted myself on the couch, turning this way and that before hopping to my feet.

James's hand shot out to stop me. "Ryder. Please."

"I'm not running." I wasn't sure which of us I was trying to convince, but he relaxed. I gave his hand a gentle squeeze, taking a step back. "I made you a promise, so this is me trying, but I need to move."

James pushed his hands through his hair as I began to pace in front of him.

"You're over three hundred years old," I said plainly. "Why now? And... what about Liz?"

He nodded, as though he'd been expecting this line of questioning. "I was heartbroken to realize she wasn't my mate. After a century or two, I resigned myself to the fact that I didn't have one."

"I thought you were head over heels for each other."

"We were." James's fond smile was so wholesome, it made the corners of my own mouth tease upward briefly—but the nerves prevailed, and it faded as quickly as it came. "Being in love and being mates are two different things completely," he continued. "Believe it or not, there are many fated beings who can't stand the sight of each other. When I realized Liz and I weren't brought together by destiny, I decided it didn't matter."

“So you stopped looking for it.”

“I don’t even know when the mark showed up. It could have been there for years before I noticed it.”

“So you don’t know when it showed up?”

He hesitated, then spread his hands. “I’m guessing it appeared the day you were born. These last few decades, I’ve started to feel a... pull, I suppose you could call it. This sort of itch that I was missing something.”

I stared at him. “That sounds maddening.”

“Fate’s a bitch.”

I was avoiding his gaze, but I could feel James’s eyes on me with each step I took. All he wanted was for me to sit next to him, but I couldn’t. “Did you always know it was me?”

“Not until I laid eyes on you for the first time.”

“When I showed up at Liz’s for my interview.”

His mouth curled into a genuine smile. “It was like something finally clicked into place, like inserting the last piece of a puzzle.”

Looking back on it then, he was right. When I’d stepped into Liz’s that day, James caught my attention right away. I’d always fallen out with people just as quickly as I’d fallen for them. But James was the first one I ever wanted to keep. I’d locked onto every detail of him, committed it to memory.

“You felt it too.”

I nodded in confirmation. “I thought it was just because I found you attractive. Did you ever plan on telling me?”

“Of course I did. I thought about it the night you...” He eyed Hannah’s bedroom door, where our guests were sleeping. “The night you found out about me, but I didn’t think it was the right time. Then the hunters showed up and plans got derailed. I never expected Luke to pick up on it.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, letting out an exasperated sigh. “Why didn’t you tell me the first time I asked?”

“You weren’t ready. You needed time after the fire to process everything. You said so yourself.”

“Don’t throw my own words back at me.” I was getting defensive now. I spent the better part of a year trying to prove to Erin that they didn’t know me as well as she thought she did. I was an adult, damn it. I was more than capable of making decisions for myself.

“That’s not what I’m doing and you know it.” James pinched the bridge of his nose, taking a few seconds to collect his thoughts before he spoke again. “I know this isn’t easy for you to hear, but I’m willing to do whatever it takes to help you through it.”

I’d promised him I’d try, and I hoped he saw how hard I truly was. I closed my eyes, focusing on my breathing and replaying my own words in my head. But the fear was winning out. “I need to be alone.”

Opening my eyes, I stared at a darkened spot on the carpet. Anything to keep from seeing the hurt in his eyes.

“Ryder, you?—”

“I’m not running,” I repeated—and I meant it, “but I need some space. You can’t expect me to just accept all of this and move on.”

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“Of course.” He stood, which made me look at him. “I suppose that would have been wishful thinking.”

James approached me cautiously, like a baby deer that would bolt if he made any sudden movements. I didn’t intend to flinch when James brushed the hair out of my face, but I did. And I didn’t miss the way he stiffened in response.

“I just need time,” I whispered, so softly I hardly heard myself.

“I know.” He matched my tone, tucking that stray piece of hair behind my ear.

I turned to face him, inadvertently leaning into his touch. It was like my body could sense what my head refused to. He glanced at my mouth, and I knew what he was waiting for: a kiss. Though he wouldn’t force me and would never outright ask for it, those chocolate eyes met mine with the faintest hint of red, and I wondered if I wore my emotions on my face the way he wore his in his eyes.

I closed the distance between us and pressed my lips softly to his. It was quick, less than a second, but the tension in the air eased slightly.

“We have lunch with Shiloh tomorrow,” he reminded me.

“I know. I’ll be there—I promise.”

His “okay” was almost inaudible. I remained frozen in place as he moved for the front door. I heard it open and close, then silence.

I was left alone with my worst fear: my own thoughts.

My scotch sat on the table, almost untouched. My stomach was churning too violently to risk drinking it. I grabbed both glasses and took them to the kitchen, dumping the contents down the sink and rinsing them out. I had a dishwasher, but I was desperate for something to do. Carlos was still out back, playing in the leaves. It was too dark to see him, but I could hear the happy yelps and crunching as he bounded back and forth between the piles. I knew I wasn't alone in the house, but that didn't stop it from being too quiet.

Fuck. I missed him already. The conversation replayed over and over in my head.

Mates, bound together by fate.

Destined to be together.

Where the hell was I supposed to go from here?

Feeling lost, I wandered back to the couch and put on one of my mind-numbing reality TV shows. The only time I moved was to close the back door once Carlos decided to grace me with his presence. As if he could sense my unease, he curled up on the couch beside me instead of on his blanket. I could have gone to bed—I should have, but I didn't. Put off by the idea of sleeping alone, I stayed right where I was. One episode played into another, the night slowly creeping by.

I must've dozed off at one point because I blinked and the sun was streaming through the windows. The TV silently judged me, asking if I was still watching my show. Carlos was gone, but it didn't take long to figure out that he was begging for scraps in the kitchen.

I sat up, pressing the heels of my hands into my eyes. Footsteps approached, and

when I looked up again, a cup of coffee sat on the table in front of me. I followed the tattooed arm up, finding Raleigh's eyes.

He was shirtless, wearing nothing but a pair of pajama pants. Tattoos covered every inch of his body, and I noticed a new one over his heart—Evie's name, right next to Angel's initials. "Thought you might need that," he said, indicating the steaming mug.

I muttered a thanks. "How'd you sleep?"

"Like a rock. Where's James?"

"Home, I guess."

"Uh oh."

"It's nothing. What time is it?"

"Ten-ish?" Once I'd had a couple sips of coffee, he asked, "Is there a park around?"

Curious, I crooked a brow. "Yes."

He glanced toward the bedroom, where I assumed Angel was still asleep. "He's always losing sleep because of Evie. Why don't you leash Carlos up and we'll go for a walk?"

I froze out of reflex, bracing for the chaos that always followed that word. Thankfully, Carlos was happily distracted. "Is there an ulterior motive here?"

"Absolutely."

“What are the chances of me getting out of it?”

“None whatsoever.”

I sighed. “Can I at least finish my coffee?”

“I’ll allow it.”

Chapter 4

We parted ways to get dressed, and then I started the daunting task of wrangling Carlos. I’d opened the back door again to let him tend to his leaf piles. Normally, he’d come running when I so much as looked at his leash. When I picked it up and he didn’t appear in front of me, I knew he’d woken up and chosen violence. I went to the back door and jingled it in my hand. “Carlos!”

He popped out of one pile of leaves, and with an excited yip, he plowed into another. Leaves went scattering across the lawn. That clearly meant, “I’m busy. Try me again later.”

I whistled. “Walkies?”

His head appeared out of the pile like a game of whack-a-mole. Now he noticed the leash, and he screamed in joy. I cringed, praying he hadn’t awoken Angel. But it worked: Carlos bolted out of the leaves and into the house, dragging a trail of dirt with him in the process.

I’d clean it up later.

Raleigh was strapping Evie into her stroller. He was clearly amused at my failed attempts to secure Carlos, who insisted on spinning in circles. The spinning was obviously helping and I was the incompetent one.

“Keep laughing, asshole,” I said. “Wait until Evie’s walking.”

By the time I clicked Carlos’s harness into place and hooked the leash, I was already out of breath.

“Want to trade?” Raleigh asked. “You look like you could use a break.”

I seriously considered it, then I eyed the maze of straps that secured Evie to her seat. No thanks. “Shut up.”

Carlos set the pace for the first block, but Raleigh’s long legs easily kept up. I, on the other hand, was panting by the end of block two. I yanked on the lead, pulling Carlos back. He whined in protest, but I didn’t care much for his opinion.

“Are you ready to talk yet?” Raleigh asked as we approached the park.

“No.”

“Tough shit.”

I side-eyed him, but he wasn’t paying any attention to me. He unlatched the gate, pulling the stroller back to let me go through first. I was winded from the walk, but it did nothing to still the energy buzzing through my veins.

“What do you think about all of this?” I whispered to Carlos, who was distracted by a squirrel. He only whined, zeroing in on the helpless creature. “Thank you for your concern.”

He bolted the second I unclipped his leash, taking off after the rodent that had somehow offended him. Raleigh and I found a bench, Evie stirring as we sat down. “All right Clark,” Raleigh said, unfastening his daughter and lifting her out of the stroller, “start talking.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” I was nothing if not stubborn.

“I don’t believe you,” Raleigh sing-sang, bouncing a giggling Evie in his lap.

I was stuck. In order to talk to Raleigh about the whole “mate” thing, I’d need to tell him that James wasn’t human—which was dangerous. I wasn’t ready to risk that.

“James is ready to get serious,” I said instead.

“Uh, I hate to tell you this, Ryder, but you’re already serious. Wait—did he propose?”

“No!” I put my head in my hands.

Despite how often he teased me, Raleigh knew when to be a grown up. “Take the baby,” he said, holding Evie out for me.

I took her happily into my arms, her knit sweater soft on my fingertips. She rested on my chest, and it was as though her weight grounded me emotionally. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“Better?” Raleigh asked.

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I nodded. “I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“What did James say when you told him that?”

I watched Carlos over Evie’s head. He’d found another dog, and he was chasing the poor thing around in circles.

Raleigh took my silence as a response. “You weren’t honest with him, were you?”

“I didn’t lie. I told him I needed space to think.”

“So he opened up to you and talked about something that he knew you’d freak out about, and you turned him away?”

I grimaced. “Well, when you put it like that...”

“Talk to him, Ryder. He might be able to make you feel better about it.” Raleigh took a deep breath, and I knew the next words out of his mouth were going to be frustrating. “Besides, you wouldn’t be this scared if you didn’t know what you wanted to do.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Sure, you commitment-phobe.”

“You’re one to talk,” I scoffed.

“We’re not talking about me, are we?” Raleigh fussed over his daughter, who’d curled into the crook of my neck. “All I’m saying is that if you didn’t want to take whatever this step is, you would’ve ended things on the spot.”

I didn’t get a chance to reply. On that note, I didn’t want to reply. Letting Raleigh know that he was right was bordering on dangerous territory. Evie decided then that she was fed up with the conversation and refused to let us go on any longer. Apparently, a trip to the park without other-daddy was out of the question. She let out a cry that Raleigh explained meant she only wanted Angel. As it was, I had to be ready for my lunch meeting. His friend had left, so Carlos laid at my feet, tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth. This time, he contented himself to trot alongside us on the walk home. All he’d done was play in the leaves and chase a few innocent animals in the park, and he was as happy as could be.

Why couldn’t human life be that simple? Or...paranormal life?

Ugh!

As we walked into the house, I heard Angel in the kitchen. Between the running water, Evie’s crying, and the looming presence of my best friend, you’d think the house wouldn’t feel empty. James was doing exactly as I asked and still, it made my heart sink to be in that house without him. After a quick check-in with Angel, who was a man of few words anyway, I trudged down the hall to take a shower.

I rushed through washing myself, not caring to spend any more time than necessary in the too-big space. I wasn’t accustomed to solo showers anymore.

“Will you guys be okay while I go to this meeting?” I asked, walking into the living room and scrubbing my messy hair with a towel. I was early, which never happened, but I was craving some one-on-one time with my man before Shiloh showed up.

Angel was plastered to Raleigh's side—as always—with Evie on his chest. “We’ll be fine,” Raleigh answered. “Remember what I told you.”

“Sure thing, Dad.” I wadded up my towel and carefully threw it in Raleigh's direction on my way out the door. Evie found it hilarious.

Liz's was only closed one day a week, and James chose that day to invite Shiloh for lunch and drinks. According to James, Shiloh had been a little jumpy in their interview, so he wanted them to feel comfortable in the space before throwing them to the wolves on their first shift.

By the time I parked outside and jogged up to the door, I was itching to have James in my arms. Even one night without him was too long.

Despite having his back to me, James knew the moment I entered. Still, he feigned shock when I slipped my arms around his waist and brushed my lips over his neck.

“Hey, you.”

“Hey, yourself,” he rumbled. “I’m glad you came.”

I held him close, feeling a sudden need to comfort him. “I’m sorry if I gave you the impression that I wouldn’t.”

“About last night?—”

“I have questions,” I interrupted, “but I want to talk this out.” I held him in place when he tried to turn around. Because as damn good as he felt in my arms, I was still terrified about a lifelong bond.

James let out a sigh of relief. “I’ll do this however you want. You call the shots here.

I'll tell you everything you could ever hope to know."

"Not right this second," I chuckled. Right now, I needed my vampire. "How long do we have?" I knew the ghost of my breath across his skin would drive him wild.

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James reached over his shoulders and laced his fingers behind my neck to hold me close. “About an hour,” he murmured.

I smiled and spun him around, backing him against the bar and caging him in with my arms. “Guess we’d better make this quick then.”

My head darted in for his neck, my tongue rolling around his silver chain and pulling it between my teeth. James’s head fell back, exposing his delicious skin.

“Ryder,” he moaned, hand twisting into my curls and pinning me in place.

I dropped the chain. “I love it when you say my name like that.”

He ground against my thigh, and I earned another intoxicating sound from him as the move granted him the friction he needed. “We’re at work, love. This is a bad idea.”

I made a show of taking a step back and glancing around the place. “We’re alone at work. And you’re the boss. You can do whoever you want. Besides, you said we have time, right?”

“Mmhmm...” James’s resolve was wavering, I could feel it.

“Kiss me.” It was half a demand, half a plea, but full of that breathy moan that I knew drove him wild.

His response was part whimper, part growl. Then he folded. “Let’s be quick.” He sealed his mouth over mine.

I couldn't ignore the way our lips fit together like two pieces of a puzzle. I knew his next move before he made it. He angled my head, the tips of our tongues flirting with each other. A shiver zipped down my spine. By the time it hit my tailbone, my cock wasthrobbing. He pulled me closer with a primal snarl, grinding his own hard length into me. We spun, and I found my back pressed against the bar as I rutted against his thigh. I squirmed and bucked, welcoming the pressure. Our heavy breaths turned into pants as his tongue lapped at my skin.

I cursed, feeling the tickle of his fangs. "Yes," I hissed, turning my head to give him better access. My hips jerked forward in anticipation.

A sudden voice intruded on our private moment. "Oh, shit! I'm so sorry!"

James pulled off of me with a pop, fangs retracting before my eyes. I hadn't heard the door over our labored gasps. Fuck, I hadn't even heard thechimeabove it. I was so shocked—and painfully hard—that I couldn't find words as I grappled to compose myself.

Whoever the intruder was, they stood frozen at the glass door, their small frame swallowed by the entrance. They were so fine-boned that when the door blew shut and hit them in the back, it sent them stumbling forward. Whether it was embarrassment or the cold that colored their cheeks, I wasn't sure, but I'd never seen someone's face redden so quickly.

James recovered much faster, cool as a cucumber. "Not at all," he told the newcomer calmly. "We'resorry, Shiloh. This is completely inappropriate. It won't happen again."

"No, it's my fault; I'm early and I saw you come in," they gestured at me with a flustered motion, "so I thought... I don't know what I thought."

I bit back a snort, earning a glare from James. “If you’ll excuse me...” James cut me off by clearing his throat and stepping in front of me. I frowned and muttered, “Or not.”

“I’ll give you two a minute,” Shiloh said, a slight quaver to their voice. “I have to use the restroom anyway.”

James kept shielding me until Shiloh disappeared behind the bathroom door. Only after we heard the lock click did he step back and let his eyes roam over my body. The grin that tugged at his lips only served to make me harder—if that were even possible. “Your jeans are borderline obscene.”

That was exactly why I’d worn them. I leaned back, giving him a better view. “You heard them coming, didn’t you?”

The sparkle in his eyes told me everything I needed to know. But with a quick glance down, I was satisfied to know that he was as turned on as I was. “I’ve been warning you that you’d regret teasing me one day.”

“I don’t know if ‘regret’ is the word I would use.”

My eyes were trained on his lap. I studied the outline of his erection like I was going to be tested on it. My hand itched to reach out, but before I could follow through, James placed a finger under my chin and raised my vision to his. Crimson swirled in his eyes.

I was getting to him.

Perfect.

“You’re playing with fire, Clark.”

“So burn me, vampire.”

I closed the distance, palming him through his jeans. His face remained stoic, but his Adam’s apple bobbed, giving away his nerves.

With a deep breath through his nose, he knocked my hand away from his crotch. “Go into the office and cool yourself down.”

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“Yes, sir,” I quipped, satisfied when a growl formed deep in his chest. I began to retreat, only for him to catch me by my arm.

“Don’t antagonize them, Ryder. They’re nervous enough.”

As if on cue, the bathroom door opened and a small, timid person poked their head through. They looked around sheepishly, then gave me a shy smile. Damn, they were cute. Having shrugged out of their oversized coat, Shiloh straightened the baggy t-shirt they wore and fully emerged. The tee nearly dwarfed their lithe frame, leaving me curious as to what was underneath. They brushed a strand of shaggy, light brown hair out of their face, revealing bright, curious eyes. Now that they were closer, I could see the hint of green mixed with the brown, giving their eyes a camouflage appearance. A smattering of freckles spread across their cheeks.

Turning back to James, I lowered my voice to a whisper. “No promises.”

Chapter 5

When I left the office and returned to the main room, Shiloh sat across from James in a booth along the wall. A mixed drink sat in front of each of them with glasses of water off to the side. James’s eyes met mine, and Shiloh turned to watch me approach the table—and their eyes traveled over my body.

“Keep staring like that and I’ll have to walk away again,” I teased, sliding into the booth next to James.

Shiloh’s cheeks flushed red and they buried their face in their drink. “I’m sorry! I’m

so fired.”

“You’re not fired,” James assured them, his hand finding mine. I sat back, relaxing into his touch.

“I got caught blatantly checking out my boss. Can this get any more embarrassing?”

My face hurt from smiling.

“Relax, Shiloh, it’s Ryder—he loves the attention.”

Shiloh looked at me with those big, brown eyes... and turned even redder when I winked at them.

Oh, this is going to be fun.

“Like he said,” I drawled, “relax. I’m not your boss.” I took a sip from the drink James offered me.

Shiloh cocked their head in confusion. “You’re not?”

“Ryder’s my best bartender,” James offered.

I snickered. “I’m your only bartender.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to say you’re the best, does it?”

“It does because I can mix circles around you and you know it.”

“Shut up and drink.”

James made me choke on my retort by tipping my glass against my lips, forcing me to either swallow the liquid or wear it. Shiloh's attention bounced between us like they were watching a tennis match. I met their eyes and slowly wiped my mouth with my thumb, holding their gaze—until they quickly dropped it into their mojito.

“You don't have to play shy with me,” I told them, instinctively reaching across the table to lift their chin.

My hand was snatched out of the air by James, who tutted. “Ryder, you can't just grab people and make them look at you.”

Shiloh's head snapped up, and I admired the way their freckles stood out against the deep red of their cheeks. “It's fine.”

“Don't encourage him.”

I sat back with a grin. “Please encourage me. Can I call you Shi?”

“Um, sure.” Cheeks aflame, Shiloh's enchanting eyes darted between us, finally settling on James.

James tangled our fingers together and placed our hands on my thigh, pinching me hard in rebuke. “Don't be nervous, Shiloh. Most people learn to ignore Ryder or spit back at him. Don't let him get under your skin. But if he does, I promise I'll give you free drinks to throw in his face.” I winced and attempted to pry his hands away from the death grip on my thigh. Shiloh clearly thought the situation was hilarious.

I shot a glare across the table. “Keep laughing, Shi.”

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They stopped so abruptly they started to choke. James glared at me and nudged a glass of water closer to them. “Keep acting up and I’ll take you home.”

“Is that all I have to do to get you back in bed?”

Shi coughed on an inhaled sip of water, smiling when they recovered. “You two might actually kill me.”

The three of us fell into easy conversation about the bar, Shi’s duties, and what they could expect for the first few shifts. As James’s first drink disappeared, I made my way over to the bar and mixed us a second round, and James offered to make the third.

He hooked a finger in the collar of my shirt, pulling until I leaned into him. “Behave,” he whispered, nudging me to let him out of the booth.

Shiloh looked at me with a bashful smirk as I sat back down. “You’re not going to behave, are you?”

“Fast learner.”

“Good thing I know how to bite back,” they muttered in a tone they likely thought I couldn’t hear before taking a sip of the same mojito they’d been nursing all afternoon.

“You sure you don’t want another one?”

“I’m a bit of a lightweight.” They gave a nervous laugh before they continued. “I don’t want to embarrass myself in front of you on the first meeting—um, again.” They nodded toward where James mixed drinks behind the bar. “How long have you two been together?”

“Hm?”

They gestured to my neck. “The love bites and the shameless flirting? You two are clearly some kind of something.”

My eyes drifted to James. He took his time mixing his drink. I could see the concentration in his brow, how his muscles flexed under his sweater. I coughed against those stupid little butterflies in my belly. “It’s complicated.”

Shi scoffed. “There is nothing complicated about the way you look at him. Trust me, I know complicated.”

I broke my attention away from James and cocked a brow at Shiloh. “Care to share?”

“Nope.”

Wow—not even an attempt to deflect. Color me impressed.

Shi followed my gaze. James was wiping down the bar after finishing our drinks. I’d overseen every part of the remodel—James had wanted me to—but of all the parts we’d rebuilt together, the bar was my baby. The new, deep, polished mahogany shone under the lights. The wood had a hint of red, reminding me of how James’s similarly colored eyes swirled with crimson.

Fuck.

This was complicated.

I didn't get time to dwell on it before James returned to the table with the drinks, and I plastered my cockiest grin on my face before getting to my feet.

"What's that look for?" he asked, sliding my vodka and Sprite across the table and handing Shi their water refill.

I decided to tamp down the nerves that fluttered in my stomach. "Just remembering your taste on my tongue." To amp it up, I brushed my fingers along my neck—right over his mark.

"Christ," he muttered, throwing himself into the seat and downing his double shot in one go.

I stamped a kiss to his cheek, then stood. "Bathroom."

A few minutes later as I opened the door to leave, I heard a voice coming from the small alcove that hid the bathroom doors. Oh well, too late now. The conversation they were having was clearly stressing them out. I didn't intend to listen, but... well, they were blocking the path.

"I told you what time I'd be home. No, I don't need this job, but I want it. You know I'm not the type to—" They noticed me and cut off their sentence with a yip. "I have to go."

"Everything okay?" I asked as they disconnected their call.

"Fine," they said, perhaps a little too quickly. I watched them silence their phone. "What's wrong?"

I indicated the exit behind them. “You’re blocking the way.”

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They flushed. Stammering, they skirted around me and into the bathroom. I glanced at their retreating back, but even I knew when not to pry.

“What do you think?” James asked when I returned to the table.

“I like them,” I told him. I knew he must’ve overheard the conversation they were having, too. “Are you concerned about whatever’s going on at home?”

James looked amused. “If I worried about my employees’ home lives, I never would’ve hired you a year ago.”

“Ha, ha.” I was still staring in the direction of the restrooms. Shi opened the door, and I pulled my eyes away, turning to my drink. “Something’s off, though.”

Shi returned to their seat and glanced at me from across the table, silently begging me not to ask any questions about what I’d overheard. “What’d I miss?”

“We were just talking about when you’d be able to start,” James said. “How’s tomorrow sound?”

“Tomorrow? Really?”

James nodded. “You really impressed me in your interview, Shiloh, and I know you’ll be a fine addition to the team. So what do you say? I’ll be here, and Ryder will be behind the bar with you the whole time. I’m convinced you’ll give him a run for his money.”

“Hey!”

Shi chewed their cheek, glancing down at their phone again. “Let’s do it.”

Skeptical, I asked, “You sure? You can talk it over with your... family... if you need to.”

Shi didn’t take the bait. “No need. I will be here.” Their phone vibrated again and they groaned, scrubbing a hand over their face. “I should go deal with this. Thank you for the food and drinks.”

“Drink,” I corrected. At their startled glance, I grinned. “But there’s always next time.”

As they stood, James gave me a suspicious look out of the corner of his eye. “Do you need a ride home?” he asked them.

“Thank you, but my partner is picking me up. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’m not even joking!The police said they would payusto keep Ryder out of their sight!”

“All right,” I said, hiding my shame behind a sip of my drink, “did we need to tellthatstory?”

“Of course we did,” Raleigh said, a shit-eating grin on his face. “We’re your best friends. We have to embarrass you in front of the boyfriend.”

I didn’t get bashful very often, but the fact that Raleigh caught the whole incident on video made my cheeks light up like one of my signature flaming cocktails.

James kicked my foot and I looked up at him. His brown eyes sparkled and a heart-melting smile graced his mouth. The tension in my body eased, and I let my leg curl around his. After our afternoon at the bar, we'd brought dinner home so the guys could get to know James. They'd put Evie to bed and we were sprawled out on the living room floor, takeout containers littering the space between us. Carlos laid nearby, pretending that he wasn't hoping for someone to drop something. Raleigh took the idea of "getting to know James" and ran with it like an Olympic sprinter. Angel was... Angel. It didn't offend either of us that he didn't speak much because he was always present in the conversation. He sat to Raleigh's side, quietly smiling to himself.

Even if it was at my expense, I was glad that the three of them were getting along. Angel caught my eye, waving his empty glass and indicating the kitchen. I gave James a kiss on the cheek. "Refill?"

"Please." He downed the rest of his drink and handed his glass to me.

Raleigh slid over to my vacated spot as Angel and I went into the kitchen.

"Is everything okay after this morning?" he asked.

My brow furrowed. "Nothing happened," I deflected.

When I was met with silence, I turned to see Angel giving me one of his "cut the shit, Ryder" looks. His icy glare never failed to make me falter.

"Everything's fine," I amended. "Hand me that whiskey?"

"I'm glad," Angel said as he passed the bottle. "It can't be easy for a human to date a vampire."

The bottle of Jack clattered to the counter, though thankfully it didn't shatter. I righted the bottle and stared at him. He was watching me with one brow raised.

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My heart thundered. James must have heard him—with his supersonic hearing, there was no way he hadn't. I waited for the inevitable confrontation, for him to storm into the room and demand answers, but it didn't come.

"Y-you know?" I fumbled for words. My eyes must have been the size of walnuts. "Wait, you know vampiresexist?"

Angel smiled softly before nodding. I waited for him to elaborate, then remembered who I was speaking to. "How? He looks like an ordinary human."

"Most times." He sighed at my stunned stammering. "How do you learn things about people? How can you tell if someone's a kind person? They act, and you observe. How can you tell if someone is a vampire? You observe." He shrugged. "It takes practice. The signs are there, once you know what to look for. The silver chain, the speed, the way he talks, the red haze in his eyes when he looks at you." An uncharacteristic blush heated my cheeks. "If you look close enough, these things give him away."

I stared as he nodded knowingly. He'd said that last line with a finality I'd come to recognize in my years working with him, so I knew better than to press. It never ended well for anyone who pushed Angel. Besides, he'd damn near reached his daily quota of words.

Still, my mind reeled. How did he even know vampiresexisted?

Raleigh appeared in the doorway. "Everything okay, you two?"

“I think,” Angel said, stepping up to his husband and putting his hands around the bigger man’s waist, “Ryder’s learned to get his head out of the clouds.”

Raleigh eyed me over the top of Angel’s head, pressing a kiss to his hair. They’d always had their secret looks, but something about how they watched me now... was I missing something? I shook the feeling away. I had a vampire waiting for me in the other room—and I needed to have a conversation with him. I grabbed the drinks from the counter and returned to my spot on the living room floor.

“Is everything all right?” James asked, nuzzling my cheek.

Was it? The Jenkins men reentered, Raleigh sitting on the floor, his long legs stretched out in front of him. Angel knelt behind him, wrapping a tattooed arm around his chest. Tattoos of the all-seeing eye cascaded down both arms and, from what I’d seen, across his back as well. I’d never learned the reason behind his obsession with the symbol. As I sat there and watched Angel curl into Raleigh’s neck, I swore one of those tattoos blinked. Stunned, I set my drink down and rubbed my eyes. Exhaustion. It had to be. The last twenty-four hours had been a whirlwind, and I was running low on fuel. It was the only explanation for seeing Angel’s tattoos move.

Right?

“Love?” James’s hand on my back brought me back to reality. I glanced around the room, at everyone watching me expectantly.

Then Angel smirked.

I was definitely missing something.

“I think I’m just tired.”

“I’ve hit my limit too,” Angel said, stamping a kiss to Raleigh’s cheek and getting to his feet. “I’m going to check on Evie and get to bed. Goodnight, bloodsucker.”

“Goodnight, glow stick!”

My brow furrowed as I looked back and forth between James and Angel’s back, which was quickly disappearing down the hallway. Sure enough, a warm halo illuminated the dark walls to either side of him. He looked over his shoulder, tossed me a wink, and vanished through the bedroom door.

I probably looked like a cartoon character as I shook my head, turning back to Raleigh. “Angel’s, um...”

“Somuch more than a name,” he breathed, dreamy eyes staring into the space his husband had vacated.

“I-I don’t understand,” I said, swallowing a protest when James cupped the back of my neck.

“Come on, love,” he said gently. “Let’s talk.”

“Okay.” Stunned, I stood and reached for the containers.

“I’ll take care of that,” Raleigh said. “You two go ahead.”

I didn’t even have the mental capacity to be a good host and argue. With James’s hand on the small of my back, I let him guide me to the bedroom.

Chapter 6

Almost on autopilot, I readied myself for bed. As I left the bathroom, James was

pulling the blankets back. I grinned and sauntered over to the bed. “You going to use that mouth of yours to keep me relaxed?” I joked, easing onto the pillows.

James settled between my thighs, resting his chin on my stomach. “It’ll be difficult to carry on a conversation with my mouth full, don’t you think?”

“You can nod.”

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“Ryder...” He attempted to scold me, but his admonishment trailed off into laughter.

“Okay, okay.” I combed through his hair and he all but purred. “So, Angel is a literal angel.”

“He is.”

“Did you know?”

“The moment I laid eyes on him. I’ve only seen an angel once before, but marks like his are very distinct.”

“You mean his tattoos?”

James nodded against my belly. “That’s how the marks manifest to humans. Adaptive camouflage—it helps him blend in.”

I gnawed on the inside of my cheek. Questions flickered through my mind like pictures in a View-Master. I was dying to know more about Angel, but that wasn’t the most important thing at hand. I gulped, trying to focus on the strands of hair running through my fingers instead of the invisible weight on my chest.

“Do I have a choice?” As much as I tried to swallow my fear, the tremble in my voice betrayed me. James looked at me, and I could see he was every bit as scared as I was. I sighed in relief when he bobbed his head—even if his pretty eyes did turn sad.

“You do,” he said softly. “It’ll be painful for both of us, but you can reject the bond.”

“Painful how? Would it mean we can’t be together at all?”

“No, but...” He paused to think. “It’ll be like leaving the house knowing you have everything you need, yet you still feel like you’ve forgotten something—only you can’t go back to get it.”

“That sounds infuriating.”

James winced. “I’ve heard of some people going mad over a rejected bond.”

The corner of my lip twitched. “Well, we can’t have you going mad, can we?”

I had to give it to him: he could hide his emotions well. But a flicker of hope flashed across his eyes. “That was easier than I thought.”

“What if I do? Accept it, I mean. Is there a whole thing? Do we have to get married? Because?—”

He interrupted my spiraling by grabbing my hand and dusting a kiss across my knuckles. “Breathe, love. We don’t have to do anything more than what we’re doing right now. Accepting the bond is as simple as acknowledging what fate has chosen for us.”

“That’s it?”

“Our connection will grow stronger. We’ll feel each other’s pain, each other’s emotions. You’ll be accepting that you’re the only one for me, and I’m the only one for you—forever.”

My brow furrowed. “This is more curiosity talking than anything, but there’s only ever one mate? For everyone?”

James shifted, crawling up the bed to sit next to me, his hand finding mine once more. “Multiples are possible—but I’ve only ever heard stories about them.”

I let James play with my fingers, his thumb brushing each nail before moving onto the next. “How did Luke know?”

“Kian’s brother? If he and Dani were half as competent as they claimed to be, they must have known about our marks. When you...” James trailed off, the memory of me and Luke being intimate together too much for him to bear.

“You don’t have to say it.”

“He likely saw your mark. It’s shaped too perfectly. Anyone in tune with the supernatural could identify it. That, coupled with the fact something likely felt... odd about it, probably tipped him off.”

“Are you saying I’m bad in bed?”

James laughed, that true laugh that brought out the swirl of red in his deep eyes. My stomach fluttered, but I tamped that down. Ryder Clark didn’t do butterflies.

“No, love. That’s not what I’m saying at all.” James rose onto one knee, slotting his leg between mine and leaning in until our lips brushed. He latched onto a thick handful of hair until he pulled a gasp out of me. “I’m sure you were more than satisfying. But this,” he slipped his free hand under my shirt, feathering touches over my pebbling skin. I squirmed, pressure building between my legs, “this breathtaking, electrifying feeling? That’s reserved just for us.”

James slanted his mouth against mine, swallowing any hope I had of responding. He dropped his jaw and I moaned as our tongues clashed together. With his t-shirt clenched in my fists, I poured everything I had into that kiss. The temperature rose;

my breathing grew ragged. I tugged on his shirt, desperate to remove the pesky fabric between us.

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Before I could lift it over his head, James broke the kiss, holding me in place by his tight grip on my hair. “Tell me all of your kisses leave you that breathless—I dare you.”

“That was not a kiss,” I panted. “That was tongue-fucking my mouth.”

“My point stands,” he said with a smug grin. “Name one person that’s kept you coming back for more.”

My answer was instant, my heart thumping louder in my chest. “You.”

“Ah, but I’m so much more than a person. I’m a supernatural being.”

“You’re a supernatural bastard,” I grumbled, not even bothering to adjust the erection straining my underwear.

James sobered and reached out for me again. Our fingers linked, our hands fitting together like a key in a lock. As if we were...

Made for each other.

Damn it, there was that fluttering feeling again.

“You’re still scared,” James stated, his thumb rubbing small circles over the back of my hand.

Those butterflies—scratch that, hornets—in my stomach prevented me from speaking.

All I could do was nod. I was terrified, but it had nothing to do with the bond anymore. Even though it was bigger than both of us, and it scared the life out of me.

What scared me even more was that I wanted to say yes.

Instead of giving a verbal answer, I brought our mouths together. James opened for me, angling his head to deepen the kiss. When I shifted to lie down, he rolled on top of me. He caged me in with his arms, his weight pinning me down. Strangely enough, I didn't feel trapped.

I felt safe.

I only broke the kiss to come up for air, and James worked his lips down my jaw. "You're insatiable, you know that, right?"

"Please," I said. "Let me have you."

"Can you be quiet, love? We don't want to wake up our guests."

Choosing to ignore the fact that he was using words like "our" and "we," I responded with a whimper. His mouth sealed over mine again, taking my breath away. I grabbed his hips and tugged, moaning into the kiss when our cocks ground together. James's tongue found the crook of my neck.

"Bite me," I begged. "Please." My voice was too whiny for my liking, but I needed the high—I needed the courage.

"Are you sure?"

I snarled, snatching his hand and guiding it to the bulge behind my sweats. "If you ask me again, I'll make you watch me take care of this myself."

He chuckled, low and throaty, and goosebumps swept over my entire body. He pressed his lips to my pulse. I arched into the feeling, exposing myself to him—submitting to him. One more swipe of his tongue, then his fangs grazed my neck. My breath hitched when they broke through the skin. At the same time, he clenched his hand around my shaft, adding enough pressure to send me into a haze of euphoric bliss. I fell into the high while rutting against his palm.

One draw, and every worry in my body seemed to fade.

A second, coupled with another squeeze from his hand, almost worked the way I wanted.

Three, and...Fuck, yes. That was it. What had I been so worried about?

My body rolled, seeking contact with every point of him it could find. I mewled when his hand let go, only for nimble fingers to find my waistband. Fabric ripped as my boxer briefs were pulled from my body and tossed aside.

James sealed off his bite with a single pass from his tongue, then rose onto his knees so he could undress. He started with his shirt, and my hands moved of their own accord, tracing over the ridges of muscle in his stomach.

Through bleary eyes I watched him work his belt, then pop the button on his jeans. The zipper practically lowered on its own. Quick as a flash, the fabric was gone and he had his hand wrapped around his glorious erection.

“That’s mine,” I said, though my feeble strength and slurring voice were anything but commanding.

Still, James shuddered when I batted his hand aside and took over. His fingers closed over mine, moving in time with me. I swiped my thumb over his leaking tip and

brought the sweet liquid to my mouth. I hummed in satisfaction and turned to James's fingers, sucking each one. I moved to sit up, only to have him guide me back to the pillows.

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He stretched out, blanketing me with his entire body. “Let me take care of you tonight, love.”

I wanted to protest. I truly did. I wanted to argue, to shove him onto his back and wrestle for dominance until one of us surrendered. I could blame the buzz, but that wasn’t what made me submit.

James rolled his hips, our hard lengths gliding together and crying for attention. He pulled back, lips seeking out every bit of exposed skin within reach. I arched into his touch as his fingers explored my chest and stomach. My cock wept, milking another drop of liquid onto my abdomen.

“Hands above your head,” he said.

In lieu of friction, my hips bucked into his hot breath. James only laughed at my impatience. “Hands up,” he repeated, voice a little sterner. “If they move, I stop.”

I obeyed, hooking my fingers into the mattress. James knocked my legs apart and knelt between my thighs. My breath hitched. “It’s okay,” he cooed, kissing my heated flesh. “Can you trust me?”

I shook my head against the pillow, then forced myself to look down and meet his eyes. Oh, how he didn’t realize how much weight that question truly held.

James grinned, eyes transforming in front of me. Breathtaking crimson swirled in a pool of melted chocolate. He was hypnotizing. My pulse raced, and his eyes flicked to my neck. But they snapped back to my face when I spoke.

“I accept.”

Chapter 7

I'd only just fallen into a deep sleep when a fist pounded against my door. I groaned, peeling one eye open to the early-morning sun streaming through the window. Once I'd accepted the bond, James had me up all night. I sat up, and it was as if I could still feel him inside me.

“The hell is going on?” James mumbled, cuddling in close to my side.

“Raleigh.” Because his name was answer enough.

“Ryder?” Raleigh called. “Are you awake?”

“Mm, sort of.” The door flew open and I yelped, yanking the blanket to cover up. “Hey!”

“I knocked!” He made himself right at home, leaping onto the mattress. “Morning, vampire.”

“Why are you waking us up at the ass crack of stupid?” James said in response.

“So I can start my day staring at your pretty faces.” Raleigh grimaced, picking at a loose thread on the blanket. “There's a situation at the Hopyard. We need to get back early.”

My heart sank. They were supposed to be in town for another week. “Is everything okay?”

“Aside from Jack being an incompetent excuse for a bartender? Yes, everything's

fine. I just need to get back and deal with it.”

I snickered. It had to be the Tanqueray delivery again—it was always the Tanqueray delivery. “Get out.”

Raleigh flinched, clutching his chest. “Damn, Clark. I at least expected a goodbye.”

I kicked the unsuspecting Raleigh to the floor. “Get out so I can get dressed. I’ll drive you to the airport.”

He collected himself, swiping his sleep-tousled hair out of his eyes. “You don’t have to do that.” The only response he got was a flat look, daring him to challenge me. He held his hands up in surrender. “Fine, fine. Thank you.”

Once Raleigh vanished, I pushed myself from the bed, pausing when James stroked my thigh.

“I can drive them if you want more sleep,” he offered.

I removed his hand from my thigh, kissing his fingertips. “It’s okay. I’ll drop them off and meet you at the bar in time to open.”

Feeling his eyes on me, I turned around before reaching the bathroom door. James’s dark gaze traveled over every inch of my naked body.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked, squirming.

James stretched, pulling the sheet away to reveal his hard cock. “You want some company in the shower?” he asked, wrapping his fist around his shaft.

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My own blood rushed south, heat pooling low in my belly. “You’ve got five minutes.”

James leapt from the bed. “Challenge accepted.”

“Ryder, you know you have to give her back, right?”

“I don’t want to,” I complained, tucking Evie closer to my chest and ducking away from Raleigh’s outstretched arms. She curled closer, settling deeper into sleep. Oh, my heart. “See? She doesn’t want to leave her Uncle Ryder.”

We stood in the airport lobby, both Raleigh and I stalling the inevitable. Angel would never admit it, but he was lingering as well.

Angel was the one to respond. “You could always get one of your own.”

“No, thank you!” I returned Evie so fast that her eyes shot open—briefly, but long enough to glare at her daddy taking her away from me.

Raleigh was grinning. “Nice work,” he said to his husband.

As Angel juggled the baby and their luggage, I turned to Raleigh, my arms suddenly empty. I crossed them, ignoring an odd pull in my chest. “Are you sure you can’t stay?”

“Aw.” Raleigh cocked his head. “If you missed me, you can say that.” He expertly dodged the shove I aimed his way. “I wish we could. Even if it’s only to stare at your

boyfriend a little longer.”

“Raleigh!” Angel scolded. He stepped over to us, stamping a kiss to my cheek. “As much as I would love to watch you two bicker in an airport lobby all day, we should go. Thank you for having us, Ryder.”

And with that, he walked away. Short, sweet, and to the point, but that’s how affection was with Angel. Strong arms jerked me forward, and I let out an unflattering “oomph” as I connected with Raleigh’s hard chest.

“Thanks, Ryder.” He pulled back, and his blue eyes met mine. “James is amazing. I’m really happy for you. You know you always have a place with us, right?”

“So do you. James loves you.”

Raleigh crossed his arms, giving me a onceover. “So, are congratulations in order? I heard something big happened last night. Something of the lifelong bond variety?”

My eyes slid to his husband. “Angel!”

“Can’t hear you!”

“You could have at least told me you knew,” I shouted after him. Shaking my head, I turned back to my best friend. “I guess something did happen: I accepted.”

“Look at you. I’m proud of you.”

I scoffed. “Tell me that again in six months when I haven’t fucked it up. You’ll let me know when you make it home?”

He nodded, gave my shoulder one last squeeze, and walked away. I rested against a

pillar, watching them disappear behind the security barriers.

I yawned the whole drive to the bar, hoping the insanity of a weekend there would be enough to keep me awake until I got home. It was only September, but fall in Salem was an event, something people counted down to and celebrated. Halloween decorations had been up for weeks, and the tourists were beginning to flock in. New staff typically started during the week, when things were slower and they'd have more time to learn. Starting Shiloh on a Friday night during the busiest part of the year was a bold move, but I trusted James to know what he was doing. When I walked through the back entrance of the bar, Shiloh was exiting the supply room with an armful of napkins they could barely see over, and they nearly collided with me.

"Whoa!" I caught some of the bundles before they tumbled to the ground. "The hell do we need all these for?"

"I'm nervous and I'm trying to keep busy," they admitted.

"There's no need to be nervous, Shi." I smiled at their glare. "I'll be here with you all night long."

"That doesn't make me feel any better," they mumbled.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." Though the flush creeping over their cheeks told me otherwise.

James's voice came from the back. "Ryder, stop terrorizing the employees." I looked over my shoulder to see him enter the room. I couldn't have fought the smile that curled my lips if I'd wanted to.

"There's only one employee!"

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“I was including myself.” He looked over my shoulder. “Things might get a little hectic tonight. Don’t be scared to take breaks and ask for help when you need it.”

Turns out that was the understatement of... well, James’s life.

The mid-afternoon shift crept by easily enough, but by the time the day ended, the weekend began. Shi moved around me like they’d been slinging bottles their entire life. For the most part, they held their own, but then we made the mistake of blinking, and a crowd formed out of nowhere. That’s when Shi started to stumble.

I tried to ignore it at first, knowing they might panic if they thought I was watching. But when they wound up with a group of rowdy, drunk frat boys shouting in their face, that was the end of the line for me.

I knew what a rough night behind the bar felt like. I remembered one specific shift in particular, and I might’ve walked out that night if not for my coworker—for Dani. So when I saw Shi’s frustration after fumbling a drink they were mixing, I captured their hand as they reached for a towel to clean it up.

“Can you get some more cocktail stirrers please?”

As I suspected, they looked at me in confusion. “What? You’ll drown without me. Besides, we don’t need any.”

Their hand shook in mine. I kept my voice low so the customers didn’t hear. “I’d send you for napkins, but we clearly don’t need those.” Shi flushed. “Go. Take five minutes to breathe. I’ll survive.”

Their hesitation let me know that I'd won. Using the grip I still had on their hand, I sent them toward the partition. They threw their towel onto the rail and stormed down the hallway while I tended to the crowd. I could manage it on my own—I'd dealt with much larger crowds in far worse conditions—but I wanted my vampire next to me.

I spun and grabbed a bottle of Cuervo to line up a round of shots, muttering loud enough for him to hear. "I could use a hand."

Seconds later, James emerged from the hallway and let himself beneath the partition. "Shiloh okay?"

"They'll be fine."

He moved past me, his hand sliding across my lower back. I shivered. He didn't have to pass by so closely, but I wasn't going to complain. When I handed off the shots, I received a glare of disapproval from one of the frat boys. Less than impressed with how he spoke to Shi, his comfort was the least of my concerns. I shot him a wink and went about tending to the crowd, working in sync with James. We moved together flawlessly, knowing the other's move before it was made.

Shiloh reappeared, red in the face but breathing a little easier. The crowd had dispersed from the bar and found seats, so James skirted past them to give us more room to work.

"Feeling okay, Shiloh?" he asked.

"Yeah, sorry—bathroom break," they mumbled.

James gave an encouraging smile and disappeared down the hallway.

Shiloh and I tended to the stragglers wandering up to the bar for third and fourth rounds. When it seemed like everyone was taken care of for the moment, Shi turned to me.

I spoke first. “Don’t you dare say you’re sorry.”

They mopped a spill in front of them, intent on anything that didn’t require looking directly at me. “I cracked.”

“You didn’t crack. It got busy and people got rowdy. That can be a lot.”

They scoffed. “I feel like I’ve been doing this long enough to handle it.”

“How long is long enough?” I asked.

“A couple years.”

“Aw, you’re just a bartending baby, aren’t you, Shi?” I gasped. “Oh, my God: I am totally calling you Shi Baby. Don’t you love a good nickname?”

“I’ll tell you when I hear one.”

“Oh, come on, Shi Baby. Please tell me I can call you that. It works on so many levels.”

They rolled their eyes, but I saw the grin they were fighting. “Only if you tell me about a time you cracked.”

“Deal.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Okay, so I used to be this hotshot bartender in Vegas?—”

“I know who you are.” Then, realizing what they’d said, they let out a sound I could only describe as a squeak and turned the most adorable shade of red I’d ever seen.

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I wasn't about to let that go. "You looked me up?"

They swallowed and cast their eyes down. "You looked familiar, that's all."

"Okay, pin that—we'll come back to it. Point is, I'm used to crowds much bigger than this."

"This isn't helping, Ryder."

"Let me finish, Shi Baby." With a cocky smirk at their groan, I continued, "I met my ex for dinner right before my first shift here. Because she's always had perfect timing, she handed me papers to terminate my parental rights."

Shi gawked, but I held a hand up to stop them from interrupting.

"I was a wreck that night, to put it lightly. I was spilling drinks and dropping shakers like you wouldn't believe. My friend gave me the same out that I gave you. So don't feel guilty about taking it. We all need a break now and then." I donned my heart-stopping smile yet again, and Shi's blush deepened. "Even viral, contest-winning bartenders like me."

They rolled their eyes and smacked me with a towel. "You're so self-absorbed."

"But I made you smile. So I'll take the win."

The conversation lulled as I took another order and began mixing drinks. Shi continued to watch, worrying their bottom lip.

“Spit it out, Shi Baby.”

“Fuck, that’s going to stick, isn’t it?” they muttered. Then, they raised their voice.
“Would you tell me about them sometime?”

“Who?”

“Your kid. Your face lit up when you talked about them.” The corner of Shi’s mouth kicked up into a grin. “I’d love to know what the TikTok-famous Ryder Clark is like as a dad.”

“So you have looked me up!”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh all you want.”

It was their turn to handle a customer, and I observed as they effortlessly carried a conversation with her, mixing her a drink with newfound confidence.

“Have a drink with me one night,” I said once they had finished. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

“As in a d-date? I thought you were?—”

“Not as a date,” I clarified. “As two new friends getting to know each other.”

“I think I’d actually like that.”

As I turned back to make drinks again, Shiloh nervously called my name. “I’m sorry, by the way.”

“What for?”

“Y-your friend. Everyone within spitting distance of Salem knows about the fire.”

I shifted uncomfortably. Right, the fire: otherwise known as the cover story for Dani’s death. Before Shiloh could see an ounce of vulnerability in my eyes, I schooled my features and gave them a sad smile. “Thanks, Shi.”

The crowd thinned further as the night wore on. It was after two when I saw the last person out and locked the door behind them. I returned to my spot behind the bar and began cleaning.

Shi let out a sigh of relief. “Thank G—oh, fuck me!” They jumped out of their skin and clasped a hand to their chest. “Where did you come from?”

James slid his arms around my waist.

“He does that a lot,” I said, wiggling in his arms as he nuzzled my neck.

“I thought I warned you about flirting with the staff,” he whispered against my sensitive skin.

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“You’re doing it right now!”

“Well, I’m the boss. I can do what I want.”

Shiloh brought us out of our little bubble by brushing past us with a bucket of dishes in their hands. “You two are disgustingly cute.”

James laughed. “Hear that, love? We’re disgustingly cute.” I turned, and his hands cupped my cheeks. He swooped in, planting a passionate kiss on my lips that left me dizzy and breathless.

And then he vanished.

I was still staring at the spot he’d occupied when Shi came back into the room with cleaning supplies. They snickered. “You all right there?”

I blinked. “Uh, yeah. Fine.”

“You sure? Because you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Nah, just a vampire.

Chapter 8

I went home alone that night. James insisted he had things to do, but I knew it was because he didn’t trust himself to keep his hands off me. I was dead on my feet, and I needed sleep.

When I got home, though, I found a familiar car in my driveway: it belonged to Kian, Hannah's boyfriend. When Dani attacked me last year, it was his brother who saved me—Luke, who was also part of the team of hunters responsible for our woes last year. After he betrayed them by releasing me from my bindings, he made me promise to take care of Kian.

Until now, Kian hadn't come to me on his own.

Assuming the worst, I rushed through the front door. I was not prepared for the sight I walked into.

All the lights were off, save for the soft glow of the TV. I glanced around the room as I entered, unable to keep from smiling at the image in front of me. Kian was spread out on the couch, still dressed in his work uniform. He was fast asleep, Carlos—who was also dead to the world—snuggled under his arm. Or rather, he pretended to be snoozing. The twitch of his ears informed me that he was aware of my presence, but apparently I wasn't important enough for him to open his eyes. At least, not until I approached the couch. Then I got a warning glare that said, "Don't you take my big spoon away from me."

I hesitated to wake Kian. He looked so peaceful, and the last year had been hard on him, to say the least. Despite him being a decade-plus younger than me, that couch did no one's back any favors.

Kneeling in front of him, I softly touched his shoulder. He stirred, his arm protectively tightening around Carlos as he gathered his bearings.

"Hey. What's up?" I asked.

"Sorry," he mumbled, pushing himself into a sitting position. He yawned, messy hair standing on end. He'd cut it shorter in the last year, the dark, messy mop falling away

to highlight the lighter hair beneath. “I didn’t plan on falling asleep.”

“It’s almost four in the morning; you don’t need to be sorry for sleeping.” I dodged an attack from Carlos’s tongue. “What’re you doing here? Is Hannah okay?”

In that moment, Kian looked more like a kid than his twenty-one years. He didn’t meet my gaze, instead focusing on the silent TV. I could almost see the emotions flickering behind his hazel eyes. They glossed over, then he shut them. His throat worked as he swallowed, and the mask was back when he looked at me again. “Things have been hard since Luke left. And I don’t want to worry Hannah. I guess I could use someone to talk to.”

“Why don’t you get some sleep?” I suggested. “We can talk over breakfast tomorrow. Or... later today, I guess.”

“I’d really like that.”

My hand stopped him as he tried to lie back on the couch again. “Go get in Hannah’s bed.”

Kian shook his head. “That’s hers.”

“A, she’s not in it right now. And b, you’re her boyfriend. I assume if she had a problem with you in her bed, we’d know.”

“The entire state of Massachusetts would know.”

I snorted, patting him on the knee and getting to my feet. “How many days in a row have you worked?” Kian thought over his answer, taking a little too long. “That’s what I thought. Go to bed.”

“Can Carlos stay with me?” he asked, following me down the hallway. “He’s warm.”

I stopped in my bedroom to grab a pair of sweats for Kian to sleep in, then handed them over before he disappeared into the spare room. “Sure, but don’t let him get used to it—he forgets whose house this actually is.”

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Before I could finish the sentence, Carlos flashed down the hallway and slipped behind Kian to get into the bedroom.

“Does he never sleep with you?” Kian asked.

“James is terrified of him.” I wanted to smack myself at how my nose wrinkled as I recounted the memory of their first meeting. “It’s kind of cute actually.”

Kian smiled and held up the pants. “Thanks for these, Ryder—and for letting me stay.”

“Don’t mention it. Get some sleep and we’ll talk tomorrow.”

We both slept like the dead. We’d entirely missed breakfast by the time we were both ready to face the world, so I offered to take Kian to lunch. James wanted to work a shift with Shiloh himself, so he offered me the day off. Kian provided the excuse I needed to actually take a day instead of hanging around waiting for James to finish.

At the restaurant, I sat across the table as Kian did nothing more than pick apart his grilled sandwich—the same thing he’d been doing for ten minutes.

“Kian?”

Tired eyes looked up at me. He let out an exasperated sigh and dropped the piece of lettuce he’d been shredding with his fingers. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. You don’t have to talk if you’re not ready, but you should at least eat

that before it gets cold.”

He didn’t say a word in response, staring at the deconstructed sandwich. He picked up a slice of the bread and tore a frustrated bite out of it.

It was eating me up inside that I couldn’t tell him what truly happened to Luke. Kian had been told that Luke vanished in the middle of the night, leaving no trace he was ever there—except for a note so vague anyone could’ve written it. His “evidence room” was wiped clean, closet emptied, and phone disconnected.

But I couldn’t be the one to tell Kian that he was right about James being a vampire, or about Luke being a hunter. It wasn’t my place, and I didn’t want to risk James’s safety—again.

“I found something.” Kian rummaged around in his backpack, which he’d guarded with his life all morning. “When Luke vanished, I threw everything he left behind into boxes and shoved them in my spare bedroom when I moved to Cambridge. I couldn’t bear to go through everything. But when it comes time for Hannah to live off-campus, I figured she would need the extra bedroom to study and stuff, so I started sorting through the things. I think he left these behind on accident.”

Kian produced a rumpled stack of papers and set them on the table between us. It was a court decree—I could see that much from where I sat.

I grabbed the thick stack and pulled it closer. That’s when I noticed the name printed across the top. “You’re adopted?”

“I didn’t think so.” Kian looked down at his fingers. “Read the next line down.”

Frowning, I did—and my eyes nearly popped out of my head. “Name of adoptive parent,” I read aloud. “Luke Cavanagh? I thought?”

“That he was my brother? Yeah, so did I.” Kian took a long drink of his coffee. I didn’t need a sixth sense to know that he wished for something stronger.

I set the papers back down in front of him—he made no move to take them. “Do you remember your parents?”

“Luke always told me they died when I was a kid, but I was too young to remember. That’s all I’ve ever known.”

“That could explain the papers,” I pointed out. “Maybe he legally adopted you after your parents died.”

Kian emphatically shook his head. “The names don’t add up.” He pointed to the adoption petition. “That’s not my last name.”

He pulled another form out of his bag—one that showed his name change from KianParkerto KianCavanagh.

“Strange,” I muttered, more to myself than to him. “What does this mean?”

Kian answered me anyway. “I don’t know. I’ve been going insane trying to figure it out.”

“You haven’t asked Hannah? She’s wicked smart, you know.”

He grimaced. “I didn’t want to tell her until I knew for sure. Because of all the…” he trailed off, waving his hand toward me vaguely.

“Me stuff,” I finished for him.

“Yeah.” He sighed. “I hate to call it that. Feels mean.”

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I considered the documents on the table between us. “It’s not mean; it’s the truth. Our situation is complicated. How long have you been sitting on those?”

“A few weeks.”

I winced. “You could have come to me sooner, you know.”

“I figured I owed it to myself to try this ‘alone’ thing first.”

“But you’re not alone. You have Hannah.” I snatched the papers again and scanned the adoption decree; something wasn’t adding up. “And me, for what that’s worth—which isn’t much.”

Kian snorted. “More than you think.”

“Can I take these?” I asked. “I want to do some digging.”

“They’re all yours.” Kian took another bite of his sandwich. “I’m sick of looking at them.”

Thankfully, Kian finished off his plate before checking his phone and announcing he had a late shift to catch. I made him promise to call if he needed anything else and I spent the next hour at the diner, bouncing between the papers and my phone. Google wasn’t bringing up much, but I wasn’t the most tech-savvy person either. I needed help, and I couldn’t get it through my usual channels. Given the supernatural involvement, I didn’t want to ask the police.

With a defeated sigh, I made the call. One of the hardest things to accept about being in a partnership was that I wasn't alone anymore. After twenty years of it, I'd grown too used to doing things on my own.

"What a pleasant surprise," James hummed, voice pumping through my veins like a drug.

"Hi," I whispered, already feeling more relaxed.

"Is everything okay? I thought I was going to see you later."

I paid for the meal, then shrugged into my jacket. If I sat at the diner any longer, they'd charge me for lodging. "If the bar isn't too busy, I'd like to see you sooner rather than later."

"Can't get enough of me, huh?"

I groaned, and lowered my voice. "You already know the answer to that, vampire." Then, in a normal tone. "Something strange happened, and I need some help trying to figure it out."

"Uh oh."

"It's not bad," I told him, leaning against the door of my car. "I don't think. But it's... weird. I don't know what to make of it."

"I'll be there shortly."

"No," I said quickly, "don't do that to Shi. I can come to you."

"I'll see you soon then."

I sat in my car for a moment, wondering why I felt so unsettled. Throwing Kian's papers into the passenger seat, I hissed at a sudden sting in my finger—a papercut. I glared at the pages that silently mocked me with their mystery. Something wasn't right, but I couldn't figure out what. When the chill in the air started to seep into my bones, I finally started the car and drove to Liz's.

Rushing toward the warmth of the bar, I paused when someone called my name. It was a busy Saturday afternoon with everyone flocking to the fall festival in the town square, but I still found Ben when he popped into view. I tucked Kian's papers under my arm. "You out here getting into trouble?"

He came to a stop in front of me, his salt-and-pepper hair blowing in the wind. His eyes shone in the afternoon light, his face pink from the cold. "Would it make me seem cooler if I said yes?"

Damn, I loved the bashful ones. I flashed him my signature grin. "I'm flattered, but you're married to my ex."

"That's actually why I'm here. Erin came day-drinking with a co-worker, and a glass of wine turned into being 'white-girl wasted.' Her words, not mine. I'm here to pick her up."

Shaking my head, I opened the door and gestured for him to enter. "My condolences."

Erin made herself known immediately. She shouted out Ben's name and threw herself into his arms. He blushed under the attention. With her glossy eyes and slurred words, Erin hadn't been exaggerating—I felt bad for Ben, the poor guy.

I left them to it and sought out who I truly wanted. The adoption papers under my arm felt like they weighed a thousand pounds. James pretended not to notice me until

I approached the bar, then he gave me a show-stopping smile that made my heart skip a beat. “Hey,” he said.

I kept a smile on my face—totally of my own volition, and not because the sight of James had me grinning like a fool. “Mind if I hang out in your office? Unless you want me back there with you?” There were quite a few people in the bar, but nothing he and Shi couldn’t handle.

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James leaned on the counter in front of me with his arms crossed. “Oh, I want you here, but not to work.”

“Down boy,” I muttered, fighting a wave of heat creeping under my collar. “You’re the owner of this place, you have an image to maintain.” He’d gotten insatiable since I’d accepted the bond. James licked his lips, and my eyes involuntarily dropped to the movement. Fuck, I was in for a whirlwind when he got home. I was equal parts excited and terrified.

“Make yourself comfortable, love. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

I gave him a quick kiss. “See you soon.”

After just a few minutes in the office, I grew restless. I tossed the files onto James’s desk and browsed the books on the shelf. I wasn’t normally a reader, but it was never too late to start, right?

My one request when James rebuilt his office was that he replace the couch. Granted, I didn’t have reading in mind when I asked him to do it but I couldn’t help but feel warm and cozy as I settled into the corner with the book on my lap. I ignored the papers and dove into the story, trying to shake the threat of panic rising in my throat.

An hour and a few chapters later, the door crept open. “You’ve been so calm back here. I thought you’d fallen asleep.”

“How do you know how calm I’ve been?” I asked, rubbing my eyes. I set the book aside and stretched my legs over James’s lap as he settled in next to me.

“Heart rate. I’m even more attuned to yours now because of the bond.” He glanced at the book, wrinkling his nose. “Dracula? Really?”

“Me reading it is no more ironic than you owning it.” James massaged my calves, and I stifled a moan.

“I own it because it’s a classic, not because I’m a vampire.”

I relaxed, only answering with a contented noise in the back of my throat. “I should be rubbing your legs. You’re the one who’s been working.”

“You know I don’t feel fatigue like you do. Now what’s going on?”

Reluctant to move, I stretched out behind me, barely able to reach the papers on the desk—but I managed. “Kian was asleep on my couch when I got home last night. This morning, he showed me these.”

James flipped through with one hand while the other stroked my legs. “Luke adopted Kian?”

“Apparently.”

He set the papers aside, returning his full attention to me. “What’s got you worried?”

“I don’t know,” I muttered, shaking my head. “It’s just a feeling. Something’s not right, but I don’t know who to turn to for help.”

“I know someone.”

“Who?”

He hesitated, not meeting my gaze. Uh oh. “You’re not going to like it.”

“Try me,” I said, twisting my fingers through his. “I may surprise you.”

“Do you remember the group of vampires you met after the... accident?”

I shifted, a sense of discomfort washing over me. Oh, I remembered them all right. I saw their blood-red eyes in my nightmares—but I’d never admit that to James. In response to his question, I nodded. Though his hand tightening around mine told me he knew exactly how I felt. Damn heart rate.

“Gabriel is a private investigator. That’s how they masquerade their business.”

“Okay. Call him.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Really? You’re okay with it?” He eyed me suspiciously. I didn’t hate Gabriel, per se, but I’d made no secret that I didn’t particularly like him or his crew either. I tended not to be a fan of things that killed people.

“Sure,” I said, ignoring the lie that twisted my gut. “Let’s go pay your friend a visit.”

James considered me for a long moment, likely reading right through my bullshit.

“Associate,” he said at last.

“Apologies. Let’s go pay your friend an associate.”

James grinned, lunging forward to tickle my stomach. “Smartass.”

Chapter 9

“Ow!” I leapt out of my chair, wondering what the hell had just stabbed me in the leg.

“Are you all right, love?”

“I’m fine.” There it was: what looked like a broken piece of plastic. I tossed it to the floor and sat back down. “I’m just ready to get this over with.”

I’d been on edge the past week, to say the least. I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was, but the mystery behind Kian’s adoption was distracting me so much that I seemed to find the sharp edge of everything, from the odd piece of plastic to the edge of my keys. I was more than ready to visit Gabriel and put it behind us. James squeezed my thigh, stilling it. I hadn’t even realized it was bouncing. We sat in a waiting room in downtown Boston, on a way-too-high floor inside one of the city’s many skyscrapers. It had taken several days to get an appointment with Gabriel, and now that we were here, we were being made to wait. See? The man was evil. He owned the whole floor, working as an investigator to cover up what he did outside of work hours—which, I guess, explained his appearance on the day of the fire.

James had been checking in on me all morning, and every time he asked, I believed myself a little less. “Are you sure? Because we can?—”

“I’m sure,” I lied again through the nerves in my stomach. In an effort to convince him, I brought his hand to my mouth and kissed his fingertips. That move never

failed to make him melt. I stood, and his hand slipped from mine. Historically, heights and I didn't mix, but I was itching to move and that led me over to the windows. If I pushed away the thoughts of exactly how high up we were, the view was incredible. It was early in the morning, early enough to where lights were slowly being flipped off as the sun rose higher in the sky. In the distance, sunlight reflected off the glittering surface of the Charles River. Even if the guy gave me the creeps, I could appreciate Gabriel's taste. And that was precisely when the door opened and he stepped inside.

I shoved my hands in my pockets, training my eyes on the view as I used my peripheral vision to pay attention. Gabriel rounded the table and smacked a folder down onto it. Only then did I return to my seat.

Yep, Gabriel was exactly how I remembered him. His platinum-blond hair had grown a little, curling at the ends, and I assumed the glare he gave the lock that fell into his face meant he didn't care for its new length. The dark collared sweatshirt he wore only made his pale skin and hair stand out even more. When he looked up from the table, I fought the urge to shrink away. Barely. The blood red in his eyes battled with the sunlight for control of the space.

"Thanks for meeting me so early." He paused, and before I could get a word out, he opened his mouth. "Were you two not offered drinks? I swear, I'm firing that useless?—"

"We're fine," James interjected. "No need to fire anyone."

Gabriel relaxed in his seat, eyes sliding to me. I fought the urge to shrink back in my seat. In fact, I fought the urge to do anything that would give away how uncomfortable I was—especially when Gabriel's mouth curled into a grin. "Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes? It's good to see you again, Ryder."

I swallowed, regretting our decision to decline the drinks he offered. “You too.”

Thankfully, James broke the tension by indicating the folder he’d brought with him. “What’d you find?”

Gabriel didn’t respond right away, instead holding my gaze for several long moments. “Quite a bit actually,” he finally said, turning his attention to James—and I didn’t sag in relief. “It was exciting to look into something other than infidelity or insurance claims for once.”

“We’re happy to be of service,” James said dryly.

Gabriel singled out a page. “The documents you provided got me pretty far. Not much came up in Massachusetts, but then I started looking out of state.”

He slid the page across to me. It was a birth certificate.

“California?” I muttered, worrying my bottom lip. “That’s a big move for a kid to make. Wouldn’t Kian remember it?”

“There’s more.” Gabriel slid the entire folder over. It was a news article: one about a suspicious fire that killed two people and injured three more.

I was baffled. What did this have to do with Kian? “I don’t understand.”

“It’s the strangest thing.” Gabriel pointed to a highlighted section on the page. “The victims’ five-year-old boy was never found. This article is the only thing to survive the fire. There were no arson reports, no witness statements, and no other new reports to be found. Every first responder who was there that day has mysteriously vanished.”

I rolled my shoulders to combat the chill creeping down my spine. Everything in that article felt eerily familiar: a suspicious fire, people dead—and more missing.

“What aren’t you saying, Gabriel?” James asked. I looked up, surprised to find that Gabriel was still staring at me. Those red eyes burned through me. James was onto something—Gabriel definitely knew more than he let on, and James had figured that out before I had. “You think this was related to the supernatural.”

“I do.”

I held up the papers in my hands. “Did you clean this up?”

A thin-lipped smile. “Alas, my presence was required elsewhere. But my sister, Abigail, was the one to head that mission.”

“Can we talk to her?” If she could confirm that the victims of that fire didn’t have any children, then there was a chance we could be wrong about this entire thing.

“Ryder, are you sure you want to keep digging into this? You might uncover some things you never wanted to.”

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“Kianneedsanswers, James.” I took a deep breath. “Please.”

Gabriel took his phone out, sent a text, and relaxed in his seat. “Abigail will be up soon.”

Though I desperately wanted to connect these pieces, my sense of unease grew as the minutes passed. For a vampire, Abigail moved painstakingly slow. Itching for something to fill the charged silence, I asked, “Do all of you have Biblical names?”

The two vampires shared a look and laughed. “They’re very common names,” James said.

“I know, but I’ve never met such a cluster of them before.”

“They’re timeless,” Gabriel explained. “If we all walked around with names like Vladimir or Jezebel—especially in small towns—we’d draw more attention than we care to.”

“Jezebel is Biblical,” I pointed out.

Gabriel flashed me a grin, and a flicker of amusement in his eyes had me shifting closer to James. “You have your hands full with this one.” It was a statement. Not a question.

“You have no idea,” James said.

The door opened again, and Abigail stepped into the room. Her eyes found mine and

she smiled, and it chilled me to the bone. I'd seen her once before. She'd traded her white evening gown for a business-casual dress, accentuated by a navy jacket. Her platinum hair was tied back, but she carried the same intensity I'd seen a year ago. "Good to see you two again," she chirped, attempting to sit on the edge of Gabriel's chair. "It's been a while."

Rolling his eyes, Gabriel gave her a shove. "Get your own seat, Abby."

As she did so, Gabriel filled her in on everything we'd discussed. "What do you know about the boy?"

"What boy?"

"The couple's five-year-old was never accounted for."

She shrugged. "We assumed he died in the fire."

Now it was Gabriel's turn to be surprised. "What do you mean, 'assumed?' Didn't you make sure everyone associated with that fire was taken care of?"

I had to admit that I was the slightest bit amused when she bristled under her brother's glare. "There wasn't a body to recover. Every picture in the house burned. He wasn't at school, and there was no other family for him to be with. He was never seen again."

Until now.

Bile rose in my throat.

"Why are we talking about a fire from fifteen years ago?" Abigail asked, attempting to read the room.

The other two vampires looked at each other. I looked down at my lap.

“Because that boy didn’t die in the fire, and he didn’t vanish into thin air.” Gabriel’s tone was stern, assertive—and it had me wanting to bolt.

Gabriel pinched the bridge of his nose. “What were you told when you were called there?”

Abigail squared her shoulders. “Hunters were involved. A rookie made a mistake, mixed up some numbers and they targeted the wrong house. No humans were supposed to be there.”

James’s hand found mine again. “A rookie hunter who made a mistake,” he repeated. “Does that sound like someone you know?”

I squeezed, finding solace in his fingers entwined with mine. “Sure does,” I said. I was through with this conversation. I’d gotten the answers I came for, and I needed to get out of here. With another tight grip on James’s hand, I let go and shot to my feet. “Can we go?”

“Of course,” he responded cautiously, as if I were a bomb ready to blow. And, frankly, that was exactly how I felt. I paced in front of the door while I waited for him to join me. Gabriel and Abigail were not-so-quietly bickering.

James softly thanked Gabriel for his help, promised to call if there was anything else, and followed me out of the building. “Do you want me to drive home?”

I pulled out my phone and checked the time. “I don’t want to go home.” I didn’t stop moving until my hand was on the door handle, and only when I recognized how bad it was shaking did I turn around and hand my keys to James. “But I will let you drive.”

The momentary confusion on his face gave way to understanding as he finally connected my thoughts. I made a move to walk around the car, but he stopped me with a hand on my waist.

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With a sigh, I dropped my head to his shoulder. “I’m fine,” I whispered.

“If you can look me in the eyes and say that, I’ll believe you.”

I steeled myself, waiting for my heart to stop pounding before raising my head and looking at him. “I’m fine,” I repeated.

I thought he would read right through the lie, but to my surprise he leaned in, pressing a soft, sweet kiss to my lips. “Okay.”

Chapter 10

It didn’t take long for James to figure out where I wanted to go. I called my daughter as he drove, hoping I wasn’t waking her up.

“Hi, Han,” I said when she answered. “Are you busy?”

“Not unless you count my eighteenth rewatch of Buffy as busy.” How fitting. “My morning class got canceled. What’s up?”

“We had an appointment in the city that just wrapped up, and I thought we’d drop in to see you.”

“This early? What kind of appointment? Who with?”

“If I tell you everything over the phone, we won’t have anything to talk about when we get there. Do you want to see me or not?”

“Hmm...” Hannah mock-pondered. James fought to keep his snickers to himself, earning a glare from me. “I guess I could do with a visit. I’m at Kian’s apartment. I’m not getting dressed though, you’ll have to deal with pajamas.”

“Well, the deal’s off then; I’m going home.”

I could hear her smile through the phone. “See you soon, Ryder.”

I disconnected the call, not bothering to redirect James since he’d heard every word.

Truth be told, I wanted to be left alone. I’d been fighting the urge to tell him as much the whole time we’d been driving. This time, he didn’t stop my leg from bouncing. It was as if he knew I needed some way to get my energy out, or I’d explode.

I’d probably explode anyway.

We parked in front of Kian’s building. James killed the engine and waited for me to make the first move. I couldn’t say exactly what I expected, but it wasn’t for James to get out of the car with me. I wanted to spin around and demand to do this by myself, but that wouldn’t be fair—even I could see that.

I knocked. As we waited, James threaded his fingers through mine. The act made me tense, but then I reminded myself that I liked having his hand in mine. What had come over me lately?

The chain rattled, and the door opened. Hannah stood there in a fluffy robe with her hair tied up and out of her face. “Hi! Is everything okay?”

She stepped forward and hugged me, and that was exactly what I needed in that moment. She gave James the same treatment, then stepped back in the doorway. “Get in here, that wind cuts right to the bone.”

Hannah wrapped her robe tighter around her as she led us into Kian's cozy, two-bedroom apartment. We shed our heavy coats and shoes in the hallway, following her past the living area on the left and into the kitchen. The first bedroom and master bath on the left belonged to the two of them, and the second bedroom at the back of the apartment was reserved for their study-slash-office space. A half bath and laundry closet sat nestled in the corner of the kitchen, and that's where James headed after kissing me on the cheek and excusing himself.

I chuckled inwardly, knowing he had no physical need for a bathroom. I was grateful for the small break.

"Coffee?" Hannah asked, already filling the well on her Keurig. I was already jittery, and caffeine was likely a bad idea, so of course I accepted.

I took in the pajama pants peeking beneath her robe. "Did you sleep here last night?"

"And the night before." Hannah rolled her eyes, selecting a coffee pod and popping it into the machine. "I don't know who raised Emily but it must have been in a barn somewhere. The girl's a wreck. And don't get me started on that boyfriend of hers. Now what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've never shown up on such short notice before. Is something wrong?"

"Can't a man come see his kid?"

Hannah threw a knowing grin over her shoulder and damn, she looked exactly like her mother—it was scary. "I'm not a kid anymore."

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“I’ve got seventeen years to catch up on. Where’s Kian?”

“Doctor. He woke up with a nasty cold this morning.”

I accepted the mug she handed me, and stared down into the steaming liquid like it held all the answers to my problems. I’d selfishly come here for myself, because I needed to see her. Now that she stood in front of me, I had to tell her, I knew I did. When I handed Kian the information Gabriel had found, he deserved to hear the whole truth. That meant revealing who, and what, James was. Hannah needed to hear that from me. But as the bathroom door opened, my eyes met his, and I hesitated. It wasn’t just my life on the line anymore. I had him to think about—had a partner to think about, and that thought terrified me.

“What’s going on?” Hannah asked, looking between the two of us. I should have known that hesitating in any sense would tip her off. She was way too perceptive.

James had crossed the room and slid an arm around my waist. “It’s okay.”

With a deep breath, I gestured toward the small kitchen table. “Sit down. We have something to tell you.”

Wary, Hannah slid into one of the chairs and set her coffee down. I took the seat across from her, and James sat to my left, his hand finding mine the second I was no longer holding my own mug. “James is a vampire,” I blurted.

“Wow, way to ease her into it, love,” James snickered.

“Shut up! I’ve never done this before!”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Hannah interjected, redirecting my attention. “Can you repeat that please? Because it sounded like you just said ‘James is a vampire.’”

“That’s exactly what I said.”

The silence seemed to bounce off the walls, rebounding and slamming into me, ringing my ears. The words lingered between us like a bomb detonating in slow motion. I couldn’t bring myself to meet her eyes yet. I felt them boring a hole through me, but I couldn’t move.

“Ryder?”

“Hm?”

“Look at me.”

Slowly, I raised my head. Hannah was watching me with a concerned expression. She scanned my face as if looking for any sign that I was messing with her. She didn’t find one. Aside from James, I could typically lie my way out of anything. This, however, I couldn’t make up if I tried. The last thing I wanted to be doing was sitting in front of my daughter and telling her that my boyfriend was a vampire. It had become a part of everyday life for us, but in telling Hannah, we’d burst our happy little supernatural bubble.

“You’re not joking,” Hannah finally said. I could only shake my head. Seeming to sense that I wasn’t ready to continue, she said, “Did you just find out?”

“No, I found out pretty early on.”

“So last year when you caught me and Kian and accused us of being drunk, you?—”

“Didn’t know,” James finished, jumping in to defend me. “He found out after that, Hannah.”

Hannah sat back in her seat and crossed her arms in front of her chest. “So, why are you telling me now?”

Attempting to find courage in my coffee, I picked it up and took a drink, letting the warmth—and James’s hand—ground me in the moment. “I’ve had a year now to settle into dating someone who’s... not human. We knew we couldn’t keep it a secret forever.”

Hannah traced the rim of her mug, contemplating her response. I wasn’t sure what I expected, but it sure as hell wasn’t, “Okay.”

I flinched as if I’d been hit. “Okay?” I echoed.

“Mmhmm.” Hannah sipped her coffee. “I mean, I can accuse you of being drunk and delusional if you’d prefer a different reaction. Besides, for all I know, I’ve passed out watching *Buffy* and this is all a dream.”

“I could pinch you if you want,” I offered, and nearly choked on a mouthful of coffee at the glare that earned me.

“I dare you to try.”

“Do you have any questions for me?” James asked.

Hannah pursed her lips over her cup. “Of course I do. You can’t drop that you’re a vampire on a girl and not expect a question.”

He spread his hands. “I’m an open book.”

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She sat forward, an eager look in her eyes. “Is that why you love the classics? Did you know Charles Dickens? We’re studying *A Tale of Two Cities* in class, and...”

And just like that, she and James fell into an easy conversation over their shared love of classic literature. I nursed my drink while I listened. Her reaction felt almost too good to be true, but I wasn’t about to question it. It was enough to take my mind off everything, and that was exactly what I needed. That fist around my lungs loosened its grip, and by the time the coffee was gone, I felt relaxed enough to leave.

We respectfully declined an invitation for lunch—Kian was on his way home and I wasn’t ready to face him yet—and Hannah gave us both rib-crushing hugs as we left.

“Don’t be a stranger,” she whispered in my ear. “You’re always welcome here.”

I pressed a kiss to the top of her hair. “Just give me a heads up if I have to face your mother,” I quipped, earning a slap to my chest.

Utterly exhausted, I was grateful that James was driving. Though he remained silent for the most part, it was charged, like there was something he wanted to say—but I had no desire to push. I could barely summon the energy to walk through my front door, and it seemed as if the moment I stepped through it, every ounce of stress from throughout the day crashed into me. My head hurt, and my body ached.

I let Carlos outside, then leaned against the door frame to wait for him; I didn’t trust my legs to hold me anymore. I stiffened when James wrapped his arms around me from behind, then forced myself to relax. What the hell was wrong with me? Two days ago I could hardly keep my hands off him. I didn’t so much melt into his touch

as flop, and the kiss he pressed to the back of my skin only irritated me where it would normally have me arching my neck for more. “I’ll make you something to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.” I attempted to soften my next words by leaning into his touch and letting him kiss me again. I sighed, frustrated. I was on edge, and I didn’t know why, much less how to fix it. “Why don’t you go home? I won’t be good company tonight.”

“You shouldn’t be alone.”

“Don’t tell me what I need, James!” I snapped, the words coming out too hostile. I immediately regretted my tone, but I lowered my voice and doubled down. I could already feel my walls building up again. “I just want some space, please. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I didn’t turn around. Not when he hesitated, not when his arms slipped from around me, not even when he kissed my cheek again. I couldn’t bear to see the hurt in his eyes as I pushed him away.

“Okay.”

I let out a deep sigh when the front door closed, rubbing away the ache in my chest. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt so close to punching something. Probably when Erin served me those termination papers.

It took too long to get Carlos inside, wearing my patience down further. By the time I fed him and set up the pointless baby gate—he could easily clear the damn thing—it was all I could do to undress and collapse into bed.

Chapter 11

I tossed and turned all night. I'd doze off, jolting awake less than an hour later in a cold sweat with my heart threatening to beat right out of my chest.

Somewhere around three in the morning, I started to think that James was right: maybe I shouldn't be alone. But I was too proud to call him, so I suffered. I suffered hard.

The blanket was too hot. Kicking it off made me too cold. I flipped my pillow around—nothing helped. My thoughts cycled in a noose-like spiral, and damn it if I didn't want James next to me every time a panic attack struck. Just when I thought I had a handle on my emotions, my chest would tighten again. I hadn't slept properly since Kian stayed over. It was almost as if someone—or maybe the universe—had it out for me.

When my alarm went off early the next afternoon, I fought the urge to hurl my phone across the room. I moved through my routine on autopilot, barely stopping to think when I showed up at the bar for my shift. I didn't even remember driving there. It took me three tries to enter the right code into the keypad, and when I finally pulled the back door open, it was with more force than necessary.

Shiloh jolted from their position at the register when I stormed into the room. "You look like you've been to hell and back," they commented, resuming their counting.

"Careful, Shi Baby—flattery will get you everywhere." When they didn't respond to my brilliant quip, I plastered on an enormous grin and slowly leaned into their field of vision obnoxiously.

They squirmed and shoved my face away. "You'll make me lose my place! I've already started over three times."

It had only been a few days, but more of Shi's personality was beginning to show

through—and I loved it.

I lifted myself onto the countertop next to them, swinging my feet and staying quiet while they counted. “What are you doing here so early?” I asked when they finished.

“Couldn’t sleep.” Shi slammed the drawer shut nearly as hard as I had the back door. Even they winced at the noise.

“That makes two of us,” I mumbled. “Want to talk about it?”

They scoffed. “Why? So I can distract you from your own problems?”

“Yeah, actually, that’d be great.”

They gave me the side-eye, but I caught the ghost of a smile across their lips. “I should. It might make me feel better. But I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Uh oh, now there’s two of us who avoid our problems. Poor James.” I felt a sudden, familiar pang in my chest. I groaned, pushing the heels of my hands into my eyes.

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“Well, I guess I know what your grief is about. What’d you do?”

I feigned offense. “How do you know it was me?” Shi shot me a pointed look. I sighed. “I’m dealing with a family thing, and he’s been helping me with it. I was a total dick to him last night.”

“Let me guess: he didn’t deserve it.”

“None of it.”

As if on cue, the back door opened and shut again, signaling James’s arrival. Shi dropped their voice. “Looks like you’ve got some apologizing to do. I’m going next door to grab some coffee. You want anything?”

I shook my head but thanked them anyway, and they walked toward the door. “Shi?” They stopped short of the hallway and turned back. “You know you can talk to either of us if you need to, right?”

A small smile teased at the corners of Shiloh’s mouth. Small, but genuine. “Thanks Ryder.”

With that, they were gone. I stayed perched on the bar while James bustled around his office. I didn’t need to seek him out to make myself known—he knew I was there. Part of me groused at the fact that he was keeping me waiting, but I deserved it. My heart had been pounding since he opened the back door, and it continued until I heard the office open and shut. Despite the palpable tension between us, James’s eyes lit up when he rounded the corner and his gaze landed on me. “Hi.”

Instead of answering, I hopped off the bar and stepped into his space, grabbing him around his waist and molding into my spot in the crook of his neck. His arms closed around me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, pressing a kiss to the sensitive skin on his collarbone. His grip tightened on my shoulders.

“I know. I don’t hold it against you.”

“I was an asshole.”

“I expected nothing less.”

I reared my head back to glare at him. “What do you mean by that?”

James smiled, and it calmed my racing heart. “I can’t exactly expect you to know what to do at all times, can I?”

I swallowed. “Guess not.”

“And I need to be sensitive to the fact that this is new for you without the added stress from the bond.” He combed his fingers through my hair, guiding my head back down to rest on him. “I’m sorry I was so clingy.”

“You wanting to be with me shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Maybe not, but I need to learn that there will be times where you want to be alone. Even if you didn’t realize it, you’d been telling me all day that you needed your space. I didn’t listen.”

“So much for supersonic hearing,” I muttered into his shoulder.

“Ah, there’s my smartass.”

“Am I forgiven?”

“Hm, not quite yet.”

Smirking, I pulled back to meet his eyes again. The chocolate irises swirled red, mimicking the smooth mahogany of the bar top next to us. He bit his lip, his gaze darting down to my mouth. I gave him a quick peck—only to grunt in surprise. His hands shot to my neck to hold me in place, crushing my mouth with his. I melted under his touch, leaning into him for support as he angled his head to deepen the kiss. The tips of our tongues met briefly, then he pulled away, leaving me hungry for more.

“Now you’re forgiven,” he whispered.

“Maybe you can ‘forgive’ me some more later?”

A sharp pinch to my ass made me yelp. “If you behave.”

“Don’t tease me like that.” I gave him another kiss that he broke offwaytoo early.

“Shi could return any second,” he said, pulling away and moving for the hall. “Do you want to get caught again?”

“That was your fault. You knew they were coming and didn’t stop me.” Though the idea of being caught had me squirming on the spot. What can I say? I’d always been a show-off.

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“Oh, shit,” he muttered, stopping in his tracks. No doubt it was the stutter of my heart that tipped him off. Glancing up, I saw him looking at me over his shoulder, lust-filled eyes blazing. “You want to get caught.”

I shrugged and threw out my best grin. “Sue me.”

“I won’t, but Shiloh might.”

“Who’s suing who?” Shiloh called, returning from their coffee run with a drink in one hand and some chocolate-covered monstrosity in the other.

“No one, because Ryder is going to learn to behave.”

“Ha! I’ll believe that when I see it.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Are you two teaming up against me now?”

James opened his mouth to speak, but Shi beat him to it. “Aw. You mad, Clark?”

My jaw dropped. “Who are you and what have you done with Shi Baby?”

Shiloh laughed, disappearing into the kitchen.

James looked...proud. “I knew they’d find their voice someday,” he said, shrugging off my glare. “With you around, people don’t have a choice.” He playfully shoved my shoulder, kicking me out of whatever trance I’d been in.

I moved closer to James. I told myself it was so Shi wouldn't overhear me, but that was a total lie. The clanging of dishes from the back let me know that they wouldn't be hearing a word we'd say. I just wanted to be closer to him—needed to be closer. His arm snaked around my waist as if it belonged there. I felt strangely vulnerable after spending the night alone, and I hated that more than feeling smothered.

"I'm sorry," I repeated.

"Are we stocking up on apologies—hey!"

I'd smacked his chest, and he was rubbing the spot dramatically. "That didn't even hurt," I said, rolling my eyes. "I should have cleared it with you before I told Hannah about you."

James shrugged. "I'm not upset, love. But why are you bringing this up now?"

"Because it's time to tell Kian, but every single person that we tell only adds to the risk."

James weighed his options. Neither of us were under any illusion that the hunters had given up merely because we'd foiled Dani and Luke. As his thumb rubbed the same spot on my back, I fought the urge to wriggle out of his grip. Touching me clearly brought him comfort, and I didn't want to interrupt his train of thought.

"I appreciate you wanting to protect me," he finally whispered, "but I think it would be better to tell Kian the truth. He's already had so much kept from him that it might backfire on you otherwise."

"What if?—"

"Shh, love. Don't overthink it." James pressed his lips to my forehead and I closed

my eyes, savoring the feeling. “We will cross that bridge when we come to it. Kian came to you for help. You promised Luke you’d take care of him.”

“A promise to Luke isn’t as important as your safety.”

“I’m a big, scary vampire,” he said, dropping his tone even more. “I’ve beaten death so many times I’m on a first name basis with the Grim Reaper. I think I can take it.”

I bit my lip, but James pulled it free. “Come on, love. Don’t deny me that gorgeous smile.”

Damn him. Heat crept under my collar and my grin tugged at the corners of my mouth. “You’re sure you’re ready for this? Ready for me to start telling the world that,” I took in a deep breath, “my boyfriend’s a vampire?”

James shook his head. “No, I’m not ready. But it seems like it’s supposed to happen this way, so I’ll stand by your side no matter what.”

I leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek. “Thank you for offering to risk your life so I don’t have to lie to my daughter’s boyfriend.”

“I’d do anything for you, love. You know that.” My stomach flipped, and I ignored how much I liked hearing him say that. “Would you help Shiloh with the prep, please?”

Meaningless prep work seemed to be exactly what I needed to get my mind off of things. “Happy to.”

James retreated to the office, and Shiloh joined me behind the bar. I looked over and snickered. “You’ve got chocolate all over your face.”

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They reached for a napkin—and wiped the wrong side of their mouth. God, they were adorable. “Other side.”

With flushed cheeks, they scrubbed at the spot, then looked at me inquisitively.

“Almost.”

They hesitated, then handed the napkin over in defeat. “Help?”

I took the napkin with a smirk and softly brushed the spot they had missed. Their skin was so soft, not like James’s rigid muscles at all. Realizing how close our faces were to each other, I hurriedly wiped the smudge away. “Was that your breakfast?”

They shrugged. “It’s no sticky bun, but it’ll do.”

I grabbed a lime and placed it on the cutting board. “What the hell is a sticky—ow!”

The blade missed the fruit and sliced clean down my finger instead. I cursed, grabbing the nearest towel to stem the flow of blood.

“Are you okay?” Shi asked, white as a ghost.

“Squeamish, Shi Baby?” I managed, though the cut hurt like hell. They glared at me, and I sobered. I peeked behind the towel. “I’ll be fine, but I need to clean it.”

“Should I go get James?”

“Absolutely not. I’ll clean this up, bandage it, and I’ll be right back.” I indicated the mess behind me on the bar top. “Don’t touch that. I’ll handle it.”

Shi nodded, and I went to the kitchen to grab the first aid kit, knowing that James would’ve smelled the blood before I even felt the pain. Sure enough, he was waiting for me. I sighed. “I’m fine. It just needs to be washed.”

“You’re right. I have something in my office that’ll help.” And something told me he didn’t mean antibiotic cream.

I didn’t bother protesting. James tugged me behind him, out of the kitchen, and across to his office. The door barely shut before he flung the towel to the floor and sucked my finger into his mouth. I suppressed an immediate moan, squirming on the spot. He pulled off, cursing when my finger still bled. With one hand, he reached back and undid his chain, letting it fall to the floor between us. On the second try, I bit down on my tongue, using the various sources of pain as a distraction from the erotic way James’s tongue swirled around the cut on my finger. When it still wasn’t healed to his liking on the second try, I tried to jerk my hand out of his grip.

“I’m going to come in my pants if you don’t stop.”

He sucked, hard, releasing my finger with a pop and finally the cut was sealed, already fading to a light pink. James peered up at me, crooking a brow. “Is there anything that doesn’t turn you on?”

“Not much.”

He gave me a filthy look, then went to his desk and produced a roll of dressing. “I’ll wrap it so no one gets suspicious. Why don’t you chill in here for a while? I think Shi and I can handle it.”

Skeptical, I cocked a brow at him. “You trying to get rid of me?”

“Just the opposite. I’m trying to keep you, which means I need you to stay sane—and in one piece.”

James was right: I was stressed to say the least. I had boyfriend stress, kid stress, and now my kid’s boyfriend stress. “The bar’s covered in blood.”

With a glint in his eye, James said, “A little blood doesn’t bother me, love.”

I still hesitated, my hand held tightly in his. My finger brushed an edge of the bandage that was sticking out. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, love. I promise I’ll come get you if it gets crazy.”

“Thank you.”

I went back to the bar to make sure I hadn’t left anything behind, only to find that the area had already been cleaned. Shiloh, green in the face, was sanitizing the bench. “You okay?” they asked.

“Think a little scratch is enough to take me out?” I teased. “I’m fine. Just taking some time to let it rest. Don’t miss me too much.” I accepted the kiss James pressed to my cheek and turned for the office.

“Oh, I’ll be happy to ignore you some more later.”

Two minutes later, I was settled into my corner of the couch with Draculain my lap—and I was still grinning.

Chapter 12

I lost myself in the pages, and it wasn't long before I heard the bustle of life from the front of the bar. For a second, I closed the book and considered going out to help. I got as far as the office door before I paused and took a deep breath. James told me he had it, and I needed to learn to trust him. He'd never hesitated to ask for my help before, and tonight would be no different.

So, I reclaimed my spot and reopened my book. Though all I did for the next hour was try—and fail—to reread the same page. I needed to call Kian. It'd been days since we met, and I was sure that keeping quiet was killing him as much as it was killing me. But the idea of spilling everything brought a pang of protectiveness for James. I'd just gotten comfortable with the idea of a lifelong bond with him. Well, as comfortable as I could be.

I was trying, okay?

Telling Kian the truth would throw a wrench in all of that. James would be exposed, again. And God, I'd been hard on them when I caught them creeping outside the bar last year. I'd been certain that he and Hannah were out of their minds, that no such thing as a vampire could ever exist.

Oh, how quickly that changed.

If I decided not to tell him the truth, what would I say?

When I was about to give up on reading and throw the book across the room, there

was a soft knock at the door before it crept open. I was expecting to see James or Shiloh, and my heart started racing when Kian poked his head inside the room—with a nasty bruise on his forehead.

“What the hell happened?” I asked, closing Dracula and setting it aside.

“I ran into a door.” At my narrowed eyes, he laughed. “I promise that’s actually what happened. It was dark, I was drunk on cold medicine. Teaches me to turn a light on when I use the bathroom at night. James told me where to find you. Am I interrupting?”

“Not at all.” James had given me space to figure out what I was going to do, and now I was out of time. I dropped my feet to the floor and offered Kian the seat next to me. “Is it busy out there?”

“James said you’d ask that,” he snickered as he perched on the edge of the couch. “He said to tell you it’s fine. Nothing those two can’t handle.”

“I thought you’d be working today.”

“Called out sick again.”

“Still not feeling any better?”

He shrugged. “Physically I feel fine, but I... haven’t been focusing very well, and since Hannah has a busy day, I thought I’d see if you found anything.” He wrung his hands in his lap. “I’ve, uh, been going a little stir crazy.”

I blew out a breath. “I understand the feeling. I discovered a lot, Kian, but it’s not going to be an easy conversation.”

His eyes met mine, and he nodded. “Okay.”

“I’m going to tell you everything I know. I need you to hear me out, and I need you to remember you’re not alone.”

He nodded nervously. Going to James’s desk, I retrieved the folder and returned to the couch with it.

“The papers you found were legit. You were born Kian Parker. Luke wasn’t lying either: your parents died in a fire when you were five years old.”

Kian accepted the folder and opened it, landing on the lone surviving article about the fire. “Where does Luke come into this? How did I end up with him?”

I let out a deep, shaky breath. “That’s where things start to get a little strange. And I need you to stick with me.”

“Okay.” He set the file aside and gave me his undivided attention.

“I did some digging, and the fire that killed your parents wasn’t an accident.”

Kian sucked in a breath. “Arson?”

I nodded grimly. “But it wasn’t intended for them. Someone made a mistake.”

“How did you find out about it? Was there an investigation?”

“No. There are people who didn’t want a paper trail.”

Kian paled. “You know who it was.”

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“I do. And I owe you an apology.” I cleared my throat. “Last year when you said Luke was a vampire hunter, I called you ridiculous and sent you home.”

Kian relaxed. “Because it was ridiculous. Luke’s side hobby wasn’t?”

“A hobby at all,” I finished for him.

The only sound was my heartbeat in my ears. I couldn’t look at Kian while I waited for his reply. Instead, I stared across the room at the bookshelf, at the empty space where Dracula belonged.

“What do you mean?” he asked slowly.

“Luke did hunt vampires—because he thought they were monsters.”

“What?”

I held up my hand, and he let me continue. “There’s a whole group of hunters; Dani was a member too.” My throat tightened around her name. I’d wanted her to stop hurting James—I’d never wanted her dead. I shook off the memory. “Dani tried to kill me last year. She was trying to lure James here so they could slay him. James is a vampire, and this group that Luke and Dani worked for has been hunting him for years. Dani’s the one who set fire to the bar last year.”

Kian’s mouth worked, but no sound came out.

“I know this is a lot,” I said gently. I leaned forward, hoping he took the action as

comfort. “If you need to talk with anyone about all of this, we told Hannah about James yesterday.”

“I don’t even know where to begin,” Kian muttered. “The fire at Liz’s. The news said?—”

“That it was electrical, yeah. All the reports were doctored. Dani wanted to take James down and would have done anything to make that happen, including taking me out with him. She drugged me and tied me up. Luke didn’t agree with any of that. Before he ran out of the building, he loosened my ties and made me promise to look after you.”

Kian was staring at me with a dumbfounded expression on his face. His glossy eyes blinked, hands frozen in his lap where he’d been tugging on his fingers. “Are you drunk?”

I choked out a nervous laugh. “I wish I was, but I respect you too much to lie to you.”

Kian shook his head and dropped his face into his hands. “Let me get this straight. Your boyfriend is a vampire. The man I believed my whole life to be my big brother isn’t my brother at all and has been hunting your boyfriend.”

“Was hunting,” I corrected. “I think he made it clear when he fled that he was done with that life.”

“Right. What does this have to do with my birth family? Are you saying my parents were vampires?”

“No, your parents were killed in an accident.” I fought against a wave of nausea as I prepared myself for my next words. “And I think Luke was responsible.”

“What?” Kian shot to his feet. From where I sat, he towered over me. “Luke killed my parents, and then decided to adopt me? As what? Some form of atonement?”

“Maybe. I know it’s a lot, but if that’s true, he also saved your life.”

“How do we know for sure?”

“We don’t,” I said, looking up at him. “Not unless we talk to Luke.”

“You were the last person to see him.” It wasn’t a question.

“I guess I was.”

“And he told you to take care of me.”

“He did.”

“Did he tell you where he was going? Has he reached out to you since?”

I shook my head slowly. “I’m sorry. If I knew, I’d tell you.”

Kian slumped as the fight left his body and he collapsed back onto the couch next to me. “I don’t know what to think.”

“I’d say you’ve earned a little time to figure that out.”

“I feel like I’m in a fever dream.”

“Yeah, me too.”

I trained my eyes on the floor, unsure where things would go from there. I expected Kian to be angry, to lash out. I expected screaming, maybe a punch or two. I didn't expect the odd, choking sobs that came from next to me.

“Okay, didn’t see that coming.”

I jumped up and grabbed a box of tissues on James’s desk. Crouching in front of Kian, I squeezed his knee in comfort and offered them to him.

“I’m sorry,” he garbled through a wet laugh. “I’m so tired, I don’t know how to react.”

“I was worried you’d choose violence. I might have, if I were in your shoes. Thank you for not doing so, by the way.”

“My pleasure.” A genuine laugh broke through the sobs, Kian wiping his nose with a tissue. “So I’m adopted. The guy I thought was my brother is also a monster hunter who’s been hunting your vampire boyfriend. Am I missing anything?”

“Fuck, I hope not. I don’t think I can take much more.”

“Thank you, Ryder.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had someone thank me for ruining—ew!” Kian had pelted me with his gross, snotty tissue, making me fall back onto my ass. I pinched it in my fingers and tossed it back at him. “And here I was feeling lucky to have missed this part of parenthood.”

“I mean for telling the truth, and for not sugarcoating it. Ever since Luke took off, it’s almost like I can feel everyone tiptoeing around me. I can’t stand it.” Then he sighed. “God, what am I supposed to tell Hannah?”

I shrugged. “Tell her whatever you need to. She already knows about James, but the rest of it is your story to tell.”

“How did she take the news about James?”

“Better than I thought,” I admitted.

“I’m surprised she didn’t figure it out herself,” Kian continued. “I just wish I had more time to process this before I told her. It’s so much to take in.”

“Does she know you came to see me?”

“Yeah, she’s been so supportive. She’d never pry, but?—”

“You don’t want to keep things from her. I get it.”

Kian let out a sigh, then glanced around the office, seeming to take in the space for the first time. He was back to twisting his fingers again, going over each one on the left hand before switching to the right, taking on that childlike vulnerability again.

“You don’t want to leave yet, do you?” I asked. The only answer I got was a shake of his head. I pushed myself to my feet. “Stay here as long as you need. James won’t

mind. Call her, Kian. Let her help you.”

With that, I was on my feet and out the door.

Chapter 13

Kian could take as long as he needed in the office. James wouldn't mind, and he was taking it better than I would've. I had been preparing myself for multiple scenarios—even ones where I didn't tell him the truth—but his true reaction wasn't even on my radar.

In the bathroom, I leaned over the sink and splashed cold water on my face. I considered what Luke would do. Hell, what any adult would do. There weren't any resources for this kind of thing. Well, there were, but I highly doubted the books covered vampires and hunters and?—

“Ugh!” Groaning, I jerked a paper towel out of the dispenser to dry my face. I slumped against the wall. I didn't know what to do with myself. My skin was crawling, my body itching with the need to do something. But what?

I could go home. James and Shi could handle the bar without me, but I didn't want to be by myself.

So with that, I stomped down the hallway to the front of house.

The bar wasn't busy, but it was enough to keep James and Shi moving. Of course, James was the first one to note my presence. “Please give me something to do.”

He glanced toward the office. “Kian?”

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“Wanted some time alone, and I need to get out of my head. So please, put me to work.”

We weren’t exactly quiet, so I wasn’t surprised when Shi spoke up. “I could use a break,” they said, looking to James. “I’m starving.”

Whether they were lying, I couldn’t tell. Regardless, James wasn’t one to let his employees go hungry. He nodded his approval, and Shi let me under the partition as they headed to the kitchen.

“Is everything okay?” James asked quietly. “I mean, as okay as it can be?”

I shrugged. “It could have gone worse. I expected him to lash out. He wasn’t angry like I expected him to be—like I would have been.”

“No?”

“No, he was just... sad. It killed me to watch.”

A man stumbled up to the bar, barely supporting himself with a hand on the counter. He was clearly drunk, and James confirmed my suspicion. “I’m not serving you anymore. I told you that three drinks ago. You’re done.”

Bleary, drunken eyes turned to me. “You haven’t served me yet.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to,” I said, inclining my head toward James. “If he says you’re cut off, you’re cut off. Can I call you a cab home?”

The guy waved his hand dismissively. “I can manage myself.”

James and I shared a worried look as the guy turned away. When I looked back—yep, he was fishing his keys out of his pocket, stumbling toward the front door.

“I didn’t realize he drove,” James said, taking a step toward the partition.

“I got it,” I said. I managed to get to the door first, stopping the guy in his tracks. “You aren’t driving.”

“Says who?”

“Says me,” I asserted, holding my hand out. “Can I have your keys?”

“I’m not handing my keys to you!”

Okay, I see how this is going to go. I wasn’t muscular by any means, but this guy was heavily intoxicated. He could barely stand up straight. I should have offered to call the paramedics instead of a taxi. He was built, but given his state, I could likely take him.

“Then I guess we’ll have to call the police.” I gestured to where a small crowd was gathering behind us. “These lovely people would like to get on with their evening, so either please leave in a taxi or have a seat until someone can come get you.”

“Like hell. Move.”

I knew the guy’s next move before he made it. He fumbled for my shirt, managing a weak grip before I knocked his hand out of the way, spinning him around and slamming him into the wall.

“I tried to do this the easy way,” I said, straining through gritted teeth. He struggled, but in his inebriated state, he couldn’t muster the leverage he needed to overpower me. A moment later, I pinned him in place.

“Bastard!” he growled, jerking his head back.

I twisted, but I wasn’t fast enough. His skull connected with my lip. I flinched, my tongue darted out, and I tasted metallic blood. “Oh, I’ll show you a bastard.”

I hauled him away from the wall and wrestled him toward the door, shoving him away from me the second we cleared its threshold. “Get out of here,” I snarled. “If you come back, I will call the police and you can sober up in a cell.”

I spun and went back inside. He shouted after me, but I wasn’t falling for his games. Vegas Ryder might have, but I liked to think I’d grown since then. Besides, it wouldn’t do any good for me to take my frustrations out on that asshole—even if he did deserve it. I quickly cleaned myself up with a napkin, running my tongue along the inside of my mouth to assess the damage. I winced at the sting when I found the cut.

“Let me see,” James said.

“I’m fine.”

“I wasn’t asking.”

I batted his hand away when he reached for my chin. “Well I’m telling you: leave it. It’s just a busted lip.” Relaxing a little, I added, “I’ll be okay. It’ll heal in a few days and it’ll be nothing more than another story about me throwing some drunk asshole out of a bar.”

“Ryder...”

“James.” I tried to match his stern tone. I wasn’t going to budge. I’d spent most of my adult life as a bartender—in Vegas, of all places. Punch-ups were part of the job. I wasn’t going to let a small cut on my lip be the thing to take me down. Sure, it would be swollen for a few days, but it wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle. Hell, I’d dealt with worse after that altercation with Dani.

Thankfully, James relented, even if it wasn’t without a look that said he wanted to keep pressing. I could see the concern in his eyes, the way his hands twitched with the need to touch me. I wouldn’t have minded, but we had a full house and even I realized that too much PDA was bad for business.

James’s gaze shifted to look behind me. “Shiloh, bring me a Ziploc from the kitchen please.”

Shi froze mid-step, eyes widening as they took in my appearance. They backtracked, returning with a plastic bag. James filled it with ice and handed it to me along with a clean bar towel. “At least stand in that corner and ice it for five minutes.”

I looked at the ice pack, then back to him, earning an eye roll at my hesitation. “Please.”

Then his eyes went from stern to... damn it, he was giving me the puppy eyes. That was my move! I could never resist those. I guess my resistance had him resorting to desperate measures.

I tried to stay strong but crumpled. “Fine,” I said, snatching the pack from him and tucking myself into the corner and out of the way. James barely managed to suppress a grin. Those eyes sparkled with mischief as he turned back to the customers. Damn it. He’d found my kryptonite.

“What the hell did I miss?” Shi asked, needing to reach over me to grab a bottle.

“Only the chance to see the world-famous Ryder Clark in action. I tossed some plastered dickhead to the curb.”

“You are so full of yourself,” they scoffed, shaking their head and turning away.

“Admit it,” I called after them, but not loud enough for customers to hear, “the scars only make me hotter.”

My five minutes passed, and James walked over to check my frozen lip. He deemed it still too swollen for his liking. He grabbed me by the upper arm and ushered me to the other side of the bar where he plopped my ass down on a stool.

I pulled the ice away from my mouth. The cut was making my eyes water. “I’m fine,” I slurred.

“When you can say that without the lisp that you’ve never had before, I’ll believe you.”

“I didn’t know you were a doctor,” I groused, voice muffled behind the towel.

He dropped his voice to a whisper. “I used to be.”

He turned away, missing my incredulous look. I’d have to interrogate him about that later, though—Shi was snickering. “What’s so funny, Shi Baby?”

“Nothing,” they said quickly.

I crossed an arm over my chest and tucked it under the one holding the ice pack to my lip. “Keep your secrets. I’ll just sit here and watch you look pretty.”

They spilled their pour, and I grinned in triumph, finally settling back in silence.

“Ryder,” James scolded, “if you keep it up I’m going to start charging you for every ounce of alcohol they spill.”

“Then let me get back to work. I’m useless sitting here.”

“Five more minutes.”

“James—”

“Five. More. Minutes.”

He was giving me that look that made me shrink back in my seat, but I listened. He hovered the whole time, never moving more than a few steps away from me. Once my second round of freezing was over, he finally allowed me to get back behind the bar.

I practically leapt off the stool, tossing the ice pack to James and falling into place next to Shi. James moved to the corner I’d vacated, but he stayed close the rest of the night—almost bumping into me at every turn.

Damn, he was being clingy. It was suffocating.

After a while, James faked a dinner break, finally leaving me alone. Given his behavior tonight, I was surprised he was willing to go farther than two feet from me. I

was changing out bottles when someone in the corner of my eye got my attention.

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A young woman strutted up to the bar. She stumbled a bit before catching herself. At first, I thought she was drunk, but then I took in more of her appearance. “Can I get another one of these?” she asked, handing an empty seltzer can over to Shi. I discreetly positioned myself at the end of the bar to get a better look. She looked at me, batted her fake eyelashes—and wobbled. She didn’t know how to walk in her shoes.

Shi, however, didn’t seem to notice anything odd about the situation. “Sure thing.”

“Hold on,” I said, making Shi freeze in their tracks. I turned to the girl. The too-high heels, the heavy layer of makeup and... aha: the ring on her finger. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-four,” she said without missing a beat.

I wasn’t buying it. “What year were you born?”

“1999.”

I’d been doing this way too long. I knew a rehearsed answer when I heard one. “Name one song by the Killers.”

“Who?”

I grinned. “That’s what I thought. Go home.”

She walked away, defeated.

“Jesus, Shiloh,” I sighed, grabbing the seltzer can from the counter. “You need to be more careful.”

“How did you know she was underage?”

“She had a high school class ring on her finger. One of the oldest tricks in the book: she swiped the can off an empty table. I’ve seen it a thousand times. Seriously, if we get caught serving minors that could be the end of it. You need to pay closer attention.”

“Um, yeah, you’re right...”

I winced. Maybe I’d been a little too harsh. I was feeling on edge, and I didn’t know how to fix it. The night had barely started, but I was ready for it to be over—and that wasn’t like me. I was typically the first one to show up for a shift and the last to leave, but tonight? Last call couldn’t come fast enough.

Shi was looking at me with a strange expression.

I couldn’t ignore it. “What’s that look for?”

“You’re really good at this, aren’t you?”

I bit off a smile. “Not sure I love that you sound so surprised.”

Before they could respond, a commotion in the back corner of the bar caught our attention: a fight was breaking out. Shi looked at me with panic in their eyes, and their look had me pausing to take a deep breath before I stormed over to separate the fighters. If this was how the night was going to be, I was in for a shitshow.

Turns out, that was only the beginning.

Chapter 14

That was the shift from hell.

Closing time couldn't come fast enough, and I all but shoved the last few patrons out of the bar. I may have been too aggressive closing and locking the front door... maybe. But the door deserved it. At least, that's what I told myself when the glass rattled in its frame.

Red flooded my vision, and I thundered back across the floor to begin cleaning. James picked that precise moment to step into my path. I was in no mood to play any games and I wasn't even sure how he tolerated being around me. I stepped to the side, and he matched it. And again when I tried ducking around the other way.

The asshole I'd tossed out at the start of the night had set the tone. People drank like fishes and by the end of it, I'd put one person in a taxi and broken up two fights. I was no stranger to babysitting drunkards, but that didn't mean I liked doing it. It probably didn't help that the extremely stressful conversation with Kian was still playing on a loop in my head. Worse, James had sent Shiloh home early after I'd lost my temper with them again. I owed them one hell of an apology. My lip had started to throb, making me irritable. But Shiloh deserved none of the hostility I threw their way.

"I don't want to talk right now," I snapped at James. I snatched a bar rag and wiped down the sticky, disgusting counter. James snatched the towel out of my hand, and I whirled on him, ready for a fight.

Even if that fight was with a vampire.

James stood there, holding the cloth out of reach, daring me to challenge him. "Did I say anything about talking?"

I fought the urge to look away from his intense stare. “I guess not,” I admitted.

“The cleaning can wait.” He tossed the rag aside. “Come with me.”

“James...”

“I wasn’t asking,” he snarled, reaching out to grasp my bicep. He manhandled me to the back of the bar, down the small hallway and straight out the back door. Cold wind whipped through the alley, stinging my bare arms, but I didn’t get much time to react to it. James threw me against the wall, and I grunted from the force. I wasn’t small by any means, but I was no match for his supernatural strength.

“What the hell?” I panted, cut off by his hand around my throat.

“Hush.”

“James, it’s freezing.”

“I said, ‘hush.’” He squeezed,lightly.“You need to cool down. When I let go, you’re to stay completely silent. Understood?”

I didn’t know what had gotten into him, but after the way he’d kicked me out of his office earlier—hard and frustrated—my dick was more than interested. His dominance was fucking hot.

When I nodded and he fell to his knees in front of me... that was even hotter.

His hand released its grip, and I took in a gasping breath. He hadn't been constricting my airway, but it was as if my lungs just knew to obey.

“What are you doing?”

His head snapped up, blood red eyes meeting mine in the dark alley. “Didn’t I tell you to be quiet?”

I snapped my mouth shut, and he reached for my belt.

His voice had gone dark, thick with desire, and he muttered, “I told you: I can’t be trusted when you wear these jeans.” His fingers pushed under my shirt, shoving the fabric out of the way so his teeth could nip at my lower belly.

I shuddered, those red eyes hypnotizing me. For a moment, I almost forgot everything I’d been stressed about. I braced myself against the brick with one hand, the other gripping a fistful of his hair. I held on tight, not wanting to miss a single second of what he was doing.

James’s gaze fixed on my crotch like he hadn’t eaten in days. My belt sprang open with a satisfyingclink, and he unbuttoned my pants, easing the pressure on my straining erection. A chilling gust of air blew, pebbling my skin but as James fisted the base of my erection, I grew lightheaded from the rush of blood.

“Please,” I muttered, relieved to feelsomethingother than the anger that had been simmering in my veins.

“Do you even know what you’re beggingfor?” he asked, a teasing lilt to his voice. Ignoring that I’d broken the rules, he tugged my jeans down to my knees and knocked my legs apart as far apart as they would go.

“I don’t fucking know. Just do somethi—oh,fuck.”

James lapped at my cockhead, his tongue dipping into the slit to lick up as much

precome as he could. My chest burned, desperate for air. He eased off, but my lungs seized again when he ducked his head to trail a hot path all the way up the underside of my cock. I squeezed my eyes shut—continuing to watch was a dangerous decision. He sucked like a pro, effortlessly taking me to the back of his throat. I nearly lost it at the feeling of his tight, wet throat constricting around me. He pulled off fast, hollowing his cheeks to take me down again.

Despite the frigid temperature, the air grew thick and heavy, making full breaths impossible. His fingers wrapped around my length, squeezing slightly before his tongue found the sensitive bundle of nerves that completely unraveled me. I moaned, barely able to hold off my orgasm. James dropped his hand and took me to the hilt again. Without waiting for permission, I tightened my right hand in his hair and slowly thrust into his mouth. A firm squeeze to my thigh let me know that he wanted more, and that's exactly what I gave him.

My hips bucked. I fell into the deep, heady feeling, fucking his mouth with reckless abandon. My left hand dug into the wall behind me, the rough surface biting into my skin—I didn't care. I wasn't just chasing an orgasm. The moment was filled with pure need. Both of us craved some sort of release, and neither of us knew how else to get it. James's slurps mixed with my cries of pleasure to fill the alley with obscene sounds—stoking the fire in my belly.

Each time I sank into that tight suction around my cock, pleasure surged through my veins, displacing the stress. My climax built, tingling the base of my spine. Then, my skin started to crawl. Something in the air shifted, and I somehow knew...

We were being watched.

I was close. And I was not stopping. I held my breath until my orgasm became inevitable, then forced out a slow exhale to last a little longer. I forced my hips to slow, rolling them forward and seeking out the wet heat of James's mouth.

I pried my eyes open.

“Oh, shit.” The first thing that entered my field of vision was James’s nose buried in my groin, saliva dripping from his mouth in the sloppiest, sexiest way possible. One hand kept a firm grasp on my balls, the other pressed to his own erection.

The sight was too much. Dirty, erotic, and everything I wanted. My hairline was drenched in sweat. My legs quivered, the muscles beneath the skin of my thighs twitching. James moaned, the vibrations around my cock hurtling me closer to the edge.

But movement caught my eye, and I glanced up to the mouth of the alley.

Shiloh stood there, frozen mid-step and watching us intently. I was certain they’d turn and run when our eyes locked together, but I was wrong. They stayed. With one unmistakable expression in their beautiful, camouflage eyes.

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Lust. Damn, they looked good flustered. They squirmed in place, unable to tear their attention away. And that was what sent me over the edge.

“Fuck,” I growled. James choked as I held him down. My hips rocked forward and hung there while my cock pulsed my release down James’s throat. My entire body went weak. My eyes never left Shiloh’s as I abused James’s mouth. The orgasm seemed to last forever. I finally lost the battle, my eyes falling shut. When they reopened, Shiloh was gone.

Suddenly sensitive, I shivered when James pulled off. He wiped his mouth. “Damn, you really needed that, didn’t you?”

He had to have known Shi saw us. “More than I realized.”

“Think you can clean the bar without breaking anything now?”

“After a recovery period,” I said.

James stood with a smirk, and I tugged my jeans back into place as the cold crept into my skin. James watched me with that cocky grin on his face. The second my lungs stopped burning, I kissed it right off his mouth. I groaned, my own taste flooding my tongue. The muscles in my legs twitched, trying to remember how to function. I brought my hand up to my neck, still feeling the heat of his fingers around my throat. I’d never gotten any pleasure from that kind of restraint before.

Then again, I was never one to hand over control. But with James, it was easy. I didn’t have to think twice about it. Panic spiked in my chest, but I tamped it down.

He grunted into my mouth, his fingers holding me in place by the back of my neck. Our tongues danced, fighting for dominance until he nipped at my lip to break the kiss. I'm almost ashamed to admit that I whimpered.

"You okay?" he asked.

My chest still heaved, head spinning from a lack of oxygen. James had to know that Shi had watched us—he had to.

"Just trying to remember how my legs are supposed to work."

He showed no indication that he knew we'd been caught. He chuckled and kissed my forehead. "We can't leave here without cleaning. Shiloh doesn't deserve walking into such a mess tomorrow."

At the mere mention of their name, my cock twitched. I wondered what would happen the next time we saw each other. I had clearly liked it, but I worried Shi wouldn't feel the same.

When James turned his back, I smiled. Fuck, I couldn't wait to see the look on Shi Baby's face.

Chapter 15

Though my legs were still wobbly, I forced myself to start cleaning. James had already cleared the dirty dishes, and soft music drifted in from the kitchen. I disassembled the drip tray, taking it with me as I joined him. He was acting suspicious. He was a little too calm considering the angry way he threw me against that wall. And the knowing smile he gave me as I entered the kitchen confirmed as much.

I crowded behind him, reaching around to drop the sticky tray into the soapy water. “You knew they were there, didn’t you?”

“Knew who was where?” he asked innocently, though his dirty little smile told me everything I needed to know.

I molded myself to him, making sure my hips rolled right over his ass. “Don’t play coy with me, vampire,” I hummed into his ear.

Bashful-James was a version I could get used to. The coy smile and the way he avoided my gaze was fucking adorable. He shrugged. “They left their coat in the office. I wondered if they’d come back for it, and when I heard a familiar heartbeat, I assumed. But if you know, then that means...”

“They caught us. We locked eyes the second you swallowed my load. And you already knew that.” My hand crept around his hip, eliciting a guttural groan from him when I squeezed the bulge between his legs. “It turned you on.”

James let his head fall back onto my shoulder. “Fuck yeah, it did.”

I massaged his erection. “One look from Luke had you ready to rip his balls off, but you let me openly flirt with Shiloh in front of you. You let me touch them. You just let them watch while you sucked my cock. Why?”

“Luke was a creep. He never had any good intentions with you.” James dropped the dish in his hands, bracing himself on the sink and rolling his hips into my palm. “With Shi there’s—fuck, I don’t know. There’s something different there.”

I squeezed harder, relishing that I was able to bring him to the edge so easily. I leaned in, making sure I spoke my command right into his ear. “Come for me, vampire.”

And damn, he fell right over the edge. He groaned, cock pulsing and come spilling into his jeans. I felt the wet spot warm the denim under my hand as he rode out his orgasm against my palm.

James looked over his shoulder, rolling his eyes at the sight of my pleased smile. “Proud of yourself?” he asked, squirming in place.

“Always.” I kissed his cheek and nudged him aside, stepping up to the sink. “Why don’t you go home and shower? I’ll finish up here.” I turned my attention to the dishes, only for his hand to wrap around my throat. He turned my head to bring our mouths together.

“It’s going to get below freezing tonight,” James muttered against my mouth. “Shiloh’s coming back for that coat, and you need to make sure they aren’t uncomfortable with what they saw.”

I swallowed. “I will.”

And with one more kiss, he was out the door.

I pulled out my phone, continuing the song James took with him. I only got a few dishes in before I heard the sound of James's office door. I didn't get the usual chill that came with James entering a room, so it had to be Shiloh. Sure enough, they stood in the doorway with their coat slung over one arm. When our eyes met, their cheeks brightened.

"Enjoy the show?" I asked.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about," they stammered, dropping their gaze to the floor.

I turned off the water and dried my hands, then leaned against the sink. "Shiloh, look at me."

Brown eyes met mine. They continued to fidget with their fingers.

"Did James and I make you uncomfortable?"

Shi rolled their bottom lip between their teeth before shaking their head. "No," they finally said. "It's my fault. I should have walked away the second I realized what was happening."

"We shouldn't have been having sex at work."

"I get it. The thrill of getting caught..." Shi trailed off, and I waited for them to

continue. “I read a lot,” they blurted.

At that moment, I swore it would be my personal mission to find out exactly what Shi Baby had been reading. It sure as hell wasn't Dracula, but it sounded like something I needed to get my hands on. “You're sure you're okay?”

“I am. But I think the next time I forget something, I'll wait until my next shift to get it.”

I indicated the coat in their hands, then turned back to the dishes. “You needed that tonight. It's going to get cold.”

They didn't respond immediately. I returned to my Luke Combs and cleaning, but I didn't hear them leave. Instead, “Do you want help?”

“You're off the clock, Shi. Get some rest, you've earned it. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Ryder,” they said, so softly I barely heard it over the running water.

I finished the cleaning quick enough, locked up and drove home. It wasn't until I pulled myself out of the shower that the post-orgasm exhaustion set in. I fished my phone from my jacket pocket, let James know I was home, and collapsed into bed.

The chime from my phone came with a low battery notification. I fumbled around next to my bed, hoping like hell that I remembered to bring one of my chargers back from the living room. I let out a sigh of relief when I found it, all but throwing my phone onto the nightstand. I turned away, falling into a deep sleep.

Maybe a little too deep.

When I finally peeled my eyes open, I felt like I'd slept my way into another

dimension. Though oddly enough, it seemed I awoke before my alarm. Thinking nothing of it, I trudged out of bed. I lost myself in my habitual morning routine: showering, feeding Carlos and letting him outside, and making myself something to eat. There was something comforting about it, though the morning seemed strangely quiet. I was almost finished cooking when I noted the time on the stove, and it stopped me in my tracks.

Fuck.

I hustled to my bedroom and yanked my phone off the charger.

The screen remained black.

“The fuck?” I bent down to pick the charger off the floor. When I straightened, the charger came with me—too easily. I followed the cord right to the frayed end. Upon further inspection, I saw tiny teeth marks in the plastic surrounding the wires. I reached behind my nightstand, unplugging the other half of the chewed-through charger.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I raced to the living room to retrieve my spare, cursing my furry roommate the entire way. Once my phone was plugged in—and actually charging—I went back to my room to change into jeans, willing the stupid phone to turn on as fast as possible. I was already an hour late to the bar. I was shoving food in my mouth and arguing with Carlos about getting inside when incessant pinging from the living room let me know my phone was up and running. I gave the dog a few more minutes of freedom while I rushed into the room to call Liz’s, hoping like hell Shiloh would forgive me. They were the one to answer the phone.

“Finally,” they muttered. “Jesus Hector Christ, where are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m so sorry, Shi—the dog ate my charger.”

“Aren’t we a little old for that excuse?”

“Ha-ha,” I deadpanned. “I’ll be in as soon as I feed him to the sharks. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s no problem. You might want to call James though. He’s been losing his mind.”

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“He’s not there? Okay, I’ll call him—Shit!”

The front door flew open and James barreled into the house. The crack of the door handle hitting the wall could be heard a neighborhood away.

Shi spoke first. “Please tell me that’s not a serial killer showing up to murder you.”

“Just my boyfriend trying to scare the life out of me.”

“Already? I swear he just left...”

“I got to go,” I said quickly. “See you soon.” I disconnected the call and turned to James. “Sorry,” I said, returning my phone to the charger. “Carlos chewed through my charger, my phone died, and I slept through my alarm.”

“You didn’t think to check your phone before you fell asleep?”

“Carlos has never been a chewer before,” I shot back, irritated. The perpetrator was digging in the corner of the backyard and paying zero attention to my calls. “And why would I have any reason to suspect my charger wasn’t working when it was working just fine yesterday?”

Stepping outside, it wasn’t until I threatened to drag Carlos in for him to abandon his dirt masterpiece and flee inside.

“You had me worried sick,” James said. “Your phone is never off.”

“I know. I already said I was sorry. What more do you want me to do?”

“Don’t get snippy with me.”

“I’m not snippy.” I secured Carlos behind his gate. “What the hell’s gotten into you lately?”

“What are you talking about?”

I snatched my phone and keys from the table. “You’ve been so far up my ass lately that I should start wearing a plug.”

“Classy,” James scoffed.

“I thought my maturity was one of the things you liked about me.” I made my way to the front door, but James stood in my way. I tried to move around him, but he anticipated my every step. “I’m late.”

James stopped me as I made another attempt to step around him. “Shiloh assured me they were fine, so tell me what you meant.”

I wrenched out of his grip, grateful he didn’t use his vampire strength. “The last thing I want to do is talk right now.” I nearly faltered under his stare, but I stood my ground and crossed my arms over my chest. “You storm in here, acting like all of this is my fault, and accuse me of getting snippy. I’m not a child, and I won’t have you treating me like one.”

“I’m not treating you like a child!”

“Tell that to your tone. Shit happens, James. Phones die, alarms get missed. I know you don’t like Carlos, but this is something that animals do. I asked you a simple

question and you accused me of getting an attitude. I'm sorry I worried you. Now please, let me leave."

"I thought you'd earned the day off. I was going to cover for you."

"Thanks, but I made a promise to Shi." I stepped around him but froze with my hand on the doorknob at his next words.

"So Shiloh's more important than me?"

"Oh my God." The sheer absurdity of James's jealousy made me laugh. "Do you hear how ridiculous you sound? I'm not going to entertain this argument anymore." I yanked the door open, pretending I didn't see the hurt in his eyes. "When you decide you're ready to talk like adults, you know where to find me."

Even I flinched when that door slammed shut, cutting off his response.

Chapter 16

I walked into work more wound up than I'd ever been—and for once, I didn't mean sexually. I hated how tense things were with James. I didn't like tiptoeing around someone, and I didn't like being tiptoed around either. Especially when the culprit was clinging to me like a koala.

Don't get me wrong, he'd always been the clingy one out of the two of us, but since accepting the bond, he had gotten much worse.

It was the middle of the week and had been an uncharacteristically slow one, so Shiloh was more than capable of closing the bar on their own, but I was desperate for anything that didn't require talking to my boyfriend.

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They were nowhere to be found when I walked in, but I threw myself behind the counter and found things to do. Since Shi had done most of the prep work, I was left checking already-full bottles and stocking extra towels just to keep myself busy.

Shi emerged from the restroom a few minutes later, and I popped up from behind the bar, startling them. “Fuck, I didn’t hear you come in.”

I opened my mouth to reply, when I noticed that their cheeks were flushed and their eyes were red. “Is everything okay?” I asked instead.

“Fine.”

“Someone’s cranky.”

“Someone needs to shut up,” they snapped, choking on the last word as if they were trying not to cry again.

“Whoa!” I spun to face them as they stormed past me. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ruffle your feathers. If you need, I can handle the bar by myself.”

The fight went out of them, and they slumped against the counter. “I’m fine,” they reiterated, brushing their hair out of their face. “I’m sorry I snapped at you, and thanks for coming to help. I just... want to get through this shift.”

The corner of my lip tipped up in a grin, and I was grateful for the stop I’d made on the way, despite being late. “I have something that might make it better. I hope it’s the right thing.” I grabbed the box I’d left on the counter and handed it over to them.

Skeptical, they lifted the lid on the box... and smiled. “A sticky bun!”

After they’d mentioned it, I spent some time researching and found a nearby bakery that made them. Frankly, the thing looked like a cavity waiting to happen: similar in size and shape to a cinnamon bun but smothered in chocolate and topped with some sort of nut. But it seemed to make Shi happy, and they practically hummed as they took a big bite of the pastry.

“Hopefully it makes up for me being a dick to you last night.”

“Want to try?” they asked, offering it to me.

I respectfully declined, if for no other reason than it meant they had more. “You know you can?—”

“Talk to you if I need it.” They gave me a tight-lipped, chocolate-tinted smile. “Thanks, Ryder.”

Except when necessary, they didn’t say a word for the rest of the night. As I suspected, it was a slow evening. Though I saw it coming, it was still odd. Typically, the weeks leading up to Halloween were some of our busiest. As the night wore on, Shi only seemed to get uneasier.

“Go home,” I told them. “I’ll close up.”

They let out an exasperated sigh and threw the towel onto the bar. “I don’t want to go home.”

I didn’t want to set them off again by prying, so I simply said, “Okay,” and went about cleaning the taps.

Before I locked up, Shi surprised me. “Do you have anywhere to be?” they asked.

I snorted. “It’s after midnight and the only other place I’d be is at home—but I don’t really want to be there either.”

“What are you avoiding?”

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.”

They searched my eyes, and the moment lingered a little too long. Their cheeks flushed that adorable shade of pink, but for the first time, they didn’t look away. It was hard not to squirm under their scrutiny. “Want to have that drink?” they finally asked.

I considered it. Carlos would be fine for a little longer, and I didn’t have anywhere else to be. My only other option would be to go home and pretend like I hadn’t been fighting with my boyfriend.

Fuck, that word still felt weird—even in my head.

I grinned. “Mojito, right?”

I mixed, only for Shi to chug the damn thing in about ten seconds.

“Slow down,” I said, accepting the empty glass back. A silent gesture that demanded more. “You still have to get yourself home.”

“Walked,” they said, wiping a drop of liquid from the corner of their mouth.

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“My point stands: we want you walking home, not stumbling.” I made a second drink, cutting the alcohol in half. “You ready to talk?”

“Not yet.” I tensed when they took the glass from me, but relaxed when they only took a sip. “You first.”

Unsure of where to begin, I drank half of my vodka and Sprite—and cringed. Ugh, was that Sprite stale? “I don’t...”

“Trouble in paradise?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I was caught up with a vampire who wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his life with me. Sounded like some angsty teenage romance novel. “Guess you could say that.” Shi simply waited for me to continue. After a moment, I relented. “It’s time for us to take the next step. I thought I was as ready as he is.”

Shi’s face was already flushed from the booze, their eyes shining. Their first drink had hit. Hard. “I know the feeling.”

“Okay, I spilled. Your turn.” I nudged their arm and hid in my own drink, feeling exposed. Then I heard their breath hitch. Glancing over, I caught a single tear running down their cheek. I set my drink down and gave them my undivided attention.

“I’m not from here, you know?”

I shook my head. Shi had kept their personal life close to the chest.

“I’m from Texas. Houston. I’m a city kid, born and bred. I met a guy, fell in love... but he wanted to move back home. Smalltown life didn’t really appeal to me, but I loved him, so I did it.” They shrugged, as if it were the easiest decision they’d ever had to make. “But things changed when we got here. We fought. A lot. And not the usual ‘who put the peanut butter in the fridge?’ kind of arguments that normal couples have.”

I scrunched my nose. “Peanut butter in the fridge?”

“I get confused in the mornings!” They laughed, brushing away another tear.

“Continue.”

They avoided my eyes. “I guess he wasn’t as happy here as he expected he’d be. He wanted to go back to Houston, but I was already settled. To my surprise, I love it here.” Shi sniffled and wiped their face. “We’ve fought about it for weeks. This morning, it finally ended.” Shi’s voice broke—along with my heart.

“The fight, or...?”

With a sad smile, those tear-filled eyes turned to me. “Come on, Ryder. You’re smarter than that.”

“Well, I like to remain hopeful. I’m sorry, Shi.” I picked up my drink and downed the rest of it. “And here I am losing my mind because my boyfriend wants me forever.” At their silence, I continued. “It’s the forever part that scares me. Though I suppose I should be grateful.”

“Don’t think like that. Stress is subjective. Your feelings are valid.” They finished off their second drink before speaking again. “Did you realize that today is the first time you’ve referred to James as your boyfriend out loud?”

“No, it’s not.”

They shrugged. “First time you’ve said it in front of me.”

That feeling started creeping over me again: a fist tightening in my chest, blood rushing in my ears. Shi brought me back to the present with a nudge to my shoulder. “Hey. Don’t overthink it.”

I snorted. “I’m not usually one to overthink anything.”

“I can see that.”

I collected Shi’s glass from them.

“Is that a sign you’re not going to make me anymore drinks?” they asked as I walked toward the kitchen. I heard their voice calling after me. “Because I can make them myself. Yours just taste better.” I spun at that opening, grinning at their groan of regret. They clapped a hand over their mouth. “Told you I was a lightweight—my filter’s already gone.”

“God forbid you give me a compliment, Shi Baby.”

Though they’d accepted the nickname by that point, they still rolled their eyes. “And stroke your ego? Not a chance.”

I threw them a wink. “My ego doesn’t need any help.” I continued to the kitchen, washed the glasses, then returned to the bar to stack them. “Besides, I’d much rather you stroke something else.”

They groaned. “I set you up for that one.”

“It was a team effort. Just the way I like it.”

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“Maybe I shouldn’t drink anymore. I’ve already reached the ‘saying stupid things’ portion of the evening.”

“Maybe not.” I turned off the lights in the main room, preparing to lock up. “But if you do want to drink more, at least don’t do the irresponsible thing and stay here by yourself.”

“My ex won’t be out of the house until morning.”

“If you can deal with my four-legged roommate, I’ve got a bedroom no one’s using tonight.” Their eyes widened, and I held a hand up to let them know I wasn’t finished. “No funny business. Just a safe space to do whatever you need to do.”

They hesitated. “You’re sure?”

“You don’t have to be alone unless you want to be.” They followed me down the hall as I turned the lights off one by one. I popped into James’s office to grab my jacket and hand theirs over, then we made for the back door. “I know I talk a lot of shit, but I’m not a bad guy.”

Shi thought it over, then smirked. “Just a guy with commitment issues?”

I stared at them in stunned silence. Their mouth widened into a full smile and they brushed past me to walk out the back door.

I set the alarm and exited after them. “You’re getting the Carlos treatment.”

They turned to look at me, walking backward to my car. “That’s not some freaky sex thing, is it?” They barely managed to say it with a straight face.

“Get in the car,” I said, giving them a playful shove on the shoulder.

Ten minutes later, we made it to my place. I was relieved to see the windows were dark. I had half feared James would be waiting for me.

“Brace yourself,” I said, unlocking the front door. Shi only got a single step in before I heard the inevitable scream and crash. Carlos had cleared the baby gate.

Shi fell to one knee and had enough time to get out, “Hi, sweet angel face!” before the rambunctious hound leapt, knocking the unsuspecting person to the ground—not that they seemed to mind. They laughed while Carlos gave them a precursory sniff before licking every part of them he could get to.

It was safe to say that Shiloh crying was something I never wanted to see again. Hearing their laughter was like a soothing ointment on a burn, so I was happy to let Carlos go on for a while. Only when they started gasping for breath did I move to the back door and open it, letting Carlos bolt into the backyard.

I helped Shi to their feet. “Should I apologize for him?”

“Please don’t,” they said, righting their clothes. “I really needed that. Can I rinse off my face though?”

After directing them to the bathroom, I began mixing us more drinks in the kitchen. They raised their brows when they walked in and saw a mojito waiting for them. “You just happened to have the ingredients for a mojito lying around?”

“It’s my party trick.” At their confused look, I chuckled. “I’ve been a bartender most

of my adult life and I have a boyfriend who loves to cook. I have a lot of ingredients around here that most people wouldn't."

They gave the glass a suspicious sniff. "You didn't dilute this one, did you?"

"Ah, busted."

"Don't baby me." Shiloh took a sip, and if their satisfied hum was anything to go by, I did it right. "That's the last thing I need right now."

"Noted."

Chapter 17

Shiloh drank three more mojitos, becoming progressively tipsier. Combined with the two from the bar, they quickly fell over the line and into drunk-off-their-ass territory. Their inhibitions lowered with each drink, and I started to see glimpses of the real Shiloh peek through.

I loved it.

As they babbled about anything and everything, I realized I'd never heard them talk so much. I happily sat back and let them. The night wore on, but eventually they ran out of things to talk about and the conversation lulled. Shiloh and I sat on one couch while Carlos curled up on the other, having grown bored of our new houseguest who would no longer let him lick their face. How dare they.

Shi snuggled into the plush cushions. With their head resting against the back, they closed their eyes. I muted the TV that had been playing some nonsensical 90 Day Fiancé episode I'd seen a hundred times. Their breathing slowed, and I thought they'd fallen asleep. Even in the dim light, I could see their dark lashes tickle the freckles

across their cheekbones. I shook my head, wondering why the hell their ex wouldn't be going to the ends of the earth to make them happy.

Shi cracked an eye open. "You perving on me, Clark?"

"Can't help it." I grinned. "You're too pretty."

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“Shut up,” they slurred, turning their face into the couch to hide their beautiful blush.

“I thought you’d fallen asleep.”

Their empty glass spun around in their hands. “Not quite. Just wondering what my next move is. I don’t know anyone here. I barely know how to find the grocery store on my own.”

“Do you want to go back to Houston?”

“I thought I would. But I don’t. I like it here. I didn’t realize what was outside of Houston until I left.” They closed their eyes, sighed, then shook their head. “Enough about me. I want to know more about you.”

“You mean there’s stuff you didn’t find on Google?”

“Shut up,” they giggled.

“Something in my background check didn’t add up?” I gasped dramatically, clutching a hand to my chest. “You didn’t find that video from my thirtieth birthday, did you? Raleigh assured me he destroyed all evidence of that.”

Despite the theatrics, there actually was a mortifying video from that night—and I knew all too well that Raleigh didn’t keep his promise and destroy it. The bastard.

“Stop making me laugh! I have to pee!”

“If you need help going potty, Shi Baby, all you need to do is ask.”

“Fuck you!” They shoved their glass into my chest and rose from the couch. I watched until they were safely behind the bathroom door, then I went to the kitchen.

There was no chance in hell they were getting more alcohol—I knew when to cut someone off. I had more than a buzz going myself, and one of us needed to be coherent. I dumped their glass in the sink, draining the rest of my own cocktail. I grabbed two cold bottles of water from the fridge and returned to my seat. I was thinking about knocking on the door to check on them when they stumbled back into the room and collapsed next to me. “I don’t want that,” they slurred, shoving the bottle away.

“Drink it, or I’ll put you to bed.”

They snatched the bottle, mumbling something that sounded suspiciously like, “Someone should.”

“I want half that bottle gone before I answer any personal questions out of that pretty mouth of yours.”

Shi settled into their corner of the couch, eyes on the trashy reality show playing silently while they sipped at the water. They clearly needed it more than they realized because they didn’t say a word, the water slowly disappearing. They must have been reading the captions because they suddenly snorted. “How can you watch this shit? It has to be fake.”

“I don’t think anyone could make this stuff up if they tried,” I told them. Then I shrugged. “Hannah likes it. I guess there’s something cathartic about letting your brain rot for a few hours.”

“Hannah’s your daughter?”

“Yeah, she got me into these crummy shows when she started spending weekends here.”

I thought Shi would ask more about her, but they fell silent instead, content to watch the show on mute. “This one has to be delusional,” they finally remarked.

I looked up from the bottle in my hands to the screen to see who they were talking about. “Oh, a thousand percent. But it’s like a train wreck: I can’t stop watching.”

Shi moved out of the corner of my eye. They were holding up their water. “Does this earn me any questions?”

After deeming their offer acceptable, I nodded. “One.”

“Did you like me catching you last night?” they giggled.

“You are definitely still not sober enough,” I laughed, heat creeping under my collar.

Another precious laugh. “I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’”

Though I wanted to entertain the conversation just to hear that sound, it wasn’t the time. “You’re drunk.”

“I was curious sober too.”

“All right, time for you to get to bed.” I patted their knee and moved to stand, only for them to grab my hand. Shi’s water bottle fell to the couch between us, and their eyes locked on to our entwined fingers. Heat flickered through my veins, as if their gaze drew a path of fire up my arm. I should have pulled back—I knew I should

have—but something prevented me from doing so.

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Surely, Shi Baby wasn't about to do what I thought they were.

Our eyes met, then, and I knew.

I was frozen in place, breath held, as they leaned in. Time seemed to dilate, then...

I dove for the water bottle they'd dropped, and in record time twisted the top off and pressed the spout to their lips. They sputtered on the first sip but took the bottle from my hand and tipped it up, draining it.

"You're too drunk to do anything with that mouth but drink water," I told them gently. "When you can speak without slurring—hell, without giggling—we can talk about it."

"What about James?"

"I'm sure he'd love to be a part of that conversation. You ready for bed?"

"Mmhmm." Shiloh sat up and set their water bottle on the table. "I'll go."

"Absolutely not. You're staying here."

"I'm not some charity case, Ryder. I can get myself home." They stood and swayed on the spot, and I jumped up to steady them with an arm around their waist.

"Uh huh, if 'home' is face down in the middle of the street somewhere." They snickered, and I rolled my eyes. "Let's go."

I led them down the hall to Hannah's room, parking them on the edge of the bed. "Do you want some clothes to change into?"

"Um," Shi clutched their stomach.

I lunged for the trash bin under Hannah's desk and fell to my knees in front of Shi as every one of those mojitos came back up. I brushed their hair away from their face, soothing them as much as I could. They tried to apologize between heaves, but I shushed them, combing through the sweat-drenched locks. I only set the trash aside once I was sure they were finished.

"Think you can manage the bathroom?" I asked. At their nod, I helped them to their feet. "There's a spare toothbrush under the sink."

While Shiloh readied themselves for bed, I switched out the liner in the trash can. By the time I reappeared in the bedroom with a new water bottle, they were sprawled face down on the bed—jeans and all. I snickered, placing the water on the nightstand and creeping out of the room. A soft mutter of my name made me turn back.

"Did you dodge my kiss because you don't find me attractive?"

Damn. I felt my heart crack in two. "No, Shiloh. You're beautiful." I padded back across the room and leaned over the bed. Shiloh's breathing began to slow. I moved in close, whispering softly. "I have a boyfriend, and you've had too much to drink. And we work together, but none of those reasons are the true problem. Your ex is an idiot and you were too good for him. The right person is going to be so lucky to have you, Shi Baby." I tenderly pressed my lips to their temple, hoping that they would remember it and that it would soften the blow of the double rejection. "No matter what, you always have someone in this town. You're not alone—not ever."

Shiloh finally let their eyes fall shut. I stood, quietly retreating to the doorway where

I could make sure they drifted off to sleep. Only after their breathing slowed did I let myself retreat to my own bedroom.

I went through my nightly routine and crawled under the covers, but my brain wouldn't turn off. Usually, alcohol lulled me into a gentle sleep, but tonight I could only lie there and stare at the ceiling while the booze slowly faded from my system. I kept replaying that moment on the couch, wondering what would've happened if I hadn't interrupted Shi.

Would it have stopped with a kiss? Would I even want that—any of it—if James wasn't in the picture?

My stomach twisted at the thought. I sat up, thinking I was about to be sick.

No, I didn't.

I wasn't quite sure what to do with that realization. As Shiloh had pointed out earlier, I'd never been an overthinker. But damn it, those confusing emotions swirling around in my stomach had made one out of me and I couldn't stand it. The last week or so had been a complete whirlwind, and I had no idea how to make sense of it all. The stubborn part of me wanted to hole myself up to avoid dealing with it. But I couldn't do that anymore. There was another part of me, one that was bonded to a damn vampire, and I kept hearing his voice in my head.

“You don't have to do this alone.”

The voice was so vivid, so clear, that for a split second I looked around the room, expecting to see James lurking in the corner or sneaking out of the bathroom. I eyed my phone on the nightstand, and the window beyond that. No, I couldn't have him over right now—not with Shiloh in the next room.

I calculated the time difference to Vegas. It wasn't too late, especially if Raleigh worked that night. But what if he didn't? He still had a husband and a daughter at home.

I groaned and threw myself back down on the pillows. I couldn't call Raleigh to get me out of this either. Not only was it my problem to deal with, but I already knew what he would say. And I didn't need to hear his smug voice saying it. Whatever it was I needed to work through, it would need to wait until morning.

Yet again, I spent the night tossing and turning. With each hour of the clock, I cycled through the different emotions plaguing my mind. I couldn't put a name to any of them, but in the end, there was only one fact I was certain of.

I wanted my vampire.

Chapter 18

Somewhere around dawn, I dozed off. I only awoke again when I felt the other side of the mattress dip. I had a fleeting moment of panic before James's hard body slid in beside mine, his strong arm wrapping around my waist and giving me a squeeze. "I'm sorry about yesterday," he whispered, peppering kisses across my bare shoulders. "I was scared, and I overreacted."

"Me too," I muttered in return, barely awake enough to remember what the hell we'd been fighting about in the first place. "I don't know what's been going on with me lately."

Another kiss to my neck released more of the tension. "Shiloh's here?"

"Mmhmm." I leaned into his lips, craving more of him. Each tender kiss lit up nerve endings beneath my skin.

"Why?"

"We were drunk." Coming to terms with the fact that I wasn't going back to sleep, I peeled my eyes open and turned into his chest. "I let them stay over."

James pressed his lips to my forehead. "You really care about them, don't you?" I nodded. "I almost got jealous when I heard their heartbeat."

I snorted. "Jealous? You? Pfft—ah!"

James dug his fingers into my stomach, and I wiggled in a vain attempt to free myself from his grip—his vampiric grip.

“Stop!” I cried through the laughter. “I can’t breathe!”

Reluctantly, James ceased the torture. “Humans are no fun.”

I slid out from beneath him. “I dare you to tell me that next time I have your cock in my mouth.”

That did the trick. I glanced over my shoulder as I sauntered away, and James’s eyes had turned almost predatory.

He was gone when I came out of the bathroom, but the sounds coming from the kitchen told me where he was. Before joining him, I checked on Shi; soft snoring from behind Hannah’s bedroom door confirmed they were still fast asleep. I found James in his usual spot in front of the stove.

“There’ll be plenty for them too,” he said before I could ask. The man was a caregiver through and through.

“They’ll need it.” I fished out a bottle of water and painkillers, then sat at the table. “They weren’t joking when they said they were a lightweight.”

“Two-drink drunk?” James asked, amused.

“Not even—and I watered the second down.” I cracked open my bottle, guzzling half of it before my thirst was quenched. I resorted to picking at the label as I asked James my next question. “Why didn’t you get jealous when you found Shi here?”

“Because nothing happened.”

“How do you know?”

James turned from the stove and brought me a plate of food. “Not only do I trust you, but I would’ve been able to smell them on you.”

“They tried to kiss me,” I confessed, dropping my voice to a whisper in case Shiloh had woken up.

“Tried to?”

I nodded, pushing the eggs around my plate. “I ducked out of it, but I kissed their temple when I put them to bed.”

Considering James had been ready to rip Luke to pieces for simply hitting on me, he was surprisingly calm after I admitted to kissing our co-worker. I wasn’t sure what made me spill everything.

“I’m not upset, love,” he finally said.

“You’re not?”

He sighed. “I don’t know what’s different between Luke and Shiloh, but the more I try to make sense of it, the more I infuriate myself.” He chuckled. “After the other night, I wouldn’t blame you if you had shared a drunken kiss with them.”

“I couldn’t have done that—to either of you. They were too drunk to consent to a trip to Waffle House, much less anything physical.”

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“Which means we’re about to have one hell of a hangover on our hands. They’re awake. Brace yourself.”

James returned to the stove to make another plate and slid two pieces of bread in the toaster. I started to eat, hearing the creak from Hannah’s bedroom door. Soft footsteps padded down the hallway before Shi meekly poked their head around the corner.

“There go my chances of escaping unseen,” they lamented, their voice rough and scratchy. “Hi, James.”

“Morning, Shiloh,” he returned, managing to hide his grin by keeping his back turned. I still heard it in his voice. “Sit down. You should eat.”

“I’m okay, really.”

“That wasn’t a suggestion, Shi Baby.” I kicked the chair across from me. “Sit.”

That beautiful pink flush crept under Shi’s collar and swept over their cheeks. They looked between me and James, but relented and crossed the room to lower themselves into the chair. James reached over their shoulder to set their food in front of them, while I nudged an extra bottle of water and the Tylenol across the table.

“Are you not eating?” they asked James.

“Already did,” he lied. “You’ve been knocked out for a while.”

Shi groaned, rubbing at their temples. “It wasn’t long enough.”

“Eat,” James repeated. “You’ll feel better.”

Shiloh grabbed the Tylenol, but I stopped them from opening it. “Maybe you should eat first. You’ll want to keep that down.”

“Oh God,” they groaned. “I puked all over you last night, didn’t I?” They dropped the bottle, wincing at the noise and burying their reddened face in their hands.

I stifled a grin. Damn, they were adorable. “You didn’t get it all over me,” I assured them. “I’m too skilled at my job to let that happen.”

James stood in the corner of the kitchen, watching Shiloh with a look in his eyes that I couldn’t quite discern. Shiloh peeked at me through their fingers and I let my mouth quirk up in a way I knew would deepen that blush. The redder their skin got, the more the smattering of freckles across their nose and cheeks stood out.

“Don’t worry, Shiloh,” James finally spoke, a sinister grin curling his lips. “You should have seen Ryder last year when we separated.”

My stomach flipped. “Don’t you dare!”

Amused that he got a rise out of me, James crossed the room, stopping behind my chair and bending to wrap his arms around my shoulders. “Don’t what? Tell Shiloh that we all drown our sorrows in a bottle from time to time? That we all do things we regret?”

I gulped. “He’s right, Shi.”

Slowly, as if afraid every bite could come back up, they began eating. “You two broke up?”

“For a little while, yeah,” I said, my throat tight. “Sometimes things have to happen for a reason.”

“And what was the reason?”

“It’s complicated,” James and I both said.

Shi’s gaze flitted between us. “That doesn’t make things any clearer.”

We didn’t expand further, and Shi got the hint. We focused on our breakfast. I had no desire to relive those days apart from James. I fucked up when I slept with Luke. I knew I’d hurt James. Worse, I’d led him right into the hunters’ trap. But I couldn’t take it back. The next time I looked up from my plate, I caught James’s eye. He must have sensed my inner turmoil because he gave me a sweet smile and mouthed, “It’s okay.”

His small gesture did more to soothe me than I thought it would, and I turned back to my breakfast. Shiloh’s fork clattered to the plate, making even me flinch. “Oh, fuck. I tried to kiss...” They trailed off, looking from me to James.

“I told him, Shi.”

This time, they paled instead of turning red. “I’m?—”

“Don’t you dare say you’re sorry.”

“You have a boyfriend. Who’s also my boss. And I tried to kiss you, oh my God.” Shiloh hid behind their hands again. “Why haven’t you fired me yet?”

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“Because I don’t want to,” James said. “I don’t blame you, Shiloh. As insufferable as Ryder can be?—”

“Hey!”

“—he is pretty cute.”

“I’ll show you ‘cute,’” I snarled at James.

Shiloh whipped their head around again, too quick for James to come up with something snarky in response. They closed their eyes and grabbed their stomach—were they about to be sick again? After a few deep breaths, they centered themselves and stood, taking their plate to James at the sink. “I think I’m going to get an Uber home. Thank you for breakfast,” they said to James before turning to me. “And thank you for last night. I’m?—”

“Shi,” I warned.

“Grateful,” they finished shyly, pulling their phone from their pocket and dashing from the room.

I started to follow them, but James called me back. “Give them their space,” he said quietly. “Imagine how they feel right now. Besides, we should talk about yesterday.”

I groaned and pushed my half empty plate away. I wasn’t hungry anymore. “Do we have to?”

His response was cut off by a knock at the door. “Are you expecting anyone?”

I shook my head but thankful for the delay in conversation, rose from the table. James swept my plate away as I went to the front door.

“Kian!” I exclaimed, surprised to see him on the front step. I hadn’t expected to see him again so soon. A gust of wind made me shiver. “Come in.”

Kian stepped over the threshold. He looked... tired. His hair was a mess. Dark circles framed red-rimmed eyes; he hadn’t been sleeping. Or he’d been crying. Or both. Whichever it was, I couldn’t blame him. “I um, I was hoping we could talk.”

“Sure.”

I gestured to the couch and Kian sat, Carlos leaping up to curl next to him. Kian’s hand immediately fell into his fur, as if Carlos was a comfort to him.

James appeared in the room, drying his hands on a kitchen towel. “Hi, Kian. Can I get you something to drink?”

I chose to ignore how domestic that felt.

Kian declined, and James turned to leave. “I’ll give you two some privacy.”

“Wait,” Kian called after him. “I’m actually glad you’re here. I was hoping to talk to both of you.”

James looked at me with panicked eyes, asking permission to be there. I shrugged in response. If Kian wanted to talk to both of us, who was I to say no? I settled onto the two-seater, James taking his place next to me after tossing the towel onto the kitchen counter. He was the one to break the silence, looking between me and Kian. I didn’t

know how to start, and Kian was busy scratching Carlos behind the ears.

“What’s going on?”

Kian took a deep breath, but he didn’t take his eyes off the dog at his side. “I don’t know if Ryder said, or if you know, but he told me. About you.”

James nodded. “He didn’t want to hide the truth from you, but that meant revealing what I am.”

“Did you know my parents?”

“No, I didn’t. But Kian, I can’t even begin to tell you how truly sorry I am.”

Kian’s jaw clenched. “Everyone’s sorry, but I don’t need any apologies.”

I fidgeted with my hands in my lap, unsure where I fit into all of this. “What do you need from us?”

He sighed, dropping his head into his free hand. His voice cracked when he spoke. “I don’t know. I need to figure something out though, because feeling like this is driving me up a wall.”

James squeezed my thigh. I let my hand find his, finding solace in weaving our fingers together. “Would it help if you knew more about me?” he asked Kian.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Do you sparkle?”

I fought to keep a straight face. James, however, grunted. “You’re going through a rough time, so I’ll forgive you for that one.”

After a pause, Kian gestured between the two of us. “How does this work?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Well, when two people really like each other...”

“Ew! Gross! Not what I meant!” He scrubbed a hand over his face as if he could erase the mental image. “I deserved that.”

“Yes, you did,” James agreed. “Now, what do you mean by that?”

“V-vampires have super strength, right? So how do you keep from hurting Ryder?”

James fished the chain around his neck out from his sweater, holding it up with his thumb. “Because of this.”

“Silver?” Kian guessed. “I thought that was werewolves.”

“Pure silver dulls my powers, but there’s not enough in this one to hurt me. Can’t say the same thing for the wolves though: any amount is too much for them.”

Kian looked at the jewelry for a moment, then shook his head. “I’m confused. If it

dulls your powers, why wear it?”

James tucked the chain away again. “Think of it like... Adderall for vampires. Too much of it can kill me, but the right purity keeps my powers in check. Does that help?”

Kian nodded.

“What else?”

He was quiet for several long moments, stroking Carlos’s fur. “Did my brother—Luke—say anything to you before he left? Did you see anything?”

“Sorry, but I didn’t arrive until after he was gone. He likely booked it out of there before the fire started.”

Kian bit his quivering lip. “I don’t know where to go from here.”

James knelt in front of Kian. In that moment, Kian wasn’t a twenty-one-year-old man; he was a lost, scared little boy who didn’t know which way to go. His parents were dead and his brother was missing. Did he even consider Luke a brother anymore? There was so much to unpack, and he wasn’t the only one who didn’t know where to start.

Kian hugged Carlos close, letting James rub his back while he fought against the tears threatening to fall. My heart squeezed—not just because I felt for Kian, but because in spite of everything, James sat there and soothed him. My man was so compassionate that it made my heart ache. It was yet another reason I loved him.

My stomach lurched.

Fuck.

Sitting there, watching him soothe the brother of the guy who tried to kill him, it finally hit me. Outside of the mate bond, I'd been distraught over everything.

Because I was in love.

Chapter 19

Unfortunately for us, Shi and I didn't get much time to recover. They from their wicked hangover, and I from my startling realization.

I'd tasted those silly little words on my tongue more than I cared to admit over the last few weeks, but now they didn't seem so silly. My stomach roiled at the thought of spitting them out. By that time, Shi showed up at the bar looking as green as I felt. They carried a bottle of Gatorade in one hand and held an ice pack to their head with the other. Teasing them gave me a break from trying to figure out how to tell James that I lov—nope. My stomach wasn't ready for me to even think the words. In the midst of it all, a thought crept in.

He'll just leave like everyone else.

But I shoved it away. I had to. I had too much else to think about.

“Regretting that last mojito, Shi Baby?”

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“I’m regretting a lot of things,” they muttered, bypassing the bar and heading to the back to put their coat away.

I glared after them. I wasn’t going to tolerate tension between us over a drunken almost-kiss. I followed, blocking the doorway when they came out of the office. “Move, Ryder,” they commanded. I had to admit, it almost worked. The fire in their eyes had me squirming on the spot.

“Not this time. I’m not going to have things between us get weird when nothing even happened.”

They let out an exasperated sigh and collapsed against the wall. “This wasn’t me getting drunk and belting out ‘Islands in the Stream’ at the top of my lungs, only for a video to end up on YouTube.”

“Wait, does that exist?”

“Ryder!”

“Okay!” I held my hands up in surrender. “Sorry, not the time.”

“I tried to kiss you,” Shi said. “We work together. Your boyfriend is my boss—ourboss. That shouldn’t have happened.”

I shrugged. “That’s what alcohol does to people, Shi. I’m not offended. I’m not uncomfortable. You were hurt and you latched onto someone who gave you what you needed. Frankly, I’m flattered.”

They rolled their eyes. “Of course you are.”

When our gazes met, I made a show of looking them up and down. “I mean, can you blame me? Look at you.” I grunted when they shoved me back with a hand on my chest.

“You’re ridiculous.” But they were laughing now, and that was a complete one-eighty from the scowl they’d given me. My job was done.

“Are we good?” I asked.

Shi sighed, rubbing that ice pack over the back of their neck. “As long as you don’t get mad at me if I have to run off to throw up again, we’re good.”

I followed them closely into the front of house, leaning down to talk louder than necessary in their ear. “I promise not to get mad if you puke your guts out the whole shift!”

They wiggled away, muttering, “You’re such an asshole,” as the ice pack found their forehead.

By the time we closed the doors, both Shiloh and I were on the verge of collapsing. We made it through the shift—barely. I was in better shape than they were, but not by much. James insisted on driving them home while I did the cleaning, and they gratefully accepted. I wasn’t nearly as sick as they were, but damn I was exhausted. The combination of the hangover, the restless sleep, and the stress of the last few months weighed on my shoulders.

I managed all of the cleaning in the time James was gone, and while I waited for him to return—because he also refused to let me drive despite my objections—I found myself sitting at the counter, eyeing the bottles of top-shelf scotch. My eyes found the

same bottle he poured for me when he confessed to being a vampire. God, that conversation was so long ago. It felt as if he'd been a part of my life forever. Like there hadn't been a time where he wasn't there.

“Don't even think about touching any of those bottles, Ryder Clark.”

I spun, not expecting James to come through the main entrance instead of the back. “I wasn't! I was just thinking?—”

“Exactly. That's never good.” He grinned, and I couldn't fight the smile that crept onto my face. He stepped up to where I sat on the barstool, situating himself between my legs and snaking his arms around my waist. “Can I take you home now?” he asked, his lips brushing mine with the tease of a kiss that was infuriatingly out of reach.

“Damn, at least buy a man dinner first.”

“Oh, I'll feed you all right.” My laugh was swallowed by his mouth capturing mine, his tongue sweeping along my bottom lip. I opened happily, letting our tongues tangle briefly before James pulled back. “What are the chances of me getting you in a hot bath tonight?”

“Slim to ha-ha,” I responded. “You'll be lucky if I don't fall asleep on the drive home.”

James snickered. “Then I guess I'll have to figure out some other way for you to unwind.”

I cocked a brow but was met with silence. James tugged me off the barstool and led me out of the building.

Once we got to the house and Carlos was freed, James led me to the bedroom. There, he leisurely undressed me, one article of clothing at a time. Every inch of exposed skin was accompanied by a kiss that sent shivers up my spine. He stripped me down to my boxer briefs, then stepped away to put my clothes in the basket. I hooked my thumbs behind my waistband to discard the final piece of clothing, but he closed in behind me and halted my hands. “Not yet, love.”

“Okay...?” Confused, I let him guide me over to the bed—where a towel was strategically laid over the sheets. When had that happened?

“On your stomach,” he instructed.

I happily obeyed. I lowered myself onto my stomach with my arms crossed under my head, the towel under my hips. I didn’t need to be instructed to close my eyes—they did that on their own. Though when something wet drizzled over my back, I gasped. “What the hell?”

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“Relax,” James said. His strong hands massaged the warm oil into my skin. He started with my shoulders, his thumbs digging into the tight knots that had formed there.

I groaned, tears in my eyes when he hit a particularly sore spot.

“Shh,” he soothed. “I know. Let me fix it.”

I focused on my breathing while James’s hands undid the knots in my shoulders and slowly worked their way south. The farther they got, the more my cock became interested. My hips began to rock against the bed. “That’s it, love,” he praised. “Take what you need.”

I fucking whimpered. I don’t know when I became such a praise slut, but damn—it did something to me. James’s hands squeezed my ass cheeks and I cried out, bucking back into his touch. He kneaded the flesh harder on each pass, drawing more indecent sounds from my mouth. And when he delicately tugged my underwear down, I nearly lost it. My cock wept, desperate to be touched. James knocked my legs apart and knelt between my thighs. “I’ve got you,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to the base of my spine.

I arched toward his mouth, his tongue darting out to lick between my cheeks. A dark, rumbling laugh pulled from deep in his chest when I jolted at the action. “I love how responsive you are.”

Words eluded me. I could only answer with another pathetic cry. He flattened his tongue in my crease, trailing a hot, wet path right to my eager hole. I shuddered, his

hands spreading me apart for his tongue to ravish my entrance. I rocked against his mouth, chasing more. My fists clenched, body tense with the effort of holding off my orgasm. James ate my ass like a man starved, my panting and his obscene slurping sounds the only ones in the room.

“Please,” I begged when he pulled off.

“Don’t hold back.”

“Then don’t stop!” I cried, halfway to a growl. I was so close, my orgasm tantalizingly out of reach.

A low, guttural groan escaped me as his tongue pushed through. Almost without warning, my orgasm raced down my spine. I came hands free, my release spilling into my boxer briefs and the towel beneath me. James held my hips tight, easing me through every wave. Fatigue quickly took over and as he peeled my underwear off me, I collapsed onto the towel. “I need to shower,” I mumbled, breathless.

“Let me clean you, love.”

Something clattered to the nightstand, and I cracked an eye open to see his chain sitting there. He disappeared into the bathroom, and I heard the water running. He returned and lifted me off the soiled towel, placing me gently on the other side of the bed. He cleaned me with the warm, wet cloth. I felt like I was floating somewhere between consciousness and sleep. I was vaguely aware of James in the room, could hear the sounds of him getting ready for bed, but I couldn’t move. When he got into bed, he lifted me again, settling me on his chest and covering us both with the blanket. He held me, tracing lazy shapes over my back while I began to drift into what would hopefully be a deep sleep.

Until a glass-shattering shriek jolted me awake.

“What the hell?” James grouched, covering his sensitive ears. “It’s the middle of the night! Does Carlos really need to sing now?”

“Something’s wrong,” I said, feeling like I had cotton in my mouth. I shook away the sleep fogging my brain. “That’s not his normal howl.”

I scrambled out of bed, fumbling for a pair of sweats on the floor and stepping into them as I ran out of the room. Normally, Carlos would sneak his way over the baby gate and sleep on the couch at night. He never created a mess or destroyed anything, so I pretended not to know about it. So when I found him lying in the middle of the kitchen floor, still emitting that high-pitched scream, I knew something wasn’t right. His cries stopped when I flipped on the light, but he didn’t jump up to greet me like he usually did.

“What’s wrong, boy?” I asked, opening the gate and sitting on the floor next to him.

James appeared behind me in the doorway, keeping his distance. “Is he okay?”

“I don’t know.” I stroked Carlos’s back, wanting to pull him closer to me but not wanting to hurt him further if he was injured. I wasn’t sure what he could have gotten into in the few hours it had been since he came inside. He was panting like it was a hundred degrees in the kitchen. I knew he was part Husky, but he’d never been uncomfortable with the temperature in the house before.

“He’s stopped screaming,” James pointed out. “Come back to bed, love. I’m sure he’s fine.”

“I—” More screaming cut me off, each ear-piercing howl like a shrill cry for help. I felt along his back. Nothing. He let me check his front paws without incident, but when I reached for his back left leg, he nipped at my hand, barely missing my fingers.

“That’s it.” I leapt to my feet and started toward my bedroom again. I was wide awake now. “I’m taking him to the vet.”

It wasn’t until I was dressed and trying to figure out how to get Carlos into the car without hurting him that James halted me in my step. “You’re exhausted, Ryder.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m not going to let him sit there in pain all night.”

“That’s not what I meant.” His hand appeared in front of my face. “Give me the keys. I’ll drive.”

Chapter 20

Getting Carlos into the car meant perfectly timing the cycles of screams. Whatever these spells were, each one that hit broke my heart. I wrangled him into the backseat with his blanket, and the cycle continued for the entire half hour drive to the emergency vet. I tried to comfort him, only to be nipped at every time. After the third bite where he nearly broke the skin, I turned my attention to James. The yelps were hurting my ears, so they must have been torture for him. However, he relaxed—at least a little bit—when I put my hand on his thigh.

By the time I got Carlos inside the vet’s office and we were taken to the back where I could set him down, my arms felt like noodles. James and I flinched every time Carlos screamed again, and when he whimpered in between episodes I consoled him as much as possible.

I’d never had pets growing up, nor when I moved out on my own. Not only did my studio apartments disallow them, but I spent so much time working that I didn’t have time. The fear I felt in that moment, knowing that something was wrong and I couldn’t fix it, made me appreciate that I’d never had to lose a pet either.

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“Calm down, love,” James said, rising from his chair in the corner of the room to stand behind me. “Nothing’s going to happen to him.”

I laid my head on his shoulder. “I thought you said you weren’t a mind reader.”

“I can feel how stressed you are. And I’d like to think I know how your brain works by now.”

“Fuck, I need to call Hannah,” I realized, jerking back and fumbling for my phone.

“Not yet.” James pulled me close again, pinning my arms to where I couldn’t reach into my pockets. “It’s four in the morning. There’s no sense in worrying her until we know what’s going on.”

It wasn’t much longer before someone came in. They looked Carlos over, giving him a shot that was supposed to relax him. The tech did the same thing I did, feeling over his back, belly, and each leg—and dodged the same warning bite when they reached his paw. Good thing whatever they’d given Carlos slowed his reflexes. Another technician came in to pick him up, and my panic resumed when he was whisked away for tests.

“Let me go,” I whispered to James, who had kept a tight grip on me even after the door was shut.

“Where?”

“Nowhere. I just need to move.”

To my relief, he took a step back and let me pace the length of the small room. It felt like forever before the door opened and the same person from before led a very sleepy Carlos back into the room on his leash. While he nursed his back leg, he was at least putting weight on it, which he hadn't been doing before.

"Good news, Dad," the vet said. "He's going to be fine. They're muscle spasms."

"Muscle spasms?" I echoed. "How does that even happen?"

She knelt down next to Carlos, getting his tail wagging by scratching him behind the ear. "They're common in high-energy breeds like Huskies, and exacerbated by overexertion." She straightened and pulled a pill bottle from her pocket. "The sedative we gave him should keep him comfortable for a while, but if the pain gets too bad you can give him half of one of these with his food. He should rest for the next few days."

"That'll be easy," I said sarcastically.

She laughed. "Animals are smarter than you think. He should mostly take care of the recovery himself, but you can always call us if there's anything you're concerned about."

It wasn't until we got Carlos home and settled that the adrenaline started to fade from my body. The sun was starting to rise, and I knew Hannah would be getting up for class soon. I sat on the empty two-seater and scrubbed my hands over my face, only peeking between my fingers when the smell of coffee wafted in front of me. I looked up to see James setting a cup on the table.

"Thank you," I muttered, feeling for my phone. "I should call Hannah."

"You should go back to bed." James spoke softly as he walked back to the kitchen.

He hadn't intended for me to hear him.

"Don't tell me what to do," I called after him. "You know how I feel about that."

"I'm not telling you what to do. It's not like you listen to me anyway."

"I'm a grown man and I don't need my boyfriend babysitting me all the time."

"Ryder, calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down."

James sighed, and then he was next to me, crouching with a hand on my back. "I told you Carlos would be fine."

"I don't know why; you don't even like him." I was glad James couldn't see my face, because I flinched at my own words. I regretted them instantly, but instead of apologizing and making it up to him, my stubborn ass stood my ground.

"That's unfair but you're exhausted and stressed so I'll let you have it. Do you feel better?"

"No," I admitted honestly. I felt like shit, but I couldn't manage to climb out of the hole I'd dug.

"Then let me get you to bed."

"I don't want to go to bed!" I took a deep breath, slightly taming my temper. "I want to call my daughter. And then I think I want to be alone with Carlos for a while."

"Are you sure?" James was pretty good at schooling his emotions, but that didn't stop

me from knowing that I was hurting him. Again.

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“Yeah,” I said, fighting to keep the emotion from my own voice. “I’m sure.”

“Okay, I’ll go.” His hand disappeared from my back as he stood. “You don’t need to worry about coming into work today. I’ll cover it, but you can call if you need me.”

I stayed in the same position until I heard the front door shut. When I looked up, my phone was sitting on the table next to my untouched cup of coffee that was doctored up the way I liked it. I’m such an asshole.

I grabbed my phone and opened my contact list. James’s name was the first on my list, right above Hannah’s. My thumb hovered over it.

Instead of breaking down like I truly wanted to, I moved my thumb and tapped Hannah’s name.

She picked up on the first ring. “What’s wrong?”

I snorted. “I’d ask if I woke you, but something tells me I didn’t.”

“I have class in an hour—unless I need to drive home instead. Now I’ll ask again: what’s wrong?”

I groaned and brushed my hair back, but my fingers caught on a few knots and only fueled my frustration. “Um, Carlos is fine, but we spent the night at the vet.”

“I’m on my way.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but the call dropped.

Given the fact that it was rush hour, I wasn't expecting Hannah for a while. A record-breaking forty minutes later, the front door burst open and Hannah charged into the living room. I poked my head out of the kitchen where I'd disposed of my empty mug after finally drinking my coffee. It had been the perfect cup, which only made me feel worse about lashing out at James.

Carlos wagged his tail, but he was still too high to be his usual self. Hannah dropped her bag at her feet and fell to her knees in front of Carlos, accepting the lazy kisses to her face while she spoke to him in a hushed voice.

"Do I want to know how fast you drove?" I asked, returning to my spot.

"Are you asking as a parent?"

"Yes."

"Then five under the speed limit. What happened to him?"

"He has muscle spasms in his back left foot. He woke us up in the middle of the night screaming, and he wouldn't stop."

Hannah shifted onto the floor. "How much was the vet bill?"

"Don't worry about it, Hannah. He's my dog too."

Only then did she pull her attention from Carlos to look back at me, studying my face longer than I was comfortable with. Damn it, she and Erin were a little too good at reading me like a book. "What aren't you telling me?"

“It’s nothing to do with Carlos. They sedated him and sent muscle relaxers home with us in case the pain gets to be too much for him. He’ll be okay.”

Carlos laid his head down, trapping Hannah’s hand between his chin and the couch cushion. “Then what’s going on?”

“Nothing you need to worry about.” My walls were rising again, my defenses slowly clicking back into place. Not only was Hannah my daughter, but I didn’t necessarily want to talk about the fight with James.

When I was met with silence, I glanced up to see that classic Erin glare. Cold, blue eyes met mine and I gulped.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I told her.

“Why? Because it works?”

I laughed. “God, you are your mother made over.”

“Don’t deflect, Ryder. I might be your kid but I’m an adult. Just spare me any dirty details.”

I groaned, putting my head in my hands again. “I can’t stand you, child.”

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“Okay, I made you laugh now tell me what’s happening.”

She already knew that James was a vampire—that should have been the hard part. But as the “soulmate” conversation flashed through my mind, I somehow found that even more difficult to tell her. I opened my mouth to start, but, “You want a drink?” came out instead, and I shot to my feet.

“I can make my own coffee.”

I thought she’d continue to demand answers, but she merely headed into the kitchen. Taking a bottle of water for myself, I returned to the couch and waited for her to finish. I wanted something stronger. But it was barely eight in the morning, and I wasn’t going to let myself fall down that rabbit hole again.

The couch sank when Hannah settled into the seat next to me.

“This seems serious.” Her eyes widened. “Did you and James break up?”

“No,” I assured her, “we didn’t break up.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“Of course not.” But I thought about my answer. Had he hurt me? No, no he hadn’t. I’d been the asshole in every argument we’d had.

“Then what’s the problem?” After a pause, “Is this vampire-related?”

I resisted letting out a sigh of relief. Maybe there was something in letting those close to me in on the secret. “There’s... a thing with vampires. Long story short, it’s getting serious.”

“And you’re scared shitless.”

“Watch your mouth!”

“My language isn’t the problem here.”

I laughed. “Are you sure you need a Harvard education? You’re already too smart.”

“Does he know?” Hannah asked, ignoring my attempt to redirect the conversation.

“Know what?”

“How you feel about getting serious.”

“Don’t you have something to be studying for?”

“I turned in my assignments yesterday. I’m not missing anything important, and you’re not getting out of this conversation.”

I tried to muster my own scowl, but she outglared me. “Fine,” I relented. “Yes, he knows. But it’s still hard.”

“You mean new and scary.”

“Hannah!” I laughed. The kid was calling me out like no one had—even Raleigh hadn’t been this persistent.

“You’re only annoyed because you know I’m right.”

I sighed. “I’m not about to admit to that, but things have been weird lately. It’s like I can’t even focus on things happening with James because the universe has it out for me.”

“When was the last time you got away from work for a while?”

“James makes me take days off,” I said evasively.

“Not a day off. A vacation.”

“I can’t take a vacation right now.”

“Why not? I can stay here and take care of Carlos.”

“I have work.”

“I know you don’t go to Harvard, but do I need to pull up the definition of ‘vacation’ for you?” Hannah scoffed. “Something tells me your vampire boss-slash-boyfriend will understand.”

I had to admit that the prospect of getting out of town for a couple days sounded appealing. Carlos snuffled on the other couch, and Hannah followed my line of sight. “I’ve got him. I promise. Besides, you don’t have to go very far.” She gestured around the house. “Just get out of all this for a little while.”

Losing the energy to argue further, I stood. “You’re right.”

“I know.”

I went to my bedroom, ignoring the evil laughter that trailed behind me.

Chapter 21

It only took a couple hours to arrange to be out of town for the weekend. Shi, being the amazing person they were, agreed to cover my shifts. I expertly dodged their questions about what was wrong and if I was okay, managing to end the call without giving too much away.

I heard Hannah talking softly to Carlos in the other room while I packed a small bag. I’d have to shop for food, so I could always buy anything I forgot.

By that evening, I was pestering Hannah with last-minute questions. I was haunted by the memories of what happened last time I left her alone in my house, but Hannah wasn't fazed at all. Kian had brought her supplies to stay for a few days and after he left for work, she changed into a pair of fuzzy pajamas and curled up on the couch, Carlos under her legs and a book in her lap. He'd hardly moved from his spot the entire day.

I paused with my hand on the doorknob, rethinking this whole thing. "This feels like a really bad idea," I said. "Maybe I should stay. I can hang out at home for the weekend."

"Absolutely not." Hannah set her book down and rose from the couch, charging across the room. She flung the front door open, admitting a particularly bitter gust of wind. She all but shoved me out the door. "Go!"

"You'll call if you need anything?"

"Of course I will. If you don't leave right this second..."

"Okay, okay. I'm going." I stepped forward to give her a hug and press a kiss to her hair. Under her relentless stare, I made my way to my car. Hannah didn't close the front door until I was out of the driveway.

An hour later, I swear the only song saved to my phone was "Must Have Never Met You," and I was listening to it for about the tenth time. I cursed and slammed my palm against the steering wheel. Well, if Luke Combs was that determined for me to hear it, then I guess it was time to feel the suck.

Too bad that came with blurry vision. I made it to a red light and pressed my fingertips into my eyes, willing the burning to stop. I still had a long drive ahead of me; I'd never make it if I gave into the tightness in my chest.

Okay, fine—the drive wasn't that long. But when I already felt like jumping out of my skin, another half hour felt like forever. I'd never been the best at sitting still for long periods of time, much less when I felt like a piece of my heart was missing.

The farther I drove, the worse the ache became. I had to work hard for each breath. Each exit I passed, my hand itched to hit the signal and turn back to Salem. I rubbed my chest, but it was pointless. I had a niggling feeling in the back of my mind about what that stupid organ wanted, and that thought only fueled my fire to keep going—if only to prove a point.

I hadn't been to Cape Cod since I was a kid. Mom and Dad kept a small beach house for those rare occasions when Florida was too perfect and they needed a reminder of how wet and gloomy New England could be. Truthfully, I wanted to go farther. I was seconds away from booking a flight to Vegas, but with the way I ached to turn around with only an hour's difference between me and James, I wasn't sure I'd survive such a distance.

The cold was relentless. The closer I got to the Cape and the open water, the more frigid it became. Still, I cracked my window to get a taste of the fresh ocean air. The temperature inside the car plummeted, but I was too stubborn to acknowledge it.

Finally reaching my exit, I stopped at the light and rested my head back against the seat, growling when my bundle of curls prevented me from relaxing. I yanked at the hair tie containing them, tears pricking my eyes again when my hair only got more tangled.

My plan was to head straight into town for groceries, but the knot in my hair was the final straw. I wasn't about to suffer insubordination from my own goddamn hair; it needed to go—immediately. I drove down the deserted roads on the outskirts of town until I reached my family's beach house.

It had been decades since I'd seen it, but the navy shutters and pale gray shale siding looked exactly how I remembered. I swallowed against the tightness in my throat, stopping at the breaker to make sure the house had power. It would no doubt be colder inside than out until the heater got going, but I'd tolerate it for as long as possible.

At the simple act of opening the front door, nostalgia swept away the hollow feeling in my heart. When the heating hummed to life, I made my way to the kitchen. It didn't take much rummaging through the drawers to find what I wanted: scissors.

I flipped the lights on as I moved down the hall to the bathroom. Though I didn't need them; I knew this house like the back of my hand, and in all the years I'd been gone, it hadn't changed a bit. Sure, appliances had been updated—and since my mom couldn't leave things alone for very long, the decor had been switched up more than once over the years.

I didn't overthink what I was doing. I cut the hair tie out, not caring that a chunk of my hair came with it. In fact, it felt good. So I kept going. If a lock of hair brushed my shoulders at all, I deemed it too long and chopped it. Piece after piece dropped to the floor, hair littering the sink and counter in front of me. When I finally finished and set the scissors down, I felt like I could take a complete breath again. I sighed, running my hand through the shortened strands and looking in the mirror.

And it looked... horrible. I could only laugh at myself. I wasn't sure what I expected to see, but the hack job seemed like another metaphor for my life at the moment. It needed to be fixed, so I set out in search of a broom to clean up my mess. A rumble from my stomach reminded me that I needed to stock some groceries as well.

Leaving the house to heat up, I pulled on my jacket and drove into town. Most of the touristy shops were closed for the off season, but I passed an open barber shop, laughing at the sign in the window.

“We fix home haircuts.”

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The man inside jumped out of his skin when I stepped through the door. But when his eyes took in my handiwork, he chuckled. “Oh, dear.”

“Come on. It can’t be that bad.”

The corner of his mouth quirked into a grin. “I’ve definitely fixed worse.” He stood from his seat and offered me his spot. “Breakup?”

I winced, the ache in my chest deepening. “Something like that.”

The barber laughed, then sprayed my neck with cold water from his spray bottle, making me flinch. “How much more length did you want taken off?”

“As much as it takes to fix it without those,” I said, indicating the clippers on the station in front of me.

“No buzzing,” he muttered. “Obviously.”

After that, he worked in silence. As shears cut away hair that pattered against the cape around my shoulders, I closed my eyes. It was the only thing that kept the burning at bay. Despite loving my long hair, I had to admit that I felt better when he was finished. Though the cold wind on my neck was something I could have gone without.

By the time I loaded up on groceries—by which I meant junk food that had no nutritional value whatsoever but certified mood lifters—and made my way back to the house, it was nearly dark. I busied myself by putting everything away, then I

stood in the middle of the living room like a fool. I usually felt lost after running from my problems, but I'd never been stuck, alone, with nothing more than the consequences of my own actions to keep me company.

Logically, I knew that it would only take one phone call to fix everything, but I wasn't ready for what that phone call would mean for my future. I still needed to work through the feelings thrashing around inside my head. The last couple of months had been a whirlwind. In a matter of weeks, I'd gone from thinking that whatever James and I had was completely casual to realizing it was something more, and then discovering that I was in love with the man. It felt like I'd been moving at a hundred miles an hour and slammed into a concrete wall. And now I was surveying the damage.

I knew I was in too deep. There was no way out for me now. I'd had my chance to run from it, and I'd chosen to stay.

Then I realized I didn't want to run from it—and that scared me even more.

I perched on the edge of the couch, flipping my phone around in my hands. Sitting there by myself, I felt silly. All I had to do was say those three stupid little words to James, and I couldn't bring myself to do it. I was bonded to the man, for fuck's sake. Even without the bond, I knew he felt the same about me. I didn't need to worry that he wouldn't say it in return. Still, my stomach churned at the thought.

Fed up with my own thoughts, I scrolled through the contacts in my phone and pressed one.

The line picked up after one ring. "What's wrong?"

Damn it. I smiled fondly. I should have known better than to expect I'd get a word in before she started her interrogation. "Good to hear your voice, Mom."

She cleared her throat, a sign that she was calling me on my bullshit. I could practically picture her standing in front of me, one hand on her hip, brow crooked. The last time I called her out of the blue, I told her I had a seventeen-year-old kid.

I sighed. “I’m seeing someone.”

“And did they hurt you?”

“What? No!”

“Are they horrible to you? Did they do something wrong?”

“No, Mom!”

“Then why do you sound like your puppy just died?” I heard her suck in sharply.

“Did something happen to Carlos?”

“Carlos is fine.” I groaned. “I don’t...”

“Okay.” In the background, her TV show paused—the show she watched whenever my dad was out of the house because he couldn’t stand it. “What’s going on, Ryder?”

“Nothing,” I said again, with a shrug she couldn’t see. “It’s literally nothing. James is great. He’s been nothing but incredible to me since we met.”

“James? Your boss, James?”

“Yeah, that’d be the one.” I chuckled. “Things are, uh, getting serious.”

“And that scares you.”

“Have you been talking to Hannah?” I let out a relieved sigh. At least I wouldn’t have to be the one to say it.

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“I’m guessing you haven’t told him.”

“I don’t know how,” I said, my throat tight.

“Ryder, you said your first word when you were eleven months old and you haven’t shut up since. Don’t tell me you don’t know how to talk.”

I swallowed hard, the ache in my chest intensifying. “What if it bites me in the ass?”

“It might,” Mom said dryly. “But that’s a risk you take when it comes to love.”

Bile rose in my throat at the sound of the word.

“Are you scared he won’t say it back?”

“No. I know he will, but?—”

“That doesn’t make it any easier.”

“It really doesn’t.”

Rustling hit my ears as Mom adjusted her position. “I wish I could tell you something that would make it easier, but I’m afraid venting to Mom won’t help you there.”

“Then what will?” I asked, already knowing her answer.

“Telling him.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

“Because you know it’s the right thing to do. And the right thing isn’t always the easy thing.”

I cocked a brow. “Did Raleigh tell you to say that?”

“I would think the fact that I had no idea about this man in your life proves I haven’t spoken to Raleigh in ages.”

I snickered. She was right about that too. She and Raleigh were scary close—much to my dismay. Though the conversation I had with him a few weeks ago about this whole “mate” thing was eerily similar to the one I was having now. Mom’s voice pulled me out of my spiral.

“You’ve never been an overthinker, honey. Don’t start now.”

I took a calming breath. “I’ll try. Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome. Call him, and I’m going to finish my show before your dad gets home and gripes until I turn it off.”

I laughed, we said we loved each other, and I hung up the call. See? I was more than capable of saying the words. So why was it so damn hard to say them to a man who would easily give his life for me?

Instead of calling James, I set my phone on the coffee table and grabbed my jacket. I knew I’d regret it, but I needed to move, and the beach house was too small for the energy buzzing through my body.

Leaving my phone behind, I headed for the beach.

Chapter 22

I regretted my decision.

Late autumn in Massachusetts could get brutal, but that bitter wind coming off the water was damn near deadly. With each gust it felt like tiny ice needles embedded themselves in my face. But I only wrapped my leather jacket tighter around myself and stood my ground.

The length of beach in front of the house was deserted, not that I expected anything less. Someone would have to be out of their mind to be vacationing at the beach in this weather.

Hi, it's me; I'm someone.

I felt like I'd been standing at the edge of the water for hours. I paced one way before doubling back, not wanting to go too far. I marched in the other direction before pausing outside the steps that led to the front door. My fists clenched in my pockets. Every muscle in my body urged me to run back inside and call James, but my stubborn ass couldn't do it.

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Instead, I closed my eyes and centered on that ache in my chest. Thinking his name made it fade, even if just a little. So I let myself daydream. His face came into view, and I relaxed even more. That crooked grin he gave me when I said something ridiculous made me smile. His red-tinted eyes sent a wave of warmth through my body despite the cold, intensifying when I remembered what it felt like to have his hands on me. They started in my hair, and I wondered if it would feel the same after my haircut. The tension in my muscles uncoiled with every inch his hands discovered. They smoothed over my shoulders, one grazing down my chest and stomach while the other wrapped around me, held me close.

Fuck, I missed him.

In an effort to push the pain away, I kept going with my imagination. For once, my fantasy didn't turn sexual. I simply pictured James holding me close, silently offering reassurances as I worked through the confusing feelings that had taken up residence in my brain.

The bar used to be my happy place. It didn't matter what I had going on in my life, I knew I could set it all aside when I was behind the counter. My emotions poured into the drinks I made, my anger taken out on the lids of the shakers. The sounds of the ice and the blenders were enough to drown out my problems. Somewhere along the line that all changed, and I couldn't pinpoint when it happened.

Surrounded by the icy cold air, I felt nothing but James's warmth. Nothing but comfort as I pictured my new happy place, one that brought me a sense of comfort I'd never felt. James was my safe space now. And for the first time, I allowed myself to feel good about it.

That cozy feeling grew stronger by the second, almost to the point where I couldn't stand it. My skin tingled, and a chill zipped down my spine. It felt like I'd had the wind knocked out of me, and I didn't need to open my eyes to know what I'd see. My vampire had found me.

My first instinct was to run. Though, I was used to running away from him, and now I wanted to run to him. To throw my arms around him, beg him to hold me tight—just like I'd been picturing.

I never wanted him to let go.

But I squashed that feeling down, along with everything else I'd realized about myself. And it made me feel sick.

"How did you find me?" I asked. Dark, heavy storm clouds had begun to roll in, and the change in the wind meant rain was inevitable.

"The bond."

I already knew that would be the answer. I knew it the minute he walked up behind me.

"And Hannah might have helped," he confessed.

"The same Hannah who sent me out here in the first place?"

"Unless you know of another."

All I could do was shake my head. Well played, kid. "I told you I needed space."

"You didn't tell me anything. You ran."

“Did that not say it clearly enough?”

“No!” James’s voice thundered over the wind, and I flinched. I hadn’t heard him lose his cool before. “I’m not letting you run anymore, Ryder. I’m sick of enabling your escapism. You said you wouldn’t run, and that’s exactly what you did. If you need something, you’re going to have to use your big boy words and tell me.”

I tightened my fists until my nails dug into my palms, the pain a welcome distraction from the emotions swirling inside me—eerily similar to the storm brewing in the sky.

As the first drops of rain fell, I turned and started up the stairs.

“Ryder, stop walking away from me!”

I spun to snap back, only to come face to face with James. “Then tell me what you want so I can have the space to think.”

“I want to talk,” he said, finally lowering his voice.

“I’m through talking.”

“Funny, you’ve hardly said a word to me about how you feel since we talked about being fated.”

“Because I still feel the same as I did then: I’m terrified. Nothing’s changed. Telling you that over and over doesn’t fix anything.” I started to shiver, and I wasn’t sure whether it was from my out-of-control emotions or the cold that seeped into my bones with every drop of rain. Most rolled off my jacket, but they fell into my collar and soaked my jeans when the wind blew. “I’m cold, and wet, and... sad, so can you please leave me alone?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t have to do this alone anymore. That’s what I’ve been trying to get you to see this whole time.”

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The wind whipped around us, and the rain came down harder. I couldn't find anything to say. There was nothing left to say. And I was tired of fighting. Mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted.

"Stop fighting me, Ryder. I know you want to. I can feel your walls crumbling, but damn it—I need you to let me in. I can't help if you don't."

"What if I don't want your help?" I whispered.

"You'd be lying through your teeth and I don't need to be your mate to know that."

Damn him. I wanted him. I wanted him in whatever way I could have him, and the fact that I couldn't fight that infuriated me. I'd always prided myself on my willpower. Around him, I was... helpless.

I couldn't do it anymore. I felt that strong, undeniable pull toward him, and this time I let my feet close the distance between us. Too cold to take my hands out of my pockets, I rested my head on his shoulder. Rain pelted down my bare neck, creeping down the back of my shirt. "Can we at least go inside?" I asked, words muffled by his sweater. "I'm freezing."

In the time it took him to wrap his arms around me, James's body temperature increased, creating a pocket of warmth around us. "You're the one blocking the path, love."

I pulled away from him to climb the rest of the stairs and threw the door open. I didn't bother to look behind me to ensure he followed—I didn't need to. My body

zeroed in on his mere presence the moment he was within ten feet of me. I went to the desk and pulled out its wooden chair to avoid sitting on the nicer furniture in my wet clothes, which were starting to get uncomfortable. My sweater clung to me in ways it shouldn't, and I'll spare the dirty details of how my jeans were beginning to chafe. I squirmed in an attempt to find a comfortable position.

"Got ants in your pants?" James joked. I only glared at him in response until he dropped that annoyingly gorgeous smile. "Go take a shower. I can wait."

"No." Damn, my tone mademecringe, but I couldn't stop myself. "You clearly want this conversation to happen, so let's get it over with. Once I get under that hot water, I don't plan to move for a very long time."

James remained quiet for a long moment, but sensing that I wasn't going to relent, he finally opened his mouth. "I'm sorry."

I sighed, starting to feel sick. In truth, he hadn't done anything bad. He'd only been... doing exactly what a boyfriend should do. I was the one being a dick. "You don't have anything to be sorry for."

"Yes, I do. Because when we had this whole 'mate' conversation, we made promises to each other. I didn't hold up my end, and I chased you off as a result."

I dropped my face into my hands. "You couldn't have said that on a phone call?"

"That would require you to answer said phone, which you haven't done since you took off this morning."

Okay, he had a point there. My skin itched, and I started toward the bathroom again. I was getting seriously uncomfortable. "I'm sorry. Like I said, I needed some space. I still need that."

“No.”

I stopped in my tracks, spinning around to face him. “What do you mean ‘no?’”

James took a step toward me. I, in turn, took a step back. “I’m not giving up on you. We’re not doing this again: this gray area of ‘will they, won’t they.’”

That bubble formed in my chest again and the more I attempted to rub it away, the worse it got. I couldn’t fight it off any longer. “Christ, you can’t see it, can you?” I snarled.

“Seewhat? You haven’t exactly given me a lot to work with lately. You did what Ryder Clark does best when things get hard: you ran.”

“I fell in love with you!”

The words seemed to explode out of me and bounce off the walls of the empty space. The rain was the only thing to respond, pelting the sides of the house. James just stood and stared at me, so I took it as my cue to continue.

“There. I said it. I love you. I fell head-over-fucking-heels for you, and it wasn’t my choice. This is something so much bigger than us, and it terrifies me.”

That bubble worked its way up my throat, and my eyes started to burn. Oh, hell no. I spun on my heel and attempted my shower once more.

“Ryder.”

“What?” My voice cracked with the emotions threatening to spill over.

I whirled again, and this time James was closer. “I love you too.”

Before I could say anything else, his hands cupped my cheeks, and his lips crushed mine. I couldn't stop the tears that fell, painting our lips with a salty flavor as I angled my head to deepen the kiss. I fisted his sweater in my hands, unsure whether I wanted to pull him closer or push him away.

That kiss, so full of passion it made my toes curl, was short. I took in a deep breath as our lips separated. "I-I don't know what to do."

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“Right now you need to get these cold, wet clothes off.” He gave me one more soft kiss, then guided me to the bathroom. “You need to take a shower, and then,” he leaned in, his next words a low rumble in my ear, “you’re going to lie in bed and do as you’re fucking told.”

Chapter 23

James followed me into the bathroom, stepping around me to turn on the water.

“Arms up,” he ordered, determination in his eyes.

“I can do it myself,” I protested, wrapping my arms around my middle. I already felt exposed. I had no qualms about being naked, but in that moment, I needed to hold on to every little bit of control I could get. However, with James, giving up control was easy. I don’t know why I ever questioned it—questioned him. He’d proved himself time and time again and yet, I fought him left and right.

Maybe it was time to stop.

“I know you can, love,” he said with a smile, “but you don’t have to. Especially when you’ve got the man you love to do it for you.”

I rolled my eyes, then yelped as his icy fingers slipped beneath my shirt and grazed my bare skin. “If you’re going to keep teasing me about it, I’ll take it back.”

But I lifted my arms as he worked my sweater off me. “Say it again. Please.”

The heavy, wet fabric hit the tiled floor with a plop. James's hands dropped to my belt but for the first time in our relationship, I kept my eyes on his. "I love you." The words felt strange on my lips, barely more than a whisper. I hadn't said them to a partner since Erin.

Quick, talented fingers worked my belt loose. "Again," he pleaded.

"I love you."

Our lips met. His hands worked my jeans open, peeling the wet denim down my thighs.

"I love you," I gasped, coming up for air.

James dropped to his knees, working the laces open on my boots. First the left, and I kicked free, then the right. He reached up, hooking his fingers behind the waistband of my underwear and stripping me of those as well. My hard cock sprang free and bobbed in front of his mouth. He licked his lips, hungry eyes finding mine.

"I love you." My voice was raspy now, thick with desire.

Deeming my offer sufficient, his tongue darted out to lick the head. I hissed and shuffled on the spot, only to groan in protest when he pulled off and straightened to his full height.

"I love you too," he returned, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me in for another kiss. Our bodies flush together, my dick ground against the rough denim of his pants. "And I'm going to take my time with you tonight." He brushed his nose against mine. "I'm going to spend hours showing you how much I love you."

James moved away and I whimpered at the loss. He stripped, indicating the shower.

“Get in.”

I considered being a brat and disobeying him just to see what would happen, but the thought of that shower was too inviting and without James’s body heat, I was shivering.

So, I did the only thing I could do: I did as I was told.

I moaned at the warm water on my skin—though it wasn’t hot enough for my liking. I reached for the knob, but James caught my hand midair. “Slowly. You want to ease yourself into it.”

I relaxed into his arms, knowing that he wasn’t just talking about hot water. With my eyes closed, I let him smooth his hands over my body as the spray wetted my hair. The new length would take some getting used to.

“I love the new hair,” he murmured in my ear, sliding his fingers through the wet strands to feel for himself.

“I was starting to think you hadn’t noticed.”

“What I noticed is that you’re still in the safe zone because I still have plenty to grab onto.” He proved his point, clenching a handful in his fist. I hissed at the sting—but my cock loved it. “Hands on the wall, love.”

I obeyed, splaying my hands across the tile in front of me. James pressed in close to my back, and his thick length against my crease had me fighting the urge to buck backward.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he teased, rubbing his hands over my waist, “but I need you to be patient. I promise it’ll be worth it.”

Part of me wanted to fight him, to fuck myself against him until he painted my back with his release. Instead, I rested my forehead against the slick tile, relishing in his hands exploring my body. James used his lips and fingers to map out every inch of my skin while the water thawed the icy chill in my bones, only pausing to gradually increase the temperature of the water.

He trailed soft kisses over my shoulders, down the center of my back, and along my spine. He sank to his knees, large hands kneading my ass and pulling my cheeks apart to tease between them. I rocked back into his touch—only for him to shove me forward.

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“Easy, love,” he said. “This shower is about warming you up, nothing more.”

The water became hotter, and so did my skin. James’s fingers dipped down, teasing between my legs but staying tantalizingly out of reach. Every time I tried to arch into his touch, he stopped until I stood still again.

It was torture.

My cock hung heavy between my thighs. Sweat beaded on my forehead, but whether from the hot water or my building orgasm I wasn’t sure. Finally, James took mercy on me. He reached around me again, turning the water off this time, and guided me out of the shower. After scrubbing us both dry with a towel, he silently indicated the door.

Something about that moment felt far more significant than any night we’d ever shared. I left the bathroom and walked down the hall to the master bedroom, James’s commanding presence behind me. Once inside, I hovered awkwardly next to the bed, unsure of what he wanted me to do next. Lucky for me, I didn’t need to figure it out. James wrapped his arms around my waist, taking control. My hands found his, fingers twisting together over the soft skin of my stomach.

It was intense already—almost too intense. My heart was on my sleeve, and those emotions I’d been working so hard to suppress felt exposed, but I couldn’t ignore them any longer. I sighed, dropping my head against his shoulder and exposing my neck for him. His lips dusted across my collarbone, pausing over my carotid. It pulsed, thumping under his mouth. Fangs tickled my skin. “May I?”

I nodded, gulping. “Yes.”

“Do you want me to take my chain off?”

I squeezed my eyes shut and thrashed my head side to side. Without that, I could turn. No, I wasn’t ready for that. Telling him I loved him was already too much. “N-no.”

“Okay, love,” he hushed, giving my hands a squeeze and pulling me closer to him. “That’s why I asked. You’ve got total control. I don’t want you to forget that. Do you understand?”

I don’t know how he expected me to speak. It felt like he’d reached into my chest and wrapped his vampiric fist around my heart. I could barely breathe. Working one of my hands free, I threaded my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer to my neck. “Please—oh.”

Cold, sharp fangs sank into my skin. My legs buckled, James’s arm tightening to stabilize me. A low moan rattled his chest as he took one slow draw, then licked over the spot to seal the wound. I didn’t think I’d ever tire of him feeding from me, but one pull definitely wasn’t enough.

“I want you present for this, love.” He kissed his mark, then retreated a step. “Get on the bed for me. On your back. I want to see you—all of you.”

Complying, I positioned myself in the middle of the mattress and situated the pillows under my head so I could keep my eyes on him. James rounded the bed, fisting his erection. My mouth watered. He produced a bottle of lube from somewhere— I’d been so caught up I hadn’t even seen him grab it—and tossed it on the bed. His gaze traveled over me, taking in every inch of my naked body. I fought an unusual urge to squirm and cover myself. I felt too exposed.

James picked up on it. “Put your hands behind your head.”

I obeyed, drawing my bottom lip between my teeth as he placed a knee on the bed. He moved like a predator hunting its prey. The nerves fluttering through my body surrendered to instinct, and I widened my legs to give him space to settle between them. He stretched out, aligning our bodies from head to toe.

“You look absolutely breathtaking right now, Ryder,” he husked.

I couldn’t answer. I released my lip, tipping my head back and thank fuck he could read what I wanted: our mouths met, unleashing the beast. James ground his hips into mine, swallowing the moans I fed him. His tongue speared inside my mouth, twisting and tangling with mine in a messy kiss. One of his hands held his weight on one side of my head, the other teased down my stomach and dipped between my legs.

When did he open the bottle?

Cool, slick fingers slipped between my cheeks. I tensed at the initial sensation, but James distracted me by sucking on my tongue—a move he knew drove me wild. I chased him when he pulled back, whimpering in protest at the broken kiss.

“Relax for me, love,” he whispered against my lips, middle finger slowly rimming my hole. “Breathe in.”

I did.

“And out.”

James pushed through with one finger at the same time, gently shushing me when I cried out. He slowly worked me open with one finger before adding a second. I silently begged for his mouth. I needed it—I needed him, however he would give

himself to me. With two fingers buried to his knuckles, he granted me his mouth once more. I rocked my hips into his hand, dick hard and leaking over my stomach.

I liked it rough—two fingers were usually plenty before I got impatient and demanded his cock. My heart raced, anticipating his thick length—only to get a third finger instead. I saw stars when he crooked them, grazing my sweet spot. Tears burned behind my eyes, and I squeezed them shut.

“You’re doing so good, love,” James praised, latching onto my neck.

I moaned, sputtering out a desperate, “P-please baby,” as my body rolled into his. His erection pressed against my hip, precome wetting my skin and creating a slick glide between us.

“Are you ready?” he asked, tapping my prostate again.

“I’ve been ready,” I panted, thoroughly at the end of my rope. I needed him now.

James stamped one more kiss to my cheek, then moved between my legs. He bent mine at the knees and pushed until my thighs touched my chest. His eyes turned hungry. “You look so good right now... somine.” He growled the last word, and it sent shivers through my body.

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Before I could beg more, he leaned over me and captured my mouth, lining his cockhead up with my entrance. The wide head pushed against my hole, and suddenly those three fingers didn't feel like enough. I tightened up again, and he slid his length along my crease until the tension released from my body.

“Good boy,” he cooed, choosing that precise moment to pump his hips forward.

I wasn't sure whether the desperate sound I made was a result of the praise or his cock—or both. But I fought to keep my hands in place. Each rock of his hips sent him deeper inside me. I craved the burn, holding my breath until it swelled to full. He released the grip on his erection, bottoming out so our hips met, and pulling me close with the same hand.

I was panting hard, lips brushing his. “I love you,” I gasped. It turned into a moan when he circled his hips and his cock moved inside me.

“I love you too.” He smiled against my mouth. “You can do this, love. I know it's intense, but I'm right here with you.”

My entire body quivered. I hooked my ankles behind his back, holding him deep inside me. “I don't think I'll last long.”

Thankfully he answered me by sliding partially out before thrusting back in, picking up his pace with each cycle.

“Do you trust me not to bite you?” he asked, straining through the effort of holding back his orgasm.

I gave him a sharp nod. "I trust you with my life."

"Fuck, Ryder."

I reached behind his neck, fingering the clasp on the chain until it fell onto my chest. I threw it across the room, bracing myself. James drizzled more lube between us, then he drove into me hard and fast. The burn was unlike anything I'd ever felt. I was fuller than I'd ever been. I gasped, the room silent except for the slap of skin against skin. My cries turned into screams that reverberated off the walls as James reached an inhuman speed.

My stomach flipped, my lungs ached for air. I bucked against his hips, my cock desperate for friction even while knowing he could make me come hands-free in half a second.

And with one expert swivel of his hips, he did.

My cock spurted between us, painting our chests with my release. James fucked me right through it, drawing out the aftershocks until I trembled like a leaf beneath him. His mouth met my neck, and a brief surge of fear shot through me. I was certain he was about to bite me.

Trust.

He sealed his lips over his mark and sucked, deepening the bruise without puncturing my skin.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and held him close, letting him suck on the bite mark as much as he fucking wanted. With one more, hushed, "I love you," into his ear, he growled against my skin, his cock pulsing inside me. He came in a hot rush, shaking in my arms. I repeated the phrase over and over as I combed through his hair,

holding him close. I fought to catch my breath, resting my forehead against his temple. By the time he stopped sucking, the hickey on my neck was dark purple and angry, and it was only when he brushed his thumbs across my cheeks that I realized I'd been crying.

James brushed the tears away, soothing me and keeping me close to his chest until they dried. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Why are you thanking me?"

A soft touch of his lips to my forehead, my cheeks, then finally my mouth. "For trusting me."

Chapter 24

I woke up the next morning to the sound of birds chirping outside the window. Loudly. I grumbled and snuggled in closer to the warm, hard body next to me. I wasn't sure what time it was, but it had to be too early to function. We barely got cleaned up from the first round before James and I went in for another. Then a third, and somehow a fourth, before we were absolutely spent.

I tried going back to sleep, but once my body took in the bright sunlight streaming through the sheer curtains, I was awake. That didn't mean I was ready to move. I twisted James's silver chain in my hand, soothed by the feeling of his bare skin against mine. He'd replaced the jewelry after round two when the urge to bite me became too much for him. I might have trusted him, but between our love and the bond, he no longer trusted himself.

One of his arms draped around my shoulders, the other rested over his side. I laid there with my eyes closed, counting the links on the chain as it slid through my fingertips. Using that to ignore the world worked until a particularly urgent twinge

from my bladder had me fighting back a groan. The last thing I wanted to do was move, but I sat up anyway, surprised to find James dozing beside me. I moved carefully, but when I came out of the bathroom, his eyes were already open.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you sleep.”

“Guess you wore me out last night,” he said with a shrug.

“No coffin?” I teased.

“My travel one is being repaired.” He glanced at the light streaming in through the curtains and groaned. “Sleep isn’t necessary, but that doesn’t mean I’m ready to leave the bed yet.”

“Lie back down then,” I told him, sliding beneath the blankets again. “I’m not ready to get up either. Is Liz’s covered?”

“Yeah.”

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“Good.” I nudged him to lie down and reclaimed my spot on his chest. I relaxed in his hold, tracing lazy shapes over his belly with my finger and smiling when he squirmed. “You’re ticklish?”

“Yes,” he laughed, stilling my hand. “And it’s ten times as intense as when I was human—don’t even think about it.”

“I’m not thinking about anything! Just filing that away for later.”

James brought our tangled fingers to his mouth, brushing kisses across my fingertips. “You are nothing but trouble, Ryder Clark.”

I fought the flutters in my stomach. “Good thing you love me then.”

Damn, that smile...

I nuzzled into his neck, pressing kisses to the skin there. He hummed in pleasure.

“Do we have to go back to Salem?” I whispered against his skin. “Can’t we stay here in our happy little bubble forever?”

“I wish we could, love.” James kissed my hair. “But there’s something we need to take care of.”

That had me sitting up. “What’s wrong?”

James pushed himself up as well, reaching for the nightstand. “I was in my office last

night, and noticed that something looked strange. That copy of Dracula you've been reading was sticking out farther than the others." He fished through his wallet, then offered something to me. "This was stuck between the pages."

He dropped the object into my hand—it was a diamond. The smallest I'd ever seen, no bigger than a pinhead. The sun streaming through the windows caught on the clear gem, making it sparkle in my hand. It was stunning, but I felt a sense of unease wash over me as I looked at it. "What is it?"

"I'm assuming you weren't using that as a bookmark then."

"That'd be one expensive bookmark."

James was silent for a moment. "Have you felt odd the last week or so?"

I scoffed; that was the understatement of the century. "Yeah, I'll say."

"Like you've been on edge for no reason? Or maybe like you've been having the worst luck ever?" I nodded along with him, but all thoughts of sliced fingers or chewed-through phone chargers vanished with what came out of his mouth next. "I think we've been cursed."

"Cursed?" I demanded. James only nodded in response. His eyes were far away, deep in thought. "Is that better or worse than hunters who want you dead?"

"That depends on who placed it."

What does this tiny thing have to do with a curse?"

"It's a conduit." James pushed himself from the bed and started toward the dryer calling out behind him. "In order for a curse to be most effective, it needs to be

present at all times. Meaning that whoever put this on us left something behind to keep it going—a conduit. Without one, the person would have to trail you around at all times, which is sure to get suspicious.”

I captured the diamond between my thumb and forefinger, holding it up to the light. “This is carrying a curse?”

“Part of it.” James re-entered the room, tossing my dry clothes on the bed and stepping into his clean jeans.

“What do you mean ‘part of it?’”

“I’ve been feeling everything you have. It’s why I’ve felt the need to be with you every second of every day lately. Being apart from you has been killing me, and it’s got nothing to do with the bond. Curses like this one plague the owner of the conduit. When that diamond was placed at the bar, I became its owner. If you’ve been feeling it too, that likely means there’s one at your house as well.”

“My house?” I fought to disentangle myself from the sheets. “You mean where my daughter is currently staying?”

James halted me by placing his hands on my shoulders. “Relax, love. Curses are targeted. There’s no reason to suspect that Hannah is in any danger.”

He freed me from the sheet and helped me find my feet.

“What do we do?” I asked.

“We get home and find that object. Then I take it and destroy it.”

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I moved pliantly, letting him dress me. It didn't take us long to pack up the groceries and shut the house down before making the drive back to Salem. My nerves heightened with each mile, and judging by the fact that James didn't still my bouncing leg or pull my hand from my mouth, his were doing the same thing.

Several hours later, we arrived at my house. He went straight to my bedroom when we got there, leaving me to say goodbye to Hannah.

"What's going on?" she asked. "I've never seen the two of you so freaked."

I glanced back to where James was tearing my room apart. "I can't tell you right now." I cupped her cheeks in my hands and pressed a kiss to her hair. "But I promise to tell you soon. I need you to go back to Cambridge for the night. It doesn't matter if you go to Kian's, or back to campus but I need you to get somewhere and stay there. Can you do that?"

"Is this a vampire thing?"

"Yes. That's why I need you to go. We can handle this. Do you trust me?"

Hannah nodded, eyes searching mine. "Will you be okay?"

I put on my best smile. "We'll be fine. Text me when you get there?"

With another nod she was off, and I joined James. The sheets on the bed were in a heap—which was saying something because I never made the bed anyway. He was currently in the process of tearing my clothes out of my dresser.

“Where should I start?” I asked.

Coming up empty, James turned around to lean against the dresser and scrubbed a hand over his face. “The living room would be my next guess, then the kitchen—except you never cook, so that’s probably our last resort.”

“Ha-ha,” I delivered in a deadpan. I closed the distance between us to wrap my arms around his waist. “Still making jokes at a time like this?”

His smile was sad. “I don’t want you to see me lose my cool.”

“You’ve seen me lose my cool, quite a few times in the last week, actually.”

“That’s different. You’re human.”

“Oh, is a vampire losing their temper somehow worse?”

James simply grinned and kissed my cheek, ignoring my question. “Let me hear you say it.”

I knew what he wanted, but I groaned. “I’ve said it a hundred times.”

“Please?”

Uh oh—he was giving me those puppy-dog eyes again. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Why not? Is it working?” He hammed it up by chewing on his bottom lip. He knew damn well it was working, the bastard.

“You infuriating creature.” I grabbed his face and kissed him senseless. “I’m going to search the living room.”

“I’m so lucky you love me!” he called after me.

I skidded to a stop in the hallway, poking my head back through the bedroom door. “Idolove you.”

Flustered, James turned his gaze to the ground. If there was ever a time where I wished he wasn’t supernatural, it would be in moments like this one. I could only imagine how precious he’d look with a dark flush washing over those cheeks. I guess I’d have to settle for my imagination on that one.

While he searched the rest of my bedroom, I started with the couch. I turned out every single one of Carlos’s blankets while he glared at me. I unzipped each cushion and stuck my hand inside the lining, but all I came up with was crumbs and dog food. I did find one of Carlos’s toys that had been missing for months; that took care of the glaring at least.

Eventually, James judged the bedroom clear and started in the kitchen. The house filled with the clattering of crockery. James worked at my pace, sparing me the vampire speed—it was really disorienting when he did that. Eventually, he joined me in the living room. “Find anything?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Not unless you count the bat.”

James crooked a brow at the scraps of fabric Carlos was furiously shredding to pieces. “That’s a bat?”

“Used to be,” I shrugged. “Nothing in the kitchen?”

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“No,” James sighed as I remade the couch. “How often do you clean Hannah’s bedroom?”

“I changed the bedding after Shi stayed over, but you know Hannah—she cleans after herself better than I would. You think it’s worth looking there?”

“It can’t hurt.”

Carlos dropped the remains of his bat toy and ran to the back door, commencing with his signature whine that meant something like, “Open this door, peasant.”

“You start,” I told James. “I’ve got him.”

My boyfriend caught me with an arm around my waist as I attempted to pass him. “You sure?” Then he winced. “Sorry, I’m suddenly feeling clingy again.”

And I wanted to pull away. Luckily, I was nothing if not stubborn. “I’m sure,” I said, intentionally returning his embrace. “I trust you.”

He blinked, taken aback. “Can I get that in writing?”

My first inclination was to bristle, so I laughed instead, giving him a playful shove before going to the back door.

Since Carlos had recently dug underneath the fence and camped out in the neighbor’s backyard, I leaned against the doorframe to keep a close eye on him. Even with my jacket and thick sweater, I shivered. Carlos bounded across the grass, making a

beeline for the back corner of the property. Only instead of doing what he should have been doing, he started to dig.

“Carlos, knock it off!”

He was unfazed, paws scrabbling at the dirt even faster. I rolled my eyes and reluctantly went after him, pulling my jacket around me to ward off the chill. As I got closer, Carlos caught something with his leg and kicked it out of the dirt mound. He picked up his treasure and tried to take off with it, but unfortunately for my not-so-bright four-legged son, he darted right into my path. I intercepted him with my arms around his middle.

A silver chain dangled between his teeth. When I finally wrestled it from his mouth, the clearest diamond I’d ever seen fell to the ground in front of me. This one was bigger than the first, but still smaller than a dew drop. It caught the sun, glimmering in the light. It was beautiful, but it also sent an ominous feeling through my entire body.

“James,” I called, my voice no more than a whisper. Before I could blink, he materialized next to me.

He paled—something I didn’t even know was possible. He took three big steps back, face twisting in pain. “Even being near that thing makes me feel sick.”

“Because of the curse?”

“No. That chain is so pure that it’s a miracle I’ve been able to be in your house at all.”

“Looks like you owe Carlos a hug.”

The skepticism on his face was priceless. “What?”

“You owe him. He decided to take it out of the house for you.” I looked back to the gem in my hand, wondering how such a small piece of pressurized carbon on a delicate silver chain could have caused so much chaos. I could have easily snapped the chain—I was surprised it hadn’t done so when Carlos yanked it out of the ground. “How has this little thing caused us so much grief?” I asked aloud. “Someone put a curse on this? Just to fuck with us?”

James shook his head. “No, love. That diamond was already cursed. It has been since its creation. Someone targeted us, put it on a chain, and planted it to weaken my powers.”

“How do we get rid of it?”

When he didn’t respond, I looked up. His eyes were fixed on the jewelry in my hand, almost fearful.

Then he uttered three words I thought I’d never hear from him. “I don’t know.”

Chapter 25

“Why does Gabriel know all of this stuff that you don’t?” I asked, leaning back on the couch and closing my eyes.

I was trying to remain calm, but the thought of seeing Gabriel again had my blood racing. After we found somewhere to stash the conduit so James could tolerate being in the house, he suggested we call Gabriel for advice on what to do about it. James was currently pacing the length of the living room, thumbnail fixed between his teeth. I’d never seen him so frazzled before.

“He’s older than I am,” James muttered. “Not by much, but he’s more experienced. I only had Liz; she had to teach me everything. He had an entire family behind him—what are you doing?”

While he’d been talking, I’d stood and crossed the room to step directly into his path. Rather than halting, James’s next pass took him into my arms. As they closed around his waist, he rested his head on my shoulder for once.

“I’m trying to relax you a little,” I said, rubbing soothing circles over his back. “Is it working?”

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“Yeah,” he sighed, tension leaving his body. “It’s working.”

Huddled together in the middle of my living room, it hit me: I’d never stopped long enough to just hold him. I’d been... selfish. I’d been so caught up in how our situation affected me that I hadn’t even begun to think about what he was going through. He’d been facing a life with a mate who could have wanted nothing to do with him. And he’d dealt with it.

I didn’t deserve him.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” His voice was muffled by my shirt.

“Because I don’t do this more often.”

“You don’t have to apologize for that.”

“I’ve been selfish. This whole situation is affecting you as much as it has me and I should have realized that. I haven’t been the best partner to you. Regardless of my opinion about being bound by fate, it’s clear that what we’re doing is more than casual. No matter how we identify it, I’ve been slacking. I’ve been the worst version of myself lately, and I’m sorry.”

James lifted his head and looked at me, an adoring smile on his lips. “Wow, Ryder Clark is growing up.”

“Shut up,” I snickered, playfully smacking his chest. “Now tell me about that diamond.”

The mere mention of the thing made him shiver. “What about it?”

“You said it’s always been cursed. How?”

James led me over to the couch and only began to speak once we were both settled. I laid on his chest, tracing meaningless shapes over his arm. “Have you heard of the Koh-i-Noor diamond?”

I shook my head.

“It’s the diamond that sits in the English monarch’s crown.”

That got my attention. “How the hell did it get there?”

“That’s only a piece of it. It’s one of the largest cut gemstones in the world. It’s hard to know exactly when, but it was discovered in India during the seventeenth century. The Mughals invaded India, and the Mughal ruler commanded a throne of gems be built for him. The Koh-i-Noor was one of those gems. It sat at the top, front and center. Eventually, the Persians took down the Mughals, and the gems in the throne were stolen by the Persian leader who wore the Koh-i-Noor in an armband. For years, between raids and battles, they exchanged hands as rulers rose and fell, eventually ending up back in the possession of a Sikh ruler. His fondness for the gem is where the diamond’s power comes from. That caught the eyes of the British. To them, it was a symbol of power—and they wanted it. In the 1800s, they tricked the young Maharaja of Punjab into signing ownership over to them. He was only ten.”

I stared up at him, stunned. “Is there anything you don’t know?”

He tried not to smirk too smugly. “I have a fascination with history. And I may have done some research. Anyway, Queen Victoria meant only to display the stone, but her husband, Prince Albert?—”

“Okay, now you’re just making up names.”

He gave me a flat look, and I zipped it. “As I was saying, the prince ordered it recut and polished so she could wear it. Hindu folklore says that ‘he who owns this diamond will own the world, but will also know all its misfortunes. Only God or woman can wear it with impunity.’”

“So the curse only affects men?”

James nodded. “That’s likely why it was used against us. No one knows where the other pieces went when Prince Albert resized it. Though I’ve heard stories of them being used in witchcraft, which is likely what happened here.”

“How do you know that’s what we’ve got?”

“The clarity, mostly. I can feel the power coming off that thing. There’s a long history there, and ancient curses are often the most potent. The fact that someone else bound it to us with a new curse only amplifies the first.”

“And with the silver chain...”

“I’m practically human again.” James had one arm around my shoulder, toying with the fingers on my left hand. “You said you feel like you’ve been the worst version of yourself lately.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Are you saying humans are the worst version of vampires?”

He chuckled. “I’m not saying anything. The ancient curse brings misfortune to the men who own it. I think the new one placed on the jewel targets our insecurities. It takes the worst parts of us and makes them our entire personality.”

“That’s why I’ve felt so smothered.”

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James sighed. “And why I’ve wanted to smother you. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for that.”

“Why? You did.”

“Because your behavior can be blamed on the curse. I’ve always been a commitment-phobic asshole; yes I’m admitting it, don’t look at me like that!”

He snickered, unable to hold it back. “Damn it. I owe Shiloh a weekend off.”

“Why?”

“I bet them you’d never admit to it.”

I sat upright, jaw dropping. “You bet on me?” James could only laugh in response. A deep, belly-aching laugh that—as offended as I was about the situation—warmed my heart. I wasn’t about to ruin that. So instead, I moved to stand up. “That’s it, I’m...”

A knock at the door turned my blood to ice. “... getting the door apparently.” Despite my words, I couldn’t make myself move.

“I’ll get it, love,” James said softly, rising and wrapping his arms around my waist from behind. He held me close and kissed my neck before stepping around me.

Carlos was going batshit, and while James welcomed our guest, I corralled the dog into the kitchen to calm him down. As helpful as Gabriel had proved, his presence

still gave me the creeps. Funny how one good deed couldn't outweigh murdering my friend. My friend who tried to kill me. And James.

Shut up.

"Ryder?" James called.

"Hm?" I was distracting myself by scratching Carlos behind the ear. Totally for his comfort. Not because it was soothing for me.

"Will you come here?"

I didn't want to, but I secured Carlos before joining James and Gabriel in the entryway. He was dressed more casually now, in jeans and a sweater, but it didn't make him any less intimidating. His eyes lit up the living room as he took in my appearance. I tried to ignore the feeling crawling under my skin when our eyes met, but it was hard.

"Right here, love," James whispered, and the unease faded from my body. All I had to do was focus on my vampire. "Gabriel says he can help us. We have to destroy the silver first so he can touch them, but we can't do that here."

"Why not?"

It was Gabriel's turn to speak, though I kept my eyes trained on James. "The only way to destroy silver is to submerge it in sulfuric acid. Unfortunately, the resulting fumes are toxic to humans if performed in an enclosed space. Since we can't touch the chain, you'll have to be the one to place it in the acid. Once enough time has passed, we'll be able to retrieve the diamonds and destroy both of them appropriately."

“The acid won’t destroy them?”

“The only sure thing capable of destroying a diamond is intense heat—like a building fire, for instance.”

My gaze shot to Gabriel’s smirk. Okay, now he was taunting me. But I tamped my anger down.

“We can do it at my place,” Gabriel offered. “I have an outdoor patio with enough open space to where you won’t feel the effects of the acid.”

Oh, how convenient. I shuffled in place, shoving my hands in my pockets. “All right.”

“Why don’t you go ahead of us and get set up?” James suggested. “We need a minute.”

Gabriel smirked at me. “Sure thing,” he said, letting himself out of the house.

James took my chin in his hand, tipping my gaze to his. I hadn’t even realized I was still staring at the front door. “Breathe, love.”

I did, and stepped into his arms. “I know,” I muttered, burying my face in his neck. “I’m being ridiculous.”

“I don’t think you’re being ridiculous,” he said. “But I, for one, am ready to get this over with. It’s not my life on the line anymore; they’re fucking with you now. That curse could have swayed your decision about the bond.”

I frowned at him. “It didn’t. I’m still here. A decision I made on my own, despite an ancient curse. Don’t worry, it’ll take more than a little witchcraft to change my mind about you.”

“It could have.”

“That’s the curse talking. Or do you really want to sit here and argue about how stubborn I am? Because you know I’ll win.”

James snorted. “You’re right.”

Deciding I was fed up with all of the hunter nonsense, I threaded my fingers through James’s hair and pulled him in for a deep kiss. “Let’s get rid of these suckers.”

Chapter 26

There was no way those conduits were emitting physical heat. At least, I thought so—I was ninety-nine percent sure.

Though with each mile we traveled on our way to Gabriel’s house, the diamonds burned a hole in my pocket. Maybe James had a point: the power those small gemstones held was heavy, weighing me down with the thoughts of exactly what they’d done to us. I’d always been one to trust my gut, and those stupid little stones had me second-guessing everything. I kicked myself for every single time I pushed James away, especially when all I wanted was to have him nearby. All the bad luck and the clumsiness—I’d never been clumsy.

James squirmed in the passenger seat, gritting out a direction every so often. Being so close to the high-purity silver in my jacket was taking a toll on him. Then something clicked. “Take your chain off,” I told him.

“What?”

“You said the combination of the silver on the conduit and the chain you already wear makes you almost human. If you take yours off, your powers might give you a fighting chance. At the very least it might keep you from throwing up in my car, which you look dangerously close to doing.”

James chuckled, removing his chain. “I don’t remember the last time I felt this sick.” When the metal clattered into the cupholder next to him, he let out a sigh of relief. “Good idea, love. That helped. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it.”

“It’s okay, baby.” I placed my hand on this thigh. “You can admit that I’m smarter than you.”

“Asshole,” he snickered. He attempted to knock my hand away, but I tightened my grip. “Take a left here.”

I felt better when he laced our fingers together. “Can you throw up?” I asked. “As a vampire?”

“We have tough stomachs, but we can. And given what our diet consists of, it’s not very pretty.”

I grimaced, my own gut twisting at the mental image. “Is vomit ever pretty?”

James didn’t need to tell me when we reached Gabriel’s house—I just knew. The large house sprawled across a vast plot of land on the outskirts of Boston. Close enough to still be considered the city, but skirting the edge of city limits. It wasn’t quite a mansion, but it was near enough. After I parked in the driveway, I expected James to move first like he always did. Then I realized why he didn’t: he needed me to get farther away from him with the silver.

The front door opened, pulling my focus back to the house. Gabriel stood on the front porch with his hands in slacks that were, no doubt, designer. Even from this distance, the red in his eyes was visible, and I gulped against the bubble rising in my throat. What I truly wanted to do was stay in the car and hide, but my man needed me. And after the asshole I'd been lately, the least I could do was face my fears and destroy the silver so that he could tolerate being around me again.

So, I ducked across the center console to stamp a kiss to his cheek and got out of the car. As a defensive instinct, I stuck my hands in my pockets but flinched when my fingers contacted the gems there. Gabriel tried to remain stoic, but as I approached I could see how the silver affected him. He was just a bit better at hiding it.

"If you're wearing any silver to keep your powers in check, take it off," I told him. "It helped James. It might help you too."

Gabriel tilted his head, a look of what seemed to be admiration crossing his eyes. "Good call, human." He pulled his hands from his pockets and removed a silver ring from his right middle finger. I glanced back toward the car, worried when James hadn't gotten out. "James will be more comfortable coming in once we submerge the pendant in the acid. He knows that."

Still I hesitated. I peeked around Gabriel into the interior of the house, and from the pristine white walls and the expensive hardwood flooring, nothing about it screamed, "Big scary vampire lives here!"

"Ryder, I know I make you nervous, but I promise I want those things destroyed just as much as you do. You barely have to come inside alone. All I'm going to do is lead you through the house and out to the back patio. There, we have the open space you'll need to submerge the chain without harming yourself. Once it's in the container, you can hightail it back to the safety of your mate. I promise."

I bit my lip. God, I hated how these stupid vampires could practically read my mind—so much for not being telepathic. I guess interacting with humans for hundreds of years gave them an edge. “Fine. Let’s get it over with.”

Gabriel stepped aside to clear the doorway, but when I didn’t move he sighed and entered the house ahead of me. He didn’t pause to take his shoes off, so I continued after him. Floor-to-ceiling windows bathed the house in natural light from the setting sun. Gabriel dropped his silver ring on a nearby table and led me from the entryway, down the hall, and past the open living room on the left. I followed him through the kitchen to where he’d opened a door off to the side. “There’s a plastic container there, on the table,” he told me, pointing. “You can put both conduits in, but you don’t have to. The acid will only destroy the silver. Don’t drop it in from a distance; carefully lower it into the liquid so it doesn’t splash back. Sulfuric acid is highly corrosive, and it wouldn’t take much on your skin to hurt you. Don’t linger. Those fumes will be dangerous. Once it’s dissolved, I’ll take care of things from there.”

Gabriel stood to the side of the door, clearly intending for me to step onto the patio alone.

“Yes, sir,” I muttered, throat tight.

I stepped over the threshold, removing the conduits from my pocket. The gems sat heavy in my clammy palm, the silver chain trailing over my fingers. I approached the container sitting on the table, expecting to feel something. Well, something more than the anxiety crawling under my skin. “Why isn’t the acid corroding the container?” I asked.

“It’s made of high-density polyethylene,” Gabriel explained from inside. “One of the few materials resistant to it.”

I picked out the chainless diamond, setting it to the side; I didn't want to accidentally drop it into the container and get a chemical burn. I sure as hell wasn't getting close enough to the stuff to drop in something that small. With the other stone in my hand, I held it by the end of its chain, suspended over the substance. The diamond hit the acid first—and nothing happened. I continued and could tell the exact second the silver met the acid. The liquid sizzled like hot oil, and it became difficult to breathe.

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“Hold your breath,” Gabriel ordered. “You have to move fast now.”

My chest already ached, so holding my breath only intensified the burning in my lungs. I picked up my pace, lowering the chain into the container.

I couldn’t move away from that thing fast enough, fleeing into the house—and right into James’s rigid chest. He held me close, combing through my hair and whispering in my ear. My chest burned and I coughed. I hadn’t even realized I was gripping onto him like a child until my breathing returned to normal and I could raise my head again.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Gabriel gestured toward the living room. “I’ll bring you something to drink.”

Warily, I asked, “Is it blood?”

He grew exasperated with me. “Water.” When I didn’t relax, he rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to poison your drink, Ryder. If I wanted to hurt you, do you think I would have stood back here while you approached a container of corrosive acid?”

“Then why do you always look at me like you want to rip me apart?”

“Because I like watching you squirm. Now go sit down.”

James and I retreated into the living room and Gabriel followed close behind with two glasses of water in his hands. I took one, and he set the other in front of James. “Drink,” Gabriel ordered. “I know you feel as sick as I do.”

“Where’s your drink then?” James asked, reaching for the glass.

“I find water disgusting—and yes, I hated it as a human as well.” Gabriel settled into the armchair on the opposite side of the table. “Do as I say, not as I do. Though your human here was a genius for reminding me to take off my ring. I hadn’t thought of it.”

“Neither had I.”

I leaned into James’s touch when he put his arm around me. “What happens now?” I asked, voice raspy.

Gabriel was the one to answer. “You let me take care of things from here. I’ll destroy the conduits on my next assignment.”

“I know they targeted us, but won’t the Koh-i-Noor curse affect you?”

He shrugged. “I can handle a little bad luck. Have you figured out who planted them yet?”

I hadn’t even thought about it. Thankfully, James came to my rescue. “I’ve been pouring over everything we know trying to figure it out.”

“The list can’t be that long,” I said. “How many people do we know that have spent time in both my house and your office?”

“Shiloh,” James said after a brief hesitation.

“No,” I snapped instantly, ice running through my veins like I’d been doused in cold water. There was no way. “It can’t be them.”

“How do you know?” Gabriel asked.

“I just...” Then I paused. I didn’t know—not for sure. Shiloh had shown up right before everything went to hell, and they’d been left unsupervised in both locations. I turned to James. “It can’t be them.”

He grimaced. “We might have to consider the possibility, love.”

Gabriel excused himself when his phone rang, which left me and James in silence to try and figure out who would curse us. We ran through every name we knew, right down to the tradespeople James used for the bar and I used at home. Not that it was any use—outside of having the heating serviced, I hadn’t had any work done to the house since I moved in.

“I hate to say it but what about?—”

“Don’t even go there,” I scolded as James and I arrived at the same conclusion: Raleigh and Angel.

James leaned back into the couch with a sigh. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

I rested my chin in one hand, reaching out with the other to rub my palm over his thigh. He widened his legs, nudging my hand farther up his leg. “Not here, baby,” I snickered. I kept my voice low, though I knew it was pointless with another vampire in the house.

James laughed. “Why can’t we still be in our beach house getaway where we’d never have to leave the bed?”

“I did propose that idea,” I reminded him. “You said we needed to get back here and deal with this.”

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“I regret my decision.”

“I’m returning now,” Gabriel announced. “Put your clothes back on.”

“Wait until you find your mate,” James told him. “You’ll be just as insatiable.”

“Even in the face of danger?”

“Ah, the risk only makes it hotter.”

I took another glance around the space. The living room was big enough to fit an entire football team. Across the entrance sat a formal dining room, and between the two a grand staircase that led to the second floor where I assumed the bedrooms were.

“You have all this to yourself?” I asked. Gabriel answered with a nod. “Doesn’t it ever get to be too much?”

“Not really.” He shrugged. “I know I’ll have someone to share it with someday. I just have to be patient.”

With a break in the conversation, my eyes fell on the row of bookshelves across the room. I was too far away to read the titles, but it started something in my mind. “Dracula,” I whispered.

Gabriel crooked a brow and followed my gaze to the shelf. “Even I can’t see that far.”

“Neither can I but that’s not the point. I never finished it.”

“There is a copy if you?—”

“No, no; that’s not what I’m getting at.” I looked at James. “I never finished the book.”

“I’m not following, love.”

“You found the conduit in the bar stuck between the pages of Dracula. The last time I had the book, I set it down on the couch and didn’t pick it up again. I never finished it, I never even put it back on the bookshelf. Did you clean up your office that night?”

Realization flashed in James’s eyes. “No. That was the night you cut your hand. I…” At the memory of exactly what happened that night, my cheeks flushed. James paused, eyes flitting to Gabriel. “I went home before you did, remember?”

“But there was someone in your office that night. Someone who has unrestricted access to my house.”

James’s eyes widened. “No, you don’t mean?—”

James was cut off by the sound of my phone ringing. It was Hannah.

And she was sobbing.

“Hold on, Han,” I told her. “I need you to slow down. I can’t understand you. What’s going on?”

“Kian’s place is a wreck!” I halted James with a hand on his chest. “It looks like the front door was kicked in and there’s stuff everywhere. Kian isn’t answering his phone and?—”

“Get out of there, Hannah.” I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. “Go to your dorm room and stay there. James is going to come get you and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Go,” Gabriel told us. “Deal with it. I promise I’ll take care of the conduits.”

I was already in the driver seat by the time Hannah ended the call. James grabbed the door, preventing it from shutting. “You’re not driving right now, Ryder. Let me.”

I was shaking my head. “I need your vampire speed right now. You’ll be able to get to Hannah much faster than we can in a car. I’ll keep trying to get a hold of Kian, and I’ll meet you there.”

“I really don’t want to leave you right now, Ryder.”

“Please.” I looked up at him with pleading eyes. “Get to Hannah.”

James hesitated, fear clouding his features. That was one emotion I’d grown accustomed to recognizing over the last year and as much as I hated it, I needed him to push past it this time. He glanced around us, then ducked into the car to pull me in for a kiss. “I love you,” he whispered. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I promise. I love you too.”

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One last kiss, and when I opened my eyes, he was gone. I finally started the car and sped toward Cambridge, knowing that James was likely already there. I tried to keep calm as I drove, but it was difficult. Ringing echoed through the car as I attempted to call Kian again and again—and every time it went to voicemail. I'd just ended another call and pressed the button to try again when the squeal of tires seemed to pierce through my brain. I looked up, but not fast enough. A van blocked the intersection. I slammed on the brakes, but the last thing I remembered was the sound of crunching metal.

Everything went black.

Chapter 27

When I came to, I wasn't sure exactly where I was. I shifted, finding hard, unforgiving concrete beneath me. With each beat of my heart, pain coursed through my body. Still, I somehow found it in me to sit up. I reached up to the back of my head, my hand coming away wet and sticky with blood.

The space was dark and damp, and combined with the concrete, I guessed I was in a garage but in the pitch black, I couldn't even begin to identify where. Though something about the place seemed oddly familiar. The ringing in my ears was deafening. I brought my legs underneath me in an attempt to stand—only to fall back down, landing painfully on my ass. My limbs felt like lead. Centering myself, I scooted to my right, carefully feeling out to the side with my hand. Every time I came up empty, my heart sank a little more.

Yes!

Finally, my hand connected with an automatic garage door. That at least meant I was in a house. Relieved, I paused to gather myself. My bloody hand rested on one leg while I mustered the strength to try again. I had to stand up—I had to.

There were too many lives at stake.

After a few measured breaths, I planted my hands to either side of my hips. Gritting my teeth and letting out a snarl of pain, I pushed myself up, not stopping until I was on my feet. Though I stumbled slightly, I managed to remain upright. With my hands on my knees, blood seeping through the denim of my jeans and trickling down the back of my neck, I tried to wait out the nausea. Then I straightened up. My past experience with head injuries warned me the nausea was something I'd just have to deal with.

Fighting the urge to pass out again, I rotated slowly. My boots scraped against the concrete and I winced. The noise likely seemed louder to me, but I didn't want to tip off anyone who might be lurking in the shadows that I'd regained consciousness. I groped along the wall, navigating around various yard tools and garage-related obstacles—no doubt leaving a streak of blood along the wall worthy of any horror movie—until my fingers curled around a wooden door frame. I cautiously reached for the metal knob—it was cold, which meant they hadn't resorted to setting the place on fire.

Yet.

I leaned in, pressing my ear to the wood. I couldn't hear anything from the other side, but that didn't necessarily mean that there was nothing there.

I tried the knob, turning my hand slowly and feeling it give. To my surprise, there was nothing blocking it either. Whoever had put me here, they were confident—or stupid—enough to think they wouldn't have to restrain or barricade the door.

It was even darker in the house than it was in the garage. I took a step and cringed, my heavy winter boots squeaking against linoleum—I was in a kitchen. The dark and quiet of the house gave me enough confidence to pause to take in my surroundings. I knew this kitchen. At least in here, the faint moonlight streaming in through the window gave me some light to work with. The modern appliances that couldn't have been more than a few years old, the crisp white cabinets, and the spacious butcher's block island set right in the middle... this was James's kitchen. Letting out a sigh of relief, I started to move again, but not before grabbing the first weapon I could find and sliding it into my back pocket. I'd been at his place a few times but I was working entirely off of muscle memory and the little light that I had. Fuck, how long was I out?

The rest of the house was eerily quiet. Something wasn't right. I took each step slowly. I felt for the edge of the kitchen counter, using that to guide me around the perimeter of the space and toward the open dining area. From there, I'd be able to find my way back to the living room.

But as I rounded the corner, my stomach lurched. A shape lay crumpled in the middle of the floor. I froze, searching for any sign of movement. Nothing. Though it was so dark I wasn't confident I'd be able to see something anyway. I stumbled into the room, falling to my knees next to the body.

Kian. He was on his side, face in the carpet. I steeled myself, though I wasn't sure any amount of mental preparation would be enough if he was...

Before I was quite ready, I gently grabbed his shoulder and rolled him onto his back. Damn it, it was still too dark for me to see if his chest moved.

"Kian," I whispered, leaning down to determine whether I could feel his breath. I let out a sigh of relief when a soft exhalation warmed my cheek. Grabbing his shoulders again, I gave him a gentle shake. "Kian!"

This time he stirred, groaning and attempting to sit up.

“Don’t move,” I told him. “Not yet.”

“What happened? Where am I?” he mumbled, words slurring as if his tongue was too big for his mouth.

“We’re in James’s house.” I brushed his hair away from his face, my hands coming away sticky. “You got hit in the head.”

“I did?”

“Pretty hard it seems. Where’s James?”

Kian was able to pry his eyes open, blinking and trying to come to terms with the darkness. “Dunno... feel sick.”

“You probably have a concussion. You mean James didn’t bring you here?”

Kian’s eyes widened, taking in my appearance as they adjusted to the dark. “There’s blood all over your face,” he said, gulping.

“I don’t doubt it.” I worked an arm around his shoulders, helping him into a sitting position. “Listen: I want you to get out of here. The moment you can stand, I want you to leave the house and get as far away as you can.”

“What about you?”

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“I need to find James.”

“Hell no!” he shouted, too loud. He lowered his voice when I shushed him. “I’m not leaving you alone to deal with my mess.” He looked down. “I’m more involved in this than you think. I need to help you. Please.”

I closed my eyes against another wave of pain. That was as good as a confession from him, as far as the gems were concerned, but I didn’t have it in me to argue. “Is there anything I can do to change your mind?”

“Not a chance.”

“Fine,” I relented with a sigh. “But at least stay here while I scope out the rest of the house.”

“I don’t think I could move yet if I wanted to.”

I pushed to my feet, making sure he was stable enough to keep sitting.

Then I paused: we weren’t alone.

It was too dark to make out much of their appearance. Unlike the kitchen, the shades in the living room blocked out the natural light. Two figures stood shrouded in darkness, invisible except for one thing: like cats in the night, two pairs of blood red eyes stared back at me. Vampires.

I felt Kian shift behind me, but I grabbed his shoulder and shoved him back to the

ground. “Stay there.”

They giggled in unison, and it churned my stomach. I’d seen this movie before; I didn’t like it then either.

“What do you want?” I asked them.

“Easy,” the one on the left said. “Just leave.”

I scoffed. “Really?”

My gaze was pulled to the right. “We’re happy to let you walk out of here if you let us have the monster upstairs. We won’t risk human life.”

Another voice rang out in the darkness. “But I will.”

Oh, fuck. I knew that voice! On quivering legs, I spun, trying my best to shield Kian with my body.

A woman sauntered into the room. The moonlight came in from the kitchen behind her, illuminating her just enough for me to see. She lowered her hood, her long, jet black hair falling over her shoulder in waves. Gone was the bubbly pink and purple woman I’d grown to cherish as a friend. Now, her dark edge only mirrored the evil in her heart. “It’s good to see you again, Ryder.”

I swallowed. “Wish I could say the same, Dani.” Behind me, Kian grabbed my hand, hauling himself to his feet. My heart was in my throat: James was upstairs? I needed to get to him, but how could I beat two vampires to him?

The creepy twins jolted. “There’s someone coming—another vampire.”

Dani scoffed. “So?”

The one on the right turned to her. “Humans, always so impatient. We’re in over our heads. Better to retreat.”

Lefty responded, the gleam of her eyes narrowing to slits. “But he knows who we are.” She must have been talking about Kian, because I sure as hell had no idea who she was.

“Leave then,” Dani snapped. “I’ll clean up your mess here. Clark and I have unfinished business.”

One twin whispered something to the other, and then they were gone. I should have been worried, but my focus was on Dani. I knew I could take her—I’d done it before.

“W-what do you want?” Damn the quaver in my voice. I saw the smirk on her face grow with every word.

“Aw.” Dani tsked, tilting her head. “If only we had time for pleasantries. As it is, this place is rigged to blow any minute now. Why don’t we just cut to the?—”

Dani grunted as Kian tackled her to the ground. The move took both of us by surprise and was enough to stun her.

“Go,” he shouted. “Get James.”

I didn’t need any further invitation. Spinning on my heel, I tore off down the hallway and up the stairs.

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There were no windows in this part of the house, so I had to rely on my memory with my hands stretched out to either side of me. My right met the wall, grazing over the edges of picture frames. Halfway down the hall, my left dipped, falling over the ledge of the doorframe and meeting the wood of the bathroom door. I threw it open, not even caring what was on the other side. I just knew I needed to get to James. My eyes took longer to adjust to the dark than I cared for, but to my relief I was met with more darkness—and not a hunter in sight.

I continued down the dark expanse of the hallway, feeling out for the spare bedroom I knew was on the right; the one James converted into an office he never used.

Empty.

Which only left James's bedroom. Either I'd find him in there—or someone else. I was really hoping for the former, because if he wasn't in that room then I didn't know where else to look. He could be anywhere.

My skin prickled as I approached the bedroom, goosebumps rising over my body.

I wasn't sure how I knew, but I did. He was in there.

Instead of taking the careful measures I should have, my heart won out. I lunged for the door, twisting the knob and stumbling into the room. I couldn't see much, but I could see enough. James lied on the bed. "Baby," I said. "Please tell me you can hear me."

Since vampires didn't need to breathe, I couldn't tell from his chest whether he was

alive. Hell, I didn't even know whether I'd be able to find a pulse. But what did I have to lose?

I cupped my hand around his neck, and that simple move let him know I was there. He flinched, and I could breathe a little easier. Though my relief was short-lived.

As soon as he came to consciousness, his face contorted in pain. "Wrists," he strained through gritted teeth.

I leaned over him, running my hands up until I landed on something cold and metallic.

Chains.

No doubt silver.

"You have to get out of here," James said.

"Not without you."

"Ryder," he said, a little more desperate. "Promise me, love. Get yourself and Kian to safety. I can manage on my own."

Like hell. I ignored him, climbing onto the bed and throwing my leg over him, straddling his waist. I leaned over, feeling for the chains on either side. "You don't get to make me fall in love with you and then leave me, James Campbell. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

James choked out a pained laugh. "Stubborn ass."

"Damn straight. Your stubborn ass."

I felt for the end of the chains to see if I could untie them. No such luck. They disappeared inside the wall to either side of the headboard. Damn, the creepy sister twins were more calculated and methodic than I'd hoped. How long had they been planning this? They'd watched us closely, knowing that James often spent the night with me and used that to their advantage to plan the ultimate attack.

"Wait here," I said, pressing a quick kiss to his lips. "I'm going back to the garage to get something to cut these."

"Not like I have a choice."

I almost paused to glare at him, but I scrambled off the bed. I needed to be fast. Dani had said the house was a powder keg, but she wouldn't detonate it while she was still inside, would she?

And a gut-wrenching cry made my heart plummet into my stomach.

Dani appeared in the doorway. "You can't leave things alone, can you?"

My heart raced, thumping through my ears and making the cut on the back of my head pulse. "What did you do to Kian?"

"He'll live, but only if he gets immediate medical attention. Tick-tock."

I was getting dizzy by the second, but I refused to waver. "Bring it on bitch."

I lunged, whipping out the carving knife I'd stealthily grabbed from the butcher's block in the kitchen. My heroic effort was foiled when I tripped over something in the dark. I flew into the silhouette of Dani, pinning her against the wall. My right hand lashed out, and?—

Damn it.

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She was too small. She slipped right under my arm, and the knife bounced off of the wall. With a primal snarl I pushed away, adrenaline pumping through my veins and making me forget about my injuries. I managed to wrap my arms around Dani's waist. "I don't want to hurt you," I told her. "But you're not making this easy."

"Then give it up, Clark." She writhed and bucked in my arms, her elbow nearly connecting with my nose. "Run away like you always do, and this will all be over."

I chuckled. It was a dark, sinister sound that I didn't know I was capable of. "You're even dumber than I remember."

I brought my knee into the back of her legs and sent her crumbling to the floor. But for being so small, she definitely held her own. Dani's head thrashed back, skull colliding with my nose. A sickening crunch, and blood was pouring down my face. I wasn't lying before: I didn't want to use the knife, but I was quickly running out of options. Fuck, no one ever told me how much a broken nose hurt. Still, my body pushed through the pain.

Dani's arm lashed out at me, but I grabbed it and twisted it behind her back. She cried out in pain, her voice higher than it had been before. I pushed even harder. I dropped her arm to grab the hood—taking a fistful of hair with it—and brought the knife to her neck, slowly and carefully. I applied only enough pressure to serve as a warning.

Dani's laugh chilled me to the bone. "Some parent you are," she spat. "You're worried about me while Hannah's boyfriend is bleeding out on the floor."

She's right, I realized in dismay. My stomach roiling, I changed positions, jerking the

knife away from her neck and plunging it into her abdomen. I swallowed a wave of nausea as hot blood spurted over my hand, splattering the hardwood floor beneath us. I could only hope the wound wasn't fatal. I held the hood tight, bringing my mouth to her ear to make sure she heard me perfectly. "You keep my daughter's name out of your fucking mouth."

Certain she wouldn't be a threat anytime soon, I shoved her face into the floor, a grunt of pain following me down the hallway. I tossed the knife, letting it clatter to the ground. My heart was aching to run to James, but Kian was my first priority. He didn't have supernatural powers behind him. When I knelt next to his still form outside the bedroom, I was certain he was dead. But when I touched his hand, his fingers squeezed around mine. It was weak, but it was something.

"I'm going to get you out of here," I said. "I promise."

I felt across his back, searching for the cause of his injury. When I found it, I recoiled.

A wooden stake was driven through his back.

I swallowed down more bile and reached for it again.

"Don't!" someone cried. I flinched, head jerking toward the sound. Gabriel. "Leave it," he instructed. "Taking it out could cause more harm than good. He needs a hospital."

"How exactly am I supposed to explain this to the paramedics? And what about James? I need to get him out of here."

"Let me worry about that."

I glanced up into his red irises. “What are you doing here?”

But his attention wasn't on me; it was focused on the stake in Kian's back, then the silver chains binding James to the bed. “I thought you could use some help.”

That wasn't a complete answer—I wanted to know how the hell he had found us—but I didn't have time to grill him. My gaze went from him to James, then to Kian.

“Look at me, love,” James said quietly.

Tears stung my eyes. I squeezed them shut and shook my head. I wouldn't leave him. I could save them both.

Gabriel reached for me. “Ryder...”

“No!” I shouted, wrenching out of his grip. “I'm not walking out of here without James.”

I fought the urge to flinch when Gabriel knelt next to me. My hand still held Kian's, but I was itching to run to James, to rip those chains out of the wall with my bare hands. I could save them both. I had to save them both. The thought of leaving the house without either of them wasn't one that I could bear.

Gabriel placed a soft hand on my back, his voice soothing. “Ryder, you are a vampire's mate, so you can trust me when I say that I've got him. James will survive, but a vampire can't heal injuries caused by a stake. I'll help you get Kian across the street and come back to free James. Call for help, and wait until it arrives.”

“What about the neighbors?”

“They won’t know a thing—don’t look at me like that! They’re asleep.”

“Then what?” I asked, sick with myself for even entertaining the idea of leaving without James.

“We’ll meet you at the hospital. I promise everything will be okay.”

I dropped Kian’s hand and shot to my feet, storming across the room. Taking James’s face in both hands, I leaned down and crushed his mouth to mine. I poured every emotion I felt into that kiss, one that said, “Don’t you dare die on me or I’ll haunt you in the afterlife.”

But when I pulled back, I could only whisper, “I love you.”

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“I love you, too,” he returned. “Now go. I’ll see you at the hospital.”

I stole one more kiss before I turned away. My eyes burned. My vision blurred. I swiped at the tears with the backs of my hands, and then it was time to steel myself. The adrenaline was fading from my body and the pain in my head was returning, to say nothing of my broken nose. Gabriel went to scoop Kian into his arms, but I stopped him. “I’m not leaving James alone with Dani, even if she is wounded and half unconscious. I’ll get Kian out of here. You work on the chains.”

Gabriel must have seen the steel in my eyes. Without arguing, he stepped aside. I knelt next to Kian again, carefully helping him to his feet. He groaned with each movement, barely able to walk.

With slow, halting baby steps, Kian leaned heavily on me as we made our way out of the house. Every step sent jolts of pain through my body, and I could only imagine what he must be feeling. The moment we stepped outside, Kian took in a deep, gasping breath. That was a relief: at least the stake hadn’t punctured his lung. When we crossed the street, I sat on the cold, hard ground and Kian propped himself up against me, whimpering.

“You can do this, Kian,” I encouraged. “I know it hurts, just stay with me.”

I wasn’t sure whether I was speaking to him or myself, because I was feeling exceptionally weak. With every exhale, a little more fight left my body. I wondered what happened to the guy who overpowered the shadowed figure in the hallway, because I surely didn’t feel like that guy anymore.

True to Gabriel's word, not a light was to be seen in either direction. The entire street was dark and quiet. Panting, I wrestled my phone from my pocket and called for help.

I don't remember much from the next few minutes. The next thing I knew, sirens were piercing the air. Paramedics showed up and assaulted me with questions, but all I could get out was, "Remodeling accident."

I knew they didn't believe me, but Kian's injury was too life threatening for them to argue. They demanded I ride with them to the hospital—I was covered in blood, after all—and I have a vague memory of fighting with them before the more muscular one hauled me to my feet and strapped me into the ambulance. I sat in the spare seat, barely clinging to consciousness. The door shut and the ambulance rumbled to life. The sirens started up again, and then we were moving.

We couldn't have made it more than a hundred feet away before the ambulance screeched to a halt. A blast rocked the entire street, vibrating the asphalt and rocking the vehicle. I tried to peek through the rear window to see, but it was out of reach. I knew the explosion had come from James's house, but I couldn't see anything more than an orange cloud billowing across the pane of the ambulance window, and the flame-lit dark street beyond. One of the medics yelled at the driver to go, and we were gone before I could see if James made it out alive.

With that, the rest of the fight left my body. I laid my head back, closed my eyes, and let the darkness sweep over me.

Chapter 28

Fuck, my head hurts...

The absolute last thing I wanted to do was open my eyes. I'd been in a deep sleep, and I wanted to get back there. But slowly my memories started to come back to me.

I wasn't at home.

An obnoxious beeping came from the machine next to me. Bright, fluorescent lights had me squeezing my eyes tighter instead of fighting to open them. I stirred, wincing against a pain in my right arm. I peeled my eyes open, looking down to see an IV sticking out of the vein. The smell of disinfectant made my stomach roil. I tried to look around, but moving my head wasn't the best idea. Plastic covered my nose and mouth, and I grappled for the offending material, the beeping growing more erratic with my increased heart rate.

Where was James?

I opened my mouth to call out, but a voice said, "Shh, love. I've got you."

"You're here," I panted.

He shushed me again, taking my hand in his. "I am. You're safe. I'm safe." James brushed my sticky hair away from my forehead. He continued stroking until my heart rate returned to normal.

With a calmer hand, I pulled the mask away so I could talk. "How long have I been out?"

"All night. You have a grade four concussion and a broken nose, but the doctors say you'll be fine."

"Kian?"

"Alive. He's going to live."

"I want to see him." I tried to sit up, but James guided me back down to the pillow.

“You need to rest, love,” he told me. “He’s out cold. He’s not going anywhere today.”

When James removed his hand, I snatched it out of the air. Thankfully, he let me. Something peeking out from the edge of his sweater caught my eye, and I wanted to inspect it further. I pushed his sleeve out of the way, revealing deep burns around his wrist. I could make out each distinct link of the chain wrapping up his arm. Dropping his hand, I reached for the other, finding the same thing.

“You’re hurt,” I said, stating the obvious.

“They’re around my ankles too. And...” He straightened, glancing toward the door before he lifted his sweater. The same marks danced across his stomach. “But I’ll be okay.” He dropped the fabric and leaned over me again. “I’m already healing. You need to do the same.”

“I want to see Kian,” I reiterated. “I need to see him for myself.” My throat grew tight. “I need to call Hannah.”

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“She’s been bouncing between your rooms all night. Finally passed out in Kian’s about an hour ago.”

I attempted to sit up again. “I need to see her—oomph. That’s not fair!”

James held a hand tenderly in the middle of my chest, but it was enough vampire strength to keep me on the pillow. “I’ll make a deal with you,” he said. “You sleep for two more hours, and I’ll break you out of here so you can see them.”

“And how do you plan to do that?” I asked, words muffled as he replaced the oxygen mask over my face.

James dropped his voice to a whisper, his eyes sparkled with mischief. “Same way I got them to stop asking questions about the wooden stake through Kian’s back: a little mind manipulation.”

“You can do that?”

“Yes. It’s also how Gabriel ensured every person on my street ‘slept through’ that explosion.” He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “And I promise if you get some rest, I’ll tell you more about it.”

I wasn’t sure whether it was James or the medication dripping into my IV, but I started to feel more relaxed. He pulled up a chair and held onto me, his thumb softly stroking the back of my hand until I drifted off to sleep again.

James stayed true to his word. When I woke up that afternoon, he shamelessly flirted

with a nurse to get me into a wheelchair that I promised not to leave. I had no doubt that there was some vampiric magic worked in there, but I wasn't going to question it.

The nurse told me she was removing the IV that fed me pain medication, so I was likely to get more uncomfortable. I didn't care. The painkillers made me foggy, and I didn't want to feel sleepy anymore.

We had to take an elevator to see Kian in the ICU. James wheeled me there himself, and I relaxed into the chair, my head resting against his chest as I watched the numbers climb.

"It's okay, love," he said, leaning down to kiss my cheek. He laughed, making me turn my head to look at the adorable way he was scrunching up his nose. "We really need to get you cleaned up."

"Does that mean I get a sponge bath?" I asked as the elevator dinged and the doors opened.

James shook his head and muttered, "What am I going to do with you?"

"Love me?" I countered, wondering if that single word would ever feel normal in my mouth.

"That I do." James stopped at a closed door, rounding the chair and crouching in front of me. "Remember what we agreed on."

I rolled my eyes. "My ass is not to leave this chair under any circumstances."

"Good boy."

I narrowed my eyes but couldn't resist the fluttering that kicked up in my belly.

Damn praise kink.

James straightened to his full height and nudged the wide door open. My heart pounded against my ribcage, and he looked back at me. "Are you ready?"

Not really, but I nodded anyway. I wanted to stand so badly my legs itched: needing to be pushed around in a chair made me feel helpless. I resisted the urge to look around the corner, forcing myself to sit back in my seat. The only light in the room was the one directly over the bed, and Hannah sat in a chair to Kian's side, holding his hand and resting her head on his arm. She sat up when we entered, twisting around to look at me with red-rimmed eyes.

"Have you told him you love him yet?" she asked, indicating where James stood behind me.

His hand squeezed my shoulder, drawing my eyes to his. "Yeah, I have."

"Good." I looked back to Hannah, who was standing from her seat and walking over to me, arms outstretched. "Then I don't need to feel guilty."

She held me close and buried her face in my neck. I joked by calling her kid, but in that moment she'd never felt so small. As my arms closed around her, she fell into my lap and I had to suppress a groan. I guess I'd done more physically than I thought. I didn't dare move her, letting her sob into my neck and feeling tears soak my hospital gown.

"What did you mean?" I asked. "What do you have to feel guilty about?"

"It doesn't matter," she hiccupped.

“She means she loves you,” Kian rasped from the bed. I hadn’t realized he was awake. “You forgot the most important words, Han.”

I was still bewildered, but James spoke before I could ask, a gentle hand placed on Hannah’s back. “Why don’t I take you to get something to eat?” he suggested. “Let’s give these two a minute.”

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Hannah pulled back, nodding and patting her eyes dry with the sleeves of her sweater. “Thank you,” she whispered, pressing a wet kiss to my cheek.

I resisted the urge to wipe my face dry—I really did. But my childish nature won out in the end. “I thought I skipped the phase where you’d snot all over me—” She smacked me in the chest. “Ow! Hey, I’m injured!”

Hannah said nothing, but I caught the hint of a smile as James ushered her toward the door. “Let’s go before you end up putting him in the bed next door.”

I jolted when James pushed me closer to the bed. He pressed a silent kiss to my hair before he and Hannah were out of the room.

Kian spoke first. “I’m with her.”

He sounded like his throat was coated with sandpaper. I looked around, and thankfully his cup of water was within reach. I didn’t want to face James’s or Hannah’s wrath if I was caught out of my chair. “What do you mean?”

“She loves you. We both do. What you did for me...”

“Was what anyone would have done,” I finished.

“Still... Thank you.”

Instead of going through the whole dance of “no need to thank me,” I went back to what Hannah said. “Why would she feel guilty about telling me that?”

He reached for his water again and after taking a sip said, “She didn’t want James to hear you say it to her first. Not when it’s so blatantly obvious you’re in love with each other. Yours and Hannah’s relationship is a little more complicated.”

I scoffed. “Complicated, right. Because falling in love with a vampire was easy.”

“You’re lucky I’m too drugged up to smack you.” Kian fought against shutting his eyes. “I’m sorry, by the way. I never should have taken those stupid diamonds.”

That made me sit up straighter. “So it was you.” I wasn’t angry. I probably should’ve been, but I wasn’t. I was too exhausted, too full of pain. “Why’d you do it?”

Kian picked at a loose thread on the hospital-issued blanket that covered him. “I knew,” he admitted. “I knew about Luke—about James—before I came to you. Six months after Luke disappeared, I was approached by Dani. I didn’t know who she was at first, not until you said her name back at the house. I mostly met with the twins. I met Dani once—to get the diamonds—and she kept her features hidden from view. Dark clothes, hood pulled up. She stayed in the shadows so I couldn’t tell you the first thing about her. And... she told me everything: about vampires, about hunters. She said that James was responsible for Luke’s disappearance, and if I did what she asked, she’d help me find him. At first, I told her no, but the more time that went on, the more I missed him. I wanted my brother back. I never expected to find those adoption papers.”

Kian took a shaky breath before continuing. “That’s when I agreed to do it. I was confused, I was angry, and if doing it would get Luke back here to answer my questions, then I said I’d do anything.”

I wrung my hands in my lap. “Did you know those gems were cursed? Or what that silver would do to James?”

“No!” Kian shook his head emphatically. “I never wanted anyone to get hurt. She only told me that I needed to place one in the bar, and one at your place. I figured they were trackers of some sort, and if James really was a vampire, it wasn’t a terrible thing to know what he was up to. Only... I lost one.” He finally looked at me. “After the night I spent at your place, the one with the silver chain went missing.”

“Carlos, the thieving little bastard,” I muttered. He must have taken it from Kian while we were sleeping and buried it in the backyard.

“I’m sorry,” Kian repeated, tears falling down his cheeks. His heart rate spiked, the beeping on the monitor increasing with it.

I lunged forward to grab his hand, wincing with the movement. “It’s okay. You were vulnerable, and she took advantage of that. That’s not your fault.”

I wanted to grill him, to keep him talking until I figured out what those horror twins meant.

“He knows who we are.”

But now wasn’t the time.

Kian sniffled, words slurring. “Whatever happens from now on, I’m on your side. I should have never doubted you.”

“It’s all over now,” I assured him. “Rest. I just had to see you were okay with my own eyes.”

“Thank you, Ryder,” he mumbled again before succumbing to the effects of the pain medication.

Even if I could have moved on my own, I didn't want to. I sat next to his bed, simply watching the numbers on the monitors and the rise and fall of his chest. I wasn't sure how long I sat there, but sometime later I heard the door open behind me. Assuming it was James and Hannah returning, I smiled to myself and waited for my wheelchair to be moved.

“He's alive because of you, you know?”

I flinched and whipped my head to the left—too fast. “Luke?” I hissed, wincing at the bite of pain. “What are you doing here?”

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He'd darkened his hair and cut it short, and the three-piece suit was gone. It was the first time I'd seen him dressed casually, in nothing but jeans and a light knitted sweater. A coat draped over one arm, supported by his hands in his pockets. He tore his gaze away from Kian, his striking green eyes meeting mine, shining with unshed tears. It was then that I noticed the silver cross he used to wear was gone. "I couldn't stand to lose him. Thank you for pulling him out of there. It must have killed you to leave your mate behind."

I didn't respond, instead picking at my nails in my lap. For a while, the only sounds in the room were the inflations of Kian's blood pressure cuff.

"I have dyscalculia," Luke finally said.

My brows furrowed. "What?"

"It's like dyslexia but with numbers." At my confused glare, he continued. "That hunt fifteen years ago was the first time they let me lead, and I royally fucked it up. I reversed two of the numbers, and as a result, two humans were killed. It would have been three, but I tracked Kian down to a friend's house; it was his first sleepover. Right before the house was engulfed, I saw a family picture hanging on the wall." He paused, a tear escaping the corner of his eye. "That's why I adopted him. Even if I didn't disable the fire alarms or set the fire, it was my bad call that killed two innocent people—two parents. When I laid eyes on that little boy, I knew I couldn't let him go into foster care. I needed to right my wrong."

"Does he know you're here?"

“No. I’ve been careful; sneaking in and out when he and Hannah are sleeping.”

“Are you staying?”

Luke’s head slowly bobbed up and down, tears streaking his cheeks. “Even if I’m discovered.”

“You betrayed the hunters who were trying to kill James,” I told him.

“I know.”

I looked at Kian sleeping in his hospital bed, and I knew what Luke’s return would mean to him. “Let me talk to James.”

“About what? Getting rid of me for good?”

“Don’t make me regret being nice to you, Luke. James can protect you.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I do. Because I’m never letting Kian go through anything alone ever again. And if that means making sure you don’t get taken down in the process, then so be it. Besides: James loves me. He’d do anything for me.”

Luke snickered. “So you two are…”

“Deeply committed,” I answered. “I’d rather not analyze it too much. I’ve learned my lesson about running from him.”

The door swung open, interrupting our conversation. “Look who came to check on you…” James’s voice trailed off as he realized who was in the room. “Wow. I

thought it was you, but I couldn't believe it."

Hannah brushed past me to sit on the edge of Kian's bed. I couldn't quite turn far enough to look over my shoulder, but it wasn't long before a third person made themselves known: Gabriel. And he wasn't paying me any attention. Or Kian. His eyes were glued to Luke, and I'd seen that look before: it was how Raleigh looked at Angel. It was delivered with an intensity that had the poor human squirming under his gaze. Across the room, James was watching the two of them closely, and I could tell he was fighting a smile.

Did the two of them know each other? Maybe it was the pain meds, but I felt like I was missing something.

"Who's this?" Gabriel finally asked. He kept his hands in his pockets but I knew that if he took them out, I'd see the burns from the silver chains. As much as I hated to admit it, I owed him for saving James's life.

"I'm Luke. Kian's brother."

Hannah looked between the four of us. I wasn't sure how much Kian had told her about the adoption, so I kept quiet, wondering if Kian would still accept Luke as his brother. Or as family, period.

I decided, then, that I was done. I was tired, and the room was getting way too crowded for my liking. Thankfully, I didn't have to say a thing. James was suddenly next to me, wheeling me out of Kian's room and back to my own. He helped me into bed and took a seat next to it, stroking the back of my hand with his thumb and peppering kisses over my skin. "It was Kian," I whispered, just before slipping into unconsciousness. "And the hunters th-they're?"

"I know, love. I heard everything." James's lips found my forehead. "You can rest

now.”

“I love you,” I whispered again, before drifting off into a deep sleep.

Chapter 29

Hospitals were meant to be a place where people rested and recovered, right?

That was the biggest load of shit I’d ever heard.

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I tossed and turned all night. Well, as much as I could with the IV coming out of my right arm and the wires attached to my right. Not to mention the incessant beeping from the monitor and the blood pressure cuff inflating every ten seconds.

Okay, maybe it wasn't that often, but it sure felt like it. Maybe they'd installed a sensor to know when I was dozing off, because the moment my eyelids grew heavy, sure enough, the damn thing would inflate.

Having your arm strangled doesn't make for a decent night's sleep.

By the time I started to get fed up, I was convinced it had to be close to morning and I was minutes away from being discharged so I could sleep in my own bed. I didn't see why I had to stay overnight anyway—I'd sustained worse injuries after my fight with Dani a year ago.

A glance at my phone dashed my hopes: it was just after three. I dropped the offensive device with a frustrated groan, and James shuffled in his chair. I looked over in time to see him stand up.

"Why aren't you asleep, love?" he asked, approaching the uncomfortable hospital bed and brushing my hair away from my face.

His simple touch made me relax. I leaned into him and closed my eyes. "Can't get comfortable. Sheets are too scratchy, machines are too loud, and these fucking wires!" I picked my arm up to prove my point, only to wince as the IV tugged uncomfortably.

James leaned down, brushed a kiss to my forehead, and whispered, “Sit up.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

Exasperated, I sat up with his help. He raised the top of the bed, then nestled in behind me. “James, I don’t need cuddles right now. I need sleep.”

His strong arms pulled me against his chest. “I swear to all things holy,” he growled, “if you don’t shut up and let me hold you until you fall asleep, then there’ll be hell to pay when I get you home. Have I made myself clear?”

I grumbled but relaxed into his hold. My eyelids grew heavy, and I fought against closing them to prove a point. “You’re a sex-crazed vampire. That doesn’t seem very holy to me.”

“Ryder Bailey?—”

“I regret telling you my middle name.”

“You didn’t have to. It was on your paperwork when I hired you.” His hand dropped from my shoulder to slide down my stomach, our fingers twisting together. “Now sleep.”

And damn it if I didn’t drift right off.

It only felt like minutes had passed before I was jostled awake. James was no longer behind me, having returned to his chair and pretending to doze.

A nurse stood at the side of my bed. “I’m sorry to wake you,” she said in a gentle

voice, “but I have your discharge papers. I can always come back if you’d like to let your partner sleep.”

“Hell no.” I sat up, perhaps too fast, and took the papers from her hands. Once they were signed, she disconnected my IV and left to let me get dressed.

James waited for her to leave before he “woke up” and helped me into a change of clothes. I closed my eyes during the drive home, and with his hand stroking the back of my neck, I was in danger of falling asleep again. Unfortunately for me, it was a short drive.

When James opened the front door and voluntarily put himself between me and the bouncing ball of fluff rampaging through the house, I swore I fell a little more in love. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Starving,” I said, collapsing onto the couch.

James crooked a brow at me. “I guess that means I’m making breakfast then.”

I peered at James through my batting eyelashes. “You love me, right?”

The smile on his face said he read right through my shit. “I do.”

“And I’m so, so tired...”

“All right you little shit! I’ll make breakfast.” He bent down to kiss my cheek. “I’d have done it anyway; I didn’t need all the drama.”

I snorted and relaxed onto the couch. “Have you ever known me to do anything any other way?”

I didn't get an answer but truth be told, I was hoping for things to quiet down for a while. I was getting sick of all the excitement. I had James, and I had my daughter, and I wanted nothing to take my attention away from them for the foreseeable future.

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James went to the kitchen, and I watched TV through lidded eyes for a while until there was a knock at the door. I glanced at my phone—it was still ridiculously early. “Don’t move!” James called out.

“I wasn’t planning to!” I scrubbed at my eyes. “Do you know who it is?”

James crossed in front of me with a smirk on his face. “I may have gotten you a surprise.”

“Okay...” That had me sitting up straighter.

James opened the door, and I strained to see who the hushed voice on the other side belonged to. A moment later, they stepped into the house.

“Shi Baby!”

They smiled, and suddenly I felt guilty for ever thinking they had any sinister intentions. Their gaze traveled over me—no doubt cataloging my injuries. I had a nasty scar on my forehead and racoon eyes from the broken nose. “Who’d you piss off this time?”

“It wasn’t my fault!” My eyes dropped to their hand. “What’s that?”

They held up the object: a tennis ball on a thick rope. “It’s for Carlos.”

“Where’s my present?”

Shi threw their arms out to the side. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Just drop that on the floor. It’ll be a nice surprise for Carlos later.” I smirked, throwing my blankets aside to clear a spot on the couch next to me. “Come sit down.”

“You hungry, Shiloh?” James asked, returning to the kitchen.

“No, thank you though.” They sat and fixed their attention on me. “I won’t stay long. I know you’re tired, but I wanted to see how you were.” They gestured to my nose. “Broken?”

I nodded. “And I have what they called a grade-four concussion.”

I didn’t miss the waver in their gorgeous smile. “I was really freaked when you didn’t show up yesterday. When James called and said you’d been in an accident, I...”

They wound loose thread around their finger so tight, the digit turned red. I grabbed their hand, untwisted the thread, and held it in my lap. “I’ll be a little banged up for a while, but I’ll be fine, Shi.”

Shiloh’s gaze dropped to our entwined hands. For a moment, I thought they’d pull away.

They didn’t.

Instead, they took a deep breath. “Good, ’cause I actually kind of like you.”

“I knew it!”

“Don’t make me regret saying that,” they warned me—but they still didn’t pull their hand away. That is, until James came into the room with my plate in his hand. Then

they stood, and their hand slid out of my grip. James noticed, but only offered a fond smile.

“Are you sure you don’t want any?” James asked them. “There’s plenty left.”

Once again, Shi declined. “I shouldn’t. I’m sure you two are exhausted, and someone’s got to run the bar. I’ll go so you can rest.”

We said our goodbyes, and James saw Shiloh out. While I ate, he fed Carlos by dropping his bowl on the kitchen floor and calling him in from another room. Not that it did any good: Carlos was only interested in my breakfast.

Once the plate was clear, James threw the dishes in the sink and dragged me down the hall to my bedroom where the hot water was already running in the shower. I stripped and got in, not surprised when he joined me. And when he reached for the shampoo, I let him wash my hair without arguing. I was perfectly capable of doing so myself, but that wasn’t the point. Since letting myself admit I was in love with him, it was easier to let him love me in return. It only made it that much sweeter that our love for each other had nothing to do with the bond. Fate may have brought us together, but I walked right into love with him, and with the curse finally lifted, I could see that.

And I was finally starting to be okay with it.

I let him dry me off and dress me in a warm pair of pajama pants, kissing me anywhere he could reach. And when he tucked me into bed, the kisses continued over my shoulder and neck. I hummed, warm lips trailing softly over the cut on my head. “Think you can kiss it all better, vampire?”

“I can and I will.”

James's arm curled around my waist, and I twisted our fingers together over my stomach. "Why don't you just keep me company?"

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Although I had to admit, I did feel a little better—but it had nothing to do with his kisses, and everything to do with his presence. I only drifted off after he slid in and pulled me close, completely undoing me with a single soft kiss to my temple. His hand in mine, knowing he was right beside me, was all that I needed.

Chapter 30

Christmas Eve

'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring—except for the Husky who might die if he didn't get any pizza.

I'd just woken up from a mid-afternoon nap, and followed the sounds of voices and the song of Carlos's people to the kitchen where he was in an all-out fight with James over the box on the table. Hannah sat there, happily eating her slice and watching in amusement.

I winced when Carlos's pitch notched even higher. How it wasn't hurting James's sensitive ears, I had no idea. "I don't think this is a fight you'll win, babe."

James threw me a scowl, then turned to hide the grin on his face. "Cujo didn't wake you, did he?"

I shrugged and joined Hannah. "I'm awake regardless. Now give me that," I said, making grabby hands at the food. "I'm starving."

Hannah slid the box my way and I grabbed a piece from it.

“I’ll get you a plate, you heathen.”

“I don’t need a plate!” I garbled around a mouthful of cheese and pepperoni.

One was placed in front of me anyway.

It had been almost two months since our latest vampire-related adventure. My concussion faded rather quickly, save for the tiny pink scar that hid perfectly behind my hairline. My nose healed and thankfully, the snoring that came with it hadn’t stuck around. My car was totaled. Obviously the whole thing had been a trap, but for insurance purposes, the other driver ran a red light and insurance paid out for it.

Kian was in the hospital for four weeks, but was eventually released with a clean bill of health. He was still recovering, and sported a few new scars on his back and stomach. Gabriel was right not to let me remove the stake, otherwise Kian would have bled to death. He left his job at the restaurant after tensions arose when he couldn’t do much of the physical work he’d done before the... “accident,” as we were calling it. We’d told Hannah he’d gotten hurt in a second car accident that day. It sounded a lot better than “your boyfriend got involved with a clan of vampire hunters and got stabbed by a wooden stake. James made sure that Hannah forgot about the events leading up. We hated keeping the truth from her—especially with Kian knowing all the nasty parts of the supernatural—but I wanted to protect Hannah from it all as much as possible.

Luke surprised us all by stepping up to help, sitting with Kian when Hannah couldn’t and even going so far as to cover Kian’s bills while he was recovering. James, the saint that he was, agreed to protect Luke without hesitation—so long as he proved himself to both of us.

Hannah’s voice brought me back to my thoughts—and James, who was walking back into the room after answering the front door. “Hey, you,” Hannah said, accepting a

kiss from Kian who'd appeared over her shoulder. He was getting better, but I noticed his slight wince when he straightened again.

"You couldn't convince Luke to join us?" I asked, stealing a second slice of pizza. I knew he'd dropped Kian off, since Kian hadn't yet been cleared to drive.

Kian shook his head. "I tried. He said it still doesn't feel right."

James saved the situation from getting awkward. "Is Shiloh coming?"

I shook my head. "They're spending Christmas in Houston with their family."

James smiled. I was thrilled for Shiloh. Despite loving it in Salem, they missed their family. It was without a doubt the Christmas bonus James gave them that paid for their trip.

I peeked inside one of the grocery bags sitting on the table. "What kind of cookies are we bak—ow!"

"Knock it off," Hannah scolded me. "Your Christmas present is in there."

"Oh, so it's my fault you waited until the last minute to wrap it?"

"I'm sure it is somehow," James muttered.

"Hey!"

Hannah laughed, and the knowing look that James threw me across the table told me that was his intention all along. He stood, unpacking the cookie ingredients from the bag. Hannah snuck away to finish her wrapping, and Kian and I finished our dinner.

Though it was something I never knew I wanted to see, the image of James and Hannah smiling and laughing together made my heart swell. Instead of the butterflies I'd grown accustomed to, a warmth started in my chest and spread throughout my body.

Occasionally, I snuck licks from a spoon or some dough from the bowl before it went into the oven. Once the cookies were cooling on wire racks, we all convened at the table with tubes of icing and sprinkles. Hannah sat between me and Kian, while James sat across from us.

When Hannah handed over a bag of green icing, a sinister idea formed in my mind. "Hey, Han, you've got something on your face."

“What? Where?”

I intercepted before she could scrub at her cheeks, smearing a glob of green icing across her skin. “Right about there.”

“Ah,Ryder!” she squealed at an inhuman pitch, immediately retaliating.

Kian joined in, and chaos ensued. James dodged flying decorating accouterments and Carlos reaped the benefits. I just knew I’d find him chasing sprinkles across the linoleum for days. We only stopped once we were all breathless.

“Thanks for your help, loving boyfriend of mine!” I said to James, who was laughing in his seat.

“You got yourself into this mess, love. You forget that child is half you.”

I joined Hannah at the sink, and together we shook the sprinkles from our hair. She wetted a paper towel to wipe the icing from her face, but after only smearing it around, she announced she was taking a shower.

“Goodnight,” she told us both, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and giving me a squeeze.

I opened my mouth to respond but wound up with a mouthful of icing as she squeezed from the wrong end of the bag, coating my entire face.

Something told me it wasn’t an accident, and Kian’s snickering as he followed behind

her confirmed it.

I cleared the sugary paste from my eyes while James found another wet cloth. My eyes darted down to his mouth. “I know a better way for you to do that,” I whispered, not waiting for an answer before I leaned in and captured his lips—and smeared his face with icing in the process.

James nipped my lip to break the kiss. “We have guests who might not want to overhear us. Go put yourself in the shower, sticky.” At my salacious look, he added, “Alone. I’ll start cleaning this up.”

I relented, but not without a pout and an extra sway to my hips.

James groaned, and I smirked knowing that while he would stick to his guns, his pants would be a little more uncomfortable while he did it.

After my shower, James was nowhere to be found, but Hannah was finishing up in the kitchen.

“Better get to bed or Santa won’t come,” I teased.

She continued rinsing the dishes and stacking them in the drainer. “I’m a little old for that, don’t you think?”

“I’ve got eighteen Christmases to make up for.”

She crooked a brow over her shoulder. “Are you going to put on a red suit and hand out presents tomorrow?”

“Hell yeah, just you wait.”

The conversation lulled briefly, and I was the one to break it. “You doing okay, Hannah? For real. You can tell me.”

She’d hardly stopped to breathe since everything happened. Between finishing her first semester, working weekends at the pet store, and taking care of Kian, I couldn’t imagine where she’d have time.

She sighed, drying her hands and turning to rest against the counter. “It was hard to get that phone call.”

At the sound of her voice breaking, I pulled her into a hug. “I know it was scary,” I whispered into her hair. “But he’s okay.”

“I know,” she sniffled. “He’s better than ever and I’m being ridiculous.”

“You’re not ridiculous. Believe me, I know what it’s like to see the person you love get hurt.” I held her until she stopped crying, and waited for her to be the one to pull away. Carlos announced James’s arrival, and that was when Hannah picked her head up. “You should get to sleep,” I told her.

“If you want us to disappear so you two can?—”

“Hannah Kinsley, don’t you dare finish that sentence. Now brush your teeth and get to bed.”

“Damn,” she said, wiping her eyes. “You got the ‘dad’ voice down.”

“Goodnight, Hannah,” I said sternly, committing to the bit. Though deep down, I was proud of myself. That was the second time she’d ever referred to me as “Dad” in any sense.

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Before I could dwell on it further, James appeared and offered me a hand. “She’s right, you know.” He followed me down the hall to the bedroom and waited until I slipped under the covers. “That was impressive.”

He slid in behind me. Like a magnet, I curled into his touch, relaxing as I felt his arm close over me. “You think I could really do this?”

“Do what?”

“This whole... domestic thing. Settling down?”

With his lips against my ear, James chuckled. “I hate to break it to you, love, but you’ve been doing that for over a year now.”

Had I? I supposed I hadn’t let my brain slow down enough to think about it—which was shocking considering how much of an overthinker I’d been lately. Panic threatened to rise in my chest, but I leaned back into James and let him chase it away with the whisper of his lips over my skin and the brush of his fingers through my hair.

And with that, I closed my eyes. Because I finally realized that maybe settling down wasn’t so bad after all.

It no longer surprised me to wake up in an empty bed. It was Christmas morning, damn it. So I flipped onto my stomach, starfishing across the bed and closing my eyes again. Noises from the rest of the house reached me: the sounds of Hannah’s shower, Carlos’s nails clicking on the hardwood floor as he did whatever it was that he did in the mornings before I got up to feed him. I listened for the telltale rustling that meant

James was in the kitchen.

I rolled out of bed and padded down the hallway, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. Carlos was sitting calmly behind the baby gate for a change, trying like hell to peer around the corner to see into the living room where Kian—still in his pajamas—nestled into the corner of the couch. Carlos had developed a soft spot for the boy over the last couple months and tended to settle whenever he entered a room.

I tried not to take it personally.

Food was the last thing on Carlos's mind with his friends in the room, so I freed him to join Kian while I helped James in the kitchen with breakfast.

James gave me the hard job—scrambling the eggs. That's apparently the only thing I was trusted enough to do.

I admit, I was starting to get used to having a full house. I thought back to my studio apartment in Vegas and found myself wondering why the hell I ever lived alone. Well, I had Raleigh, who sometimes treated my apartment as his personal man cave, but even he had someone to go home to at night.

I could no longer imagine a world where I wanted those things for myself: work, an apartment that was more shelter than home, and meaningless hookups in between. I was much happier with where my life was at now.

Someone called my name from the other room, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Hannah, who was glued to Kian's side, held a small white box in her hand. It was covered in silver snowflakes and secured with a red ribbon. "I want to give you your present."

“I’m not going to get slapped in the face with frosting again, am I?” I took the box and sat next to the two of them.

“You started that! Open it, already! That thing took me days to get right.”

I tugged on the bow, and the velvet ribbon fell away with barely any effort. James stepped up behind me as I lifted the lid and pulled the tissue aside, removing a palm-sized disc from the box. It was one of those plaster ornaments you crafted in school with a mold of your handprint and the year printed or stamped into it. This one was bigger—much bigger—than the one I created when I was six.

Hannah was scrawled across the bottom. “It’s got last year on it,” I noted, twisting the green and red tartan ribbon between my fingers.

Hannah leaned farther into Kian’s grip, eyes shimmering. “That’s the year you became a dad.”

I gasped, like actually gasped. The box fell to the floor, but I kept a tight grip on the ornament, holding it close to my chest. I wasn’t letting it go for the world. My throat was tight and my eyes burned. I blinked, pressing my fingers into my eyes.

James’s hand rubbed my back. “Are you okay, love?”

“Give her our gift,” I said, closer to tears than I liked to admit.

While James retrieved the gift, I collected myself and carefully placed the ornament back in its box, tucking it in tight with the sparkly tissue paper. I stood and set it on a high shelf where Carlos couldn’t knock it over and break it.

“I love it,” I whispered, giving her a kiss on the forehead. “Thank you.”

“Aw!” she chuckled. “I made the big, bad Ryder Clark cry!”

“Watch it, kid. You’re next.”

James returned, handing Hannah the...horriblywrapped gift. I cringed. “Why’d you let me butcher the wrap job like that?”

It was my turn for a kiss. “So I could say it was from both of us,” he whispered low enough that Hannah wouldn’t hear. “She’s only going to rip the paper anyway. It doesn’t matter.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:07 am

Just as he predicted, Hannah tore the paper off without even commenting on the wrapping. When she realized what was beneath the paper, she sat up, cradling the book in her hands as if it would fall apart—and it likely would if handled carelessly. But James and I knew she would treasure it like it deserved.

I'd known about the book for months. James asked me if he could give it to her as a gift when he learned she was studying classic literature. Even I couldn't believe my eyes, so we knew Hannah would throw a complete fit over it.

As she took in the words on the cover, James reached over the back of the couch. His hand absently rubbed the back of my neck, but his eyes were glued to Hannah.

"Poems; Emily Dickinson," Hannah read aloud, looking up in disbelief. Emily Dickinson was her favorite poet, and a large reason why she decided to major in literature.

"Open it," I told her, my heart beginning to race.

"Boston, Roberts Brothers... 1890. This is an original?"

"It is," James confirmed. "Damn near impossible to get your hands on. Some day I'll tell you how I did it."

I already knew the full story. James had found it while he was rearranging his shelf one day. Turned out that he knew Emily's cousin and he'd won the book in a bet.

According to him, Emily's sister had been pissed when she found out.

Hannah carefully handed the book to Kian and extracted herself from his arms, scrambling over to us. She grabbed James by the collar of his sweater and jerked him over the back of the couch into a crushing hug—even by supernatural standards. And with that, my heart... well, frankly I don't know what the thing was doing, but it wasn't functioning as it should, stammering and stuttering in my chest like it was about to short circuit.

The final piece of the puzzle clicked into place.

The credits rolled.

A new chapter began.

However you wanted to say it, this was where I belonged. James was right: I left my bachelor life behind when I moved to Salem, even though it took me over a year to realize it.

Kian handed the book over to James, and he and Hannah flipped through it, picking out poems and discussing their favorites.

I stood and rounded the couch, standing next to my vampire. My hand came out of its own volition and rubbed across his back, and the grin he flashed over his shoulder made my heart soar. With the image in front of me, I paused and waited for that annoying little voice to pop up. I waited for the doubt to creep in again. When it didn't, I let out a sigh of relief. The curse was well and truly behind us—as was my own self-doubt.

My gaze slid to the Christmas Tree, where a small box waited with James's name on it. Considering that he sacrificed his home to keep my family safe, a key to my place was the least I could do. It was the spare since I hadn't had time to get a copy made, but it was more symbolic than anything else; James already came and went as he pleased. But suddenly, it didn't seem like enough. A house wasn't good enough. He

deserved the world.

The room started to spin, and I didn't realize I'd stumbled in place until James's arm caught me.

"Ryder, are you okay?" Kian asked. His voice was warped, like my head was underwater.

But his question was enough to get Hannah's attention, and I was vaguely aware of Carlos nudging my leg with his nose. I shook my head to clear it, and everything came back into focus. Especially James, who was looking at me in concern.

"Huh?" I said.

James frowned, pulling me close. "He asked if you were okay, and I'm wondering the same. You look like you're about to pass out. What's going on?"

I opened my mouth, floundering for words. I intended to say, "I love you." Or maybe something about what he meant to me, or what that gift meant to Hannah. I should have grabbed the box under the tree for him, or maybe I should have told him how much it meant to me that he loved my daughter as much as he loved me.

My arm was wrapped around his waist, hand on the small of his back while my thumb brushed the skin through his sweater. I counted each stroke, one, two, three...hoping the bubble in my throat would go away. No, not a bubble. Words. I'd swallowed them down before, but this time, I let them spill.

Those two words hung in the living room. Hannah dropped her book into her lap, her hands covering her mouth. Every sound in the room seemed magnified. Hannah's gasp. My heartbeat in my ears. My stomach churned. I couldn't breathe.

James looked at me, eyes swirling that gorgeous red—a shade inked into my memory

forever. They searched mine for any indication that I wanted to take my words back. Instead, I tightened my hold on him. It was the only thing keeping me upright in that moment.

“What did you say?” he finally gasped. When I didn’t speak, James cupped my cheeks in his hands, forcing me to meet his eyes. “Ryder, I need to hear you say it again. Please.”

I didn’t think I had it in me. Once seemed like enough, but everyone in the room was staring at me. So I took a deep breath and tried like hell to steel myself.

Nope, there was no steel to be found. My legs had turned to goo. But I did it.

“Marry me.”