



Blood Descendants

(Vengeance and Venom #1)

Author: *Keary Taylor*

Category: Fantasy

Description: There are vampires in New York City. Turns out, they're everywhere.

I went in to find my best friend. Ophelia disappeared without a trace after going to one of those elusive Red parties. Turns out Red parties are where vampires feed on willing humans, and where some people vanish, never to be seen again.

I went to that party for answers. What I found was a dangerously gorgeous vampire with tattoos, piercings, and a legacy as dark as the shadows he moves in—Ares Hunt. He insists I'm in way over my head. Maybe I am. But when I refuse to give up without a fight, Ares makes a proposal: he'll help me find Ophelia, but in return, I have to pretend to be his fiancée so he can infiltrate his father's inner circle. His father, a powerful vampire, is at the heart of these Red parties, and Ares is desperate to bring him down.

Suddenly, I'm living in a world I barely understand—wearing a massive engagement ring, sharing a penthouse with Ares, and mingling with the vampire elite. Pretending to be Ares' fiancée turns my entire world upside down. With every passing day, our business arrangement begins to blur. Ares is intoxicating. He's a man born of darkness, filled with venom that equals my need for vengeance, but I see the protective man hidden beneath the rough exterior. He helps me face my demons. He makes me feel like I belong. And when he kisses me for the first time?

I realize Ares was right – I am in way over my head.

Total Pages (Source): 19

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:26 am

It's been a week since I learned that vampires exist.

As I walk through the party, I see more evidence here. They're not being obvious. There isn't blood cascading down any throats. I don't see fangs flashing in the neon lights. But if you pay attention, the tells are there.

That man's lips are locked on that woman's throat. They look like they're in the throes of a passionate prelude to a wild romp in the bedroom. But she's sitting stark still. Her eyes aren't closed; they stare at the wall vacantly.

There is a woman who has a man pushed up against the wall. She's flirting with him, but her eyes are fixed on his neck, watching his pulse. The man looks nervous. But even though he's pushing against her, trying to make his way out of there, she doesn't falter even one step back. Because she's stronger than him, even though he has at least four inches of height on her and likely forty pounds.

But the biggest giveaway is when I watch as a man guides a woman by the wrist to the far back corner. She giggles as he pulls her in close. And one tiny yelp of surprise escapes her throat when his eyes flash brilliant, blood red. I barely catch it as his canines elongate, and he goes in for her neck.

Her body tenses for a moment. But just two seconds later, she relaxes. And she stands there, still, docile.

I've lived in New York City my entire life, all twenty-four years. And until last week, I would have told you that the city was inhabited only by people, pigeons, and rats.

But that's not true anymore.

What else exists out there? Are all the fairytales and nightmares true? I'm not sure I want to know.

Unease seeps into my skin as I walk into the crowd, scanning faces. At first glance, I'm not sure how you tell a regular person from someone who sucks blood. They all look the same to me. Until they're ready to feed. I'm in danger. Every nerve in my body is screaming it. They're stronger than me. And every inch of them, once they're zeroed in on a target, screams predator.

I don't know how it works. Once you're bitten by a vampire, are you dead? I don't think so. Because that woman looks woozy, and not in a drunk way. Will she also turn into a vampire soon? Will she be under the vampire's thrall?

I don't know how the hell this all works. I just need to keep any fangs away from my neck tonight.

My eyes scan the crowd, searching for auburn hair, pale skin, and fiery green eyes.

"This your first Red party?"

My eyes slide over to a man sitting at the bar. He's dressed in a dark red suit. His shirt is night black, and the top four buttons are undone. He scans me with intense blue eyes. Golden hair flops onto his forehead.

"No," I answer.

"I rarely miss them," he says. He stands, and I realize how tall he is. He takes a step forward, and he towers over me. The predatory hunter's look in his eyes tells me exactly what he is. "And I don't recognize you."

“I didn’t think regulars were common at these things,” I say. I’m making the bullshit up as I go, but I know I’m in dangerous territory. Yet I need information.

The man shrugs, cocking a smile. “There’s always the groupies chasing the nothing bliss.”

I barely suppress a shiver. People go looking for this on purpose? Being totally zoned out while a vampire feeds on them?

“Need a fix tonight?” he asks, his tone expectant. His eyes drop down the length of me, over my exposed shoulders, over the tight fit of violet fabric over my chest, over the drape of the dress on my hips. He leaves little wonder what’s going through his head.

“Not yet,” I defer, faking every confident tone in my voice. “The night is young.”

“I’ll make it worth your time,” he purrs. “You won’t find a gentler offer in here, sweetheart.”

“Who ever said anything about gentle?” The reckless words leave my lips before I can think how dangerous they are. I walk off into the crowd before he takes them as an invitation.

I’ve been to far larger parties before. This is a private venue, though being on the second floor, it’s not hard to find. A bouncer was situated outside the door, but as I watched for a solid ten minutes, he never turned anyone away, and he wasn’t checking names to a list. So, anyone dumb enough to wander in is allowed. But there’s probably only eighty or so people in here. It only doesn’t feel like a small crowd because the space isn’t very large.

A man tugs a woman down onto his lap as he falls back into a couch. She gives an

excited squeal. He traces the back of his knuckles along her jaw, his eyes fixed on her throat. She lifts her face to the ceiling, her eyes sliding closed, reveling in his touch.

He splays his hand on the side of her neck, brushing his thumb over her pulse point.

He pulls her in close, and she seems all too eager to be in his embrace.

But I catch sight of it as his eyes flash red, and sharp fangs are exposed for just a fraction of a second before his lips lock into her flesh.

Just like all the others, the woman tenses for just a moment, and then relaxes into a frozen state.

When I'd witnessed this very nearly same event happen two weeks ago, I'd been so horrified I'd immediately left. My hands had shaken the entire walk home. I didn't get a moment of sleep that night.

Then, for an entire week, I was in hard denial about what I'd seen. I reasoned that something had been slipped into my drink, even though I hadn't had one. I had definitely hallucinated. But I knew the truth in my gut.

Fangs plus blood plus victims being immobilized equals vampire.

I still can hardly believe what I'm seeing.

It took me another week to track down the location of another one of these parties. I only found out about it three hours ago.

And now here I am .

I scan the crowd again. I don't know if I really expected her to be here. If she were

okay, I would have heard from her. She's not the type to simply disappear on me. So, I shouldn't be surprised when I don't find her face in the crowd.

The last thing I want is to draw attention to myself, but I'm desperate.

I pull my phone out and open it to a picture of Ophelia.

"Excuse me?" I say to the woman closest to me. "Have you seen this woman recently?"

"I don't think so, but this is my first time coming to one of these parties," she answers.

"Thanks," I mutter as I move on. I ask the next man I come across. He says no. I ask two more women, and neither of them recognizes Ophelia.

I turn, scanning the crowd. If I can figure out who is working this party, they might be my best bet.

There, at the very back of the room, I see a man in a black suit open a door. He leads that first woman I spoke to through it and closes it behind them.

I take a step forward, something in my gut pulling me in that direction.

"Trust me, you don't want to find out what's going on behind that door."

The deep voice behind me immediately stops me in my tracks.

Alarm bells go off in my brain. Something tingles along my skin. But a shiver runs down my spine at the timbre of the voice.

I turn, and the man is a perfect match to the voice.

He wears black from head to toe. Black motorcycle boots. Black jeans. Black tee shirt. Black leather jacket .

A wash of tattoos spreads from the neckline of his shirt, climbing up his throat, wrapping around his neck. There's a thick, heavy silver chain around his neck. He has a wicked jawline and a clean-shaven face. Both ears are pierced with silver studs, and a matching silver hoop is through his left nostril.

Strong and vicious. That's how I'd describe all of his facial features. Lips of an incubus. A nose every sculptor envies. Dark eyes and thick brows. And the most perfect dark wavy locks I've ever seen in my life.

He's inarguably the most tempting man I've ever laid eyes on. But every inch of him radiates the same feeling: dangerous.

"You work here?" I manage to ask, even though my mouth is suddenly inexplicably dry.

"No," he answers simply. He does a quick scan of me, but it's entirely different from the way the man in the red suit looked at me. I feel as if this man is... evaluating me. Sizing me up.

I recognize that look. It's the same one I use when I evaluate my clients at work. It's the one I use to decide if they can handle themselves on the mat.

"Then how do you know what's in that room?" I ask. I stand a little straighter. Even at my full height and wearing three-inch heels, he still towers above me. "How do you know I don't want to find out?"

“Instinct,” he says simply.

I take half a step closer to him, never breaking eye contact. “The only instincts I trust are my own.”

I step around him, away from that door. I aim for the bar, the opposite end from the man in the red suit.

“You ever seen this woman around?” I ask as I show Ophelia’s picture to a woman sitting there .

When she looks over at me, she seems slightly dizzy. I scan her neck for bite marks but find none. She blinks hard, as if trying to clear her vision. But she takes my phone, taking a closer look. “Maybe,” she says. “She looks kind of familiar.”

“These parties are a semi-regular thing,” I say as hope flashes through me. “Did you go to one three weeks ago?”

The woman starts tipping sideways, and I lunge forward to steady her. She giggles stupidly and pushes her hair out of her face. “I really should stop coming to these things. But forgetting? Nothing else makes the voices stop like the bite.”

Shit. She’s not even trying to hide anything. Have vampires always been this obvious, and I’ve just somehow been oblivious?

“Did you go to one of these parties three weeks ago?” I ask again, removing my hands from her when I’m sure she won’t fall over again.

“I did,” she says as she leans against the bar, her elbow to the wooden surface, her chin resting in her hand. “I think. I don’t know. These things all kind of blur together. You should ask Felix. He’s always at these things.”

“Who is Felix?” I ask as adrenaline starts burning in my blood. Finally. We might be getting somewhere.

“The one who looks like Apollo and Hades had a love child,” she says, waving in the direction of the man in the red suit.

Great.

“Thank you,” I say. “And you should probably head home, don’t you think? Do you want me to get you a cab?”

She offers a smile, one that’s kind of sad and hopeless. She shrugs one shoulder. “There’s no one waiting for me there. At least here, I’m not alone. ”

My heart breaks for her a little. And I understand what she’s saying just a little too well.

There isn’t much more I can do for her, though. So, I turn and, with a determined, deep breath, head down the bar toward Felix.

The adrenaline in me spikes harder when Felix catches my gaze, and he has a cocky smile that curls his lips. He’s shameless as his eyes drop down the length of me again, and he stands.

I don’t know exactly how much stronger a vampire is than a human. I can defend myself better than just about any woman in this city. It’s the only reason why I have the guts to walk into a party where I’m sure my friend went missing. But a vampire? I’m not so sure I can take him down if he decides not to take no for an answer.

When I’m just four steps away, a massive body steps between Felix and me. Mr. tall, dark, and tatted glares at me with dark eyes.

“Unless you’ve got a death wish, it’s time to call it a night,” he growls. And then his hand clamps around my upper arm, and he steers me toward the front door.

“Get your damn hands off of me,” I seethe. I try yanking out of his grip, but it’s like steel.

“You don’t know what the hell you’re getting yourself into here,” he says, low and cold. “Trust me, if you knew the truth, you’d be thanking me.”

He shoves the door open and hauls me out onto the sidewalk.

“What truth, that this is a party full of vampires looking to feed off of idiots with some seriously twisted kinks?” I bark as he lets me pull out of his grasp.

His expression goes tight and cold .

He didn’t expect me to know the truth.

“Or that you’re one of them?” I ask with ice in my voice. I walk up to him, determined he’s not going to push me around, even if he is a dangerous supernatural being that shouldn’t exist. “So why pretend you’re any different from them? You think you’re some savior? That you’re saving a sweet, innocent girl from being bitten unknowingly?” I shake my head as he stares down at me darkly. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“Who is she?” he asks. And his tone is more even than I’d expect, but there’s a surprising amount of regret and maybe anger in his tone.

I hesitate for a moment. I don’t know this man. I don’t know what he’s capable of. Everything in me tells me he’s dangerous, that he’s no knight in shining armor. But he did think he was protecting me by making me leave the party. Do I dare tell him

the truth?

“Ophelia Bennett,” I answer. “She’s my best friend. And I’m pretty positive she went to one of these parties three weeks ago. She’s been missing ever since then.”

“You know what kind of party this is, and you still walked in there after her?” he asks. He’s impressed. Shocked. Maybe a little horrified. He doesn’t hide any of the emotions from his tone.

“Of course,” I say, my brows furrowing. “We’re all each other has. So, if you’ll excuse me, I need to keep looking for her.”

I turn to walk back inside, but he catches me by the arm, stopping me in my tracks.

“Your heartrate says you’re scared,” he states .

“But that’s not going to stop me,” I say, determination steeling my blood.

He studies me for a long moment, and I can see the wheels turning in his head. “I can help you find her,” he finally says. “But I need your help in return.”

Wary nerves coil in the pit of my stomach, prepared to strike if need be. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Come on,” he says, taking a step forward. He doesn’t let me go, but his grip loosens just slightly, feeling less threatening. “You and I need to talk.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:26 am

“I need to know where we’re going to talk,” I say firmly.

“This isn’t exactly the kind of conversation you want to have in public,” he states, his eyes sliding over to meet mine. “You live close by?”

“Not a chance in hell I’m showing you where I live,” I say with a shake of my head and a raised eyebrow.

“Good, that tells me you’re not a complete lunatic with a death wish.” And I’m surprised at the slight smile that pulls on those obnoxiously perfect lips. “Look, I’m going to get a hotel room. And just so you know, I mean it when I say I’m not going to try anything, take this.”

The man pulls a gun that was tucked into the back of his pants and slides it into my bag.

A curse slips from my lips, and I check the crowds around us to be sure no one saw. “Would a gun even stop you? I might know what you are, but I haven’t quite figured all the rules out yet.”

“Aim true enough, and you’ll take me out,” he says. There’s a dark confidence in him that’s... unnerving yet alluring at the same time.

“And if I don’t?” I press.

“You might slow me down for a second, maybe long enough to get a second shot off.”

His expression is cold and even as I look over at him in horrified annoyance.

I don't get the chance to say anything else because he pulls a door open and steers me inside, enveloping us in warmer air.

My mouth drops open for a moment as I take it in. There are towering ceilings that immediately tell me this place has money to spare. The entire place is opulent in the most modern and simplistic way possible. There's a wall of mirrors, and crazy chandeliers. Everything is decorated in natural wood and stone.

This is the kind of hotel you only ever see in the feeds of billionaires online.

I look over at the man next to me as he walks to the attendant and starts reserving a room. He looks like the type who runs in motorcycle gangs and hangs out in tattoo parlors. Not the type who can walk into any posh hotel at the last moment and just casually ask for a room.

But I see it when he hands over a black credit card.

It's all done and taken care of in less than two minutes.

"Come on," he says with the nod of his head.

I don't say a word as we cross to the elevators and step inside. And it all really hits me when the doors slide closed, trapping me with this man in a very, very small space.

A week ago, I found out vampires exist. I've seen fangs and inhuman strength and how they can incapacitate you with a bite .

And not only have I talked to one for the first time tonight, I allowed one to drag me

out of where I meant to be and let him take me somewhere private.

My hand slides to my bag, closer to that gun he gave me.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he says again without looking at me. His eyes stay fixed on the elevator doors.

“But every inch of you is broadcasting danger, and it’s not just the fact that you’re a vampire,” I say. Every muscle in my body is tensed. My brain is going through every maneuver I might have to take him out, or at least keep his fangs off of me if he turns out to be a liar.

“I am dangerous,” he says darkly. “But not to you. Not right now.”

The doors slide open, and he steps out. When I hesitate inside the elevator for a moment, he turns. “You’re never going to find your friend without my help. And I’m never going to be able to get to her without you.”

My heart is racing. But as I once again imagine all the horrible things that could have happened to Ophelia, I step out of the elevator.

Only then do I realize that it’s opened up to a penthouse suite.

Everything matches the lobby. All the décor is natural tones, dark wood, gray stones. I couldn’t afford even the knickknacks that sit on the side tables. Everything about this place screams wealth. And it’s massive.

The space opens up into a huge living area with couches that look like I’d get the best sleep of my life on them. There’s a gigantic dining table in the area off to the side, and beyond that is one of the most beautiful kitchens I’ve ever seen. Toward the back, I see a set of double doors that open to a massive bed with fluffy white blankets

and pillows.

And there are massive floor-to-ceiling windows everywhere, granting us glittering views of the city and a little peekaboo view of Central Park.

“Are you in the mafia?” I didn’t mean for the words to slip out past my lips, but they’re there before I can stop them.

The man hesitates two seconds too long. “Not exactly. My family has a certain... influence in the city, though.”

Shit. I really am the world’s biggest idiot. Not only is this guy a vampire, he’s from a powerful, dangerous family, too.

“You said your friend has been missing for three weeks,” the man says. He walks into the living room and sinks down into a tufted, black leather chair. Even the way he sits screams dangerous and powerful. I have to look away for a moment when I find my eyes studying the tattoos rising up his neck. “You weren’t with her when she went missing?”

I shake my head. Cautiously, I walk into the living room. Still holding onto my bag for dear life, I sink into the couch across from him. “She mentioned something about a Red party. She wanted to go real bad, and she begged me to go with her, but I had a class to teach.”

“You’re a teacher?” he asks, cocking an eyebrow in surprise.

“Mixed martial arts,” I quip, enjoying when his expression changes from doubtful to impressed. “I teach women’s self-defense classes.”

“No wonder you’re crazy enough to walk into a party like that by yourself,” he

responds, and the way he's looking at me changes. There's a little more respect in his eyes. A little more curiosity. He's looking at me less like I'm something fragile and stupid .

"She decided to go to the party by herself," I move on. "I thought she'd call me after and tell me how it was. But she didn't. I didn't think too much of it. She could have just been tired after. But she didn't call me the next day either. She didn't answer my texts. Her phone rang once when I called her, and then went to voicemail."

I pull my phone out and open my texts to her. They still only read as delivered, not read. "I started getting worried. So, I went by her apartment. It was locked, which I think is a good thing. She didn't answer. But her neighbor said she hadn't seen Ophelia come in or out in two days."

I look back up at the man. "It took me a while. Whoever is throwing these parties doesn't make it easy to find any information on them. But I finally found the date and time for the one tonight. As you saw, my search wasn't proving too fruitful."

"I believe it's my father's company that's throwing the parties," the man says. He crosses one ankle over the opposite knee. "I parted ways with him three years ago. But I was looking into the company a few weeks ago, and there are charges that don't line up. My father is a real estate mogul. I wanted to find out why the hell he was renting spaces. Why he was hiring caterers. Bouncers. Bar tenders. He's throwing parties, but not attending them, and not hosting them in his own spaces. It doesn't add up. Your friend going missing at one of his parties..."

He shakes his head, his eyes losing focus as he trails off.

"You think they're connected?" I ask. I can't connect the dots yet, but something like nervous fear drips into my stomach.

“She have any connection to vampires that you know of?” he asks as his eyes meet mine once more .

“Hell no,” I answer, confident.

“Feels like a lure then, maybe.”

His words make me sick. “You think he’s luring unsuspecting people in? To be snacks?”

The man shakes his head. “I don’t know. I was watching everyone at that party for an hour when you came in. It’s obvious a lot of the humans there are regulars. They knew what was going on. But others definitely didn’t.”

“Ophelia didn’t know,” I say, shaking my head confidently. Then my eyes narrow at him. “If you’re a vampire, why would you need my help getting to her?”

He lets out a hard breath, and his eyes slide away from mine to look out the window at the night that is never fully dark in this city. “I get the feeling you don’t know much about my world yet. You’re not going to like what I’m about to explain.”

“Trust me, I haven’t liked a single bit of this night yet,” I counter. “Why slow down now?”

He looks back at me. There’s a darkness in his eyes that tells me I’m out of my depth. I have my own bitterness and venom. But this man... he overshadows me a hundred-fold. “You have to be born to a vampire father and a human mother to one day be a vampire, at least the kind I am—a Born. I learned my father was a vampire when I was sixteen. And he told me what I would be someday. I just had to die first.”

I would have expected to feel overwhelmed at the information. This is huge, a

massive wave, and I'm just a little, tiny creature on the shore.

But I just find myself feeling relieved. I've lived in terrified cluelessness for the last week. I've had nightmares. I've speculated. My imagination has tortured me with the unknowns for what feels like years.

Finally. Here it is. The truth. Straight from the mouth of the horse.

When the man doesn't see me having a meltdown over his truth, he presses on. "I died when I was twenty-six. Four days later, I Resurrected to what I am now. I've been twenty-six for six years now."

"You're immortal." Not a question.

He studies me closely, evaluating every inch of my reaction. He nods. "But, like I said, vampires can be killed?—"

"How exactly?" I cut him off. My eyes scan him, looking for weak points. I don't find any.

He hesitates one second. It gives me immense satisfaction that he's looking at me like I could be a threat to him. Like I might try to kill him the moment he tells me how. "Beheading," he says, holding my gaze, the coldness returning to his eyes. "Stabbing through the heart. We heal quickly, and we're pretty damn tough. So, if you're going to go after a vampire, you'd better have perfect aim and plenty of strength."

"Noted," I state. There's a decorative metal cane on the side table next to me. It's pretty pointy on the end. I don't know exactly how fast this bastard is, but I might have a shot of getting to it quick enough and plunging it through his chest.

"Not a fucking chance," he says evenly. "You'd make it maybe two feet before I

could rip you apart.”

My eyes flick back to meet his. Ice rockets through my veins.

“And no, I can’t read your mind, you’re just being way too damn obvious,” he adds. “But we’ve established some level of trust here, don’t you think? I tell you exactly how to kill me. You know what I am, you could tell any authority. We’re in this shit together now, right,…” and then he trails off, his eyes narrowing.

You’re stupid, you’re stupid, you’re stupid , my brain is screaming at me. How the hell did you get yourself in this situation? But my name leaves my lips anyway. “Lana.”

He mulls that over for several moments longer than seems necessary. He notes I didn’t offer my last name, I’m confident in that.

“Ares Hunt,” he says finally.

A shiver works its way down my spine just before goosebumps flash over my entire body.

Ares Hunt.

How fitting.

“As in the god of war?” I question, even though every syllable of it makes perfect sense.

“My father picked it. Fitting for what he wanted me to be.” He interlaces his fingers, looking at me over the top of his knuckles. “My father is in real estate. He owns a huge portion of Manhattan. And he’ll keep buying up every bit of it he can. He’s

building an empire. I am his heir, but not the only one.”

I look out the window. I can barely afford one room in a shitty apartment shared with two other women. Ares is heir to an empire in the most expensive city in the country.

“My father is building not just an empire of skyscrapers. He’s determined to make a presence here in the city. To have an influence. An immortal one.”

An empire of vampires.

“Just how many siblings do you have?” I ask, and I know it; this is the part he warned me I wouldn’t like.

“Eight, so far,” he says. The tenseness in his jaw is telling of how he feels about this. “I’m the oldest. The only one who has Resurrected so far. The next oldest is only sixteen. The youngest is a year old. And I don’t think he has any plans to stop anytime soon.”

“That’s disgusting,” I say, not even bothering to hide the sneer building on my face.

“Agreed,” he says, his tone cold as ice. “It’s the reason I left three years ago. My father told me it was my turn to help build the empire. Started pressuring me within months of my Resurrection. I told him I had no intention of ever being a breeding stud.”

My stomach turns.

“Augustus Lonan doesn’t take the answer of no very well,” Ares grits out. “Things got... ugly. Complicated. Violent. I’d worked for my father for years. Went to school, got the degree he demanded. Helped him grow richer than the king of many countries. But my refusing to make more heirs? He took it as a rejection. A betrayal.

When I couldn't change his mind, I left. Disappeared for a year so he would stop looking for me. When I came back, I moved in with my sister. Same mom, different fathers. She's the only person I've ever actually loved, besides our mother."

Ares looks away, and I get the sense this isn't something he shares lightly. This is something vulnerable. To someone more dangerous, more vicious, confessing who the only person you love is would put them in danger.

Once more, Ares is trusting me with something important.

"Augustus knows I'm back in the city," he continues. "He's keeping tabs. He's waiting for me to come to my senses. To come back into the fold. And that's how we're going to find your friend."

My heart jumps in my chest. "What do you mean?"

Ares' expression darkens. "I'm going to finally come to my senses. I'm going to return to the fold. But on my own terms, where he can't shove it down my throat."

My head is spinning just a little. This is already getting so damn complicated. I'm not sure I'm following his line of thought.

"I need you to pretend to be my fiancée, Lana."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:26 am

“Y ou’re insane.”

Ares lowers his laced fingers, his hands resting on the arms of the expensive chair. He leans farther back into his seat, and his eyes slide down me. But it doesn’t make my skin crawl, not in the same way Felix’s gaze did back at the party. He’s still evaluating me. Sizing me up. Determining my ability to do what it’s going to take.

“Do you want to get your friend back or not?” he asks. His tone isn’t critical. It isn’t spoken with a sneer. It’s simply logical.

“I’ll do whatever it takes,” I hiss out, my frustration rising.

“Then this is what it takes, Vengeance,” he says coolly. Goosebumps flash over my skin at the nickname. He doesn’t say it snidely. It almost comes out sounding like a compliment. “Augustus is tied to this. I wish it had nothing to do with him, but my gut instinct says it does. It’s all being paid for by his company. And they’re trying to hide it. You will not get anywhere near his company on your own. You’re a hell of a lot more competent than I could ever hope for, but even if you’re the world champion MMA fighter, you still couldn’t go up against Augustus’ lackeys. So, I know this is sudden. I know it sounds insane. But if you want to save your friend, you need me. And I need you.”

“This isn’t just about Ophelia,” I declare. “You were looking into your father before I walked into that party. What do you actually need me for?”

Ares studies me, hesitation in his eyes. Again, here comes another part I know I’m not going to like. “A little distance and time have given me some perspective on my

father. I always knew he did things his own way. But lately, I've had a suspicion it's a lot darker than I realized. So, I started digging," he says, his dark eyes fixed on me. "Like I said, to get back into my father's good graces, to be invited back into his inner circle, I need to kiss his ass. I need you to go along with it that we're engaged, and we're already trying for a baby."

Those last six words make my stomach lurch. A disgusted breath escapes my lungs. I shake my head and look out the window.

"I promise, there will be absolutely no sex involved," Ares says, spiking anxiety in my system.

"I should fucking hope not!" I bark, looking back at him with a sneer. "But anything else..."

Ares sighs and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I need you to play a part, Lana, and we are both going to have to play it convincingly. So, yes, we're going to have to act like we actually like each other when we're in public."

"Holding hands? Cuddling? Whispering soft nothings in each other's ears? Kissing?" I clarify with disdainful sarcasm in my tone .

"Yes," he says, his jaw tightening. "And maybe a little more."

"What more could there be?" I bark in shock.

The look he's giving me says he's reevaluating his decision to propose to me. And it makes me bristle even more. I need to get my cool back.

I bring Ophelia to the forefront of my brain. I think of her smile. Her laugh. I think of late nights on her couch and dozens of nights out in the city.

I have no one left but her.

“Augustus is keeping tabs on me,” Ares pushes forward. His tone is softer now, more controlled. “He’s going to doubt the speed of this since you and I have never been seen together. If I just tell him we’re engaged, he’ll never believe it. To sell it, you and I are going to have to move in together.”

I simply stare into those hazel eyes of his for a dozen heartbeats.

What do I have to lose?

My life.

Maybe my sanity.

My grip on reality.

But it’s not like I have anyone else in this world. Ophelia is my best friend.

I live in a shit apartment. It’s truly nothing to give up.

“What about my job?” I think out loud. But it’s certainly relevant. “I work full time. I can’t afford to just quit and walk away.”

Ares stares at me for a long moment, his knee bouncing up and down just slightly. “We will have to make this look real. As my fiancée, you won’t have to work.”

I look at him wordlessly for a minute as that processes. I remember where we are. In an extremely expensive hotel, in the penthouse suite. Ares handed over that black card like it meant nothing.

I realize then that Ares is not financially dependent on his father. Not if they've been estranged for three years.

Ares is taking me on as his kept fiancée.

"I have an... emotional connection to my work," I admit. "I don't really just want to walk away. But my boss, he's a massive asshole, and he's not going to like me taking an unknown amount of time off."

The smallest of smiles cocks in one corner of his mouth. And it just about makes my heart stop. Something grows... hot in my lower belly. "I'll pay him a visit. I can be... persuasive."

I don't doubt it. It's hard to imagine telling a man like Ares no.

I lean back in my seat, my death grip on my bag loosening. My eyes wander the penthouse, not actually seeing anything. I feel overwhelmed. Exhausted. But after three weeks of feeling terrified and desperate, I have my answer. I have a possibility. I have hope that I might find Ophelia.

Fuck it.

"Alright," I say in a breath. "I'm in."

Ares' brows rise slightly higher, telling me he didn't actually expect me to agree to this. "Okay," he says, sounding a little relieved. "Go home. Pack. I will pick you up just after sunset."

I raise an eyebrow at that. "So, the daylight part is true?"

Ares stands. "Not like you think," he says. He watches me with expectation, a clear

indication it's time to leave. He probably paid thousands of dollars for this room, and we've only occupied it for an hour. "But I'll explain everything later."

We head to the elevator and then step inside .

"I need your number," Ares says as the doors slide closed. He hands me his phone with a new contact card open. I hesitate for just a moment. Once I give it to him, I can't just disappear and pretend this night never happened.

But until Ophelia is safe and sound, I can't do that anyway.

I take his phone and type my first and last name – Lana Kincade, and my number. Just two seconds after I hand it back, my own phone vibrates.

"You've got my number. Text me your address," he says, very business and matter of fact. He once again stares straight forward. "I'll be there with a truck this evening."

"Okay," I say, my throat feeling thick. The doors slide open, and we cross the lobby. I step outside, and it's clear Ares isn't leaving just yet. I reach into my bag, my fingers wrapping around the cold metal.

"Keep it," Ares says, raising his hand slightly. "You're unlucky enough to be my fiancée now. You need protection at all times."

Why the hell am I blushing? Why does him actually calling me his fiancée make my stomach do an immature little flip?

"See you tonight, Ares," I say, his name crossing my lips for the first time. I like the way it tastes.

"See you soon, Vengeance."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:26 am

“Y ou’re really not even going to attempt to find a replacement for you?”

I don’t bother looking up at Dannika as I continue stuffing my clothes into garbage bags. “Maybe if you and Kylie pick, you’ll actually like whoever ends up in room three.”

I hear it as she snaps her mouth closed. Dannika never was very direct. Never would she expect me to call her out on her obvious dislike for me. I’ve lived here for two years now, and she’s never breathed a friendly word in my direction.

I don’t know what the hell I did to get on her bad side, but now it doesn’t matter.

“I didn’t even know you had a boyfriend,” she says as she crosses her arms over her chest, raising her chin.

“Fiancé,” I correct her, finally looking up at her from beneath my lashes. I turn and begin stuffing my shoes into a box. There’s not much of anything left in the room now.

“I don’t know that I believe you,” she says, though her tone doesn’t sell her words. “You haven’t dated anyone since that sleazeball who cheated on you with the girl across the hall. And now you have a fiancé?”

“You think I tell you anything?” I ask as I scoop the last of my things into the last empty box. “You’re the most judgmental and critical person I’ve ever met, Dannika. This day couldn’t come soon enough.”

“You’re so full of bullshit,” she says in a defensive huff.

And it’s so incredibly satisfying when there’s a solid knock on the door just then. Dannika’s eyebrows raise slightly, her head whipping toward the door.

I don’t fight the satisfied smirk that takes over my face as I step around her and pull the door open.

My heart skips two beats when I open it to reveal Ares standing there, as promised. Out of fear? Probably. Out of shameless appreciation? I’ll never admit it.

“Sorry I’m early, Vengeance,” he says in a low, cool tone. I see him note Dannika behind me for the briefest moment. “I couldn’t wait any longer.”

My heart then decides to relocate into my throat when he takes a step forward, and his hand wraps around my waist, low, intimate. He pulls me toward him, and he presses the hottest, sweetest kiss to my forehead.

My entire body lights on fire at every tiny point of contact, and within half a second, every bit of me feels consumed.

I look up at him to see his gaze fixed on Dannika. “You’re right, this place is a shithole.”

He has no idea how perfect his words are. Dannika picked this place, and it was she who decorated it and picked all the furniture .

A single, annoyed sound escapes her. I turn to see her simply shake her head.

“Ares,” he says as he steps forward, extending a hand to her. “Lana’s fiancé.”

“I don’t see a ring,” Dannika says as she just looks at Ares’ tattooed, extended hand.

Something cold and predatorial shifts in his eyes. Doubt and fear prickle along the back of my neck. I slide my hand into his extended one, wrapping it around my waist.

I just might die of a heart attack tonight.

I might hate Dannika, but I don’t know that I want to see Ares rip her to shreds. I get the impression that’s possible.

“Everyone knows the best diamonds come out of Russia. The best in the business also happens to be a former KGB smuggler. You know how to motivate a man like that to work faster, I’m all ears.”

Every bit of color drains from Dannika’s face. She swallows once. She looks Ares over, taking in the layers of black, the tattoos peeking out from all the edges of his clothing, the metal in his ears and nose.

I wouldn’t dare talk back at him, either.

“I’m keeping your deposit,” she says, her words tight, the pitch slightly too high. She turns and walks into her bedroom and shuts the door.

“She’s a real treat,” Ares says, glaring death at her door.

“You have no idea,” I say just a little too softly.

He looks down at me, and I’m surprised to find intensity and real annoyance there. His left hand curls into a fist.

“Come on in,” he says instead of walking into Dannika’s room and doing something

violent and supernatural .

I was so caught up in Ares I didn't even notice the team of three beefy guys standing out in the hall behind him.

“What's yours?” Ares asks as they file inside.

All I have to do is point and direct. The three guys grab box after box, hauling them to the elevator and down to the truck parked below. And Ares doesn't just stand there. He loads up the heaviest of the boxes, hauling them out.

It's all done in less than half an hour. Two years of my life here, packed up and removed in less time than it takes me to run one load of laundry.

“Any last burning goodbyes you're wanting to offer?” Ares asks as the movers head out with the last of the bags.

“Nope,” I answer honestly. Dannika can go rot in her room forever. Kylie hasn't been home all day, but there's no love lost between her and me either. “Let's get out of here.”

I don't know who the show is for when Ares takes my hand in his and leads me out of the apartment. He doesn't bother to shut the door behind him as he exits.

I may be going into shock. I don't know what to say as he takes us to the elevator. He doesn't say a word as we ride the elevator to the ground floor. But he doesn't let my hand go even when we're alone. He only tightens his hold when the doors open, and we walk out the front doors.

His grip is firm. Yet, somehow, it doesn't feel threatening.

It feels... Fuck. What is that? Protective?

But my line of thought is immediately disrupted when he crosses the sidewalk and goes straight to a matte black motorcycle parked at the curb. He grabs a helmet and extends it toward me. "Let's go home, Vengeance."

"That's yours?" I ask, my voice shaking just slightly .

"The third greatest love of my life," he says as a rouge smile crooks the corner of his mouth.

I take a deep breath and accept the helmet. I pull it down over my head. He steps forward, taking care as he latches the buckle and adjusts it for me.

He offers this wry, coy smile that makes all of my insides liquify.

"Hold on," he says as he turns and straddles the bike. He sifts in the seat, clearly making room for me.

The organ in my chest is trying to find a quick exit. But I clench and unclench my fists just once before I climb onto the back of the bike.

Hesitantly, I put my hands on Ares' hips. He's not a man you just touch casually. The man is named after the freaking god of war, and he looks it.

But as he fires up the bike, the engine snarling to life, he hits the gas just slightly. My arms wrap around him in a death grip, my face buried into his back.

I swear his chest rumbles just slightly with a chuckle. But he throttles the gas, and we take off down the street.

There's insane traffic, but you wouldn't know it existed as Ares weaves his way through the lanes. I finally dare open my eyes, watching as thousands of people fall behind us, as familiar landmarks come and go.

And I realize I'm going from the worst apartment in Sutton Place to the Upper West Side.

And not just the Upper West Side.

Ares slows, and I find a moving truck parked in front of one of the oldest and most historic buildings in New York City. Without hesitating, he guides the bike down into the underground parking at the back of the building .

"So, you obviously didn't go destitute when you cut ties with your father," I say after I've climbed off the bike and pulled the helmet off. I hand it back to Ares, who secures it on the bike.

I realize then that he never wore his own helmet. But maybe vampires are wreck-proof.

"Not exactly," he says vaguely. But he doesn't elaborate as he heads straight for a door. I follow after him, memorizing my surroundings as I go.

We walk into a long hallway. The floors are covered with elaborate tile. The walls are crisp, fresh white. There are a few doors that branch off here and there, utility closets and maintenance access.

But finally, we break into a gorgeous lobby.

A chandelier hangs overhead, and instead of crystals, it looks as if it's crusted with diamonds. The ceiling is a beautiful dome with elaborate detail carved into the

moldings. Two large, arched windows give us a view of Central Park. A set of gleaming elevator doors sits positioned across from the desk where an older man stands and crosses to us.

“You the ones moving into 8A?” he asks as he slides his hands into his pockets. He has to be well over sixty years old. His fully gray hair matches his fully gray mustache. But there’s a confidence in his step that makes me think in his younger years, he was more than capable of handling himself.

“Yes, sir,” Ares answers. And something in my view of him shifts just a bit when I note the respect he gives the doorman. “I’m Ares Hunt. This is my fiancée, Lana.”

“Pleasure,” he says. He’s eying Ares, and I can’t exactly blame him. My new fake fiancé looks like he should be making shady deals in Harlem, not moving into multi-million dollar apartments like it’s no big deal. “Name’s Lazlo, but most just call me Laz. You need anything, just let me know.”

“Thank you, Laz,” Ares says. He offers Lazlo a small, polite smile and slips his hand into mine.

There’s that hurricane again.

“Nice to meet you,” I offer, remembering my manners as Ares turns us to the elevator. It dings before Ares even presses the button, and the three movers step out, giving Ares a nod before they head back out to the truck.

This building is old. Older than most that surround us. But as we take the elevator up eight floors to the top level, it doesn’t shake, doesn’t creak or squeal. It’s as smooth as any brand-new skyscraper. It opens to reveal a hallway with brilliant white walls and glossy white floors.

I follow as Ares pulls a set of keys from his pocket. He stops at a door marked 8A and slips one of the keys off the ring. “Welcome home, Vengeance,” he says as he extends it to me.

That fucking name. It sends a wave of goosebumps washing down my entire body. I’m embarrassed to take the key in case he notices them. I don’t want him seeing the effect he has on me just by calling me a nickname.

My fingers close around the key, and I’m careful to avoid skin contact. If he notices me acting weird, he doesn’t make it obvious. He simply pushes open the door, already unlocked for the movers.

I step inside, and utterly freeze.

There’s no way this is the right place.

I try to hiss Ares’ name to call him back, to tell him he’s accidentally unlocked the wrong apartment. But the words are trapped in my lungs.

And Ares strides in without hesitating .

It’s the most beautiful apartment I could ever imagine.

The floors are a perfect walnut color, and even though I can tell they’re old, they’re gorgeous. White walls climb above me before they meet a ceiling crisscrossed with beautiful beams the same color as the floor. White pillars hold up an arch that separates this space as the entryway. Beyond that, there is a massive living room. Huge windows look out over Central Park.

“Lana?” Ares calls as he looks over his shoulder back at me, his brows furrowing just slightly.

I just blink, taking it all in, my mouth slightly agape.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, taking a step back toward me.

I take a breath, but still, words don’t come for a moment. I take it all in. The immaculate and obviously brand-new furniture. The paintings hanging on the wall. I’m floored by the beauty of it all, and I can barely see any of the space.

“You bought this place?” I ask, my words not wanting to work. “This... this is ours to live in?”

I feel him studying me, but I can’t look away from the most beautiful space I’ve ever seen. “Welcome home,” he simply says again.

Finally, my feet find life again. I take a step inside and then another, followed by another.

“This is...” I say breathlessly as the room opens up. It’s lovely, simply put. Cozy couches and plush armchairs in the most modernly cozy way possible. Heavy drapes frame the truly massive windows, displaying the nearly dark night. And outside, there’s so much green.

Green comes at such a high price in this city. And we have endless amounts before us.

“A housekeeper will be coming in twice a week,” Ares says as he walks down the hall. He opens a door, looking inside. And I get the feeling that he hasn’t really looked around yet. “A cook will come in twice a week as well. You have any kind of food allergies?”

“No,” I reply automatically before what he actually said sinks in. “Wait. What? A

cook?”

Ares nods and wanders farther down the hall. He opens another door. “You like to cook?”

“I don’t even really know how,” I confess without thinking. “But you’re just going to have someone come in here and cook for us? Do you even eat food?”

Ares turns back toward me slightly, an eyebrow raising. “Yes, I eat food, Lana.”

Huh. It never would have crossed my mind that a vampire would still eat normal food. Guess I should have expected that. How would one ever sustain a body like Ares’ on blood alone? That kind of physique takes a serious protein intake.

I follow after Ares, taking in the apartment as I go. Off the living room, there is a huge dining room with a modern table and ten chairs. Attached is a kitchen that nearly makes me want to learn how to cook. The hallway stretches beyond that, and next, I find a library with high-end leather furniture occupying the space. Beyond that, there are two large bedrooms and a bathroom with some serious amenities in between them. Next, we find a home gym that makes my mouth water. And finally, a ridiculously long walk later, at the end of the hall, is the last bedroom.

It's beautiful. Beams crisscross the ceiling. A sparkling chandelier hangs from the ceiling. Those heavy drapes frame the stunning arched windows. The bedroom is placed in the corner of the building, offering stunning views of the park and the impressive buildings down the side road. A king-sized bed dominates the center of the room, an ungodly amount of pillows piled atop the fluffy comforter.

Off the bedroom, Ares wanders into a ridiculously large bathroom, and I follow.

“A tub?” I gape. There it is, a massive and immaculate clawfoot thing in the center of

the room, right in front of the window. I've lived in five different apartments in New York throughout my life, and I've never seen a bathtub in one.

"Not bad," Ares notes, though he doesn't have nearly as much wonder in his tone as I do.

There's also a huge two-person shower, double vanities, and a separate toilet room. And branching off of the bathroom is a walk-in closet that's the size of a small boutique shop.

It's also stocked with a decent-sized collection of men's clothes. All of them are black, with the exception of a few white t-shirts.

"Okay, I know I might be kind of stupid, because you laid it out fairly clearly," I admit as I look at all of Ares' clothes hanging in the closet. They're accompanied by several of my bags sitting on the floor, waiting to be unpacked. "But it didn't really cross my mind that we'd be sharing a bedroom."

I feel too embarrassed to look at the man who could probably walk into any club and get any woman he wanted to go home with him. Ares might be terrifying looking in some ways, but he's also quite possibly the most beautiful man I've ever laid eyes on.

And I'm maybe just a little scandalized at the thought of sharing a bed with him.

"I don't sleep much," he says instead of making it more awkward. "So, it won't be a problem. The bed is yours. When I do have to sleep, I'll do it somewhere else. The bed in the next room over looked halfway decent."

"It looked like the most comfortable bed I've ever seen in my life," I point out, finally able to look over at him with his reassurance. I give him a look. One that says I'm beginning to realize he's a rich man who has never slept on anything less than resort-

quality bamboo sheets.

He simply shrugs with a faint smile.

“You don’t do anything halfway, do you?” I ask as we wander back out toward the hall. The movers walk through the door again. I realize then that they’ve already put some of my things in the primary bedroom. It’s so big and so stunning I didn’t even notice the stash of my things.

“It’s all part of the show,” Ares says as we walk back down the hall. He crosses the kitchen and opens the fridge. But, of course, it’s empty.

“Well, why the hell does it have to be so big?” I say softly as I look around again.

“Cause we’re planning to fill it up with kids, remember?”

My eyes snap back to him. He looks at me with those dark eyes of his. “That’s going to take some getting used to. And maybe test my acting skills. I’ve never really been sure if I wanted kids, to be honest.”

“At least we have that in common,” he says. He turns to a cupboard, and I’m surprised it’s fully stocked when he opens it. He grabs a glass and fills it with water. He sets it on the counter in front of me and nods to the barstool. I pull up a seat, and he leans forward, his elbows resting on the gorgeous marble. “We need to make a plan. We have to do this smart, or Augustus is going to know something is wrong. I’m not looking to put you in any more danger than necessary. ”

“You always this gallant?” I ask as I grab the glass and lift it to my lips.

“Trust me,” he says as he crooks that signature, small smile of his, “thinking of me as gallant would be a mistake.”

“I don’t know,” I reply as I set the glass back down. “You look like a hardass, and you can talk the talk sometimes, but so far, you’re not nearly as terrifying as I thought you’d be.”

A true smile curls on Ares’ lips and embers spark in his eyes just for a moment before they flare brilliant, blood red.

A curse escapes my mouth as I shove my way back from the counter, knocking the barstool right over.

“Don’t ever forget what I really am, Lana,” he says. There’s still a smile on his lips, but there’s a real warning in his tone. “Just because I have good control now doesn’t mean you aren’t the best smelling dessert I’ve ever come across in my life.”

My face feels hot. I know I must be blushing, probably brilliant red. How the hell am I supposed to interpret that?

“Okay, fine, you’re a terrifying vampire,” I say as I pull the chair upright again and slide back up to the counter. “I won’t forget that. Now, what’s the plan, Venom?”

He arches an eyebrow at me, and the smile pulling at his lips tells me he likes the nickname I’ve just bestowed upon him that’s complimentary to my own.

“I think it’s a fairly across the board thing that family is going to have a million questions when you get engaged,” Ares moves on. “Considering we’ve known each other for,” he checks the incredibly expensive looking watch on his wrist, “twenty-two hours, I think we need to take a few days and get our story straight. I need to know your story, you’re going to need to know mine. ”

The idea of having to tell Ares my story makes my skin go cold.

But he's right.

If we're going to sell it that we're in love, that we're engaged, we need to know each other.

I can do this. To get Ophelia back.

"Okay," I finally say. "We'll play twenty questions over the next few days."

"More like a thousand questions," he says, arching an eyebrow at me. "But yes. We need to go talk to your boss, get you some time off. And tomorrow, we need to go pick a ring."

I can't help but smile and shake my head as I look away. "This is just so damn weird. And it's all just moving along at lightning speed."

"For what it's worth, you're handling all this about a million times better than I think anyone else ever would."

My eyes slide back to meet his. "You think so?"

He nods his head. "For starters, you learned vampires exist, and you haven't tried to stake me or run away. You haven't called the cops. And a vampire just begged you to pretend to be his fiancée and move in with him. And you're here. If I didn't know any better, I would almost say you were meant to be a part of this world, Vengeance."

He holds my gaze for a long moment, neither of us saying a word. And I realize that there are two parts to Ares Hunt: the hard, dangerous, terrifying, near-mafia heir to the city and the man who is protective of a woman he doesn't even know yet and says all the right words at just the right time.

“Maybe you could explain it to me now?” I break the silence. “Your world. I saw fangs and people all zoned out and put two and two together. But any of the details, I have no idea yet.”

“Okay, I’ll explain it to you, but then that’s it for tonight. It’s been a fucking day. You need to get some sleep.”

Two sides. Venom and valiant.

I don’t know if I’m tired. I’ve been running on adrenaline, disbelief, and pure stubbornness today. He’s not wrong, though, a breaking point is probably not far off.

“That’s the last of it, Mr. Hunt.” I nearly jump out of my skin when his voice comes from behind, back toward the bedroom. The movers all walk out into the kitchen, barely looking like they’ve broken a sweat after all their trips back and forth with my things.

“Thank you for your help on the short notice,” Ares says as he walks over to the man. He pulls out his wallet and extracts some cash. I don’t catch how many of them there are, but I see they’re all hundreds. He hands the money off to the man, who gives Ares an appreciative tip of his head before all three of them disappear out the door.

I follow Ares back to the living room. He settles into one of those expensive looking chairs, and I lay down on the couch after I kick my shoes off.

“I don’t know how vampires came into existence,” Ares admits. He sits there, both feet on the floor, both hands resting on the arm rests. He looks powerful sitting there. Dangerous. “Some kind of evolution. A curse. A science experiment. I don’t know. But I do know we’ve been around a long time. Some of us are old.”

“How old?” I pry. My curiosity is running wild now, despite the terrible, impossible

subject of my curiosity.

“Hundreds of years,” Ares says .

I blink hard and wonder if I need to clean my ears. There’s no way I heard that right.

“The oldest Born I’ve ever met was over four hundred years old,” Ares elaborates.

“Augustus himself is over eighty years old but doesn’t look a day over forty.”

“So, you stop aging at whatever age you die and— what did you call it? Resurrect?” I ask.

He nods. “Like I said, I was twenty-six when I died. I’ve been twenty-six for six years.”

“So, you’re really thirty-two?”

“I guess,” he says. “As I told you, you create more Born with a vampire father and a human mother. Once a woman Resurrects, she can’t have any children.”

“Of course,” I say, annoyance dripping from my tone. The gender unfairness of the world doesn’t stop at being human or vampire.

“We’re getting off track here,” Ares replies with a hint of annoyance. “Some of the rumors about vampires are true. We do have to have blood to survive. We do crave it. We’re faster than humans, immeasurably stronger. We’re predators.”

“And humans are your only prey?”

“I don’t crave blood from anything but,” Ares acknowledges. “We’re immortal, but as I told you, we can be killed.”

“You said the sunlight thing wasn’t what I thought,” I encourage.

He nods. “Once a vampire, your eyes stay dilated, always. It’s what allows us to see in the dark. My vision is about ten times better than it was when I was still human, and I had twenty-twenty vision. But because of the dilation, we’re nearly blind when the sun is out. It’s damn painful. ”

“What about sunglasses?” I ask. And almost as soon as I voice the thought, I feel stupid for asking.

“They help,” I’m surprised when Ares gives me the answer, and it’s simple. “I have custom ones I’ve had made. But trust me, it’s still uncomfortable. We still far prefer the night.”

“Those curtains aren’t going to be open much during the day, are they?” I ask as my eyes go to them.

“Sorry, kitten,” he says, his voice a purr. “You won’t be getting a whole lot of sunlight in this place.”

“How many vampires are there in the world?” I ask. My brain is tumbling through a million questions. I don’t have time to dwell on such a mundane issue as sunlight in my new home.

Ares shakes his head, a hint of a smile pulling on his mouth again. “No clue. Not that I travel that much, but I’ve met a few other Born here and there throughout the world. Here in New York City, though? I’d guess there’s a hundred or so of us.”

That’s actually shockingly few, considering there are nearly eight and a half million people in this city.

“You said the Born are one kind of vampire,” I shift my thoughts. “What other kind is there?”

“The Bitten,” he says, and I detect a bit of a sigh in his voice. “If a vampire drinks from a human and takes too much blood, but not quite enough to kill them, the vampire venom takes over when they’re in that weakened state. They’ll change. They aren’t as strong or fast as a Born, and they’re not immortal. They still age as usual. But their existence is problematic.”

“Why?” I question.

“They don’t tend to have very good control, at least not in the beginning,” Ares continues. He crosses one ankle over the opposite knee. “As I’m sure you’ve already put together, the numbers aren’t in favor for vampires. Exposure is a real danger. The Bitten can’t control their urges very well, so they put all of us under threat. But then there’s also the Debt.”

I don’t even know what that means, and I already don’t like the sound of it.

“The Bitten have a debt to whoever sires them,” Ares explains. “If I created a Bitten, they couldn’t help but obey every little command I gave them. They’re unfailingly loyal. They’ll do anything for their sire. They don’t have any control.”

“They’re basically slaves,” I say. Pity fills me, but also anger. The power balance is so damn extreme.

“Yes,” Ares admits. “The Debt eventually wears off. It might only last months, but more often, it lasts years. So, because of all these issues, the creation of a Bitten is extremely frowned upon.”

You hear stories. Fairy tales, horrors. Not that I ever thought vampires were real, but

I always thought vampires could just make more vampires by biting them.

Turns out they can make more. But they're astronomically less superior.

"What else?" I ask, even as it finally hits me. I feel all the adrenaline burn out of my system. The curiosity has mostly been sated. Now, I'm just exhausted from being awake through the entirety of last night, and now it's getting late again.

"I'm sure there's more," Ares says. "But that's all the basics for now."

"Okay," I say, groaning a little as I sit up. I'm exhausted. And I plan to make good use of that gym in the morning. "I think you called it. That's enough for today."

He fixes those dark eyes on me for a long moment, studying me as if I'm something interesting and complicated. "You're still not freaking out. You're okay with all of this?"

"Okay with it, no," I state as I stand and turn toward the bedroom. "But I always knew the world was bigger than me. The proof I've seen tells me it's pointless to fight against the facts. Adapt or die, right?"

"Right," he says softly.

"Goodnight, Venom," I say as I continue down the hallway.

"Goodnight, Vengeance," I hear him call after me.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:26 am

I 'm extremely confused when I wake in the morning.

This incredible bed isn't mine. That ceiling is completely unfamiliar. The smell of this place isn't old and slightly sour like it should be. And it's too cool for what me and my roommates can afford to spend on air conditioning in the summer.

But as I sit up and look around the beautiful bedroom, it all comes flooding back.

Right. I gave up my apartment to move in with a vampire I don't even know.

You're insane, Lana, I think to myself.

But I roll out of bed and scrounge through the bags of my clothes. I pull on some workout clothes and head straight into the home gym.

Never, ever would I associate such a luxury to myself. Growing up, we always struggled. There was never enough money. I was the kid who got every bit of clothing from a secondhand store. I never owned anything new in my life .

And now, I'm living in one of the most expensive buildings in New York City, walking into my own personal gym.

Maybe I hit my head on my way to that party, and now I'm actually lying in a coma in some hospital, dreaming up this insane life. The vampire part, though? Definitely more creative than I actually am.

I jump onto the treadmill and run till I can hardly breathe. The entire time, I'm

listening for the sounds of life in the apartment, but I hear none. It's still silent when I get off the treadmill and go for the weights. I throw some music on to stifle the silence and get a full workout in. An hour after I woke up, I wrap it up and wander out into the hallway.

"Ares?" I call out. I don't find him in that next bedroom over, and the bed doesn't look slept in. I find my way to the kitchen, and to my surprise, there is a spread of pastries waiting there, as well as a cup of coffee.

Valiant.

It isn't my typical breakfast by any means, but it was thoughtful. So, I down a bear claw. I next find the fridge fully stocked. I opt for a glass of orange juice to wash everything down.

There's still no sign of my fake fiancé when I head back down the hall. I fish out my shower supplies and jump in. An array of body jets and elaborate shower heads greets me. I take it in with a disbelieving smile.

Twenty-five minutes later, I'm showered, hair done, makeup in place, and dressed in black jeans, a black tank top, and black combat boots. If I'm going to play the part of a vampire's fiancée, I might as well dress for it.

And just as I step out of the bedroom, Ares stops in place, obviously on his way to the room. I don't miss it when his eyes drop down the length of me, taking in every black-clad inch of me. The little smile that curls in the corner of his mouth is enough to make my heart trip.

"You ready to put everything in motion?" he asks.

"Yep," I answer, slipping my phone into my back pocket. "Where were you this

morning?”

We head out the door, and Ares locks it behind us. “Keeping an eye on my father’s place, watching his comings and goings.”

“Does he live in Manhattan?” I question as we step into the elevator.

Ares nods. “He’s in Greenwich,” he says as we descend. “For now, at least. He’s always buying new properties, and when he gets his hands on one he particularly likes, he’ll take up residence. Last year, he was in SoHo, the year before that, he was in Hudson Yards.”

Of course. These are all some of the most expensive places to live in the city.

“You said Augustus is keeping tabs on you,” I say. “You aren’t worried he’s going to know you’re spying on him?”

“It wouldn’t be anything new,” Ares confesses. The elevator doors slide open, and we walk out. Immediately, Ares slides on some sunglasses. They’re fashionable looking, but I note how they fully encase his eyes in a subtle way, effectively blocking out all the brilliant sunlight pouring through the windows into the lobby. Ares gives Lazlo a tip of his head as we walk by, who returns the gesture. “I’ve been back in Manhattan for two years. I haven’t stopped keeping an eye on that man the whole time. Augustus won’t think anything of it.”

We aim back down that hall and let out into the parking garage. “Where were you for the year you left? ”

Ares offers me a pleased look as he takes the helmet and extends it to me again. “You’re asking all the right questions, Vengeance. We might just pull this off.”

I take the helmet and yank it down on my head, praying I don't end up with helmet hair all day. Once more, Ares helps me strap it on, adjusting it to fit just right.

"I went to Portland for about eight months, made some friends there. Spent two months in Costa Rica rethinking my life. And then I bought this bike in Texas and took another two months slowly making my way back to New York."

I want to ask him more questions, but we're ready to go. So, when Ares straddles the bike, I climb on behind him, making sure my feet properly find the pegs. Knowing what's going to happen if I don't, I wrap my arms around his waist, feeling secure enough not to fall off.

The engine roars to life, and Ares carefully backs us out of the parking space. Expertly, he maneuvers the bike until we pull back out onto the road. Just before he rolls out, he asks over his shoulder for my work address. I rattle it off, and off he takes. We weave through traffic, traveling down the length of Central Park before plunging down into the depths of Hell's Kitchen.

I'm trying to rehearse what to say as we head toward the gym. But I'm not entirely sure how I make this convincing. I've worked at Valor Combat Sports since I graduated high school. Tate Kelso has been my boss for two years now. I might despise the man, but he's not completely oblivious to my life, not like my roommates. There's a sinking feeling in my stomach that tells me this isn't going to go particularly well.

Anxiety pitches higher in my blood when the building comes into view. Ares slows and then comes to a stop at the curb. My limbs feel stiff, my movements jerky as I climb off from the back of the bike.

"Your boss going to be a problem?" Ares asks as he dismounts and takes the helmet as I remove it. "Your heartrate is going crazy."

I flush at that. Damn vampire. “Most likely,” I say as I nervously run my hands through my hair.

Ares simply makes a noise I can’t quite interpret as he secures the helmet. And then he slips his hand into mine, sending my heart straight against my ribcage. He pulls me after him through the doors.

The scent is the most familiar in my life as we step inside. It’s at once home and the source of an exceptional amount of pain, all at the same time. It’s the same place I came to after the worst day of my life. It’s where I learned how to fight. Where I had my first kiss. It’s where I thought I’d find my own path in life. And it’s where I lost it all, where he walked all over me.

There are two rings when you first walk in. To the left, there are heavy bags and speed bags, all the stuff you need to train as a boxer. To the right is our MMA cage. Straight ahead, there is a hall with five doors branching off of it; one leads to my classroom, one is the weight room, two open to the locker and shower rooms, and the last leads to Tate’s office.

There are a dozen people here, even though it’s late morning now. I recognize every one of them, all the amateurs, all the trainers.

“Garrett, you seen Tate this morning?” I call out to the trainer I’ve known since I was thirteen.

“Back in his office,” Garrett calls out. “What you doing in here this early? ”

“Got some shit to take care of,” I answer, as at home here as anywhere in my life.

“So, just another Monday, eh?” he calls with a chuckle as he holds up the punch mitts. He glances away just once, though, his eyes going straight to my fingers

interlaced with Ares’.

I don’t answer him as I steer both of us toward the office.

“You’ve spent more than just work time here,” Ares notes aloud.

But I don’t get a chance to confirm, because I knock on the office door before pushing it open.

“You’re not on until tonight,” Tate says, barely glancing up at me from his paperwork.

“I know,” I acknowledge. “But something’s come up. I’m going to have to take some time off work.”

That grabs his attention. He finally looks up, but it isn’t me he looks at. His gaze immediately locks on Ares. He looks him up and down, taking in the tattoos, the piercings, the dangerous set of his jaw, and the fact that he hasn’t removed his sunglasses despite being inside.

“Ares Hunt,” he says coolly as he steps forward, his inked hand outstretched. “Lana’s fiancé.”

Tate’s eyes narrow, and he shakes Ares’ hand automatically. “Fiancé,” the word comes out like it doesn’t have any meaning. And his eyes slide over to meet mine without moving his head. “What the fuck is this con talking about?”

Wow. Judge much?

“Let’s not pretend we’re friends, Tate,” I say, all of my insides bristling. “Just cause you aren’t part of it doesn’t mean I don’t have a life outside this building. And don’t

you dare call him that again. ”

Ares squeezes my hand, and I’m not exactly sure what it’s meaning is. Appreciation? Support? Trying to calm me down?

“Some like keeping private things private,” Ares says. “Don’t assume you know anything about anyone, and your life will be much simpler.”

Tate is sizing Ares up. Which, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say they’d be on par with one another. Tate is six-two, the same height I’d guess Ares is. He’s well-built, muscled, and solid. Tate spent five days out of seven here before his hostile takeover. He can take on pretty much anyone who walks through the front doors.

But Ares is more than meets the eye.

“Why do you need the time?” Tate finally asks as he looks back over at me.

“I’ve got some in-laws to meet,” I say, going for as close to the truth as I can manage. “And wedding plans to make. Life is going to be a little... complicated for a few weeks.”

“And you think I should just let you out of work because you come in here with someone you say you’re engaged to? Come on, Lana. You’re not a very good liar.” I hate the look on his face, the one that says he thinks I’m stupid. I hate that he’s seeing through this so damn easy.

“Lana’s lips always taste like strawberries and kiwi.” My heart jumps up my throat as Ares steps forward. He rests his hands on the surface of Tate’s desk, but every inch of him looks poised to rip the man’s throat out. He leans in close, his tone calm and deadly sounding. “She has two little freckles on her left ass cheek. She prefers dark chocolate to milk. She hates Monday mornings more than just about anything. And

she makes the most incredible noises when she comes. When you know any of those details, then you can call her bluff. ”

Shit. I feel like my entire body has gone red. I press my thighs tighter together, and something in my lower belly tightens.

Ares words reach a very deep, very primal part of me that’s been dormant for a long time.

Tate’s eyebrows rise, and he sits back in his chair, putting some distance between the two of them. And finally, something that looks a bit like fear alights in his eyes. His survival instincts were never honed. He might not have sensed the danger Ares is when we first walked in. But he certainly senses it now.

“What about your classes?” Tate asks, trying to fight the intimidation he feels.

“I will message everyone and tell them I have some personal stuff to take care of,” I offer. “It won’t be the end of the world if class is cancelled for two weeks.”

“Except the money I’ll lose,” Tate says with angry annoyance.

Ares reaches into his back pocket and takes out his wallet. I can’t even imagine the cash this man must carry around all the time. But he extracts another stack of hundreds and drops them down on the desk. “That ought to cover it. So, do the human thing, give Lana the time off. And leave her the hell alone when she comes back.”

Without waiting for an answer, Ares turns. He takes my hand again and walks us out the door.

I spare one glance back, catching Tate’s eyes. There’s a whole storm there. Anger.

Annoyance. He's definitely debating firing me. But he's also stark still, his entire body tight, coiling as far away from Ares as possible .

I note that, technically, Tate never said I could have the time off.

But he also didn't argue with Ares.

I don't think many would have the balls.

I feel like I should offer a goodbye to all the other trainers. I've known most of them for years. They've been the closest thing I've had to family for a while. But I don't want to acknowledge this feeling like I'll never come here again.

So, I don't do anything but wave to Garrett as Ares and I head out the door.

"We might need to take a week," Ares says as he takes the helmet from the bike. I feel his gaze fix on me behind his shades as I take it from him. "A few days might not be enough to get our shit straight to sell this."

I nod in agreement. "And it's not an easy sell when no one has seen us together. We're going to have to work this into our back story."

Ares nods. I pull the helmet on and climb onto the back of the bike after him.

He points us toward midtown, and just a few minutes later, he pulls into a parking garage. I climb off, and again, he takes my hand as we head back out onto the street level.

I probably shouldn't like the feel of his hand in mine. But I do. I like its warmth. I like its size. I like the confidence in it. I even like that with the tattoos that cover not just his hand, but every surface of him that I can see, most people are giving us a

wide berth.

I'm not sure what that says about me.

"So, do you want to tell me about the connection you have to that place?" Ares asks. I'm not even paying attention to where we're going. He walks swiftly, confidently, and I just follow.

I swallow once. I know Ares needs to know details. But not every detail of my past is a place I want to go. There are things there I have no desire to relive. "My dad used to own it," I begin, sifting through what I'm willing to share. "He inherited it from his father once he passed. I was about five when that happened. So, the gym has always, always been a part of my life."

"I get the feeling your dad was hands on with that operation," Ares says. He looks over at me, and I feel his intense gaze studying my face. But I can't look at him right now. Not when I'm falling back through the past.

I nod. "My father was a trainer. A boxer. He was really good, too. Made some money when he was young, before he took over. He loved working with younger boxers. Honestly, he didn't like running the gym that much. He wasn't much of a businessman. He was all about teaching. About connecting with young fighters. He started training me when I was about four. He made me think I could take on anyone in the world."

"I'm pretty sure you could," Ares says. I finally spare a glance in his direction. He's still looking at me, and his expression tells me he means it.

"I was good," I admit. "I won lots of competitions. I definitely leaned more toward the MMA stuff than the boxing. My dad had all my trophies set up in the living room. But I was always small. Being five-four and never being able to bulk up enough

limited me. Which was fine. I never had dreams of going pro or anything.”

“What did you want to do?” Ares asks.

I shrug. “It doesn’t sound ambitious enough, but I always just kind of wanted to do what my dad did. Run the gym. Valor Combat Sports was always this great place where people came together. I just thought I’d work there, teach classes, and someday, I’d take over, just like my dad did.”

“What happened?”

I let out a hard, frustrated sigh. “Like I said, my dad wasn’t the best businessman. He never made all that much money because he never charged people enough or he got taken advantage of. My dad died two years ago. When I tried to take charge of the gym like his will said, I found out he was buried beneath quite a bit of debt. Until I paid it off, I couldn’t take over.”

“Tate Kelso undercut you,” Ares states.

I nod. “He’d been a patron at the gym for three years. And he was always trying to talk to my dad about how the place could be better. Their visions weren’t the same. But Tate came from some money, so when he heard what had happened, he paid off the debts, and the gym became his.”

“Damn,” Ares says with the shake of his head. “He snaked it right out from under you.”

I nod. “I lost my mom when I was a teenager. I literally lived at that gym. There’s an apartment above it. I spent the majority of my life there. And then to find out I couldn’t hold on to it? I lost the place my dad loved most at the same time I lost him. Tate even kicked me out of my home. I’ve been living in that shithole you moved me

out of ever since.”

“How’d your parents die?” he asks gently as we cross the street with the herd of traffic.

My stomach tightens. I’ve only ever talked to Ophelia about this. I don’t have many other friends. And everyone else I talk to works at the gym, and they all know exactly what happened. Opening these wounds is not something I do. Ever .

“It was a training accident with my dad,” I explain, keeping it simple. “This guy he’d been working with, Steven, accidentally got my dad in the head. It really was an accident, but there were other health issues we couldn’t see. Dad had a stroke. He died on the way to the hospital.”

Ares curses under his breath. “I’m so sorry, Lana.”

I nod in appreciation. The weight of it all bites at the back of my eyes, but I refuse to let them well or redden. “My mother was killed in a home invasion. I... I don’t like to talk about it much.”

“You don’t have to,” Ares assures me and squeezes my hand. “Not everyone has to know all the details. That’s all you have to share with me if you want.”

I sniff once, even though no tears have broken through. “Thanks. Sorry you picked such a trauma-rich fake fiancée.” I chuckle through the pain.

And it works. Ares gives a soft laugh as well. “Trust me, Vengeance, you’re not the only one with some heavy shit in this relationship.”

But we don’t get to dive into any more details because just then, I realize we’re on Fifth Avenue, and he pulls a door open for me. With a hand at the small of my back,

Ares guides me inside.

I stop in place.

The entire interior is a glittering, sparkling show of opulence.

The floors are polished black marble. The walls are gold, with endless mirrors hanging everywhere. Dozens of crystal chandeliers hang overhead. Even the air smells rich.

There are display cases set up all over the place.

And there are diamonds everywhere .

But surprisingly, considering the never-ending crowds outside, the place is empty, save three waiting employees.

“Welcome to Volga Tsar,” says a woman with black, blunt-cut hair. Despite her words, she wears a judgmental expression. Her eyes scan up and down Ares, ready to call the cops on him. “But I am afraid we are closed for a private event.”

I realize then the life Ares chose when he decided on all those tattoos and piercings.

“I called earlier,” Ares says. He pulls me in closer, his hand wrapping around my waist. With every inch it drops, my heart rate rises.

“Mr. Hunt?” she asks, her tone doubtful and surprised. Her brows disappear into her blunt bangs.

“That would be me,” he answers, a very satisfied smile pulling on the corners of his mouth. “And my gorgeous fiancée, Lana.”

Once more, her eyes look him over before they flick to me, evaluating if we can possibly be the people Ares is saying.

Ares called ahead? And closed this whole place down so just the two of us could have it?

“We’re delighted to help you on this beautiful occasion,” another woman says as she steps forward. She not so subtly hip bumps the other woman out of the way. If I had to guess, I’d say this woman is the supervisor. She screams ass-kisser with that black business dress, perfect blonde hair, and makeup that looks as if it was done by a professional. “My name is Carissa. It was me you spoke to on the phone, Mr. Hunt. How about we get started?”

“That sounds perfect,” he says, giving a very smug glance to the first woman. He places a hand to the small of my back and encourages me forward, following Carissa .

“Have you given much thought as to what cut of diamond you like?” the saleswoman asks as she steps behind the counter. She unlocks one of the displays and pulls out a velvet cushion. Sitting atop it are a dozen massive diamonds.

“Kitten?” Ares encourages when I stare at the jewels with wide, cartoon eyes.

“I...” My mouth opens, but I can’t gather my thoughts enough to form words.

I’ve seen plenty of wedding rings in my life. So many women wear them. There are pictures online. I have a pretty good idea of what a normal ring looks like.

These diamonds are all way, way bigger than “normal.”

“I really don’t know yet,” I say, scrambling to seem like a functional woman who

totally expected to be here today. “This all still seems like a dream. I’ve hardly had two seconds to think about it.”

“Aw,” Carissa coos. “Whirlwind romance, huh? But look at you two. If I had a man who looked at me like that, I’d say yes in a heartbeat, too.”

My eyes rip up to Ares. And he offers a smile. The first full one I’ve seen on him yet. And my heart stops.

His teeth are snow white. And perfectly straight. They damn near look fake.

And a smile transforms his entire face.

He looks younger.

He looks less like the vampire he is.

And, despite the fact that I can’t see his eyes, considering he’s still wearing his sunglasses, he does indeed look like a man who is crazy in love.

Yes, yes, yes, my heart screams without thought.

An awkward sounding chuckle comes out of my lips. Do better, Lana, something in the back of my brain says. And so, I lift a hand, caressing the side of his face, and soften the look in my eyes. “It didn’t take much convincing.”

Because no, it really didn’t.

Not to save my best friend.

Not when my fake fiancé looks like this.

Ares covers my hand with his, pulling it across his face until his lips press into my palm with a kiss that scorches my entire body.

Carissa makes a needy noise. “Ugh. I already can’t wait to see your wedding pictures. I have a feeling you’re going to melt the camera with all that heat, though. Come on. I’ll show you some options.”

I’m pretty sure Ares is going to melt my clothes off with the way he’s looking at me. But he just gives a smile, one that touches his eyes. And he wraps a hand around my waist again as we walk down the display case.

Maybe it’s the fact that Ares is a vampire. But he’s watching with focused intensity the entire time I look at ring after ring with Carissa. And he’s largely quiet, other than to say things like, “You like that one, Kitten?” or, “No, bigger.”

“Ares,” I hiss in a low whisper at one point when I see a price tag that is seven figures. “We both know what this is. Don’t waste your money.”

“My last name is Hunt, Vengeance,” he says as he leans in close, his lips brushing the shell of my ear. Instantly, goosebumps flash over my entire body. “Trust me, there’s a certain level of expectation that comes with it. Bigger,” he says, raising his volume slightly as Carissa begins to pull out a display. She abruptly puts it back and reaches for another instead.

Round. Square. Marquis. Princess. My head is spinning with the names. I certainly never expected to learn every cut of diamond this week.

I try on dozens of rings. And Ares watches intensely with every one.

But something flutters in my chest when Carissa pulls out one particular set in its own display.

Radiant cut. It looks truly massive. It's set on a simple band. But it has a double wedding band that accompanies it. Square diamonds encrust the wedding band, a sharp contrast with the simple engagement band.

And it feels like magic when I slide it on, and it fits perfectly.

"Platinum, D-FL five-carat center diamond, one-carat wedding band," Carissa says, her tone nearly reverent.

I don't even know what half of those terms meant. But from her tone? I know I don't want to see the price tag.

"That car outside is for you, Lana." I look over my shoulder when Ares speaks. There is indeed a black SUV waiting at the curb. "It's going to take you down the street. They've got instructions to help you. I'll catch up with you in an hour."

"I thought..." I start, confused.

"We're all done here, Vengeance," Ares says, his tone cool and even. But there's something in his countenance that is confident, and a little mischievous.

I don't know what the hell is going on. But I take the ring off, laying it on the velvet cushion in front of me. "Thank you for your help, Carissa."

"It was all my pleasure," she coos, and she means it. Guess money can buy you anything, even rose-colored glasses for strangers .

I give Ares one last glance, still confused, but I head to the door, which the woman with the blunt hair opens for me.

As soon as I step outside, a man in a suit exits the vehicle. He's massive and sturdy,

like a mountain. His brown hair is buzzed short. His hands are like hams. And the fact that he's wearing some very, very dark, very good coverage sunglasses tells me he's likely a vampire. "Miss Lana, I'm Billings."

I reach out and shake his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Right this way, Miss Lana." He pulls open the back seat door for me and waits.

A small spike of fear shoots through me. I can handle myself pretty damn well. But Billings is a Goliath and a vampire.

But Ares sent him for me, and I have to trust Ares.

So, I climb into the back seat.

Moments later, we're rolling down fifth avenue. We drive three blocks, a distance I could have easily walked, before he stops in front of a shop with a name so French sounding, I have no idea how to pronounce it.

Billings exits and opens my door for me once again. "Mrs. Lamont will assist you inside."

I simply give a nod of thanks and pull the door open.

This place looks nearly as opulent as the jewelry store. Except there are racks of clothing I'm scared to breathe around.

"You must be Lana," a voice asks as it approaches from the back. A woman steps out, dressed like she's ready to go to a burlesque opera. Her accent matches the origins of the store.

“I am,” I answer, feeling uncomfortable and completely out of my league. “Are you Mrs. Lamont?”

“I am,” she says with a bob of her head. “Mr. Hunt asked me to help you with your new wardrobe. ”

For a moment, I’m tempted to be offended or judge him. But I have to remind myself what he said at the jewelry store. My last name is Hunt, Vengeance. Trust me, there’s a certain level of expectation that comes with it. Bigger.

“Thank you,” I offer instead. And I notice that, once again, there are no other customers in the store.

Mrs. Lamont guides me back to a private fitting room that is as big as my new closet, and that’s saying something. Wrap-around mirrors take up one end of the room. There’s a platform set up in the center of the room like I’d expect to see in a bridal store. A singular chair sits opposite the mirrors. A rack of clothes is already placed in the room, pre-picked at Ares’ instructions.

One by one, Mrs. Lamont has me begin trying items on. Expertly, she evaluates them on me. And she sorts the items onto two different racks. Keep or discard.

Skirts. Tops. Dresses. Pants. Even shoes of every type imaginable.

I’m smoothing my hands over my hips, looking at myself in the mirror as I wear a silky red dress when the bell at the front door dings. Just three seconds later, I hear the sound of footsteps, and Ares walks in.

He takes in a deep breath through his nose. Even though I can’t see his eyes behind those shades, I feel them on me. Down my hips, over my thighs, before rising back up over every single inch of me.

“Do I make a decent Barbie doll?” I ask, arching an eyebrow at him.

“I never expected I’d appreciate dress-up play,” he confesses, not a bit of shame in his words. “That one is going in the yes pile, Mrs. Lamont. ”

“Of course, Mr. Hunt,” she says with the dip of her head. “We’re about done here. Just two more things.”

And I don’t know if I’m horrified or thrilled when Ares walks to that lone chair and sinks down into it. He leans back, his legs spread casually, his shoulders taking up the bulk of the seat.

He looks so damn appreciative and smug.

I wish it didn’t send a tingling wave of pleasure and satisfaction up my spine.

“You’re awfully presumptuous,” I call him out as Mrs. Lamont unzips the dress. I refuse to blush as the fabric slips down my body, revealing my black strapless bra. My body heats as it falls past my hips, showing my black underwear. I swallow once as I step free of the silken fabric and look back up to meet Ares’ eyes.

He watches every move I make with rapt attention.

“Why would I still be shy around my fiancée, Vengeance?” he asks, playing stupid.

I flip him my middle finger, unsure how to take it, how unabashed he is. I accept the pants Mrs. Lamont hands me. I step into them, appreciating how perfectly they hug my hips and waist. Next, I pull on the form-fitting red top I’m given.

“You approve?” Mrs. Lamont asks. Not me—Ares.

Ares nods. “She’ll wear that one out. My driver will load everything up. You can charge it all to the card I gave you over the phone.”

“Yes, Mr. Hunt,” she says with a very satisfied smile and a nod. I wonder just how much all this is going to ring up to be.

No. Actually, I really don’t want to know.

“Do I fit the part yet?” I ask as I pull some shoes on, hopping for a moment to keep my balance .

“No one will question you,” Ares says as he watches me walk up to him. I still feel it as he shamelessly scrapes his eyes up the length of me. “You’re just about ready to step into this nightmare, Vengeance.”

He climbs out of his chair and aims for the front door. “Thank you, Mrs. Lamont.”

“You’re very welcome, Mr. Hunt,” she calls after us.

Outside, I find Ares’ bike parked at the curb, very illegally. Guess when you’re a vampire, you think you can get away with anything.

I just shake my head and climb back onto the bike behind Ares.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

We park back in the garage of our new building. In the lobby, Billings is waiting with all my bags. I blush at the absurdity of it all. But Ares simply takes them from his driver and heads for the elevator.

“Since we’re supposed to know each other on a deep level, I’m just going to say it,” I announce as we step into the elevator, which feels crowded with all the bags. “I grew up pretty damn poor. We didn’t have money. I’ve never made much in my life. So, you just dropping all this money, it’s weird for me.”

I feel Ares’ eyes on me. As if he knows there’s more coming, he doesn’t say anything. “I’ve been financially independent since my dad died. The struggle has been real, but I’ve been making it work. But you just dropping serious money when it comes to me?” I shake my head. “I’ll admit, it makes me uncomfortable. I don’t want you thinking I’m just secretly thinking I hit the jackpot.”

The elevator opens, but neither of us steps out immediately .

“I’ve never had to want for anything in my life, Lana,” Ares says, and when the elevator doors start closing, he throws his hand out, bags and all, stopping it. “I know that’s an advantage of privilege. All of this in the last two days? It doesn’t mean much to me. I appreciate what you’re saying. But don’t for one second think I’m doing you a bigger favor than you’re doing me. The money means nothing. But bringing you into this hostile world? That’s the real ask.”

I swallow once, holding his intense gaze.

I think we see this in very different ways. But all that tells me is just how truly

ignorant I am of what I'm about to walk into.

"Okay," I say simply. "Just so long as you get that I'm really not a gold digger."

"It never crossed my mind, Vengeance," he says sincerely. And we both step out of the elevator.

"So, I know you grew up rich," I say as I unlock the door and push it open for him. We walk through the entryway and into the living room. The drapes are drawn, leaving the room dim. "You have a sister. And your father is some kind of tycoon that borders on mafia status. I think it's your turn to start spilling more details about your past, fiancé."

Ares sets the bags on the kitchen island before he aims for the living room. He pulls his sunglasses off, letting out a relieved sigh. He sets them down on the coffee table and rubs his eyes before pressing his thumb and forefinger into the inner parts of his eyes.

Just how much pain has he been in all day? He never gave an indication today while we were out, but as he sinks down into a chair, he looks like he has a massive migraine .

"Can I get you something?" I ask without thinking, my brows furrowed. "Water? Some Aspirin?"

Ares looks up at me from beneath his dark eyelashes, a hint of a smile pulling on his mouth. "I'll be alright, Vengeance. This will fade in a few minutes. But thank you."

His tone makes me wonder if anyone has ever taken care of him. The way he's looking at me makes me wonder if he's wondering if anyone's ever taken care of me.

I just nod and curl up on the couch I occupied last night.

“My mother, Annika Hunt, didn’t know what Augustus was when they started dating,” Ares begins. He slouches down in his chair, lacing his fingers together and resting them on his chest. “He told her when she let him know she was pregnant. She freaked, tried to break things off. Which Augustus kind of allowed.”

I don’t like the way that sounds. Controlling asshole.

“But he kept tabs on her, so he knew when she went to the hospital in labor,” Ares continues. “She found a little sympathy and let him in for my birth. The bastard was sneaky, though. Wrote down my name on the birth certificate before she even had the chance to wipe the sweat from her brow.”

“It suits you,” I say, raising one eyebrow.

A little smile in the corner of his mouth tells me Ares agrees, but he shrugs one shoulder. “She was angry enough about it all, she took me home and cut him out. And the bastard seemed okay with that, at least for the time being. I wouldn’t be useful to him for a few years.”

“That’s disgusting,” I say, the ick spreading through my entire body.

Ares nods. “My mother was the heiress to one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in the country and was already managing everything on her own by that time. She wasn’t hurting for money and wanted nothing to do with Augustus’ fortune. She lived her life here in Manhattan. But she really wanted me to have a sibling. She went to a sperm bank, and when I was three, my sister Florence was born.”

The only person he’s ever loved besides his mother. That’s what he told me.

“Growing up, my mother never talked about my father. I didn’t even know his name. He didn’t come looking for me. Mom wanted to pretend he didn’t exist, wanted to pretend I’d be nothing but human forever. But when I was fourteen, I got curious. I started digging for who he was.”

“Was that a mistake?” I ask, curiosity making my words bold.

Ares shrugs again. “It wouldn’t have mattered. Augustus was keeping tabs on me, biding his time. He had no interest in being a traditional father. One way or another, when I was old enough, he would have come after me. Instead, I learned his name and went and found him.”

“Did you know what he was?” I ask, my brows furrowing.

“Not at first. Augustus was pleased to have contact now that I was older. He started teaching me about his business, about real estate. He gave me my first million to invest when I was fifteen and was pretty damn proud when I doubled it before I turned sixteen. But he didn’t tell me what he was until I was eighteen. And he advised me on what age I should end my life so I’d Resurrect and stop aging.”

“Shit,” I say, shaking my head. Most eighteen-year-olds are just starting to deal with the looming financial responsibility of striking out on their own. Ares had to contemplate when he should take his own life and trust he’d really come back as a vampire.

“Yeah,” Ares says, his tone a little dramatic. “I had years to think about my death. To wonder if Augustus was telling the truth that I’d really come back from the dead as something else. In the meantime, I went to college after graduating, got the degree in business he determined I should have. And I helped him grow his empire while starting my own.”

So much wealth. Augustus was wealthy. Annika was wealthy. And at such a young age, Ares became wealthy all on his own.

“Florence was always the brilliant one, though,” Ares says, changing directions. “She was always so damn smart. She graduated high school when she was just fifteen years old and immediately started college. She finished her doctorate by the time she was twenty-two.”

“Is that even possible?” I ask in amazement.

“It is when you have an eidetic memory, and you immediately understand everything you set your mind to,” Ares says. “She was our mother’s protégé and was already furthering the company by leaps and bounds after just a year working there. But then our mother went missing. The circumstances were... suspicious. She was found in Harlem four weeks later, dead.”

Anxiety pitches in my blood, and I can’t help but think of my own mother. “I’m so sorry.”

Ares nods in appreciation. “We found out she’d been taken by someone who thought they could get money out of her. Guess it went south. They never reached out for ransom money, which was stupid because Florence and I would have paid anything to get her back. ”

I can’t imagine how awful that must feel, knowing you would have cooperated with her captor but never got the opportunity. And then they lost their mother because of it.

“Three weeks later, I decided it was time to see if Augustus was telling the truth,” Ares continues. “I was afraid whoever had killed our mother was going to come after Florence, too. So, I ended it. Resurrected four days later, just like my father said I

would. I could protect my sister far more effectively as a vampire.”

The morbid side of me is wildly curious how he did it, how Ares met the end of his mortal life. But that isn’t the kind of question you should ask.

“Within two months of Resurrecting, Augustus started pressuring me to start having my own children. He wanted to make our family line stronger. I’d known about my half-siblings for a while, but it hit different when he was asking me to go find some women to knock up to produce my own little heirs.”

My stomach turns.

“I let him know in no uncertain terms that I had no intention of trying to make him more heirs. Augustus doesn’t like being told no. So, as I told you, it eventually grew so bad that I left after three years of that bullshit. I knew Florence was safe. So, I took off. And I haven’t talked to Augustus since.”

“But that’s about to change,” I say, all the pieces finally starting to fall into place.

“With a ‘fiancée’ at my side, going along with the lie that I’m ready to have my own children, that’s about to change.” Ares’ dark eyes are fixed on me.

I let out a hard breath, my eyes falling to the floor. That was all a lot. And while our pasts, the way we grew up, were so different, we also have some crazy things in common, things that most people will never understand.

Both of our mothers were murdered.

And as I look back up at Ares, I feel like he carries around the same bitterness and general mistrust for the world that I do.

“We’ve never talked about dating history,” I say, shifting the direction of the conversation. “Did you never have any other girlfriends that gave Augustus hope?”

Ares shrugs. “I had one girlfriend in high school. We dated for most of my junior and senior years. If I’m being honest, I always knew she was with me for the money.”

“Ouch,” I say, cringing.

He just shrugs again. “We kept each other company. I was never in love with her. So, it ran its course. There was another woman a year before I Resurrected. Mila was... sweet. Good. She was an incredible person. But I...” He shakes his head, his eyes fixing on the floor.

“What?” I encourage. These are the kinds of details we need to know about each other.

“I always felt like I was tainting her,” Ares finally admits, his eyes rising to meet mine. “My world was dark and dangerous. There are always ulterior motives when it comes to my world. Mila, she wasn’t cut out for it, and I didn’t want to drag her into a life she didn’t belong in.”

I can’t tell. From the look in his eyes, I can’t tell if Ares was in love with Mila or not. I see conflict there, I don’t question that. But love? I can’t really tell.

“What about you, Vengeance?” he asks, clearly done talking about his own dating history.

I take a deep breath, my mind falling back into the past. “Nothing in high school. I was dealing with too much trauma for that. After I graduated, I started dating this boxer at the gym. And it was... nice. But it didn’t really go anywhere because he got transferred for work only two months later. Last year, I started dating this guy who

used to live in my building. And, honestly, I don't really know why, because he kind of always gave me the ick. I think I just wanted some experience, you know?"

Ares nods like he gets that.

"But that was doomed from the beginning. We were only together for about six weeks when I found out he was cheating on me with this woman who lived across the hall from me. And the craziest part is that I didn't care that much. It was actually kind of nice to have a reason to end it."

"We're a couple of winners in the love department, aren't we?" Ares says with a sad little smile.

I huff a laugh. "Glad to hear I'm not the only clueless one."

Ares shakes his head at the ridiculousness.

"Now, how about our story?" I question.

"We should probably start from the beginning," Ares says. He slides up in his seat, sitting straight once again. He already looks like he's recovered from his headache. "How did we meet?"

"I've been thinking about it," I answer. "I think we say we met online. We talked there for months before we ever met in person, which is why no one has ever seen us together until recently."

"But we live in the same city," Ares points out. "That would make more sense if this was a long-distance thing."

I shake my head. "I have trust issues," I say with a shrug. "I thought you sounded

interesting, but I know the dangers of meeting up with strangers you meet online. So, I told you I was going to need some time. We talked online until I felt safe enough to meet up in person.”

“Fair enough,” Ares says with the nod of his head. “And, by the time we finally met in person, we’d spent months talking already, which put the in-person relationship at an accelerated timeframe.”

“I think it works,” I say, chewing on my lip as I think it through. “We only met in person a month ago. That’s only four weeks. I think we can get away with it if people question it. It’s not a very long amount of time.”

“People are going to call us crazy,” Ares says with an arched brow. “Getting engaged after a few months of online talking and one month of being around each other in person?”

“People do crazier shit all the time,” I iterate. “Look at Las Vegas, people get married after knowing each other one night. A few months of knowing each other isn’t completely unbelievable. Besides, we just play the madly in love card. I mean, Carissa sure seemed to buy it.”

Ares stares at me silently for a few moments, contemplating it all. He’s the one who’s the good actor. Maybe he doesn’t realize just how well he’s selling this.

“I think you’re right. It’s our best bet,” Ares concedes. “But we need the little details figured out. Where online did we meet?”

I contemplate it for a good long moment. A dating app would be the easy go-to. But I’ve never been on one of those, and depending on if anyone digs into our facts, it probably wouldn’t be hard to find that wasn’t the truth. Same for a “wrong number, right guy” kind of situation. There won’t be any kind of text history between us, or

call logs.

“I think Snaptalk is our safest bet,” I finally conclude. “We found each other through some tangential connection and started talking more and more regularly.”

“I don’t have Snaptalk,” Ares pokes at the plan.

“We both deleted it when we decided to commit to a relationship,” I say with a shrug. “That app is nothing but trouble, so it wouldn’t be that weird of a thing to do once you get really serious. There are other ways to talk to people.”

Ares taps his thumb on the arm rest, thinking. I watch him closely, knowing I have to learn his mannerisms. He looks away while he’s thinking, and I can practically see the gears turning in his head as he considers. “It’s not as strong as I’d like, but I think it’s our best bet. But maybe we need to say we talked online for six months before meeting in person. The longer the time, the more believable.”

I nod. “That sounds good to me. What was our first date? It seems likely someone will ask that.”

Ares taps his thumb again. “If you weren’t sure you could trust me, it was somewhere public. And four weeks ago, that would have been the beginning of May.”

“And a big one here,” I nearly cut him off as the thought occurs to me. “Did I know you’re a vampire before we met in person?”

“I’d say yes,” Ares surprises me when he answers quickly. “I’d told you, but you didn’t necessarily believe me.”

I consider that. I try to imagine it for real, if some guy I was interested in and had been talking to for months had told me he was actually a vampire. In real life, I

probably would have thought he was nuts and ghosted him. But for the sake of our story, I let the thought marinate until I can find an outcome that sounds plausible. “I’d told you I’d never been to the top of the Rockefeller Center, so you took me there for our first date. And then we got dinner.”

Ares looks up at me. “You ever actually been?”

I shake my head.

“Good thing you’re already dressed up,” Ares says as a smile starts pulling on his lips. “We’ll go as soon as the sun’s down.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

And that's exactly what happens.

As soon as the sun goes down, Ares and I head back downstairs. I don't know anyone who has their own car and drives themselves around in Manhattan. But Ares, so far, has not gone anywhere without his motorcycle. Once more, we climb on, and he smoothly makes his way across the city. The thought of finding parking everywhere stresses me out, but he never seems to hesitate. He finds the closest parking, and then, hand in hand for show, we head into the Rockefeller.

Only as we're getting our tickets do I realize the stiffness that's crept into Ares' shoulders. Only then do I see his eyes shift to the door twice.

Augustus keeps tabs on Ares, I remember.

We crowd into the elevator with six other people. And my heart jumps into my throat when Ares pulls me to him, sliding his arms around my waist. My own wrap behind his neck, and Ares traces his nose along my skin there .

"We're being followed," Ares says, his words so low and quiet, only I can hear them.

I nod almost imperceptibly. "I'll do my part," I promise.

An older man with white hair and a chronically unhappy expression clears his throat and takes half a step away from us.

I think that means we're going the job well.

Ares' hands slide down lower, and I swear, I hear the breath hitch in his throat, just a little. I lean closer into him, our bodies connecting in the small space.

Not only does Ares look the part of the god he's named after, he smells incredible. Something musky and clean at the same time. Like wealth and danger bottled into the most intoxicating thing I've ever experienced. My forehead rests against his shoulder, against the black fabric of his t-shirt, and I take in a long, slow inhale, his scent branding itself into my memory.

Wrong, wrong, wrong , my brain is screaming at me. You just barely met this man. You know what he is. You know he's dangerous. Are you really willing to play pretend like this?

But something ancient and primal is there, countering all those arguments. It doesn't feel like days since I met Ares. I swear it's been months already. And I was obviously wrong about my first assumptions about him as a vampire. Not once have I ever felt like I was in danger. Quite the opposite. Everything he's done thus far has made me feel... safe. Protected.

Yet you've seen what a great actor he is, the logical part of my brain reminds me.

I don't want to listen to that part. I shove it back into the recesses of my mind when Ares' hands slide into my back pockets.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

I want to whisper back, don't be . But that would be a confession of how damn good this feels. And that's just something I can't admit aloud to the universe.

The doors slide open, and the noise volume increases. The crowd quickly files out around us, and I hate that I suddenly feel cold when Ares disengages from me, taking

me only by the hand, and steps out into the space.

There are so many people, and as I pay just a little attention, I hear a dozen different languages spoken around me. I always knew this was one of the top tourist attractions in the world, but it's kind of humbling to see how many people have made it a goal to visit my home city and are in such awe of it.

Ares works us through the crowds, and just before we go up the stairs to go to the next level, I spare one glance over my shoulder.

I don't know who it is I'm looking for, who is watching us. And maybe they haven't gotten out of the next elevator yet. But one thing is for sure, I shouldn't be looking around for them. This has to look real.

The air is warm when we step outside. Despite being seventy floors up, there's barely even any breeze. Up this high, the city feels... calmer. More still. Below, I see headlights moving up and down the streets, but no longer can I hear thousands of humans around, no longer can I hear the constant horns blaring or the sound of sirens racing down the street. This is the city that never sleeps, and I love every minute of it. But this high up, it feels different.

Hand in hand, Ares and I wander to the tall glass walls that prevent anyone from doing something tragic. I place my hands on the glass, leaning up against it, taking in the modern miracle that is my hometown.

The lights are spectacular. It's like looking up into the sky but multiplied by a thousand. Billboards and home lights. Streetlamps and headlights. It glitters in the darkness, the sun fully set into the west.

Ares settles in behind me, his body aligning with mine. He wraps his hands around my waist, and once more, he brings his nose to my neck. He inhales, and I wonder if

he's doing the same thing I was doing in the elevator.

"Do I ever need to worry about this position?" I find myself asking. I feel his breath on my neck, and I know his teeth are only an inch away from my skin, at best.

"I told you, Vengeance," he says, his tone low and a little rough sounding. "You smell like dessert. My mouth hasn't stopped watering since I laid eyes on you at that party."

He leans in closer, his body fully aligned with mine. And he brushes the tip of his nose from my collar bone to the hollow behind my ear. "But my control is exceptional."

I realize then that my eyes have slid closed, and my head has tipped back to rest on his shoulder. Goosebumps cover my entire body.

I'd be embarrassed if we didn't need to be putting on exactly this kind of show.

Ares tugs me from the railing. A wicked smile pulls on one side of his mouth as he walks backward for a moment, leading me to the end of the observation deck. His wicked lips pull a smile to my own.

It's way too damn easy to pretend in this scenario. With this man. It makes me wonder. Have I really been this damn lonely? That I'm this willing to jump in the deep end?

But it doesn't matter. I'm here now. And right now, it feels pretty intoxicating .

Ares' eyes never leave me for a second, and I feel my skin heat. I know this is for show. But the effect he's having on me is very real. Nerves are making me feel ready to jump out of my skin. This distance between us feels awful after experiencing his

closeness just a few moments ago.

But I don't have to wait. Because when we reach the far end, where the view is the best and the entire night seems to be celebrating for us, Ares stops. And he holds my gaze. He takes me by one hand, and he drops to one knee.

"Lana," he begins. He's way too good at his. His volume is perfect. Not awkwardly loud, letting on that this is meant to be overheard. It's just like it was meant for only the two of us. "I don't care if it's quick. I don't care if there's going to be people who question. I knew you were mine from that first day. And every day since has been the best day of my life. You're the other half to my soul."

I stare down into his eyes, and my heart is beating about ten thousand miles per hour. My free hand covers my mouth, which is pulled into a shocked smile. It isn't hard to fake this right now. Every reaction is genuine in this moment.

"I'm looking for forever with you, Lana," Ares says. He looks so hopeful. So happy. He looks in love. "Will you marry me?"

Pound, pound, pound, my heart is going crazy.

I honestly never expected to hear those four words spoken to me. With as little dating experience as I've had by this age, I truly never expected that those words would ever be asked of me.

And now here they are. Asked by a rich vampire who looks like he could tear up the roughest of the rough .

Fake , my brain reminds me.

"Yes," I answer, the word coming out a little emotional, an act, as I nod. My hand

drops from my mouth, and a wild grin pulls on my lips.

And there's that dazzling sight again. Ares smiles, the full, wide, uncontrolled version that makes my brain stop working. He pulls a black box from his pocket and opens it. And, there, inside, is the ring I was admiring.

I nearly choke on the shock as Ares slides it onto my finger. It has physical, tangible weight.

My gaze returns to Ares. For the briefest second, I see warning flash through his eyes.

But I only get one second to understand its meaning before Ares rises. His hands come to either side of my neck. He tips my head back just slightly, and then his lips are on mine.

This kiss is molten. Heat and fire and the sun.

Ares' lips mold to mine perfectly. And his lips are hot. So hot.

The breath catches in my throat. All of my internal organs freeze. My body locks in place, completely overwhelmed.

But as Ares' lips part slightly, and as his tongue teases my lips, begging me to play my part, I tell my body to simply feel. To push out every thought. My body knows exactly what to do, even if my brain can't quite catch up or make sense of any of this. But my hands, my mouth, they know exactly what they need to do.

My hands slide up Ares' chest. Hard lines and ridges are obvious through the thin fabric of his t-shirt. And I wonder if he has to work out to have a chest like that or if it's just a bonus of being a blood-sucking immortal. My lips have no hesitation to that last thought, though, as I kiss Ares in return. They part, granting him access. His

tongue is demanding and curious. He tips me back just a little, deepening the kiss, stealing the breath right from my lungs.

And it's at least ten solid seconds before I realize the crowd surrounding us is clapping and cheering.

Ares releases me, and I blush when I realize there are dozens of people watching us.

"Congratulations!" someone shouts. "Kiss her again!" someone else yells. "Take it to your room," yet another mumbles.

Ares turns to the crowd with that gleeful, mischievous smile. "Thank you," he offers. "I will, and it's our next stop." I realize then that he's answering the callouts thrown at us.

I offer one embarrassed smile before Ares tugs me to him again, his hand cupping the side of my neck. With that devious smile, he pulls me in, taking my mouth as his own.

A girl could get used to this. Ares is, without question, the best kisser I've ever touched lips with. Sensuous, dark, greedy, hungry, his mouth conveys a million claims. And I breathe in every one.

The crowd goes wild again. And this time, it's me who starts smiling.

"You like that attention, Vengeance?" Ares asks against my mouth.

"It doesn't have anything to do with the crowd, Venom," I say, knowing I'll most likely regret the honesty.

There's a low rumble at the back of his throat, and he doesn't say anything more for a

moment. Let him process that as he will .

But after a few moments, he steps back just slightly. He waves another thanks at the crowd. “I think we better get out of here before someone calls the cops for public indecency,” he jokes. Then he looks back over at me. “Time to go home, fiancée.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

I hear her scream. As I run through the dimly lit hallway, Ophelia's terrified screams reverberate in my brain.

My legs pump harder. Faster. She screams again, and I hear the sound of flesh meeting flesh.

Fight back, I mentally beg her.

I don't slow as I reach the door at the end of the hall. I turn my right shoulder to it and barrel straight into it. It splinters as I explode through it, and I stumble into the room.

Ophelia gasps, scrambling back on the bed. She's wearing nothing but her underthings, and her wrists are bound. Blood drips from her neck and her nose. She's covered in a random constellation of bruises.

And a faceless man turns toward me, a primordial growl raging up his throat.

I get half a second to pull the gun from the back of my pants before he pounces.

Before I can get a shot off, his body lands on top of me—and I jerk up from the bed with a yell .

My right arm is extended, but there's no gun in my hand.

There's no faceless man.

And no Ophelia bound on a bed.

“Lana?”

I jump at the worried call from down the hall and flinch harder when, less than a second later, Ares barrels his way into the bedroom. His eyes are brilliant red, his nostrils flared. His eyes scan the room, and the tension in his body says he’s ready to tear the world apart. “What is it?” he growls.

I take a shallow breath, quickly followed by another. “No... nothing,” I barely get the words out. “I... it was just a bad dream. I found Ophelia. There was a man there...” I shake my head, willing the image away because the thought that it might be real makes me want to spiral.

Some of that tension seeps out of Ares, and I feel his eyes shift to me. He’s quiet for a long moment. I don’t know what he’s thinking. I focus on blacking out the dream, erasing it bit by bit. With my eyes squeezed closed, my hands shaking, I force myself to take slower breaths. In through my nose, out through my mouth.

“We’re going to find her, Lana,” Ares says softly. “I swear.”

I take three more breaths, embracing the numb darkness filling my mind, and finally nod my head. “Okay.”

There are another few moments of uncertain silence. How do you comfort your fake fiancée, the woman you don’t really know yet have kissed the life out of?

“We’re supposed to be to my sister’s place in an hour,” he says uncertainly. “I can let her know we’re going to be a little bit late.”

“No,” I shake my head and climb out of the bed. “I’m fine. It was just a dream. It’s

over. I'm getting ready now."

He meets my eyes, a look of uncertainty on his face. But I don't wait for him to argue as I walk into the bathroom, ignoring the fact that I'm wearing nothing but underwear and a tank top.

Today's agenda is to meet Ares' sister. According to Ares, there's no way anyone would believe this if I hadn't met this sister, the one person in the world Ares is closest with. She's been told what's going on, and Ares trusts her to no end.

I stalk into the closet and pull on the first things my hands find. A black skirt that hits mid-thigh and a yellow ribbed top that hugs my body. Standing in front of the mirror, I take in my own reflection.

My hair is a wild mess. My skin is pale, and there are dark shadows beneath my eyes.

But it's nothing compared to how Ophelia looked in my dream.

I know it's just a dream.

I know that wasn't real.

But what if the truth of what she's going through is worse? What if she's really being abused and used like that? What if... what if she's dead?

This is taking too damn long.

I'm sorry, Ophelia, I think into the ether. I'm coming.

We need to speed this up.

I dab on some makeup, making myself look less of a zombie. I tame my hair back into a knot at the back of my head.

And when I look back at my reflection when I'm finished, I finally see someone who looks the part of the billionaire's fiancée. This woman is put together. This woman has never struggled to pay the grocery bill. This woman has never been talked down to by anyone in her life.

I look down at the massive rock on my finger, where it has stayed put since Ares put it there two days ago. Is this thing going to turn me into a different person?

Would that be so terrible?

I walk out of the bedroom and into the living area to find Ares on the phone. But the moment he sees me, he freezes in place, just for a second, his eyes scraping over the whole of me.

"I'll take interviews on Monday," Ares says, sounding surprisingly professional. "Give me five candidates."

He doesn't wait for whoever is on the other end to respond before he hangs up. Once again, his eyes shamelessly take every inch of me in.

"What do you say? Can I pass for the fiancée of Ares Hunt?" I ask, lowering my chin and looking at him from beneath my lashes.

Instead of answering me, Ares steps forward, sliding his hand into mine. And he guides me to the entryway, where a huge, gold-framed mirror hangs on the wall. He walks to where the two of us are centered, every bit of us in the length of it.

"What do you say, Vengeance?" Ares asks as I see him look down at me in the

mirror's reflection. "Do we look like we fit together?"

My mind goes somewhere far too dirty, considering this man is a stranger. But the heat in his gaze as he looks at me, the hunger I see there, makes my lower stomach tighten.

I swallow once and actually look at the two of us in the mirror.

Ares is all danger and darkness. Black on black, he looks the bad boy and the billionaire right now. His hair is wild in the most purposeful way, those curls teasing my fingers. He wears diamond studded earrings tonight and a silver chain around his neck, matching the hoop in his nose.

And there I am next to him, black heels, little skirt. Huge diamond on my finger. Pain and rage in my eyes, scars on my hands from the fights I've won.

"Yes," I answer honestly, shocked when I believe myself. There, that woman in the mirror, looks exactly like she belongs on the arm of that man.

My spine straightens just a little, and my chin lifts.

"Don't let that crown ever slip," Ares says, his voice low and a little rugged. My eyes meet his. How is it possible for someone to be this sincere, this intense, while also looking like he'll be the end of me? "You're Lana fucking Kincade. Don't ever let the world forget it."

I'm left without words, but Ares doesn't ask for more. He pulls the door open and pulls me after him.

I hadn't thought of it even once before reaching the ground floor, but I'm exceptionally relieved when, instead of heading to the parking garage and climbing

onto the motorcycle, we walk out in front of the building, and the black SUV is waiting for us, Billings at the wheel.

Ares pulls the door open for me. I climb inside, settling into the plush seat.

Ares climbs in after me and pulls the door shut. With ease, the driver merges into the traffic.

“What are you doing interviews for?” I ask when the thought crosses my mind.

Ares sits with his hands resting on his knees. And I’m trying to get a read if he’s relaxed. His pose certainly should look it, but he rubs his palm over his pants twice, almost a sign of nervousness.

“Things are about to get busy,” he says calmly. He scans the darkening evening, his brows furrowed slightly at the remaining light in the sky. “Stepping back into Augustus’ world is going to take up a lot of my time. I’m going to need someone to help manage my own properties.”

“An assistant?” I question. And it’s totally wrong of me that I bristle at the idea of him hiring a female assistant.

Ares shakes his head. “They need to be a lot more than that. I need someone smart, savvy. Someone who thinks like I do.”

I haven’t quite figured out what that is yet. I swear, the man is a walking contradiction sometimes.

It takes me a minute to register where we are as the car slows.

Riverside Drive.

Wealth. So much damn wealth tied to Ares Hunt.

I'm expecting something spectacular, but my imagination is far too simple, I realize, as the driver pulls over and up to the curb.

There aren't many freestanding homes left in Manhattan. But that's exactly what this is. I blink three times when I climb out, taking it in.

It looks like a castle. While most everything in this city gets dirty and is nearly impossible to keep clean, the white exterior of the house is pristine and fresh. I don't know architecture, but this looks like a cross between gothic and Greek to me. It rises six stories high, dozens of windows dotting the exterior. And there's so much detail carved into each feature.

"There are only two occupied freestanding homes left in Manhattan," Ares says as he places a hand at the small of my back. "The Hunt House is one of them."

There, above the front door, I see a stone accent. And those exact words are carved into it: Hunt House. The line below it reads Est. 1907.

"Your family built this house?" I gape in awe. "And has owned it the whole time?"

"It's never left the family," Ares confirms as he steers us to the front door. I kind of expect some fancy butler to appear. But Ares just enters a code at the door and pushes it open.

Oh, I like this place.

The entryway is its own massive room. Black and white checkered tile crosses the floor, and the walls are painted a color so dark I can't tell if they're black, blue, or green. Beautiful picture frame molding is precisely placed everywhere. A crazy

modern chandelier dominates the space overhead. And a glorious staircase leads out of the room, the walls transitioning to a brilliant, stark white as they ascend.

Movement from the right pulls my eyes, and I look over to see a woman standing from a grand desk. I'd guess this was a formal parlor, somewhere intended to entertain company, but it's obviously a personal office right now.

The woman has gorgeous curves, it's hard not to notice that right away. As she walks around the desk, I realize she's fairly short, definitely several inches shorter than I am. Her features are calm, composed. She sports short, choppy hair that looks like it probably cost a fortune. It's a warm blonde color, but the purposeful dark roots are a giveaway that her natural hair color is closer to Ares'.

"So glad you could make it," she says with a warm smile. "I'll admit, I've been anxious for this moment since Ares told me his plan a few days ago."

A few days ago? Ares and I only met a few days ago.

She pulls Ares into a hug, and the difference between them is almost comical. Their size. Their appearance. Their entire demeanors are wildly different.

"I've been dying to meet you, Lana," she says as she releases Ares and turns toward me. Her expression, her tone are still warm, but she extends a hand.

I'm actually a little relieved she didn't come at me with a hug. I've never been much of a hugger. Maybe that's the effect of growing up with a father who is a boxer and always being around fighting.

"Lana, my sister, Florence," Ares introduces unnecessarily.

I shake her hand. "It's really nice to meet you," I say honestly. Everything about the

woman is elegance and class, but there's something undeniably warm and comforting in her presence.

"Oh, the pleasure is mine," she says as her eyes rake over me. I feel her evaluation, but not her judgment. "I had to meet the woman reckless enough to walk into a vampire party, knowing her best friend disappeared from there, and walk out of it pretending to be a vampire's fiancée."

When she puts it like that, it sounds a little insane.

Footsteps above pull my eyes to the stairs, and a moment later, a woman wearing the best cross between business and bohemian enters the foyer.

"Lana, this is my wife, Clementine," Florence introduces as she wraps an arm around the woman with admiration and pride.

"It's lovely to meet you," Clementine says with a London accent and a warm smile. She's significantly taller than Florence, lean and lithe. Her warm brown skin is damn near glowing, and her curly hair has me jealous.

"You too, Clementine," I say as I shake her hand as well. But the strength in her grip, the way her skin feels just a tad too cool, makes my brows furrow in question.

"Bitten," she offers in explanation. "Going on three years now."

"I thought you said..." I begin to dig, but cut myself off before I can come across as rude. "Never mind."

"There will be plenty of time for all the questions you're dying to ask later," Florence says with a knowing smile. "Dinner should be ready. Let's eat."

She turns, heading up the stairs, Clementine right behind her. Ares places a hand at the small of my back, and we follow his sister and sister-in-law.

Every floor is the most gorgeous mix of class and modern. The Hunts have impeccable taste. I could spend an hour on each floor just taking in every detail, every perfectly placed art piece. This place could truly be a museum without changing much at all.

But we ascend two stories before walking into a moody living room. Attached is a blocky, huge dining table with seating for ten. And just behind that is the most grandiose kitchen I've ever seen. Inside, there is a man moving from pan to plate, a flurry of action.

I approach the table, and like he's a true gentleman, Ares pulls a seat out for me. I sink down into it and note that Florence is watching our interactions with rapt interest. The smallest of smiles pulls on her lips as she watches her half-brother sit beside me .

The moment we're seated, the servers descend. Golden platters filled to the brim with mouthwatering dishes are laid out before us. It's a feast that could feed a dozen, no question. My stomach growls, reminding me I haven't eaten in too long.

"Someone needs to eat up," Clementine says with a smile, and I feel my face blush. I didn't think anyone would hear it. But when you're dining with two vampires...

"Why don't you tell us about yourself, future sister-in-law," Florence says as she dishes up her food. She says the last of it with a wink.

I pile on some of the delicious looking food and glance over to Ares. What has he told them? What haven't I told him yet that I should? "Um," I say, swallowing and gathering my thoughts. "I've lived in this city my whole life. I've barely even left

Manhattan, if I'm being honest. And I love it here. I really can't imagine living anywhere else."

"Classic New Yorker," Florence smiles, raising a glass to my words.

I smile, liking this woman already. "My parents split when I was just a kid, and I lived with my mom until I was a teenager. I lost her and my younger sister at the same time, and then I went to live with my dad."

Beneath the table, Ares' hand comes to my thigh.

I haven't told him that part yet. About Emmie.

I swallow once and try to push all those thoughts away.

"I'm so sorry, Lana," Florence offers with sincerity. "Losing your mother... It's indescribable if you haven't experienced it. But your sister, too?"

I nod. "Thankfully, my dad is great. Was... great," I correct myself. Damn. This is why I don't like talking about myself. "Anyway. I lived with him. He owned a training gym. I kind of followed in his footsteps. I've been a trainer for the last few years. My dad passed away a few years ago, but it's nice, I still get to work at the gym, so I feel like I still have a little part of him."

"That's beautiful," Clementine says, setting her glass back on the table. I note it's filled with a thick, red liquid. Blood. "I try to remind Florence how lucky she is that she's surrounded by decades of ancestors in this place. Not all of us have mementos."

So, Clementine has lost family, too.

"Well, no wonder you're brave enough to be with my brother," Florence says with an

evaluative smile, one that comes out approving. “You’re the toughest fucking woman in New York.”

I can’t help the laugh that comes out and the smile that pulls on Florence’s face tells me this was her goal.

Ares squeezes my thigh beneath the table again before reaching for his cutlery and digging into his food.

“That’s about it for me,” I say, because I don’t really want to dig in deeper. “What about you two. How did you meet?”

Florence and Clementine automatically look at each other, and the look in each of their eyes sparkles and softens at the same time. Damn. No one would question the love between the two of them.

“I work in pharmaceuticals, I’m sure Ares told you that,” Florence says. “And we do all the things you’d expect. Research on treatments. Chemicals. Drugs. But when Ares Resurrected...” She looks over at her brother, studying him with a level of curiosity I’ve never seen so deep on another. “It didn’t feel real. It didn’t make sense to me. This result of, what? Magic? Science? Ares let me take some of his blood, and on the down low, I created a new division at the company. There are only two other employees in it, aside from myself. We study vampirism.”

Shit. That’s one of the coolest things I’ve ever heard in my life.

“Through Ares, we connected with other vampires, took other samples,” Florence continues. “So far, we’ve found common genetic markers, which is fascinating when considering the origins of vampirism. And the DNA...” she shakes her head, a smile spreading on her lips. “You wouldn’t believe how incredible it truly is. There is so much more data than there should?—”

“The mad scientist is coming out,” Ares cuts off his sister, looking up at her with a teasing smile.

“Sorry,” Florence apologizes with a chuckle. “I just love the science. Anyway, we were hoping to study not just the Born, but the Bitten as well. So, Ares helped in seeking out some connections.”

“Ares and I met at the same hospital,” Clementine says, giving a soft, appreciative smile to her brother-in-law. “I never exactly felt good stealing donor blood, but I didn’t feel better about feeding off of people either. He explained what his sister was doing and asked if I’d be willing to come talk to her. I didn’t have anything to lose, so I agreed.”

She looks back at her wife, and it isn’t too hard to figure out the rest from there.

“I never believed in fate before,” Florence says as she looks at the woman who is her polar opposite in looks. “But I have from the minute she walked through the door. I was done for. The fact that my brother was a vampire, and then the love of my life was another kind, and I was studying them... The rest was easy.”

Clementine lays a hand over Florence’s before looking back at me. “I was turned in London a year before I came to New York. My sire was this kind woman. She was just lonely. I was lucky when it came to the Debt. She never took advantage of me. But she was killed by another vampire, an old flame of hers. I got scared, didn’t know if he was going to come after me as well. Since I didn’t have any family left, I decided to start somewhere new. I’d always wanted to see Broadway, so New York seemed to be calling my name.”

“Wow,” I admire. “Your story...” I shake my head, my entire soul filled at hearing it all. “It’s beautiful. Thank you for sharing it with me.”

“Way to show us up,” Ares says, taunting his sister.

“Who doesn’t love a good fake-to-real love story, though?” she taunts him right back.

The way her words make me blush.

And the next hour passes easily. Light talk laced with dark humor and jabs. The dynamic between Ares and Florence makes it obvious how much they care about each other. And how deeply in love Clementine and Florence are. And despite everything, I actually feel at ease here with them all. I don’t feel like an outsider to so much love. They invite me right in with an open door.

As the night grows later, I wander after Florence with dishes, putting them in the sink. There’s staff waiting in the wings to swoop in and take care of it all, but it says something that Florence clears her own dishes.

“You’re the perfect fit for him,” she says as she leans against the counter. She folds her arms over her chest and fixes me with those penetrating eyes. “I want you to know that. Ares, he’s had plenty of reasons to block everyone out of his life, to guard his heart. There was that leach back in high school and then sweet Mila. I was never sure what kind of woman would fit into his life. But you’re perfect, Lana. Your toughness, yet your femininity, your no bullshit demeanor. I haven’t seen the light in my brother’s eyes like this. Maybe ever. So, thank you for putting it there, whether you meant to or not.”

My heart is doing gymnastics in my chest. My brows furrow as I look over my shoulder, back at Ares, who chats comfortably with Clementine. “Really?” I ask, completely unsure.

How could someone like me ever be the perfect fit for a man like Ares Hunt?

“Really, Lana,” Florence says without a trace of hesitation in her tone. “Don’t doubt yourself for one second. I couldn’t have dreamed up a better person for my brother if I tried. I know this is technically for show for that asshole who sired him, but if I had to pick someone for him for real, you fit the bill exactly.”

And without another word, leaving that massive weight on me, she turns and walks out of the kitchen.

What the fuck?

Aren’t siblings supposed to put up a huge fuss when you tell them you’re in a fake engagement? They’re supposed to be worried to death about their blood. Not go and give the fake fiancée a huge seal of approval.

Taking two seconds to try and catch my breath, unsuccessfully, I turn and follow her back out to join my fiancé at the table.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

I was already nervous for today, but as I watch Ares pace from one end of the bathroom to the other, his thumb worrying over his lower lip for the tenth time, my pulse picks up speed.

Looking in the mirror, I return to my makeup. I dab on mascara, double checking the lip color, the rose on my cheeks, the eyeshadow. I'm wearing a black dress that hugs my body. My makeup matches, smokey and dangerous looking. Silver earrings fall in a cascade that nearly reaches my shoulders. I thought Ares and I should match.

Ares checks his phone, halting too abruptly to be human. He mutters something under his breath, too quiet for me to make out the words.

"Are you okay?" I ask finally. "Is something wrong?"

He looks up at me, and I see it all there in his eyes. He's dreading this with every bone in his body. "Walking back into my father's house wasn't something I ever thought I'd do again. I kind of can't believe I'm willingly walking back into the viper's den."

Shit. Something heavy and cold drops in my stomach.

Ares lets out a sigh that sounds a little more like a hiss and runs his hand through that gorgeous dark hair. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be saying anything, Vengeance. I know how to handle Augustus. It's just kind of hitting me, the reality of taking you into his home, him laying eyes on you. The thought of the number of women he's..."

"Hey," I say, turning and stepping toward him. I cup either side of his face, bringing

his gaze to mine. And my comfort level in doing it shocks me. A few days ago, I never would have so casually touched this vampire who looks like he runs the streets. And now? Well, it's way too damn easy, considering it's only been eight days since we met. "I'm a big girl. I literally teach women how to protect themselves from predators. And I know Augustus isn't the same. But you're going to be there next to me. And I still can't figure out what the hell it means, but I trust you. You've got me?"

And my heart hammers out an ecstatic rhythm when Ares' hands wrap around my waist, drawing me just a bit closer. "I've got you, Lana. I swear."

I nod, swallowing down the feral cat wanting to stretch and nuzzle against his body. "And I've got you. I won't leave any room for him to doubt us. I can promise you that."

That hungry look that ignites in Ares' eyes is starting to become familiar. He studies my eyes, then my lips. And I wonder if he's looking forward to the show later, the same as I am.

I will never forget that perfect kiss atop the Rockefeller building. It's forever seared into my being. And I have no qualms about a repeat.

"Thank you," he says, and runs his thumb over my lower lip. Before I can do something stupid like lean in and bite his lip like I'm dying to, when there is no reason to put on a show, I turn away and grab my things from the bathroom counter.

"You're welcome," I say, sliding the strap of my purse over my shoulder. I reach out and take his hand. "Let's go meet your mafia vamp father."

The black SUV is waiting for us at the curb. Billings holds the door open for us, and I climb in first, Ares' hand at my lower back. He follows in after me, and the driver

shuts us inside.

“I’m meeting my new manager for training on Monday morning,” Ares says as we roll forward. “I’ll be in the office most of the day. Would you come with me in the morning? I’d like you to meet him.”

Ares and I have to integrate into every part of each other’s lives. The difficult part to grasp is the fact that it doesn’t feel hard or like a stretch at this point.

“Of course,” I answer with a nod. As I look over at Ares, a thought hits me hard. “Not going to lie, I’m having a really hard time picturing you in any kind of office, doing business like any other rich guy in this city,” I allow the words. But my eyes scrape over Ares, and they ring true.

That crooks a smile in one corner of his mouth. And I catch just a little glimpse of one of those pointed teeth.

Nope. That definitely wasn’t a little zing of thrill that went through me.

“Looks can be deceiving, Vengeance. We both know that by now.” And he reaches over and takes my hand. And I can’t help it when I study his own. There’s a silver ring around his middle finger, a snake eating its own tail, ouroboros. Beneath it, I note the ink.

“What do the runes mean?” I ask, running a finger over the complicated lines on his knuckles.

Ares is quiet for a moment, his gaze turning to the ink he chose to mark his body with forever. “Creator of my own fate,” he says softly. “I got that one while I was in Portland.”

During the time he was separating himself from Augustus.

“I think it’s my favorite,” I say without really thinking about the words.

“You’ve barely seen any of them, Vengeance,” Ares goads with a touch of a feral growl in his tone.

“We should probably fix that,” I say as my eyes rise up to meet his dark ones. “You know, for the sake of this.” Our fake relationship.

He holds my gaze, and I hate that the slightly cocky look in his eyes is turning me on. “Uh huh. For the sake of this.”

Every inch of me is set alive by electric fire.

Focus, Lana, I internally try to reason. Don’t forget why you’re doing this.

But that voice isn’t very clear or loud.

Just a few minutes later, the car stops at the curb. Billings climbs out and comes around to open Ares’ door. I climb out after him, taking his offered hand for help. I smooth my hand over my dress when I get out at the sidewalk, and Ares slides an arm around my waist.

Shit. I’m starting to like the feel of it way too much. It’s size. It’s heat. It’s intimacy.

A girl could get used to the touch of her fake fiancé.

While the Hunt House was borderline magical, Ares’ father’s house is exactly fitting of the image I have in mind for the man. It’s a brick building with black details. And it is covered in detail. From the stone lions to the moldings. The shutters, the arches.

The balconies. The building stretches five stories high. And while it is attached to other buildings, it isn't obvious. And this location? I can't even imagine how one individual could ever, ever afford it.

Apparently, it fits within the budget of an immortal borderline mafiaesque vampire.

We set toward the massive black doors, but before we even reach them, a man steps out wearing a black suit and an obvious earpiece.

"Welcome back, Ares," he says in a deep, rumbling voice. "Augustus is anxious to see you."

Ares ignores the man's words completely and walks in the doors, pulling me along at his side.

Just a few weeks ago, I couldn't imagine setting foot in a building like this. Now, I live in one that is nearly as impressive. And my fake future sister-in-law lives in one as well and says I'm welcome over any time.

The walls are painted a deep blue that compliments the wood details that run underfoot and climb the walls. A modern chandelier overhead casts us in a dim glow. And straight ahead are floor-to-ceiling windows granting us the most beautiful view of the East River.

Another guard is waiting for us just inside. "Arms up," he simply says, looking at me with heavy, dead eyes.

"Excuse me?" I ask doubtfully, arching an eyebrow at him.

"Weapons check," he says simply.

“Watch your hands, or I’ll relieve you of them,” Ares snarls as he puts his arms up, and the man quickly pats him down .

I fix the guard with a look of pure hatred, and raise my arms.

He sweeps his hands down my back, over my hips. He sweeps one hand between my breasts in a cutting motion, and Ares growls in warning.

“Clear,” the guard says, unphased. He steps back, taking up his position by the front door with his hands clasped at his waist.

“Mr. Lonan is waiting for you upstairs,” the first guard says.

I take a moment to look around. And it feels like such a waste. Space comes at such a premium in this city. But as I look to the left and to the right, I find nearly identical wide hallways, each with a couch in it and a large variety of artwork on the walls. Nothing else. Nothing functional. This space is for receiving. For show. And nothing more.

The first guard walks up the stairs, and Ares and I follow after him. I realize as Ares takes the space in, observing every detail, that he’s never been here before. And then I remember Ares telling me that Augustus moves every few years, always claiming his latest real estate conquest.

What would it be like? To have more money than some small countries?

With my hand gripped firmly in Ares’, we step off on the third floor. Here, there is another guard waiting down the hall we walk. And then our guard pushes a door open, extending a hand toward it.

The set of Ares’ shoulders is stiff. And his grip on my hand is starting to get painful.

The muscles in his jaw twitch.

But his gaze is steely as he takes one breath. And then we cross the threshold together

.

We enter into an office, and for a moment, I almost feel blind, it's so dimly lit. There is only sconce lighting, glowing dimly on the walls. And these walls are lined with bookcases, their shelves filled with books, antiques, pictures. There's even a skull right there.

A window dominates the back wall, and it gives us a glittering view of the dark horizon. And in the center, a huge desk dominates the space. Before it, there are two chairs that look like they cost more than I make in a year.

There, stepping around the desk is a man who fits exactly as I imagined him.

His eyes are dark, the exact same shade as Ares'. His hair is the same shade as well, though this man's is combed back, a look that is old and modern at the same time. But while Ares' face is clean-shaven, this man's jaw is hugged by a neatly trimmed beard.

I wouldn't immediately pick them out as father and son if I didn't know, but I can see it.

"My son," the man says. His tone is calm, his voice doesn't rise. But he sounds pleased, happy. He walks right up to Ares and wraps his arms around him, though it looks more like a power move than a gesture of affection. "Welcome back."

"It's been a minute," Ares says, his voice nearly monotone. He's using so much control right now, I'm exhausted just watching this interaction. "Father, I'd like to introduce you to my fiancée, Lana Kincade."

“Lana,” the man says as he releases Ares and turns to me. His gaze drops down the length of me, and my skin crawls. From what Ares has told me, this man sleeps around. A lot. All with the intent of creating more children who will one day be vampires, just like him. The man steps toward me, and I extend a hand before he can try to hug me. He smirks at my assertiveness but takes my hand, shaking it softly, which actually creeps me the fuck out. “Augustus Lonan. It’s lovely to meet you.”

It takes every ounce of my strength not to yank my hand away when he raises it and presses a kiss to the back of my knuckles. “You as well.”

Lies.

“Come,” Augustus says. He extends a hand to the door and walks out, turning down the hall. I cast one look at Ares, who looks about as ready to snap as I feel, but we make our way down the hall after the man who created him.

Augustus leads the way into a gorgeous living room. A massive fireplace dominates the space, a white marble mantle framing the fixture. Black walls stretch high above, and the millwork detail is impressive. There isn’t one chandelier, but four overhead. Soft leather couches frame the space, and a stupidly white rug is laid out in the middle.

It looks just like the lair of a rich mafia vampire.

“Forgive my curiosity,” Augustus says as he takes a seat on one of the couches. He spreads his arms over the back, taking up space. He crosses one ankle over the opposite knee. “But my son hasn’t given me any details about you. Simply a phone call that he was engaged and he wanted to have a meeting.”

“Ask away,” I say, feigning confidence as Ares and I sink onto the couch opposite him. Ares stretches a hand behind me, draped casually over my shoulders. I cross my

legs, and he rests his free hand on my bare knee. I lace my fingers through his.

“I’ll preface this conversation by letting you know that I’ve looked into you,” Augustus says with no apologies. And my stomach drops for a moment. We’ve prepared for this, I silently remind myself. This is exactly why Ares and I have taken an entire week getting to know one another, briefing on what is to come.

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” I answer. “I’m dying to know if you’ve found anything interesting.”

Augustus raises an eyebrow at that, looking slightly impressed that I’m not freaking the fuck out. “You’re a surprise, Lana Kincade. Not like most of the women in this city. But you are exactly what I might have dared envision for my son.”

“I’ll take the compliment, but you haven’t really answered my question,” I state, raising my own eyebrow.

The man chuckles, and I can see how it wouldn’t be hard for him to convince a slew of women to sleep with him. His eyes dance when he smiles. With danger, but still. They dance. “Well, you were born here in Manhattan. Your parents had a decree of divorcement when you were five years old, just one year after your sister Emmie was born.”

Details. The man has details that even Ares doesn’t know yet. He barely knows my sister died. I haven’t told him her name yet.

“You’re nailing the basics so far,” I goad, knowing I probably shouldn’t. Yet I can’t help it. The man screams predator, and he is exactly the kind of reason why I took my focus into teaching self-defense to women.

The look in his eyes darkens as he recognizes the challenge. “Your grades through

elementary and middle school were exceptional. And then your mother and sister were killed. The police report..." he shakes his head, and my grip on Ares' hand tightens. I hear the faintest growl rumble in his chest. His entire body tightens around me, every motion protective. "Fucking brutal. Can't imagine what finding that would do to a fifteen-year-old."

More details I've yet to share with Ares. And his grip on my knee tightens.

"Fuck up her grades for the rest of high school," I say coolly. I'm not letting Augustus get under my skin. He's testing me right now, and I will not let him make me fail. "Bring on weekly therapy for three years. Give her some brutal nightmares. But you already knew this."

Augustus looks at me, his eyes evaluating me and every word I say, every reaction I give. Finally, he nods. "I commend you for graduating high school, though. I'm sure it wasn't easy. And your father? He must have had quite the strength of character. Losing a daughter like that. I'm sorry you lost him as well."

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right?" I say evenly, though, in reality, I'd like to give this man a quick punch to the throat, a ball-crushing kick to the junk, lay him out face down, and make him bleed all over his white rug.

A woman walks into the room holding a tray of hors d'oeuvres. She sets them on the coffee table in the center of the room. And then reality starts closing in, the literal fact of what these men in this room are. She walks straight to Augustus and offers him her arm.

"You're a gem, Heather," he says with a soft smile. He takes her hand, drawing her closer, and I get half a second view of his fangs lengthening and black veins sprouting from his suddenly glowing red eyes.

Those fangs disappear into her wrist. And Heather goes eerily still. The look in her eyes goes out of focus.

Exactly like I saw at that party where this all began .

Augustus takes eight long pulls, and then he licks over the spot where he bit her, sparing me from having to see any blood.

“Son?” Augustus offers, literally holding the woman’s arm in Ares’ direction.

“I’m good,” Ares says, his tone hard and cold.

“Thank you, Heather,” Augustus says, looking up at the woman as she slowly comes back to herself. “Would you send in some white wine, perhaps?”

“I don’t drink,” I pipe up because there’s not a chance in hell I’m going to let my inhibitions be hindered around this man. “Health nut, remember? The benefits do not outweigh the cons for it to hold any interest for me.”

“Fair enough,” he says, dismissing the poor woman. “You have rave reviews online for your instruction.”

I nod. I’m aware I have a great reputation.

“Yet what I can’t find any trace of is your relationship with my son,” Augustus says, his eyes darkening.

“Have you ever been in love, Mr. Lonan?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him slightly, leaning forward in my seat.

Ares’ grip on my hand tightens slightly, maybe a warning to not push this man too

far.

“Love is relative,” he says, giving me that little smile that makes me want to hurt him. “I’ve loved many, many women in many, many levels of variance.”

I shake my head. “Have you ever had that magnetic pull to a person? Have you ever wanted to keep them a secret, keep them all to yourself, so you don’t have to share an ounce of what you have with the public? Have you ever had them wrap themselves around your soul, altering it into a new version of yourself that you never knew you wanted?”

Augustus studies me with every word I speak. Serious, dark, contemplative. He watches me, his gaze studying every bit of my body language.

But he doesn’t answer me, which gives me my answer.

“When you’ve been fucked over by the world too many times in your life, you don’t really give a damn to invite it into your new, perfect world. I’m happy to keep Ares to myself until the end of fucking days.”

Ares’ hand tightens around mine again, and I swear the heat rising off of him has risen a few degrees.

Guess I can be a good actress when needed.

It helps that all this vile energy is surging through me sitting in the presence of this man.

“You should know better than anyone that I’m careful not to leave a footprint online,” Ares says, speaking up for the first time in so long. “Lana and I started talking online. A dark, bitter soul knows another dark, bitter soul. Lana doesn’t trust

anyone. And I know what this world is like. So, we didn't meet in person for six months. But the moment I laid eyes on her in the real world..."

His eyes lock on mine, and the look in them deepens. In them, I see possession. Claiming. Hunger. Desire. I might be on my A game right now with this show, but Ares still puts me to shame.

"I knew I was going to ask her to marry me right then and there, but I figured I'd better wait a few weeks so she wouldn't run," he continues, studying every inch of my face. The way his words hit me right in the core... I should be embarrassed. "But it all lined up perfectly."

I smile, caressing a hand to his cheek. And it's a problem that my body can't lie. Electricity races through every pathway in my body .

"Congratulations," Augustus says darkly. My contentment pops at his voice. I look back over at him to find his gaze darkened, and something very close to a disgusted sneer is on his lips. "You look very happy."

Look. That word makes me nervous. What if Ares and I aren't as good as I think we are at selling this?

"Have you set a date?" Augustus asks, and my face goes cold.

We haven't discussed that.

"We're thinking May next year," Ares lies smoothly. At least one of us is good on the spot. "But we haven't nailed it down yet. There are a few things to factor in."

"Which are?" Augustus encourages, sounding slightly bored and annoyed.

“Considering what drove us apart before, I thought you and I could talk things through. Now that I’ve found my match,” Ares says, steering the conversation expertly. “We’re hoping for a positive pregnancy test any day.”

Augustus’ eyebrows raise at that, and finally, finally, he looks... happy.

“So,” Ares says, cutting him off from saying anything else. “I thought it high time we smooth things out. I’ve got some ideas for the company I’d really like to discuss.”

A slow smile pulls on Augustus’ lips, and my heart picks up pace.

We’ve done it. I see it written all over his face.

Ares is back in.

“Then let’s talk business,” Augustus says. He rises to his feet, smoothing his sports jacket. “Lana, you’re free to explore the mansion. It’s a historical treasure that should be appreciated. ”

The rest of the night is between me and my son , the message comes across clear as day.

Ares leans over and presses a kiss to my temple. I offer him a tiny smile as he stands, watching the gorgeous view as he walks away with his father back toward the office.

I lean forward and take one of the hors d’oeuvres left on the coffee table. Of course, it’s one of the best tasting things I’ve ever put in my mouth. I can only imagine how much Augustus pays his cook. I take another, knowing I’m killing a bit of time. Even though Augustus gave me the invitation to look around the mansion, I don’t need to look suspicious by immediately looking through every drawer and under every surface for hidden door buttons.

Ares was at the Red party because he wanted to figure out why his father was hosting and holding the parties. Augustus is in real estate. He's not an entertainer. He's not trying to draw in clients by hosting parties where vampires feed on humans who, for the most part, don't know what the purpose of the Red parties is.

Ares wanted to know why his father was doing this.

And my best friend had disappeared after attending one of those Red parties.

I climb to my feet and circle the living room, looking over every surface, every nook, every doorway.

Do I expect Augustus is hiding Ophelia in some dark corner of his home? No. This man is smart, conniving even. The feeling of darkness that comes right off the man is enough to set my teeth on edge. But there's no way he'd be so lazy as to take someone to his own home.

All this, operating under the assumption Ophelia is even still alive .

I don't know what sick shit Augustus or his people are into.

But I'm going to hold out hope that Ophelia is fine until I see evidence to the contrary.

I wander into a grand dining room that even puts the one at Hunt House to shame. There's a table that could host an entire boardroom of people. The detail work in the ceiling and rising the wall is dizzying. It's nearly like a modern cathedral in here. Along the walls, there are paintings, photographs of old buildings around Manhattan, and there's even a set of swords on display.

Beyond the dining room, I find a kitchen. But with the chef and his assistant busy at

work preparing our dinner, I don't get the chance to explore the place. Not much lost. It looks like a commercial kitchen. A beautiful one, but still sterile.

Down the hall, beyond Augustus' office, is a guest bedroom with an attached bathroom. Beyond screaming wealth, there's nothing of note. So, I take the stairs, rising up another floor.

Here, I find four other bedrooms, all of them look completely unoccupied. They look almost exactly like the one on the floor below. And I find no evidence of secret spaces or hidden doors. Again, not that I'm truly expecting to, but these are actual damn vampires I'm dealing with.

At the very end of the hall, I find the last bedroom. And I might not have the keen sense of smell Ares does, but even I can detect the scent of Augustus in here. Like money and coal and pine.

Looking over my shoulder, I find the floor still empty. I step inside.

The bed is made. The carpet has recently been vacuumed. The housekeeper has rid every surface of dust. His nightstand is free of any clutter, and even though I'm dying to look through it, I'm not that stupid. We have to play this carefully, and if I go jumping in too suspiciously, it will blow everything.

The only thing of note is that on one of the bookcases, there is a line of nine picture frames. Ares occupies the first, a picture of him when he was just a teenager. I smile as I walk up to it. He looks so, so much younger and so much more innocent. His neck is completely free of tattoos. And while his ears were already pierced, the hoop in his nose is missing. But there's something different about his eyes. They seem heavier. Darker.

I remember that this would be the time when Augustus was training Ares to be a part

of the company when he was grooming Ares to be his predecessor, his little clone.

And I realize the miracle it is that Ares is the man he is, instead of just a younger version of his father.

My eyes slide over to the next frame, and I see another boy, one who looks to be about sixteen years old. He shares similar features to Ares, but his hair is much lighter, his eyes blue instead of hazel.

Beside the boy, there is a picture of a girl who looks around thirteen. Another girl after her, maybe twelve or so.

Five boys. Four girls.

Cold goosebumps flash over my skin when I realize these are all Augustus' children.

And Ares and I are pretending to be trying for a baby, a child to add to this sick brood of power and influence on the city. Augustus is trying to increase the vampire population in the city to build sway .

To what end? The thought makes me shiver.

I turn, and finding nothing else of note in Augustus' room, I wander back to the stairs. I ascend them to a door that lets out onto a gorgeous rooftop deck. And wonder and beauty prickle along my skin.

The view over the river is beautiful. Lights dance and sparkle in the dark. Behind me, the city rises to overwhelmingly tall heights. There are so many recognizable monuments.

Twinkle lights are strung along the railing. Centered in the massive space is a dining

table that's surprisingly intimate and cozy, with seating for only six. But I wander to the two seats set up near the railing, looking out over the river. I rub my hands over my arms, chilled in the mid-June air, considering my dress is sleeveless.

Where are you, Ophelia? I silently wonder as I stare out at the darkness. Shit. I hope she's okay. I pray she's alive.

After my mother and sister were killed, my whole life became really small. I had to keep it simple. Because no one understood. I was just the sad girl with a sad story. So, I didn't have many friends. No one could carry the weight that was Lana Kincade's reality. And I didn't blame them. But it left me lonely.

But then there was Ophelia. I recognized something in her eyes when she walked into my self-defense class that evening eighteen months ago. She'd been through something dark and heavy, too. She was angry like I was. She was cold, like I was. And she didn't give a damn if people didn't like her, just like me.

After class, I asked her if she wanted to go out for pasta. We'd talked for three hours that night, laughing, getting angry, talking shit. And it was the first time I'd shared a genuine connection with someone who wasn't my own blood.

It would have been kind of nice if we were gay. Loving Ophelia was instant. But I'd never been into women, and though Ophelia admitted she'd experimented, she preferred men when it came to romance.

She became the most important person in the world to me.

And then five weeks ago, nothing.

Not a word.

Not a text.

Not a trace of where she'd gone.

I'm going to find you, I silently promise her.

My head jerks toward the door when I hear a slight squeal. Augustus emerges first, followed by Ares.

I try to read his expression to gauge the conversation they've just had. But Ares' face is carefully composed, as neutral as it could get.

He crosses to where I sit and leans over me. And there's that heat in his eyes as he slides his hand around the front of my throat, tipping my head up. He kisses me upside down. Heat sears me where his hand caresses me softly. The breath is lost in my lungs as his mouth molds to mine. And I melt when his tongue asks for permission to enter. And I grant it. He invades my mouth, just slightly, teasing, tempting.

I answer him with vigor that has very little to do with Augustus watching. Every drop of blood in my body screams for Ares, and my body acts without permission. My brain would grant it anyway.

And shit. I know I'm in trouble.

Because this is supposed to be fake .

But the way I like this, the way I react, the way I fantasize about these moments, none of it feels fake.

Ares backs away just slightly, running his thumb over the side of my throat. "Fuck,

you taste like nirvana.”

Buried six feet deep. Here lies Lana’s soul, snatched from her chest on the fourteenth of June by a man with tattooed hands and chaos in his eyes.

“Dinner is served,” another voice calls from the center of the deck. I glance over to see the chef and the assistant setting numerous dishes on the table.

Ares takes my hand, holding my eyes with something that looks a bit like a question. But he leads me to that table, pulling my chair out for me as I sit.

“I don’t wish to put pressure on you, Lana,” Augustus says as he begins dishing his food. “But as a part of this company, Ares will be expected at a number of events. It certainly leaves the right impression if his fiancée is in attendance with him.”

“I’ve seen the way other women look at my future husband,” I say as I accept the glass Ares pours for me. “I fully admit that I am the jealous type. So, if he’s going to be where others can lay eyes on him, I’ll be there too, rest assured, Mr. Lonan.”

Beneath the table, Ares’ hand comes to my thigh, smoothing it over my skin in a way that sends a shock straight to the core of my feminine body.

Augustus’ eyes fix on where Ares’ hand disappears under the table. And I think, for the first time, we’ve caught him at a loss for words.

“At least you seem able to hold your own,” he finally says, taking a drink from his own glass.

Dinner passes with very little real conversation. Mentions of the work to come for Ares. Comments about our future children. Thinly veiled digs at my humble beginnings.

But it's nothing I can't handle.

Finally, at the end of the meal, I lay my napkin on the table. "I need to use the rest room."

"Then my son can help clear the table with me," Augustus says, standing and beginning to stack the plates, much to my surprise.

I simply give a nod and catch Ares' eyes for a moment. He's every bit on guard as he was earlier, but he tips his chin up at me, and I cross to the door.

I find the only publicly accessible bathroom on the top floor. I take care of business, wash my hands, and observe myself in the mirror.

I'm pretty damn proud of myself for holding up the way I have. I'm facing down a damn vampire. One who is most definitely involved in shady things. One his own son described as borderline mafia status. And that determination in my eyes is one of my greatest accomplishments in life.

Just a few more minutes , I internally tell myself.

I twist open the doorknob, but before I can step out, Augustus fills the doorway.

He takes a step forward, forcing me to take a step back. With his dark eyes fixed on me, he crosses the threshold and pulls the door to the bathroom closed behind him, locking it.

"What—"

"You're an impressive woman, Lana Kincade," he cuts me off, his gaze absolutely focused. He's studying my face, memorizing every line and plane. "I've been pushing

you the entire night, and you haven't tripped once."

He takes a step forward, and I take a matching one back .

"My son is impressive in his own right," Augustus says, looking me over like a predator. "But you need to understand the difference between rich and wealthy. The financial difference between my son and myself is vast. The power and influence we hold on this city isn't even a comparison."

"Why are you saying these things, Mr. Lonan?" I ask. My throat feels tight. Sweat breaks out over my skin.

Any normal man and I'd be confident I could fend him off. Enough to get myself out of this tight situation.

But Augustus is a damn vampire.

He could take me straight to the floor. Pin me down. Do whatever he wants to me. Or he could just sink his fangs into my neck and drain me dry. Dead. No more Lana.

"Because I want to make you a different kind of proposal, Lana," Augustus says. He takes another step forward, and finally, I run out of space. With a step backward, my ass hits the edge of the counter. "I have no interest in marriage like my son. But bear me another child, and I will set you up for the rest of your mortal life. Here in this house, preferably. But anywhere you like. So long as you show up to those events I mentioned and stay on my arm. Spit that venom you're so good at. I can make you a very comfortable woman, Lana."

My mouth opens, but no words come out.

The fuck?

Augustus wants me to bear him a child? In exchange for being, what? His kept girlfriend? His incubator put up in a shiny tower?

I might be at a physical disadvantage here, but I'd bet there's one aspect where a vampire shares weakness with a human man .

My hand darts forward, and through his pants, I fist Augustus' balls, giving them a vice-like squeeze and twist.

He lets out a wheeze and caves forward, catching himself with a flung-out hand on the counter.

"That would be a fuck no ," I say through clenched teeth. "And you look at me like that again, you proposition me once more, you insult your son like this ever again, and I'll make sure you never make another single heir."

For good measure, I squeeze harder, letting my fingernails dig into his tender flesh.

I shove past him, leaving him hunched over at the counter, unlock the door, and step out into the hall.

Just then, Ares walks up the stairs, on his way to get another load of dishes.

"It's time to go, darling," I say, catching his hand and turning him as I head down the stairs.

Ares' brow furrows at me for a second, and he casts a look over his shoulder, but Augustus, clutching his genitals in pain, is just out of his sight.

He lets me drag him down the stairs and doesn't say a word as we walk out the front door. There, the black SUV waits, Billings in the driver's seat. He scrambles out,

opening the door for the two of us.

“What happened?” Ares asks the moment we’re seated and pull out onto the road.

I grit my teeth, shaking my head, as I look out at the dark night. “Your father tried to proposition me,” I say without looking at him. “Asked me to be his arm candy. Give him another child. Said he’d make me very comfortable in exchange. ”

“Shit,” Ares growls, his hand going to the handle of the door, every muscle in his body coiling.

My hand flies out, laying it on Ares’ arm. “Don’t,” I say firmly. “It was slimy, but I took care of it.”

Ares’ dark eyes slide back over to meet mine. “Took care of it. You’re capable, Lana, but Augustus is?—”

“Vampire men have the same weak spot as human men,” I cut him off, a smirk curling my lips.

“You...” Ares struggles for words. “Damn.” A chuckle rumbles in his chest, and in the dark, his teeth glow white as snow as the second smile I’ve ever seen takes over his face. “I couldn’t have dreamed you up more perfect if I tried, Vengeance.”

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

“ I ’m meeting with my father again this afternoon,” Ares says as we walk to the doors of a beautiful, modern building. I take it all in, making sure to pay attention to its location, what the lobby is like, what button he presses. Floor 39. “I’ll be getting access to his files again. I’ll start digging as soon as I get any kind of privacy with them.”

We step into the elevator once it opens, followed by five others. “What do you think happened to Ophelia?” I ask, despite the crowd surrounding us. Everyone is holding their own conversation or has their necks bent down to stare at their phones.

Ares shakes his head. “Those parties are all about food and chasing the numb bliss,” he says, speaking in light code for the sake of any listening ears. “And there’s always a back door. I watched at that party you were at, and there were three people who went with the bouncers through that door and didn’t come back out. I was planning to go check out what was behind that door, but you put a twist on the night. ”

Dammit. Maybe if I’d shown up later that night, Ares would have gotten his chance to go see what happened beyond that door.

“Do you think she’s...” I trail off, unable to vocalize the word. Words matter, and I won’t speak those ones aloud.

Ares’ hand slips into mine. I look over to see him staring at me. “I hope not. Augustus might get away with a lot of shit, but bodies are inconvenient.”

He speaks low, low enough I don’t think anyone else can hear his words.

I swallow once and nod. But I'm not sure if my imagination thinks the alternatives are any better. When pretty, young women go missing, there is almost always a sad, terrible story attached.

The elevator dings and half the crowd gets off, two more people replacing them. We make two more stops before, finally, the doors open on floor 39.

It's all sleek and modern. There is a sign on the wall displaying business names and numbers. Hunt Enterprises is listed as 3903. Ares steps forward, my hand still clasped in his, and hooks to the right. He pushes a door open, and there, just inside, is a woman with salt and pepper hair. But she doesn't look old, just prematurely gray. She wears a smart button-up shirt, and she looks up from her paperwork when we walk in.

"Lana, this is Pat," Ares introduces. "She runs the office, keeps us all on our toes. Pat, this is my fiancée, Lana."

"Fiancée?" she asks with a doubtful raised eyebrow.

"As of eight days ago," I say, flashing a proud smile. I hold up my left hand, displaying the massive rock on my finger for show.

Pat looks from me to Ares, not buying it.

"Haven't you wondered why you've hardly seen me the last few weeks?" Ares says simply, and he turns and walks farther into the office.

"Down that way is our accountant, Tom Dee," Ares says, waving a hand down the hall. "And our property manager, Lydia. Our attorney Nadia works from home part-time, I don't think she's in today."

Weird. Ares has this whole team of people who work for him. It's a constantly

moving, huge operation. Yet I've hardly seen the evidence of any of it outside the office.

Some are good at separating their work and home life. Guess Ares is an expert.

Straight back, Ares aims us toward a door. Sitting in a chair just outside of it is a man. He stands the moment we walk up.

"Mr. Hunt," he says, extending a hand. "I'm excited to get started today."

"Just Ares," my fake fiancé says as he shakes the man's hand. Ares pushes the door open, revealing an office that couldn't be more different from his father's. It's all modern and crisp. And there's almost nothing personal in it. Very few books. No stacks of stuff. Except there on his desk. One framed photo of me.

Damn. I blush hard.

I don't even know when he took it. Or when he had time to frame it and bring it here. I feel like we've been together almost nonstop.

Ares rounds his desk and sinks down into the seat. There are three seats directly across from the desk, so I sink into one, the man takes another.

"Lana, this is James St. Claire, my new property executor," Ares says as he leans back in his seat. "James, my fiancée, Lana."

"Pleasure to meet you," he says, angling toward me and shaking my hand. And there's something a little too... concrete about his grip.

"He's like you?" I direct my question at Ares without looking away from James.

“Yes,” Ares answers. “So is Tom Dee. Pat knows about us. Lydia and Nadia don’t know, though.”

Well, that sounds complicated.

I look James over, taking note of this man who’s about to become a big part of Ares’ life. I’d guess he’s about thirty, maybe a tad younger. He has a strong jawline, and there’s something a tad mischievous in his eyes. He sports sandy brown hair and green eyes that are almost yellow. I’ve never seen anyone with eyes like his.

“This whole reality of vampires is still kind of blowing my mind,” I admit since the door is closed. “If the immortality thing is real, Ares is just a baby. How long have you been what you are?”

“Direct,” James notes, looking at Ares with a grin. “I like it. I Resurrected at twenty-seven, but I’ve been that age for nineteen years.”

Still not that impressively old. I’m surprised James is only one year older than Ares. He seems older for some reason. Though, I suppose he should be forty-six, so maybe it’s just that.

“Where are you from originally?” I ask, but I’m not sure why I feel such a need to quiz him.

“I was born in Los Angeles, but I never stayed put anywhere long,” he answers. He leans back in his seat, crossing one ankle over the opposite knee. “My mother didn’t like my dad much, so I lived with her until the booze took her down. I lived with my father after that, who traveled constantly. Got sick of that when I became an adult. Lived in Europe for a few years until that got old. Been settling in Manhattan for the last three years. I like it here. Think I’ll stay for a good long while.”

“Your references were all raves,” Ares points out. “Your portfolio wasn’t anything to ignore. I think you’re a good fit for Hunt Enterprises.”

“Thank you, sir,” James says, which sounds weird, considering they look so close in age. “I look forward to getting started.”

Ares nods, and his eyes slide over to me. “I’ll see you at dinner, kitten?”

My duty here is done. I nod and stand. And because we have to sell this show to everyone in our lives, I step forward. I lay my hand on Ares’ chest and lean in. My lips find his, something soft and tempting in the lightest touch.

His fingers lace into my hair, and he draws me closer, the kiss turning slightly more demanding.

“See you at dinner,” I say, my voice coming out slightly raspy.

Ares nods, holding my gaze, and he watches as I turn and head to the door.

“Nice to meet you,” James says again, and I find him fully blushed, looking slightly embarrassed and uncomfortable to be in the same room as me and Ares.

“You too,” I say with a smirk, feeling smug for no credible reason. I let my hips sway as I cross to the door.

“Billings is waiting downstairs for you,” Ares says. I look back at him to see the most adorable smile on his lips, though it looks like he’s trying to fight it. He brushes a thumb over his bottom lip.

“Thanks, darling,” I say, winking as I walk out.

“You know everything?” Pat surprises me by asking as I walk past her desk to the exit. There’s a challenge to her tone, one that tells me she doesn’t think I do, and she’s feeling sassy about it.

“I think so, all the important, fanged parts anyway,” I say, giving her a wink as well before I let myself out of the office.

When I walk back out, Billings is indeed waiting at the curb for me. I climb in and give him the address of the gym.

It takes us a good twenty-five minutes to get there with the current traffic. With nearly two million people on this island, which is only twenty-two square miles, congestion is constant. But I love it. I can’t imagine living anywhere else. I love the chaos. That there’s always something to do, somewhere to be. I love the diversity of people and the endless variety of food options. I love the wonder of the city because that’s what it is. A modern miracle. That humans built all of this. Such tiny little creatures creating such massive structures.

Finally, Billings pulls into the parking garage behind the gym.

“I’m not really sure how long I’ll be,” I say as I pull out my cell. “Should I just call you when I’m nearly done?”

“I work exclusively for Ares,” Billings says, shaking his head. “Mr. Hunt doesn’t have anywhere to be any time soon. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“Thank you,” I say, truly appreciative yet shocked by that revelation. Billings drives us a total of maybe an hour a day. And this is his only gig?

I don’t get people with money. I can’t imagine having that much extra of it.

I climb out of the SUV and head around to the front of the building. That familiar sense of home mixed with hurt fills my chest as I take in the old brick structure. This is the place I came to after the worst day of my life. After I lost the most beautiful woman in the world, the one who always took the time to truly listen. And the sister who could be such a pest but always made me feel important because she looked up to me. And then it was my refuge. Where I could work out all of my anger and grief. Where Dad was always there. Where we cried together. Where we tried to hold each other together.

And then it was taken from me.

With a steadying breath, I push open the doors and walk inside.

But where it should be busy and loud, it's quiet and damn near empty.

My brows furrowed, I wander in. There's one of the old regulars on a bag at the far end of the gym. But both rings are empty. The classroom doesn't reveal anyone inside. I turn down the hall and filled with nervous dread, I knock on Tate's door.

When no one answers, I push the door open.

And find it completely empty.

Nothing on the desk. The shelves are totally cleared out. No computer. No scheduling calendar on the wall.

Every trace of Tate is gone.

"Thought I heard someone walk in."

I jump about three feet, and my heart relocates to my throat as I turn around and find

Garrett standing in the hall.

“Just me,” he chuckles, holding his hands up.

“What’s going on?” I question, my brows furrowing. “Where is everyone? Where’s Tate?”

“You don’t know?” he says, arching an eyebrow at me .

I shake my head, feeling more confused by the second.

“That tatted guy you walked in here with last week,” Garrett begins. “Came in here early one morning. Made Tate an offer he couldn’t refuse. The bastard wasn’t happy about it. He really doesn’t like whoever the hell that guy is. But when you make that kind of offer...”

“Ares bought the gym?” I gape.

Garrett nods. “Told Tate to be the fuck out of here by the end of the day, the apartment included. Been a little chaotic in here ever since, still trying to figure out how to get things rolling forward again.”

“Who...” I stutter, at a loss for words. “Who’s running the place then?”

Garrett sighs, running a hand through his messy gray hair. “You said his name is Ares?” he asks. I nod. “Well, Ares asked me if I thought I could run it like your dad used to. When I told him I didn’t want to, he asked if I knew anyone who might want the job until you’re ready to step in.”

Until I’m ready. Fuck.

We talked about it one day, what I had wanted for my future. I'd told him I wanted to run the gym, just like my dad.

And Ares went and bought it back from the bastard that snaked it out from under me.

"You give him anyone?" I ask, my words coming out a little rough. My head is spinning.

"Larry," he answers, smiling, because he knows exactly how I'll react.

"Larry is coming back?" I say loudly, excitement sparking into my tone.

Garrett nods.

Larry ran the gym with my father for eight years. He left a year before my dad died, moving upstate to take care of his aging mother. He's got to be in his sixties now. But he and my father were two sides of the same coin.

I couldn't imagine a better situation.

"It's temporary, and Larry knows it," Garrett continues with a satisfied smile on his lips. "He's moving into his new place today, and he'll be diving in tomorrow. But Ares insisted the apartment stay open for you, for whenever you want it."

My throat tightens, and something at the back of my eyes stings.

I live with Ares now, in a gorgeous apartment on Central Park.

But I told Ares what this place means to me. My home.

And he's bought it and is holding it for me.

“Looks like you picked a winner,” Garrett says with a wink. “I got to get back to it. But it’s good to see you, Lana. You coming back to work soon?”

“Hopefully next week,” I say, though I don’t know if that’s realistic or not.

“Good,” Garrett says as he wanders down the hall. “Your students are getting anxious. The ladies might like looking at Josh, but he scares most of them.”

I chuckle. Josh is the other instructor here, just part-time. He is indeed something to look at, even if he is in his mid-forties, but he is intimidating. I know exactly what Garrett is talking about.

“Thanks for always being here, Garrett,” I say as I stop in front of the doors.

“It’s home,” he says with a shrug. “I think we’re all just pretty damn happy that jackhole Tate is gone. Tell Ares thank you for me for that one.”

“I will,” I chuckle. I wrap my arms around him in a quick hug. “See you soon.”

“Bye, Lana,” he calls as he wanders back over to his client, the only other person in the building currently.

I shake my head as I step outside. I glance up at the building as I walk out. This isn’t a nice part of town. This isn’t a big building. It needs some work, and it’s run down.

But it means everything to me.

And Ares went and bought it for me.

That’s not the kind of thoughtful thing a fake fiancé is supposed to do.

And it's not going to help me in keeping my heart guarded. Because this is supposed to be transactional between me and him. A way for both of us to get what we want.

But the line is starting to look really, really blurry to me.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

I walk into the building from a morning run through Central Park. Which might have been a mistake. With how muggy it was out there, I should have just stuck with the treadmill. But with this kind of front door access, how could I not every now and then?

“Mail is here, Miss Kincade,” a voice calls out as I cross the lobby. I look over my shoulder to find Laz walking over, a stack of mail extended in his hand.

“Thank you,” I say, still catching my breath. I take it and step into the elevator.

It’s mostly junk mail. What looks like a credit card statement for Ares. I am so, so tempted to open it and see just how much money he spends every month, but that’s stepping over the line. There’s a cell phone upgrade offer for me. But it’s the silky, golden envelope with just the names Ares and Lana written on it that draws my attention.

It does have my name on it, I reason as I step off the elevator and walk down the hall. I use my keys to open the door and lock it again behind me. Setting all the other mail on the counter, I slip my finger under the flap of the golden envelope.

You are formally invited to the New York City Baron’s Solstice Ball , it says in an elegant script. I don’t know what the address is, but I’m sure it’s something high-end. The date is three days away, and the start time is, of course, midnight. Attire: black tie.

Let those formal events Augustus mentioned commence.

I snap a picture of the invitation and text it to Ares. Just how formal are we talking? I send along with the image.

Formal, his response comes through almost immediately. I'm having Billings pick you up in an hour. Was there anything from the credit card company with the mail?

Yes , I answer him, my brow furrowing.

Open it.

So, he wants to brag, I think to myself as I reach for the white envelope. I tear it open and pull out the pages.

Only it isn't a statement. It's a brand-new black card. And it has my name printed on it.

What the fuck is this? I fire off.

I know you said money is a touchy subject, but I can't ask you to pay for shit you wouldn't normally be buying , he answers me. Don't make it more of a thing than it is. Take it with you. Billings knows where you're going.

Okay, Augustus , I send off, both amused and annoyed.

Don't ever call me that again, Lana. This is your only warning.

My face heats as I blush.

That really was rude of me. Ares might have money, and he might be sending me on a shopping trip, but he's nothing like his shark of a father.

Sorry , I type out. That was a dick thing of me to say. Thank you.

He simply likes my message.

I'm not sure how to interpret that, but I don't let myself overthink it. I peel the card off the page and activate it. And then I dash into the shower to hurry and get ready.

Exactly an hour later, I walk out to the curb just as Billings pulls up. He opens the door for me, and I climb in. And he sets off down the road. Just fifteen minutes later, we stop in front of a shop with a name so fancy, I don't even know how to pronounce it.

But as I walk into the shop alone, I swallow once. Ophelia should be with me. She loved an excuse to get dressed up. Loves , I correct myself.

I internally chide myself for thinking in past tense.

I'm going to find her. It's taking forever. And currently, with no leads, it's easy to feel hopeless. But I'm going to find her.

But damn. I really need more friends. Who wants to shop for a fancy event by themselves?

I pull out my phone and scroll through my contacts. When I reach her name, I click it and hold the device to my ear.

"Lana," Clementine's friendly voice comes through. "It's good to hear from you."

"Hey," I greet her. "Any chance you're free. Like, right now?"

"Everything alright?" she asks, her tone shifting to worried.

“I’m fine,” I reassure her. “Ares has just sent me on a shopping hunt, and I feel pretty fucking lame doing it by myself. ”

“I am so glad you called,” she simply says and asks for my location. She assures me she will be here in fifteen minutes, and we end the call.

I would have called Ares’ sister, Florence, but as the head of a pharmaceutical company, there’s no way she won’t be busy at work at eleven in the morning on a Tuesday. But Clementine, her wife, is the sweetest and calmest person I’ve ever met.

Twenty-five minutes later, because she does everything with understated flare, Clementine glides through the front doors, a serious set of sunglasses perched on her face.

And it’s the perfect afternoon. Trying on dresses that cost over ten grand a piece. Rejecting the ones we hate. Complimenting one another. Twirling before the mirror. And I don’t know if the shop workers know who we are or if they can just smell the money, but they bend over backward for us.

And a huge part of me hates it. Acting like a spoiled, rich girlfriend. Looking like one.

But there’s another part, one that appreciates having someone wait on me for a change. That feels like I’ve let out a breath at being taken care of for the first time in forever and ever.

By the end of the afternoon, Clementine stands beside me wearing a deep blue dress that lays across her chest and stomach in folds before fanning out around her. In contrast with her skin, she’s radiant. And I stand there in a golden dress that is dangerously close to the same shade as my skin. I damn near look naked. It hugs my chest with a severe pattern that’s sharp and pointed. And then it looks damn near

painted on my waist. It hugs my ass and hips before gathering into a gorgeous bustle and then cascading down to the floor.

I admire my profile in the mirror. I made myself not look at the price tags. If Ares sent me here, he's aware of how much these creations cost.

"That dress was made for you," Clementine compliments. She looks me up and down, her raised brows a testament to what she's saying.

"You think Ares will approve?"

What the fuck?

Since when have I ever cared if a man would approve ?

"I think the best approval is in how long it takes for the dress to land on the floor," Clementine says with a smirk. "I'd wager that just might happen before you can step foot out the door."

My cheeks heat as I look at my reflection.

And I know I can't lie to myself. It's exactly what I've been fantasizing about since I put the dress on.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

I dig through Ophelia's social media profiles. Every single account she has, even the secret spam ones. When you know someone well enough, it isn't hard to find what they try to keep private. Not that she's keeping anything particularly interesting a secret. But there are no posts since she went missing.

I make a call to her landlord. He hasn't seen Ophelia, and he lets me know that she has two weeks to get caught up on her past due rent, or she'll be evicted.

I use the credit card Ares gave me to pay for her rent. It just about kills me, the guilt eating me alive. But I vow to pay him back for it. Taking this time off work is making a massive hit on my bank account, but it won't be that way for forever.

I call Ophelia's job at the law firm, and the secretary is the only one I get ahold of. He hasn't seen Ophelia in weeks either, and she didn't give them any notice that she was leaving. She's already been replaced at work.

Her email address isn't all that difficult to break into. Piss0ff111! is her password, one I've seen her enter before. There's nothing out of the ordinary, and she hasn't sent any emails since she disappeared.

Lastly, I call the police department, where I filed the missing person's report. I'm put on hold for two minutes while they connect me with the assigned detective.

"You calling about Miss Ophelia Bennett?" a gruff man with an older sounding voice finally connects.

"Yes," I answer desperately. "I was wondering if there were any new leads on her?"

“Not much, but we finally got the footage from the bank across the street from where you said she was last known to be,” he answers, which shocks the hell out of me. After so many dead ends today, to have something, anything, is the world. “She did go into that building around eleven-thirty, alone. The footage is kind of grainy, and there was only one window that wasn’t blocked, so I couldn’t get any footage of her inside. But I watched the footage for twenty-four hours forward from when she entered. Miss Bennett didn’t walk out. At least out the front door.”

“Is there a back exit to the building?” I ask, feeling desperate.

“I haven’t gotten ahold of the owner of the facility yet to go in and investigate that. I can call you back as soon as I get an answer.”

“Do you know who owns the space?” I ask, reaching across the kitchen island for a pen laying there and the golden envelope from the ball invitation.

“Eh,” he draws out, and I hear the tapping of a keyboard. “Looks like Wind Up Properties Enterprise. ”

“You happen to have a phone number?” I ask, my heart beating very fast.

“Good luck,” he says after he rattles it off. “Usually, you leave voicemails stating you’re with the police department, you get a pretty quick callback, but not this one.”

“Thank you so much,” I say, feeling hope surging for the first time. It’s something. The first something I’ve got. “Please, call me as soon as you find out anything else.”

“I will,” he promises, sounding more caring than I’d expect. “I’m glad Miss Bennett has someone like you who cares about her. Too many people just drop off the face of the planet with no one to go looking for them.”

“That’s what best friends do,” I reply. The detective gives an affirming noise and ends the call.

Just as I lay my phone on the counter, the front door opens, which makes me jump about three inches in my seat, and my heart takes up residence at the base of my throat.

“Everything okay?” Ares asks as he walks in. His motorcycle helmet is tucked under his arm and, as he walks in, he sets it on the island.

“I got ahold of the detective that’s working Ophelia’s case,” I say, an unsure smile trying to crack on my lips. I relay the information I just received. “Now I know she didn’t leave the space the way she came in. And that’s not normal.”

“No,” Ares agrees as he lays his hands on the countertop. “It’s not. You don’t leave out a back door for no innocuous reason.”

I shake my head. “But at least I also know she wasn’t carried out the front door in a body bag either,” I say, hating the formation of the words but relieved by them. “Are you familiar with Wind Up Properties? ”

“The name sounds familiar, but that only means they’re not a particularly heavy player in the city,” Ares says. Which tells me he is quite familiar with all the heavy hitters in New York City. “We could do a walk by. And I happen to be very good at getting through locked doors.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. But at the look in his eyes, he knows as well as I do that we might not ever hear back from the detective that he’s been granted access to see if there’s a back exit.

“Let’s do it,” I say. And a familiar darkness creeps into my chest. One that feels a

little reckless. A little dangerous. A little like the fuck it version of myself I was as a traumatized teenager.

Ares nods. “I’ve been invited to a meeting tonight. We’ll go by on the way to that.”

“What kind of meeting?” I question, my brows furrowed.

“One Augustus invited me to,” Ares says, his tone darkening in depth. “One with other prominent vampires in the city.”

“Oh shit,” I say, my brows rising. “Is that what it meant by the New York City Barons?”

“That’s what I’m starting to wonder,” Ares agrees. “But in my digging, I haven’t found anything online about what that means or who these people are. No surprise there. It’s not the best idea for vampires to have an online footprint.”

Which seems to remind him. Ares crosses to the fridge. And there, at the back, is a box. From that box, he removes what I realize is a bag of donated blood.

The sight of it makes my stomach turn, and I look away just before Ares bites into it. There’s the sound of gulping as he drains it .

My eyes squeeze closed. I can never forget the reality of what Ares is. Of what it means.

Blood. It means he drinks blood. Human blood.

It’s all too easy to forget that vampire isn’t an arbitrary term. That Ares doesn’t just look like a bad boy. He literally has fangs and inhuman strength, wicked speed.

Ares is exceptionally dangerous.

I can't ever forget that.

"I..." my voice shakes as I try to vocalize the question burning my chest right now. "I've seen other vampires feed directly from people. But you just grabbed that like it was a Capri Sun. Do you..."

"I rarely feed from a live person," Ares says. As I look into his eyes, I think he doesn't like me asking about this, though he doesn't seem upset about it. "I've seen some pretty shitty behavior from other vampires. I just don't want to be one of the assholes. So, I've been getting a bagged supply since I got back into the city."

I nod, my eyes falling away. At least he's a vampire with a conscience.

I hear the sound of something dropping into the trash and look up. Ares closes the cabinet that hides the trash and turns back around, his expression gathered, calm, focused. "I want you at that meeting." It takes my brain a second to remember what we'd been talking about before I asked the uncomfortable question. "You're smart, Vengeance. Between the two of us, I know we can glean something we can use."

His compliments warm my chest. Even if the thought of being in a room with powerful vampires makes me squirm. "You think they'll let me in the room? This doesn't exactly sound like a meeting they let little human women in on. "

He lifts his chin. "You're Lana fucking Kincade, remember? There isn't a chair at any table in this city you don't belong at."

Shit. The things this man does for my confidence. For my feelings of self-worth. I've always been the poor girl who lived in a dumpy apartment and then the tiny little space above the sweaty smelling gym. The girl with the angry attitude and the grief

trauma. The one who struggled to make ends meet. The one who had nothing and nobody.

But Ares Hunt, billionaire, businessman, the tattooed bad boy with the body of a god, tells me I am heir of the city.

“Okay,” I agree, trying to absorb his confidence through osmosis. “How soon should we leave?”

“As soon as you’re ready,” he answers. “We just need a quick outfit change.” With a smirk, he steps around the island and heads toward our bedroom.

Twenty minutes later, I’m dressed in these incredible, flowy black pants and a white top that is very nearly just a corset. I pull my hair up into a sexy but powerful updo. I don a pair of red heels.

But the moment Ares steps out of the closet, my heart stops. No, utterly disappears from my chest.

I’ve never seen Ares wear anything but casual clothes. T-shirts, jackets, jeans, the like.

Ares in an all-black suit will be my undoing.

Ares in a suit perfectly tailored to fit his god-like body will be the death of me.

“Like what you see, Vengeance?” his voice is a purr.

“Oh shit.” I didn’t mean the words to come out, but the very pleased look on Ares’ face tells me they escaped.

“Right back at you, kitten,” he says as he walks by me, pausing just slightly, his lips only a breath from the shell of my ear.

My entire body breaks out in goosebumps.

Twenty minutes later, Billings stops the SUV half a block down the street. From here, Ares and I get out and walk. It’s not exactly quiet, but New York City never is. But it is eleven-thirty on a Wednesday. There’s at least not hordes of people out.

“This is it,” I say as my eyes lock in on the doors. There’s nothing exceptional about this place. It’s an old building, but I wouldn’t call it particularly charming. There’s an old wood door that isn’t necessarily classic. There’s one window that faces the street, but it’s small and kind of dingy. Considering the lights are off, it’s safe to say there are no events happening right now.

Ares walks straight to the door and tests it. Of course, it’s locked. But he pulls a set of tools from his pocket, and in literally no more than two seconds, he swings the door open.

“I don’t know why I kind of just expected you to just bust off the doorknob or something,” I admit, keeping my voice quiet as I follow Ares inside.

“Signs of breaking and entering don’t do anyone any good,” he says as he looks around. I can’t really see anything, the space is too dark. But Ares strides in, confident, knowing the exact direction he’s headed. So, putting my hands out in front of me while my eyes try to adjust, I cautiously step forward.

“There’s nothing special about this place,” Ares says somewhere in the dark. “Just like the place we met. Bar. Lounging. Bathroom. Augustus owns a hundred places that are better than this. So why the hell is he renting a place like this?”

It's questionable to the thousandth degree.

Finally, my eyes start to adjust to the nearly non-existent light. He's right. There's a bar. There are five different couches set up throughout the space, a handful of other chairs. There's a disco ball hanging from the ceiling. I see a clearly marked sign for a bathroom.

"Back door," I point out, even as Ares takes a step toward it. I glance over my shoulder, checking we're not about to get caught. But the door remains shut, and the voices outside pass by without hesitating here.

Ares pushes that door open, which reveals an even darker hallway. Ares reaches a hand back, and I take it, knowing I'm about to be blind.

"There's a step down here," he guides me in the dark.

Totally blind, I sweep my foot over the ground until I find the step, probably looking like an idiot to a vampire who can see in the dark. But I find level ground, and Ares sets out like it's noon outside.

"It's a hallway," he tells me. "Three other doors so far. One for the restaurant next door. Others are open, just offices. I can smell outside air down this way, though."

"So, there is a back exit," I conclude, though truthfully, it was the only obvious answer. And sure enough, just a few seconds later, a door squeals as Ares pushes it open. Light meets my eyes once more.

We step out into the back alleyway. It's a long one, servicing all the buildings that surround us. There's a dumpster just to our right, but besides that, there's nothing out of the ordinary out here, save for the homeless man sitting at the entry of it, a dog sleeping at his feet.

“It would be plenty easy to take someone out this way. You just walk right out onto the street,” Ares says as he takes it all in.

“Or load them up into your car,” I point out. “You could easily drive a whole truck up into here.”

Ares makes an affirmative noise. “I found some statements for the rental. Augustus only rented this place once. It’s the same case with the others. Only once, never the same place twice.”

“What about future Red parties?” I ask. “Has he put down any deposits on any other places?”

“Not that I can tell, but it’s got to be in the works,” Ares says as he guides me back into the dark hallway, and we pull the door closed behind us. “He’s been putting them on on a pretty consistent basis for over a year now. Every two to three weeks.”

“It’s got to be any day now,” I point out as I follow blindly behind Ares. “This weekend will be three weeks since the one we met at.”

“I’m guessing the Baron’s ball put it off,” Ares points out.

“So, it’s got to be next week,” I say as Ares guides me up over that step again, and we walk back into the rental space.

“Seems likely, but never count Augustus as predictable,” he says, closing the back door behind us.

“Never,” I agree, even though I’ve only met the man once. A man who propositions his son’s fiancée after dinner isn’t a man you can predict the actions of.

“Come on,” Ares says as I see his silhouette cross back to the main door. “We need to get going. We can’t be late to that meeting.”

Nodding, I follow after him. He opens the door and confidently strides out, which is smart. Act like you belong, and no one will question it. I walk out after him, and Ares locks the door once more and pulls it closed.

We climb back into the SUV, and Billings merges back into the light traffic.

“I don’t know what it really helps, but at least now I know Ophelia left out the back,” I say, mulling it all over.

“It’s something,” Ares agrees. He reaches across and takes my hand. My eyes rise up to meet his hazel ones. “We’ll figure out what happened to her.”

He doesn’t promise we’ll find her. I swallow hard. Because I know the likely outcome, logically. My gut has been trying to tell me for a while now. So, Ares doesn’t make promises he can’t keep.

But I see it in his eyes. He means it. He will help me find out what happened to her.

We roll through the night, and at just ten minutes to midnight, we pull into a parking garage. Not wasting any time, Ares guides me to the elevators. We step inside, and he presses the button for the seventy-ninth floor. It’s a silent, anxious ride up. And I find myself wondering how the hell I ended up here. Just a few weeks ago, I was teaching self-defense classes and eating microwave mac and cheese by myself in my bedroom. And now I’m about to walk into a room filled with rich, dangerous vampires who run this city after dark.

And the man standing beside me, the one that’s covered in tattoos, the one who looks like he runs an illegal casino and will break fingers if you don’t pay him what he’s

owed, the one who is smooth, and calm, and supportive, he slips his hand into mine, interlacing our fingers once we slide past the seventieth floor. He brushes his thumb over my knuckles, a soothing action.

This is your life , Lana, I tell myself. Fake it if you have to. But don't let them think you're weak.

I raise my chin as the elevator dings and the doors slide open.

Side by side, Ares and I step out. There's an open lobby, but there's nowhere else to go but straight to the giant double glass doors ahead. There's no signage, no names on the door. It's the kind of space that says if you don't know exactly where you're going, you're not meant to be here.

Ares pulls the door open, and I walk through. My grip tightens on his by the second, but he doesn't even flinch.

It's a huge room, filled with modern, shiny tables and black and silver chairs. Everything is polished, cleaned, and dusted to perfection. I'd almost guess this was some kind of high-end club. There's a gleaming bar at the back of the space. And all around the entire area are floor-to-ceiling windows, granting us a gorgeous night view of New York.

Near the windows, in the center of the space, an area has been cleared, and a dozen chairs are circled up. There are five men sitting there, talking amongst themselves, including Augustus.

Ares' father looks up, and immediately, his eyes go to me. They narrow, and I'm sure he's recalling our last encounter with my nails digging into his scrotum. And from the lack of other women here, I'd guess my presence isn't welcome due to the fact that I own a vagina.

“This is a closed meeting, son,” Augustus says. He spreads his arms wide on the chair. Leaned back, one ankle crossed over the opposite knee, he’s the picture of collected and calm. But the tension in his shoulders gives him away.

“Marriage means equality,” Ares says as he walks us into the circle of chairs. He guides me down into one before taking the seat right next to me. I note he’s placed me as far from his father as possible. He takes my hand once more, the action extremely deliberate. “It means truth and trust. I don’t keep anything from Lana. I don’t make decisions without her. So, my presence here means her presence as well.”

“This isn’t how we do things, Augustus,” a man growls. He’s older than Augustus and kind of an ugly man. His nose is bulbous, his hair a bit greasy and slicked back. He wears a tacky suit like he’s trying to look like a mobster.

“Time has shown us that evolution is essential to survival,” Ares says, his tone low and dangerous as he levels the man with a look. “Even immortals could stand to learn this. My fiancée stays.”

The doors to the space swing open and in walks another man. His eyes immediately flick to me, but he doesn’t seem threatened by my presence. Not like the others.

“It’s your risk to take, my son,” Augustus says. He steeples his fingers before him, his gaze fixed on me. “Every piece of information you share with this human woman, one who won’t be one of us someday, puts her in more danger. You do realize what must happen to her should the two of you break up?”

Ice washes over my skin at his words.

“None of us have to worry about that,” Ares says as he brings my hand to his mouth and presses a kiss to my knuckles. “Besides, you wouldn’t hurt the mother of your unborn grandchildren, would you?”

At this, Augustus' eyes widen. "Does that mean...?"

"I'm late," I say with a shrug. "But there are two more days until I can take a test. "

Shit. My acting skills have their limits. I'm already pretending to be Ares' fiancée, I'm not sure I'm up to pretending to be pregnant as well.

This softens the look in Augustus' eyes. And it makes me sick. I feel like a breeding cow. Produce babies, and you're valuable. Don't, and you're nothing but scrap meat.

"It's your risk to take, son," Augustus says with a shrug. "Just don't doubt the outcome if things end."

"I heard you," Ares says, his tone hard. His hold on my hand tightens. He does not agree to Augustus' terms, though, I don't miss that.

"Let's begin then," Augustus moves on. "I'd like to introduce you all to my son, Ares Hunt. We've recently been reunited. While he might be a bit emotion driven, he's an impressive businessman and knows this city. Ares, let me introduce you to the New York City Barons."

Shit. This sounds so formal, so sinister. Vampiric Barons who run the city.

"Giovanni Bosco," Augustus introduces the ugly man who spoke up earlier. "Cliff Morgan," he indicates the next man. He's younger, probably around Ares' age. His hair is blond and done in the most anal way. He's handsome in a nerdy, uptight way. Preppy, rich boy vibes radiate off him without him saying a word. "Sysco Sullivan." The man sports a buzz cut. His thin mustache and the all black clothing he wears make him look like he should run in Ares' crowd if we were going by looks alone. I wouldn't want to mess with Sysco. "And Harry Kim." The man who came in after us. He looks around thirty. Black hair and clear skin, he wears a clean, crisp suit. He

looks too innocent and normal to be in this room with this crowd .

“Nice to meet you all,” Ares says with the dip of his head. “This is my fiancée, Lana.”

“I can tell you all you don’t have anything to worry about with me here,” I say, trying to establish my own presence. To assume my character. “This isn’t the first time my life has been threatened by a rich bully.”

I look over at Augustus, crooking a little smile at the memory of the noise he made when I nearly brought him to his knees.

This brings a little snigger of entertainment from Sysco and Giovanni. “You’ll have your hands full with this one as your daughter-in-law, Augustus,” Sysco says.

“Let’s all hope she doesn’t go the way of Natalia,” said father-in-law says darkly.

And I can’t help but wonder what happened to Natalia because Sysco immediately shuts up.

“Are we here to talk shit or to bring in another Baron?” Harry speaks up, breaking up the constant banter and snark. He folds his hands over his lap, his expression collected and cool. “If you trust your son to come into the circle, Augustus, then you ought to trust his fiancée. The line of trust is a trickle effect. If this is personal, handle it when you don’t have to waste everyone else’s time.”

I think I just might like Harry Kim.

“The Barons organized twenty-one years ago,” Augustus says, finally getting to something useful instead of giving Ares and me shit. “New York used to be run by the Steele family, but after their demise, it left a hole, a void to be filled.”

“I’ve never heard of this Steele family,” Ares says, though he doesn’t sound desperate for the information. He’s playing it extremely cool and collected .

“There were four brothers,” Sysco speaks up. “They ran this city for two damn centuries.”

Now we’re talking. I hear these vampires are supposed to be immortal, but no one has seemed to be older than fifty or so years. Two centuries... that sounds more like what I expected.

“They had a lot of children,” Cliff speaks for the first time. “Overall, there was something like forty cousins. And they kept New York in check.”

“Most of them were arrogant assholes,” Sysco takes the conversation back over. “But they kept the city out of trouble. But then one of the uncles went crazy. Slaughtered the whole family in one night.”

“Went crazy?” Ares says, his tone questioning. My brows furrow because it couldn’t have been so simple.

Giovanni nods. “No one knows what really happened, but yes. The man just started working his way through the city, killing his family members one at a time. I think he must have taken himself out in the process, because he was found in the slaughter a day later.”

“Crazy,” Sysco punctuates, raising his eyebrows and tilting his head a little.

“The sudden elimination of the Steele family left a void,” Augustus says, trying to reign back in the story. “Large numbers of vampires left unchecked leave all of us in danger. But some of us, we had a vision for... more.”

And here it is. What the reason for all of this is. What Augustus wants.

“New York has always been full of opportunity,” Augustus continues. “As the city that never sleeps, it’s the perfect place for a strong vampiric hold. Yet our numbers are not high. Nothing like Seattle. Nothing like Chicago. And it’s not just about numbers.”

“Influence is power,” Giovanni says. He leans back in his seat, rubbing his hands together. “The nation believes the government has the most influence on the general population. Yet there is influence from all kinds of different organizations, different families, different systems.”

“The Barons have been acquiring significant land holdings in New York for the past twenty years,” Augustus takes the conversation once more. “When you own such a significant portion, you have... sway.”

“I’ll own twenty percent of Harlem in the next ten years,” Sysco says with a barely surpassed smirk. “Not to mention how many of the docks I’ve already acquired.”

Shit. That’s wild. Looking at him, one would never guess Sysco had that kind of money, or drive. But as I’ve learned from Ares, never judge a book by its cover.

“My family already owned ten percent of Morningside Heights,” Cliff speaks up. And, of course, he’s old money. Even his stupid haircut screams it. “I’ve already acquired another five percent in the past two years. My next focus is in the Clinton area.”

So. Much. Damn. Wealth.

“What is this?” Harry asks, dark annoyance starting to creep into his tone. “A bragging session? If you want to swing your dicks, you’ve got the wrong crowd. If

you want approval for your son to be made a Baron, Augustus, you've got it. I've already looked up Ares' portfolio. He's accomplished more in ten years than any of the rest of us, and he was totally inactive for three of those years. I don't buy into the breeding program like the rest of you, but he's obviously going in the direction you want him." Harry indicates me, and those future grandbabies. "I have other shit to attend to. Are we voting tonight?"

"He's got my vote," Sysco says. And there's something a little feral about his smile, a little manic. He's a wild card, one to keep an eye on. But there's something honest about him. And I think I like him. "I see no reason to make this complicated."

Augustus smiles, a wicked thing. Everything in his plan is lining out. He looks expectantly at Giovanni and Cliff.

"I need more time to look into him," Giovanni says, and his tone makes me think he just wants to make us squirm. He just wants to be difficult. "We shall see how he performs at the ball. And how his human woman handles the pressure. A Baron must be tested."

Augustus makes a low, growl sound in the back of his throat, and red embers ignite in his eyes. I see his grip on the chair tighten.

But it's obvious he is not the sole dictator of the Barons because he doesn't say anything. His gaze shifts over to Cliff.

"I agree," Cliff speaks up, though he looks nervous, and he doesn't look at Ares. "It's too soon. If he handles the ball, if he shows he can keep his cool, if Lana can do what is needed of her, then I think we can move forward."

Fuck that.

But I can't say anything. We both have a part to play right now. This is simply a means to an end.

"Then we can all look forward to the ball with great anticipation," Augustus says through clenched teeth. "I know my son won't disappoint."

Those words sound like a threat.

"We will see you all again on Saturday, then," Harry says. And, without waiting for any further discussion, he stands, nods to the group in general, and makes his way to the doors. There, where I didn't notice before, waits an obvious bodyguard, a massive man with deadly looking hands. The concept of a vampire needing a bodyguard is wild to me. And it makes me wonder, is Augustus the most powerful in this group? Or is it the one with the calm demeanor and zero patience for bullshit?

"Pleasure meeting you, Lana," Sysco says as he stands, shaking my hand. He presses a quick kiss to the back of it, and Ares bristles. "Ares, I think we should go out sometime. You and I? We're not like these other guys."

The way he says it, it's a compliment.

"I'll call you," Ares says, but from his tone, I can't tell if he means it or not.

Sysco gives us a nod and makes his exit.

"I hope you don't take it personally," Giovanni says as he stands, as does Cliff. "The inner circle is tight. With matters as important as these, one cannot be too careful."

"Of course," Ares says as he gets to his feet. And it shouldn't be satisfying that he's at least four inches taller than Giovanni and a good six inches taller than Cliff. "We protect what we care about."

Ares shakes Giovanni's hand, and despite both of them being vampires, Giovanni winces, attempting to control it.

"Cliff," Ares says, looking over at the squirrely man with a wicked smile that could rival Augustus'. "Pleasure."

Cliff doesn't say a word, simply swallows hard. He gives a nod and immediately turns and leaves. Giovanni follows right after him .

"Did I play your part well enough, father?" Ares asks once the others have exited. My nerves kick into high gear again.

"You barely spoke ten words," Augustus says, fixing his son with a withering, cold stare. "Had you asserted yourself, spoken for your damn self instead of letting Harry Kim do it for you in the most simplistic way possible, you'd be a Baron already."

"Patience, father," Ares says, not rising to his father's baiting. "Good things come to those that keep their fucking cool."

Ares takes my hand, and like he hasn't just poked the bear with a thousand toothpicks, he guides me back to those doors, and we make our dramatic exit.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

“ I ’m going back to work on Monday,” I say as we exit the SUV and walk to the doors of Augustus’ house. “I’m getting stir crazy, and since Larry is taking over the gym, he’s got way too much to juggle. By the way, were you ever going to tell me you bought the gym and kicked Tate to the curb?”

A smile curls on Ares’ lip as he opens the door for me. “I figured you’d find out on your own.”

“Your money is mostly annoying,” I say as we walk inside. I drop my voice, even though Augustus can probably hear me. “But thank you. It means a lot to me.”

“You’re welcome, Vengeance,” he says. And it never fails. Every time he uses the nickname, goosebumps wash over my skin. And I really, really like the look in his eyes when he uses it.

The house is quiet when we first walk in. No signs of life. “This should only take a minute,” Ares says as we walk up the stairs.

He’s here to pick up some paperwork. I don’t understand their world, so whatever that paperwork is, it’s meaningless to me. But it’s all part of getting Ares access to the records that might lead us to where Ophelia is.

The sound of a woman giggling pauses me on the stairs. Ares looks back at me, his eyes widening as he stops, listening for if we need to retreat and head back out.

“Ares,” Augustus calls out from the floor we haven’t quite reached. “Lana. Come on up.”

The look on Ares' face tells me he'd really, really rather not. But holding my hand tighter, he continues up the stairs. A woman walks by, coming from the direction of Augustus' office to the living room. She's wearing a silky bathrobe, but it's obvious there's nothing else under it. All the important bits are covered, but barely.

"Don't let us interrupt," Ares says in annoyance as Augustus wanders out of his office. At least he is fully clothed. There isn't even a hair out of place.

I don't even want to know.

"I won't," Augustus says with a smirk. The woman takes a seat on the couch, and the chef walks out of the kitchen with a tray of food. She helps herself without a word. Thankfully, Augustus comes out with some documents in a folder, which he hands over to Ares. "Take care of this, and you can step up to the next level, son."

What does that mean? What does that mean? I want to scream because it makes something in me jump to attention. It makes me hope.

"It's already done," Ares says, never once breaking his father's gaze. "All I needed was this and the signatures."

"It's all signed," Augustus says with a wicked grin. "Well done."

I nearly jump out of my skin when movement from my left startles the shit out of me. Another woman wanders out of Augustus' office. She has on some lacy panties. But nothing else.

"Allez-vous enfin nous rejoindre, Ares?" she says as she walks by us, eying my fake fiancé up and down with absolutely no shame. I don't know any foreign languages, but that definitely sounded French to me.

“Bianca,” Ares says, his nostrils flaring in annoyance and disgust. “It’s been a few years.”

“Too many,” she says, the words heavily accented. Her eyes are fucking Ares already, but she wanders by, straight to the woman on the couch. She kisses the woman’s neck, her hands not hesitating as they lay claim.

“You’re welcome to j?—”

“Don’t you fucking dare proposition me again,” I cut Augustus off with a glare that could kill.

He simply grins.

Until Ares steps forward. There’s the quick switch of metal on metal, and I get a quick glimpse of a switchblade before Ares presses the tip into his father’s chest, right over his heart. He fists Augustus’ expensive shirt, keeping his father from being able to step back.

“You make another disgusting comment to my fiancée again, and I will make sure it’s the last words you ever utter,” Ares says. His tone is low and lethal. His eyes are so cold, surely it’s no longer the god of war he’s named after but the god of death. “You proposition her to join you in this house ever again, and I’ll make sure you never create another child, yet live to suffer the rest of your life without a dick. Do you understand me, Augustus? When it comes to my future wife, you’re on monk-level behavior. Got it? ”

“Careful, my son,” Augustus says, pride and vengeance warring on his face. “You’re starting to sound exactly like the man I’ve trained you to be.”

The sight of something red behind the two of them draws my attention. Behind the

warring father and son, Bianca's lips have latched onto the first woman's neck. And from that point of connection, a trail of blood drips down her flesh. The woman sits there frozen.

Bianca makes a noise of greed, pulling harder. Her hand comes to the woman's neck, and she smears that trail of blood over her skin.

My heart thuds hard in my chest. A faint ringing starts somewhere in the room, or my head. The breath catches in my throat.

And when I look back at Ares and Augustus, the knife is no longer at Augustus' chest. Ares has the blade pressed to the side of his father's throat. And a trickle of blood drips from it. "I'm nothing like you. I may be your protege, but I will never be like you."

My eyes fix on the blood dripping down to his collar now. My vision starts to tunnel, and the room grows darker. The floor seems to shift beneath my feet, but I swear I won't go down.

"If blood makes you squeamish, you are marrying into the wrong family, my dear."

Augustus' words barely register in my brain, but Ares' head suddenly whips around, his gaze meeting mine.

And in a movement that's too fast for me to see, he's at my side. His hazel eyes fill my vision, and in them, I see panic rising .

"Get me out of here," I try to say, but the words are so constricted in my throat, I'm not sure they make it out.

The room spins as I look back at the blood staining Augustus' collar. He reaches up,

touching the cut and the blood smears.

And my throat closes off. It's no longer Augustus' fancy home I'm seeing but the wreckage of an old, drab apartment. There's blood. So much blood. Everywhere. On the floor. On the table. All over their clothes. Their bodies. It's splattered on the walls.

My stomach rolls.

I'm faintly aware that my feet are moving, but when I trip over what I think are stairs, I'm swept off my feet.

Emmie's hair glued to her face with blood. Red staining Mom's chest. The blue rug under the table is no longer blue but purple now that it's saturated with red.

"Lana," a voice calls my name after the sharp sound of what might be a door closing. Something warm and firm caresses my face. "Lana."

Screams. Someone was screaming. Me.

And then the cries of the neighbor. The flashing lights of the police cars. Questions. So many questions. My own sobs. And finally, the warm, familiar embrace of my father.

But there was so, so much blood.

"Lana," a scared voice begs.

I blink, realizing that my cheeks are wet with tears. A warm hand once more wipes over my face, and I suck in a sharp breath.

Ares' face comes into focus.

We're in the middle of my bed, back in our apartment.

How the hell did we get here ?

"Lana," Ares breathes out in relief. His hands tremble just slightly as he wipes his thumb over my cheek, his fingers splayed back into my hair. "Fuck. Are you okay? Do you need a doctor?"

The tears well in my eyes again, but this time, they don't break free. I'm so damn embarrassed. "I'm so sorry, Ares. We can't... We can't do this. You're a fucking vampire, and I see a little blood and lose my shit."

"Hey," he says, grabbing my wrists as my hands rise to thread through my hair, my entire body shaking. "You have nothing to be sorry for, and it's going to take more than a little trauma blackout to scare me away, Vengeance."

I freeze at that. Because just like that, he's seen it for exactly what it was. How the hell can he read it so well?

How is he not walking away in embarrassment?

"Do you want to talk about it?" he says softly. Those eyes study my face, and I'm astounded by the lack of judgment in his expression. There's only concern.

Who the hell is Ares Hunt? Cause there's no way he's a real man. He's the most complicated, perplexing male I've ever laid eyes on or had the privilege of touching.

I squeeze my eyes closed and try as hard as I can not to picture what landed me here. But it's there, branded to the back of my eyelids.

“When I was fifteen, I’d been at school late,” I say, even without giving my lips permission to share the past. “I’d been sick a few days before, and I had to make up two different tests. I didn’t come home until a few hours after Emmie had already gone home. Mom, she worked in the office at the school, so she usually walked with us to and from. She and Emmie went ahead of me since I was going to be a while. ”

Ares takes my hands, which were lying in my lap. He smooths his thumb over the back of my hands, his tattoos standing in stark contrast to my own clear skin.

“When I came home...” my words shake as they fail. And it’s like I’m right there again. “The front door was ajar. I knew something wasn’t right.”

It was so damn cold that day. The wind had been blowing sideways, and the rain was starting to fall. My shoes were half soaked. The lobby floor had been slippery and dirty. But despite the heater running, the hallway had seemed cold when I stepped onto our floor. My ears started ringing before I stepped foot into our apartment, as if I already knew.

“I walked inside, and they...” I squeeze my eyes closed. “Mom was on the floor in the dining room. Emmie was lying in the kitchen. They’d... they’d been stabbed.”

Ares curses under his breath, the look in his eyes softening.

“It was seven times for Mom,” I say as my voice cracks. “Three times for Emmie. I guess the guy who did it took a little mercy on a twelve-year-old. The police said she would have been gone within seconds. So, at least she didn’t suffer very long.”

The rage that fills me when I think about what they did to her, how they did make my mother suffer, makes me want to end the whole damn world. The evil that some can possess is enough to make you want to give up on humanity.

Ares brings a hand to the back of my neck, pulling me forward until his forehead touches mine. “I’m so sorry, Lana.”

I shake my head as a few of those tears finally force themselves free. They land on Ares’ hand. “Apparently, there was a drug dealer who lived in the apartment above ours. He had a wife. A kid. So, when some deal went bad, this guy went after them all. But he was off by one floor. And then he took off. I don’t even know if he realized he killed the wrong family. He fucking got away with it. The police never even had a suspect.”

Ares swears again, a slew of the darkest curses.

“The blood, Ares,” I say as my voice breaks. “There was so much of it. All over them. All over the apartment. Mom put up a fight. She didn’t go down easy. So, it was her blood, all over everything.”

I can see it so clearly. Smeared in the kitchen. Over the table. Splattered on the ceiling fan. The whole apartment was crimson.

“I guess I started screaming. And I don’t know how no one heard it when the intruder was taking Mom out, but I guess the screams of a teenage girl are more to worry about. A neighbor came looking. He must have been the one who called the police. I... I wasn’t particularly coherent. I... I don’t even remember how I got to the police station, but there I was, and the next thing I knew, Dad was walking into that sterile, cold room.”

Ares shakes his head, his eyes squeezed closed.

“I missed an entire month of school after that,” I say quietly. The utter panic, the terror that was raging through me, begins to ebb just a little bit. “But even after I went back, I wasn’t okay. I started talking to a therapist right away, but I was still

processing. Honestly, I was pretty fucked up for at least two years. Guess I'm still not okay. That wasn't a one time event, Ares. I can't... I see blood, and I'm right back there."

"You don't have to be okay, Lana," Ares says. He opens his eyes, staring into my own. We're close. So damn close. Just two breaths apart. "The reality is that not a person on this planet is okay. We're all bruised. We're all broken. We've all got scars. You're still Lana fucking Kincade."

He catches me so off guard, a little laugh huffs over my lips. I bite my lower one and shake my head. "Ares, this doesn't make any sense. You are what you are, and there is always going to be blood involved. I don't want to embarrass you again like that. Or get us into a situation that compromises what we're doing."

Ares presses his thumb against my lips, effectively cutting off my words. "Not a chance, Vengeance," he says, his eyes darkening as he shakes his head. "You couldn't embarrass me if you tried. We're in this together. Got it? Vengeance and Venom."

I search his face, looking for evidence of lies. Of doubt. People can say whatever they want and not mean it. Words can be said to use people. To trick others. To manipulate.

But I can't find any evidence of that in Ares' eyes.

There are a lot of things I want to say right now. There are a lot of things I'm feeling right now.

I'm too exhausted, though.

"Okay," I say simply.

And as if he can read my mind, Ares shifts in the bed, lying back against the pillows. And like it's something he's done a thousand times before, he gathers me into his arms, my head coming to rest on his chest. "Get some sleep, Vengeance," he says softly. And I know I'm in trouble when he presses a kiss to the top of my head.

I search for words but can't find any that make sense or won't put us in a world of trouble. Ares could have berated me for embarrassing him today, for potentially compromising our mission. Instead, he's reassured me. Instead, he's curled up in the bed with me, holding me with strong arms that make me feel... safe.

Instead of overthinking it, I nuzzle into Ares' side. My fingers cling to his perfect body. My head rises and falls in time on his chest to his breath. He brushes his fingertips over my arm, sending a wash of goosebumps over my skin.

"Sleep, Vengeance," he says in little more than a whisper. "I've got you."

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

I watch out the window as Manhattan flashes by. It's been dark for two hours, but New York is never truly dark. There are endless lights out there, billboards, street lights, glowing windows from the night owls. New York never truly rests, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Billings drives me without a word. Ares had to be at the ball early, getting everything squared away, making sure everything was in place. And he was meeting with the Barons. Since I needed time to get ready, I stayed at home. Now, it's fifteen minutes until the starting time, and we're just a few minutes away.

There are already several other limousines lined up at the curb, all waiting for their turn at the drop off. I watch as one well-dressed man or woman after another climbs out and wonder what the ratio of vampires to humans at this event will be tonight.

Just before we pull up to the drop off, I watch the front doors as walking sin exits. Ares moves like the god he's named for, his dark eyes fixed on the SUV as we stop right in front of him.

My heart starts hammering as he steps forward and pulls the door open. He reaches a hand inside, and the entire world turns electric as I take it. The skin-to-skin contact leaves me craving more. Leaves me wondering how many volts we could generate if there was more contact. So much more.

"Fuck," Ares breathes as I step from the vehicle, my dress cascading down around me. Shamelessly, his eyes rake over every inch of me, taking their time.

And I feel weak in the knees, in the chest, in the mind, as I drink my fake fiancé in.

He's wearing a dark burgundy suit trimmed in black and gold that is the exact same shade as my dress. And it was tailored to hug every inch of his body in the most sinful way possible. He's traded out his typical silver for gold-trimmed diamond studs in his ears and a golden hoop in his nose. He's perfectly matched the golden earrings cascading from my own piercings.

"You look..." I clear my throat, trying to make words work because I feel damn speechless.

"Any bodies I put in the ground tonight are all your fault, Vengeance," he growls, pulling me in close, his breath sliding down my neck as he delivers the words. "Others looking at you makes me feel a little... vicious. But, fuck, who could keep their eyes off you?"

Heat climbs my cheeks as my eyes rise to meet his. I see something new in Ares' eyes that I haven't seen before. A darkness is there. Possession. Violence. Feral hunger.

It pours gasoline on the fire that's already burning in me, the one he lit the second I saw him in that suit.

"I picked this one for you," I shamelessly confess as Ares wraps a hand around my waist, his palm sliding low, only a hair away from being positioned on my ass. I cover his hand with my own, ensuring he doesn't move it.

"You're playing with fire, Vengeance," he leans in, saying the words to my exposed, bare shoulder before pressing his hot lips to my skin.

Shit. I am going to absolutely combust and burn this fantastic dress to embers.

We walk through the doors and, effortlessly, Ares guides us back into the building

until we step into a beautiful ballroom. And my jaw drops.

Everything gleams and glitters. The chandeliers are wild. There are gauzy drapes hanging from everything, making the room feel elegant and intimate. Every furnishing is covered in black velvet. The tables are covered with white tablecloths, and the center pieces look like they cost more than I make in a month. And everyone in attendance is dressed to the nines. Tuxedos, gowns, elaborate hair, and professional makeup. It's the kind of event you only see in movies.

"Lana," a familiar voice calls from behind. I turn to see Sysco walking up, a smug smile on his face. "Aren't you motive for murder tonight?"

They might deliver it in varying ways, but Sysco and Ares are not that different.

"Good to see you, Sysco," I say as he takes my hand and brings it up to press a kiss to the back of it. Ares watches him closely, still evaluating the man. I want to tell him he's got nothing to worry about and that he should just accept the inevitable, these two are going to be friends one day, but maybe now isn't the time, not when Ares is feeling all possessive with me wearing this dress.

"Ares, you're looking sharp," Sysco says with an oblivious smile as he looks my date up and down. "Bold choice with the red. Don't get offended if I steal the idea for the next preening event."

"Copycat," Ares says, the first tiny joke I've heard him make. And a small smile cracks the corners of his mouth. "Where's your date tonight?"

"Not all of us are blessed with perfect better halves, my brother," Sysco says, still smiling as he surveys the crowd. And I realize I don't actually know who the hell all these people are or why we're even here. "My control might be flawless in day-to-day life, but in the bedroom?" He shakes his head. "Might be a while before I dare

test that again. How do you manage it, Ares? ‘Cause, trust me, we’re all aware of how you smell, Lana.”

“Which is?” I blurt out, he catches me so off guard with the words.

“Like dessert,” Ares and Sysco say at the same time.

Oh yeah. Ares already told me.

“Trust me, it’s no easy task,” Ares answers Sysco’s question, even as he pulls me in closer, looking down at me like, indeed, he’d like to devour me whole. “But when you’re this obsessed with someone, you’ll do anything to keep them around.”

His words send a cascade of electricity down my spine. I swallow once as I stare into those intense hazel eyes.

“Damn, that’s beautiful.” The words should sound sarcastic, but they absolutely aren’t when Sysco says them. “I’ll see you guys later. I’ve got a bone to pick with Montana. ”

I don’t know who the hell Montana is, but Sysco strides off across the ballroom.

Ares’ words are still echoing in the back of my brain, looping around my organs, settling somewhere low in my belly. But addressing them is way too damn dangerous. So, instead, I look around for a distraction.

“What is this ball actually for?” I ask, circling back around to my previous thought. “Besides proving to Giovanni and Cliff that you’re ready to be a Baron?”

“Look,” Ares says, nodding to a table across the space. At it, there are four children seated, accompanied by a very pregnant woman who looks like she’s spent the entire

day prepping to be here, but annoyed at the same time.

Ares nods toward another table. There, I find a set of unquestionably triplet girls who look around fifteen years old. And with them are a set of twin boys who seem just a few years younger.

“The Barons are showing off their families,” Ares says. “Those are Giovanni’s kids. And that’s Cliff’s wife and kids.”

Ares turns, and I follow his line of sight. At another table, I see a woman looking incredibly uncomfortable. With her, she has two children, a boy who looks around six and a girl who I would guess is eight. “Those are some of Augustus’ other children.”

Ares’ half siblings. Though from the look on his face, he doesn’t see them that way. And who could blame him when Augustus breeds them and leaves them until they’re a useful age for him?

“Damn, they’re serious about this breeding program,” I say, a sneer barely suppressed from my face.

“I can just imagine the disappointment on Augustus’ face when we have to tell them you’re not pregnant,” Ares says, keeping his tone low so as to not be overheard.

“He could do with a little more disappointment in his life, arrogant prick,” I mutter, watching my volume as well.

Ares smiles at that, that proud, admiring smile he so often uses. “Come on, let’s get you some food.”

Ares places his hand at the small of my back and leads me forward toward the tables where dinner is being served. I take it all in, trying to get a grasp on this wild event.

Maybe I'm getting some kind of vampire radar, but I swear, I can tell who is vampire and who is human. Of course, there are the human children and some of their human mothers. There are other humans milling about as well. Not just servers but others dressed in gorgeous clothes. And there are more vampires in attendance than just the Barons. If my guesses are right, there are thirty or so vampires in attendance. Which is a pretty large percentage of New York's vampire population if there really are only a hundred or so.

I don't know why, but I expected this to be a massive event with hundreds of people. Instead, there are probably only sixty, a few more if I include those who are working the event.

They picked the perfect space, though. It feels busy in here. Any larger of a space, and it would just feel kind of... pathetic.

"Lana Hunt?"

My head turns at my name called. A woman walks up to join Ares and me at our table, her own dinner plate in hand.

"That's me," I confirm as she sits in the seat right beside me, undeterred by the lack of invitation.

"Francesca Bosco," she says as she extends a hand. I take it, evaluating the woman. She's probably in her sixties, and while she is beautiful, she kind of looks a little... plastic. Like she's been fighting the reality of aging and isn't doing it the most gracefully. "I like to introduce myself to all the human wives. It can be a lonely place to be."

"You're also married to a Born?" I say stupidly. It's obvious, but I'm not sure how to make conversation. There are too many damn weird scenarios in this world.

She nods, her eyes scanning the room. “Giovanni and I got married before I even knew he was a vampire.” She stabs at her salad, but I kind of doubt if she’s going to eat any of it. “Not sure how I missed the signs. I mean, he never left the place during the day. And the way that man could pick me up? I wasn’t the trim little thing you see before you now when we met. Gio was into thicker women at the time.”

As she stares down at her food, I cast a glance at Ares, brows raised. I do not know what to make of Francesca.

“I was pregnant with our first son before Gio told me what he was,” she says, looking up at me as she nibbles on one little carrot. “And by that point, what was I going to do? Take off? I loved the bastard, and we were starting a family.”

Oh boy. I’m a little scared to see where this story goes. Ares pointed out Giovanni’s triplets and twins, and there is no way Francesca is young enough to be their mother.

“I gave that man three sons before this body didn’t want to cooperate anymore,” she barrels right on. “Which is a real shame because I always wanted a whole brood of kids. But you know, modern medicine is a miraculous thing. Did you know they can take your eggs, his sperm, and put them in another woman called a surrogate?”

Oh. I didn’t expect this twist. I nearly choke on my water. “Yes, I did. ”

She nods, pressing right on. “We did that as soon as I couldn’t get pregnant. Thankfully, I still had a good handful of eggs. And you might not think it possible, what with how hard it is for a vampire to conceive, it’s a miracle we got the three we did, but my Gio gave his donation, and voila, that medical clinic cooked up the triplets, and that poor woman. That’s not what she was expecting. But she popped out my girls. Well, not popped out. They had to cut her open. But Gio paid her handsomely for her troubles. And then the twins. Aren’t they darling?”

I'm pretty sure she only took two breaths throughout all of that info dumping. She overwhelmed me like a tide with her oversharing of personal information. "They are," I say without thinking.

"Anyway, I just wanted you to know that it is possible, even though you'll keep aging, and they won't. Gio still goes down on me every Sunday night without fail. Bless that man, forever forty-six, with this old lady. Bless his heart."

She calls out to someone else and waves. Without a word of goodbye, she stands, hauling her plate with her as she goes to greet her next listener.

"Wow," I say, my brows rising. A chuckle rises up my throat, and I turn to find Ares with a smile, shaking his head. "I learned way more about Giovanni's sperm than I ever hoped for."

"You're a rock star, taking all of that," Ares laughs, his eyes following Francesca through the crowd. "You never know, all that information might be useful someday."

I watch as Giovanni crosses to his wife, pressing a kiss to her temple. "It's kind of sad though, isn't it?" I observe. "He's going to live forever, and she's going to die of old age someday. Their love will be forever for him, but till death do them part for her."

She looks like she could be his mother. Like she is, no question, twenty years older. But it wasn't always the case.

"Only a vampire can love you forever," Ares says quietly. I look over at him to find him observing as Giovanni takes Francesca by the hand and leads her to the dance floor. I wonder what's going through his mind, but he doesn't offer any other thoughts.

But as I look around and see Cliff's wife sitting with her children, I realize it's the case for any mixed-species relationship.

Something twists in my chest.

If this were real between Ares and I, it would be our story.

Ares is forever twenty-six years old. And I may only be twenty-four, but give it just two years, and we'd be the same age. And then I would be older. And it would continue on like that forever. Because Ares won't age another day.

"Ares."

I look over to see Augustus looking at his son. When he's caught Ares' attention, Augustus nods for him to join the conversation.

"Go," I say. "I need to use the restroom."

He presses a kiss to my forehead as he rises, and damn. The shock of electricity that races through me at the simple contact is almost embarrassing.

As Ares goes to talk politics and blood, I make my way through the room, passing between immortal vampires and the humans so desperate to be around them.

The bathroom is just as opulent as the rest of the event space. I struggle to use it in my incredible dress, but somehow manage. I wash my hands, looking at myself in the mirror.

Who is that woman looking back at me? It's certainly not the bitter, half-starved woman I knew a few weeks ago. The woman looking back at me looks so confident. She has her shit together. She knows her place in the world, and it's impressive,

considering that's as a human in a world full of vampires.

It's kind of incredible, the influence others can have on you. Ares came into my life, and suddenly, I feel like a whole new person, even if I still feel entirely like me.

One person can come in and change your life so profoundly, it pushes you into evolution.

I dry my hands and step back out into the party.

Immediately, my eyes sweep the space for Ares. He's standing beside his father still, deep in conversation with Cliff Morgan and two women I don't recognize. Though, somehow, I can tell they're also immortal. This looks like it might be a long conversation.

With a sigh, I turn, surveying the crowd.

It almost looks like it should be any regular rich person's party. It's all talk, jokes being told, the occasional dance. There are no fangs, no traces of blood, no one is lying dead in a corner with puncture marks in their necks.

Vampires are surprisingly... civil.

"And who might you belong to?"

My skin immediately crawls at the sound of the voice approaching. I turn to find a man who looks to be in his mid-thirties walking toward me. He holds a wine glass with suspiciously red liquid in it, his other hand tucked into the pocket of his trousers

.

"I think you've mistaken me," I say, my tone coming out cold and sharp. "I'm no

dog. I don't belong to anyone."

I turn to walk away, maneuvers running through my mind automatically, ones I would teach my students to use on assholes like this.

"A woman who holds her own," he says, stepping after me. "A rarity in this world."

"I doubt that," I say, still walking across the room. "From my experience, only those who say shit like that hold that view. It's a you problem, not a general blanket fault."

"She's spicy and strong," he says with a chuckle.

A quick punch to the throat, that would probably stop him from spewing the terrible misogyny coming from his lips. Though, most likely, he's a vampire. So... spiked heels to the testicles?

"But rude," he says as I work my way around the outside edge of the room. I'd take him down right here, but damn, do I really want to cause a scene? "The least you could do is look me in the eye as you reject me."

"Respect is earned," I say as I step around a woman in the fluffiest ballgown I've ever seen. "And you blew that the first moment you spoke."

"Come on now," he says, and my heart rate picks up. "It's all about the game. The pursuit. You realize vampires are predators, right? What do you think your evasiveness is doing to my instincts right now?"

Fuck.

My eyes flick around the room as I realize this might not be someone I can handle on my own. I've always been one to have the attitude that a woman needs to be able to

save herself. I've made it my entire career. But this is no ordinary dick that is chasing after me.

Where is Ares? Or hell, even Sysco? Fuck, at this point, I think I might even try to get Augustus to help.

"Come on, sweetheart, at least give me the courtesy of one minute of conversation."

A hand wraps around my wrist, pulling me to a jarring halt, flipping me around to face him.

I get two seconds to actually take the man's face in, telling myself to commit it to memory so I can unquestionably point him out in the crowd later. Black hair. Gray eyes. Uneven facial hair. A scar going down the left side of his face.

But he grins at me predatorily, victory gleaming in his eyes.

"Get your fucking hand off my fiancée."

The words are spoken in an unforgiving snarl. And movement over my right shoulder pulls my eyes for a fraction of a second before there's a sickening wet crunch.

Ares' fist buries itself into the man's chest. My eyes widen as I take it in. Ares' hand is gone. Fully submerged. The cracking sounds of bone fill my ears. The man sucks in a wet gasp.

Ares yanks his hand back, and I've never, ever heard such a sound. Wet ripping, tearing. Separation. Shredding of tissue.

Ares stands there, his eyes burning a violent, glowing red, with a wrecked heart in his hand. His breathing huffs ragged and savage.

The man stands there for just one second, horrified shock etched over his face. And then he collapses to the ground, a limp mass of limbs on the floor, blood spilling out of him.

And I have no words as I watch the color drain out of his body, and he turns completely gray .

“Finally,” a voice cuts through what I realize was complete silence. I look up to see every eye in the room turned to Ares, but it was Sysco who spoke. “Demetri was such a dick. Had it coming.”

The room is silent, every eye in the room fixed on the barely contained rage that is Ares, a man’s heart gripped in his hand.

“Let it be a warning,” he says, and his voice is ice. It sends a shiver down the length of my body. “Put your hands on Lana, and it’ll be the last thing you do.”

I feel numb. Cold. Frozen.

Is this shock?

But as I look at Ares, reality starts connecting just a little.

Red. Ares’ hand is coated in red.

I wait for it. For my vision to tunnel. For my breathing to speed up. For the panic to climb up my throat.

Since my mom and sister were murdered, I see blood, and I shut down.

This is the most blood I’ve seen since that day. It’s dripping from Ares’ hand. It’s

pooling on the floor.

But all I feel is shock.

“Always knew Augustus’ line had a flare for the dramatic,” Giovanni says, but it sounds like a compliment. It’s confirmed when he winks in Ares’ direction and turns back to the party.

And like this is nothing more than an argument, the rest of the party continues on. Conversations resume. The music turns back on. And it’s as if everything is normal, and there isn’t a body on the floor and blood pooling on the polished wood.

“Lana.”

My name comes from Ares’ lips in panicked shock .

My eyes rise back to meet his. He’s staring at me with wide, alarmed eyes. As if he’s suddenly remembered what happened the last time I saw blood.

He’s searching me for signs of passing out. Of the oncoming panic attack.

Where the hell is it? I search myself internally for the signs of any of it.

My eyes slip back down to Ares’ blood soaked hand.

I am in shock. But I don’t feel like I’m about to lose it.

“I…” my mouth opens, but I can’t find words in my brain. So, I just shake my head. No. That’s not right. I nod.

Ares drops the heart in the center of the collapsed man. He shakes his hand, dripping

blood all over the place. But he places his dry hand on my waist, guiding me to a table. “Sit here for just a minute. I’ll say my goodbyes, and we’ll get out of here.”

I feel too shell-shocked and too numb to respond with anything but a nod. I sit in the chair, casting my gaze about the room. Eyes dart in my direction, their looks evaluative. But there’s something different there than previously.

Fear, maybe?

Respect?

The rules of this world are so different than my own. I don’t know how to interpret them. Do I even really remember how to breathe in this moment?

Sysco told me I was a motive for murder tonight. Ares warned me about any bodies he might put in the ground.

Someone actually died tonight because he put his hands on me.

The sound of silverware clanging against glass startles me, my shoulders shrugging up to my ears.

“Excuse me, if I could have your attention, please?” It’s Augustus. He holds a glass up, his eyes casting about the room. “The Barons of New York City thank you for coming to our event. You are all an important piece of this city. Together, we can make this place a strong hold for our kind. Together, we will make a presence here, in the greatest place on earth. And today, it is my greatest pleasure, my honor, to present to you the newest Baron. My eldest son, Ares Hunt.”

“To Mr. Hunt,” Giovanni says, raising his glass in a vote.

“To Ares,” Sysco says, also raising a glass.

“To Ares Hunt,” Harry Kim says, looking bored of this party.

“To Ares,” Cliff votes lastly, raising his glass.

And my fake fiancé stands there, next to his father. He holds his chin high, his eyes dark as he looks around. He looks every bit the part. A dangerous, powerful leader of creatures of the night in the country’s most populated city.

“To Ares Hunt,” the crowd calls out, raising a glass to toast to him.

And all at once, they sip from their glasses.

And the deed is done.

My hands tremble in my lap. It’s so easy to forget with Ares. What he really is. Why we made our alliance. The darkness that comes with this world.

But this is reality. And I can never forget it.

The conversations resume around the room, and I breathe just a little easier when things seemingly go back to normal.

I feel cold as Ares strides across the room, his eyes fixed on me. He reaches out his clean hand, helping me to my feet. “Let’s go home,” he says, and I can’t quite read his tone. But I’m still in too much shock to do so anyway.

I shuffle forward, my hand in his. Eyes watch us go, but no one remarks. No one stops us. And I realize that Ares is now an important, respected man. Everyone lets him through without question.

Neither one of us says a word as we exit the building. And I don't know how he knew, but Billings pulls the SUV up to the curb at just the right moment. Ares pulls the door open for me and climbs in after I'm settled into my seat.

The drive back to our building is silent. My eyes look out the window, but they're unfocused, not taking anything in. My hands are folded in my lap, picking absentmindedly at my expensive dress.

Red.

The sounds.

Ares' gleaming eyes.

All because that man touched me.

The man who essentially called me his prey.

I saw so much blood, and this time, I didn't lose it.

What does that mean? Why was this time different?

Page 15

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

It feels as if it's only been thirty seconds before the car pulls to a stop, and my door is suddenly being opened by Billings. I blink twice before I take his hand and step out of the vehicle. Silently, Ares walks beside me as we walk into the beautiful front doors. But just as we step inside, he tucks his right hand into his jacket, hiding his bloodied weapon. Neither one of us looks up as we walk through the lobby, but thankfully, it's empty at the moment. I push the button to call the elevator, and I breathe a sigh of relief when it opens immediately. We step inside, and quietly, we ascend through the building.

I let out another little breath of relief once we're inside our apartment, the door locked behind us.

"I'm going to shower," Ares says, striding across the space.

And I feel like I'm finally waking up. And I realize it's not just me who has been acting a little shell-shocked over the last twenty minutes or so, but Ares is acting off as well. He has been so quiet. His gaze was contemplative as we rode home. And he seems removed as he immediately goes to the bedroom and then into the bathroom. I stand there, a little confused, in the dining room alone.

Shit.

I have to confront what happened tonight.

Ares killed a man.

A predator. The man literally called himself that. I was his prey.

But still. Ares killed him.

And the way he killed him?

I have to remember what Ares is. He's told me before, reminded me, that he is dangerous. The word vampire too often becomes arbitrary. Just like how some people are electricians or Italian. Ares is vampire.

But I cannot forget what it means. And that is: not human anymore.

Ares has died.

Ares has Resurrected.

And come back as something different.

I wander into the bedroom, standing at the window, looking out at Central Park. Even at this hour, at nearly four in the morning, there are still people out and about. And for a fleeting moment, I wonder, are they out late or up extremely early?

Once upon a few weeks ago, there was no way I would ever be awake at this hour. I've always been a morning person, which means an early to bed person.

My life looks so damn different.

The sound of the door to the bathroom opening pulls my eyes over my shoulder. Ares stands there in sweatpants and a white t-shirt. The sight is almost jarring. I've never seen him dressed so casually .

And he's so clean now. No traces of blood. His right hand is no longer solidly red.

How do you just wash that kind of blood away?

Doesn't killing someone stain you for forever?

"You killed a man today," I say, the words coming out hoarse. It feels like days since I last spoke, not less than an hour.

"I'm sorry you had to see it, Vengeance," he says, and I'm having a hard time reading his tone. "But I'd do it again. You told him no, and he had the gall to touch you."

"I might have handled it," I say, and I don't know what the hell is happening when something stings the backs of my eyes.

"I know," he says, his own eyes darkening. He takes a step into the room. "You're Lana fucking Kincade."

Moisture pools in my eyes as I finally figure it out. I might have handled it on my own. But I didn't have to.

For once, someone else had me. For once, someone took care of me.

And that is the reason why seeing blood didn't affect me for the first time since my mother and sister were killed.

Ares was protecting me. And I knew it with every bone in my body.

"Lana," Ares says, my name coming across his lips like a prayer of agony. His hazel eyes are fixed on my own, and I can tell something big is coming. "I can't do this anymore."

Everything in my chest drops out into nothingness. Instantly, I feel cold.

“Ares,” I say, the name coming out hurt.

He shakes his head and takes another step into the room. “I can’t do this anymore, Vengeance. I can’t pretend anymore. I want you for real, Lana Kincade. Every touch, every kiss, every glance, every night, every shower, every dinner. Real. Lana and Ares.”

The breath catches in my chest with every word he speaks. I feel something building inside me. Rising with the force of an oncoming tsunami.

I turn to fully face Ares. His chest is rising and falling hard, but the look in his eyes screams absolute confidence and conviction.

“I’m done pretending, Lana,” Ares says, his voice low, intimate. “I’m all fucking in.”

I cross the bedroom in four long strides, and I don’t slow as my body collides with Ares’. My hands come to either side of his face, and my lips find their home. Devouring. Claiming. Branding. This kiss, with no witnesses around, is searing. Ares’ lips cave to mine, moving in time with my own. His tongue greedily seeks out mine, and I am all too anxious to dance.

Finally. It’s the word that my entire body sighs as I sag into Ares’ embrace. As his hands circle my waist, pulling me tighter, holding me close. Finally. And I realize that I never stood a chance. I might have walked into this agreement with caution, with a chip on my shoulder. But Ares is my match. The equal to my bitterness. The perfect counter to my own hurt.

“I want you, Ares,” I say against his lips. A feral growl of approval rumbles in his chest as he moves his lips to my neck. And my entire body feels electric. Alive. Godlike. I realize how dangerous this is. This man has fangs, this man could drain the life-force from me in less than a minute. And his lips are latched to my neck.

But I trust him.

As a sigh escapes my throat and I tilt my head back, I absolutely trust him .

Closer. I need closer. Even though his hands are wrapped around me, I need so much damn closer.

I lift my right leg, rising myself up onto my toes of the left. Ares' hands slide down over my ass to my thighs to hoist me up. But my dress falls all too in the way. With an annoyed growl, Ares gives a swift yank, splitting the dress from the bottom, up to my thighs. A wicked smile pulls on my lips as he tries once more, his hands hooking behind my legs. And this time, it's successful. My legs wrap around his waist.

Ares spins, planting my back against the wall. And the contact between my legs makes my entire body spark. Ares pins me to the wall with his hips ground into mine. He looks into my eyes for one hot, heated moment. There are red embers ignited there, his hunger a threat to the entire world.

Greedily, I take his lips again, devouring the man's soul.

"Tell me what you want, Vengeance," Ares says against my lips, his hands gripping my hips with the most delicious possessiveness.

My fingers lace into his hair, and he leans into my touch, his eyes blazing as he looks into my own eyes. "I want you. All of you. Right the fuck now."

"Fuck yes," he growls, the sound rumbling through his entire body, which I feel... everywhere.

He releases me, my body sliding down the wall till my feet hit the ground. And with another sharp yank, Ares rips the rest of the dress clean in half. The tattered fabric

falls to a pile at my feet as a gasp rips from my throat.

The wicked grin that pulls on his lips is enough to melt me through.

“Like what you see, Venom?” I ask as I step forward, pushing him back a step .

He seems to have lost his words for the moment. He simply nods.

And it’s my turn. My eyes scan down the length of his body. Too many clothes. My hands find the hem of his shirt, and I hoist up, yanking the fabric up and over his head. Finally, it clears his head, a bit of a challenge considering our height difference. His shirt falls to the floor in a soft cascade.

I take a moment to take him in. My eyes scan from the waist band of his pants, up the defined muscles of his stomach, over the rise of his chest. Shit. This man’s body is perfection. I’ve been around a lot of incredible physiques throughout my life. Growing up in a combat sports gym, I’ve seen a few well-defined guys.

But none of them hold a candle to Ares Hunt.

And every inch of his skin is tattooed.

Gargoyles. Skulls. Crows. Moons. Patterns. Runes. Ares’ body is the most beautiful tapestry of art I’ve ever seen.

“Like what you see, Vengeance?” he asks, a smile tugging on his lips.

“Fuck me,” I simply breathe out.

He surges forward, taking my lips once more. He walks me backward to the bed. With one hand cupped behind my neck, he lowers me to the bed with his other. And

my entire body lights on fire as Ares presses his lips to my stomach. His lips are a thousand degrees as he works them higher until, finally, they work their way up to the base of my sternum. And when he comes to the obstacle of my bra, he reaches up, and with one yank of his wrist, he tears that bit of fabric right off me, too.

A curse and a prayer slip over his lips as he unabashedly stares at my breasts. And my eyes close in ecstasy as he kisses his way up the underside curve of the right one. Until finally, his lips latch onto my hardened nipple.

“Ares,” I breathe, writhing beneath his touch.

He answers only with a growl, sucking on me hard before he turns his attention to the other side. With a wide, flat tongue, he licks his way from the underside up, until his lips once more latch onto me on that side.

Fuck.

This man.

His mouth.

His hand slides down my stomach and then to my thigh. He grips my ankle, turning my leg out until I’m spread for him. And slowly, with fingers that feel molten, he slips them beneath my lacy panties. And he doesn’t hesitate as his fingers slide to my folds, finding them slick with my arousal.

“The fact that you’re wet for me, Vengeance...” he growls as he bites at my stomach. And suddenly, he slips a finger inside of me. A gasp rips from my throat, and I feel like I’ve been lit with a hundred fireworks. He stretches me farther as he pushes another finger inside.

A moan escapes my lips, and I tilt my head back, gripping the blanket as I cling to the earth for dear life.

“You know how long I’ve been fantasizing about this?” he says softly as his thumb presses directly on my clit. He drags it back and forth across it in the most delicious way. “Since you asked how to kill a vampire. Being in this apartment, not being able to touch you, not making you scream my name every night...” he growls, licking at my skin as if I’m the last meal he’ll ever partake in. “Please allow me to make up for lost time.”

“Ares,” I say, his name coming out a little desperate as something gathers beneath his thumb. It comes from the far reaches of my body, pushing me toward the edge of a cliff.

“Perfect, Vengeance,” he says, the excitement picking up in his tone. He pistons his fingers in and out of me, picking up the pace, curling his fingers, hitting that spot deep within me as he rubs my clit with precision.

His free hand cups my side, and the bare skin to bare skin is the very best sensation in this world. He presses a reverent kiss to my stomach before shifting back. And the very next moment, he licks up the very center of me before latching his lips onto my clit and sucking. Hard.

I fall off that cliff. My entire body tenses, wound tight as a coil. And then I detonate.

The orgasm rips through me, draining the life from every corner of my being. Ares’ name rips from my chest in a wild, feral cry as I squeeze his head with my thighs. He sucks harder, his tongue stroking over my clit in the next moment, pushing my ecstasy to a level I never even knew existed.

A cry rips from my chest, and as my eyes fly open, all I see is white stars, the world

dissolved into perfect bliss.

Ares gives one last lap at my pussy as the high begins to subside, just before he surges forward, claiming my mouth with his own. I taste myself on his lips, and it's the headiest thing I've ever experienced. His hand cups my jaw, kissing me like I've never been kissed in my life.

Desperately, I claw at the sweats slung low around his hips. I shove them down, and Ares maneuvers as I do, kicking them off the bed.

With a gasp, I push myself up the bed till my head hits the pillow. Ares kneels there, looking every bit of me over with predatory possessiveness .

My eyes trail down the perfection of his body until finally I see it. Thick and long, my mouth goes dry as I take him in. Fuck. If that isn't the prettiest cock I've ever seen in my life.

"Think you can take it, Vengeance?" he asks, and while it's wicked and teasing, it's also sincere, with just a hint of worry.

I simply nod wickedly, reaching for him. "I want it. Now."

Suddenly, the grin on his face falters. "Fuck. Lana, I don't have any condoms," he laments. "And I'm not looking to get you pregnant with any Born babies."

"My period ended yesterday morning," I say, breathless, pulling him to me. "You're not going to get me pregnant this time of month."

"Thank fuck," he breathes, leaning in, kissing me in a searing kiss that reaches my very core. Between us, I feel him fist himself. He rubs the head of his cock along my entrance, a tease I can barely stand. He looks up, meeting my eyes for just a moment,

one last request for consent.

I nod.

And Ares moves forward, sliding into me.

I have to let out a breath, my entire body freezing for a moment. Shit. I feel full. Absolutely stretched to the brim.

But as he hesitates for a moment, giving me a second to adjust to him, my body relaxes just a little. And he slides in farther.

Damn. How is there any more room inside me to take any more of him?

As I let out a breath, he slides inside me farther still until finally, he bottoms out, buried to the hilt inside of me.

“You okay?” Ares breathes, the air coming in and out of his lungs ragged. His entire body is trembling, as if it’s taking everything in him to hold back .

I take a second to answer. I feel as if he’s climbed into every bit of me, occupying my body at the same time.

But by the second, it feels... sensational. Like fate. Like exactly where I’m supposed to be.

“Fuck me,” I breathe out again as I rise up to meet my lips to his. His tongue invades my mouth, and slowly, gently, he slides out of me before pressing back inside. I let out a slow breath, Ares catching every bit of air. My body relaxes to him, stretches, adapts.

And shit, the sensation of him inside me?

“More,” I beg.

Ares buries his lips against my throat, bracing himself on his forearms above me as he slides in and out. I raise my knees around his hips, opening wider.

My entire world centers down to this moment, to this man, to this union. I rock my hips against him as Ares slides in and out. And when I moan in desperation for more, he picks up the pace. My head spins with the intensity, with the incredible sensations ripping through me.

I’ve had sex before. With two other men. But nothing, nothing , compares to Ares Hunt.

The lithe form of his body. The immense size of him. The words he whispers against my skin. The kisses that turn me electric.

I nearly cry out in frustration when Ares slides out of me completely. But I’m rewarded almost immediately by him sliding the length of himself over my clit. And the slick pressure of it immediately chases me sky high. The sensation comes over me again as he grinds himself up over my clit. And that it’s my wetness giving it lubrication... Fuck, I’ve never been more turned on in my life .

My head throws back as a gasp rips from my throat, and I’m shot out of a cannon toward my undoing.

“Ares!” I cry.

And just as I trip over the edge, he plunges back into me, spearing me all the way through the center. The feral, ragged noises coming from his lungs propel me harder,

faster.

I shatter.

Ecstasy. Bliss. Ares is my undoing as I come, and it is not quiet.

Ares curses as a roar rips from his lips and he shutters into me, his entire body tensing around me, caging me in.

By the time it subsides, I'm a quivering, shaking mess. And I've never, never felt more satisfied in my existence.

There are roughly four million other women in this city. And I am the only one who gets to touch Ares Hunt.

He is mine.

Mine.

"You were perfect, Vengeance," Ares pants, and I take it as a massive compliment that I can make a vampire pant.

I stare up into his eyes, and something in me darkens. I realize there is a part of me I didn't know existed. Because I would do just about anything for this man. Not all of them good. Not all of them wise.

"You're mine, Ares Hunt," I tell him in a dark promise.

"Every piece of me," he agrees.

He presses a kiss to my lips, sealing it as a vow.

My body feels heavy now, the last of my energy reserves burned up. As if he can sense it, Ares rolls off of me. Reaching for the tissues on the nightstand, he gently, carefully positions himself between my legs, cleaning me up. There's something vulnerable about it, on both our parts, something tender .

I'd never let any other man do this. Ever.

But this is Ares.

He discards the tissues when he's done and lays back on the pillow. He gathers me in his arms, and I let out a tired, breathy sigh as I rest my head on his chest. It feels like everything is exactly as it should be in this moment.

"Sleep, Lana," Ares says as he presses a kiss to the top of my head. "You were perfect in every way today. Now you deserve some sleep."

And so I do. With my arms wrapped around the center of my world, I close my eyes and let darkness take me under.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

There is no natural light in our apartment. The windows constantly remain closed during the daytime hours, for Ares' sake. So, when I wake, I have no indication of what time it is or how long I've been asleep.

I roll over, noting the dull ache between my legs. And a wicked smile pulls on my lips as I remember everything that happened. And there, as I roll over, I make out Ares' form in the bed through the dark.

He's lying on his back, an arm slung over his eyes. I've never seen him sleep before. He told me once that, as a vampire, he doesn't sleep often. But here's the proof that he does, in fact, sleep at times. And I take great pride in the fact that I tired him out enough to do so.

Through the dark, I stare at him. He's so damn beautiful. Yes, he looks dangerous. He looks like someone you'd cross the street to walk on the opposite side of the road from. But just look at him. Gorgeous lips. The most incredible jawline of any man I've ever seen. And that's nothing said of this body .

I can't help it. I reach out and touch him. My fingers trace their way over his chest, down his stomach.

I don't startle when his hand suddenly wraps around my wrist.

"Dangerous, Vengeance," he says. His voice comes out scratchy and low, so freshly woken from sleep, and it reaches a very feminine place in me.

"You've never made me feel in danger, Venom," I say, grinning as I splay my whole

hand against his bare skin.

He blinks the sleep from his eyes, staring up at me. Slower this time, he brings his hand to the side of my neck. He pulls me down to his lips, kissing me with reverence and fervor. “Good morning,” he says in a growl.

“Good morning,” I say as I melt into him.

Ares brushes the hair from my face, and I relish the feeling of his warmth. Even the smell of him is comforting.

“How are you feeling this morning?” he asks, his tone gentle and genuine.

“Sore,” I answer with a chuckle. “But amazing. Last night was perfect.”

“No regrets?” he asks. And as I look up and meet his eyes, I see worry there.

It’s my turn to touch him, to reassure him. I reach a hand up and place it on the side of his face, my thumb brushing back and forth over his cheek. “None, Ares. I meant everything I said last night.”

“I didn’t scare you away?” he asks. “Because I mean it, Lana. I’m in this. All the way.”

I stare into his hazel eyes, and I see the conviction there. Nothing in me doubts what he’s saying. “You’re not just my fake fiancé anymore, Ares. You’re mine. Exclusive for real.”

“Mine,” he says, his eyes darkening. He rolls forward, pushing me onto my back. And he kisses me. Deep. Claiming.

Labels are such a strange thing. We've used fiancée for weeks now. I guess I could call Ares my boyfriend now, but that does so little to capture what this is.

Mine feels like such a better term.

Ares is mine.

From the nightstand, Ares' phone buzzes. He ignores it, his lips coming to my neck, his hand sliding down my throat, over my chest, until he cups my breast. But then his phone goes off again. And then again.

Ares mutters a curse against my skin and, with a reluctant groan, rolls away from me to retrieve the device.

I pull the blanket around me, enjoying the view of his tattooed back. Damn. Every square inch of him is perfect.

"It's James," Ares says, reading through the multiple texts. "Sounds like there were shots fired at one of my buildings last night. Some domestic."

"Is everyone okay?" I ask, my brows furrowing. In a city this populated, shit like this happens daily, but this is coming a little close to home.

"Sounds like it, but the police want me to come check it out to give some kind of inspection clearance," he says as he climbs out of bed. And I instantly flush at seeing his completely naked silhouette in the mostly dark room. "Want to come with?"

I bite my lower lip and nod as he looks over his shoulder at me. Throwing the blanket off, I climb free of the bed. I step toward the bathroom, but in half a second, Ares is around the bed, wrapping his arms around my waist. I squeal as he picks me right up off the floor and buries his face against my neck.

“Fuck, it’s taking everything I have in me not to take you right here again,” he says as he sucks on my skin. “But you need to recover from last night. And we have to get going.”

I spin in his arms, my breasts pressed into his chest. Between us, his hard cock shows his readiness. “Tonight,” I say, raising one eyebrow. “You’re mine tonight.”

“Deal,” he says.

He smacks my ass as I turn and head back into the bathroom. I pin my hair up and take a quick shower while Ares gets dressed. When I’m finished, I pull on a sensible outfit and fix my makeup since I slept in it last night. Ten minutes after James texted, Ares and I head out of the apartment and into the elevator.

And it’s everything when I slip my hand into his when it’s just us. When he leans in and kisses me hard just ten seconds before the elevator door opens.

These moments are just for us. There are no witnesses. There’s no worry about if we’re being watched. We do these things because we want to. Because he is mine.

With his specialized sunglasses on, Ares and I stride out into the lobby. Sun streams in through the windows. With a wave to Laz, we head to the door that goes into the parking. Ares extends the helmet to me, and I climb on behind him.

Damn. This is the best as I wrap my arms around his waist. I can cling as tight to him as I want as we pull out onto the street. I don’t hold back as I rub my hand over his chest. Ares puts his left hand on my thigh, and everything in me feels alive.

A backpack. Isn’t that what a girlfriend on the back of a man’s bike is called?

I’m a very happy backpack.

Ares weaves his way through the traffic. It's busy, considering it's Saturday. We head straight south, navigating our way expertly until Ares rolls into Hell's Kitchen. And he truly is an expert on finding parking in the city where it's impossible to find parking. He pays for it, and then, hand in hand, we head down the street.

I spot James standing at a curbside, tapping away furiously on his phone. A police officer stands nearby, writing up something on a pad of paper.

"James," Ares greets his property executor. James' head snaps up, though I can't see his eyes at all through his own special sunglasses.

"Ares," James replies, standing straight and putting his phone into his pocket. "Sorry to have called you for this, but the cops said I couldn't sign for it."

"It's the law," the officer says in a monotone, bored voice. He doesn't look up from whatever he's writing.

James looks annoyed. "Anyway. Looks like the husband was drunk. Couple started fighting. The husband grabbed his gun and started firing off shots."

"At his wife?" I ask for clarification, my brows furrowing.

"She said no," the officer says, finally putting away his notepad and joining us. "He was just being an asshole who took no thought to the fact that he lives in an apartment surrounded by other apartments. By the time we got here, the guy had passed out. But, since the shots went through multiple walls into other units, we need the owner to come sign that you'll have the plumbing and electrical inspected so there are no safety hazards."

"Was anyone hurt?" Ares asks.

The cop presses his lips together in a tight line and shakes his head. “Nah, just peekaboo holes between neighbors now. You’re welcome to go check out the damage if you like.”

“I need to do that?” Ares asks James, looking at him with this ‘you got this?’ expression.

“Yes, you do,” James says, and there’s an expression on his face that I can’t quite read.

“Go ahead, Mr. Hunt,” the cop says. “But if you’ll sign here that you’ll get your inspections, I’ll be on my way. Call if you have questions.”

Ares doesn’t hesitate as he signs the papers. And for the first time, I wonder if Ares just owns a few units in this place or the whole building?

With Ares, I never know.

The cop leaves Ares with his card and climbs into his cruiser, pulling away from the curb.

“What’s going on?” Ares asks, turning back to James.

“You don’t actually need to go in, but I needed to talk to you. One of the neighboring tenants is a Born,” James says, keeping his tone low so he’s not overheard. “The man is off his fucking rocker, but he’s pissed about the daylight coming in. When he realized what I am, he started going off about calling in the House of Marshals, saying he wanted to get Aleah Steele in here. I think he’s harmless, but I thought you should know.”

“Who the fuck is the House of Marshals? Or Allah Steele?” Ares questions, his brows

furrowing.

James glances from Ares to me and then back to Ares, looking a little confused. “The House of Allaway?”

“You keep saying House like I should know what that means,” Ares says, his tone making his loss of patience obvious.

James arches a brow, his mouth a little slack. He looks at me again like he’s expecting one of us to laugh like this is some stupid joke we’re trying to make. “I... I’m sorry. Ares, how the fuck do you not know about the Houses? You... you know about Cyrus, though, right?”

Something sinks in my stomach. James seems truly shocked and honestly worried that Ares doesn’t know what he’s talking about. And I have to wonder, what parts of this vampire world is Ares unaware of?

“Not here,” Ares says, looking around at the hustle and bustle of the city. “Can you meet us back at the office?”

“Yeah,” James confirms, but there’s still a look of deep concern and surprise on his face. For now, he simply turns away and hails a taxi.

“You really have no idea what he’s talking about?” I question as we walk back toward the bike at a quick pace.

“No idea,” Ares says, his brow deeply furrowed. “House? Allaway, Aleah, Marshals? I have no idea what any of those words are supposed to mean.”

I consider for a few moments, but none of it means anything to me either. James isn’t really that old in terms of immortality. He’s only been Resurrected for nineteen years,

so it's not like he's significantly older than Ares, the keeper of ancient knowledge.

Without another word, Ares climbs onto the bike. I secure my helmet and climb on behind him. Ares takes off, rocketing down the street. I tighten my grip around his waist, trusting his vampiric instincts because I would never get on this bike with any normal man driving through the city like this.

Only six minutes later, we pull into the underground parking at Ares' building. I can tell Ares' mind is completely preoccupied when he says nothing as we walk into the building. He simply holds my hand tightly as we ride up the thirty-nine stories. He heads directly to his door when we get out on the right floor. Just as Ares is unlocking the door, the other elevator opens, and James steps out.

Once inside the office, Ares double checks that it's empty. Considering it's Saturday, it is. Ares nods James into his office. The three of us step inside, and as if just to be double sure no one is going to overhear this conversation, Ares closes the door.

"I've never heard any of these names before," Ares says as he takes a seat at his desk. Considering the curtains are drawn in here, he removes his glasses, as does James. "Cyrus. Allaway. I've heard of the Steele family, but they're all dead. What the fuck is going on, James?"

James steeples his fingers, staring at Ares over the top of them. He still looks wary over this whole situation. But his eyes turn to me, and he seems like he's deeply contemplating something.

"Out with it, James," Ares growls.

"I'm debating if it's safe for Lana to hear all of this," James blurts out, looking at me with concerned concentration. "Under normal circumstances, no way should she be privy to any of this. But since you two are engaged, and she's going to potentially be

the mother of Born children someday, I guess it's going to have to happen at some point."

Shit.

What the hell does James know that might put me in danger if I know it?

"Don't worry about me," I say, swallowing once. "I'm really not too concerned about safety, considering I have Ares around. And it sounds like something I should probably be aware of. I'm in this now."

James holds my gaze for a moment, and I look over to Ares. A look of pride and admiration shines in his eyes.

"You said you knew about the Steele family," James says, looking back at Ares. "How much do you know about them?"

Ares leans back in his chair as if settling in for something big. "They were a huge family who ran the vampire population in New York. For a long time. Kept everyone in line. But one of the uncles went crazy and killed everyone. Why, I don't know. But the Barons formed shortly after that, keeping things from getting out of hand."

James nods, and then shakes his head. "Not all of the Steeles were killed. Aleah and Duncan Steele survived. They just joined the House of Marshals a few years ago. And the Barons have zero authority over New York in the worldwide view of vampires. The House of Marshals does."

Ares narrows his eyes at James, and from the way his jaw tightens, he doesn't like what James is saying.

James shifts in his seat, looking uncomfortable under Ares' stare. "There are four

Houses in the States. The House of Marshals is based in Boston. The House of Conrath is in Mississippi. The House of Valdez is in Las Vegas. And the House of Sidra in Washington State. Every one of them quarters up the states and rules over that region. Appointed by King Cyrus.”

Something flips in my stomach, and my blood goes cold.

“I’m sorry, did you just say King Cyrus?” I question, my brows rising.

James looks over at me, and from his expression, I can tell he still can’t believe we don’t know this information. “Shit. If you don’t know about Cyrus, you don’t even know how we came to exist, do you, Ares?”

“Haven’t given it that much deep thought,” Ares admits, albeit begrudgingly.

James wipes a hand over his face, shaking his head as he blinks three times hard. “Two thousand plus years ago, a man named Cyrus was... an experimenter. Back then, they probably would have called him a witch doctor. Now, some might say he was a scientist. But he created this... concoction that made him the ultimate predator. Stronger. Faster. Insane strength. But he was cursed for it by craving the blood of his own former kind. He became the first vampire.”

This doesn’t sound real. This sounds like a fairy tale or a scary story told to frighten children. Then again, Ares once told me about vampires, and though he said he didn’t know how they came to be, a curse was actually one possibility he mentioned.

“You’re talking about this Cyrus like he’s still alive today,” Ares points out, his look doubtful.

“He is,” James says, nodding his head. “And he still rules as king of all vampires. The fact that you don’t know about him...”

“Get over it, and keep explaining,” Ares says, his patience growing thin again.

James snaps his mouth shut and nods. It’s the most aggressive I’ve seen Ares be with someone he wasn’t about to kill, or his father. Ares does not like feeling like he’s in the dark.

“So, Cyrus had a wife, Sevan. And he really, really loved her. When he realized time no longer had a hold on him, he wanted Sevan to become like him. But she refused. She saw the monster her husband had become, and she didn’t want to be like him. But one night, Cyrus forced it on her. Turned her into what he was. What he didn’t know was that she was pregnant.”

“Monster,” I say under my breath.

“Undoubtedly,” James agrees. “Sevan was a vampire now, but the baby still grew in her. When he was born, he was totally human. And Sevan was relieved. She didn’t want him being like them. But after he grew into adulthood, he died. But four days later...”

“He Resurrected,” Ares concludes.

James nods. “He became the first Born vampire. And he recognized the potential of what they were. How they could change the world. But not with three vampires. So, this son set out to run his own experiments. He took human lovers. And eventually, some of them conceived.”

“He made his own breeding program,” I say with a sneer on my face.

“Can you blame him?” James counters, looking up at me from beneath his dark lashes. Those strange eyes of his lock on mine. Green, but nearly yellow. “If you were the first of your kind, would you not get lonely? Would you not want a family?”

“Easy for a man to say when he doesn’t have to do the hard part,” I counter him, a sour taste in the back of my throat.

He doesn’t react. He just looks back at Ares and continues. “He was successful. The Blood Father created nineteen children. And those children died when they came of age, and every one of them Resurrected as a vampire. And those of his male children managed to do the same thing.”

It makes me sick. The thought of this breeding happening, the women who were just carriers .

“The Blood Father?” Ares questions the name.

James nods. “I’ll get to that. Cyrus wanted to keep the vampires a secret. He felt they were in danger with few numbers. But he also saw power in the secrecy. He wanted to grow their family and keep it contained in their village in Austria. Bide their time in that castle.”

“Castle?” I question again.

James nods but doesn’t look at me. “But the Blood Father saw opportunity. The number of vampires was growing. And they were so much stronger than humans. He laid out plans to make their presence known, to take a position of power within the world.”

It chills me to think what this could mean. If the vampires took positions of power. If they decided to use their abilities to influence the world. It’s terrifying to consider.

“Cyrus and Sevan turned on their son,” James says, his tone cold. “They rallied some of their grandchildren, and there was a war. Family against family. Father against son. And this war raged on for years. In the end, Cyrus beheaded the Blood Father.”

Chills wash over me. But I feel something like... relief.

“Cyrus took power once again. Those who allied themselves with him, he granted power and privilege to. He made them the first Royals. Those who sided with his son, he shunned and banished. The Born. And while he rejected his son’s vision, Cyrus realized that the vampires wouldn’t stay contained. So, he granted the Royals stewardship over the world. Gave them the task of managing the vampires. And their biggest job is to keep the vampires’ secret.”

“House of Marshals,” I say as the puzzle pieces start coming together. “House of Conrath. They’re these Royals. ”

James nods. “There are really three kinds of vampires in this world. The Bitten. The Born. And the Royals. Yet the only difference between the Born and the Royals is blood. If their bloodlines track back to those certain grandchildren who sided with Cyrus. And the Born... they’re nobody to the Royals. Subjects. Cyrus erased his son’s name from history. He is known only as the Blood Father now. And there is no changing the past. No making up for the sins of the fathers. The Royals’ bloodlines are tracked. Especially the females.”

Ick. This shit keeps coming up.

“Why?” Ares questions.

James takes in a deep breath, settling back into his seat. This is a lot to explain. My brain is spinning with it all, and I’m not even sure I believe every bit of it. “Because when Cyrus forced his wife into vampirism, he cursed himself yet again, and her. He was cursed to lose that which he loved most, over and over. While Sevan was a vampire and should have been immortal, after ninety or so years, she began to wither. To starve. Blood wasn’t enough to sate her thirst. And she died.”

Ares' brows furrow. "She starved to death?"

"Essentially," James nods. "And the king grieved. Deeply. But fifty-one years later, a woman came to the castle. And she had all of Sevan's memories. She looked different, had a different name. But she remembered every detail of their life together."

"Are you talking about reincarnation?" I gape.

Once again, James nods. "She was Sevan, reincarnated in the Royal line. And she and Cyrus were reunited for over a century. Until she withered again, and died again. And it has been a vicious cycle for two millennia now. Sevan always reincarnates in the Royal line. And so, he keeps tabs on any female Royals like you wouldn't believe."

"Isn't that kind of... incest?" I ask, my nose wrinkling as I put it together. "If I'm understanding it right, every single vampire can trace their origins back to Cyrus and Sevan. So, if Sevan reincarnates in their own line, in the Royals, isn't that their own descendants?"

James shrugs. "I guess so. But if you've ever studied genealogy, you'd understand how wide family trees spread, and quickly. The relation dilutes rapidly. It would hardly be any different than the relation between you and Ares."

I look over at Ares, and while I have a moment of ew , I think James is right. When I think of how many generations there have been over two thousand years, there's a whole lot of DNA in the gene pool.

"Sevan last died over 250 years ago," James continues his story. "She's never stayed dead for so long. Cyrus turns into more and more of an asshole while he searches for her. You'd be wise to stay clear of his radar at all costs. The man is a psychopath. He literally tortured the leader of the House of Conrath a few years back. He was

convinced she was Sevan. And she might have led him on. He didn't take it well when it turned out she wasn't. Currently, he's keeping an eye on the Royal of the House of Marshals. She's two."

"That's disgusting," I point out.

James shrugs. "I only said he's keeping an eye on her. He will wait until she's of age, obviously. And he'll be keeping an eye on any other females born in the Royal lines."

"You say the House of Marshals rules over our region, but their Royal is two. Who is her father? I assume he's in charge?" Ares asks .

A smirk comes to James' face. "Things are rarely that simple or straightforward when it comes to the Houses. The girl's mother was taken against her will and inseminated by a Royal bastard she killed while she was still pregnant. Since the little girl is the rightful heir to that House, she obviously isn't old enough. So, for now, her stepdad and her mom are pseudo in charge of a 'House,' along with Aleah and Duncan Steele, until she's old enough. Thus, it's called the House of Marshals. Because they're keeping stewardship until she's old enough."

My brain is spinning. It was overwhelming when Ares told me about the reality of vampires. Little did we know that was only a tiny portion of this all. The history runs thousands of years deep and reaches into the present day.

"So, that's what I meant when I said that Born at the apartments was going off about calling the House of Marshals and Aleah."

Shit.

This all is way more complicated than we thought.

“I don’t think any of the Barons know about this,” Ares says. He laces his fingers together and brushes his thumb over his bottom lip. “They’re risking a war if they knew of the double coverage of the Barons and the House. So, I don’t think I’m the only ignorant idiot in New York.”

James mulls that over for a moment. “New York is shockingly unconnected with the rest of the vampiric population, with a surprisingly low number of vampires, considering the overall population. But you’re right, it would come to war if the Houses, if Cyrus, knew there was another organization trying to control the city. You need to consider the future very carefully, Ares.”

Ares continues to stare at James for several long moments, and I can’t help but wonder what’s going through his head right now. His whole world has just been turned upside down. “You said the House of Marshals are in Boston?”

James nods. “Elle and Lexington Dawes are the parents. They’re good, reasonable people. If you decide to talk to them, I think that would go okay. Just probably don’t mention the Barons.”

He’s quiet for a moment longer, considering this. “Is that all of it, James?” Ares asks.

James takes a moment, considering. How do you effectively cover two thousand years of history in an hour-long conversation? “I mean, there’s plenty more you could learn about the Houses, but the core of it, the basis of everything, yeah, I think that’s it.”

Ares gives a small, slight nod. “Thank you, James. This is important information, and the fact that it’s new to me, I hope you’ll understand that it’s to both our advantages to keep it to yourself.”

That sounded a bit like a threat. And from the cold, composed look on Ares’ face, I

think it was.

“Understood,” James says, not balking but somehow in agreement.

“You can go,” Ares says, dismissing his assistant.

James stands. “Lana,” he says, nodding to me in goodbye. I give a little wave, and James slips out the door. Just a few seconds later, I hear him exit the office door, and it swings closed behind him.

There’s a tense moment of silence, the weight of everything hanging in the air. My eyes slide back to Ares, who is staring at the surface of his desk, not seeing anything .

“Do you believe him?” I ask first. Because I’m not totally sure that I do.

“I’m not sure what he would stand to gain by lying about it,” Ares says, his eyes snapping back up. “But I think I should probably confirm what he’s claiming. If he’s right, the Barons won’t like it.”

“I get it, the Barons are powerful and very rich,” I say, recalling every experience I’ve had with them. “But there are only six of you. Against a worldwide system of vampires. No offense, Ares, but the Barons wouldn’t stand a fucking chance if all of what James said is real.”

“You’re right,” Ares says, giving a little nod. “They could have us squashed in a day. Again, if what James says is true.”

I eye Ares, trying to read his emotions. “How are you feeling about all of this?”

Ares scrubs his hands over his face before lacing his fingers together behind his head and leaning back. “It doesn’t sound real. The fact that there’s a fucking king of

vampires. Then there's his reincarnating wife. And these Houses? It all sounds like a story, not reality. But the explanation of how vampires came to exist? I've kind of always thought it was some kind of curse."

I nod. "We could confirm at least parts of it. What if we did... a drive by of this House of Marshals? We might even be able to talk to someone without drawing too much suspicion. I mean, technically, they rule over this area, so it wouldn't be too far-fetched for you to talk to them."

Ares nods. "I think that's a good idea. It's, like, a four-hour drive to Boston, but that's nothing. I?—"

He cuts off when an alert sound I've never heard from his phone goes off. His eyes instantly darken as he pulls it out of his pocket. "There's been another Red party scheduled," Ares says, his tone rising. "Friday night. This one is in SoHo."

"Finally," I say breathlessly.

Meeting some Royals is going to have to wait. For now, we finally have a lead.

It's about damn time.

I'm coming, Ophelia.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

Over the next four days, I see very little of Ares. He's constantly wrapped up in business with the Barons and his father. So, I go back to work. I restart my classes. And while it feels amazing to be using my body again, to be moving and striking, there's something different.

My heart isn't in it. Not like it used to be.

My mind keeps wandering to other places. To visions of a king, to musings on a resurrecting queen.

Ares made some calls to other vampires he knows outside of New York.

They confirmed every damn detail James shared with us.

There really is a king.

There really is a queen.

There really are Royals who rule over the entire world.

Holy shit.

No wonder I can't focus on work. No wonder my heart isn't in it.

My world has expanded exponentially. And against all logic, I feel... enamored by it. I feel consumed by it.

I wonder what Sysco is up to and if Giovanni is causing trouble. I try to plan for Friday night.

Another Red party. Finally. It's been three long weeks since the last one, which means Ophelia has been missing for five fucking weeks now. And I've not really gotten any closer to finding her or the answers to what happened to her.

I'd make a truly terrible detective.

And with all of this constantly going through my mind, I have to consider. Do I still want this? My job. The gym that has meant so much to me for my whole life. Last week, I would have said a resounding yes because what Ares and I were doing was still technically fake. Once we found Ophelia, we would go our separate ways, and I would need a life to go back to. I'd need this job, and I'd settle back into my small, shitty life.

But Ares and I are for real now. He's mine. I'm not giving him up any time soon, and the way he touches me, the way he protects me, the way he looks at me? I don't think he's giving me up anytime soon, either. Lana and Ares are a package deal now.

So, what does that mean for my future? The idea of being a kept girlfriend is insane to me. Ares can certainly afford it—if I don't want to, I don't have to work another day in my life so long as we're together.

I don't know that I want that. To be reliant on him.

But as I wrap up my last class of the day, I'm relieved it's over. Because my head hasn't been here all day. It's been in the supernatural. In the hidden world that has engulfed me wholly. It's been wanting to be at Ares' side, working through insane shit and bargaining with dangerous characters .

I walk out of the gym that night and find Billings parked at the curb. Just as he's been every night since I started work back up. I climb inside and look out at the city.

My world has changed so drastically over the last three weeks. It seems impossible that it has only been that long since I went to that Red party and met Ares there. It feels like it's been years, not weeks. My entire life has been turned upside down.

I can't explain it, but I feel like I'm exactly where fate wanted me to be, though. It doesn't make any sense. I'm not a vampire. I'm not even a Bitten. I'm just some human woman who doesn't always have the best survival instincts, not when someone I care about is in danger. By all accounts, I shouldn't have any reason to be tied to this world.

But as Billings makes the last turn to my building, I feel home. As I walk into the lobby and wave to Laz, I feel like I was meant to be in this life. As I unlock our door and step into the empty apartment that looks out over Central Park, I know, somehow, without a shadow of a doubt, that this is where I belong.

I head straight for my bathroom. I strip my sweaty workout clothes off, dropping them in the hamper where the housekeeper will take care of them tomorrow. I turn the water on hot in the shower and step in.

A sigh escapes my lips as I stand under the amazing water pressure. My fingers lace into my hair, and I let the water cascade down over me. The luxury that comes with my new life isn't too bad, either.

I lather up my hair, taking my time washing it. I deep condition it. And I scrub the most amazing smelling body wash over my skin .

I barely feel the air change as the shower door is pulled open. A pair of warm hands wrap around my waist.

A soft smile pulls on my lips as I lean back into Ares' touch. His tattooed hands slide over my stomach, one rising to cup my breast. His lips come to my neck, and a contented sigh escapes my lips as I lean my head back against his shoulder, granting him better access to my flesh.

“Coming home to you naked, in the shower, Vengeance?” Ares growls in my ear as his hand slips lower. “I hope you’re aware I’m never, ever going to get enough of you.”

I turn in his arms, coming chest to chest with him. And the sight of all that tattooed flesh glistening wet is enough to make me quiver. “I guess we’re just two greedy addicts.”

I take his mouth with mine, hungry, desperate, a little feral. And Ares doesn’t hold back. His hands slide over my ass before he hooks his hands behind my thighs, hoisting me up in one smooth motion. He backs me up until my back hits the tile wall. And the next moment, a gasp rips from my lips as the head of his cock teases my entrance, just one second before he slides himself inside me.

I started birth control the day after Ares and I claimed each other for real. Too bad it won’t be fully effective yet.

But I’m going to enjoy every moment anyway.

Ares touches his forehead to mine, staring with such heat and intensity right into my own eyes. He gathers my wrists together, pinning them to the wall above my head as he thrusts into me again and again.

My breath comes out ragged as he pumps me. I feel so damn full. Every inch of me is occupied by him. And it’s everything, and not enough at the same time. More. I need more.

I surge forward and kiss him, taking his lips, biting and tugging. I claim his tongue. I steal his air. I pull a hand free, and it comes to his throat, appreciating every square inch of his skin as it slides down lower, down over his shoulder, sliding over the incredible ridges of his back.

I nearly moan in displeasure as Ares sets me down, but in the same movement, he bends me forward over the shower bench. He swipes his hand over my folds, caressing my most intimate area. The next moment, he sinks himself inside me once more. A breathy sigh of relief escapes my lips at our restored connection.

Ares' hands dig into my hips, and I realize suddenly just how much control he's having to exercise. I've watched Ares drive his hand straight through a man's chest and rip his heart from his ribs without any effort. So, him applying just the exquisite amount of pressure? This man has exceptional control.

And it just gets so much damn better as he leans over me. One hand slides up to cup my breast. The other slides lower, and his fingers expertly slip between my folds until he finds just the right spot.

"You're so damn good at that," I pant as he swipes his middle finger right over my clit. I press my hips farther into him, begging for more.

"Fuck, just look at you," he praises, and I can just feel the burn of his gaze as he takes every square inch of me in.

"Harder," I beg him.

His hand comes back to my hip, and he grants me my wish. I stumble forward he thrusts so hard, but his firm grip keeps me in place, keeping me steady.

"More," I beg, feeling the coil inside of me beginning to tighten .

Ares slides those wicked fingers over my clit and rams into me from behind. In. Out. Deprivation. Fulfillment.

Those wicked fingers play a symphony between my legs.

Ares' lips come to my back, a kiss placed right between my shoulder blades. And then there's his tongue, tasting my skin as if I were the sweetest sugar.

"Ares," I breathe out, his name coming out desperate.

"I've got you, kitten," he says, his voice rough but sure.

Every muscle in my body tightens, my breath growing shallow as he swipes one finger straight down my folds over my clit, increasing the pressure as he goes.

And I explode. I'm shoved right over the edge.

A cry comes out over my lips as my knees shake. It pulls from every corner of my body as the orgasm rips through me, from my scalp to my toes. I grip that bench like my life depends on it. Ares slams into me, pressing on that place deep inside of me that is so tightly wound, sending my brain spinning higher and higher.

Ares was named after a god, and he proves his worth right here, right now.

Moments after I reach the climax, as I begin spiraling down, Ares slides out of me. With a shuttered groan, he tightens his grip on me, and comes on the shower floor.

I'm panting. I'm quivering. I'm two seconds from collapsing onto the ground, completely spent. Completely satisfied.

Ares presses a kiss to my shoulder. And then he gathers me into his arms, my chest to

his. He holds me so carefully, yet I feel completely supported and secure.

“Every inch of you is perfect, Vengeance,” Ares says as he looks down into my eyes. He looks a little drunk, a little high. And I take absolute pleasure that it was me who could make him look like this. “Every night, every morning, I want you. Every dark stare, every curve, every lock of hair. You undo me, Lana.”

I gather my strength, raising a hand to the back of his neck, kissing the man I’ve fallen for, the man I’d trade my soul for. “You’re my favorite new addiction, Venom.”

I grab the shampoo, squeezing out a dollop onto my hand. With a soft smile, I scrub my fingers through Ares’ hair. He lets his own hands slide over my body, undemanding, simply appreciative. I lather up the body wash next, taking my time as I scrub down every tattooed, beautiful inch of him. And Ares lets me, his head tipping back in appreciation of my touch. And it’s everything, the fact that I can make him feel this way. The fact that this man chooses me. That he worships me just as much as I do him.

We rinse off, and Ares hands me a fluffy towel as I shut off the water. Wrapped and comfortable, I step out of the shower, looking at the two of us in the mirror. Ares’ hair drips into his face, the towel wrapped low on his hips. Me, with my towel tucked under my arms, Ares towering above me in height.

“We look like we belong together,” I muse aloud. And I mean it. Staring at the two of us, side by side, we look like the perfect match.

Ares walks to my side, his hungry eyes fixed on me. He wraps his hands around my waist from behind, staring at us in the mirror over my shoulder. “Yeah, we do.”

He presses a kiss to my cheek, his breath warm and comforting. But I hear his

breathing change, a little more concentrated, a little more dangerous. “I found a shell company my father is the owner of,” he says. And his tone tells me this is the last thing he wants to talk about right, but the fact that he is talking about it right now, considering the beautiful moments we’ve just created, tells me it’s wildly important.

“And?” I encourage, my brows lifting. He has my full attention.

Ares turns, leaning back against the counter. “It only owns one building. Near the airport in Newark.”

“Does Augustus own any other property in New Jersey?” I question.

Ares shrugs. “He owns plenty outside of New York, but nothing unexpected. But this building looks like a warehouse from what I can see online. I thought we could go check it out. My instincts are telling me it’s something.”

I admit to myself that this doesn’t seem like it will lead to much. Augustus owns tons of real estate. But the shell company. That this is the only property under it. That is strange.

“Okay,” I nod. “Let’s go.”

Twenty minutes later, we’re both dressed and walking out of the elevator. Ares hands me my helmet and climbs on the motorcycle. And while it was terrifying the first few times I climbed on behind this man, it feels as natural as breathing now. I slip into my seat and wrap my arms around Ares as he backs the bike out of its parked space and then points it to the exit.

The night is surprisingly peaceful as we roll onto the road. In fact, it’s some of the lightest I’ve seen the traffic in ages. Ares expertly navigates us through the streets, through the Lincoln Tunnel, and merges into traffic as we cross into New Jersey.

Just thirty minutes after we left our apartment, Ares slows the bike as we make the last turn. The area is extremely industrial, so it's totally dead this time of night. A few cargo ships wait at the docks, their lights brilliant but without too much activity going on. Ares slows as we approach the address.

It looks like a warehouse, alright. It has old red, corrugated siding that's starting to rust. I see two broken windows from here. But there is a thick padlock on the front door.

Ares pulls into the parking lot of the building next door, tucked beneath some trees, making it nearly impossible to see. I climb off the back, pulling the helmet off and putting it back on the bike as Ares dismounts.

"This certainly isn't Augustus' usual purchase," Ares says, keeping his voice low as we cross the parking lot into the small parking area of Augustus' warehouse. "And he only buys shit that can make him more money. This place looks abandoned."

"He's definitely wanting to keep people out, though," I remark, pointing to the chained and locked front door.

Ares looks up, scanning the face of the building. I realize after a moment that he's checking for cameras. When he doesn't find any, he wraps his fingers around the chain and gives it a hard yank.

It falls to the ground, broken.

Damn.

The door protests as Ares slides it open. For a moment, he disappears into the dark interior. As I step inside, my eyes adjust, taking in the dim space.

It's empty except for a few empty crates at the far back of the building. There's nothing in here. Just a dusty, stained concrete floor.

"Foot tracks going back toward that office," Ares says, nodding his head in the direction of the back left corner. "They look recent. "

I squint in the dark, but I can't see anything. Then again, I don't have the eyes of a vampire.

Ares sets out in that direction, and I scramble to catch up with him. There is a walled-off section with one lone window that looks out into the bulk of the warehouse. A steel door separates the spaces. When he finds yet another lock on the door, Ares looks over his shoulder at me.

"Someone really doesn't want anyone getting inside," I say, arching a brow.

Ares gives a small nod of agreement before he breaks the chains and pulls the door open. This one does not squeal like the other door. It swings open silently.

It's dusty in here, too, but the smell is different. Like more moisture. Colder.

There is an open space, though it isn't large. Two desks are pushed up against the wall, but there are no chairs. And they look like they've been there since the eighties. There are three doors breaking off from here.

Ares checks the first door to find a supply closet with an assortment of random, forgotten about items. Door number two reveals a bathroom that is surprisingly clean, considering the rest of the space.

Door number three reveals a set of stairs plunging down into the ground.

Ares looks back at me, and I wonder if he can hear how hard my heart is beating in this moment. Something surges inside me. Excitement. Hope. Fear. It all wraps its cold hands around my throat.

Without a word, Ares steps down onto the first stair. Then the other.

Nerves are eating me alive, but I don't stop as I follow after Ares into the dark.

I expect my footsteps to echo throughout a cavernous space. Instead, the sound bounces back to me. Then I hear the sound of someone sucking in a sharp breath.

And it wasn't Ares.

"Please," a woman says, her voice terrified. I startle so hard my foot slips on the last step. "Just let me out. I swear I won't say anything. Just, please. I need to go home."

"Fuck," Ares says. One second later, I feel half-blinded as a few overhead lights turn on, buzzing loudly as the tube lights warm up.

Cages. My entire body feels numb as my eyes take in bars first. And then my eyes focus, and I see people.

A man backs away from the bars quickly, his entire body shaking with fear. A brunette woman walks up to her bars, gripping them and staring out at Ares and me.

"Oh my gosh, please," a second woman says, this one with brilliant red hair. "Please, get me out of here. Before those other guys come back. Please."

"What the fuck?" I breathe out, all of my organs squeezing with disgust and terror.

There are six cages in this damp, dark space. Prison cells. In each one, there is a bed.

In each one, there is a toilet and a sink. Exactly like a prison cell.

And there are three people in those cells.

“What the fuck is going on?” Ares asks, his brows furrowed as he looks around at each of the people. “Why are you here? Who?—”

“You’re not with those assholes?” the calm brunette asks.

“What assholes?” Ares asks, trepidation in his voice .

“I didn’t get their names,” she says. And I can’t believe how calm she is. “The big one with the scars. And the tall skinny one with the stupid green hair.”

“Toby and Keiran,” Ares says, the look in his eyes growing colder. Goons that work for Augustus.

“Are you with them?” the man in the cage asks, and I’ve never heard such equal measures of fear and accusation.

“No,” I answer. “How did you get here?”

I feel sick. So sick. Because I’m so scared I already know the answer.

“I went to a party,” the redhead speaks up first. “I didn’t really know what it was for, who was hosting it. Or I guess I should say what .”

“A Red party?” Ares questions.

She nods.

“When?” I ask next.

“Hard to tell how long we’ve been down here,” the man answers. “If I had to guess, two weeks?”

Ares curses. “So, there are more of them I’m not seeing.”

“Or you just didn’t get the alerts set up in time,” I correct him.

“Where?” Ares demands, the anger radiating off of him growing stronger. “Where was the party?”

“Brooklyn,” they both answer at the same time.

“Still in New York,” I say, looking over at Ares. “I think you just didn’t get the alert quick enough.”

“Better than another operation to find,” Ares concedes. “Tell me exactly what happened.”

“My friend told me about this party she’d heard about,” the woman dives in. She’s filled with all kinds of words and all kinds of emotions, bursting at the seams. “We got there, and it wasn’t really anything special. But the attendees? I’ve never seen so many hot guys in one place.”

I know what she’s talking about. Those guys at the Red party I miraculously walked away from, thanks to Ares, were indeed alluring. Somehow, I walked away with the most attractive of them all.

Damn vampires.

Not only are they ultimate predators, but they're beautiful too.

"I hit it off with this guy, and we started kissing. And then I remember something sharp, pain. But then... nothing for at least a few seconds. I... I still don't really know what happened. But I felt kind of out of it after. I looked around for my friend, but she wasn't there. And then there was this guy, the big one. He took me through this back door, told me he had something for my headache. Only that asshole knocked me out. When I woke up, I was here."

She lets out a little sob, barely keeping it together. And I shouldn't judge her for being emotional. After what she's been through.

"Same for you?" Ares asks the man in the cell next to hers.

The man nods. "Same. The party. Missing time. The big guy taking me through the back door, then I woke up here."

Ares turns to the woman across. "You too?"

Her gaze darkens. "Not me. I'm an exchange."

"What does that mean?" I ask, really not wanting the answer.

"You know what they are, right?" the woman asks, her gaze fixed on Ares. "You're one of them, to break in like you did."

Ares holds her eyes for a moment, evaluating the ramifications of confirming what she already knows. He gives a small nod.

"They're collecting us from the Red parties," she says, her eyes cold as she stares at Ares. "Then holding us here until they have a buyer."

“A buyer?” the word comes across my lips, rough and low.

Her eyes slide over to meet mine. “They’re selling us as living blood bags.”

All of my organs drop out. The world tilts just a little. And my entire body feels cold.

“There were four of them two weeks ago,” the woman continues to explain. “Two of them have sold. The buyer is coming for him tomorrow.” She nods her head toward the man across from her.

“How do you know that?” Ares questions.

“They like to talk,” the woman says, the disgust unhidden from her voice. “Sick fucks. I think they just like making everyone afraid. To make a horrific situation worse. But they don’t lie. Everything they’ve said, it happens.”

“Please,” the man says, desperation rising in his tone. “Get me out of here. Please. I can’t do this. I can’t be some vampire’s living dinner, day after day!”

Ares holds a hand up to him, silencing him temporarily. “You said you’re an exchange,” he says, his dark eyes fixed on her. “What do you mean by that?”

I swear the air is ten degrees colder with that frigid stare of hers. “I was sold to a politician who happens to have fangs two months ago. He kept me in this room. Fed me. Made sure I was always hydrated. Gave me books to read so I didn’t die from boredom.” The sarcasm and hatred are thick in her tone. “But for some reason, he decided he didn’t like the taste of me. The boss told him he could exchange me. She’s going as my replacement in three days.”

The redheaded woman lets out a sob, turning away from the bars as she laces her fingers into her dirty hair.

“The boss,” Ares says, his voice growing rougher by the moment. “You know his name?”

“Toby and Keiran call him Al,” the woman answers.

It only takes two seconds for it to sink in.

Augustus Lonan. Al.

Fuck.

Augustus is harvesting people at the Red parties. And then he’s trafficking them to vampires.

“Do you recognize this woman?” I ask, yanking my phone from my pocket. I take five seconds to scroll through my pictures until I find the one of Ophelia I was showing off at the party I attended. I walk across to the woman, holding it up for her to see.

She only shakes her head.

I move to the man, displaying Ophelia’s picture.

“Maybe,” he says. “There was some blonde woman in that cell on the end when I first got here. She didn’t say much, and she was only here for a few hours.”

My stomach quivers. I walk down the row, showing the other woman the picture on my phone.

She nods. “That was her,” she says, her eyes welling with tears. “Like Nick said, she didn’t say much. But she was right across from me.”

Shit.

Shit.

“Ophelia was here,” I say, turning to Ares. The backs of my eyes are burning. My stomach turns. I feel like I’m going to throw up. “She was here. And that motherfucker sold her!”

Ares crosses to me in two long strides. He grabs my wrists, and I realize I was about to slam my fist into the metal bars. “We’ll find her, Vengeance,” he says, his tone low. “At least now we know she isn’t dead.”

“Don’t count on it,” the brunette says. “Not all of these bastards have very good control.”

A tear breaks free from my eyes, racing down my face.

“We will find her,” Ares says as he stares into my swimming eyes. “There will be a record. Al will have buried it good, hidden it well. But there will be a record. And we’ll get Ophelia back.”

For the first time since I got all wrapped up in this, for the first time since I realized Ophelia was missing, I want to break. I want to shatter.

We have our limits, and I’m pressing up against the boundaries of mine.

Ares holds my eyes, the conviction in his own shining through in the deepest of promises. He’s begging me to hold on, to keep it together just a little longer. When I give the smallest of nods, he turns back to our informants.

“Is there anything else helpful you can give me?” he says. “Anything that can help

me find those who have already been sold?”

“There’s another Red party this weekend,” the redhead says as she rushes to her prison bars again. “I heard them talking about it when they brought our dinner.”

Ares nods. “I know about that one. I’ll be there to make sure no one else falls victim to Al. ”

“Are you going to let us out of here or what?” the man asks, desperation rising in his tone with every passing second.

“I am,” Ares says, nodding. “But I need you to understand that you are dealing with a very powerful, very hungry man. A man who has incredible resources. Money. Influence. I am not threatening any of you, and I am not blackmailing you. But you need to understand what might happen to you if you get out of here and talk. That you will likely be found, and you will likely be silenced.”

Chills wash over my skin. I always knew Augustus was dangerous. I knew he was sick and twisted for his drive to make so many children. But this? Trafficking and imprisonment? Ares is right. The things Augustus might do to cover his tracks...

“It’s in your best interest to leave here and get out of the city if you can,” Ares continues explaining. “Do not make a scene. Do not say what you know now. Just get out and try to move on.”

“You mean it?” the man asks. “You want us to just leave and not say a word?”

“Have you not opened your eyes since you came here?” the brunette says, her tone cold. “These are not reasonable people we’ve been dealing with. These are people willing to sell you for your blood. Listen to this guy.”

“I won’t say anything,” the redhead says, staring out at us with wide eyes. “I swear. I just want out of here. Please.”

Ares nods. He crosses to her cell, where he fumbles with the lock. When he finds it made of solid steel, nothing to really break to open it, he grips the very bars themselves. They groan and scream in protest as Ares pries them open until there’s an opening just wide enough for the woman to slip out. She gives a terrified but relieved sound as she slips out. She doesn’t wait as she races to the stairs, climbing them two at a time.

Ares moves to the man’s cell, prying the bars open, bending the inch thick rods.

“Thank you,” he says as he squeezes his way out, pausing for a moment to look Ares in the eye. “Thank you.”

Ares just nods, and the man takes off for the stairs.

Finally, Ares walks to the brunette’s cell. He pries the bars apart until there’s an opening just large enough for her to slip through.

“Thank you for all of the information,” Ares says as she steps free. “You might have helped save a lot of lives from being really miserable.”

“You think you can stop this guy?” she asks as she stands in the walkway.

“I know I can,” Ares confirms, his hands rolling into tight fists.

“Good to know not all vampires are pure fucking evil,” she says. And she turns and walks for the stairs.

I feel chilled. Cold to the bone as I look around this terrifying place. Ophelia was

here. She was literally in a cell. And she was sold. For her blood.

“Get me out of here,” I say, my words coming out as a hoarse whisper.

Ares hand slips into mine, and he pulls me forward, crossing to the stairs. He leads me up them, and we cross the warehouse after the brunette, watching as she walks out the door. As we make our own exit, I see two figures running down the street toward the lights of civilization, and the last woman walking calmly behind them.

My body feels stiff as Ares directs us back to his bike. My legs feel like they’re full of sand. My joints need oiling. My shoulders tense toward my ears.

Bars.

Darkness.

Money.

Blood slaves.

Fuck.

“Lana,” my name suddenly reaches my ears. I blink and realize we’re standing next to Ares’ motorcycle, and Ares is staring into my eyes.

“Augustus is an evil man,” I say, my brain suddenly snapping into hyperdrive. “He’s taking people, ignorant, innocent people, and he’s selling them to vampires! And, and he has to be making a lot of money off of it because otherwise, why would he do something so risky? He makes so much money with everything else. Ares, I?—”

But words fail me suddenly.

I can't process it all.

"What Augustus is doing is unforgivable," Ares says, locking eyes with me. "Taking humans like this, the kidnapping, the trafficking, there is no good explanation. I will end him for this."

Those six words instantly still everything in me. I stand a little straighter. Ares suddenly comes into focus. I feel the cool of the night air.

Augustus is a bad man. In this country, bad men go to prison.

But you can't send a vampire into a prison.

When he gets hungry enough, it would turn into the worst kind of horror movie .

There will be no prison time for Augustus for his crimes. Only death.

"I will end Augustus, Lana," Ares vows, his hands on my arms. He stares deep into my core, into my very soul. "But first, I have to find the record. We need to know how many people and where they went. And then we have to serve justice."

It hits me what he means. Ares has vowed to take out all those vampires who purchased a human to feed off of.

Ares has had a mission for a few months now. Something that drove him, gave him purpose. Find out what Augustus was doing, why he was renting mediocre venues when he owned dozens of upscale ones.

As of tonight, Ares has accomplished his mission.

And now he has a new one.

Find the record.

Take out Augustus.

Take out the buyers.

I can already feel my world shifting. The trajectory of our lives has just altered dramatically.

“Okay,” I say, my throat feeling rough and tight. “But take me home tonight. I... I don’t feel... I need a few minutes to process.”

“Of course,” Ares says. He cups a hand to my cheek, concern laced through his gaze. He leans forward, pressing his lips to mine briefly. He then grabs my helmet and gently secures it for me. Finally, he climbs on the bike and rips it to life. I slip on behind him and hold on for dear life because suddenly it seems like my own is spiraling into chaos.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

I sleep fitfully that night. Maybe it's because Ares tucked me into bed, locked all the doors, double checked the security cameras, loaded the gun he'd given me when we first met, placing it on the nightstand, and then left to go searching for the records. Maybe it's the fact that I know my best friend has been sold to a vampire. But I sleep some of the worst sleep of my life.

When the sun rises in the morning, Ares has not returned. I check my phone to find a message from him letting me know he is still searching and that he thinks he will be out all day.

I feel numb as I climb out of bed. I kind of feel like my head is in a fog. Maybe this is my brain's way of protecting itself. The human mind can only take so much.

So, I shut it off. I head into our home gym. I run on the treadmill until my legs nearly buckle beneath me. I hit the weights and max myself out to where I can barely wipe my hair from my face. Which is a mistake. I have classes to teach tonight. But I don't care. I need to do something, and this is something I can do right now.

The chef shows up just after I finish punishing my body. She makes me the most amazing lunch I've ever had and then prepares a dozen or so meals to be put in the fridge for later. As she wraps up, I head into the shower for a quick rinse off before I need to leave for work.

I brush my hair back into a slicked back pony and change into my preferred workout clothes. I text Billings that I need to head to work in a few minutes. He immediately replies that he will be outside in just a minute.

I'm heading into work, I text Ares. Anything yet?

His response comes through almost immediately. Not yet. I've gone through his main office, but I know he has other places he keeps work stuff. I've got a few more places in mind to look.

I like the message and slip my phone into my pocket. My keys jingle as I lock our apartment, and then the elevator takes me back to ground level. Billings is indeed waiting at the curb when I walk out the doors.

"Thanks," I tell him as I climb in the back seat. "This should start being my regular schedule, so I hope that helps you know what to expect."

"It's not a problem, Miss Kincade," he says as he puts on his turn signal and merges into traffic.

I stare out the window as we drive. Eighteen months ago, I was teaching one of my classes, and a new face walked in. Ophelia looked so damn determined. And she showed it as she did everything I instructed. She was tiny, and that was always going to make it more challenging. But I knew what that was like .

I'd invited her out for dinner after that first class. And then we talked after the next class.

Ophelia became my most regular student.

Soon, we were hanging out regularly throughout the week.

And finally, she shared her story with me.

Ophelia had grown up in Chicago. Her home life hadn't been great, it even started out

bad considering her Mom used the whole time she was pregnant with Ophelia. Then her mom died when she was little, and her dad was a mostly absent drunk who hardly realized he was a parent. Ophelia had her grandmother for a while, until she died as well. Ophelia had two older siblings, a brother who OD'd when she was in middle school and a sister who went missing just after Ophelia graduated high school. Ophelia speculated the sister had also been lost to drugs and just hadn't been found. She had no love lost toward her family.

She'd moved to New York after she became a paralegal. She really wanted to be a lawyer, and she would have been a damn good one, she was one of the most persuasive people I knew, but she didn't have the money to pay for law school. Still, she swore up and down that she would never live life like she had as a kid, and she'd provide for herself, so it wouldn't get to that.

My best friend's life was so hot and cold. In so many ways, she'd been wronged. And in others, she talked her way into a better life. She should have been underqualified for her job, but she got it. She had an insanely good deal on her apartment, because she'd sweet talked the landlord. She'd sweet talked her way out of any charges when she got in a yelling match with a police officer about her rights.

I'd almost say she had a way with people. But not always.

Ophelia started dating once she arrived in the city. Just casual, nothing serious. But one night, she went out with a guy who gave her a bad feeling. And by the end of the night, he tried forcing himself on her.

Ophelia had fought back.

But she didn't win.

For some, being sexually assaulted defines them for a while. And I place no blame on

those. It's an awful, evil thing to do to another human being.

But it just made Ophelia angry. Determined.

Ophelia always joked that when she found the man who did that to her, she was going to kill him. She'd said it as a joke, but there was always something in me that believed that if she ever got the opportunity, she would.

Her experiences made her a hard and bitter person.

She'd never be helpless against someone again.

And that was how she walked into my class. And she might have been hard and bitter, but she was also the most loyal person I'd ever met, and we loved each other fiercely.

A single tear slips down my face as I think about where she ended up. Helpless. Because even though she trained, even though she could handle herself now, she was up against a vampire, and no human is going to beat a vampire singlehandedly.

Her body is being used against her will yet again.

Fuck Augustus, I think to myself. I curse him in every way I can think of.

I wipe at my face as I realize we're nearly there. I straighten in my seat. I have to pull it together. I can't let my coworkers see me like this, and certainly not my students.

Billings slows as he drives in front of the building, but there is nowhere at the curb to pull over. He creeps forward and turns right down the block to find somewhere else. But the street is packed.

“It’s fine, Billings, I’ll just hop out here,” I say as I unclick my seatbelt.

“Alright, see you in a few hours,” he says with a nod.

I push the door open and wave at the oncoming car as I slam my door closed and cross the street. With focused intent, I head down the sidewalk back toward the gym.

We’ll be going over incapacitating moves today. In my head, I run through the agenda—all the grabs, all the strikes, everything a woman needs to know to take down her attacker. With the right moves, a woman can take down a man twice her?—

A hand wraps around my face, covering my mouth. I’m yanked backward roughly, and I trip. But strong hands grip me painfully around the arm, even as something sharp pricks me in the side of the neck.

Before I can use any of those incapacitating moves I was just practicing in my head, the world spins and tilts. My legs feel liquid. Suddenly, my whole body is rising, and I realize a set of arms is beneath my back and under my knees.

The world grows darker, and the last thing I see is the ceiling of an SUV before the darkness swallows me whole.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:27 am

My neck screams with pain.

With a groan, I lift my head, but the pain intensifies. The agony of the muscles tells me I've been in this position for hours.

I shift, my back also spiking with pain. And as I try to stand, to roll over, to move in any direction, I stay exactly put. I'm sitting in a chair, and my hands are bound behind my back, my ankles tied to the chair.

My eyes rip open, desperately searching my surroundings as my heart rate skyrockets and adrenaline floods my system.

The room is dark. I only make out shadowy outlines as my eyes slowly refocus. I feel... groggy. Fuzzy. And then I remember the sharp bite of pain in my neck just before I went out.

Drugged.

"Good morning."

Dread and terror soar in my veins as the voice cuts through the dark. A dim red light turns on, and through the dark shadows, I see Augustus crossing the room.

His dark eyes are fixed on me, his expression cold and blank. He's dressed in a suit, the only attire I've ever seen him wear. Slowly, controlled, he crosses the space until he's standing right in front of me.

“Seems you’re a bit of a lightweight when it comes to sedatives,” Augustus says as he stops right in front of me. “I was worried for a minute there that Toby might have killed you. I thought you would have woken hours ago.”

“What’s going on?” I ask, trying to remain calm, even though everything in me is screaming that this is bad. Really, really bad. “Augustus, where’s Ares?”

“I would imagine my son is out looking for you,” he says, keeping his tone so calm it makes my skin crawl. “You never showed up for work, and then you didn’t come home last night. If my son loves you as much as his gaze says he does, I imagine he’s having one of the worst nights of his life.”

“What are you doing?” I ask, my tone growing harder. “Augustus, where the fuck am I, and why did you kidnap me?”

He gives a chilling little chuckle. “Such a dramatic word, don’t you think? But you catch on quick. What gave it away? Was it the knots around your wrists? The needle to the neck? The surprise grab?”

He’s taunting me, and I’m in no fucking mood for games. “You know what Ares is going to do to you for this, right? You named him. Expect nothing less than dark and terrible from the god of war.”

A smile grows on Augustus’ face. “Amazing, isn’t it? How, even as a newborn, one can tell a being’s future. I knew exactly what I was doing when I named my first-born son.”

“At least you’ll meet your end against a worthy opponent,” I snarl.

Augustus smiles, though every inch of it is condescending. He drags a chair across the space, placing it directly in front of me. He takes a seat, crossing one leg over the other. “You know, I thought you were going to be the perfect woman for my son.

You came along, and finally, my son came back where he belongs. But you've... distracted him. Captured his attention and intentions wholly. Ares might not understand why you had to be dealt with, but he will come back around. He will fulfill his purpose in this city."

"If you think Ares is ever going to help you traffic people as living blood bags, you don't know him for shit," I spit, wading into the deep end because I've never been afraid to swim.

"How did you really meet my son, Lana?" he asks.

My stomach sinks, and my blood goes cold.

"Online," I say through gritted teeth.

He gives another of those sinister smiles. "You can say whatever you like. I suppose it doesn't matter anymore."

I lean back in my seat as Augustus stands and takes slow strides toward me. He bends until his face is right in front of mine. I take in every detail of him.

How can someone who looks so much like the man I've fallen for be so heinous? How can I hate everything about him when I'm coming to love everything about his offspring?

"You should have stayed the hell out of my business," he says, his words low, quiet, terrifying. "Do you know how much you cost me, letting those three go? Not just money, but relationships. Reputation. You'll pay dearly for that."

My head whips to the side as an anvil collides with the side of it. Pain explodes in my face, and I swear I hear something in my skull crack.

Augustus' other hand strikes next, whipping my face to the other side. A startled, pained scream shutters over my lips. And in the next moment, Augustus grips me by the front of my shirt, hauling me out of the chair, only it's still tied to my ankles, so it drags across the floor as he hauls me up and then pins me against a wall.

"If you taste the way you smell, you will more than make up for what was lost," he says, his words coming out nearly delirious with glee. "Let's find out, shall we?"

One startled gasp of fear and pain escapes my lips as sharp points pierce my skin.

And then I can't explain it.

My body goes numb. Still. Calm.

My mind stops.

I'm aware of the sensation of blood leaving my body. Augustus sucks, drawing my blood out of me, his lips latched to my neck.

But I feel nothing.

I am nothing.

Nothing exists.

The world has ended.

And all is quiet and still.

It's kind of peaceful in this nothing. I think I get it now, why that sad girl knowingly went to the Red parties to be fed on. There is no joy here, no happiness, but there's also no pain, no remorse, no sadness. I just dissolve into the universe.

But suddenly, the numbness lessens, and my feet hit the floor as Augustus releases me. Only my legs can't hold me, and I drop to the floor, my back roughly sliding down the wall behind me.

"Oh, you will fetch a price," Augustus says, licking at the corners of his mouth. And my head spins at the red I see there. Blood. My blood.

My heart rate picks up. The world tilts just a little.

You can't fall apart now, Lana. It's just blood. It's. Just. Blood.

I shake my head, take a deep breath, and square my shoulders.

Ares checked for cameras when we went to that warehouse. He might not have seen them, but they were absolutely there. Augustus knows exactly what we did. And I will pay the price for it.

"You could have had it all," Augustus says as he once more grips me by the front of my shirt. He hauls me up as if I weigh nothing, righting my chair and roughly dropping me back down on it. "Ares would have settled into his position as a Baron. You could have stood at his side, supported him, bore him the children who would have helped establish this city. You could have had a very comfortable life. My son would have taken care of you. Instead, you twisted him. You turned him against his legacy. So, in the end, this cannot be blamed on anyone but yourself, Lana."

"You're a sick, twisted fuck," I spit, my words slightly slurred as his venom lingers in my blood. "Ares is nothing like you, and he never will be. I only wish I could be there to watch him rip your cold, dead heart out."

Augustus chuckles. "Ah, the naiveté of early love. You've known my son for a few months and assume you know him best. I've groomed him for years. When it comes down to it, Ares will realize his place. Money. Power. Influence. There's a reason

they've had a chokehold on the world for all of time. I only wish to see him rise to his full potential. Why would you hold him back?"

There is no reasoning with Augustus. This man's heart is black all the way through.

"Ophelia Bennett," I say, changing the course of the conversation. "Who did you sell her to?"

Augustus turns, looking over his shoulder at me with a smile. "You think I know any of their names? You think I memorize every purchase? Come, Lana. I thought you were beginning to understand me."

"You bastard," I say as tears sting my eyes. I shake my head. I will not let them fall. I will not let this monster see me cry.

He doesn't acknowledge my insult, he turns back toward me, and from his pocket, he draws a knife. And my heart goes into overdrive as he stalks back toward me. My eyes widen as I take in his form, bathed in red light, his eyes glowing brilliantly. My whole body tenses as he stops before me.

But he crouches, and cuts the ropes from my ankles.

"I want you to get comfortable," he says as he looks up into my eyes. "Enjoy your last few days of ease, Miss Kincade. The transaction is already finished. Only travel arrangements remain. Your buyer will be here in two days to take you to your new home."

He slices through the rope around my wrists. And I surge forward, attempting a last-ditch effort at freedom.

But even as I grab for his knife, Augustus is suddenly across the room, my hair ruffling in the wind he creates with his incomprehensible speed.

He only smirks as he rests his hand on the doorknob. “Just remember, as you serve the rest of your days as a living donor, that you brought this on yourself, Lana. You could have had a different life if you’d have just minded your own damn business.”

He twists the knob and steps out, even as I surge to my feet.

But I’m nowhere near fast enough. Before I’m halfway across the room, the door has shut again, and I hear a heavy lock click into place.

I slam against the door futilely. My fists bang on the steel surface.

“Augustus!” I scream, tasting blood in my throat, the word comes out so brutally. “You can’t do this, you bastard! Ares will find you, and he will fucking end you!”

But I hear nothing out there but silence.

Cold, dead silence.

The tears push heavy on my lashes as I turn, taking in the room for the first time. My breath rips in and out of my chest in rough pulls.

There are no windows. There are no light switches even. I can’t even tell where the red light is coming from.

There is a blanket on the floor. There is a bucket in the corner. There is no food and no source of water. The only furniture is the chair I was tied to and the one Augustus sat in.

It’s a blank, empty room.

With no escapes. With no way out, except for that locked door.

I have no idea where I am. I don't know how long it's been since I was taken. I pat my pockets, and sure enough, my cell phone is gone. I have no way to contact anyone. And from the lack of sound coming into this room, I assume no sound is getting out either.

I've been taken by my sadistic, fake father-in-law. And I don't doubt him.

In just a few days, a buyer is going to show up.

I've been sold to a vampire, and there is no escaping.

THE END OF BOOK ONE