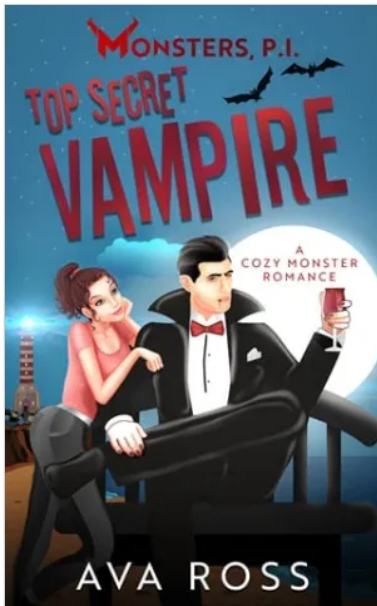




Top Secret Vampire (Monsters, PI #4)

Author: *Ava Ross*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Can my heart take the bite of Secret Agent Vampire?

Reese: Moving back to Mystic Harbor was supposed to be a fresh start, but my welcome wagon has a knack for mischief. First, my blender explodes, then a seagull decides I'm its target. When I think things can't get any weirder, someone scrawls "Leave Town" on my bathroom mirror. To restore my sense of security, I hire a vampire detective named Wolfram to help me track down a potential stalker. Wolf, with his dramatic black cape and surprisingly cute fangs, makes my heart flutter in ways I didn't expect. But once we unveil the identity of the person determined to chase me out of town, our time together will end—unless we decide to bite out of love.

Wolfram: As a born vampire, not one of those measly made vampires, I control my hunger with donated blood. The only blood a born vampire truly craves is that of his destined mate. Taking a job at Monsters, PI turns out to be more than a just a favor to my orc friend; it leads me to my fated one—Reese. Now, an unseen enemy threatens her peace in this quaint town. I, Wolfram Xavier Vladimir Zegrath, will eliminate this menace. Then I will claim my true mate as my bride.

Total Pages (Source): 32

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 1

Reese

I 'd only been back in my home town of Mystic Harbor two months when a seagull attacked me while I was walking on the shore. If I hadn't almost stepped on shells placed in a pattern that wrote Leave Town on the path from my house to the beach, I'd believe the incidents weren't related. But it wasn't until my blender exploded this morning, sending shards of glass, metal, and my spinach smoothie all over the kitchen, that I realized I had a big problem.

What scared me the most was discovering someone had tampered with the device.

Now, I was convinced I had a stalker.

"You need to go to Monsters, PI," my mother said as she helped me wash spinach smoothie off the walls, floor, and ceiling of my newly restored cliffside home. "A friend suggested it, actually, when I ran into her at the supermarket. Jane. Remember her? You and her daughter were friends long ago."

Jane . . . Jane . . . I didn't remember anyone named Jane, but it didn't matter. I hadn't stayed in touch with any of my friends from long ago, let alone their mothers.

"Why Monsters, PI?" I asked. "And . . . monsters?"

"You know." Chuckling, she accidentally swiped green gook across her face while nudging a strand of her graying hair off her cheek. "Orcs. Gargoyles. Minotaurs.

Monsters .”

About four years ago, yetis and orcs and ogres, plus all sorts of other creatures, had emerged from caves, below the ground, and from the sea, joining human society. I’d read all about it online and avidly watched the videos on my computer—when I wasn’t making sure I wrote my daily word count for my latest thriller novel. People had gone wild with excitement when the first demons and elves strode through town.

They insisted they came in peace, and who didn’t want to sit down and chat with a phoenix or a gargoyle? Me, for one, because I planned to incorporate creatures like these into my next book.

Treaties were formed, and monsters took jobs, bought property, and started raising families alongside humans. Some even began to date us. Now it was common to see a pixie flying a baby stroller above the sidewalk or run into a merman at the hardware store, Shriek & Nail. Yes, merman could shift their tails into legs, and my, oh, my, weren’t they hot with their teal-colored scales . . .

My fellow Mystic Harbor residents had gone all in on the monster theme, renaming their businesses to make monsters feel welcome, and our per capita monster population was higher than almost anywhere else in the world.

I’d yet to hear about Monsters, PI, however.

I frowned. “Maybe I should stop by and see—”

“Hello?” a woman called out from the front of my house. “Is anyone here?”

“It’s your aunt Beverly,” Mom said with a smile, flicking a green-stained hand my way. “Go greet her and bring her back here. I’ll keep working on this mess.”

“No need, Alice,” my aunt said in a breezy tone, strolling into the kitchen. “My, my, my.” Her nose twisted. “Are you decorating again, Reese?”

The slight edge of a sneer in her voice got my back up, but that was nothing new with Aunt Beverly. She put on a decent front, but I’d always sensed she didn’t like me, though I wasn’t exactly sure why. Although, one time she snapped at me for asking my mother to go to a movie with me. My mother had already made plans with her sister, and man, was my aunt pissed. She’d minced out something about how I didn’t need to monopolize my mother all the time, that she could spend time with her every now and then.

It had been my mother and me since I was little, after she and Dad split. He was an archaeologist, so I hadn’t seen him much while growing up. He was either working on a dig or guest lecturing at one university or another. It was natural that Mom and I had grown closer together.

Too bad it hadn’t brought me and my aunt closer together as well.

“My blender exploded,” I said in a light tone, not rising to her taunt. “We’re cleaning up the mess.”

“Is this why you couldn’t meet me for coffee, Alice?” my aunt asked, her lips pursing as she peered around my kitchen.

“Reese needed help.” Mom started rubbing down the wall directly behind the oven. “And I wanted to do this for her. We can get coffee another time.”

“Always Reese,” my aunt growled, though she spoke low enough only I could hear.

Had jealousy guided her behavior toward me all this time?

“Grab a sponge and start scrubbing, Beverly,” Mom said in a cheery voice, oblivious as always to how her sister was behaving. I could deal with my aunt’s attitude, but it somehow felt worse that my mother never saw it in the same way as me. “I was just telling Reese she should go to Monsters, PI for help with her interesting situation.”

“She needs to see a private investigator for blender gook on the walls?” My aunt’s mouth screwed up, and she didn’t take the sponge Mom held out. “I just got my nails done, and I don’t want to damage the polish.”

“Then have a seat,” Mom said. “Reese made a pot of coffee, and she has one of those fancy machines that’ll give you the same experience you would’ve had at Mystic Mocha.”

She never seemed to notice her older sister’s snide demeanor, which used to bug me when I was a kid. When I brought it up, she told me her sister had reasons for being less touchy-feely and that I should respect that she wasn’t the type to act gushy about any child, not even her only relative other than my mother.

“No thank you,” Aunt Beverly said as I started to open the cupboard for a mug.

“I have pastries from Mythical Muffin,” I said. They were the best place for baked goods in town. Their homemade breads were to die for.

“I’m not hungry,” my aunt said with a sniff, leaning against the counter on my mother’s left. “You owe me lunch, then, Alice.”

“Sure, I’d love to.” Mom’s gaze shot my way. “Want to join us?”

“Thanks, but I have a lot to do today.”

“Odd things have been happening to Reese since she moved back to town.” Mom ran

her sponge along the countertop.

“What sort of things?” Did I actually hear a touch of concern in my aunt’s voice? Couldn’t be.

Mom told my aunt about the writing and the seagull attack, plus brought in why green slime covered my kitchen walls. “Someone sabotaged her blender. She’s got a stalker! That’s why I suggested she go to Monsters, PI. I’m sure they’ll figure out who it is and make them stop.”

“You’d be safer back in the city,” Aunt Beverly said. “I can’t imagine why you want to live here in this big, drafty house by yourself. Didn’t you feel more secure in your apartment with all those locks and alarms?”

I shrugged. “I feel safe here. Crime’s basically nonexistent in Mystic Harbor.”

“Then why do we need a detective agency?” Aunt Beverly said. “Surely our local law enforcement can handle our needs.”

“Monsters, PI doesn’t only solve crimes,” Mom said. “You know that. They’re so much more than our local cops. Look at the evidence they found for my friend, Wanda, when she was trying to divorce her dead-beat husband. It was amazing. Without their investigative services, her ex would’ve taken her for everything she had.”

“I suppose.” My aunt studied her nails, and I had to admit, it was a pretty manicure. I loved the bright pink polish. “I still think you’d be safer back in New York.”

I wasn’t going to argue with her. I did that once when I was a teenager, defending Mom over something I could no longer remember, and my aunt ripped me a new one with her words. I was a sputtering kid, doing what I could to defend what I’d said,

while she was an adult who knew very well how to manipulate others. She told me I was ruining our family and asked how I would like it if she couldn't come to the house any longer because she and I had a disagreement.

At her scolding, I burst into tears and rushed from the room.

Mom sat with me later and thanked me for speaking up for her but asked me to leave defense like that to her in the future. She'd hugged me and told me she loved me. But she'd asked me to be the big person and write to my aunt, apologizing for snapping, which I did. Mom suggested I ask my aunt if we could move forward from there.

Aunt Beverly wrote back, telling me we would put this behind us. However, she added, I wasn't to ever speak to her like that again.

"I won't keep you two any longer." My aunt grabbed her purse off the table to leave. "Alice? I'll see you at Kraken's Keep at one."

At my mother's nod, she left.

I dumped out my bucket and refilled it with clean water and continued scrubbing.

Mom returned to our conversation. "Perhaps you're experiencing a ghostly haunt. Go to Monsters, PI, and ask one of them to perform an intervention." Mom shook her fist at the ceiling. "Get out of here, Jolene."

"Jolene?"

"You know that Dolly Parton tune." She burst out in song. "Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jo-leeene! Don't take my man away."

"I have not heard that song." Though I felt I should. "Did someone named Jolene

own this house in the past and did she steal someone else's man?" And how could that play into making my blender explode spinach smoothie all over my kitchen?

"Jolene Molson died here," my mom said softly, her wild-eyed gaze spinning. "Some say she was murdered. Others say she did it herself. She fell down the back stairs leading to the beach and they found her later, lying in the sand with a snapped neck. Her front door was wide open. Anyone could've come inside. Did someone push her or was it merely an accident? We'll never know." Her hand swept toward the back of my house that looked over the bayside of Cape Cod and had been dramatically built on a steep cliff. "This happened long ago. I doubt what happened matters now." She held up a green-stained finger. "Except if she's decided to haunt you."

"Why would she do something like that?"

"To make you leave, of course. That's why they all do it. Maybe she doesn't like the renovations you've done since you moved in, or she has unfinished business and you're not helping."

"What kind of unfinished business?" I rinsed my sponge out in my bucket and continued scrubbing. Spinach had stained the pale gray I'd used on the kitchen walls, and I worried it wouldn't come out. I'd probably have to repaint.

"She might want you to reveal the final clues about her death."

Pausing, I leaned my hip against the counter and frowned. "How would I do something like that?"

Mom shrugged. "Just saying."

"Hmm." I wiped more green gook off the wall.

A ghost? No one believed in such things, did they? But there was no harm in asking around town about a potential haunting. This Victorian was on the historical society's registry, so I could have a resident ghost that needed her feelings smoothed before we could live together in harmony.

I wasn't sure how a ghost could make a seagull dive bomb me on the beach, but maybe they'd taken possession of the little creature? As a thriller author, I could come up with all sorts of spooky reasons for why the bird might've attacked. Who wouldn't be inspired by that famous Alfred Hitchcock movie?

As for the rest . . . I would've dismissed the shell message in the sand as a childish prank if the same words hadn't appeared in lipstick on my bathroom mirror—while I was sleeping within fifteen feet of the location.

"I'll give Monsters, PI a call," I told Mom.

"Good. Let me know what they say."

"I'd rather we call in professionals," my wonderful assistant, Tracy, minced out as she strode beside me from the parking lot on Main Street to the other side, where Monsters, PI was located. Though she'd shown up late, she'd helped me finish in the kitchen and had volunteered to come with me today for my appointment.

"Monsters, PI are professionals," I said. "My mother told me they've solved all sorts of cases already." I didn't mention that my mother had also said that each detective at the agency had met their fated mates while on assignment and married them not long after. I wasn't looking for a relationship right now. Deep in my heart, I longed to be with someone special, but I had a stalker. How could I risk endangering another person?

Someone was out to get me, and until this case was solved, that needed to be my

focus.

Tracy huffed but didn't say anything else as I opened the front door to Monsters, PI and stepped inside.

"If they can't offer help, we'll go with that firm you recommended," I told her softly as the door closed behind us.

With Tracy following, I walked toward the reception desk where a woman about my age of thirty, with dark hair in a blunt cut with bangs sat on the other side of the desk. She looked up with brown eyes that contrasted nicely with her pale skin, then rose as I got closer, smoothing her bright red dress. A broad-shouldered man dressed in a button-up shirt and dark pants and with deep auburn hair stood behind her, his hand resting sweetly on her shoulder.

"I'm Reese Hamilton." I gave them a smile and gestured to the woman by my side. "This is my assistant, Tracy Davenport."

"Nice to meet you both," the woman said, the man murmuring agreement. "I'm Hannah, but I'm only filling in at the reception desk while the regular guy is on vacation. You'll meet Blake next week when he's back." She tilted her head to the man. "This is Reylor, my boyfriend. He works here and is covering for the owner, Katar, while Katar takes paternity leave. His daughter just turned one month old, and she's a sweetie."

"Amazing that he took the time off," I said with a smile. This spoke well of this agency already.

Hannah's eyes sparkled. "He's a great guy. Reylor will introduce you to Wolfram Zegrath, who'll be providing the services you requested."

“Is Wolfram good at this?” Tracy asked in a haughtier tone than I liked, but this woman was always looking out for me. I’d be lost without her. “Because we will only work with the best.”

“I bet he does a great job,” I told her firmly, not quite willing to chastise her for her attitude in front of others. I’d speak with her later, reminding her that I was in charge, not her. This woman was much too eager to overstep her position.

“Wolfram is an ancient vampire,” Reylor told me, and I admired how civil he sounded.

Really, I should’ve made Tracy wait at my house or asked her politely to let me do the talking. She would’ve grumbled, but she only behaved like this because she wanted the best for me. I suspected I’d find it at Monsters, PI.

“No one,” Reylor added, “and I mean no one, will come close to threatening you while you’re under his care.”

“A vampire?” Tracy gasped, her hand fluttering at her throat.

“That’s kinda cool,” I said. I’d always been fascinated by paranormal things. Maybe he’d let me quiz him about vampire customs and traditions for my upcoming novel. Who better than a real source for something like that?

Hannah sent Wolfram a text, and a tall, muscular man strode down the hall, his black cape swishing around his legs and his red bow tie almost gleaming against his starched white shirt.

Oh, my.

Normally, I wasn’t into the billionaire, night stalker, mafia look, but on Wolfram . . .?

Talk about making my girly bits perk up and shout hoorah.

Back off, babe, I told myself.

When he reached the end of the hall, his attention landed on me, and I could swear he blanched, though it was hard to tell since he was rather pale already.

Tracy released another gasp and backed away, her fingers rising to mesh in front of her body in the form of a cross.

He didn't cringe—or even look her way, for that matter—which sparked my curiosity. If a cross didn't bother him, what other vampire lore might be incorrect?

“I assume you're Wolfram?” I strode over to him and held out my hand. “I'm Reese Hamilton, your new client.”

He stared down at my hand for a long time before reaching out to take it in his own.

When he suddenly dropped to his knees, I gaped at him, my lips twitching.

Reylor grinned. Hannah frowned.

Tracy took stuttering breaths while Wolfram leaned over to kiss the back of my hand. He gazed up at me with a look I couldn't define.

Heat flared deep inside me at his touch. I hadn't felt attraction for someone for such a long time, I could barely remember when. I'd lived in an apartment in New York City. Food delivery was my best friend. I wrote during the day and made myself work out for exercise each night. I didn't get out much, let alone date much. At all, actually. It has been so long since my girly parts had seen action, they must assume there was a drought of biblical proportions.

“If you’ll come this way.” Wolfram rose to his feet and gestured to the hallway. “We can begin.”

“Sure thing.” I walked beside him down the hall. “Does anyone call you Wolf for short?”

“It’s Wolfram ,” he intoned in a growly voice that made everything inside me throb. “Wolfram Xavier Vladimir Zegrath, if you would be so kind.”

“Whoa, that’s . . .” A mouthful. “If it’s okay to ask you a personal question, do you drink blood?” A woman needed to know stuff like this if she was going to work closely with someone.

“I’m a vampire , my dear,” he drawled, his intent gaze on my face. “We all drink blood.” He had black eyes. I’d never seen eyes that color before, but I liked them. They were like a deep, dark pool of mystery, and I was a sleuth eager to delve into his secrets.

“Not to be unkind, but you sound a bit stuffy,” I said. While cute, this guy was a walking vampire cliché, from his starched white shirt to his raven-wing hair and eyes. If this was Halloween, he wouldn’t need a costume.

“I’m anything but stuffy,” he said.

“Vladimir, huh?” I tilted my head back to look up at him. “Don’t you find that a bit of a cliché?”

Pausing, he blinked down at me. “Why would I?”

“Vampire. Vladimir?” My low laugh rang out, and I swore he shuddered, which made my girly bits slump. It looked like the long drought would continue. “I mean . . .” I

flicked the edge of his cape and leaped up to tap his bow tie. “Cliché.”

“I am not a cliché.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.” I took his hand and squeezed it.

This time, there was no mistaking it. A shiver ripped through him, transferring itself up my arm.

Wolfram stiffened his spine and smoothed his face. “As for the name Vladimir, I’m older than Dracula. One might even say he copied me .”

“Oh.” My mouth formed a circle. “How old are we talking about here?”

“ Very old.” He waved for me to enter his office, and I sashayed past him, hoping he was staring at my ass.

I wasn’t sure why my heart had perked up for this man alone, but I was eager to find out.

And where had my avoiding dating resolution gone?

It had flown out the window—with a bat. Ha.

“Wait. Wait!” Tracy scurried down the hall after us and scooted inside Wolfram’s office before he could shut the door.

“Please, have a seat,” he said smoothly.

My skin tingled, and he was only stating something general, not . . . telling me to remove my clothing. Bare my neck for his fangs.

My inner wannabe vampiress needed to chill out. This was a business arrangement, not a dating app hook-up.

Wolfram could be married and have a bunch of little vampires running around the house, spontaneously combusting into bats and soaring through the sky alongside he and his vampiress wifey.

That thought cooled me off quickly.

Tracy and I settled in seats while he glided to the other side of his desk and did the same.

He made a steeple with his fingers in front of his chest, and his penetrating gaze met mine. “Please. Do tell me what issue you’re dealing with here in town.”

“I’ve got a stalker.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 2

Wolfram

“W hat?” I barked, making myself settle back in my chair.

“A stalker,” Reese said softly. “I hope you can help.”

“I will.”

Despite my vampire-like appearance . . . Alright, I would concede that I slightly, and I was strict about that specific term, slightly , could appear clichéd to someone who did not know me. I wasn’t sure what to think about that.

Because Reese was . . .

When a vampire meets his true mate, the woman who’s destined to adore and feed him for their very long lives, his heart awakens from its motionless slumber and starts beating.

The moment I touched Reese Hamilton’s hand, a thud rang out in my chest. My heart suddenly thundered, as if I was a tree felled in the forest. I’d dropped to my knees, and it was all I could do not to beg Reese to allow me to sink my teeth into her wrist. Lick her belly. Suck on whatever part of her body she’d allow me access to.

I could not allow my interest in her to get in the way of helping her.

This was a job, not a back-alley sip. As soon as the means became possible, I'd taken on the demeanor of a civilized vampire. I purchased the blood I drank from bags and meticulously lined them up in my refrigerator. When I felt the need for sustenance, I collected one and delicately pierced it with my fangs, staving off my hunger in a polite manner. I'd eaten this way for years and thought nothing of it.

Now look at me. If any of my brethren were here, their eyes would widen at my embarrassing display.

My fangs had slid through my upper jawline.

My claws had extended from the tips of my fingers.

I craved her fresh blood . . .

How mortifying.

As I stared at her neck, my lungs throbbed. My heart continued to surge, battering itself against the inside of my ribs to get to her . "I need to suck on . . ."

"Oh, my." Reese's hand fluttered at her throat. "Sucking . . . um. I shouldn't say this, but for some reason, I'm okay with that idea."

The older woman reeled away from Reese, glaring at my woman. My mate. My only one. This was not allowed.

My growl rang out, and she wisely turned her attention back to me, her mouth widening with horror.

"I didn't say that ," Reese whispered.

“Neither did I.” But I had, and I needed to restore control as soon as possible. I flicked my finger toward the older woman. “Who is this?”

Reese slapped her palms against her cheeks. “Let’s back up here and leave . . . sucking out of the equation.”

“A wise decision,” I said.

“I’m Reese Hamilton, your new client, and this is my assistant, Tracy Davenport,” she said. “I’ve got a problem, and I’m hoping you can help.”

“I will do anything for you,” I ground out.

“Oh . . .” Reese’s eyes widened above her hands still cupping her cheeks. “That’s quite sweet of you. Are you sure I can’t call you Wolfie or Wolf?”

“I will indulge you in this, though I prefer Wolf. Never Wolfie.”

Her hands slid away, landing on her lap, and she shot me a smile that made my heart seize before it began pounding again. “Cool. Cool.”

“Yes, quite . . . chilled.” It had been some time since I’d interacted with humans beyond simple exchanges. The temperature in the room did not reflect her statement, but perhaps she meant something else with the word.

It had also been a long time since I’d taken a job. Naturally, I didn’t need to work. I’d amassed enough wealth ages ago to sustain my lifestyle. But when Katar reached out, indicating I might find this fun, I was intrigued. When had anything last sparked my interest in human activities?

“You can solve crimes,” Katar had said.

“And what will I do with the villains of said crimes?” I’d asked.

“They’ll need to be prosecuted in the usual, human way.”

“A pity,” I’d said.

“I thought you gave that up?” he’d asked, his mouth twitching with humor.

“It has been so long since I indulged in draining a true villain that I can’t quite recall the taste, though I do remember them being universally bitter. There’s something about nasty deeds that taints the blood.” Yet I’d hunted them. When one needed blood to survive, one wasn’t always choosy. Villains, while less tasty, deserved what I brought them. Innocents did not.

“Are you on board?” Katar had asked with an indulgent smile.

Such a trite term, on board, but . . . “Yes,” I’d said.

Reese shifting in her chair brought me back to the present.

“Please, explain what you mean by a stalker,” I said.

“Seagulls. Leave Town.” The last, Reese said with a shudder. “And exploding blenders.” She punctuated each statement with a nod of her head.

This was also a job, not my first meeting with my true mate, despite my wish to indulge in the glory of such a moment. I tugged a pad of paper from my desk and removed a pen from the center desk drawer. I held the pen over the paper, poised to write. “Tell me everything.”

“I either need a ghost exterminator or a bodyguard. Or both.” Her head tilted. “Are

you capable of doing both?”

“What makes you believe this is a stalker or a ghost, for that matter?”

“Let me back up,” she said. “Odd things have happened to me recently, and I believe the incidents are connected.”

I’d soon determine if this was true. “I’m prepared to guard your body with my own. A potential ghost, you say?”

“That’s my mother’s thought.” Reese burst a song about a woman named Jolene who was stealing another woman’s man away.

“I assure you, no one, not even a woman with the illustrious name of Jolene, could steal your man away,” I told her firmly.

“Oh good.” She smiled again, and I wanted to ask her not to, because it not only made my heart compress, but it also made my cock jut against the front of my pants—another appalling, embarrassing gesture I was grateful none of my brethren were here to see.

“If your issue involves a ghost, I’m quite capable of eradicating it,” I said.

“I want to release her from her earthly bindings and send her peacefully on her way,” she said, “not destroy her.”

“Are you a witch?” I asked.

“I wish.”

“Reese,” Tracy snapped. “Stop chattering. Tell him what you need so we can tell him

we're not interested in his dubious services and leave. A vampire. Really?"

"My services are anything but dubious." I politely pointed out.

"You're killing me here, Wolf." Reese fanned her face with her hand.

"Never," I vowed.

"I didn't say I wasn't interested in hiring him," Reese told Tracy.

"Regarding a potential ghost, I'll be delighted to do what I can in that regard," I said, trying to keep this conversation on track.

Tracy kept huffing and shifting on her seat, and I wondered how long it would be before she wrapped her hands around the exposed skin of her throat to shield it from my view.

She had nothing to fear. The only person my fangs ached to sink into was Reese—as it should be with true mates.

"I need more details," I said, returning to the conversation at hand—again. "First, tell me about the seagull."

Reese sighed, and her pale blue eyes with incredibly long lashes widened. "One attacked me while I was walking on the beach."

"Were you carrying food, perchance?" I asked.

"Perchance?" Her lips twitched. "Who says things like that?"

"Me. I say things like that."

Her smile quivered. "I was not carrying food."

I jotted down this detail on the paper. "Were you, by chance , wearing a scent that might hint at food, such as vanilla or cinnamon?"

"Scents make me sneeze."

"Very well." I noted that as well. "And what do you mean by a message, Leave Town ?"

"Someone spelled that out in seashells on the path between my house and the beach."

"I do not like to suggest such a thing," I said in a delicate manner, "but is there a chance you're mistaken and that the shells only hinted at this message?"

"Tell him about the lipstick." Tracy shot daggers at me. Unless they were made of oak, she was wasting her time.

"Lipstick?" I kept my gaze on Reese. Truly, it was all I could do to not rise and stride over to her. I'd take her hand again and kiss it. Glide my tongue up to the pulse point in her wrist and beg her for one drop of the precious liquid thrumming through her veins. This was all my feverish heart would need right now.

Patience, I chided myself. We'd only just met. Humans did not bare their wrists to every vampire they encountered, and they didn't understand the magnitude of true mates. Soul mates, perhaps, but such bindings had nothing to do with blood.

"The words, Leave Town , were not only written in shells and left on my path," Reese said, "but someone snuck inside my house and wrote the same thing on my bathroom mirror in lipstick."

“Your lipstick?” I studied her plump lips.

“I don’t wear lipstick,” Reese said. “In addition to scents, I’m not tolerant of artificial colors or flavorings. I have a hard time finding toothpaste that doesn’t give me a reaction.”

“We buy a certain kind on Amazon.” Tracy tilted her head, studying my face. “You’re not really a vampire, are you? This . . . costume is some sort of fetish, correct?” Her hand flicked toward my body in general.

I flashed my fangs, savoring how she gasped and leaned back in her chair. “I will attest to the fact that I’m a born vampire.”

A frown bloomed on Reese’s face. “I’ll admit I don’t know anything about vampires outside of fiction novels, but perhaps you’ll satisfy my curiosity. Unless I’m irritating you. In which case, tell me to stop.” Her voice dropped off. “Please, tell me to stop.”

“I’m happy to indulge you in this.”

“Cool. What’s a born vampire?”

“Some vampires are made, as in bitten and drained of their blood before they’re fed their host’s blood to turn them, but—”

Tracy’s gasp rang out again.

“Born vampires are literally that,” I said. “My parents procreated in the usual manner, and my mother delivered me much like humans do.”

“That’s amazing,” Reese said.

Tracy was so pale, I worried she'd need a transfusion. "No, it's atrocious." She lumbered to unsteady feet, wavering between Reese and my desk. "We need to leave here before this . . . this monster sucks all our blood and turns us into creatures of the night." She yanked on Reese's arm, trying to drag her from her chair.

Reese shrugged her off and pinned me in place with a stern gaze. "Do you want to suck all our blood and turn us into creatures of the night?"

Tracy? No.

Reese? Yes.

Actually, no. It wouldn't be necessary with her .

"I haven't turned a single individual," I said.

Reese patted Tracy's hand trembling between them. "See? He hasn't drained anyone's blood—"

"Yet," Tracy barked out. "Yet!"

"And he hasn't shared his own blood with them," Reese said. "Sit. We're still interviewing him, and I'll decide if we're hiring him to serve as my bodyguard and exorcist of the potential ghost in my new house."

"Do not mistake me for a priest," I drawled. "However, I'd be delighted to guard your body in any way, shape, and form."

Color rose into Reese's face. "That's . . . an interesting statement right there."

"And inappropriate." Tracy grumbled, settling back in her seat. "There are other

firms we can reach out to. I've told you that numerous times."

"None can compare to Monsters, PI," I stated. "None can offer me ."

"I don't see why you're any different," Tracy said.

She didn't need to. Only Reese's opinion mattered.

"Do these other firms offer vampire protection in particular?" I asked.

"Vampires are useless." Tracy rolled her eyes. "You can't even go out in sunlight. How are you going to provide the 24/7 protection we're seeking if you need to climb into a coffin and turn into a slug at dawn? You'll be a cold, motionless thing awaiting a stake while my poor Reese will be at the whim of whoever's trying to harm her."

I drilled Reese with my eyes. "Has anyone tried to harm you?"

She shook her head. "Just scare me."

My growl ripped out. "Which is enough. I humbly ask you to accept my offer and allow me to provide the protection you're seeking." I slanted Tracy a look I hoped wasn't laden with the scorn ripping through me. "I do not sleep in a coffin. I do not turn into a slug. And I do not need to sleep all day. As for sunlight," I thrust out my arm and tugged back my sleeve, "do you note my light tan?"

Tracy leaned forward, scowling. "Not really."

"It is present. I will happily follow Reese into the sunlight or the darkness, whichever she prefers."

"Both," Reese said with a smile. "It's settled, then."

“No, it’s not,” Tracy screeched.

Why so vehement?

Perhaps she was involved. If so, she’d soon feel my wrath.

No one touched my mate without her permission. No one threatened to harm her.

No one.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 3

Reese

“Y ou’re hired.” I sat back in my chair with a smile. I felt so much confidence in his abilities. Surely a vampire would be able to look at my situation in a new way.

I told myself I wouldn’t get involved with someone, but damn, Wolfie was cute. I adored his stilted way of speaking. The way his dark eyes gleamed when he looked my way. And the sweet way he showed off his hint of a tan. “When can you start?”

“This instant.” He stood, looming over me and Tracy. Since I found this position appealing, my heart fluttered, smacking my ribcage.

Wolfram’s gaze homed in on my neck. Could he hear my racing pulse?

Tracy looked like she was going to pass out and slump onto the floor.

“Perfect.” Standing, I struggled not to sound giddy. I get to hang out with Wolfie. I get to hang out with Wolfie, I sang in my mind. “How will we handle this?”

“Reylor has paperwork you’ll need to complete,” he said. “And I’ll ensure you receive it within a day or two.”

“That’s fine.”

“I shall travel with you to your abode and survey the situation,” he said. “I’ll need to

remain close to you at all times to ensure nothing and no one harms you.”

Sounded wonderful to me. “Will you turn into a bat and cling to my gutter above my front door or . . .” I wasn’t joking. Not too much. Why did I have an overwhelming urge to tease him?

“I’m capable of assuming mist form, and it’s quite common for a vampire such as myself to utilize this means of travel, but I do not take on the form of a bat,” he drawled.

His stilted way of talking should be a total turn-off, but it made my skin tingle instead. Perchance it was his drawl. Or what I took for flames flickering in his dark eyes.

No, I told myself sternly. There were no flames in his eyes. He was looking at me as one might a client, not as a woman he wanted to slip between the sheets with.

As for me, I’d bet anything flames blazed in my eyes.

Was I developing a crush on my vampire bodyguard or was this just a transient thing? He could be married, with seventeen born vampire children.

“Are you married?” I asked.

Tracy gasped. “This hardly matters.”

“If he is, she might not like him spending all his time with me,” I said, implying I would be willing to accommodate whatever needs his vampiress wife might ask for.

“I have not yet had the honor of wedding anyone,” he said. “Though I do believe that time will be upon me soon.”

“Why?” Tracy asked, standing again. “Sperm count getting low?”

“Tracy!” I stared at my assistant, wondering what had gotten into her. “You can’t say things like that to Wolfie.”

“Wolf, if you’ll be so kind, please,” he said, his eyes sparkling when he looked my way.

“You don’t like me being assertive, huh?” Tracy whirled around to face me. “Then what can I say? This situation is horrifying. I can’t believe you’re hiring a blood sucker to be your bodyguard. That’s not any different than hiring a wolf to guard your sheep. You’re his prey, Reese. Prey!”

“She is not,” Wolfram said. “I assure you I only drink donated blood.”

“This situation between us cannot continue,” Tracy shouted.

“What do you mean?” I stared at my assistant, wondering if she’d been body swapped by aliens because she’d never behaved like this before.

“You. You’re the problem. You didn’t listen when I told you it was a huge mistake to sell your apartment in New York City and move to this wretched, backwater place. Massachusetts. Who the hell wants to live in Massachusetts?”

“I do,” I said quietly. “Cape Cod is amazing. I grew up in Mystic Harbor, and I missed it. I’ve said this numerous times.”

“It’s a middle of nowhere beach destination for tacky tourists.” From the way her gaze zipped up and down my frame, I got the feeling Tracy was lumping me in with those tourists. “I distinctly told you not to buy that ancient building near the water. It’s perched high on a steep cliff. One landslide, and you and the money you’ve

wasted will slide into the sea.”

“Tracy.” I slumped in my chair, stunned by this woman I’d called a friend. “It’s gorgeous, both the house and the view. And the inspectors and structural engineer signed off on it. It’s not going to slide into the sea.” I gaped up at Wolf, who was scowling at Tracy, his hands clenched to fists at his sides. “I’m sorry. I had no idea she felt this way.”

“As for the shells spelling out Leave Town ,” Tracy minced in a pretend, high-pitched voice, “and the lipstick writing on your mirror, I think you did it yourself. The blender was a fluke you tossed in to make all this sound serious.”

“Why would I do something like that?” I asked, now hurt more than stunned. This woman had worked with me for four years, and I’d always considered her a friend. Yet, all this time, she must’ve resented me.

“To draw attention.” Her face screwed up into a caricature of herself. “Please help me, everyone,” she mimicked. “Someone’s trying to scare me! You’re a drama queen, and I’m telling you right now that you’d better straighten up fast or else.”

I stood, returning her glare, my voice deadly. “Or else what, Tracy? I’ll remind you of who employs who in this situation.”

“Well fuck you,” Tracy snarled. “I hate you. And I hate even more that I’m locked in an office right now with a predator who’s eager to drain all my blood.”

“The door is not locked,” Wolf said with the hitch of one dark eyebrow. His thin lips twitched. “And you can trust that I’ll never seek your blood.”

“Predator,” Tracy shrieked. She raced around Wolfram’s desk and started smacking his chest, screaming at the top of her lungs that he was trying to kill her.

“Tracy, stop!” I flung myself across the top of the desk, skidding and tumbling toward the floor on the other side.

Surprisingly, I didn’t hit the hardwood surface, because Wolfram did a misty thing and melted away from Tracy only to reappear beneath me.

“Oh, um.” I braced my palms on his chest, leveraging myself up enough to look down on him. His heart beat at a furious pace behind his ribs, the heavy thuds vibrating up my arms. “Thank you for saving me from getting hurt.”

“Performing my duties admirably already, am I not?” he asked.

If I hadn’t caught the gleam in his eyes, I’d think he was completely serious. I liked that he could joke about something like this.

“I didn’t realize vampires had beating hearts.” I smoothed my hands across his chest, wishing I could undo some buttons and touch his skin. Would it be cool or warm?

A shudder ripped through him, and I thought he’d mistify again, but he remained where he was, his body throbbing beneath mine. Of course, I’d made up the word “mistify,” and now I liked it.

His gaze focused on my mouth before it glided to my throat where my pulse beat as feverishly as his. “Now your blood, I would gladly taste.”

“See? See?! I quit,” Tracy raged, glaring down at me straddling Wolfram with our groins lined up perfectly and him doing nothing to make me ease away from his stiffening cock.

But wait. What did Tracy just say?

“Excuse me?” I should be looking up at her, but all I could do was stare into Wolfram’s gorgeous dark eyes.

In fantasy romances, it was said the fae could lull a person and make them do whatever they pleased.

Could vampires do the same thing?

“I said I quit,” Tracy fumed.

With that, she rushed to the door, wrenched it open, and stomped out into the hall.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 4

Wolfram

“ I do apologize,” I said as Tracy left my office, slamming the door behind her.

“For lulling me?” Reese asked with a twinkle in her eyes.

Such a tease. “Vampires only lull their prey .”

Her eyes widened. “You said you’d drink my blood. Does that mean you see me as prey?”

“I see you as . . .” I turned to mist and reformed beside her, holding out my hand to help her rise to her feet.

“As what?” She took my hand and rose, peering up at me.

“I’ll need to obtain some items from my home on our way to yours.”

“Ah.” Her brow scrunched. “You’re not going to finish your statement?”

“I am not.”

She huffed and crossed her arms on her chest that unfortunately lifted her lush breasts for my viewing pleasure. Her rapid breathing told me she was unsettled by my comment, but I could not explain. Ensuring she was safe had become my first

priority, not claiming her as my own.

“Will you turn into mist outside my house to provide protection?” Her scowl was so cute, it was all I could do not to smile.

Odd. I never smiled. Yet for her, I had a feeling I would not be able to resist. “Why would I consider doing such a thing?”

“To . . . encase it.”

“I won’t need to do that.”

“I guess that’s good. I can’t imagine what might happen if you’re in mistify mode and a hurricane or tornado arrives. Your bits would scatter in all directions.”

“My bits, such as they are, are quite safe, even from a tornado or a hurricane, though I appreciate your concern.”

“Dry, Wolfie.” Her lips quirked up; her humor restored. “You’re awfully dry.”

“Wolf, please.” Taking her hand, I urged her around my desk. “I take great pride in my polite demeanor.”

“Just don’t call me my dear again, and we’ll get along fine.”

“What makes you believe I’ll call you dear?” I opened the door and looked out into the hall, needing to make sure her former assistant wasn’t waiting with a blade drawn or some other paltry weapon in hand to harm my mate. Tracy had seemed quite irate, and out of control people often behaved in an erratic manner. She was the first person on my list of suspects.

“Because you’re old. Too old to even be my grandpa.” With a sparkle still present in her pretty eyes, Reese sauntered past me and out into the hall. “Although,” her voice lowered to almost nothing, “I do love a good age gap romance.”

“I should note that my hearing is excellent.” I joined her and neatly closed and locked the door.

“Oops,” she said, shooting me a grin that made everything inside me thunder. “I didn’t say that. We have a business arrangement, and we don’t want to mess with that.”

“Precisely.”

We headed for the front door, Reese waving to Hannah as she passed, and stepped onto the sidewalk.

The sunlight hit us both.

Reese looked me up and down, frowning. “No sparkles.”

“Would you like me to sparkle?” For her, I’d consider doing so.

“It’s not necessary. I like you just the way you are.” She linked her arm through mine. “I’m glad you can go out in sunlight.”

“It’s common with born vampires. Made ones cannot, which is where the belief that none of us can comes from.”

“Cool.”

“As for turning into a mist and surrounding your home, the idea has merit. But

instead, I'd prefer to remain inside the dwelling with you."

"You mean stay in my guestroom?"

"Unless you're suggesting your own bed."

Her breathing jerked in and out of her, and she stared up at me with wide eyes.

"I'm teasing," I said. Not . . . truly, but it was too soon to state my intentions that were completely honorable.

She poked my chest, though not hard, and her laugh burst out, tickling across my skin and making my heart slam against my ribs hard enough to bruise it. "Good one." She waved to the street. "My car's in the lot across the way. Since she rode with me, I'm not sure how Tracy's going to get to her place. I rented a condo for her, but since she just quit, I'm not paying next month's rent."

"Does she always behave in such a manner?"

"Never." Her sigh bled out as we strode on the crosswalk to the other side. "I didn't realize she resented me that much. I'm stunned, actually. And hurt. I thought she and I were more than a boss and assistant." She paused on the opposite sidewalk, her breath catching. "I need to change my passwords. She has a list and can access almost everything."

"Is she someone who'd harm your business in such a way?"

Reese shrugged. "I wouldn't think so, but the Tracy we just saw in your office is a completely different person than the one I called my friend."

"Then you'd be wise to ensure she cannot cause you any harm." As would I.

Completely and forcefully, if necessary.

“I’ll take care of that when we get home,” she said.

“Let’s go there first. Once I’ve assessed the defensive situation, I’ll travel to my own residence and return with my belongings.”

“Alright.”

“I’ll ride with you, if you don’t mind.”

“And mistify yourself to your place after?”

Mistify . . . I loved the term as much as this woman calling me Wolf. As for Wolfie . . . It was growing on me, an appalling thought for those who sometimes did lie motionless inside a coffin. “Perhaps.”

“Do you own a car?” she asked.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“If you can mistify and reappear anywhere, why bother driving?”

“Rain. Snow.”

“Don’t like getting your slick cape wet?” Her smile told me she was teasing. “I guess that makes sense. But, like, you might not be looking at this from all the right angles. Imagine. You could spontaneously travel to an all-inclusive resort in Cancun with a blink of your eyes.”

“I cannot . . . mistify luggage.”

She sighed as if greatly put upon. “Now that’s a true bummer.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 5

Reese

“R eese? Is it truly Reese Hamilton?” a voice called out from somewhere nearby. I turned to find my old college professor striding our way. “I heard you were back in town.” His easy smile traveled between me and Wolf, and I had to hand it to him, his face didn’t even twitch as he took in Wolf’s cape and starched white shirt topped with a red bow tie.

“Wolfram?” I said. “This is Flint Prospect. Flint? This is Wolfram Zegrath, a friend who works at Monsters, PI.” No need to share that I’d hired him.

“Ah, the detective agency?” Flint’s gaze flicked to the building across the street from us, and he tugged on his suit jacket and straightened the collar of the t-shirt he wore beneath. The silver in his dark hair gleamed in the sunshine, but other than that and the few creases around his eyes, he looked the same as he had seven years ago when I graduated with my associate’s degree.

“Yes, I began my employment there recently.” Wolf dipped forward in a short bow. “It’s a delight to meet you, Flint.”

“Flint was my professor at the community college where I got my creative writing degree,” I said. “His classes helped me define my voice.”

“Now, now.” Flint said, patting my arm. “It’s just one of the many things we do for our writers. I will say, however, that I can take some credit for your success.”

A hawk soared overhead only to dive down, aiming for us. Spooked after the recent attack, I ducked, memories of the seagull bombing fresh in my mind.

Wolf lifted his arms, spreading his cape wide, and with a poof, he disappeared, reappearing between us and the bird, his cape outstretched, and his fangs bared.

The bird screeched and flung itself in the opposite direction.

“Mary, wait,” Flint shouted. His gaze darted to mine. “Mary is my trained hawk. I can’t imagine what’s happening. Mary. Mary!” He rushed toward an open area in the parking lot and held up his arm. The bird soared down and landed on his forearm. Only then did I see the traces dangling from the bird’s ankles.

Wolf reappeared at my side and swept his cape around me, tugging me against his muscular frame. His cryptic voice swept across my ear. “I have you. You’re safe. The bird attacked you,” he growled, glaring Flint’s way.

“Thank you so much.” My heart still beat at twice its regular speed. “Flint said it’s his pet. It must’ve been trying to land on his arm. Back when I went to the community college, he ran the birding club. I’d nearly forgotten. I didn’t join, but my best friend, Charmaine, did. They’d go out early on the weekends to spot various species for their logbooks, and from what I remember, Flint ran a small sanctuary for birds injured in the area.”

Wolf grunted. “You’re suggesting the *Buteo jamaicensis* did not try to cause you harm?”

“What’s a buteo . . .?”

“Red tailed hawk.”

“Cool that you know that.”

“When you live a long time, you read many books.”

How awesome was that?

Flint remained about ten feet away. “Mary won’t harm anyone. She’s very tame. I raised her from the time she was found lying beside the road, horribly injured.” He stroked the hawk’s spine, and it preened, leaning toward him. “Is it alright if I bring her closer? I apologize for her scaring you both. She was only seeking me.”

“I was not frightened,” Wolf said. “But I assume Reese was. She was recently attacked by a seagull, and I’m sure that experience still haunts her.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I was worried for a second there.”

“Notification of your bird’s intentions would’ve helped us avoid this potentially unfortunate incident,” Wolf said, his voice neutral. He released me from his arms and stepped forward to stand beside me, his cape fluttering around his legs. “Naturally you can bring it closer, though I warn you, if it threatens Reese, I will take action.”

As he walked over and stopped in front of us, Flint’s attention focused on Wolf. “You’re a vampire, right?”

“Indeed.”

“Quite a display you just put on there.” He narrowed his gaze. “You’re out in full sunshine. I thought sunlight would melt you.”

“I’m a born vampire, not made. Nothing makes me . . . melt.” His eyes slanted my way, and why did I get the idea he thought I might be able to melt him when no one

else could?

I shook off the thought.

“That’s interesting.” Flint’s frown remained, but he didn’t ask further questions, just looked at me. “Again, I’m sorry. Where were we? Oh, yes, I was telling Wolfram that my input significantly contributed to your success.”

I wouldn’t go that far, but he wasn’t the first person— man , in particular—to be eager to take credit for my hard work.

“I read her simple essays and short stories before anyone else,” Flint said, rocking on his heels, his face suffusing with pride. “I only had a few important suggestions for her class final. A novella. She wisely listened to my advice.” His beaming smile turned my way. “I believe I see hints of my efforts in each of your novels. Am I right?”

“Perhaps.” It was hard to remember exactly what he’d suggested. I only took three classes with him; the majority were with other professors. “How’s your own publishing journey going?” I shared my smile with Wolf. “Last I saw, Flint had published three or four books. Thrillers, which I also write.”

Copying me? Nah, it couldn’t be that.

“An author as well?” Wolf said. “How admirable.”

“Oh, well, you know,” Flint said. “I have four novels published now. One of my manuscripts was a finalist for the Brooster Award.”

“Amazing,” I said.

“I’m making slow progress on a new book. I hope to be able to quit my regular job and go full time one of these days. Unlike you,” his voice sharpened, though it was subtle; I doubted even Wolf noticed, “I don’t have the luxury of sitting at a desk all day long, dreaming up intriguing plotlines, let alone traveling to one college or another to guest lecture.”

So he knew the community college had reached out and asked me to teach a class in writing and self-publishing this fall? But I suppose he would since he worked in the English Department.

“I’m honored that my alma mater asked me to share some of my knowledge with students,” I said with a fake smile. “As for writing full time, I’ve only been able to do that for three years. I worked for a newspaper, writing columns, plus served as a waitress at a restaurant to make ends meet prior to that.” I was eternally grateful to the readers who not only found and read my books but talked about them with their friends. I’d still be serving meals and interviewing dog groomers for articles if they hadn’t.

“What do you plan to offer the students?” Flint asked.

“I’ve discussed my lectures with the dean. I’m sure she’ll be happy to share.” She wouldn’t. She’d tell him it was none of his business or, if he was that interested, he could attend my classes.

“My novels are fantastic,” he said. “Don’t you agree?”

I’d read his first. Sadly, I spent so much time writing, I could only read a few books a month, and I avoided reading within my own genre while I was drafting to avoid inadvertently copying someone else. “Yes, I enjoyed your first book.”

His smile grew slick. “Can I call that an endorsement? You owe me.”

Not really, but . . . I was always willing to help other authors. If they hadn't helped me, from critiques to encouragement when I felt down, I wouldn't be where I was today. "Sure. Would you like a formal quote?"

"That would be wonderful. I appreciate it." He rattled off his email. "Could you send it by tomorrow?"

"Alright." It was getting hard to hold onto the polite upward flick of my lips, though I could say something nice about his book that I'd enjoyed.

"Anyway, it was good seeing you again," Flint said, stroking Mary's spine. "Don't forget the blurb. I'll reach out in the morning, in case you forget."

There was no getting out of it now. I'd write it up and email it tonight to avoid the nudge. I winced out another smile. "I'll remember."

He turned and started to walk away from us but spun around, nearly unsettling Mary from his arm. She flapped her wings before tucking them back down at her sides. "I appreciate the solid reference you gave Tracy, by the way. I believe she's going to work out quite well."

"Tracy?" I asked, not sure what he was talking about.

"Yes, she just accepted my job offer. She'll not only serve as my self-publishing assistant, but she's agreed to put in a few hours at the college each day. They'll pay her for that, of course," his slick smile widened, "I plan to have her do some things for me while she's helping at the school."

"You hired Tracy?" When had she applied for a job with Flint? I bit back my growl. It appeared I'd never known that woman, that I'd only fallen for her friendly facade.

“Who wouldn’t after your stellar endorsement? So nice of you to email it to me this morning.”

I had done no such thing.

Which reminded me. I needed to change my passwords right now.

Flint nodded pertly. “She’ll be starting work with me tomorrow.”

“Please allow me to fly you to your home rather than take your vehicle,” Wolf said as Flint carefully placed Mary inside a cage in the back of his truck and climbed into the driver’s seat. “I sense you need to take care of some tasks as soon as possible.”

“I can’t believe Tracy did that.” My sigh bled out. “She must’ve been applying for jobs all along. However, since she was that unhappy, I shouldn’t be surprised. Surely, she knew I’d give her a real reference if she asked. Instead, it looks like she’s been writing them for me.” I shook my head, stunned all over again by my former assistant’s behavior.

“I’m sorry,” Wolf said.

“Thanks.” I needed to find a new assistant and fast. Maybe I’d hire someone local. My mom might have suggestions. “I wish Flint all the best with her. Should I fill him in on some of her less than stellar attributes?” I rolled my eyes. “Although, from what he just said about my books and all the help he did not, I’ll point out, give me, they may deserve each other.” I grunted. “Yes, he gave me some solid advice when I was just getting started, and I appreciate it, but I’ve worked incredibly hard. I own my current success, not him.”

“You’re completely right. Males are too often eager to take credit where it isn’t fully due.”

“That sort of behavior never goes away, does it?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“If anyone should know, it’s you, grandpa .” My laugh shot out, loosening my tight spine.

He growled and lifted his hands, advancing on me.

I giggled and backed away.

He latched onto me and swooped me up in his arms, spinning me around until I was laughing and tears were streaming from my eyes. When he finally stopped, he stared down at me with such stark longing on his face that I couldn’t drag a breath down my tight throat.

“I apologize for manhandling you.” He placed me gently on the ground.

“It was fun. Don’t feel bad for that.”

“You didn’t mind that I held you?”

I leaned into his chest and batted my eyelashes up at him. “Not one bit. You might want to do it again.” With that parting shot, I spun away from him and started across the lot, aiming for my car I’d parked near the opposite edge.

“Wait, wait,” he called out, mistifying only long enough to reappear ahead of me.

I nearly ran into him. “That’s a cool trick, Wolfie.”

“Wolf, if you please,” he ground out, though his eyes sparkled. “If you keep calling

me Wolfie, I'll have to seek revenge."

"What kind of revenge?" I snorted. "Hit me with your best shot. I dare ya."

His eyebrows lifted. "Some might suggest you are asking me to discipline you in some way or another for your impertinence."

"I'm not into BDSM. Let's get that straight right away. I don't scorn anyone for enjoying their own kink, but if you believe spanking me will endear me to you, think again."

"Duly noted. As for Professor Prospect, if you don't want to give him an endorsement, then you shouldn't. I'll stand behind any decision you make, and I'll gladly inform your old professor that you've changed your mind. If you wish."

"Don't worry about it." My lips thinned, and I watched as Flint drove his vehicle out of the parking lot. "I can handle him."

My eyes were caught by someone standing on the sidewalk on the other side of Main Street. Was that Charmaine? Back in our last year of college, my best friend and I had argued. I hadn't seen her since graduation, but I'd missed her. We'd shared everything, and our parting had left a gap I still hadn't filled.

Excited, I waved, but it must not be her, because she turned and strode down the sidewalk without responding.

I lowered my arm to my side and looked Wolf's way. "I can write something up quick and send it to Flint later. I did enjoy his first book, and I don't mind sharing that."

"Very well."

“As for you taking me to my house, I can get us there just as quickly in my—” I gaped at my shiny red SUV sitting in the lot not far away, both tires on this side flat. “What . . .” Racing forward, I stooped down beside one of the tires and sent Wolf a stunned look. “Cut. Someone cut my tires.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 6

Wolfram

Reese rose and jogged around the SUV. “All four tires are slashed. Who’d do something like this?”

I pulled my phone out and called Detective Carter, the local law enforcement officer. Since he was close by, he said he’d be here within minutes.

“I’m terribly sorry.” I joined her beside her vehicle.

A siren rang out and the detective’s car pulled into the lot, stopping nearby. Detective Carter got out and came over, frowning as he studied the tires.

“Any idea when this happened?” he asked Reese.

“Sometime between me arriving at Monsters, PI about half an hour ago and now.”

He scanned the lot, but no one appeared to be paying any attention to us. “I’ll fill out a report. Could’ve been kids.”

I mentioned Tracy who’d recently quit and had appeared quite angry with Reese, and he noted that on his phone.

“I’ll talk to her,” he said. “Any others who might want to inconvenience you?” he asked Reese.

“This feels like more than an inconvenience.” She reminded him about the seagull, the blender incident, plus the written threats, but the detective didn’t appear concerned about them.

“Could mean nothing or everything,” he said after writing it all down. “As I said, appliances malfunction all the time.”

“Someone messed with it. I’m sure,” she said.

He nodded. “Birds can be unpredictable. As for the writing . . .”

Her chin lifted. “I told you it was there.”

“I wish you’d called me then rather than tell me later, after you’d wiped it off.”

“Yup.” The worry in her gaze sparked anger inside me. “I’m not making this up. Something’s going on, and I think it’s escalating.”

The detective nodded and tucked his phone into his back pocket. “Never dispose of evidence.” He grunted. “Let me know if anything else unusual happens. Do you want me to call a wrecker for your vehicle?”

“I’ll handle it.” I bit back my growl. This was all connected; I was convinced of it. A stalker? Possible. Whoever was trying to hurt Reese would pay dearly.

The detective left, and I called for someone to come collect her vehicle and take it to a garage where the tires could be replaced.

“I guess I’m flying with you now,” she said, gnawing on her lower lip. “I really need to make sure Tracy isn’t sabotaging my business accounts.”

“I’ll be glad to assist.”

It didn’t take long for the wrecker to arrive and load her vehicle on the back. He took down her information and told her that the garage would be in touch when her SUV was ready to be picked up. We watched as he drove the wrecker out of the lot.

“How will we fly?” she asked. “Are you hiding wings beneath your cape?” She looked up at me with so much sadness it gutted me. She must feel as if she’d been violated today, and that would make her uncertain about everything.

“Wings, Reese?” I said, a teasing grin tugging at my lips, hoping it would cheer her up. “I’m not your average bat boy.”

“You said you couldn’t turn into a bat.” She laughed, the sound brightening the unsettling moment. “If you could, you’d be tiny and unable to lift me, let alone take me to my house.”

“Nothing about me is tiny.”

“So say all the men.” Her eyebrows lifted as she scanned my frame.

My cock kicked into action, though it was going to have to back off. We’d just met. There was no way it would come close to this precious woman soon.

“Even if you were a big bat, I doubt you could fly us to my home.”

“Which is why I’ll mistify us.”

She frowned. “You said you can’t mistify luggage, so Cancun’s out for a vacation destination. I assumed you could only mistify yourself.”

Myself and my true mate, though I wasn't going to mention that. There were many things I could extend to her as my mate, but now was also not the time to bring them up. I wanted this chance to know her better, to help her. Anything personal could come later.

“I can extend my mist to you,” I said.

Her gaze sharpened. “You can? Really?”

“Indeed.”

“Cool.”

I stepped closer and held out my hand. “Shall we?”

“You promise not to let go? I'm worried about getting my bits scattered.”

“Your bits are completely safe with me.” Not necessarily from me, but that, also, would have to wait.

“Let's do it.” Her breath caught as I wrapped my arms around her, drawing her against my chest. She gave me her address, and I locked it in my mind.

At my command, shadows crept around us, light and insistent. A hint of sweet chocolate engulfed us, wrapping us up like a living blanket. That was the secret to mistification. To everyone else, it would appear as if our bodies had turned to steam, when in reality, the mist encircled us, and we could then travel anywhere within it.

Holding her felt wonderful, and I savored the moment. The mist flowed and coiled around us, drawing us tighter and, I swear, reinforcing the bond growing between us.

She gasped, gripping me with enough pressure to stir longing deep inside my chest. I enjoyed how she clung to me, how she made my heart thud with a delicious rhythm.

The emotions I harbored for her already could be dangerous, especially with her a human and me, a vampire. We were predators—and humans were our prey.

Shoving the thought aside, I steeled myself and focused, channeling the energy needed to travel. The pull of her essence surged through me and became a part of the dark mist, brightening its hues to gold.

“Hold on,” I said, both to comfort her and make sure she gripped me firmly.

With a rush, we plummeted into the void.

An instant later, the mist swirled away from us, and we stood on the beach at the base of a cliff.

“Whoa.” She clung to my chest, looking up at me with wide eyes. “That was . . .”

“Stunning?” I quipped.

The salty tang of the ocean air mingled with the rich scent of her hair—a blend that deepened my connection to her. Flowers danced around us, planted in flowerbeds framing the path. Sunlight glittered on the bay like diamonds sparkling as brightly as the feelings with my chest.

Her lips curled up on one side. “Disconcerting but sure, let's call it stunning.”

“I didn't frighten you, did I?”

She shook her head. “It was almost fun.”

“Almost?” I teased, tugging on a strand of her hair. I wanted to stroke it. Slide my fingers down her back. Draw her back into my arms.

Too soon.

I'd waited multiple lifetimes to find my fated one. You'd think I could bear waiting a little longer before claiming her fully.

There was something sweetly endearing about her that tugged on my newly awakened heart, and I wasn't sure how to deal with the feelings threatening to overwhelm me. I'd lived a stark, somewhat cold life, the usual for a born vampire.

Now I not only possessed a heart that beat only for her but emotions unlike any I'd experienced before in my life. They would destroy me or set me free.

“That's my home,” she said proudly, gesturing to the house above us, a sentinel overlooking the sea. Perched partway up the rugged cliff, it was a Victorian masterpiece with gray, weathered cedar shingles, white shutters, and a copper roof. Stained glass windows glistened in the sunlight. “It was vacant for years and was in rough shape when I bought it, but I fixed it up. Not me specifically.” She shot me a sweet smile. “I hired out some of the work. But I painted, refinished floors and woodwork, plus ordered all the fixtures myself.”

“It's lovely,” I said.

She smiled up at me. “Isn't it? It cost way more than I wanted to pay, but I fell in love with it when I saw it. I've worked hard and saved as much as I could, and I made a tidy profit on my apartment in New York City, so I could swing the price. I had to finance some of it, but I have a solid fanbase and my books sell well. I plan to pay it off as soon as I can.”

“I congratulate you on your success.” Would she welcome me reading her books or would she see that as an intrusion into her mind? I’d ask her one day.

“Follow me.” she waved toward the cliff. “I’ll show you around the house after I’ve made sure everything’s okay online.”

As we walked along the sandy path toward the base of the cliff with a long stairway ahead to reach the top, I studied our surroundings for threats. Leaves rustled in the wind. Seagulls called in the distance. And waves lapped on the shore. Reese walked beside me, her focus miles away, absorbed in her thoughts about online accounts and her former assistant. I took in her beautiful profile. Her furrowed brow revealed the stress weighing on her mind.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught movement near the second-floor window of her home, a shadow flitting past. My instincts screamed.

“Reese,” I whispered, reaching out to grab her wrist. “Someone’s . . .” I squinted into the sunlight but didn’t see anything. Was I mistaken or—

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Just . . . let’s proceed cautiously.” I kept my voice low. I had to keep her safe.

The shadow shifted again, this time on the first floor, and I sped up, pushing down the fear coiling in my gut. Before we reached the base of the stairs leading up the cliff, I spied someone climbing out a window on the left side of the building, tumbling to the ground between tall hedges.

“Reese.” I tightened my grip on her wrist. “Someone was inside your house.”

Her brow creased. “What do you mean?”

“Wait here.” I slipped into mist, letting the shadows wrap around me like a cloak. It felt exhilarating to transform, to be free to glide across the ground without anything holding me back. I flowed away from her, darting up the cliffs and around the left side of the house. The scent of salt air mingled with the earthy aroma of plants.

Leaving the mist near the building, I sharpened my senses. I scanned the perimeter, noting every sound, every rustle that could point me to the intruder. My heart raced, though not from fear but from the instinct to protect Reese. A flash of movement caught my eye, and I spotted the figure slipping down the driveway and onto the road.

They hesitated, perhaps sensing I was nearby, before bolting to a vehicle and climbing inside.

Before I could mistify and reform at their side, the air twisted around them. The vehicle shimmered and disappeared.

A chill coursed through me. This was no ordinary trespasser. Whoever they were, they could wield magic much like my own.

Growling, I turned back toward the house, my fists clenched in frustration.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 7

Reese

By the time I'd finished climbing the stairs and reached my home, Wolf was striding around from the other side of the building, his face full of concern.

"Who was it?" I asked as he approached me.

"I don't know. I only caught the back of them before they climbed into a car and both disappeared."

"Disappeared? You mean . . . are they a vampire like you?"

"The scent was wrong. It's not one of us." His frown deepened. "I'm not sure who or what they are, but they're not human. A witch could do something like this."

"They were inside my house." Panic roared through me, and I pivoted and raced to the door, unlocking it and flinging myself inside.

I rushed around the first floor with Wolfram following, but I didn't see anything moved or disturbed. After taking the stairs to the second level, I did the same thing, scanning all the rooms but seeing nothing out of place. If he hadn't seen them slipping from my house, I wouldn't know anyone had been here.

"Attic?" Wolfram asked, and we hurried up those stairs as well, but I'd cleaned the room out when I moved in, and it looked the same.

He strode around, pausing periodically to tap his shoe on the wide floorboards before returning to me.

“What were you looking for?” I asked.

“An empty space below the floor where someone might’ve hidden something.”

“Did you find one?”

“Nothing up here. I’ll look throughout your house if that’s alright with you, in case there’s something else going on.”

“Of course.”

We went back downstairs and while I went to my office and turned on my laptop, he started searching.

Wolf joined me in my office. “I didn’t find anything suspicious. I’m going to install wireless surveillance cameras on your home and set booby traps.”

I frowned up at him from where I sat at my desk. “What kind of booby traps?”

“Tripwires such as a thin wire or string stretched in front of a point of access that will trigger an alarm when touched, alerting me to an intruder's presence.”

“Like a buzzer?”

“Something more sophisticated than that. I’ll set them up to alert me through an app on my phone. They’ll cover all your access points.”

“You won’t be here all the time.” Which meant if he was out of the house and

someone triggered one of his devices, I wouldn't know, and he wouldn't be here to help. A shudder rushed through me. I'd lived here alone for months and never felt unsafe. Now I felt as if someone might always be watching.

"I will not be leaving you here alone," he said. "Consider me your bodyguard 24/7."

He wasn't making a demand, and his tone remained neutral, so I didn't insist that I could take care of myself.

Because I couldn't. I hadn't even taken one self-defense class, though I should. The thought of facing someone like the person who'd climbed out of my window a short time ago worried me. Wolf said they could be a witch since they'd made the car disappear, which seemed beyond vampire mistification.

Monsters, I was getting used to. Magical people? Not so much.

"I'll install motion sensor lights as well," he said. "They'll come on when someone moves outside your home. I'm turning your home into a fortress."

I didn't want to sigh, but it slipped out. "I don't like being afraid or feeling as if I need to walk around all the time wearing armor. No one has tried to seriously harm me." I doubted the seagull would've pecked me to death. The blender was more an inconvenience than a solid threat.

The writing—

"Not yet." His words stunned me into silence, and after a pause, I nodded. "We need to find out why they're doing this and if the incidents are related. We suspect they are, but we'd be foolish to make that assumption when we don't have all the facts."

"How will we determine if they are?"

“I have ways.”

“Vampire ways?”

He grunted, his steely gaze meeting mine. “We also need to find out why they’re doing it. We assume their goal is to drive you from town, but there could be another, unknown reason.” His sharp gaze scanned the room. “Once you’ve finished here, I’d like to go to my home for essentials. You should come with me. When we return, we need to go through everything in case there are some clues we’re missing.” He settled on the sofa while I turned back to my laptop.

“My list is gone,” I said, pawing through the piles on my desk.

He came over to stand beside me. “What list?”

My face heated. “I keep a list of all my login information. I know I should do something more secure with it than laminate it and leave it on my desk, but it’s always worked for me.” A horrifying thought dawned on me. “That person who was here could’ve stolen it.”

“Are your passwords saved on your laptop?”

“Yes. The list was a backup.” I held up my phone. “I also take a picture, so I’ll be able to get in.” But so would the person who was here.

“Change your passwords immediately.”

“I will.”

He returned to the sofa while I opened up a browser. I was able to get into my email without a problem, as well as my publishing account, and I promptly changed the

passwords. But when I went to FaceSpace, I couldn't get in. I'd set up two-step verification, but that didn't work. I couldn't get into Instaplug or TickingClock either. I'd scheduled videos and posts for the next few weeks, so current marketing wasn't an issue.

"My bank, publishing, and email accounts are secure," I croaked. "I changed the passwords. I'm worried my social media accounts have been hacked. Do you have FaceSpace, Instaplug, or TickingClock on your phone?"

"I do." After entering the passcode, he handed his phone to me.

"Your screen name is Bitesized?" My laugh burst out, and it felt good to find humor in something when this was stressing me so much. It was no coincidence that Tracy quit, and I couldn't get into any of my social media accounts. She was the only other person with full access.

"It made sense at the time." His face darkened. How cute; a vampire who blushed. "I would like to state for the record that I'm not bite sized, however."

Oh-la-la. Was he hinting at body parts? I wanted to ask but decided not to. I liked him, and I liked the friendship we were developing, but I wasn't in any rush for more.

"Back to your accounts," he said with a cough. "I'll go start erecting traps while you investigate your accounts."

"Alright." I held up his phone. "Thanks."

"Anything and everything I have is at your disposal." He dipped forward in a bow before he straightened and left the room, his cape swirling around him.

Adorable. I loved how formal he was, maybe because it gave me a perfect reason to

tease him. I kept picturing myself messing up his hair. Loosening his red tie. Wrinkling up his cape.

I placed his phone on my desk and scrolled into FaceSpace, quickly finding my page. My gasp rang out when I read what someone—damn, that Tracy!—had posted in bold on my page.

It's with considerable glee that I announce that I no longer plan to write or publish any more books. Although, honestly, I didn't exactly write them. AI did.

I hate my fans. I hate everyone who reads my books, though I love all your money!

From now on, I'm going to spend my time lounging in my hot tub on my enormous balcony, raising a toast with expensive wine to all the money I've made off you gullible fuckers.

"No," I hissed. "No!"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 8

Wolfram

At Reese's cry, I mistified into her office, reforming beside her. I crouched, my claws extending from my fingers and my snarl ripped up my throat as I sought the threat.

There was no one inside the office but her and I.

"Are you alright?" I barked, retracting my claws and twisting my neck while loosening my tie.

She stared down at my phone before looking up at me, her face full of sadness and with tears shimmering in her eyes. That was all it took to make me stomp around her desk, looking for someone I could rip apart.

"Look what she did." She poked her finger toward my phone, and I leaned close, reading quickly. "Fuck."

"Right?"

I noted hundreds of replies, the ones I could see universally irate.

"Tracy," I growled.

"Who else? No one else had access."

“Except, possibly, whoever was inside your house.”

“The message has been posted for hours, long before we saw someone here. So, Tracy. How could she do this to me? It’s mean and nasty. I’ve got to get my account back so I can delete that post.” She feverishly scrolled into TickingClock and Instaplug, finding the same post on all her platforms. Shoving my phone away, she cupped her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking with her sobs.

“Hey.” I didn’t know what to do or say. I wasn’t a male who’d made many social contacts through my life for various reasons. Seeing Reese upset gutted me. I wanted to rip Tracy’s heart from her chest and hand it to Reese, but that wouldn’t make up for what the woman had done.

I couldn’t stand seeing her this upset. I tugged her chair away from her desk and took her hand, urging her to stand. Then I sat in her big chair and drew her down onto my lap, wrapping my arms around her. I might not be able to find the right words in a situation like this, but I could hold her.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my chin landing on the top of her head.

She trembled, and that made rage boil through me. How could I handle this threat?

“What can I do?” I asked.

“This is nice.” Her lips twitched as she looked up at me. “Do all the detectives hug their clients when they’re upset?”

“They should.”

She chuckled, though it came out forlorn. “I appreciate it. As for fixing this, I’ll reach out to the three platforms and reset my passwords. Then I can delete the posts and try

to reassure my readers that I was hacked, that I don't feel that way at all."

"Will they believe you?"

"I hope so." Her shoulders curled forward. "It might take some time, but I'll show them this wasn't me. As for AI, I've never used that in my writing. I've been publishing books far longer than AI has been around, and my readers know that. They'll believe me."

"Good. Will it take long to change your passwords?"

She reached out for her phone. "I hope not. It depends on how long it takes for the platforms to get back to me."

I held her as she sent messages to the platforms.

"Are you ready to go to my place?" I asked after, and she nodded.

I mistified us both to my living room. While I went to my bedroom to pack a bag, I left her at the expanse of large windows with a stunning view of the Atlantic.

"Gorgeous," she murmured as I strode from the room.

I grinned. Her home was equally stunning. If we ended up together, where would we choose to live?

And I was getting ahead of myself thinking we could have something permanent. We were true mates, but that didn't mean she'd ever feel the same for me as I would for her.

I was destined to love this woman. Destined to cherish her always. I'd find a way to

make this work.

When I was finished, I found her out on my back deck, leaning against the railing. After lowering my bag to the decking, I stared at her, warmth spreading through my chest. Her dark hair danced with the breeze, moonlight framing her eyes that I swore held galaxies. Every slender line and curve of her belonged more to art than reality. Her grace and kindness calmed my world.

My heart hummed with newfound tenderness each time she smiled, and I marveled at how amazing it was to feel that formerly dead organ thudding for this woman alone.

Being with her was like gently turning the pages of a favorite book, revealing details I'd missed before. When I first met her, my feelings were whispers, soft and uncertain, but they were growing louder, weaving themselves into the fabric of my soul. With her, something inside me had begun to flourish. She would become an irreplaceable part of everything I was or would ever be.

She must've sensed me watching, because she turned, smoothing her hair off her face, her smile making my chest ache. "There you are."

"Here I am." Always. I'd remain with her for as long as she'd allow. Watching out for her. Making sure she was safe. And doing all I could to bring happiness to her every moment. "Are you ready to leave?"

With a nod, she strode over to me and after I'd lifted my bag and hung the strap over my shoulder, she stepped into my arms as if this was the only place she'd ever want to be.

I held her as I transported us to her office once more.

"I'm not sure I'll ever get used to the spinning feeling I get when you do that," she

said with a laugh. “But it’s fun to zip from one place to another.”

“I’ll take you wherever you wish to go. Paris for dinner one night? Or perhaps you’d rather visit the pyramids of Egypt. We could take a tour.”

“Without luggage,” she said with a smirk. “Though I’ll note you were able to bring your bag here.”

“I can transport a few things. But don’t let the lack of luggage hold you back. I’ll buy you a beautiful dress for that dinner in Paris. Pants and a long-sleeved shirt, plus a big broad hat to shield your face from the sun while we tour the pyramids.” Could she hear the husky need in my voice? “Whatever you want is yours.”

“That’s sweet of you, Wolf. Watch out, or I’ll take you up on these offers one of these days.”

Did this mean she saw a future for us? The realization both stunned me and thrilled through me like liquid flames.

“Let me show you where you can stay.” She eased around me and left the room with me right behind. We took the stairs to the second floor. “My room overlooks the water. I’ll put you next to me.”

“I’ll hear if you call out to me no matter where you are.”

“Nothing beats a vampire’s hearing, am I right?” Her mood sobered. “I hope I don’t need your PI services forever. As for the rest . . .” Her smile bloomed as she opened a door on the right and stepped inside the room. “I think you’ll be comfortable here. The curtains should keep out most of the light while you sleep, and look,” her low laugh punctuated the word. “A real bed. No coffin.”

“I haven’t slept in a coffin since I was a teenager.”

“When was that, Wolfie? The eleven hundreds?”

That imp. I lifted my hands, though I held back my claws, and advanced on her while she giggled, backing away. “One day soon, little one, you’ll pay for your impertinence.”

“I look forward to it.” She spun on her heel and strode away from me as if I, a master vampire, had not just threatened her. Almost. Maybe. I’d held up my hands and told her she’d pay, correct? That must be about the same thing, the closest I’d ever come to threatening her. She opened a door on the side of the room. “There’s a bathroom through here. Please let me know if you need anything. I have spare toiletries if you like to brush your fangs at night.”

“They retract and only drop down at my command.”

“Interesting.” Turning, she leaned against the wall beside the door, her gaze flicking down my form. “I’d love to hear anything you’d like to share about your species. Such as . . .” Her hand fluttered at her throat where, even feet away, I could hear the delicious pulsation of blood rushing through her veins. “Can I stock up on blood bags for you? Though, honestly, I’m not sure where I’d buy it.”

“Some thrill in donating blood to us.”

“Donating like through a needle or do they let you suck the blood directly from their necks?”

“Many enjoy the latter, but I buy my meals in a bag from a supplier who deals in this for us. I’ll reach out and have some delivered. They’re fast. As for all the other, supposedly titillating vampire details, I’m sure you’d find me quite boring.”

She bumped off the wall and advanced over to me, her light, floral scent overwhelming my senses. Without a thought, my fangs extended. I'd kill for even one taste.

Her fingertip trailed down my shirt buttons. "I find you quite fascinating, Wolfie." With that, she raced from the room, laughing as I gave chase.

It would be easy to catch her. To materialize directly in her path. To wrap my arms around her. I'd press her against the wall and—

Why not now?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 9

Reese

My mouth was going to get me into trouble, but I didn't care one bit as long as I could continue to tease Wolf. Thankfully, he seemed to adore it as much as I did.

I barely made it back down to the foyer before he caught me, his arms going around me in a way that made me feel safe. Cherished. And overheated. This vampire was going to be my downfall, and I suspected I'd meet him more than halfway with my arms wide open.

With a growl, he spun me around to face him. "Wolfie."

"It's such a cute nickname. Don't you agree?" I chirped.

He leaned toward me and—

Someone knocked on the front door behind me.

"I'm not finished with you," Wolf said, his lips curling up on one side.

Damn, this guy made my heart flip around in my chest. "I look forward to your retribution." With a snicker, I spun and unlocked the door, cracking it only wide enough to see who was there.

It had been a while, but I recognized him from . . . what happened. He was a year

older than me, but we'd been casual friends since elementary school. After what happened, I'd avoided him as much as I could.

"Wilber Blight." I braced my foot on the inside of the door to keep him from shoving it open and coming inside. This man had . . . A shudder ripped through me. "Um, well. It's . . . interesting to see you again." Why was he here?

"Reese? What are you doing here?" His face blanched, though he'd never had a lot of color to begin with. Something about hating sunlight. Whatever the reason, he'd had a note from his mom saying he couldn't take phys ed class outside. He'd remain inside and walk laps around the gym.

That was when he . . .

"I bought this house." It was all I could do to speak in a civil manner. But we'd grown up since then. He must've changed. "I fixed it up. You should've seen it when I bought it." The words sputtered out of me. Anything to avoid silence and him possibly bringing up our past. "The woman who owned it went into a nursing home, and it was vacant for some time. Her family sold it, but she hadn't done any work on it for years. I freshened it up, and I'm happy with the results."

"Do you mind if I come inside?" He cocked his head, glaring at the late-day sunlight, though it was currently setting over the bay and creating shadows on my porch. "Please. I promise. I . . . Well, the past is the past, right?" He said the last in a false, bright voice.

"I'm not alone," I ground out.

"Is there a problem?" Wolf asked in a deadly voice. He tugged me away from the door and widened it, stepping between us. "Would you like me to send someone on his way by any means within my disposal?"

“No, it’s okay.” Not really, but I could make nice. The past was in the past. I stepped back and flicked my hand, urging Wilber to enter.

Wolf remained between us, watching with a carefully fierce expression. “One word . . .” he whispered to me, following it up with the clenching of his fists at his sides.

I loved that he was here, that he was eager to protect me, but I wasn’t fourteen any longer.

“Wilber,” I said in a stoic tone. I’d get this over with, and then I wouldn’t need to see him again. “This is my friend, Wolfram Zegrath. Wolfram? This is Wilber Blight.”

The teenage bully who groped me inside the gym when I was fourteen to his fifteen. I’d kicked him in the balls and run while he clutched his package and groaned. When I told the principal, the incident was dismissed as boys being boys and maybe I should smile at him every now and then.

There was nothing worse than not being taken seriously.

“Wilber.” Wolfram studied the other man. “Why are you making my . . . Reese nervous?”

“Nervous?” Wilber’s shrill laugh rang out. “No idea. We’re old friends, right , Reese?”

My face flaming with rage, I said nothing.

“Wolfram, you said?” Wilber scratched the back of his neck. “Is that German?”

“Originally Romanian, though my family hasn’t lived there for ages.”

Many ages, from what he'd said.

"I haven't seen you in a long time." If only I wasn't seeing him now, either. "I moved here from New York, where I've been since I graduated from community college. What are you up to now, Wilber?" Groped any teenagers lately?

"This and that," he said with a tight smile, his eyes filled with near-panic. "I got my law degree." With his hands on his hips, though one held a sheath of papers, he rocked on the heels of his polished shoes. He also wore dark pants and a long-sleeved, button-up shirt. A dark blue jacket. A loosened tie.

"Do you work here in town?" I asked. Hopefully not.

His face tightened. "You know I can't."

Actually, I didn't.

"My mother . . ." He clamped his mouth shut, not finishing the statement.

"Oh." What should I say to that? Maybe my talk with the principal had resulted in ramifications I was unaware of, though that wouldn't keep his mother from working here in town.

He huffed and thrust a glossy folded booklet out toward me. "Anyway, I'm canvassing the neighborhood." His slick smile grew. "I'm running for state legislature, and I'd love to have your vote."

Never.

"This booklet lays out my plans if I'm elected, and I'm sure you'll agree that I've moved past whatever odd occurrence might've happened in our past. I'm more than

capable of doing the best for this community.”

Truly? He must know I’d never agree with something like that.

“I’ll look over your information.” No, I’d burn it.

As far as his mother was concerned, I had no idea what he was talking about. My gaze sought Wolfram’s, and he shrugged, equally puzzled.

“Can I count on your vote?” Wilber started backing toward the door.

I pressed for a smile, though I was sure it came out flat. “Interesting seeing you again, Wilber.”

“Thanks.” With that, he spun and stepped outside, shutting the door behind him.

I scooted over to one of the long panes of glass on either side of the door and watched as he got into a car and backed out onto the road, the tires spinning as he took the vehicle down the hill.

“Odd running into him again.” I turned to face Wolf. “For the record, he and I were never friends.”

“You’re frightened,” Wolf growled, his dark gaze stabbing the door. “Why?”

“Back when I was fourteen, I hurt my ankle, and I couldn’t run track during phys ed class. Wilber always stayed inside, so they told me to hang out with him. He . . . pushed me against a wall and pawed my breast. Tried to kiss me.”

“Fuck.” Wolfram mistified, returning not long later. “Gone, but I’ll track him down. Kill him.”

“Don’t bother. It was a long time ago.”

“He frightened you now .” He tugged me into his arms and held me. “You’re still shaking, and I won’t have it.”

“It’s just a reaction to seeing him again. I know he has no power over me now. He didn’t back then either. I kneed him in the balls, and he released me with a yelp. While he clutched himself, I ran to the principal’s office.” I shared that I didn’t find help there.

That only made Wolf’s claws extend from his fingertips farther. “I will kill him.”

“It’s been a long time. I hope he’s grown up since then and learned his lesson.”

“Did he apologize back then? He didn’t do so now.”

“No.”

“Then he has not learned a lesson.” Wolf braced my upper arms and stared into my eyes. “He will.”

“Please let it go. I don’t care about Wilber. I doubt I’ll ever see him again. Don’t endanger yourself for something like that.”

“You have nothing to fear in that regard. Vampires have remained hidden forever. You know we exist only because we’re willing to let you see.”

I should be shivering at this statement, but it only made me feel more secure. No matter what, I knew Wolf would never hurt me.

“Forget about him,” I said. “I haven’t seen him since high school, and that was good

enough for me. He went to a big university while I stayed local and went to the community college.”

“He started to say something about his mother.” His scowl deepened. “I’ll see if I can discover any information.”

“Why bother?” I lifted the brochure and grumbled when I read the first line that talked about turning the local park into a condo complex. “He’ll never get my vote.” I tore it into a bunch of small pieces and stomped into the living room, where I flung them into the fireplace to tinder the next fire.

“Wilber has a reason for wanting you to leave Mystic Harbor,” he said, following me.

“He didn’t know I was here until just now. I doubt he’s involved in whatever’s happened.”

“He may have pretended.”

Good point. “Add him to your list, then.”

“I already have.” He placed his hand on my shoulder and gently squeezed. “What can I do to make this better?”

Turning, I lifted a smile, though I didn’t go all-in. “You already have.”

He studied my face for a long while before nodding grimly. “See if you can access your accounts now, and then we can talk about my growing list of suspects and brainstorm ideas for why these incidents are happening.”

“Alright.”

We went into my office, and I sat at my desk, booting up my laptop while Wolf settled on the sofa with a pad of paper on his lap, a pen poised over it.

Scratchy sounds soon rang out as he started taking notes.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 10

Wolfram

“ Yay,” Reese cried out, lifting her hands away from her computer keyboard. “I accessed all three accounts, changed the passwords, and deleted the nasty comments. I’ve made new statements, apologizing to my readers.” She pivoted around in her office chair, tension stealing her excitement. “I explained what happened, and all I can do now is hope they believe me.”

“Excellent.” I held up the pad of paper full of notes. “I’ve started a list of suspects and outlined possible motivations.”

“We still need to call Detective Carter about the person inside my house and someone hacking my accounts. I need to see if there’s a way I can press charges. Tracy is the only one who had access to those accounts.” She listed them off. “Defamation. Identity theft. Invasion of Privacy.”

“Don’t forget cybercrime violations.”

“Good one. Since Flint hired her, I’ll notify him as well. I’m sure she’ll deny doing it, but I know it was her, and he at least needs to be aware of my suspicions.”

“If she did it, she’ll pay for trying to ruin your career.”

“I can’t figure out why she’d do something like this. She quit. I didn’t fire her. And I was always a decent boss, or I tried to be. I never complained when she needed time

off, and I didn't ask her to do anything outside business hours. I even gave her bonuses."

"If confronted, she might confess."

"That would be perfect, but I doubt it."

So did I.

She called the detective and left a message for him to stop by when he had time. With a sigh, she leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. "What do you need from me?"

I started down my list of suspects. "Wilber Blight. He showed up not long after someone crept from your house."

"You said you thought the person was a witch. I doubt Wilber is."

"We'll see." I continued reading my notes. "He's running for state legislature, and you have information that could damage his campaign. Plus, there's something suspicious about his mother that I need to research."

"It could be something silly." Taking a nail file from her desk, she sawed it across one of her nails. "Random fact. When we were young, he couldn't go out in sunlight."

An interesting detail I wrote down. "Why not? Did he ever say?"

She tossed the file onto her desk. "I think I remember him saying he burned easily. He was kind of hyper about it in elementary school, hiding in the building's shadows. Kids can be mean. He still went out during recess back then, but he always wore long

sleeves, a hood that covered his face, and even gloves.”

“That must’ve been hot in the summer.”

“But effective. One of the mean girls, and there were too many of them, sadly enough, loved to run behind him and yank his hood down, exposing his face. The poor guy would cry. The teachers were pretty good about it, though. They’d rush over and cover him up fast. But by the end of the school year, and I think this was third or fourth grade, he would stay inside even during recess.”

“Were his parents the same?”

“I know where you’re going with this.” She tapped her chin. “Monsters emerged into human society only a few years ago, but I assume vampires have always lived close to their prey—us.”

“You’re correct.”

“I’m trying to remember if I ever met his parents, but I don’t think so. He didn’t participate in any sports or school activities. I would’ve seen his parents if only in passing if he’d done band, for instance. Or acted in plays. I did a lot of that. It was fun. Sad that he didn’t.”

“I’ll look into it. Wilber could have a skin condition, or he could be a born vampire. My family is ancient, which means, over time, we’ve acclimated. Most of my family can remain in sunlight for long periods of time. Other families are not as fortunate.”

“How ancient are we talking about?”

“Let’s just say that my tour of the Egyptian pyramids would come with details passed down from close relatives who lived during that time.”

“Wow. You really are old.”

My cryptic smile grew. “Please don’t call me daddy.”

Her snort rang out, and she rose from her chair. “I’ll keep that in mind. I’m going to grab some dinner. Do you eat food?”

“Sometimes. We don’t digest it like you do, but it doesn’t make us sick. I still enjoy a good tenderloin. Extra rare, of course.”

“Grim, Wolfie,” she said with a trilling laugh as she scooted out of the library. “Very grim.”

The next morning, I finished planting traps outside her home while she did some work in her office. I joined her, taking my usual place on her sofa with my pad of paper in front of me. When she’d finished, we continued going through the rest of my suspects.

“Flint Prospect,” I read.

“Really?” She sat at her desk again, the chair turned to face me. “Why my old professor?”

“He appeared jealous of your success. He hired your assistant; one might even say that he stole your assistant. And we don’t know if he did so before or after she quit.”

“I doubt either one of them will tell you if you ask, though I’d start with Flint. At this point, I don’t care if I ever talk with Tracy again. Good luck to her if she hopes to get more than employment dates out of me for a future reference.” She sighed. “Although, I need to wait until after the local law enforcement looks into it. Maybe she wasn’t involved.”

“She’s the most likely suspect. She was angry with you yesterday. She quit without giving notice, and she had access to your accounts. You said no one else did.”

Biting down on her lower lip, she shook her head. “She’s my first and only assistant. Some authors have more than one, and I’ve thought of hiring more, maybe one to handle marketing while another does graphics and manages my newsletter, but Tracy always insisted she wanted to do as many of those tasks as she could. I’m kind of a control freak, and I still do a lot of things myself, so it was easy to let her handle the things I wasn’t good at and do the rest on my own.”

“Let’s not forget Mary,” I said, tapping my paper with my pen.

Her eyebrows lifted. “Mary?”

“His hawk.”

“You think he told the seagull to attack me?”

“You said he runs a bird sanctuary, and he stated himself that he raised and trained Mary. Does he work with seagulls as well?”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh.”

“Tracy and Wilber can stay on the list as well as Flint, though I can’t imagine why he’d endanger his career at the college to come after me. Who else is on your list?”

“No one else so far. Do you have family or friends who might be eager to ruin your career or drive you away from Mystic Harbor? Those are our primary motives right now.”

We'd talked about other reasons but kept coming back to her career and her recent move to this area.

"I wish I'd kept the blender parts so you could look at them, but they went out in my trash pick-up. But no, no family or friends I can think of who might want to do something like that."

"Please list your family members and any close friends who might still be in the area. I'll look into their backgrounds and see if any should be added to my list."

"Aunt Beverly is my only surviving family other than my mom. She's never liked me, but I doubt she'd try to ruin me. She never married and has no children. I'm sure I have second or third cousins living somewhere in the country who I've never met, but I don't even know their names. I could ask my mother."

I wrote her aunt and mother down for further investigation.

"As for friends, I didn't stay in touch with anyone other than a few from college, and I haven't spoken with them in at least a year. None live locally. They came here to go to college and left to take jobs."

"Names?"

She listed three I'd look up online. "I suppose you could add Charmaine to the list. She and I were best friends in college, but we argued—"

"About what?"

"Her older brother, of all things. He had a crush on me, and she kept insisting I should go out with him. But I wasn't interested."

“What’s her last name?”

“Hodgkins.”

I wrote it down.

“Funny, but I swear I saw Charmaine in town before we found my tires slashed. But when I waved, whoever it was turned and walked away. If it was her, I swear she would’ve responded in some way. Sure, we argued, but we shared everything back then.” Her lips thinned. “It couldn’t have been her.”

Perhaps not, but I’d investigate any clue, even those that seemed improbable.

“Anyone else?” Reese asked.

“There’s only one other suspect.”

“Who?”

“Jolene Molson.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 11

Reese

“The possible house ghost?” My low laugh rang out but when his lips didn’t curl up in humor, my laughter bubble popped. I sagged back into my chair. “You’re not joking.”

He shook his head. “She visited me last night.”

“What? You can see ghosts?”

“If they chose to come to me, though I’ll point out, they rarely do.”

“I can’t imagine how a ghost could hack into my social media accounts.”

“We’re assuming Tracy did that. The hack may not be related to the other incidents.”

He had a valid point. “Did she hint that she was involved?”

“She didn’t speak to me. She stomped around my room and loomed over me as if she thought that would frighten me.” His cryptic smile rose. “She soon realized behavior like that would not be rewarded.”

“What did you do to her?” Morbidly fascinated by all this, I leaned forward in my chair. “You didn’t hurt her, did you?”

“It’s impossible to harm a ghost.”

“Did you scare her?”

“They don’t easily frighten either.”

“What did you do?”

“Bared my fangs. She popped from view and did not reappear again. However, she’s here, she was eager to make trouble if only with me, so she’s now on my suspect list. I’ll see if I can discover anything about her at the historical society. Perhaps we can send her on her way. That would be better for her than rattling around in her former home.”

“I feel bad for her. She might be lonely. Maybe she thought you were cute.”

He snorted. “The only person I want thinking I’m cute is you.”

“Oh, I do, Wolfie. I do.”

He growled and set his pad and paper aside, rising to stalk toward me, where he braced his palms on the armrests of my chair. Leaning in, he ran his nose from my earlobe, along my jawline to my chin, then down to my neck. “You smell amazing.”

“Boundaries, Wolfie,” I said, laughing because it tickled. “Boundaries.” I placed my palms on his chest to nudge him away but instead left my hands there, spreading my fingers wide. His heart beat at a furious pace, and yeah, he looked extra cute today dressed in jeans and a starched white shirt, still wearing his infamous cape. I loved how gorgeously clichéd he was, and I drooled whenever I looked his way.

“Boundaries, yes.” Backing, he lifted his hands, his face filling with horror. “I do

apologize. You're correct. I've overstepped the guidelines between us."

"For what it's worth, I was teasing. You can sniff my neck whenever you want."

He growled again but turned and strode over to sit on the sofa, placing his pad of paper on his lap. "I'm going to mistify into town and look into each of our suspects. Would you like to come or remain here with me checking in often? You should be relatively safe in daylight."

"You can't keep me away." I'd written my daily word count, and while I could write a newsletter and do some marketing, I could handle all that tonight. That was the benefit of being ahead with my release schedule. I could play hooky every now and then. "Did Jolene own a car? From the little I've heard about her, she died around the time of the second world war, and while there were cars back then and monsters can walk into car dealerships today, I doubt ghosts do. How would she get a license or sign the papers to buy a vehicle?"

"Ghosts follow their own set of rules, but you're right that she can't solidify enough to purchase a car. She lived long enough ago, she may not have known they existed, though she may watch you get into yours from the attic window."

"Creepy, Wolfie. Creepy."

He huffed, and heat swirled through his dark eyes. "You're truly asking for it, aren't you, my tiny little . . ."

"Tiny little what?"

"Nothing."

"It must be something. You can tell me. In fact—" Someone knocked on the door.

“Saved from answering by yet another door knocker. I’ve lived here for two months, and I’ve seen more traffic recently than I did all the prior weeks combined, outside of family, that is.”

“Your mother and aunt live in the area?”

“They’re both in Mystic Harbor. Mom lives in the house she and Dad bought right after I was born, and my aunt bought the place next to hers. She’s proprietary about my mom and . . . Okay, I already mentioned that my aunt doesn’t seem to like me much.” Rising, I strode into the foyer.

I opened the door to find Detective Carter standing on my small, covered porch.

“There you are,” he said. “I received a message that you had a crime to report?”

“Come on in.” I waved toward my office.

We all sat, and I explained.

“You found no evidence after the person departed?” he asked Wolf, who shook his head. “Then I’m not sure what I can do about it. I noted cameras on the house.”

Wolfram grunted. “They were installed after I chased the person away.”

“Well, let me know if you see anyone else snooping around. As for the social media hacking, I’ll question Tracy, of course.” A frown filled the detective’s face as he took notes on his phone. “I’ll see if she’ll voluntarily surrender her phone for a forensics’ analysis, though I could obtain a warrant if need be. Plus, I can ask the social media providers for information about who might’ve posted instead of you. They’d have access to an IP address. That sort of thing.”

“I deleted the posts.”

“There will still be a record. I’ll tell you right now, if Tracy did this, it might be a challenge to prove. I’m not giving up. Not one bit, but I want to be honest with you.”

“I thought this would be the case,” I said. “I’ve done damage control, and I believe I’ve mitigated any major problems. I don’t want to let it go, however. If she did it, I hope we can prove it and see she’s punished.”

“Believe me, she will be.” He stood. “I’ll keep you informed about my investigation.” His gaze shot to Wolf. “You as well, I assume?”

“Yes, please,” I said as Wolfram nodded.

He left, and we opted to mistify to the garage who’d called to say my vehicle was ready to be picked up. I’d filed with my insurance company, but I had a high enough deductible that I’d have to eat most of the cost of replacing the tires. At least they weren’t new.

After we’d picked up my SUV, we drove to Mom’s house to quiz her about Wilber and Flint, though I doubted she’d have much information about my old professor. My aunt was there, but while she pursed her lips as Wolf and I took a seat at the kitchen table, she didn’t say more than a mumbled greeting.

“Coffee or tea?” Mom held up the coffee pot.

“I’ll have coffee,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Tea, please, my lady,” Wolf said.

“My lady.” Mom blushed. “I like that.”

Aunt Beverly rolled her eyes. I might've spied humor there—or I might not have.

“What brings you by today?” Mom asked after she'd served our drinks and placed a pretty dish full of cookies in the middle of the table and sat herself.

“Wolfram works for Monsters, PI,” I said, sipping my drink. “And he was assigned to my case.”

“Wonderful.” Mom clapped her hands and gazed at Wolf raptly, slanting her eyes my way and wiggling her eyebrows after.

Got it, Mom. He was a hot guy, and she wanted to make sure I saw it as well. Couldn't miss it.

“We have questions about people here in town,” I said. “You remember Wilber Blight, don't you?”

Mom's smile wavered. “Hard not to after what his mother did. Oh, most people in town didn't know all the details like Bev and I did. Or they've forgotten. The nerve of his mother doing something like that.”

“What did she do?” This was news to me.

“Well.” Mom peered around the room as if someone might be standing nearby, eager to overhear what she had to say. Although, if she had a resident ghost like me, she might not be wrong in that. “She was an accountant and managed the books for many of the businesses in town. I told you all this, didn't I? Although, what she was doing was discovered while you were in college. I'm sure I mentioned it at least in passing. It was all hush-hush back then, but I do like to share tidbits of gossip. I mean, her husband was a prominent physician. Imagine the scandal if it got out? But Beverly here was part of the group questioned, and she has the inside scoop.” Mom dimpled a

smile her sister's way. "Maybe you should tell them about it. I'm sure you remember the details better than me."

"I don't gossip," my aunt said, taking a long swallow of her coffee. Her sharp gaze fell on me, and I got the idea she might be open to gossiping any day of the week with my mother. With me? Not on any day ending in Y. She lifted a cookie from the plate and took a bite, slowly chewing. "These are perfect, Alice. I don't know how you do it. It amazes me every time. Your cookies are always delicious."

"Thank you. I've had that recipe for years. I'm happy to share it with you," Mom said. "But tell them. The story is equally delicious."

"I truly don't like to spread tales. Let it rest. Wilber's a decent enough fellow. He's a lawyer. He's running for office." Her gaze landed on me. "You could do much worse than him."

"Oh, what an interesting suggestion." Mom leaned toward me. "Wilber is single. His family has considerable money and a lovely home on the water. As for his mother, that was in the past, and I doubt it would matter to anyone now."

I hadn't shared what happened back in high school. After the principal brushed it off, I worried everyone else would, too.

"I have my own lovely home on the water," I said, wondering if I should bring the incident up now. Maybe not. "I don't need his. And I have money as well. I don't need to hook up with Wilber to make my life better. Besides, I don't believe he and I share the same political views."

"I thought your mother taught you better," my aunt said with so subtle a huff, I doubt Mom heard. It pinned me to my chair like always, and I floundered, trying to figure out how to respond. Funny how, with one glare, she could turn me back into that

uncertain fifteen-year-old who'd spoken up and been ground into the dirt for doing so. Everyone said they wanted to raise strong girls, when in actuality, they preferred meek ones.

"In what way?" I asked sweetly, taking a cookie with a shaky hand and biting into it. Amazing. In that, my aunt was right.

"Politics should never be brought into the marriage bed," she said.

Wolf watched our interaction with a sharp gaze, and the longer he looked at my aunt, the deeper his frown grew.

"What makes you believe Reese would wish to be with Wilber?" he asked.

"She should dream of being with him," my aunt said casually. "He has prospects." From the way she looked Wolfram up and down, she must believe he did not.

Not that he and I were dating or even talking about anything like that. But my heart kept pattering whenever he was around, and I was looking forward to getting to know him better.

Kissing him.

"Wolfram comes from a very old family," I said.

"You're a vampire, aren't you?" Mom asked in a bubbly voice, oblivious as always to my aunt's mean girl attitude.

He dipped his head forward.

"Where do you get your blood?" Her smile held true even when it slid to my neck.

Please, I wasn't that gauche. If there was biting in my future, there were cooler places than my neck for something like that. A neck bite would be the teenage equivalent of a hickey.

"Bags," he said. "Many are eager to donate."

"What about people who need that blood after surgery and things like that?" my aunt asked with a touch of fascination. "I understand that everyone deserves to live, even those of questionable parentage, but surely that disturbs you."

"All our donated blood is shared. You'd be surprised how many will eagerly give to a vampire but not to the blood bank. We ensure they receive more than they otherwise would."

Aunt Beverly nodded. "Hmm."

"Wolfram showed me his home on the water last night, and it's gorgeous," I said. Not that something like that mattered, though it must to her.

"Purchased or . . . did you lure someone into giving it to you?" my aunt asked.

Could I smack her? I really wanted to verbally do so. This time, I'd find a way to win the argument. I wasn't a bumbling teenager any longer.

"Beverly," Mom said with a roll of her eyes. Her lips thinned, and she paused as if gathering her thoughts. "Finish the story about Wilber because I'm sure Reese would enjoy the gossip if nothing else. As for him dating Reese, I believe she's right, now that I think about it. They wouldn't be compatible." Mom patted my hand sitting on the table. "He's not a cheerful person like my daughter."

"Wilber's mother embezzled money from one of the businesses," Aunt Beverly said,

speaking around another bite of cookie. “As if that wasn’t enough, she was caught shoplifting. Her husband fixed it for her, and whatever he said or did made everyone stop talking about it fast. I’m not sure anyone but me and Alice remember.”

Since Wilber was on Wolfram’s suspect list, I tried to see where this new information might lead him to attack me.

Anything I could come up with would be a stretch.

Unless he suspected I knew about what his mother had done and worried I’d tell the community about that, in addition to what he’d done to me.

Both of those juicy details could ruin his bid for the legislative position.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 12

Wolfram

We left Reese's mother's home and drove toward town.

"Your aunt will remain on my suspect list," I said as she turned her vehicle into the community college parking lot.

"She doesn't like me but there's nothing new about that."

"I don't see this so much as disliking you as resenting you and your relationship with your mother. That's a solid reason to drive you away."

"For whatever reason, she's always tried to shove herself between us. Mom doesn't see it, but she's blind when it comes to her older sister. Aunt Beverly raised Mom after their parents died, and in my mother's eyes, her sister is wonderful and amazing. Mom sees the best in us all but doesn't appear to notice the bad."

Reese parked, and we got out, walking toward the building where Flint had an office.

"Oh, hey," she said, stopping on the sidewalk, lifting her arm to wave. "There she is. Charmaine. Charmaine!" she called out to a woman striding farther down the sidewalk.

The woman didn't turn or acknowledge Reese.

“That’s weird,” She lowered her arm back to her side. “Maybe it wasn’t her. Again.”

“Would you like me to go grab her?”

Her laugh bubbled out. “And if it’s not her? The woman will scream and rightly so. Let her go.”

“Very well.” I stared in that direction for a long while.

We entered the building and took the stairs to the second level and continued down the hall. Flint’s office door was closed, but we could hear people speaking inside.

“Maybe he has a student with him.” Reese pointed to the wooden bench in the small open seating area across from this section of offices.

We sat and waited.

Finally, the door opened, and Tracy and Flint stumbled out, locked in an embrace, their arms around each other and their lips fused. Flint’s hand was up Tracy’s shirt that had been hiked up around her upper thighs.

“Well,” Reese lifted her eyebrows my way. “There was no way I could compete with what my old professor has to offer.”

They stilled, and Flint’s hand slipped out from under Tracy’s shirt. Color rose into her face as she dragged her skirt down around her legs and smoothed the rest of her clothing and hair.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, her glare remaining on Reese.

“I stopped by to see Flint,” Reese said.

“You can’t have him,” Tracy snarled. She turned to Flint and whined. “Don’t talk to her. She’s mean, and she’ll say nasty lies about me.”

“You mean like tell him to lock his social media accounts before you post slanderous statements on them?” Reese asked.

“I’d never do anything like that.” With a huff, Tracy stalked down the hall.

Flint gave us a weak smile. “I assume you stopped by to deliver your endorsement?” he asked Reese.

She rose from the bench and strode over to stand beside him, me following. “Actually, I wanted to share some details about Tracy and talk to you about the guest lecturer position the college offered me, but I find now that I don’t want to bother.” She held her hand out to me. “Come on, Wolf. Let’s leave Flint and Tracy to whatever it is they were planning to do. On the floor or his desk, I imagine. Honestly, Professor, I’m shocked. Not that you’re developing a relationship with someone, though I’ll mention again that you shouldn’t trust her with anything, but I’m stunned that you’d be intimate with an employee during class hours.”

“She’s much more than an employee to me,” he said, his spine stiffening, and his gaze sharpening. “Take care with what you say about my fiancée. I’d hate to have to sue you for defamation.”

“Fiancée? You move fast.”

“We’ve known each other for years. Don’t think you can threaten either of us.”

“No,” Reese poked his chest, her face bright with color. “You watch out. Don’t think you can threaten me.”

A low growl rumbled in my chest, and Flint darted inside his office, slamming the door.

We left and went to her SUV, climbing inside again.

“I can’t believe those two have known each other for years and are getting married.” She white knuckled the steering wheel. “She hates this town, but she never mentioned knowing anyone here. However, this is a bonus for me. After his threat, I no longer need to give him an endorsement for his book.”

I squeezed her hand before releasing it so she could drive us into town. “If they’re both involved, we’ll ensure they pay.” In one way or another.

No one challenged the true mate of a vampire and came out the victor.

We parked in the lot across from Monsters, PI, and strolled down the road to the historical society’s office, but the door was closed and locked. The sign said they wouldn’t be open for a couple of days.

“Where next?” Reese leaned against the brick wall of the quaint building.

“Everything else I need to look into can be done online.”

“I have an idea.” The smile she gave me made everything inside me quiver. “Let’s go to the bookstore next to Mythical Muffin. They messaged me that they’d ordered a bunch of my books and asked if I’d stop in and sign them. Readers love buying books with the author’s signature. I’ve also got some swag on my backseat, and I can put a custom bookmark inside each as an extra goodie. After that, we can pick up some items for tomorrow’s breakfast at Mythical Muffin.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

After collecting the swag from her car, we strolled down the sidewalk, passing the bakery with a sweet scent drifting around us. We went inside Cryptid Book Den. While Reese walked up to the counter to speak with the older woman working there, I studied the choices on the shelves, looking specifically for Reese's books. I wanted to buy a copy of each and read them.

Oddly enough, I couldn't find any on the alphabetized shelf. Perhaps they'd put them on an endcap.

Not there, either.

Were they sold out? That would make sense. She was a local author, and they'd be sure to highlight that fact. Tourists loved buying things created by people living in the area.

"What do you mean?" Reese stood at the counter, her hand to her throat, horror filling her face.

I stalked over to stand with her, scowling at the woman standing behind the counter.

"They pulled all my books off the shelf." Tears shimmered in Reese's eyes.

"You do understand." The woman squirmed under my glower. "Honestly, I don't believe you plagiarized one bit, but I have to do what my boss says. He said the accusations are credible, and he told me in no uncertain terms that we were not going to sell even one book for you again."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 13

Reese

I sat in my driver's seat, struggling not to sob. "I didn't plagiarize anyone," I whispered, not daring to look Wolfram's way. "You believe me, don't you?"

I'd questioned the clerk further, and she admitted that rumors were circulating in all the book forums that I'd copied the work of a less famous thriller author. They'd showed examples, and while there was a similarity to the story in questions, and I'd pointed out that the book I was accused of copying had been published after hers, the clerk was insistent.

"I love your work," she'd told me in a low voice, glancing toward the door to the office behind the long counter. "I've read all your books, and I don't believe it for a minute, but I only work here. I spoke up for you, if that helps, but the boss was insistent."

"Damn Tracy," I snarled, smacking my palm on the steering wheel. "She's involved in this. I know she is. And I'd bet anything Flint's involved too."

"We need to tell Detective Carter."

I called him and explained, and he said he'd arranged to speak with Tracy tomorrow but that he'd also make a point of chatting with Flint. He told me to get a lawyer.

"Know any lawyers?" I asked after I hung up. "Good ones."

“I know shark lawyers.” He held up his phone. “Would you like me to speak to one of my friends?”

“Please and thank you.” I couldn’t believe this was happening. How could I do damage control for something like this?

I started my SUV and drove toward my house while Wolf spoke with his friend. He hung up as I was shutting off the engine.

“Let’s go inside, and I’ll tell you Brandon’s plan,” he said.

We settled on the sofa in the living room and Wolf put his arm around my shoulders, giving me a hug and a kiss on the top of my head. We might only be friends, but I found his touch both comforting, and arousing—something I should let go of right now. I had important things to worry about, and I didn’t need the distraction of a relationship on top of everything else.

Except it felt good to snuggle into his side, to feel the warmth of his touch. I’d be worse off if I was alone.

He tapped a pad of paper on his lap with a pen.

“Where did you get that?” I asked. “It wasn’t there a second ago.”

“I misted it here from your office. See?” He pointed to the notes he’d taken this morning. Was that only this morning? It felt like years had passed since we picked up my SUV at the mechanic.

“Thank you for being here with me.” A whimper came through in my voice. “It would be torture trying to figure this out on my own.”

“There’s no place I’d rather be, Reese,” he said gravely. “Nowhere.”

My face flooded with heat, and I wasn’t sure what to say. What we had was changing, and while I might feel as if I should resist it, I didn’t want to. I liked him. I loved how kind and sweet he was.

And I still wanted to kiss him.

Heaven help me, but I was falling in love with a vampire.

“First thing.” He flipped to a clean page. “Brandon, my shark shifter lawyer friend, said that—”

“Wait. Shark shifters exist?”

His lips curled up on one side. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“That’s cool.”

“It truly is.”

“He can really shift into a shark?”

“Of course.”

Huh.

“He asked if you have proof that your book was written prior to the one you’ve been accused of plagiarizing.”

“At the end of each day, I email myself a copy of the latest version of whatever book

I'm writing, so yes. It's all on my laptop, and I back that up to the cloud often. I have copies of each version of my books from the time I first opened a Word document to write, to the time I upload the final file for publication. That'll be easy to prove."

"Excellent." He made some notes on the paper before looking up again. "He'll be able to tell you what else he needs once he's finished looking into this. Next is witnesses. Does anyone other than you know for a fact that you write your own books?"

"Tracy, but she's not a reliable witness when she's probably the one who started this rumor." I palmed my face. "What will she do next?"

"Assuming she did this."

I looked up at him. "Who else could it be?"

"I'm as eager as you to pin these incidents on her, but I don't want to overlook anyone else who might be involved."

"If all this is supposed to make me leave town, which is a guess on our part, accusing me of copying another author won't make that happen. If anything, it makes me want to stay here where I'm safe."

"I still suspect we're dealing with two people here. Although, say this was only Wilber. Ruining you could be a distraction. If you're busy trying to fix things, you may not bother to tell everyone about what he did years ago or remind them of his mother's actions."

"Alright. Maybe they could be connected."

"If we can find out why they're doing this, that'll help us narrow down our suspects."

He tapped the paper. "I'll give Brandon this information and see what he suggests we do now."

"We?"

He paused. "I'm sorry. You. What you can do now."

"I like we, Wolf," I said softly. "Very much."

His arm tightened around my shoulders.

Chapter 14

Wolfram

Our investigation stalled over the next few days, but I was grateful no one was trying to harm Reese—for the moment.

We spent the time walking on the beach, getting to know each other, and working with Brandon on strategies. He'd reached out to the author Reese was accused of plagiarizing and thankfully, the author didn't think Reese had copied her at all. She not only assured us of this, but she also said she'd put together some side-by-side comparisons to help prove it and state this on social media. That should dispel the rumors.

Brandon was also tracking down those spreading the rumors on social media and issuing cease and desist orders. Most had deleted their posts, but sadly, some damage had already been done. Reese had seen a barrage of one-star reviews on all her books, along with messages swearing they'd never read her stories again. At least her true fans had jumped to her defense and were posting about how much they loved her books on social media.

"It's a nightmare," Reese said as we sat in the living room one evening. "And whoever's responsible has been quiet for days. I'm waiting for the next bomb to drop, and I can't imagine what it might be. It'll be another direct hit, though, I'm sure of it."

Detective Carter arrived and sat across from us to fill us in on his investigation.

“Tracy and Flint both willingly surrendered their phones, and I’ve run forensic data. There’s no evidence that either of them accessed your accounts and posted anything since Tracy quit your employment.”

“Then it wasn’t them?” Reese asked.

“I said there’s no evidence on their phones. They could’ve used other devices. There is evidence that someone accessed your accounts, however, and changed your passwords to make it difficult for you to mitigate the damage, and whoever did it used an IP address in this area. We’re still working on discovering who that might be. Tracing the IP addresses, etcetera. It takes time. As for the person who entered your house, I’m at a loss for how to investigate that.” His gaze met mine. “Did you happen to see the vehicle’s license plate?”

I thought about it before shaking my head. “It was blacked out or there was no plate. I don’t recall seeing anything before the vehicle disappeared.”

The detective scratched the back of his neck. “And you’re sure it . . . disappeared?”

“I am.”

“I’m quite comfortable with monsters. Even vampires. But the thought of trying to investigate witches and magical beings is overwhelming. Is there any way Monsters, PI could work with us on cases like this?”

“On a consulting basis?” I asked. “I’m sure there is. I’ll speak with Katar about it. I imagine he’ll be glad to help. In fact, our new hire, an ogre named Thain, might be able to assist.”

“For curiosity’s sake, how do ogres differ from orcs?” he asked, and I was grateful to hear only respect in his voice. It would be difficult living in a town where the law

enforcement didn't make us feel welcome.

"Ogres have creamy golden skin versus the green of an orc," I said. Reese also listened with interest. "Their physical shape is similar, as is their intelligence and strength. But ogres often have magical abilities. If we're dealing with a witch here, I believe Thain could add some insight. Ogres often have a profound sense of smell."

Detective Carter frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"They're the only species capable of scenting magic on an object or a person. Some can even see an object's history with one touch. A witch can hide in plain sight. They look like any other human. But most ogres could identify a witch by scent alone. They smell different, much like a yeti might wouldn't smell than a centaur. Vampires, I'll add, can taste the difference between species in blood."

The detective flinched and cleared his throat, but I held up my hand before he could speak. "I refer mostly to knowledge I've gained from my readings, not personal experience. I haven't drunk from a living person in so long, I've forgotten what they taste like. But I do remember being able to tell by their blood if someone can wield magic."

"Let's work with Thain, then," he said, his smile holding no disdain. "Nothing against your abilities, but we'd incite riots if you start tasting people to discover who's threatening Reese. Assuming whoever was inside her house is involved in everything else."

"I have no interest in participating in anything like that regardless," I said. "I believe they're all connected, but we could be dealing with more than one person."

"We won't discount anything, not even magic." The detective nodded toward us both, tucked his phone into his jacket pocket, and stood. "I'll be in touch if I discover

anything helpful.”

I walked him to the front door and returned to the living room to find Reese scrolling on her phone.

“People are amazing.” Her shoulders drooped. “But people also suck.”

“In what way?” I sunk down onto the sofa beside her, wanting to hug her, but not sure if that was what she needed most from me now.

“Most are kind. They’re telling me they knew something was wrong, that this wasn’t like me at all.”

“And the others?”

“Have left one-star reviews on all my books and are swearing I made a mistake and I’m trying to get out of it. I guess a few authors have been known to fall off the verbal cliff, then announce they were hacked to make them look better after they come to their senses.”

“Keep being who you are, and they’ll realize they’re mistaken.”

She gave me a sad smile. “Thanks. I’m glad you’re here with me right now. You’re making me feel secure, but it’s more than that.”

I couldn’t resist stroking a strand of her hair off her face, my fingers lingering on her cheek. Such soft skin. “In what way?”

“It’s you, Wolf. I feel better because you’re here with me.”

“Reese.” My voice came out croaky, rougher than I intended, but the throatiness

matched the urgency in my heart. “Do you think there can ever be more than—” I hesitated, grappling with my words. “More than just friendship between us?”

She lifted her gaze, a sparkle of surprise mixing with something deeper in her blue eyes. “I hope so.”

Before I could think through my actions, I tugged her onto my lap, her warmth settling into me. It was supposed to be a simple embrace, a way to provide comfort, but when she shifted around to face me, straddle me with her thighs tight around mine, need rushed through me. Her body fit against mine in a way that both thrilled and terrified me.

“Does this mean you hope for more as well, Wolf?” she asked, her breath mingling with the air between us. This was when I realized she felt as unsure about where this might be going as me.

I'd never been a male who concerned himself overmuch about anything. Other than getting staked, I supposed. But the odds of that were slim now that monsters had been accepted into human society. And rogue vampires hadn't gone on rampages since the dark ages. People were more apt to gush about a vampire than run in the opposite direction. Or throw holy water at us. I couldn't remember when that last happened.

But right now, I felt more hope, more vulnerability than I had in my life. This moment meant everything, and I didn't want to mess it up.

“Yes,” I fumbled out, feeling overwhelmed by everything she made me want. The vulnerability was foreign, exciting, and gut-wrenching all at once.

Her hands gripped my shoulders, and I sensed her steadying herself. The world around us faded, the buzz of the day dropping to a distant hum. Only she and I existed.

She leaned in, closing the space, and I was lost. Her lips met mine in a soft, tentative kiss that sent shockwaves through me. The sensation ignited me, filling me with warmth and exhilaration.

I couldn't think or breathe. Everything else—the threats, any potential villain outside—vanished. All that mattered was the feel of her pressing herself against me, her taste both sweet and inviting.

Her kiss deepened, and I tightened my hold on her, drawing her closer, as if she was my lifeline.

And perhaps, she was.

Chapter 15

Reese

W olf's lips moved across mine, exploring and eager. He tasted sweet, like the dark chocolate I adored, mixed with a flavor that was all Wolfram. Shivers rippled through me as his hands slid down my sides, his touch leaving a trail of warmth through the fabric of my shirt.

His tongue traced the seam of my lips, seeking entry, and I parted them, eager to taste more. The sensation of his tongue gliding across mine sent a jolt of bliss through me. He deepened the kiss, his tongue stroking mine in a dance that made my heart race and everything inside me heat. I arched into him, craving this, craving his touch. As if he understood my plea, his hands slid beneath my shirt. He ran his fingers up and down my back, making me ache for him even more.

His touch remained gentle, the calluses on his hands showing me he'd lived life fully. He ran a fingertip along the line of my bra, before moving around to the front. I moaned as he shifted my bra up, his hands cupping my breasts softly, almost reverently.

He groaned, a sound of pure desire. Heat coiled low in my belly, gliding lower. He rolled my nipples, the sensation sending sparks across my bones. I moaned, pressing into his hands, seeking whatever this man could give me.

His touch was electric, his kiss intoxicating. His heart pounded against my palms, and I stroked his chest, teasing his nipples. His scent, a mixture of fresh air and something

uniquely Wolf, wrapped around me, heightening my pleasure. I felt more alive than I ever had before.

I ran my fingers through his thick hair, the soft strands cool on my overheated skin. His kiss deepened, his tongue stroking mine. I could only think of what it would be like to have him stroke other parts of me. I moaned, my body aching with need.

His hands left my breasts, sliding down my sides, his thumbs tracing the curve of my waist. He gripped my hips, pulling me closer, pressing me in a way that left no doubt that he wanted me as much as I did him. His cock jerked upward, hard and eager. When he nudged it between my thighs, heat roared through me.

I pulled away, sucking in deep breaths, trembling with need. His dark, intense gaze met mine, the desire in them clear. I wanted him so much.

Leaning in, I captured his lips in a fierce kiss, my hands exploring his chest and shoulders with the same intensity that he continued to stroke mine. He groaned, his hands gripping my hips tighter, his body arching into mine. I ached with desire.

I was lost in him, lost in this moment, lost in the sensation of his touch, his kiss, his body. And I didn't care. I never wanted to be found. I wanted to stay like this forever.

He lowered me onto the cushions and rose over me, still kissing me, his fingers stroking my breast. When he lifted his head, I saw so much in his dark eyes. The world.

Us.

“I want to bring you joy,” he said.

“You already do.” But I knew what he meant. He was asking if I was interested in

more than just kisses. For tonight, when everything felt sad and hopeless, I wanted to find joy with this man alone.

“What do you want from me, Reese?” There was no mistaking the restrained need in his voice. “Tell me, and it’s yours.”

“Take me to bed, Wolfie.”

He grumbled about the nickname but sent me a shy smile. “I should chastise you. Tell you you’re going to pay for teasing me unmercifully with that wretched Wolfie , but I find I’m coming to enjoy it. Please, however, do not use it around anyone else. I’m an ancient vampire, I’ll never live it down if you do.”

“Deal.”

He stood and lifted me into his arms. I stroked along the nape of his neck as he carried me up the stairs and down the hall to my bedroom.

“No mistifying?” I asked.

“I want to carry you.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 16

Wolfram

Reese was precious to me, and I would ache for her until my dying day. Knowing that she wanted to be with me made my heart pound in my throat.

Inside her room, I kicked the door shut and strode over to lay her on the king-sized bed. I wanted to make this time last forever. But even more, I wanted to make sure she found pleasure.

Stepping back from the bed, I kept my gaze locked on her as she lay on the surface, her eyes never leaving mine. Tonight would be special. I would do all I could to make it unforgettable for her.

I started by unclasping my cape, nudging the silky material off my shoulders. It slid to the floor, and I kicked it aside.

Reese sat up on her elbows, a sly smile lifting her lips. “Are you going to give me a strip tease, Wolfie?”

I growled at the nickname but it melted into a smile. This woman . . .

I raised an eyebrow, doing my best to sink back into my usual stoic demeanor. She was right when she called me stuffy. I wasn’t a man who laughed much, had fun much. With Reese, I wanted to let go and savor the joy she had to offer. “Would you like me to give you a strip tease?”

Her voice came out throaty, filled with anticipation. “Oh, yes. Very much.”

“Then it's yours.” With my gaze locked on hers, I slowly began to undo my shirt, one button at a time, exposing my chest bit by bit. Her eyes followed the movements, her breath hitching as I slid the shirt away, letting it drop to the floor in a rustle of fabric.

I bent down to unlace my boots, making my movements deliberate and slow. When I kicked them off, they thudded on the floor to my side.

Straightening, I ran my hand down my chest to the top of my pants and slowly shifted my hips while unfastening the button. I followed that up with the slow glide of the zipper. I slid my pants over my hips and stepped out of them. My erection strained against the front of my briefs.

Reese sat up, her fingers reaching out to trace the lines of my abdomen, her touch sending jolts of heat through me. She followed the waistband of my briefs, her fingertip brushing the head of my cock, making it throb with need.

“You're beautiful, Wolf,” she whispered, her gaze lifting to meet mine.

The anticipation in her touch was a tangible, heated thing, and it made me crave her even more. My hard cock jutted against the cloth, begging for her attention. But I wanted to take this slowly, to savor every second, to make sure she felt every bit of pleasure she deserved.

My hands trembled as I hooked my thumbs into the waistband of my briefs, the last barrier between Reese and the full view of my form. Desire heated her eyes, and they'd darkened with each piece of clothing I'd removed.

I wasn't done teasing her yet.

With a slow, deliberate motion, I began to lower my briefs, careful to keep my erection hidden from her view. The fabric caught on my hard length, sending a shudder of pleasure through me before it finally sprang free. I turned, letting the briefs fall to the ground, presenting my back to her as I stepped out of them.

She leaned forward, her breath a hot whisper on my skin as she explored the contours of my back. Her hands glided to the curve of my ass, and anticipation thrilled through me. She followed the line of my spine, her nails lightly scratching my skin. I arched into her touch.

“Wolf,” she said, her voice filled with awe and longing. “You are incredible. So strong, so mine.”

A growl of approval rumbled in my chest. I loved hearing her claim me, even in such a small way. It made me want to claim her in return, to make her mine in every way possible.

But there was still more dance left. I stepped away from her, urging her to lie back on the bed. She looked up at me, confusion flickering in her eyes before it was replaced by curiosity. “What are you up to, Wolf?” A playful smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

I stepped back, giving myself room to move. “Enjoy the show, tiny one.” My voice dropped to a low, sultry tone.

I began to dance.

At first, my steps were slow. I couldn’t remember the last time I stood on a dance floor. There, I was more apt to slink to the side, to watch. But my mother had insisted I learn how to move, stating I might one day want to sweep my wife across a gleaming floor. Now I was grateful I’d paid attention, though I doubt my mother had

ever thought I'd dance like this.

I let my inner rhythm take control, swaying my hips, rolling my shoulders. Reese's eyes followed my every move. I turned, giving her a view of my profile, my cock jutting out as I thrust my hips back and forth in a rhythm older than time. Her hot, hungry gaze spurred me on.

I maintained a slow, sensual sway, watching as she watched me. There was something incredibly arousing about doing this for her, letting her see all I could offer while performing only for her.

As my dance continued, I became bolder, more explicit. I wrapped my hand around my cock, stroking myself as I rocked my hips forward, into my tight grip. I was putting on a show for my love, but this was truly a celebration of the desire burning between us, one that was both powerful and primal.

Reese's eyes widened, and her lips parted. When she ran her tongue across her upper lip, I nearly came on the spot. My dance was arousing her as much as me, and I loved that. She clutched at the bed sheets, her gaze never leaving my body.

I danced for her, moving with a grace and sensuality that countered my long existence, pouring every ounce of feeling I had into it.

With a final flourish, I came to a stop in front of her, my cock thrusting out with need.

Her eyes shining with heat, she gazed up at me. "Wolf." Her voice shook with emotion. "That was amazing."

I cupped her cheek, gliding my thumb across her smooth skin. "Not as amazing as you. You're the one who's captured me, Reese. I am yours, completely and

irrevocably. No one will ever come between us.”

I kissed her, putting all my heart into my touch, hoping she could feel what I did, that she'd want me as much as I did her.

As she kissed me back, she wrapped her arms around my neck. She tugged me down onto the bed on top of her.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 17

Reese

His dance had stunned me. Amazed me.

And aroused me in a way nothing else ever had.

Wolf climbed over me, his arms braced by my shoulders, his legs spreading around mine. Everything inside me thrilled at his weight, at the way he gently cupped my cheek. His fingers wove into my hair, and he captured my mouth with a heady groan. Our kiss lit us both aflame, and I couldn't keep my hands off him. I stroked his shoulders and chest and slid my hands around to his back, clinging as his mouth invaded mine. His tongue drove my need to a fever pitch.

His lips trailed a path of kisses down my neck, his breath hot on my skin. I shivered, aching with anticipation. He looked at me, his dark eyes full of emotion.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his voice husky.

I nodded, following it up with words I hoped would share the feelings blooming inside me. “I've been sure since you spun me around in the parking lot.”

He laughed, his hands tracing the curve of my waist, making excitement shiver through me. “You have a peculiar way of showing it, love.”

I poked his chest, though not hard. “Hey, I thought I was being obvious.”

He captured my hand, pressing a kiss to my palm. “I needed to hear you say it.”

His hands moved to the button of my jeans, undoing it with a swift flick. I lifted my hips, helping him slide them down, his fingers tracing the length of my legs in the process. Pleasure coursed through me. I kicked my jeans off, leaving me wearing nothing but my silky black underwear.

Wolf's gaze traveled over me; his eyes filled with hunger. “You're beautiful, Reese.”

Flames licked across my cheeks, but I met his gaze boldly. “I believe I'm still overdressed.”

“All in due time.” He leaned down, capturing my lips in another searing kiss, his body pressing into mine. Nothing could compare to the feel of his bare skin on my belly and chest.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him closer, and his hardness pressed against me. He groaned into my mouth, his hands exploring my belly, gliding the waistband of my underwear. I arched into his touch, urging him on.

He ended the kiss, his lips trailing down my neck again, his hand sliding up to cup my breast through my bra. I gasped as he teased my nipples, each roll of his fingertips making pleasure jolt to my core.

“Wolf,” I said, my voice husky and deep. “Please.”

He looked up, his eyes burning with need. “Please what?” His tease gave way to a growl.

I bit my lip. “Please help me remove the rest of my clothing.”

A few flicks of his fingers at my back, and my bra went flying. He groaned as he stared at my breasts, his eyes darkening with a fire that matched my own. He dipped his head down, and I held my breath. The first touch of his lips on my nipple sent shockwaves through me. His mouth was warm, his tongue teasing as he sucked, making heat ripple across my bones.

“Oh, Wolf,” I breathed, my fingers tangling in his hair, urging him on. He cupped my other breast, his thumb flicking over the nipple in rhythm with the pulls of his mouth. I squirmed beneath him, aching for more, my body alight with desperation.

He switched his attention to my other nipple, giving it the same exquisite torture, his mouth and hand working in unison to drive me out of my mind. My breath came in short gasps, my heart pounding as I writhed beneath him, lost in the overwhelming joy of his touch.

“You taste good,” he murmured, his voice a low growl vibrating against my skin. “I could feast on you forever.”

His words sent a thrill through me, and I arched my back, offering myself to him shamelessly. “Yes, Wolf, please.”

He slid his fingertips along my side, hooking the waistband of my underwear. He slowly slid them down, exposing me to his view. I lifted my hips, helping him remove the last barrier between us.

He left my breasts with a final, lingering kiss, his lips trailing a path down my quivering belly. I quivered as he pressed soft kisses on the sensitive skin of my inner thighs, his stubble grazing, adding a delicious friction to the mix.

He knelt between my thighs, his gaze locked on mine as he kissed up one thigh and then the other, each touch of his lips bringing him closer to where I needed him the

most. I spread my legs wide, begging for his touch in the place that throbbed.

“Yes, Wolf.” My voice came out so husky, I could barely recognize it. “I need you.”

His eyes glinted with fire. “I’m going to taste you. I want to feel you come undone on my tongue.”

Before I could say a thing, he hitched my legs over his shoulders, gripping my hips as he positioned his head between my thighs. The first touch of his mouth on my flesh made me cry out. The sensation was almost too much to bear.

He licked and teased, his tongue exploring every inch of me before he focused on the tight bundle of nerves at my core. He slid his hand up to my nipples, and each flick and pinch made pleasure jolt through me. I was lost in a sea of sensation, desperate for the release only this man could give me.

He alternated between long, languid licks and firm, focused strokes on my clit, building a rhythm that sent me hurtling toward ecstasy. Tension coiled deep inside me, my body drawing tight. I was going to shatter into a thousand pieces.

But just as I hovered on the brink, ready to fly down the other side, he slowed his pace, drawing out the exquisite torture. I clenched the sheets, arching my spine off the bed as I chased the elusive peak.

“I’m so close . . .”

He looked up at me, his eyes burning with need. “I’ve got you.” His low, rumbling voice resonated through me. “Let go, love. I’ll catch you.” He returned to his delicious torment, his tongue and fingers working to push me over the side. The world shattered around me, and I convulsed with wave after wave of bliss, crying out his name.

As the waves subsided, he gently lowered my legs onto the bed, pressing kisses to my thighs as I floated back down. I lay there, boneless and sated, my heart pounding as I struggled to catch my breath.

He rose over me, his eyes locked on mine as he placed the head of his cock at my entrance. I savored the feeling of him, hard and ready, and I bowed my spine, urging him on. He leaned down, capturing my lips in another fierce kiss. One thrust, and he buried himself inside me. He paused, giving me a chance to adjust to his thickness and length.

I gasped, my fingers digging into his shoulders as he filled me, stretching me. He groaned, shaking with restraint as he gave me the time I needed. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper, urging him to move.

With a heady growl, he thrust his hips back and forth, setting a rhythm that made my body heat up to match his. I mirrored his movements, rising to meet his, the slaps of his drives echoing around us.

His lips found mine again, his kiss passionate and deep. With one hand bracing him over me, his other explored me, touching, teasing, driving me wild. My pleasure built, coiling all over again as I neared the beginning of something wonderful.

“Reese,” he said, his voice a low growl. “You feel so good.”

I moaned, my fingers digging into his back, my heels into his hips, urging him to go faster. “Don't stop, Wolf,” I gasped. “Please, don't stop.”

He thrust harder, pushing me higher and higher. I could feel it coming, the fire within me about to explode. He reached between us, his fingers finding my clit, his touch sending me over the other side.

I cried out, groaning as my orgasm ripped through me. He groaned, tensing as he found his own release, his hips pummeling mine as he gave way to his own pleasure and spilled himself inside me.

Finally, his pace slowed, and he came to a stop. He pressed his forehead against mine, meeting my gaze with his own. “You're everything, tiny one. Everything to me.”

We lay with our bodies entwined. He kissed me, his lips soft and gentle, his eyes filled with a warmth that made my heart flutter.

“That was . . .” I kept flashing a silly grin.

“Exquisite,” he said, his smile making heat coil within me all over again.

I nodded, stroking his face. “So, when can we do it again?”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 18

Wolfram

I made love to her again and it was even more wonderful than the first time. I'd fallen for this woman and there would never be another who could fill that emptiness within my soul.

Finally, we fell asleep in each other's arms, and I held her as she spooned against my chest, my chin resting on the top of her head.

I woke sometime before morning to a light sound I couldn't define. Sliding from the bed, I left Reese's room and paused in the hall.

The soft creak of the old Victorian house whispered secrets to me I couldn't quite understand. My vampiric senses remained on high alert because every shadow could be a threat. Minutes stretched on as I listened for the sound that had pulled me from Reese's warm embrace. Had it been a figment of my imagination? A settling of the old timbers that made up this grand home?

Deciding it was nothing, I turned back toward the bedroom, my heart aching to slide into the warm space beside Reese. But a faint rustle, like the softest whisper of fabric against skin, drifted up from the first floor.

My instincts screamed, and my heart released a heavy thud of warning. There was an intruder in the house.

I had to move carefully. Mistifying within the confines of the home could be risky. I needed to remain solid, to rely on the stealth and speed that had kept me alive for centuries.

With preternatural quietness, I descended the staircase, my bare feet making no sound on the carpeted steps. Silvery moonlight filtered through the windows, illuminating the path to the ground floor.

The kitchen was my first destination. The scent of Reese's herbs and spices was strong here, but beneath that, I detected the faintest trace of something else—an unfamiliar cologne, perhaps, or the tang of fear-laced sweat. I scanned the room, my eyes catching the subtle glint of the full knife block on the counter. Everything appeared undisturbed.

Next, I moved to the dining room, the heavy mahogany table a silent sentinel, the chairs neatly pushed in. The chandelier above created shadows on the wooden floor, but there was no movement, no sign of an intruder here.

The living room was much the same, the plush sofas and overstuffed armchairs frozen in time, waiting for the dawn. The fireplace remained cold and empty; its hearth clean other than the torn scraps of Wilber's brochure.

I crept down the hallway, past framed photos and artwork, my senses tuned to the slightest anomaly. The air hung thickly, swallowing all sound. I paused outside Reese's office, finding the door slightly ajar. The room beyond remained shrouded in darkness, the only sound the soft ticking of a clock on the living room mantel.

With a deep breath, I nudged the door open, scanning the room for signs someone had been here. The moonlight here was weaker, the blinds drawn tight, but my night vision was more than sufficient to make out the contours of the room.

Reese's desk appeared as she'd left it, her laptop closed, stacks of papers neatly arranged on either side. Bookshelves lined the wall beyond, filled with volumes that spoke of her love for the written word. Nothing appeared out of place.

Yet the sense of an intruder's presence lingered, a phantom whisper gliding across my skin. My heart galloped in my chest, not for my own safety, but for Reese's. Whoever dared to invade her sanctuary would face me, and I would show them no mercy.

I moved through the room, my senses straining for any hint of the unwelcome guest. I was a predator in the night, silent and deadly. My fangs ached to descend, my hands to form claws that would rend flesh and bone.

But there didn't seem to be anyone here. The office was empty, the house quiet once more. Had the intruder fled, or did they hide in the shadows, watching, waiting?

As I turned to leave the office, a whisper of movement caught my eye. A shadowy figure emerged from the long, dark draperies, their form cloaked in darkness, the details of their face obscured by a hood. I couldn't tell if they were male or female, human or paranormal.

I bolted toward them, my vampiric speed fueled by a surge of fury. But as I closed the distance, my foot struck something lying on the floor. I stumbled, barely catching myself. I barely glanced at the shadowy object that had nearly felled me, an unrecognizable thing in the dim light.

It felt wrong, out of place.

I did not stop. The intruder had rushed from the room, and I would not allow them to escape. I gave chase, my every instinct screaming at me to catch them, to protect Reese from whatever threat they posed.

When I burst into the foyer, it echoed with silence. The figure was gone, vanished as if they'd never been here. The quiet mocked me, a reminder of my failure to apprehend them. I paused, my senses straining for any hint of their presence. The house remained still, the only sound was the clock and slam of my pulse in my ears.

I tested the front door. Locked, just as we had left it.

A yelp pierced the night, the sound coming from the seaward side of the house. My heart lurched up into my throat, and I sprinted down the hallway, my bare feet slapping the hardwood floors. I flung myself into the kitchen, my reflexes bringing everything into sharp focus.

The back door stood wide open, and briny wind rushed in, making the curtains above the sink billow. Why hadn't they triggered my tripwires? I'd look at the cameras later and maybe I'd find an answer.

I ran to the door, my mind racing. When I stepped out onto the small deck, the cool night air lifted goosebumps on my skin. The woods bordering the building on either side loomed, their dense foliage full of shadows, the leaves chattering in the wind.

I scanned the area, my night vision thrusting through the darkness. Then I saw them, descending the stairs cut into the cliff face, their movements frantic. They reached the bottom and glanced up, though the moonlight didn't reveal anything about their hooded identity. Whirling, they raced down the path to the sea.

I mistified, reappearing on the beach.

But though I scanned the area, my senses seeking in all directions, I found no one.

Chapter 19

Reese

I woke to find Wolf gone from the bed and his side cool.

“Wolfie?” I called out in a sultry voice. I wouldn’t mind another round if he was up for it, and I suspected he would be.

He didn’t reply.

Sliding from the bed, I stuffed my feet into my fuzzy slippers and slipped on my robe. I slunk to the bathroom, but didn’t find him there. But then, vampires didn’t pee as far as I knew. This wasn’t something we’d taken time to discuss, but he’d mentioned that his internal organs didn’t function in the same way as a human’s.

I slipped into the hall, but he wasn’t there either.

I remained in place, straining to hear any hint of sound in the quiet house. The fresh scent of the sea drifted through the air on a cool breeze coming from somewhere below. My heart thumped at a furious pace, my mind suddenly spinning with worry. I didn’t call out Wolf’s name again; something told me to stay silent, to move carefully.

With my robe wrapped tighter around me, I padded down the stairs, the wood creaking under my weight. Each step jerked through my senses, and my teeth chattered. I scanned the shadowy corners of the foyer below, struggling to pick up the faintest whispers of my vampire lover.

Sweat coiled down my spine as I made my way to the kitchen where moonlight streamed in through the windows, sending long, eerie shadows across the floor. The back door was closed, the room appearing as I'd left it. I moved on, my fear a living thing inside me, but my determination to find out what was going on stronger. I had to find Wolf, to discover what had pulled him away from our warm bed.

He wasn't in the living room or dining room either.

Everything remained undisturbed in the foyer, the silence pressing in around me. That left only my office on the first floor. With a jagged swallow, I crept toward the open doorway, my pulse a furious thud in my ears.

After stepping into the room, I flicked on the light, the sudden brightness making me squint. Wolf stood naked in the middle of the room, his fangs and claws extended and his body rigid. His gaze was locked on the floor by his feet, his expression unreadable.

Following his gaze, my breath snagged in my throat. A toddler-sized china doll lay askew on the floor, its glassy eyes staring blankly at the floor, a bit of the frilly pink hem of her dress gouging up toward the ceiling. Her porcelain skin was eerily smooth, her pink lips parted as if in mid-speech. An antique, the doll was the kind of thing you'd find in a collector's shop, not the sort of possession I'd ever owned. Since the prior owner cleaned out the place, the doll hadn't been left behind.

"Wolf?" I whispered, my eyes darting between him and the doll. "What's going on?"

He didn't answer right away, his gaze still fixed on the doll. When he finally spoke, his voice came out low and strained. "I heard a noise. When I came to investigate, I found someone inside your house. They got away." He lifted stark eyes my way. "I followed them out the back door, but they got ahead on the stairs. By the time I mistified to where they'd stepped out onto the beach, they were gone."

“Magic again?”

“A witch, since they found a way to escape, they didn’t touch my wires, and there’s nothing on my cameras.”

“And the doll?”

“I tripped over something inside your office while chasing them, and it felt wrong, so I came back after making sure your home was secure to find it lying here on the floor.”

I stepped closer, my gaze on the toy. “It’s just an antique plaything, right?” Though there was something about it that made my skin crawl. “Something a little girl from long ago may have cherished. Or a collector.” I’d never understood the lure. “Where did it come from?”

Wolf shook his head, his eyes dark with concern. “I don’t know.”

I knelt down beside the doll, my hand reaching out to touch its cold, lifeless face. The instant my skin made contact, a shiver ripped up my arm, and I snatched my hand back as if burned.

“This is creepy.” Easing away, I stood and wrapped my arms around my waist. “Really creepy.”

Wolf’s jaw remained set in a hard line. “I agree. We need to find out how it got here.”

“And why it’s here at all.” My mind raced with possibilities, none of them comforting. “Do you think this is connected to everything else?”

“Perhaps.”

Trying to steady my nerves, I sucked in a few deep breaths and shot them back out. “Okay. So, what do we do now?”

“One moment.” He closed his eyes and hummed an odd, rhythmic tune before going silent. His eyes opened again. “I tried to draw Jolene out, but she didn’t respond.”

“Do you think she left the doll?”

“I don’t know.” He moved toward me, his hands reaching out to grip my shoulders. “We’ll get to the bottom of this. I promise. But for now, let’s get some rest. We can deal with it in the morning.”

“We’ll just leave it there?” At least, down here, it couldn’t stare at me . . .

“Let me bag it up and take it to your car. I’ll put it in the trunk.”

“Good idea.” Chills wracked my frame. “I don’t want it inside my house.”

He eased around me and went to the kitchen, returning with a black garbage bag. Stooped down beside it, he laid his palm on the doll’s chest. His eyelids slipped closed, and he remained frozen before he lifted his hand. “Magic. I’d swear it.”

“Good or bad?”

“Anyone who would leave something like this in your office is up to no good, but I don’t sense anything malicious from the doll itself. Just . . .” He frowned. “Maybe in the way it was left here.”

“Should we cut it open and see if there’s something inside?”

His lips curled up in one corner. “Vicious thing, aren’t you?”

“It's a doll, not a living child.”

He eased it onto its back and palpated its cloth covered torso before shaking his head. “I don't feel or sense anything. I'll take it to the historical society tomorrow to see if they can tell me something about it. I've lived a long time, but I never played with dolls.”

My jittery laugh rang out. “No girlfriends with little sisters who might've cuddled dolls like this?”

“I never dated.”

That was a stunning declaration. “Not in thousands and thousands of years, Wolfie?” How I found the will to tease him was beyond me.

“Reese, darling. I'm not that old.”

“To you, no. Everyone else? Way old.” My grin slipped out, but it faded much too fast. All that time, and he'd never been with anyone special? What did that mean for us?

Even he must feel spooked about the doll because he opened the garbage bag and used the side to slip it into the depths, not touching it with his hands again. He secured the top with a thick knot and straightened. “I won't be long.”

I jerked out a nod. “Make sure you wash your hands when you come back inside.”

I woke the next morning to find Wolf sitting in the squishy chair parked in the corner of my bedroom, dressed in his signature dark pants with a white button-up shirt and a red tie, his cape secured loosely around his shoulders. He held a wine glass with rich dark liquid, the blood sparkling like garnet jewels in the early morning light.

Seeing me staring, he drained the glass. With a snap of his fingers, it disappeared. His fangs retracted, and he gave me a sweet smile.

“How long have you been up?” I asked, my voice croaky.

“Not long.”

“Breakfast is over, however,” I quipped.

“Unless you want to offer me dessert.”

I slid the covers back and stretched, savoring how he watched me with heat growing in his eyes. “What do you think, Wolfie? Are you up for some early morning exercise?”

He mistified, appearing in my bed completely naked, his arms wrapping around me.

“Neat trick with your clothing,” I said. “Can you do that for anyone else or only yourself?”

“I could do it for you.”

“No need to peel off my underwear, then.”

“I could rip through them with my fangs if you prefer.”

Oh, yes, I liked that idea. “Keep that thought in mind for later. For now, it’s time you showed me all you have to offer.”

“I thought I did so last night.”

Frowning, I tapped my chin as if I was in deep thought. “I think you might’ve, but I seem to have forgotten. Could you refresh my memory?”

With a growl, he tugged me closer and claimed my mouth in a steamy kiss.

His urgency left me breathless. His hands roamed my body, tracing the curves of my waist before sliding up to cup my breasts. I moaned into the kiss, pressing myself into his palms, the heat of his touch searing all the way to my soul.

His tongue delved into my mouth, exploring, tasting, claiming. I responded with equal excitement, my hands tangling in his thick, dark hair, pulling him closer as if I could somehow meld us into one being. His hardness nudged my thigh, a reminder of what was to come.

He broke the kiss, his lips trailing a fiery path down my neck, nipping and sucking my skin. I bowed my spine, a whimper escaping my lips as he continued driving me out of my mind.

His gaze raked over me, a growl of appreciation rumbling in his chest. “You’re so sweet and tempting. I need you.”

“I’m yours.” I explored the contours of his shoulders, tracing the lines of muscle rippling across his chest. He was all hard planes and angles, his skin smooth. Cool, but not cold. I pressed a kiss right over his heart, where it beat steady and strong.

Our mouths met again in a slow, languid dance. Wolf took his time, exploring my lips as he was determined to memorize my taste. He cupped my face, stroking my cheeks with his thumbs, making me feel cherished. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer, deepening our kiss.

He kissed me until I was writhing beneath him, everything inside me humming with

anticipation. When he finally broke away, he left me breathless, wanting more.

His trailed kisses along my jawline, nipping gently before moving across my neck. He kissed every bit of me as if it was sacred ground, lingering on the pulse throbbing in my neck and at the hollow of my collarbone.

As he reached my belly, he paused, looking up at me with dark, intense eyes, before he kissed me again, his tongue dipping into my navel, making me gasp. Then he glided lower, gently parting my thighs. I let out a shaky breath, opening myself up to him completely.

When he placed his mouth on my clit, I nearly exploded. This wasn't the first time he'd loved me like this, but it still felt new. Maybe it always would. His insistence stoked the fire inside me while denying me release. He explored me with his tongue, his lips, his breath hot on my most sensitive spot.

“Wolf.” I dug my nails into the sheets as waves of heat coasted over me. Whenever I got close, he pulled back, leaving me teetering on the brink.

“Not yet.” His voice came out a low rumble. “I want to savor you. I want to make this last.”

This was exquisite torture, the most intense bliss I'd ever known.

Chapter 20

Wolfram

I left her lying on the bed, shaking with need, her head thrashing on the pillow and her hands fisting the blankets, but only long enough to move to the side of the bed and tug her over to join me. I flipped her over and growled to see her so wet and swollen, her body ready to let go and topple over the edge along with mine.

Because I didn't want her to come yet, not until I'd brought her to the cusp multiple times, I gave her a moment to slide back down while massaging her back, stroking her gorgeous, smooth flesh, rubbing her muscles to relieve tension.

"That feels amazing," she said in a languid voice. "But give me your cock, you dastardly vampire."

"Dastardly?" I huffed with a big grin on my face. This woman pleased me like no other. I would love her for this lifetime and beyond. No matter where she went after, I would follow. And if she was chosen for another life after this one, I'd beg to be reborn so I could find her again and love her like I would right now.

"Fuck me, already," she growled into the blankets, her voice muffled.

"Are you saying you want me to slide my finger inside you?" I teased a tip through her wetness, barely sliding it in, only to drag it down to encircle her clit.

She thrust her hips up and wiggled her ass. "Cock, Wolfie . Put it in me this instant or

I'm going to shove you onto the bed and ride you like a cowboy at a rodeo."

There she was with that nickname again. Payback was going to taste sweet. "Always rushing," I said with a sigh. "Don't you want me to make this last?"

The sight of Reese quivering with anticipation was too much to resist. Slowly, deliberately, I pushed a single finger inside her, her warmth and wetness enveloping me, sending a jolt of raw need straight to my core. My cock throbbed in response, aching to replace my finger, to feel her tight around me. Her moan filled the room, a cry of desire that threatened to unravel my resolve.

She bucked into my hand, seeking more, but I held back, my finger only sliding partway into her before retreating again. I leaned forward and braced her against the bed, holding her still.

Her legs spread wider, an open invitation, and the scent of her arousal filled the air. I could get drunk on that scent alone. It took every ounce of willpower not to plunge inside her right this instant.

With each teasing stroke of my finger, her breath hitched, and her moans grew more frantic. Her body wound tighter, ready to let loose. Her thighs trembled, and she clutched the blankets. She was close to falling, but I denied her the final push, needing to draw this out for as long as I could.

The tension between us crackled in the air. I was playing a dangerous game; the need to bury myself inside her nearly overwhelmed me. But I was determined to savor every second of this moment, to make this last for as long as I could.

Her pleas grew more desperate, her ragged breathing fanning my need. "Wolf, please." She thrust her hips toward me, her body seeking what it craved.

I leaned down, brushing my lips across her ear. "Patience, love." Heated emotion coated my voice. "I want you to feel everything, to remember this night forever."

I continued my sweet torment, my fingers dancing over her sensitive flesh, each touch designed to stoke the fire within her. I adored how responsive she was, how her body sang for me alone.

Her breath came in short, sharp gasps, her chest rising and falling. Her orgasm was building, a tidal wave ready to crash on the shore. But just as she reached the peak, I eased off, denying her the final stroke that would send her over the side.

She whimpered in frustration. "You're driving me crazy."

"Good." I curved my lips into a wicked grin. "I want you to be as desperate for me as I am for you."

The torment in her voice was a mirror to my own. This sweet agony bound us together in a way nothing else ever could.

I leaned in and whispered, "Let me show you how much I adore you." I rained kisses down her upper spine, each one a promise of what was to come. If only I could spend three lifetimes stroking her curves, worshiping the softness of her skin.

I knelt between her legs, my gaze locked on the sight of her, slick and swollen with need and exhaled against her core. She shuddered, a needy moan ripping up her throat.

"Wolf," she cried out, her voice trembling. "Now."

Ignoring her plea, I flicked my tongue over her sensitive bud in a light, fleeting way that made her writhe, craving more. No one else tasted like my mate, and I savored

the sweetness that was uniquely her alone. My own need grew with each desperate cry.

Her orgasm built, the tension in her body binding tighter and tighter. But just as she was about to unravel, I backed off again, leaving her teetering at the peak.

Her frustration growled through the room.

I smiled, my lips brushing her inner thigh. "Soon, love."

I shifted my attention to her hips, placing tender kisses along the gentle swell, my fingers tracing wherever they pleased. I was lost in her, in the way she responded to my touch.

As I explored her with my mouth, she yanked on the blankets, pushing her hips up to rock against me.

My cock was a rigid thing, the tip coated with precum. I'd kill to be plunging hard inside her. But this was about showing her how deeply she was cherished, how completely she was adored.

I continued my barrage, alternating between long, languid licks and soft, sucking kisses, driving her wild. She bucked beneath me, her pleas growing more frantic.

"Please, Wolf. I can't take any more."

I rose over her and placed the head of my cock at her entrance, sinking in only a fraction. "Is this what you want, little one, teasing one, a woman who calls me Wolfie?" My feral grin rose. Oh, how she was paying.

"I promise I won't call you Wolfie more than one hundred times a day. I swear!"

Laughter bubbled in her voice.

With one thrust, I buried my cock inside her.

She welcomed me with a slick embrace, the sensation exquisite, a perfect fusion of our bodies and souls. I paused, allowing her to adjust to my size, intensity tight on my face.

“You feel incredible,” I said, my voice a low growl in my chest. “This is where I belong, deep inside you.”

Reese moaned, her internal muscles fluttering around my cock, urging me to move. But I wanted to savor this, to make every stroke count. I began to withdraw, the drag of her body against mine intoxicating. I was going to come soon, but I’d take her with me.

With slow, deliberate thrusts, I set a steady rhythm. Each plunge brought a new wave of pleasure, a new surge of gasps and moans from my woman. She arched to meet me, her hips rocking back to take me deeper with each thrust.

The sound of our bodies moving together filled the room. I stroked her clit, my fingers matching the pace of my hips, driving her closer to the brink.

“Wolf,” she cried out, her voice utterly beautiful. “Don't stop.”

Her plea was a siren call spurring me on. I could feel the tension building within her, and I wanted to be with her when she let loose.

I increased the speed of my thrusts, making them forceful, insistent. The bed creaked beneath us and sweat slicked our skin.

She began to tremble, releasing sharp pants. She was close, and so was I. Curling over her, I kept moving while brushing her ear with my lips. “Let go, love. Show my cock how much you love what it's doing.”

With a final stroke of my fingers on her clit, Reese tumbled over the edge. Her orgasm hit her, her body convulsing around mine, her cries echoing off the walls. The sensation of her tightening against my cock was too much. I couldn't hold back any longer.

With a guttural roar, I followed, barreling through my release with an intensity that shocked through me. I pulsed inside her, each wave drawing us closer together.

We collapsed onto the bed, our bodies still connected, our heartbeats furious. I wrapped my arms around her and dropped to the side, taking her with me.

Then I held her, never wanting to let go.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 21

Reese

“How do you think the person got inside the house last night?” I asked while we sat at the dining room table, me eating a buttered muffin and sipping coffee, him piercing the side of a blood bag with his fangs and sucking. His throat worked as he swallowed the nourishment down. There was something incredibly sexy about watching him eat in this way. And undeniably cute. I shouldn’t think a vampire sucking blood was cute, but he was with a capital C.

Would he ever want to take a sip from me? The bite might sting, but I had a feeling the pinch would be followed by pure bliss.

“I don’t know how they got in,” he said. “The back door was locked. My traps were in place. But somehow, they got past them without alerting me.”

“You said the back door was open, so they may have come in from that side.”

“No initially. When I came downstairs, I started there, and everything was locked up as it should be. They escaped that way, though they could’ve used any entrance. I need to see someone in town today. She may have some suggestions for how I can keep a witch from getting back inside. I will not let them make you feel threatened.”

But I did. There was no other way around it. I was safe as long as Wolf remained by my side, but we couldn’t go everywhere together. I needed to write, or I wouldn’t make my upcoming deadline. He’d eventually have to return to his job at Monsters,

PI.

Which meant we had to figure out who this was and make them stop.

“This morning, I’ll take the doll to the historical society and see if they can tell me anything about it,” he said. “I’ll stop by my friend’s place after that.”

“Are we overlooking anyone? While I’m sure Flint or Tracy, let alone Wilber, is perfectly capable of trying to scare me, I’ve known them all for years, long before monsters joined our society. I don’t believe they’re witches.” Although, how would I know? It wasn’t like I could tell by their taste, like Wolf could.

“Some monsters have always mingled in human society, those who can either mask their appearance or who look just like you.”

“And you think one of them is after me?”

“We’re going to find out. I also plan to stop at Monsters, PI and speak with Thain about doing a reading on the doll.”

“I can work on a book while you’re gone.”

He lowered the empty blood bag onto the delicate plate he’d used to bring it from the refrigerator. “I’d prefer to have you with me if that’s possible.”

“I haven’t done much marketing lately, and I no longer have an assistant to handle various tasks I tend to put off myself. Someone has to do these things. If I let them drop, I’ll lose readers. Visibility is everything in this business, especially after what happened. And I still need to work on my next release. I’ve slowed some in the past year, but I try to write at least five thousand words Monday through Friday.”

“Can you bring your laptop and do some of this while I’m speaking with them?”

“I can.” I bit back my sigh. It didn’t make sense for me to remain here alone. Someone broke into my house last night despite Wolf’s traps and my locked doors. I’d be foolish to think I was safe here by myself. “I need to get a gun.”

“Not a bad idea. Do you know how to use one?”

“Believe it or not, my mom was quite the marksman at one time. She took me to firing ranges when I was younger, but I haven’t handled a gun in years.”

“We can stop by Shriek that’s why I felt I could stop by after picking up some groceries in town. I set her up with a snack and a full glass of water. She could get those things by herself, but she’s still using a walker and that makes it a challenge. She won’t need me for a little while, though.”

We walked into the living room, sitting, Wolf next to me on a sofa with Charmaine taking one of the high-back chairs across from us.

“What have you been up to since we graduated?” I asked, still unable to believe she was sitting in my home. We hadn’t parted on the best of terms, but she must’ve put her irritation behind her because she’d reached out. It was so good to see her again. She’d been my buddy through college, my friend who did all she could to support me, and I’d done the same.

“Like you, I left this small town and found a job in Orlando at Disney, would you believe. I started by playing the role of Cinderella, costume and all, but worked my way up into a management position. They were gracious enough to give me a leave of absence so I could come home to be with Mom.” Her easy smile rose, though it faded a bit when she glanced Wolf’s way. “You don’t need to tell me what you’ve been up to. Look at you, a bestselling author. I’ve bought all your books, and they’re so well

written. I love how you twist the plots. I can never guess who committed the crime.”

“Thank you.” I lowered my laptop case onto the floor beside the sofa.

“How’s your mom?” she asked.

“Great. I was visiting with her yesterday. My aunt Beverly was there too. She moved back to town several months before I did. She bought the house next to Mom’s.”

“They always were close.”

Charmaine would know. She’d gone with me to Mom’s for dinner many nights while in college. We’d both lived in the dorms, my mother feeling I’d get a better experience living among other students rather than commuting from her house. We’d gotten into the habit of going home on the weekend to do our laundry and raid my mother’s fridge of whatever leftovers she was willing to part with. She always cooked us a big meal and packed up what was left for us to take to our dorms.

“Is your aunt still making a stink?” Charmaine asked.

“I try not to let her get to me.”

Wolf put his arm around my shoulders.

“Did you know my brother’s now an actor?” she said. “I know he’s going to be big one of these days. He lives with my dad and plans to move out when his career takes off. He’s been performing in off-Broadway shows.” She named some I’d actually heard of, though I wasn’t a theatre fan. “He’s amazing on stage. You live in New York City, so you’d know.”

“Not any longer,” I said. “I sold my apartment and moved back home two months

ago.”

“Bummer for him.” Her shoulders curled forward before she straightened them and nodded. “Did you happen to see him while you were living there?”

“No, I didn’t. Charmaine’s older brother used to visit us in college a lot,” I told Wolf. “He was into acting even back then.”

“He was a theatre major like me,” Charmaine told Wolf. “My parents divorced when I was little, and Dad lives in New York City, which is perfect for my brother.”

Good thing the city was enormous; otherwise, I might’ve run into him while I lived there. Although, he must’ve forgotten about me by now.

“I’m glad to hear he’s doing well.” A neutral enough response. Still living with his dad, and he had to be at least thirty-two? But then, the economy was tough right now. And he hadn’t finished his degree, the last I knew, nor done any training, though that wasn’t why I hadn’t been interested. There was no spark between us, and you couldn’t push something like that.

“I should probably go,” Charmaine said, standing. “But it was great connecting with you again. Let’s not let a bunch of years go by without reaching out again. I missed you so much!”

“I’d love to talk again. How long will you be in town?” I rose, and we all walked into the foyer.

“I’m not sure. We can do lunch. I told my brother he should come help her when I leave, but he hasn’t committed to doing that yet.”

“It would be nice to see him again.” Another neutral statement. I opened the front

door, and fresh air and sunshine poured in.

“I’ll tell him.” Charmaine stepped out onto my porch. “I’m sure he’d love to see you.” Her narrowed gaze slid across Wolfram. “Are you a vampire?”

“I am.” He dipped forward in a bow. “Any friend of Reese’s is a friend of mine.”

Her shrill laugh rang out. “Does that mean you won’t come knocking on my window one night asking if I’ll let you in?”

“The days of vampires doing things like that have long since fled,” he said. “Your neck is safe from me.”

“Yeah, okay.” Her frown didn’t fade until she looked my way. “Good seeing you again, Reese. I’m at . . .” She gave me her email, which was her name with a period between the first and last, plus a yahoo dot com. “I imagine you still use the same one, so I’ll reach out.”

“I do. Are you married?” I asked, since she was still using her maiden name for her email. Although, many chose not to change their names any longer.

“I hope I’ll find the right guy one day. I just haven’t yet,” she said with an easy smile. “But my Prince Charming is out there somewhere, and I’m sure he’ll soon stroll into my life, a glass slipper in his hand.”

Cute, since she’d once played Cinderella.

With a wave, she strode down the walkway and got into her car, backing out onto the road and driving toward town.

“I’ll ask around town about Charmaine’s brother—and her,” Wolf said as I shut the

door and went to retrieve my laptop case.

“Because she stepped into my life again?” I asked.

“She said she’s been in town for a while, and you’ve been home for months. Why come see you now and not earlier?”

“Maybe she wasn’t sure I’d want to see her. It was bad back then. She was incredibly angry, and I was hurt that she kept pushing him on me when I told her I wasn’t interested.” I stared forward, lost in thought. “She seems to have gotten over her irritation now, but it’s been years. I doubt he even remembers my name.”

“We’ll see,” was all Wolf said.

I grabbed my laptop and drove into town, parking my SUV in the lot across from Monsters, PI. Inside, we waved to the yeti covering the desk, who must be Blake, back from vacation, and strode down the hall to Thain’s office.

“Hey,” the tall, muscular ogre with golden skin and warm brown eyes said, standing when Wolf poked his head through the partly opened doorway. His attention traveled to me, and he nodded politely. “What can I do for you two?”

We stepped inside and sat, me grinning at the black and white pug mix asleep on a dog bed to one side of the desk. The pet looked up, its tail flopping on the cushion.

Wolfram introduced us before he lifted the garbage bag and placed it on Thain’s desk. “I’d love to get your opinion on this.”

“It’s not a body, is it?” he said with a laugh that quickly faded. Wolf explained about the doll, and Thain grew serious. “I’d be glad to take a look.”

He unknotted the bag and slid the plastic wide enough to expose the doll's gruesome face. I mean, she wasn't truly gruesome. I was sure a child had loved her at one time and kissed that face to show her adoration. But still. We were talking creepy china doll here.

"I assume you'd like me to see if she can tell me anything." Thain's gaze remained on the doll.

Wolf grunted. "If you can."

Thain pressed his palms together and closed his eyes. I didn't understand whatever he whispered. Was he speaking in ogre-ish or a language older than his species?

His eyes opened, but he appeared to be staring at nothing.

Reaching forward, he placed his fingertips on the doll's cheeks.

His guttural groan echoed in the room, echoed by the howl of his pet.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 22

Wolfram

I stiffened.

The dog stopped howling only to slink off its bed and slide beneath Thain's desk.

Thain lifted his hands off the doll and shoved his chair back. "That was an interesting experience." His gaze met mine before gliding to Reese. "This doll was purchased for a little girl long ago. I don't sense that the child ever received the doll. I didn't catch the child's name, but her mother was called . . ." His frown deepened. "Josephine? Joelle?" He shook his head. "Not those, but—"

"Jolene?" Reese asked, glancing at me. "A woman named Jolene used to live in my house, though it was eighty or so years ago. She died there, though we don't know if it was from natural causes or . . ."

"You suspect murder?" Thain asked, his calm voice lifting. "Is all this related to a ghost issue?"

Reese shrugged. "If there's a ghost in the house, she's not making her presence known other than to Wolfram."

I explained how I'd seen her but hadn't spoken with her, that I'd tried to reach out to her since without success.

“Here’s the thing,” Thain said. “This doll,” he poked his finger toward the toy mostly covered by the garbage bag, “was intended for Jolene’s daughter. The doll . . .” A grumble rose in his chest. “I didn’t get more than a few impressions, but I think the doll was left for you on purpose.”

“You’re saying it’s a message from Jolene or whoever’s been stalking me?” Reese asked.

“That, I don’t know. The only impression I got was that whoever left the doll wants you to act in some way to help the child.”

Perhaps it was a coincidence that the intruder was inside Reese’s office on the same night the doll appeared.

“I believe this is a message, and you need to heed it.”

“Could the doll have been left to help give Jolene closure?” Reese bit down hard on her lower lip.

“That’s my assumption from my reading,” he said. “I can’t be sure, but I don’t believe the doll was left by the intruder.”

“If that’s the case,” Reese looked my way, “how will we figure out what Jolene needs? I want to help her.”

“We’ll do more investigating, hoping we find clues that will point us in the right direction.” I tucked the bag back around the doll, secured the knot, and rose, lifting it. “We’ll go to the historical society next and see if they have any information about Jolene and her daughter, plus show them the doll. Thanks, Thain. I know that was hard for you.”

“I don’t mind doing readings but that thing,” his concerned gaze fell on the doll again, “it’s not only creepy, it’s almost haunted itself. Don’t keep it inside your house. I’m not sure what it might do.”

Reese shuddered. “I want to take this one out to the firepit and burn it.”

“I wouldn’t.” Thain stood. “Burning might activate the spirit lingering inside the doll.”

He walked us out to the door and with a wave, left us to return to his office.

“How can we dispose of it?” Reese asked as we left his office, the bag holding the doll in my hand. She was right to suggest I wash my hands last night. “Once we deal with whatever Jolene wants us to do, that is. I don’t want to keep it in my house after that.”

“I’ll ask my witch friend to handle it for you. She’ll send the spirit on, and after the toy is cleansed, it can be donated to someone who might actually want it.” I scratched the back of my neck. “Whoever that might be. Not someone who can sense paranormal activity, that’s for sure.”

We paused on the sidewalk.

“Do you have a witch in mind for the doll?” she asked.

“I do, though you won’t be able to meet her.”

“Why not?”

“Few witches are willing to reveal their identity.”

“You’re saying I might know her but not that she’s a witch.” Reese wrapped her arms around her waist.

“She’s a good person, but it hasn’t been that long since witches were hunted.”

“I don’t blame her then.” She sucked in a breath and released it. “Let’s go to the historical society first and then the hardware store.” She blinked up at me. “I can’t believe we’re casually talking about witches. Monsters are an amazing addition to our everyday lives, but those who can perform magic? I’m not sure what to think about that.”

“They can’t craft spells like in a fantasy novel. They mostly do spells that might influence a person in a slight way, craft charms to keep another away, or even perform incantations to help someone find a lost item.”

“All things we could use.”

I held open the door to the historical society for her. “How so?”

“Maybe we can get a spell to keep whoever’s stalking me away from my home. A charm might bring me good luck, something I’m out of right now. And we need to gather more information about what this creepy doll and Jolene want.”

“Good points.”

We paused in the foyer, standing on the antique carpet, looking up the staircase on the opposite side that disappeared into darkness. The red carpet lining the stairs contrasted with the bright white painted rail and treads. A closed door stood on our right and another down a hallway beside the stairs. Two paintings of stoic-faced men hung on the pale green painted walls, and a small table held an ancient statue the size of my forearm. An urn with closed umbrellas had been placed beside the table. The

sound of shuffling papers came from the open doorway to our left, and a handwritten sign with an arrow pointed in that direction, stating Come on In!

With a shrug and a shy smile, Reese stepped into a large room that must be the main office of the organization.

The building appeared to be over a hundred years old, and I admired the smooth plaster walls and the dark wooden trim with intricate features in the corners. A tin ceiling hung overhead, the white paint accenting the pattern.

Tall shelves packed with books and artifacts had been built into the left and right walls, and a large, polished desk, strewn with papers, occupied the center of the room. An elderly woman wearing a dark blue blouse with a white lace collar sat behind the desk, not looking up when we stopped on an ornate oriental carpet inside the door from the foyer.

Light filtered through gauzy curtains covering tall windows between two long stacks of bookcases on the back wall, casting shadows on framed sepia photographs mounted nearby.

The air smelled of old paper and polished wood. A grandfather clock ticked in the background, and simple chairs had been arranged near small tables piled with books and other antique items, including a wooden coffee grinder and, surprisingly enough, a third century Chinese urn in perfect condition. The overall atmosphere was quiet and studious, appropriate for a place designed for research rather than comfort or decoration.

“May I help you?” the woman asked in a crotchety voice, looking up. I’d place her in her mid to late eighties, if her heavily lined face and gray hair in a bun were anything to go by.

She laid a magnifying glass to the side and rose as we approached the desk. The tag pinned to her blouse said, Margaret, Director .

“I’m Reese Hamilton and this is Wolfram Zegrath,” Reese said, gesturing to me. “I bought the Molson place two months ago, and during my renovations, I found an antique doll.”

An interesting way of telling her how we’d discovered it.

“It’s inside here.” I lifted the garbage bag into view. “We believe it belonged to Jolene Molson’s daughter.”

Reese continued. “We brought it by to see if you or anyone working here might be able to give us information about the era the doll might’ve come from, plus anything you might know about the Molson place or Jolene.”

“I don’t know much about the Molson home or Jolene, for that matter, but a doll, you say?” Margaret asked, her gaze fixed on the bag. “Let me see? I adore antique dolls.”

Someone had to.

I laid the bag on her desk and as she sat again, I parted the top, revealing the doll curled on her side.

“Interesting,” Margaret said, leaning close. She held the magnifying glass above the doll. “A porcelain head, which is quite common, and hand-stitched clothing.” She looked up at us. “It’s common for dolls such as this one to wear hand-stitched clothing, though you’ll find that some current collectors make clothing themselves by hand as well. It helps keep it authentic.” She lifted the doll from the bag and gently turned it, lying it on its back on the black surface. Her head tilting, she scrutinized the doll further, turning it this way and that.

“I’d say early twentieth century,” she said. “Possibly German in origin due to the craftsmanship and materials used. The intricate detailing on the dress suggests it belonged to a child of wealth.”

“That fits with Jolene’s daughter,” Reese told me softly. “The house was well constructed and has many features that weren’t common for that era, such as the intricate moldings and high, coffered ceilings, plus the bay windows with stained glass and marble fireplaces in all the main living areas and bedrooms.”

I’d noted how lovely her house was and was glad she’d restored those features rather than removed them during the renovation process.

“Dolls like this can be worth a significant amount of money if they’re well-preserved, which this one is,” Margaret said. “I doubt a child played with it much or it would show more wear. Do you mind if I undo the back of her dress? Visible markings or stamps might indicate the specific manufacturer, which could potentially increase its historical interest or market value depending on rarity. Are you planning to sell the doll?”

“I want to give her away,” Reese said.

To a witch. Another sly way of putting it. Reese was savvy and this only made me adore her more.

Margaret gently unfastened the back of the dress and eased it away from the torso. Taking her magnifying glass from her desk, she squinted through it. “Ah, Meissen.” She looked up. “They held a prestigious reputation for porcelain production, though they shifted most of their focus to figurines, tableware, and decorative pieces in the early twentieth century. This doll could’ve sat on a shelf in a store for a while before it was purchased, however. I’d say this doll’s worth in the five to twenty thousand dollars range.”

Reese gasped. “That much?”

To think it was lying on the floor in Reese’s office, where anyone could step on it.

“Or more,” Margaret said with a sweet smile. “Rare or uniquely detailed dolls like this one might fetch an even higher price at auction or among collectors who specialize in fine antiques. Would you like a referral? Oh, no, wait. You said you plan to give the doll as a gift.”

To a witch who’d destroy it, if need be, but yes.

“As for the Molson place, you’ll no doubt find most of what interests you about the home in . . .” She paused, peering through the magnifying glass at the exposed doll’s back. “Oh, that’s too bad. This may change things.”

I leaned closer, wondering what she meant.

“See here?” She pointed to a thin line of tiny stitches. “This will decrease the value considerably. Someone appears to have damaged the doll. A fall on a sharp rock perhaps? It created a tear that needed to be repaired. The repair is well done, but I’m afraid that does decrease its value. Collectors can be quite picky and aren’t always interested in something that’s not in pristine condition.”

After refastening the back of the dress, she turned the doll over and stroked its face. “Lovely. I can see why someone would buy this for a precious child.” Her gaze went wistful. “I was raised by a kind enough family after I was found abandoned, wandering through town. My new family didn’t have much, especially after the depression. There was never enough money for a treasured plaything such as this.”

“I’m sorry,” Reese said.

“I’ve always wondered if I had a mother and father who adored me.” Margaret’s sad smile rose. “When they found me, I told them my name was Margaret, but they couldn’t determine where I came from. For some reason, the name Margaret May echoes in my mind. Perhaps May was my last name, though there were no Mays in the area. My new parents gave me their last name. When I was small, I’d make up stories that my parents had lost me and were looking for me, desperate to find me. They’d knock on my new parents’ door and demand she give me to them. They’d take me to their glorious home where they’d treat me like a princess.”

Her soft huff jutted out. “A silly dream that never came true. My family treated me well, but it’s not the same, is it? Oh, I know lives can be better for adopted children, but that wasn’t the case for me.”

What a sad story.

Her wistful smile rose. “There’s nothing to be done about it now, is there? It’s water under the bridge, as my adopted parents used to say. No use longing for such things now. I’m much too old to dream.”

“No one is too old to dream.” Reese strode around the desk and gave Margaret a hug, stepping back after. “Everyone deserves a loving family.”

Fortunately, someone had given Margaret a home and, to some extent, affection, even if it hadn’t been her original parents.

“Now, about that book I was thinking of,” Margaret said. “It was among my adopted mother’s things, and I put them all on one shelf. Honestly, my eyesight isn’t what it used to be, and I’ve barely looked them over. But I vaguely remember there being one that might have some information about your lovely home. Let me see if I can find it for you.” She walked slowly over to the farthest bookcase and ran her fingertip along the spines. “Here you are.” Pulling a book from the shelf, she returned to us

and gave it to Reese. “Normally, we ask guests to study our books here inside the office, but I’m about to close for the day. If you’ll let me make a photocopy of your driver’s license and write down details as to where I can locate you if need be, I’ll allow you to take the book home with you for a night. Please promise to return it in the same condition by the end of the day tomorrow.”

“That would be great,” Reese said, giving Margaret her driver’s license that the elderly lady photocopied using a machine in the small room beyond this one before she handed it back.

“Enjoy,” Margaret said, though her smile faded. “I will point out one detail. You mentioned this doll belonged to Jolene Molson’s daughter?”

Reese nodded.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. Jolene had no children.”

After thanking her, we left, striding toward the parking lot.

“It’s strange that she thinks Jolene had no children,” Reese said as we stopped at her SUV to leave the doll and book in the back. “As the director of the historical society, Margaret must be well versed on the history of the town and those who lived here. I doubt the community was larger back then, and I assume the records were good enough to indicate something like that.”

“People received birth certificates in that era. While they often weren’t born in a hospital, the birth was registered with the town.”

“Maybe the book will give us more information.”

She locked the vehicle, and we walked down Main Street, entering Shriek & Nail, the

local hardware and all-around general store. A bell jangled overhead, and we were greeted with the scent of fresh lumber and herbs. The wooden floors creaked underfoot, adding a rustic charm to the business. A long counter stretched across the right side, where clerks busily rang up customers' purchases. Rows of shelves stretching all the way to the exposed beams overhead held an assortment of tools, and neatly organized bins had been stacked along the back wall.

In another section, I spied stacks of canned goods beside garden seeds in colorful packets. Barrels containing various items, like loose nails you could buy by weight, had been tucked into spots here and there.

"Can I help you?" a teenage yeti asked, coming over to stand beside us.

"I'm looking for a weapon for self-defense," Reese said.

The yeti glanced at me. "You're standing here with a vampire, and you're worried about protection?"

"I can't be around her all the time," I said.

"I get it, dude," he said. "I get it." He waved for us to follow him. "We've got guns and knives and an assortment of other things." Stopping beside a glass-fronted, locked case, he nodded. "Handguns are wonderful, but you need to know how to use them, and you should practice regularly. Since you said self-defense, I'll point out that guns are great, a solid line of defense. But if whoever's after you happens to take the gun from you, then . . ."

"What about a knife?" Reese asked, worrying her lower lip with her teeth.

"Same deal. Perfect for gutting someone." His low chuckle rang out. "I speak figuratively. No need to do something like that." He lifted his clawed hand. "Aim to

disarm and disable them, not kill them, I always say.”

“Can you suggest anything else?” I asked.

“Pepper or bear spray. Both are legal in Massachusetts, though you should know that pepper spray isn’t legal in all states, and they’ll take it from you if you travel over the border to Canada.” He unlocked the case and handed Reese a cylinder on a keychain. “Bear spray contains capsaicin, a natural ingredient found in chili peppers, which makes it effective at deterring aggressive animals without causing lasting harm. Take it from one who knows, it’s effective.”

“You tried it yourself?” I asked.

“Not on purpose, dude. I was checking it out when I was a little kid, and I kind of accidentally shot it straight into my uncle’s face. From personal experience, I can verify that bear spray works on monsters. Yetis, anyway.”

“What about witches?” Reese asked.

“I’d assume so. As for my uncle, it took me forever for him to forgive me.” He removed another cylinder from a pile inside and gave that to Reese. “There are no specific restrictions or permits required for adults to purchase, possess, or use pepper spray for self-defense purposes in our state. But remember that while you can legally carry and use it in your defense, if you use it against someone without cause, you could wind up in jail.”

I wasn’t going to ask him how he knew this detail. Maybe all the clerks were taught information like this about the weapons they sold.

“Pepper spray also contains capsaicin, though in a lower concentration,” he added.

“Which works better?” Reese asked, studying them both.

“Bear spray, for sure. It’s more effective because it not only contains a higher concentration of capsaicin, but it also creates a wider cloud that covers more area faster. It’s perfect for chasing away large animals like bears. In contrast, pepper spray’s narrow stream was designed for human threats at close range.”

Reese sighed. “I’m not sure what I’ll face.” When her gaze sought mine, it hardened.

This woman was not only savvy, but she was also incredibly strong both inside and out.

“So . . . If I have to choose,” she said. “I pick the bear.”

Chapter 23

Reese

We left Shriek & Nail and got into my SUV.

“Where to?” I asked because I didn’t know where the witch lived.

“I sent her a text, and now isn’t the right time. I’ll have to handle it at another time instead of this afternoon.”

“Is there anywhere else we need to go before I return home and catch up on my writing?” Which I hadn’t had the chance to do so far despite bringing my laptop. But I’d been as eager as him to speak with Thain and the director of the historical society. And I felt good now that I had bear spray.

“I think we’re done in town for the day.”

I took us home and went to my office. He followed, sitting on the sofa and flipping through his phone, trying to discover anything he could about our suspects.

I worked through the afternoon, and then we had dinner together, me enjoying homemade chicken alfredo, him another bag of blood.

“Have you ever thought of drinking some of my blood?” I asked after we’d savored our meals—such an odd way of putting it when he’d drunk his from a blood bag.

His hooded gaze shot to my neck. “I’d be lying if I told you no.”

“How badly do you want it?” Curiosity drove me, not an urge to tease. I wanted to know.

“There isn’t anything I wouldn’t give to take a sip of your blood.”

The guttural need in his voice made me want to offer him my wrist right now. Bare my neck to him. Hell, beg him to bite me wherever he pleased. While I knew most of the stories told about vampires were myths, it wouldn’t surprise me to hear that a vampire’s “victim” could feel pleasure from his bite.

“Why not take a sip if you really want it?” Maybe this was a foolish offer on my part, but any twang of fear I felt came from made up stories about vampires, not because I was afraid of Wolf.

“I’d never do such a thing without your complete understanding of what it would mean and your full consent.”

“Will one bite turn me into a made vampire?”

“You’re in a unique situation in that you can be transformed into born like me.”

I leaned forward, really intrigued now. “What would it mean if I became a born vampire?”

“You could bear my children. You’d live longer.”

“Thousands of years like you have?”

“I’m nowhere near the oldest of my kind.”

“I don’t know if I want to live forever.” There couldn’t be anything more torturous than watching everyone you knew die, over and over again. My mom. Even my aunt. “How do you let yourself make friends?”

“You learn to love completely while you can and mourn when they pass. It’s not a step to take lightly, and not for that reason alone.” He gestured to my empty plate. “Food doesn’t taste the same any longer. You’ll get hungry and often, but blood will be the thing you crave the most.”

I didn’t like the taste of my own when I licked a bleeding cut, so I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

“I’m fortunate in that I can go out in the sun,” he said. “But many born vampires can’t. I sleep when I feel the need, but some fall into such a deep sleep during the day that they can’t be woken. Some of the things you’ve heard about vampires are true. It’s not always an easy lifestyle.”

But it would mean I could be with him forever.

If we did this, I suspected it wouldn’t be a human marriage that could be ended fairly easily. Once I’d committed, it would be for life. No, for eternity.

“This is why I haven’t suggested I take a sip of your blood.” He flashed a smile, but his eyes remained serious. “I would never steal or give in just because I crave it more than anything. I’m happy with the way things are right now.”

“But you want more.”

“I don’t only crave your blood. I want you by my side, bearing our children if you think you want them, spending our lives together. I don’t offer that lightly. I’ve never felt this way about anyone, and I never will again.” He held up his hand. “Please

don't feel this means you need to say you want this as well. If you do so, it must come from your whole heart."

So many things to think about. I liked him very much. I was sure I was falling in love with him.

But become a born vampire?

At least I didn't have to decide something like this now.

"Why can I be transformed into a born vampire?" If he thought I'd missed that statement, he was mistaken.

"Because you're my true mate."

Page 24

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 24

Wolfram

I 'd told her she was my true mate, but I could not hold this information back. It would be wrong to keep sliding into her bed and claiming her body without her being fully aware of what else I might one day ask of her.

“What does that mean?” she asked, her expression guarded. “This is . . . a lot.” She snuggled closer, which somewhat reassured me. I wouldn’t be the first vampire to lose his true mate when they couldn’t deal with everything involved with being a born vampire and chose instead to walk away.

Wrapping my arm around her shoulders, I kissed the top of her head. “When a vampire meets their true mate, their heart starts beating.”

“Beating?” She crawled into my lap, facing me, a gesture that sent such a profound feeling of relief through me that my hands shook. She looked up at me, her face open, though with a hint of reserve in her eyes. Leaning her ear against my chest, she listened. “It’s steady and loud ,” she finally said, looking up at me again. “You’re telling me it wasn’t beating until you met me?”

“It was not.”

Her smile bloomed. “Was that why you dropped to your knees?”

I nodded gravely.

“I know you’re not making this up to get into my pants, because you’ve already been there.” She shook her head. “This is stunning. Are true mates something like soul mates?”

“Yes.”

“And it can happen when a vampire meets a human, not just another vampire?”

I dipped my head forward in agreement. “True mates are rare. Born vampires can marry and have children. They don’t need a true mate bond for that. But for a human to be part of a vampire child’s creation, they must be a vampire’s true mate.” I took her hand and pressed her palm against my chest. “That’s you for me, Reese. Only you.”

“We met such a short time ago.”

I understood why she could have reservations. This was a lot to deal with all at once. “How long does it take for someone to know that another is their perfect match?”

“Not long for some but look at our divorce rate.”

“True mates never part. They don’t want to. They live for each other.”

“It sounds amazing.” Looking up at me, she nibbled on her lower lip. “I’ll think long and hard about this before deciding what I want to do.”

“Take the time you need to decide. A week from now. Ten years from now. On your deathbed, if you choose. I’m here for you for as long as you want me in your life.”

“Forever, Wolf. I’m beginning to think I want forever.”

I placed my fingertip on her lips, sealing them closed. “No rush.”

She nodded and snuggled closer. “We need to find out who’s stalking me and end it so you and I can get to know each other better.”

I wrapped my arms tighter around her. “Soon, mate. Soon.”

Later, we sat together in the living room, her with her laptop open on her thighs, studying her social media pages, me scrolling through the web to see if I could discover something that might lead me to her stalker. I wasn’t having any luck, and frustration snarled through me.

“My readers seem to believe me when I told them I was hacked.” Reese frowned at her computer screen. “As I said, some authors will behave in a horrible way and ruin their career, only to say they were hacked and someone else did it. My readers have been incredibly supportive. This is the side benefit of regular interaction with them on social media. It can be a time-suck, but it’s incredibly rewarding. I love my readers. They’re the best.” With a sunny smile, she closed her laptop and set it on the coffee table, tugging the historical society book out from beneath it. “I wonder what I can discover about Jolene.”

I entered yet another forum, this one started by a group of hunters living in the area. I didn’t expect to find anything here other than a bit of random gossip. Solving a mystery like this one took patience and a knack for finding the equivalent of one puzzle piece after another and slowly putting them into place until I’d completed the full image.

“This is . . .” Reese looked up at me. “I can’t believe Margeret didn’t tell me what the book was. I thought maybe it contained information about the community back when Jolene was alive, but it’s . . .” She gusted out a breath. “This is her diary.”

“What?” That caught my attention. Tired of reading about the number of turkeys one of the hunters recommended to last a family through a winter, plus another’s comment about how many points the buck he’d shot had, I closed my phone and set it on the table by her laptop. “She said she hadn’t looked through the books that came from her adopted mother’s estate.”

“She may have only glanced at it long enough to see it belonged to Jolene. Her eyesight isn’t good. It must take forever to go through donated books.” She flipped quickly through the small book. “It doesn’t look like Jolene kept it for long, however. About a year or so, I’d say.”

“Perhaps because she died. What does it say?” I asked.

Rising, Reese turned on another light and sunk down beside me again. “The writing is tiny and in cursive, and it looks like the book got wet at one time, because some of the ink is smeared and unreadable. But I’ll see what I can make out.” She started reading. “I love him, but no one must ever know.” Reese lifted her head. “A husband?”

“She wasn’t married, was she?”

“Not from what I heard. Thain said the doll belonged to her daughter. A woman doesn’t need to be married to have a child, however.” She returned to the book, squinting as she read, slowly gliding her fingertip down the page. “We meet each night and walk along the beach. Oh, how I wish we could be together.” Reese’s grumbling huff rang out. “I can’t make out this part.” She turned the page. Another. “He says if I’m patient, we will finally be together. My love. What joy he brings me. If only . . . But no. I must not give up hope. His treasured promises and sweet kisses keep me going.”

I shifted on the sofa to watch her face as she read.

“Aw,” Reese said. “She was in love. I hope he was a good guy like you.”

My smile curled up on one side. “Many would not agree with you on that.”

“Because they don’t know the real you like I do.” She rose up onto her knees and held my shoulder with one hand, the book with the other, and gave me a quick kiss on the nose before retaking her seat. “His mother has forbidden him from seeing me. We don’t know how she found out. Did she have him followed? She says, I’m sad. My love. The only one I’ll ever adore. What will I do now that I can no longer see him? My heart is breaking.”

“Families could be strict back then. But she owned this home. The doll was expensive. She must’ve had some means. Unless there was a scandal, most mothers would’ve seen her as a fine catch for her son.”

“You’re right. I wonder if it was something like that.” With a sigh, she studied the book again. “It looks like months have passed.” Her voice echoed in the quiet room. “I encountered his mother this morning while at the general store, and she slighted me. I’m not surprised, though I’ll admit I was hurt. In this country, we are all equal, or so my mother told me on many occasions. But my poor, sweet, departed mother’s past is a subject of gossip, and his mother is quite strict about propriety.” She looked up. “There it is. Her mother made Jolene a pariah in the community for some reason.” She returned to the diary. “His mother had the nerve to tell me to behave and know my place. I know my place and it’s with him!”

Reese flipped through page after page that she couldn’t make out, finally arriving at a date months after the last entry. “He still comes to my house to see me. We sit on the back porch overlooking the sea. We hide , and oh, the shame of it. We deserve much more, but it seems there’s no way through this for us, and that breaks my heart. He tells me it doesn’t matter, that he’ll love me forever, and I believe him. No one is as devoted as him.”

“I hope he didn’t hurt her,” I said.

“Yeah.” She squinted in the light, sharing more. “Now that my father has departed to a better place, and I’ve inherited the house, I have some standing in this community. He tells me to remain patient, that we’ll soon be together forever, but I worry all the time. What if she finds a way to keep us apart? And now the situation has changed, and we must act soon, or everyone will know.” Reese looked up at me. “I think she’s . . .” Leaning forward, she studied the swirling letters on the page. “We’ll have to decide if we’re going to run away soon, or it will come out. My poor child will be born and me an unwed woman. I’ll never live down the scandal.”

“She’s pregnant,” I said.

“Well, he kept visiting her, and they loved each other very much. There wasn’t much protection back then.” She skimmed some more. “She’s putting up food, canning and buying dried meat and grains. Beans. Preparing to hide inside her house for many months to keep anyone from finding out, all because she doesn’t want to bring shame to him or his family. Those who shun her! I feel bad for Jolene. It’s funny how, even now, the woman is shamed for having sex but it’s okay for the man.” A few moments later, her breath caught. “Listen to this.” Her voice lightened. “He came to me last night, and we traveled three towns away and secretly married. Let his mother stew on that! Aw, this is good news.” Reese’s frown bloomed. “Oh, maybe not good news, because she died on the property, and no one seems to know she was married, let alone that they had a daughter.”

“What else does her diary say?”

“That he went to his mother and told her they’d married. That his mother was angry. She made threats to both him and Jolene. Such a nasty creature. They decided to run away, to leave town and disappear forever, to seek a place where no one would ever find them. Once they had a safe place to live, she’d have a solicitor sell this house

and send her the money. Then she could be with her love, and they'd share a new life together."

"That didn't happen."

"Sadly, no. Oh, here it says that she packed everything she could inside her Ford, including the china doll she bought for a possible daughter. She saw it in the general store and couldn't resist, though her husband enjoyed teasing her that they would have a son. After that, she would have her daughter as well." Reese looked up again. "He seems sweet. I'm glad he wasn't taking advantage of her."

"Me too." All too common during any era. "If she owned a vehicle, she had wealth. I wonder what happened with her mother to bring shame to their family and keep her and her love apart?"

"We may never know, though we could ask Margaret." Reese read some more. "Oh, no." She lowered the diary onto her lap and looked up at me with tears in her eyes. "He died. He was on his way to her the night they planned to leave, but it was stormy, and he slipped, falling off the cliff. When he didn't arrive, she went looking for him and found him dead at the base, his neck broken."

Poor Jolene. I peered around the room, but didn't find her ghost nearby, listening. Are you here, my friend? I sent the words out with my mind, but I received no reply. We want to help you. Tell us what you need us to do.

"Jolene brought everything they'd packed back inside her house and decided to remain there until their child was born. After that, she'd sell her home and move, telling those in her new community that she was a widow. She didn't trust his mother not to do something bad, though she wasn't worried his mother would physically harm her. She thought of going to his mother, of telling her that they'd married and had a child on the way, but she worried his mother would try to take the baby away,

that no judge would give her custody of her own child due to her mother's scandal."

"This was common back then. Women were supposed to go from one man's protection to the next. She was fortunate that she didn't have any relatives eager to take her inheritance from her, because no court would've awarded her the house and any money if it was challenged."

"At least that's changed for women. It took forty years or so after Jolene died to bring it about, but women have rights now." She flipped through the pages some more, but it wasn't until nearly the end of the book that she could make anything out. "She hints here that her mother needed money to survive, that she slept with men to get by. That her father didn't care because he loved her."

"Sad that this is shamed, as if women do this themselves without anyone else's involvement."

"Jolene gave birth alone, here inside the house, to a daughter." Reese's gaze met mine. "A child no one knew about. I wonder what happened after that? There are no more entries in her diary."

"I believe Jolene and her child need peace, and we are going to help them find it."

Chapter 25

Reese

Three days passed, and we still didn't have any more information that would solve this mystery. But whoever it was hadn't made an appearance or done anything that might help reveal their identity. We'd returned Jolene's diary to the historical society, but Margaret hadn't been able to give us more information. As we'd assumed, she hadn't read the book, and she said she probably wouldn't have the time.

There were no records in town of Jolene marrying, let alone giving birth to a daughter and keeping her hidden inside the home.

"Maybe whoever was after me has given up?" I said as we sat at the breakfast table together, him with a bag of blood and me with a bagel slathered with cream cheese and a cup of coffee.

"Perhaps."

"If so, we can put this behind us and focus on helping Jolene, among other things." Like us. Each night, we slept together and made love. During the day, we took long walks on the beach or went into town for ice cream. At the end of the day, we sat and read books or talked about anything and everything.

With no new information, we didn't know what to do about the doll that remained in my vehicle's trunk.

I was falling more and more in love with Wolf all the time. I wasn't sure if I was ready to tell him I wanted immortality, but I was close. He meant the world to me, and the thought of a life without him gutted me.

“There's nothing I'd enjoy more than—”

Someone knocked on the door.

“Did you order pizza?” I quipped, rising from the sofa where I'd been lounging beside him.

“Maybe it's a fan seeking an autograph,” Wolf said as he walked with me out into the foyer.

“Cool. Or it could be my stalker, stopping by to chat about what they can do next.” My laughter faded. “Actually, that wouldn't be funny because they probably would've done new things already. I hope this is over.”

For whatever reason, as I reached for the doorknob, my heart fluttered with unease.

Wolf threw me a glance, his eyebrows raised. “Let's hope it's pizza, then.”

I opened the door, only for my pulse to surge when I found Detective Carter standing on the porch, a stern look on his face. The unease emanating from him washed over me like a cold wave, dousing my cheer in one swoop.

“Detective Carter?” My voice came out small. “What brings you here?”

“Reese.” He gestured toward the foyer. “I need to discuss something with you. May I come in?”

My stomach lurched as fear tumbled through me. “Do you have any information about my stalker?”

He exhaled slowly, shaking his head. “Not today. This is something else.”

Before I could process his response, a growl rumbled in Wolf's chest. “What is this about?” The protective edge in his voice wrapped around me like a shield.

“Wolf. It’s fine,” I said, but the worry coming from him transferred to me, bringing on my anxiety.

“May I come inside?” Detective Carter asked again, his tone stiff.

“Sure. Please.” I stepped back, gesturing for him to enter. The last thing I wanted was to feel cornered, but I had to know what this was about.

As he stepped in, Wolf moved in front of me and kept a careful eye on the detective.

“Come into the living room,” I said, my voice higher pitched than I liked.

He followed us inside the room.

“Sit down, both of you.” The detective waved to chairs, and my heart started slamming into my rib cage. Something was wrong.

Wolf guided me to the couch and sat, perching me on his lap. I felt safe in his arms, but everyone knew safety was a relative thing, a bubble that could pop at any moment.

“What’s this about?” I asked, trying to remain calm.

“Reese, where were you last night at approximately eight fifteen p.m.?” Detective Carter's steady gaze pinned me in place.

“I was with Wolf. We were here, together.”

He nodded, jotting something down on his phone. “Were you ever apart?”

Wolf replied before I had a chance to speak. “I left briefly to collect some belongings, and I believe it was at about that time. But I was with her prior to that and for the rest of the night.”

Detective Carter studied us both, his finger pausing above his phone. “I see.”

I leaned forward. “Wait, why does this matter?”

His eyes darkened. “Would you allow me to search your house for one specific item?”

“What?” I barked. Panic swelled inside me, compressing my throat. “What item?”

“Are you granting permission?” he asked. “May I proceed?”

I swallowed hard, glancing up at Wolf, whose expression had stiffened. “What do you think?” I said only for him.

“Trust your instincts. If you feel uncomfortable, say no.”

“You're welcome to have a lawyer present, if you'd like,” the detective said.

“Why would I need a lawyer?” I asked. “I haven't done anything wrong.”

“This may only be a formality.” But from the sharp look in his eyes, he meant business. Cop business.

Drawing a deep breath, I nodded. “Go ahead, Detective.”

“Thank you.” He stood, and we did as well.

The detective rummaged through the living room, checking corners and under furniture, moving fast but with careful precision.

“What are you looking for?” I asked, wishing I could snap the tension in the air.

“I’ll know if I see it.”

Anxiety knotted in my stomach as he looked under each piece of furniture and opened all the side table drawers and even the game closet, riffling through my things as if I was a common thief. I followed him, hovering nearby, unable to shake the sense that something wasn't right. Wolf kept close, his hand gripping mine, squeezing it in reassurance I couldn't grab onto.

“I’d like to look in the kitchen next,” Detective Carter said, and we trailed behind him down the hall and into the room where he turned on all the lights. He opened the fridge. The light flickered on, illuminating the jars of mustard and pickles. A bottle of ketchup. Leftovers from my meal last night. I barely resisted an irrational urge to slam the door shut.

“Find anything?” I croaked.

“Just condiments,” he said dryly, moving on to the cabinets, inspecting each one with a careful eye. My heart raced as he shifted aside packaged pasta and canned beans, peering behind them.

Next, he moved on to the dining room where my old wooden table stood, a vase of freshly picked flowers from the garden in the center—a splash of cheer in this grim situation.

Time passed as he searched the room.

Detective Carter finally cleared his throat. “Do you have a first-floor bathroom?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Show me.”

“Sure.” The word felt like lead in my mouth. I didn’t know how I could refuse.

He checked the half-bathroom, even examining under the sink. Each scrape of his shoes on the floor jarred through me. The world felt heavy, like a storm was brewing, and I lay exposed on the beach.

He went through my office, saying nothing, even dropping to his knees to peer under my desk and opening the fireplace damper to squint up the chimney, his penlight flashing. The walls still held the scent of fresh paint, and the familiar sight of my disorganized stacks of papers was anything but comforting. He shifted the piles. I reminded myself that he was just doing his job, but it felt invasive.

He gestured to the bookcase where I proudly kept one copy of each book I'd published. “You must write a lot.”

“I do. You know how it is.” I forced a smile, trying to lighten the mood.

He closed the drawer, nodding thoughtfully. He went to the foyer, us trailing behind him. “May I check the basement next?”

“Yes, of course.” Had I known him better, I’d have joked that I’d cleaned it out, and he’d find nothing but a furnace and the oil tank, plus a couple empty boxes on the wooden shelves. The heavy knot in my throat stifled my humor.

He wasn't gone long and rejoined us on the first level. “Nothing down there.”

I could've told him that.

We took the stairs to the second floor, and he meticulously went through each bedroom, closet, and bathroom. The walls seemed to shrink in as I waited for him to find whatever he was looking for.

“Does this house have an attic?” he asked as we left the last bedroom.

“Yes. Why?”

“Let’s take a look.” His tone came out deliberate, making my spine quiver with fear.

Following him up the narrow staircase to the attic, my heart pounded in my throat. The flickering bulb lit the space above, wavering shadows on the walls.

As we left the stairwell, something caught my eye under the stark light.

A statue about one foot tall, carved from pale gray stone, its features obscured, stood in the center of the empty room.

“What the hell?” I gasped, dread pooling in my stomach. “I didn’t—” Panic surged through me. “That wasn’t here before. I don’t know how it got here.”

“Yes, I'm sure you didn't.” From the detective’s tone, I could tell he didn't believe me.

Wolf's expression shifted from curiosity to concern.

“Hey,” he said softly, his arms wrapping around me from behind. “I believe you.”

Adrenaline shot through my veins. “I didn’t bring this here. I wouldn’t—”

“Reese,” Detective Carter said, his serious eyes glancing back and forth between us. “I have camera evidence showing you stealing this statue from the historical society last evening.”

I was drowning in ice water. “What? No! That’s impossible. I would never steal anything. I was here all last night.”

“You have no alibi for the time in question.” The detective pulled his phone from his back pocket and swiped into it. He held it up, displaying the image of the statue standing on a table inside the historical society’s lobby. “This security feed shows you taking the item shortly before eight thirty.”

The video played, and he was right. I watched as “I” slunk into the historical society foyer from beside the stairs and walked over to the statue, lifting it and slipping it into a cloth bag before peering around. My face showed plainly in the image. I hurried back down the hall toward the rear door.

Panic surged through me, a tsunami crashing over my senses. “No, that can’t be right. That’s not me.” Though it sure looked like me. “I swear, I didn’t do it.” The tremor in my voice betrayed my fear as I caught a glimpse of Wolf, his gaze darkening with a protective fervor that chilled my bones.

Detective Carter placed a heavy hand on my shoulder. “I understand this is unsettling, but you need to listen. I’m going to inform you of your rights now. The evidence is overwhelming.”

“This is unreal.” Confusion and terror roared through me. “I would never take anything. Who would believe . . .?” How did this statue end up in my attic?

“I have to take you down to the station.” The detective held up a set of handcuffs.

“Will you come with me calmly or do I need to cuff you?”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 26

Wolfram

“ I . . . I . . .” Reese burst into tears.

With my fangs thrusting down from my jaw and my claws snapping to full length, I glared at the detective dangling the cuffs in the air. I tightened my arms around her. “You. Will. Wait,” I snarled at him.

His eyes widened as I mistified us to the beach below.

“Wolf?” She spun around and the horror and sadness in her eyes as she looked up at me made me determined to hide her away from this forever. “I didn’t steal that statue. Please believe me. I know the camera footage shows I did it, but it wasn’t me.”

“I know it wasn’t.”

“They’re going to convict me. I’m going to go to jail.”

“You are not .”

“What am I going to do?”

“Want to run away?” I was only half-kidding.

“I’d love to, but that will make me look guilty.” Her gaze flicked to her home perched

high on the cliff. “He’ll put out a warrant for my arrest.”

“He knows I was going to take you away.”

Her head tilted. “He thinks we’re gone forever?”

I shrugged. “I believe he’s giving us a chance to speak in private. But I dictate this, not him. We’ll return you to him if you think it’s in your best interest. One word, and we’ll be in Egypt. London. Paris. Wherever you want to escape to. I’m yours for this lifetime and beyond and nothing will steal that from us.”

She sighed. “I can’t leave. I’d love to. But my mom’s here. My aunt even if she doesn’t actually care. My life. I’m not someone who runs away.”

I held her, desperate to shield her from what was coming. She felt too small and fragile in my embrace, and the thought of losing her sent a jolt of fear through me.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, each droplet squeezing my heart tighter. “What if I can’t prove I didn’t do it?” she whimpered.

The emotions lashing through me fought for release. I wanted to rage at the world that was hurting this woman I loved. I hated that I couldn’t fix this for her. There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do to protect the one person who had come to mean everything to me. I tilted her chin and pressed my lips against hers in a sweet kiss that ignited a fire between us.

With our mouths moving together, I poured all my fear and love into our connection. Her tears mingled with the kiss, but the warmth of our bodies wrapped around us, blocking out the world. I lost myself in her taste, the honeyed sweetness of her lips almost driving me mad, each touch a reminder of what was truly at stake here.

When we finally broke apart, breathless, her wide eyes shimmered.

I cradled her face with my hands, my thumbs brushing away the last of her tears. “You are everything to me. You’re brave and strong. I admire you more than you can imagine. You won’t face this alone. We’ll fight this together.”

“I . . . I don’t know how,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

“The strength in your heart is more than enough. We’ll take on this threat and defeat it.” My resolve surged as I pressed my forehead against hers. “We’re a team. I won’t let them tear us apart.”

“Okay.” Easing away, she sucked in a breath and shot it back out. “I can do this. Together, right?” Her uncertain gaze sought mine.

“Forever, Reese. Forever.”

“Forever.”

Her vulnerability stirred something deep within me, a need to protect her at all costs.

“I’m ready to go back,” she said.

With a nod, I took her hand and mistified us back to the attic to find the detective standing in the middle of the room, a cloth bag in his hand.

“Are you ready to proceed?” he asked Reese, his expression unreadable.

“Without the cuffs,” I said, my voice low and steady.

He studied us both before grunting. “I have to follow protocol. But if she agrees to

come quietly—”

She straightened her shoulders and looked him in the eye. “I’ll come with you, Detective. Let’s do this.”

“There’s paperwork to fill out,” he said, taking her arm and guiding her toward the stairs. “But it will be relatively straightforward.”

“Thank you.” I could practically feel her resolve harden.

“No questions or comments until our lawyer arrives,” I said as I followed them down the stairs, all the way to the foyer.

“Somehow, I knew you'd say that,” Detective Carter said.

We left the warmth of her home, stepping into the cool air, and my heart ached to see Reese so worried. The video evidence, plus him finding the statue in her attic, was much too incriminating, and I assumed all connected to her stalker who’d just upped the game.

No more games. They'd come for my mate.

I would destroy them.

Outside, he opened the back door of his vehicle and urged her inside. I climbed in with her. There was no way I'd follow, leaving her to face even this part of the process alone.

As he drove the vehicle toward town, I sent my shark shifter friend a message.

“Tell her not to say anything until I get there,” Brandon replied immediately. “I’ll do

my best to meet you there when you arrive.”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 27

Reese

As the detective pulled the vehicle into the lot in front of the station, my stomach twisted itself into a knot so tight I could barely breathe. The detective got out and opened the rear door, gesturing for me to go inside with him.

Wolf remained with me the entire time, his presence a comforting shadow that I needed more than anything right now. He kept his hand on the small of my back as if he could shield me from everything about to happen. I wasn't ready for this. I'd never been arrested before, never even gotten so much as a speeding ticket.

This was a nightmare; one I couldn't wake up from.

Inside, the warm air hit me like a slap, the entry sterile and silent except for the occasional clink or murmured conversation from some distance away. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting a harsh glare over the gray walls and speckled linoleum floors.

Detective Carter led us to the front desk. "I need to process Ms. Hamilton."

The woman at the desk had thin, pursed lips that spoke of long nights on the job and no interest in making this process any easier on me. She glanced from me to Wolfram, then back to the detective, before she tapped the keys on her computer, not saying a word.

My stomach dropped further, if that was possible.

“Alright,” she finally said, sliding a clipboard across the counter. “Put your details here. Name. Address. Date of birth.”

With shaking hands, I grabbed the pen and filled out my information. It felt surreal. I shouldn’t be here. This was happening to someone else.

Except it wasn't.

Once I'd finished, Detective Carter looked it over and handed it to the clerk. “Take her out back. I’ll join her shortly.”

The woman rose from her chair, motioning to a door to our left. “Through there, Ms. Hamilton. I'll meet you on the other side.”

Wolf remained with me; his eyes boring into the clerk with a look of cool indifference. Anger thrived in his eyes.

“I’m staying with her.” His growl came out low enough that only I could hear the rage simmering beneath it.

She eyed him warily but led us down a narrow corridor, our footsteps echoing off the walls until we came to a stop in front of a closed door.

“Not without me,” someone said in a sharp voice behind us. A tall, muscular man with tousled blond hair and deep green eyes joined us. “I’m Brandon Sharvish. I represent Ms. Hamilton.”

The clerk sighed and urged us into the room.

We sat inside on hard wooden chairs with only a pitted wooden table between us and an empty chair. The clerk left.

“Thank you for getting here so quickly,” Wolf told Brandon sitting on my opposite side.

“Always glad to help.”

“Don’t answer without clearing it with me first,” Brandon said. “I’ll guide you through this. Be as honest as possible but speak with me before revealing anything that might incriminate you.”

“Yup,” I said.

A short time later, Detective Carter joined us.

We sat in the cold, sterile booking room, and my pulse echoed in my ears. My heart hammered, and no matter how deeply I tried to breathe, I couldn’t get enough air.

Wolf squeezed my hand. He sat on my right, his presence reminding me that he and Brandon were here to help me.

Before Detective Carter could speak, Brandon leaned forward, his forearms landing on the table. He shot the detective one of those evaluating looks that seemed to imply he already knew far more than he let on. “I’ll assume you’ve got something concrete since you brought us in here.”

“Of course,” Carter deadpanned. He placed his phone on the table and tapped at it a few times. “Let’s start simple. Reese, where were you last night at about eight fifteen?”

After receiving Brandon's nod, I swallowed hard. "I was home. With Wolf." My fingers knitted together in my lap, and I gripped my hands tight to stop their trembling.

His eyes flicked to Wolf. "Is that true? Were you with Reese last night?"

"Yes." Wolf's voice came out harder than stone. "As I said, I did step out briefly."

"Define briefly."

Wolf exhaled; his brow furrowed. "I was gone for ten, maybe fifteen minutes. I went to get some personal belongings from my house and returned immediately."

Carter's jaw tightened. "Fifteen minutes. That's not much time. Did you drive?"

"I . . ." Wolf shot me a sharp look tinged with humor. "I mistified . I'm a vampire."

"I heard that somewhere." I had to hand it to the detective, he didn't even flinch.

"I can move myself with a blink of an eye," Wolf said. "Which means I mistified to my home, grabbed clothing, and returned in the same manner."

"Did Reese leave the house while you were gone?" he asked.

"Speculation," Brandon interjected before Wolf could answer. "Reese and I will answer all necessary questions. You're on the clock, Detective. Let's not waste our time with hypotheticals. Get to the point."

Carter ignored the jab, fixing his eyes on me again. I didn't see anything malicious there, just a sharpness that told me he was trying to size up my answer before I even gave it. "Reese, can you vouch that you didn't leave the house during that time? No

walks to the garden, checking something inside the garage, or anything like that?”

“No,” I said, sucking back the panic rising in my throat. “I didn’t leave. I was inside the house the entire time Wolfram was gone.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.” The word came out harsher than I intended, but damn it, I was telling the truth.

Detective Carter adjusted his chair and flipped the phone around to face us, tapping to start the video. The footage played again, showing someone who looked an awful lot like me slipping through the back entrance of the historical society, night sky showing through the windows in the main area on the left. The figure moved with purpose, checking around like they were making sure the coast was clear before snatching the small statue from the display and tucking it into a cloth bag.

The timestamp in the corner read 8:22 p.m.

I sat frozen, my breath stuck in my throat. It couldn’t be me. But that woman had my hair, my build, even my damn mannerisms. How?

Detective Carter didn’t take his eyes off me. “Is this you?”

Brandon sat stiffly beside me, but I could feel his presence like a wall at my side. He gave the barest of nods, urging me on.

“No.” My voice came out steady but strained. “That can’t be me. It’s not me.”

“Take a good look.” Carter flipped his fingers toward the phone. I didn’t need to. I’d already seen enough. “You’re telling me that this woman, who has your face, your

hair, your exact height, isn't you?"

"It isn't me," I said, louder this time, straightening my spine to mirror my words.

Brandon's hand landed lightly on the table. "My client stated she didn't leave her house, Detective. I think we're repeating ourselves."

"Even with the timestamps?" Carter leaned back in his chair, his arms crossing on his chest. "It's a lot for a judge to swallow, don't you think? But we'll leave that for later." He cleared his throat and turned his phone back to face in his direction, focusing on the screen again. "Another question, Reese. Are you capable of mistifying?"

"Are you serious?" My voice pinched higher. "I'm human. Completely human."

"Are you absolutely sure?" He raised an eyebrow, his expression frigid.

"Do I need to stake myself to prove I'm not a vampire?" My frustration bubbled up, my hands balling into fists on the table. "I can't mistify. I can't fly. I can't disappear into thin air. I come in through doors like a normal person would."

Detective Carter tapped his phone. "Like this one did."

"If I may," Wolf asked, laying his phone on the table. He rose only to ease around me and speak with Brandon in a voice so low, even I couldn't overhear. Brandon released a slick smile and grunted. Wolf retook his seat. "Allow me to show the camera footage on Reese's home during the time in question last night."

"Alright," Detective Carter said. Did I hear a touch of sympathy in his voice? He must think he'd caught me and all that was needed was to charge me with the crime. Yet I sensed he would welcome a way to prove this couldn't be me.

Wolf played a series of videos, the grainy images spooling across the screen. In each, taken of my home from all angles, no one left the building.

And best of all, they all held timestamps between 8:15 and 8:31 p.m. At 8:20, one image showed me standing at the window, peering out at the driveway.

“See?” I gasped out, vindicated at last. “It couldn’t be me.”

Chapter 28

Wolfram

Detective Carter nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving my phone. He reached up, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’ll need to verify this footage, of course. Make sure your cameras haven’t been tampered with.”

“I’ll give you access to the devices and original files whenever you wish.” I kept my voice calm. I itched to track down the person who’d tried to frame Reese. “You’ll find that everything’s authentic.”

Carter tapped the table with a nail, obviously weighing his thoughts. His gaze shifted back to Reese, her face a mask of panic barely kept in check. “This definitely changes things, but I’ve got to ask you, Reese, who else could it be? Who do you think would want to impersonate you like this?”

Before Reese could respond, Brandon leaned in, his voice as smooth as a blade. “Detective, my client won’t engage in guessing games.”

Carter side-eyed Brandon but didn’t argue. At this point, he had enough sense not to overstep, but he was stuck, looking for direction, wanting an answer.

Reese straightened in her seat. “I don’t have a twin. Not even a sister. I’m an only child, and my mom and aunt are the only living relatives I have left.”

Carter nodded; his lips tight as he tapped the information into his phone. “Do either

of them resemble you?”

Reese barked a weak laugh. “There's some vague resemblance, of course. We're related. But they're older and both have lighter hair. I got my deep brown from my father.” The room fell silent before Reese spoke again. “Whoever did this could be wearing a disguise. I've heard of glamour, someone using magic or tricks to look like another. I suggest you look into something like that.”

Detective Carter rubbed his temples and shot me a glance. “Glamour, huh? I've got to admit, I'm not used to dealing with monsters, magical folks, or anything like that. My cases don't involve those who can impersonate innocent people this well. I deal with humans, with very human motives.”

Reese opened her mouth, but I placed a hand on her arm, a signal to let him talk through this. We had to let him come to the correct conclusions in his own way. He clearly wanted to believe her. The evidence against her was flimsy now. But the man was stuck.

Finally, he sighed again, sounding almost sorry. “Alright. We'll get Wolfram's footage authenticated and look into possible magical leads. But you need to understand the evidence is still strong, even if . . . odd.”

Reese's posture loosened, and she shot me a relieved look.

The detective's words softened. “I'm going to ask you to remain in town, Reese. If we have more questions later, I need you to be available.”

“I want to solve this too,” Reese said, quiet but firm. “Anything to put an end to this nightmare.”

Carter gave a gruff nod before standing, signaling the conversation was over. “You

can go now. Again, don't leave town. I'll be in touch."

"Let me see her," someone shouted out in the hall. "Let me see her. Reese. Reese!"

She turned to me. "Aunt Beverly?"

"Where is my niece?" her aunt thundered.

"Company," Detective Carter said, frowning at the door.

It burst open and Beverly tumbled into the room, her gaze latching onto Reese. "There you are."

"Aunt Beverly?" Reese stood; her eyes wide. "What are you doing here?"

Beverly snarled at the detective. "I will not let you hold my niece as if she's a common criminal. You," her finger gouged the detective's chest, "will release her this instant."

"I was just about to do so," the detective said with a sigh.

"Excellent." She rounded the table to tug Reese into her arms. "Are you alright? He didn't do anything to you, did he?"

"I'm only doing my job," Carter said with a sigh. "I was about to escort her to the front door."

"Good." Beverly's arm went around Reese and with a pert nod to me, she led Reese out into the hall. I followed them with Brandon not far behind. "I hope you didn't tell him anything."

“Brandon’s my lawyer, and he and Wolf watched out for me,” Reese said weakly, gaping at her aunt. “You’re here. You’re being nice to me.”

“Of course I am,” Beverly snapped. “You’re my niece. We . . . may have had our issues in the past, but we’re blood. We stick up for each other, especially at a time like this.”

A smile teased across Reese’s mouth, and she shot me a stunned look before turning back to her aunt. “You’re right. We’re family. We stick up for each other.”

We left the building and after giving Reese another hug and telling her she’d stop by the house soon, Beverly got into her car and left.

“That was so strange,” Reese said, watching the vehicle pull out onto the road and speed away. “And wonderful.”

I stroked her spine. “I’m glad she came to the station.”

She smiled up at me. “Me too.”

The three of us moved to the far side of the parking lot where we wouldn’t be overheard.

Brandon exhaled, rubbing his jaw as the three of us stood close with the wind whipping around us. “Alright, here’s what we do now. Reese, I want you to go about your normal business but remain at home as much as possible. Don’t give them any reason to question you again unless absolutely necessary. If they call or show up? Tell them you can’t answer any questions without me present and notify me immediately. I’ll come to you right away.”

Biting down on her lower lip, Reese nodded. “I will.”

“I know it feels awful.” His eyes softened before his lawyer side took back over. “But I’m on top of it. We’ve got them questioning their case, which means we’re on the right track. You need to trust the process and not panic. We know you didn’t do it, and we’re proving it already.”

Her shoulders loosened. I gave her hand a soft squeeze, showing her that I wasn’t going anywhere. Not now, not ever.

“What do you think their next move will be?” I asked.

If only I knew where the enemy could come from next. I always needed to know. A hunter had to watch the shadows to determine which might bite.

Brandon shook his head. “Detective Carter’s smart. He’ll verify everything twice. He’ll probably interview you both again, so make sure your stories continue to line up. But that’s standard protocol; it’s just him being thorough.”

I growled low in my throat, angry with the whole situation. “He’s seen the footage from her home. It’s conclusive.”

“Exactly.” Brandon scanned the space behind the station. “Now, for the tricky part. Someone’s gone to great lengths to make you look guilty. We’re talking about layered manipulation—footage, magic, evidence placed carefully inside your home. A tip-off, I’m sure, about the theft. None of this is random.”

Reese rubbed her temples. “Do either of you know who has the magical ability to do something like this?”

I turned my gaze to Brandon. “A shifter would’ve been my first guess, but even they don’t have the skill to impersonate another this well. I’ve only interacted with one witch in the area, and I’m confident no one could pay her enough to do something like

this.”

“Magic like this is difficult to pull off but not impossible.” He glanced at Reese.
“There must be other witches in the area.”

“Someone's been carefully studying Reese. I would've believed it was her.” I thought back to the footage, and while I hadn't let it show on my face, the precision of the impersonation had chilled me.

“Why me?” Reese's voice wavered. “I don't understand why they're targeting me.”

I told Brandon about the prior incidents. “We believe someone's trying to drive Reese from town, though we don't know why.”

“Our best guess right now?” Brandon said. “Is that this person is trying to isolate you, make sure you're out of the picture or that you feel helpless. Whoever this is, they're scared of you.”

I gritted my teeth. The idea that someone out there saw Reese as a threat enough to try to derail her life . . . they had no idea the storm they'd invited.

Reese leaned into my side. “I haven't done anything to anyone. I've only been here two months. Sure, a couple of people haven't been thrilled to see me back in town, but sabotage like this? This takes things to a new level. What do they want?”

“That's what we need to find out,” Brandon said, his gaze locking with mine.

They were playing a dangerous game, and it was only a matter of time before they made their next move.

I had to expose them before that happened and end this for good.

This person would soon find out what happened to someone who threatened a vampire's true mate.

Chapter 29

Reese

We settled in the living room, snuggling together on the sofa. I cradled a glass of wine, the crimson liquid swirling under the lights, feeling its warmth as I took the first sip. Wolf held his own glass filled with the rich ruby of his version of fine dining.

Despite everything, being here with him made me feel almost normal. Safe.

A relative thing after being credibly accused of theft.

“I can’t fathom any of this.” My voice broke the silence. The wine suddenly tasted bitter. “The footage, the impersonation. Someone’s gone to great lengths to make me look guilty, and I still can’t understand why they’re after me. And my aunt! I can’t believe she came to the station, that she was determined to defend me, though that’s the one good thing in all this.”

“Maybe she’s always carried a soft spot for you in her heart, but she hadn’t known how to express it. Give her a call. Go to lunch with her sometime. You might be surprised by what you have to talk about with each other.”

I gave him a smile. “I think I will.” My smile soon fell when I thought about my situation.

Wolf scanned the room like he was trying to pull clues from the air. His dark hair

caught the light, shining like the wings of a raven. "Let's go through the suspects and possible motives again." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. "Maybe we'll think of something new."

"Good idea." I leaned further back into the couch, the cushion swallowing me. "Who first?"

"Beverly." He said my aunt's name quickly, like he didn't expect her to be the right call, but I guessed we had to be thorough. "Your aunt fits, at least personality-wise. She doesn't like sharing your mom with you."

I sighed. "She wasn't thrilled when I moved back, that's for sure. On more than one occasion, she's subtly tried to push me to return to New York. But would she frame me and then slam into the police station hell-bent on freeing me? Besides, she doesn't look like me, and she can't do magic."

"I think we can move her to the bottom of the list." He stared forward, frowning. "I still believe all this is connected. Has anyone in your family ever hinted they could do witchcraft? You know what I mean. A person who had uncanny precognition. Someone who could almost make something come true because they wished for it. It might appear as a healthy dose of luck."

I paused. "I don't think so. My mom never mentioned anyone like that, not even in my dad's family, and she's talked about him quite a bit as well."

"Which doesn't mean your family is devoid of magic but does draw suspicion away from your aunt."

We fell silent again before Wolf swiped his fingers over the screen. "Wilber Blight. Any odd occurrences from him or his family that you're aware of?"

I shrugged. “After what happened, I avoided him.”

“You reported him to the principal.” Wolf’s hands clenched, though his voice remained calm. “Men like him don’t forget things like that.”

I remembered how Wilber had eyed me when he stopped here to campaign. “He’s got a reputation to protect. I wouldn’t put it past him to try to discredit me. If I was ruined but spoke up, no one would believe me.”

“That’s motive right there. If he’s without magical abilities himself, he could’ve hired someone from out of town to create the video and plan the other incidents.”

I nodded, the thought chilling me. “I hate thinking that he’s capable of something so elaborate, but he’s slimy enough to try anything if he thought I was a threat to his reputation in this community.”

“He’s still on the short list.” Wolf marked something on his phone and then swiped us to the next person. “Tracy.”

The moment her name left his lips, my fingers tightened on my wine glass. To think I used to trust that woman. “Where do I even start?”

He didn’t respond, just nodded as if to say, go on .

“You saw it for yourself. She hated that I moved back to Mystic Harbor and planted roots with people who know me. Even when she was my assistant, there was always this weird vibe like she thought I only needed her because I was isolated, working alone in my New York apartment.”

“And now?”

I bit my lip. “I saw her for who she truly is the day we visited Monsters, PI. She never supported me moving back. Now, I don’t think she ever believed in me. I didn’t realize—” My voice trembled, my bitterness bleeding through. “She hacked my accounts. Or I believe she did. Maybe she’s responsible for everything else. Like you suggested with Wilber, if she can’t do magic herself, she could hire someone to do it for her. Why didn’t I see who she really was? I trusted her for years.”

“She saw her chance,” Wolf said. “She must feel entitled to your success. Perhaps she thought it was dependent on you relying on her. Anything that threatened that narrative . . . well, here we are.”

“She hated that I was finally at a place in my life where I didn’t consult her about everything.”

Wolf raised an eyebrow. “Someone so focused on control, on sabotaging the instant she’s no longer involved, could easily escalate their behavior.”

I swallowed and nodded. Tracy as a suspect made perfect sense. “She’s definitely high on the list.”

We continued through the others, Wolf quickly running a finger down the last few names. “Flint Prospect, an old mentor of yours. Now a rival?”

A humorless laugh scraped its way up my throat. “Something like that. He liked taking credit for my early success; that’s for sure.”

“And now that he’s struggling to hold onto that when he must realize that your success today is due to your own efforts.”

“He works with birds, so he could’ve sent a trained seagull to attack me.”

“People like Flint with fragile egos will sometimes lash out when they feel threatened. Your return to town could be enough to spark jealousy. What would he gain from driving you away?”

I drew in a slow breath and released it. “I’ll be guest lecturing at the college. From what I heard, he hopes to be chosen as dean of the department. That could be why he wanted the endorsement. Maybe he’s worried he’ll lose his standing if I’m around. My books are quite popular. I’m not interested in competing with him for the position, but he might believe I am.”

“Because of all this, he’ll remain on the short list as well. What about Charmaine?”

“Charmaine.” I rubbed my forehead. “We were best friends once. We had a huge argument about her older brother.”

A soft growl rumbled from Wolf’s chest. “She could also be jealous of your success.”

I set my wineglass down on the coffee table, sinking into thought. “I haven’t been back long enough to spark this level of anger, but Charmaine was always intense about loyalty between friends. If she felt abandoned . . .”

“We’ll keep her on the list. And before you ask, I crossed off your mom. She loves you.”

“I know,” I said with a sad laugh. “I just hate that I’m sitting here, thinking about all these people who could be behind this, people I used to know and trusted at some point. Well, other than Wilber.”

Wolf’s arm came around my shoulders, the warmth of his presence sinking into my bones. “We’ll get to the bottom of this. Whoever’s behind it will pay for hurting you.”

I closed my eyes and leaned into him, holding onto that promise.

We went to bed and surprisingly, I slept.

But I woke sometime before dawn and lay in the dark, thinking. Worrying. Who was trying so hard to hurt me?

I slid from the bed, taking care not to wake Wolf, though the odds of that were slim. Unlike the mythical vampire, he was able to sleep at night versus all day, but like mythical vampires, when he dropped off to sleep, it seemed to suck him deeper into its embrace than a human. I'd chuckled at how difficult it was to wake him, and I'd teased him about it one time. He'd scooped me up, spun around with me in his arms, and then kissed me silly.

The hardwood floor was cool under my feet as I padded into the bathroom. After using the facilities, I washed my hands and smoothed my hair, catching my pale reflection in the mirror. The bags under my eyes reflected the weight of all I'd dealt with recently.

I tiptoed back to the bedroom, careful not to wake Wolf, who lay on his back, one muscular arm slung over his abs, the other resting behind his head. He looked far too peaceful for someone neck-deep in mystery and mayhem. His cape lay crumpled on the floor, tossed there when we feverishly removed each other's clothing earlier.

His lips parted, and he sighed. If I poked him, I wondered how long it would take before he'd stir. Probably too long. I held back a grin, already framing ways I could tease him about it tomorrow.

Spying his messy hair, I couldn't resist rolling my eyes. For someone who liked his appearance structured, from his starched shirt to his cute little red bowties, sleep sure knocked him down a rung on the ladder. Gorgeous, though.

I lifted the edge of the covers and was about to slide between the sheets when I heard a soft sound, so faint I almost convinced myself I'd imagined it.

But no, there it was again. Subtle, like the slow shift of something on the floor or a door easing open. Unease fluttered in my chest and settled like a stone in the pit of my stomach.

Was someone inside the house? My heart smacked against my ribcage as I stood frozen beside the bed, torn between shaking Wolf awake or checking it out myself.

I bit my tongue, my pulse pounding in my ears. Maybe it was nothing. Wolf had set the booby traps outside, and the cameras were ready to gather any evidence. We were safe inside our fortress.

The sound came again, not loud, not aggressive, but distinct. Something subtle, like a soft clink or a shift of a floorboard under pressure. It sounded intrusive, and it was coming from somewhere on the first floor.

Fear slithered up my spine, but I swore I was determined not to be scared anymore. This had to end. Now.

After watching the steady rise and fall of Wolf's chest, I shook my head. He'd been through enough, and I'd feel pretty stupid if I woke him only to make him mistify through the house and find nothing.

I grabbed the bear spray from my bedside table. It's fine. You can do this.

With a silent exhale, I slipped from the room, tiny cylinder in hand. In the hallway, I stopped, listening.

Nothing.

I should go back to bed. Join Wolfie in his vampire-ish slumber. Guys in general could sleep like they were half-dead, but vampires topped them all.

Then I heard a sound below me.

With my heart clawing its way up my throat, I tiptoed toward the stairs and stopped again, listening.

I heard it again, coming from my office if I wasn't mistaken.

Maybe I should wake Wolf. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe . . .

No.

I was done with this. Done with dancing to the strings of whoever was stalking me, manipulating me. Enough was enough. Time to take them down and put an end to this.

Steeling my nerves, I ghost-walked down the staircase, taking each step lightly, my heart drumming in my ears. I paused at the bottom. The air felt charged, like something was about to break. I listened, and there it was again, subtle but unmistakable movement coming from inside my office.

Anger flared in my chest, burning away the last of my fear.

I crept across the foyer to my open office door. Tension whipped back and forth inside me.

Someone was in there, moving, quietly shuffling through my things. My office, the place where I wrote, where I felt most myself.

Whoever this was had crossed a line.

With the bear spray cocked and my teeth clenched, I peered inside.

I froze.

Charmaine.

She didn't hear me creep up behind her because she was too absorbed in rifling through papers, drawers, and even my laptop bag. A silver jewelry box sat open beside her. In her right hand, she held something shiny—a penlight, flicking the small beam over one of my recent manuscripts. Charmaine, frickin' Charmaine. Her presence was a sucker punch to the gut.

My shock melted in milliseconds, replaced by a wash of ice-cold anger.

“Looking for something?” I snarled, stepping across the room, the bear spray clenched tight in my hand. “Or are you planting something else to frame me?”

That jewelry box.

She snapped upright and spun around, the penlight slipping from her hand, clattering when it hit the floor. “Reese?”

“Why are you doing this?”

Her eyes darted between the bear spray and me. She tried to force a smile, but it came out a wince. “I was just—” A flick of her hand and the can was wrenched from my grip. It went flying, smacking into the wall and dropping to the floor with a loud bang. With a snarl, she pointed her index finger right at me.

I froze. I couldn't move, though I could breathe—for now.

“Witch,” I hissed, my voice only a whisper.

She huffed and advanced toward me. “Yes. You finally figured it out.”

We’d shared everything in the past. Silly me for using the same passwords I had back in college. “You hacked into my social media accounts.”

“You really need to change those passwords.”

I had but it was too late now. “You messed with my blender. Cast a spell on the seagull that attacked me. Wrote on my mirror.”

“If only it had worked.”

“I don’t get it. You also slashed my tires and snuck into my house to plant the statue in my attic.” My gaze fell on the jewelry box. “Where did that come from, the local jewelry store?”

Her slick smile grew.

“You framed me.”

“Such a clever girl, aren’t you? Although, it took you a long time to figure it out.”

“Why?” I snarled.

“I imagine you’d love an answer. All I’ll say is that with you out of the way, the path will be clear for me.”

“For what?”

“For Wolfram’s delightful vampire bite, of course.” She stroked her neck.

“Immortality will soon be mine.”

Page 30

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 30

Wolfram

I woke to find Reese gone and lay under the covers, pretending I was still asleep. She'd teased me one too many times about how deep a vampire slept. This time, when she returned to bed, I'd be waiting to pounce. I'd soon show my pretty little mate the error of her teasing ways.

But after waiting a bit, she didn't come out of the bathroom.

Rising, I listened and didn't hear her inside the suite. Had she gone to the kitchen for a late-night snack? She never had before, but there was always a first time.

That's when a bang rang out from the first floor.

I mistified to the foyer and was drawn across the open space to Reese's office, arriving in time to hear Charmaine tell Reese that she was going to erase Reese's memory back to when she'd lived in New York, that she'd plant a suggestion that Reese wanted to live there more than anything. Reese would leave me and sell her house, and Charmaine would step in to "cure" my wounded heart.

With a flick of my wrist, the magical bindings holding Reese shattered. I advanced into the room and tugged her behind me, snarling at Charmaine. My claws snapped out at the ends of my fingers and my fangs descended. My growl ripped up my throat. "You dare threaten my true mate?" Power surged through my voice, freezing Charmaine in place.

Fear shot through her eyes. “True mate?” She gaped at Reese. “I would never harm a vampire's mate. I only wanted—”

“Silence! You wanted immortality? You thought by eliminating Reese, I'd turn to you?” A dark laugh escaped me. “You're delusional if you believe I'd ever bite you or turn you into a vampire. There will be no immortality for you, witch .”

Desperation clawed across her face. “But Wolfram, please—”

I closed my eyes and summoned my witch friend. She appeared in a swirl of smoke, her floor-length, deep blue cloak hiding her body and features.

“Charmaine has been using magic to harass and manipulate Reese—my true mate,” I told my friend. “She impersonated Reese, framing her for a crime she didn't commit. She slashed her tires, hacked into Reese’s social media accounts to sabotage her career. Sent a seagull to attack her. That’s the one thing that confuses me. Reese came to Monsters, PI after the seagull and mirror incidents. How are they connected?”

“You were supposed to fall for me . The blender, the seagull, and the writing were just me having fun with Reese.” Charmaine lifted her chin. “But then my mother had to ruin my plan by telling Reese’s mom about Monsters, PI. Once I saw you were with her, I had to heat things up to drive her away.”

Clever. I should’ve asked Reese’s mother again where she’d heard of Monsters, PI. “What else were you planning?”

“Whatever it took.” She didn’t sound a bit remorseful.

“I’m sure there are other things we haven’t yet discovered,” I said.

“Jewelry box.” Reese pointed to her desk.

“Where?” I growled at Charmaine.

“The jewelry store one town away. Marcelle’s.”

I’d make sure it was returned before it was noted missing.

“To top it off,” I said to my friend, “Charmaine was going to wipe Reese’s memory and compel her to move away. All in the hope that I’d give her the bite of the undead.”

The witch nodded, the hem of her cloak shifting as she stalked toward Charmaine. The air grew thicker around them, swirling with power.

Charmaine let out a muffled scream, quaking as she watched the witch approach. The witch reached out, a pulse of energy spiraling from her palm, encircling Charmaine like a snake winding around its prey. A flick of her hand, and they both disappeared in a second puff of smoke. Charmaine’s panicked shriek cut off and the room returned to silence.

“Where did your friend take Charmaine?” Reese asked, creeping closer to wrap her arm around me from behind.

Spinning, I roamed my hands over her, checking for injuries. “Are you hurt? Did she harm you in any way?”

Her laugh bubbled up, bright and clear. “Stop, that tickles. I’m fine, Wolf. You got here in time.”

Relief flooded through me as I pulled her into my arms, holding her.

“Their council will take care of this,” I said. “There’s no excuse for what she’s done,

and she knows it. With magic, they'll drag a confession from her and then they'll impose a sentence. She won't be able to come near you or harm you again. That's guaranteed. Let's just say she'll wish she'd never decided to seek immortality from a vampire. I'll make sure Detective Carter is made aware as well."

"He'll want to prosecute Charmaine."

"Not after my friend speaks with him. This is for their council to handle, not him."

"It's over, then." Reese looked up at me with joy in her eyes.

"It is." I traced my fingers through her hair before I pulled her into my arms again. Wrapping her in my embrace was the best thing I'd experienced in years. She was safe. She was alright.

"When we went through motives for our suspects, we didn't think of anything like this." She nuzzled my chest. "She truly thought, with me out of the way, that she'd be able to convince you to change her into a made vampire."

Something I'd never do.

She melted into me, her softness fitting perfectly against my frame. I gazed down at her, my heart beating up so forcefully that I was sure she could feel the thunderous beats. She was everything to me, every dream fulfilled, every wish granted. The culmination of a lifetime of longing.

She tilted her head back, her eyes locked onto mine. In those deep pools of blue, I saw a myriad of emotions, trust, love, and a hint of vulnerability that made me want to protect and cherish her all the more. Her fingers grazed my cheek, her touch lighting a fire within me that burned hotter than any sun.

Our lips met in a soft, lingering kiss that fanned the flames inside us both. Her taste was intoxicating, a nectar that drove away all thoughts but of her.

She pressed closer, her hands exploring the planes of my back, her fingertips tracing the line of my spine. Every touch sent bliss coursing through me, making me want more. My arms tightened around her as if I could somehow merge us into one being.

Her lips parted, the soft gasp escaping her driving me wild. I deepened the kiss, my tongue exploring her sweet mouth.

She arched into me, seeking more contact, more connection. I reveled in the feel of her curves, her softness that was both yielding and strong.

I mistified us to our bed and broke off the kiss, rolling onto my back while taking her with me.

She rose over me, her palms warm on my chest. "I love you, Wolfie. I always will."

"Wolfie," I growled, flipping her onto her back and looming over her. "I'm a fierce vampire. The terror of all I survey. And you persist in calling me Wolfie?"

"You adore it."

My sigh bled out, and my smile lifted, driving my pretend horror away. "I do. Almost as much as I adore you, my precious love." I traced her cheek with my fingers. "No more threats. No more fear. Just us, together."

"Together sounds perfect." Her eyes sparkled. "Just so you know, I still plan to call you that dreaded nickname, tease you about your deep vampire sleep, plus grin at the cute way you cuddle a bag of blood while your fangs pierce it."

“I do not suck blood in a cute way.”

She winked. “It’s all a matter of perspective. Trust me. It’s incredibly cute.”

My growl of mock outrage made her laugh, the sound sweeping away the last shadows from my soul.

I kissed her again, planning to show her all the ways I loved her.

We were safe.

We were together.

Nothing would come between us again.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Chapter 31

Reese

“That doll.” The words burst out of me, my voice rising in pitch. It was late-afternoon, and Wolfram and I sat on the sofa, making out. We did that a lot lately. We’d nearly lost each other and there was no getting over that.

Wolfie leaned back from me, one eyebrow lifting. “Has the thrill waned, my love?”

I pursed my lips. “What do you mean by that?”

“My kisses aren’t distracting you enough. I will admit, I’m slightly offended that you’re thinking of that doll when I’m touching you.”

If his eyes weren’t sparkling with joy, I’d be worried. Instead, I laughed. “Oh, you’re an amazing distraction. But that doll!”

He sighed. “What about that doll?”

“Remember how Margaret said it’s not worth as much because someone did a repair on the back?”

“I can’t see where this detail is more exciting than my kisses.”

My lips twitched with humor. “What if it wasn’t torn?”

His fingers paused on my nape that he'd been stroking. Highly distracting. If the idea hadn't occurred to me, I'd be tugging off his shirt by now. His pants. My own clothing. "You're suggesting it was purposefully cut?"

"Thain said the doll was a message from Jolene."

"To her daughter. Do you believe the repair could be a clue?"

"There's only one way to find out."

He mistified from the room and I shook my head, wishing I could do that. Imagine being able to visit a tropical location with a blink of my eyes. Tuscany. Dinner in Boston before returning home without having to drive.

He reappeared with the doll in his hands and laid her, face down, on the coffee table. If he'd put her on my lap, I would've freaked.

However, to explore my idea, I'd have to touch her.

"Scissors," I said, rising and grabbing them from my office desk drawer. I peeled back the doll's dress and carefully snipped the fine stitches closing the "tear". After laying the scissors on the table, I widened the slight gap. My sigh bled out, and I sagged back into the sofa cushions. "There's nothing but cloth inside."

"Look further," he said, his eyes alight with excitement. "Meissen dolls were stuffed with sawdust, cotton, or horsehair. Not cloth."

"How do you know something like that?"

"I read. I study details. I forget nothing ."

I rolled my eyes. “And you’re quite conceited at times.”

“Such is the life of an ancient vampire,” he said with a pretend sigh.

I poked around inside the back of the doll, gently tugging out a large piece of cloth that had been carefully folded and pinned together with delicate stitches. A few snips cut the threads, and I spread the cloth out on the coffee table, gaping at the cursive note written on the smooth surface.

Wolfram read it aloud.

My Dearest Love,

Happy Fourth Birthday! If you’ve found this note, then we’ve celebrated, and I’ve gifted this doll to you as I planned. Even better, your clever eyes have uncovered a little secret I left just for you. Read it with an open heart. I’m sure there will be plenty of time to laugh and share such things once we’ve escaped this wretched town. I have a plan in place. The house will be sold soon, and we’ll drive from here, not looking back. Never to return.

But life has a way of stealing those we love away, so I’m leaving this for you to find—just in case.

You were brought into this world through a love so deep and true that words will never capture the fullness of it. Your father and I cherished every moment we had together, and though the world may not always tell such stories aloud, never doubt that you were conceived in that same, beautiful love. You were our secret, our joy.

I dream about your future every day, my sweet girl – our sweet girl. I hope you're happy. I hope you find laughter wherever life allows, and even when it's hardest, I hope you continue to rise with grace. I can see you grown now, so strong, so

intelligent, thriving, and shining like the brightest star. Never stop chasing your dreams, dearest. You deserve everything wonderful life has to offer.

More than anything, I long to be with you for every step of your journey, to hold your hand and watch you face the world with that fierce, brave heart of yours, with kindness always at your side. But should that not come to pass, should circumstances keep us apart, always know that my love surrounds you, no matter the distance—in this life or beyond.

I am so proud of you, my little Margaret May. You have a fire inside you, one that can never be dimmed, and I know that as you grow, you'll become the remarkable woman I knew you could be, strong, compassionate, and filled with the courage to live life fully.

Never forget, my love. You are, and always will be, everything to me. I carry you in my heart always, just as I hope you carry me in yours.

With all my love,

Your devoted mother,

Jolene

“Margaret is Jolene’s daughter,” I croaked, my eyes stinging with tears. “Jolene died here, perhaps from a fall or foul play, and since no one knew her daughter existed, they didn’t look for her. Margaret must’ve been scared and left the house, looking for her mom. I wonder . . .” I shook my head. “Do you think her grandmother adopted her? Margaret didn’t mention who raised her, but it wouldn’t surprise me. She had Jolene’s diary, though she didn’t share it with Margaret. I bet his mother discovered she had a granddaughter and took her in. I hope she loved her, that she did what she could to replace the mother Margaret lost.”

“It didn’t sound like she did.”

“I also hope she didn’t kill Jolene.”

“Let me see . . .” He closed his eyes. To seek the ghost? “Ah. She’s hovering near the fireplace.”

I looked that way but didn’t see her. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to see her.

“She looks sad, and she’s shaking her head,” he said. His voice deepened. “Your mother-in-law didn’t kill you? Ah, she’s shaking her head again.” He sighed. “Was it an accident? She’s nodding, so I believe it was.” A shudder ripped through him, and his gaze sought mine. “She disappeared.”

“That’s . . .” I wasn’t sure what it was. With shivers tracking through me, I sucked in a deep breath and shot it out. “We need to take the doll and note to Margaret.”

His smile rose. “I believe that’s what Jolene wants.”

We placed the note back inside, and he mistified us to the historical society. There, we found Margaret sitting at the desk, a book open in front of her, her magnifying glass in hand.

After she’d carefully tucked a bookmark between the pages and set everything to the side, I gently laid the doll on her desk, face down.

“So good of you two to stop by again,” Margaret said, a bemused expression on her face. “I’m afraid I haven’t discovered anything new about Jolene, but I’ve asked the librarians in the area to look at their collections in case they have something that might give further details into that time here in Mystic Harbor.”

“This doll is yours,” I said, my eyes stinging with tears again.

“Oh.” She frowned. “I don’t understand. Are you saying you’re giving me the doll? Please don’t think you must just because I mentioned I found her beautiful.”

“She belongs to you. She’s a gift from your mother.”

Margaret’s lips curled down. “The woman who raised me? She was older and she passed many years ago. She wasn’t my true mother, though I suppose she tried.”

“Jolene was your biological mother. Look.” I parted the fabric in the back, revealing the folded note. “I started thinking about the tear and wondered if the fabric had been purposefully cut. When I removed the stitches, we found a note inside. It was written by Jolene for her daughter, who she called Margaret May. That’s you.”

Margaret’s eyes shimmered with tears. “You believe Jolene Molson was my mother? It’s not possible. She had no children.” She frowned. “Although, you mentioned she said she was pregnant in her diary that I’m now exceedingly curious to read. The date of her demise would fit. If I was her daughter, and I’m not saying I think such a thing could be true, she would’ve died when I was only a couple years old.” She tugged out the note and gently spread the fabric wide.

Then, with her magnifying glass, she read, her lips moving as she skimmed through Jolene’s message. When she looked up, tears trickled down her face. “She was my mother. No wonder I called myself Margaret May.” Lifting the doll, she hugged it to her chest, silent sobs shaking her shoulders.

I was crying.

Wolf was crying.

I rounded the desk and put my arms around her, holding this frail woman who'd finally discovered who she was, who'd soon be able to read Jolene's diary and know that her parents had loved her deeply.

And that's when I saw Jolene, a misty fragment of a woman standing near one of the bookcases, dressed in old-fashioned clothing. She smiled and touched her fingertips to her lips before holding them out to me and Margaret.

With a wink, she disappeared, and I suspected this was the one and only time I'd see a ghost.

Outside the historical society, we sat on a bench to compose ourselves, talking about this and that and nothing until our tears had dried.

I told him about seeing Jolene.

"Then she's finally at peace," he said, tipping my chin up to give me a sweet kiss. "We fulfilled her final wish."

A text came through on my phone, making it buzz.

Would you like to go to lunch tomorrow? my aunt asked.

With you and mom? I replied.

A long pause followed. I was thinking just you and me. If that's alright. I could almost hear the hesitancy in her voice.

First steps were always the hardest, but they were the most meaningful. And when I moved back to Mystic Harbor, I'd taken a baby step that had turned into a joyful run. Might as well keep going.

I smiled. It came out bittersweet but true and sent a reply. I'd love to join you for lunch.

Lovely. Noon at Kraken's Keep? My treat!

I can't wait. Teary-eyed, I tucked my phone into my pocket and told Wolf, who hugged me.

We sat like that as the sun slowly started to sink in the sky, until a cool breeze skipped through town, carrying with it the rich scent of the sea.

Rising and holding hands, and despite the drizzling rain, we strolled down Main Street, stopping at Creature Cones for ice cream and to chat with Melly before entering Monsters, PI to see if Wolfram was needed in the next day or two.

Blake sat at his desk. He rose as we approached, giving us an easy grin. "There you are."

"Were you looking for me?" Wolfram swished his cape back so he could reach his back pocket and retrieve his phone. He scrolled in and frowned. "I don't see a message."

"Not a problem," Blake said. "I hadn't called, but I'd thought of doing it. Almost the same thing, don't you think? Someone else will handle the new case."

"What new case?" Wolf asked.

"Mine," a woman said from behind us.

I turned to find a woman approaching the desk. She wore a cape that looked suspiciously like the one the witch had worn when they came to collect Charmaine.

“I’m Ellie Landish.” Her gaze focused on Blake. “I’ve got an appointment?”

“Yes, yes, you do.” Blake sat and clicked into his computer. “Our detective is expecting you.”

The woman gave me a polite nod, and I took in her long black hair and deep blue eyes. She was pretty, with a tiny dimple in her chin and a lush frame, and she stood about my height. “I specifically asked for someone with magical abilities.” Her attention turned to Wolfram. “Such as his.”

Wolf grunted. “I’d be happy to help with—”

“That won’t be necessary.” Blake rose from his chair. “As I said, someone else is going to handle this one.” His brown eyes landed on Ellie. “He’s an ogre .”

As if that explained it all.

Her face froze before smoothing. “I don’t . . . Alright. I can deal with this if I must. Can you direct me to his office?”

“No need to.” Blake’s gaze shot to the hall where Thain walked toward us.

Crouton, Thain's black and white pug mix scampered around his owner and raced toward Ellie. When he leaped against her legs, she stooped down to give him pats.

Thain and I might be history but that didn't extend to his pet.

“Crouton, how you been?” she asked as he whimpered and wiggled, jumping up to lick her chin.

“He's fine,” Thain said.

Ellie straightened. “You.” Her hand lifting, she backed away, bumping into Blake’s desk.

“Ellie,” Thain said softly, striding right up to her, tilting her chin and gazing into her eyes. “It’s been a long time.”

“Not long enough,” she snapped.

His low laugh rumbled through his chest. “We need to talk.”

“I want to work with someone else.” Desperation came through in Ellie’s voice. Her gaze landed on Wolfram. “Please handle this. Anyone but him .”

“No vamp,” Thain growled, though he shot a contrite look Wolfram’s way. “No insult intended.”

“Not taken that way,” Wolfram said gravely.

“Come with me, Ellie,” Thain said in a deadly voice. “It’s past time we went through this.”

“Very well,” she huffed.

He latched onto her hand and tugged her down the hall and into his office. The door snicked closed behind them.

“Well,” Blake said, his gaze going from Wolf to me. “That was interesting.”

Very.

“Do you know the history between Thain and Ellie?” I asked Wolf.

He shook his head. “No idea. Ogres and witches have been at odds for a long time, though I believe there were attempts to form a truce through marriage. I don’t believe I heard what happened with that, but it appears that something in their past has risen to a head.”

I’d love to be inside Thain’s office, snooping. But my curiosity would have to wait.

Wolf mistified us back home, and we snuggled on the couch.

I settled on his lap and latched onto his shoulders. “Where were we when we were interrupted?”

He tapped his lips, one corner curling up slyly. “I believe you were kissing me.”

“And you were kissing me.”

“I am certain I was.” He mistified us to our bed and climbed over me. A flick of his finger, and our clothing disappeared. “What would you say about spending the rest of the day here, my love?”

I grinned. “I could be persuaded.”

He proceeded to show me one of the many reasons I loved him.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

Reese

Six weeks later

The moon hung low in the sky, its silvery trail of light shimmering across the bay, making the surface of the water sparkle like a trail of diamonds. Waves lapped at the shore, their rhythmic push and pull a soothing melody between Wolf and me. A breeze stirred my hair, carrying with it the salty tang of the ocean.

I wrapped the blanket tighter across my shoulders and leaned back into Wolf, who sat behind me, his arms around my middle. Sitting on this blanket, tucked between the sea and the stars, felt like something out of a dream. The world was glorious. Just the two of us, with no more fear, no more uncertainty.

“You see?” Wolf held out a bag of blood, lisping because his fangs had descended, not that I’d tell him he did it. I adored this as well, and the last thing I wanted was for him to stop doing it. He spoke with his usual dramatic seriousness. “This, my love, is how a fierce and fearsome vampire sustains himself.” As I peered up at him, he bit down hard on the bag and guzzled, his throat working with each swallow. “Is not coot,” he said around the bag.

I laughed, nudging his side. “Fierce? You’re sipping on donated blood from a bag. It’s pretty much like drinking from a juice box. And it is cute. You’ll never convince me it isn’t.”

His brows furrowed, though his dark eyes sparkled, and he held the bag away, cupping it as if it was a glass of fine vintage wine. “Do not mock me while I dine,

mate,” he lisped. “I am a creature of the night. I inspire terror wherever I go.”

I leaned back into his chest and another laugh bubbled from inside me. “Wolf, you're sweet and adorable. No one is terrified of you.”

He huffed, also pretend. “Sweet? Adorable?” As I looked up, the sleek sharpness of his fangs caught the moonlight before he bit down on the bag again and mumbled around it. “I am noble, love. Powerful. I strike fear into the hearts of men. Never call me . . . adorable.”

My heart swelled as I watched him eat. Despite everything we'd gone through, he still found ways to make me laugh.

“I hate to break it to you, but fierce vampires probably shouldn't wear black capes.” I flicked at the edge of his. “Or starched white shirts. Or cute red bow ties.”

Wolf let out a growl and tightened his arm around me. He dropped the empty bag onto the blanket and rested his chin on my shoulder, his lips brushing the shell of my ear. “One day, you will tremble from my fearsomeness.”

More from his touch, but I nodded and shot him a solemn look.

I turned on his lap to face him, our eyes locking in the moonlight, his dark eyes holding a thousand promises. A lifetime of eternity lingered in their depths.

Taking a deep breath, I shifted in his lap, savoring the feel of his warm hands resting on my waist. “I've been thinking.”

His smile faded, concern creeping onto his face. “About what in particular?”

Nervous, I ran a hand through my hair and glanced at the water, the moon casting its shimmering light across the waves. “I've made a decision.” The words caught in my

throat, but I pushed them out. “I know what I want to do about us.”

Wolf stilled. His eyes locked on mine, searching, and a touch of fear flickered in his. His voice came out guarded. “And what is that?”

It broke my heart to see him doubt, even after all we’d been through. Even after all the times I’d shown him with every kiss, every touch, that he was my world. But love didn’t always make us rational. When you truly cared for someone, fear still clung to the edges, whispering that maybe it was too good to last.

I held my wrist up, my skin gleaming in the moonlight. “I want you to bite me. I want you to make me your true mate, forever.”

His sharp intake of breath was like the sea breeze, cool and filled with surprise. He blinked, and warmth flooded into his eyes, though some concern remained. “Reese.” His hand came up, curling around my arm gently, as if he wasn’t confident this was real. “Are you sure? There’s no need to rush into this. You have all the time in the world to think about it. We’re talking about eternity.” His voice turned softer, almost pleading. “Once I do it, there’s no turning back. You won’t age. You won’t live the way you do now. Not blood-wise, not sleep-wise, nothing. You may not be able to go out in the sun. Are you certain?”

I pressed my fingertip to his lips. “Don’t try to talk me out of it. I love you, Wolf. I don’t need more time to decide. This is what I want. You are what I want. I’ve made up my mind.”

“You’ll have to give up—”

“Everything I’m giving up is nothing compared to what I gain by being with you forever.”

He swallowed hard, his eyes never leaving mine as if he couldn’t quite believe what I

was saying. “Reese . . .”

“I mean it,” I whispered. “I want to be with you in every way possible. No more waiting. No more second-guessing.”

Silence stretched between us, the gentle lull of the waves crashing and ebbing on the shore the only sound. I swore the world waited for him to speak.

“Are you sure?” His voice had gone hoarse, his hand trembling as he brushed back a strand of hair from my face. The tenderness in his touch cracked something deep inside me.

“I am.”

After another searching gaze, he jerked out a nod and brought my hand up to his lips, pressing a kiss to my palm. He kissed his way up my arm, his soft, reverent touch making my breath catch in my lungs. When he reached the pulse point in my wrist, he hovered there, his eyes flicking up to meet mine, pausing one last time.

I smiled, my heart racing in anticipation. “Now, Wolf.”

His lips brushed my skin, gentle and sweet. Then his fangs sunk delicately into my wrist.

There wasn't pain, just a rush of sensation so intense and pleasurable it stole all my thoughts. My eyelids fluttered as the world around me seemed to glow. Each sound became clearer, sharper. With every pull of his mouth, the stars above us sparkled brighter, dancing in the deep velvet sky. The sway of the waves hitting the shore erupted in an ancient, beautiful song for my ears alone.

My senses exploded, tuning into every detail, from the texture of the sand beneath my knees, to the rustling of the ocean breeze, to the salty tang in the air. The moon

shimmered more intensely, casting its silvery light in a way I'd never seen before.

Something inside me shifted, like my soul had sought out his and finding it, locked into place. Everything I felt for him, from love, passion, and trust, intensified to something I could barely comprehend, something I could barely hold onto.

When Wolf finally lifted his head, his fangs retracting, I blinked up at him, gasping as a new world settled around us.

He smiled, his eyes gleaming in the moonlight, and he brushed his thumb along my cheek.

"From now on," he said, his voice a caress, "the only blood we'll need is each other's. A small bit to keep our bond strong. Our love will sustain us."

My heart swelled as I gazed into his eyes, the same ones that I'd looked into a thousand times before but now seemed to hold the universe in their depths.

He captured my lips in a kiss filled with love and devotion. I could barely breathe.

This man was my future. My everything.

And nothing would ever take that away.

I hope you enjoyed Wolfie & Reese's story as much as I did writing it!