



Unfettered Vampire (Found & Freed: The Unfettered #5)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: I shouldnt fall in love with my descendant

I shouldnt fall in love when Ive only just found freedom.

I should be in therapy, not making moon eyes at the man who thinks he is my boss.

But hearts never listen to logic.

I only wanted to be part of my great-great-grandchildrens lives. The piece of work who held me captive kept me in line by threatening them. Hes dead now, but I still want to protect them. And know them. Love them.

They are so young to have lost their mother. No wonder their father needs a nanny.

It all seemed like a wonderful idea.

Until it wasnt.

He is handsome and kind. Gentle and respectful.

Everything the men who used me in the harem were not.

Its not surprising Im falling for him.

I can tell myself its fine. He is my in-law. We are not blood related.

We are both lonely.

I can tell myself a lot of things.

But can I tell him Im a vampire? His dead wifes great-grandfather? A former trafficking victim?

Or that I live with a collection of paranormal men in a bizarre but beautiful found family? Bound by the trauma we went through together in a billionaires harem?

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Chapter one

Ned

That is one impressive house. I feel daunted just looking at it. It is a million miles from the tiny two-up two-down in the East End of London where I started my family all those years ago. Well, not a million miles in actual distance, it's only about eighty of those. But it is so far away in every other aspect, and I'm not sure how I feel about it.

Am I happy that my great-great grandkids are growing up in luxury? Yes. Am I happy that it is a side effect of being enslaved by a psycho billionaire? No. Well, maybe yes. Having some good come out of it has to be something.

A heavy sigh escapes me. I don't know the answer. I'm tired and I just want to see my family. Whatever I think or feel about things is irrelevant. It happened. It is reality. Time to get on with it. Moping is for losers.

With that thought in mind, I carefully drive my car down the driveway and get it as close to the front door as I can. Thank heavens there is a porch, and it is a cloudy day. I'm really not looking forward to getting older, and direct sunlight meaning bursting into flames instead of intense discomfort. But I guess I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.

All right, time to take a deep breath and make a run for it.

I grimace as I barrel out of the car and sprint the short distance to the shade of the

porch. I'm so anxious to get out of the sun that I don't even hesitate about ringing the doorbell.

The chimes ring out pleasantly and the large fancy door opens swiftly. I quickly step inside into the white marble floor of the entrance lobby. The grand staircase is super impressive.

"Edmund?" says a pleasant voice behind me.

They are probably slightly offended that I barged past them, but there is sod all I can do about that. I needed to get away from the sun. Hopefully, they won't report my social faux pas to their boss.

"It's Ned," I reply automatically as I turn.

And then my long dead heart thumps. Jesus effing Christ. My eyes are feasting on the most handsome man to have ever walked the earth.

Tall, check. Dark, check. Handsome, hell yeah, because if I needed to breathe I'd be asphyxiating right now.

He is definitely six foot something. With dark, luxurious looking hair in what has to be an extremely expensive haircut. Eyes the color of finest whiskey. Strong nose and jawline. Manly chin. Good tan.

Flipping heck. If he smiles, I just know his teeth are going to be dazzling white and perfect.

My gaze rakes over his broad chest and then down over his strong legs. All wrapped up in a very fancy suit .

I swallow. God damnit. This is no butler. This has to be Morgan Dowd. My great-granddaughter's widower.

Apparently, taste in men is genetic or something. Because, damn it. This is unreal.

"Come this way, please," he says.

I nod mutely and follow him. Why the hell did he have to open his own door? He could have sent a member of staff to do it. Now his first impression of me is me bursting into his house uninvited.

Not that he seems bothered. And besides, I am about to glamor the poor man into hiring me as his nanny. It is not as if he needs to like me.

I glance around as he leads me down a hallway. The house is silent. It feels empty. I don't think the kids are here and it is stupid of me to be disappointed about that. I knew they wouldn't be. Because who the hell introduces their kids to all the people they are interviewing?

Morgan opens the door to a lovely study. There is a big mahogany desk, groaning bookshelves. And a plush leather chair in front of the desk. Right in a beam of dazzling sunlight.

"Take a seat," he says as he gestures to the cursed chair.

Fuck my life. The only other chair in here is the one behind the desk. The one he is about to sit on.

"Would you like a drink?" he asks.

"Whiskey, please," I answer.

And then I remember it is not even lunchtime. And this is a job interview. For a nanny position.

Morgan gives a soft chuckle. “I know the feeling. How about coffee to tide us over?”

“That would be great!” I blurt .

Oh my days. I can’t believe he took my fuck up for a joke. I’m never this lucky. Ever.

He wanders over to a side table, and I belatedly spot a gorgeous coffee machine. For fuck’s sake. I thought he was going to have to leave the room. Oh well, there is nothing for it. I’m going to have to act while his back is turned.

Quickly, I grab the chair and yank it sideways, towards the shade. It is far heavier than it looks and it scrapes loudly across the stained floorboards.

Morgan whirls around at the noise and catches me red-handed. Wrapped around his expensive chair and inexplicably dragging it across his fancy floor.

I wince. “The um...sun was in my eyes.”

He blinks at me. Then he robotically holds out a coffee. I think I have really freaked him out now. Should have known my luck wasn’t going to last. I’m going to have to glamor the shit out of him.

I take my coffee and sheepishly sit in the chair. At least it is out of the sun now.

Morgan takes his seat on the other side of the desk. He places his coffee cup down, and then he sighs heavily.

“The kids are four, three and two years old. Their mother died by suicide just over a

year ago. I've taken as much time away from my business as I can, but I need to be more hands on. Hence needing a nanny."

He takes a deep breath and the grief in his eyes is breaking my heart. "I just wanted to get that out in the open."

"Okay," I nod calmly.

While inside, I feel like I am dying. How many times has he had to say that today? Lay his grief bare for everyone to see. It's awful. And it is all my fault .

Ritchie said he'd kill my family if I didn't behave. And stubborn, arrogant ass that I am, I didn't listen. And my great-granddaughter and her family paid the price.

"The kids are doing remarkably well. They have a great therapist. The job isn't anything to do with that."

I nod my understanding. "And how are you doing?"

He blinks at me again. His body even recoils a little. A tiny, rueful smile tugs on the corners of his generous lips.

"Not so good."

Now I'm the one startling in surprise. That was a brutally honest answer. But I did ask. And I'm a stranger, a safe space. Someone he thinks he is never going to see again, because I'm pretty sure he is not going to give me the job by his own volition.

He visibly rouses himself and picks up a piece of paper.

"So you don't have any professional experience, but you helped raise your baby

sister?”

She was my daughter. I want to say it. It is on the tip of my tongue. I long to claim her, to tell the world that she existed and that she was wonderful. But I can't. I look nineteen. Early twenties at most and that is shockingly young to have kids these days.

I want to come across as normal and unremarkable as possible. As well as avoiding awkward questions about where my child is. So, sister is the lie I am going with.

My Barbara has to stay dead and buried. As much as it pains me. But this is all so I can take care of her great-grandkids, so I think she would forgive me.

“Yeah, that’s right,” I say with a smile.

Morgan doesn't reply. His eyes look over the piece of paper in his hand. My shitty resume, I assume. I only threw enough of a one together to get an interview. My plan always was to get my foot in the door and then use my powers to get him to give me the job.

Except I wasn't expecting to feel guilty about it. Goddammit!. This is awful. Stupid conscience. Dumb morals. What good have they ever done me?

Morgan sighs heavily and places my resume down. Then he pinches the bridge of his nose.

“The job is yours, if you want it.”

His softly spoken words drift around the study. My mind replays them. Several times.

“What?” I splutter, because I must have misheard him.

“You’re hired.”

I stare helplessly at him. He looks at me and smiles. A nice smile, even though it doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

I haven’t used any glamor. He has to have had dozens of far more suitable candidates than me. What the hell is going on?

“You are a man,” he says.

Well, no shit. Ten out of ten for observation.

He shrugs. “It feels less like replacing her.”

His gaze drops to the floor and his shoulders droop. For the second time today, my long dead heart beats. Fuck me. My great-granddaughter had excellent taste in men. Truly phenomenal. Her husband is hotter than hell and so damn lovely it is unreal.

I can feel his love for her. It is a palpable thing hanging in the air between us. He loves her. Misses her. Morgan mourns his wife with an intensity that smolders.

The knowledge settles my determination. I’m going to take this job. I’m going to look after the kids, but now I’m also going to look after him, the very best I can. Because, lord knows he deserves it. And it is the very least I can do. A shitty pathetic gesture towards making amends for this terrible thing I have done.

And while I’m doing so, I need to keep my heart dead. I absolutely cannot fall for this man. Nope. It cannot happen. For so very many reasons. I don’t deserve him, for a start.

But most of all, because his heart is already taken.

I take a deep breath and seal my resolve into my soul.

Then I smile. “When do you want me to start?”

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Chapter two

Morgan

The alarm clock rings out and scatters my dreams. I fumble for the off button and stare blearily at the ceiling. Then it hits me like a sledgehammer. Just like it has every morning for over a year.

Jennifer is dead.

The familiar ache in my chest builds and swells. Heavy and all-consuming. Grief is such a bitch. And I am so tired of it. As awful as that sounds, it is the undeniable truth. I'm so very tired. If grief would bring her back, I'd gladly suffer it. For eternity. But nothing can bring my wife back, and I'm weary of this constant pain. It is a weight that presses down on everything, pushing any happiness away and even physically slowing down my movements.

I rub my hands over my face and try to focus on what I need to do today. Think of the practicalities. One breath, then the next. Then a minute. Followed by an hour. And slowly, slowly, you get through the day.

Ned is meeting the kids today.

The thought of that nearly makes me smile. It is a glimmer of something to look forward to. He is an odd one, for sure. But I think he will be good for the kids. Someone different and new will be refreshing for all of us. Someone young, full of energy and not weighted with grief, could very well be a lifeline for us all.

I like that he didn't gush with false platitudes. He simply said 'okay', when I explained our situation. He said it calmly. With no fuss. But his eyes showed how much he cares. I saw true and vivid pain in them. I suspect he has lost someone too. And I much prefer empathy to sympathy. Someone who has trod this long and arduous path and come out the other side, could be such a boon. A guiding light.

I heave myself out of bed and head to the kitchen to make the kids' breakfast and myself some coffee. I really hope the kids like him, and this all works out. Because the final say, as always, is theirs.

Robotically, I go through the motions of making coffee. Despite the novelty and distraction of the children meeting Ned, I wonder if today is going to be a good day or a bad one?

It's funny, in a strange way, how people think time heals everything. They expect grief to be this linear process, a journey with stages you move through, and at some point, you're supposed to arrive at the 'end' and feel whole again. But grief doesn't work like that. At least, not in my experience. It comes in waves, unpredictable and relentless. Some days are better than others, but even on the best days, it's always there in the background, lurking like a shadow. That weight of loss has become a permanent companion, and though I try not to let it define me, it's a part of me now.

I've tried, over the past year, to make things feel normal again for the kids. But the truth is, there's no going back to the way things were before. Every routine, every moment, feels tinged with Jennifer's absence. Her laugh, the way she'd reach out and touch my arm when she wanted to make a point. The sound of her voice as she sang lullabies to the children. The silence left behind is deafening.

Ned is a chance, though, for a new chapter. Not a replacement for Jennifer, not even close, but maybe a way to help the kids see that life can still be good. Different, but good.

I sip my coffee, trying to shake off the melancholy as I prepare for his arrival. The house is quiet except for the soft hum of the refrigerator. I should savor it before the kids wake up.

It feels strange to think about letting someone new into our lives, but the children deserve something positive. They deserve more than just a father who's barely holding it together.

A couple of hours later, and I'm standing by the front door, grinning like an idiot because a car has turned into our driveway. Ned is on time. He's here, and he hasn't changed his mind.

He parks really close and then bolts out of his car. His shoulders are hunched, and he's acting like it's pouring with rain. I glance up at the sky. It's cloudy, but there is no rain.

Ned skids past me into the entrance hall. His shoulders relax, and he stops hunching.

"Hi," he says as he looks up at me.

He's every bit as cute as I remember from the interview. I wasn't imagining that. He's all big brown eyes and well-defined cheekbones, with a mop of dark hair. Actually, in this light, I can see flecks of gold and green in his gorgeous eyes. Just like Jennifer had.

I shake my head to clear it. I really need to stop seeing her everywhere. It's ridiculous. She's gone, and she's not coming back.

"The kids are in the playroom. Let me introduce you," I say.

He nods, and his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. Is he nervous? That's strangely

adorable. I don't think my kids are that terrifying. But I guess that's something he needs to decide for himself.

I turn and lead the way. I don't understand why he wants this job. He's young and absolutely stunning. Looks like that could get him anything he wanted. An acting career, a modeling job. A sugar daddy. Why on earth he's choosing to be a nanny is beyond me. But I'm grateful that he's here, whatever his reasons.

I open the door to the playroom and grimace. It was looking nice ten minutes ago. And the kids were looking fairly presentable. I'd put time and effort into both because I didn't want Ned to think I was completely hopeless.

The kids pause their playing and stare up at Ned. A newcomer entering their domain. Fresh blood.

"Noah, Oscar, Lottie," I say as I point to each of my little darlings. "This is Ned. He has come to meet you."

Ned looks completely overwhelmed. He even looks a little pale. He's staring back at the kids intensely. Then he gives them a little awkward wave.

He is such a dork. I love it.

"You're pretty," says Lottie, breaking the silence.

The boys giggle. I wince .

Ned drops down onto his knees, right beside Lottie. "So are you, sweetheart."

Lottie thrusts her toy truck at him, and he takes it with a smile.

“You look just like...” he pauses suddenly and swallows audibly. “A princess!”

Lottie grins at him, all toothy and gummy.

“What about me?” demands Noah.

“And me!” adds Oscar.

Ned smiles. A true smile that lights up his eyes. It’s dazzling to behold. He looks like he thinks this is the best day of his life, and he’s never been happier.

“You look like a brave knight,” he says to Noah.

Then he turns to Oscar. “And you look like a scary dragon!”

Oscar roars loudly in delight, and Noah runs to a toy box and grabs a lightsaber. Then he waves it around his head.

I shake my head fondly and quietly back out of the room. I’ll leave them to it, since today is all about getting to know each other. I won’t leave Ned alone with my kids until I’m one hundred percent sure they’re comfortable with him. Which, judging how that just went, will not take long at all.

In the meantime, I’ll lurk in my home office and try to get some paperwork done. It’s only down the hall, so I’ll be able to hear if something goes wrong.

The house is unnervingly still, but not in a bad way. There’s a sense of peace I haven’t felt in months. Maybe it’s because for the first time in a long while, I’m not alone in managing everything. I pause with my hand on the handle to my office .

That’s strange. My mental image of something going wrong is Ned needing rescuing,

not me needing to protect my kids from the stranger.

I'm not usually so quick to trust. Especially when my children are involved. I wonder what it is about Ned that has won me over so quickly?

There's something about him. An unspoken understanding, maybe, a quiet acknowledgment of pain. It's as though he carries his own scars, hidden just beneath the surface, and in that, there's an odd comfort. I don't feel judged, and I don't feel pitied. For the first time in a long while, I don't feel like I'm drowning alone.

I step into my office and let the door click softly shut behind me. Whatever it is about Ned, I'm glad for it. I'm looking forward to having him in our lives, and it feels damn nice to have something to feel hopeful about.

For once, the future is looking a little brighter. I can't wait.

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Chapter three

Ned

“ Y ou were paid to do a job, so man up, have some pride and bloody well do it properly!” I snap.

The plumber is staring at me in horror, but I don't give a shit. If he had done what he was supposed to, I wouldn't need to be having words. And I don't think he is being incompetent, which would be somewhat forgivable. He is just downright frigging lazy and thought he could get away with it.

He opens his mouth to say something, but I don't want to hear any of his excuses. So I continue with my tirade. As I'm doing so, the front door opens. Morgan is home.

My words falter, but a human would not have heard him. So I gamely continue on. Even though I'm no longer paying attention to the workshy workman. All my focus is on the sound of soft footsteps jogging up the stairs. Every evening for the whole week, it has been the same. Morgan comes home and goes straight up to see his kids. I don't think it is because he doesn't trust me. He is simply a man who loves his kids and misses them when he has to spend the day away from them .

Soft footsteps come back down the stairs. The kids are asleep. He has given each of them a forehead kiss and now he is coming to see what all the commotion is about.

But he is being awfully quiet. A human still would not have heard him. So I have to keep on being my true grumpy self. Damn it! Up to now, I've been on my very best

behavior. Morgan thinks I'm charming and sweet.

"Everything alright?" asks Morgan from behind me.

My stomach does something strange. He didn't spy on me. He announced his presence. He had one second to see me arguing with the plumber and he immediately took my side.

"Everything is fine!"

Crap. That came out harsher than I intended. I meant to reassure him that I had it all under control, but now I just sound like a grumpy asshole.

"George here was just leaving, but he is coming back first thing in the morning to redo his fix on the leak."

George hastily agrees to this plan and then scurries away as if the hounds of hell are nipping at his ass.

I turn to face Morgan and find him regarding me with a wry smile. I swallow uneasily. Not only was I a bad tempered shit, it was to someone who is twice my size and appears to be twice my age. It's such a strange disconnect. Because forty-year-olds look like babies to me, and I could snap any human like a twig.

But to mundanes, I still look like a young man. A short, slender one. They see a twink. Not a ninety-nine-year-old man who fought in the war and feels older than dirt.

"Should have guessed you were a firecracker," says Morgan with a soft, tender smile

.

My heart beats. Gosh. I may be an old man, but being a vampire has certainly given me the libido of a teenager. I'm not at all immune to tall, dark and handsome men smiling at me.

"Thanks for dealing with that for me. It's not at all in the job description, so I really appreciate it."

I nod. "No problem."

I hate that he has brought up that he sees me as just his employee, but there is nothing I can do about that. It is the truth, after all.

He hesitates for a moment, and I wait with bated breath.

"Would you like a drink?"

Oh heaven help me. The answer should be no. I need to say no. I have to flee.

"That sounds great!" I say.

Damnit! Where is my backbone? My will power? Why oh why am I so flipping weak and feeble? Spending time with Morgan is a terrible idea. But I am powerless to resist. So I follow him meekly to his study.

"How were the kids?" he asks.

"Great!" I gush far too enthusiastically.

For fuck's sake. I am a human. A young one. Working as a nanny. I am fond of kids. I'm not an old man, absolutely delighted to get to know his great-great grandkids. If I mess this up and get fired, my life might as well be over. I'll have nothing left to live

for.

“Their behavior was great!” I amend lamely. “And they went to bed with no fuss at all.”

Morgan raises one eyebrow. “Did you ensorcell them or something?”

I almost say, ‘No,’ sulkily, because I did not glamor them. I simply used my vampire strength to play with them energetically all day and tired them out the good old-fashioned way.

“I wish I had that power,” I manage to say instead.

Morgan chuckles, and the crisis is averted.

“What would you like to drink?” he asks.

“Whiskey,” I reply.

He nods and drifts over to his drinks cabinet. I listen to the quiet sounds of clinking glass and pouring liquid. It’s soothing. Almost homely.

Morgan walks back to me and hands me a cut-glass tumbler. I take it very carefully, ensuring that our fingers do not touch. I don’t think I could cope with that.

I knock back a mouthful of my drink, and flavors explode over my tongue.

“Flipping heck! I didn’t expect you to crack open the good stuff!” I splutter.

Morgan gives me a quizzical look.

“Dalmore?” I ask.

He smiles, “Dalmore twenty-five. You know your whiskey.”

I return his smile and take a far more appreciative sip of the expensive whiskey. God, it is perfection. Full of depth and character.

“Most young people don’t like whiskey,” says Morgan.

I snort in agreement. Ain’t that the truth. The younger generations are all Philistines.

Oh shit. I look up at him in horror. “I...um...my uncle got me into it.”

Morgan simply nods. “Your uncle sounds like a good man.”

“He was,” I reply absentmindedly as I stare at Morgan’s incredibly handsome face. I can’t see any suspicion or alarm. It looks like I got away with it.

“Is he no longer with us?”

I blink and try to focus on the conversation. Hells, my uncle has been dead for eighty years.

“Umm...no, sadly not.”

“And the rest of your family?” His dark eyes are so kind. I could fall into them forever.

“All gone,” I say. “It is just me left.”

And the three children sleeping upstairs.

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

His sincerity is going to break me. Here is a man struggling with his own immense grief, yet still capable of feeling genuine concern for a practical stranger.

“It’s fine, it was years ago.”

Apart from Jennifer. But I didn’t know her. I had been trying to learn my lesson and stay away from my only living descendent. Barbara died of TB far too young. Her daughter Susan was taken by cancer when little Jennifer was only twenty. My bloodline seemed cursed and the grief was too much to bear.

I stayed away from Jennifer. But I caused her death. So now I have to make sure nothing ever happens to her children. It is going to be the only good thing to ever come out of being turned. I am going to be able to protect my family. Like I always should have done.

“I don’t think grief gives a shit about the years,” Morgan says. Then he downs his drink.

I sigh sadly. “No. You are right. It doesn’t. ”

I still miss Barbara. I miss my wife. I miss friends who died in the war. So very many years have passed, but they have barely taken the edge off the pain.

The perceived wisdom for vampires is that things get easier once you age out of a normal human lifespan. I’m turning one hundred in eighteen months time, so I guess I’ll soon be finding out if it is true.

In the meantime, I feel like an ancient fossil. Lingering after everyone I knew has gone and the world I lived in no longer exists. Everything has changed. The very

language has evolved. I really don't know how older vampires do it. Maybe it's something you get used to.

"Do you want to watch a film?" asks Morgan.

I open my mouth, but before I can say anything, he continues.

"No, sorry. Forget I said anything. You have better things to do than keep an old man company."

Old man? Who is he kidding? He is barely forty-five years old. Idiot. That's not old. That's barely beginning.

"I imagine you have a boyfriend or girlfriend to be getting back to?"

I blink at him while my thoughts whirl. My oh my, how times have changed. I love that he can ask that so casually. And I'm amused he went with boyfriend first. I don't blame him. I've always looked a little too girly. People have always known what I am. It's why Nell and I got married. To cover for one another.

"No, there is no one waiting for me."

A flash of something in Morgan's eyes makes my heart beat. Damn it. He wasn't glad to hear that. I'm projecting. The poor man is grieving for his wife. He is not looking for anything. I should have simply invented a boyfriend. Then I'd be forced to keep myself in check.

"But I do have to go!" I blurt. "My housemates are doing a dinner!"

He nods his understanding. "Sounds lovely."

My stomach swoops. “See you tomorrow!”

Now I’m running. Actually running. Grabbing my coat and heading for the door as if the house is on fire. It is for my own good though. And Morgan’s.

I’m leaving him to have dinner all alone in a silent house with only sleeping children for company. And it truly is for the best.

If I stay, I’ll get silly ideas and that will lead to all kinds of disasters.

Morgan is my boss. My great-grandson in law. And that is all he can ever be.

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Chapter four

Morgan

Today has been so hard. For absolutely no reason. I hate that grief comes in waves like this. One day I feel as if I can see the shore. Then the next day, out of nowhere, I'm drowning again. All I can do is hope that tomorrow will be a little better.

At least the work part of today is done, and I'll soon be home. I'll be able to kiss the kids and then in a few hours, I can escape into sleep and feel nothing until the morning.

As I turn into my driveway, the house comes into view. It looks like nearly all the lights are on. It's a lighthouse in the dark, guiding me home. My kids are in there. Ned is in there. Everything is going to be okay.

I park the car and quietly let myself into the house. A quick jog up the stairs and I'm in the kids' room. The house is more than big enough for them each to have their own rooms, but they like being all together and I hope it lasts for as long as possible.

I give them each a quick kiss and inhale their small child scent. I miss the way they smelled as babies, so I assume I'll miss this one day as well. So I want to get as much of it while I can.

It is hard to leave them, but it's silly to stay and I can't risk waking them up. So I tiptoe quietly out and go in search of Ned.

I find him in the kitchen, bent over and unloading the dishwasher. Wow! That is an incredible ass. But as soon as the thought crosses my mind, it is extinguished by a tidal wave of guilt.

Jennifer is dead, but she is still my wife. Ned is half my age and my employee. I know my therapist would say that attraction and arousal are normal, healthy human responses. But I'm not there yet. It simply feels like betrayal.

Ned closes the dishwasher door and turns around. A startled laugh bubbles out of me.

“Another makeover from Lottie?”

His brown eyes widen and his hand flies to the sparkly hair clips in his hair. He has the cheekbones to carry the excessive blusher my daughter has painted on him. It looks good, if dramatic. As if he is an eighties pop star and not the victim of a toddler's playing.

“Oh crap, I completely forgot!” he says.

I can't stop grinning. “It looks good.”

Ned flashes me a smile, and suddenly I feel like I've been punched in the gut. Fuck. Something about this light. Those eyes. That smile. He really does look like Jennifer.

“I'll just go wash this off,” he says as he turns and walks away.

I nod to myself in the empty room. What the hell is wrong with me? Have I finally cracked? Am I losing my mind? Why am I still seeing Jennifer everywhere? It makes no sense .

Numbly, I drift out of the kitchen and into the living room. The TV is on mute,

playing Casablanca to itself. A cup of coffee is on the table. Now all I can imagine is Ned sitting here, waiting for me. And it does something strange to my heart.

I don't realize that I'm standing here, staring at the silent room, until Ned comes and joins me.

"Great film," I say in a lame attempt to disguise my odd behavior.

"Yeah," Ned agrees easily. "When it came out, the queues for the cinema were insane."

I turn to him with a quizzical look. "Didn't it come out in 1943?"

His brown eyes widen. "Um...yeah. I was on about a film festival."

"Oh."

He turns back to the TV. "Was it really 1943?"

"Something like that."

"It has aged well."

It is hard not to stare at Ned. Casablanca is a great film. A classic. But it has definitely aged. It looks even older than I feel, and that's saying something.

"Would you like a drink?" I say, instead of quizzing him on his odd opinions on films.

He looks up at me and bites his bottom lip. I can see his inner battle reflected in his eyes. I'm pleased that part of him wants to stay in my company.

“I’d love one,” he breathes out on a soft exhale.

I nod and head over to my drinks cabinet. My hand automatically goes to the everyday whisky, but sod it. Saving stuff for special occasions is just a waste. Life has taught me that .

I pour Ned a glass of my most expensive whisky. Then I experience a wave of crushing doubt. Maybe he didn’t want to stay because he enjoys my company. Maybe he simply likes my whisky.

I grimace at my dark thought. Ned is not so shallow. I’m being an asshole. And even if he is only staying for my drinks collection, what do I care? I still get to enjoy the pleasure of his company.

I hand him his drink and he takes it with another smile. Then he sniffs it carefully. His eyebrows rise.

“Cracking out the good stuff again?”

“Why not?” I shrug.

I watch, utterly enchanted, as he takes a small sip and savors it. His eyes flutter closed and a small sound of pleasure pours out of him.

I cough. “Can you guess what it is?”

“This is a Glenfiddich,” Ned says with wide eyes and a deeply impressed expression.

A smile stretches across my face. Big enough that I can feel it. I have no idea why I am so ridiculously pleased, but I am.

“Correct again. 1937 Speyside single malt.”

“Nearly as old as...Casablanca,” says Ned.

I laugh. A proper laugh. One that moves my belly. Wow, it has been a long time since that has happened.

“How the hell can you afford this?” Ned asks in a tone of wistful amazement.

I shrug as I take my own sip. “Jennifer’s great-grandad turned out to be filthy rich and left her a heap of money. You should have seen our old house. We had twenty-four-hour staff, security, and everything. But then there was a tax issue and most of it went. But not all. ”

Ned is staring at me with the strangest look. I can’t decipher it. Horror? Dismay? Whatever it is, it seems to be making him deeply uncomfortable.

“You’ve been through a lot,” he finally says, and I have to look away from the compassion in his eyes.

I swirl my drink to buy myself some time. “After losing Jennifer. Losing some money didn’t seem like a big deal. At all.”

I risk a peek at Ned and find him looking utterly crestfallen.

“But the business I started with help from her inheritance is doing well, so it is all good!” I say cheerfully.

Ned smiles and nods, but there is still a stricken look in his eyes. It’s not sympathy, thank heavens. It almost looks like guilt. But that can’t be right. Jennifer’s death has nothing to do with Ned.

“Shall we watch the rest of the film?” I ask.

I’m clutching at straws here, but I need a distraction. Anything to get this conversation and mood out of the dark pit it has fallen into.

Ned nods and we end up sitting on the sofa, side by side. With our legs nearly touching.

Ned picks up the remote and turns the sound on. Then he settles back comfortably.

This is nice. So very nice. Except I am now realizing how touch starved I am. My entire attention is focused on the one lonely inch separating my knee from Ned’s. I’d give anything for that distance to close and to simply feel the heat of another human’s body.

I hug the kids as much as they will tolerate, but I cannot remember the last time I touched an adult. And I’m not even thinking about in a sexual way. Just plain old human contact.

Wow. That is so tragic. Another mental note for something to talk to my therapist about.

I take another sip of my drink and pretend to be engrossed in the film. Damn, this whisky is good, and damn was watching the film a brilliant idea. I’m getting to spend time with Ned without having to scramble my brains for normal sounding conversation. Even I can manage not to be weird, when all I have to do is sit here.

Another sip of whisky glides down my throat. Its fire heats my belly with a warm glow. Oh shit. I think I forgot to eat again today. Oh well, I’ll grab a sandwich once Ned has gone. Or heat up the leftovers he has probably popped in the fridge for me. He is such a sweetie. Doing stuff for me is not in his job description, but that never

stops him.

I down the rest of the drink. I swear I can feel it in my veins. It is making my limbs heavy and causing me to sink into the sofa. This is nice.

My leg moves. It brushes against Ned's. The touch feels like a zing throughout my body. I sigh happily and let the film take me far, far away from reality. I'm not Morgan anymore, I'm Rick Blaine, a jaded bar owner and main character.

Suddenly Ned jumps to his feet.

"Don't fucking touch me!" he snarls.

I stare up at him as my heart pounds. The palm of my hand tingles. Oh shit, I put my hand on his thigh.

Ned's face is very pale, and his eyes are enormous. His breaths are coming in short, rapid bursts .

My stomach roils with cold horror. Oh fuck. This is far more than outrage at your sleazeball of a boss getting handsy.

I carefully put my drink down, then I raise my hands in surrender.

"I'm so sorry Ned."

I'm not going to insult him with a lame excuse. Saying that I didn't mean anything by it, that I forgot where I was, or that the whisky has gone to my head, is all pathetic. None of it is going to make this any better.

Ned takes a big shuddery breath. "Please don't fire me."

What the actual fuck? That's what is going through his head? My poor sweet boy.

"Ned, the fault is mine. I'm not going to fire you."

He takes another deep breath. His relief is almost palpable. But there is still a frantic look in his eyes. A wild animal caught in a trap, thrashing helplessly against impending death.

"I know you didn't mean... I know you wouldn't." He shudders. "I'm sorry I freaked out."

I stare at him. I hate this. I hate it so much. I hate that someone has hurt this lovely young man so very badly. I wish I could hunt them down and give them what they deserve.

"I'm sorry I freaked you out," I say as gently as I can.

Ned winces and closes his eyes. Oh shit. I'm such an idiot. I hate sympathy. I shouldn't go flinging it around. I should have known that Ned would not appreciate it.

"I've gotta go," says Ned, still with his eyes closed.

I nod my understanding even though he can't see me.

"Are you going to be okay? Will one of your flatmates be home?"

He shouldn't be all alone when he is this upset and rattled. I can't bear the thought of it. I wish I could be the one to comfort him, but I'm the monster who has unsettled him.

“Yeah,” Ned says weakly.

Then he turns and leaves. I sit uselessly on the sofa and listen to the sound of his car driving away until I can’t hear a thing. He has gone and I’m the one who is all alone.

Oh Ned. Sweet Ned. Why is the world so cruel and unfair? How could something so hideous have happened to him? And how is he still so lovely? There truly is no justice in the world.

I take a deep breath and run my hands over my face. I need to treat Ned with the respect that he deserves. I need to keep my distance. Like I should have been doing in the first place. The last thing he needs is his middle-aged boss drooling over him and adding to his trauma.

His workplace should be a safe place.

From now on, I’m going to keep things strictly professional.

It is the way it has to be.

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Chapter five

Ned

One year later

“Ned, wake up!”

Lello’s voice lances through my brain.

“Wake up! Wake up!”

I groan and roll over. “You have a mate to pester now. You can leave me alone.”

“He has gone out with Brodie to find parts for the pool pump, and I want to make cookies with my BFF!”

“I’m not your BFF,” I grumble into my pillow even though it is pointless. Lello decided in the harem that I was, explained what it meant, and that’s been the end of that. I’ve literally never had any say in the matter.

“Yes you are, silly billy. Come on, up, up. You don’t want to waste your day off, do you?”

I turn my head and open one bleary eye to glare at the annoying little kelpie and to tell him in no uncertain terms that spending the day in bed is the perfect way to spend my day off, but as soon as his bright blue eyes and beaming grin come into focus, the

words wither on my lips.

“Fine,” I sigh heavily.

Lello squeals in excitement, and it is hard to fight my own grin. Being a soft bastard is one thing, being blatant about it is quite another.

I roll out of bed, throw my robe on and follow Lello down to the kitchen. He skips ahead of me and starts pulling the blinds down, even though the autumn sky is cloudy and not too bright.

“Good morning Pink, Good Morning Jade,” he all but sings as he yanks on the blind cords with far more force than is necessary.

The two poor sods look up from their cups of coffee with half-awake expressions. Like deer in the headlights. I know the feeling.

I sigh. “Lello, why don’t you go hang out with Gray, while us old farts have coffee and wake up?”

Not that Pink or Jade are old like me, but they have definitely been cured of the exuberance of youth. Unlike Lello.

The kelpie whirls to face me. “Good idea! He gets up every morning to watch the sunrise. He is not a lazy sleepy head like you guys!”

He dances off while singing softly. Presumably in search of the demon.

I stagger over to the coffee machine. Thank heavens for small mercies.

Behind me, Jade huffs out a sigh of relief. “I love Lello, but he is too much in the

morning.”

Pink chuckles in agreement. “I’ll always be in awe of him for being so cheerful, even in the harem. I don’t know how he did it.”

My chest tightens painfully. Pink had been the very opposite of cheerful during our slavery. He had given up. I’ll never forget the look in his eyes the moment he decided to sacrifice himself to save us all. I owe him a debt that can never be repaid. And I don’t even know how to express it.

So I do what I always do. Ignore it. Pretend it doesn’t exist. Just like my feelings for Morgan.

I tighten my grip on my coffee cup as the all too familiar waves of emotion wash over me. Longing. Pining. Regret. I’m such a sappy bastard. It’s pathetic. This crush has gone on long enough, it is high time to be rid of it.

Ever since that night I freaked out, Morgan has been nothing but pleasantly professional. It is clear I burned my bridges there.

Sometimes I catch a glimmer in his eye, but that is probably my imagination. Or simply plain old lust. It feels big-headed to admit it, but I am good looking. Attractive enough that Ritchie wanted me for his harem.

And when I look at the others, it is clear that the sicko had high standards. Hells, even my nightmare of a maker was drawn to my looks. The sick fucker wanted a cute boy to fuck for all eternity.

So, all in all, it is hardly surprising that Morgan sometimes desires my body. But I’m so tired of it. I don’t want to be an object of lust anymore. I want to be loved. Yet here I am, stuck looking like this for all eternity. All because I had the shitty luck to

cross paths with a vampire in the precise year that genetics and the flush of youth conspired to make me highly desirable .

Now I'll never get to be the withered, tired old man that I feel I am inside.

I sit down at the table with Jade and Pink. Hells, I'm in a whiny mood today. If I could make feeling sorry for myself an Olympic sport, I'd win a gold medal.

As I bring my coffee cup to my lips, a cold shiver runs over me. An icy feeling that creeps over my body. Ah ha. That's it. That's what is wrong with me. I need to feed. Being hungry always makes me moody.

I guess I should be happy with the good timing. It is my day off. Which means slipping off to feed is not going to be a problem. I just need to hit someone up on Grindr. Glamor them. Feed. Then run away, leaving them feeling dazed and incredibly horny. But hey, they have Grindr, so I'm not going to feel bad about that.

I hear Red's footsteps a few moments before the kitchen door flings open, but I still jump to my feet. Red's hair is all over the place and there is a frantic look in his eyes. He is clutching one of the cushions from the living room to his chest.

"You alright, Red?" I ask.

He nods distractedly, walks right up to me, and sniffs my shoulder. His fingers trace lightly over my robe.

"Fluffy," he murmurs.

I look at Pink and Jade for help, but they just stare back at me. With very carefully blank expressions. I think they know something, but for some reason they aren't sharing. Well, screw them.

“Can I have it?” asks Red.

“My robe?”

He nods feverishly .

What the hell is going on? I have pajamas on, and it is not like I really feel the cold anyway. So I shrug out of my velvet housecoat and hand it to Red.

He all but snatches it from me. Then he turns and runs out of the kitchen.

I stare in utter bemusement at the empty spot where he was just standing.

“He is nesting,” whispers Pink.

Oh. Oh shit. Suddenly everything makes sense. Sort of.

“I thought omegas didn’t nest until they were older?” I ask.

“That’s why I’m whispering,” says Pink. “We don’t think he has realized yet.”

Jade lets out a quiet groan. “Do you think Brodie is going to be able to cope with Red’s heat? It’s going to be more intense now that he is nesting. Can a human help with that?”

Pink sips his coffee. “Brodie is a healer, I’m sure he’ll figure something out. He’s always been able to help Red through his heats before.”

Oh hell’s balls. The next few days are sure going to be interesting. My dreams of a peaceful life have never felt further away.

Going out to hunt actually feels peaceful. It is a good escape from the drama unfolding at the house. Not that drama is anything new. There is always something going on.

First it was Lello and all the drama with Carter, and then his herd trying to steal him. Then it was Gray finding his way back to sanity and settling with Mal. Followed by Blue and Sammy being an absolute pair of idiots.

It has been quite the year. But that's what living with six young men and assorted mates is going to get you. I'm clearly a glutton for punishment. Home is one disaster after the next. Work is full of pining for someone I can never have.

Compared to all that, feeding is simple. Straightforward. Peaceful.

I walk around the corner and the hotel I'm heading to comes into view. I stare at it for a moment, then I check my messages. Yep, this is the right place.

Wow, WellHung45 has expensive taste. Not that I'm complaining.

I slip inside the hotel and quickly navigate my way to the room number Mr. WellHung45 has given me. It is depressing how good I am at finding my way around hotels. All this experience from Grindr hookups and I'm not even getting any action. It is simply a straightforward way to get a stranger to allow me near their neck.

At least tonight's victim has a lovely set of abs. And a glorious happy trail. Maybe I'll admire the aesthetics in the flesh before I feed. It is not as if I feel like doing anything else. Well, only with one, very out-of-bounds person.

I knock on the door of room 303 and plaster on my most charming smile. The door swings open and I freeze. Then I blink. Then I blink again.

Morgan cannot be standing in front of me. I'm seeing things because I was just thinking of him and now my mind is glitching. I blink again, but he is still here. With a look of absolute horror slowly consuming his handsome features .

“You’re PowerBottomAtRockBottom?” he wheezes.

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

“Where are the kids?” I snap.

He startles and then rouses himself. “With a babysitter. From a very reputable agency.”

“You have a nanny! You don’t need flipping strangers taking care of the kids!”

Morgan swallows. His Adam’s apple bobs. “It’s your night off.”

My hands go to my hips. “And you couldn’t wait?”

“I didn’t want you to know,” he says softly as his eyes flutter closed.

Damn, he looks good. Navy blue henley and dark jeans. I only ever see him in suits. This casual look suits him. Really suits him.

Angrily I shake my head in a futile attempt to clear it. “How often do you do this?”

He winces and doesn’t open his eyes. “Would you believe me if I said this was the first time?”

I stare at him helplessly. I swear I can hear sincerity in his voice but surely I am only hearing what I want to hear.

“I’m not in the grave yet,” he continues. “I need...”

He trails off and I jump in. “And a man feels less like replacing her?”

His eyes snap open and cloud with hurt. Deep and visceral. Fuck. I’m such an asshole.

“Marrying Jennifer didn’t stop me from being bisexual,” he says, with far more calm than I deserve.

Our eyes lock. Time freezes. He sees my apology. I see the growing question in his eyes. We are both here for the same thing. Or so he thinks.

Tension thickens the air between us.

He is warring with the idea that he could still invite me in, and damn is my heart fluttering at that. I’m tempted, oh lord am I tempted.

But I’m not feeding from Morgan. I’m not biting him and leaving him even more horny than he already is. It is stupid, but I hate the idea of him hooking up with someone else and the thought of him being high on vampire venom while doing it, makes me hate it even more.

Of course, I could feed and then stay.

I swallow audibly. I haven’t had sex since I was freed from the harem. I’m not sure I’m brave enough yet. And sappy old fart that I am, I don’t think my heart could take a hookup with Morgan. I want to make love to the man. I don’t want to be fucked by him.

And none of this, absolutely none of this, is anything I can tell him.

So there is only one thing I can do.

“Let’s...let’s never speak of this again,” I croak.

The light in his eyes dims, and he nods.

Somehow, I turn and start walking away. My body feels robotic and not at all like my own. Then a sudden thought hits me like a thunderclap and I’m whirling around to face Morgan again.

“Delete the photos I sent you!”

Morgan blushes. A beautiful crimson coloring of his cheeks. “Likewise.”

I nod, turn, and this time my body is working, and I can flee. I reach the outside and gulp in a breath of fresh air. Like hell am I deleting those photos. Now I know they are Morgan’s, they are my prized possessions. I’m going to be staring at them every night before I go to sleep. Even though I understand that it is going to be a form of self-harm. I’m going to be torturing myself. But I’m not going to have the willpower to stop.

But that’s a problem for later.

I sigh heavily as I open up Grindr on my phone. Right now, I still need to feed.

As the youngsters say, fuck my life.

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Chapter six

Morgan

My alarm clock went off ages ago. I really should be getting out of bed. But I'm just lying here staring at the photos Ned sent me. Except he didn't send them to me, Morgan, his boss. He sent them to WellHung45, a stranger he wanted to hook up with.

Therefore, I should do the honorable thing and delete them. They were never meant for me. So I should not be drooling over them now.

But I'm not strong enough. I cannot resist. I am a weak and despicable creature.

His face isn't in any of the shots, but my mind is having no trouble at all adding it to the images. I thought the young man who agreed to meet up with me was stunning and I could not believe my good luck. Now I know it's Ned I'm looking at, I'm completely blown away.

Ned's body is beautiful. Incredible. Even hotter than I ever imagined. And that's saying something.

An all too familiar, prickling and uncomfortable feeling of shame itches along my skin. What kind of monster imagines their young employee naked? And then keeps the photos they were given by mistake ?

I'm going straight to hell. There is no doubt about that. I am a doomed soul.

Ned has been abused in the past. He doesn't need any more predators in his life. That's why I've spent the last year wistfully admiring, but keeping my distance.

It was the right thing to do. I need to be proud of it. And I need to keep on doing it. It is what any sane, decent person would do. I used to think I was such a person. I'm not so sure now. The evidence is certainly stacking up against me.

For a start, feeling giddy because he liked my body when he didn't know who it belonged to, is unhinged behavior. I should not be thrilled that he can appreciate older men. It is irrelevant information.

And I definitely should not be incensed that he is on Grindr. It is hypocritical for a start. Nevermind the absurdity of the rest of my mixed up and messy emotions.

What I should be, is happy that he has healed enough to be seeking out random hook ups. It is perfectly normal behavior for a young gay man. This strange burning jealousy I'm feeling is utterly uncalled for. Ned is not mine. And he never will be.

I need to get that fact into my thick skull. Tattoo it on my face, if it would help.

And right now, I need to get out of bed and begin my day. Starting with a cold shower. I can't lie in bed and angst all day. I'm not a teenager. I have work to do.

My original plan was to work from home today, but after the events of last night, it is so very tempting to slink out of the house to avoid Ned. Even though I know that avoiding the inevitable is only going to make everything even more awkward. So no. I'm going to be brave and stick to my original plan.

The sooner Ned and I see each other and get over the uncomfortable cringeyness, the sooner we can put this all behind us and get back to normal. Well, normal for us at least.

In the meantime, I'm going to have a cold shower. A very cold shower.

Time for more coffee. This spreadsheet is not making any sense and I think caffeine is the only thing that could possibly help.

As I get up from my chair, my back protests. Wow. I really am getting old. I always knew I would. Of course I did. I just didn't expect it to happen so damn quickly. One minute I was young and carefree, then I blinked, and now I'm a middle-aged widower with three kids. It is a little disconcerting.

I walk carefully towards the kitchen. The last thing I need is to put my back out. As I make my way down the hall, I hear all sorts of commotion coming from the bottom of the stairs.

"I want my blue trainers!" says Oscar. "They make me run faster!"

"I know, sweetie, but we can't find them right now, can we? And we can't be late picking Noah up from school," says Ned.

Is it that time already? Gosh. The day really has run away from me .

I step out into the entrance hall and find Ned, Oscar, and Lottie by the front door. Ned has thick dark shades on, a baseball cap with a wide brim, and an unopened black umbrella in his hand.

I glance out of the window. The sky is clear blue and the sun is shining brightly. A beautiful September afternoon. The nicest day since Noah started school a few weeks ago.

"Is your lupus playing up?" I ask.

Ned flinches and doesn't look at me. "Yes."

Shit. That's not good. I can't confess to the hours I spent Googling lupus after he told me he had it. But I also can't ignore the knowledge that direct sunlight is going to make his flare up much worse. And I can't bear the thought of that.

"I'll pick up Noah," I say.

Ned bristles. "I can do it!"

"I know you can," I say gently. "But I'd like to pick Noah up anyway. It has been a few days since I have."

Ned's shoulders stay tense and rigid for a few moments. Then they sag.

"If you are sure."

I smile. "I am."

It's not like Ned to give in, and I like that he has. It feels like a victory. Like I have earned his trust. And it seems like a step towards dissipating this horrible awkwardness that is lingering between us.

"Oscar, Lottie, do you want to come with me or stay with Ned?"

"Come with you!" they both squeal while jumping up and down.

Their enthusiasm is contagious and now I'm grinning like a crazy person. My main motivation was to stop Ned from making himself sick, but actually, I could really do with this. Spending time with my children is far more enjoyable than spreadsheets.

“Come on then!” I say as I herd them out of the door and towards the car, grabbing my keys as I go.

I look back over my shoulder and see Ned standing in the doorway. He looks forlorn and all alone. As if we are leaving him behind forever and not just for the school run.

It makes my heart clench. I’ll be back in twenty minutes. I will have to wait until then to check if he is okay. Perhaps our embarrassing encounter last night has unsettled him far more than I have realized? He could be worried that I’m going to fire him, or some nonsense like that.

Getting two kids into the car and buckled into their respective seats takes far longer than it should. I’m terrible at this, while Ned makes it look effortless. I swear he has the patience of a saint. I truly don’t understand how a twenty-year-old is so good with young kids.

By the time I return to the house, having successfully picked up Noah and gotten all three kids back into the car, I’m a frazzled mess. I love my kids and I adore spending time with them, but there is no way I could do this every day by myself. Plenty of people cope as single parents and I admire them so much. It’s pathetic, but I just don’t think I am cut out for it. And that’s okay, because I don’t need to be good at doing it by myself. I have Ned and he is a godsend.

I unlock the front door of the house and the kids barrel past me. I follow them to the kitchen and I’m just in time to glimpse Ned scrubbing ferociously at the sparkling clean counter, before he turns to catch Noah, who has launched himself at him .

I watch as Ned hugs my son, and then gently puts him down. Noah is excitedly rattling off all the events of his day. Ned looks down at him with rapt attention and the biggest, softest smile I have ever seen.

Oh gosh. I can feel my heart actually melting. It is turning to goo. I don't think this is an inappropriate, dirty and sleazy infatuation. I think it is far more than that. I cannot believe it has taken me so long to realize this.

Ned is perfect. In every way. My kids adore him, and everyone says that children are excellent judges of character. And he clearly adores my kids in return.

He is kind and sweet and takes no bullshit.

But most of all, I'd give anything. Absolutely anything, to see him smile at me like that.

Oh fuck. This can't be happening. I cannot fall in love with my nanny. For so very many reasons.

But I have a horrible, sinking feeling that it is far too late to stop it from happening. It is etched in my bones and my fate is sealed.

Oh shit, shit, shit. What the hell am I going to do?

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Chapter seven

Ned

U gh. I can't believe it is time to feed again. Hopefully, this time won't be so eventful. I've blocked WellHung45, and if Morgan makes a new account, well, I know what he looks like naked now. In intricate detail. You could show me any random square inch of his flesh and I'd recognize him instantly.

So, no, last time's disaster is never, ever happening again. And this stupid disappointment I feel at that, can go do one. Why on earth would I want a repeat of that calamity?

Things still aren't back to normal. Every time I turn around, Morgan is staring at me with a strange look in his eyes. I don't think he is going to fire me, because surely he would have done so by now if it was on his mind? But fuck know's what has got into him lately. All I can do about it is try not to ruffle any more of his feathers and wait for this storm to pass.

Tonight, I'm going to feed as quickly as possible and then get the hell home. Comfy slippers and a good book is all I want. By all rights, I should be relaxing in a nursing home without a care in the world. Not still dealing with all the bullshit life brings .

My shoulders hunch. Even though it is nighttime and I'm nearly at the shitty hotel tonight's hookup has chosen. It is a crap part of town, but I'm sticking to my decision to never go to a victim's home. Hotels enable me to think of them as faceless, nameless food sources. It is less personal. It feels safer. And any little thing that

lessens my guilt is something to hang onto.

“Hello, Ned.”

I nearly levitate out of my skin. My feet grind to a halt, and I glare at the vampire who has appeared right in front of me.

Tall. Blond. Thin. Blue eyes. Fancy suit.

Crap. It is Baltazar. Leader of the local flight.

“Hi,” I say warily. What does this fucker want? It can’t be anything good.

“I wanted to check on how you were doing,” he smiles insidiously. “A little youngling, all alone.”

I shudder and try to hide it from his all too knowing eyes. Fucking vampires. Apart from the whole needing to drink blood, and sunlight being a pain in the ass, I feel like an old human. A very old human. Yet to vampires, I am nothing more than a baby. I hate it.

“I’m fine,” I say with gritted teeth.

There is absolutely no point in telling him I’m not alone. I live with what feels like a thousand other people. Paranormal kin. My brothers in all but blood. And their assorted mates. Okay, none of them are vampires, but I’m not short of company.

And then there is Morgan and the kids. A whole other family .

I am not alone. Far from it. But a vampire is not going to see it that way and I’m not going to waste my breath arguing the point.

“Vampires belong in flights.”

His blue eyes are cold. His tone almost emotionless. He is acting as if he doesn't care. But I can sense the threat. He doesn't like that I am not under his rule.

I lick my lips. “The Grandmaster said I didn't need to join a flight.”

“Silas feels sorry for you. Understandably.”

This motherfucker. I really hope that insult was aimed at me and wasn't a sly dig at the Grandmaster. Though, calling him by his first name is giving me doubts. Oh for fuck's sake, the last thing the paranormal world needs is another civil war.

I don't like Silas. He is a necromancer, after all. But he seems to be a decent enough leader. And he helped Lello, so he gets my respect for that.

Add in the fact that he is holding a position of power while everyone knows about his traumatic past, well that is quite something. All in all, Baltazar is being a complete fucking asshat by insinuating that the Grandmaster is giving me leeway as a fellow victim.

But I can't punch the twat in the face. He is like a billion years old or something. Far stronger than me, anyhow. Hitting him will only irritate him.

So I bite back my temper and wait to see what he says next.

He smirks at me. “Though, you are a special case. Killing your maker when so young, is quite something.”

My heart thumps. Then it thumps again. It starts to beat as if I am alive. I can hear my blood moving through the small veins in my ears. It is a surreal and very unnerving

sound.

I stare helplessly up at Baltazar. A deer in the headlights. Too numb and dazzled to escape my impending doom.

Cold fingers trace under my chin. “It can be our little secret.” His head cocks to the side. “You are very pretty. I can see why he chose you.”

My vision blacks out. I can’t see a thing. I’m rooted to the spot. A statue carved of fear. Dread and terror are clawing at me. I’m helpless, so very helpless, and there is no hope.

“Ned!”

There are strong fingers wrapped around my wrist.

“Ned? Calm down. I’m sorry I was such an asshole.”

I blink, and suddenly I can see again. Baltazar’s blue eyes are full of concern and a smattering of shame. I wince and close my eyes again.

“I’m sorry,” whispers Baltazar. “I got a little too carried away with the whole intimidating, powerful flight leader act. I wasn’t thinking.”

I draw in a big, shuddering breath. Habit from when I was alive. Strangely, it is still calming.

“Ned, I may be many things, but a rapist isn’t one of them.”

For fuck’s sake. First, he scares the crap out of me, and then he drowns me with his pity. What a nightmare. Apparently I’m such a pathetic bastard, I can shock old

vampires out of their usual dickhead behavior. Brilliant. Just bloody brilliant.

I open my eyes. Maybe if I'm pathetic enough he will leave me alone and decide he doesn't want a damaged freak of a victim in his flight after all .

He is still staring at me intently, but he lets go of my wrist. I want to leave, but he hasn't dismissed me yet.

"You may feed from my pet. It is the least I can do. You are in no fit state to hunt."

Oh crap. This is an offer I cannot refuse. All the patheticness in the world would not save me from the wrath that insult would cause.

Was this his cunning plan all along? Has he orchestrated this entire situation? I cannot fathom the motive or reason, but it seems likely. Far more believable than him suddenly turning benevolent and kind-hearted.

"Thank you," I say weakly. It is the only thing I can say. He has me trapped. Cornered. Whatever he is up to, I am his powerless pawn.

Baltazar's hand rests on my shoulder. His touch is light, but his strength is unmistakable. He steers me to a nearby alleyway. There is a dark car parked at the very end of it. The vampire clicks his fingers and makes a beckoning gesture.

The car door opens and a human jogs up to us. A big, well-built man somewhere in his mid twenties. His brown eyes stare at Baltazar with utter devotion. He is barely noticing my existence.

"Kneel," says Baltazar. "You are going to feed my friend here."

The human drops to his knees as if his strings have been cut. My stomach rolls.

Addicted humans give me the ick. I'm soft enough and still human enough to feel sorry for them. The thought that in a few hundred years all my humanity will have fallen away and I might be keeping a pet of my own, gives me nightmares .

The pet tilts his head, baring his neck to me. Offering his blood.

My hunger surges at the sight, and my body takes a step towards him.

"Enjoy," drawls Baltazar.

I shudder. Fuck him. This is gross, but I guess it is not much different from what I was going to do to the random guy waiting upstairs in the hotel. At least this poor sod is aware of what is happening.

I step even closer. The fact that this man has to kneel in order for me to be able to reach his neck, is darkly hilarious. I'm really not the suave, tall, dark and handsome vampire of popular myths. No Hollywood director would cast me as one. I don't look the type. I look far more like prey than predator.

Nevertheless, the human's blood is singing to me, and my hunger is rising. There is no point in delaying this. So I take a hold of him and bite.

His blood gushes into my mouth. Hot and coppery. I gulp it down. Fuck, he tastes good. No drugs, alcohol or cigarettes. The clean, vibrant taste of a healthy diet and a young man in his prime. He tastes of youth. Of life. And I drink it all.

As soon as I'm sated. I stop. I remove my lips from his skin and lick the puncture wounds shut. Then I step back away from him.

He is swaying slightly. A dazed, glassy look to his eyes. The scent of his intense arousal is clouding the air. But he isn't even looking at me. His attention is entirely

focused on Baltazar.

The flight leader steps forward and holds out his hand to the kneeling man. He seems to have only eyes for his pet and that is just fine by me. Let him forget me and leave me alone. Maybe all is not lost and all he wanted from me was for me to play a part in his kinky sex games.

“Come on baby, let me take care of you.”

The human lumbers to his feet and follows Baltazar to the car. Doors open and slam. The engine roars to life. Then I’m all alone.

Standing in a dark alleyway and wondering what Morgan would taste like. Does he drink enough good whisky to be flavored by it?

If I drank from him, would he look at me with devotion?

Would he want to be mine?

These questions are consuming me. Burning through my being. I can think of nothing else. I am enslaved by them.

Oh shit. Icy cold horror douses me, bringing me to my senses. I draw in another shaky breath and run my hand through my hair. This is precisely why I have to keep my distance from Morgan. He has to stay my boss and nothing else.

Because he is lovely. And I’m a monster.

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Chapter eight

Morgan

Working from home is lovely. It is comfortable. Convenient. That's why I've done it every day this week. It's got absolutely nothing to do with wanting to catch glimpses of Ned during the day. Or having the pleasure of hearing his voice drifting through the walls while I'm battling admin tasks.

Nothing to do with that at all. Nope. I'm a grown, sensible man. With responsibilities. I don't go around behaving like a teenager with their first crush.

I sigh heavily and run my hands over my face. Who am I kidding? I can't even fool myself with this nonsense. Denying the truth will not help the situation.

What the hell am I going to do? I can't fall in love. I just can't. Ned is half my age. He is my employee.

Yes, he is lovely and clever and appreciates good whisky and old films. Yes, he can be delightfully grumpy and assertive. Yes, he is supremely gorgeous.

But I'm sure my feelings are not as innocent as all that. He looks an awful lot like Jennifer. He is wonderful with my kids. He has been here five days a week, in my home, for some of my darkest days. For the whole last year .

He is familiar. Safe. The easy and obvious choice for my broken heart to latch on to. We could fall in love and nothing would be disturbed. The kids would be ecstatic.

Ned would simply stay here instead of leaving at night.

It could all be very simple.

And Ned deserves far, far more than that. He should have someone who worships the ground he walks on, for reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with dead wives, grieving children and convenience.

Because, as much as my heart wants to protest that I am that person, I can never be certain that I am.

So I need to stop this. I know I do. It is obvious and clear, and as plain as the nose on my face.

I know I need to. But I have no idea how. I don't even know where to start.

Ned is firmly tangled around my heart and I haven't a clue how to undo it.

I sigh again and get to my feet. I'm thirsty. A nice cold water will help clear my mind. And if Ned just happens to be in the kitchen cooking dinner for the kids, then that's simply a happy accident.

As I approach the kitchen, I hear the sound of bubbling water. Pasta? I hope it is spaghetti bol. Ned makes a mean spaghetti bolognese.

I find Ned in the kitchen, looking down at his phone. The playroom is just next door and the kids can be heard happily playing. There is indeed a bubbling pot of water on the hob, and a mound of chopped garlic on the counter.

"Looks like you love garlic as much as you love whiskey," I remark .

Ned looks up from his phone and grins. Then he chuckles.

“What’s not to love? Garlic is delicious.”

His hazel eyes are twinkling with merriment. I have no idea what is so funny about garlic, but I can’t help grinning back.

I free myself from his gaze and set about getting myself a glass of water, like I was supposed to be doing. I watch Ned out of the corner of my eye. His attention drops back to his phone and his shoulders tense. He seems a little stressed. It is on the tip of my tongue to ask him what’s wrong. But it is none of my business.

His personal life is his own. He is my employee, not my friend. As much as that hurts.

I glug down my glass of water, and the coldness is refreshing. It is like a reset for my rambling thoughts.

I look around and find that Ned has wandered over to the window and poked his head through the slitted blinds. I have no clue what is so interesting about the driveway and front garden. Especially at nighttime. But Ned seems transfixed.

Wait. Is there someone out there?

I walk over to Ned and peer through the gap he has created. If he is spying on someone, I don’t want to give us away by opening the blind wider.

But there is no one out there. At least, no one I can see.

“What is it?” I whisper as my gaze darts around the dark and hopefully empty garden.

Ned stiffens and then goes utterly still.

Oh crap. I'm looming over him. My hands are on either side of his on the windowsill. My head is above his. My groin is scant inches from his ass. His hair is nearly tickling my nose. I can smell him and he smells amazing.

I need to move. I need to back away. If putting my hand on his knee freaked him out, then this is a disaster. But I'm frozen. Immobile. Rooted to the spot.

I can sense a frisson of fear from Ned. But that's not all. There is tension. Sexual tension. Heavy in the air between us. I can feel it, I swear I can. It is real and I'm not imagining it.

He is not breathing and I don't think I am either. We are close, so very close. A fraction of an inch closer and our bodies would be touching. Pressed together. I would have thought I'd be able to feel his body heat from here. But I can't. Perhaps he is cold, or we are not as close as I thought.

"Is dinner ready yet?"

I leap away from Ned as if he has suddenly burst into flames. Though if he had, I'd like to think I'd be more noble and try to put them out, instead of running away.

I whirl and look down at Noah. There is no horror, alarm, or confusion in his eyes. Whatever he saw, his innocent mind thought nothing of it. He is simply hungry.

"Ten minutes," says Ned calmly.

Noah nods and runs back to the playroom.

I suck in a deep breath, and like the coward that I am, I don't look at Ned as I go and

retrieve my water. I don't think I can acknowledge what just happened. Hell, I'm not even sure I understand what happened. Or if anything just did. For all I know, we could have just looked out of the window together and everything else was purely my imagination.

"Are you eating with the kids?" Ned says softly .

I blink. He is by the hob, stirring the spaghetti. I didn't hear him move from the window.

"And you?" I ask, and it feels like a bigger question than a proposal. I swear I was less nervous when I dropped to one knee for Jennifer.

Ned bites his bottom lip. Then he nods. My heart does cartwheels. Ned is staying for dinner. Usually, he dishes up for the kids and then busies himself with cleaning and tidying while the kids are eating.

And I usually eat later. Sitting down all together is going to be wonderful. All my favorite people in the world around one table.

The one and only good thing to come from Jennifer's death, is my ability to savor, relish and truly appreciate such small moments of joy. I took them for granted before. I didn't understand what treasures they were, and I'll never make that mistake again. For as long as I live.

I set two more places at the table, and Ned dishes up. It is beautiful domesticity. And precisely why I can never trust my feelings for Ned. I might not love him for who he is, but merely because of how well he fits into my life. Which is wonderful for me, but awful for Ned.

Despite being fully aware of this, I bask in soppy feelings as he rounds the kids up

and herds them to the downstairs bathroom to wash their hands. The very same bathroom that has suffered no leaks at all since Ned yelled at the plumber. Listening to him now, it is hard to believe it is the same man. I've never once heard him raise his voice to the children.

I watch with a smile on my face as everyone troops back to the kitchen and takes a seat at the table. I sit down too and when Ned joins us, I'm practically glowing with contentment.

A whisper of guilt coils through me. The same old belief that I should not be happy while Jennifer is dead. But for once, I am able to ignore it.

Oscar unleashes his current obsession with knock-knock jokes and soon everyone is giggling. Myself included. But while Ned is smiling, he looks on edge and I catch him glancing at the window, more than a few times. He doesn't eat much either. He picks at his food and moves it around his plate.

I hope he is okay. I'm going to assume that it's not my near groping of him that has put him in such a strange mood, because he was uneasy and looking out of the window before that ever happened.

Dinner finishes, and the kids rush off to play some more before bath time. I linger and help Ned with the dishwasher. We work in silence for a few minutes. But then I have to ask. Concern is flowing through me and I need to know.

"Is everything alright?"

Ned's beautiful eyes glance at me briefly before turning sharply away.

"Yeah."

I stand motionless, staring at him while he turns the dishwasher on. He is ignoring me, but I know he can feel my gaze on him.

Eventually, he sighs and surrenders. “I ran into an asshole last night and it has kinda spooked me.”

My heart freezes, and my blood runs cold. Was it the asshole? The one who violated and traumatized him ?

Ned looks up at me and winces. “Baltazar has never...done anything. He is just a jerk.”

“That’s some jerk if he has unsettled you this much.”

Ned’s shoulders tense. I almost reach out my hand to give them a little squeeze, but I manage to stop myself just in time.

“It’s...it’s fine,” Ned’s voice sounds strangled. He peeks up at me again, and then he sighs heavily. “Baltazar leads a local cult, and he wants me to join. He is crazy, but harmless.”

Cult? Wow. Well, that’s quite something. And it explains the bizarre name. But this doesn’t sound good at all.

“Should we call the police?”

Ned’s hazel eyes widen. “Oh no, no. It’s fine. I’m just paranoid he will turn up here.”

My stomach clenches. Hard. It feels like a rock in the middle of my organs. Suddenly, Ned’s hand is on my arm.

“Morgan, I’d never let anything happen to the kids, or you. Please believe me.”

The sincerity in his voice seeps into my soul. Ned is all of five-foot nothing, yet I find myself nodding in agreement. Somehow, it is entirely believable that he can protect us from unhinged religious fanatics.

“The worst that will happen is that he will stand on the lawn spewing gibberish.”

I nod again. How the hell did Ned get caught up with such a weirdo? I guess times have changed, and Ned is young and actually leaves the house and socializes. Unlike me. Home and work. It’s all I do, so of course I’m not going to come across strange people for them to latch onto me .

“Can I stay the night?”

I blink at Ned. Did he really just say that?

He takes a deep breath and continues. “I’m really sure it is fine, but I hate the thought of you and the kids getting dragged into my drama. If I’m here, I can deal with him if he shows up.”

My mind is filling with images of Ned in my bed. I shake my head to clear it. I have five guest rooms. All perfectly lovely. One is even already sort of Ned’s. I offered it to him as a sanctuary to hide in from the kids when he needs five minutes. He has some books in there and a pair of slippers.

But he has never stayed the night. Until now.

“Of course you can stay, it will be a pleasure to have you.”

Oh god. Did I really just say that? Kill me now, please. What kind of cheesy

innuendo was that? And I didn't even mean it. Well, not consciously. Oh my, I can feel my cheeks heating.

There is a fond, warm look in Ned's eyes. He chuckles, but he doesn't tease me.

"Fancy getting out the good whisky once the kids are in bed?" he asks instead.

I swallow thickly and nod. Right now, I can't think of anything in the world I want more.

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Chapter nine

Ned

I wish I could sleep. A whole eight hours would be blissful. But every year since being turned I seem to need less and less. I suppose it doesn't help that my sleep schedule is all out of whack. Vampires should be nocturnal, so fighting it can't be good for me, but I can't exactly be a nanny who sleeps all day.

It's a pain in the ass that can't be helped. And it has left me wide awake in Morgan's home at three o'clock in the morning. Wandering around in the dark and behaving far more like a ghost than a vampire. I do feel like a lost soul, so there is that, at least.

I've checked all the doors and windows. Multiple times. I've checked on the kids. I can walk silently and see just fine in the dark, so I'm not going to disturb anyone like this.

That doesn't however, apply to getting the vacuum cleaner out. Or any other household chores.

Which means, I've entirely run out of things to do. Reading a book is out of the question, because I feel far too on edge. I'm thrumming with anxiety, and extremely unsettled. There is no way I'd be able to concentrate .

Fucking Baltazar. Such an asshole. My rational mind tells me that he is not the type to do anything to my family. But my traumatized ass is terrified of the children being used against me again. I can't stand the thought of them being in danger. Of their

well-being and safety being dependent on how pleased some crazy motherfucker is with my behavior. And I really, really don't want to be enslaved again.

So, yeah. I guess I'm wandering around the house all night.

Therefore, I might as well bask in happy memories and recall the feel of Morgan right behind me. His strong arms bracketing me in by the window. His incredible scent washing over me and stirring my desire. What would have happened if I had moved back an inch and pressed myself against him?

My feet have taken me to Morgan's bedroom door. Fuck. Suddenly, all of my focus is on this thin piece of wood. I swallow dryly.

It is ajar. And I'm pretty sure it doesn't creak. I've never heard it make a sound.

I'm standing here staring at the fancy chrome handle. I know I am. But it seems to have hypnotized me. I'm transfixed and I cannot look away.

I haven't checked Morgan's window. Or the window in his bathroom. It's a pretty shitty security check if I leave them out.

He'll never hear me. He'll never know. He will remain none the wiser.

If I give him a quick glance as I pass his bed, what is the harm in that? And if he sleeps with his mouth wide open and drools, and wears ugly pajamas? Well, that might just cure me. Heaven knows I need a cure from this stupid crush. I'm so besotted it is ridiculous.

Silently, I step into Morgan's room.

Oh my. Okay, no ugly pajamas. No open mouth. No drooling.

He looks like a statue made in worship of male perfection. He is sprawled artfully on his back. Tanned limbs in contrast to the white sheets. One lone sheet is covering him from the hip down. Morgan either sleeps naked or in a pair of boxers. The temptation to pull the sheet down to discover the truth, is the strongest I have ever experienced in my ninety-nine years of existence.

Heaven help me. Okay, If I feast on the sight of his naked chest, maybe I can distract myself. And my, oh my, what a chest that is. A perfect amount of definition. Enough chest hair to run one's fingers through. Dark, broad nipples that are begging to be licked.

If I was capable of hot flushes. I'd definitely be having one right now. Oh lord, the real thing is a thousand times better than photos. I've died and gone to heaven. I could stay here forever. Definitely until morning.

Morgan stirs slightly and turns his head. Now I have a perfect view of his handsome profile. Along with his exposed neck.

His jugular is beating. The most enticing rhythm I have ever encountered. I bet he tastes incredible. He smells divine, and that is usually a good indicator.

I could creep up to him. Softly place my lips on his flesh. Pierce his skin gently. Let his warm blood fill my mouth.

He would never know.

But I would .

Hells, what is wrong with me? I'm stalking around in the middle of the night. Looming over an oblivious, innocent human. Thinking about drinking from them. Watching them sleep.

Just call me Edward Cullen. Teenage creepy vampire of Twilight fame. Though at least I don't sparkle.

"Ned."

I freeze. I swear I have not made a sound. I can't have woken him? Surely? Frantically, I cast my gaze over him and replay the sound of my name on his lips.

His voice was a murmur. Soft and mumbled. Barely formed. His eyes are closed and his breaths are even.

Oh my lord. Is Morgan dreaming about me?

My heart thumps. My lungs move. Butterflies stir in my stomach.

Morgan shifts against the sheets. He is stirring. Perhaps some part of him can sense my presence. I should leave. If he wakes up and sees me, it would be a disaster. At best, it would give him a heart attack, and at the worst, he will fire me for being a perverted weirdo.

But my feet have taken root. I can't move. Morgan is dreaming about me and it is the most wonderful thing ever.

I suck in a breath. I'm being absurd. I see the man every day. I'm his nanny, he is probably dreaming about me mopping the floor or something. Dreams do not equal romance.

Besides, even if he is by some miracle dreaming of chasing me through a meadow and weaving roses into my hair, it is not as if standing here is going to enable me to see it.

I need to go .

Morgan moves again, and an aroma fills the air. I inhale it and savor it on my tongue.

Arousal.

My gaze flicks down to the sheet covering his lower half. Is that my imagination, or is it now tented?

I lick my lips. Is Morgan having a dirty dream about me? If so, this is bloody amazing and the best thing that has ever happened to me.

Suddenly, Morgan gasps and sits up. I drop and hit the deck so fast I swear I would have broken something if I was human.

“Who’s there!” Morgan calls out into the dark.

Fuck. I bite my bottom lip. It’s times like this I’m glad I don’t need to breathe.

I hear him fumbling for the lamp. It clicks and warm light fills the room.

Crap, oh crap. I’m pretty close to the footboard of his bed. I don’t think he will be able to see me. But I’ll slide a little bit under the bed, just to be sure.

Morgan lets out a heavy sigh. There is a slight sound of movement. I think he is running his hands over his face.

“Get it together, Morgan,” he mutters in a delightfully rumble sleep-thickened voice.

The lamp clicks off and the bed creaks.

Get it together. That is precisely what I need to do. It is very sound, if unintentional, advice from Morgan.

I'm lying on the floor, half under his bed, in the middle of the night. Morgan is not the one who needs to get it together. I am.

Starting right now.

Chapter ten

Morgan

I 've made it out of the house and to my office at work. It shouldn't feel like such a huge accomplishment. But it does. The fact that it does is proof that I truly am losing my mind.

Ned stayed the night. He slept under the same roof as me. A mere few steps down the hall. That has got to be enough of Ned to see me through the day. It is going to have to be.

As I settle into my desk, trying to suppress the unease that still lingers, I glance at my calendar. Meetings, deadlines, emails. Business as usual. My staff looked relieved when I walked in earlier, like they'd been holding their collective breath, waiting for my reappearance. An absent boss is bad for morale. I know this. I need to start acting like the responsible adult I'm supposed to be.

Ned said the crazy person harassing him was nothing to worry about. And strangely, I trust him. I can feel it in my very bones that Ned would never, ever put the kids at risk. If there was a problem, a real problem, he would tell me. Right ?

I close my eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. All in all, everything is fine, I remind myself. Time to put my head down and get some work done. Pining for Ned is ridiculous, and worrying about him and the kids is unnecessary. I force myself to focus on the task at hand. Emails. Phone calls. Budgets. Just the normal, everyday stuff that somehow feels monumental today.

Deep breath. Let everything else go. Focus. I have a business to run.

The familiar hum of the office buzzes in the background, the steady rhythm of clicking keyboards and muffled voices grounding me in a semblance of normalcy. My mind is just beginning to calm when suddenly, the door to my office bursts open. The sound is so abrupt that I jump in my chair, my heart pounding as if I've been jolted out of some deep sleep.

I blink, trying to make sense of what I'm seeing.

Ned is standing there, drenched from the rain, striding into my office like he owns the place. Lottie is balanced on his hip, her tiny hands gripping his jacket, and Oscar is holding his other hand, his little face as calm as ever. They're all soaked, raindrops still clinging to their clothes and hair, they've been caught in a downpour.

"I have to go," Ned says, his voice curt, his expression unreadable. He places Lottie on the table without even waiting for me to respond. "Something's come up." His tone is matter-of-fact, as if this is a perfectly normal scenario, dropping the kids off at my office in the middle of a workday, without warning, and turning around to disappear just as fast.

I open my mouth to say something, but he's already halfway out the door. "Noah has sports club after school, so he doesn't need picking up until four," Ned adds, not even turning back to look at me. And then, just like that, he's gone.

The door clicks shut behind him, leaving me standing there, staring at the spot where he was only moments ago. My mind is racing, trying to piece together what just happened. What the hell is going on?

I look down at Lottie and Oscar. They seem completely unbothered, as if this is just another day for them. Lottie is playing with a paperweight on my desk, her chubby

fingers wrapping around it, lifting it with more effort than she should need. Oscar's eyes are fixed on the window, watching the rain streak down the glass.

But then I notice Lottie's shoes. One pink, the other yellow, clearly mismatched. The sight of it twists my stomach into knots. I walk around the desk, kneeling down to hug them both, the urge to protect them overwhelming me. Lottie giggles as I squeeze her a little too tightly, and Oscar pats my shoulder as if to reassure me.

My heart is hammering, and my thoughts are spiraling. Is Ned going to be okay? Where did he go? Why did he just drop them off like that without explaining? My mind races with questions, all of them unanswered, feeding into a creeping anxiety that is growing and growing.

And the worst part is, I know I'm useless. Completely useless in this situation. Whatever's going on, whatever pulled Ned away so suddenly, there's nothing I can do to help. I'm stuck here, in my office, with no choice but to wait.

I sit back in my chair, my hand lingering on Oscar's arm as if that simple touch could anchor me. But it doesn't. I feel the horrible, sinking weight of helplessness. All I can do is hope. And wait.

Why do kids look so sweet and innocent when they are sleeping? It is like they turn into angels as soon as they close their eyes. Cute little people who are utterly incapable of causing chaos and generally being hard work.

I kiss them on their foreheads and bask in the illusion. Noah mentioned wanting his own room the other day, but he seems to have forgotten all about it. For now. He'll remember soon enough and then this precious phase will be over.

Then they will all grow up and fly the nest and I'll be all alone.

Wow. Where did that self pity come from? Sighing heavily, I pull out my phone. The blank screen stares back at me. Almost as if it is mocking me. No calls. No texts. Nothing.

No word from Ned and it has been hours. Maybe I should phone him? It seems awfully intrusive if he is dealing with an emergency. But I've been assuming he will call me as soon as he can, since he dropped the kids off at my office. That was before lunchtime. It is nine p.m. now.

Fuck. I really hope he is alright.

The sound of the door chime startles me. Who the hell can that be? It is far too late for a delivery.

I open my Ring app. It's Ned, shoulders hunched against the pouring rain. My heart thumps right up into my throat. It is so good to see him. But I'm so confused, has he lost his key?

I all but fly down the stairs and fling the front door open. Ned looks up at me. There are raindrops caught in his long lashes.

"Can I explain?" he says meekly.

Wordlessly, I nod and step aside so he can come in. We end up in the kitchen. I fetch him a towel and make him a cup of tea.

We sit at the table. Ned toweled his hair while I was making tea and now the cloth is slung around his neck. He picks up his drink and sips it. The clock in the hallway ticks loudly and the rain beats against the windows.

"There was an emergency with my housemate, Jade. I needed to help him."

A strange, uncomfortable emotion clenches at my guts. “Is Jade your boyfriend?”

Ned nearly chokes on his tea. “Hell no! He is like a brother to me. They all are.”

A warm tingling glow pushes away the dark emotion I was feeling.

“All?” I ask, and my innocence sounds believable. Ned will never know about the spike of envy I just felt.

Ned carefully puts down his drink. “Lello, Red, Blue, Gray, Pink and Jade.”

I blink. “That’s a lot.”

Hazel eyes look at me for a moment before darting away. “Can I tell you everything? It is heavy, but it will help you to understand.”

I nod.

Ned takes a deep breath. “We were imprisoned together.” He stops and fixes me with an intense look. “That’s im-prisoned, not in prison. It is an important distinction.”

My nod is automatic. I’m acting as if I’m following. I do want him to continue, but right now I am completely lost.

“There was this crazy billionaire, and he wanted his own harem of pretty boys. So he collected us, one by one. And kept us locked up.”

Ned’s eyes are wide and dark. My mouth is dry, but I nod for him to continue.

“He called us his rainbow and assigned us each a color. It became our name, and we were forced to wear stupid clothes in our color. I was Indigo. The other boys have

reclaimed their harem name in some sort of power move that I don't quite understand, but fully respect."

Ned huffs out a breath. "Sorry, got sidetracked there. So...um...anyway, we went through hell together. So when one of them needs me, I'm there."

He drops my gaze and fiddles with his cup of tea. I am utterly lost for words.

"It is the only time I would ever be flaky with the kids," he says it so softly, I only just hear him.

My mind is reeling. My stomach is churning. I am devastated for Ned, what an unimaginably horrific thing to have happened to him and his friends. Sex slaves? It is the most barbaric thing I have ever heard of.

"Is Jade alright?" I burble, as some frazzled part of my mind limps into a semi-form of functioning.

"He is now. He was at work. Think it was a full on panic attack."

I run my shaking hand through my hair. My heart is bleeding for Ned. I'm not sure I have ever felt pain quite like this. The only thing that tops it was when Jennifer's death finally sunk in .

I'm not a violent man, but I think if I ever got my hands on this billionaire, that would probably change.

"I love the kids. I love my job. I know I don't deserve it, but please don't fire me."

The look in Ned's eyes is frantic. Desperate, imploring. I reach out and take his hand. He is freezing.

“I’m not going to fire you, Ned.”

He stares into my soul. Seeking the truth of my words. Finally he nods. Then his Adam’s apple bobs and he drops his gaze.

Jesus Christ, I can feel my heart breaking. It is shattering into a thousand pieces.

“I completely understand if the answer is no, but I would like to give you a hug,” I say.

Ned doesn’t look up. But he nods. And for some reason, instead of going to him, I pull him to me. I place him on my lap and enfold him in my arms. Then I simply hold him while he trembles softly.

I will hold him all night if it helps.

I would do anything for him. Absolutely anything at all.

Because he is Ned. My Ned. And nothing can change that.

Chapter eleven

Ned

Consciousness slowly settles over me like a warm, fuzzy blanket. Awareness comes to me in a slow, steady drip of information. The softness of the pillow beneath my head, the gentle weight of the blanket over my body, and the firm warmth of someone holding me.

It's morning. I'm in Morgan's bed. He is spooning me.

Nothing happened last night. Well, nothing fun. He simply held me while I fell apart, and he is still holding me now. I'm wearing one of his tee shirts, and he's in a pair of boxers. The heat of his naked chest radiates into my back, warming me in a way I haven't felt since I... died. Yes, died. A heavy word that hangs in the metaphorical air, but there's no denying it. Since then, I haven't felt warmth, not real warmth, until now.

I slept like a baby. For hours. It's a miracle. Especially considering how increasingly restless my nights have been lately. I've become used to cold beds and colder dreams, so the peace I found in Morgan's arms feels like an oasis after years of wandering in the desert. If I had known that the cure for both my sleeplessness and permanent chilly flesh, was being snuggled by a hot guy, I would have started doing it decades ago.

But now that I've discovered it, I'm not sure I'll be getting a repeat. Last night, I completely fell apart. I didn't realize how tightly I had been holding everything in

until the dam finally burst. All my fear, pain, regret, and stress. Every dark emotion I'd experienced in the harem, it all came flooding out. A torrent I couldn't stop. And Morgan was there for it all.

Now, in the calm aftermath, I feel lighter, almost... cleansed. It's as though a boil has been lanced, and all the disgusting pus has drained away, leaving me with a euphoric sense of peace.

Morgan was wonderful, so kind, so gentle. He just held me, seeming to know that was all I needed. I didn't want to talk, didn't want to do anything. I only wanted to be held, to feel anchored by someone who wasn't afraid of my storm.

The feel of his strong arms around me was everything. But that had to have been a lot for him. Surely, I've scared him away. No one wants to deal with that level of emotional meltdown, right? He's not going to have any feelings for me now. All I'll get from him is pity. And isn't that a crying shame?

But it is understandable. He was compassionate enough to forgive me for being flaky with his kids. He was wonderful enough to hold me all night. It would be greedy to want even more from him.

Suddenly, Morgan stirs behind me. His warm, slightly rough hand slides down my bare arm, rubbing gently, and it feels like a spark of electricity, a warm fire that spreads through me .

"Oh good. You've warmed up," he murmurs, his voice still thick with sleep. "You were so cold last night. I was worried about you."

My heart thumps. Oh my. This gorgeous man is being so kind and attentive. He doesn't seem freaked out by my freak-out. It's too much. My head is spinning, and my stomach is doing strange flips. Am I swooning? Is that what this is?

“How are you feeling?”

Before I can answer his question, the bedroom door bursts open. A stampede of children rushes in, and before I know what’s happening, the bed is full of three bouncing kids, their laughter filling the room.

“Hey! That’s not fair!” Noah says, pausing in his jumping to glare at me. “How come Ned gets to sleep in your bed, and I’m not allowed? You said I was too big! Ned is bigger than me!”

Morgan chuckles beside me, sits up, and pulls Noah into a headlock, ruffling his hair fiercely as Noah squeals and squirms in mock protest.

“Because Ned was sad and needed a cuddle,” Morgan explains, his tone light and easy, as if none of this is a big deal. “Now, who wants pancakes?”

A chorus of excited voices fills the room. “Me! Me! Me!”

Morgan flashes me a quick, concerned glance. I smile and nod at him in reassurance. My faculties are all back together. My breakdown has ended.

He smiles warmly at me and then turns his attention fully to his children.

He roars like a beast, bending over so the kids can climb on top of him. They cling to him like little monkeys as he stands up and walks toward the kitchen, their giggles and shrieks echoing through the house.

I watch them go. I cringe as I hear them make their way down the stairs, but they appear to make it down safely. Then pots and pans clang and cupboard doors slam.

I’m grinning so much my face is hurting. Morgan is the most wonderful man on the

planet. There is not a soul who can hold a candle to him. He is perfect. In absolutely every single way.

Oh lord. Just listen to me. I am being a right sappy ass today. If anyone knew, I'd die of embarrassment. But luckily, I am the only one who has to listen to this drivel.

I chuckle softly as I slide out of bed and pad over to the bathroom. My clothes are on the radiator, but they're still wet from last night's downpour.

Damn it. I don't have any spare clothes here, which is a very silly oversight and something that needs to be fixed. For now, though, I guess I'm going downstairs in Morgan's tee shirt. It hangs like a nightie on me, so it's perfectly decent. Still, it feels shockingly intimate.

I take a deep breath and head downstairs. The smell of pancakes hits me the second I walk into the kitchen, delicious enough to make my stomach rumble. Morgan glances up from the stove and flashes me a quick smile before turning back to his cooking. The children are clustered around the table, each assigned a breakfast-making task. It's a scene of chaotic efficiency. Eggs being cracked. Pancake batter being whisked, plates being set.

Morgan doesn't seem to need any help from me. Besides, it's good for him to have this time with his kids. They look so happy, so at ease with him. My heart swells at the sight.

My phone is still on the table from last night. I quickly pick it up and check for messages. No new updates. No further disasters. Everything has calmed down. Thank fuck. Seems like Jade really did just have a panic attack, and it wasn't anything more sinister.

The timing was inconvenient, though. Red and Brodie are busy dealing with Red's

heat. Blue and Sammy are off somewhere in the ocean. Gray and Mal are visiting Hell, and Lello and Carter are at the lake.

Pink was free, but the lovely boy is basically a human. He has magic that he cannot wield, and no other powers or strengths. So it was only me who could come to Jade's aid and make sure nothing paranormal was going on.

We really need a family planner or something to make sure not everyone's away at the same time. If Jade's magic flinging around freak-out had been something bigger than a panic attack, I might not have been able to handle it by myself.

I shake my head, pushing the thought away. No use dwelling on what-ifs. Right now, I'm here, and Morgan is dishing up pancakes. The scene before me is warm, vibrant, and alive.

Everyone joins me at the table, and the noise level instantly skyrockets. It's loud, noisy chaos, and I love it. I find myself laughing at the antics of the kids, feeling a joy I haven't experienced in what feels like an eternity.

As I watch Oscar and Lottie squabble over the maple syrup while Morgan tries to mediate, a pang of longing strikes me. This is what I've always wanted, a family. Something I never had. Barbara was barely a year old when I was turned. I lost the next few years to the hazy, blood-drunk frenzy of a baby vampire. By the time I was myself again, I'd missed her entire childhood.

When Barbara's daughter, Susan, came along, I was just a ghost in the background. Always there, but never truly present. How could I explain why I still looked twenty? I couldn't. So I missed out again. As I did for Jennifer, because I thought it was the right thing to do. A mistake I will regret forever.

But here, watching these kids bicker and laugh, feeling Morgan's quiet strength

beside me, I realize that I've been given another chance. This is everything I've ever wanted, a dream I never thought possible. Could I really reach out and claim it?

My gaze drifts to Morgan. He's still smiling at the kids, but when our eyes meet, something passes between us. Beneath the exasperated amusement in his expression, I don't see any pity for me. Instead, I see warmth. Genuine warmth. Fondness. Affection. Maybe even... more?

My stomach swoops, and I look away, my heart racing. Morgan feels something for me. He does. I'd be blind not to see it. And of course I feel something for him, too. Oh lord do I feel things for him.

All I have to do to gain everything I've ever wanted is to simply allow it to happen. To let myself believe that I'm worthy of this.

It is right here in front of me. I just need to take it.

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Chapter twelve

Morgan

The knock on the door startles me. Ned pokes his head around my study door.

“I’m just about to head off. Do you need anything before I go?”

My gaze flicks down to the corner of my laptop screen. Wow, is that really the time? Where the hell did the day go? And what is the point in working from home so I can keep an eye on Ned, if I completely zone out?

“Are the kids alright?” I ask.

Ned’s smile is beautiful. “All fed, washed and tucked up asleep in bed.”

“You must be exhausted.”

“Yeah, a bit,” Ned chuckles.

He looks fine. He really does. Completely recovered from his wobble. Which isn’t at all surprising. I’ve known him for over a year now, and I had absolutely no idea of the extent of what he had been through.

He is so amazingly strong. And I cannot believe he chooses to spend his days chasing after my children. Though, actually, maybe I do understand it. It is a chance at a normal life. Domesticity. Family. He did say all of his relatives were dead.

I pull down my laptop screen. “Can I tempt you with a whisky before you go?”

I can’t read the look on Ned’s face, but he nods, so it is all good. He steps quietly inside and I head over to my drinks cabinet. I did not hunt down and bid on this rare whisky, whilst imagining the look on Ned’s face. No, not at all. Nothing like that. It was entirely for my own pleasure.

I carefully pour two drinks and hand one to Ned. He takes it graciously, and I watch him with intense focus as he takes a sip.

The look that flows over his face is beautiful. I was right. I did buy this whisky entirely for my own pleasure. Watching Ned enjoy it, is a joy like no other.

“I don’t know this one,” he admits.

I grin in absolute delight. “Macallan Mizunara 33-Year-Old Komorebi Edition. By the East Asia Whisky Company.”

“A rare one,” comments Ned with a raised eyebrow. He takes another sip. “It is so good.”

I’ll have to take his word for it. I can barely taste mine. I’m too transfixed by Ned and all my senses are caught up in admiring him.

“I’m going to watch The Dam Busters, fancy joining me?” I blurt.

I need him to stay. I can’t stand the thought of him leaving once he has finished his drink, and this is the only excuse I can come up with. A film. An old one, because he likes those.

Ned wrinkles his nose. “I’ve never understood wanting to relive the war. Some things

are best left forgotten. ”

I blink at him. “Casablanca is a war film.”

Hazel eyes flash at me. “It’s a romance!” he snaps vehemently.

I chuckle and hold my hands up in surrender. “Okay, it is a romance.”

His eyes narrow, but he takes another sip of his whisky and says nothing. Jennifer was feisty like that too. Her eyes used to flash exactly like that when she was annoyed. Clearly I have a type.

“How about, It’s A Wonderful Life?” I suggest.

Ned’s eyes light up, but then he frowns. “I’m not that soppy.”

“I am,” I say softly. “You could keep me company while I’m being soppy.”

Ned’s lips curl up into an amused smile. He likes that I am giving him an excuse to watch It’s A Wonderful Life. It is a flimsy pretense, we both know it. But we are both embracing it.

“Fine,” he says with a wry shake of his head.

I grin. Victory has never tasted sweeter.

A short while later, we are settled on the sofa with a huge bowl of popcorn, because I insisted that a movie night could not be complete without popcorn.

The lights are dim, and Ned is a few short inches away from me. I press play, and bite back my contented sigh. I never thought I’d ever be this happy again. There were

many, many long and painful days where it did not seem possible. Yet, here I am. I think Jennifer would approve. She wouldn't want me depressed and moping around the children for the rest of my life, if nothing else.

I'm not going to go with the cliché, 'She'd want me to be happy,' because I can't possibly know that. My wife was possessive. And had a flair for dramatics. She wouldn't want to be forgotten, that's for sure. And she would have loved people weeping over her grave.

I will mourn her forever. I could never forget her. That's simply not possible. But the children and I cannot spend the rest of our lives in her shadow. She is at rest. It is time I found my peace.

"Are you okay?" asks Ned with a raised eyebrow.

A warm smile spreads across my face. "Yeah. Yeah, I am."

Ned gives me a bemused look, but he doesn't probe. He turns his attention to the film instead. Still smiling, I follow his lead.

We watch the first hour of the film in companionable silence. It's comfortable and warm. Relaxing and soft.

But now there is a strange tingle of anticipation running up my spine. A shiver of excitement in the air. Something is about to happen. I just know it is.

Ned reaches for the popcorn that is on my lap. Playfully, I move it away from him. He flashes me a look of surprise that quickly turns into a grin. He tries to snatch the bowl, but I hold it out of his reach.

He laughs and dives for it, knocking me backwards and landing on top of me. I stare

up at him as we both freeze. Popcorn rains down on us, but all I can really see is Ned's heated and dark eyes.

There were reasons why I shouldn't want him. I vaguely remember angsting over them. Right now, I can't recall a single one. They can't have been important. Ned is wonderful and I crave him with a passion that is intoxicating. Surely that is the only thing that matters ?

Our lips are close, so very close. But I'm not going to close the distance between us. Given everything Ned has been through, consent is even more essential than usual.

I tilt my chin up and pucker my lips a little. I hope my eyes are saying that I'd very much like for him to kiss me. I'll say it with words, when I can remember how to talk.

He is gazing into my eyes with a ferocious intensity. His cheeks are flushed. I watch, utterly hypnotized, as his very pink tongue pokes out and runs over his plump bottom lip.

He is a slender weight on top of me and my arms are itching to wrap around him and pull him even closer. I'm longing to run my hands all over his body.

He is staring at me as if he would like that too. His gaze drops down to my lips, then back up to my eyes. I am pretty sure he wants to kiss me.

"I'd really like you to kiss me," I croak. There, I did it. I formed words. In the right order. It is a miracle.

Suddenly, his lips are on mine. Soft, tender. Passionate.

The popcorn bowl clangs on the floor as I drop it. My arms wrap around him, exactly

as I was imagining. But this is real. It's reality. It is really happening.

I'm kissing Ned.

He feels cold. I guess he is somebody who always feels the chill. I'll have to remember to turn the thermostat up.

A groan pours out of me a whole second before I register that Ned has slipped his tongue into my mouth. Bright sparks of pleasure are dancing all over my body. My hands are sliding up and down his back. I glide up to his hair and down to skim over his ass. Then I find the edge of his tee shirt. My hand eases under it. The feel of his bare, smooth skin makes me groan again .

He whimpers softly into my mouth and presses himself even closer. His hips start to rock, grinding against me. I can feel his bulge, rubbing along my own, but there are far too many clothes between us for it to be satisfying.

Getting out of said clothes feels like an impossible puzzle. An insurmountable task. My head is spinning. My blood is on fire. I am arousal, lust and need. A creature no longer capable of rational thoughts.

Kissing him and rutting against him is going to have to do. It is all I am capable of doing. Belts and buckles, zips and buttons are all completely beyond me right now.

The kiss deepens. It intensifies and ignites my hunger to a raging inferno. My hands move to his ass cheeks and squeeze and knead.

Ned moans and writhes. I love seeing him like this. Pleasure-drunk and passionate. It suits him.

His hips pick up pace and suddenly it feels really good. The pressure and the friction

are exhilarating. Even though there are two pairs of jeans and two pairs of underwear between us. I can't feel his cock at all, not really. But I know it is there. Rubbing against mine.

My orgasm comes out of nowhere. It explodes through me. A surge of blinding ecstasy that consumes me. It possesses me and for one vivid moment, I am carnality incarnate.

My hands push down on Ned's ass, pressing him even closer to me. My hips dance frantically. All jerky and uncoordinated. I roar through my bliss, and exult when I feel Ned shuddering through an orgasm of his own.

My peak crests, tumbles, recedes. Reality slowly drifts in to the space left behind .

I'm lying on my back on the sofa. Ned is on top of me. I'm breathing heavily.

And I just came in my pants. Like a horny teenager.

I stare up at Ned. He stares back. He is a lot less out of breath than I am. But he is all flushed and his hair is all messy.

Is this the bit where regret creeps in? Are all the reasons why we shouldn't have done that, about to come crashing down?

I hold my breath and wait. The clock ticks. All I feel is happiness.

I smile at Ned. His flush deepens and he smiles back, almost shyly. It is the most adorable thing I have ever seen.

It doesn't look like he is having second thoughts.

I release the breath I was holding.

Ned kissed me. We fooled around. Now he is smiling at me.

The world is suddenly a bright and wonderful place. And the future looks shining. I cannot wait for it to begin.

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Chapter thirteen

Ned

I made out with Morgan. My boss. My great-grandson in law. The man whose wife is dead because of my actions. A human who knows nothing about the paranormal.

And it was wonderful.

I guess that means I'm going to hell. But I was probably headed there already, purely on account of being a vampire.

Besides, I'd have to actually die, and stay dead, first. Add in the fact that I'm friends with a demon, who is in hell right now, visiting family, and all in all, going to hell doesn't seem that terrifying.

But fear of punishment should not be the only reason not to do shitty things.

Okay, now my thoughts are truly spinning. Get it together, Ned.

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel and focus on the road. It is late and there are hardly any other cars around. Just how I like it.

Leaving Morgan's was a good idea. No matter how much my long dead heart is protesting. If I had stayed, we would have done far more than make out. I'm not a saint and I don't profess to having that level of self-control. No, leaving was the right thing to do. We need to take it slow. For both our sakes.

And in case my morality wakes up and decides I'm not a shitty person, and puts a stop to this.

That thought makes me grimace. I shudder and put it aside. Adding it to my towering pile of angst that needs to be dealt with at some point. Right now, there are other things to focus on, because the house has come into view and I need to check on Jade.

As I pull into the driveway, a warm tingly feeling washes over me. At first I think it is magic, then I realize it's worse. It's happiness because I'm home. This house of delinquents feels like home, and isn't that just the sappiest, cheesiest shit ever to exist. Goddamnit.

I stomp to the front door, let myself in, and then stomp up the stairs. I pause outside Jade's door and listen carefully for a moment. He is still awake, reading a book by the sounds of it.

Time to take a deep breath and get rid of my grumpiness. Jade can normally handle me at my worst. But I'm pretty sure he is not at his best right now.

I knock softly.

"Come in."

Moss green eyes greet me as I walk in, but they quickly look away. His shoulders drop. My stomach clenches. The poor boy.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

"Much better, thank you. I'm so very sorry for all the trouble I caused."

Damn it. It looks like he is about to cry. Shame always was Jade's response in the

harem. Apparently it is his go to emotion. Shitty things that are out of his control happen, and he feels guilty about it.

Whereas I respond by being a grumpy, nasty asshole.

Where are the nice boys? Lello, Pink or Red, should be here. Comfort is much more their wheelhouse than mine. I could run away and find one of them. Turn around and walk out.

I suck in a breath. I really am a dickhead. What if I was standing by Noah, Oscar, or Lottie's bed, and they were really upset? I wouldn't have any problem with it at all.

Jade is practically a kid too, and I'm perfectly capable of being nice. Cantankerous Ned was a shield I wore in the harem. It was what got me through. But we are not in the harem anymore. I'm free, unfettered, and in love with a wonderful man. A wonderful man, who, for some bizarre reason, seems to have feelings for me in return.

There is more than enough warmth within me to share with Jade in his hour of need.

"Hey, it wasn't your fault," I say.

Jade's eyes stay firmly fixed on his lap. He looks like a picture of misery and not at all convinced by my words.

"It was a little bit of excitement in my boring life," I try.

My terrible attempt at humor earns me nothing more than the very slightest of nods. It's fitting. And no less than I deserve. Hells, I truly suck at this.

What would I do if it was one of the kids, or Morgan, who needed me?

“Can I give you a hug?” I ask.

Startled green eyes lift up to look at me. He blinks and then gives me a tiny nod .

“Scoot up then,” I say brightly as I climb into his bed.

Jade makes room for me and I pull him down into a spoon, wrap my arms around him, and hold him tightly. He is ramrod straight for a moment, and then he sighs before deflating like a balloon.

“Thanks,” he breathes softly.

“It really was no bother,” I say.

I mean, I had to abandon the kids, so I thought I was going to lose my job, so I had to confess my dark past to Morgan in the hopes he’d understand and allow me to continue being a part of the children’s lives.

Which then led to me having a freak out and crying in Morgan’s arms all night. Which definitely brought us closer together and probably led to the whole kissing and making out thing that happened tonight. Which is hopefully going to lead to a relationship.

But Jade does not need to know any of that. He can remain in ignorant bliss of that convoluted chain of events. It all worked out wonderfully in the end, and that is all that really matters. But it definitely was a bother and I’m lying my ass off for saying it wasn’t.

“You’d do the same for me,” I say softly.

Jade nods frantically. “One hundred percent! I’d do anything for you, for any of the

boys!”

My heart stirs and that gross, warm tingly feeling returns. Apparently, having a found family is incredibly pleasant. Look at me, two whole families and a home. I’m quite sure I don’t deserve it, but I’ll take it nonetheless.

“Well, there you go then,” I say. “I’m just glad you are feeling better.”

Jade lets out a huge sigh and sags even further into the mattress. I can feel all the pent up tension leaving his body .

A few minutes later, he starts snoring softly. Chuckling, I slide out of his bed, place his book on the nightstand, and flick the lamp off. Then I quietly head to the kitchen. The actions of making a warm cup of milk always seem to trick my brain into thinking it is time to sleep. Despite me being a vampire.

I can’t hear anyone else about, so I’ll be able to make my nighttime beverage in peace, free from teasing. Not that I care that they think making warm milk before bed is an old man thing to do. I am an old man. And a product of my time.

When I was human, everyone had warm milk before bed. It helped keep you warm in houses with no central heating. And it was filling and relatively cheap. These youngsters don’t know what they are missing.

I walk into the kitchen and yelp. Baltazar looks up from his seat at my frigging kitchen table, and grins.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I snap.

“Visiting my friend,” he smirks.

“I’m not your fucking friend.”

My outburst earns me an even wider grin from the motherfucker sitting across from me. Uninvited. Unwelcome and very much unwanted.

“We need to talk about Jade,” Baltazar says calmly.

My throat tightens as panic floods my body. “Why?”

The piece of shit vampire gestures at the chair opposite him. “Take a seat.”

I grind my teeth and sit down. Baltazar is a flight leader, as well as a member of the Council. He is used to obedience and respect. Showing him a little of both is probably good for my health. Especially since I piss him off all the time by refusing to swear allegiance to him .

“Your friend is part fey.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“I suspect that is what caused his recent incident.”

I stare at the vampire and concentrate hard on my poker face. I don’t want to give a single thing away. Not until I know what the fuck is going on and if Baltazar means any harm to Jade.

“Jade is not the only part fey we are keeping tabs on. And he is not the only one who has had an incident recently.”

The Council are keeping tabs on Jade? Fuck. That cannot be good news. At all. Why would they do such a thing? Jade is a sweetie who wouldn’t hurt a fly.

“The fey have long wanted to come back to Earth. Their recent ploy appears to be whispering to their descendents to open a portal from this end,” says Baltazar, answering my unvoiced question.

Oh. Oh Lord. That is what’s going on. Well, that’s not good. And that’s the understatement of the century. All the rumors say the fey were evil, twisted motherfuckers. Stealing babies. Destroying crops. Making shady deals and disappearing people who stepped into toadstool rings.

I force a swallow down my tight throat. “Jade is not that good at magic. There is no way he could open a portal to the fey realm.”

Baltazar calmly steeple his fingers.

“He is not good at wielding his innate fey magic because he has never received instructions on how to use it.”

Behind Baltazar, a drop of water drips from the tap and hits the stainless steel basin of the sink. The noise ricochets around the dimly lit room.

Bollocks. If the fey whisper instructions to Jade on how to open a portal, and he does it and the fey invade our world, that would be deeply shitty. As in really, really shitty. This keeps getting worse and worse. And now my nerves are completely shot.

“What the fuck do you want me to do about it?” I snarl.

This old bastard must want something from me. He is not here to gossip. And I have a terrible, sinking feeling that whatever it is, I’m not going to like it.

The flight leader smirks and sits up straighter. His blue eyes gleam eerily in the light.

“Keep an eye on him, of course.”

I narrow my eyes. Nothing is ever as simple as that. As much as I hate it, Baltazar has a great deal of power over me, so I don't believe for one minute he'd be all benign and assign me an easy task.

Baltazar stands. “And kill him if you have to.”

Oh fuck.

Double fuck. Triple fuck. I should have known that life was treating me too kindly. Turns out that bitch is just a tease.

Because seriously, fuck my life.

Chapter fourteen

Morgan

I haven't felt like this since I was a young man. All jittery and like I'm walking on clouds. With butterflies swarming in my stomach, and as if I could burst into song at any moment. It's as if every cell in my body is vibrating, alive with a force I haven't experienced in what feels like decades. That lightness of being, the thrill of something unfolding, of something new, wonderful, and terrifying in the best way possible.

I suppose it could be too much caffeine. But I really don't think it is. No, this is different. This feeling, it's not the jitter of an espresso shot. I remember this feeling, this giddy, dizzy first step of something magical. The raw potential, the endless possibilities, spooling out in front of me like a vast, untrodden landscape. The daydreams of what might come to pass are vivid, almost real. I can touch them in my mind, taste them in the back of my throat. It's wonderful, and I'm loving every minute of it.

Last night, Ned kissed me. And with that single, simple gesture, he cracked open a whole new chapter of my life. A chapter I thought had closed forever. One of fresh starts, of new beginnings, where the future feels boundless, and happiness fills our days. It's the sort of moment you don't expect to happen at my age. Not when you've already lived and loved, and come to terms with the thought that some things just don't happen anymore. But then they do, and it feels nothing short of miraculous.

I'm sitting here now, in my home office, grinning inanely at an email from a supplier.

I'm so glad there's no one here to see me. If anyone saw me, they'd think I've lost my mind, smiling at stock inventories and shipment schedules. But I can't help it. The joy, the excitement, it's bubbling up inside me, completely uncontrollable. I really need to focus and get some work done, but every time I start to type an email, my mind drifts back to Ned, back to that kiss, and my fingers hover uselessly over the keyboard.

I pause, taking a deep breath, and listen. It's pointless, I know, but I listen anyway, trying to hear any sign of Ned somewhere in the house. He's here. I can't hear a thing, but I know he's here, under the same roof as me, and that alone feels marvelous. It's like having some secret treasure close by, something precious and warm, even when he's in another room.

But something was off this morning. He seemed a little distracted and distant, a shadow of worry creasing his forehead. He pulled up in his tatty old car just as I was returning from dropping Noah off at school. I watched as he greeted Oscar and Lottie warmly, his smile genuine and bright, but he barely spared me a glance. A small part of me felt a sting of disappointment, though I brushed it aside.

I hope it's nothing to do with us. Perhaps he just doesn't want to be too affectionate in front of the kids yet, and I can understand that. They don't need to be dragged into the whirlwind of new emotions just yet. Ned's right. As much as it pains me, taking things slow is the sensible idea. We've both been through enough in life to know how important it is to protect what's precious. Yet, as much as I tell myself that, a bigger part of me wants to rush in, full speed ahead, all guns blazing.

I'm still lost in thought when I hear it.

"Blasted new-fangled thing!"

Ned's voice echoes down the hallway, and before I can even fully register what's

happening, I'm on my feet and running towards the kitchen. I skid around the corner, and I'm greeted by a sight that almost sends me into fits of laughter. There's a sea of bubbles, white foam everywhere, covering the floor, knee-high and even deeper in spots.

Oscar and Lottie are in the middle of it all, giggling hysterically, scooping up big armfuls of bubbles and throwing them into the air like confetti. Ned, meanwhile, is standing in front of the open dishwasher, glaring at it with an expression of complete exasperation. The machine is overflowing with foam, spilling out like some sort of comedic disaster in an old sitcom.

There's a bottle of laundry detergent sitting on the counter, and I immediately realize what's happened.

"Did you accidentally put laundry liquid in the dishwasher?" I ask, fighting back the urge to laugh.

Ned's eyes flick to the bottle, and then he groans, smacking his forehead. "Gordon Bennett!"

I can't help but laugh at that. It's a phrase I haven't heard in years, proper Cockney slang my granddad used to say.

"It's an easy mistake to make," I say, still chuckling as I coax the kids into helping clean up the mess. Between the four of us, we make quick work of the bubbles, scooping them up and dumping them into the sink until the floor is finally clear again.

Ned clears the worst of the foam out of the machine and sets it to rinse, looking more than a little sheepish. I can see the tension in his shoulders and I know something more pressing than housework chaos is weighing on him.

I herd the kids into the living room to reward them with some screen time. As soon as they are transfixed by cartoons, I head back to Ned and I make us both a cup of tea. Setting the mugs on the table, I beckon Ned to join me.

He walks over to the table with none of his usual grace. There's a heaviness to his movements, and he sinks into the chair like someone carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. He looks tired, worn down. Like an old man.

"What's wrong?" I ask, my heart starting to race. There's a lump forming in my throat, a quiet fear whispering in the back of my mind. Please don't say you regret last night.

Ned sighs, fiddling with his teacup. "Nothing," he mutters, but I can tell it's a lie.

I swallow hard, my voice coming out sharper than I intended. "Are you regretting last night?"

His head snaps up, hazel eyes wide with surprise. "Hell no!" he exclaims, a little too loudly. "Last night was..." He trails off, and to my surprise, a faint blush creeps across his cheeks. "Last night was wonderful."

Relief washes over me like a tidal wave, and I can't help but grin. My heart is racing for a whole different reason now. It's the best news I've heard in a very long time. Without thinking, I reach out and place my hand over his.

"So, are we officially dating?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper .

For a moment, Ned just stares at me, his eyes searching mine. Then, slowly, a smile spreads across his face, and it's like watching the sun break through a clouded sky. His eyes light up, and he nods.

“I guess so,” he says, his voice warm and full of promise.

The moment hangs between us, charged with an electric energy. My body moves towards his without me even thinking about it. It’s like gravity, a force pulling me in, impossible to resist. I gently cup his cheek. I lean in, closing the distance between us as slowly as I can, giving him every chance to pull away or say no if he wants to.

But he does neither. He stays right there, his eyes locked on mine, and when our lips finally touch, it’s like fireworks going off inside me. My whole body ignites, every nerve ending alight with a kind of joy I haven’t felt in years. It’s more than just a kiss. It’s a connection, a promise, a beginning.

Eventually, I pull back, my heart racing. The kids are right next door, and I can’t let myself get too carried away. But I don’t go far, pausing with our noses almost touching. I stare into his eyes, and for the first time, I let myself believe that this might really be happening. That I might get to have this. This happiness, this love, for the second time in my life.

“So,” I ask, my voice soft, “what’s really bothering you?”

Ned’s smile falters, and for a moment, a shadow passes over his face. He drops his gaze, and I see the sadness there.

“Just some...heavy stuff with one of the boys,” he says quietly.

One of the people he was imprisoned with. My heart aches for him, for all of them. They’ve been through so much already, more than anyone should ever have to endure. It’s not fair that life keeps throwing more at them.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I ask.

The startled look on Ned's face, along with the whiplash way he looks up at me, hurts for a moment. Then I realize that having any faith in humanity after what he has endured, is a miracle. It's nothing personal. He is not surprised that I'm nice. He is shocked that anyone is.

I watch a whole range of emotions flow over his face. Then he shakes his head. It is not a surprise since I don't know his friends and I have no special skills. It still sucks to be useless.

Life can be heavy sometimes. But it's moments like this, sitting here with Ned, that remind me how beautiful it can be too.

Perhaps a bit of humor to lighten the mood? That could be my contribution.

"Heavy shit?" I say with a teasing grin. "Isn't that what hippies said in the sixties?"

Ned looks aghast for a moment. "I...watch a lot of old shows."

I chuckle and squeeze his hand. "And I'm an old fart who doesn't speak like a young person either."

Ned's expression turns soft. "Forties isn't old."

My eyebrow lifts. There is something very sincere in Ned's eyes. He truly believes what he is saying, and he is not simply trying to humor me. I've caught myself a stunning young man who genuinely doesn't think I'm old. How did I get so lucky?

I shake my head in fond bewilderment. "I don't deserve you."

Ned's grin is electric. "Well, you can try to make yourself worthy later."

My heart swoops. My stomach twists. My cock stirs. Every part of me speaks in full agreement.

“Hell yeah!”

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Chapter fifteen

Morgan

This was an excellent, if rather impulsive, idea. Ned deserves to be dated properly. Wined and dined. And not just pawed at on the sofa the minute the kids are asleep.

I'm so glad I managed to persuade him. Now I'm walking out of the cinema with him. The city lights are bright and there is a bite to the October air. It feels terribly romantic.

"Any messages?" asks Ned anxiously.

I chuckle and shake my head. "The kids are fine, Ned. You said you liked the babysitter after grilling the poor girl for twenty minutes."

Ned stares at me and bites his bottom lip. I can all but see the gears turning in his head, probably thinking about whether he gave the babysitter enough instructions.

"It's a very reputable agency," I remind him.

We both wince as memories of the Grindr incident hit us. Silently, with nothing more than a shared look, we agree to not speak of it, not now, and not ever.

I puff out a tiny huff of relief. It is an embarrassing memory, but further proof that we are meant to be together. The universe was trying to give us a helping hand that night. But we got there in the end.

“The restaurant is this way,” I say. It’s as good a way to backpedal out of an awkward conversation as any.

Ned nods and turns with me. Phew. Crisis averted.

We walk in comfortable silence for a bit. The streets are busy, but not overwhelmingly so. The sound of distant traffic, the occasional snippet of conversation from a passerby, the clinking of glasses from a nearby café.

I’d like to take his hand, but his are shoved deep into his jeans pockets. Holding his hand in the cinema was incredible. He was freezing, though. Does Lupus affect circulation that badly? If not, should I gently encourage Ned to get a checkup? It can’t be healthy to be that cold.

“What did you think of the film?” I ask, because bringing up health concerns is not a date night topic of conversation.

Ned rolls his eyes. “CGI nonsense and no heart. I knew when they brought color out, filmmaking was going to go downhill.”

I laugh, but before I can voice a response, Ned abruptly shoves me behind him. It happens so fast I don’t have time to react. One second we’re walking down the street, the next there’s a young man, maybe mid-twenties, scruffy, disheveled, and running up to us, looking wild-eyed and sweaty. He drops to his knees on the sidewalk and stares up at Ned like he’s just seen a god.

I try to move in front of Ned, protective instincts kicking in, but Ned’s hand clamps down on my arm, holding me in place with surprising strength. It’s adorable that he wants to protect me, but let’s be real, he’s five foot nothing and as slender as a ballet dancer. I’m the one who should be doing the protecting.

“Master! Feed from me!” says the stranger on his knees, his voice desperate and fervent.

Yep. Just what I thought. Crazy or a junkie. Possibly both. But there’s something off about the way he says it, the way he’s looking at Ned. He’s not just some random guy on a bender. There’s a seriousness in his eyes that makes my skin crawl.

“Where is Baltazar?” hisses Ned at the man, his voice low and dangerous.

Wait? What? Baltazar? Wasn’t that the cult leader that wanted Ned to join him? Shit, I can’t believe I forgot all about that. Poor Ned, he really does have the misfortune to attract crazy people. Well, he has me to protect him now.

“He cast me off for being too clingy!” wails the man. “I won’t be too clingy with you!” he implores with fever-bright eyes and something disturbingly eager in his expression.

Ned looks around nervously. “Come on, let’s take this off the main road.”

I hesitate for a second, glancing between the two of them. But Ned’s already moving, leading the man toward a dimly lit alley, and I follow, my heart racing. This isn’t good. I don’t know what’s going on, but I have a bad feeling about this.

The man shuffles after Ned. Following him to a dimly lit alley. Just like I have. But I don’t fall to my knees again.

“Please!” he sobs.

Ned’s back is to me now, and I can’t see his face. I have no idea what he’s thinking, but I’m presuming he knows this man. He has to, right? I mean, this is all crazy, but if anyone can handle it, it’s Ned. Still, I can’t shake the growing sense of unease

crawling up my spine. But I trust that Ned knows his capabilities. I'll let him take the lead and I'll only jump in if things get physical.

The man whimpers. "You are so hungry, master. I can feel it. You have left it far too long."

"No," whispers Ned, but his voice sounds strained, like he's holding something back.

Right, that's enough. I'm dragging Ned out of here. I'm sorry for whatever this guy is going through, I truly am. But Ned is not going to be the one to deal with it.

Something glints in the man's hand as he brings it up to his throat. I blink, then dark stuff is spurting out of the man's neck. Spraying out in an arch.

Holy shit! Is that blood? Did this crazy person just cut their own neck open? Does it look black because there is not enough light in the alley to see red? Fuck. This guy is going to bleed to death right in front of us.

My hand scrambles in my pocket for my phone. I really don't think an ambulance will get here in time, but we have to try.

But before I can even unlock my phone, Ned swears, and then he moves. Faster than I've ever seen anyone move. One second he's standing next to me, the next his mouth is on the man's neck.

I blink again. My mind is breaking, trying to piece together what I'm seeing. The blood isn't spraying anymore. It's pouring into Ned's mouth, disappearing, and the man looks... calm. Blissed out, like he's in some sort of euphoric trance.

I cannot believe what I am seeing. My mind makes me check again. Looking for tricks of the light or hallucinations. But no, everything is exactly as I first thought.

Ned's mouth really is over the man's wound. Blood is no longer spurting out into the alley, therefore it has to be pouring into Ned's mouth. Even though none of that makes any sense at all.

The man's eyes are closed. His shoulders relaxed. He looks almost serene. All his agitated energy has gone. He seems at peace.

Ned is licking the guy's neck now. My mind is shattering and splintering. This new development is not making things any clearer. I still cannot piece together what is happening. Nothing is making any sense.

Ned steps back and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. I can't breathe. I can't think. In the dim light of a street lamp, the crazy person's pale neck looks fine. I cannot see a cut at all.

My phone is still in my numb hand. Guess I don't need it now.

The man sways drunkenly. His eyes are half-lidded. He looks up at Ned with an expression of sheer devotion.

"I'm not helping you with the aftermath, you are on your own there, you stupid motherfucker!" snaps Ned.

The man climbs to his feet, nods in eager agreement and starts to stagger out of the alley.

"Try that again and I'll let you die!" Ned snarls after him.

The stranger turns out of sight, out back onto the main road, giving no sign that he has heard Ned.

And now it's just us. Me and Ned.

Slowly, I turn back to Ned. He is staring at me intently. His eyes are dark and glistening. His face is pale. Something about the way he is holding himself is making the hairs on the back of my neck rise. It is like I am looking at something pretending to be Ned.

Except I'm not. I'm looking at Ned. For the first time. Because normally when I do, he is pretending to be human. This is the real Ned.

Ned, short for Edmund, an old-fashioned name. Ned who can't go out in the sun. Who loves old films and whisky. Who sometimes uses old phrases when he talks. Who thinks being in your forties isn't old.

Ned, who often feels freezing cold.

Who I just witnessed drinking blood and healing a mortal injury.

I force a swallow down my tight throat. It seems so utterly implausible, so very ridiculous, yet I'm not one to deny evidence. Not when it is all stacked up so neatly. There really is only one possible conclusion.

“So...you are a vampire?”

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Chapter sixteen

Ned

Morgan's kitchen feels different. Everything feels different. Because everything has changed. And nothing will ever be the same again.

Morgan knows I am a vampire.

I stare at him intently, but all he is doing is sitting there with his gaze fixed on the table and his large, gentle hands cupping the sweet, milky tea I made him. He has already had a stiff drink, so tea is going to have to do the rest.

The clock in the hallway ticks. It's super late, but I don't think anyone is going to be sleeping tonight. Well, apart from the kids who are all tucked up, safe and sound. The babysitter was trustworthy, after all.

She looked a little startled when we arrived home early and all but shoved her out of the door. I'm sure I'll feel bad about it later, but right now, there are other, far more pressing things on my mind.

"Are aliens real too?" asks Morgan.

The sound of his rumbling voice makes me jump. It is the first thing he has said for a while.

"Umm...as in little green men in flying saucers? Not as far as I know. "

Morgan nods slowly. He still has a dazed look on his face.

“What about witches?”

“Yeah, they are real.”

Morgan’s eyes widen, and he gulps down some tea. “The Loch Ness monster?”

My eyebrows rise. “Umm...I don’t think so, But I’ll check with Lello. He is a kelpie from the Scottish Lochs. He will know.”

Morgan’s face pales even more and he looks back down at the table. Poor man. He is taking it well, all things considered. I still remember the shock of discovering the paranormal world was real, and it’s been eighty years for me.

I really don’t want Morgan to fall apart. I especially don’t want him to start throwing garlic and crucifixes and stakes at me. None of that will hurt me, except for my heart. But that is the worst pain of all. Being hated by someone you love.

I take a deep, shuddery breath. Morgan looks dazed and shocked. He doesn’t look like he is about to fly into a murderous rage.

“All the men who were imprisoned in the harem with you...the people you live with...they are all paranormal too?”

“Yes.”

I’m not going over it again, or giving him a list of names and species. Morgan’s poor mind is trying to process, he doesn’t need to be further overwhelmed with additional information. What he needs is time for it all to sink in.

“And that’s why it was never in the news?”

“Yes. ”

The sudden sound of the doorbell makes us both jump. Even though I had been dimly aware of the approaching car and then the footsteps.

“That will be my friend Sammy,” I say as I turn towards the front door.

Morgan nods blankly. I’m not sure if he has even heard me. Or if he even registered that I said I was inviting over a human new to the paranormal world.

I open the door and Sammy bounds in. His blue eyes are bright and his blond hair all messy. He all but barges past me and makes a beeline for the kitchen. By the time I’ve caught up with him, he is bent over with his arms wrapped around Morgan, who is still sitting. And now looking even more bewildered than before.

Oh crap. As well as being an overly exuberant ball of energy, Sammy still dresses like a sex worker. I don’t think Morgan is judgemental in any way, shape or form. But having Sammy bounce into your home, in the middle of the night, and drape himself over you, has to be a little disconcerting.

“Welcome to the family!” exclaims Sammy brightly.

I reach out to yank him away from Morgan, but the cheeky little shit steps back of his own accord.

“I’ve heard so much about you!” he gushes.

Morgan looks up at him in surprise. “You have?”

Sammy's grin is positively malicious. "Oh yes! Ned keeps a framed photo of you by his bed. It is the cutest thing ever!"

Morgan's dark eyes flick to me. I open my mouth to form some sort of denial, but damn it. My cheeks are burning. I can feel it. My traitorous face is landing me right in it .

The corners of Morgan's mouth twitch. Then they curl up in a smirk. My heart thuds, a hollow sound in my chest.

Then the sound of a chair dragging across the floor makes me wince. Sammy plonks himself next to Morgan.

"So, finding out the paranormal world is real? Quite the head fuck, isn't it?"

Oh balls. This was a terrible idea. But it is not as if I know any other humans who have recently discovered the paranormal world and who would be willing to drop everything and come over in the middle of the night.

"Are you going through everything you thought was make believe and wondering which ones are true?" asks Sammy.

"Yes!" agrees Morgan passionately. "I'm down to cartoon characters now!"

Sammy laughs.

Okay. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all. They seem to be building up a rapport. Which should not be surprising, since Sammy, while being a lot to handle, is also warm and lovely. And could probably charm a snake. He might just be exactly what Morgan needs.

Quietly, I slip away. The whole point of asking Sammy to come over was so that Morgan can ask him questions. Especially ones he might not want to ask me. So there is no point in lurking.

I head outside and then slide into the passenger seat of Blue's car. When I called, I suspected that he'd drive his mate here, since Sammy is such a terrible driver. So I'm not surprised to see him.

"Thanks for this," I say .

The siren nods. He is still far too quiet. All that time being masked and muted has really done a number on his head. I swear he forgets he is free to talk now.

"You can come in if you like?" I say gently.

Blue stares at the house, and then at me. And then back at the house.

"Morgan is a good man," I assure him.

Blue swallows. "I...um...I..."

My hand reaches for his knee, but I remember just in time and pull it back. Blue hates being touched. Another terrible thing the harem did to him.

"It's okay. I just wanted to make sure you knew you were welcome," I say.

Blue nods and flashes me a tiny smile. Then his expression falters and turns somber.

"You'll have to report this to the Council," he whispers quietly.

I groan and thump my head against the back of the seat. "Yeah, I know. But since it is

all fucking Baltazar's fault for letting his blood slave go all crazy like that, and Baltazar is on the Council, it should all be fine."

Blue nods, but his eyes still look worried. He has a point. Humans discovering the paranormal is real, is always a big deal and a big pain in the ass. Luckily for him, he didn't have to sort out the paperwork for Sammy. It was Mal and Gray who blew cover in front of him, so it was their problem.

Nice for some. This is very much my issue to deal with. No matter how much Baltazar is to blame.

So I need to stop hiding out here and deal with it. Morgan and Sammy should have had enough time to cover any awkward questions by now. All I'm doing by lingering is being a coward.

Sighing heavily, I open the car door. "You all good out here? Need anything?"

Blue smiles again at points at the car stereo. Sammy has him hooked on modern music. I'm not sure Blue deserves that fate, but it seems to make him happy.

"Alright then. Hopefully I won't be keeping Sammy from you for too long."

I slip out of the car and back into the house. I find Morgan and Sammy chatting away like best friends. And Sammy has found the vodka. I frown, but maybe it is for the best. Alcohol eases most things.

"You know," says Sammy. "With all the weirdos I've met and the crazy shit I've seen, knowing that paranormal stuff is real means the world makes more sense. Not less."

Morgan nods in agreement, but I don't understand how he can relate to that. He is not

a survivor of the care system, or an ex rent boy from the wrong side of the tracks. Morgan's life was perfectly normal and nice.

Until his wife committed suicide.

I wince and close my eyes. The ways in which I have destroyed this wonderful man's life are unforgivable. If I had a single decent bone in my body, I'd walk away. I'd leave him in peace. I'd stop being a wrecking ball to everything he knows and holds dear.

I open my eyes. I watch Morgan and Sammy share the vodka. Then my heart starts to clench painfully as the full implications of the situation finally sink in. Morgan seems like he is going to cope with learning the world is not what he thought it was. He is strong and tough and able to adjust. He is going to accept that paranormal beings are real.

But that doesn't mean he is going to want to date one.

I might not need to be decent. Morgan might save himself. He might want nothing to do with me. I could lose him. I could lose the children. I could lose everything.

And it would be exactly what I deserve.

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Chapter seventeen

Morgan

I 'm blearily pouring Oscar a bowl of cereal when it hits me. It wasn't a bizarre dream. It was real. The paranormal world is real. And Ned is a vampire.

I groan and rub my hand over my face. And I drank far too much vodka with Sammy. Add in the fact that I was probably only asleep for a couple of hours before the kids came and bounced on my bed, and it's a miracle that I don't feel worse.

The doorbell rings and the sound lances through my brain. Grimly, I shuffle off to the door.

It's Ned. In dark sunglasses and a baseball cap and hoodie. His shoulders are hunched.

The sun is shining brightly. And he is a vampire. My heart races. My hand grabs him and yanks him inside while my other hand slams the door shut.

"What are you doing!" I shout far too loudly for my own fragile head.

I close my eyes against the pain and breathe deeply. "Do you need to be invited in now that I know you are a vampire? "

I open my eyes. Ned has taken his sunglasses off. His expression is a mixture of wary and sheepish.

“I need to be invited in, not because I am a vampire, but because we were dating and I lied to you and you might not want anything to do with me anymore.”

I stare at him. “Were dating? Past tense?”

My mind whirls and catches up with the rest of what he just said. Oh. Past tense, but not because he is dumping me, but because he thinks I might dump him.

I suck in a deep breath. Discovering the world is not as it seems, is frightening and disorientating. Just like it must have been for Ned. Call me crazy, but I know him, and I know that however he ended up being turned into a vampire, it was not by some malicious intent on his behalf.

I’m not going to hate him for something he never chose.

Ned swallows. I watch his Adam’s apple bob.

“I hope we are still dating,” I say.

Relief flows through Ned’s beautiful hazel eyes. “I hope so too,” he whispers, and it’s my turn to be flooded with relief.

But wait a minute. He is staring up at me with those beautiful eyes of his, while practically trembling. He looks hopeful, but as if the hope he is experiencing is a painful emotion.

This wonderful man is tentative and unsure. He is bracing himself for rejection, even though I just told him I still want him.

I can’t stand it. I can’t stand that he doubts himself, or my feelings for him.

My hands reach out and grab fistfuls of his hoodie. I yank him up to me and press my lips against his .

I feel his surprise. Then his shuddering relief, quickly followed by delight, and then finally, his passion. He kisses me back like it is an act of worship. His arms wrap around my neck and he presses his entire body as close to mine as he can get.

Fireworks are igniting in my mind. My soul is swirling and my heart racing. I'm kissing Ned and it is perfect.

“Daddy, I want to...”

Ned and I leap apart as if we are a pair of school kids caught behind the bike shed.

“Ned!” exclaims Lottie happily. “Come play tea party!”

I chuckle as I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. Ned's eyes are bright. His lips swollen. He has never looked more beautiful.

“It's Ned's day off, sweetie.”

Lottie's lips begin to puff out in a pout, but Ned intercedes. “No, it's fine. I love tea parties!”

Lottie grins, grabs Ned's hand and drags him away. Ned looks over his shoulder at me and gives me a very naughty smirk that hits me right in the gut.

Jesus Christ. It's going to be a long, long day until the kids are in bed. It is such a shame they have grown out of naps. Seven p.m. feels a lifetime away, because the moment they are asleep, I'm ripping Ned's clothes off.

My body is vibrating with excitement. That was the very longest day of my entire life. But the end is in sight. I'm sitting on the floor in the kids' bedroom, reading a bedtime story .

Ned is sitting by the foot of Noah's bed. Just sitting there, cross-legged. Listening to my terrible story telling skills. But somehow he is making his mere presence an intense distraction. It is as if he is the center of gravity and pulls all things towards him. Especially all my thoughts.

I have no clue how I'm managing to read this book. A whole day of heated glances as we took care of the kids together, and now I am about to combust. I'm going to be one of those news stories about people who randomly caught fire and nobody knows why.

"They're asleep," whispers Ned.

My head snaps up so quickly I nearly give myself whiplash. I quickly cast my gaze over all three children. They all have their eyes closed and are sleeping peacefully. My heart melts for a moment at how adorable they are. I love them so much. My little angels.

Then my attention snaps to Ned. He grins at me as he backs silently out of the room. My stomach flips right over and I stalk after him. He runs straight to my room and by the time I get there, he is already pulling his top off.

That's an excellent idea. Superb even. The best idea I have ever come across. My fingers clumsily fumble with my buttons as I attempt to copy Ned.

His dark eyes flash. He prowls up to me. Then, in a series of swift, efficient motions, my clothes are removed. Ned's trousers disappear. And all of a sudden, he is standing naked in front of me. In my bedroom. And I'm not hallucinating or having a dirty

dream. This really is happening.

My gaze roams all over his beautiful body, drinking in the sight. He is truly gorgeous. Perfection. I should feel awkward standing before him with my hairy middle-aged dad bod, but the look in his eyes is leaving me with no doubt that he likes what he is seeing. Wonders never cease.

Suddenly he is in my arms and I'm losing all ability to think. My world is shrinking. My awareness narrowing. There is Ned and nothing else.

My universe is kisses and lingering caresses. A world of tongues, fingers and lips. Pleasure and arousal. With soft sounds of lust. There is nothing else. I don't want there to be. Everything I need and want is in my arms. And in the next room.

All the treasures of the world exist under my roof. I'm the richest and luckiest man alive.

A small whimper snaps me back to reality. Ned is spread out on my sheets. I'm half over him, my lips are pressed against his, and my fingers are teasing around his hole.

I stop all movement. I pull away from our kiss and stare into his dark eyes.

"Everything okay?" I breathe.

He nods, but he doesn't look very confident. "I haven't since..." He trails off and swallows instead.

The harem? He hasn't had sex since his imprisonment? This is the first time he has had consensual sex since... goodness knows when? Oh my.

"I'm honored that you trust me that much," I say, somehow finding the words.

His blush is beautiful. Then a thought comes to mind and slips past my tongue before I can stop it.

“Grindr?” I ask.

His blush deepens and he looks away. “That was for feeding,” he mumbles. “I never...”

Oh. I see. A strange, gleeful feeling is twisting through me. Surely I’m not happy about this? I’m not one of those strange, jealous and possessive people. At least, I never used to be.

I close my eyes for a moment and imagine Ned in someone else’s arms. My entire body recoils and convulses. Okay. Guess I am possessive now.

I open my eyes and meet Ned’s gaze. I’m not going to dump my new found envy on him, but he is being honest and vulnerable with me and I want to give him the same in return.

“I...um.” Shit, this is hard. “I never tried Grindr again, and that really was my first attempt.” Phew. There, I did it.

Ned’s eyes grow impossibly large. “This is your first...since...Jennifer?”

I swallow and give him a shallow nod.

A look of pain crosses his face, and he closes his eyes. He sucks in a tiny shuddery breath.

Okay, it is a bit much for him. I get it. The shadows of dead wives are long. There are at least a dozen gothic novels about it. It is quite the mood killer.

“We don’t have to do anything,” I say softly. “We can cuddle instead.”

Ned’s eyes fly open. He searches my face. Then he gives me a small smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Why are you so sweet?” he says.

I let out an exaggerated sigh as I lie down next to him and pull him close.

“Just born with it. It is such a terrible burden, being this perfect.”

Ned laughs at my terrible joke and the sound of his happiness makes my heart do a full cartwheel. I want to coax that sound from him every day. For ever and ever .

Ned snuggles into me and we get comfortable. He fits against me like my missing puzzle piece. A sigh of deep contentment pours out of me. I’m not just the luckiest man alive, I’m the happiest.

Chapter eighteen

Ned

I have never been more nervous in my life. It's ridiculous. Morgan is coming to the house to pick me up for a date, and he wants to meet the boys. It's hardly a dangerous or life-threatening situation. Hell knows I've suffered far worse.

So why does this feel intolerable? Why the fuck are my palms sweaty? I didn't even know my palms could get sweaty. It has never happened to me before. I must be having some sort of breakdown.

"It's going to be fine, Ned." says Lello. "Everybody is going to love him and he is going to love everybody."

Lello's blue eyes are wide and utterly earnest. I sigh and pat him on the shoulder. How anyone is so damn sweet is completely beyond me.

Jade and Pink walk into the dining room and quietly take their seats. A dining room is a strange place for what is supposed to be an informal meeting, but it is one of the few rooms big enough to comfortably hold everyone, so it is going to have to do.

My gaze locks with Jade. His expression is strange and I can't read it. Shit. Please don't tell me he knows that Baltazar has ordered me to kill him if he goes loopy again.

"We are happy for you, Ned. We really are," says Pink, snatching my attention away

from Jade.

There is something in his gentle tone that sets my teeth on edge. I'm pretty sure there is a 'but' coming.

"But..."

See! I knew it! I knew they couldn't resist meddling in my business.

"Shouldn't you tell Morgan that you are his great-grandfather?"

"I'm not!" I snap.

Jade fixes me with a glare. "No, you're his dead wife's great-grandfather."

I open my mouth to defend myself, despite the horrendous guilt coiling low in my belly, but the doorbell rings. Talk about being saved by the bell.

"He's here!" I announce unnecessarily as I turn and sprint for the door.

I fling open the door and grin at Morgan like a maniac. He has dressed up for our date and looks absolutely stunning. He is wearing a tie and everything. Before I can say a word, Lello comes out of nowhere and throws himself at Morgan, wrapping him in a tight hug.

Lello untangles himself, grabs Morgan's hand and tows him to the dining room, all while talking ten to the dozen about everything and nothing.

Morgan looks back over his shoulder at me, and I give him an apologetic shrug. He smiles warmly and turns back to Lello. Seemingly completely unphased .

A warm, tingly feeling washes over me. My boyfriend likes my best friend. It's wonderful. As for my best friend liking my boyfriend, that's a given. Lello likes everyone. He is daft like that.

We reach the dining room. A quick glance confirms that everyone is here now. Well, everyone apart from Gray and Mal. But that's not surprising. They are often late. Too busy going at it like rabbits. All the frigging time. It would be alarming if Gray wasn't an incubus.

"Everyone, this is Morgan. Morgan, this is everyone," I say lamely.

It would take a thousand years to name everyone individually, and there is no way Morgan could remember all that.

"Hi everyone!" says Morgan cheerfully.

At the back of the room, Blue pales. I watch helplessly as Sammy whispers something to him, and then they both slip out of the room. My heart sinks, but I understand. The only mundane humans Blue has ever known were the men who used us in the harem.

It may be a little mean of me not to class Sammy as a man, but the cute little twink is the most unthreatening person in the world and really not in the same category. Whereas Morgan is a manly man. Tall, broad shouldered, deep voiced. The works. I totally understand Blue's fear, but it still hurts.

Red intercedes smoothly and distracts Morgan from Blue and Sammy's abrupt departure. I huff out a small sigh of relief and let Red take the lead. The omega is good at this shit. People and conversations and making things comfortable. It's really not my wheelhouse .

While Red engages Morgan in polite conversation, I look at Pink and Jade. Pink keeps giving me concerned looks. While Jade is positively glaring. What's got in to him? I know this great-grandfather stuff isn't the best, but I'm not sure why Jade has his knickers in a twist about it.

Before I can puzzle it out, the door opens and Gray and Mal finally make an appearance. Gray is wearing his stupid white fluffy bathrobe again, but he is covered up at least. I don't think Morgan is ready for casual nudity just yet.

Suddenly, Morgan startles like a deer hearing gunshot. He jumps and flounders backwards until his back hits the wall. His eyes are enormous, fixed on Gray in absolute terror, and he has turned a very unhealthy pale color. I'm not sure he is even breathing.

Crap.

"Gray! Cut it out!" I snap.

Gray stares at me with wide, confused, and utterly bewildered eyes. Oh for fuck's sake.

I take Morgan's hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. "Hey, it's okay. Gray is a demon. The reaction you are feeling is a perfectly healthy human response. Demons usually shield their energy, but Gray is not right in the head and has apparently forgotten how to."

Behind me, Gray sucks in a sharp breath. I turn around just in time to see his anguished expression before he sobs and clings to Mal, burying his face in the man's broad chest.

Mal's arms wrap around him. Then he glares at me. His dark eyes flash red and all

the vacant chairs in the room slide across the floor towards me. And Morgan .

Motherfucker! Okay, I was rude and I upset his mate. There is no need to get physical and attack. He could hurt Morgan. Humans are incredibly weak and vulnerable.

I snarl and show my fangs. “You really want to try it, motherfucker!”

There is a reason vampires are feared. We are fucking deadly. Strong and powerful.

“No! No fighting!” wails Lello as he steps in between us.

Red joins him. The omega crosses his arms over his chest. “Lello is right. This is stopping right now. Ned, take your boyfriend and go on your date.”

What the fuck? My hands lift as rage seethes through me. Red is taking Mal’s side? Mal wasn’t in the harem, I was. Red’s loyalty should be to me.

A tug on my sleeve snatches my attention. “Come on, Ned let’s go. We don’t want to miss our dinner reservation.”

I blink. I see Lello’s wide and worried blue eyes. I hear Gray’s soft sobs.

My anger dissipates. Leaving me feeling worn and dejected. My shoulders slump. That all got rather out of hand. And so quickly. It has left me feeling a little dizzy.

“Sorry, everyone.”

I turn and lead Morgan away. Red is right, us leaving is the quickest way to cool everyone down. And we were going out anyway.

The cool night air knocks further sense into me. What was I thinking? Gray is a

frigging ancient demon. He could wipe me out with a snap of his fingers.

And I shouldn't have been so nasty to him. It's not his fault he is a little crazy. Being tortured by humans for a hundred years is bound to do that to you. He is a little sweetie when he is lucid, and he wouldn't have wanted to scare the crap out of Morgan on purpose.

It was just shitty timing. He has never seemed to have much problem with his shielding before. Or, I guess Morgan could be extra sensitive to demonic energy? Whatever caused it, it's a fucking mess, that's for sure.

We get in the car, and the slam of the doors is soothing. I groan and cover my face with my hands.

"That could have gone better," I sigh.

Morgan chuckles. His warm hand rests on my knee. "Meeting the family is always intense."

I lower my hands from my face and stare at him. "There is intense, and there is that frigging disaster."

Morgan chuckles again. I scrutinize him intently, but he seems fine. Has he really recovered so quickly?

"Are you okay?" I ask.

He gives me a rueful smile. "Apparently so. It seems demons stop being so terrifying when they start crying."

I wince. I did that. I made Gray cry. I'm such an asshole.

I stare at Morgan some more. “I’m sorry you had to see me lose my shit.”

It is one thing knowing your boyfriend is a vampire, it is quite another seeing it. Though I suppose he has already seen me drink blood. Perhaps getting arsey and confrontational pales in comparison to that?

Morgan squeezes my knee. “You were protecting me. It was fucking hot.”

In the dark car, his pupils widen. The scent of his desire coils lazily around me. He is telling the truth. He really did find me vamping out hot. Oh my god.

My heart thumps. And thumps again. Morgan being able to accept what I am, was wonderful enough. But finding it a turn on? Oh hells, that is a whole new level of awesome.

I lick my lips. “How about we skip dinner and book a hotel instead?”

Morgan’s sharp little inhale is music to my ears.

“That’s the best idea I have ever heard,” he says with a grin.

I grin back at him. I have to agree with him. It’s the best idea I’ve had for a century.

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Chapter nineteen

Morgan

As soon as the door of the hotel room shuts behind us, Ned and I collide. A storm of touch, kisses, and bodies pressed up tight together. A fervent, burning passion that's almost desperate.

Meeting his family wasn't the best. It didn't go as either of us had hoped. But I have faith it will be something we look back on in the future and laugh about.

And that's the last bit of attention I'm giving it tonight. Ned is in my arms. We are alone. The kids aren't going to walk in, because they are safe at home with a babysitter that even Ned begrudgingly can find no fault with, and that the children also approve of.

So I'm officially turning my mind off for the night. Tonight is about pleasure and nothing else.

I have waited far too long for this. I simply cannot wait any longer. I want Ned. I need him. And judging by the frenzied way he is returning my passion, he feels exactly as I do. He wants me just as much as I want him, and the knowledge of that is sending me to dizzying, euphoric heights .

Shedding my clothes feels like breaking free from a chrysalis. I'm discarding the old. I'm being reborn. All in desperation for my naked skin to be against Ned's.

At first, he is ice against my fire. Then he heats under my touch. My body is warming his, bringing him fully to life, and it is magical and wondrous.

I back him up towards the bed until his legs touch it, and he topples backwards. I fall right with him.

The bed is plump, and the sheets are soft. It is a nice hotel because Ned deserves the best. And oh goodness am I happy with my choice, because he looks splendid spread out naked on the egyptian cotton.

My hand traces over his firm abdomen and finds his cock. He is hard for me. Just from our kissing. The triumph of that runs like electricity through my veins.

My fingers curl around his length, and I start stroking him gently. He moans and his cock swells in my hand.

A grin curls across my face. Seems there is not much to learn about making love to a vampire. It's all very human. Which means I can put all my skills and experience to good use. I want Ned to be crying out my name, not tolerating the fumbling of a beginner. This is perfect.

I play with his cock. Varying the pressure and tempo. Exploring to find his extra sensitive spots. It has been a long time since I mapped the body of a new lover, but thankfully it seems I haven't forgotten how. I'm going to learn Ned's body, every inch of it until I know how to drive him wild. He'll never want anyone else.

I watch as his hips lift and his legs spread. He is a true bottom, just as I assumed. His deepest pleasure comes from his hole. And I'm very happy to oblige .

I abandon his full and leaking cock to settle with my head between his legs. My hands rest on his thighs and gently coax them to open even more for me.

As soon as my tongue laps at his hole, Ned keens and his back arches. Perfection. I'm going to rock his world and make him scream. Pleasure him until he is a quivering, sobbing mess.

My tongue swirls around and around. As wet as I can make it. Then I change direction. Then I give him long, broad licks over his hole.

He softens. Opens. Flutters. It is all the invitation I need. I slide my tongue inside him. Sinking into his tight, soft flesh.

He wails. I can't see, but I can picture him throwing back his head, fingers clutching and twisting desperately in the sheets.

I delve and plunder as far as I can go. I swirl around his insides. Then I flick and fuck. In and out, in and out.

He is gasping now. Strangled sobs of joy. It's music to my ears.

I ease a finger in beside my tongue. He needs deeper and wider, and my tongue can only do so much.

He groans and then whimpers.

I stop. I withdraw from his body and look up at him from between his legs.

"Are you okay?"

He nods with his eyes closed, but then he swears.

"Damn it! I'm not scared like Blue! I'm the grumpy, belligerent one."

I stroke the soft skin of his inner thigh. “You are allowed to have more than one emotion. Even at the same time. And you are allowed to change. You were belligerent in the past. You don’t have to be now.”

Ned huffs. A noise that is part amusement, part disbelief. I slide up the bed until our heads are nearly touching.

He opens his beautiful eyes and smiles softly. “Sweet and wise.”

I grin back at him.

His expression turns intense. “I want you,” he says, and I can hear the frustration in his voice.

“Do you want to top?” I ask.

His eyes grow impossibly wide and his mouth drops open. It is impossible not to grin at his surprise. I’m not at all offended. I don’t know what it says about me that people are often amazed to learn that I’m vers, but it has happened so often that I accepted it long ago.

Ned’s amazement turns into a beautiful blush. “That’s...um. It’s not really my thing,” he stammers awkwardly.

I smile and caress his arm. “That’s fine by me. I am vers, but I do have a preference for topping.”

Relief flows across his face. Bless him. He really didn’t want to disappoint me. As if he ever could.

“You could still go on top,” I suggest. “I could lie back and you could ride me?”

The look on Ned's face is priceless. I'm going to memorize it and cherish it forever. Surprise. Delight, and a deep, nearly feral lust. My boy likes my idea.

Grinning, I roll onto my back. I gesture towards my straining cock.

"All yours. "

Ned laughs. Then he pounces. And oh lord does that make the hairs on the back of my neck rise, as well as making my cock throb. There was something too fast, too graceful in the way he moved as he straddled me. Something that woke all the primal parts of my brain.

My subconscious has finally figured out that the person in my bed is not human. And fuck me. I love it. It is beyond hot. It is scratching an itch that I didn't know I had.

The look in Ned's eyes as he stares down at me, pulls a deep groan from me. A wicked smile curls his lips.

His fingers gently curl around the base of my cock, holding me steady. We haven't got the lube out yet and I've only opened him with my tongue, but I trust he knows his own body.

For a moment, I think about condoms. But then I remember Ned explaining how vampires can't catch or carry human diseases. I'm going to have the pleasure of having Ned bareback, and just the thought of that is nearly enough to send me over the edge.

The very tip of my cock notches against his hole. I groan again. Ned's eyes flutter closed, but mine are staying open. I'm not missing one second of this.

Ned lets out a long, soft exhale. Then he lowers himself. Soft, tight flesh pushes

against my tip. Then the flesh spreads. It opens. Ned's body welcomes me in. The tip of my cock is encased in glorious heat.

There is some more pressure. I feel his tight ring of muscle fully surrender as Ned takes more of me into himself. He gasps. I study his face closely. I'm pretty sure that was a happy gasp.

My hands rest gently on his hips. He sinks a little lower. Taking another inch of me .

I groan and fight to keep my hips still. I want all of him. I need him to slide all the way down and take all of me. I want to be buried balls deep in Ned, experiencing that tight, soft heat and pressure over all of my cock. But Ned needs to take this at his own pace. And a pleasure delayed, is a pleasure intensified.

He moans and works himself a little lower, allowing my cock to burrow a little deeper. My hands tighten on his hips. Does he need my help to control this slow descent? No, I don't think he does. But I think he is enjoying my grip on him.

He lowers himself a little more and fireworks start igniting in my mind. Pleasure burns bright and golden in my gut. I'm sweating and groaning. My heart is racing and all I am doing is lying here.

Ned makes a noise of pure carnal desire, and he slides all the way down. His soft ass cheeks are resting on the top of my thighs. He is fully seated. Every inch of my cock is buried deep within him. He feels incredible. Amazing. This is like heaven on earth.

He pants for a moment, and a terrible whine escapes me. I could watch him for eternity, but my body is desperate for movement, for friction.

Ned opens his eyes and rewards me with a benevolent smile.

“You feel so good,” he whispers.

“So do you, baby, so do you.”

Ned shudders. He moans. Then he moves.

More graceful than a dancer. Lifting up, slamming down. Taking my cock and riding me. I gurgle. I groan. I gasp. He is so very beautiful.

His hands roam over his own body as he rides. One works up to his hair and runs through it as his head tilts back in a look of pure ecstasy.

He picks up the pace and I’m done for. My orgasm detonates. I’ll apologize later, but there is no earthly way to hold back this storm.

As I grunt and writhe and fill his ass with thick ropes of cum, Ned starts to cry out and spasm too. Oh fucking hell, that is so hot. I’ve taken him with me, or he is following me over the edge. Whichever it is, we are cumming together.

The crescendo of joy slowly recedes. Ned looks down at me as I pant heavily. My softening cock is still nestled inside him.

“I was hoping we could go for longer,” he says sheepishly.

I chuckle, and he gasps at the movement.

“The night is young, baby. The night is young.”

Chapter twenty

Ned

F rigging hell. There really is something so soul satisfyingly wonderful about a good hot shower after a night of fantastic sex.

I'm glad we lingered in the hotel bed until the last possible moment, because being in my own shower is an extra layer of gratification.

It's lovely that Morgan took the time to drop me home before hightailing it back to his so the babysitter could leave. Bless her for agreeing to extend her booking to an all nighter. But now it is morning, it's not surprising she has places to be.

A little shiver of uncertainty runs through me. Maybe I should have gone back to Morgan's with him? It is the weekend and my day off, but that didn't stop us last time.

I rinse the shampoo out of my hair. No, the kids need to spend time with just their dad. I can't take up all his attention. I'll be seeing them all soon enough.

A grin spreads across my face. My chest feels like it is about to burst with happiness. Fuck it. I'm going to let it out .

I open my mouth, and the shower reverberates to the sound of my singing. This feels damn good. I had forgotten it was even possible to be this happy. I sing and soap away for ages, but I can't spend all day in here, sadly. Things to do, people to see.

I turn off the water, grab a towel, and nearly walk right into Lello.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Lello! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

Lello crosses his arms over his chest and fixes me with a stern stare. “Vampires can’t have heart attacks.”

I huff and barge past him, heading for my closet and my clothes. If he tells the others that I was singing in the shower, I’ll throttle him. Even if he is my best friend.

“How did your date go?” Lello asks, with bright blue eyes.

Damn it. I can feel my cheeks heating. I’m not sure if driving straight to a hotel and ripping each other’s clothes off, technically counts as a date, but whatever the official name for it is, it was the best night of my life.

“Lovely,” I say in as deadpan a tone as I can muster.

Lello squeals and brings his hands together as if in prayer. “Did you have nooky?”

I sigh in defeat. He is not going to let this go. “Yes.”

Lello jumps up and down. I roll my eyes and start pulling my clothes on.

“Tell me everything!” demands Lello.

“Like what?” I huff as I pull a tee shirt over my head.

“Where did he kiss you? Did he lick you? How many times did you orgasm? ”

Hells. Lello’s questions are causing all sorts of delicious memories to flow through

my mind. I whirl around to face my best friend.

“Jesus Christ, Lello, I’m not telling you that!”

His mouth lifts up in a pout. “I can tell you everything Carter and me did last night?”

I groan and pull on a pair of jeans. “I don’t want to know.”

Lello falls silent for a moment. “In the harem...” he begins, but I turn back to face him and silence him with a hand on his shoulder. I’m fully dressed now and more able to cope with this.

“Lello, sweetie,” I say, and his big blue eyes stare at me with rapt attention. “We’ve been through this,” I say gently. “The things that happened in the harem weren’t normal. Out here, in the real world, sex is private. It’s between the people doing it. No one else watches, and no one else talks about it.”

I watch as Lello tries to take in what I have just said. But then his face fills with confusion. My chest tightens. Poor fucking kid. Taken from his loch when far too young and thrown into the harem. He has no other life experience. No wonder he finds things bewildering.

“But Gray and Mal go to a sex club?” he says.

I blink. Then I sigh. For fuck’s sake.

“Okay, sex clubs are an exception. It is complicated, but most people, most of the time...”

“Oh!” interrupts Lello brightly. “Carter is awake!”

The kelpie gives me a quick peck on the cheek. "I'm glad you had a nice time," he says, and then he is gone. Running to his mate .

I watch him go, and sigh wistfully. I wonder what it would be like to have a mate bond? To be so connected to someone that you can feel their emotions and sense when they are awake? I always thought it sounded terrifying before. No privacy at all. No sense of self. But now, imagining that depth of a bond with Morgan? It doesn't sound so bad at all.

Jeez. I really am loved up. I smile at my own daftness and head for the kitchen. I'm not going to bother with sleep, so coffee is very much needed. Everyone who claims the effects of caffeine on vampires is psychosomatic, can go do one.

I pop my head around the kitchen door. Pink looks up from his cup of peppermint tea. He flashes me a quick smile before jumping up to close the blinds.

"Thanks," I say as I step into the now shadowy, dimly lit room.

"Do you want a cup of tea?" asks Pink.

"No thanks, it's coffee I'm after."

I head to the machine and flip it on to do its thing.

"How was your date?"

I bite back my groan. Not this again.

"Lovely. How were things here?" There, that should safely deflect the conversation.

"It all calmed down, just fine," says Pink.

Well that's a relief. I open my mouth to say something, but the coffee machine starts to spit out its goodness. I inhale deeply. Damn, that's good. It is an aroma I will never get tired of.

As soon as my cup is full, I take it over to the table and sit across from Pink .

"I...um...am really happy for you, Ned. Despite what I said about the great-grandfather stuff."

I stare into Pink's warm, brown eyes. He seems sincere enough. And genuinely concerned for my feelings. Another little sweetie who didn't at all deserve to suffer through the harem. He is just a baby, goddammit. Eighteen when Ritchie took him. That's no age at all. No experience to tuck under his belt. Though saying that, all my years haven't stopped me from being a complete idiot most of the time.

"Thanks," I say as I sip my coffee.

A look of relief flows over his face. Then he sighs. "You're so brave."

"What?"

Pink props his elbows on the table and rests his chin on his hands. "Letting yourself fall in love," he says with a wistful look in his eyes. "I don't think I could. I'm such a coward."

I hide my smile by taking another sip of my coffee. Everyone suspects that the mage who empties Pink's magic, has come to be far more than a mere convenience for Pink. But it's fine if he is not ready to admit it yet. As for love being something you can control, damn, Pink really is young if he believes that.

But he doesn't need a lecture from a curmudgeonly old man. So I'm going to remind

him how awesome he is instead.

“What are you talking about? You are the bravest person I know!”

Pink’s brows furrow in disbelief.

“Hey,” I insist. “You were willing to sacrifice yourself to save us all. ”

Color tinges Pink’s cheeks. He drops his gaze, removes his elbows from the table, and starts fidgeting with his cup of tea.

“You let yourself get shot in the head so we could escape. We’d all still be there if it wasn’t for you.”

I place my hand over his. He looks up and gives me a soft smile, even though his eyes are full of anguish.

I hold his gaze. I let him see that I understand it didn’t feel brave at the time. It felt cowardly. Like taking the easy way out. The final escape.

It changes nothing. Regardless of motive, Pink still saved us all. And we will all be forever grateful. A fact he needs to understand.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he seems to accept the truth in my eyes, and his smile turns into a genuine one. Perfect. That’s much more like it and exactly what I wanted to see.

I release his hand and gulp down the rest of my coffee. He finishes his tea. Now there are no more excuses for dawdling.

“Since you are such a badass.” I wink. “Wanna come with me and be my backup

while I apologize to Gray?”

Pink laughs. It is a delight to hear true merriment in his voice. I’m so glad he is out of that dark place. Metaphorically and physically.

“Okay, but if Mal is still pissy at you, you are on your own.”

“Fair enough,” I agree with a grin.

And it truly is.

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Chapter twenty-one

Ned

Jeez, I sound like a cheerful person. I'm humming as I drive to work. What kind of a freak does that? Me, apparently.

Not even the traffic is ruining my good mood. I have plenty of time. It is a nice day. My car has a UV filter on the glass. It's all good.

Hmm, thinking of glass. Now that Morgan knows what I am, maybe we can get UV glass for the house. Not having to dodge sunbeams would be great. It was one good thing about the penthouse Ritchie kept us in.

The boys all offered to chip in to get the house kitted out, but it's pricey, and I dunno. I already feel bad enough that they all agreed to move here so I could be close to the children. They claimed no one else had any connections to anywhere, so it made no difference. But it feels like a big deal to me. Adding special glass is a whole other step. It feels kind of permanent. Like declaring that it's my forever home or something.

Oh shit. That's exactly what I was just thinking about for Morgan's home. And I don't even live there. For flip's sake, we've only just started dating, and look at me, practically picking out the wedding vows. I'm such a sappy shit.

Morgan's house comes into view and a huge grin spreads across my face. Yep. I'm officially a sappy shit.

I park close to the door, get my keys ready, and make a run for it. As soon as I unlock the door and step inside, my senses prick. Something feels off. It is far too quiet for a start.

I head down the hall and find Morgan in the kitchen, sitting at the table. His expression is unreadable. It's nothing good, I can tell that much at least.

I swallow. "Where are the kids?"

"Tina has taken them to the park." Morgan's voice is cold. Inflectionless. It's making the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

"Tina? The babysitter?" I squeak.

What the fuck is going on? A heavy feeling of utter dread is dragging at my guts.

Morgan nods, the movement slow and heavy.

I lick my lips. "What's wrong?" I say, even though I'm not sure I want to know.

"You are Jennifer's grandfather."

The words hit me like a sucker punch. They knock all the air out of me. Four little words that are shattering everything and causing my world to tumble down.

Ridiculously, it is on the tip of my tongue to correct him and say, 'great-grandfather,' as if that will make any difference. Thankfully, it dies on my lips and a single strangled word comes out instead.

"How?"

“Jade came over to see me yesterday. ”

Another sucker punch, no scrub that. This is a stake to the heart. Cruel and painful. Wiping out all the light in the world. It's betrayal. It's hurt. It's confusion.

Why would Jade do such a thing to me? He could have least given me an ultimatum first. Tell me to tell Morgan myself. Why this destruction? What was the urgency? Does Jade hate me? And if so, why? What have I ever done to him?

Morgan draws in a big shuddering breath and all thoughts of Jade flee my mind. All my focus is on this wonderful man before me. Wonderful and wounded. Because of me.

“This was all so you could get close to the kids?” he asks in a tone of bewildered shock. “Was being their nanny not enough? You wanted to be their stepfather?”

Pain lances through my chest. I take a step towards him and then falter to a stop. It is very clear that he doesn't want me close to him.

“Being their nanny is more than enough, I swear. I tried so hard not to fall for you.”

Not hard enough, clearly. But regardless of that, I cannot bear the thought of Morgan believing for even one second that my feelings for him are false. That I manipulated him and used him. I'm a liar, yes. A concealer of the truth, absolutely. But everything else is real. He has to believe that, if he believes nothing else.

Morgan looks away from me, as if holding my gaze is causing him pain. He stares out of the window and I stand here awkwardly while a deep silence shrouds us. Long minutes pass.

“Why didn't you tell me?” he whispers finally .

And lord am I happy the awful silence is broken. But this is a question I don't have an answer for.

"Because I'm an asshole," I confess.

More silence.

Then, "You look like her." He stops suddenly and shakes his head. "I guess she looked like you." He buries his head in his hands. "This is so confusing."

My tongue is sticking to the roof of my mouth. I cannot think of a single word to say. I feel like I'm dying. My soul is withering, its flame extinguishing. Any moment now and I'm going to cease to exist.

"Maybe I'm an asshole too," Morgan says suddenly. "I think it was the resemblance that first attracted me to you."

My heart thuds. It twists. No, no, no. Morgan cannot blame himself for any of this. He has done nothing wrong. All the blame is mine, and mine alone.

"I'm so sorry," I croak out uselessly.

There are so many things I need to say to him. So much I have to explain. But I have never been more lost for words. It is so unfair. Why does the power of speech have to desert me now, of all times?

"I knew you were older than you looked. But this? Jennifer. The kids. How...how... you can't be their grandfather and their stepdad."

Once again, the word 'great' is on the tip of my tongue. But it is pointless. I don't think an extra generation or two is going to change how Morgan feels about this.

“I fucked my dead wife’s grandfather.”

Morgan looks up at me. His eyes are full of horror. His expression is stricken. He is thoroughly aghast. He hates what we did. He regrets making love to me .

I never thought he’d see it like this. To me, it’s awkward. Inconvenient. A whole lot of unconventional. But it doesn’t feel like a sin. It doesn’t feel like incest. Or betrayal of Jennifer’s memory.

I want Morgan so much that this whole being related thing, is something I overcame. I can overlook it now. It is far from ideal, but it is not a deal breaker.

But I never gave Morgan a choice. I didn’t give him the truth so he could make up his own mind. I simply took what I wanted because I wanted it. I’m every bit as evil and twisted as Ritchie.

I suck in a breath that sounds like a sob. My heart is beating, and it is breaking. I never wanted to hurt Morgan. Ever. And it is the only thing I’ve ever done to him.

“I’m so sorry,” I repeat uselessly.

There is hot wetness on my cheeks. I think I’m crying. Woodenly I turn. Stiffly, I walk away. For the first time ever, I feel like the animated corpse that I am.

I walk out of Morgan’s home.

And he doesn’t call me back.

Chapter twenty-two

Morgan

“I can do it!” shouts Lottie forcefully.

I sigh wearily and hand the socks over to her in defeat. I feel like I’ve been trying to get her dressed for all of eternity.

Behind me, the boys are having an energetic lightsaber duel while rain lashes at the window in a moody and dramatic backdrop. The morning light is gray and dull. Exactly how I feel. It is like the weather is acting out my mood.

“Where’s Ned?” huffs Lottie as she battles with her sock.

“He’s gone,” I say with a grimace.

The room falls deathly silent and still. Suddenly, the only sound and motion is the rain against the windowpane. I whirl around to find Noah and Oscar staring at me. Noah’s eyes are huge.

“Like Mommy?” he whispers.

Oh fuck! Why am I such an idiot? I could have phrased that a whole lot better. Now I’ve gone and traumatized them .

I reach out and grab my boys, then I turn around to pull Lottie close, too. I envelop

them all in the best bear hug I can manage.

“No! No, not at all like Mommy. Just on holiday.” I bite back the words, ‘he’ll be back soon,’ because as much as I want to comfort them, I don’t want to tell them things that I’m not sure are true.

“Okay!” says Noah cheerfully, then he starts to squirm.

I release them. The boys resume their fight and Lottie goes back to battling her socks. Crisis averted. For the children, at least.

As for me, I’m still suffering. I’m shrouded in pain and confusion. It’s throwing me back to the very darkest of days after Jennifer’s death. I hate this. Surely I’ve had all the heartache one person should have to bear in one lifetime? I’m not sure if I can cope with much more.

And what about the children? Will they be able to cope? Ned disappearing from their lives would be hard on them. They adore him, and they have already lost so much in their short lives. Should I forgive Ned for their sake? Allow him to continue to be in their lives? He is their grandfather, after all. And it’s not exactly as if they have an abundance of family.

I suck in a big, shaky breath. Fucking hell. This is such a confusing, tangled mess. The kids can’t know Ned is their grandfather. I’m keeping all that vampire stuff away from them. It’s too much and they don’t need to know. Ignorance is bliss, as the saying goes. The children deserve as normal a life as possible. I want to give them that much.

But he is still their grandfather, whether the children are aware of it or not. So do I have the right to keep him from seeing them, no matter how much he has hurt me? Because I know, without a shadow of a doubt, he would never hurt the kids. In fact,

he would defend and protect them ferociously. And what kind of dad wouldn't want a vampire looking out for their kids?

I love the idea of my children having a dark angel looking over them. The world is a scary and dangerous place and my kids won't stay under my roof forever. They're going to need all the protection they can get.

Does that mean I should shove all this pain aside? Allow Ned back into our lives, but keep him out of my heart?

Or am I making excuses to keep him close? Because, despite everything, I still think Ned is a wonderful man. I'm just struggling to understand how and why he would keep such a devastating secret from me. Is it because he knew I'd react like this? Or is it something much more sinister?

So many questions. So few answers. In the end, all that really matters is, can I trust him? First the vampire stuff. Now this. It is a lot. It wouldn't be surprising if my trust was irrevocably broken.

The sound of the doorbell is startling. For one stupid moment, my heart races because I think it might be Ned. Even though I know damn well it's Tina.

I let her in and she hurries upstairs to supervise the kids, who sound like they have progressed their duel into a full intergalactic battle.

I leave her to it and drift despondently to my office. There are a hundred and one things I need to do, but I don't have a single ounce of motivation. Right now, I don't particularly care if my business crashes and burns.

My ass has barely touched my chair when the doorbell chimes again. My stupid heart gets all fluttery for the second time. Who the hell is that? I'm not expecting anyone,

and I don't remember ordering anything. I've left my phone somewhere, so I can't check the camera.

I open the door and find a young man with blond hair and blue eyes. I'm strangely, stupidly, both relieved and devastated that it is not Ned. The man holds up a very impressive looking ID badge.

"Greetings, Mr. Dowd. My name is Baltazar and I'm from the Paranormal Council, here for your interview."

My mind is whirling. I don't remember anything about an interview, but Ned did say there was an admin side to a human discovering the paranormal world is real. It seems vastly unfair that not even the undead get to escape bureaucracy.

I step aside and welcome the official into my home. I lead him to my office and offer him a drink, which he declines. Then his name finally registers in my floundering mind.

Baltazar. The man who Ned first told me was a dodgy cult leader who was after him. Then Ned changed his story and said Baltazar was the vampire responsible for the crazy guy in the alley, the one who forced Ned to reveal what he is.

My stomach clenches. More lies. Baltazar is an official, similar to a policeman. As far as I can tell. If Ned was avoiding him, that can't be good. Is Ned a criminal as well as a vampire?

"This visit is mostly a formality," says Baltazar in a friendly and pleasant voice.

I nod.

Baltazar smiles. "We've completed your background checks and are happy with what

we found. ”

I swallow. I don't even want to know what would have happened if they hadn't been happy. I'm just not going to go there, otherwise I might never sleep well again.

“All that's left to do, is to ensure you understand the importance of not sharing your knowledge with any other human beings.”

I nod, and then I clear my throat. “Of course. I understand. I wouldn't dream of it, it is for everyone's safety.”

Humans discovering that the things that go bump in the night actually do exist, would be a disaster. I've watched enough movies where that theme is explored, to be convinced of that. Human nature is what it is. Some humans would want to use paranormal beings as weapons. They'd test and experiment. Other humans would get frightened and try to exterminate. Paranormals would be forced to defend themselves. The whole thing would be one giant, awful mess.

That's if anyone believed me and didn't lock me up in a psychiatric hospital. Either way, spilling what I know, would only ever lead to catastrophe.

Baltazar steeples his fingers and gives me a long, intense stare. A prickle of unease dances along my spine. Is he reading my mind? Examining my soul? Doing something even more freaky?

“Excellent,” he says eventually. “Well, that will be all. I'll see myself out.”

I blink and open my mouth, but he has already gone. Wow! He can move fast. Distantly, I hear the front door opening and closing softly. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle. But after several minutes of staring at nothing more frightening than my empty office, my subconscious calms down and I collapse back against my chair

with a heavy sigh. Boy, am I glad that's over.

Ned comes with a lot of baggage. Vampire. Relative. An unsettled relationship with the supernatural police.

Perhaps the kids and I are better off without him?

My chest tightens. I rub at it futilely. If Ned really is bad news, why does the thought of never seeing him again hurt so much?

Chapter twenty-three

Ned

I can sense the sun setting. A strange stirring in my flesh. An ancient call to rise, to hunt and to feast.

I ignore it. There is no point in getting out of bed. There is no point in anything.

In my bedroom, behind the blackout blinds, there is no change to the light. Day turning into night means fuck all. It doesn't make a difference. I've been in bed all day, now I'll be in bed all night.

I reach for the cigarettes on my bedside cabinet and light one up. The familiar taste is soothing. It ignites a thousand memories. A sensory nostalgia from when I was still alive.

Today is the first day I have smoked in ages. Over a year probably. I didn't want to breathe the fumes on the kids or have the smell embedded in my clothes. None of that matters now, because I doubt Morgan is ever going to let me see them again.

My phone pings.

I glare at it as it lies there, all smug, next to my packet of cigarettes. I will not fall sway to its allure. I'm not scrambling to check the notification. It is not going to be Morgan. He is too old school for that. If he had something to say to me, he'd come say it in person. Or call at the very least.

Swearing, I grab my phone.

It's not Morgan. I was right. It's Baltazar. Fuck my life.

'How's Jade?' The text message smirks at me.

I scowl at the phone. 'Fine.' I type. Then I toss the blasted thing down onto my bed.

Jade is a traitorous, interfering, life-destroying, evil bastard. But Baltazar doesn't need to know that. Jade has shown no signs of seeking world domination and opening portals for his kin. And that is all the information the annoying vampire is getting.

I puff bad temperedly at my cigarette. I'm just thinking about opening up my liquor cabinet when there is a soft knock on my door. Before I can open my mouth to say fuck off, Lello and Pink let themselves in.

I groan in dismay and collapse back against my pillows. Lello flicks the light switch on. I wince at the sudden, dazzling light.

"What the fuck do you want?" I snap.

"To check on you, of course!" says Lello brightly. "And to bring you cookies!"

The little kelpie sits on my bed, makes himself comfortable and places a towering plate of cookies on my lap.

"Thanks," I grumble as I reluctantly shuffle up to a sitting position.

The cookies do smell good. And it is impossible to stay grumpy at Lello. He is just too damn sweet and innocent. Being mean to him makes me feel like the worst kind of monster .

Lello stares at me with big blue eyes. I sigh in surrender and stub out my smoke. Then I pick up a cookie and take a bite. Solid food isn't the best, and it's not like I really need it, but I can still appreciate taste and flavors. That's one thing that hasn't been taken from me.

"Delicious," I say, and Lello beams with pride.

"How are you, Ned?" asks Pink solemnly.

I look away from the concern in his eyes. People being nice to me is unnerving. I'm not sure if I will ever fully get used to it. In fact, I'm not sure if I even want to become accustomed to it. Right now, I'd love nothing more than to be left alone. But these guys aren't going to leave until they are sure I am okay.

"Fine," I mutter.

Jeez, that sounded pathetic and pitiful, even to my own ears. I'm not going to be fooling anyone with that. I need to up my game.

Lello pats my arm. "When Daddy died, I thought the world was ending, but then Carter came along and now everything is wonderful."

Oh for fuck's sake. I shove another cookie in my mouth so I don't have to say anything. Usually I can let Lello's infatuation with Ritchie wash over me. I know it is not the kelpie's fault. Ritchie bit him and forced a mate bond, and that makes kelpies go all super sappy and devoted and shit.

But the fact that Lello still finds it hard to see Ritchie for the vile, rapist, piece of shit he was, is not something I'm in the mood to deal with right now.

Pink coughs. "In the harem, everything seemed so utterly hopeless and pointless. But

life is so much brighter now.”

Oh lord. Time to nip this in the bud. I can’t take anymore. It’s time to take a deep breath and place my half-eaten cookie back on the plate.

“Guys, relax. I’m not about to yeet myself into the sun, so you can chill with this intervention bollocks.”

Pink and Lello stare back at me with very unconvinced expressions.

I roll my eyes and try again. “I’ve been dumped and I’m probably never going to see my great-great-grandkids again. I’m allowed to mope around in bed for a few days.”

Lello pats my shoulder again.

“Of course you are,” says Pink. “We just wanted to make sure that you knew you weren’t alone.”

I open my mouth. Then I close it again. “Thanks,” I mumble weakly. There really isn’t anything else to say. They are both being lovely and I do appreciate it. Despite the fact that I’m a grumpy asshole.

Pink smiles, then he wraps his hand around Lello’s arm. “Come on, Lello. Ned wants to be alone right now.”

Lello clambers off my bed, but he shoots me a worried look. “Is that true?”

I nod. I’m surprised that Pink is so perceptive, but I’m not going to deny it. Lello and Pink are being lovely, but I’ve always dealt with shit on my own. It is the only way I know.

“Okay, well, if you need anything, just shout. We could do a movie night if you like?”

“I’ll let you know,” I say, and I almost sound normal.

Pink drags Lello away and the door softly shuts. I sigh and let my head fall back against the headboard. Blissful solitude. Even if it does feel a little lonely now, after that invasion .

I place the plate of cookies on the bedside cabinet and retrieve my cigarette and relight it. That’s better. Now, what was I doing before I was interrupted? Ah, yes. Lying around feeling sorry for myself.

Frigging hell. I’m so pathetic. But what else am I going to do? Morgan doesn’t need more apologies from me. He needs time and space. He has all the facts now, it’s up to him to weigh up the evidence and be my judge and jury. There is not one single thing I can do or say that is going to make this any better. Or sway the outcome. I am completely powerless.

Suddenly, my attention is drawn to the shadows in the corner of my room. Goosebumps erupt over my flesh. A pair of glowing red eyes are visible for a few seconds before Gray steps into my room.

I sit up straight. “Hi, Gray.”

He seemed to take my apology well, but I’m not one hundred percent certain where I stand with the demon. And that’s a little unsettling, to say the least.

His dark eyes stare at me intensely. He certainly is a very pretty little thing. Ritchie definitely had a type. Evil fucking bastard that he was.

“You need to feed,” Gray says with only a slight rasp to his voice. He really is getting good at talking.

“I’m fine,” I say with all the false cheer I can muster.

The demon narrows his eyes. “Shall I bring you a human?”

Oh hells. That kind of chaos is the very last thing we need. Especially since I really don’t feel like feeding. I was speaking the truth. There is no need for Gray to drag some poor hapless human into my bedroom .

“Um...that is so kind of you to offer, Gray. But I’m fine. Honestly. I’m not feeling hungry.”

The demon cocks his head to the side and gives me a long, suspicious stare that flips my stomach right over. Then suddenly he prowls towards me. Closing the distance between us in a blink of an eye. I flinch back, but he simply snatches up the plate of cookies, turns and disappears back into the shadows with them.

Jesus Christ. That’s a relief. For a moment there, I thought I was done for.

He is welcome to the food, but I really hope he doesn’t return with a human. I said no, so hopefully he will respect that. Even though I get the distinct impression that he doesn’t believe I’m not hungry.

I suck on my cigarette and fill my lungs with calming smoke. Shitting hell. There really is no peace around here. I can see why my kind prefer to brood in ruined castles. Maybe I need to go find one. A bitter snort escapes me at that thought.

With no Morgan and no kids, it is not like I have a reason not to.

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Chapter twenty-four

Ned

What the frig is all that commotion? It is the middle of the night. Though considering that this is a house full of paranormals, that on its own isn't necessarily strange.

But this sounds as if all hell has broken loose, and it appears to be coming from Jade's room.

Oh shit.

I jump out of bed and run down the hallway. Lello, Pink, and Red are in Jade's room, but there is no sign of the fey.

My gaze tracks around the walls and ceiling. Holy Mary. Every inch is covered with strange, twisting symbols. This can't be good.

"Recognize the language?" I ask Pink, since he is the most highly educated out of all of us.

Pink's face is pale, and his eyes are huge. "It's High Fey. I didn't think Jade knew that language."

Crap, crap and double crap. Those sneaky, thieving malicious asshats really do want to come back to Earth. And they really are doing a number on Jade.

“Where is he?” I ask .

“We don’t know!” sobs Lello.

I take a step towards him, but just at that moment, Carter and Brodie rush into the room and go straight to their respective partners and Lello is wrapped in his mate’s embrace. Nice for some.

“Ned, you found Gray when he went missing. Can you find Jade?” asks Lello from the safety of Carter’s arms.

It is a good idea and I can see why my friend thought of it, but sadly, it is not going to work. Life is rarely that simple or easy.

I shake my head. “Jade doesn’t feed on life force, there is no connection between us.”

Except the fact that he spitefully destroyed my life. The motherfucker has shaped my entire future. That’s a hell of a connection.

But maybe the fey were messing with his head at the time, so perhaps I should give him the benefit of the doubt until we know exactly what the fuck has been going on. Anyway, that’s all irrelevant right now because none of it enables me to track him.

“He is in the stone circle,” says Gray from right beside me.

Holy fuck! My heart pounds, and it feels like I just leaped ten feet in the air. Where did Gray come from? I didn’t hear or see him enter the room.

“What stone circle?” asks Red while clutching Brodie’s hand tightly.

I love how absolutely nobody is questioning how the demon knows. We are all

simply accepting it as the truth. Which is probably wise.

Gray points south. “Five leagues.”

“How far is a league?” says Red, turning to Pink .

“Umm...about three miles.”

Carter is tapping furiously at his phone. He holds it up to Gray, with a photo of a stone circle on it. “This one?”

Gray nods.

“Great,” says Carter. He looks at everyone in the room. “It’s called Stanton Drew. It’s fifteen miles south of here. On the edge of a small village.”

“Is it an old fey portal?” I ask.

All eyes turn to me. It is damn hard not to squirm, but I’m made of stern stuff. I can handle a few stares.

“Probably,” croaks Pink as his eyes widen in alarm. “Most stone circles are.”

“What made you think of that?” asks Red. His face has gone deathly pale.

Carter’s arms tighten around Lello, and the kelpie bites his bottom lip. Yeah, this can’t be fun for him, considering his herd tried to sacrifice him to open a fey portal.

I have no idea why everyone is so shocked at my suggestion, I would have thought the fey scribbles all over the wall were enough of a clue, but clearly not. Maybe my friends were in denial and I can’t blame them for that.

I shrug, “Just a hunch.”

More secrets and lies. I seem to be? made of them. It is all that I am. I haven’t told anyone about Baltazar’s concerns about Jade. It didn’t even cross my mind that maybe I should. And even now, my instinct is to keep quiet. I truly am a deceiver at heart.

“I suggest less chatting, more action,” says Carter.

Exactly what a former Enforcer would say. But he does have a point.

“Everyone, get in a car!” calls Red. “Gray, come with us, don’t go shadow walking. We need to stick together. ”

The room bursts into movement as we all scramble to do as Red says. I run to my room, throw some shoes on, and grab my phone. I make it to the driveway just as Pink is getting into Carter’s car. Everyone else is already stuffed inside. Looks like I’m the last. A quick glance at both cars shows me there is slightly more room in Mal’s, so I jump in.

Another frigging happy couple. Gray is off on a midnight mission, so of course his mate has gotten out of bed and is driving him.

It’s only after the door shuts and we speed off, does it hit me that perhaps I should have squeezed into the other car. But Mal has his eyes fixed on the road, as does Gray. Neither of them seem the least bit bothered by my presence. So I think our little disagreement is well and truly forgotten.

Mal drives like the dangerous man he is, and the miles fly by. We are going to be there in no time at all. To where Jade is probably opening a portal to the fey realm.

Fuck.

I feel conspicuous as hell as I pull my phone out of my pocket, but nobody is paying me any attention, and besides, everyone is so phone addicted these days, staring at one is pretty much invisible behavior.

Nevertheless, my fingers still shake as I fire off a quick text to Baltazar. Just the name of the stone circle, but he's a clever vampire, I'm sure he will figure it out. And if Jade really is about to open a portal, we are going to need all the help we can get.

Mal turns the car into a tiny, unlit gravel car park. Carter's car is just behind us. Everyone piles out and wordlessly climbs over the gate. I don't need a map to tell me that the stone circle is across this field, and in the small scrub of trees. Unusual magic is itching at my skin. It's pulsing from the trees like a beacon.

We hurry across the dark field and into the woods. The stone circle is easy to find. It's utterly unmissable.

The stones are covered in luminous runes that are glowing an eerie electric blue. Jade is standing in the midst of them with an absolutely crazed look on his face.

Yep. Not good. Not good at all.

"Jade?" says Red.

Jade doesn't seem to be able to hear him. His eyes are open, but I'm pretty sure he can't see us either. He is in a trance and muttering under his breath. No, scrub that. He is chanting. Jade is spell casting. Right now. While we are all standing here, doing nothing.

My attention snaps to Gray. He is by far the most powerful one amongst us. But the

little demon is watching the proceedings with a vaguely curious expression.

“Stop him!” I hiss.

Gray gives me a puzzled look. “He is not in any danger.”

“He is opening a portal for the fey!” I snap.

Gray blinks slowly. “So?”

Every swear word I know pours out of my lips. I give Mal a beseeching look, but the half-demon merely gives me a malevolent grin in return. He agrees with his mate. He doesn’t care if the fey conquer this realm.

Demon-spawn bastards, the pair of them. I have children. Human children. I don’t want them growing up as fey subjects.

“Pink!” I yell.

He flinches and turns to look at me in alarm.

“Are fey really as bad as the legends say? ”

Pink’s eyes widen. He licks his lips. “As far as anyone knows.”

Crap. I glance around at my friends. Blue is off in the ocean. Nobody else is old enough to have been around the last time the fey walked on Earth. Apart from Gray, and he clearly doesn’t give a shit, and I don’t have time to change his mind.

Goddamnit! Where the hell is Baltazar? There is no sign of him.

Fuck it. I'm out of time and out of options.

I take a deep breath and step into the stone circle. Magic coils around me. It's like static, but far more intense. I can feel it moving my hair. It's uncanny, but I don't think it is causing me any harm.

I stride up to Jade and place my hand on his shoulder.

"Jade!"

He ignores me.

"Sithri!"

Shitty of me to use a name he doesn't go by anymore, but desperate times call for desperate measures and all that. It might grab his attention.

He blinks. His hazy emerald eyes slowly focus on me. He stops chanting.

Thank fuck for that. But it's not time for a victory dance just yet.

"Please don't do this," I say.

Jade stares at me. I don't think he understood what I just said, he is too spaced out.

Away with the fairies, my twisted mind helpfully supplies and I very nearly let out a snort laugh. Talk about gallows humor .

Suddenly, a movement on the periphery of my vision catches my attention. It's Baltazar. Finally. But he appears to be alone. Why the hell has he not brought the cavalry? Now is so not the time for power games and political moves.

He strides towards Jade. What is he going to do? Surely, he doesn't think that simply trying to arrest Jade is going to work?

All too late, I see the gleam of a dagger in the vampire's hand. I open my mouth to shout something, either a warning or a threat. I don't know. And I never will. Because Jade lifts his hand and a blast of magic pours out of him, straight into the vampire's chest and suddenly there is nothing but a floating cloud of dust where the vampire used to be.

Jade turns his full attention to me. His emerald eyes are glowing.

"Please, don't do this," I whisper.

"Jade! Don't hurt Ned! Don't let the fey in! You don't want this!"

Jade's gaze flicks to my side, where Pink is now standing. The little human really is a brave motherfucker. Here he is yet again willing to risk his life for the greater good.

The light in Jade's eyes shifts as he stares at his best friend. Pink and Jade have had their difficulties, but they are close. Closer than I am to either of them.

Jade continues to stare wordlessly. He looks a little more human. As if looking at his human friend is bringing out his human side.

I swallow as my mind races. Jade has more human blood than fey. His fey side is only distant ancestry. So, is he human enough for me to glamor him ?

"Jade," I say.

It's worth a shot. It's not as if there is anything to lose.

His emerald eyes turn back to me, and I hit him with my full whammy.

“Stop this,” I command.

He snarls at me. He fights it, so I enforce my will with everything I have. It is way harder than glamoring a full human, but it is working.

Slowly, slowly, piece by piece, he surrenders to me. His primal prey self accepts my predator dominance. His control slips away and I seize the reins.

“Sleep!” I bark with a final push of the last of my strength.

And he does. His eyes roll back and he crumbles to the ground. The glowing runes go dark as if they have been unplugged. All the strange swirling magic vanishes as if it was never here.

Cool night air rushes in. The distant sound of traffic fills the silence. Everything is suddenly, startlingly normal.

Everyone rushes to Jade’s side while I stagger backwards a few steps.

I heave in a breath of cold air. Then I fall to my ass. You know what? Sleep sounds like a wonderful idea. I close my eyes and allow my body to keel over.

Then there is nothing but darkness.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:35 am

Chapter twenty-five

Morgan

I can't stop thinking about Ned. All day, every day, whatever I am doing, he is the only thing on my mind.

Right now I'm putting groceries away. Nothing about putting orange juice in the fridge should be making me think of Ned. Yet here I am. Incapable of any other thoughts.

I wouldn't mind so much if all this thinking was getting me towards some sort of conclusion. A decision on what to do. But nope, that's staying out of reach. I'm still as conflicted as ever. My mind is simply spinning in circles like a dog chasing its tail.

I sigh heavily and cast my gaze over the mountain of full bags on the counter, all groaning with food that needs to be put away.

The kids are watching cartoons, but that's not going to hold their attention for much longer. Perhaps I should see if Tina is free? The house is a mess and there is a ton of stuff I need to do.

It shames me to realize it, but I had no idea how much Ned was doing around the house. I had a housekeeper for the first year after Jennifer's death. She retired just before Ned started, and I mistakenly thought I was managing just fine. Clearly not.

I need to hire more staff. It makes me feel uncomfortable, but this house is far bigger

than the one I grew up in. It was never meant to be managed by one person.

The doorbell chimes, scattering all of my thoughts.

The sound makes my heart race. My hands are trembling as I pull my phone out of my pocket. I tap on the app, and my heart sinks. It's not Ned.

But it is two of his friends. Lello and Pink, I think. I didn't get a good grasp of everyone's names. But even if I didn't have a good memory for faces, I'd know these were Ned's friends. People he was imprisoned with, because they are both incredibly stunning. The type of people you'd definitely notice if you passed them in the street. Exactly who a crazy billionaire would kidnap.

I abandon the shopping and go answer the door. I open my mouth to invite them in. But Lello starts talking before I can say a thing.

"Ned has not been feeding and now he is not getting out of bed. He is really weak. Brodie thought he would be okay, so he left with Red to hide Jade from the Council, but Ned is not alright and he is not listening to us, but he will listen to you."

I stare at Lello as my mind tries to make sense of what he just said. But all that I'm understanding is that Ned is in some sort of danger. And I suddenly realize that it is the only thing I need to understand.

My stomach rolls and my chest tightens. I take a step towards Ned's friends and then I freeze.

"The kids. "

"I can watch them," offers Pink.

Shit. I don't know this man. But Ned needs me. I take a deep breath and try to gather my thoughts. Ned needs me. I don't know Pink, but Ned does. He called him his brother. And while my trust in Ned has been wounded, my faith in his love for the kids is unshaken. Ned would not be friends with someone who could be a risk to his grandchildren. It just would never happen.

"Okay," I nod. "Come in and meet them."

It doesn't take long to introduce Pink to the kids and the moment he agrees to play dress up with them, they are enthralled. I leave them to it and jog back to Lello, who is waiting on the doorstep and hopping foot to foot.

He has my every sympathy. Rationally, I know I've been gone less than ten minutes, but my heart is adamant I've been absent for an ice age.

"Your car?" I ask.

"Oh no!" says Lello as his eyes grow wide with alarm. "I can't drive."

I duck back inside, grab my keys, and hurry over to my car. Lello slides into the passenger seat and I reverse out of the driveway far quicker than I should. Lello doesn't seem worried, though.

As I tear down the street, he starts talking again. Something about fairies and portals and Ned saving the world. And Baltazar being killed.

Wait, what? Ned saved the world?

Somehow, I'm not surprised. It's exactly the kind of reckless, wonderful thing he would do.

“Ned saved the world and it made him weak?” I attempt to summarize .

“Kind of. He was weak before because he hasn’t been feeding. Using glamor on Jade used the last of his strength. Brodie checked him and said he’d be fine as long as he fed as soon as he woke up. And then Brodie had to run with Red to take Jade somewhere safe because he is going to be in big trouble with the Council now, because he tried to let the fey in and he killed Baltazar.”

My head is spinning. “And Ned?” I prompt. It is the only thing I care about.

“We got him home, and he did wake up, but he won’t feed. Even though Gray brought him a human. He is just lying in bed, all sad and fading away. He mutters your name sometimes, but that’s it. Carter went to try and find Brodie because they used to be Enforcers together and he knows some of the hiding spots Brodie might use. They didn’t take their phones because the Council could track them. And Gray says they are somewhere warded, so he can’t sense them.”

I suck in a breath while I try to process all of that.

“Me and Pink had the idea of coming to get you. Because he will listen to you if you tell him to feed. And he’ll be happy again if you tell him you don’t hate him.”

I wince. I don’t hate Ned. I couldn’t. It’s impossible. I was hurt. Confused. Overwhelmed and conflicted. But I never bothered to explain that to him. He might very well believe that I hate him, and I cannot bear the thought of that.

We reach Ned’s home and I throw the car haphazardly onto the driveway. I jump out of the car and follow Lello into the house and up the stairs. He flings open a door, revealing a bedroom, and my heart stops .

All the air leaves. Gravity takes its place. It pushes me to my knees and tears a

scream out of my lungs.

I'm too late. I didn't get here in time.

Ned is lying on his back on the bed. Motionless. Head tilted up slightly. Mouth hanging open. Eyelids open a tiny slit, revealing pale, lifeless, milky eyes. He is dead. Very dead.

Not again. Not again. I can't do this again. Finding a loved one dead very nearly destroyed me the first time. There is no chance at all that I can survive it a second time. I'm not strong enough. I've never been strong enough.

"Morgan. Morgan." Distantly, I hear someone saying my name.

Lello's tear-streaked face swims into focus. He is pushing a knife into my numb hand.

"...happened before. Might not be permanently dead forever. Human blood might bring him back."

I'm only hearing fragments of what is being said. The words are echoing dully around my head.

Might not be dead.

Human blood might bring him back.

Suddenly, I'm surging to my feet. I grab Lello by the shoulders, very nearly cutting him with the knife I appear to be holding. He yelps, but doesn't resist me.

"What do I need to do?" I scream.

“Cut your wrist. Hold it over his mouth.”

That’s simple enough. I can do that. I’m willing to do anything, anything at all if I can stop this from happening. I don’t want Ned to die. He can’t die. Please don’t let him die.

I drag the knife over my wrist. It doesn’t even hurt. Warm wetness flows over my skin .

“Oh! That’s deep!” squeals Lello, but I don’t care.

My feet stagger the three steps to Ned’s side. I hold my bleeding wrist over his mouth and watch the blood pour in. Now all I can do is pray. Even though I don’t believe in any gods. But if any of them are real and listening, they can have my soul along with my utter devotion.

Ned’s mouth twitches. I gasp. Did I really just see that? Was it a trick of the light? Am I hallucinating?

No! Look! There it is again! He twitched. Ned definitely moved!

An awful feeling of hope coils through me. Cruel, teasing and mocking.

Suddenly, Ned really moves. His head lifts up. His lips seal around my wrist. His hands shoot up and take a hold of my arm, holding me close to him.

I yell and flinch from the suddenness of the movement. Then I suck in a huge, ragged breath and hold still. Ned has to take what he needs. He has to heal and get better.

I’m sobbing now. My shoulders are heaving, and tears are running down my face. Behind me, Lello is crying too, but he is keeping his distance and not interrupting. He

understands as much as I do, that Ned can't stop yet.

I stare down at Ned's too pale face. His throat is moving, and I can hear him gulping. I'm starting to feel a little dizzy, but I don't care.

Abruptly, Ned's eyes snap open and fix unerringly on me. I swallow. He looks feral. Dangerous. A predator caught in a cage. Oh my. What if I've brought back something that isn't Ned?

Cold, clammy horror claws at my guts. Then he blinks and all I see is Ned .

Recognition flows over his face. He stops sucking on my wrist and starts licking at it instead, healing the wound. It's Ned. He is back. He came back to me.

It worked. Ned is alive.

Chapter twenty-six

Ned

Morgan. Morgan. Morgan.

He is everywhere. All around me. Inside me.

His life essence is shining bright. Wrapping around every cell of my body. He is a part of me now. Written into my DNA. His fire has reignited mine. He has brought me back to existence. His energy is sustaining me. Fueling me. Enabling me to evade true death.

I feel him. Smell him. Sense him. Everything is Morgan.

Awareness coalesces around me. Brought into focus by Morgan. His hot blood is gushing down my throat. My lips are on his wrist. I'm holding him to me and drinking deeply.

My eyes open and stare straight at him. Morgan. My Morgan. Feeding me and bringing me back to life.

His pupils are wide and blown. His face is pale. Shit, how much have I drunk?

Hastily, I stop drinking from him and lap at the wound instead, sealing it shut. He shudders and trembles.

As quickly as I can, I swap our positions so that he is lying on the bed and I am standing above him. Is he okay? Did I drink too much ?

Suddenly, I become aware of Lello standing in the corner. “Get Morgan a big glass of water!” I snap.

Lello hurries away, and all my focus flips back to Morgan. I can still taste him on my tongue. Feel him in my veins. I’m shining with his light. Glowing with his essence. The truth of him is embedded in every part of me, and my awareness is flooded with his goodness. Morgan is a good man. Even my bones know this now.

Lello returns with the water. I cradle Morgan’s head and help him hold the glass to his lips. He gulps it all down. Then he sighs heavily. Carefully, I lie his head on the pillow. He stares up at me. His warm brown eyes swirling. Growing intense.

I swallow. I think he is going to be okay, blood loss wise, but the other effects of a vampire bite are taking hold. Even though I didn’t technically bite him, I did feed from him, and I also closed his wound. There is enough of my venom in his veins to flood him with arousal.

“Ned...” says Lello, but I interrupt him.

“Not now, sweetie. Thank you so much for bringing Morgan to save me, but right now, I need to look after him.”

I’m assuming that is what happened. If not, I can always be filled in on the details later. Right now, there are other things on my mind.

“Oh!” exclaims Lello. And then, “Have fun!”

The door clicks shut behind us. We are alone. Just Morgan and I.

We stare at each other. The fragrant scent of his arousal is filling the room and making me giddy. I want to inhale it. Bathe in it. But I do possess some self-control.

“Thank you for saving me,” I say .

He nods slowly, the movement all jerky and uncoordinated. He is looking at me as if he wants to devour me, which would be only fair.

I lick my lips. “Vampire venom is very potent. It’s what is making you so aroused.”

Morgan says nothing. He just stares at me with wide, helpless eyes.

“I know this is not ideal and I’m so sorry for that. But the quicker I help you, the quicker you will be feeling like yourself again.”

This time, I don’t wait for a response. I simply began calmly undoing his belt. When he makes no move to stop me, I undo the button on his trousers. Next, I carefully unzip his fly. He is wearing boxer briefs, so I slip my hand inside the opening and free his full and straining cock.

My gaze flicks back up to his face. He is watching me intently, but he doesn’t look distressed. I hold his gaze and give him a long, gentle stroke from root to tip. Pleasure blooms in the darkness of his eyes. It is far too satisfying to see. This is an unfortunate necessity. I should not be enjoying it.

Especially since we are not exactly on the best of terms. He is angry at me. He feels betrayed and disgusted.

Yet he still came to help me. And in return, here I am jerking him off non-consensually, because nobody high on vampire venom can consent to a single thing.

“That’s it. Let me make you feel good,” I purr, because all the angst, regret and recriminations can come later.

What Morgan needs from me right now, is confidence and calm. It will soothe his agitated mind and enable this to go as smoothly and as quickly as possible .

My hand works up and down his hard length. Oh lord, he feels so good in my hand. Hot, heavy, firm. Swelling even more under my touch.

I wish I had lube. But I can still make this damn good. Eighty-five odd years of practice counts for something. If I had picked up the violin, I’d be a maestro by now. But no, it was men who were my interest back then. And for most of my existence.

Now, I just want to watch my great-great grandkids grow up. And have one man in particular. This man who is in my hand right now, but who is so emotionally far away that the distance might remain impossible to close. I’m getting to pleasure him, but I might never get to truly have him. Life really does suck.

My hand keeps moving. It twists over the leaking tip of his cock. Morgan’s eyes flutter closed. His head tilts back, jaw falling all loose and open. He is magnificent. I love seeing him like this. Blissed out on pleasure that I am giving him. He should look like this always.

My free hand moves to his balls and gently cups them. Morgan groans and his hips twitch, thrusting up into my hand.

I carefully roll his balls, tugging on them a little. Just enough sensation to really feel without crossing over into pain.

He moans. His hands grab hold of the sheets.

I collect more of his precum and smear it down his cock. He gasps. His hips move, bucking up. So I curl my fingers even tighter around him, giving him a fist to fuck, since it is clearly what he wants. I slide down to his root and hold that hand still while my other continues to caress his balls .

Morgan cries out and starts fucking my hand. Short, sharp thrusts of his hips. One, two, three, four, then he lifts his hips right off the bed, arching his back and holding the position. All the muscles in his body go rigid. His cock throbs.

I bend my head down and place my lips over his tip. No need to make a mess, and while I can't get as much life force from cum as an incubus can, it is still good stuff.

I drink Morgan down while he groans gutturally through his orgasm. I massage his balls, and tease his slit with my tongue, prolonging his euphoria for as long as I can.

But soon he is spent, and he collapses against the mattress, breathing heavily. He is a bit sticky with precum, but it is not too bad. So, I tuck him away back into his boxers and do up his fly for him. Hopefully, it will make him feel a little less awkward when he comes down from his high.

Finally, I brace myself and look at his face. He is a little flushed and his eyes are still a little hazy, but he is clearly lucid and over the worst of the venom.

We stare at one another and the silence stretches. I wish I knew what he was thinking.

He clears his throat. "I'm glad you're not dead."

Well, technically I am, but I'm not pedantic and I know what he means.

"Me too."

A ghost of a smile teases at his lips. Then there is another long, heavy silence.

“I’m sorry I freaked out about the grandfather stuff!” he blurts suddenly .

And it is my turn to give him a half smile. “Vampire venom and post nut glow are making you feel soppy. We will talk another time.”

Morgan frowns. It doesn’t suit him, but he does it anyway. “Pretty sure I mean it.”

I watch as a stubborn look fills his eyes and his shoulders tense. He is preparing for battle. He is going to argue his point. Claim he is in his right mind and is forgiving me for my lies.

Oh lord, it’s making my heart beat. Fast and sure. My pulse is shaking through me. I want nothing more than this. For Morgan to declare his love for me so I can fall into his arms and forget everything else.

But it seems as if I have finally grown a backbone. Or I have grown to love Morgan so much that I cannot bear the thought of lying to him anymore.

I lick my lips. “There’s more.”

His eyebrow rises. My hands start shaking. I look away and stare blindly at the window.

“The billionaire, Ritchie. He kept me in line by threatening Jennifer and the kids. The inheritance and the fancy house and the staff, it was all a ruse so he could execute a kill order at any time.”

The words pour out of me. Pus from a boil. Water from a dam. Rushing out of me, desperate for freedom. I can’t look at Morgan, I can’t. But he takes my hand and I

don't have the strength to pull away.

"I got arrogant, defiant. Thought I was calling his bluff. But I was wrong, so very wrong." I inhale sharply. "And that's how Jennifer died."

The grip on my hand turns vice like, and I welcome the pain. As soon as he is over the shock, I hope he beats the crap out of me. I deserve it and I welcome it. It would be nice to be punished for my sins.

"Ned, look at me."

Woodenly I obey.

Morgan's eyes are brimming with anger. It is a struggle to hold his gaze, but he asked me to, so I'm going to do my best.

"Jennifer was ill for a long time. She tried all sorts of therapy, different medications. Noah was a surprise, and when he was first born, she was better. She thought babies made her happy, and it was fucking irresponsible of me, but that's why we had Oscar and Lottie. But just after Lottie's birth, she became very unwell again."

What is he trying to say? I'm hearing his words but I'm not understanding.

He sees the look on my face and takes a deep breath.

"Jennifer was ill. For a long time. The things she said in her note... Ned, it wasn't Ritchie, it was her choice. He lied to you."

My cheeks are wet. My mind is floundering. It is exactly the kind of cruel and twisted thing Ritchie would do, and I did spend months anguishing over exactly what I had done to piss him off so much. But still. How can Morgan be so sure?

He takes my other hand. “Ned, even if I’m wrong, it is still not your fault. Ritchie murdered her, not you. You are not responsible for the actions of a psycho.”

I suck in a jagged breath, but it is no good. I’m sobbing like a baby.

The door bursts open and Lello runs in. His arms wrap around me and hold me tight .

“Why did you make Ned cry!” he yells at Morgan. “No, don’t say a word! You’re still woozy from venom and Ned is really sad. Mal will drive you home and anything you want to say to Ned, you’ll just have to say another day!”

Morgan makes a defeated sound. Then the bed moves. Lello has me squished so tight that I can’t see a thing, and I’m not sure I want to.

“Is that what you want, Ned? Do you want me to leave?”

I don’t want him to see me like this, and I need time to process everything he has just said. And Lello is right, Morgan probably is still high. Both of us being out of our minds while having a deep and emotional conversation, has to be a recipe for disaster.

I nod my head and gasp out a very pathetic sounding, “Sorry!”

“It’s fine, Ned. I understand,” he says gently.

And then he is gone.

Chapter twenty-seven

Morgan

It feels strange to be reading Jennifer's note again. Every word is etched on to my soul, but it has been a while since I've looked at the physical copy.

Every word is exactly as I remember it. There is nothing odd or off. No hidden messages. Not one single thing I missed in the first thousand times I read it.

It's her handwriting. Her turns of phrases. Her state of mind.

I sigh and run my hand through my hair. The other, unopened letters in the box I've pulled from the safe, stare up at me.

One for each of the children on their eighteenth birthdays. One for their wedding days. One for the birth of their first child, and one for if they decide not to have kids.

Would a billionaire trying to control Ned really go to all that trouble? It doesn't seem likely. But I guess I can never be one hundred percent certain.

Carefully, I fold the letter and place it in its envelope. Then I return it to its box and replace the lid .

Nothing is certain in life. And what I told Ned really does feel like the truth. Even if Jennifer's death was by Ritchie's hand, it is still not Ned's fault. He is not responsible for the actions of a psycho.

I slide the box back into the safe and close the door. The strong click is strangely satisfying. It's strong, soothing. Final. An auditory accompaniment to the feeling of locking things away. I've physically put the letters away and I've also emotionally set them aside.

It lightens my mood, but I still feel like an old man as I make my way back to my office chair and sit down heavily.

My mind is still whirling. The pain of losing Jennifer has been shut away for now, but I can't stop thinking about the implications for Ned.

Ritchie must have been evil incarnate. Poor Ned. Carrying that terrible guilt, believing he had caused his granddaughter's death. No one should have to bear that. It is unfathomably cruel. Just thinking about the suffering it has caused Ned is breaking my heart. The broken look in Ned's eyes as he told me what he believed, will haunt me forever.

Ned doesn't deserve that. Nobody deserves that.

He was imprisoned, repeatedly violated, and manipulated and gaslit. It is beyond awful. The darkness of the world never ceases to shock me, and I hope it never does. I have no wish to become someone who is numb and uncaring about the horrors of the world.

My gaze flicks to the clock on my office wall. I need to pick the kids up from their bereavement group in an hour. There isn't time to have a whisky and then sober up. I'm going to have to cope with this emotional turmoil with no anesthesia .

That's fine. But I'm definitely not going to get any work done today. Not that I was expecting to. So, it's all fine.

I sigh again and lean my head back against the headrest. As soon as my eyes close, a vivid image springs to life. Ned's hazel eyes staring at me while he stroked my cock exquisitely. I shudder violently and snap my eyes open.

That was intense. The whole thing was intense.

Finding him dead. Feeding him. Watching him come back to life. Feeling the venom course through my veins. Experiencing the best hand job of my entire life.

I should probably feel much more overwhelmed. But ever since Jennifer's death, every other calamity hasn't felt like a big deal. I guess after losing your wife, all other disasters feel insignificant. Perspective or something.

Maybe I'm mostly unflappable now? That would be nice. But I wouldn't go that far. I am sitting alone in my office right now, brooding and ruminating and wishing for a whisky. So not exactly as cool as a cucumber.

As if to prove my point, my thoughts twist down another uncomfortable path.

Ned was fully convinced that he had caused Jennifer's death. He believed that and still allowed me to develop feelings for him. Some people would be horrified at that.

But I don't think there is a mean or conniving bone in Ned's body. He is lovely. Despite everything he has endured.

I do truly believe that he became my nanny purely because he wanted to know his grandkids. He wanted to be in their lives. And he was keen to protect them from ever being in the hands of another Ritchie.

A shudder wracks my body. All our staff in the old house were Ritchie's people and were willing to kill us on his command. It's going to be a long, long time before I

ever attempt to open the door to that trauma. It's going to have to stay locked away for now. Though, I do wonder if part of me knew? I found having staff awkward and I've been really reluctant to seek the help we need for this house.

I shake my head to clear it. I'm not dealing with that right now. What I am dealing with and attempting to untangle, are my feelings for Ned.

Okay, so looking at the facts. He had his reasons for taking the nanny job and I truly believe he never meant for any of this to happen. For Pete's sake, in the early days, he avoided me like the plague.

He didn't mean to fall in love with me. He never meant to make me fall in love with him.

Love?

I taste the word on my tongue and it feels so right. Yes, love. I love Ned and I'm pretty sure he loves me. He never would have looked so heartbroken and guilty if he didn't.

So...love. We love each other.

I'm no spring chicken, and neither is he. Love is not all it takes. I don't believe that. You can't build a life on love alone, especially when kids are involved. Trust is a vital foundation for a healthy relationship.

Therefore, I guess it all comes down to if I can come to terms with everything.

Ned is a vampire.

He is Jennifer's grandfather.

He hid a lot of truths from me.

I breathe in and out deeply and allow the questions to sink into my soul. Can I accept all of that?

A slow, certain realization settles over me. I want to. I really want to. That has to mean something.

Images begin to flow across my mind. Accompanied by a graphic replay of how I felt at the time.

First, I recall Lello and Pink at my door saying that Ned needed me. All I had felt was terror, and I hadn't hesitated at all.

Then I remember seeing Ned dead. I had felt nothing but overwhelming grief and horror. And then when Lello had said I might be able to save him, again there had been no hesitation in my soul. I had wanted nothing more than to bring Ned back.

The final image that floats before me, is Ned sobbing his heart out after I told him Ritchie had lied. The one and only thing I had longed to do in that moment was to hold him. To comfort him. To take away some of his pain.

I let out a long, steady exhale. Then a smile creeps across my face.

Can I come to terms with everything? Can I fully accept all that Ned is and all that he has done? Can I trust him?

Yes.

Yes, I can.

He is Ned, my Ned. And I love him.

Chapter twenty-eight

Ned

He is never going to be able to forgive me. How could he? After everything I have done and all the lies I have spun. All the truths I have kept from him. This last thing has to be the final blow. The straw that breaks the camel's back. One too many things to deal with.

Not only am I a traumatized, broken mess of a person. I'm also a vampire. And his dead wife's great-grandfather.

And now, on top of all of that, the very worst thing about me. Because even if he is right, and I didn't cause Jennifer's death, I still slept with him while fully believing that to be true. I really am a monster with zero morals.

He now knows what I believed, what I thought to be true, the entire time we were becoming closer. He understands what a vile and twisted creature I am.

Nobody, absolutely nobody, could forgive all of that. There isn't a heart big enough in all of creation.

My heavy sigh echoes around my dark and empty bedroom. If anyone did have a heart big enough, it would be Morgan. But at the end of the day, it doesn't matter. It's irrelevant. Because, if a miracle occurred and Morgan still wanted me...Well, it would be deeply wrong of me to accept that mercy. Someone who shines so bright, should not be tainted by me. Deep down, I always knew this. Now I can see it, feel it,

practically taste it on my tongue. And hopefully I've grown enough to embrace it.

I run my hands over my gross and sticky face. Crying for hours is exhausting as well as messy. I'm glad that Lello kept me company and held me, truly I am. But I'm also relieved he then respected my wish to be alone. Sometimes solitude is the only peace that can be found.

I'm sure I'll feel embarrassed later about sobbing like a baby in front of witnesses. Right now, I simply feel weary. Bone tired and despondent.

My poor Jennifer. I had no idea how much she suffered. If I had been part of her life, could I have done something? Helped her in some way? Isn't that what people always say when someone chooses to leave, that they wish they had known?

But that's a pointless train of thought, because I'll never know the answer. Any opportunities I may have had, I've well and truly missed.

It's a completely different flavor of pain and guilt from the ones I have been carrying.

Could all of that original pain and guilt I carried for Jennifer's death, really have been for nothing? Was the blame merely a cruel trick? Smoke and mirrors and Ritchie's twisted manipulation? Is it really, truly possible, and if so, what does it mean for me and for my future?

I roll over onto my back and stare at the ceiling. Being the cause of Jennifer's death has been a blueprint for my identity. My very character is based on it .

I'm the asshole who got his great-granddaughter killed, leaving her babies motherless and a man without his wife. All because I didn't like being told what to do.

Even though I did try very hard to do as I was told. Ritchie's threat terrified me from

the very moment he first uttered it.

But that's beside the point. The point is, if I'm not that vile, twisted piece of shit, then who the hell am I?

I suck in a deep breath, filling my stiff lungs. Then I slowly let it out until there is no air left in me at all.

Whoever I am, it's no one good. I'm sure of that much at least. I may not have killed Jennifer, but I'm still a bastard. Look at what I have done to Morgan. All the evidence I'll ever need to prove I am an asshole, is right there.

He is better off without me.

The words repeat in my head. Over and over again. Ringing out as clear as a bell. They sound like the truth. They feel like it too. A blindingly obvious statement of fact.

Morgan is better off without me.

Not that I need any more reasons to validate that statement, but there is all the other stuff, too. Besides me being a lying piece of shit, there is all that other drama.

Baltazar's death. Jade going on the run. The Council's investigation into the whole thing.

And Baltazar's flight has to be enraged. I can only hope that they are too distracted by fighting over who inherits the throne, to be seeking retribution just yet. But it is bound to come one day. The problem is merely postponed, not canceled.

The whole situation is a steaming pile of shitty, dangerous mess. One I've been

ignoring because I've been behaving like a self-obsessed teenager and feeling like my personal problems and my love life are the center of the universe and far more important than anything else.

It is time to grow up. What is actually important, is the kids and Morgan's safety. That is the only thing that really matters. Wanting to keep the kids safe was how all of this began. My intentions were good, but clearly the old saying has a lot of wisdom in it. The road to hell really is paved with good intentions.

I need to hold on to what I originally wanted. And that was for the children to be safe. It's blindingly obvious now, that dragging them into my chaotic world is achieving the very opposite of that goal. It always was a terrible idea to begin with. In hindsight, making a huge life altering decision when I had just escaped years of slavery and abuse, was bound to fail. It was a knee jerk reaction and nothing more. A trauma based response.

Everything seems so perfectly clear now. So startlingly evident. It is shocking that I ever failed to comprehend it.

I need to leave.

It is the best thing to do. I can finally stop being a selfish ass and think about the greater good for once.

Yes. That's it. That is exactly what I need to do.

A surge of energy rushes through me. I leap out of bed, grab a suitcase from the top of my wardrobe, and wildly start flinging things into it. It feels great to have a purpose. To have found resolution and to be taking action. It's empowering.

I'll go find an abandoned castle to brood in. Just like I was thinking about the other

day. Nice thick stone walls to keep the sun out. Somewhere where people no longer go. Somewhere peaceful .

Maybe I can try to figure out how to do a Long Sleep. I can wake up when the kids are all over eighteen and introduce myself to them, with no lies this time. A fresh start. A new beginning.

Then I will be able to protect them, keep an eye on them. All the things I meant to do but fucked up spectacularly. This time, I'll do the right thing and do it from a distance. I'll watch over them without endangering them.

And Morgan... My heart thuds and my hand freezes midway in shoving a pair of jeans into my suitcase. I close my eyes.

Morgan will be free of me. He will be able to find someone who deserves him. Someone who is good for him. And when I wake up from my Long Sleep, I'll be able to meet them.

I'll see Morgan happy and settled and in love. Everything that I want for him. Sure, it will hurt that it's not me. But I'm a big boy. I can take it. I'm going to have to.

Because it really is for the best.

Chapter twenty-nine

Morgan

Today is going to change my life forever. That's strange for a Thursday afternoon in November. The weather is utterly unremarkable too. Just dull and gray. If life was like the movies, there would be something dramatic going on, or at least stirring and rousing background music.

But no, it's just me, driving my car while wearing my nicest suit. Glancing frequently at the bunch of red roses on the passenger seat as if they are going to be destroyed if I don't keep my eye on them.

I hope Ned accepts my apology. I hope I can grovel enough. I never should have freaked out and doubted him. Love is everything and I've been an idiot trying to resist it. I've thrown up barriers. Made mountains out of molehills. Generally behaved like a broken man frightened of being hurt again.

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. My therapist says I need to give myself some grace. I am a wounded man. It is not terrible and awful of me to behave like one.

Just like it is not terrible of Ned to behave like a damaged person as well. He has been through hell. Expecting him to act and communicate like a healthy, well-balanced person is unfair.

We are both messed up people. We have our flaws. Nevertheless, we are both worthy of love.

I really, truly hope Ned sees it that way.

Next time I'm in this car, I'll either be the happiest man in the world, or a thoroughly rejected one. Either way, I'm relieved the kids are with Tina, so I am free to deal with the aftermath of the conversation I'm about to have. This moment is a crossroads in my life. And I really hope it turns down the happy path.

Ned's house comes into view and my heart rate doubles. I turn into the driveway and find somewhere to park amongst the scattering of cars.

Then it's a quick check of my hair in the mirror. Now it is time to grab my roses and go before my courage deserts me completely.

I hurry up to the door and knock before I can chicken out. It's only a few moments before I can hear footsteps. My heart rate picks up pace again. Any faster and I'm going to be in serious trouble.

The door opens, and it is Pink who is looking up at me. Okay, deep breath. Honestly, it is probably a good thing that I have a few more moments to brace myself before seeing Ned.

Pink's gaze flicks to the bunch of roses in my hand and his face falls. Oh, that's not good. Has Ned told him that he never wants to see me again?

"Come in," says Pink as he steps aside.

My stomach is in knots. Is being invited in a good sign? Or does it simply mean that Ned is going to break my heart face to face ?

Pink leads me to a large kitchen, complete with a large pine table. Ned is not here. But Sammy is. And Lello. And Sammy's boyfriend, Blue. The one who is scared of

me, and ran away last time. This time, he gives me an uneasy look, but quickly turns his focus back to Lello.

Lello, who is Ned's best friend. Lello, who is sitting at the table with his face in his hands and crying his heart out. With a handwritten note in front of him.

A wave of dizziness washes over me, and I lose my balance. Pink catches my arm and steadies me.

"What the fuck is that?" I gasp.

Lello jumps at the sound of my voice. He looks up at me in alarm, and then snatches the note and hides it under the table.

"Sorry! Ned said you weren't to see it!" he exclaims. "I was supposed to come and tell you."

Despite the absolute horror of this moment, I'm profoundly touched that Ned realized that any note would be traumatic and triggering for me.

"What does it say?" I croak hoarsely.

"He has left. He has gone to find a castle to hide in and have a Long Sleep for ten years."

Relief bubbles through me so intensely that I nearly laugh. He has not done the worst. Anything else can be dealt with. Okay, deep breath. Think. He has left, I understand that bit, but what the hell is a Long Sleep? I open my mouth to ask, but then it hits me. I get the gist. I think it was in the Underworld films where the vampires took turns sleeping for long periods of time. Leapfrogging through the centuries, they called it.

So I guess that is what Ned is doing. Ten years is not as long as one hundred, but it is still an awfully long time. I will wait for him, of course, but he is going to miss the kids growing up.

Pink clears his throat. “He...he still hasn’t been feeding properly. He is weak. I...I’m worried he won’t wake up.”

And just like that, all my tentative relief evaporates, and my veins turn to ice. No, no, that can’t be right. Pink has to be mistaken.

“Surely he knows what he is doing?” I say.

Pink slowly shakes his head. “Ned is very young for a vampire. He is a baby and barely knows anything and he is...”

“An idiot?” I finish for Pink.

Pink nods and licks his lips. Shit, this is a disaster. We have to find him. But presumably, if his friends knew how to, they wouldn’t be sitting here crying.

“I can take you to him,” says Gray, making me jump a mile. I swear he wasn’t here a second ago.

“Can you?” I ask as I whip around to face the demon.

Gray nods solemnly. “He is in France. I can take you through the shadows.”

I force a swallow down my too dry throat. “How long would it take?”

Gray lifts up his hand and snaps his fingers. It makes me flinch, but it is clear enough. Instantaneous. Which is a whole lot quicker than getting to an airport. And every

second counts. I need to get to Ned before he slips into the Long Sleep thing.

“Take me!” I cry.

The demon nods, grabs my suit jacket, and then the world spins and darkens. Gravity twists and sound becomes solid. My mouth opens, but before I can scream, everything returns to normal .

Except I appear to be in a very large wine cellar. One that’s draped with red velvet and scattered with candelabras. As I turn around, trying to take it all in, I’m greeted by the sight of a large bed covered in blood red silk sheets.

Ned is sitting on the edge of it, cigarette hanging from his bottom lip as he stares at me in shock.

“Those things will ...” I start automatically.

“Kill me?” finishes Ned, with a raised eyebrow and a sarcastic expression.

Yeah, okay. Fair point.

“What is this place?” I ask, as I look around in bewilderment. There are cobwebs and dust in the corners. Did Ned just finishing cleaning this place up, and that’s what’s left? Or are they part of the spooky and dramatic theme?

Ned stubs out his cigarette. “An abandoned chateau. It was a vampire themed hotel for a while.” Ned shrugs awkwardly. “It tickled my funny bone.”

Suddenly, my mind comes back online and I rush up to him as all my frantic feelings blaze back to life.

“Thank goodness you are not asleep!”

Ned blinks. Then his gaze flicks down to the roses that I am somehow still holding. A beautiful pink blush tinges his cheeks.

My Ned. He is here. Right here and standing in front of me. Alive and not sleeping. I found him and I got here in time. It is the most wonderful thing ever.

“Umm...Gray, could you please give us a minute?” Ned stammers to the demon standing next to me. The one I had completely forgotten about .

Gray’s dark eyes slowly flick back and forth between us. “You are shy?”

“Yes,” says Ned inexplicably. I have no idea what we are talking about.

The demon huffs. “Make up sex is delicious.”

Oh, my god. Suddenly, I’m looking at my feet while my cheeks burst into fire. That’s why Gray is lingering? I really hope Ned doesn’t think I’m presuming anything is going to happen.

“He’s gone,” says Ned gently.

I’m still dying of embarrassment here, so I blindly thrust the roses at him. It gives me something to do while I pull myself together, and I do want him to have them.

Ned takes them graciously. I risk a peek and I’m just in time to see a beautiful smile teasing at his lips as he admires the flowers.

“I don’t have a vase,” he says.

“That’s okay,” I shrug.

Then I’m smiling too. Words are stupid. I think it is marvelous that we didn’t need the right ones to say, ‘I’m sorry,’ and ‘I forgive you.’ But I want to be crystal clear for this next bit, so I’m going to attempt to use the right words, in the right order.

“Please come home and be my boyfriend!” I blurt loudly.

A thousand emotions flow across Ned’s face. His eyes are practically aflame with them. He wants to, he really wants to. I can read that much at least, and it is making my heart want to burst with joy.

“There are a thousand reasons why I should say no,” he whispers .

There probably are. But life, and more especially, happiness, is far too fleeting to be worried about things like logic. We can overcome the downsides, I’m sure of it. I have to hope that the main reason he left and ran away to an abandoned chateau, was because he believed I didn’t want him. Now he knows that I do, everything else can be worked out.

All I have to do is to not allow Ned to convince himself our problems are insurmountable. He is a stubborn ass once he makes his mind up.

“A thousand reasons,” he repeats sadly, as if trying to convince himself.

“If I kiss you, and keep kissing you, you won’t be able to say any of them,” I say quickly. It really can be as easy and simple as that.

Ned’s beautiful eyes widen. He stares at me. His pink tongue pokes out and runs along his bottom lip. Then he nods, and that is all I need to see.

I close the short distance between us and lift him up into my arms. He squeaks, but then my lips are over his and his yelp of surprise turns into a moan of pleasure. His legs wrap around my waist, and his arms around my neck. The bunch of roses are squishing into the side of my head.

It is perfect. Just like he is.

I have my Ned, and my children, and it is everything I need.

Ned

Three months later.

Waking up is so surreal. This is my bed. My room. My home. Everything familiar and known. Yet Morgan is snuggled up to my back, one arm slung over me. His wonderful scent is everywhere. And I am warm. Truly warm. Down to my bones. Like I am alive once more.

Not only that, I feel safe. And Loved. Cherished and wanted.

I still can't believe this is my life now. It's not some cruel and mocking dream. It is my reality. I'm so glad I was too weak to resist when Morgan walked through the shadows with a demon he used to be terrified of, to give me a bunch of roses and to ask me to be his.

I glance over at the baby monitor standing on my bedside cabinet. The picture is grainy, but I can see three lumps in three beds. The kids are still asleep in their room down the hall.

When the extension is complete, our rooms will be next to each other, and I'll be a lot more relaxed. Even though I know full well I'm simply being paranoid. The whole point of Morgan and the kids moving in was to have a house full of paranormals keeping them safe.

And there is all the excellent magical warding the Grand Master himself put around the house after the kelpie attack, and then strengthened after Blue's stalkers. All in

all, there probably is no safer place in the world than this house. So the kids being a little further down the hall than I would like, is fine. As much as I'm tempted to kick Lello and Carter out of their room. But I won't. The extension will be ready soon enough.

A family annexe attached to the main house. It's perfect. Morgan is a genius. We are going to have the best of both worlds. Some privacy, and the joys of my crazy found family.

A grin stretches over my face. Another wonderful thing happened yesterday. I saw Gray in the garden with the kids. Showing them bugs. I caught the look on his face, and he was besotted. Gray is soft for my children and that is a huge weight off my shoulders. They really are going to be safe now, with a demon uncle.

All that is needed for life to be absolutely perfect, is for Red, Brodie and Jade to be able to come home. But everything is pointing towards that being resolved soon. The Council are pissy with Baltazar. It seems he had fingers in a lot of pies and was up to all sorts of no good.

As for Jade's fey problem, the Grand Master is being remarkably understanding. The gossip is that a fey dagger once found its way into his hands and caused all sorts of problems for him. So I guess he would feel hypocritical for blaming Jade for something he nearly fell sway to.

Add in the fact that Gray is in the process of making amulets that will stop the fey from being able to talk to their descendents, well, it is in the Grand Master's interests to play nice with us.

Gray says he still doesn't care if the fey invade, he just wants Red and Jade home. But now he has got a soft spot for the children, maybe he will be more motivated.

Which just leaves me with Baltazar's flight to fret about. Even though the new leader,

Carol, seems utterly uninterested in me or any kind of revenge. Hopefully vampires don't do loyalty. That would be great.

Okay, that's enough worrying. It's time to get up. I'm filthy from last night's fun and really need a shower. Then the kids are going to need breakfast.

Gently, I move Morgan's arm off of me, but he stirs, puts his arm back and starts nuzzling my neck.

"Where are you going? It's the weekend. There is no need to get up."

Oh lord. The feel of his lips on my neck is divine. I'm too weak to resist this.

His hand slips over my hip and wraps around my cock in a very confident way that does all sorts of things to me. He strokes me, and that's it. I surrender. I am staying in bed with this wonderful man and letting him do whatever he wants to me.

"Good boy," he rumbles into my neck.

Fuck. Is he trying to make me cum instantaneously? Oh lord. This is heaven. I absolutely love that we have got to a place where we are both comfortable with him leaning into his dominant side .

He continues to kiss my neck. He slips a hand under me and starts using that one to stroke me. With his now free hand, he lifts up my leg and eases it backwards to rest on his thigh.

A strange noise spills out of me, and Morgan chuckles. I moan as his hard cock slides right into me. He knew I was still sloppy and wet from last night. Wonderful bastard that he is.

My body jerks slightly as he rocks into me with slow, lazy thrusts. His hand is still

dancing up and down my cock. His lips are still sucking on my neck as if he is the vampire. It is euphoric. It's beautiful. And most amazing of all, my heart is beating, truly beating. Low and steady.

His hand leaves my leg and trails over my body to my nipple. The first pinch makes me squeal. Then he twists and tugs, in time to his movements on my cock and his gentle shallow thrusts in my ass. It is exquisite. Sensory overload.

He keeps working me, over and over. The pleasure builds, slow and strong. A gradual thing of the utmost intensity. It is subtle enough to creep up on me, and before I fully realize what is happening, I'm a sobbing, writhing, twitching mess in Morgan's arms.

"Good boy," he rumbles again.

I soar on the very cusp of orgasm. His gentle thrusts are not quite enough. He is not going deep enough, hard enough, fast enough to push me over the edge, but it is more than enough to hold me there.

I gasp. I whine. I think I'm begging.

Oh lord. The pleasure is still building and building. Like pressure behind a dam. Actually, I think I am going to be able to cum like this. I can feel it brewing. Gathering like a storm.

A sharp pinch of pain from my nipple makes me yelp. My impending orgasm recedes.

"Not yet," Morgan whispers.

I groan and shudder. All my muscles are trembling. I've been reduced to a quivering mess. Morgan is stupidly good in bed. It's insane. I'm a very lucky man.

A deep groan vibrates through Morgan. I can feel it as well as hear it. He is about to blow.

“Cum with me,” he grunts.

He thrusts deeply and holds his hips flush with mine. He shudders and a burst of warmth gushes inside me. Suddenly, I’m moaning and spasming as an orgasm rolls through me. It is a long, gentle one that goes on and on. My ass clenches around Morgan’s cock, making as both cry out. I wail as my cock dumps its load onto the sheets.

Slowly, ever so slowly, reality returns and I find myself a wet-noodle-limbed sweaty mess in Morgan’s arms.

“That was wonderful,” I sigh.

Morgan kisses my neck again. “Thanks, you weren’t bad yourself.”

A sharp snort laugh escapes me and I try to whack him on the arm. This damn man is utterly impossible. He is perfect enough as it is. He can’t go around making me laugh as well.

My gaze flicks to the baby monitor. Three empty beds. Shit, the little darlings got up while we were fooling around. Thank heavens I have a lock on my door.

“The kids,” I mumble as I attempt to get up.

Morgan pulls me back down. “Have a house full of paranormal uncles. We can shower and get dressed first.”

I sigh in happy defeat. “Fine.”

We share a shower, but it is mostly quick and functional and only a little teeth-achingly sweet and tender. After we are finished, he throws a towel at me, and I throw one back. We laugh and dry ourselves off. Then we throw on comfy clothes. It is the weekend after all.

My gaze roams over Morgan. Black tee shirt and gray sweatpants. Perfection.

He smiles at me, takes my hand, and together we walk down the stairs. It is suspiciously quiet. Where the hell is everyone? I can sense a shit ton of people in the kitchen, but why on earth are they trying to be silent?

I open the kitchen door and nearly have the heart attack that Lello claims is impossible.

“Surprise!” bellows what seems like a hundred people.

Streamers and poppers go off. The kids jump up and down in excitement. There are balloons everywhere. And confetti. And an absolute mountain of food on the table and the counters. Including a giant chocolate cake. Of all the solid food in the world, I flipping love chocolate cake.

My gaze flicks around the crowd. Lello and Carter. Gray and Mal. Blue and Sammy. Pink and his mage. My heart aches that Red, Brodie and Jade are not here, but I have every faith that they will be back soon.

Finally, my gaze lifts up to the giant banner strung across the room, hanging haphazardly from the ceiling.

‘Happy Birthday Ned!’ it says. I recognize the kids’ paint work. And their hand prints.

This is why Morgan was keeping me in bed? So the others could set up a surprise

party? The dirty, wonderful bastard. Morning sex is the very best way to be delayed .

Morgan leans close to my ear. “Happy 100th birthday, sweetheart.”

My eyes get annoyingly wet, but despite that, it really can’t get any better than this.