

THE WEDDING OF ANTANASIA JESSICA PACKWOOD AND LUCIUS VALERIU VLADESCU by Beth Fantaskey.txt
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BY
BETH FENTESKY

Chapter 1

My best friend – if I could still call her that, like I hoped – Mindy Stankowicz looked completely baffled as crowds of Romanians who knew where they were going pushed past her to get to the baggage carousels at Bucharest's busy Aeroportul International Henri Coanda.

I knew that I should rush over and help Min, but I held back for a few seconds, just watching as she searched the crowd for me, her eyes now and then darting to signs covered with a language that my four months in Romania hadn't fully prepared me to understand, either.

Bagaje pierdute...

Conexiune gara...

Carucioare bagaje...

In a way, we were both strangers in a very strange land. Newcomers to a culture that was dramatically different from that in which we'd grown up, and now strangers to each other, too, although we'd been friends since kindergarten.

Mindy took a hesitant step forward – then stopped again, obviously not sure where to go, and I still didn't move. My own feet seemed bolted down as I tried to sort out all of the emotions that rushed through me just to see a friend from my recent past, someone who had witnessed everything that had happened in high school, from the day that Lucius Vladescu had walked into my life to the day that I'd feared he'd been taken away from me, forever.

Looking back on our last months of school, I still wasn't sure if Mindy had deserted me, or if I'd abandoned her as things with Lucius had gotten more intense. Mindy had wanted to help me deal with all that I'd been going through with Lucius and Faith Crosse and Jake Zinn, but I'd pushed her away, scared to confide the truth about my feelings for Lucius – and the truth about what he was. What I was becoming. Still, the day that Mindy had yanked her arm away from me in gym class – sort of renouncing our friendship – I'd been hurt...

Who had been the worse friend?

Standing in the middle of the crowded airport, surrounded by Romanian travelers who were all hauling their luggage off spinning baggage carousels as announcements were made in numerous languages, so the whole scene was like a chaotic, modern Tower of Babel, Mindy suddenly looked scared, and I remembered one crucial detail from our shared history.

On the night that Lucius had almost been destroyed – on my 18th birthday, when nearly everyone else, even my parents, in a way, had turned their backs on me and Lucius – Mindy had called to warn me that he was in deep trouble.

She'd had her doubts about Lucius, feared that he might even be hurting me, but in the end she'd come through and tried to save his very existence. Attempted to rescue him for me, because she'd already known that I loved him.

Maybe, if I hadn't shown up in the barn that night and tried to intervene, things would have gone a little differently. Maybe Ethan Strausser would have grabbed the stake instead of Jake, and Lucius would be gone...

All at once my feet were freed, and I wasn't just walking toward Mindy, I was running. And without even thinking about how things might be awkward between us – I was a vampire, for crying out loud, and we hadn't seen each other since my transformation, let alone really talked about that fact – I shoved through the crowds and held open my arms, just as Mindy saw me, too, and threw her own arms

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wide without the slightest hesitation, with nothing but joy in her eyes to see an old friend, and we crashed into each other and both started crying so immediately and so hard that we didn't even have the time or the composure to say "hello."

We clung onto each other for a long time, ignoring the people who pushed past us, some cursing mildly in Romanian at the two girls who were blocking all the traffic, and when we finally calmed down, I blurted out the question that I'd been wanting to pose, but had been too scared to voice, thinking maybe it was a lot just to ask Mindy to fly to Romania for the wedding of a friend whom she might not even like anymore.

"Will you be my maid of honor? Please?"

Mindy pulled away from me and dragged her fingers under her eyes, which were dripping mascara all over her round cheeks, and said, with a shaky, still half-teary smile, "Jeez, Jess, I thought you'd never ask!"

I wiped at my own face, trying to clear away some of my tears, too. "I was afraid _,"

Afraid you'd say no... That you couldn't in good conscience support my marriage to a vampire... That we weren't friends like that anymore...

But before I could find the right words, Mindy reached out and squeezed my arm, stopping me from saying more. "Who else is gonna do your hair on the most important day of your life, Jess?" she teased. "Huh?"

For some reason I almost started to cry again - but I was laughing, too. "Nobody but you," I promised, knowing that everything that had happened between us, all of the weirdness, had been fixed. That we wouldn't have to say another word.

Or maybe there was one more thing to say, because suddenly Mindy got serious, all the laughter fading from her eyes.

"You're really a -" She glanced around, probably checking to see if there were any English speakers who might overhear. Then she leaned close and whispered, so even I could hardly hear, "vampire?"

I straightened a little, not wanting to hide what I was or act like I was ashamed. Wanting to be completely honest with Mindy this time, because I'd hidden too much from her in the past. "Yes. I am."

Mindy studied my face for a long time, like she needed to see that I was still really, truly me, and not just some bloodsucking creature who would be beyond her understanding. Gradually, as we searched each other's eyes, I saw her smile not only return, but get steadier and warmer, like she was setting aside her last reservations about me. About us. "That's cool," she finally said with a nod. "That's okay."

I hadn't known that I needed anybody's endorsement, but I guess I needed Mindy's, because it felt good to hear somebody say that, out loud.

What I was now... It really was okay.

"Thanks," I said, as my own smile got even bigger.

I'd been ecstatic about marrying Lucius, but having my best friend back... It filled some empty place in my heart, and although we were pretty much adults, and I was about to be married, I reached out and held her hand, just like we used to do when we were little kids skipping on the playground.

"Let's get your bags," I suggested, pulling her toward the correct carousel, where most of the luggage had already been claimed. As we stepped up, though, I saw three

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big, new-looking, faux Louis Vuitton suitcases conspicuously taking the ride around for probably the twentieth time. When they reached us, Mindy let go of my hand, stretched out an arm and hauled one, then another, down, and I hurried to grab the remaining bag before it could spin by again.

As the heavy suitcase thudded to my feet, I looked to Mindy, confused. "Three pieces of luggage? But I thought you can only stay for three days, tops...?"

Mindy looked at me like I was the one who was out of my mind. "This is the biggest event of your life," she reminded me. "It's gonna take a lot of hair product!"

I started grinning like crazy then, feeling completely happy in that moment. I was about to marry Lucius, and Mindy really was back...

"Come on," I said, starting to wheel the suitcase I'd claimed toward the exit. "Lucius has a driver waiting for us, and we have lots to do."

"I'm right behind you," Mindy promised, hurrying along beside me with her two bags wobbling in tow. "Can't wait!"

I looked over at her and we shared a smile that summed up about fifteen years of friendship and all the hopes and dreams we'd had as girls about falling in love and getting married and living happily ever after.

Then I faced forward and led us both toward the waiting car.

The wedding was officially underway.

Chapter 2

"I'm thinking a classic updo," Mindy said, head bent low as she leafed through the pages of a special bridal edition of Celebrity Hairstyle magazine. "Depending, of course, on your headpiece."

I was torn between checking out the options and watching the passing scenery from the back seat of the Lexus SUV that Lucius had provided for our ride from the airport. Apparently he'd anticipated how much Mindy would pack, because the SUV had more storage than the other vehicles in the Vladescu's well-stocked garage... the contents of which would soon be at my beck and call, too, hard as that still was to believe.

Outside the window, the dramatic vistas of the rising Carpathians unfolded, and now and then when we rounded a curve on the steep mountain road, I would find myself staring at nothing but sky and gasp a little, not just because it felt like we were flying off the road, but because I was also amazed to think that this rugged, wild landscape was my new home.

"Jess?" Mindy tapped my sleeve. "I asked about your headpiece. It's going to be a tiara, right? I mean, it has to be a tiara!"

I turned to see Min's eyes gleaming at the prospect of being part of an honest-to-goodness royal wedding – the kind we'd never really thought would happen for either one of us, in spite of what all our favorite Disney movies had taught us to expect. "Yes, it's a tiara," I confirmed, wondering if Mindy was actually more excited than me about the wedding, itself. I couldn't wait to be married to Lucius, but I was nervous, too, about the ceremony.

Would I follow all the proper protocol?

Would the guests have a good time?

And most importantly, would any of my relatives – Dragomir or Vladescu – cause any trouble? Because that was definitely possible.

"I can't wait to see the dress!" Mindy said, returning her attention to the magazine on her lap. "I bet it's beautiful!"

"You'll see it tomorrow," I promised, hoping she'd like it. And hoping Lucius would like the gown I'd chosen. I'd designed it myself with the help of Lucius's Romanian tailor, and it was a little unconventional. But I'd wanted something different and special. A dress that would remind me of my past and my future. I started to smile, thinking that my gown also paid tribute to one of the most important moments that Lucius and I had shared.

I could still hear his voice as he'd stood behind me in a small Pennsylvania dress shop, his fingers twisted up into my curly hair. "Don't ever again say that you are not 'valuable,' Antanasia. Or not beautiful..."

I desperately wanted to make him think I was beyond beautiful when I walked toward him to be married.

I had to take his breath away.

Nothing less would do.

Getting nervous again, I resumed staring out the window and saw the rooftops of Sighisoara in the distance. It crossed my mind to suggest a slight detour, so I could show Mindy the charming, medieval town, just like my Uncle Dorin had done for me the first time I'd traveled to Romania. But at the last moment I kept my mouth shut, because there was something else that I was suddenly eager to show Mindy first, even more than the narrow, quaint streets that Lucius had roamed as a child.

Leaning forward, I tapped the driver's shoulder, signaling to him in my limited Romanian, "Se opreste cind ai lui Vladescu casa, te rog."

Although Mindy looked up from her magazine to give me an impressed look, I was pretty sure my grammar – and definitely my pronunciation – were way off. But the driver – one of the stern young guards who'd once pinned my arms in a dark forest – must have understood, because he nodded without taking his eyes off the twisting road and agreed, "Da, bineinteles."

"What's that all about?" Mindy asked, seeming remarkably comfortable for a girl taking her first ride in rural Romania with a vampiric chauffeur at the wheel of a luxury SUV. "What's up?"

"We're going to pull over in a second," I said. "There's something I want you to see."

"What...?"

Before Mindy could even finish her question, though, the SUV slowed and eased to the side of the road, and I pointed past my friend's shoulder, signaling for her to look out her own window.

She shifted in her seat and when confronted with the view had the reaction I'd expected, because I'd had it myself the first time Dorin had pulled over at almost that exact spot on the road. I still had the same reaction every time I saw the place that was to be my home. The mixture of awe and disbelief and maybe a touch of fear that made your jaw actually drop and which left me, and now Mindy, unable to think, or say, anything more than...

"Is that place for real?"

"You're really going to live there?" Mindy asked, without taking her eyes off the sprawling, soaring, Gothic Vladescu estate. She took a step closer to the edge of the precipice, and I grabbed her sleeve, not wanting her to tumble down into the steep, narrow valley that separated us from Lucius's home. But Mindy seemed too transfixed to even notice that I'd stopped her. "You're actually getting married there?"

It was hard to tell if I heard awe – or concern – in her voice. Maybe there was a mixture of both. Or maybe I was projecting my own conflicted emotions about my soon-to-be home onto my friend.

Letting go of Mindy's sleeve, I shaded my eyes against the setting sun and joined her in studying the massive castle where I would soon live with Lucius.

The vast stone mansion, the size of a small – or maybe not-so-small – city block, was magnificent, without a doubt. Like something straight out of a fairy tale. And yet, as my eyes traced along the rambling exterior, which was punctuated by sharp, spike-like turrets and dominated by a tall watch tower, I couldn't help thinking, with more than a little misgiving, that fairy tales always had dark twists. Children got lost in desolate forests and stumbled across witches intent upon stuffing them into ovens. A handful of beans could lead to an encounter with an angry giant. And, as Lucius had reminded me in the shadow of the very stone walls I was observing, innocent girls could find themselves eaten by wolves, if they weren't always on guard...

Mindy interrupted my thoughts with a soft, low whistle. "That place is..."

She couldn't seem to articulate her thoughts, but I could finish them well enough. Huge.

Awesome.

Imposing.

Fearsome?

"Yes, I know," I agreed, dropping my hand and looking to Mindy. "It's almost too much for words." She finally managed to tear her gaze away, too, and met my eyes. "When you said you were getting married at Lucius's 'estate,' I didn't think you meant, like, an honest-to-goodness Cinderella, king-and-queen castle."

I looked a little deeper into my best friend's eyes, because, for the first time since Lucius had come into my life – maybe for the first time in Mindy's and my friendship – I thought I'd witnessed a flash of raw jealousy there. But it vanished so quickly that I wasn't even sure I'd really seen it. The light was fading fast, and it was getting hard to see...

Mindy turned back toward the valley, seeming drawn to look at the edifice that dominated the landscape, its silhouette getting more and more stark as the sun set.

"Where, exactly, will you get married in there?" she asked. "Is there, like, a special room just for weddings? Because it looks big enough to have a special room for everything."

I looked again at the castle, too, searching the towers and shadowed courtyards and tall, narrow windows – and trying to imagine the spot, myself.

"Lucius won't tell me," I admitted.

Mindy spun toward me, clearly shocked. "What? You're joking, right?"

Although she'd hadn't had a boyfriend yet – not unlike me too long ago – she'd been

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planning her own wedding since we were about five years old. There was no way Melinda Stankowicz would ever let anybody – not even the love of her life – surprise her with a location for the most important night of her life. Especially not if she was getting married in an estate that held collections of weapons and was splashed with bloodstains, for crying out loud.

No, Mindy would have insisted on seeing the room... or the chamber... or wherever, exactly, her groom intended to tie the knot.

"The only thing I know is that I haven't even seen the spot yet," I told her. "Lucius purposely kept it hidden from me when he showed me the rest of the castle." Including a labyrinth of buried chambers that could only be called a dungeon, where Lucius admitted he'd sometimes been "disciplined," to use his own euphemism...

"Jess, are you sure you don't want to see where you're actually exchanging vows?" Mindy asked, with genuine concern – almost alarm – in her voice. "This is your wedding!"

"I know," I agreed. "Believe me – I've thought of that!"

I'd been very worried when Lucius had first suggested that I let him pick the location.

But when I'd brought up the topic of choosing where we'd marry, my future husband had said to me, "I know the perfect place." Then he'd arched his dark eyebrows, mischief in his black eyes, and asked, "Do you trust me, Antanasia?"

I'd looked into those complicated, mysterious, wonderful eyes for a long time, knowing that this was a once-in-eternity opportunity to choose where I'd be wed... and thinking, just for a split second, that the vampire who stood before me had not too long ago surprised me with a stake pressed close to my heart.

Lucius had been smiling, teasing, but there'd been something serious deep in his eyes, too, and I'd had a feeling that he was testing our bond, just a little. That something important was happening between us. Something more than just a decision about where we'd perform the ceremony that had united generations of vampires before us.

Then I'd begun to smile, too, mirroring Lucius's own expression...

"Jess – seriously!" Mindy's voice brought me back to present. "You're letting a guy – even a guy as cool as Lucius – make that decision?"

In spite of the twinges of apprehension I always felt in the shadow of the Vladescu estate, I found myself smiling the same way I'd done the night that I'd given control of that crucial choice to Lucius as I turned to Mindy and said, without any lingering doubts, "I trust him."

Then I glanced at my watch, realizing we needed to get moving. "Come on," I said, heading toward the waiting vehicle. "We need to get to the Dragomir estate – which is much less impressive," I warned her, so she wouldn't expect too much. "I'm sure you can't wait to clean up, and we both need to get dressed for dinner, then round up Mom and Dad, too. The last time I saw them, they were off on some nature hike in the mountains, looking for a medicinal plant Dad remembered harvesting the last time they were here."

"Your parents came?" Mindy asked. "Really?"

"Of course," I said – surprised that she would be surprised. This was my wedding. Then I remembered how Mom and Dad had tried to stop me from going to Lucius's aid on that terrible night when he'd almost been destroyed in the Zinn's barn. Mindy probably knew most of what had happened that evening, including how my parents had taken my car keys away, afraid that Lucius really had succumbed to his darker

"I forgave Mom and Dad a long time ago," I told Mindy, not even bothering to ask how much she knew for certain. "They were only trying to protect me. They didn't know how bad things were about to get for Lucius."

"Yeah, I guess not," Mindy agreed, as we reached the Lexus. But she held back a step, seeming to have something on her mind.

I waited, too, while she chose her words. "Jake..." she finally began, seeming hesitant to bring up the topic of my old boyfriend – who'd plunged a stake into the love of my life. "He..."

"He didn't really try to kill Lucius," I reassured her. "It was all a set up, to save Lucius's life, actually. Jake is a nice guy." Which, in a strange way, was part of the reason I couldn't love him.

"Yeah, your mom told me the story," Mindy said. "There were so many rumors, and so much confusion after that night... I had to go ask her, one day, what was true."

"Lucius tried to invite Jake to the wedding," I added. "Even volunteered to fly him here. He feels so grateful for what Jake did."

Mindy's eyes widened with surprise. "And...?"

I shook my head, before Mindy could start thinking anybody else from school would be at the ceremony. "He declined. I think he'd rather just forget the whole thing." Maybe forget me, too, after how I'd treated him.

"Yeah, I can see him wanting that," Mindy said. "Jake doesn't seem like a guy who'd like a fancy wedding – especially with vampires."

"No, I don't think he'd be comfortable in a castle," I agreed. Yet I still thought of Jake as a knight in shining armor. A really good guy who'd risked a lot to save a classmate he didn't even like. A hero, in a way. But I was destined for someone very different. Someone who was probably at that very moment completely at ease while donning formal dinner attire, or running a razor over his stubbled jaw, being careful at the spot where his skin was scarred. Or maybe he'd be issuing last-minute orders to his staff, or pacing around his study, hands laced behind his back as he prepared the toast he'd probably give that night...

Although I saw Lucius nearly every day now, my stomach started to tickle, like it inevitably did when I thought of him, and I began moving us toward the SUV again, suddenly in a hurry to see him. "Come on, let's go!"

"Where's the dinner going to be, anyhow?" Mindy asked, following my lead.

The driver reached out and opened the door for both of us, and as I climbed in, I grinned over my shoulder. "Let's just say that in a few hours, you'll get a much closer look at Lucius's house!"

"Oh, boy," Mindy muttered, climbing in, too. "Oh, boy..."

And for the second time that evening, I couldn't quite tell whether she was excited or scared. Or maybe I was projecting my own feelings again. For although I knew that Jake Zinn wasn't on the guest list, I wasn't exactly sure who all might show up.

Although we were both hosting the party, of course Lucius was there first – especially since my small group of guests was running late, thanks to Mindy's endless readjustment of both our hairstyles – and he smiled and approached us as we entered the room.

Chapter 4

The Vladescu castle might have intimidated me with its sheer size and its grim history, and the stone walls could make it feel cold and formidable. But the dining room where Lucius and I held a pre-wedding dinner for our closest friends and family seemed warm and intimate as the people whom I loved most in the world gathered near the long, gleaming mahogany table, which reflected the light from no fewer than four massive wrought iron chandeliers, each one holding dozens of flickering tapers that cast a soft glow over the room.

"Welcome, everyone," he greeted us, coming up beside me and slipping my hand into his, pressing our palms together. He met my eyes, and I saw the appreciation, the love, that I always craved in his gaze. "You look beautiful tonight, Antanasia," he said, glancing down to appraise the red dress I'd chosen for that evening. A long, full, silk gown with a delicate, but intricate, pattern of Swarovski crystals across the bodice. I'd chosen this dress not really to impress Lucius, but to honor my birth mother, who'd been known for wearing crimson.

"I always love you in red," Lucius added, raising his eyes to mine again. Although his eyes were incredibly dark, I saw that they were glowing warmly, so I knew that I'd pleased him, too. "Then again," he noted, teasing, "I even loved you in your Arabian horse T-shirt!"

We shared a private smile at the reference to a shirt that Lucius used to mock – and which I'd worn on the night that he'd tried to defy the pact and end our betrothal. But of course we hadn't been able to avoid a destiny that we both wanted so badly...

Then he bent slightly and cupped my chin in his hand and kissed my lips, and even as my heart pounded, like it always did when we touched, I flushed a little, because my parents were right there. Not too long ago, I'd been humiliated just to be caught sitting on the porch with Lucius, both of us moving close to a kiss that never quite happened. As Lucius and I drew apart, my eyes darted to look at Mom and Dad, so I could see if my sudden adulthood – the fact that I was kissing a boy... a man... in public, even just a chaste, sweet greeting – seemed strange for them, too.

When I checked their faces, though, it was hard to read their expressions. I looked to Mindy next – and for the second time that evening, I wondered if I caught a flash of jealousy in her eyes. She'd once had a crush on Lucius, before I'd acknowledged my own feelings for him...

"Ned, Dara – so nice to see you," Lucius said, interrupting my speculation. He released my hand and stepped past me to embrace my parents. "Welcome to my home."

"It's good to see you, too, Lucius," Mom said, closing her eyes and pulling him to herself, holding him tightly just like a real mother would do. "We've missed you."

They held each other long enough to let me know that my husband-to-be had missed Mom, too. The very fact that he didn't answer her right away made me think that Lucius – motherless Lucius – was either savoring the rare maternal touch, or was perhaps too close to being overcome by emotion to speak.

During the brief months we'd all shared a home in Pennsylvania, my mother had definitely unlocked something inside of Lucius. A vulnerable place that even I wasn't really privy to. A part of my hardened warrior prince that was just a child, yearning for the love of a parent.

"Thank you for coming," he finally said, and although his voice was quiet, I was pretty sure it was thick with feelings that he was working hard to control.

When Mom released him, he straightened and moved to my father, and although I suspected that Dad, even more than Mom, had distrusted Lucius during those last few weeks that he'd lived with us, Ned Packwood was never one to turn away a hug. The

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two men hesitated before each other for just one second, until Dad threw his arms wide and invited, "Come here, Luc!" Then he clasped Lucius to himself and gave his back about five hearty slaps, until Lucius, laughing, withdrew and held Dad at arms' length, noting, "Easy, Ned! You strike hard for a pacifist!"

We all laughed, then, and all at once I exhaled with an almost audible whoosh and felt my shoulders relax. I hadn't even realized how tense I'd been about their meeting until I saw that things were fine between them.

I knew that my parents were still worried – maybe terrified – about me marrying into vampire royalty. But a part of them had always known that this moment might come, and, true to their beliefs about parenting, they were letting me go. Letting me be the adult they'd raised me to be. Letting me choose Lucius, and taking him back into their hearts.

To be honest, I doubted they'd ever really let him go. Lucius went to Mindy, who suddenly seemed kind of uncertain, almost nervous, about how to act in such a regal setting. Or maybe she was worried, in her own way, about reuniting with Lucius, after all that had happened in Pennsylvania. "Umm..." She actually started to curtsy a little, and held out her hand, like she expected him to kiss it. But Lucius smoothly took the extended hand and drew my friend into a less vigorous, but still welcoming, embrace. He spoke softly to her, too, but I heard him say, "Thank you, Melinda, for coming. Thank you for everything."

They stepped apart, but Lucius gave her hand a squeeze before releasing it, and I saw that Mindy's eyes were glistening. She'd understood all that he'd meant. Thank you for insisting that Antanasia give me a chance... For trying to save me... For standing by us when no one else would...

He came back to my side, mastering his own emotions, which I saw were again surprisingly close to the surface, and placed one hand on the small of my back, connecting us as he often did when we were in public. I loved how he always laid subtle claim to me like that now. I felt the same possessive instincts for him, too. I looked up to his handsome face. And soon we would stand before the world and make it official...

"I must excuse myself," he said, addressing me first, then Mom, Dad and Mindy. "I need to mix and mingle with our Romanian guests, as you Americans would say."

I looked around to realize that several other people – vampires – had arrived while we'd been preoccupied. Among them I saw some of my Dragomir kin, including my Uncle Dorin, face already flushed with the warmth of the room and maybe the glass of dark red wine that he held in his hand as he told some animated story to three of my cousins.

I turned to look across the room, to a far corner, and saw that Lucius's Uncle Claudiu had joined us, too, and the peace that I'd just felt to see my friends and family reunited with Lucius was shaken a little.

Claudiu – younger brother of Vasile, whom Lucius had destroyed in the very house where we stood...

I hadn't been sure Claudiu would show up for a happy occasion. Although he was one of the Elders who ruled the clans, there was no love lost between him and Lucius. But Lucius, always one for decorum, had insisted that we invite him, because to do otherwise would alienate him further and maybe even cause a rift that couldn't be fixed.

Claudiu's presence in the room seemed to dim the candles a little, cast deeper shadows on the stone. I stared at him, remembering that – along with eternal love – obligation, politics, intrigue and diplomacy were part of my new life, too. I would also be binding myself to the Vladescu clan when I joined my life to that of the vampire who was pressing his palm against my back, promising me, "I won't be long,

"I'll go with you," I offered, thinking that it was probably proper for me to greet everyone.

But Lucius stopped me by slipping his hand to my arm and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "You will have time to speak to everyone later," he said with a smile. "Why don't you look after our American visitors? Make sure they are comfortable? I will bring our relatives to you, which is perfectly fitting, given that you are not only royalty, but also - for one more day - still technically a guest here."

I gave him a grateful look, knowing that he was probably bending protocol a little to give Mom, Dad and especially Mindy time to settle in before they were left alone in a party where they were outsiders. I looked around the room once more, noting that a few more guests had arrived and trying to recall who was a Vladescu and who was a Dragomir. Not that I wasn't practically an outsider, myself...

For now.

Then I watched Lucius walk with his obvious usual confidence toward Claudiu and the small group that surrounded Vasile's brother, and I envied my betrothed the ease with which he moved in the circles of power - sometimes dangerous power - that I was joining.

I also found myself admiring other things about Lucius. His always impressive height; his thick, black hair, cut a little bit shorter and neater than he normally wore it, for our wedding; and the way he carried off the dark, custom-tailored suit that he'd chosen for this occasion. His shoulders were broad under the fitted jacket, and his legs looked especially long and powerful in a pair of narrow, European-style pants.

I was so caught up in observing Lucius that I barely noticed Dad saying to Mindy, "Come on, Melinda Sue! Let's see if we can't find something to drink." As they moved off together, it didn't even strike me that getting beverages for my guests was probably my responsibility.

No, as sometimes happened, I was nearly mesmerized by Lucius.

As he greeted Claudiu and the others, he smiled, so his white teeth - as white as his crisp dress shirt - flashed in the candlelight, and my heart skipped a few beats. I hadn't seen nor felt Lucius's fangs since that first night he'd completed my transformation from mortal to vampire. We were waiting for our wedding night to touch like that again, savoring the anticipation, which was almost unbearable, given how close he was to me now, every day...

I placed my hand on my chest, feeling my heart, which had started racing.

"He's very handsome."

My mother whispered that in my ear, and I jolted, then turned to find her smiling - laughing a little - at me, a knowing, teasing look in her intelligent eyes.

"Mom!" I started to protest, flushing to have been caught looking at Lucius with what must have been obvious lust. Then I remembered that I wasn't a high school girl anymore, and that Lucius was almost my husband. I was allowed to look. Soon I would be one of Mom's peers... a married woman. I controlled the urge to blush and confided, "It seems like he's getting even more handsome, to me."

I stole another look at Lucius and saw that he was grinning broadly, running his hand through his black hair as he conversed with his uncle, acting like there was no tension between them.

"I think he's getting more handsome, too," Mom agreed.

I jerked back a little, surprised by the comment, and noted that she wasn't laughing anymore. She looked thoughtful – but in a pleased way – as she added, "He's happy, Jessica. That's why. Happiness makes people beautiful."

I smiled at my mother. "I hope he's happy, Mom."

Then Dad and Mindy rejoined us, Dad carrying some kind of pewter mug that he never did get a chance to drink out of, because all of the sudden, Lucius's deep voice broke into the quiet conversations that were taking place around us as he announced, "Please, everyone! Take your places. Dinner is served!"

I went to my place at one end of the table, Lucius took his at the distant other end, and the rest of the guests searched for their names on the vellum place cards that were artfully arranged on silver chargers before each tall chair.

As we all took our seats, I realized that there was one empty place – one person missing, at Lucius's right hand – and for the life of me, I couldn't recall who was meant to sit there.

I was distracted from wondering, though, as a team of silent, uniformed servers swept away the place cards and replaced them with individual menus explaining the night's selections in hand-printed, swirling calligraphy.

One by one, the menus were slipped beneath our noses.

And a few seconds later, all of us Americans began to laugh out loud.

Chapter 5

"Nice touch, you two," Dad said, grinning at me, then Lucius. "Very thoughtful!"

I smiled down the table at Lucius, too, loving him both for his consideration of my parents, and for the gentle humor in the gesture. His secret, last-minute addition to the menu – "Lentil Casserole à la Vladescu" – was definitely an inside joke, given how he'd despised my parents' reliance on grains and beans, and especially lentils, but it was also just a nice thing to include for them.

"The casserole is Lucius's idea," I said, ignoring the confusion on my vampire relatives' faces. I was sure they all knew what lentils were, but their significance on the menu was going right over the Vladescus' and Dragomirs' heads.

Mom knew that Lucius was joking with her, though. He hadn't exactly been shy about sharing his opinions on her cooking in the past. "You should have called and asked for my personal recipe, Lucius," she said, giving him an arch, but affectionate, smile. "I would have shared it!"

Even from far down the table, which was being circled by two servers filling long-stemmed glasses with red wine, I could see the amusement in Lucius's eyes. "Oh, I couldn't trouble you like that!" he joked. "Let's see how my cook handles this ever-so-adaptable and persistent little legume on her own. I am always eager to taste a new variation!"

All at once, to see Lucius at the head of that huge table, in control of the menu and the conversation, I was really struck by the magnitude and speed of the changes taking place in my life. Less than a year ago, Mom had practically dragged Lucius by the ear from our modest dining room table and scolded him for being rude to Jake during our first date. I looked from Mom to Lucius and back again, thinking that could never happen now. Lucius was far beyond anyone's control.

I was living independently in a new country, but was I a real adult like that, too?

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I squirmed on my chair and glanced at Mindy, who struck me as small and young and still a little uneasy in such a formal gathering. She seemed to be eyeing – warily – the almost dizzying, dazzling array of silverware that was spread out before each of us.

I scanned my own place setting, not sure if I knew when or how to use some of the gleaming implements, either, and the confidence that I'd felt when Lucius had taken my hand was rattled again.

I'd wielded power with Lucius on the night that I'd stopped the vampire war and claimed my place as leader of the Dragomir clan. But I couldn't help wondering in that moment... who did I resemble more?
Lucius, at ease and in command?

Or Mindy, smiling – but nervously?

Was I ready to be at the end of this table, like the prince I saw far, far across from me? Or did I still look like I belonged on the sidelines, a humble guest at my own party?

The two servants pouring wine reached Lucius and I simultaneously, their performance choreographed to serve us last, and I nearly placed my hand over my glass to signal that I didn't want – couldn't drink – wine. Then I looked quickly to Lucius and saw that he seemed oblivious to being served. I glanced at my parents, too, as if for approval, before remembering that a sip of wine was legal for me in Europe, and I no longer needed permission. More to the point, I would be expected to take part in the toast, even if the taste made me cringe.

I slipped my hand back down to my side, hoping that nobody had noticed my near mistake and watching as the dark, almost black, liquid swirled into the glass. In the firelight, it looked a lot like something else that I wanted much, much more. Craved and needed, actually.

My eyes stayed fixed on the inky liquid. Blood and wine... Two things I'd tasted only a few times, each, now about to become regular parts of my existence...

Then out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lucius rise, and my attention – along with that of all the guests – shifted back to him as he raised his own glass high to toast us all.

I knew, as I watched him, that he was enjoying himself. That I was seeing Lucius Vladescu in his element. Yet I was also keenly aware that part of his enjoyment stemmed from the very fact that, given who was in the audience, even something as simple as welcoming guests could be fraught with peril. That one snub, intended, unintended or merely perceived, could have serious repercussions.

But of course the pressure didn't show on Lucius's face as he began a toast that would not only thank our guests for sharing a special meal, but could also, if not handled with grace and finesse, someday start a war.

I looked around at my Dragomir relatives – and to Lucius's Uncle Claudiu, who sat stiffly in his seat, his long, pale fingers gliding up and down the stem of his wineglass, and my throat tightened, as if those fingers were twisting around my neck.

Clauidu would probably love a war. As a Vladescu Elder, he'd been part of the plot to have Lucius dispose of me some dark night in the bed that we'd share, so the Vladescus could wield unchallenged power over an empire of vampires...

I tuned back to Lucius, almost terrified, suddenly, by my own future, and desperate for reassurance that the powerful warrior-prince who stood across from me, presiding over the table, would keep me from harm.

And seeing Lucius did calm me – for an instant. Of course I'd be safe alone with him in that huge bed he'd shown me when we'd toured the castle...

Still, my eyes darted back to Claudiu. But what about those times when Lucius couldn't be at my side?

I was so preoccupied with fighting a rising panic that it took me a second to notice that Lucius hadn't started his toast yet. Wasn't even looking at his guests – or at me.

No, his attention was drawn to the wooden door at my back, which squeaked open on its old hinges. As the door swung wider, ushering in a chilly draft that made the candles flicker wildly in the chandeliers, Lucius's expression changed dramatically, so that I forgot all about Claudiu and secret plots.

I started to swing around in my seat, certain that whoever was entering the room wasn't just some servant bearing a tray of food or more wine. And just as I twisted to see behind myself, Lucius confirmed my suspicions that someone important had joined the party.

"Although he arrives deplorably behind schedule," Lucius announced, as I caught my first glimpse of the last, late-arriving guest, "I ask you all to welcome my one and only brother!"

Chapter 6 Brother?

For a split second the word caught me completely off guard, and I had this flash of betrayal, certain that Lucius had kept something important – a huge secret – from me. He didn't have a brother...

I was stunned, too, by our new guest's appearance as he sauntered into our midst, making a beeline for Lucius.

The rest of us were in formal attire. Even Dad, who usually wore decrepit T-shirts that advocated for causes no one had even thought about in ten years, was in a suit. But the guy who was strolling the length of the room, grinning like he didn't realize he was making a scene, had on a pair of grubby board shorts and a yellow T-shirt that advertised a Venice Beach surf shop. A shirt that looked worse than most of Dad's...

As he passed by the table, the candlelight reflected off glossy, long brown hair that was cinched into a loose ponytail with what looked like an old leather shoelace. Hair that was maybe too glossy, like it needed a wash.

I noticed a familiar sound as he walked, and glanced down at his feet, where I discovered a pair of black, rubber...
Flip flops?

I rose from my seat, uncertainly, and turned to Lucius, wanting some sort of explanation and – even in my shock – half expecting my impeccably mannered vampire prince to be very displeased. If this really was his brother, the late arrival... the sloppy clothes... they were disrespectful.
But when I saw Lucius's face, I realized that he didn't seem angry.

On the contrary, he was also grinning from ear-to-ear, setting down his glass and pushing aside his chair in order to step toward the newcomer.

What the...?

I looked to my parents and Mindy, who also seemed confused, and was embarrassed to be able to do nothing more than offer them a baffled shrug, myself.

Still standing, awkwardly, I spun back to Lucius just in time to see him extend a handshake to the guy he'd called brother, who in turn clasped my future husband's hand before pulling him into the same kind of masculine, back-slapping embrace that Lucius had just shared with my dad.

It wasn't until Lucius grabbed the stranger by the shoulders and spun him to face us – so I could see they shared nearly identical smiles, the gleaming white teeth of Vladescu nobility – that I realized who this person really was. It was almost like I was thinking the words that Lucius spoke as he announced, still smiling, "This surf bum who dares to join us – late – and in such inappropriate attire is, I am almost ashamed to admit, my best man."

I sank back down onto my seat, still not quite believing my eyes.

This... this... was the legendary Raniero Vladescu Lovatu?

Chapter 7

"So..." Mindy drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs, probably trying to keep warm in my bedroom, which was chilly even in late summer.

"What's up with that Raniero guy? He was a surprise, huh?"

I finished buttoning up my pajamas and crawled onto the mattress with her. Our last "slumber party," before I started sleeping every night with someone different. And not just sleeping...

"Raniero's not what I expected," I admitted, trying to distract myself from thoughts of my wedding night, which suddenly loomed large in my mind again. Lucius was... experienced. I wasn't. Would that matter to him? Would it show – in a bad way?

I'd hinted at being worried one evening, when Lucius and I had been alone in his study, kissing – Lucius obviously struggling with a desire to do more, in spite of our decision to wait until after our wedding for that, too. I'd been unable to stop questioning if I knew what I was doing, even just kissing, and I'd sort of sheepishly apologized for my inexperience. Lucius had drawn back, a strange look in his eyes and a half smile on his lips as he'd said, "I don't think I could allow another man who'd touched you to continue walking this earth. The only reason Zinn survives is the debt that I owe him." He'd smiled a little more broadly, joking, "Your inexperience saves lives, Antanasia."

At least, he'd been kind of joking, because I knew that Lucius really didn't like the idea of me being with anyone else any more than I liked thinking of him with the "Bucharest debutantes" who lurked in his past – or with Faith Crosse. Especially with Faith, who was so awful and who had no doubt boasted lots of experience...

"You were starting to say something about Raniero?" Mindy prompted, rattling my knee and thankfully ending my train of thought. "Earth to Jess!"

I actually shook my head, dislodging pictures that I didn't want to conjure up in my imagination – or recall from memory. "I only know that Raniero is Lucius's cousin," I told Min, forcing the image of Lucius and Faith, tangled up together on the bed in the garage apartment, out of my mind. "But Lucius considers Raniero a brother, because he often lived at the Vladescu estate when they were growing up. They were raised almost like brothers."

"Doesn't Raniero have parents, either?" Mindy asked. "Why'd he live with Lukey so much?"

I smiled at Mindy's use of a nickname that I hadn't heard in a long time. "Raniero does have parents – in Italy," I explained, trying to recall everything that Lucius had told me about his best man. "But the Elders thought it would be wise to educate him with Lucius."

Mindy tilted her head, seeming confused, maybe because we'd grown up in a culture where "heirs to the throne" weren't such a big deal. "Why?" she asked.

"Since Lucius really is an only child, the Elders thought it would make sense to prepare another young Vladescu vampire to step in – just in case something should

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happen..."

I somehow couldn't bring myself to finish that sentence. Not on the eve of my wedding, when I was supposed to be planning for a long, happy future with Lucius. I couldn't think about the possibility of something awful happening to him...

"Anyway, the Elders thought Raniero showed promise, and could be raised to serve as Lucius's right hand man - almost like a general," I added. "A second-in-command, since there's no pure-blooded Vladescu brother."

"So what went wrong?" Mindy asked, grabbing a pillow and hugging that to her chest, too. "Because Raniero doesn't look like he could lead a limbo contest at whatever beach he washed up on - let alone take charge of an army or a nation!"

I shrugged. "Lucius hasn't revealed much more about him. Only that he abruptly moved to California a few years ago, putting distance between himself and the clan leaders."

I wondered, suddenly, if Raniero had ever endured time in those dungeon rooms I'd seen. Or was that type of "education" reserved for genuine princes-in-training? Because if Raniero did bear some of the same scars Lucius did - if he'd been taken into those dark chambers to be "educated" to within an inch of his life, until his flesh had torn and his bones had broken - I could imagine why he'd gone to live on a beach in the sunshine.

"He and Lucius are obviously still close, though," I added, dismissing more awful thoughts. Memories, now, of the way Lucius's uncles had thrashed him when they'd come to Pennsylvania, and how that had changed him, taken him to a dark place...

"Well, Lucius and Raniero sure are different," Mindy noted, rolling her eyes.

"Lucius is totally royal, and Raniero is, like, a slacker!"

Although my thoughts had just been trapped in a dismal dungeon, I couldn't help laughing at the idea of a slacker vampire - especially a Vladescu slacker. "We only saw him for a few hours," I reminded her. "Maybe he was just having a rough day!"

"Or a rough year," Mindy said. "That guy needs a haircut - or at least a shower!"

"Mindy!" I started to protest, wanting to defend Lucius's best friend. But I found that I couldn't do it. Raniero Vladescu Lovatu had seemed a little... scruffy. He'd slurped down his soup like a starving barbarian, slouched in his chair, and actually summoned a servant by waving his hand and calling out, in his Italian accent with a California surfer twist, "Dude - more lentils, prego."

I'd kept looking to Lucius, expecting him to cringe or maybe even suggest that Raniero watch his manners, but I'd seen nothing more than indulgent amusement in my fiancée's eyes.

Who, exactly, was this guy Lucius called "brother?" And did he have any interest in the power he'd also been raised to perhaps one day wield? Were those flip flops just a disguise...?

"I guess we'll see if he cleans up for the wedding, huh?" I said, laughing off my own suspicions about Lucius's closest friend. "I can't imagine that Lucius would let his best man - even a guy he considers a brother - wear board shorts at the ceremony!"

Mindy hugged her pillow tighter and frowned. "Unless somebody does a real extreme makeover on that guy between now and tomorrow, I'm not getting my hopes up."

"Hopes?" I asked, not sure why Mindy cared about Raniero at all. I mean, it was my wedding. If Lucius's best man looked like he'd just rolled in with the tide, that was my problem.

"Well, I'm the one who has to spend the whole wedding with him, right?" she reminded me. "And I at least have to dance with him, don't I?"

I realized, then, that as maid of honor, Mindy probably considered Raniero her date for the evening. And maybe, just maybe, she'd hoped that the guy she'd be paired with might be... better. Or, given her old crush on "Lukey," a little bit like the groom, himself, even. "Oh, Mindy..."

I wanted to tell her that I was both sorry that Lucius's best man was a disappointment - and that she really wouldn't want to even think about getting involved with any vampire. I was born to marry Lucius - wanted nothing less than the life we'd share - and yet I wouldn't necessarily recommend blood, eternity, and being considered frighteningly different as a lifestyle for any of my friends. Vampire boyfriends or flings, even - they weren't always a great idea. My fingers dug into the blankets on my bed as I thought once more, with a mixture of jealousy and anger, about Faith Crosse. No, a flirtation with a vampire could be dangerous for everyone involved...

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Before I could advise Mindy that she was probably lucky that Raniero wasn't her type, though, we were interrupted by a knock on the door, and my mom poking her head in to ask, "Mindy? Would you mind if I spoke to Jessica alone for a minute? I have something to give her."
I started to tell Mom that Mindy could probably stay. After all, we were practically sisters, as surely as Lucius and Raniero were brothers. But then I saw the look on Mom's face, and I turned to Mindy, telling her, "I think you'd better go, okay?"
Because the expression on my mother's face... I hadn't seen her look like that in all the years she'd raised me.

Chapter 8

Mindy had sensed my mother's mood, too, and she was already crawling off the bed, agreeing, "Sure, Dr. Packwood. I should go to my room anyhow. Tomorrow's a big day!"

When Mindy offered that reminder, my heart seized up with anticipation – and fear again. I'd managed to distract myself from thoughts of the wedding for a few minutes, but in just hours I'd don my dress, and a servant would arrive with the things I'd need for the private act I would perform first...

Would I have the courage...?

"It's gonna be wonderful," Mindy reassured me, no doubt seeing the blood draining from my face. "I mean, you're getting married! To Lucius!"

Yes... I was... It was really happening...

Then she leaned in to give me a quick hug, said her goodnights, and left me and Mom alone.

I climbed off the bed, too, and walked toward my mother, curious about that look on her face – and the object that she held in her hands. "What is that?" I asked.

"What's going on?"

Mom smiled with her mouth – but that didn't quite erase the sad, almost solemn, look in her eyes as she said, "I have an early wedding gift for you. Something I want you to have tonight."

I looked again at the item she carried, thinking that the present was as strange as my mom's mood. Unlike most wedding gifts, this one wasn't wrapped in pretty paper. Rather, the package that Mom cradled, with obvious care, was covered by a plain white cloth, which she started to unwind, almost like a bandage.

"This is a special gift from both myself – and your birth mother," Mom revealed, her fingers trembling a little as she continued to unwind the fabric.

I'd never seen Dara Packwood – always so strong and confident – ever really shake before, and that shook me. I drew a little closer to her. "Mom...?"

"I promised Mihaela that I would give this to you on the eve of your wedding – if you married Lucius," she said. "Keep it safe, as Mihaela did, and then me, on your behalf. Because this, in turn, may keep you safe."

She looked up from unwinding the cloth, and I saw that odd expression in her eyes again, and I understood, somehow, that Mom was, in that moment, giving me away. The ceremony tomorrow would be a formality to her. This act, to her – whatever she was giving me – it symbolized the completion of her pledge to raise me as her own – but for Lucius and for the family that I was returning to.

"Mom..." I felt the tears starting to form in my eyes. I wasn't ready... I didn't want to leave her...

But of course Mom knew that I was ready, and that I had to leave her, and she held out the present, pressing it into my hands.

"You're going to be a wonderful ruler – and a wonderful wife," she promised. "You are two incredibly special people, and you share a very powerful love. I knew that, even before you both did."

Lucius and I... apparently we'd been the last to know...

Then, before I could really even see what she'd given me – maybe because of the tears I was still fighting back, Mom hugged me and whispered, "I'm proud that you're my daughter. That Mihaela chose me to be your mother, too."

"You'll always be my mom," I said, hating that it sounded like we were saying good-bye.

"I know, Jessica... Antanasia," she corrected herself. "And you will always have a home in Pennsylvania. But I also know that from the moment you take your vows

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tomorrow, your life will be centered here – and that it always will be, long, long after your father and I are gone...”

For the first time that I could remember, Dr. Dara Packwood seemed unable to come to grips with a concept – eternity, as it related to me – and we both fell silent, just holding each other.

“I love you, Jessica,” she said, deciding to use my old name... maybe for one last time.

“I love you, too, Mom,” I said, as my tears really started to flow, soaking her shoulder.

After a few moments Mom pulled back, steadied my shoulder with one hand, and used the other to wipe the tears from my cheeks, like she used to do when I was little, and we both tried to smile again.

“You’ll help me get ready tomorrow, right?” I asked. I wasn’t sure that I could do that one frightening act of preparation without her by my side...

“Of course,” she promised. “Of course!”

I felt relieved, because I’d almost been afraid that we really were separating from one another. And yet I couldn’t shake the feeling that something had forever shifted between us.

I wanted Mom to stay a little longer, but she left me then. And when the door closed behind her, I dared to look at the gift in my hands, and I thought it was appropriate that it had come wrapped in a cloth like a bandage, because it seemed like my heart cracked and bled, just to hold something so precious.

My hands actually started to shake, too, and I wasn’t sure whether I was calling to Dara or Mihaela – or maybe both – as I said, softly, “Oh, Mom...”

Chapter 9

“... trust your instincts – and distrust anyone who makes you the slightest bit wary... even among your closest ‘friends.’”

“... Vladescus are strong willed – but a Dragomir princess never cowers...”

“I will always be a part of you, Antanasia...”

I closed the black, leather-bound notebook and sank down onto my bed, not even sure how I’d gotten back across the room, because I’d been so absorbed in reading my birth mother’s cramped but careful script. It seemed as though she’d tried to fill every single inch of the tiny booklet – small enough to be carried in a pocket, or maybe hidden in a fugitive child’s blankets – with all of her collected wisdom. Everything that she’d obviously thought I would need to know to be a ruler of not one, but two, clans. And to be a wife.

I stroked the cover with my fingertips, tracing the pebbled leather, overwhelmed by how much she must have loved me to have left me such a legacy.

Lucius had given me the manual for becoming a vampire; Mihaela Dragomir had bestowed upon me the guide to surviving as one.

I closed my eyes for a moment, bowing my head in a gesture of gratitude and respect and love for her, too.

Thank you, Mihaela, for protecting me, even as it was clear that you saw your own destruction looming...

Although I’d only skimmed the book, knowing that I would read everything more carefully – come to live by her words in the months and

years to follow – I’d seen how her messages had become more clipped and concise and her handwriting more jagged as the pages ran out, as if she’d known that the time for recording her thoughts was running low, too...

Shivering, suddenly realizing that the room had grown colder while I’d stood reading, I slipped between my blankets and tucked the little volume under my pillow, like maybe I could absorb her wisdom in my sleep. I also wanted to keep the notebook right with me. Even my nightstand seemed too far away for something so valuable – at least to me.

Resting my head on my soft, down pillow, I closed my eyes, already feeling warmer, not just from the blankets, but because it felt like I had a new ally in this still unfamiliar world that I was joining. Someone wise, who had already experienced the things that I faced, and who could help me.

I understood, too, why my adoptive mom had felt so strongly that she was handing me

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over to start a new life, with new counsel, because Mihaela's words would no doubt serve as my primary guidance from now on. But I knew that I would always need Mom, too, and that I would also turn to her for as long as I could. Although the gift, and the evening, were bittersweet, I started to smile, remembering a specific passage that I'd noted as I'd paged quickly along. "... hope that you come to love him..."
I knew that Mihaela referred, of course, to Lucius - whom I would marry the very next day. Whom I did love, with such intensity that it was almost frightening, and yet wonderful - amazing - too.
Lucius... How could I have ever not wanted YOU?
I started trying to picture our wedding, but maybe because I still wasn't sure where it would be held, I had trouble imagining it, and like often happened since the evening when Lucius had proposed to me, I found myself remembering that, reliving the whole thing in my mind. And although I'd been sure that I wouldn't sleep for one second on the night before we got married, before long I was drifting into my favorite dream, which always started with Lucius taking my hand and leading me down a secret path that only a handful of vampires - and two very special humans - even knew existed.
"Come with me, Antanasia," he invites, fingers strong and cool around my hand. "It's time that I show you a place that is not just special, but sacred..."

Chapter 10

The path is steep, carving sharply up the mountainside, taking us higher than I've been in the Carpathians yet, and I cling tightly to Lucius's hand, getting short of breath even though we're walking slowly. The terrain is rockier here, and the trees have thinned out. The air, itself, is thinner, making the climb even more difficult.

Even Lucius, who is fit and who was raised in these mountains, seems to breathe a little harder. It's getting dark and we aren't speaking, too busy concentrating on our footing, and in the silence I can hear him inhaling, exhaling in steady rhythm at my side.

And then the quiet of that lonely spot is broken by the sound of someone - something - close by, but hidden from sight. Foot steps, moving quickly in the opposite direction, slipping and sliding down the mountain so rocks are dislodged and tumble toward the valley below.

Who or whatever has passed us sounds big - or maybe there is more than one of them...

I crush Lucius's fingers with mine, pulling us both to a stop, and ask in a whisper, with barely concealed alarm, "Lucius? It's getting late..." I peer into the distance, looking for forms or shadows in the direction of that ominous rustling.

"Do you think maybe we should come back tomorrow?"

I know that I don't need to remind him that there are bears and wolves - and people who destroy vampires - in these mountains. I'm sure that he'll understand why I'm getting nervous.

The sound of footsteps grows fainter, carried away by a rising wind, but I'm not reassured - until Lucius, who has been a half-step ahead, guiding us on a path I've completely lost track of, turns and asks softly, "Would I let any harm come to you, Antanasia? Allow you even to stumble?"

It's a question that I know will probably always be with us, given how our commitment to one another began - and nearly ended. Given who Lucius IS.

Although I know in my heart that the answer will always be no - that he'd never let me come to any harm - I'm also sure that we'll never forget, either, what could have happened that night when Lucius took me as the first prisoner in a war on my family.

That moment when the stake - the missing stake - rolled toward the fire... That will always be with us.

Sometimes I think Lucius questions my trust in him more to reassure himself that I really do believe in his love than to reassure me that I have nothing to fear when I'm with him...

As I try to meet his black eyes in the gathering darkness, the wind rushes down the valley again, crashing into us, and I almost do lose my footing on the steep grade, and of course he is there to steady me, clasping my arm with his free hand.

I get my balance, but we stand there for a second face-to-face, and I forget about my fears, because I so desperately want him to kiss me, right then and there. Whenever we're close like this, and alone, and I can smell his skin, feel his hands on me, I want to feel lips against mine, too...

But Lucius has other plans - a destination in mind.

"Come along," he says, smiling like he knows that his question about trust has been answered - probably by the look in my eyes, which are lighter than his, and no doubt easily read by the glow of the rising moon. I am sure that he could see what I was thinking, and although we often tell each other how we feel, I sometimes still get a little embarrassed about how nakedly apparent my love for him must be, in my eyes. It still seems strange to me, to be so exposed like that, when Lucius - trained since birth to be closed off, invulnerable - is sometimes difficult to read, even for me.

We start to walk again, Lucius slowing his pace even more, because the terrain is getting trickier and the air is getting very thin for lungs like mine, used to life near sea level in southern Pennsylvania.

My eyes are trained downward, because I don't want to rely entirely on Lucius to keep me safe from falling, and the ground rises ahead of me as we pick our way through the massive rock outcroppings that I've come to know as defining the Carpathians.

I'm so focused on the earth at my feet that I lose track of everything around me, including time, and I'm surprised when Lucius suddenly halts and squeezes my hand harder, signaling that I should stop walking and raise my face to look ahead.

And when I do, I am confronted by... nothing.

Chapter 11

Although he hasn't revealed our destination, I've known from the start of our adventure where Lucius is taking me. And yet the utter blackness before me - the tall, narrow hole like a slit into the side of the mountain, a perhaps bottomless wound - makes me pull back a little.

Lucius doesn't hesitate, though. Without a word, he steps inside first, and because our hands are linked - and because I want to follow - I allow him to guide me into the constricted passage, so small that Lucius has to walk ahead, slightly bent, his arm stretched behind himself to reach me. We move at a snail's pace, feeling our way along, because there's no hope of our eyes adjusting in such a complete, subterranean void.

I want to ask him why we couldn't have brought a flashlight or a candle, even, but something tells me not to talk.

I'm scared... scared of being in a tight space underground, in darkness that almost certainly harbors creatures that would make my skin crawl if I were to see them in the light of day. And I have irrational fears, too, like that the ground might drop away just ahead of us and our next step send us tumbling into empty space. But I'm also excited, and know that Lucius is familiar with the path.

As if on cue, he bends lower and turns – not easy in the cramped space – and places his free hand gently on my head, protecting it as he guides me past a turn where the rock juts down from above. “Careful here,” he whispers. “The rock is sharp.” Yes, it’s quite obvious that Lucius has been here many times...

As I round the bend in passageway, my back still bent, too, I see in the distance a faint glow, and my anticipation grows – along with a new confusion.

The light – it flickers like flame.
Is someone else already here?

Are we meeting someone?

If Lucius is surprised, he doesn’t voice it. He just continues to draw us down the gently curving corridor and toward that light, and my eyes finally begin to pick out details around us. The passageway is actually very dry and smooth, not as scary as I’d thought in the dark. The walls appear almost cared for. I glance down and see that the dirt floor seems swept clean, too, so there’s nothing to stumble over. And the air, though musty, smells like spice... maybe some kind of incense. I take a deep breath, thinking the smell is vaguely reminiscent of the unusual cologne that I first began to associate with Lucius back in America.

I walk close on his heels, venturing to draw the fingertips of my free hand along the wall at my side, wondering if Lucius chose that cologne because it reminded him of this spot.

The light grows stronger and my heart begins to pound. I am about to see what is probably – no, definitely – the most significant place in my life...

The ceiling rises higher and the walls widen as we get closer, so even Lucius can stand upright, and at the last moment – just as we pass beneath a crude wooden support that separates the passage from the chamber that lies at the end, he draws me to his side and then steps aside, allowing me to walk through first, and telling me, voice hushed with reverence, “This, Antanasia, is where our parents promised us to one another.”

As I step into that hidden cavern, lit by a small row of simple candles arranged on a wooden table, almost like an altar... That honestly is the first time it really strikes me that I have been here before. That the infant I sometimes picture being offered up at a subterranean betrothal ceremony was actually ME.

That child... She always seemed like a stranger... No more real than a doll...

But of course that baby was... me. Flesh and blood. My eyes have witnessed all of this before. Perhaps I was placed on that table...

And Lucius...

I turn slowly to face him, and see that he looks both happy and suitably solemn as – clearly understanding what is running through my mind – he says, “Yes, Antanasia... This – THIS place – is where you and I REALLY first met.”

He stays near the entrance, giving me time to take everything in. Both to look with my eyes and feel all of the emotions that course through me as I stand in a place that is, as Lucius promised, sacred to the vampire clans.

The cave is not large, but like the passage, it is clean and obviously maintained. Along with the table, there are wooden benches, crude like the support at the entrance and arranged in rows, almost like a classroom or a church.

“This is where our ancestors made all of their most important decisions,” Lucius explains, obviously seeing how my gaze lingers on the seats. “The Elders and senior

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vampires would gather here to debate. Still do gather, for the most crucial, clandestine meetings."

I look to him and see that his gaze is traveling around the space, as if he's seeing it anew, too.

"And they sought refuge here, too, right?" I ask. "When vampires were being purged..." A chill runs through me – and not because the cave is cool. Our parents were destroyed in the last purge. Will there be others...?

"Yes," Lucius confirms, stepping into the chamber, lacing his hands behind his back and pacing, head bent, the way that he always does when he grows pensive, thoughtful. "This has always been a safe haven. Its location is highly guarded." He raises his eyes to meet mine and adds, "Destruction awaits the vampire who reveals THIS spot to a human. That is the penalty, with no hope of clemency. No mercy."

I watch Lucius coolly stating this fact, and although I know that he is prepared to rule, I am a little bit in awe – and slightly unnerved – to think that the vampire who kisses me so tenderly, and who just protected my head with a gentle hand, wouldn't hesitate to carry out that kind of justice.

Uncertainty grips me. Will I, as a princess, be responsible for handing down such a sentence? Am I responsible for doing it NOW, if a Dragomir breaks the code of secrecy?

I stare hard into Lucius's eyes. Has he already served as judge, issued a sentence like that?

I start to ask him – but change my mind. Maybe I don't want to know... not right then. So I ask another question that is bothering me. "If this is a safe haven, why didn't our parents...?"

But Lucius is already shaking his head. "Rulers do not 'hide,' Antanasia," he reminds me. "Especially not leaders such as our parents were. Such as WE will be. Kings and queens do not cower in caves, even to save their lives."

I swallow thickly, a queer feeling in the pit of my stomach, and not just because I doubt my courage in the face of destruction. Lucius has also just elevated us to "king and queen." But he and I are barely a prince and princess. At least, I am barely a princess. And to rise up to be queen – that only happens if we... if Lucius and I... ever marry and have a CHILD. An heir to the throne, who would complete the last part of the pact uniting our clans...

I watch the handsome, powerful vampire who stands before me, not sure if that feeling in my stomach is pure excitement, because I do want that future with him, or if I am experiencing a twinge of anxiety, too...

"Don't look so alarmed, Antanasia," he says, mouth curving into a smile as he steps closer to me. He takes my hands in his and bends to rest his forehead against mine, his fingers caressing mine. "All that in due time, yes?" he asks quietly, obviously guessing at what I'm thinking. "I didn't mean to frighten you!"

As we stand together in the quiet cave, in the circle of candlelight, the concern that I did feel vanishes. I would accept any future – mete out harsh justice, face destruction... anything – just to stand like this with Lucius for a few moments, even. "I'm not scared," I promise him.

"Are you sure?" he asks, clasping my hands together and pressing them against his chest, so I can feel his heartbeat.

After a few seconds, I realize that Lucius's heart beats a little more quickly than usual. Just slightly faster and harder than its familiar slow, almost imperceptible pace, and I raise my face to his, wondering what could cause Lucius Vladescu's

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heart to speed up its rhythm.

I see, then, that there's something different in his eyes, too. A flicker that tells me something is happening. Something more than just Lucius showing me the cave where generations of Romanian vampires have come to seal pacts and forge treaties and sometimes hide from persecution by humans.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of the candles flickering, too, and I have my second revelation of the evening.

Not only have I really been here before, but Lucius has prepared this spot for us this night.

The footsteps scrambling down the mountain... That was almost certainly one of his two trusted guards, returning after completing the task of readying the cave for our arrival...

And the fact that we've made this journey in the dark, when it would have been so much easier in daylight...

I study Lucius's black eyes, wishing more than ever that I could read his thoughts as well as he seems able to read mine, still feeling his heart beat in its new rhythm, and asking him, "Lucius... Why are we really here tonight?"

And his answer... It isn't what I expect at all

Chapter 12

Lucius withdraws from me, just a step, but continues to hold both of my hands in his, and his eyes are boring into mine, and gradually... I see them change again.

For the first time, I see in his complicated, often guarded eyes, the same naked need for me that I am always showing him, and I know that the last wall is breaking down between us. Lucius has told me, many times, that he loves me. And I've seen that love in his eyes. But never like this. He is purposely revealing himself to me – exposing his soul in a way that I know is difficult for him – and I can't stop watching his eyes, wanting to always remember this moment, that expression.

"I've brought you here this evening to ask you to marry me, Antanasia," Lucius finally says, just as I start to feel like I'm tumbling into those eyes, like I'd feared falling into a hidden abyss as we'd come to this place. But with those words – those impossible words – everything stops.

Time, itself, seems to crash to a halt.

"Lucius..." I murmur his name, not believing that the moment is real. Marriage to Lucius – both avoiding it and desperately desiring it – is practically all that I've thought about since meeting him and learning of the pact. And yet I'm still unable to believe my ears, and I keep searching the endless, dark depths of his eyes, wanting reassurance that I'm not dreaming. "Lucius...?"

He squeezes my hands more tightly, pressing them harder to his chest. "I want to ask you – in this place where we were promised to one another by mandate – to marry me not because doing so is required of you, but because you love me as I love you," he says. "I ask you to choose me of your own free will, because that is how I choose YOU, Antanasia. Not to fulfill a pact, but to follow my heart, which will settle for nothing less than a life with you by my side."

I want to scream, "Yes!" Want to cry out and hurl myself into his arms. But my feet seem rooted in place, and my tongue is locked in my mouth. I can't do anything but

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meet his eyes, certain that he already sees the answer in mine.

And then –standing before me as an equal, which seems right for Lucius and me – better than having him drop down on bended knee – he poses the question I’ve wanted to hear... maybe since the day I first saw him.

“Antanasia, will you marry me?” He releases one of my hands to stroke my cheek, push my curls away from my face, and his voice is softer, even more tender, as he asks again, almost in a whisper, “Will you, Antanasia? Will you be my wife?”

That naked vulnerability that I’d seen in Lucius’s eyes is echoed in his voice, and it is that sweetness – that unguarded, hopeful request for my promise to always be with him – that finally allows me speak. Because I know that this is the closest that Lucius will ever come to pleading for anything in his entire existence, and he is doing it for me. To show me how much he wants me, too...

“Yes, Lucius!” I cry. At least, I think I cry out. But in truth, my voice is soft, almost choked. “Yes!” I repeat, pulling my hands from his and twining my arms around his neck. I stand on tiptoes to reach him, to whisper in his ear, because I want to tell him, again and again. “Yes, yes, yes...”

He clasps me to himself, whispering in my ear, too. “Thank you, Antanasia... Thank you for loving me...”

We hold each other for a long time as reality sets in. We are getting married, not to fulfill a treaty but because we can’t live without each other...

Then Lucius slips one hand up into my hair and I shift in his arms to see his face again just before he bends to meet my lips with his, kissing me softly. We kiss like that again and again – just gently. It’s like we both recognize this moment as deserving of reverence, just like the space in which it takes place. When Lucius’s rough lips meet my soft ones, with such care, it’s almost as if he’s promising me, “This is how I’ll always care for you...”

And somehow, while we are still kissing, Lucius takes my left hand into his hands and slips a ring onto my finger. I never even notice him reaching into his pocket, have no idea how long he’s held it in his palm.

I know that most girls would probably squeal and pull back, wanting to see the diamond, but I never even open my eyes. I just slip my arms back up around his neck, not caring what the ring looks like. I would be happy with nothing... nothing more than what we are sharing right then...

“Antanasia.”

The voice intruded on my dream, and I rolled sideways, shutting it out, not wanting to leave Lucius – and everything I was reliving – behind. But the voice – Mom’s voice – interrupted again, and I felt pressure on my shoulder as she shook me.

“Antanasia!”

“Mom,” I groaned, wanting five more minutes of the dream. “Please...”

But my mother shook me harder, and as I reluctantly opened my eyes, I heard her laughing at me.

I blinked about three times, because sunlight was streaming into my room – and glinting off the huge, sparkling diamond that always adorned my left hand now. A Vladescu family heirloom, which had been removed and hidden by Lucius’s mother, Reveka, as she’d faced her destruction. A vintage treasure that she’d wanted her only son to give to me.

Then I looked to Mom, who seemed happy again, and maybe a little surprised to hear herself say words that kind of shocked me, too, even though I’d been planning, anticipating – and occasionally worrying about – nothing but this day for weeks.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” she urged with a smile. “You’re getting married today!”

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Chapter 13

I kept my back to the full-length mirror as I stepped into my wedding gown.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to surprise myself when I saw the full effect of the dress and the makeup that Mindy had done for me, and the intricate updo with the delicate tiara sparkling against my shiny, dark curls – or if I was afraid to look at my reflection and realize that the gown... that I... wasn't as beautiful as I'd hoped.

"Are you sure you don't want help?" Mindy called through the door that linked the two rooms of the suite that Lucius had provided for my wedding preparations at the Vladescu estate. "I am your maid of honor!"

"No, it's okay," I told her. "I'll be right out."

I wanted to be alone when I first saw myself as Lucius would see me...

Pulling the heavy, white silk up around my body – over my curves – I pressed the dress against my stomach with my left hand, holding it in place while I reached around to pull up the hidden zipper, as far as I could.

When my hand stopped, unable to go farther, I started to smile, remembering how Lucius had once surprised me by zipping up a similar dress for me, back in a Lancaster County shop.

Tonight, Mindy or Mom would help me, but in the future, sealing those last few inches would always be Lucius's job. I'd feel his cool fingers graze the skin along my spine, the way they'd done that first time. Only I wouldn't try to fight the tingle that I experienced, like I'd done back then...

"Jess, we're dying out here!" Mindy called, sounding eager and impatient. "Hurry up!"

"I'm hurrying," I promised, smiling at Mindy's enthusiasm, too.

But I still took a moment to smooth the fabric, feeling the softness of the silk and the roughness of the lace and beading – a sharp contrast that reminded me so much of Lucius, himself – before finally turning to look into the mirror.

And the person I saw reflected there...

Wow...

Chapter 14

"Wow..." Mindy spoke my thought aloud, practically skidding to a stop after bursting through the door. She paused, just staring, then drew closer, walking slower, like she was in awe of the dress. Or maybe she was in awe of me. Maybe, for the first time, she really saw me as a princess – because I felt like one. Stood like one.

"Wow," she repeated, coming up next to me, so we both watched my reflection in the mirror.

Mom joined us, too, stepping up behind me and placing her hands on my bare shoulders. I saw that she, too, thought I looked beautiful. Different. "You are going to take Lucius's breath away," she promised.

I didn't say anything, because I didn't want to sound vain. How could I explain that I knew I wasn't a "pretty" girl – but that in that moment, I felt like the most beautiful woman on the face of the earth?

The top of the dress fit me like a glove, accentuating the curves that Lucius had helped me to embrace, before sweeping away into a full, snow-white train. But the bodice wasn't pure white, like a traditional gown. It was overlaid with black silk so delicate, so gossamer, that it created an effect like a lovely, soft, dove-gray mist swirling around me.

That detail, alone, might have been enough to make my wedding dress unconventional. But I had wanted more than just a different gown. I had wanted a dress that spoke to who I'd been in the past – that virginal girl – and also the woman, the ruler, whom I knew I was becoming. And so I'd instructed the tailor to add a cascade of black, hand-beaded, lace flowers and leaves, twining like a wild vine across my body. A dark, dramatic touch that symbolized, to me, what Lucius called the "dark side of nature," which I had joined when he had first made me a vampire, and which I was destined to rule with him...

In the mirror, I met my own eyes – dark and dramatic, too, thanks to Mindy – and I believed that my mom might just be right. I really might take Lucius's breath away, as I'd hoped.

The mirror also reflected a window across the room, and I noticed that the light

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was fading outside. Vampires might already be gathering in whatever secret place Lucius had chosen for the ceremony. And I was almost ready, save for one thing... All at once, the silence that had fallen over the room was interrupted by a knock on the door that led to the hallway, and, forgetting my dress for a moment – forgetting that Mom and Mindy were there to do things like open doors for the bride – I hurried to answer the summons.

Swinging open the door, I found the person whom I'd anticipated – dreaded, in a way – waiting for me. Throat suddenly tight, I nodded for him to enter, knowing that the servant wouldn't really need any instruction.

And as I'd expected, he walked directly, wordlessly, to a small table and set down the silver tray that he carried.

Then, still without saying a word, he retreated to wait outside while I performed the first ritual of my wedding. The one that frightened me most.

Chapter 15

I stood before the table, studying the objects on the tray, not quite ready to touch them. There was a small, silver, lidded cup, embellished with a deeply etched pattern of vines that had darkened over generations, the tarnish so black that obviously even careful polishing couldn't remove it. The pattern was reminiscent of the lace vine that twined across my gown, making me even more glad that I had chosen that detail. It seemed like, as I'd designed my dress, I had somehow connected to my mother, and her mother, and all of the Dragomir women who had used this vessel before me, over the course of hundreds of years.

And my ancestors had also used the silver knife that was placed next to the cup. And the spoon that held the pinch of pungent herbs, and the strips of bleached, cotton cloth folded

Mom placed her hands on my shoulders again. I hadn't even realized that she – and Mindy – had joined me at the table. I twisted a little to see her face. "Mom...?"

I wasn't sure what I wanted to ask, though. I knew what I had to do.

Mom gave me a reassuring smile, and I drew some strength from how calm she looked.

"You're going to be fine," she promised. Then she turned me so we were facing each other and pulled me to herself, squeezing me tightly. "I'm going to join the other guests now," she said, stepping back, but taking my hands into hers, keeping us connected.

"Mom!" I objected, clutching at her fingers. "Don't go yet!"

I wanted her to help me...

But Mom shook her head. "No, Antanasia. It's time for me to go."

I knew my mother well enough to understand that she had deliberately chosen this moment to leave – and purposely used my new name. She was reminding me that I was an adult now. My wedding was starting, and I would have a lot of difficult things to face in the future, without her to help me. It was time for me to start facing them...

"I know that it's hard, but try not to be scared," Mom added one last piece of advice. "You want to savor every moment of this night. It's not about getting everything right – it's about you and Lucius promising yourselves to each other. That's all that matters."

I took a deep breath, then agreed, "I know."

"I love you," she said, hugging me one more time.

"I love you, too," I said softly.

Then Mom left Mindy and me without another word, because we'd said all the important things the night before.

When the door closed behind her, Mindy looked to me with wide, nervous eyes, like she wished that calm, competent Dr. Dara Packwood was still with us, too. "Um... what do I do, Jess?" she asked, eyes darting to look at the tray. "Do I... help you?"

I shook my head. "No. Just stay in the room in case something goes wrong."

My maid of honor got a little pale, but she nodded. "Okay."

Then Mindy, seeming to sense that I needed some space – a little privacy – retreated a few steps back, and I sat down at the table, and without giving myself any more time to hesitate, stretched my left arm across the tray and used my right hand to lift the knife.

Chapter 16

Just as I placed the blade against my wrist, though, I stopped my hand. Cutting myself was going to hurt, and if the knife went too deep, I could find myself bleeding too much. People committed suicide by slitting their wrists... I knew that I wouldn't really die that night - couldn't be destroyed that way - but I still found my fingers shaking a little as I rested the blade against a spot where a blue vein was visible just below the surface of my skin. It was one thing to have Lucius gently pierce my flesh in a moment of passion - and quite another to sit there alone, like an untrained surgeon, and draw my own blood... enough to fill a cup that suddenly seemed much larger than it had just moments before...

Behind me, Mindy shifted her feet, which caused the fabric of her simple black sheath to rustle, and I knew that I needed to hurry. It was getting late, and I didn't want to keep our guests - and especially Lucius - waiting.

Lucius...

Somewhere deep in the recesses of the Vladescu estate, wherever he was getting ready, he would be performing the same ritual as me. I knew that his hand wouldn't tremble, though. I could imagine him calmly lifting the knife, placing the blade against his flesh and drawing an almost invisible line down his arm. A line that would in seconds turn crimson as the blood began to flow out. He would turn his wrist over the cup and allow it to collect the drops...

Fingers more sure, I pressed my own knife harder against my skin, and flinched as the well-honed blade, as sharp as a real scalpel, broke through. I applied just a little more pressure, focused on that thin trace of blue vein, and heard Mindy gasp as the dark, thick blood suddenly rushed out of the wound, covering my wrist. The narrow gash hadn't hurt at first, but it started to sting, then, and I sucked in a breath and forced myself to ignore the sharp, throbbing ache.

Just do this for Lucius... The worst part is over...

Steeling myself against more pain, I drew the blade about a half inch farther down my arm, then carefully and quickly turned my wrist so the blood that was coming faster, by then, dripped in a steady rhythm into the waiting cup.

I knew that Mindy was probably horrified - maybe even a little queasy - to watch me. If I had been in her place - had never tasted blood or shared it - I would have felt the same way. But of course, I had changed, and as the nearly black liquid spilled from my vein, I couldn't stop thinking, in spite of the pain, how beautiful it was. How I wanted to share this very essence of myself with Lucius, that night and many, many times in the future...

"Jess..." Mindy's uncertain voice broke into my thoughts, and I glanced up to find that she had come close and was bending down beside me, a worried look in her eyes.

"I think that's enough," she said, looking to my arm. "I think you should stop..."

"Yes," I agreed, noting that the cup already held a few ounces. "That's enough."

I shifted and turned my arm so it lay flat on the tray, then used my other hand to lift the spoon full of herbs - willow and ginger - that would keep the blood from clotting too quickly. I stirred these into the cup, then started to reach for one of the pieces of cut cloth.

"Here..." Mindy surprised me by taking my bleeding arm in her hand and grabbing the cloth, too, before I could touch it. "Let me help, so you don't get blood on your dress..."

"Okay," I said, letting her press the material against the wound.

After about a minute, when the blood didn't seep through the fabric, Mindy carefully lifted a corner and peeked underneath. "I think it's stopped," she said. She met my eyes. "But I'll leave that piece on your arm, so we don't accidentally open the cut again, okay?"

I nodded. "Thanks." It wasn't exactly the right answer to Mindy's question, but I wanted her to know that I appreciated the calm, capable way she was dealing with a situation that most bridesmaids weren't asked to handle. And I was also grateful for the look in her eyes, which told me that I didn't repulse her.

I watched as she wound the bandage around my arm with the same care she'd used when arranging my hair, and I knew without a doubt that I'd chosen the right person to be my maid of honor. That I'd chosen the right girl to be my best friend, so many

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years before.

"Thanks," I repeated, as she tucked away the tail of the cloth, so it looked as neat as possible. When Mindy stood up, I raised my arm, thinking that the bandage, which I'd feared would spoil my appearance, was actually strangely right. It was a visible reminder that, in spite of the care that Lucius and I were taking to make our wedding perfect, and to look perfect for each other, we were still two flawed individuals who brought not only deep love but also old wounds to our marriage. Places inside of one another that we would always have to be careful with. I would always need to remember Lucius's awful childhood, and understand those times when he grew quiet and retreated into himself. And Lucius would always need to reassure me that the dark side of himself would never be unleashed on me.

I traced my fingers across the fabric, wincing again when they passed over the cut, which still stung a little. Lucius would have a nearly identical bandage, tied on by Raniero, and the same pain...

"Should I take this out?" Mindy offered, reaching for the tray.

"No, wait," I said, stopping her with a hand on her arm. "I'm not done yet."

"No?" Mindy's raised eyebrows – and the way she kind of yelped – told me that, while she was doing a great job coping with a vampire wedding, she'd seen me shed enough blood for one night.

But I had no choice, and I took the knife again, not scared this time, because I knew I could handle the sting. Then, using my left hand, I marked the palm of my right with a deep "x." Once again, the blood seeped out, and I picked up the last clean cloth, grasping it tightly in my fist to staunch the flow.

"Lucius will mark his left hand," I told Mindy, who seemed understandably confused.

"So when we hold hands at the ceremony to speak our vows, our blood will be blended, palm to palm."

"Oh, wow..." I could tell that Mindy, always a romantic, was torn between thinking that this was the most beautiful gesture ever – and believing that it was also totally wrong.

"Some vampires bear the scar for the rest of their lives," I added. "Like a wedding ring that you can never remove."

That was why I'd tried to cut my palm so deeply. I wanted that permanent reminder of the night I married Lucius. My first real scar. I knew that Lucius would definitely make his cut deep and wide. That, having endured so many scarring wounds in his past, he wouldn't even flinch to add another to his hand, to mark himself as mine.

Mindy didn't seem to know what to say to this, so I nodded to signal that it was time for her to take away the tray – and stop worrying about whether I would use the knife again. "I'm done now, if you're sure you don't mind..."

"Oh, sure," she said, putting the lid on the cup and carrying away the tray, balancing it with one hand as she opened the door.

The silent, waiting servant accepted the burden from her hands, and Mindy closed the door. As she came back across the room, she asked, "Now what?"

"We wait," I said, "for whoever will lead us to the wedding."

Once again, in spite of Mom's advice, the butterflies in my stomach started fluttering like crazy. Somewhere in the estate, our guests – vampire and human – would be assembled, and Lucius would be making his way to the ceremony, and...

Who was even coming for me?

Another servant? One of Lucius's two guards?

I didn't have long to wonder, because before Mindy could even decide whether to risk wrinkling her dress by sitting down, there was another knock on the door to the adjoining room, and I again rushed to answer it, too nervous and impatient to let my maid of honor do it.

And this time, when I opened the door to reveal the corridor, I saw that someone had been very, very busy as I'd been spilling my blood for Lucius. I also greeted, with great happiness, my escort to the ceremony.

Chapter 17

"You look beautiful," Dad said, eyes getting a little moist as he stepped into the room to greet us. But he was smiling, too. "Both of you!"

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I saw that he took note of my bandage and the cloth that I clutched in my hand, and a shadow crossed his face, dimming his smile. I knew that, having traveled to Romania with Mom when she'd studied vampire culture, he would be familiar with the marriage rituals – probably knew exactly what I'd done. And I had a feeling that, while he was always open-minded, he still didn't like seeing his own child bleed. But he didn't say a word.

Like Mom, he was letting go.

"You look pretty spiffy, yourself, Mr. Packwood," Mindy noted.

I checked out Dad's appearance, too, appraising him head to toe. When I got to the tips of his polished shoes, I raised my face to his and heard the surprise in my voice as I asked, "Dad?"

I'd expected my father to dress up for my wedding, but the tux he wore looked like something Lucius would have chosen. It rested perfectly on his shoulders and the pants broke just where they should, at the top of those gleaming shoes. He wore a bow tie, too, and not only was it tied neatly, but it looked like somebody had checked it with a level.

In short, my dad appeared pretty regal, himself.

"It is my daughter's wedding," Dad reminded me, clearly understanding my shock. "Of course I'm wearing a tuxedo!" Then he grinned and noted, "Although, I'll admit that it's a very nice tuxedo, commissioned by Lucius, who apparently has some sort of issue with rented clothes."

I started laughing as Dad added, mimicking Lucius, "I have come to understand your passion for recycling, Ned, but I must draw the line at pants. Especially at my wedding!"

"Sounds like Lukey," Mindy agreed, grinning.

I smiled, too. Yes, it did sound like Lucius...

Then Dad held out his arm for me, elbow crooked, and offered, "Shall we? Your guests – and your groom – await the princess!"

Although the gesture was also kind of teasing – a fancy flourish to go with his suit – we both got serious. In a heartbeat, all of the laughter stopped.

Mindy sensed the mood change, too, and wordlessly stepped behind me as I took Dad's arm. I waited while she gathered up my train so it wouldn't drag along the floor when we walked to the secret spot where the ceremony would be held.

It really was time...

"Dad," I said quietly, as we stepped toward the door, arm in arm. "Do you know where we're going? This castle is like a maze!" I didn't want my father to give away Lucius's surprise location – not when I'd waited so long in suspense – but I was honestly worried about getting lost.

"Oh, Lucius thought of that, too," Dad said with a twinkle in his eyes.

He reached out to open the door, and as he ushered me through, I got the full view of something I'd only glimpsed as my father had slipped into the room, maybe purposely keeping me from looking down the hallway.

"Oh, it's beautiful," I gasped, stopping short in the doorway.

Or maybe Mindy said that. Maybe we both did.

The entire corridor was lined with hundreds of flickering votive candles in small, leaded-glass holders. They were each about a footstep apart, the only light in the otherwise dark hallway. A fire-lit path for us to follow. A lovely gesture on Lucius's part...

As always seemed to happen when I was about to see Lucius, my stomach tickled with anticipation, and although I was still nervous about the ceremony, I squeezed Dad's arm, signaling that we should go, and the three of us began to follow that glowing pathway, which twisted and turned deep into the heart of the estate.

We walked for what seemed like a long time, all three of us silent, heading into parts of the quiet castle that I swore I couldn't recall seeing before. Or maybe Lucius had shown these places to me, and I couldn't remember them. Everything seemed different that night. Magical and strange and hushed.

My heart, which had slowed when I'd become fully a vampire, started beating harder with each step I took. Yet I was growing strangely calm, too.

Lucius lay at the end of this path...

The moment we'd been waiting for – born for – was about to take place...

We approached a bend in the corridor that was so sharp and narrow that for a second it looked like we were headed toward a dead end – a blank wall – and when we

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followed the turn, I felt a warm breeze on my face. Breathed in fresh air, scented with flowers. And I saw that the candles ended just a few yards away, at what looked like a curved archway cut into the stone wall.
I stole a look at Dad's face and saw that he was smiling again, like he was certain that I'd be pleased by what I was about to see, and a few moments later - when I wasn't sure if I wanted the anticipation to be finally satisfied or to stretch on and on, it was so wonderful - we reached the end of the path and Mindy released the hem of my gown, allowing it to fall to the floor.
As we stepped under the arch, I pressed my hand against my heart, forgetting that I might stain my dress with blood from my palm, and cried out, softly, "Oh, Lucius!"

Chapter 18

I gasped in wonder at the setting, because Lucius had chosen for us to marry not in some grand ballroom, but in a small, intimate courtyard - like a grotto - that was bounded by stone walls smothered beneath creeping, wild vines and twisting tendrils of moonflower, which snaked all the way up to the eaves high above us. The last bright, white blossoms of late summer were open for the night, and looked just like stars that were falling to earth around us.

The only light came from the full moon and even more candles - candles everywhere - tucked into the sills of the tall, arched windows that lined the walls, and clustered by the dozens on the stone table where the small silver cups waited, and hidden among the flowers that grew in unruly profusion throughout the garden.

The whole scene was perfect, as Lucius had promised. Although we were at the center of a castle that he maintained with an eye for order and precision, the courtyard had a chaotic beauty, kind of like love, itself. At least, it was like the love that I had for Lucius, which seemed uncontrollable. A disorderly, wild place at the center of my own heart, which had once insisted on rational order, too.

Yes, it was the garden that caused me to draw a sharp breath.

But it was the sight of Lucius, himself - not the amazing setting that he'd created for us - that compelled me to speak his name

He stood waiting for me at the end of a pathway through the foliage, before the stone table, and I'd never seen him look

so serious - so grave. But this wasn't the dark side of Lucius that sometimes came over him. No... it was like he was so happy that he couldn't even smile. I understood that expression because I was feeling the same thing. It was like a joy so deep that it could only be expressed with our eyes, seeming too profound for something as frivolous as a grin.

Although I knew that our guests were waiting, watching, I was barely aware of them sitting on rows of wooden chairs on either side of the path, and I didn't walk toward Lucius right away. We just stood in silence, completely lost in time, space - and each other. Even in the distance, in the darkness, I could tell that I had succeeded in moving him. That he would never forget how I'd looked when I'd entered the garden as his bride, just as I would never forget the sight of Lucius standing tall with his usual confidence, his broad shoulders drawn back and his hands clasped behind his back - a pose that was familiar to me.

But that night, Lucius didn't bow his head and pace. He stood perfectly still, back straight, eyes fixed on me as we shared that extraordinary, deep happiness, both of us knowing that this moment would only come once.

We might have stood like that for hours if Dad hadn't withdrawn his arm from mine and kissed my cheek. I finally broke my gaze with Lucius to turn to my father, whose eyes glistened with tears again as he told me, "I love you, Jess."

I wanted to tell Dad that I loved him, too, but my throat suddenly caught, and I had to trust that he understood what I couldn't quite manage to say.

Then he stepped aside, because the tradition was for me to walk the final few feet to my husband, alone. I didn't even carry flowers. I was supposed to approach Lucius empty-handed, to symbolize that from that night on, there would be nothing between us.

I nodded to Mindy, who stepped ahead of me and began to walk slowly down the pathway, and when she reached the end and took her place, looking back to me, the guests rose and turned, too. But I still barely noticed them, or Mindy waiting to

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the left of the stone table, or Raniero standing at Lucius's right hand. I was again transfixed by the sight of Lucius, taking in not just his eyes, but the whole of the man, the vampire, whom I was about to marry. His black hair gleamed in the moonlight, which, together with the candles, illuminated his features, too. The high cheekbones, straight nose and strong jaw that I'd first noticed back in a Pennsylvania high school, on a day and in a place that seemed lifetimes removed from this one. He wore a tuxedo as dark as his eyes, and which fit – and suited – him as perfectly as the garden fit our ceremony. The suit was understated – no tails or shiny silk lapels – but its simplicity only seemed to emphasize Lucius's self-assurance, as if he was confident enough in his own power to need nothing showy on his body. Somehow, he managed to look like the prince that he was in nothing more than an impeccably fitted dark coat, a white shirt and black tie, and a pair of black pants, narrow like those he'd worn to our pre-wedding dinner.

Lucius stood straight but at ease, like the warrior he'd been raised to be, waiting for me, and I could hardly believe that he was mine. Had he ever looked so tall before? So commanding? So compelling?

As I began to walk toward him, never taking my eyes off of him, I saw that he did wear one subtle touch of color. A dove gray vest, almost like the color on the bodice of my gown. And as I stepped close to him, he withdrew his hands from behind his back, like he couldn't wait one more second to touch me, and I also saw a flash of white on his arm. A glimpse of bleached cloth that peeked out from under his sleeve, just above his hand.

"Antanasia...", he said, when I was close enough to hear him whisper. Close enough to see the amazement, the wonder, in his eyes – emotions powerful enough to render even Lucius Vladescu – maybe for the first time in his life – speechless. "I... I..." I did smile, then, because I knew that I'd succeeded. Lucius, always so eloquent, couldn't even find the words to express what he felt just to see me.

I took my place at his side, and Lucius smiled too, revealing, for the first time that evening, the pure white teeth that I would finally again experience against my throat, later that night. I stared up at his handsome face, certain that I'd never been happier than in the moment when Lucius held out his left hand – his scored, dominant hand – and clasped my similarly marked right hand, squeezing our palms together, both to privately join us in that public setting – and to gently reopen the wounds, so our blood could commingle.

The incision on my hand, so fresh, ached to be disturbed, the skin pulled apart, and Lucius watched my face carefully, concern and apology in his eyes to wound me again, but I shook my head, just slightly, telling him that it was okay, that he should make sure the blood flowed out.

At my sign, he pressed his fingers more firmly around my hand, twisting our palms, just slightly, and I forced myself not to show that it did hurt as my cut reopened against his. I could feel the blood begin to seep out, and although I knew that Lucius bled, too, it was impossible to tell whose blood was whose – just as it was meant to be, from that time on.

I'd thought that the instant when Lucius had first sunk his fangs deep into my throat would always be the best moment of my life, but nothing could compare to uniting with him in front of our family and friends, forever. Nothing would ever compare to that warm, worshipful look in his eyes, which were again unguarded, open, to me, while our cool blood blended at the point where we connected.

We took another moment to just be, together – seal everything in memory – and then we turned to face the eldest of the Elders, who had stepped from the shadows and joined us across the stone table, and who announced, "Let us begin..."

Chapter 19

As our guests took their seats again behind us, Alexandru Vladescu, the ancient vampire who was to preside over our ceremony, reached across the table and rested his hands, which trembled with age, upon our foreheads, compelling both Lucius and I to bow slightly as he offered our families' equivalent of a benediction. "We gather this evening to unite, for eternity, Prince Lucius Vladescu and Princess Antanasia Dragomir, and to offer them the blessing of our clans," he said, fingers surprisingly firm against my head. "From this day forward, as promised in the pact

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sealed at their births, they shall live – and rule – as one.”

Then he removed his hands, and Lucius and I raised our heads, and I knew that this was one of only two times that I would ever see Lucius Vladescu bow down before another vampire, no matter how venerable, wise or powerful that Elder might be. The next time Lucius lowered his head would be at our coronation as king and queen. If that day ever came...

I shifted my eyes slightly to see Lucius in profile. His straight nose and strong chin and the shock of newly cut black hair that fell over his forehead, as if he couldn't quite contain that ungovernable side of himself, even for our wedding.

Lucius, who would be the father of my children. The next princes and princesses...

“But first,” Alexandru said, summoning my attention forward again, so I found myself looking into eyes that were familiarly dark. Vladescu eyes, which had seen centuries, perhaps millennia, of marriages and births... and destructions. “First you must accept one another as bride and groom, before your witnesses.”

It was my turn to squeeze Lucius's hand, my fingers automatically contracting around his, and I drew a shaky breath.

This was the most important part of the ceremony, and although I knew that Lucius wanted to marry me, I felt my stomach clench, too, with nervous apprehension, for the question that was about to be asked wasn't posed as a formality. In the world that I was entering, where unions really were eternal, the words to be spoken next were meant to give both partners one last chance to reconsider before the die was cast forever.

“Lucius Vladescu,” Alexandru said, voice low, almost ominous, “will you accept Antanasia as your wife, for as long as you shall exist?”

Lucius and I turned to one another, and he took both my hands, and the moment that I saw his face, my apprehension vanished. Not only was his expression still open, unguarded, to me, but I saw again in his eyes the deep love that was always there now, sometimes hidden slightly behind laughter or frustration or the other more complex emotions that my complicated prince experienced, but always there. And on that night, love was all that I saw as Lucius, speaking to everyone – and yet only to me, said gravely, reverently, “Yes, I accept Antanasia as my wife, now and always, for as long as I shall exist.”

Although I'd known in my heart that Lucius would accept me, and that my momentary fear had been unreasonable, I was still relieved – and moved almost to tears – to hear him say those words out loud.

He wanted me, forever...

Then, while Lucius and I remained facing each other, our damaged and whole hands joined together, Alexandru Vladescu spoke my name, and asked me the very same question. “Antanasia Dragomir – will you accept Lucius as your husband, for as long as you shall exist?”

I opened my mouth to speak, hardly even waiting for the sound of the elder vampire's voice to fade in the quiet night, certain that I needed no time to consider my response. Of course I knew my answer...

But just before the words came out of my mouth, Lucius squeezed my hands in a way that I understood was meant to silence me, and he lowered his eyes, closing himself off from me.

I waited, uncertain, not understanding what he was doing.

And when he raised his eyes again, I saw the last, most hidden part of Lucius's soul... a glimpse into a place inside of himself that I'd never expected to be allowed to see. Not even if we really did live forever.

Chapter 20

In the last moments before I committed myself to be his – to be part of him – for all time, Lucius allowed me to see that dark, damaged place inside of himself that had once driven him to thrust a sharpened stake up under my breastbone, before he'd broken down and cried out in rage and despair, “Everything around me is destroyed!” I stared into his eyes, shaken but refusing to look away, even though this aspect of Lucius was terrifying. I knew that I would never see this part of him again, though – not like this – and I wanted to try to understand this side of him before we were joined for eternity.

And as I studied his eyes, I saw not just the vampire prince who had nearly destroyed me, and who had destroyed his uncle, and who might very well take life in the future, but also the orphan raised with beatings in lieu of love. It was like I saw Lucius's whole history unfolding before me, both the source of his strength – his ability to stoically endure terrible pain, to rule a far-flung vampire nation, and to sacrifice even his existence if necessary – and the reason that his power would always be dangerous, too, because it was rooted in suffering not tempered with love.

"Oh, Lucius..." Forgetting the ceremony, forgetting our guests entirely, I murmured his name. "Lucius..."

He was giving me one more chance to run from him, like he'd offered on the night when he'd first tasted my blood. The very last chance to run...

But seeing that glimpse into his soul only made me want Lucius even more.

He trusted me enough to reveal his darkest nature to me. Trusted that, although love was new to him, ours was powerful enough to keep me from ever turning away from him.

We stood in silence for a long time, the blood that flowed between our palms thickening, bonding us even more tightly. Our guests would have no idea what was passing between us, and probably wondered if I was about to call off the wedding. And then, without the slightest hesitation, still staring into Lucius's eyes, confronting the deep pain and the incredible, barely controlled power that I saw there, I told everyone – and yet only Lucius, as he'd just told me, "Yes, I accept Lucius as my husband, now and always, for as long as I shall exist."

When I said that, Lucius lowered his eyes once more, and I knew that he really never would reveal that side of himself again, so openly. That I shouldn't see it again. That, like the stake he'd pressed against me, and which had disappeared, I would have to accept that this part of Lucius existed, henceforth out of reach to me... but always capable of surfacing in his actions.

When he opened his eyes again, I saw complete happiness in them – the restoration of the vampire I had first come to love, in all his arrogant, wonderful, witty, tender, commanding glory. Eyes that held just the faintest shadow of that dark place, which I would always recognize, now, along with the love that I always saw in his gaze.

That darkness he harbored – I would never again see it so completely, but its source would never be entirely hidden from me, either. And as his bride, I thought that seemed right.

The corners of Lucius's lips lifted with a smile, and I smiled, too, knowing that we were both feeling the same way. Both believing that, although the ceremony wasn't finished yet, in that moment when I'd accepted Lucius and he'd accepted me, we had become husband and wife.

I could hardly wait to kiss him, to seal the new covenant between us...

We continued facing each other, sharing happiness and a wonderful new peace.

It took effort to stop meeting Lucius's eyes, to stop smiling at one another, but eventually we released our unmarked hands and both turned back toward Alexandru, who nodded first to Raniero, then to Mindy, signaling that they should reach for the small, silver cups filled with our blood.

Chapter 21

Although I would try hard to remember each detail of the rest of the ceremony as clearly as I recalled the second when I knew that Lucius really was my husband, I would succeed in capturing only certain moments that followed.

The instant when Mindy passed my silver cup to me, offering me my own blood to share with Lucius – a strange, almost troubled, look in her eyes, instead of the sentimental tears I'd expected – and the way Lucius closed his eyes as he accepted the cup from me, lifted it to his lips, and drank deeply.

And I would remember finally noticing Raniero – realizing that Lucius had somehow managed to get his best man cleaned up and into a tuxedo, so he looked suitably regal as he offered Lucius his cup, the feel of which would always be etched into my memory, too, as deeply as the V that was scored into that ancient vessel, the letter a crude precursor to the elegant initial that adorned the bookmark Lucius

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had once given me.

Of course I would also recall – always – Lucius telling me, in his deep voice, “I offer you nothing less than my blood, Antanasia... Nothing less than myself,” and the heaviness of the silver as I accepted the cup from him and lifted it to my lips, hand trembling just a little with nervousness and anticipation. Nor would I forget the taste of his blood – that sweet, cool, incredible essence of Lucius, himself, which I’d craved for so long. The cup hadn’t held enough to satisfy me – it wasn’t supposed to – but I’d known that I would drink more later...

There were vivid images, too, of Alexandru opening the genealogy Lucius had shown me months ago and sliding it across the stone table so I could affix my name next to my new husband’s. I had turned, just before placing pen to paper, and seen my mother looking bravely happy, my father crying openly, Dorin’s eyes alight with the history of the act, and Claudiu refusing to look at all, face turned away as Lucius bent next to me, his body steadying mine while I carefully inscribed my signature and he wrote our marriage date above the empty place where our children’s names would be written in the same black ink...

All of those things went by so quickly, up until the moment when Lucius slipped a gleaming wedding band onto my finger, and I did the same for him, conscious, in a wonderfully, shamelessly, selfish way, that this, even more than the mark on his palm, would tell the world that he belonged to me. Not everyone would understand a scar specific to vampires – but a gold ring was almost universal in its meaning. Nobody else could have him now...

Lucius held out his left hand to me, watching my face, laughing a little at how I was so obviously eager to put this public claim on him, as if he read my thoughts, and I felt the strength in his fingers as I pushed the band as far as it would go. Then, when our rings were in place, Alexandru Vladescu spoke the words I swore I couldn’t wait one more second to hear. “Lucius, you may kiss your bride.”

Chapter 22

Lucius took both of my hands again, and although I’d become conscious of all those around us as the ceremony had progressed, everyone seemed to vanish once more, as if Lucius was a magician who could summon and dismiss whole gatherings at will. There was room in those deep, black eyes to hide an entire wild garden, and a lot more wonderful tricks, too, I was sure...

“Kiss me, my wife,” he invited softly, breaking protocol by speaking. But neither of us cared about decorum at that point. “Kiss your husband.”

His eyes were still full of love, but there was mischief there, too – one of my favorite aspects of Lucius – as he stepped toward me, and I found myself smiling, almost laughing, nearly overcome by a joy that had been held deep, deep inside of me, experienced quietly, but which suddenly bubbled up, no longer able to be controlled at the sound of Lucius’s teasing command.

Kiss your husband...

He stepped even closer to me, so his tall, strong frame was pressed against my much smaller body, and slipped his arm around my waist, drawing me to himself. I bent my head back to look up at him, and at the very last second, just before his eyes closed, I saw the teasing mischief replaced by a solemn promise. My laughter faded away, too, as he moved his hands up to cradle my face, turning it to whisper directly in my ear, his rough lips grazing my skin as he said, “I love you more with each passing

moment, Antanasia – and this is just the beginning.”

Tears welling in my eyes, I allowed Lucius to turn my face again so he could place his mouth against mine, and we kissed for the first time as husband and wife – a kiss that summed up everything we’d just experienced together. The nervousness, the anticipation, the breathtaking sight of one another, and the awe of that moment when we’d both known we were one.

He pressed a little harder against my lips, so they opened just a bit – just enough for us to taste the blood that lingered upon one another’s tongues, and so I could feel that his fangs were beginning to form, as mine were in my own mouth.

And then, because we weren’t really alone, we pulled back, and Lucius rested his forehead against mine, both of us smiling again, and the kiss kind of continued in our eyes, more privately, with the promise of everything yet to come, until someone

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- I had a feeling it was Mindy - began to applaud.

Epilogue

The mountain clearing was quiet, and our guests waited expectantly as I stepped toward Lucius, who held up his left hand, offering it to me in a different way than he had at our wedding. This time, his cut palm faced forward, so I could clearly see the X he'd placed there.

I accepted his left hand in my right, and he placed his right hand on my back, just under my shoulder blade, molding his palm against my body. Then I took my left hand and gently rested it on his right arm, just where his bicep curved to meet his shoulder.

As we faced each other, prepared to move to the haunting sounds of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, I wasn't worried about the fact that I still wasn't a good dancer. In spite of a few last-minute lessons in Lucius's study, I couldn't really "waltz or quadrille," any more than I'd been able to do those things the first time we'd danced back in the Woodrow Wilson High School gym under twinkle lights that would never satisfy me, either, now that I'd been married in a sea of candles. No, I couldn't dance - but I could put that look on Lucius's face. That worshipful, protective expression that I saw in my husband's eyes as he held me.

The pianist began to play, and Lucius and I started to step to the sonata's delicate and yet powerful cascade of light but mysterious notes - a musical expression of how I felt every time I first saw Lucius after we'd been apart for even a few minutes, like we had after the ceremony. That incomparable rush of joy and calm and excitement that came over me whenever he walked into a room. And there were the dark undertones, too...

We moved together at the center of a circle formed by all our guests, and Lucius placed his hand more firmly against the back of my black dress - like the photographic negative of a traditional wedding gown - which I'd changed into after the ceremony, because his cut palm had stained my white dress with blood when we'd kissed.

The piece was full of tempo changes and tricky to dance to, and he led us through the most foreboding, bittersweet part, my eyes trained on his so I wouldn't stumble against him.

What amazing eyes my husband had...

He smiled - and like I'd pretty much expected would happen at some point, I lost the inconsistent rhythm and bumped his feet with mine. Giving up easily, I pulled my hand from his and slipped my arms up around his neck, forgetting about my attempt to do a few basic

steps, because suddenly I just wanted to hold him while that beautiful, poignant song played. Suddenly the music, written so long ago and still so evocative, reminded me too much of time, which had been on my thoughts all evening.

Years, decades, centuries... eternity.

We had the promise of that, but - given who we were, rulers - we both knew that promise was probably false. That one day, we'd be taken from each other, just like our parents had been separated forever. Either frightened people would turn on us again, or one of our own kind would betray us...

When I rested my cheek against his chest, Lucius gave up trying to guide me to waltz, too, and I stroked his hair while we swayed, telling myself not to worry on my wedding night, because that terrible day might be a week away - or a thousand years in the future.

"Is something wrong, wife of mine?" Lucius whispered, using a word - "wife" - that he couldn't seem to get enough of that night. "I'm sensing that you're not happy..."

I raised my face, realizing that other guests had joined our dance, and forcing myself to smile, because I didn't want him to worry, or me to waste this celebration thinking about terrible things that might never happen. It was just the song that had caused me to get sad for a minute...

"I was just wondering how even Lucius Vladescu got a baby grand piano up to a clearing high in the Carpathians," I said, teasing him. "I was trying to figure out the logistics."

Lucius laughed with surprise and wrapped his arms more tightly around me. "I am glad you retain your rational, mathematical side, Antanasia – for I do love that, too!"

I glanced around the rocky, grassy clearing, which wasn't exactly well-suited for a party, but which was special to me. "All joking aside, Lucius," I said, caressing the back of his neck with my thumb and meeting his eyes, so he could see how much I genuinely appreciated everything he'd done. "Thank you for making this possible. The food, the music – everything – here."

Lucius grew serious. "If this is where you see your mother in dreams, and you feel that Mihaela is with us now, then I would drag one hundred pianos up this mountain to make her part of the celebration for you."

"I know it's weird," I admitted. "But I really do feel her presence here."

I'd first seen the clearing when Lucius and I had gone riding one day, and immediately recognized a semi-circular outcropping of stone, because I'd seen it many times in my sleep. Usually, it was winter in the dreams, and the earth was covered with snow, but the sharp rocks had been unmistakable. I'd actually hauled too hard on the reins, rising out of the saddle and searching for Mihaela, certain that she had to be there, waiting for me, before I'd remembered that she had been gone for years. I was searching for a ghost. A fantoma, as my new countrymen would say.

"I am completely irrational – as you used to frequently remind me," Lucius joked, shifting his hands to squeeze my waist. "I believe in the power of dreams. Like most vampires, put great stock in them. What you feel here does not seem 'weird' to me, at all."

I shivered in his arms, because my dreams did seem strange to me. Ominous sometimes, like the sonata...

I glanced around us, surprised to hear... nothing but the rustle of wind in the trees, clinking glasses, and quiet conversation in the distance. Then I looked back to Lucius and found him grinning at me. "Did you know the song ended?" I asked.

"That everyone else walked away?"

"Yes," Lucius admitted, still holding me. "But I wasn't quite ready to let you go."

As we reluctantly separated, I shivered again, this time because the night was getting late and chilly... and with anticipation, too. Very, very soon we would get away from everyone and there'd be no reason to stop holding each other, or to stop kissing, or stop touching...

"We should say our farewells now," Lucius suggested, taking my hand and leading us toward a gauzy, billowing white tent, where everyone was gathered and from which swung glowing, iron chandeliers not unlike those in the Vladescu estate's dining room. Suspending the heavy lights from the fragile tent was another one of the seemingly impossible logistical, engineering tricks that the magician I'd married had pulled off that night, along with spiriting all of our guests, and an amazing seven-course meal, and that piano, far up a mountainside. "They will feel bound to stay until we depart," he added, smiling at me. "We should leave soon, so they are free to go, too."

As we walked hand-in-hand under the stars, I tried to read that smile. Either he'd noticed my shudder and also realized it was getting late – or he was getting eager, too...

Judging from the glimmer that I saw in his eyes, I had a feeling it was mainly the latter.

We stepped under the tent, Lucius ducking because he was too tall for the lowest parts, and began to say our good-byes and thank yous, eventually finding my Uncle Dorin, whom I'd barely seen all evening. I'd only noticed him twice: once talking to Mindy, and once making a good effort at conversation with Claudiu, whom of course he knew from meetings of the Elders, but who wasn't exactly a friend.

Quite the opposite, really.

"Oh, Antanasia," Dorin said, eyes twinkling even more than usual. "Lovely affair! Just lovely. I'm so happy for you two!"

"Thank you," I told my uncle, leaning in to hug him. "Thanks for being here – and for everything you did to make this night happen."

Dorin stepped back and waved off my gratitude, nearly spilling the red wine he was again enjoying, maybe because we hadn't served cappuccino. "You say that too often. It was nothing! Had to be done!"

I did thank Uncle Dorin a lot. But could I ever express enough gratitude for how

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he'd orchestrated Lucius's survival back in Jake Zinn's barn, and somehow gotten Lucius's "body" back to Romania? Or for breaking Lucius's own command and returning to America to inform me that Lucius was alive?

Lucius reached past me to extend his hand, adding, "Thank you, Dorin. Antanasia is correct. You were instrumental in bringing her back to me."

Dorin took Lucius's hand, seeming, like always, a little intimidated by my husband, even at a party. And my uncle definitely blanched when Lucius added, still smiling and clasping his hand hard, "However, I wouldn't suggest disregarding any direct commands in the future, no matter how noble your intentions!"

It was a joke – but a warning, too. Lucius was happy with the outcome of Dorin's insubordination, but as he often told me, vampires were an unruly bunch and it was easy to lose control if you allowed even the slightest disobedience to go unnoticed.

"Point taken!" Dorin agreed with a nervous grin. They released hands and he added, seeming relieved to look to me, "Congratulations, you two!"

Lucius stood straighter, frowning and scanning the crowd. "Now where is Claudiu?" The pink that had been returning to Dorin's cheeks drained away again, and he didn't meet Lucius's eyes as he informed us, "Claudiu? He... he wasn't feeling well. I... I think he left."

Lucius looked down at Dorin, one eyebrow arched. "Really? Left my wedding without a word to me?"

Dorin's cheeks were ivory, like he was afraid Lucus would shoot the messenger. "Er... I believe so, yes."

I got a little sick, myself. I knew the source of Claudiu's "illness." He couldn't stand the thought of a Dragomir marrying into the Vladescu family. He barely tolerated Dorin as one of the Elders, and he hadn't been able to even watch me sign the genealogy. I was sure that Lucius hadn't been blind to Claudiu's attitude, and he would not like this snub...

"If you see my uncle," Lucius told Dorin, "please let him know that I will definitely inquire as to his health in a day or so."

"Lucius..." I placed my hand on his arm, recognizing from his deadly serious tone that it wasn't going to be a friendly visit. He didn't sound angry... but it was still very clear that he didn't accept Claudiu's disappearance into the night. That Claudiu would be held accountable, and forced to accept me as family, if it came to that...

"I will let Claudiu know you plan to visit," Dorin promised nervously. He downed his wine in a gulp, swallowing hard. "If I see him, I certainly will!"

Lucius placed his hand on my back and guided us away from my uncle, and when we got a few steps away, I stopped him and whispered, "Lucius, please..."

But what could I ask him to do? Even I recognized that Claudiu's early, wordless departure was an insult to us – to me – and if we going to rule together, it would have to be addressed. Otherwise, Claudiu might think he could offend me and get away with it, which would begin to erode my already tenuous authority. And that would not be good. I suddenly remembered something I'd read when I'd skimmed my birth mother's gift to me. "Power lost is almost NEVER regained..."

Still, I didn't want to start a fight...

Lucius understood the dismay on my face and took my arm, smiling and reassuring me, quietly, so only I would hear, "Much of ruling is bluff and bluster, Antanasia. Don't worry about something so minor as a confrontation with Claudiu. It will amount to nothing."

But Lucius had destroyed Claudiu's brother. Violence did happen...

Lucius could tell that I wasn't convinced there was nothing to worry about. "If it makes you feel better, I will take my trusty best man," he promised, laughter in his eyes. Then he straightened and scanned the crowd again. "Where is Raniero? Has he abandoned me, too?"

I started searching, too, craning my neck. "The last time I saw him, he was with Mindy, and they were dancing not too far from us."

As I looked around for Mindy or Raniero, I recalled thinking, just briefly, that they'd seemed to be hitting it off while they'd danced. Mindy had been laughing, like she'd at least found Raniero to be an amusing, if physically and hygienically disappointing, date.

I frowned. Or had he been disappointing, after all?

With his messy brown hair tamed by a ponytail, and his board shorts replaced by one

of the tuxes that Lucius's poor, overworked tailor had custom-fitted to the surfer's lean body, Raniero had looked pretty good, to me. He was tall like a Vladescu, and he had unusual gray-green eyes - maybe inherited from his Italian Lovatu side - and a grin that kind of grew on you. Most girls - especially girls who hadn't seen Raniero in his dirty flip-flops - would probably have been pretty happy to find themselves paired with him at a wedding.

But Mindy - and a vampire...?

I looked at Lucius, who seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"You don't think they...?" I asked.

Lucius shook his head and sighed. "Oh, I hope not..."

I wanted to ask him who he was worried for. Raniero, at the mercy of Mindy Stankowicz, who'd read a decade's worth of Cosmo in preparation for "catching" a guy? Or was there something I should know about Raniero Lovatu and his track record with girls?

But before I could ask, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see Mom and Dad, and forgot all about Mindy.

* * *

My parents walked with us to the path in the forest that would take Lucius and me back to the castle, where we'd spend our wedding night.

Lucius had offered to take me anywhere in the world - Rome or Paris or some nameless, private island in the middle of nowhere, if that's what I wanted - but I'd wanted to go home with him. I'd wanted to spend our first night together in the huge bed where we'd hopefully spend so many nights, and where we'd someday start our family...

"Do you really have to fly back already?" I asked Mom and Dad. "You could stay with Uncle Dorin for a few more days. We could visit..."

But they both shook their heads. "No," Mom said. "You two are on your honeymoon - and our plane leaves first thing in the morning."

"Okay," I agreed. I'd known they wouldn't stay, but a part of me kept clinging on to them. "I understand."

Still, we all lingered at the edge of the dark path that Lucius and I were about to take. Most of our guests would follow a shorter trail to an unpaved road, where transportation waited to take them the rest of the way down the mountain. But Lucius and I had decided to walk to the estate alone, taking a shortcut through the forest. We didn't even want to be around a driver. We were ready to just be together.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Dad asked, peering into the trees. "Looks awfully desolate in there."

Lucius, who had been standing behind me, placed his arm around me, crooking his elbow so his forearm shielded my chest. "I'll keep her safe, Ned," he reassured Dad. "I've walked these paths since my childhood."

I had a feeling that Lucius wasn't just talking about the literal trail we were about to take. My metaphor-loving husband was talking about everything that lay ahead of us.

"You know that I'll protect her with my life," he added.

My parents, who had once feared that Lucius might do quite the opposite, didn't speak right away. Then Mom finally said, "We know you will, Lucius."

We hugged once more, the reversal of the greeting we'd offered each other just a few days before, and suddenly it was time for me and Lucius to go. But just as we turned toward the path, my eyes brimming with tears, so I had to hang onto his hand, Lucius paused and turned back, calling, "Ned... Dara?"

My parents stopped walking, too, and turned around. "Yes, Lucius?" Mom asked, sounding uncertain in the darkness.

Lucius seemed uncertain, too - another rare state for him - as he asked, "Would it be all right if I... If I addressed you as 'mother' and 'father,' in the future?" There was a huge silence, and for a second - even while I processed my surprise over this request - I was scared that they were actually about to say no. Maybe scrambling for some alternative that wouldn't sound quite so accepting.

Don't turn him down, I wanted to beg them. It would destroy yet another part of him...

But when Dad finally spoke, I could tell that he'd only hesitated because the question had brought my gentle, sentimental father close to tears again. His voice was choked and soft as he advised Lucius, "We'd really prefer 'mom' and 'dad,' son."

No need to be so formal with family!"

Lucius's hand tightened around mine, and his voice was a little strangled, too, as he said, simply, "Thank you. That means a lot to me."

I honestly doubted that Lucius would ever really address my parents as "mom" or "dad" - it was hard to imagine those words coming out of his mouth - but I knew he was happy to have that choice. It was the permission, and all that it implied, that had been important to him.

Then, without another word, we separated, my parents returning to the party and their lives, and me and Lucius heading down that lonely path. We didn't talk at all. It was too nice just being together, listening to the night, thinking about what was about to happen, which somehow didn't scare me anymore.

Eventually, Lucius's castle - our home - came into sight, and when we reached the massive door, one of the guards, who had probably never been too far from us, materialized to open it, and Lucius bent down and swept me up off my feet, cradling me against his chest.

The gesture was clichéd enough to make us both laugh, but I'd secretly hoped that Lucius - chivalrous Lucius - would carry me across the threshold. I was glad that he didn't disappoint.

We entered the cavernous foyer where he'd once declared me a prisoner, and, feeling the heavy gold rings on my left hand, I was keenly aware that nothing had really changed since that night. Even before that night - ever since the pact had been signed - we'd been unable to escape one another, no matter how hard we tried.

Lucius carried me through the hallways, and I held tight to his neck until we reached the door to the bedroom we would share - only this time there was no guard in sight. We were really alone.

He bent slightly to reach the knob, twisted it and opened the door. Then he gently set me down on to my feet, drew me to himself and said softly, "Welcome home, Antanasia."

I didn't - couldn't - say anything. I still didn't want to talk. I just wanted... him.

I could see in his eyes that Lucius wanted me, too, just as badly.

Finally, we were going to share everything. Our blood, again, and so much more...

Then Lucius reached back with one arm, still holding me with his other, and just as his lips touched mine, he closed the door behind us, shutting the world out.