

Beautiful Trouble Publishing

NOCTURNE

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PROLOGUE

It was just past midnight, and Nella Jackson couldn't sleep. Her twenty-first birthday was only a few minutes old. She had hoped to go out later and party, but her mother wouldn't let her. Nella groaned as she rubbed her eyes. Why did she even care what her mother said? She was a grown woman and could do what she wanted, when she wanted.

Giving up on sleep, she flung back the blankets and made her way to the window. Nella pulled back the curtain and looked out onto the busy Friday night street from her ground-floor bedroom. She was about to close the curtain and give sleep another try when she saw him.

Once again, he was parked across from her house. She opened the window to get a better look at him but was unable to see his face in the darkness. Her heart raced as she traced the side of her throat with the palm of her hand. Could he bite her? Maybe...just once... Nella tossed the thought from her head in time to catch herself unbuttoning her pajama top. Why was she thinking that? He couldn't bite her. Unless he was a vampire—and those creatures didn't exist, right?

Suddenly, a disheveled man appeared at her window. She hadn't noticed him walk down the street; it was almost as if he'd appeared out of thin air. His eyes glowed red as he shifted from foot to foot. Spittle dripped from his fanglike teeth. Sores covered his face and neck. He was probably looking for the crack house across the street, she thought, until he spoke.

"Come with me," he hissed.

Before she could protest, he reached for her through the open window, but missed when she jumped back. In the blink of an eye, Mr. Jag had rushed across the street and had the man by his throat. He looked up at her, but she still couldn't make out his features in the dim light. Only his eyes, which glowed a beautiful shade of red. She blinked. Red eyes?

"You all right, ma?"

Nella nodded, unable to say more. She started to turn from the window as his nails dug into her failed kidnapper's throat, but something stopped her. When she turned back around, she realized the something was him. She wanted to go with him, wherever their destination might be. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a card and slid it across the windowsill.

"Can you meet me here tonight?"

Without looking at it, Nella scooped up the card and shoved it into the pocket of her pajama top before closing the window. Her legs wobbled as she flopped back onto the mattress and pulled out the black business card. A picture of a crown was printed in the center, the letters “Club Reign” surrounding it in purple font. She pressed the card to her chest as if it were the most precious gift she’d ever received and pinched her cheek. Maybe she really was dreaming.

Idris Eyad stepped from the backseat of his car in time to watch his protégé Lazarus rip out the throat of the lower-level vampire, some idiot named Ricochet, and sighed. This transition wouldn’t go as smoothly as he had hoped. This was exactly why he needed to get to the girl before some idiot did. He patted Lazarus on his back before they climbed back into the Jaguar.

“And so it begins,” he said before taking a healthy swig of blood from his flask.

CHAPTER ONE

When the sun came up, Helen Jackson was sitting on a bench at the Harlem transit station in New York, pretending to be at a job that she gave up months ago. For years, she had driven the F subway line for the New York Transit system, but she had finally quit her job so that she could keep an eye on her daughter. After she shook the tiny container of creamer from the fast-food restaurant on the corner, she poured the liquid into her cup. She was being overprotective. But there was no other alternative except to kill her daughter outright, and that she couldn't do. Yet.

The station was beginning to come alive with commuters. People rushing to jobs that didn't require bloodshed. Helen smoothed down her burgundy tie. Her daughter, Nella, was turning twenty-one today. Now that she was officially an adult, it would be harder and harder to keep her off the streets, away from the night. She had thought that if she kept Nella in the house, where she prayed over her and in every room, her daughter wouldn't turn. What was a mother to do? As she sipped her coffee, her mind spun with all possible scenarios that could befall her only child. She'd go home and Nella wouldn't be there. She'd go

home and Nella would be dead. She'd go home and Nella would be alive, but she'd have to kill her. Had her daughter figured out that, starting today, she no longer had a reflection because she was turning into a vampire? Helen shuddered.

She had prayed that this day would never come and that the law of the supernatural would pass over her household. But because of something foolish she had done as a young girl in love, she now had to lose her daughter to the vampire world. It was written and signed by her in her own blood.

If only she hadn't been so stupid. Helen thought back to that night in Kingston, Jamaica when she had met Idris Eyad on one of her night patrols. She was in training to become an Ifa priestess, like all the women in her family before her. During a divination by Esu, the Yorba god of all paths in the universe, she was handpicked by him to become a slayer of evil.

Helen had seen Idris walking on the beach, and her heart had leapt. She knew what he was. Could tell by the way he floated across the sand that he was a vampire. It was his eyes that drew her to him. They were so dark and mysterious, as the cliché goes. He was so tall, which drew her to him even more than his amber eyes. Breaking from her memories, Helen rose to toss her empty cup in the trash, but her thoughts of the past followed her. After that first meeting on the

beach, there was no question that she was going with him wherever he lived. There was no doubt in her heart that she had found her soul mate. All she wanted was to give him something back, to repay him for all he had given her. She wanted to give him a child.

Sitting back on the same bench, Helen blinked back tears. Was it worth giving up her soul, her career, her family to experience Idris as a human man for one night? The first time she had held Nella in her arms and looked into her daughter's eyes, she'd known it was.

But dancing with the devil always has its consequences.

And tonight, she would face hers. By midnight, Nella would turn into a vampire. Helen wept, not caring that the people around her stared because she was going to lose her daughter. Helen stood and quickly made her way to the bathroom. She barely made it into a stall as the vomit rose from her stomach and spilled into the porcelain bowl. It was after she dry heaved one last time that she felt the presence standing behind her. Helen didn't need to look to know who it was.

Straightening her uniform, Helen flushed and backed out of the stall. The previously crowded restroom was now empty. She quickly rinsed her

mouth and washed her hands at the sink, keeping the woman in her peripheral vision.

“We’ve been looking for you,” the woman leaning against the radiator said.

“Well, you found me,” Helen replied, wiping her hands on a paper towel.

The woman produced a sword from beneath her scarlet wings. Her eyes shone crimson, lighting the dim bathroom. Helen called a sword to her side, a trick she still remembered from her training. She turned to face the angel, who had raised her sword in opposition, countering the woman’s stance with one of her own. Only this woman wasn’t an angel, but one of the vampire council’s bounty hunters.

“I think you know what that means,” the hunter said.

“Yes,” Helen replied, eyes narrowing on her target. “I most certainly do.”

The women circled each other in the small subway station ladies’ room. Helen’s gaze never left the hunter’s, though the light reflected off the woman’s red breastplate and into her eyes. She stared at the hunter’s long black dreads, her creamy mocha skin. The muscles in the angel’s forearms bulged as she tightened her grip around the red leather handle of the sword. Her crimson wings fluttered in the breeze from the air-conditioning vent above them.

If Helen didn't know this hunter personally, she'd think she was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen. However, she'd known Mehina for years. They had trained together in another life back in Jamaica, when they were chosen by the light to slay the demons of the night. Helen baulked but wasn't about to back down. If Hell had sent Mehina to collect her, she wasn't going without a fight.

"You're not going to make this easy, are you?" Mehina said.

Helen simply shook her head. Mehina swung first. When the swords connected, the metallic sound echoed in the small, dim room. The hunter pivoted on her back foot, trying to strike from a different angle. Her sword was once again met by Helen's. She grunted as Helen backed her against the radiator. The hunter sat back against it, drawing up her legs and kicking Helen in her midsection.

Helen gasped and stumbled to the ground. She was surprised, not by Mehina's strength but her own weakness. She'd been out of practice for far too long. Mehina swung again. Helen rolled to her left. When the sword clanged against the tiled floor, Helen sprang to her feet. She punched the hunter in the center of her chest. Mehina stumbled backward but didn't fall as her breastplate absorbed much of the blow. Helen delivered a roundhouse kick to push the

hunter farther back and give her room to swing, but Mehina's ruby shield deflected Helen's sword.

The hunter's scream tore through the air. She lunged forward, thrusting her sword in front of her. The side of the blade sliced Helen's arm, but it didn't faze her. When Mehina struck again, Helen twisted to the side, the blade missing her stomach by inches, then grabbed the hunter's arm and brought it down over her knee. Mehina's sword fell to the ground. Helen dove for it at the same time as the hunter, and the momentum from both pushed the sword farther from each other's reach, but Mehina was quicker. She elbowed Helen in her throat, knocking away the former slayer's sword and grabbing her own.

Dazed, Helen took a second to catch her breath before turning onto her stomach. She knew that she'd been defeated. When she rose to her knees, the hunter stood in front of her, leveling the blade at her throat. It's just as well. She was ready to die. At least with death she wouldn't have to give her life to the vampire council.

"That's enough," Mehina roared. "Stop this."

Out of breath, Helen stared up at her and tried not to cry. Blood trickled from the wound on her arm, but she didn't move to wipe it away. She wanted to keep some of her dignity intact if the hunter decided

to behead her. To her surprise, Mehina lowered her weapon and moved to the window.

“You’re now one of us,” Mehina said. “You’ll be fighting with us instead of against us. The council can use someone like you.”

Helen frowned. “You’re not here to kill me?”

The hunter shook her head. When she turned from the window to face Helen, Helen detected sadness coming from her but was wise enough not to comment on it. She rose to her feet. She wondered why her life was being spared.

“You have a debt to pay first. It’s been decided that you will serve as one of our slayers.”

Helen’s mouth fell open. She had hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but the dark forces of Hell always collected on their debts. In her bargain to make Idris human, she had signed away her soul. She no longer had claim to her own life, but she had hoped they would just kill her and get it over with. She would rather be truly dead than one of the walking dead.

“For how long?” Helen asked.

“After twenty-one years, you’ll have another review. At that time, your fate will be decided.”

Helen’s shoulders slumped. “So I may be there forever?”

Mehina shrugged. “When you kill an angel, the punishment is severe.”

“I didn’t know!” Helen cried. “I thought she was just a girl!”

“Nevertheless, you’ll need this.”

The hunter materialized a sword that was identical to her own. She tossed it to Helen, who caught it with one hand. Helen turned the red and black weapon over in her hand, studying the intricate detail of the ruby and black diamond patterns intertwined with hieroglyphics on the staff. The handle was covered in red and black leather with her name engraved on the bottom.

“I need more time with my daughter,” Helen whispered as tears streamed down her cheeks.

Mehina shook her head. “You already had twenty-one years. That was part of the deal.”

“Just a few more hours,” Helen pleaded. “Then I’ll go willingly.”

“You have until midnight, as agreed,” Mehina said as her form dissolved into air.

Helen finally wiped the tears from her cheeks. She straightened her uniform and fixed her hair as she inhaled a deep, shaky breath. She couldn’t put it off any longer. It was time for her to talk to her daughter. She just hoped that she wasn’t too late.

CHAPTER TWO

Nella stood in the dark landing of her brownstone, staring up at the bright sunlight. This was her third attempt at going out without getting burned. The first two tries had ended with blisters that ran down both of her arms and hands. The wounds had healed in a matter of minutes, but the raw skin still hurt as it rubbed against the fabric of her hoodie.

This time, she hoped she was better prepared. She wore a black sweat suit over her tank top and shorts. Pulling the hood up over her head, she tugged the drawstring closed over her chin, and shoved her hands into a pair of thick black gloves. After wrapping her nose and mouth with a wool scarf, she put on a pair of her mother's sunglasses, before unfolding the umbrella.

What's happening to me? she wondered as she took a small step forward. This morning, she'd had a bizarre craving for blood, but when she tried to sample it from the package of ground beef that her mother was thawing for dinner, she couldn't bring herself to drink it. Then, while she was getting dressed, she couldn't see her reflection in the mirror. She barely slept a wink last night, but slept soundly

when the sun peeked through her blinds—and now this.

The library would be opening soon. Maybe she could find an answer there. Something was happening to her, and she was scared. Maybe she was developing some kind of disease, she thought as she shuddered. She hadn't been out of the house in ages. The library was the only place her mother let her go by herself. Sighing, she considered the fact that she didn't have a job or money, both her mother's decisions.

Although she didn't have to, she obeyed her mother's odd orders because she loved her mother dearly. Plus, she didn't like the look her mother would give her, as if she'd kill her on the spot, when she spoke up. But tonight, she decided, enough was enough. It was time for her to take control of her life. If her mother didn't like it, oh well.

The sun pressed down on her as she cleared the first step, although the umbrella absorbed the impact of the rays. Sweat sprang to her brow, but she wouldn't turn back. She had to find out what was wrong with her. Was this why her mother kept her locked up all the time? Did her mother know what was happening to her and not tell her?

"Nella, why you got on all that stuff?" Keisha asked as Nella passed her apartment building.

Her best friend's shrill voice caused her to jump. Nella had known Keisha since grade school and could usually tell Keisha anything, but not this. Especially since she really didn't know what was happening to her. She glanced at her friend and contemplated ignoring her but knew she wouldn't hear the end of it.

"I just didn't want to get sunburn."

To her dismay, Keisha stood, stretched and scrambled down the stairs, inviting herself on Nella's two-block walk to the library. Nella cursed under her breath. She loved Keisha like the sister she'd never had, but this was something she needed to do on her own. Then again, it would be nice to have someone to walk with her. She'd been isolated for too long.

"That's the last thing you gotta worry about," Keisha said. "You hear about Ricochet getting kilt last night?"

Nella shook her head. Ricochet was a small-time drug runner. Nella never thought about him and really didn't care that he was killed. Besides, she barely knew what was going on in her Harlem neighborhood. Her mother wouldn't let her do anything, least of all hang on the street to listen to the gossip.

"Girl," Keisha leaned into Nella and hooked her arm around her elbow, "Maia said he done got his throat ripped out."

“What?” Nella exclaimed.

“Yep,” Keisha continued. “Last night. Said it was over some girl. People are crazy.”

Nella wasn’t sure why this part of the story made the hair on her arms stand on edge. She thought about the guy who stood outside her window some nights. Then, the memory of the dude at her window flashed into her mind. Was that Ricochet? She remembered how Mr. Jag had gripped him around his neck. She panicked. Had she just witnessed a murder? A murder that was her fault. Crap! She gulped.

She changed the subject, telling Keisha about her plan to sneak out that night and go to the club. She didn’t have to invite the rest of her friends. Just telling Keisha was like putting an ad in the newspaper. Her best friend squealed and squeezed her arm.

“It’s about damn time,” Keisha shouted. “It’s gonna be on and poppin’, tonight! And you twenty-one, too. Shit. It’s about to be like that.”

Nella laughed. “I don’t have anything to wear.”

Keisha sucked her teeth. “I got you. You can wear one of my outfits. Lord knows I can’t fit into it anymore.”

As her friend rubbed her protruding belly, Nella sighed. She’d love to have a baby one day. Of course, she’d have to have sex first. She was tired of being the good girl only because her mother forced her to; she

was ready to be bad. She thought again about the mystery man outside her window. Who was he, anyway? *Damn*, she sighed. He was so sexy.

They reached the Harlem library branch just in time for the doors to open. As Keisha waddled to the magazines, Nella made a beeline for the first available computer, almost knocking down a slow-moving man in the process. She spent the next hour researching her symptoms online but came up empty.

Most of the medical websites claimed she might be anemic, but she wasn't convinced it was such a simple explanation, especially since that wouldn't cause her to not cast a reflection. She typed her symptoms into another search engine, and this one came up with one source: vampirism. She froze.

Vampires didn't exist. Did they? She scanned the website. This couldn't be the cause, she reasoned, but then, it also made a lot of sense. She printed out the pages, vowing to study them more when she got home.

"You ready?" Keisha asked when Nella's time was up.

"Yeah."

As they walked to the front lobby, Nella paused to wrap herself in the protective layers of clothing. She was glad that she lived in New York and no one looked at her strangely for it, except for Keisha.

“Black people don’t get sunburn,” Keisha said, shaking her head. “And it’s June. It’s like ninety degrees out here.”

Nella shrugged as she opened the umbrella. “You can’t be too careful.”

Keisha rolled her eyes as they cleared the concrete steps and walked back to the apartment building. “That’s your mama’s fault,” she huffed. “Don’t know why she keeps you all locked up in the house all the time.”

“She has her reasons.”

“Ain’t no reason to keep your grown-ass daughter locked up. I love Ms. Helen, but damn. You need a life.”

“I know.”

“Don’t you wanna date and stuff?”

“Yeah, but...”

“But nothing, Nel. You need to stand up to her, tonight.”

Nella fell silent. Deep down, she knew that keeping her inside the house and not letting her date, or live, was her mother’s way of keeping her off the streets and out of trouble. She knew her mother didn’t want her to end up pregnant like Keisha or strung out on dope like Vaniece. But the more her mother tried to drive a wedge between her and the night, the more she was drawn to it. She yawned, and Keisha spewed

more street gossip. She hadn't been able to sleep last night. Every time she closed her eyes, his image flashed behind her eyelids. Mr. Jag, she liked to call him. Every night for the past two weeks, he'd parked his Jaguar XKR175 across the street from her house.

Nella smiled. He was fine, tall and pale skinned. Long, silky blond dreads hung down his back to his waist. Last night, he'd worn a black shirt over a white t-shirt, jeans and gold chains. He had to be a dope boy, because no one else could afford to push a whip like that in her neighborhood, and he was the only white boy on her street. She sighed, thinking that she'd never get the chance to meet him. Or anyone like him, for that matter, as long as she still lived with her mother.

As Keisha kept talking, the scene at her window played in her mind again. She had thought it was all a dream until she woke up, still clutching the card in her hand. It upset her that she never got his name but hoped she'd get that, and more, tonight. Nella thought about asking Keisha if she knew him, as she knew everybody in the neighborhood, but decided against it.

They stopped at the hot dog vendor's cart that was parked outside the subway station. Keisha pulled a crumpled dollar bill from her jeans pocket, and Nella shook her head. The smell from the grease and

the burning meat was making her queasy. Normally, she could devour two, but just the sight of them was making her sick even though she was hungry.

Suddenly, her canine teeth ripped through her gums. She cried out in pain, but no one noticed. With a trembling finger, she touched them. Her eyes widened. Fangs? How? Maybe that website was right. Was she becoming a vampire? She froze. It would be cool if she was, at least she wouldn't be so ordinary anymore, but how could becoming a vampire even be a possibility?

"The baby wants onions," Keisha said, staring at the translucent slices. "But then, when I eat them, I get gas..."

Nella tuned out her friend. This was getting really weird. How was she turning into a vampire when she'd never been bitten? She looked up at Keisha, who continued to talk as she squirted ketchup on top of the onions. As she concentrated on her friend, something moved in the corner of Nella's eye. She turned to her right.

Nella watched people walk by on their way to and from the subway stop. Thinking she saw a flash of light come from the direction of the office building right next to her, she shook her head. It was probably the sun reflecting off the glass doors. The heat under

all these clothes was getting to her. She had to get out of them.

“Come on, Kei,” Nella said impatiently. “I gotta go.”

Keisha waved her hand at Nella. “Hold on. Let me get some pickles.”

With an exhale, Nella looked around. The light flashed again, this time right next to her, on her left. She turned. There was nothing there. At last nothing that she could see. But she could’ve sworn she saw a person standing there. Nella felt a hand on her shoulder and jumped to the side, glancing behind her. There was no one there.

“What you jumping around for?” Keisha asked, still adding pickles to her hot dog. “The heat’s getting to you, ain’t it?”

“Yeah. Look,” Nella said, her voice low when she saw the flash of light again. “I’ve got to get out of here.”

“Huh?” Keisha put a hand on her hip. “You just gonna leave me here? I’m almost done.”

Keisha reached for the mustard at the same time as Nella felt something grab her upper arm. Nella was gone in a flash, running down the crowded sidewalk. She heard footsteps behind her but knew that she shouldn’t run straight home—something she saw in a Lifetime movie—so she doubled back and ran through

the alley next to Keisha's apartment building, ditching the umbrella. The footsteps got closer. With strength she didn't know that she had, Nella scaled a wall, landing in the backyard of Mrs. Figeros, a friend of her mother's.

"Nella?" the woman called out. "How's your mother?"

"Fine," she replied as she zipped through the yard.

Nella climbed the chain-link fence at the edge, flipping over the top to land on her feet on the other side. Another flash of light joined the chase. She now heard two sets of footsteps pursuing her on the hot concrete and stripped off her scarf as she circled back to the hot dog stand and tossed it aside. Keisha was still there, adding more pickles to the crowded bun. Nella grabbed her arm. Carefully, she dragged the pregnant woman down the stairs into the subway station.

"Where we going?" Keisha asked, looking behind her. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

The guard, knowing Nella's mother, didn't blink when Nella scrambled over a turnstile, dragging Keisha and her hot dog with her. They raced along the crowded platform, jumping on the next train that pulled up. Nella didn't exhale until the doors closed.

She looked around, trying to figure out what was chasing her and why.

“What the fuck?” Keisha yelled when the car lurched forward, spilling mustard and pickles on the front of her yellow polo shirt. “What was all that, Nella? Who you owe money? Is it Fred? Girl, you betta pay Fred back. He don’t play.”

Nella doubled over, panting. Through the train window, she saw the clouds of energy she was running from. They were invisible to the naked eye, but Nella could clearly see the black outline of two figures and shuddered. What were they? Things were getting weirder and weirder. Keisha was still yelling at her, but her friend was the least of her worries right now. She was about to pass out from heat and exhaustion.

“I’ll buy you another hot dog,” Nella told her as she sat in the first available seat, trying to figure out how she was going to get home.

CHAPTER THREE

As the day turned to dusk, Idris Eyad stood on the roof of his lair. His amber eyes scanned his New York-New Jersey Empire. Sighing, he straightened the lapels on his plush black robe, before picking imaginary lint from the cuff of his sleeve. He was becoming bored with this lifestyle. Some days, he hoped to simply step down and let some other guy run things for a while.

Of course, retiring wasn't an easy solution for a vampire—especially a master. As he watched the city lights twinkle against the dark sky like stars, he materialized a tumbler of scotch and blood while he pondered what his life would've been like if he'd never been bitten. For starters, he would have died four hundred years ago. He sipped his drink, wondering where his soul would've ended up. In Heaven? In Hell? Or would it be straddling the same line it was now, not quite dead, not quite alive?

He fought the urge to glance at his platinum Bulova watch because he'd given up on time long ago, just as it had given up on him. But today was special. As he strolled through his rooftop garden, he instinctively searched his territory for her. As he inhaled her soft scent, the space where his heart used

to be became heavy with regret. Idris wished he could've met her some other way, before this night, but it's too late to wish for what could've been.

Idris had witnessed many changes to his territory over the years. He'd witnessed the Civil War and the end of slavery in the U.S., and the destruction of the World Trade Center. He'd watched technology evolve from the miracle of a single light bulb to the iridescent lights that twinkled like stars before him.

Thinking on all he'd witnessed caused him to consider all he'd experienced. He'd dined with Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy. He'd had coffee with Langston Hughes and talked politics with Zora Neale Hurston.

But no revolution would be as great as the one that was about to happen. She would be the key. All he had to do was keep her alive and out of the hands of his enemy.

As he changed into a deep purple suit, black shirt and matching tie, his thoughts took him to the upcoming election. He was running for the Domestic Vice President seat on the Vampire Council. As he was well liked by the current council members and masters from other territories, he wasn't too worried about the elections. Still, he would need to start campaigning.

The States had twenty-five master vampires. The council thought to divide the fifty-state territory in this way because it was too vast for only one or two masters to manage well. For the last one hundred and twenty years, New York-New Jersey had been his territory. He loved his job. Loved being a creature of the night, but it was time for his species to evolve. He'd set a plan in motion to make sure this would happen, the details of which were a closely guarded secret. Even his protégé, Lazarus didn't know them, though he was a big part of his plan.

The wind blew through his already cold skin as his mood darkened. The master from the Washington DC area, a close friend and ally, has just been killed. Right now, his first lieutenant was managing the dead master's territory. A few weeks earlier, the Master from the Carolinas had been assassinated. From what Idris could tell, these were random killings. He hoped the council would be able to resolve this crisis before the election in a couple of weeks. Yet he had a feeling that wouldn't happen.

"Idris," a soft whisper interrupted his thoughts as her hands encircled his waist.

When he didn't turn to address his wife, she planted a kiss on the back of his neck and waited. He finished his drink before he finally turned toward her. Aponi was nude. Her jet-black hair curled around her

shoulders, flowing over her lithe body to her waist as her olive skin shimmered in the moonlight. The scent of her blood rose to the surface of her skin as an offer for him, but he wasn't interested. Instead, he frowned at her attempt at seduction.

"I don't have time."

"Just once," she pleaded. "We don't do things like this anymore."

His stance softened, but he still wasn't in the mood. Lately he hadn't been as attentive to her as he once was. It wasn't that he didn't love his wife, but his attention was being diverted by someone else. Someone who needed his attention, and he vowed to be there for her. He kissed his wife to appease her.

"Maybe when I get back. Right now I need to focus."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "On what?"

Centuries ago, he'd observed Aponi bathing in the Hudson River and had taken her as his bride. Of course, being a vampire meant that he didn't have to be mated to one person, thus he'd had his share of women over the years. But none were more special than... Realizing where his thoughts were headed, he broke them off. He didn't want to think of her now, especially since his wife might be listening to his thoughts. While they shared basic details of their lives with each other, there were some things he kept from

Aponi—his order of business tonight, for one—as was customary between vampire spouses.

Aponi moved toward him to run her fingers through the silky black curls that hung to his shoulder. He grabbed her hand, kissed her palm and let it fall to her side as he moved away. Idris was sorry that he couldn't give his wife the attention she deserved, but his wife demanded a lot of it, and he needed to devote his time to other matters.

"I'm serious," he said. "Later."

Though Aponi huffed away and slammed the door behind her, Idris relaxed. He could've simply ripped out her throat and made another one wife, but that was no fun anymore, either. Opening up his private channel to call Lazarus, he was surprised by another call. He listened to the soft, desperate plea, and then replayed it twice before making his way to the elevator.

Nervousness nipped at his soul. It wasn't Helen's call that twisted his stomach into a knot, but the meeting that would happen later that evening after Helen had been taken to Hell. He exhaled. It was time to welcome his daughter into the family.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lazarus was still awake when he received Idris' call. He never really slept that morning, mostly tossed and turned. The lower-level brunette vamp who slept on his chest did nothing to help him. She was just a distraction from the woman he was supposed to be protecting, and he didn't fuck her. Now, he wanted to throw her out into the sunlight to see whether she'd survive. But even he wasn't that cruel. With disgust, he pushed her away when she tried to curl up next to him.

Wearing only a pair of boxers, he stood and moved around the pitch-black room of his chambers with ease. He retrieved a bottle of donated human blood from the refrigerator across the room and gulped it down, then tossed the empty bottle in the trash before he extracted another. This one he nursed while sitting in his favorite chair. Plugging in the ear buds to his iPod, he listened to Ludacris rap about his twenty-inch rims.

Lazarus closed his eyes. He had always loved the night. His ancestors had moved to Haiti from France to operate a sugarcane plantation. At its height, his family had over fifty workers, whom he now knew were slaves. As a little boy in Haiti, he would sneak

out of the house after dark and go down to the sugarcane fields. He'd lie in the freshly cut cane, inhaling its sweet scent, watching the stars glitter over his head until the sun came up. He shifted in his chair as his past continued to play behind his closed eyelids.

He was eighteen when he'd been bitten and turned into a vampire by his uncle. He didn't deserve this. Yeah, he was rough around the edges, as his dad had said, but he'd thought he had a good heart. At least that was what his mother always told him.

Lazarus was bad, but he wasn't as bad as his namesake uncle. His uncle was a mean, bitter man. He fought everyone and everything, even to the very end. This upset Lazarus' mother, his uncle's sister. For her peace of mind and to give his uncle a shot at Heaven, his family decided to follow a worker's advice and perform a soul-cleansing ceremony for him after he died.

When the smoke from the sage washed over his uncle's body, Lazarus watched in horror as the dead man convulsed and writhed against the sand circle the priestess drew around him. He clawed at his skin, ripping it in places along his cheeks and chest. The priestess called for Lazarus and his brothers to hold the old man down as blood trickled down his pale skin. It shouldn't have been hard. His uncle was eighty-two when he died, but the man Lazarus and his

family held down that night had the strength of a twenty-year-old.

As Lazarus rose to get another bottle, he still remembered the black spirit that had risen from his uncle's nude body. The spirit's eyes glowed red. Before his father had a chance to behead the demon with his machete, the monster grabbed Lazarus and bit him in the neck. Lazarus winced, remembering the pain of the fangs piercing his skin.

He could still see the horrified look in his family's eyes, even after his father was able to kill the demon. Instead of waiting for morning, they burned his uncle's body right then and there. It was decided in a vote that Lazarus should leave until he knew for sure what had bitten him, so that he didn't bring harm to his family. He'd gone willingly, not wanting to cause any more trouble than he already had.

If he hadn't meet Idris on one of the vampire master's visits to Haiti, Lazarus would still be running the streets, robbing tourists and killing lower-level vamps who looked at him funny just because he could. He'd never have known about this kind of power. The kind that brought vamps to their knees when he and Idris walked into the room. He never wanted to give this up.

Lazarus glanced at the bed, wanting to lie back down and slumber for the hour that was left until

sunset, but not wanting to lie next to the tramp in his bed. He toyed with kicking her out and making her sleep on the floor, but decided to tough it out in his chair. Instead, he pulled the lever on the recliner, the leather fabric stuck to his bare thighs.

Nella's image popped into his head. Her father, Idris, had entrusted him with her life. The image of her back arching, throat exposed for the taking, popped into his mind and he shuddered, his fangs cresting. He had to gain some kind of control before tonight, had to be focused when he met her at the club. Under no circumstances could he touch her, he scolded himself. Not even to help her across the street. With a hard exhale, he closed his eyes but was still too wired to nap.

When the sun finally went down, Lazarus ushered the vamp out of the house and dressed to go to the club. He met his master Idris at the elevator as he stepped off.

"So, tonight's the night," the master said.

"Yeah. Are you coming to the club with me?"

Idris shook his head. "I got a call from Nella's mother that I must address."

"Cool."

"Tonight will change a lot of lives," Idris warned.

Lazarus nodded. He was glad he'd be able to spend some time with Nella alone, but he was also worried about that. The woman was beautiful, and he was already having a hard time keeping his hands and lips off of her. There were so many questions he wanted to ask the master, but he dared not.

"We must get going."

"What do you want me to tell her?"

"Nothing," Idris said. "I will explain all when we meet."

The master turned to study him before he climbed into the backseat of the limo. "Are you nervous? You're very quiet this eve."

Lazarus shrugged. "I'm not nervous, sir. Just thinking."

"About my daughter?"

Lazarus smiled. He didn't think he was that transparent. Idris was a master, could read his thoughts without much prompting, but Lazarus had always been careful to guard his feelings. He was slipping. And yeah, he was thinking about her long, ebony tresses that flowed around her shoulders, her caramel-colored skin. Amber eyes that were innocent and dangerous at the same time. Full lips that begged him to kiss her. Her pink pajamas did nothing to hide that figure.

But this was an assignment, he reminded himself, making an effort to retain some dignity in front of his master. He was supposed to be guarding her as she turned. Making sure that some other vamp didn't snatch her before her father had a chance to talk to her. If her father wasn't sitting right beside him last night, he would've crossed those prayer lines to get to her himself.

"A beautiful woman will do that to you," Idris said, patting him on the back. "Will make you rethink life."

Lazarus laughed. "Is that what happened to you?"

"In a word, yes."

CHAPTER FIVE

Club Reign was located in the heart of Harlem, housed in a building that contained a mortgage lender's office with apartments above it. It was a nondescript building, and if the girls didn't know the address, they would've passed right by it.

Butterflies swirled in Nella's stomach as she yanked open the glass door. They entered a grand oak and marble lobby that held a glass table and a few comfortable-looking black velvet benches, along with a second set of doors. She pulled them open and was met with an iron staircase that only went down.

"What kind of place is this?" Quiana asked as they started down the first set of stairs.

"Maia said this place is off the chain," Keisha said. "If she say it, it can't be all bad."

Nella teetered in her bright blue heels. She was just glad that the day was over. After being chased by those things, she'd made it safely home where she collapsed in bed soon after, only waking when her mother had returned home from work. She didn't have the heart to confront her mother about going out tonight, so while she was cooking dinner, Nella escaped through the window and went to Keisha's. She and Keisha had agonized over what she should

wear and finally decided on an electric-blue tank-style dress. Nella tugged at the hem, hoping her outfit was good enough for Mr. Jag.

The girls climbed down a series of winding stairways that lead to the club's main doors. Each stairwell gradually became darker until the girls were surrounded by total blackness. Lit torches lined the walls but did nothing to brighten the shadows.

"It feels like we're going to Hell." Quiana snorted.

"You know that," Deenie agreed, stopping to adjust the strap on her pink heels. "But it's Nel's day, so we're gonna have to respect her choice."

"Amen," Keisha said as she leaned against the railing to catch her breath. "Not forgive it, just respect it."

Nella rolled her eyes. "Come on, guys. This is the first time I've been out in, like, ever. Please don't ruin this for me."

The last set of stairs led to a set of black wood doors with elaborate metal trim and doorknobs. If not for a ring of light peaking from around the doors like a halo, it wouldn't have been visible. Nella took a tentative step forward. A tall, heavysset guard seemed to appear out of thin air and blocked their entry.

"IDs," he stated flatly.

The girls handed them over. He carefully looked over each one, glancing at the picture then up at the owner, before he waved them through the doors. The latest by Lil Wayne flowed through the speakers as the black tiled floor and the mirrored walls vibrated from the bass. Purple couches, red stools and silver chairs decorated the large square bar area. In front of them, the large dance floor was nearly filled to capacity. Where the girls stood near the entrance, a glass spiral staircase extended up toward the ceiling.

“This is off the chain,” Deenie squealed, checking out the hot guys as they made their way across the club.

Nella had to agree. It was unlike anything she’d ever seen before, but she really didn’t have anything else to compare it to. Just excited to be out of the house, she glanced around, hoping that Mr. Jag was already here at this early hour but doubted that someone as cool as him would be.

The girls claimed an open booth in the back near the DJ booth. When the waitress came to take their orders, Nella had a hard time deciding what she wanted her first drink to be, so she let her girls go first. Keisha had informed her earlier that all the rappers drank Patron, but she didn’t know what that was. She thought wine would be too formal, and she certainly couldn’t afford champagne.

“Don’t worry.” The waitress winked at her. “I got just the thing for you. Your first drink should be memorable.”

She frowned when the waitress left to get their drink orders because she didn’t remember telling her that this was her first time. Nella glanced at the VIP booth hoping to see Mr. Jag, but felt the gaze of some guy in the next booth take in every inch of her skin. As she wrinkled her nose in disgust at him, her fangs began to crest, and she quickly grabbed a napkin to hold over her lips. Why would her fangs appear now? Why was she developing fangs at all?

The waitress returned with a tray full of drinks. She sat Keisha’s orange juice in front of her, then cranberry juice and vodka for both Quiana and Deenie. In front of Nella she placed a tall, hurricane-style glass full of red liquid. She peered suspiciously at the glass, unsure what it was, then, sniffed it for poison. *Did poison have a smell?*

“It’s the house specialty.” The waitress smiled at Nella. “I’m sure you’ll like it.”

When the waitress walked away, Nella removed the pink umbrella and put it in her purse to keep as a souvenir. She stirred the scarlet liquid with the straw before taking a small sip. The liquid was very sweet and warm. It coated her throat as it went down, but she didn’t taste the alcohol. She’d heard, also from

Keisha, that vodka was tasteless and assumed it was a part of the mixture.

Quiana got up to dance with the guy from the next booth while the other girls danced in their seats and gossiped about the happenings in the neighborhood. Nella was having the time of her life. The only thing that would make it better was seeing Mr. Jag. *Where is he?* she wondered. He did ask her to meet him here. Maybe he was just being nice. As soon as she thought it, she saw him. He leaned against the balcony railing in the VIP area above her, wearing a casual black suit with a black shirt underneath. His dreads were neat and loose around his shoulders. When he flashed her a smile, she could've sworn that she saw fangs. She almost melted onto the floor as her heartbeat sped up. When an attractive cocoa-skinned woman hooked her arm around his elbow, Nella looked away. "Tramp," she muttered under her breath, not understanding why she was so jealous.

"You should get out there, Nella." Keisha motioned to the dance floor. "It's your birthday, hey!"

Deenie laughed. "We'll all go."

The DJ spun some classic Tupac as the girls made their way to the center of the dance floor, grabbing Quiana and her new friend to join them. Nella couldn't dance to save her soul. She had danced around her room, but never in front of people. Still,

with her friends cheering her on, she swayed her body to the beat as Tupac asked how she wanted it.

When she threw her arms over her head, she noticed Mr. Jag had moved to the edge of the dance floor. How did he get down here so fast? He watched her shake her groove thing for a few minutes before walking toward her. His sudden movement made her stop. When their eyes locked, the crowded dance floor faded, and it was just him and her. She was too mesmerized by his blue eyes to move as he slowly closed the divide between them. Inhaling his musky scent, she refused to exhale, not ready to release it back into the air.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” Nella whispered.

“I didn’t think you’d come.”

“Why?” she asked as she cocked her head to the side to study him.

Boy did she enjoy the view. Mr. Jag looked even better up close than she’d imagined. He was taller than she’d imagined him to be, with muscles that looked like they would rip the fabric of his shirt at any minute. His muscles made her want to touch his chest to make sure that he was real. And then there were his eyes that scorched her skin like flames. Her fangs again pushed through her gum, and the numbing pain broke her from her thoughts of lust.

"This doesn't seem your type of place."

"I don't have a place. I haven't been out in so long."

"That's a damn shame, ma. Why are you here tonight?"

"I just wanted to thank you for saving me."

He waved off her compliment with a shrug. When her fangs refused to retract, she covered her mouth with her hand. He smiled as she blushed. Did he notice her teeth? Crap! She wanted to slink away, but he closed his arms around her waist. Her heart raced, but she didn't want it to slow down.

"I'm Lazarus," he whispered in her ear.

"Nella."

His cool breath on her skin and his strong grip around her waist caused her to giggle. She was nervous because she didn't know what to do. She'd never been this close to a boy before. But Lazarus wasn't a boy. He was a man. On reflex, she placed her hands on top of his shoulders. The heat from his body sent a chill down her spine, and she fought the urge to kiss him. Nella was sure he'd been kissed by other women before. More experienced women who could satisfy him the way she never could.

He pulled her close to him as the song changed to something slow. His breath was cool on her temple, but it made her body hot. Her friends watched open

mouthed as he twirled her around the dance floor. This had to be a dream, she thought as she closed her eyes. She was sure when she opened them she'd still be in her room, wishing she was right here.

"It's no dream, ma," he whispered.

He had read her mind? How? When she opened her eyes, he was staring at her. Nella stared back, trying to see what he saw in her, because she didn't think that she was beautiful. She wasn't the kind of woman he was probably used to dealing with. She didn't have that ghetto booty like the other girls in the neighborhood, and her breasts barely filled the B-cup bra Keisha had lent her.

"You're beautiful. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise."

"You have to stop reading my mind."

He chuckled. "Why?"

Nella really didn't have an answer. Secretly, she liked that he did. When the song ended, she wasn't ready to move from his arms. He didn't release her either. She leaned closer to him, finally relaxed enough to lean her cheek on his chest, and closed her eyes again. This time, she pretended that he was hers.

CHAPTER SIX

Lazarus couldn't help himself. When he saw her dancing in the middle of the club, head thrown back, caramel skin glistening with sweat, his fangs ripped through his gums. He knew he had to claim her before some wannabe vamp pushed up on her and he'd have to snatch somebody's throat out. A few of the male vamps began to call her, but stopped when he had issued a warning growl.

It wasn't right. The way her perfect body swayed against his. The way she looked into his eyes like she wasn't aware of the hold she already had over him. The way she licked her lips, inviting him to kiss her when it was taking every muscle within him not to do it. No one in his life had messed him up like this, and he'd had a lot of women in his one hundred plus years, both human and not.

But this was as far as it could go, Lazarus told himself. He was her bodyguard. His boss, her father, would rip out his throat himself if Lazarus did anything to hurt her. There was so much that could go wrong tonight. Nella was twenty-one but was still a virgin. She was just about to turn and smelled like fresh-cut sugarcane. There was a full moon. And Usher was crooning about how he wanted to make

love in the club. He exhaled. No truer words had ever been spoken.

He had to be the man, he thought, as the growing crowd of bodies on the dance floor pushed her into his thigh. It was he who should extract his body from hers, or he'd most certainly slip up and bite her in the middle of the dance floor. But...damn...how? She felt so good against him. Just one more song, and maybe he'd find the strength to let her go. He telepathically told the DJ to put on something slow. In a few seconds, the melodic voice of Alicia Keys flowed through the speakers.

"You feel perfect," she whispered.

"Thanks."

"Are you a cop?"

He chuckled. "Nope."

"Dealer?"

"Nope."

"Then why are you always outside my house?"

"You'll learn why soon. Probably tonight."

She rested her chin on his chest and looked up at him. That urge to kiss her again entered his soul, but he didn't dare. He looked away before she could see the desire in his eyes, but he was sure she could feel him pressed against her abdomen.

"Why can't you tell me?"

"It's not my place."

“Then whose is it?”

He didn’t answer her; instead, when the song ended, he swept up her hand and guided her through the crowd to the VIP area upstairs. This section of the club was specifically designed for high-level vamps to come and relax without feeling threatened. She looked around, taking in the silver and chrome area, as he steered her to a quiet, silver velvet-cushioned booth in the back. He’d acquired the club from Idris, who allowed him to run it when the master got tired of “keeping up with the young bloods.”

“Wow,” Nella exclaimed, looking around. “This is nice.”

“A bird told me that today’s your birthday.”

She smiled. It was a smile he’d spend the rest of his life dreaming about. A smile that made him remember there was light on the other side of the dark cloud that surrounded him.

“Who told you?”

“A bird.”

“Well, the bird’s right. It is.”

The waitress brought them a bottle of champagne. He popped the cork and began to pour. When she cooed over the blush color, he wondered if she realized it was the blood that made it that shade of pink and how far along she was in her turning.

“Let’s make a toast.” He raised his glass. “May all of your wishes come true, ma.”

She beamed. “That is so sweet.”

After touching their glasses together, they each took a sip. She winced after her first taste but quickly took another. He studied her as he draped his arm across the back of her seat.

“You’re not used to this, are you?”

She blushed as she lowered her glass. “No.”

“Get used to it. Your life’s about to change, ma.”

“How do you know so much about me?”

“Soon,” he said as he brushed his lips against her temple. “You’ll know soon.”

She settled into the space of his body and rested her hand on his thigh. It was an innocent gesture, but it aroused him. He stroked her bare shoulder with his fingers, coaxing a sigh from her. His fangs lengthened, and he used his free hand to push them back up into his gums.

“I’ll probably never see you again,” she said sadly.

“Why do you say that?”

“My mother. She’s crazy. I had to sneak out to come here tonight. I’ll be grounded until I’m a hundred.”

He laughed. “She just cares about you.”

“I’m an adult but she treats me like a baby.”

“Don’t stress, ma. She’ll come around.”

He didn’t know the full details of what all went down between Idris and Nella’s mother. Just that her mother was once destined to be a slayer, until Idris came along and she did something that not only produced Nella, but caused her to lose her status as well. He was sure that Nella knew nothing, which wasn’t right. She deserved to know her fate before this night and to have the right to choose whether she wanted to be a vamp or to remain in the human world.

It was beginning to get late—at least for her. She still had a big night ahead of her, if everything went according to Idris’ plan. He reached down to touch the velvety skin on the back of her hand, intending to remove her hand from his thigh, but he couldn’t find the strength. Resting his on top of hers, they watched the dancers below them.

“I don’t want to leave,” she sighed. “I want to stay in your arms forever.”

“I know, but I’d better get you home before I give your mom another reason to hate me.”

She giggled. “You’re not bad. She wouldn’t hate you.”

He buried his nose in her aloe-scented hair and inhaled. *If you only knew*, he thought.

“Still,” he said, “I don’t want to get on her bad side.”

“Okay.”

He waited by the front door while she spoke to her girlfriends. While they all turned, waved at him and giggled, he tried not to snarl. He had to remember that this was all new to her. Not just the club, but the vamp lifestyle. She’d have to grow up fast once she got to know her father. Nella was about to see things that would make the most hardened vampire cringe.

It seemed as if she was floating when she turned from her friends to walk toward him. He quickly looked away before she could see the desire in his eyes. Plus, his irises were beginning to turn crimson, and he didn’t want to scare her.

“Ready?” she asked.

No, he thought as he held open the door for her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She's only been gone for an hour, Helen reminded herself as she paced the small living room. *Don't panic.* In five-minute intervals, she glanced out of the window and up and down the dark, crowded street, watching for her daughter. She suspected it would be some time before her daughter returned, but she prayed Nella would come home early so she could spend a few moments with her before they were separated.

If she did return home.

She had intended to talk to Nella when she returned home that afternoon, but she'd found Nella asleep and didn't have the heart to wake her. Since her daughter was an adult, Helen understood that she couldn't control her any longer. But she didn't expect her to do this. She wrung her hands together as she paced. How could she not panic? Nella had defied her orders not to leave the house and had snuck out of her bedroom window like a common teenager. She was angry at her daughter. No. She was livid! Nella was probably out in some graveyard right now drinking blood, and it was nobody's fault but hers. Helen hugged herself as she paced to the window again.

If she had just trusted that Idris wasn't going to leave her for his wife, none of this would be happening. She thought back to the night she'd signed away her soul, when she had met Bu'Ble, the witch who'd tricked her, on the beach outside of Idris' Hampton lair. He had gone to Hell for a meeting, and Helen had decided to take a walk in the fresh night air. She shivered as the memory became more vivid behind her eyelids and remembered the cold twilight breeze on her skin. How her neck still tingled from Idris' passion bite. He was on her mind, as he often was, when the woman approached her.

At first, Helen thought the woman was a transient who would only ask her for change that she didn't have and be on her way. Yet as the woman neared her, there was something about her eyes that both intrigued and terrified Helen. They glowed. Not red like a vampire or yellow like a demon. The woman's eyes were a pale shade of green and stood out from her dark skin like emeralds.

Immediately, the hairs on the back of Helen's neck stood on edge. She should've heeded her instincts and ran the other way, but she was a slayer. So, she called her sword to her side and cautiously continued her journey. The woman was dressed in black rags that hung from her body. Her long silver dreadlocks reached the center of her back, and a black

scarf was tied around her head. As she neared the woman, Helen inhaled. The witch smelled of fresh blood. It caused Helen to gag. Again, her intuition told her to turn back, but she didn't.

"You look lost," Bu'Ble had said to her.

"No," Helen replied. "I know my way."

The woman motioned to her sword.

"You don't need that. I won't harm you, Helen."

Helen gasped and took a step away from her.

"How do you know my name?"

"I know because Esu sent me to find you."

"Why?"

"Your heart is heavy with worry. You love this vampire more than life. If that is so, would you give your life to produce another?"

"I don't have time for riddles."

Helen had started to walk away. She should've continued walking up the beach to the lair, but something the woman said made her stop. Yes, her heart had been heavy. She had lain in bed, night after night, praying for a way to make Idris human. Esu must have heard her prayers. Was this the sign she was looking for?

"I can help you," the woman said. "But you must promise to devote yourself to Esu, and all of your prayers will be answered."

Things that sound too good to be true usually are, yet Helen didn't heed this warning. Instead she listened as Bu'Ble explained the ritual. Her interest was piqued, but there had to be a catch. She knew the Yorba god Esu was also a trickster. He could've sent the witch not as a sign, but as a warning or punishment. She had turned her back on his teachings and calling to fall in love with a vampire.

"What does he want in return?"

"Just that you sign your life over to him as you promised."

Breaking from her thoughts, Helen sat on the couch, shredding the tissue she held in her hands. *Stupid*, she scolded herself as she returned to her memories. The next night, Bu'Ble had met her on the beach with the items she'd need to complete the ritual. The witch brought the girl. She should've known the girl wasn't a designated human, as Bu'Ble claimed, but an angel.

As Helen continued to think back to that night, she knew she should've seen the fine lavender light that covered the girl's skin as she pierced the girl's heart with her sword. That light was the main indication that the girl was an angel, but she didn't notice it until it was too late.

As the last frame in her memory faded, Helen sobbed. When the shadow in the corner moved, she

didn't blink. Not even when he walked around the wood table and sat next to her. The time was getting close. Her prayer barriers had been lifted. She could no longer ban him from her home. He always had permission to enter, anyway. She'd given it to him long ago and never rescinded the offer.

Helen had set up those prayer barriers to keep herself from getting hurt, but she'd never intended to keep them up as long as she did. She'd thought Idris would be so angry with her for what she did, selling her soul to have a child, that his wrath would be more than she could bear. Besides, she'd called him to her home. She needed his strength as she waited for their daughter to return home. There were details that needed to be worked out. Where would Nella live? Who would watch over her?

"Don't worry," Idris said gently. "I will take care of everything."

As he sat silently, patiently with her, Helen felt it. The love for him was still there, right under her breastbone. She'd never hated him; she hated herself. Helen bit her lip to keep from crying. Damn, she was tired of crying, tired of worrying. There was nothing she could do about it now. Helen was a woman of her word. If she owed Hell, she would have to pay her debt. Still, giving up her daughter wasn't something she could do easily.

In addition to asking Idris to watch over Nella, Helen had also wanted to apologize to him for all she had done. She'd wanted to clear the air, to leave nothing unrequited before she went to Hell. Yet now that he was here, she found herself at a loss for words. What do you say to someone you haven't spoken to in over twenty years?

"You don't have to say anything," he said.

"I owe you an apology. I'm sorry I kept you from your daughter. I shouldn't have done that."

"You were being a protective mother. You didn't want her to get hurt."

Helen smiled sadly. "But I brought this on myself. I didn't want you to visit because I didn't want to face your wrath."

Idris shook his head.

"I was angry that you did this without consulting me. I was angry that you would sell your soul for this child. I wasn't angry that she was created. I forgave you long ago."

His words surprised her. Helen looked up at the man she'd once loved. For all these years, Helen had thought her actions caused their love to be irretrievably broken. She'd never even hoped he might forgive her. He was a vampire, after all. She didn't think vamps were capable of such an emotion.

"I've always loved you," he admitted. "Even though I had to do it from afar."

His eyes still held that touch of danger that she'd fallen in love with. Helen looked down at her crumpled uniform. Suddenly, she felt dirty in his presence. She wanted to be presentable in her final hours. Sensing her discomfort, he changed her outfit to a simple white sleeveless wrap dress. He added a strand of pearls to her neck and pulled her hair back off her face in a simple bun at the base of her neck. Idris had always been thoughtful and she'd expected no less from him, though she probably didn't deserve his kindness.

"Thank you," she said with a small smile.

"I wish I could do more."

"You can't."

He covered her hand with his. She was so a foolish girl of sixteen when she did this and became Nella's mother. But she really couldn't blame youth, either. Standing, Helen went to the window. Not wanting her final moments to be filled with his pity, she refused to look at him. Her vow was to go out like the warrior she once was, that she should've been.

"Do you know where she is?"

"Yes. I can ask Lazarus to bring her back."

"No. I've kept her from her destiny long enough."

"I'll take care of her."

"I know. My only regret is that she'll be a vampire."

Idris chuckled. "This life isn't so bad."

She turned from the window and glared at him.

"I don't want my daughter drinking blood!"

"Is there an alternative?"

His words upset her. No. She supposed there was no alternative food for a vampire, but it was as if he were mocking her. Helen turned away from him so he couldn't see the hurt in her eyes.

"I'm not mocking you, Helen, but this is what we are, what my daughter will be."

"She's my daughter, too. I'd rather her be dead than undead."

Without comment, he joined her at the window and kissed her cheek. She allowed him to hold her and was taken aback. How could the embrace of a four-hundred-year-old master vampire be so tender? He chuckled at her thoughts. Hearing his laughter, she closed her eyes as the tears fell again. He held her, allowing her to cry. There was nothing left to do, except wait for Nella to come home...and for Hell to knock on her door.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The world froze around Nella as Lazarus leaned in to kiss her. It was a small kiss, planted on the center of her upper lip. She had closed her eyes when he had bent toward her. Now, she opened them, and he was gone. As if in a panic, she looked up and down the street for him, but she didn't see him. Only his scent and the feeling of his lips on hers remained. Before this moment, she'd never even kissed a man. Kissing Tyrell Atkins on the playground in fifth grade didn't count.

With a squeal, she jumped up and down. He kissed her! Her fangs pushed through her gums. Gasping, she covered her mouth with the palm of her hand when she heard movement on the other side of the door. Nella placed her free hand on the knob but wasn't ready to go inside. She had only gotten a small taste of freedom, and she liked it. Despite her mother's upcoming lecture, she wasn't ready to give it up. She was prepared to fight her mother on it, if need be.

Taking a deep breath, she finally opened her front door and screamed. Her mother stood in the hallway, clutching a rosary in one hand and a wooden stake in the other. The wild look in her mother's eyes

caused her blood to turn cold. Nella closed the door behind her and pressed her back against the cool wood.

“What’s wrong?” She kept her hand on the doorknob in case she had to run. Her mother relaxed, but Nella’s guard remained up. Something was wrong. Nella had never seen her mother in anything but her MTA uniform or a pair of jeans on the weekends. Why was she so dressed up? she wondered as she spied her mother’s beautiful white wrap dress. Wondering what was going on, she proceeded with caution.

“What kind of daughter sneaks around at all hours of the night?” her mother asked in a thick Jamaican accent. Her mother’s accent only appeared when she was angry.

Nella glanced down at her watch. “It’s only ten thirty.”

“You need to stay home,” her mother said. “You have no business running around in them streets.”

Nella threw her hands up in disgust and tried to edge past her mother. “I was celebrating my birthday. I’m twenty-one, an adult. I’m not some child anymore.”

“We have to talk,” Helen said as she allowed Nella to pass.

“Now?” Nella frowned.

Nella wasn't in the mood for one of her mother's lectures. She just wanted to rest a bit, and then maybe go back out to meet up with her girls who were still at the club. Or Lazarus. The urge to run to the window and look weighed heavily in her fingertips as she wondered if his car was parked outside yet. Nella glanced at her mother. There was something else in her eyes that she had never seen before. Tears? Had someone died? Nella softened. Her mother never talked about her family, just as she never talked about her father. Nella assumed that she'd never had one.

"What's wrong?"

"Go change out of that." Her mother motioned to Nella's dress. "You look like a hoochie coochie."

Nella rolled her eyes and stomped to her room. Instead of changing, she sat on her bed and touched her lips with trembling fingers. Tonight had been magical, and her mother was ruining it. What was going on? Was her mother dying? Was she dying? And why was her mother holding a wooden stake?

She stared at the figure of Jesus that hung dangerously low above her headboard. Her mother had hung it there, above her crib, when she was born. As Nella outgrew her crib and then her first beds, her mother had hung the cross lower and lower until the iron bottom point rested right between her eyes. Nella hissed at the image and turned her back.

A few minutes later, she finally changed into a plaid shirt and jeans. After she pulled her hair up into a ponytail, she shoved her feet into a pair of flip-flops. She stood silently, prepared to go out and get one of her mother's lectures. She was about to go to the window to see if Lazarus was there when she began to get nauseous.

"Pull it together, Nell," she told herself.

Whatever was in that house special probably took her body by surprise. Still, she couldn't help but feel that something more was happening to her. She could feel herself change, transform, molecule by molecule. The hairs on her arms stood up. Suddenly, her heart skipped a beat, before starting again. Nella moved back to her bed, intending to sit on the mattress, but missed and fell to the floor with a thud. As she convulsed against her white carpet, she heard the door open. Soft footsteps. A hand on her back.

"Drink this," her mother said softly.

A glass of water was set in front of her. Nella tentatively took a sip without sitting up. The water tasted bitter and burned as it slid down her throat. She gagged, thrashed against the floor. It felt like the liquid was burning a hole in her stomach.

"Don't fight it," her mother crooned, stroking her back. "Let it work."

Nella's eyes widened. Let what work? What did her mother give her? She found the strength to break from her mother's hold and crawled away, choosing to crouch in the small space between her bed and the window. Her mother was eerily calm, and Nella wondered why. Nella suddenly realized that her mother knew what was happening to her.

"What did you give me?" Nella asked, panting.

"Holy water."

Nella dry heaved. Why would her mother give her that? She looked at the glass that now sat on her desk. Tentatively, she crawled toward it. Holy water? She sniffed it, wrinkling her nose and frowning at the acidic scent. Taking another tiny sip, she coughed and spit it out when the bitter liquid hit her tongue.

"You used to be able to drink it with no problems."

Nella sat the glass back on the desk. "You used to give me this?"

"I gave it to you all the time. I put it in everything. Your food, your drinks, your bath..."

She covered her mouth to keep from vomiting. That meant her mother had always known. Had always known this day would come, but never told the person who needed to know—her! As she clutched the cool metal leg of her desk, she rested her forehead

against it. Her suspicions had been right: She was becoming a vampire.

“Why?”

“To protect you. To keep you safe.”

“To keep me from turning into a vampire?”

When her mother fell silent, Nella became pissed. The metal legs of the desk did nothing to ground her anger. Why was she becoming a vampire? Why hadn’t her mother said something before now? Could she have prevented it? Did she want to?

“I remember how you used to pray over me as I drank and ate all the time. I always wondered why.”

“I think you know now. I can smell the blood on your breath,” her mother said bitterly.

Nella touched her lips. Blood? Was that in the house special? And the champagne? Her whirling thoughts made her dizzy. Lazarus. Was he? Did he know? How? She needed to find him and talk to him again. Her mother was talking, but her thoughts prevented her from hearing the first part of her statement.

“I must start at the beginning. It’s time you know everything.”

“It’s a little late for that.” Her mother recoiled as if she had slapped her and sat heavily upon the edge of Nella’s bed with her shoulders slumped. Nella had never seen her mother so weary. Her mother began to

speaking. Just as she had when she was a child and her mother told her bedtime stories, she curled her legs under her and waited for her mother to begin. She had a feeling, however, that this was no ordinary story. This story, Nella could feel in the pit of her stomach, was going to change her life forever.

"I was born in Jamaica. My family comes from a long line of slayers, and I was in training to become one of them when I met your father. He was so handsome. From the moment I saw him, there was no question that he was my soul mate...

"I was sixteen. Your father was much older. He came to the islands many, many times. Each time, we would meet on the path and take long walks on the beach, under the moonlight. One night, he asked me to come to New York with him, and I did."

Helen stopped to wipe her eyes. "If I weren't only human—" She continued after a moment, "If I'd been able to believe in only the spirits, if I'd trusted that only love was enough, I would never have done what I did. But I want you to know that I did it out of love."

Helen paused. Nella didn't want her to stop talking. She listened intently, afraid to move, afraid to breathe, because she might miss something. For so long, she had tried to get her mother to talk about her father. The pain in her mother's eyes caused Nella's

heart to ache. Her mother still loved him, maybe never really stopped loving him.

“What did you do?” Nella whispered.

“I didn’t trust,” Helen said bitterly. “That your father was capable of loving someone like me. A human—promised to God, someone who can only give him love and nothing else in return. Since I didn’t believe it, I tried to make it so he would *have* to love me. I thought if I gave him something he wanted so badly for so long, something only I could offer, that would make him stay and love me. So, shortly after I arrived in New York, I met a woman. She knew of a way that could bond us together forever, but I would have to give up something in return.”

“What?”

“There are certain things you may or may not know about this world and the world that surrounds it. I have dedicated my life to ensuring that when you do find out and if you choose to walk his path, I won’t have to kill you.”

Nella sat back as a chill ran down her spine. What did her mother mean when she said she would kill her if she walked her father’s path? What was she talking about? Was her father a vampire? It made sense, yet at the same time, it didn’t. Nella wanted to ask, but she was afraid her mother would stop talking.

"The woman," Helen continued, "helped me to make your father human, for just one night. That night, we created you. But to do so..."

"What do you mean 'human'? What is he?"

"Your father is a vampire."

The color drained from Nella's face as her mother kept going.

"It was part of the deal. On your twenty-first birthday, tonight, you will turn. After midnight, you will be a full vampire."

This part didn't surprise her, since she'd already figured that out. All of the symptoms now made sense. But something else her mother said grabbed her attention.

"Deal? What deal?"

"I made a deal with the vampire council," Helen said. "I will no longer be in your life."

All the feeling drained from Nella's body. How could her mother do something like that? Even as inexperienced as she was, Nella knew never to make deals with the dark side...especially for a man, whether he was a soul mate or not. Then the rest of her mother's statement hit her like a ton of bricks. *She'll no longer be in my life.*

"I took the life of an angel," Helen said painfully. "To cover it up, I signed my soul over to the council. I

owe them twenty-one years of my life. I must work for them that long before I can die or be released.”

“Oh. My. God,” Nella whispered.

As soon as the words left her mouth, a searing pain consumed her body. She lay flat against the carpet as her mother again knelt beside her. Her mother was going to Hell. As much as she had wished to be free of her, she’d never wanted it to be like this. What was she going to do?

Lifting her head, her mother placed it in her lap. She stroked her hair, brushing her own tears into the strands. Nella only had thirty minutes left with her mother. Thirty minutes.

“I’m sorry,” her mother whispered. “I’m so sorry, Nella. My angel.”

Nella now understood why her mother tried so hard to protect her. Suddenly, images entered her mind as her mother transmitted it all to her with each stroke against her hair. The house had a prayer barrier in it, around it, through it. She kept Nella inside to keep her safe. As Nella buried her face in her mother’s lap, her mother showed her the ritual. Her father coming to life. The seed planted. The joy when he was told his seed still worked. The wrath when he learned of her mother’s betrayal.

“There must be some way to stop it,” Nella whispered.

“I have tried to reason with them, to bargain. I have waited for a death that will not come because they always intend to collect. There is no way out.”

Nella sat up and cupped her mother’s face in her hands. “There’s got to be a way to free you.”

Helen kissed her daughter. “No. You can’t fight this kind of evil.”

“What about my father? Could he...”

“He’ll be here soon. He’s dying to meet you.”

Before they could say anything more, a creature walked into the dark bedroom. The being had red wings and crimson eyes that cast a red shadow around the room. Judging by the eerie red light that radiated from the creature, Nella knew she wasn’t human. Nella watched, transfixed, before she realized this creature was here to collect her mother. In a panic, Nella clutched her mother’s arm.

“Please don’t do this.”

“Shhh.” Helen kissed her daughter’s forehead. “Don’t. It’ll only make it harder.”

The thing took her mother’s hand and pulled her to her feet. When she wrapped her crimson wings around her mother, Nella broke down. Screaming, she tried to break the hold of the being but couldn’t. Finally, the creature released her mother momentarily so that she could hug her. Nella clung to her mother,

but the creature pulled her mother's torso from her grasp.

"I love you, Nella," Helen said, blowing her a kiss. "Be strong."

Nella blinked, and they were gone. Her fangs again ripped through her gums as she yelled in anger and sank to her knees. Once on the floor, she slammed her fist against the carpet. This couldn't be happening. It had to be a dream. Sitting back on her knees, she slapped herself. There was no escaping it: she was wide awake. The rhythm of her heartbeat began to slow. She collapsed onto her side, hoping the transition would be quick so she could find a way to get her mother back.

CHAPTER NINE

Lazarus slowly opened the passenger side door and slid into the seat, taking a moment to find a comfortable position. He gave up and worked on his fangs, using his thumbs to push them back into place when they wouldn't shorten on their own. With a loud groan, he banged his head against the dashboard. Why did he have to kiss her?

"I take it you had a good time," Idris quipped from the backseat of the Jaguar.

"Forgive me, sir. Your daughter is..."

"I know," Idris chuckled. "And she hasn't come into her full power yet. Can you imagine when she does?"

Yes, he could imagine what she'd be like, but no, Lazarus didn't want to think about it. She was only half human, and he was having trouble keeping his fangs in check. He exhaled and accepted the coffee cup of warm blood Idris handed him.

"I'm concerned with the number of attempted abductions," Idris said. "Someone must know about Nella."

"But who?"

"I have a theory but no proof. We'll have to keep a closer eye on her."

Knowing that he'd be the one doing that, Lazarus drained his cup as well as the refill that Idris telepathically poured for him. There wasn't enough blood in the world to get him through one night alone with Nella. He decided to change the subject before Idris ripped his heart out and served it to him.

"Have you heard any more about the assassinations?"

"No. That worries me. I believe the assassinations are connected, but I don't know how."

"Could be a ruse," Lazarus offered as he tossed the empty cup out of the window. "To distract you while they go after Nella."

"Perhaps, but they should know I'll kill the bastard who even looks at my daughter wrong."

"Same here," Lazarus muttered under his breath.

Idris patted him on his shoulder. "I know. That's why I trust you with her life."

Again, Lazarus changed the subject to distract himself from the lingering feeling of her lips on his. "How did things go with her mother?"

"As well as can be when you've been sentenced to Hell."

Lazarus shuddered. "I'm sorry."

"What's done is done. After Nella's settled, we must teach her the ways of our species."

Lazarus smiled. “Why do I hear my name in that statement?”

Idris chuckled. “Because it is. I’ll be busy with the election. Much of her training and protection must come from you.”

“She’ll want to spend time with you, too. She hasn’t seen you.”

“When she was born, before her mother placed the prayer barrier around her, I would sneak into her room in the wee hours of the night and watch her sleep. I’ve never experienced such an intense feeling as that. Once the barriers were in place, I would just watch her grow up from across the street. I had hoped to one day get to meet her.”

“Wow...”

“You’ll experience that one day.”

Lazarus shook his head. “My time to be a baby’s daddy has passed, sir.”

“Never say never, son. I once said the same thing.”

“Are you worried about Nella’s reaction?”

“Of course. I don’t know what her mother has said about me. She does have an intense hatred for vampires.”

“That’s the slayer in her.”

Idris nodded in agreement to his comment. Lazarus turned and sent his gaze out of the window,

toward the tiny brownstone. His memory replayed the feeling of Nella in his arms. Her warmth wasn't something he was ready to let go of; he wanted to experience it again.

A bright red light flashed within Nella's bedroom and put him on guard. He knew that flash. The hunter had come to collect Nella's mother. He was about to open the car door when Idris stopped him.

"Give her some time," the master said.

Nodding, he let go of the handle but refused to tear his gaze from the window. When the light flashed again, he knew Helen was gone. Lazarus hung his head. He could only imagine Nella's pain at losing her mother and simultaneously finding out she was a vampire. How would she react when she learned her father was a master?

As the minutes ticked by slowly, Lazarus grew more and more anxious with each second. He wanted to go to her, hold her in his arms, take the pain away, but even he didn't have that kind of power. Plus, he had to remind himself, again, that she was a virgin. He couldn't take away her pain in the way he'd like.

"Patience," Idris reminded him.

Lazarus grimaced. Patience wasn't something he had in him, but he'd have to find it before dawn.

CHAPTER TEN

Nella sat in a ball in the center of her empty bedroom, rocking back and forth. Thoughts assaulted her mind like bullets. She was a vampire. She was about to meet her father for the first time. Her mother was in Hell. This was all too much for her to handle, and, honestly, didn't want to. She wanted to go back to bed and start this day all over again, but that wasn't possible.

Finally, after what seemed like days, she rose. Annoyed, she wondered what to do. Her mother had said her father was coming to collect her, so where was he? Refusing to cry, she wandered the empty hall of her home. Finding herself in the living room, she sunk into her mother's favorite armchair.

"Oh, God," she cried out.

Again, pain gripped her muscles when she said the words. She'd have to reprogram her mind because she was a vampire now. The horror of the realization that she couldn't say the sacred names she'd learned in church made her ill. Jumping up, she rushed into the bathroom and vomited. She'd have to spend the rest of her life drinking blood? Eww! But then, she already had, and it wasn't all that horrible.

She stumbled to the sink to splash cold water on her face. When she lifted her head, she didn't see a reflection. Great. Now how was she going to check her hair out? Or make sure her outfit didn't make her look fat? Lazarus popped into her head. Had he known? Why hadn't he warned her?

Nella found her way back into her bedroom and to her window, where she flung back the curtains. Sure enough, the Jag was parked across the street. She didn't see him; however she did feel him. His presence wrapped around her body like mist. It made her want to strip and be bad. She could now, being she was a vampire and all. After raising the window, she waved at the car's dark, tinted windows and motioned for him to come over.

Running her hands through her hair, she turned to unlock the front door so he could come in but stopped. Someone was calling her... in her head. Clearly hearing someone call her name, she turned back toward the window, thinking it was Lazarus. It wasn't. This call was erotic and caused her nipples to strain against her shirt. She closed her eyes, letting the call wash over her like a breeze as a third call, then a fourth call, entered her mind. Each one competed to be heard over the others.

Nella grasped the buttons of her shirt between her fingers and slowly unbuttoned each one. Hissing

in response to the calls, she let the material fall to the floor. Her fangs ripped through her gums, and she moaned as the calls intensified. She hooked her fingers in the clasp of her pink bra, ready to pull it off. Suddenly, something covered her chest. When she opened her eyes, Lazarus held his jacket against her.

“That’s one way to get kidnapped,” he said.

“If you’re the one doing it, I’d go willingly.”

She didn’t recognize the husky voice that escaped from her mouth but made no attempt to cover up as she hung out of the window to touch one of his soft dreads. Slowly, she ran her fingers up the shaft to the root and down to the tip. When he quivered, she chuckled, but realized he made no effort to move away.

“Stop it.”

“Why?”

“You don’t understand what you’re doing, ma.”

“I think I do.”

She suddenly kissed him hard on his lips while she twirled the silky rope around her fingers. He leaned away before she could deepen the kiss and carefully removed his hair from her grasp. Pouting, she clutched his jacket to her chest as though it was his body as she slowly regained her composure.

“What...”

“They were trying to draw you out with a mating call. That wasn’t fair. Especially for a new turn who’s also a master’s daughter.” He paused, turning to address something, or someone, in the invisible night. “Rest assured that I *will* handle it.”

She blinked as the calls stopped and the fog began to lift. Master’s daughter? Mating call? He nodded, and she stepped back from the window. That meant that he knew. He nodded again.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It wasn’t my place. It was family business.”

She should’ve been angrier, but she wasn’t. He was right. Turning her back, she picked up her shirt and paused. She didn’t know how she was going to put it on without lowering the jacket. That simple dilemma shouldn’t have set her off, but it did, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Nella,” he said.

She turned back to the window. “You know my father?”

“Yes.”

“Is he here?”

“Yes.”

She wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “All this time...you weren’t interested in me. You were watching me for my father.”

“Yes and no. Your pop asked me to watch you, but that wasn’t why I kissed you. Look, ma. You’d better meet him and talk to him before we have this convo.”

“Okay,” she said, although she didn’t feel much better.

“Put on your shirt. I’ll get your pop and meet you at the front door.”

When he left the window, she laid the jacket on her bed and put on her shirt. His scent hit her nose as she picked up his leather jacket. She inhaled deeply. The metallic sandalwood scent caused her fangs to lengthen. In a daze she walked toward the front door, still holding his jacket to her nose. She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she wanted him. Tonight. His tall frame filled the glass in the oak door. She flung it open and stared up into his blue eyes, and he flinched as if she had hit him. When he licked his full lips, it took everything within her not to kiss him again. He’d changed from his suit into a red polo shirt and black cargo shorts with black boots.

“Hey,” she said, suddenly nervous, though he’d already seen her almost naked.

“What’s up, ma?”

Her lips began to quiver. His simple question reduced her to rubble. Suddenly his arms were around her. He pulled her to his chest and stroked her

back while she cried. She was such a dork. Here she was, bawling like a baby in front of this big, strong vampire.

“Don’t worry about it. A lot’s happened in a short time. This would’ve reduced anyone to tears.”

“You’ve got to stop reading my mind.”

“Naw. It might come in handy one day.” He chuckled.

She giggled. Leaning away but not leaving his arms, she looked up at him. He wiped away the remaining tears from her eyes with the pad of his thumb.

“You ready to meet your pop?”

“No. I look a mess.”

“You look beautiful. He’s cool. You’ll like him.”

When he dropped his arms, she took a deep breath, trying to calm the swirl of emotions that raged inside of her. She nodded, and Lazarus stepped aside. A tall, thin man wearing an expertly tailored dark suit stood behind him. Nella gasped. Her father’s face was too soft to be that of a vampire. He had her amber eyes, and her high cheekbones. “Dad,” she whispered, afraid to say the word out loud.

When he nodded, she burrowed into his arms, knocking him off the top step and onto the second. She buried her face in his chest and covered it with tears. For so long, she’d dreamt of this moment, and

now it was here. She had a dad—a real live father. He kissed her on the top of her head. She had questions, a lot of questions, but for now, she was content to be in his arms.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Idris hadn't expected this. He hadn't expected Nella would be happy to see him. He hadn't expected her to hug him. At best, he had hoped for a lukewarm reception after he did some fast and furious explaining as to where he had been for the last twenty-one years. This moment was a gift he'd always appreciate, one that would make even an old vampire like him melt. He held his daughter close to his chest and closed his eyes.

She was still warm. He knew that when she did turn, she might retain some of her human characteristics. It was also possible that the change hadn't fully taken place yet. Maybe the process would take longer for her because she was a hybrid. He didn't really care. His daughter was in his arms, and that was all that mattered.

"Dad...I..."

"Shhh. We'll have plenty of time to talk."

"But, Mom..."

"I know, my angel. There's a lot to explain. Right now, just breathe. Tomorrow, we'll talk."

When she tightened her embrace around his waist, his soul suddenly felt lighter. This was something he'd never experienced as a vampire:

unconditional love. He kissed her again, finally experiencing joy for the first time in over four hundred years. He couldn't wait to teach her about being a vampire, about his business. It would all be hers, one day. Maybe she and Lazarus could rule together.

He glanced at his protégé. Lazarus leaned against the wrought-iron railing that framed the concrete steps, watching the traffic crawl by the home. Idris was grateful to have someone as loyal and trustworthy as his right hand. He couldn't think of anyone better to protect Nella. It also didn't hurt that Lazarus was falling in love with his daughter. Lazarus stiffened when he picked up on his thought.

I am not.

Good, Idris teased, because she'll have to sleep in your chamber.

Lazarus again bristled and turned to look at him. "What?!"

Nella lifted her head as Lazarus quickly turned away. Idris chuckled. It was the only way to ensure his daughter's safety at all times. He also knew that Lazarus would be a perfect gentleman. Lazarus grumbled but nodded.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Do you want to come in?"

He shook his head. "It's getting late. I'm sure you're tired."

She shrugged. "I don't know what to do."

"Do you want to stay with me?"

"I think that's best. I can't afford to stay here on my own."

The house secretly belonged to him and had already been paid for. He'd never revealed this to Helen, for fear that she'd reject his attempt to provide for her and Nella. When she'd paid rent each month, Idris had set it aside in a trust for his daughter. Knowing this day would come, he didn't want her to worry about anything, if she chose to reject this lifestyle.

"What am I going to do?" she whispered.

He tilted her chin back so he could look into her eyes. Her gaze was so innocent. Would that change once she began to experience what it meant to be a vampire?

"That's not for you to worry about right now. Why don't you gather some things and I'll take you home."

"Okay. Thank you."

He kissed her forehead before releasing her from his embrace. With a fluttering heart, he watched her bound up the stairs and go into the house. Lazarus moved to stand beside him.

"What's all this about her sleeping in my chamber?"

He smiled. "You saw what happened in the window."

"Yeah, but..."

"I can't risk someone trying that again. Despite who I am. She'll be safer at your side than away from it."

"Maybe, but..."

He turned to look at Lazarus with amusement.

"That's a direct order. I won't argue with you on this."

Lazarus sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "Fine."

He clamped a hand on his protégé's shoulder. "That's my boy. You should help her while I go address those calls."

Lazarus smirked. "Sure you don't want to trade?"

He shook his head. "The message needs to come from me."

"Of course."

"I'll be right back."

In a flash, Idris became one with the night and teleported to an area across town where he'd traced the first call. He didn't bother knocking; he simply broke down the door to the apartment of the surprised vamp. The male scrambled to his knees when he entered. Every limb in the vamp's body

trembled. Idris looked around the dingy apartment and tsked.

“You have nerve to call her when you live in such squalor.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t know she was yours.”

Idris clasped his hands behind his back. “What do you know about her?”

The stench of urine filled the air as the vamp peed on himself.

“Nothing. Just that she’s new. The word on the street is there’s a bounty on her.”

Idris raised his eyebrow. How could that have happened in his territory without him knowing about it? If the order were from another vamp, he would have been aware of it. The order must have come from someone higher up on the chain. Someone above him. Someone from the council, perhaps?

“Who?”

“I don’t know. A name wasn’t attached.”

This was clearly a waste of time. The vamp didn’t know anything more. Swiftly, he separated the vamp’s throat from the rest of his body. Idris shook the gore from his hands as the body turned to ash at his feet. He left the apartment in search of the others. Those vamps, too, met the same fate. His work done, he picked up Aponi’s telepathic call as he returned to Nella’s apartment.

“Where are you?”

“I’m performing some cleanup in my territory. What is it?”

“Nothing.” She sighed. “Someone was looking for you.”

He tensed. “Who?”

“Someone from the council. He didn’t leave a name.”

Idris frowned. Why would someone look for him at his home, and why would they contact his wife instead of calling him directly? Something didn’t sound right. He was back in front of the brownstone. Neither Lazarus nor Nella had emerged from the house yet. As a father, he didn’t want to know what was taking them so long, but they needed to speed up the process in light of this new information.

“I’ll be home shortly,” he said.

He disconnected the call and mentally told Lazarus to hurry. Then he climbed into the backseat of the car, settling into the leather seat. He didn’t like what was going on around him and needed to get Nella up to speed, and fast. Closing his eyes, he hoped that Helen was at least safe where she was in Hell. Maybe one day he’d get to visit her there. Right now, he needed to get their daughter settled in her new life as a vampire.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Your pop said to hurry up,” Lazarus said from where he leaned against the doorjamb.

She nodded as she neatly folded her shirts to put into her suitcase. He shook his head. See, that was the difference between men and women. Ask him to pack, he’d be done in two seconds. Her? She was working on her second suitcase.

“I can’t decide what to take,” she said.

“Take a little now. I can come back for the rest later.”

“Okay.”

She moved back to her dresser and closed the drawer, only to open another. He felt weird being on this side of the window. Her bedroom could fit into his chamber and there’d still be room left over. This was a typical girl’s room—pink and white, full of pillows and stuffed animals. It wasn’t fitting for a woman like Nella. For her, he envisioned something more sophisticated, elegant. She deserved more, deserved better than this.

As he studied the room, his gaze fell on her again. Lazarus shifted to lean his back and head against the solid oak door frame. Didn’t she realize the danger she was in? Her lackadaisical motions told

him that she didn't. He didn't want to be the one to break the news to her, but she needed to know.

"Your life's in danger, ma."

"Really? Is that why those things were after me?"

Instantly, he went on guard. "What things?"

Her lips were pressed together, but he clearly read her thoughts about the invisible orbs. Damn it! He should've been there to help her and hated that such a small thing like the sun could prevent him from protecting her at all times. Idris was going to flip when he told him that enforcers were sent after her—in broad daylight.

"Fuck! Why didn't you tell me at the club?"

Her eyes widened at his anger as she held the t-shirt she was folding in front of her like a shield.

"I didn't know what they were. I didn't know what *you* were until an hour ago."

Lazarus raked his hand through his hair and tried to calm down, but he was losing the battle. While she was right, she still should've told him, but he also should've picked up on it. He was indeed slipping. Or rather, she was making him lose focus on his job.

"What do you do for my father?"

"A little bit of everything. Mostly security."

"You're his hit man?"

He frowned at her.

"I doubt you even know what a hit man is, ma," he teased. "But yeah, I'm his enforcer."

"Well," Nella began, reaching for her underwear to fold and place in the suitcase. He tried to avert his eyes. "How does this thing work?"

"What thing?"

"Being a vampire. I was reading on this website how vampires sleep all day and drink blood to stay alive. Is that true?"

Lazarus swallowed a laugh. "That's part of it."

"What's the other part?"

"Don't think on it tonight, ma. We'll talk about it in the morning."

When he looked at her, she was adding bras to the growing pile of clothing. He hoped she wouldn't ask anything else, because he couldn't answer her until his fangs retracted. Scanning the chamber, he turned his thoughts to where he was going to put her things in his room, since he'd never lived with a woman before, and he hadn't planned on doing so.

"What does it taste like?"

Lazarus started to tell her that she'd had it at the club but decided against it. The blood in her drinks was in such small amounts that he doubted she could taste it. He hadn't wanted to put in the normal amount since he wasn't sure how far along she was in her turn.

"It's sweet," Lazarus admitted as he closed his eyes. "With a kick. That's the good stuff. The bad stuff is bitter and acidic."

"How can you tell the good from the bad before you bite someone?"

"By scent. Come on, now. We have to get out of here."

"Why? Oh, the sun, huh?"

"That. And your life is in danger."

"Right. Is it because of my father?"

He opened his eyes. "Yeah. And you're fresh bait as a new turn."

"Oh."

Moving to the bed, he closed the lid on the second full suitcase and locked it. He picked up both with little effort and looked at her. Her long onyx hair had come undone from its ponytail. Strands hung loose to the center of her back, and her eyes were puffy from crying. Still, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

"Will he let me visit her?"

"Hell ain't the kind of place you want to visit, ma. 'Sides, you can't."

"Why not?"

He turned and walked toward the front door, and she followed a few paces. Suddenly, she gasped. Dropping the suitcases, he turned around, ready to

fight whoever made her gasp like that. She covered her heart with her hand and looked up at him.

“Am I dead?”

“What?”

“Am I dead?”

He paused. “Do you feel dead?”

“Well...no, but if I’m a vampire, don’t I have to be?”

Lazarus blinked and chose his words carefully. He had to keep reminding himself that this was all new to her. Patience, her father would tell him. He’d need a lot of it over the next few days. Turning back around, he picked up the suitcases again, balancing them under one arm, and prepared to open the door.

“You’re not a full vamp yet, ma. You’re a hybrid ‘cause of your mom.”

“Oh.”

“You ask too many questions,” he muttered as he balanced both cases in one arm to open the door.

“Isn’t that how you find out things?”

“Yeah,” he said as he stepped onto the landing to give the suitcases to the driver. “But, damn...”

She giggled. “I’m sorry. There’s so much I don’t know.”

“You don’t need to know it all in one night. Like your pop would say, ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day.’ You’ll learn what you need over time.”

“Did you?”

He shrugged. “I’m still learning some things.”

She stepped back to study him. When her gaze raked his torso, it took everything in him not to grab her and kiss her. Lazarus waited for her next question. He could sense it forming in her mind, along with her indecision on whether to ask it, as she didn’t want to offend him. Crossing his arms over his chest, he waited for her to ask it.

“What?”

“How old are you?”

“A c-note.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You’re a hundred years old.”

He nodded.

“You don’t look it.”

Frowning, he closed the distance between them and stood directly in front of her. She twirled a strand of hair around her finger as she shifted her weight to her other foot. If he smiled, he’d give his true feelings away. Instead, he allowed his fangs to lengthen for effect. Her breath hitched at the sight of them. A shiver ran down his spine and settled into his groin. His eyes began to turn crimson, but he quickly closed them so he didn’t totally scare her.

“You tryin’ to say that I’m old?”

“I thought you were my age.”

“Age is a state of mind, your pop also says.”

“How old is he?”

“Ask him.”

“I’m asking you.”

“Like I said, you ask too many damn questions. Your pop’s ready to go.”

“Fine.”

He didn’t move. Instead, he bent slowly and brushed her lips with his. The kiss was pure reflex—a quickie. But it wasn’t fast enough. His lips still tingled from the earlier kiss. And this one just burned the sensation of her soft lips against his into his memory. The car horn sounded before he could deepen the kiss. He pulled away and took her hand in his.

“You do like me,” she whispered in awe.

Instead of answering her, he ushered her out of the door and closed it behind her, making sure it was locked before dragging her down the stairs and across the street. He opened the back door and waited while she climbed in beside her father. After closing the door, he took a seat in the front, wondering how he was going to make it through the day with her beside him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As the car pulled away from the curb, Nella could barely contain her excitement. She was anxious to see her father's house. In her dreams, she imagined it to be somewhere in the country, away from the city lights. *Did he have another family?* Maybe she had half or step-siblings. That would be cool. She'd always wanted a sister.

"No," her father said, answering her unspoken thought. "I don't have other children."

Stunned, she briefly looked out of the car window to hide her amazement. *Did all vampires read minds?* Maybe she'd need to be careful with her thoughts, but she didn't know how. She turned back to look at him.

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"Will I meet her?"

"Perhaps. She doesn't know about you, yet."

"Why?" she asked as she gripped her father's hand and studied the raised dead veins beneath his pale brown skin.

"Aponi is..."

"A backstabbing snake," Lazarus finished for him.

She noticed that her father smiled at Lazarus' comment rather than disagreeing or chastising him for it. Her excitement turned to fear. What if her stepmother didn't like her? Would she treat her badly, like Cinderella? *That's it!* she realized. That fairy tale was exactly what this felt like, except she was becoming a vampire instead of a princess.

"Don't worry," her father said. "I'll make sure she won't harm you."

Nella gulped, wondering what kind of woman he was married to. When they drove past the Empire State Building, she turned to gawk at the massive structure. It had always been a dream of hers to tour the landmark. She'd had a chance, in sixth grade for a field trip, but her mother refused to sign her permission slip and never explained why. Now, she realized it may have had something to do with her father.

"Is Mom dead?"

"No," her father replied as he wrapped both of his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. "Hers is a fate worse than death."

"I'm scared," she confessed. "This is all my fault."

"No, it's not. Your mother made this choice."

"So that she could have me."

"Nella." Her father's voice was stern. "This isn't your burden to carry. It's too late in the morning to discuss this. We'll do it in the evening."

"Fine. How old are you?"

"Just over four hundred years old."

"Wow. You've been around a long time."

"Don't remind me."

"And I thought Lazarus was old."

Lazarus snorted while her father chuckled. She was teasing Lazarus, of course. He was the most handsome one-hundred-year-old she'd ever seen. Despite how old he was, she longed to be in his arms. Her lips still tingled from his kiss, and she wondered how it would feel to sleep next to him tonight.

She fell silent as the car wound through the maze of city streets toward the George Washington Bridge. They would be crossing into New Jersey. Nella realized that this was the first time she'd ever been out of the city. An idea hit her as she gazed at the dark, murky water of the Hudson River. She could reinvent herself. There was so much she wanted to do and experience that she never could before. Now she could. Her excitement returned.

Starting tomorrow, she was going to go out and experience all this city had to offer. Her father shook his head. Suddenly, she heard his voice in her mind as he telepathically transmitted his thought.

I want you to explore your freedom, but I don't want you going by yourself.

"But Lazarus will be with you," she answered out loud.

No, he'll be at your disposal at all times.

She frowned. "What's going on? Is it about those things from earlier?"

He father tensed. *Crap! Why did she open her big mouth? The expression on his face told her that he was beyond angry. After he'd calmed down, he began speaking to her telepathically. Until I'm able to flush out the threat, you must remain with Lazarus or myself at all times, understand?*

She pouted, but he had a point as she remembered how Ricochet tried to grab her last night. And the mating calls. Was her father worried that the attacks were connected? What did they want with her? As she looked at her father, and the expression of rage that still lingered in his eyes, she decided against asking him about it.

"Are we there yet?"

"Almost."

"What is a master vampire? What do you do?"

"I govern our territory."

"Have you killed anyone?"

"Yes."

While this information should've upset her, it didn't. She snuggled closer to him.

"Do you kill people when you drink their blood?"

He laughed. "I think we need to have a talk about vampires."

Snickering, Lazarus shook his head.

"More questions."

"I wasn't talking to you," she countered.

"I don't mind," her father interjected. "It shows that she has an inquisitive mind."

Nella settled for sticking her tongue out at Lazarus even though she really wanted to grab him. She wanted to kiss him, just not in front of her father. Maybe later, when they were alone in bed. Seeing his shoulders stiffen, she realized he obviously had read her thought. Well, she didn't care anymore. He'd be the perfect one to help her start over by popping her cherry. He cleared his throat and sent her a look that told her to stop it.

They drove into a dark underground tunnel before emerging into a parking garage. The driver pulled the car in front of a bank of elevators, and then hopped out to open her father's door. Lazarus opened hers, swatting her on the butt as she walked by him. She rolled her eyes, but inside, she was giddy.

A servant rushed out of the elevator to collect her suitcases and then disappeared. Looking around, she couldn't get a sense of where she was. It didn't feel like they were in the country, however. Her father rounded the car to pull her into his tight embrace.

"I must say good night." Idris said as he quickly hugged her. "Lazarus will take care of you from here."

"You're not coming upstairs?"

"There are some affairs that I must address. Plus, it's been a long day for you. You need rest."

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Of course," her father said as he kissed her on her forehead.

Nella waited next to the elevator while he and Lazarus talked. She wondered what her father was telling him. Was it about her? They embraced before Idris climbed back into the car and Lazarus walked toward her. Without a word, he stepped into the elevator and held the door back so that she could enter. After she did, he pressed a button for one of the upper floors.

Judging by his body language as he stalked to the corner and the way his jaw pulsed, she could tell he was going to explode. But she didn't understand why he was so angry—or about what.

“If you’re gonna be thinking stuff like that,” he said as he clenched his teeth, “you need to at least put a private box around it.”

She blushed. “My dad heard me?”

“As did half of the vamps in New York.”

She flinched. He was genuinely angry with her, but she still didn’t understand why. She hadn’t realized her thoughts had been broadcast to everyone. Plus, she didn’t know how to put a box around them.

“I’ll teach you,” he said. “But you have to realize there’s a lot about this side of the light that you don’t know. Shit that can get you killed, understand?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

He exhaled, and then turned to look at her. The expression in his eyes had softened and his shoulders weren’t as tense, but he was still on guard. It still wasn’t enough to keep her away from him. Nella inched closer to where he stood. She wanted to wrap her arms around his waist, lay her head on his chest, but didn’t think it wise.

“I just don’t want anything to happen to you on my watch.”

She touched his arm. “It won’t.”

The doors opened, and she stepped into a small foyer. To her left was a large formal dining room, to her right a winding staircase that led to the floors below. In front of her was the living room with a large

picture window that overlooked the New York skyline. Nella was immediately drawn to the window, where she stood looking out over the dark buildings. To her right, she could make out a sliver of light slicing through the dark sky. Lazarus gently took her shoulders and guided her to the spiral staircase.

“This is amazing,” she exclaimed.

He shrugged. “It ain’t bad.”

“Where’s Aponi? Is she here?”

“Upstairs in your pop’s chambers. Don’t worry about her, though, ma.”

The black oak doors at the bottom of the stairs opened to a dark sitting room. He turned on the light while she looked around. Dark bamboo floors flowed into the sleeping chambers. Red and black leather seats filled the center of the room, along with a large plasma television. A stereo and a rack full of CDs lined the wall to her right.

She peeked into the sleeping chamber. It was a windowless room with a black oak canopy bed made up with red and silver sheets and a matching patterned comforter. There was a doorway to the bathroom on her left, a closet next to it. Her suitcases stood in front of it. When she inhaled, the room smelled like him, freshly burned sandalwood with a dash of musk.

“Make yourself at home,” he said.

“Okay.”

Nella looked around but wasn't sure what to do with herself. She tucked her hands into her front pockets and yawned. He moved effortlessly around the room, turning down the sheets, putting her suitcases in the closet. When he finished, she was still standing in the same spot.

“In case you do get hungry—” He showed her the refrigerator in the sitting room. The top row was filled with bottles of blood, while the bottom row contained water, meat, bread and fruit.

“I had them add the human stuff in case you can't drink the blood yet.”

Nella smiled. “Thank you.”

He stripped off his shirt as he walked to the bathroom, and she saw his name was tattooed in cursive on the back of his neck, while an eagle spanned much of his left bicep. His pale chest was smooth and muscular. Nella had to lean against the sofa table for support; he was breathtaking. At the opening of the bathroom, he paused and turned back to look at her.

“I'm sorry, ma. Do you want to shower first?”

“Umm...yeah...”

With a nod, he sat in the recliner, kicking off his boots and shoving the buds of his iPod into his ears. He looked up at her, caught her staring at him with

lust-filled eyes. Blinking quickly, she almost ran inside the closet. Nella fumbled around in both suitcases before she realized she'd forgotten to pack her pajamas. Cursing, she grabbed her bath gel and left the room.

When she went back into the suite, she could hear what he was listening to: Rick Ross. Her mother never allowed her to watch rap videos. Instead, she was forced to listen to jazz or classical—anything without words. To get around her mother, she would sit at her window and listen to the radios of the cars that passed.

Nella tapped him on his hard shoulder, and he looked up at her. Before she could stop herself, she kissed him lightly on his lips. Though she wanted him, she was surprised when he didn't jerk away or tell her to stop. She broke away first, before she started something that she wasn't ready to finish.

"I don't have my pajamas."

"You had to kiss me to tell me that?"

"No."

When he stood and walked into the closet, she followed. He fished a t-shirt and a pair of boxers from one of the dressers and handed them to her. She clutched the items to her chest as if they were the most precious thing she'd ever received.

"Thank you."

“The towels are in the linen closet. Don’t use all the hot water.”

Nella smirked at him as he walked by and turned in time to get a good look at his firm ass. Her fangs lengthened as she walked into the bathroom. It was going to be a long morning. She didn’t know how she would make it through the day without throwing herself at him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Walking in after his shower, Lazarus noticed the bedroom was quiet. The sun had been up for only a few minutes, and he wasn't sleepy. He'd always been an insomniac—dead and alive. Besides, he didn't know where he was going to sleep. He thought about sneaking out and sleeping in the guestroom, but Idris would know. It was clearly too dangerous to sleep next to her in the bed, especially since they couldn't seem to stop kissing.

After clearing his throat, he decided on the recliner. Nella was still sitting up in the bed as she watched him cross the room. He grabbed one of the extra black blankets and a pillow from the bed before settling into the leather chair.

"You don't have to sleep over there," she murmured. "This is your bed. We can share."

"No."

"Why?" she whispered, her voice so low that he barely heard it. "Did he tell you not to touch me?"

No, he thought as he released the lever to raise the footrest. Her father told him to do the opposite. Idris believed that if the vamps smelled another male vamp's scent on her, especially his, they'd leave her alone. He just advised Lazarus to be careful with her

heart. Even with her father's blessing, Lazarus didn't think he could do it. He wanted to, very badly, but not like this.

The leather material stuck to the back of his thighs. This was why he should've worn pajama pants instead of boxer shorts and a tank-style undershirt, which was also getting on his nerves. Normally, he didn't sleep in anything, but desperate times called for desperate measures. He dimmed the lights but kept them on, in case she needed to get up during the night, and pulled the blanket over his shoulders.

"Night," he muttered.

"Lazarus. Come here."

"No."

The slow hiss that escaped her lips caused his cock to harden. Sitting up, he looked at her. She knelt in the middle of the bed. Her long black hair was wild and loose around her shoulders. A crimson halo formed around her irises as her fangs lengthened beneath her upper lips. Oh. Shit. That wasn't fair.

He turned his back to her. Pretended he didn't see her leap off the bed and stalk toward him. She yanked the blanket from his torso, tossed it on the floor and straddled his lap. Her mouth was on his before he could gather himself. Instead of stopping her, he parted her lips with his tongue and tasted the sweetness of her mouth.

Moaning, she pressed her breasts into his chest. Her rigid nipples brushed against his. He gripped her hips, intent on pushing her away, but was unable to find the strength. Circling her waist, he pulled her closer to him and inhaled. She smelled like strawberries. The same scent that lingered in the stall and drove him insane as he showered.

“Make love to me,” she whispered. “Please...”

When he touched her bare thigh, her skin scorched his hand. Only the thin fabric from the crotch of her panties separated them. It would be easy to take her. So very easy. But not like this. He tore his mouth away from hers.

“Nella. We can’t do this.”

“Just this once...”

“No.” He smoothed back a lock of hair that fell across her cheek.

“Why?”

“I want your first time to be perfect. With someone who loves you.”

She sat back as his words sunk in. “I’m so stupid.”

“You ain’t stupid, ma. I get it. It’s hard to resist that urge when you first turn.”

“Was it like this for you?”

“Probably worse. I wanted to fuck...I mean...sleep with every female who crossed my path. But I was also angry.”

“At being turned?”

He nodded as he tightened his arms around her.

“I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, ma. I didn’t want to be a vamp. I didn’t want to leave my family, but they were afraid that I’d bite them, you know.”

“That’s sad.”

He shrugged. “What’s done is past.”

She giggled. “You sound like my dad.”

“Been hanging with him long enough.”

“Have you killed anyone?”

“Yep. Sometimes it can’t be helped. Like, if anyone tried to mess with you, I’d take out that motherfucker and not even blink.”

He was glad when she smiled but didn’t ask any more questions. The subject of his family and his past life always brought him down. She’d learn more about him soon enough. Tonight, he just wanted to hold her for a while until she fell asleep. As she relaxed in his arms, he could tell she was fighting sleep.

“You’d better get some sleep,” he told her.

“No offence, but your recliner isn’t too comfortable.”

In one swift move, he stood and swept her up into his arms. She curled against him as he carried her to the bed and deposited her in the center of it. Lazarus hesitated before climbing in beside her, and he turned her back to his chest to crush her against him before pulling the linens over them.

“Better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

When strands of his hair fell across her shoulder, she picked one up and twirled it between her fingers.

“You have beautiful hair,” she said.

“Thanks.”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “You should sleep, too. I don’t mean to keep you up.”

“I don’t sleep, ma,” he said with a yawn.

“Liar.”

“I don’t lie either.”

Turning away from him, she closed her eyes. In no time, her body relaxed as sleep overtook her. Without moving, he turned off the lights and made sure the doors were locked. He closed his eyes. Soon, the rhythm of his breath matched hers, and sleep claimed him for the first time in years.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

At dusk, a servant came to collect her for breakfast and she was wide awake. Had been for hours. Nella sat in the recliner and watched Lazarus sleep through the morning. Clearly he was lying about not being able to. She kissed him on his temple before tiptoeing out of the chambers to meet the servant in the hallway.

She had no idea what to wear, and she hoped her white button-down shirt and jeans would be acceptable. Maybe later, she could ask her father to let her go shopping, though she really couldn't see Lazarus walking beside her, carrying an armful of bags.

Her father sat at the end of a glass table that could seat at least twenty people. He looked so handsome in his black pinstriped suit and blue tie. When she entered the dining room, he rose from his chair. The soles of her sneakers squished against the tiled floor as she made her way to him and into his arms.

"You're so beautiful," Idris said.

"Thank you. Is it okay to call you 'Dad'?"

He chuckled as he released her. "Of course. I'd be honored."

As he held out her chair for her, she kissed his cheek. Directly across from the table were floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the Hudson. She gawked at the view as the warmth from the massive fireplace behind her warmed her back.

“How did you sleep?” he asked as servants buzzed around them.

“Okay, I guess.” She frowned. “How will I know when I’ve turned?”

“Well... Let’s start with this.”

He pushed his crystal goblet in front of her. The metallic scent told her that it contained blood. She sniffed it, made a face and pushed the glass away as her stomach rumbled. Chuckling, he pulled it back toward him, and then signaled to a servant who sat a plate of bacon, eggs, and toast in front of her. She dug in without hesitation.

“But I still have fangs,” she questioned between bites.

“Your body is probably still in flux.”

“Because I’m a hybrid.”

He nodded as he sipped his meal. “It will take longer for you.”

She wiped her mouth with a napkin before sipping her orange juice. “How did you turn?”

“I was born in Ghana,” he said. “I farmed with my family. We didn’t have a lot. I was maybe fifteen

when the elders of the village got greedy. They decided to enter into a new type of trade with some white men, Europeans who showed up at the village one day.”

Idris paused. “I had never seen the men before. Neither had anyone else in the village. I thought the elders were selling the land to the white men; instead they sold us. We were captured like livestock and shackled together. Everyone. Men, women and children. After everyone in the village had been gathered together, we were separated. The men placed in one hut, the women in another.”

“I remember reading about that happening in history class.”

He nodded. “I lived it. We were taken down to the sea and were loaded into a boat, strapped down to the floorboards. Anyone who protested was whipped. Some were killed. When the ship sailed, we had no idea where we were going or if we would be alive when we got there. I tried to keep track of the days, but lost count after about a month. Finally we landed in Egypt. One by one, we were taken off the ship to a room near the dock.

“It was a dark room,” he continued. “There were no windows and it smelled like death. We were each tied to a table. A man in a long black robe emerged from the shadows. He bit us on the neck before

disappearing back into the shadows. Those who resisted were killed. Those who weren't killed were transferred to a second ship and taken to Portugal."

Her eyes swelled with tears. She'd always wondered what it would be like to live through that period of time. Now she knew. And to be bitten like some common animal. Nella felt sorry for her father, but she knew he didn't want her pity. She covered his hand with hers.

"I'm sorry."

"What's done is past."

She smiled, remembering that Lazarus had uttered those same words. A servant appeared to clear her empty plate and her father's goblet.

"You met Mom in Jamaica?"

"Yes. She told you that story?"

"Bits and pieces."

"She was beautiful. You remind me a lot of her."

"Did you ever try to see me?"

"Plenty of times, but your mother had built a prayer barrier around you that I couldn't get through."

She scooted her chair toward him and rested her head on his shoulder. His scent was musky, like the earth. As she inhaled, her memory was triggered. Nella remembered breathing in that scent when she was a tiny baby. He was there, then.

He kissed the crown of her head.

“I never wanted to leave you. Your mother was afraid that I’d harm you. Fear will make you do things like this.”

Nella sniffed back tears. “I wish I had known you growing up. So many times, I asked her about you, but she refused to talk about you. Now, I understand why she didn’t have any pictures of you.”

“I don’t have a reflection.”

When she giggled, he kissed her again. “How did you become a master?”

“I was appointed by the council.”

“Does the council know about me?”

“No. I’ve taken measures to make sure that your identity is never discovered.”

Sitting up, she looked into his face. His expression was serene. She kissed his cheek. There were so many questions to ask him that she didn’t know where to begin. Besides, he’d have to go to work. Wait—did vampires work? What did a master vampire do?

Idris laughed. “Perhaps you’d like to spend the evening with me?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Yes! That’d be awesome!”

They got up from the table, and she hooked her arm around his elbow as he took her on a tour of his

lair. He pointed out antique paintings and artifacts he'd collected over the centuries. The condo was decorated just like him, she thought, a unique blend of modern and traditional.

She wondered how he acquired his wealth. Even if it sat in the bank with interest, he wouldn't have made this much money. Did vampires need money? Suddenly she worried about her own future. How would she ever be able to afford her own place? What would she do for her own life's work?

"I get a stipend from the council for being a master," he answered. "Over the centuries, I've dabbled in real estate with earnings from former employment."

"What was that?"

"I once performed the same job that Lazarus does now."

"Will he ever be a master?"

"Maybe one day."

"Will I?"

He smiled. "That's the plan. Currently, there are no female masters. You'll be the first."

Nella shook her head, unable to grasp the magnitude of her father's statement. She tried to imagine herself as a master vampire but could barely imagine herself as a regular vampire.

"I still have a lot to learn."

“Yes, you do. Hopefully, by the end of this evening, you’ll understand who we are.”

Doubtful that she’d ever understand the vampire lifestyle, Nella shook her head. How was she any different now from when she was human? Aside from the drinking blood thing and sleeping at night.

“I must make a phone call. Why don’t you rouse Lazarus and I’ll meet you both in the parking garage.”

They stopped in front of the spiral staircase. He kissed her cheek before disappearing before her eyes. That was the coolest thing she’d ever seen.

Nella smiled as she darted down the stairs. Oh, she’d rouse him all right. Lazarus was still asleep when she entered the bedroom. His arm was flung across his face, the linens tangled around his waist. She straddled his hips and planted a kiss in the center of his chest. He stirred and captured her in his arms.

“You need to stop that.”

“Dad told me to arouse you, and so I did.”

Opening one eye, he peeked at her. His eyes were the deepest shade of blue that she’d ever seen. She traced his full, blond eyebrow with her index finger, and then kissed him.

“I doubt those were his words, ma.”

“We’re going to spend the day with him, so wake up, sleeping beauty.”

When he smiled, she caught a glimpse of his fangs and found herself aroused as well. As she started to move away from him, his arms tightened around her, holding her in place. Instead of fighting with him, she laid her head on his chest and listened for his heartbeat but found none.

“Gimme a minute, ma.”

“I thought you said you didn’t sleep?”

“I didn’t until you came along.”

“Is that bad?”

“No.”

Nella closed her eyes for a few moments. He stroked her back, coaxing her back to sleep. Suddenly, her father’s voice filled her head, telling her that he was ready. She jolted awake, and Lazarus also sat up. He’d probably received the same call. With a groan, he rolled out from underneath her and stumbled to the fridge. As he waited for the bottle of blood to heat up in the microwave, he instantly clothed himself and pulled his hair back into a ponytail.

“You gotta teach me how to do that.”

“You’ll learn,” he said as he downed the first bottle. “Your pop will teach you.”

She looked down at her own lackluster outfit. “I so don’t look like a master’s daughter.”

In the blink of an eye, he changed her clothes to a black halter dress with pumps. Her eyes misted as

he walked toward her. Who was this guy? One minute he was a brute, the next he was so sweet. She doubted that he was like this all the time. Why her? Was it just because he worked for her dad, or did he really care about her? He grabbed her hands and pulled her to her feet.

“Ready?” he asked as he guided her to the stairs.

“Yeah.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was the screaming that Helen couldn't stand. She was starting to get used to the scent of burning flesh. Had already seen enough bodies torn apart in the first few minutes that she was now desensitized to it. But the screams caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand on edge. As she shuffled silently behind Mehina, she wondered where the hunter was taking her.

"We have to make a stop before I take you to your cell," the angel said. "Someone wants to talk to you."

"Who?" Helen asked, frowning.

At the end of the hallway, Mehina opened a set of doors and stood to the side. Tentatively, Helen entered. The large room looked like an office, with gold-plated ceilings and white marble floors. An oak desk sat in the middle, except off to the left was a large bed draped in gold linens. Across from the desk was a wall full of television monitors. At the desk, a large African man sat in a leather high-backed chair, scribbling in a notebook. He didn't look up at her, just gestured for her to take a seat in one of the leather wing chairs opposite him.

Helen sat and studied the man behind the desk. She'd seen him before, she remembered. He sat on the Vampire Council and managed the East Coast vampires and was also assistant to the chairman of the council. Idris had invited the councilman to his Hampton lair for a dinner party while she stayed there. It was a party attended by the high-ranking vampires and their mistresses. Mikeli was his name, if her memory served her correctly.

"You have a good memory," he said, still not looking at her.

She didn't understand why he would want to meet her or what business her debt was of his. Helen folded her hands neatly in her lap, trying to calm the rising panic that threatened to consume her, and waited. He continued to scribble on his notepad, and she wondered what he was writing. His memoirs or plans of world domination, most likely.

"Neither," he answered as he pulled off his glasses and tossed them on the cluttered desk. "So, you killed an angel."

"I didn't know that's what she was."

"In any event, why did you do so?"

"I'm sure you know."

"I've read parts of your file, but I wanted to hear the story from you."

"I don't have a story to tell. I mistakenly killed an angel, and I'm here to serve my sentence."

"That's noble of you."

"I am a slayer."

"You *were* a slayer."

Since he was reading them, she was careful to guard her thoughts. She wasn't stupid and knew that anything she said right now could and would be used against her. Helen pressed her lips together and refused to say anything more.

He stood, pulling his red jacket across his muscular frame as he rounded the desk. Now she could see just how tall he was as he perched on the edge and peered down at her. If he was trying to use his size to intimidate her, it was working, but she refused to let it show. She'd taken down bigger and badder demons in her career.

"Why am I here?"

"I like you," he said. "That's why I want you to work for me."

Helen cocked her head to the side as she studied the vamp. How could she work for him when her debt was to the vampire council? Even though he was on the council, this sounded more like a side deal. Something the council had no knowledge of.

"Your sentence for the council," he said, "will be served with me."

“Why?” Helen questioned. “What do you want me to do?”

“You’ll do whatever I want you to do, but mostly, you will be my...enforcer, if you will, on certain matters.”

“Your assassin?”

“Well, it’d be more than that.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “How much more?”

He paced away from her to stand in front of the bank of televisions. Every atrocity that one could imagine was being broadcast on the color screens. She looked away. Instant regret over what she had done eroded her strength as she drew in a breath, trying to keep her emotions in check.

“Why do you hate vampires so much?” he asked. “Is it because one killed your parents?”

She flinched but refused to answer him. How did he know this? The only person she’d ever told was Idris. Her hatred of vampires was about more than the murder of her parents. They were arrogant, vile creatures who preyed on weakness and drained the life force out of humans as if it were water and tossed the bodies aside as if they were trash.

It pissed her off that humans were being treated in such a manner. As a protector of humanity, it was

her duty to guard them from such creatures at all costs.

“And yet, you fell in love with one.”

“My personal life is none of your business.”

“That is where you’re wrong.”

She frowned at him. “What does that mean?”

Crossing his arms over his massive chest, he stared down at her, but she refused to look away. Had he said too much? Had she? Helen didn’t understand what her personal life had to do with this side deal. And yes, she had fallen in love with a vampire. She had hoped that Idris would change his ways. This hope was also a part of why she’d sold her soul.

Helen quickly erased the thoughts from her head. She had to keep Mikeli talking. Maybe it was her only hope.

“So, I work for you and then what? Will my sentence be reduced?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe isn’t a concrete answer.”

Mikeli smiled as he moved back toward the desk. It was a smile that put her on edge. He patted her shoulder. His hand felt clammy on her bare flesh. She grimaced as he stood directly in front of her. Helen had been in the face of evil before, but none as pungent as the councilman’s. Pinpricks of electricity entered her forehead as she felt him trying to break

through the barriers that she had cloaked around her thoughts and went back on guard. The sensation stopped.

“No need to worry. We’re just talking.”

“Even just talking is dangerous in Hell.”

“Perhaps. This is the deal. I will give you some assignments. If you prove yourself to be loyal, I will see if I can commute your sentence.”

“And if I refuse?”

Mikeli reached behind him for the remote to the television. With the press of a button, the screens blinked as he changed the channel. The witch who had helped her, Bu’Ble, was staked to a wall, her organs strewn about her like seeds. Her face was twisted in pain, but she wasn’t going to die. The woman recounted the night spent with Helen to a person off-screen, describing in detail the ritual that was performed and how. What the witch didn’t mention was that the baby lived. Inhaling slowly, Helen turned from the screen, careful to shield her thoughts and not to say or think her daughter’s name. She sat back in her chair, refusing to let the vampire see her panic.

“So are you ready to begin?” Mikeli asked.

“If I don’t do this, what will happen?”

“Do you really want to take that chance?”

He walked behind Helen's chair and put his hands on her shoulders. She didn't move, though her skin crawled beneath his hands. Maybe it would be easier to protect her child if she worked closely with the vamp than if she were elsewhere.

"Fine."

After giving her shoulders a squeeze, he walked to the desk and picked up a manila file folder, then sat it on her lap. His fangs crested as he took a seat in his chair. She picked up the folder and opened it. Inside was the name and address of a vampire who lived in Idris' territory. A former master. The order didn't detail why the councilman wanted him dead, and she was wise enough not to ask.

"He never got the information I needed," Mikeli answered her unspoken thought. "Therefore his life is worthless."

"When do you need this done?"

"ASAP." He slid a plastic card across the desk. "Your hall pass."

She took it and tucked it into the folder. Standing, she moved toward the door, where Mehina was waiting. There was one more question that nagged at her. Pausing, she turned back around to face the vampire.

"And if I fail?"

He put on his glasses and resumed writing. “I don’t think you want to know the answer to that.”

She turned and left the office with her chin held high. Failure wasn’t an option. Especially if it meant keeping her daughter out of his reach.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Instead of the garage, Idris waited for them on the roof of his lair. Nella looked at the lush garden that surrounded her with amazement. She hadn't thought flowers and plants could grow so beautifully in this environment. She paused to smell a lilac before joining her father at the edge. Lazarus walked a few paces behind her, as if giving her space to take everything in. Her father took her hand and pulled her next to him.

"I thought we'd start here," he said, sweeping his arm across the sky. "For as far as your eye can see, and beyond it, is my territory."

"It's huge! How many vampires are there?"

"At last census, there were five hundred thousand."

"Wow," she gasped. "That's a lot of vampires. Who knew there were so many?"

"It's not something we like to broadcast," he said, squeezing her hand. "For obvious reasons."

She gazed at the twinkling lights. Her father had to be a powerful vampire to manage such a sizeable territory. And all of this would be hers one day. She swallowed. What would her role be until then? What would she do? What did vamps do all night?

“What do they do? I mean, do they just roam the streets and bite people?”

Lazarus shook his head. “You’ve been watching too many movies, ma.”

Her father chuckled. “No. They lead normal lives. Some have families and jobs. Only certain humans are marked to be bitten.”

“They must get rowdy sometimes.”

Threading his arm around her waist, he guided her to the elevator. “That’s where I come in. Just as with humans, our world has a set of rules and regulations that must be adhered to.”

“What happens when they’re not?”

“Each territory had a set of slayers who handle law and order.”

“Like my mom?”

“Sort of.”

She became silent. The mention of her mother made her sad. Nella wondered how she’d fared on her first night in Hell. What was it like there? Did she even have a bed? Nella imagined dirty walls and demons roaming the halls. She wondered how accurate her imagination was.

They stepped onto the elevator and descended to the parking garage. This time, a white Mercedes Cls63 AMG was waiting for them instead of the Jag. She climbed into the backseat with her father while

Lazarus sat up front. She sighed as the soft leather molded around her. Oh yes, she could definitely get used to this.

“Do we have superpowers?”

“Some do. There are different classes of vampires,” her father continued as the car pulled away from the curb. “Each class possesses a different level of skills and privileges. Some can teleport. Some can shape shift. Others have telekinetic abilities. As master, I am able to perform all.”

“Will I?”

“You’re unique in that your abilities were born in you and not acquired. I’m not yet sure, since there isn’t one like you in existence.”

The car crept back over the crowded bridge into the city. In no time, they pulled in front of a gray high-rise building in Manhattan. After spinning around the revolving glass doors, they entered a large foyer with a lonely security guard posted at the reception desk. He rose to his feet and nodded in recognition as they walked by. She wondered if he knew who she was.

“No,” Idris answered as they got on the elevator and Lazarus pushed a button for the top floor. “No one knows that I’m your father, and I’d like to keep it that way for a while.”

“It’s for your safety,” Lazarus added.

She nodded. "What else do I need to know?"

"We are governed by a body known as the Vampire Council," Idris said as the car ascended. "They create the rules and regulations for us. They also authorize turns. Each turn is registered in a book."

"Kind of like a birth certificate," Lazarus said.

She frowned. "What about mine? Won't they know you're my dad?"

"I've taken measures to make sure that your turn registers differently," her father answered. "When yours shows up in the books, it will be under a different set of names."

"It hasn't already?"

"No," he said. "Right now, you're registered as a partial turn, not a full."

"Won't that tip them off?" Lazarus asked.

"Only if they already know what they're looking for."

The steel doors opened to an opulent reception area. Two leather armchairs were placed on either side of the elevator. A pretty brunette sat at the oak reception desk, answering the phones on a wireless headset. She nodded in greeting as they walked by her and through a set of doors.

The inner office area was alive with activity. Some workers were gathered around giant monitors,

shouting numbers to a group on the other side. Others were typing away at their cubicles or lounging beside a water cooler filled with blood near a break area. Nella was in awe. She'd never known this existed in the world. Of course, there wasn't much that she did know about the world.

"This is cool," she whispered.

When Idris stopped to talk to one of his employees, Lazarus took her hand and led her down a narrow hall to her father's office. A black desk sat in the center of the large, rectangle-shaped room, a leather executive chair behind it. Opposite was a circular conference table. Windows lined one wall, while various maps covered the other. Tan, gold and black made up the color scheme, much like her father's lair. She strolled to the window that looked out over the city.

"What do you think so far?" Lazarus asked her as he strolled up behind her.

"I think...I definitely need better clothes."

He laughed. "Maybe we can go shopping later. I'm sure your pop will hook you up."

The truth was that her head was spinning. It was a lot to absorb in such a short amount of time, and she was certain this was just the tip of the iceberg. She turned to him. "Do you have an office here?"

Nodding, he placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her into the hall. He unlocked a door to the left of her father's office and stepped aside so that she could enter. His circular office looked more like a war strategy room, with charts and weapons littering his glass desk. One wall was lined with glass and looked out onto the offices.

"Do you have a secretary?" she asked.

"Yeah, but she's, like, five hundred years old."

When he smirked at her, she swatted him on his arm. Just then, a woman appeared in the doorway, balancing a stack of papers in one hand and a mug in the other. She was beautiful with smooth cocoa skin, bright eyes, and dark hair that kissed the shoulders of her white suit. Smiling, she set the items on the only empty spot on his desk.

"I'm Imani. Laz's secretary. You are?"

"Nella," she answered as she shook the woman's hand.

"It's nice to meet you." She turned to Lazarus. "I didn't think you'd be in today."

"Idris is giving Nella a tour."

"Okay. Well, let me know if you need anything."

When she disappeared, Nella rolled her eyes at Laz.

"So that's what five hundred looks like."

He crossed his arms over his chest as she rounded his desk to stand behind it. "Don't tell me you're jealous."

"No," she said less than convincingly as she picked up a handgun. "Should these be left out like this?"

He took the weapon from her. Grumbling, he placed it inside the red velvet-lined gun case near the door. She tilted her head to check out his ass when he bent to pick up two grenades, which he also put inside the closet before locking it.

"Ain't nobody stupid enough to break in here and take them. Plus, these are prototypes. These aren't ready to be used yet."

She sat in his leather chair and inhaled his scent. Tilting the chair back, she propped her feet on top of his desk and looked around the dark office. Other than the desk, chair and weapons, it was sparse. It needed sprucing up with plants, a few pillows, and maybe a new rug to replace the dingy gray one beneath her. He shook his head.

"You ain't even an hour old, ma, and you already taking over."

"It'll all be mine, one day."

He rounded the desk. "And that's the day I quit."

She flashed her middle finger at him before taking her feet off his desk. He straddled her lap, bent close and kissed her. She cupped his cheeks in her hands. His tongue slid against her, and she tasted the metallic drops of blood that lingered there. Her fangs crested so that the razor-sharp tips nicked his lip. Gasping, she tilted away from him.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“How do you control them?”

He motioned for her to get out of his seat. When she did, he took her place and tugged her into his lap. His thighs were much more comfortable than the chair. She sighed as she fingered the top button on his shirt, resisting the urge to unfasten it.

“It’s not easy,” he said. “You’ll learn with practice.”

“Why don’t you have a girlfriend?”

“Who said I don’t?”

“I’m serious. I bet you have a lot of female vamps after you.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, but I’m not interested in all of that.”

“Why?”

“I’m not ready to settle down, and they be trying to tie a brother down. Plus, many just want me for status, you know.”

"To get close to my dad?"

He nodded. A figure appeared in the doorway, and they both looked up. Idris wore a grave expression on his face. As he took a few steps into the room, Nella stood and went to him.

"What's wrong?"

"There's been an emergency. I need you to come with me, Lazarus."

"Of course."

Lazarus opened his desk drawer and pulled out a semi-automatic handgun. Standing, he tucked it into the waistband of his pants and covered it with a black blazer. Nella touched her father's arm, and he patted her hand.

"There's no need for you to worry," he told her. "We'll be back shortly."

She raised her eyebrow. "I'm going with you."

"No," Lazarus answered.

She looked from him to her father. "Look, if you want me to learn about this life, I need to go. I'll stay out of your way."

Idris exhaled and glanced over her shoulder at Lazarus. "Fine. But stay beside one of us at all times."

"I promise."

Her mother never let her watch horror movies. She'd said there was enough horror in the world, and watching it as recreation wasn't necessary. Still, Nella

wondered if what she was about to experience was anything like the commercials she'd seen for those movies. She followed the men out of the room, wondering what the emergency was and why it had her father so rattled.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lazarus had a bad feeling as soon as they parked in front of the apartment building. The hairs on his forearms stood on edge. He wanted to make Nella stay in the car, but knew she wouldn't. He drew the weapon out of his waistband as he exited the car and walked toward the entrance. She tried to follow him, but her father grabbed her hand and made her walk a few paces behind.

The door was ajar, and the stench of burnt flesh assaulted his nostrils. He clutched the gun in his fists and raised it to chest level as he pushed open the door with his elbow. Seeing the body lying in the middle of the floor from the doorway, he lowered his gun. He sensed nothing else in the apartment.

He turned to her. "Stay out here until we check it out."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "No."

"Look, Nel." When he took a step toward her, she flinched. He didn't mean to scare her, but she had to understand how serious this was. "You don't have the stomach to deal with what I just saw."

She glanced at her father, then back at him with her chin lifted. "I'll be fine..."

"Maybe you should listen to him," Idris said gently.

"Dad! If you want me to learn this business, I'm going to have to see stuff like this, right? I'm going in."

He glanced at Idris, who nodded. Nella was just as stubborn as her pop. Huffing, he shoved his weapon back into his waistband and walked toward the body. The vamp, Clayton Parker, was a close friend of Idris', a former master who'd helped trained Idris when he took over. Lazarus had seen Clay many times when he stopped by the office or the lair to talk to his boss. He was a cool dude and certainly didn't deserve this.

The torso of the vampire was burned from the center out, the internal organs charred. Lazarus could see straight through the gaping hole in his flesh to his spine. His limbs were still intact, but the head had been severed and sat on the coffee table. His frozen face still held an expression of terror.

Lazarus tapped the stiff shoulder of the corpse with his foot. Rigor mortis hadn't yet set in. The flesh yielded slightly beneath the toes of his shoe. They'd just missed the assassin.

"Poor bastard."

"This was clearly a message."

“Why?” Lazarus questioned as he stooped beside the remains to search for clues. “Who’d do all this just to warn you?”

Idris inhaled sharply as he peered over Lazarus’ shoulder at the body. “I have a theory.”

When he paused, Lazarus remembered that they weren’t the only ones in the room. He rose to his feet as they both looked in Nella’s direction. She stood, transfixed, behind her father, her eyes wide. That expression of horror on her face would forever stay etched in his memory.

She covered her mouth with both hands, trying to hold back a scream. It wasn’t working. From where he was, Lazarus could feel it bubble up her throat from the pit of her stomach. Before it escaped her mouth, he gripped her arms and ushered her into the hallway.

When she released it, her scream split his eardrum. He crushed her against his chest, trying to muffle the sound before someone called the human police. She sobbed, then suddenly turned and vomited on the floor. Panting, she remained doubled over, but leaned against the wall. He brushed her hair from her cheeks.

“I tried to warn you.”

“I didn’t think...”

“This ain’t like the movies, ma, and this is mild compared to what I’ve seen.”

He stroked her back as she dry heaved. She’d have to learn to deal with this if she took over for her father. If she ever had to go to Hell; well, he didn’t want to think about that. He’s hoped that he could make it better, could somehow pull the image from her mind.

She covered her face with her hands. “You don’t have to stay with me.”

“Yes, I do. Your pop will kill me if I leave you out here.”

“Why would someone do that?”

“I don’t know, ma. That’s what we need to figure out.”

Idris walked into the hall while she gathered herself. With a wave of his hand, he cleaned up the mess. He glanced at Lazarus before turning his attention to his daughter.

“How are you, Nella?”

“I feel stupid. You tried to tell me. I should’ve listened.”

“I’m actually glad you saw this side of my job. Now you understand that it’s not all fancy cars and superpowers.”

She straightened and wiped her mouth with the handkerchief he gave her. Idris turned his attention to

Lazarus. The concern in his boss' eyes didn't sit well with him. He took it personally and hated letting his boss down. To his credit, he did try to warn her, but he should've pressed harder.

"This was definitely a message. A slayer's stamp is on it."

Lazarus frowned. "A slayer? What did Clay do?"

"I don't know, but that's the order of the evening. The cleanup crew is on the way. Let's go talk to Niklaus."

"Who is that?" she asked as Lazarus took one of her elbows and her father took the other to guide her to the car.

"He's the master of the slayers in the area," Lazarus answered. "He'll know if this was ordered or not."

This time, he climbed into the backseat with her while Idris sat up front. Nella laid her head in his lap while they drove to Niklaus' lair. Lazarus stroked her hair until she closed her eyes, and she napped as they drove to Staten Island. She looked so peaceful. How was she going to make it as a master? Something stirred within him. He couldn't deny his attraction to her any longer. Idris glanced at him.

I knew this would happen.

So did I, but she's as stubborn as you are, sir.

The master smiled. *You do care for her, don't you?*

Lazarus didn't know how to answer his question. He was beginning to care for her, but he wasn't sure how deep those feelings were. He also wasn't sure if he wanted to have that kind of conversation with her father. Instead, he countered the master's question with one of his own.

How are you going to explain her presence to Niklaus?

*I don't know. Maybe I should talk to him alone.
That might be best, sir.*

No...

Her voice was weak, but he could clearly hear it above her father's. He looked at Idris. The master nodded to say that he'd heard her, too. Her powers were coming in a little at a time. Lazarus wondered what it would take for them to fully develop.

I'll be okay, she said. I want to meet him.

I don't know, ma.

When she opened her eyes, he gazed at into the amber spheres, unable to turn his eyes away.

Please. I promise not to throw up again.

"Let her," Idris said. "Eventually, she'll have to meet him."

When her father turned back around, Lazarus kissed her on the forehead.

“How’d you do that, ma?”

“I don’t know. I heard y’all talking about me like I wasn’t here, and I just concentrated on your voices and replied.”

“I’ll have to stop thinking around you.”

She rolled her eyes. “You read my thoughts all the time. It’s only fair.”

Though she sat up when the car stopped in front of the slayer’s home, she still appeared a little queasy. Despite that, Lazarus thought she looked beautiful. Niklaus was waiting for them on the porch, his wings fluttering in the breeze that drifted off the bay. The slayer looked pissed. He cleared the four wooden steps as if they weren’t there and met them on the curb.

As far as slayers went, Nik was cool. Lazarus had to work with him a lot over the years. The slayer was six feet two inches tall with solid muscles. His dark chocolate skin shimmered lavender in the moonlight. He ran a hand over his bald head as his eyes turned from dark to light purple before normalizing to brown. Nella’s jaw dropped when she saw him, and Lazarus rolled his eyes. He didn’t get why women fawned over the slayer all the time.

“Idris. Laz,” he greeted them after they climbed from the car. “I know why you’re here. I just heard.”

He turned his attention to Nella. “Hello.”

Lazarus bristled. He wasn't the jealous type and didn't know why he was feeling that way now. Niklaus was no threat—at least not to him. Besides, she wouldn't be interested in someone like that. He watched her shake his hand. Idris introduced her as his assistant. She smiled a little too brightly for Lazarus' taste when the slayer told her that she was breathtaking. Before he could stop it, a snarl exited his mouth, and all three looked at him. He turned away, suddenly interested in something across the street.

"Well," Niklaus said as he eyed Lazarus. "Come inside where we can talk in peace."

He ushered them inside the tiny ranch home. His wife, Penelope, was clearing away the dinner dishes while their twin boys watched cartoons on the television. When she saw them, she stopped what she was doing, scooped up the boys and went into one of the back rooms. Niklaus pulled out three bottles of blood from the warmer next to the fridge and gave one to each of them while they took seats at the kitchen table.

Lazarus glanced at Nella's bottle. He didn't think she could drink it yet. She pulled her bottle toward her and held it but didn't move to uncork it. He'd have to get her something to eat when this was

over. He thought about taking it from her, but didn't want to embarrass her in front of the slayer.

"Let me just say that it wasn't me," Niklaus said as he poured hot water over his tea bag. "I didn't authorize it, and I didn't know about it until my boss called me."

"There was slayer scent on the body," Idris pointed out.

"I know. But I'm telling you, it wasn't one of my guys."

"Do you know who might've wanted Clay dead?" Lazarus asked as he uncorked his bottle and drained half of it.

She watched them, and then looked down at her own bottle, indecision etched on her face. He watched her as she removed the cork and sniffed the sweet, metallic aroma that drifted from it and frowned. *Don't*, Lazarus transmitted to her. She looked up at him, then back at the bottle.

"No." Niklaus sat next to Idris and added honey to his tea. "I'm baffled, as I haven't heard anything about Clay being in trouble with anyone. I will find out and let you know by dusk tomorrow."

Nella brought the bottle to her lips and paused. Lazarus held his breath as she took a sip. Her eyes widened in surprise when the drops hit her tongue. Lazarus instantly went on guard, ready to snatch her

up and get her out of there before her cover was blown. She sat the bottle on the table and covered her mouth, looking to him for help.

“I appreciate your assistance,” Idris said.

Get her out of here, Idris transmitted to him.

“Um...” Lazarus said as he stood up. “I left something in the car. Come help me,” he said to her.

She smiled at Niklaus and followed him outside to the car. Pausing in front of the bumper, she spat out the blood. He exhaled and wondered if this was what the rest of his life would be like: holding her hair while she spat up.

“Ewww! How can you drink that?”

“It’s an acquired taste. You’ll get used to it.”

She leaned against the hood. “No, I won’t.”

“Trust me,” he said as he smiled at her, his fangs peeking out from beneath his upper lip. “You will. You’ll have no choice, ma.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, she looked at him.

“You really can’t eat other food?”

He shook his head. “It makes me sick. The smell alone makes me wanna vomit.”

“But, why?”

“We’re dead, ma. We don’t have hearts that can pump blood for us. So, we have to drink it.”

“Oh.”

When he closed the distance between them, she wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest. Lazarus pulled her close to him. Her skin was warm. He felt the blood moving through her veins, and it caused his fangs to lengthen. What did she taste like, he wondered, and then closed his eyes to put the thought out of his mind.

“I’m not making a very good vamp, am I?”

“You’ll get there, ma. Don’t force it.”

“How long did it take you to turn?”

“A few days.”

“Did it happen all at once?”

“No. After I got bit, each of my organs shut down. Then, my heart stopped. Technically, I died, but I woke up a few days later with the cravings.”

She kissed his jaw. “That must’ve been awful.”

“Yeah. I’m just glad you won’t have to go through that part.”

“You’re dead?”

“Yeah.”

She placed her hand over his heart, feeling for a heartbeat that wasn’t there. When she looked up into his eyes, he swallowed and stuffed down the emotions that were threatening to rise to the surface. Moments later, Idris emerged from the house. They separated as he walked toward them.

“Let’s go back to the office. I need to make some calls and find out what happened.”

He climbed into the back with Nella while Lazarus sat up front. When he closed the door, he felt the master send him a coded message.

I couldn’t tell you this in front of Nella, Idris transmitted. At Clay’s apartment, it was Helen’s scent on the hit.

Lazarus glanced back at him. *Her mom?*

Niklaus assured me that he doesn’t know how that could be. Her slayer status was rescinded when she made the deal.

But why would she kill Clay?

The better question is who would send her to kill Clay, knowing that I’ll pick up her scent.

The same motherfucker who’s trying to grab Nel?

Idris nodded. *She can’t know any of this.*

Of course, sir.

“Okay,” she said as she looked from her father to Lazarus. “Y’all are way too quiet. What are you talking about?”

Her father patted her thigh. “I thought Lazarus could take you shopping for the rest of the night.”

“There are stores open this late?”

Lazarus smirked. “You’d be surprised at what vamps can do, ma.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“There ain’t gonna be any room left for us in the car,” Lazarus teased.

Nella swatted his arm as he loaded the last of the shopping bags into the backseat of the Jag. As women do, especially one with Daddy’s credit card, Nella went a little crazy, buying almost everything she saw.

“See,” Nella said, climbing into the front seat. “There’s plenty of room.”

“Barely,” Lazarus joked as he made his way to the driver’s seat.

“I have to look good,” she said. “I can’t be looking all nerdy like I used to. I’m a vampire, now. I need to dress like one.”

“You ain’t even turned yet, ma.”

“I know, but I still should look like my father’s daughter. I can’t ask you to dress me all the time.”

He shrugged as he maneuvered the car into traffic.

“I don’t mind.”

Before shopping, he’d taken her to a small diner run by human helpers. She’d had the turkey club, while he nursed a tumbler of blood. It’d been ages since he’d been around human food, but the smell

hadn't bothered him as much as he thought it would. Now it was getting late. He wanted to get her back to the lair, maybe watch a few movies before dawn came. She popped her new Rihanna CD into the player and snapped her fingers along to the first song, twisting in her seat to look at him.

"What now?"

"We need to head back," he said. "It's getting late."

"Oh."

She sounded disappointed, and that didn't set right with him. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye as she gazed out of the window at the dark landscape. It must be sad, he thought, to live in such a great city and have never seen any of it.

"Maybe we can make a pit stop first."

"Where?"

"You'll see."

When the Empire State Building came into view, she squealed. He'd heard her thoughts last night, about her mother not letting her go on the field trip and always wanting to visit it. He parked the car in an alley around the corner and got out, holding open her door. With tears in her eyes, she stared at him for a moment before flinging her arms around his neck.

"You heard me."

He nodded. "It was wrong of your moms not to let you go."

She kissed him, then stepped back to look into his eyes. "Wait. It's way after hours. How are we going to get up there?"

"Close your eyes."

When she did, he teleported them to the observation deck on the one hundred and second floor. He spun her around so that when she opened her eyes, the view would be the first thing she saw.

"Okay, ma," he whispered into her ear. "Open them."

She gasped as she gazed at the twinkling lights of the landscape in front of her, clasping her hands over her heart. He was floored that something so simple would mean so much to her. When she shivered, he opened his jacket and wrapped it around her. Her warmth heated up his cold chest.

"We can't stand here too long, ma," he said. "Security will be by soon."

As she turned to face him, he captured her mouth with his before she could comment. He didn't want her to talk. Speaking would spoil the moment. Her lips were soft and melted against his like wax. She wrapped her arms around his neck, threaded her fingers through his silky dreads. His tongue lazily entwined with hers as he caressed the sides of her

breasts. With his thumbs, he drew featherlike patterns on the material that covered them, and then flowed down the sides of her torso to rest on her hips.

Lazarus abandoned her lips to seek her throat and kissed a path from her collarbone to her jaw. When she moaned, he almost bit her. Instead, he suckled her jugular through the tight skin that covered it. The vein pulsated against his lips. His erection pressed into her hip. He would've loved to take her right here, right now against the railing, but footsteps drew his attention.

"Hey!" the guard yelled.

He quickly teleported them back down to the street. Giggling, Nella pulled away from him. The sparkle in her eyes made him pull her back to him for a long, passionate kiss. Releasing her, he held open the car door so that she could climb in, and then walked around to the driver's seat.

"That was amazing," she whispered in awe.

"I wish we could've stayed longer."

"We can come back, right?"

"Right." He picked up her hand and kissed her fingertips before starting the car.

It was past one thirty in the morning, but the streets were alive with people returning home from the clubs and restaurants. New York was truly the city that didn't sleep. He loved it here.

As he drove from the alley onto the street, he noticed a car following him. When he stopped at the traffic light, he saw the black van and recognized it immediately. The hairs on his arms stood on edge when he realized that the car contained council-level enforcers. Normally, they were invisible to the naked eye, but vamps could usually make out the wavy black breaks in energy that surrounded them. They were stealthy and deadly. Almost all of their missions were suicides. They were probably the same ones sent after her yesterday.

“What’s wrong?” she asked when he tensed up.

“We’re being followed.”

“By who?” She glanced over her shoulder.

“Enforcers. I’m going to try to lose them. Hold on.”

When the light changed, he stepped on the accelerator and made a sharp left-hand turn from the right lane, cutting off the car next to him. The van turned behind him. He followed Lenox Avenue, weaving through traffic, but the van stuck to his bumper. The van sped up and rammed the back of his Jag. His car fishtailed into the intersection and was nearly clipped by a bus.

“Fuck,” he yelled as he jerked on the wheel.

He scrambled to get out of the way while avoiding the pedestrians crossing the street. Lazarus

stepped hard on the gas pedal, determined to put some distance between his car and the van, and headed for the Bronx. Turning onto the parkway, he looped down Westchester to head back into the city.

“What do they want?” she asked, her voice rising as she gripped the handle on the door.

“My guess is that they want you, ma.”

“Why? Dad said no one knew about me.”

“I think your pop’s wrong.”

The van was right behind him, so he quickly abandoned that plan and headed back into Harlem, hoping to shake them in the alleys and side streets. The van stayed with him, anticipating the move, accelerating whenever he did. He needed to put some distance between them.

“Take the wheel,” he told her.

She looked at him. “What? I don’t know how to drive.”

“You have to, ma. It’s the only way I can get rid of these motherfuckers.”

She sighed. “What do I do?”

“Gas, brake, and steering wheel,” he quickly pointed out to her. “That’s all you need to know right now. I’ll tell you which way to go.”

“Be careful,” she whispered.

He grinned at her. “Never.”

Lazarus unbuckled his seat belt and held the wheel until she unbuckled hers and climbed over the console. She slid into his lap, placing her foot on the gas pedal and gripping the wheel. He climbed into the passenger seat and ripped out the carpet to retrieve a specially designed AK-47 from the floor boards. When he brought it up to eye level, her eyes widened.

He didn't think this was the time to tell her the car was loaded with weapons. Since he had to protect a master vampire, he needed to be strapped at all times. When Nella slowed down to get used to the controls, the van moved into position and rammed them again.

"No!" he yelled. "Step on the gas!"

She stepped hard on the pedal. The Jag took off like a rocket, and he held onto the dash. There was a place to turn coming up. He tried to sync his thoughts with hers so that she'd instinctively know which way to go, and she managed to calm her rapidly beating heart long enough to let him into her head.

"Right!" She made a wild turn. The Jag tipped slightly but held the road as if glue were on the tires. She stepped on the accelerator, putting space between his bumper and the van's. He rolled down the window, leaned out and shot at the van. Bullets pierced the headlights and hood. The van swerved but stayed on their bumper.

“Now, ma!”

She turned left. As the car spun into the intersection, Lazarus climbed into the backseat, knocking the shopping bags onto the floor. He broke out the back window to spray the van with bullets. The van’s windshield shattered. As it sped up, the van’s side door opened. An enforcer jumped out and landed on the roof of the Jag. Nella screamed. The car swerved, knocking Lazarus out of position to shoot him.

“Hold on, ma,” he said as he climbed out of the window.

“No,” she yelled. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’ll be right here.”

He climbed out of the back window and onto the roof. Meanwhile, the enforcer broke the driver’s side window and reached in to grab her. Screaming, she tried to fight him with one hand, but Lazarus knew she wasn’t strong enough. He grabbed the enforcer’s ankle and dragged the vamp to him. The enforcer flipped onto his back and swiped at Lazarus with his foot.

Lazarus punched the enforcer in his jaw. The force of the blow stunned the enforcer, but not enough to knock him off the car. The orb kicked him in the groin. His knees buckled, but he held on to the attacker, trying to toss him off the car.

“Turn!”

Nella turned the car onto the Brooklyn Bridge as Lazarus punched the vamp in the nose. The enforcer stumbled but caught himself on the car. He quickly stood and tackled Lazarus, knocking them both onto the trunk, sliding across the slick surface and almost onto the roadway. The enforcer tried to slam Lazarus’ head into the metal. With a grunt, Lazarus grabbed the orb’s wrists and head butted him, knocking him backward.

“Lazarus,” she yelled.

“I’m okay. Keep going.”

He crouched on the trunk as the car sped back into the city. The enforcer tried to pull himself up, but Lazarus kicked and punched the vamp until he let go. The wheels of the van ran over the enforcer. Lazarus gasped for air as he climbed back into the car. Despite being one member down, the van stayed with them. He fired at the grill, and sparks flew off as the bullets connected with the metal. Nella turned off the bridge and onto a side street. The van followed, losing control but quickly righting itself. He pulled the trigger. The chamber clicked but nothing came out.

“Damn it,” he yelled, tossing the gun onto the street.

He reached for the gun he had tucked in his waistband, but remembered he’d locked it in the

trunk before they went shopping. A new plan forming in his head, he climbed over the front seat and opened the glove box to retrieve a grenade from the compartment as Nella glanced at him with fear. She turned down an alley near her old home.

“When I tell you, reverse it.”

“Reverse what?”

He quickly showed her how to put the car in reverse. She looked at him like he was crazy, but she didn’t question him. They were almost out of room: the brick wall at the end of the alley was rapidly coming closer. The new vamp in the van was getting ready to pounce. Lazarus climbed into the backseat and pulled the pin. He stood up through the hole in the roof.

“Now,” he roared.

The car jerked backward, almost knocking him off, as Nella accelerated backward toward the van. As the van swerved to the right of the car, he tossed the grenade, a clear shot through the windshield. It landed on the driver’s dash, and the van exploded. Nella slammed on the brakes. The Jag skidded sideways to a stop. Lazarus got out of the car and pulled a gun from the trunk. He edged toward the flames, making sure nothing came out of them.

He turned just as Nella was climbing out of the car. Every part of her body trembled, but he was

proud of her because she'd kept it together when it mattered. Today had proven that she'd be an awesome master one day. She doubled over and rested her hands on her knees as he walked toward her. Without prompting, she straightened and ran into his arms.

"Oh. My. God!"

Pain coursed through his body when the word left her mouth. She cringed in his arms as the current of electricity coursed through her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's okay, ma. You did good."

"That was...intense."

He laughed. "You can say that again."

"You're cut."

"It'll heal."

She reached up and touched his forehead with trembling fingers. Lazarus didn't want to stand in the alley any longer, in case something else traced them there. He needed to get her back to her father's lair; he just hoped the Jag would make it.

"We'd better get out of here," he said as he kissed her on the nose.

She glanced at the car, then at him. "How?"

"I'll call your pop. He'll send the driver."

"You can't teleport?"

"Not long distances."

“Oh.”

Limping, he walked toward the car to get her shopping bags out of the back. As he turned with them in his arms, she wrapped her arms around his waist. She buried her face into his chest as the driver pulled up in the Mercedes.

“I was so scared,” she admitted. “If anything had happened to you...”

“It won’t, ma.” He kissed the crown of her head and guided her to the car. “You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mikeli Umbeye sat in his executive chair, tightly gripping the armrests as the images of the scene projected on his wall faded. The enforcers quivered as they replayed the botched kidnapping for their master, knowing what was coming next. Mikeli slammed his fist on his marble desk; blood from his goblet sloshed over the side as the marble split.

“Motherfuckers can’t even snatch a female vamp,” he spat out.

The invisible orbs solidified as he rose from his chair. In one swift move, he ripped the throats out of each of them and stalked back to his chair. He calmly sipped from his crystal goblet, watching the griffins clean up the carcasses.

This shouldn’t have been difficult. How hard was it to grab a girl? He used to do it all the time in his youth. Fear had made cowards of everyone. His call last night, with the promise of free drugs, had gone unanswered. Everyone in that territory was more afraid of Idris than of what he, Mikeli, the council level Master Vamp of North America, would do.

Mikeli huffed as he set down the goblet. That was why he’d had Clay killed, as an example. He hadn’t expected the woman to work so fast, but he was

pleased. She'd be a worthy employee, if she played her cards right. Dammit, he needed the girl now, before her womb turned. Once that happened, she wouldn't be able to go out into the sun at all.

Standing, he stalked to the bank of televisions. Mikeli wasn't stupid. He knew everything. When the girl's partial turn showed up in the books, he had suspected, but he wasn't sure until he'd met with Helen. The care she took not to think of her daughter, and her agreement to work for him without so much a question, told him all that he needed to know.

Idris had a daughter—a vampire who was born and not made.

How? he wondered as he paced, and why Idris? Wasn't he worthy of an heir? What made this guy so special? With half interest, he watched the destruction of the world. All he needed was the girl, and then he could put his plan into motion. His native Africa was already ripe for the picking. Once she was in place at his side, nothing would stop him.

He sighed. Time for Plan B.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

In one swift motion, Idris stood and threw his goblet at the fire. The flames roared in the fireplace before dying down. His eyes were ablaze with anger as he looked from Lazarus to Nella. She sat on the sofa, an afghan wrapped around her shoulders, her own eyes filled with concern. He didn't mean to scare her, but he was pissed that anyone would attempt this in his territory, right under his nose.

"I'm okay, Dad," she said softly.

Idris walked to her and sat next to her on the sofa, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. Maybe she was okay, but he wasn't. He looked at Lazarus as he paced by the window and knew his protégé was itching to go to Hell and start a war over this, but that wasn't the right move. Especially now that he was positive who was behind all of this. Mikeli.

"Honey," he said gently. "Can you give me and Lazarus a moment alone?"

"You can talk in front of me."

"I know, but there are things I need to discuss with him. Alone."

"Why?"

"Just...go..." Lazarus said quietly.

She stiffened at his tone. With a sigh, she stood and stomped from the room. Lazarus opened his mouth, but Idris raised his hand to tell him to wait. She was still in the hallway. He telepathically told her to go. This time, he heard her footsteps move to the stairs and down them.

“That’s some bold shit,” Lazarus huffed as he went to the bar and poured himself a drink, “to try to snatch her while I’m with her.”

“He’s getting desperate and trying to get to her before anyone else.”

Standing, Idris clasped his hands behind his back and paced in front of the dark windows of his study. His temples throbbed as a headache threatened to consume him. Lazarus leaned against the bar, and Idris turned to address his protégé.

“I’m thankful you were there.”

Lazarus shrugged. “You know I wasn’t about to let anything happen to her, sir. Who do you think is behind this?”

“My guess is Mikeli.”

“The dude on the council? Didn’t y’all turn together?”

“Yes, but we went two separate ways. While I embraced the good our species could do, he turned to the dark side.”

Lazarus nodded. "How could he know about Nella?"

Idris sighed. "I'm sure he has his ways. He must have figured it out."

"What would he need her for? Sex slave?"

"A breeder."

Watching as the color drained from Lazarus' face, Idris walked to the bar to pour himself a scotch. He was too rattled to materialize a drink as he normally did. After spiking it with blood, he took a long sip.

"There's a chance that her womb will still work after she turns."

Lazarus sat his glass on the bar. "So, he'll be able to create hybrids?"

Idris shook his head. "Not hybrids. Daywalkers."

"But even *she* can't do daylight."

"With protective measures, she can."

"His boys don't swim anymore. So, how..."

Lazarus fell silent as the realization dawned on him. Idris nodded. Helen got the ritual to work once. Who said she couldn't do it again? Idris paced before finally coming to a stop in front of the fireplace. The orange flames warmed his skin. His fangs lengthened in anger at the thought of Mikeli touching his daughter. He had to find a way to keep her out of the

councilman's reach while also rescuing Helen from his clutches.

How could Mikeli have figured this out? Idris was careful about her turn registry. He'd thought Helen's prayer barriers would also shield his daughter from the council's view. Mikeli must have gotten to someone. Or could the councilman have been behind this scheme from the beginning?

"How's he tracking her?"

"Her scent. Her being both a virgin and a partial turn is a combination that no vampire can resist." He turned to Lazarus. "You have to do it."

"With all due respect, sir, I really can't have this convo with you, feel me?"

"I do, but we need time and we don't have it. Once I'm on the council, I'll be better able to handle Mikeli. In the meantime, it's my allies that he's taking out. I have to stop him before there are no masters left."

It was Lazarus' turn to pace. "But she's a virgin."

"Surely she's not your first."

"No, but I mean...wouldn't you rather have someone more worthy of her?"

Idris crossed his arms over his chest and walked toward his protégé. He was asking a lot of Lazarus, but there was no other alternative. If he had thought

that Lazarus wasn't worthy of his Nella, he'd never have asked his protégé to be her bodyguard.

"I see the way you look at her. Your heart is already there, though your mind is keeping you from the inevitable."

Lazarus paused and looked up at him. "But still..."

"Do you really want someone else to touch her?"

"It's too soon."

"I don't think it is. You've been watching her for months." Idris gripped Lazarus' shoulders as his protégé hung his head. "Look, I'm not trying to talk you into this. I'm suppressing every urge I have as a father not to kick your ass for kissing her, but I can't think of a man more worthy than you."

Tears glittered in Lazarus' eyes when he looked up at Idris. "I don't know, sir, this is all too much for me to think on right now."

He patted Lazarus on his shoulder before walking over to the window. "I understand. It's a lot for me to offer, but it's not really for me to offer you, is it?"

Lazarus moved to stand next to him. "What about the other masters?"

"I'm going to warn each of them and try to meet with the president to discuss this. There's a State of

the Species Address at dusk, so I'll be able to do it all at once. I'd like for you and Nella to join me."

Lazarus smirked. "Not trying to put pressure on a brother, huh?"

Idris chuckled. "From what I can recall, you can perform under a variety of circumstances."

He understood Lazarus' worry. When it was all said and done, Lazarus was afraid of hurting his daughter when it was all said and done. Idris appreciated his concern for his daughter's feelings. If there was only another way...

Lazarus fell silent, and Idris sensed him turning his words over in his mind. "Are you sure this will work?"

"No," Idris said as he slapped Lazarus on his back. "But it's the best shot we have. I'll take Aponi out for the rest of the evening and give you some privacy."

"Thanks. I think."

Idris smiled as he dissolved into thin air.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

There was something wrong with Lazarus when he entered the chambers. Nella set aside the vampire fashion magazine she was thumbing through when he appeared in the doorway. She felt the tension in his limbs as he crossed the room to go into the closet. What had her father said to get him so rattled?

“What’s wrong?” she asked, leaping from the bed and following him.

“Nothing,” he said as he unbuttoned his shirt.

Her breath caught in her throat as his muscular chest came into view. His smooth skin beckoned her closer to him, and she reached up to press her hands against his cheeks. She pressed her lips against his, then stepped back to look at him.

“You’re a terrible liar.”

“Maybe, but you ain’t ready for the truth, ma.”

When he grabbed some items and headed for the bathroom, she followed. He sat his clothes on the vanity and turned on the shower. Much to her delight, he began to unbutton his pants, but stopped when he realized she was standing there.

“What?” he asked.

“You tell me. What did my father say?”

“He thinks he knows who’s trying to snatch you.”

She stepped into the room. “Who?”

“This dude on the council, Mikeli.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s one bad motherfucker. Once wiped out a whole colony of vamps for not agreeing to do what he said.”

“Why does he want me?”

“Your father thinks he wants you to breed daywalkers.”

“What are daywalkers?”

“Vampires that can go out in the sun.”

“Eww,” she exclaimed as she hugged herself.

“There’s no way that I’m going to breed anything.”

“If this guy has his way, you’ll have no choice.”

“But that’s never gonna happen, right?”

When he looked directly into her eyes, a shiver ran down her spine. “Right.”

“I can still have kids?”

“Apparently.” He glanced at the shower. “Look, ma, the water’s getting cold.”

When she smiled, her fangs brushed against her lip. “I’m not stopping you.”

In the blink of an eye, he closed the distance between them, grabbed her arms and pushed her onto

the other side of the doorway. He kissed her hard on the lips before releasing her.

“We’ll talk when I’m finished,” he said as he closed the door.

Pouting, she tried the knob, but he’d locked the door. With a sigh, she walked back to the bed and flopped down on her back, touching her abdomen. She could still have kids. Lazarus’ kids. Biting her lip, she wondered if he wanted to be a dad at a hundred? Why was she even thinking about this?

Grasping a strand of her hair, she twirled it around her finger. There was more to the story, she thought as her eyes closed. Something he wasn’t telling her. Yawning, she began to fall asleep. Before she knew it, she was asleep. Later, feeling someone standing over her, she opened her eyes. Lazarus stood at the side of the bed, a white towel wrapped around his waist, guzzling down blood.

She sat up on her elbows. “How long was I asleep?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

Stunned, she sat up. “Were you going to wake me up?”

“And spoil the peace and quiet? Naw...”

He sat the bottle on the nightstand. Her heart raced as he bent close to capture her mouth. His skin and hair were still damp from the shower, and his

mouth tasted sweet. The good stuff, she thought as she arched her hips toward him but the towel was in the way. She wanted to feel his skin on hers.

“Lazarus,” she sighed as he moved his lips to her throat.

The hem of her t-shirt was pushed up as he shifted to lie on top of her. His cool hands curved around her breasts. She gasped while his thumbs teased her nipples until they stiffened. Suddenly, he moved away from her to sit on the edge of the bed and put his head in his hands. Sitting up, she placed her hand on his shoulder.

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“This,” he whispered.

She removed her hand and pressed her lips against his shoulder. “But I want you to make love to me.”

“I know, and *I* want to, but...”

“My dad.”

He shook his head. “He gave me his blessing.”

She sat back. “Really?”

Groaning, he stood and stalked around the room. After pulling down her shirt, she brought her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. She was surprised that her father would give

Lazarus his blessing to make love to her, but it also crept her out. Things *were* different in this world.

“Is it because I’m a virgin?”

“Part of it.” He sighed. “Your pop thinks we should do it to hide you for a while.”

Her eyes widened. “Why?”

“Your scent is making it easy for them to track you down.”

“Is that how they’re finding me?”

“Yeah. He thinks you’ll be harder to find with my scent all up in you. You feel me?”

She blushed, thinking about how his scent would get inside of her. “So, why did you stop?”

“Because I don’t wanna just sleep with you, you know? I want this to be special for you, ma. I don’t want you to feel like we gotta do this.”

Raking his hands through his hair, he paced back to the bed. Gazing at his bare muscular chest, she licked her lips.

“If you were some other female, it wouldn’t be a big deal. But this is *you*. Not only are you his kid, but I’ll still be in charge of protecting you.”

“We can wait.”

Nella couldn’t believe that she was the one saying those words and that she was the one who didn’t want to wait. She wanted him. Now. Never before had she wanted any man the way she did him.

Sure, she'd had crushes, but this was more than a crush. If she didn't make love to him soon, she'd die.

"I wish," he said. "You pop wants us to go to Hell with him tomorrow. Do you know the frenzy you'll cause when you roll up in there with fangs *and* virginity intact?" When she stiffened, he nodded.

"Well, maybe we can do enough to get your scent on me."

He shook his head. "It's not that simple. It's all or nothing in this life. Anything done halfway is suspect."

"Oh," Nella whispered. "Well, we'll have to do it, then."

"What?" He looked at her. "Don't just agree to this 'cause you're horny. I can't promise that I won't break your heart."

"Don't worry about that. I want you. I've wanted you since the first time I saw you outside my window. I want my first time to be with you and no one else."

Sitting beside her, he placed his hand on her thigh. "Sure?"

"I'm more than sure, Lazarus. It'll be okay. I promise."

He relaxed, but she could tell that he still wasn't convinced. She touched his cheek. For some reason, she wanted to cry. Lazarus was such an enigma. Despite his bad-boy persona, deep down, he was all

gentleman. Her father wouldn't have trusted him with her if he wasn't. Nella swallowed the lump that was forming in her throat. She was looking forward to discovering more about him. But right now, she wanted to discover what was underneath his towel.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Master Thomas Miller stood on the porch of his centuries' old plantation lair, inhaling the predawn air. He loved this time of night. When the darkness held on to the sky before the light took over. The air was scented with a mixture of fresh cotton and wheat, and the moist Atlantic breeze stuck to his cold cheeks as he sipped his tumbler of blood. When a yawn escaped his mouth, he thought he should be turning in soon, but he wanted to watch the night a little longer. It was better than anything on satellite television.

At five hundred years old, he was almost tired of turning in when the sun came up. Often, he wished for a time when he wouldn't have to hide from the sun. What vampire hadn't wished for daytime access? He closed his eyes and brushed his white-blond hair from his eyes, trying to remember what the sun looked like. Was it still a bright yellow-orange glow in the center of the sky, or had global warming changed it?

Thomas laughed at himself since he'd never been this reflective about anything. Maybe his friend Idris was rubbing off on him. Turning from the railing, he headed into the mansion. Arriving at his sleeping chambers, he noted his wife Melody was

already in bed. As he stood on the side of the bed, he watched the hypnotic rise and fall of her chest. The outline of her nude body under the sheer white sheets caused his breath to hitch. He downed the rest of his drink and disrobed.

When a trail of kisses on her shoulder failed to rouse her, he turned onto his back and covered himself with the sheet. *It's just as well*, he thought. He had a big day tomorrow. After the State of the Species Address, he had a late meeting with Idris. They'd been talking about merging the East Coast territories. The meetings were suspended after the Carolina master was murdered. However, Idris wanted to meet with him about his Georgia-Florida province and how these recent murders could be linked.

The New York master also wanted to formally extend him an invitation to join his cabinet once he was elected vice president of the Vampire Council. He'd been keeping this news a secret from Melody, hoping to surprise her with it after the elections. Thomas listened to the clicks as the grates automatically sealed the windows of his sleeping chamber. Finally, his eyes closed in slumber.

Hearing her husband's snores, Melody finally opened her eyes. She looked around the pitch-black room, sneaking a peek at her husband to make sure he was asleep. Grateful that Thomas was such a sound sleeper, she slid out of bed and put on her robe as she quickly padded across the room to the chamber door to open it.

The hunter stood on the other side. Melody frowned. She'd thought Mikeli would've sent someone more menacing and less ordinary looking, but who was she to judge. The quiet ones were always the ones she had to watch out for.

The woman entered, looking even more nervous than Melody was.

"Are you new?"

The woman nodded as she gripped her sword tight.

"Well, he's right there. Do your thing. I just don't want to watch."

Melody headed into the bathroom, where she turned on the shower so she couldn't hear her husband being murdered.

Months earlier, Mikeli Umbeye, her husband's boss, had contacted her with a proposition she couldn't refuse. It seemed that Thomas was teaming up with Idris Eyad to overthrow Mikeli and take over the vampire race. Mikeli told her that it was up to her

to save the vampire world by exterminating her husband.

At first, Melody couldn't believe Thomas was capable of doing such a thing. But then she remembered how he, Idris, the Carolina master and the master from Washington would all get together and talk in secret.

Melody shivered, remembering the nights she'd met with Mikeli while Thomas went off to one of his meetings. She hated that Thomas had to die, but he was standing in her way. The councilman promised that once Thomas was out of the way, they could be together. Forever.

She moaned as her nipples hardened at the thought. All that power, and it would be hers.

Melody tossed the ends of her blonde hair over her shoulder and listened at the door. When she no longer heard movement, she turned off the shower and went back into the bedroom. The woman stood by the bed, next to a pile of ashes that used to be her husband's body. Tears sprang to her eyes. What had she done? She and Thomas had been married for one hundred years.

"I'm sorry," the hunter whispered.

"No," Melody said, wiping her eyes. "It was time for a divorce."

Moving to the closet, she pulled out her pink and leopard-print suitcase that was already packed with her clothing. She was going to go to Hell for a few days, and then she'd be settling in at Mikeli's lair somewhere in the Caribbean. While exiting, she changed into a pink jogging suit.

"Did Mikeli tell you where he's sending me?"

"Yes," the woman hissed.

"Cool. As long as it's one of the nicer suites. Something next to Lucifer's penthouse."

"It is."

She turned in time to see the hunter raise her sword. A scream began, but the sound was trapped in her throat as her head was decapitated from her body. The carcass sunk to the ground and burst into blue and orange flames.

Helen dropped her sword that dripped with indigo blood onto the carpet and covered her face with her hands as she burst into tears. This was her third hit in less than twenty-four hours. She hadn't expected the madman would work her this hard, but she knew he was testing her loyalty. Her hands shook as she bent to pick up her weapon. For the first time since she'd been arrested, she allowed herself to

openly think about her daughter. *I'm doing this for Nella*, she reminded herself.

Helen wondered what her daughter was doing as she walked into the portal that would take her back to Hell. She hoped Nella was somewhere safe and that she hadn't become a vampire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Tilting Lazarus' face toward her, Nella kissed him. Since she'd never attempted seduction before, she wasn't sure if she was doing it right. She was certain that Lazarus had been seduced by many women. More experienced women who knew how to control their fangs. Doubt began to creep into her mind. Maybe they shouldn't do this, but if it prevented a kidnapping by a horny old vamp, then why not?

Nella rested her hand on his bare, muscular thigh as she entwined her tongue with his. Straddling his lap, she pushed him back on the bed as her own fangs lengthened. Nervousness gave way to desire when her mouth connected with his. Her demeanor began to change, just as it had back in her bedroom. Images of the naughty things she wanted to do to him slipped into her mind. He must have picked up on her thought, because he groaned and broke their connection.

"Slow down, ma. I don't want your first time to be a blur."

"Believe me, I'll always remember this."

He stopped her before she tried to kiss him again.

“If we’re gonna do this”—he gripped her waist and flipped her onto her back—“it’s gonna be on my terms.”

“Fine,” she hissed as she licked his throat.

Every cell in her body begged her to take his throat, but he shook his head as he gripped her wrists and held them above her head. *At least take mine*, she pouted telepathically. Again, he shook his head.

“You ain’t ready for all that, ma.”

“What am I ready for?”

“This...”

Dipping his head, he captured her nipple in his mouth through her t-shirt. The glorious suction his lips created around it caused her to sigh. Why, she wondered, had she waited so long to do this? She could’ve snuck into the stairwell at school with a boy like the other girls in class. But no, she had to be a good girl and abide by mommy’s law.

Nella closed her eyes. No, that wasn’t it. It was because she was waiting for the right man—the one who could satisfy her, the one who wouldn’t only be careful with her body, but would also be careful with her heart. It was him, she realized—he was the one she’d been waiting for. She knew he’d be worth it.

Releasing her wrists, he pushed up her shirt to capture her left nipple without the fabric in the way. She sighed as she slowly drifted back to the Nella that

she remembered. Moisture pooled in the valley between her thighs as he leaned back to pull her shirt over her head. Immediately his lips covered her throat. Moaning, she found the edge of the towel and untucked it from his waist.

She touched his hip, wanting desperately to touch his shaft. The only penis she'd ever seen was Billy Harris' in the second grade, when he pulled it out in the middle of story time and started playing with it before the teacher made him put it away. Picking up on her thought, Lazarus chuckled as he lifted his head from her throat.

"Mine's gonna be a lot more advanced than his, ma."

"I know." She giggled. "Can I..."

Suddenly bashful, she pressed her lips together to hold back the words that were about to escape. He leaned on his elbow and stared down into her eyes. Her heart fluttered as he brushed strands of hair away from her cheeks to get a better view of her irises.

"What, ma? Never be afraid to tell me what you want."

"Can I touch you?"

He picked up her trembling hand, kissed her fingertips and guided her hand to his shaft. When she wrapped her palm around his girth, she gasped. She hadn't expected him to be so...big. But, like he said,

his was more advanced. Nervousness nagged at her while she stroked the tight muscle.

“It’s going to hurt,” she said as more of a statement than a question.

“Not if I can help it.”

When she looked up at him, his eyes had turned a solid shade of crimson. He looked away, she sensed, to gain his composure. She wasn’t about to let him go. Instead, she fondled the tip of his cock with her index finger.

“Um...” he began, and then lost his train of thought. “We should...”

“Get to the good part?”

“Yeah.”

He hooked his fingers into the waistband of her panties and pulled them down her thighs, coaxing her thighs apart with a gentle touch and settling in between them. She let go of him as he touched her moist core with his fingers. His lips found hers as he teased her virgin opening, willing the tight flesh to yield for him.

When his fingers pushed into her, her body suddenly felt weightless. She gripped the sheets beneath her to stay grounded. Her back arched as he deepened the kiss on her mouth, and her fangs ripped through her gums.

“Oh...Laz,” she sighed as her essence flowed down her canal and around his finger.

“I think you’re ready.”

He climbed between her legs and hoisted her thighs onto his hips. She gripped his shoulder as he positioned the tip of his cock against her opening. Panic surged through her.

“Wait!”

Pausing, he looked at her. “What?”

“Shouldn’t we use something? I mean, if I can breed...”

“My guys are dead,” he said. “But for you...”

Materializing a condom, he tore off the wrapper and rolled it over his erection. Maybe they didn’t need to use one, she thought, but she was still freaked out over the news that she could still get pregnant. And although his sperm wasn’t working, she didn’t want to take any chances. He kissed her as he repositioned himself between her thighs.

“Better?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll go slow,” he said. “If you want me to stop, say it. Cool?”

“Okay.”

The anxiety returned when she felt his shaft against her opening. She dug her fingers into his shoulders, but released him when she worried she was

hurting him. Closing her eyes, she felt him push his way into her an inch at a time. The initial pain when her hymen gave way caused her to grimace but that feeling quickly turned to pleasure.

When he was halfway inside of her, he paused to give her walls time to adjust to his girth. Panting, she clutched at his upper arms, then his hips. She wanted more of him inside her, but he shook his head. Her vision bathed him in shades of red, and her heartbeat slowed to a crawl as she arched hard into him. He raised his eyebrow.

She cupped his jaw and turned his head to the side. In one fluid motion, she pierced his jugular with her fangs. He shuddered and thrust hard against her opening, causing her to moan. Nella lapped at the sweet blood that oozed from his neck.

As soon as she removed her fangs, he backed away, covering the wound with his hand. She rose up on her elbows and raked his body with her ruby-colored gaze. Before she could climb to her knees, he moved away from the bed with a look of shock on his face.

“What the hell was that?”

She shrugged. “You didn’t like it?”

“That’s not the point, ma. You bit me! A few hours ago, you couldn’t even drink blood, and...you bit me!”

“I don’t know what’s happening,” she confessed. “I keep going in and out of vamp mode. And you”—she paused to lick her lips—“taste so good.” She looked at his hard cock and hissed. “You didn’t come.”

Without another word, he crossed the room into the bathroom and slammed the door. She sighed as she climbed beneath the sheets and curled them around her shoulder. The sun was starting to come up. If he didn’t come back to bed, he might fry.

“Lazarus,” she called. “I’m sorry. Come to bed!”

No answer. Nella turned onto her side and closed her eyes. The cells within her body shifted again as she began to normalize. Was he mad? she wondered. And if so, what was he mad about? A half hour went by before she heard the bathroom door open. She sat up to watch him walk across the room and climb into bed.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “Are you okay?”

He nodded as he curled his arm around her waist. “I’m fine, ma.”

Her heartbeat sped up just being in his arms. She settled against his chest and closed her eyes. The taste of his blood still lingered on her tongue. Surprisingly, it didn’t repulse her. Instead, it comforted her as she drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Idris sat up and swung his feet over the side of the king-sized bed. He materialized a black silk robe to cover his nude body as the call entered his mind from the vampire council. Another master was dead. The Georgia-Florida master, Tom Miller. He sighed. Thomas was a good friend of his and an excellent master. Idris had hoped to add him to his cabinet after he was elected vice president.

All of the masters Idris had picked to rule America along with him were now dead. He moved to the warmer and took out two bottles. Before he retired for the day, he'd planned to warn Thomas, but Aponi had distracted him. Idris had taken his wife to his condo in Atlantic City to give them privacy. As he returned to the bed, he twisted off the cap and drank most of the first bottle.

Mikeli was definitely targeting him—that was now crystal clear, but Idris still didn't know how Helen fit into the puzzle. Why would he use her as his assassin instead of more capable enforcers? After he finished drinking the elixir, he sat the empty bottle on the nightstand and simply stared at the second bottle.

Had Lazarus taken his advice? Idris wondered, though he didn't really want to think about it. He and

Aponi would be back home in time to go to the State of the Species address. Since wives weren't allowed, he wondered what Aponi would do with her alone time. His wife hadn't yet stirred. Maybe they should go back now, considering another master had been killed. But he didn't want to interrupt Lazarus; well, only the father side of him did.

Daylight raged outside his steel-covered windows. His mind worked, trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together and not allowing him to rest. He pinched the bridge of his nose as a new headache began to form, then uncapped the second bottle and quickly downed it. When he got up to dispose of the bottles, Aponi finally raised her head.

"What's wrong?"

"Thomas is dead."

"Oh, dear. That's a shame," she said with a yawn. "I hope Mel is okay."

Idris snickered. Melody and Aponi were as close as two fake friends could be. His wife loved the fact that Melody was as much of a gold digger as she was, and he knew they would often scheme over how to get even more money to fund their lavish lifestyles. Many of their plots involved rich humans they would pick up in bars. He'd picked up that tidbit one night during a lovemaking session while her mental guard was down.

Idris didn't care about her antics anymore. Vampires lived a long time, he thought. They needed something to do to keep themselves amused. He removed his robe and climbed into bed.

"You know, I'm next," he said, turning on his side to face her.

"No." She touched his chest. "I don't believe that."

"I'm a master, Aponi. There are some in our world who are out for my blood, literally."

"Perhaps. I still can't imagine my life without you."

Idris reached for her as she rested her head on his shoulder. She had been his first turn. He hadn't intended to turn her, but like an accidental pregnancy, it kind of happened. It took place while he was negotiating with her father over some of the land. One night, he stole away to see Aponi. During one of their trysts, he inflicted her with a turn bite instead of a passion bite. The shotgun wedding occurred a few days later.

She leaned up to kiss him. He smiled as she settled back against him. Some nights, he did love her, though some times, he wasn't sure why. They hadn't been entirely faithful to each other, but that was customary in their world.

“You should rest,” she said, kissing his chest. “You have a big day tomorrow.”

“And how will you entertain yourself?”

She shrugged. “Maybe I’ll stay here an extra day. Do some sightseeing, play some blackjack. Maybe lay out on the beach.”

“You’re not going to visit Melody?”

“I should give her some time to grieve. I’ll visit in a few days.”

Lifting the sheet, she dipped her head beneath it and wrapped her lips around his cock. When her tongue curled around his shaft, he sighed. If nothing else, his wife was an expert at giving head. Closing his eyes, he threaded his fingers through her silky black hair. He paged Lazarus to tell him the news of the assassination. As his wife worked him into a state of arousal, a piece of information slipped from her thoughts and into his, and he knew he wasn’t going to get any rest tonight.

Especially since he’d just learned that his wife was fucking his boss.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lazarus tightened his grip on Nella's shoulder when he received Idris' page. Damn. This was getting serious. Master Miller had been the last one standing in Idris' alliance. Was his boss next? He didn't want to think about it, and he wasn't going to let it happen on his watch.

Nella shifted in response to his touch but didn't open her eyes. Her breath was hot and moist on his neck. He was glad she hadn't woken up—he couldn't be held accountable for his actions if she had.

She had bitten him. He let out a soft whistle as he replayed it in his mind. No female vamp had ever bitten him. Not even on the wrist. It messed him up. His neck still tingled where her fangs had pierced him. They'd have to talk about that. But then, they weren't gonna do this again, right? He knew he was fooling himself as soon as he thought the words.

When she shivered, he pulled the blankets tighter around her shoulder and sighed. He'd already downed three bottles in an attempt to get his erection to go down and was about to open a fourth. He closed his eyes instead, inhaling. Her scent had changed, but not as much as he'd hoped.

He'd been to Hell many times. The first was after his initial turn. It hadn't registered, so they'd brought the new vampire down into the pit for an inquiry. He shuddered, remembering how every corner of his body and mind was probed by harpies.

Of course, this trip would be different. Maybe. Lazarus wondered how she'd react to the screams. The scent of rotting flesh and feces. The heat from the open flame pit that surrounded the rooms. He already guessed she'd probably push to see her mother while they were there. Hell was a big place, though, and there was no telling where Helen was being housed.

Nella stirred. He released his grip so she could turn onto her side, facing away from him. When she did, he moved with her, draping his arm across her waist and curling his body around hers. She sighed as she interlaced her fingers with his. His fangs were already lengthened to capacity. They shortened when he ran his tongue over them, but elongated again when she scooted back against his body.

He kissed her temple. She still had so much to learn about this life—how to hunt, the hierarchy of the species, etc. Idris was more than the equivalent to the human mayor. Her pop was also an enforcer. Lazarus didn't think she'd have the stomach to handle that part of the job—especially after she got sick at Clay's apartment. She'd have to grow up fast. After Idris was

elected to council, Nella would be master. She'd inherit everything.

Once upon a time, he was being groomed by Idris to rule the empire. He graciously stepped aside when his boss told him about his daughter. As blood, she should be heir to his throne. Idris had assured him that he had a bigger plan in mind for him, but the master never told him what that was.

Lazarus closed his eyes. It was just as well. He doubted they would ever see each other again after she became master. She'd have her own security team in place, and he'd be in Hell with Idris. Besides, he wasn't about to be a kept man. His woman wasn't going to have more power over him.

Lazarus frowned. His woman? Nella wasn't his woman. Yet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

As Idris nursed his breakfast, he changed from his lounging pajamas into his black power suit, white shirt and yellow tie. His mind was still working. He didn't care that Aponi was sleeping with Mikeli; it was the reason behind it that worried him. When his thoughts were interrupted by footsteps in the hallway, he sealed the information and stood to greet his daughter.

Nella's mood was lighter. Idris smiled as she entered his embrace and kissed his cheek. She was beautiful in her black suit and pumps. He inhaled and found her scent had changed. Lazarus' musky scent was in her blood, but not as much as he'd hoped. Still, he hoped it would be enough to keep her safe in Hell. Maybe.

"Oh...my...goodness, Dad," she chattered. "I am so excited! In church, they kept telling us how horrible it is to go there, and now I'm actually going! Ooh, do you think I'll see Mom? Can I? Can she have visitors?"

Lazarus had silently sunk into a seat at the dining room table. Idris had made sure the servant brought him adrenaline-laced blood this morning. He knew his protégé would need it. He noted that

Lazarus looked paler than usual but presentable in his navy suit, holding his red tie in his hand. When his gaze locked with Idris', there was something in his eyes that cause Idris to frown. What had happened last night? "I'm sorry, but you can't visit your mother."

She frowned. "I thought so."

Idris pushed a goblet of blood in front of her. She took a tiny sip, made a face and pushed it away. He signaled the servants to bring her a human breakfast of a western omelet and a blueberry muffin. As she dug in, he telepathically asked that they spike her juice and tea with blood. She couldn't go to Hell with the scent of human food on her breath. Not when she'd be in a room full of vampires.

Second thoughts nagged at him. Maybe he shouldn't bring her with him. It was too soon. This was only her second day with him. Maybe she'd prefer to do whatever young girls her age did. But when he looked at her, he didn't just see his daughter. He saw a woman who would be a powerful vamp one day. This trip was necessary. Not only to expose her to the harsh reality of Hell, but also to see if she was strong enough to handle it.

"Oh. My. God. Dad..." He cringed, as did Lazarus. She covered her mouth with her hand. "I'm sorry."

“That’s okay.” He patted her free hand.

The fact that she could still say the sacred names also concerned him. Her turn wasn’t complete. He had thought that the pheromones from lovemaking would also jumpstart her full turn. Why didn’t it happen?

Would it ever be? Maybe the prayer lines, the holy water, the exposure to the hallowed places by her mother had canceled out the darkness of his world. He frowned. Had Helen been trying to turn Nella into a slayer, just as she’d tried to turn him into a human?

Idris thought back to that night. Helen didn’t just try to make him human for that night. Often, she had prayed over him as he slept. He’d heard her and was angry. Not with the child that was created as a result, but because Helen threw holy water on him, which caused his skin to blister. It took months for the wounds to heal. That night, he understood that Helen would never accept him as he was, but he wasn’t ready to let go of the woman he loved.

He shifted his gaze to Lazarus. His protégé was strangely silent this evening. Lazarus was never an early evening person, but his mood tonight was surlier than usual. Lazarus just stared into his goblet instead of drinking it. He’d normally be on his fifth bottle by now.

“Is the Devil going to be there?”

He laughed. “No. This meeting is just for vampires.”

“Oh. Do I look okay?”

“You look beautiful.”

“I didn’t know what to wear. I’ve never been to a business meeting. Mom wouldn’t let me get a job, though I really wanted to.”

“You can work for me. I really do need a personal assistant.”

“Awesome!” She sipped her juice, then gasped and tugged at her ponytail. “My hair! I have to do something with it.”

Bolting from the table, she called the name of one of the female servants to help her with her hairstyle. As soon as she left the room, Lazarus slumped forward and rested his forehead on the table. Perhaps his daughter simply wore him out. Wincing, Idris shook that image from his mind and moved from his chair to take the seat his daughter had vacated. He patted his protégé on his back.

“So, how’d it go?”

“Fine.”

“Your scent isn’t as strong on her as I hoped it’d be.”

“I know.”

“And she’s still eating human food. She took a sip of blood, but it’s not enough to pass the vamp test.”

“I know.”

He touched Lazarus lightly on his shoulder. “I don’t mean to pry, but did you...”

“She bit me.”

Idris sat back. “What?”

“In the middle of... it...she turned and she bit me.”

Silence engulfed him. He wasn’t sure how to react. On one hand, he was pleased. It meant her mother hadn’t succeeded in extinguishing the vamp side of Nella. But the father side of him didn’t want to know the details.

“I don’t understand,” the master said carefully. “Isn’t that good?”

Lazarus rose abruptly, knocking over his chair in the process. When he strolled to the window, Idris followed him. He didn’t understand why Lazarus would have trouble...finishing after that. If any other female vamp had bitten him, they wouldn’t be having this conversation. Perhaps that was the reason. Because Nella wasn’t an ordinary female vamp. She was special to Lazarus.

“Yeah, but I couldn’t...finish because it messed me up so bad.”

Idris nodded and clasped his hands behind his back. He took a minute to choose his words carefully.

“Well, you have to, Lazarus,” he said sternly. “The stakes have been raised with last morning’s assassination, but I have learned some other information.”

Lazarus turned to him. “What happened?”

“Aponi is fucking Mikeli.”

Lazarus snorted. “I’m surprised that it took this long.”

“Maybe, but I can’t help but think there’s a reason behind it.”

“You think he’s gonna try to kill you?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Idris said as he walked away from the window. “Mikeli has always been jealous of me. I wouldn’t put it past him to add murder to his list of sins.”

“I won’t let it happen, sir.”

Idris smiled and turned to face Lazarus. “I know. But you need to focus on Nella. There’s an hour left before we must leave. That’s plenty of time to...finish. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I’m going to run to the office to see if they’ve discovered anything more about Tom’s murder.”

Lazarus opened his mouth but closed it. His protégé simply nodded at Idris' orders. Idris didn't mean to be so hard on him, but this was serious. His daughter's life was at stake. With the matter settled, Idris teleported out of the room.

He reminded himself that this was a part of the plan he'd set in motion long ago, after he'd found out he was going to be a father. It was the only way to keep the business in the family, to be allowed to pass it down to a female. If given the chance, the council would certainly veto the idea.

In his office, Idris sat behind his desk, starting at the reports that littered the top of it. He picked up the red folder and opened it. Just as he'd suspected, Helen's scent was at the scene. Melody was also dead. Helen's scent was discovered on that set of ashes, too. A chill flowed down his spine. He swiveled his chair around and stared out into the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“What do you think?” Nella asked when she stepped back into the dining room. “Nevaeh is the bomb!”

Lazarus turned from the window. Her curly hair had been straightened and hung in dark strands to her waist. He liked it, but then he’d like any way she’d styled her hair. Right now, her hair was the least of his worries. His hands trembled behind his back. Why was he so nervous?

“It looks good.”

She frowned at him and placed her hands on her hips.

“What’s wrong? You’ve been like this since we woke up.”

“Like what?”

He strode away from the window and leaned against the table, and she moved to stand in front of him. “Growly. Moody.” She placed her hand on his shoulders. “We made love last night. I thought you’d at least be happy about it.”

“I am.”

“Liar.”

Lazarus looked at her, then away, sending his gaze to the fireplace. He had woken up in a bad mood.

It wasn't because he was sorry he'd made love to her, but because of the circumstances that surrounded it. It wasn't fair of Idris to put him in this position, but how could he tell his boss that he wasn't going to sleep with his daughter?

"I'm cool, ma."

She massaged the knotted muscles along his collarbone. "You can talk to me, you know. Why are you so tense?"

"I've got a lot on my mind."

"Like what? You can't go to Hell like this."

Moving behind him, she continued to work on the tight muscles in his neck. Her touch was like magic. Each muscle released under her fingertips. His cock began to harden. He was ready. Physically, at least.

Before he lost his nerve, he seized her around her waist and pulled her to him. He pressed his lips against hers as he lifted the hem of her skirt to find the elastic waistband of her panties. He ripped the right side, letting the silk material fall to the ground in ribbons. He stood to lift her onto the table, but she moved out of his reach.

"What are you doing? We have to go to Hell, and Dad—"

"Is at the office, ma."

"But...here? In the dining room?"

“There’s no time to go downstairs. Plus, we won’t be interrupted.”

Lazarus felt Idris seal the room before he left.

She backed up quickly as he stalked toward her. Her eyes widened as she spied the desire in his eyes, the length of his fangs. Her shoulder blades hit the partial wall next to the entrance, and he grinned. Damn, he loved a good chase. He unzipped his fly, pulled out his cock, and rolled a condom that he materialized over it.

“Um...maybe we shouldn’t...”

“Shouldn’t what, ma?”

Lazarus licked her throat as he lifted her to straddle his hips. He entered her hard. She gasped, clutched his shoulder as he pumped his hips in a rapid rhythm, moving his cock in and out of her still tight pussy. All he had to do was come, and then the transaction would be complete.

“What happened to all that shit you was talkin’ last night?”

“That...wasn’t...me...”

“Yeah, it was. You wanted me to come.”

“I...my hair...”

“Fuck your hair, ma. We’ll fix it.”

His cock hardened, lengthened as her walls contracted around him. Grunting, he buried his face in the cleavage of her shirt. He was so close. Her hips

rising to meet his thrusts surprised him, but he didn't slow down to find out why.

"You want me to come, ma?" he whispered into her ear.

"Yes."

"Want me to come in this wet pussy of yours?"

"Please... Oh... God..."

Flinching, he dropped her and yelled in pain. She slid halfway down the wall before her legs caught her. He tried to catch his breath as he paced away from her and doubled over, resting his hands on his knees. Why was she still able to say the sacred name? he wondered as the currents of electricity subsided. When vampires were created, they were programmed to get an electric shock when the sacred name was spoken. Something to do with the falling put between their creator and the forces of above. Other than that, he never learned the full details.

"You gotta watch that," he said.

"I'm sorry. I keep forgetting."

Appearing at his side as he straightened his posture, she cupped his deflating erection and hissed. His body stiffened. She was turning again. They only had—he glanced at his watch—thirty minutes before Idris returned. That simply wasn't enough time. Was it?

"Let me make it up to you."

As she sat in the chair, she pulled off the old condom and wrapped her soft lips around him. Oh. Shit. He gripped her shoulders. His cock became firm in her warm mouth. Where did she learn that? As good as she felt, it wasn't enough. Producing another condom, he removed his erection from her mouth, pulled her to her feet and lifted her to sit on the table. He paused to roll the covering over his shaft.

"Make it up to me like this," he hissed back.

Another hiss bubbled up from her throat as he entered her. He almost slipped up and bit her. There were also too many clothes in the way, but no time to do anything about it. Yeah, he could take them off with just a thought, but then he wouldn't want to put them back on, especially when she looked at him through crimson eyes and licked her lips.

"Laz."

She wanted to bite him, he sensed. There was no place on his body that she could without messing up his suit. His thrusts were becoming erratic as his release built in the base of his cock. He grimaced as she pierced his wrist with the tip of her fang. It wasn't enough to draw blood, but it still drove him crazy.

Fuck it, he thought as he ripped her collar away from her neck, pushed her head to the side with his jaw and took her throat. He siphoned her sweet elixir as he came hard inside of her. He needed to stop

thrusting or the table would break. He needed to remove his mouth from her throat before he drained her, but he was powerless to do either.

Idris' page finally brought him to his senses. He removed his fangs from her throat. As he lifted his head, dizziness claimed him, and he remembered that he hadn't drunk his breakfast. As he sunk into the dining-room chair, he picked up his goblet and drained it in one gulp

"Damn," she whispered as she cupped the side of her neck.

"Yeah."

She slid off the table and into his lap. When she kissed him, he inhaled. His scent was mixed with hers. The aroma was strong and unmistakable. He was too spent to wrap his arms around her. Plus, he knew if he did, they wouldn't be able to make it to Hell.

"Can we do that again?"

"Not right now. Your pop's on his way back and we gotta get it together."

"Fine," she huffed as she ran her fingers through her hair. "Does it still look okay?"

"Yeah."

He handed her the goblet as he removed her from his lap to fix his pants. "Take a sip."

Her posture stiffened. "Why?"

“They’ll need to smell it on you. Kind of like a password.”

Only a few drops remained. He got a fresh bottle from the warmer, poured about two thirds into the cup, and waited. Nella looked at him, and then took a big swig. Gagging, she forced herself to swallow it. She looked back up at him and opened her mouth.

“Thank you,” he said as he fixed her torn collar.

“I still don’t see how you drink that all the time.”

“You will.”

Wrinkling her nose, she smoothed down her skirt. He kissed her hard on her lips before wrapping his arm around her waist and guiding her into the hall. When Idris stepped off the elevator, he shared a look with his boss and nodded. His boss’ nostrils flared as he inhaled and smiled.

“How do we get there?”

She was so excited that she practically bounced in his arms. Lazarus shook his head. How could she be excited about going to Hell? He figured that she’d at least protest or be more fearful than she was.

“Like this,” her father said.

With a wave of his hand, Idris summoned a vortex in the middle of the marble-lined hallway. The force of the swirling winds knocked over a vase, but it didn’t break. The windows rattled as she observed it twirl.

“Cool!”

“Before you ask, ma,” Lazarus said, “not every vamp can do this. Only high-ranking ones can. It’s to prevent ordinary people from walking up in there and starting shit.”

She looked at him. “Will I be able to?”

“Perhaps,” her father answered as he moved toward the black tornado.

He stepped aside to allow them to pass through first. Nella hung back before she stepped into the vortex. Turning, she looked up at him with concern in her eyes. He tensed.

“Will it hurt?”

“No. It’s like walking into a strong wind, ma.”

Nella turned toward the vortex, and then turned around again. She motioned with her finger for him to bend close to her lips. “I’m not wearing panties. You ripped them off...”

He telekinetically covered her with a black lace thong. “If you don’t wanna go, ma, we can stay home.”

She swallowed before kissing his cheek. “I want to, and I know, stay beside one of you at all times.”

“That’s my girl.” Idris chuckled.

Lazarus moved in front of her to enter the vortex first, in case something decided to attack as soon as she stepped out on the other side. He materialized a pistol and stuck it into his waistband,

just in case. Idris had asked two more bodyguards to join them. No doubt due to Mikeli.

The winds churned faster as he entered and held out his hand for Nella to take. She squeezed his finger and winced as she stepped into the wind. He circled his arm around her waist and pulled her to him. She buried her face into his chest.

“Just relax, ma. I got you.”

When Idris stepped in, he shielded her from the back. In the blink of an eye, the tornado descended and took them to Hell.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The vortex landed directly outside of large red steel doors. Two torches shaped like gargoyles spat fire on either side. Nella's heart beat rapidly as she peeled herself from Lazarus' chest. She felt like everything was spinning. The men quickly ushered her to the side.

"I'm fine," she said as her fangs lengthened. "I just need to catch my breath."

"Take your time, angel," her father said as he stroked her back.

"We can just go back," Lazarus said.

"No," she hissed.

Someone, or something, screamed. Jumping, she pressed into Lazarus' side. "What was that?"

"You don't want to know, ma."

Knowing that he was probably right, she nodded. She inhaled, and the putrid scent made her gag. As she covered her nose with her hand, she realized she probably didn't want to know what that smell was either. *Suck it up*, she told herself. *You're a vampire and you're acting like a wimp.*

"I'm fine, now. Let's go."

Idris led them to the doors. When a guard stepped out of the shadows, she recoiled into Lazarus'

side. As the cloaked being looked her up and down, Lazarus growled in warning and tightened his grip around her waist. She hoped he wouldn't start anything with the burly guard. Or that the guard wouldn't start anything with Lazarus.

"No females allowed," the guard said.

"She's with me," her father said. "She's my assistant. It's imperative that she attend. You may take it up with Javier if you'd like."

The guard sighed and motioned for her to step forward. Nella did, but only with Lazarus plastered to her back. The guard bent close to sniff her. She didn't know why he was sniffing her, and it creeped her out. Her grip tightened on Lazarus' arm as the guard sniffed her mouth.

He's sniffing for blood on your breath, ma, Lazarus transmitted to her. *To make sure you're a vamp.*

That's why you made me drink it.

He nodded. "But it don't take that fucking long to smell someone, motherfucker," Lazarus said out loud.

The guard recoiled. He glanced angrily at Lazarus before waving them through. Lazarus stared down the guard as he guided her past him. The auditorium was almost full when they arrived. Nella looked around the dark chambers. What looked like

the vampire crest was painted on one wall. Two gold serpents in the shape of a v framed a skull with glowing red eyes and fangs, while gold letters surrounded the image. Nella cocked her head to the side as she studied the words. They looked like Latin, but she couldn't be sure.

It is Latin. It means, 'By blood, we live,' her father translated for her as they walked to their seats.

She nodded as she continued to look around. Red and black flags with the same crest stood proudly in a holder by the chamber doors. The room didn't smell musty and rancid, as Lazarus had told her it would. Rather, it had a scent of fresh blood to it, like the aroma of a butcher shop.

They climbed down a set of steep stairs to their box. She ran her hand over the smooth cherry wood as a creature with wrinkled beige skin, dark pink wings, fangs and glowing yellow eyes moved around them. Her father told her that it was a griffin. The creature bustled around them, pouring blood in Idris' crystal goblet, making sure his microphone and headset work, that the master had adequate office supplies. She thought it was cute until it hissed at her for reaching out to touch it. As she drew back her hand in fear, Lazarus grabbed the griffin around its throat and tossed it halfway across the room. Her father chuckled

as the griffin crashed into the table for the Nevada-California master.

“I hate those things,” Lazarus muttered.

Panting, she leaned against him while he draped his arm around her shoulder. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest. She sat between her father and Lazarus while she listened to the buzz around her, awed by how many high-ranking vampires surrounded her. Behind them was the table that contained the master from the New England territory. His eyes glowed crimson when he nodded at her in recognition. She wondered how many masters there were before spying the red and yellow flag for Spain on another table. There were international masters as well?

“Dad...” He shushed her. *If you need to talk to me, he transmitted to her, it will have to be telepathically.*

“Oh.” She turned to Lazarus.

Same here, ma. You can’t trust mofos around here.

She looked around the hall and realized that she was the only female there. Many of the other masters openly stared at her. The guard’s warning that females weren’t allowed entered her thoughts. Why were vampires so patriarchal when it was the twenty-first century? Her father squeezed her hand when he heard her thought.

I hope you will change things, he said. We've been stuck in our ways for too long.

A bell sounded. Everyone stood as the president of the Vampire Council made his way to the podium to start the meeting. The vampire wasn't as menacing as Nella had expected. He was of average height with a stocky build, and when he spoke, she picked up a Spanish accent.

That's Javier Garcia, her father transmitted. He's the president of the council.

He's the vamp equivalent of the U.S. President, Lazarus added.

Is there someone above him?

Yes, her father confirmed. But this is all you need to know for now.

Flanked by two members of his security detail, the high-ranking vampire wore a long black robe over his power suit. His long ebony hair was pulled back into a ponytail. He nodded at the council members, and then motioned for everyone to take their seats.

"Welcome, gentlemen," Javier said. "Thank you for attending on such short notice. The events of the past few months are troublesome. As you know, Thomas Miller was assassinated yesterday in his home. He was beheaded while he slept in his chambers. This was the same way that Joshua Davis

of the Carolina territory was murdered, as well as Tyrell Hunter of the District of Columbia territory.

“We urge all of you, especially those on the East Coast, to use extreme caution. If any of you have information on these crimes, I ask you to come forward. If you don’t feel comfortable talking to me, please speak with Councilman Mikeli Umbeye or Master Idris Eyad.

“I would like to go on record to say I view this as an abomination, a challenge to me personally, and it won’t go unpunished.” Her father stiffened at this last statement, and Nella wondered if he knew who was committing the murders.

Applause erupted from the auditorium as the president took his seat at the center of the table. Next to take the podium was a tall man with distinct African features, wearing a red Armani suit with a black shirt and a tie emblazoned with the vampire crest. The power seeping from his pores made the hair on her arms stand on edge. Now he was intimidating.

He’s one you really need to stay away from, ma, Lazarus told her.

Is he the one you told me about last night?

He nodded. As Nella gazed at the councilman, fear entered her. She clutched Lazarus’ bicep and hoped the councilman wouldn’t try anything in front of all these people.

I'll die before I let him hurt you.

Her heart fluttered at Lazarus' comments.

"This is a sad day," Mikeli began. "The slain masters were a part of my district. I knew them well. They were friends, great leaders, and will be sorely missed. I wish I could explain why this is happening. Why these great vampires are dying so close together, and why this is occurring only on the East Coast. While I don't have these answers yet, I can assure you we will find the culprit and put him to death."

More applause. Lazarus and her father exchanged glances. Why? She wondered what else they were keeping from her. The heat in the room was beginning to get to her. She wore a white camisole beneath it, she reasoned, and it should be okay to take her jacket off. As she started to unbutton her jacket, Lazarus stopped her by placing his hand over hers.

Only if you wanna start a riot.

What? Why?

Trust me, ma. You don't wanna do that.

Nella pouted as the heat bore into her skin. The only thing on the table to drink was blood, and she didn't want to chance it by trying to drink it down here. Huffing, she crossed her arms over her chest. Her father leaned close and blew cold air on her. Instantly, her skin was cooled. She thanked him with a smile.

“Due to these recent events,” Mikeli continued, “the election for the new domestic vice president has been moved forward. It will take place in two eves. This will be one of the most important elections in council history.”

The councilman paused to scan the room. His gaze fell on her, and his eyes widened, but he quickly masked the surprise on his face. What was that all about? She gripped Lazarus’ forearm. Both he and her father tensed as Mikeli turned his gaze to her father. “Idris Eyad from the New York-New Jersey district is the prime candidate for the seat,” Mikeli said. “He is a close friend of mine. I have known him all my life and speak highly of his abilities to lead the direction of our race. Would you like to say a few words, Master Eyad?”

Nella wasn’t sure, but she believed she heard distaste in the African vampire’s words.

We have a history, her father said. *I will explain later.*

Idris rose to his feet to address the masters. She beamed with pride as he touched her shoulder before speaking. The other vampires watched him carefully, before turning their gazes to her. Lazarus removed his gun from his waistband and laid it in his lap.

“Gentlemen, I’d like to first thank you for your nomination to this seat. It is an honor for me to have

both your support and vote. I promise that I will always put the good of our race first. That I will uphold the ideals our elders have set before us. Thank you.”

The vampires hissed and applauded when he took his seat. Nella kissed his cheek as the meeting continued with President Javier addressing the vampires about the direction he'd like to see the species go. She leaned her head on Lazarus' shoulder, and soon, her eyes closed. Making love to Lazarus last night and again on the dining room table earlier had worn her out. Nella started to drift off to sleep.

Suddenly, she was jolted awake by more thunderous applause. In a daze, she looked around. The vampires had risen to their feet and were applauding the president as he exited the stage. The meeting was clearly over. She looked at Lazarus. *How long was I out?*

He shrugged. *Twenty, thirty minutes.*

“What?” she exclaimed before she caught herself. The men who hadn't been looking at her now turned to stare. To her horror, she also gained another glance from Mikeli and sunk down in her seat.

*Why didn't you wake me? What did Javier say?
I'll replay it for you later, ma.*

The torches lit as the vampires around her began to mingle. Great. Her first meeting and she fell

asleep. How was she going to take over her father's seat when she wasn't making a very good vampire? When her father and Lazarus rose to their feet, she scrambled to stand as well. Her father turned and kissed her on her cheek.

Idris shook his head. "I would like to visit with my colleagues," he said out loud. "It has been ages since Mikeli and I spoke."

I need you to go, Idris transmitted beneath his spoken statement. *Before anyone comes over here.*

Why can't I stay? She pouted.

It's too dangerous.

She was about to protest when she saw Mikeli heading toward them. Lazarus gripped her elbow. Several masters stopped the councilman's progress, giving them time to make their escape. Her father reached into his pocket, pulled out a tiny vial and handed it to Lazarus. When she looked close, she noticed a tiny tornado inside of it. A vortex? Cool. She remembered that Lazarus said only high-rank vamps could summon one. This must be how they'd get home. When she reached out to touch it, Lazarus smacked her hand and put it into his pocket.

Let's go, ma.

I'll be home soon, her father told her as he hugged her.

"Okay. Be careful."

“Of course.”

She gripped Lazarus’ hand as he pulled her toward the entrance. Turning in time to witness her father lift his glass to toast his boss, she frowned. But when she looked up, a few vamps were beginning to gather around her. Lazarus growled in warning to halt their progress and teleported them into the hallway. He removed the vial from his pocket and uncapped it. The tornado rose from the tiny opening and quickly expanded.

“What’s that all about? Why were those guys looking at me like that?”

“You’re gonna be a powerful female vamp one day, ma. That, plus the fact that you ain’t bad to look at, will bring anyone to their knees.”

She touched his cheek. “Including you?”

Without further comment, he grabbed her hand and pulled her into the tornado.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Helen paced her eleven-by-fifteen cell. Her once white dress was now covered in blood and dirt. Mehina had brought her a pair of jeans and a t-shirt to change into, but she wasn't about to with so many eyes watching her. The cells of other prisoners lined the wall opposite hers. While the wall that contained her bed, closet, toilet and sink was solid, the one directly across her bed was open and lined with steel bars. Besides, she was also in need of a shower. Her "hall pass" didn't allow her the luxury of going to the showers alone. It only permitted her to go topside.

"What you in for?"

Startled, Helen looked up. A ghoul leaned against the bars in the cell next to hers. The ghoul had green scaly skin with glowing yellow eyes. Saliva dripped down its chin, and it was dressed in a pink and black-striped jumpsuit. She couldn't tell if the being was male or female, but she didn't care. Conversation was the least of her needs at the moment.

"I'm Rosa," it said. "I sold my soul when I was five." The being shook its head. "My friend got me to pray to the devil to make me a lizard. Well"—it flicked its forked tongue at the bars—"It worked, I guess."

Helen grimaced. "I'm sorry."

"Just as well. What about you? I ain't seen you around."

"I got here last night. I sold my soul to have my daughter with a vampire."

Rosa whistled. "That's deep. How old's your daughter?"

Helen started to reply but closed her mouth. No one could be trusted in Hell. She wouldn't put it past Mikeli to use her neighbor to fish for information about Nella.

"It hurts too much to talk about her."

Rosa nodded. The guard, a being cloaked in a black robe with glowing red eyes, appeared at Rosa's door. It looked down at the clipboard it was holding, then at Rosa.

"Prisoner 666-91a. Time for your shower."

Rosa gathered her bucket of shower supplies and turned toward Helen.

"See ya when I get back."

Helen nodded when Rosa left. When her stomach rumbled with hunger, she looked at the tray, unsure about the contents of the stew they'd brought her. It didn't matter. She doubted that she could eat it. Taking a seat on her cot, she debated with herself on a nap, knowing she should at least close her eyes for a few minutes while she was afforded some peace, if

there was such a thing in Hell. The vampires were in a meeting, she'd heard. She knew Idris would be among them, but what about her daughter?

Her heart raced at the thought of her daughter being so close but so far. Idris wouldn't dare bring her to such a place. She hoped he'd keep Nella as far away from Hell as possible. A wave of dizziness threatened to consume her, and she picked up a slice of bread. Sniffing it, she turned it over in her hands before taking a bite.

Twenty-four hours down and she didn't want to think about how many more she had left. Bu'Ble had never told her she'd have to kill an angel to have Nella. She snarled. If the witch weren't already dead, she'd kill Bu'Ble herself. After what she'd witnessed on Mikeli's screen, though, the witch had to be dead—she hoped. Eating the last morsel of bread, she lay back on the lumpy mattress.

Nella's beautiful face popped into her mind, and she smiled. She missed her daughter. If only she could see and hold her one more time. She paused. Maybe she could see her again. It wouldn't be the same as in person, but it would do. Would give her the strength she'd need to keep going.

Standing, she walked to the stainless steel sink, preparing the ritual her grandmother had taught her long ago. After placing a dingy towel in the bottom of

the bowl, she turned on the water. She didn't have the proper herbs but could substitute with drops of her own blood.

When the water reached the proper height, she shut off the faucets and slit her wrist with the tip of her sword. She flinched but quickly held her arm over the basin, hoping the scent wouldn't attract any undesirables to her cell. Once the required six drops were in the water, she tore the hem of her skirt and wrapped it around her wound.

Closing her eyes, she held her palms up toward the ceiling and said the words that would bring forth an image of her daughter. She opened her eyes and stared down at the pink water. Suddenly, her daughter's face appeared. Helen frowned. Her daughter seemed...happy? That couldn't be.

She studied her daughter's image and gasped as the picture in the water expanded. Nella *was* in Hell! Idris dared to bring her daughter here. Her daughter's scent rose from the image. Blood. Helen narrowed her eyes. He allowed her daughter to drink blood like a common vampire. And she smelled something else on her daughter's skin.

Covering her mouth with her hand, she backed away from the sink. To top it off, her daughter had sex! With a vampire! What kind of father would allow such a thing to happen under his roof? In shock, she

sat down on her bed. That was unacceptable. She knew she should've made other arrangements. The vampire world was no place for her baby.

The worst part was there was nothing that she could do about it. She was here. Nella was far away. If she could somehow get a message to her daughter, tell her to run away before her father ruined her life, too... But it was too late for that.

She needed to talk to Idris. Maybe they'd allow him to visit. Closing her eyes, she called him. Rosa returned from the shower, smelling like mint. Helen quickly pulled the towel from the bottom of the sink. Sitting on the bed, she watched Rosa brush her long blonde hair. While she seemed nice, Helen could sense that Rosa had a story. Simply selling her soul wouldn't be enough to land someone in here.

"It's not too bad here," Rosa said. "It's better in this wing than the other. That's where they do the tortures."

"How long have you been here?"

"Fifty years. Topside, I was killed by my boyfriend." Rosa moved back toward the bars. She lifted her shirt to show Helen the jagged pink scar that ran from her throat down to her navel. "Jackass tried to gut me like a fish and sell my parts to vampires. Turns out, he was a vampire and a serial killer."

Helen gasped. "That's awful."

“Because of the deal I made, it was time for me to go. I just wished my death was nicer.”

“Is there such a thing?”

Rosa shrugged. “I guess not.”

“Where are you from?”

“Biloxi, Alabama,” Rosa said proudly. “Had a hell of a life there.”

“What do you do here? Is it like human prison?”

“Oh, hell no. Human prison’s probably nicer. At least they get yard breaks. That doesn’t happen here.” Rosa paused to braid her hair into two strands that hung on either side of her head. “Naw, basically it’s like the solitary you see in the movies. A lot of staring at the wall, listening to people scream.”

Helen frowned. “That’s it?”

“Yep. Can you think of something worse?”

Rosa moved to her cot and picked up her bowl. “We get to spend the rest of our lives thinking about the good and bad we’ve done.”

Helen shuddered as she watched Rosa shovel spoonfuls of the brown stew into her mouth. “A lifetime of being alone with our own thoughts...”

Rosa nodded. “Basically. The stew is okay to eat. They put carrots in it this time.”

Before Helen could reply, the guard came to take her to the showers. Standing, she quickly gathered her things.

“Don’t use the third shower,” Rosa called as Helen stepped through the bars. “An incubus hangs out there. The first one has the best spray.”

Smiling even as she forced back tears, Helen shuffled down the dark corridor to the communal showers. She noticed the three stalls as Rosa had described. Luckily, the first one was empty. She peered closely at it for signs of any distortions in the air. The third stall, as Rosa warned, was filled with a dark haze—a sign that an incubus was present.

When the guard turned his back, she stripped and stepped into the first stall. As the hot water pelted her tired skin, she sobbed. She had to figure out a way to escape this place and to get her daughter back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Idris stood as Mikeli glared at him from the front of the room. He refused to go to the councilman, even if Mikeli was his boss. It was all about position and power. If Idris went to Mikeli first, that was a sign of submission, while making his boss come to him was a sign of control.

When Idris sat back down, he could sense the rage seeping from his former friend's pores. It was a shame they could no longer be friends. They could barely even be cordial with each other.

As Idris watched the room empty out, his thoughts took him back to his childhood in Ghana. He and Mikeli had grown up next door to each other. Their families were friendly, and the boys played with each other, often sneaking out at night to take long walks through the fields before returning home near dawn to start the workday. Even when the village was sold and the boys found themselves shackled together on the ship, they kept each other from breaking. They often plotted how to escape the rickety hull and took turns working on freeing each other from the chains without success.

"It was fucked up," Mikeli said, interrupting Idris' thoughts as he took the vacant seat next to Idris.

“Indeed,” Idris said, picking up his glass. “There were many times when I thought I would rather die than continue on. You kept me going.”

“And here we are.”

“Yes,” Idris said. “Here we are.”

After arriving in Portugal, the men were imprisoned in two-foot cells for at least a month. Many of their cellmates feasted on one another when the blood thirst became too great. Mikeli and Idris protected each other, taking turns sleeping and sharing blood rations that were given out sporadically.

Finally Javier took the men to his estate, where they served as his servants. At the time, Javier was the master vampire of Portugal. He was the one who had bought the people of his village to use as slaves. It was he who had bitten and turned them on the ship. Though they rarely saw him, the men’s diligence and loyalty quickly caught Javier’s eyes, and he promoted Idris and Mikeli from servants to lieutenants. When Javier decided to try his luck in America, a newly formed country he had heard about, he took only these two men with him. Once there, they rapidly rose up the vampire ranks, helping Javier to build the vampire race in America.

“I saw her first.”

Idris raised his eyebrow in surprise at the councilman’s quiet statement. “Helen?”

Mikeli nodded. "I saw her on the beach. I was about to approach her, but she chose you instead."

Idris frowned. "Is that what this is all about?"

"No. There's more to it than that. You have always been the chosen one. You never had to work for anything. Even growing up, your family was able to provide you with everything you wanted. I had to scrape a lot of nothing together just to survive."

"Nothing was ever handed to me," Idris said. "I had faith, yes, that everything would work out. I would pray to Allah. I would believe it into existence."

"A vampire praying?" Mikeli mocked. "Impossible. We don't believe in such things."

"We must believe in something. We're still existing."

The conversation fell silent as the men watched the empty stage in front of them. Mikeli wasn't interested in discussing philosophical matters any longer, Idris sensed. The councilman prodded his mind for information, but Idris blocked his boss' attempts.

"Who was that girl with you?"

Idris pressed his lips together. "My assistant."

"Her scent is intoxicating. Does she taste that way too?"

Idris gripped the arms of his chair tightly to keep himself from punching Mikeli. He wouldn't

dignify his boss' question with a comment. The councilman was never really a boss to him, except in name only. Even their working relationship was so strained that Idris normally reported to Javier directly to avoid speaking to his foe.

"You didn't have to kill them to get to me," Idris stated flatly, steering the conversation to the recent deaths.

"Why do you think everything is about you?" the councilman snarled. "Some things are bigger than you."

"Then why do you want me dead?"

Mikeli slammed his fist on the table. It shattered, scattering shards of glass onto them and the marble floor, but Idris didn't move.

"All my life, I have lived in your shadow. From the time we met, all I heard was how great you were, how I needed to be more like you. This position I hold should have been yours, but I stole it from you and you didn't even know. You took your little master position and held on to it like it was a piece of gold. Now, you want to move above me. Be the golden boy once again. I can't let that happen."

"All because Helen chose me?"

"No, you piece of shit. Because you were chosen from the beginning. And all I had were the scraps you left behind." Mikeli stood. "For once, I want to take

everything you have and leave you my shit to feed off of.”

“How can I do that if I am dead?” Idris joked, his fangs cresting.

The councilman’s threats didn’t scare him. They only proved to Idris that he’d been right. Mikeli had been behind the assassinations. He knew Mikeli had stolen his council seat, but Idris had a bigger ace up his sleeve, one that would shift the vampire race from this narcissistic state it was currently in.

And Nella held the key, but Idris had to wait and bide his time until his daughter was with him before he could set his plan into motion.

When he looked up, Mikeli smiled at him through lengthened fangs. “When I am finished with you, death will be welcomed.”

After Mikeli dissolved into mist, Idris checked his private messages. Helen had called him; her message sounded urgent. Would they allow him to visit her? He could only try. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone slip into the chair beside him.

“He’s a little bitter,” Javier said.

“Just a little,” Idris replied, shaking the president’s hand.

In a blink of an eye, the men were transported to Javier’s chambers in Hell. The walls of the dark library were filled with every book ever written. Javier

had always been a voracious reader, Idris remembered. The plush royal blue velvet armchair cushioned him as they sat in front of a large fire pit. Idris sipped the drink Javier had poured for him as the harpies tossed a human soul onto the fire.

“What was that all about?” Javier asked.

Idris transmitted everything he had learned about Mikeli over the past few days to the president. Sighing, Javier adjusted his glasses. Idris was careful to shield his thoughts of Nella. While he trusted the president, he didn’t trust anyone with information about his daughter.

“That’s unacceptable,” the president stated.

“I agree,” Idris said. “He needs to be dealt with.”

“He’s dangerous to our species, Idris. I’m sorry he tricked me into believing you didn’t want the council position. I was preoccupied with the war at the time. I hope this council seat will make up for it.”

“I understand. As they say, ‘Good things come to those who wait.’”

“Indeed,” Javier said. “So, when you are installed as the V.P., you will handle this?”

Idris smiled. “I’m already working on it. I just need your permission to proceed.” He telepathically told his plan to Javier, again, leaving out Nella’s role. The president nodded.

"You have it. I will personally make sure that Lazarus is rewarded for his service."

"Thank you," Idris said. "That will mean a lot to him."

They fell silent for a moment, watching the harpies add more souls to the fire. The heat warmed his cold skin, and his thoughts turned to Helen's call. He wondered what she wanted to talk to him about.

"Who was the girl that you brought tonight?"

"She's my assistant."

Javier looked at him. "I've known you too long for you to lie to me. Plus, you broke a rule: no females. You should've warned me first, Idris. Now, you owe me an explanation."

Idris let his guard down and told Javier everything. The president was speechless. After a few moments, Javier gathered himself. He twisted in his seat to look at Idris.

"Helen will still have to serve her sentence. It is only fair, but I can ask that you be granted this one visit with her."

"Thank you. Now you understand why I've asked so much of you without revealing a great deal in return."

"I do, but I wish you'd have trusted me with all this from the beginning."

"I couldn't take the risk, Javier."

Nodding, the president sat back in his seat. Together they watched the crackling orange flames. Idris regretted not telling the president sooner, but despite his friendship with his master, he still didn't completely trust Javier, especially with his daughter.

"A female master who can do daylight?" Javier whistled in awe. "That changes the whole game."

Idris nodded as Javier teleported him to the holding cells.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Oh. My...”

“Don’t,” Lazarus said, holding up his hand when they returned home.

“Goodness,” Nella finished as she flopped into one of the overstuffed beige sofas in the living room. “That was insane.”

A drink was in order. Lazarus made his way to the bar to pour himself one. After draining half the glass, he loosened his tie and pulled it from his collar. For Nella, he settled on white wine. After lacing his own but not hers with blood, he pulled his weapon from his waistband and sat it on the bar before sitting beside her on the sofa. Taking the glass, she took a sip and moaned. After thanking him with a kiss, she rested her head on his shoulder.

“I’ve seen crazier at these things. Fistfights, orgies, vamps put to death.”

She flinched. “Gross.”

“Naw, it was kinda cool.” He grinned when she made a face.

Curling one arm around her waist, he pressed his lips against her temple. This felt nice—just hanging, without any expectations. He drained the rest of his glass and set it on the end table. After she

took another sip, he took her glass and set it next to his. She snuggled against him.

“What’d you think?”

She shrugged. “I wish I had the words to describe it, but I don’t. Everything’s so new. I never thought this kinda world existed.”

“Most people don’t.” He propped his feet up on the ottoman that doubled as a coffee table. “That’s gonna be all you one day, ma.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I’m not ready.”

“Yet.”

“I feel asleep in the middle of the freaking meeting, Lazarus.”

“You didn’t miss much.”

On the flat-screen television above the fireplace, he replayed the part of the meeting that she had missed. It was mostly Javier discussing the direction he hoped the vamps would work toward in the future. She squinted at the screen and shook her head when the last images faded.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready.”

“Your dad will teach you.”

She lifted her head to look at him. “What was that between the councilman and my dad?”

Lazarus closed his eyes. “It’s not really my place to speak on. They have beef that goes back before any of us were born. Idris thinks Mikeli might have

something to do with the masters getting offed, as well as your attempted kidnappings and a shitload of other stuff.”

“That’s horrible! How can someone be so evil?”

“Under the right set of circumstances, it’s easy to make that switch.”

“Could you?” When he didn’t answer, she studied him, but changed the subject. “Just looking at Mikeli gave me the chills.”

“It’s a good thing he didn’t try anything tonight, ma, ’cause I wouldn’t be here right now.”

He didn’t have to open his eyes to know she was smiling.

“You do like me.”

“Of course, especially when you’re quiet.”

She elbowed him in his ribs. “What are we gonna do for the rest of the night?”

“What you wanna do, ma?”

“I don’t know. What do you normally do on nights like this?” She placed her index finger over his lips before he could reply. “On second thought, don’t answer that.”

Licking her finger, he pulled her to him. When she kissed him, his plan to never touch her again went out the window. There were a thousand things he wanted to do tonight, and she wasn’t ready for any of them. Her sudden gasp sent a chill down his spine. He

released her lips and braced himself for the question she was about to ask.

“Do you hunt people?”

“No. Not technically. There’s a designated area where we can ‘hunt’ marked humans.”

She kissed him quickly. “I liked it when you bit me.”

He raised his eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“I thought it was gonna hurt, but it didn’t. It felt so amazing.” She fiddled with the button on his shirt and looked up at him. “Are there different kinds of bites?”

“There’s like a thousand different ones, ma.”

“How can you tell which bite is which?”

“Intent. A turn bite is deeper than a passion bite because the blood has to be drained...”

“Eww!”

“Then there’s ones for elevation. Ascension or descent. Some to use for feeding or battle.”

She shook her head. “Wow.”

“It’s easy to get them mixed up if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“The one I used on you was passion, I think. Did you feel it?”

He looked at her. “Yeah, I felt it. That’s why you need to be careful with that, ma.”

She unhooked the button and started on the next one. "Do you want to hunt me?"

He briefly closed his eyes to clear them—they had turned solid red. "Don't start, ma."

"Start what?" she asked. Her voice was innocent, but her fangs weren't.

Removing her from his lap, he almost ran to the staircase that led down to his chambers. He needed to get away from her before he took her up on her suggestion. As he crossed the threshold, he took off his jacket and draped it on the back of the recliner. Of course, she was right behind him.

"Can we go to the club?"

He looked at her as he unbuttoned his shirt and walked into the closet.

"You really wanna go?"

"Yes, unless you have a better idea."

Lazarus refused to turn around because he'd get himself in trouble if he did. He swapped his power suit for a white sweater and jeans. Normally, he'd be at the club on nights like this, but he wanted to do something more special with her. When he looked up, she was standing in front of her section of the closet, perusing the racks for something to wear.

"We can go. But I want to show you something first."

"What?"

“You’ll see, ma.”

As she changed into a pair of jeans and a pink brocade corset, he inhaled her scent, wanting nothing more than to pick her up, carry her to the bed and have his way with her. But that wasn’t an option. He needed to work off some of the pent-up frustration her innocent comments had brought out in him, and he knew just how to do it.

“How are we gonna get there? Isn’t the Jag totaled?”

Laughing, he turned to her as she appeared at his side. “You’re forgetting what we can do.”

“Are we getting a new one?”

“Is that what you want?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I never thought about a car. I’ve never driven before last night.”

“I’ll teach you. You’re gonna have to get a license, too, ma.”

“Vampires get driver’s licenses?”

“Of course. We gotta follow the rules, too.”

She followed him out of the chambers and into the elevator. As soon as the doors closed, she filled his arms and kissed him.

“What kind of car are we getting?”

“What kind you want, ma?”

“Ooh! An SUV. Something...big and black.”

When the doors of the elevator opened to the parking garage, she squealed. A shiny black Range Rover waited for them. The black-on-chrome ride sat on twenty-inch diamond-studded rims. He knew he had gone a little overboard, but it was the kind of whip he'd always wanted to push. Idris had told him to get whatever she wanted. Lazarus was glad that it was the same thing he did.

"This is sick," she exclaimed as he opened the door for her.

She slid into the heated black leather seat and exhaled. After closing the door, he walked around to the driver's seat and climbed in. As he pushed the button to start the car, she kissed his cheek.

"What did you want to show me?"

"I thought we'd take a drive up to the country. You'll see after we get there."

"Awesome! I always wanted to go out in the country."

He waited for her to put on her seat belt, and then exited the garage. As he emerged from the tunnel, he mentally scanned the area for enforcer vans. When he found none, he headed for the interstate.

"I would love to have a house upstate," she revealed. "Something contemporary. Not too big, but

not too small. An area for a garden, though I'll have to plant flowers that bloom at night. Maybe a pool."

He chuckled. "You dream big."

"Why dream if not big? All I had was my dreams, since Mom wouldn't let me do anything."

Taking her hand, he brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them.

"One day, all of those dreams will come true, ma."

She twisted in her seat to look at him. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"What do you dream about?"

He grinned. "I don't sleep, remember."

She stroked his forearm. "I'm serious, Laz."

Using the controls on the steering wheel, he tuned the radio to a hip-hop station. He didn't have an answer for her question because he never afforded himself the luxury to think beyond the next day and didn't want to be disappointed if his dreams never came true. It'd only been two nights, and she'd already messed that up.

"I don't think about it," he confessed. "We live a long time, ma. There's no need to dream or fantasize because we always have tomorrow."

When he glanced at her, she squinted at him. “Isn’t there one thing that you’ve always wanted and don’t have?”

“No.”

“Liar.”

Lazarus turned up the volume on the Drake song that was playing to signal the end of the conversation. Huffing, she twisted back around in her seat but didn’t force the issue. He wanted a lot of things—a family, his own home. Once, he’d dreamed of being a master, but it was too soon for him to let his guard down enough to tell her this.

When he heard her stomach growl, he pulled off the interstate and got her a meal from a human fast-food place. He shook his head as he handed her the bag that contained a salad and her diet drink. Balancing the plastic bowl in her lap, she ate while they drove for the next hour in silence. He’d rolled down the windows to let the night air into the cabin. As they neared the exit for the state park, he turned down the sound and blurted out, “A dog.”

“What?”

“A dog.” He repeated. “I’ve always wanted a dog.”

Her bright smile sent a shiver down his spine.

“What kind of dog?”

“A Great Dane,” he said. If he’d confessed this much, he might as well keep going. “Black.”

“That is so cute. Why haven’t you gotten one?”

He shrugged. “I’m always out. I don’t have the kind of lifestyle to take care of a dog.”

“Maybe one day?”

“Yeah, ma. One day. But if you tell anybody, I’m a have to deny it, understand.”

She leaned over the console and kissed him quickly on his lips. “Your secret is safe with me.”

He pulled from the asphalt road onto the grass. This area of the state park was protected. Idris had set it up for the shape shifters in his territory to use without fear of being shot by a poacher. The area wasn’t marked by visible signs but by landmarks. He pulled the SUV under some trees and climbed out.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“It’s a park for vamps.”

“Wow,” she said as he helped her out of the car. “What are we doing here?”

When he stripped off his sweater, her breath hitched. She touched his chest with trembling fingers as he unfastened his pants. He wasn’t going to shift in front of her because he was afraid the sound of his bones crackling as he did would scare her. He kissed her hard before shaking off the rest of his clothes and sprinting for the woods.

“You’ll see.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Idris paused in front of Helen's cell. He almost didn't recognize her. She'd changed from the outfit he had provided her into a black t-shirt and jeans. Her hair was loose and wild around her shoulders, and he didn't like the look in her eyes. Like she'd kill him on the spot if the bars weren't in the way.

"I got your call," he said cautiously. "How are you holding up?"

"As well as expected. I called you here to talk about our daughter."

He frowned. "Do you really think that's wise?"

"I have no choice. What kind of danger are you putting her in?"

"I don't know what..."

"You have her drinking blood like a common vampire!"

He snarled. "She is a vampire."

She walked toward the bars but stayed out of his reach. He didn't understand what had brought all this on, or how she knew that Nella had tasted their life force. Had she attached some tracer on their daughter before she was arrested? What else did she know?

He glanced at the prisoner in the next cell. The woman appeared to be sleeping, but one could never

be too careful. Closing his eyes, he mentally wrapped him and Helen in a soundproof box to keep their conversation private.

“I know everything,” she said in response to his unspoken thought.

“How?”

“That’s not important. Apparently, neither is our daughter’s virginity—at least not to you.”

He stiffened. “Things are different in our world. You know that.”

“So you just give her innocence away...”

“To save her life. Mikeli is after our daughter. I thought I could hide her better if he couldn’t track her by her scent.”

Gasping, she took a small step back.

“What I’ve done,” he continued, “is nothing compared to the crimes you’ve committed. You will be put to death for assassinating Clay, Tom and Melody.”

“I, too, had no choice.”

Idris tried to keep his anger in check. Did she call him all the way down here just to berate him for the way he was raising their daughter? He folded his hands in front of him as she paced behind the bars. When he inhaled, he smelled the blood of the dead vampires on her.

"I've only been gone for forty-eight hours," she said softly as tears slid down her cheeks. "And you already have her embroiled in a life of sin."

"Helen. That's not true."

"I had hoped she'd take longer to grieve for me."

"She does grieve. Every day. But she's also a young girl. She wants to experience life."

"Life as a vampire."

"What did you expect?"

Wiping away the tears, she closed the distance between them and wrapped her hands around the bars. He covered her hand with his. Though her fingers gripped the bars, her hands shook.

"Why, Helen? You sold your life, twice, for her."

"Because I'm willing to. I didn't know what Mikeli was asking of me when he offered me the deal."

Idris shook his head. "Haven't you learned never to make deals with vampires?"

Lowering her eyes, she rested her forehead on the bars. When she began to weep, he stood silently and let her cry. He stroked her fingers with his thumb, wishing he could hold her in his arms. She moved away from the bars and sat on her cot. Using the edge of her t-shirt, she blotted her eyes.

"You did an exceptional job raising our daughter," he said quietly. "She's morally sound, inquisitive."

“Not a good enough job if she prefers the company of vampires.”

“You didn’t teach her enough about your life as a slayer. Maybe her choice would’ve been different.”

“I taught her what I could. I didn’t want to scare her.”

“Still, she had a right to know. She could still choose to walk on the other side of the light.”

“Perhaps...”

“Helen. She wants to come see you.”

“No. Not here. Not like this.”

“I understand.” He sighed in relief. “So, what do you propose I do? I can’t say the sacred names that you can. There’s only so much I can teach her about your life.”

“Then, don’t,” she said bitterly. “I will.”

In a flash, his anger returned. “How, when you are here?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“Helen. Don’t do anything rash. What did Mikeli say to you?”

“I will work for him.”

“In exchange for what?”

“That wasn’t made clear.” She looked at him. “You think he knows about Nella?”

“I know he does. That’s why he sent you to do his dirty work. I just don’t understand what he’s waiting for. Why he hadn’t included her in his offer.”

“He needs something.”

“Yes.”

It was what he needed that worried Idris. He turned from the bars, and the swirl of emotions he sensed from Helen unsettled him. When he turned back, she was cradling her face in her hands. She looked so vulnerable, so innocent.

“Be careful. Don’t make any more deals.”

“I can’t make any promises. Not if it will protect my daughter.”

He sighed. “At least get some rest. Do you want me to bring you food?”

She shook her head. “I’ll be fine, but thank you.”

“Call me if you need anything.”

Teleporting out of Hell, he landed in the sanctum of his downtown office and sat in his chair. Work was piled on his desk, but he couldn’t concentrate on it. Keeping Nella safe was his priority, too. He just didn’t know how he was going to do it without killing Mikeli himself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Lazarus crouched in a pine tree, willing his body to stay still. He glanced where Nella waited for him. Normally, he did these kinds of runs alone, but he liked having her with him. It gave him a chance to show off for her. Wondering if she could see his silver spotted coat among the dark, wet tree leaves, he flicked his tail.

A rabbit pranced beneath him, munching on a blade of dew-covered grass. Lazarus couldn't pounce now. The fun was in the chase, not so much the catch. He used to hunt deer, but that became boring. Rabbits were faster, easier to scare. It took a lot more work to catch one of those. Even for a lynx.

The rabbit sniffed the air. In a flash, the gray creature took off. Lazarus sprung from his perch, right on its heels. The critter scurried under some brush and out the other side. He couldn't follow, so he leaped over the brush, landing fluidly on the other side. The rabbit dashed for the forest. Before it got there, he had to cut it off. The thick pine needles provided a lot of places to hide. Though Lazarus' nose was strong, even he would find it difficult to roust a rabbit among the trees.

He took a chance and circled to the left, cutting off the rabbit's path. The rabbit quickly changed directions. Damn it, he thought as the rabbit circled back. Lazarus leapt into the air and landed on the rabbit's back. The creature struggled as Lazarus clamped his mouth around its neck. Finally, the animal went limp. Lazarus carried his prize back to the SUV.

Nella clapped as Lazarus loped toward her. He carefully sat the rabbit on the ground. The creature hopped a short distance away, checked himself out, and then bolted for the cover of the forest. Lazarus was slipping. Once upon a time, he could catch a rabbit like that with no problem. Maybe he was finally getting old.

"That was cool." Her voice was filled with awe. "Thank you for letting it go and not eating it in front of me."

Purring, he rubbed his face against her thigh and then jumped into her lap. She giggled and stroked his soft fur when he licked her cheek. He climbed down and stalked around to the back of the SUV, where he quickly shifted into his human form. Sweat dripped down his muscular body.

"I told you I would, ma," he said as he fished a towel from the back. "That was the deal."

He quickly mopped the sweat from his body. She rounded the SUV just as he was pulling on his jeans. Leaning against the side, she watched him pull the denim over his hips and fasten them. Even though he could've changed the vamp way, he decided to do it the old way just to mess with her.

"Will I be able to do that? Shape shift, I mean."

"I think so."

"I'm not a full vamp. Will there be things I can't do?"

Lazarus held his sweater in his hands as he pondered her question. She sounded disappointed that all of her vamp skills haven't developed yet. Darkness help him once they did.

"I wish I could tell you." He pulled the sweater over his head. "It's gonna be one of those wait-and-see deals."

"Can Dad shift?"

He nodded. "I've seen him do shit that'll blow your mind, ma. Everything from a snake to this huge spider..."

"Yuck! I hate spiders."

"Spiders ain't bad," he said, sitting on the lift gate to pull on his boots. "They just have a bad rep."

"Like you?"

She sat beside him, and he shrugged as he pulled a bottle out of the warmer. Uncapping it, he

drank it and changed the subject as he reached for another.

“You gotta understand, all this around us is just matter. We’re dead, so, we can shape and change it to whatever we want. Maybe that’s why you’re not all vamp, ma. ’Cause you ain’t dead.”

“Yet.” She leaned against his arm. “I’ve felt my heart slow down a couple of times, but it always keeps beating.”

He reached for her wrist and felt her pulse. It beat slowly, rhythmically against his fingertips. Luckily his stomach was full, or else he would’ve surely bitten her right now. She touched the side of his neck with trembling fingers, feeling for a pulse where there was none. When he let go of her wrist, her fingers remained on his skin.

Turning to her, he captured her mouth. Her tongue was sweet from the honey mustard dressing she’d had on her dinner salad. A vampire eating salad? While it had chicken on it, it was still not a proper meal for a master-to-be. He pulled her closer to him. There was more he wanted to teach her, but the lessons could wait. But, right now, her mouth was too soft and sweet for him to let go of.

She sighed his name as his hands roamed her back. Lazarus toyed with the zipper on her top, wanting so badly to unzip it. They’d already had sex,

he reasoned. Why not? He grasped the pull between his fingers, tugging it down a couple of notches, but stopped. Not here. Not in the open where his focus would be compromised.

He broke away from her. Her eyes sparkled in the moonlight, and his breath hitched. He'd never seen a more perfect sight in the world. Standing, he pulled her to her feet and escorted her to the driver's side of his car. Since they were on a dark country road, he thought this would be a good time to teach her, without enforcers at their back.

"Let's go, ma."

"Where? Are we still going to the club?"

He kissed her as she settled into the seat. "Let's just drive and see where the night takes us."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Sated, Aponi stared up at the gold-plated ceiling. Indigo-hued blood dripped from the puncture wounds in her neck and pooled in the valley of olive skin between her breasts. She closed her eyes. In a few moments, she'd have to move, but right now she basked in the aftershocks of her last orgasm.

She loved being a vampire. Loved the power, wealth and prestige of being the wife of a master and could only imagine the perks she'd get when Idris was elected to the council. The thought almost made her come again. She loved her husband dearly, but she loved his affluence more and never wanted to give up this life for anything.

Aponi thought back to the first time she saw Idris. He was a friend of her father's. They were in talks, negotiating over a small parcel of land that Idris wanted to build a lair on. Her tribe owned the land. She was only fourteen at the time, but even then, she knew he was going to be the most powerful, successful man in the entire world. It was in the way he carried himself, with such grace and confidence.

She knew that her body, if nothing else, could attract such a man. One night, when everyone was asleep, she took a midnight dip in the Hudson River,

aware he was watching her nearby. They made love that night on the riverbank. Idris, being young and blinded by lust, slipped up and bit her with a turn bite. Aponi was ecstatic. She'd always wanted to be a vampire. The next morning, so as not to embarrass her tribe, Idris asked her father for permission to marry her. Her father, to Aponi's relief, agreed.

A lot had happened in the two hundred years she and Idris had been married. He'd had his share of lovers; so had she. That didn't bother her. It went with the vampire lifestyle, but Aponi *would* have a problem if Idris decided to share his riches with someone else. There was some little piece of tail from Jamaica he fell head over heels for. Stupid bitch. Aponi had fixed her. And did he really think she couldn't smell that new piece of ass he'd brought home a couple of nights ago? He was trying to pass her off as Lazarus', but she knew otherwise.

Her new lover reached out and drew circles on her smooth abdomen. She sometimes wished she'd had a child before her womb had dried out. To give Idris the son he had always wished for. Yet other times, she was relieved that had never happened. She'd be a lousy mother. And she couldn't stand the thought of having someone else take the spotlight from her. Not to mention what it would've done to her figure.

She removed her lover's hand and placed it on her breast. "I told you all that I know," she told him.

Her lover, Mikeli, dipped his index finger in the pool of blood and smeared it on her nipple, then bent and slowly lapped the blood from her rose-hued bud. Aponi moaned as her back arched. Lifting his head, he turned his attention to her jugular, his hot breath scorching her throat.

"What about Lazarus?"

"He and Idris have been in conference a lot lately."

She kissed him. Mikeli was still a handsome man, and rich—very, very rich. Idris would be beyond upset when he discovered she was having an affair with his boss. But that was why this was so much fun.

"Maybe you should ask him," the councilman said, taking her earlobe between his teeth. "I know you like him."

Aponi blushed. What woman wouldn't like to have Lazarus in her bed? He was six feet and one inch of solid muscle. Long blond dreadlocks complimented his pale skin. The way he carried himself reminded her of Idris in his prime—sexy, mysterious and powerful. Many times she had tried to get the young man to become her lover. She had hoped that time would wear him down, but so far it had not.

Mikeli laughed. When he rolled on top of her, she groaned and opened her thighs. As she wrapped her legs around his waist, she held on to his broad shoulders. She had been seeing the councilman for only a few days. Aponi had been surprised when he called her, asking to speak with her about Idris' council bid. He wanted to make a contribution to his campaign, he had said.

"I think the young man can help us," he said as he mentally transmitted a part of his plan to her along with a deep kiss.

Aponi nodded in agreement as his fangs pierced her throat.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

As Lazarus slept, Nella was wide awake. She snuggled in the cocoon of his body. For a dead man, he certainly felt alive to her. With a sigh, she tried closing her eyes again, but sleep wasn't going to come. Maybe his insomnia was rubbing off on her. He snorted softly in her ear. Shape shifting must have worn him out.

She untangled her limbs from his and walked to the bathroom. Maybe a warm shower would help, she thought. After turning on the water, she stripped off her t-shirt and panties then stepped beneath the hot spray.

Her mind churned. She'd learned a lot about vampires over the last three nights, and it was a lot to process. And she knew there was still more to learn. The lavender scent of the gel filled the stall as she squeezed gel on her loofah and swiped the sponge across her abdomen. When would she be able to teleport and change her clothes with a thought? And shape shifting! She couldn't wait to do that.

Was she really ready for this? She still didn't have a clue as to what her father really did. How was she going to manage a race of vampires when she'd never had a job? The thought of having that much

power scared but also intrigued her. For so long, she'd wished that she were more than ordinary, that she had some purpose in her life. With every fiber of her soul, she knew that she had found it. This was her destiny, despite her mother's interference.

Tears slid down her cheeks as she thought of her mother. Was she okay? What was she doing? She missed her mother and wished that she could've visited her today. A slayer? Her mom? Nella wished her mother would've told her more about her former life on the islands and her relationship with her father, because she bet her mother was fierce. If she had told her, Nella wondered, would her choice have been different? Would she still be following her father's footsteps, or in her mother's instead?

A hiss escaped her lips as she bent to scrub her legs. Suddenly, her heartbeat slowed to a crawl. As she straightened, she felt dizzy. Leaning against the tile, she closed her eyes. Her fangs lengthened. She wanted blood. A lot of it. Leaving the water running, she walked naked into the chambers and got a bottle from the warmer. As she walked back to the bathroom, she uncorked it and sipped the sweet liquid. Ah, the good stuff. She sat the half-empty bottle on the vanity and stepped back into the shower.

These small turns were getting on her nerves. Would she ever just stay in vamp mode? Maybe she

had to die, first. Her heart would stop when she felt the change begin, but would resume beating after a few minutes. She swiped the sponge over her breasts. Were vampires immortal? That website had said so, but then, that vamp who was a friend of her father's was killed. Since her father and Lazarus were so old, she assumed so but made a mental note to ask her father at breakfast.

The door to the shower stall opened. Lazarus' muscular frame appeared in the opening. Her breath hitched as she raked his nude body with a crimson-hued gaze. Damn, he was fine.

"What are you doing up, ma?"

"I couldn't sleep."

He stepped in and closed his arms around her. "Maybe I can help."

The tip of her fang nicked her bottom lip as she grinned. He pulled her lip into his mouth and suckled on the skin as he lifted her to straddle his hips and thrust deep inside her. Her fingers threaded in his water-laden locks. She loved his hair. Loved the way his silky ropes felt against her skin. Samson, she thought. That was who he reminded her of.

The water was starting to get cold but suddenly became hot. Did he do that or did she? Steam rose around them as Lazarus continued to plunge into her. She had, mistakenly, thought that after the deed was

done, they'd never have sex again. There was no point since she was no longer a virgin. Boy, was she wrong. And she was glad.

Nella held on as his fangs sunk into her throat. Her climax echoed against the black glass tiles as her ruby blood dripped between her breasts. She didn't wait for him to pull out his fangs before she bit into the side of his neck.

Gripping her hips, he exploded within her. She held on to his shuddering body as his indigo blood dripped down her chin. Still holding her up by her hips, he turned and sat on the teak shower bench. He rested his head back against the tile, clutching her to his chest. She rested her head on his shoulder and sighed.

"This ain't right, ma." He chuckled. She shivered in the cooling water. He pulled her closer to him and wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

"You're right."

When he kissed her, she could taste her salty and sweet essence on his tongue. He picked up the soft loofah sponge from the tray and began to smear soap on her chest, paying extra attention to her still firm nipples. She licked her lips. Her fangs hadn't retracted. She moaned when he kissed her neck and followed it with a light swipe of the sponge.

"Maybe we should go to bed," she whispered.

He dipped the sponge between her parted thighs and drew white foam circles on her caramel-hued inner thighs, massaging her sensitive opening with soap. Her head rolled back as she let out a hiss. Lazarus dropped the sponge and caressed her bud with his index finger. She swooned against him. His tongue traced the outline of her ear. When his finger slid inside her, she gripped his wrist as the walls of her pussy collapsed around him. He spun her around in his lap so that her back was to his chest. When he slid his cock back inside of her, she gripped his thighs for support as he cupped her breast and his thumbs teased her nipples.

“Oh. My.”

“You tired, ma?”

“No.”

“Good. I’m not tired either.”

Without moving, he turned off the shower. A light mist filled the stall to both rinse and dry their bodies. When she blinked, they were back in the bedroom. She lay on her stomach as his cock stroked her pussy. Holding his weight up with one arm, he used the fingers on his free hand to toy with her clit.

“You wanna come, ma?”

“Yes.”

“Do it. I got you.”

Her intense orgasm took her by surprise. She didn't think that she could do it again and called out his name as she released. When he bit her shoulder, her jaw filled with the urge to bite something. First, she tried the pillow, but that wouldn't do, so she turned her head and punctured his shoulder. With one hard arch into her, he came.

"Wow."

"Yeah," he mumbled as he rolled onto his side and took her with him.

She curled into the crook of his arm and closed her eyes as her heartbeat returned. His breathing became labored. His arm was heavy against her waist.

"Think you can sleep now, ma?"

"Oh, yeah."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

She knew something was wrong the minute she walked into the dining room for breakfast. For starters, her father wasn't there. Two slices of French toast and fruit waited for her at her place setting, along with a goblet of blood. Nella took a sip from the goblet and gagged. How she could drain half a bottle last night but be repulsed by it this now? Only because her father would worry if she didn't, she ate her breakfast, and then went in search for her father.

She and Lazarus never made it to the club. Instead, they came back home after driving around and talking for hours, then watched movies before falling asleep in front of the big screen. Then, they made love in the shower. With a smile, she made her way to the elevator that would take her to the roof. She'd known it before, but last night had confirmed what her heart was telling her. Nella was falling in love with Lazarus.

Giggling, she got on the elevator car and pushed the button for the roof. She didn't want to press her luck, however. They'd been together only a short time, and he probably still thought of her as his boss' daughter. Still, she'd known the first time she kissed

him that he was the one. Now she'd just have to convince him.

When the doors opened she saw her father standing at the edge of the roof. She went to him and hugged him from behind. Inhaling his earthy scent, she closed her eyes. . The many years they'd spent apart, her not knowing who he was, didn't erase how she felt about her father. She loved him.

"What's wrong?" she asked him.

"I'm just in a pensive mood."

"Because of the election tomorrow?"

"That and a few other situations."

"You can talk to me. I may still be new, but I'm a good listener."

He patted the back of her hand. "I saw your mother."

She took a step away from him. He turned to face her. The look of worry in his eyes concerned her. What had her mother done now? Nella studied him. It had to be bad if he hadn't even changed out of his pajamas yet.

"How is she?"

"She's concerned with how I'm raising you."

"That's none of her business," Nella said, suddenly defensive. "She's locked up—how does she know how you're raising me?"

"She can see you somehow."

Nella looked around her as if a camera would suddenly spring out of nowhere. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Why are you even listening to her? This is her fault. She’s the one who kept me from you.”

He father strolled a short distance away with his hands clasped behind his back. A gust of wind sent a chill down her spine, and she raised the hood on her sweatshirt and shoved her hands in the pockets.

“She raises some valid points. Maybe you don’t need to be raised in my world. Maybe you’ll be more comfortable in the human world.”

“How? I wouldn’t be able to go out in the daytime.”

“Yes, you can.”

She panicked. “But I have fangs. I have to be a vamp, right?”

“She wants you to learn her ways.”

“I don’t want to learn her ways! She’s not even a real slayer!”

“Nella,” he said as he turned to her. “Watch it. She’s still your mother.”

She went to him and placed her hand on his upper arm.

“You still defend her after the way she’s treated you?”

He turned away from her, but she kept pushing.

“I have to be a vamp, right? Isn’t that the deal she made?”

“Yes and no. You have vampire traits, but you don’t have to live *this* life. As a hybrid, you could choose.”

“No.” She practically stamped her foot. “I want to be a vamp. I want to be raised by you. I want to be a master. I’m tired of her dictating what I can and can’t be.”

He sighed. “That brings me to several points. When I’m elected to the council, this territory will be yours to rule, but are you ready for that responsibility?”

“Yes, Dad.” Tears blurred her vision. “I’m as ready as I can be.”

He stared at her. She knew she didn’t look like a master vampire in her pink warm-up suit and pigtails, but inside, she was. She’d never been so sure about anything in her life. It was in her blood. This was what she was born to do. He had moved away from her, but she walked toward him. There was something else that he hasn’t told her about her mother.

“What is it? I’m tired of people hiding things from me, so spill it, Dad.”

“Your mother hated vampires. Not just because she used to be a slayer, but because her family was killed by a vampire seeking revenge.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. She fell in love with one.”

“And she’s spent her life trying to repair that mistake. That’s why she doesn’t want you to turn. She doesn’t want a daughter who’s a vampire.”

Nella’s jaw dropped. “So, she’ll hate me?”

“Blood should be thicker than water, but she’s been hurt and double crossed by too many vampires to think clearly.”

Turning, she paced in front of the mini rose garden.

“That explains why she was trying so hard with the holy water and crosses and prayers. She was trying to *turn* me into a slayer.”

“When you rejected it, that hurt her deeply.”

Pausing, she turned back to him.

“Is there more?” When he nodded, she snorted. “Of course.”

“Remember the apartment of the slain vampire we went to? She was behind that hit, as well as the murder of the other master and his wife.”

She exhaled sharply as if hit in the stomach. “Why?”

Idris sighed. “She said it was for you.”

“How could murdering three innocent vampires protect me?”

“Mikeli. The councilman. He put her up to it. I’m still not sure why, but I believe he may strike a deal to get closer to you.”

Her fangs lengthened in anger. “This is insane! What’s wrong with her? You know what? I don’t care anymore.”

His father wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“She believes she’s acting out of love, even if her choices are misguided.”

Resting her head on his chest, she sobbed. He held her close and stroked her back. Maybe in her own way, she thought she was doing the right thing, but she wasn’t. Her mother’s actions were driving a wedge between them even as they pushed her closer to her father.

“I love you, Dad. I want to be *your* daughter.”

He exhaled. “That brings me to another issue. Before I’m elected to council tomorrow, if you still want to be master, I’ll have to transfer my powers and knowledge to you.”

Nella leaned away from him and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. She didn’t think it could happen this fast. Did she need more time? No, she was ready. Gripping her shoulders, he searched her face.

“Okay.”

“Are you sure about this? I’ll be busy with my council seat. I will help you and be there as much as I can, but...”

“Don’t worry. Are you going to take Lazarus with you?”

“Yes, but he’ll be at your disposal at all times.”

Did this mean she might not see Lazarus as much? He’d be at her disposal, but his loyalty would lie with her father first. She began to panic. Maybe this was moving too fast. Faster than she thought she could handle. But still, she wanted it. She’d learn, by trial and error, if need be. As long as her mother left her alone.

“Okay.”

Her father nodded. “In order to transfer everything, I’ll have to bite you.”

“Okay.”

Idris pulled her into a tight embrace. Closing her eyes, she braced herself. Without warning, his fangs pierced her neck. Her knees buckled as he siphoned blood from the wound and mixed it with his own before transferring it back. When he released her, she opened her eyes. It was as if she were seeing everything for the first time. Her father’s image was brighter, clearer.

“It may take a while for the transfer to take effect,” he said quietly. “How do you feel?”

“Like I can take on the world.”

He kissed her forehead. “That’s my baby. One more thing.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him.

“Name it.”

“If anything should happen to me, I ask that you avenge my death.”

Startled, she stepped back. “Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“You never know in this life.”

“You have my promise.”

As they walked to the elevator, she had a question for him.

“If you’re immortal, am I?”

“I don’t know.”

While she appreciated his honesty, it still unsettled her. The elevator took them down to the foyer. When they exited, he hugged her for a long time before releasing her with a kiss on her cheek.

“I must go. I will see you later.”

“Okay.”

Instead of taking the elevator, her father dissolved into mist. That was awesome, she thought, wondering if she’d be able to do that now. She cupped her neck. Jumping up and down, she laughed before running for the stairs. Wait until she told Lazarus.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Lazarus emerged from the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist and another around his shoulders. Rapping the lyrics to a Jay-Z song, he made his way to the warmer and pulled out a bottle. Last night with Nella had put him in a good mood. Dancing, he began to make his way to the closet but stopped short when a bitter scent filled his nose.

Aponi was draped across his bed, her curves accented in a black bra and panty set. She smiled at him, fangs peeking from her parted lips. He sighed, his upbeat disposition quickly evaporating. Nella would be on her way back from breakfast with her father, and he was in no mood for her games. He set the bottle on the nightstand.

“What do you want?” Lazarus asked curtly.

“I wanted to see you,” she said, her fingers tracing the outline of her lacy bra.

Shaking his head, Lazarus turned his back and went into his closet. He suddenly felt dirty, like he needed another shower. Aponi loped toward him and pressed her body against his back. Turning, he caught her around the waist. She licked his bare shoulder and ran her cold hands over his chest as she attempted to pull information out of him.

So that's what this was about. Lazarus wondered if she was trying to get information for Mikeli, such as Nella's whereabouts. He decided to play her. Maybe he could gain some valuable information for his boss. Releasing her, he went to his chest of drawers to get a pair of boxers. "I don't think your husband would like you being in here?"

"My husband isn't here," she said. "He went to the office. Plus"—she paused as Lazarus dropped the towel from around his shoulders—"I don't think he would care."

"He's my boss," Lazarus said, rubbing his hand across his chest. "And I like my job."

"I can get you a new one," she breathed.

"Oh." He walked to the hanging shelves. "Where at?"

"With me," she said, following him. "I think we could be very good together."

Lazarus smiled, letting his fangs lengthen for effect. She shivered, and he sensed her mind begging him to bite her as she tilted her head for him. Abruptly, he pulled her into his arms and ran the tips of his fangs down her throat but didn't pierce her. Removing his mouth, he stared into her eyes.

"You leaving him, finally?"

"No," she said, threading her hand through his dreads. "I don't have to. It'll all work out."

“What will work out?”

Aponi groaned and moved her hips against his groin. Lazarus backed her up, pinning her against the wall and cupping her breast. He sensed her wanting to give in and tell him everything, but at the same time she held back, hoping to get something from him in return. In order to get more information from her, he was going to have to turn her all the way on.

“Tell me,” he whispered into her ear. “I know you’ve been digging me for a minute, boo. If we can kick it without the old man knowing, we need to get on that, you know what I mean?”

When her knees buckled, he almost laughed. He tightened his grip on her breast, and she arched into him. For years she’d been trying to seduce him. Whenever Idris went out of town, she would try to find a way to bed him. He always turned her down. If he hadn’t already known Aponi was a deceitful gold digger, he could’ve seen where one might find her attractive. Her lithe body was still tight, despite her age. But she had never turned Lazarus on. “What do you want me to do?”

“Tell me about Nella,” she breathed, trying to wiggle her way out of her bra.

Lazarus frowned. “What do you want to know?”

“Who is she?” Aponi asked against his neck.

“Why?” He glared at her. “What do you want with her?”

“Relax,” Aponi said, flipping her long onyx hair over her olive-hued shoulder. “I’m just asking questions. She has spent a lot of time in your bed. I just want to be sure she won’t mind.”

“What does she have to do with us?”

Aponi smiled. Her gaze again swept over his muscular frame, settling on the area that was covered by his white towel.

“Not a damn thing.” She exhaled. “But someone is interested in her. I thought maybe a foursome would be in order.”

Lazarus snickered. “I don’t get down like that.”

Turning his back on her, he dropped his towel. She sighed. Lazarus quickly pulled on his briefs, hoping the show would return her to the topic of Idris. He twisted toward her as he pulled the material over himself.

“But you and me,” he said, once again gathering her in his arms and flicking his tongue across her nipple. “That’s another story.”

“After the election,” she said, “there will be no one to stand in our way. We can be together and have all of my husband’s wealth plus much more.”

“Are you saying your husband will be dead?” he asked, and then pulled her nipple into his mouth.

“Something like that,” she replied, quivering. “I’ll need your help.”

“Let me know when,” he breathed against her neck, “and it’s done.”

Lazarus allowed Aponi to kiss him hard on the mouth. It was all a part of the game. He had much to discuss with Idris and decided to go into the office after this. Maybe Nella would want to go with him. At last Aponi pulled away from him, her fangs fully extended. She took his hand, trying to drag him toward the bed.

“Naw, boo,” Lazarus told her. “We can pick this up later, you feel me?”

“I’ll hold you to that,” she said, dissolving into air.

When she was gone, Lazarus exhaled as he sat on the bed, processing the information he’d gathered from Aponi. It wasn’t much, but it was more evidence Idris could use against Mikeli. Standing, he moved toward his closet again, but a flash of movement out of the corner of his left eye caused him to stop.

“I told you, later,” he said.

He took a step in that direction and stopped short. Nella emerged from the shadows, glared at him through puffy and swollen eyes. Judging by the look on her face, she’d witnessed the whole conversation.

“Nel,” he said softly. “I can explain.”

She shook her head. He moved toward her, reached out a hand to touch her, but she jerked away from him and ran up the stairs. Lazarus hung his head as he clothed himself in jeans and a t-shirt. Making his way to the spiral staircase that led to the main part of the house, he frowned. It wasn't like they were together, he thought, but he could see why she'd be upset with him. She was still thinking like a human and didn't realize that this was all illusion. He'd never hurt her like that. When he explained why he'd acted as he did, she'd understand. Maybe.

Lazarus peeked into the media room. Not finding her on the sofa, he checked the living room, her father's study and the other rooms of the house. She was gone. Cursing, Lazarus sprinted for the elevator as he paged Idris, hoping he'd get to her in time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Helen dry heaved against the cold concrete floor. Her stomach churned from hunger, but she refused to eat anything they offered her, unsure where it had been or who it was from. She'd rather starve and die. In fact, she actually hoped she would die. Of course, her captors wouldn't allow it. Griffins forced her lips apart, inserted an IV tube and force fed her when the hunger became too great.

The creatures mopped the sweat from her brow. She wondered if this was what her daughter felt during the first few hours of her turn. Imagining the physical pain her daughter must have experienced along with the emotional anguish, she sobbed. The need for blood above all else. Helen wished she could have prevented this from happening to begin with. Why hadn't she simply trusted that Idris loved her?

The walls of the cell had shifted. They were all now solid brick except for the row of bars at the entrance. This too, she learned, was something that was done regularly. The configuration of the cell changed often and without warning. Her cell had changed twenty times since she'd been here. She could no longer hear or see Rosa.

Helen cried out in pain, and the griffins forced her again. Maybe these creatures just didn't understand emotional pain. Maybe they thought feeding her would make it less painful. It wasn't working. The scent, the coldness of the room all made Helen more anxious. She needed to get out of here. Get her daughter out of that vampire's clutches. But how did one escape Hell?

Helen hadn't seen or spoken to Mikeli since the first night, and she was glad. She was in no mood to see him. Just picturing his smug face made her want to rip his throat out. Of course he'd lied to her, she thought as her hands clenched into fists. Mikeli had orchestrated this ruse from the beginning. He must have been the one who tricked her into sacrificing an angel instead of a mere virgin. The one who tricked her into selling her soul, not once, but twice. It was a test, for him, to see if the ritual would work. She could see it all now.

She didn't remember Mikeli—didn't remember seeing him on the beach at any time during her patrols. Helen closed her eyes. Suddenly, she could see the African's vivid memories of her. She felt his lust for her, his wrath as he watched her walk with Idris. That was a long time ago. She'd made her choice. Her heart still made that choice. No matter what he did to her.

Regret filled her thoughts. She shouldn't have yelled at Idris for how he was raising her daughter. He was doing his best under the circumstances.

At last the creatures left her. Though her head throbbed, she stumbled to the sink. Once there, she filled the basin and added her blood.

The faded image in the water startled her. Her daughter was in Idris' arms. His fangs were in her throat. When Nella stepped away, her eyes glowed red. Helen's heart stopped. No. This couldn't be happening. The sound of approaching footsteps forced her to swallow her anger and pull the towel from the bottom of the sink.

As the last drop of the image drained from the basin, Mikeli appeared at the bars. Helen tried to gather her composure in the presence of the councilman, but the picture of her daughter in Idris' arms hovered in her mind. Mikeli smoothed down his paisley tie.

"What do you want?"

"Complete loyalty."

"In exchange for what?"

"Relax," Mikeli said. "I'm not interested in you. I'm saving myself for your daughter."

She bristled and moved toward the back of the cell. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The bars opened without him touching them. She flinched but refused to cower in fear as he entered the cell, his large frame taking up most of the space.

“You think I’m stupid? You were right. I was the one behind this from the beginning. I had heard about the ritual, but it failed whenever I tried to attempt it. But for him,” he spat, “it worked on the first try.”

“You can’t have her. I’d die first.”

He brushed Helen’s hair out of her eyes with icy fingers. “That can be arranged, in time, but for now I need you. She will make an awesome queen. All vamps will bow down to her. I can already feel the power within her.”

“I will kill you before I’ll allow her to become your bride.”

Anger flashed in the councilman’s eyes as his smile faded. She braced herself. The councilman was as unpredictable as he was deadly, and those traits were a lethal combination.

“That was the bargain you agreed to.”

Her blood froze in her veins. She did? When?

“I did no such thing.”

“In my office. You agreed to do whatever I asked. I’m not asking you for Nella. She’ll be mine with or without your assistance.”

She turned her head from his cold breath that scorched her cheek. She’d only agreed to this to keep

Nella safe. However, she hadn't realized that she was also putting her daughter in danger.

"If she's the one you want, why do you need me?"

"You're the only one for whom the ritual has worked. It must've been your slayer heart. I can have your status restored in exchange for this. When your daughter becomes my bride, I want you to perform the ritual on me. Make me whole so that my heir will be born and we can rule the world."

Helen's eyes widened. "You're mad if you think I'll help you do such a thing."

Mikeli's fangs lengthened as he moved toward her. "Yes," he said as he neared her. "I'm mad, and you will help me."

Glancing over his shoulder, she noticed that the door was still open. She only had one shot. Though she suspected she could probably kill him, she doubted she'd make it out of the cell before the guards captured her. Claspings her hands behind her back, she filled them with her sword, which she materialized. Helen was surprised that the action wasn't blocked.

"You are a fool," she said. "There's no guarantee that it will work again. And my daughter will have nothing to do with you."

He stepped closer to her, well within striking range.

“She will. You’re my bargaining chip for her as she is for you.”

“You’re crazy. This is why I chose Idris over you.”

He stiffened. Anger flashed in his eyes before he could blink it away. His guard down, he turned slightly. This was it. She swung. The handle of her sword connected with his temple. As he went down, she struck him repeatedly until she was sure he wasn’t going to move.

Pausing, she listened for guards, but none came. Helen tiptoed toward the opening. Had he really made it this easy for her to escape, or was this too part of his plan? She didn’t have time to think about it as she slipped out of the cell and ran for her life.

CHAPTER FORTY

Nella stood outside the Empire State Building. She had been wandering the streets of New York for hours with no destination in mind before ending up here. The club was off limits because he could easily find her there. As she stared up at the dark building, she wished she knew how to get up to the observation deck. Her teleport wasn't working yet.

"Can I help you, miss?" a security guard asked as he emerged from the revolving doors.

Nella shook her head. He looked at her and frowned.

"You've been standing here for an hour. The building's closed. Whoever you're waiting for is gone."

Nodding, she shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her pink hooded sweatshirt and moved down the street. She was getting tired but wasn't ready to go home. The scene she had witnessed between Lazarus and her father's wife replayed in her mind. Right now, she didn't want to see Lazarus or be in the same room with him.

Tears sprang to her eyes. She'd thought she trusted him. Could he really try to kill her father for his wife? Everything in her heart told her that it wasn't possible. But what she saw made a different

argument. How could she have been so stupid as to trust him? He didn't care about her. She found herself at the entrance to Central Park. As she walked along the park path, following the flickering glow of the streetlights, her thoughts propelled her along. Where would she sleep? Maybe she'd go back to her house in Harlem and spend the night there. Her stomach growled, but she knew she couldn't eat. She'd only been on her own for a few hours and already she couldn't hang. What was she going to do when she became a master?

The vamp's call washed over her as she neared the gated entry to the zoo. She'd thought that being with Lazarus would put an end to the calls. Then she rolled her eyes, realizing it was probably a line to get her into bed. How could she fall for that bullshit? She had "sucker" written all over her. Nella scanned the darkness that surrounded her. The rustling of the trees and the laughter of the group of guys who walked by her, startled her. *This is crazy*, she thought. Maybe she shouldn't have left the lair.

"No bodyguard?"

Nella jumped at the sound of the vampire's voice. He leaned against a tree, his slim frame clothed in a gray hooded sweatshirt and jeans. When he stepped under the streetlight, she saw his hair was intricately braided in rows that curved around his

skull. She looked into his glowing yellow eyes and swallowed hard.

“No,” she said. “Not tonight.”

The vampire took a step toward her. She took a quick step back. When she turned to head back toward the entrance, he blocked her path and gripped her upper arm to hold her in place. His fingers dug into her flesh, as he dragged her off of the path toward a line of trees. Her screams and kick went unanswered. Where was Lazarus? Oh. Right.

“Let go of me!”

“Relax,” he hissed. “I just wanna talk to you without an audience.”

He released her. Rubbing her arm, she looked at him and waited. If he had wanted to harm her, he would’ve already, she reasoned. She relaxed, but not enough to take her guard down.

“I’m Etienne,” he said with a bow. “I work for Idris. I keep one ear on the street for him and report to him if anything comes up short.”

“Oh.”

“Word on the street was he had a new turn that he was keeping close to his vest ’cause he was training her to be a master. I smelled Laz on you and kinda put the two together. I thought I’d introduce myself.”

She smiled. “It’s nice to meet you, but couldn’t you think of a better way to introduce yourself?”

“True that. Well, I’ll let you go. If you need anything, call me.”

When he walked away, she sprinted in the opposite direction. So Laz’s scent was working—but how did he know her father was training her to be a master? Could it be in the bite he’d given her earlier? Did that contain a scent, too? She wandered around again before finding herself in front of her old home.

It looked so much smaller now than she remembered. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she looked at the front door. She wanted to go in, but she didn’t have her key. So, she touched the cold glass of her bedroom window and gave it a hard shove. It was unlocked. It was close to one a.m., but the street was crowded with people returning home from partying.

Still, she doubted anyone would notice or care that she was breaking into her own house. Just as she was about to push the window up, a tap on her shoulder startled her. Screaming, she turned to see Keisha standing beside her.

“Oh. My. God!” She cringed at her own words but kept talking as she hugged her best friend. “You scared me!”

“I’m sorry. Just came to check who tryin’ ta break in your house.”

“My key’s at my dad’s house. How are you?”

“Same old shit, different day,” Keisha replied. “I’m sorry about your mom’s passing.”

At first, Nella almost told her friend that her mother wasn’t dead, but her father must have put that rumor on the street to explain her sudden disappearance. She pressed her lips together.

“I couldn’t believe it when I heard that Miss Helen passed. Why didn’t you tell me she was sick?”

“I didn’t know either until the last minute.”

“So you live with your dad now?”

“Yeah.”

They walked to the steps. She helped Keisha sit on the top step before sitting beside her. Her memory flashed back to when Lazarus kissed her on this very spot. The air was getting colder and she didn’t want to stay out here, too long without her bodyguard. Her lip trembled as she thought about Lazarus.

“How’s living with your dad?”

“Amazing. He gave me a position in his company, and he lives in a penthouse that overlooks the entire city.”

“He be ballin’, huh?”

Nella nodded. “Everything’s so different there.”

“You seem happy. So, what you doing back here?”

“I just wanted to check on the house.”

Keisha reached into the pocket of her pajama bottoms and handed her the key. "We got a spare in case something popped off. It's safe. People been watching it like it's a bank. Ain't nobody been in or out 'cept Mrs. Perez."

"Thank you."

"Go on. I'll wait out here for you. I know you wanna pay your respects by yourself."

Nella smiled as she rose to her feet and made her way to the front door. Pausing in the stairwell, she took a deep breath before opening the door to her apartment. The scent of pine cleaner greeted Nella when she opens the door. She remembered how her mother would clean the whole house with it every Saturday, from top to bottom. Now, she wondered if her mother spiked the cleaner with holy water.

From the short entrance hallway, she wandered into the living room. The furniture and television was still there. A fine layer of dust had settled on the oak coffee table. She ran her index finger through it and tried not to cry. Now, she noticed that there were no pictures of her mother or herself, and she couldn't remember a time when a camera was ever pointed at her. Even during grade school, her mother never signed the permission slip so that her picture could be taken.

She went into her bedroom. Nothing had changed in three days. Everything was how she'd left it, except her clothes were at her father's house. After running her hand over the pink comforter on her twin bed, she went to the window. Out of habit, she started to open the blinds, but decided against it. Turning, Nella drifted back into the hallway and into her mother's room.

The room seemed smaller now. The queen-sized bed took up most of the space. The yellows and tans made the room seem closed. As she passed the mirror-lined closet, she noticed her reflection wasn't in it. Her mother's transit uniform was folded neatly at the foot of her bed, while her peach scent still clung to the comforter.

Suddenly a loud thump came from the hallway. Nella sprang to her feet and dashed to the bedroom door. She looked around the empty hallway. "Keisha?"

No answer.

There was definitely someone here. She smelled them—a trace scent of sweat and adrenaline. Adrenaline pumping, she searched the apartment again. Nothing. Crossing her arms over her chest, she stood near the front door, facing away from it. The scent was moving away, but she couldn't tell which direction it was going. Then she heard the front door

open behind her, and she wheeled around to find Keisha staring at her.

“You okay, Nel?”

Nella nodded as Keisha hugged her.

“It just feels weird being here without her.”

“I know, girl.”

Abruptly, Nella smelled the blood flowing through Keisha’s veins. She heard the tiny heartbeat of the fetus in rhythm to his mother’s. Images flashed behind her lids. Images of the baby boy in her friend’s womb, and she smiled. Maybe her powers were coming in. It was getting late, she realized. Her father was probably worried about her.

“I have to go,” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Keisha walked outside with her and locked the door. “You coming back, right?”

“I don’t know,” she said as she headed for the subway.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The lair was dark when Lazarus returned just after three in the morning. He'd been trailing Nella since she left but kept his distance to give her space. Now he went to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle from the warmer before going up to the study. He didn't turn on the lamp, just plopped down on the leather sofa and propped his feet on the ottoman.

At least the calls had stopped, and he hadn't sensed any enforcers around her. After Etienne scared her, he had a talk with the snitch, making sure he'd never do that shit again. Of course, he'd had his hand around the lower-level vamp's throat at the time, but the way Etienne stepped to her was all wrong and pissed him off.

He sipped the blood instead of gulping it down like he normally did. If the script was flipped, he'd probably react the same way. She had to understand that he'd rather drink blood laced with rat poison than be anywhere near Aponi. When she'd gone back to the old crib, he'd read her thoughts as she remembered how he had kissed her on the steps. It was the kiss that messed him up for life.

Huffing, he kicked off his boots and settled back against the cushions. If he didn't have a job to do, he'd

wring Aponi's neck. His boss had assured him that he'd handle his wife when he had called the master about Nel taking off. Idris' sudden appearance beside him didn't startle him. He was used to his boss popping out of thin air.

"She's fine," he told his boss. "She's on her way back."

Idris nodded as he materialized a tumbler of scotch. With the wave of his hand, he lit the fireplace across the room. The flames instantly warmed Lazarus and he closed his eyes, but listened for Nella's return. Lazarus had followed her to the subway, but once they arrived there, he shook his head. She hadn't realized that Idris' lair couldn't be accessed that way. He had to call her pop again, who arranged for the suddenly empty car to stop at a point in the city where she could get off. From there, her father arranged a discreet teleport to the penthouse.

"Good. There's no telling what kind of powers she received during the transfer."

"I'm sorry, sir."

Idris waived off his apology. "It's not your fault. Nella's safety is a pressing concern in light of other developments."

Lazarus rolled his eyes. "What now."

"Her mother escaped."

"Escaped? From Hell? How?"

"I don't know the details, but I've been questioned in regards to it since my scent was in her cell."

"Wow. What do you think she's going to do?"

"I don't know. Her mind is fragile right now. Anything could send her over the edge. I've been calling her, but she has yet to return my calls."

"As if Aponi trying to do you dirty wasn't enough..."

"My wife will be dealt with. I still don't know where Mikeli is going with all of this, but with the election tomorrow, I'm sure we're about to find out."

The men stopped talking when they heard the front door open. Lazarus' stomach began to flutter. He wasn't sure why he was nervous. Idris patted him on his thigh as he stood up. Leaning forward, Lazarus set the empty bottle on the black lacquer tray.

"I'll leave you two alone. Remember the party starts at dusk."

Lazarus smirked. "We'll be there, sir."

Idris chuckled as he dissolved. Lazarus listened for Nella's footsteps. Instead of coming into the study, she went directly to the spiral stairs and down them. With a sigh, he stood and followed. She was emerging from the closet with items tucked under her arms when he caught up to her.

At first, she looked startled to see him there; then her shoulders slumped. He noticed how her bottom lip quivered and wanted desperately to pull it between his teeth to nibble on. She moved around him and headed for the door. Lazarus caught her around the waist, but she refused to look at him.

“We need to talk, ma.”

“No. I don’t want to talk.”

“Since when?”

When she smirked, he knew he was in. He pulled her to him so that her back rested against his chest. She didn’t stop him, but she stiffened.

“Your father’s wife is plotting to assassinate him. What you saw was me trying to get more info out of her.”

“But did you have to do it like that?”

“That’s the only language she understands, ma. You should know I would never do something like that to you. Not intentionally.”

“Because you like me.”

“Yeah, ma,” he whispered into her hair. “I like you.”

She turned to him. “What about Aponi? Can she be trusted around Dad?”

“She’s not gonna get her manicure dirty, understand? Your dad’s got that after the election.”

Nella dropped the items that were in her hands at her feet. With swiftness he hadn't realized she had, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately. He pulled her close to him, exploring her mouth with his tongue. She backed him toward the bed and pushed him down on top of it. Straddling his hips, she hissed low against his neck.

"I like you, too. Wanna see how much?"

"Yeah, ma. I do."

Sitting back on his thighs, she unzipped her hoodie and shook it from her shoulders. Her eyes glowed as she pulled her white tank over her head. Immediately, he covered the swell of her breasts with his hands and stroked her nipples with his thumbs. He changed his mind. It was he who needed to show her how much he liked her.

With a thought, he shed both of their clothing, then inched down on his back until her soft lower lips were within reach of his own lips. Parting her flesh, he curled his tongue over her clit. Her fallen-star scent filled his nostrils. She sighed as he traced the path back to her canal and thrust his tongue inside.

"Oh. My..."

Don't say it...

"Laz..."

She gripped his wrists as he twirled his tongue inside her, lapping up the essence that dripped down

her tight walls. He curved his hands around her hips, coaxing her thighs farther apart so he could push his tongue deeper within her. A moan escaped her lips, causing his cock to harden.

But this was about her. Lazarus had to be careful not to pierce her with his fangs as he swirled his tongue around her canal. Her thighs began to quiver. Gasping, she came hard on his tongue. He waited until her tremors subsided before scooting back up. Curling an arm around her waist, he positioned her on her back as he covered his cock with a condom.

Kissing her shoulder, then her neck, he entered her. She gripped his shoulders tightly and arched her hips into him. Every stroke awakened something new inside of him. Yes, he had been dead a long time, but he felt alive in her arms. Her heartbeat against his chest drove him crazy.

This wasn't how this was supposed to go down. He wasn't supposed to be making love to her because he couldn't love her. Vampires didn't fall in love. Besides, he'd only known her for a few days. People couldn't fall in love that quickly. But as he gazed down at her, he knew she was the one who could change his life. Lazarus kissed her throat, preparing the spot for his fangs. After tonight, she'd belong to no one but him.

Sensing his intent, she tossed her onyx ringlets over her shoulder and bent her head to the side. She quivered in his arms from anticipation. Her hands searched his body for a place to hold on to. Once again, she found his shoulders. With his chin, he gently pushed back her jaw to expose her throat. His fangs slowly penetrated her taut skin. Her sugary liquid filled his mouth. The sound of her climax filled the room, filled the space in his chest where his heart once stood.

The wave of her orgasm pulsed through both of their bodies, and he matched her moan with one of his own. She thrust hard and fast against him as she brushed his dreads from his shoulder, her eyes focused on his throat. Her trembling fingers traced his tight skin, searching for the perfect spot.

“Here?” she teased.

All Lazarus could do was nod. She licked his jugular. At first, she was so precise that he didn’t feel her pierce him; then his blood trickled down his throat. With a groan, he exploded inside her. Spent, he rolled onto his side, then his back. Immediately, she filled the empty space he’d left with her warmth.

“You like me a lot,” she whispered as she snuggled against him.

“Maybe,” he mumbled while his body still quivered.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

When she thought it was safe, Helen emerged from the hall closet of her Harlem home. She wiped the tears from her eyes as she stumbled blindly to the living room and sat on the sofa. Her daughter had changed. Nella wasn't the little girl she'd once cuddled to her breast. She was a woman. Helen was no more ready for that transformation than she was for her daughter to become a vampire.

Nella had picked up her scent. Helen thought she'd been careful by laying down prayers over it, but when her daughter's nostrils had flared, she'd known she needed to stay in the closet. What had Idris said about her? Did Nella know she had killed those three vampires?

None of that mattered, Helen thought as she went to the kitchen to make herself some tea. It paled in comparison to what Idris had done. The pulse points on her daughter's neck glowed where her father had bitten her. It wasn't an ordinary bite, it was an elevation bite. He had transferred his powers to Nella.

She slammed the kettle on the burner. Was he insane? Idris' call now washed over her, but she ignored it. She wasn't going back to Hell and didn't care who she had to kill to keep that from happening.

However, she couldn't stay here too long. Mikeli would more than likely track her here, but she refused to be Mikeli's puppet any longer. Where was she going to go? From the conversation Nella had with that pregnant girl down the street, the rumor was that she had died. She had no family or real friends to explain that she hadn't. Maybe she could stay here for the time being. Any light that went on or off, they would think it was her ghost haunting the space. That could work to her advantage.

After grabbing a mug from the cabinet, she added a tea bag to it and the boiling water. Leaning against the counter, she sipped the brew. The flash of red light to her right drew her attention, but not enough to cause her alarm. She carefully sat her mug on the counter and filled her hands with her sword.

"You're in a lot of trouble," Mehina growled. "even by Hell's standards."

"I'm not going back."

"You have no choice."

"Yes, I do."

Helen swung. Mehina blocked her weapon with her own. Helen should've remembered the hunter's strength from their earlier tussle. Still, she was determined not to go back at any cost. Sparks flew off the metal as their swords repeatedly struck each other. She grimaced as Mehina backed her against the

counter. Rearing back, she kicked the hunter in her midriff.

The hunter doubled over. Helen picked up the still hot kettle and hit Mehina on her head with it. Boiling water seeped from the lip and poured onto the hunter's skin. Her screams tore through the silence of the kitchen. Helen dropped the kettle and ran, Mehina on her heels.

"Don't do this," the hunter urged.

Mehina caught her in the living room. Helen turned in time to block the hunter's blow with her sword. The hunter's skin was beginning to peel from her cheeks, but Helen showed her no pity. She wasn't the one who'd have to face Mikeli's wrath when she returned. The councilman wouldn't even have the decency to kill her after he tortured her.

So, Helen fought for her life. She delivered a hard blow that caused the hunter to drop her shield. Then another that caused Mehina's sword to pierce and become stuck in the television.

Pivoting, Helen caught the hunter off guard. With neither her shield nor her sword to protect her torso, Helen stabbed Mehina in her chest. Dropping both weapons, the hunter screamed as Helen's sword exited her back. She sunk to her knees as Helen called her slayer sword to her hands. The hunter's eyes widened as Helen beheaded her.

Panting, Helen dropped the hunter's head and her weapon on to the floor. Her hands shook, but she was strangely calm as she walked back into the kitchen to claim her mug. A bath was in order. Heading to the bathroom, she began to form a plan. She'd talk to Idris in a few days. If his answer was unacceptable, she knew what she must do.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

At twilight, Lazarus sat at the dining-room table. He sipped his mug full of blood and watched the streetlights turn on outside the window, his stomach in knots as he waited for Idris. His boss had called him for a breakfast meeting before the election party. Idris said he had some things to discuss that he hadn't had a chance to last night.

Rubbing his temples, Lazarus yawned. Nella had worn him out. That admission made him shake his head. How was he going to let some newbie wear him out? She wasn't just a newbie. And he didn't just like her. He was falling in love with her. With a groan, he banged his forehead against the tabletop.

When and how did this even happen? He wasn't supposed to fall in love with her. All he had to do was keep her safe for her pop, but no. After she became master, she'd leave him for sure. What could he offer her? Lazarus couldn't afford to provide her with a lair like this, despite what Idris paid him. She would outrank him. What kind of life would that be?

"First Corinthians 13: says that 'If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and

all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing, ” Idris said.

“A vamp quoting scripture? Isn’t your tongue burning, sir?” Lazarus asked as he cringed.

“Everyone and everything needs love,” he continued philosophically as he sat down. “Even we vampires. You can’t pretend love doesn’t exist in this world; it does. We have simply confused it with lust. We do things backwards because all we have is time. You have to trust that she will not abandon you, like your family did.”

Lazarus rose and walked to the bank of windows. It was eerie how well Idris knew him.

“What can I give her, though?” he asked bitterly. “She’ll have everything. I’m just a vampire. She’ll have power. She’ll be able to do things I can’t.”

“I made the same mistake with Helen,” Idris said as the master joined him at the windows. “Nella will need you. She’ll need your strength and your guidance. Especially now...”

“Then what?” Lazarus said, his voice rising before he caught it. “I can’t marry her. I’m not allowed, you know that. The only thing I can give her, she can also get from some Joe down the block.”

“But she doesn’t want some Joe,” Idris said gently. “She wants you.”

Lazarus turned his back. He knew his boss was right. All evening, Lazarus had been trying to figure out a way to end this, tonight, before she got hurt. He studied the view outside the window so that his boss couldn’t see the tears forming in his eyes.

“Is that why you called me here, sir? To talk to me about your daughter?”

“Yes and no. I received a call from Helen. And another from the security agency. She killed a hunter.”

Lazarus shook his head. “She’s going from bad to worse.”

“Yes. I’d like to find out what she wants.”

Lazarus bristled. “I don’t think you should meet with her alone, sir.”

“I agree, but I have no choice. That’s not why I called you.”

The master moved toward his protégé. He gripped Lazarus’ stiff shoulders and spun the young man to face him. They were the same height but, at this moment, the master seemed taller.

“I wanted to wait to give you this until after the party tonight, but I can see that you need it now.”

“What?”

“After Mikeli is dealt with, his seat will be vacant. I want you to take over his council seat. You won’t have to rule it from Hell; you can do it topside. I would prefer it, as Nella will still need someone of your caliber to help her while I am performing my duties.”

Lazarus closed his eyes. While he was honored and flattered that the master would choose him to take over the council seat, he didn’t want it out of pity.

“I wouldn’t diss you like that,” Idris said, causing Lazarus to laugh. “I have watched you closely over the years. You’re ready for this step. If Nella hadn’t come into the picture, I would still have found a place for you in the organization.”

“Wow, sir.” Lazarus exhaled. “I’m honored. Thank you.”

Idris’ fangs extended. He pulled Lazarus close and held the new councilman in a tight embrace.

“With this, I name you the councilman for the East Coast territories. With this bite, you will oversee the territories from Maine down through Florida. You will continue to be my apprentice and assist me in ruling the United States. Do you accept?”

“Yes,” Lazarus whispered.

The master’s teeth pierced Lazarus’ neck. His knees buckled from the force, and the master hooked his arms under his shoulders to keep him upright.

When Lazarus opened his eyes, he looked around. He half expected the world to look different now that he was a councilman; so far, however, it all looked the same.

“It will come,” the master said. “Once I am in and Mikeli is gone, you will have the world at your feet, son.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“Of all the nights not to cast a reflection,” Nella muttered to herself as she tugged on her red gown, wondering how she looked in it. Her father had the gown made for her and presented it to her at breakfast before he met with Lazarus. Tonight wasn’t just about his election, he told her; it was also the night he planned to introduce her to everyone as both his daughter and the new master of the territory.

The quiche she’d had for breakfast lay heavily in her stomach. She’d taken two sips of blood to please her father, but she still wasn’t able to drink it. She rubbed her forehead. How could she be a master vampire when she wasn’t really a vampire? Her hands shook. Maybe this was all moving too fast, too soon.

A low, soft whistle came from the doorway. Smiling, she gave Lazarus a minute to view her in the backless red halter-style dress. A moment later, she turned so that he could see the v neckline that dipped low to her belly button, and the split that rode up her long leg and stopped at her hip. She brushed her new bangs, courtesy of Nevaeh, away from her eyes to get a better look at him.

His tux molded around his muscles with perfection. His dreads were pulled back in a low

ponytail, and his fangs peeked from beneath his lip. She placed a hand over her heart to stop it from escaping through her chest. There was something different about him. Something she couldn't put her finger on.

"You look amazing," she said.

"So do you, ma."

Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the desire in his eyes. She parted her lips to ask him a question, but he immediately covered her mouth with his as he untied the straps at the base of her neck and pushed them down.

"We don't have time," she said. "Dad's waiting for us."

"You're right, ma." He removed his jacket and turned his attention to her nipple. "Better make it quick."

"What happened with my dad?"

"He offered me a seat on the council."

Squealing, she wrapped her arms around his neck and jumped into his arms. Her dress fell to her feet as he lifted her and carried her to the bed. Staring down at her, he untied his bow tie and flung it over his shoulder.

"That's awesome, Laz. I'm so happy for you."

He shrugged. "Yeah, well, a lot has to happen first."

She frowned at his negativity, but it quickly turned into a moan as he kissed her between her breasts.

“Like...what?”

“We’ll talk about it later, ma.”

“Okay.”

The rest of his clothing dissolved as he rolled a condom over his hard shaft. His lips moved to her throat as he entered her. Instead of biting her, he nursed the tender spot where his fangs had pierced her so many times. She cried out, her nails digging into his skin. Just then, her father paged both of them.

“Damn,” she said, clutching his shoulders.

“I know,” he panted but didn’t stop. “We’d better go up to the party.”

“Not yet.”

“Okay.”

She just hoped that her father didn’t decide to look for them at this moment. Sweat dripped from his forehead and splashed on her cheek. Her fangs started their descent as he thrust deeper and faster, slamming the headboard against the wall. Her back arched.

There was a soft knock at the chamber door. Her father.

“Don’t stop, ma.”

“Never.”

The knock sounded again. Lazarus cursed, driving into her with such force, the nightstand rattled. Nella bit his shoulder, and indigo blood trickled over his tattoo. She darted her tongue across the sweet fluid, staining the eagle purple. Dipping his head, he punctured the delicate skin on her breast with his fangs, above her erect nipple.

“Oh, Z!” she exclaimed.

She gripped his dreads while his hands slid under her hips, lifting them slightly so he could submerge himself within her. Even when another knock pounded against the door, he didn’t slow down.

“I need the two of you upstairs,” her father said. “The ceremony is starting and everyone is here.”

“Fuck!” Lazarus muttered against her temple.

Nella grabbed his hips to prevent him from withdrawing. She flipped Lazarus onto his back and picked up the urgent rhythm. It was his turn to arch into her hips. The bed shook beneath them and she was sure her father could hear it on the other side of the door, but she didn’t care.

“Nella! Lazarus!” Idris called.

A drop of sweat streaked down her spine. There was nothing that could make her stop moving against Lazarus. The doorknob rattled, and she turned toward the door. When she reached out her hand, a black

current flowed from her fingertips and sealed the door. Her eyes widened in amazement.

“I didn’t know I could do that,” she said in awe, staring at her hand.

Lazarus turned her around, entering her from the back. His name escaped her lips on a soft moan that matched his. Her essence dribbled down her inner thigh, scenting the room. The only linen left on the bed, a black fitted sheet, became a ball in her fists. He licked her throat, suckling that spot on her neck.

“Let’s see what else you can do, ma.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

A half hour later, the pair emerged from the chamber in time to watch Javier's fangs pierce Idris' neck, officially proclaiming the master as the domestic vice president. Nella clapped along with the other invited guests of the inauguration party. The same flags that she saw in Hell now decorated her father's great room.

Servants mingled among the guests, carrying trays filled with appetizers that only a vampire could love. Nella picked up a shot glass of blood from a passing tray but couldn't bring herself to drink it. Lazarus quickly took it from her and downed it before anyone noticed. She was still annoyed that they hadn't had a chance to finish before Idris threatened to break down the door and drag them upstairs by their ears. *Maybe later*, she transmitted to him. Lazarus nudged her when he picked up on her thought.

Idris beamed as he shook hands with the masters from all over North America. He glanced in their direction periodically. Suddenly, Nella felt the gaze of her father's boss, Mikeli, raking over her body. She averted her eyes. Mikeli's appraisal was so intense, she glanced down at her dress to make sure she was still wearing one. Lazarus tensed beside her

as she threaded her hand through his bent arm and gripped his bicep. He had to calm down.

I'll try, ma, but if that motherfucker licks his lips at you one more time...

She led Lazarus over to the bar for a drink. He ordered a Patron for him and a white wine for her. She adjusted his crooked bow tie before leaning against him and sipping her drink. Wine and blood really didn't go together. Frowning at the taste, she set her drink on the bar and he ordered her another, this one without blood.

"Why would my dad invite Mikeli if he's trying to kill him?"

"He's your pop's boss," he said handing her the new drink. "He has to. Plus, we haven't figured out why he's doing this. Until then, we act like normal."

"What if he tries something?"

"He wouldn't be that stupid."

A jazz trio played on the stage at the front of the great room. She looked around, recognizing a lot of vampires from her father's office, including Niklaus and his wife, who were dancing near the band. The scene was beyond anything that she could ever dream up. To top it off, she was now a master.

She hands shook, sloshing her drink over the rim of the glass as her father walked over to them and kissed her on the cheek. He looked handsome in his

tuxedo, she thought, and she sat down her glass and hugged him.

“Nice of you two to make it,” he joked, embracing her.

“Congratulations, Dad,” she said.

“Congrats, sir.”

When she released him, Idris’ eyes moved from Lazarus to her. He motioned to his neck. Nella blushed and quickly covered her bruised neck with her hand. Her father glared at Lazarus, who looked away.

I’m not mad, her father said with a chuckle. *I understand young love.*

Nella’s shoulders relaxed, though Lazarus was still tense. He gripped his glass so tightly, she was sure it would break in his hand. She took it from him and set it on the bar as her father lightly touched her forearm.

We need to talk.

Nella frowned. *About what?*

“I knew I’d find you here.”

Before he could speak, Aponi strode over to them. She placed a hand on Idris’ shoulder and kissed him on his cheek. Her stepmother looked her up and down before taking a flute of blood from the passing waiter, then raked Lazarus with a hot gaze.

Nella had always thought Aponi was beautiful. Tonight was no exception. The mistress rocked a sheer gold strapless Dolce and Gabbana dress with matching shoes. Her long hair was twisted up in a knot that rested at the base of her neck. Nella had met her father's wife once or twice in passing at the dinner table but never had a conversation with her, as Idris preferred it that way. Deep down, Nella had hoped that she and her new stepmother could at least be friends, but she knew that wouldn't happen.

Honey, meet my daughter, Idris said, sipping his champagne.

His wife almost spat out the drink in her mouth. Nella and Lazarus grinned.

"Daughter!" Aponi exclaimed before Idris could silence her.

Daughter, his wife said again in disbelief. *How?*

It is a long story, her father said, winking at Nella. *We'll discuss it later.*

Aponi opened her mouth but quickly shut it. Idris took her elbow and guided her to the other side of the room. Aponi glanced at Nella with a look of disdain, and then plastered a smile on her face as Javier greeted them.

That went well, Lazarus said.

At least she didn't try to rape you in front of me.

Meow! He grinned.

She swatted his arm. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father's boss making his way over to them. Lazarus straightening his posture as his grip tightened around her waist.

The councilman swooped in, towering over both of them. Nella craned her neck to look up at Mikeli. He looked nice in his tuxedo with a kente cloth-printed bow tie and vest. His smile, however, was lethal. All fangs. She quivered inside but didn't let her unease show.

"I saw you from across the room," he said. "I just had to meet you."

Mikeli swept up Nella's hand and kissed the back of it. She fought the urge to pull it away to wipe it on her dress and glanced at Lazarus. His jaw tightened as did his shoulders. He was going to explode at any minute.

"I am Mikeli Umbeye, the East Coast Councilman."

"It's nice to meet you. Nella Jackson."

"Yes," he hissed. "I may have heard your name in passing."

She cocked her head to the side. "From whom?"

He shrugged. "That is not important. Care to dance?"

She glanced at Lazarus. His thoughts told her he didn't want her to go with the councilman, not even to the middle of the dance floor, but he had no choice. The councilman outranked him. So she took Mikeli's extended hand and he led her to the center of the floor, trapping her in his tight embrace. She took a half step backward, trying to put distance between their bodies, but he closed the gap by stepping closer to her.

"You're beautiful," he said, his breath burning her cheek.

"Thank you."

"How do you know Idris?"

"Why is that your business?"

"I'm just curious."

Nella laughed uncomfortably. His palm was clammy against the bare skin on her back, and she cringed at his touch. She stole a glimpse at Lazarus at the bar, he was watching them intensely. If he were alive, steam would be coming out of his ears by now.

"You must come to my chambers," Mikeli said.

"I just met you. Why would I go home with you?"

"I've been watching you. You're quite the discovery."

She raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Burying his nose in the crook of her neck, he inhaled. "Your scent is intoxicating."

Nella made the mistake of looking the councilman in the eye. He tried to probe her mind for information. It made her dizzy, and her eyes began to slide closed. She relaxed in the councilman's arms—so much so that she didn't notice her father walking toward them until he spoke.

"I must steal her away."

"We're dancing," Mikeli snarled, tightening his grip on her waist.

"Ouch," Nella whispered. "You're hurting me."

"You heard her," her father said. "Let her go."

"Not until the song ends."

With a wave of his hand, Idris changed the song the band was playing. In an instant, Lazarus was at his side. She looked from him to her father to the councilman. Mikeli's nails dug into her flesh, and she winced at the pain. Suddenly, the room began to spin. Lazarus reached for her elbow as her father pried the councilman's death grip from her back.

"I'm sure you don't want to embarrass yourself, Mikeli," her father warned as his fangs lengthened. "Let her go and enjoy the party."

When Mikeli released her, she collapsed into Lazarus' arms. The councilman stomped away as she clung to Lazarus, trying to get her bearings.

"The nerve of that motherfucker," Lazarus muttered as her father stroked her back. "Trying to do a vamp snatch teleport in the middle of your party."

"That's why I had all teleport disabled," her father said. "I knew he wouldn't be able to resist."

Her legs were wobbly; if she didn't sit down soon, she was going to faint. Only Lazarus' strength held her upright. Then her father took her from Lazarus' arms. Her knees buckled in the exchange, but her father caught her.

"I'm going to take her up to the roof for air."

"I'll do it, sir."

"No," Idris said. "Stay here. I have a feeling my wife is going to talk to you again."

Though she listened and understood her father's exchange with Lazarus, the speech sounded distorted in her ear. She kissed Lazarus before she dissolved into mist. On the roof, the fresh air didn't help, and she was upset for making her father leave his own party.

"I'd rather be with you," he said as he guided her to a concrete bench. "Sit."

"What did you want to talk about?"

Her speech slurred. Did Mikeli drug her?

"Probably," her father said, answering her thought. "Put your head down. We can talk later."

As she laid her head on her father's lap, she now understood why they told her to stay far away from the councilman. Out of the blue, her mother's voice filled her head. How could that be? Maybe she was hallucinating. Then, it happened again. Where was she? She didn't want to ignore her mother's call but she was too sick to answer. Instead, she closed her eyes and vowed to call her tomorrow.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Returning to the bar, Lazarus downed the last of the drink he'd been nursing since Nella and Idris left the party. He listened to the live jazz band with disinterest, keeping his eye out for their return. The amount of power in the room was awe inspiring. Would he ever rise to that level in the vamp world? Idris had promised him a council seat, but a lot had to happen before he could actually take it.

First, Mikeli had to die.

Lazarus' grip tightened on the shot glass as he replayed the image of Nella in the African's arms. That alone would be reason enough for him to kill the councilman. When Mikeli had tried to teleport her out of the room, Lazarus had called Idris as soon as he'd realized what was happening. Being of lower status than Mikeli, he didn't have the authority to step to him without the councilman throwing him in jail.

And it pissed him off. If only he had that kind of power, the councilman wouldn't be alive long enough to glare at him from across the room, as he was now. Lazarus glared back.

"Now I get it," Aponi said, materializing at his elbow. "You've been schmoozing the boss' daughter just so you can get his throne."

"You know that ain't the case. If it were, I would've already done you and got it over with."

Smiling, she leaned close to him.

"You still can," she said, caressing his forearm.

He snatched it away. "Not here."

"Right." She pressed her lips against his ear. "Tonight. After everything falls into place."

This piqued his interest. Lazarus raised his eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Dance with me."

Lazarus followed her to the small dance floor in front of the band. He circled his arms around her waist, and she laid her head on his chest.

"Tonight, Idris will take his fall," she said. "I'll be the rich grieving widow, and you can rule the world beside me."

"How? His seat isn't even warm yet."

"Mikeli has someone working from the inside."

"Who?"

"He won't say."

"Why are you so interested in this? Don't you love your husband?"

Aponi sighed. "Two hundred years is a long time to be married to only one person. Especially when he's cheating on you."

"He's a master vamp. Did you expect him to be faithful?"

"I didn't care that he was sleeping with other people. So was I. He fell in love with one of them. That's what I had a problem with."

"So this is about Nella's mother?"

"Partly," she said. "I've never experienced love like that. I'd hoped that when Idris fell in love, it would've been with me, his wife, not some human, and a slayer at that."

"You're jealous of her?"

Aponi chuckled. "Not hardly. This is about revenge. What better way to punish my husband?"

"But it happened a long time ago."

"That's how a guy thinks," she said with a wicked smile. "A woman never forgets. Anyway, after this woman left him, it's never been the same between my husband and me. She was the one he wanted, not me. It feels like he's just settling for me because I'm still here."

"You could get a love of your own?"

"I tried that," Aponi said, licking her lips.

He laughed. "You don't love me. You love parts of me."

"And my, what parts they are."

Lazarus scowled at her, hoping the song would end soon. From the corner of his eye, he saw Idris and Nella walk back into the room. He watched Nella on her father's arm and wondered if he'd ever get bored

with her. An eternity was a long time to be with just one person. While he had been with a lot of women, he'd never been in love.

When the song finally ended, he let Aponi go and walked toward Nella. Her amber eyes sparkled, her caramel skin flushed from the trip down from the roof. She smiled. He returned it, and then looked around. He didn't see Mikeli. He assumed the councilman had left after the botched teleport.

"I still don't feel good. I'm going to go lie down."

"I'll go with you."

"No. Stay."

"You know that ain't gonna happen, ma."

Lazarus wrapped her arms around her when her knees buckled and guided her through the crowd to the stairs. He would've teleported them down to his chambers but remembered that Idris had disabled it. When she stumbled on the second stair, he scooped her up into his arms.

"What did Mikeli do to me?"

Lazarus' fangs lengthened. "I don't know, but I'll kill him for it."

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

With a roar, Mikeli picked up his executive chair and flung it at the bank of televisions. How dare Idris make him look like a fool in front of everyone! He drugged the girl, had her in his arms, was about to teleport out when he discovered he'd been blocked. At least he was able to plant the tracer on her. *Damn you, Idris!* Rage coursed through every limb in his body. The griffins huddled at the chamber door, their escape blocked by flames that shot up toward the ceiling. Mikeli growled at them. It was a simple plan. He needed an heir, not simply to rule the world, but to take it over. Humans had been running this place for far too long. It was time to make Earth theirs.

And it wouldn't be an ordinary heir, but one who was immune to daylight and could reproduce as Nella could. They'd be his own Adam and Eve. He knew the Dark Lord would be pleased if he could get it to work.

For now, though, all his efforts to trap Nella had failed. When he'd first lost the girl's scent, he had let Helen escape, thinking she'd go straight to her daughter. Instead, the bitch had killed his best hunter.

With a thud, he overturned the large bookcase that stood behind his desk. He'd gotten wind of the

East Coast masters' plan to form an alliance, possibly combining their territories. When they refused to disband, he'd decided killing them would be easier. He wasn't about to let Idris have so much power over him and hoped that using Helen as his assassin would distract his former friend enough to allow him to take his daughter.

It was as if they were playing chess. When he moved his pawn, Idris would counter with one of his own. Damn him! He'd waited long enough. Idris had to go. Killing Idris at this point wasn't a part of his plan. He had hoped to keep Idris around until after he impregnated Nella, and then kill him. Now, even that wasn't an option. He called Aponi and told her that he was dispatching an assassin within the hour.

Materializing a human in his chambers, he bit the woman and drained her. When the woman went limp in his arms, he tossed her to the floor. The griffins edged forward to clean up the carcass. He realized, too late, that he should've fucked her first. Nella's lingering feeling in his arms distracted him. He would have Nella in his bed by dawn tomorrow and didn't care who he had to kill to make it happen.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Aponi paced the spacious master bedroom. The sun had risen three hours ago. No light penetrated the dark chamber, yet she could see all. Her eyes took in the massive oak canopy bed in the center of the room. Her husband was sleeping peacefully in the center. With her night vision, she could make out each curve of his handsome face, the rise and fall of his chest beneath his black silk pajamas. She sat on the edge of the bed and listened to his light snores.

His syncopated rhythm always helped her sleep soundly. As a young girl, she had feared the dark. The first few nights in Idris' pitch-black chamber had frightened her. It was the sound of his breath that had helped calm her down.

Standing, she turned to look at her powerful husband—the brand new vice president of the Vampire Council. Her nipples hardened thinking about the power he would've had, the power she would've had.

It would be sad to watch Idris die.

Aponi tossed her long black hair over her shoulder and resumed pacing. The assassin was late. Mikeli had promised her that she only had to let him

in. If the bastard didn't show up soon, she'd have to do the job herself.

Once again, she glanced at her husband. She did love him. Compared to the other masters' wives, she had it good. Idris was never cruel to her. Yes, he had his dalliances, but as a master vampire that went with the territory. Everything was fine. Until he chose that human over her.

Her hands tightened into fists. Getting rid of the bitch had proved easier than she'd imagined. She chuckled at her own ingenuity. Following Mikeli's suggestion, she couldn't believe her luck when she stumbled upon the spell in one of Idris' books. Finding a witch to dangle the carrot was easy. Aponi had never thought the ritual would work. But, apparently, it did.

Once Idris was dead, Lazarus would take over, and she would once again be a master's wife when she seduced him. Her nipples stiffened at the thought of his hard body against hers. She shivered and gripped the post of the bed for support.

Footsteps in the hall drew her attention. "Finally," she whispered.

She rushed to the heavy oak double doors and flung them back without looking at the dark figure at the door. Aponi didn't care who Mikeli sent as long as they succeeded in killing her husband.

“You’re late,” she hissed.

She didn’t turn around to look at the hit man as she collected her purse and travel bag. This was the least amount of luggage she had taken on any trip. Whatever else she needed, Mikeli had assured her he would provide it when she got to her new home.

When the hit man didn’t move toward the bed, Aponi frowned and turned around. She gasped when the figure stepped forward. Aponi recognized the woman immediately. The human that Idris chose over her. What was she doing here? Why would Mikeli send her to do the job instead of someone more capable? She watched Helen enter the room, look at Idris, then narrow her eyes at her.

“You?” Aponi huffed, flinging her long hair over her shoulder. “You’re the one who’s supposed to kill my husband?”

“And you’re the bitch who set me up?”

Aponi smiled as she crossed her arms over her chest. How did the woman put it all together? The ritual didn’t call for the blood of an angel, just a virgin. She had gotten the witch Bu’Ble to switch out one for the other. Killing an angel was a serious offence, one that would land the human offender in Hell’s prison and out of her life.

But she didn’t count on a baby being produced from the ritual. When she found out the bitch was

pregnant with her husband's child, she arranged for the woman to go to Hell once the child had been raised. Aponi wasn't about to take care of a child, and she certainly wasn't going to let one ruin her life with Idris.

"Well, you're here. So do it already," Aponi huffed.

"I thought you loved him."

"I do. But money is thicker than water."

Helen smirked. "No wonder Idris chose me over you."

"He didn't. Look at where he is."

"I was right," Helen muttered as she stalked away from the bed. "You don't deserve him. You don't even deserve to live."

"Look, we're wasting time with this shit. If you won't do it, I will."

Aponi picked up the sword and stormed to the bed with the weapon raised above her head.

"No!" Helen yelled, rushing toward her.

Before the blade could connect with Idris' throat, Helen leapt over the king-sized mattress and punched Aponi. The vampire stumbled backward, swinging the blade at Helen. Helen ducked to the left. Her kick landed against Aponi's torso, and Aponi's back collided with the heavy oak dresser. She dropped

the sword. Helen dived for it, but Aponi kicked her in the side before she could grab the weapon.

Aponi retrieved the sword and rushed to the bed. Despite the pain, Helen scrambled to her feet. She wrapped her arms around Aponi's waist and dragged her to the floor. As they tussled, the sword pierced Aponi's chest.

Blue-black blood oozed from the wound. Helen pulled the sword from the mistress' chest and quickly raised it, then lowered it once more to sever Aponi's head. She stepped back as the carcass erupted into indigo flames, and then vanished. Panting, Helen sat on the edge of the bed. Her hands shook as she tried to gather her composure.

"What happened?"

Helen jumped and turned toward the sound of the voice. The demon stood at the door. She recognized him from the corridors in Hell. He was one of the prison guards. His eyes glowed yellow as he stepped into the room.

"Mikeli sent me to do the job," he huffed as he looked angrily at the bed. "Why are you here?"

"He sent me as well," Helen stammered. "You can go. I can finish this."

The demon shrugged. “Whatever. My wife’s cooking a human tonight.”

When he left, Helen exhaled. Despite all that had happened, she hadn’t come here to kill him. She just wanted to talk to him, maybe sleep next to him once more as she’d done in the past. Sighing, she glanced at him where he lay prostrate under the sheet. He’d always been a sound sleeper, and she wasn’t surprised that he’d slept through his assassination attempt.

Standing, she gathered her weapon as she walked toward the door. Maybe she’d check on her daughter before she headed back home to Harlem. Earlier, she’d called, but Nella ignored her call. She was determined to find out why.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

As the credits rolled at the end of the classic horror movie, Nella snuggled against Lazarus. She was still feeling woozy and tried to eat some soup, but that didn't sit well with her stomach. However, she was able to drink a half bottle of blood before she vomited that too. He turned off the television without moving and squeezed her to him.

"What did that asshole do to me?"

"I don't know, ma. But it will be addressed."

She stared into his blue eyes that were slowly turning crimson. Panic seized her. "Don't do anything that will get you killed."

"Too late, ma."

She sat up. "I'm serious, Laz. I'll be okay, but if anything happens to you, I won't be."

He cupped her cheek. "I'm not going to let him get away with this. Nobody can hurt you and expect to live afterwards."

"But..."

She let her words drop. Anything she said would be a waste of energy because she wasn't going to be able to talk him out of this suicide mission. Instead, she lay back down when another wave of nausea sent the room into a tailspin.

“What’s wrong?” Lazarus asked.

“I don’t know. It feels like I have the flu, but worse than that.”

Every inch of her body ached. Her lungs hurt. Her head felt like it was going to explode. If she moved, she knew she’d vomit. Abruptly, her heart stopped beating. She covered it with her hand and looked back at him with panic in her eyes. Was she dying? No, she was still conscious and breathing. He felt her wrist for a pulse. His eyes told her there was none. Had it finally happened? Maybe she was finally turning for good. Tears streamed down her cheeks. He stroked her hair, her bare shoulder. A stabbing pain in her core caused her back to arch. Crying out, she clawed at the sheets, shredding them into ribbons.

“Drink this, ma.”

He handed her a bottle. She sipped the sweet, metallic liquid, and the queasiness immediately stopped, but her heart still wasn’t beating. In a panic, she sat up but he held on to her. His touch on her skin felt like sandpaper. “Don’t touch me,” she whispered. “It hurts.”

“Okay.”

Nella swung her feet over the side of the bed but took another sip from the bottle then put it on the stand. She wanted to stand, but didn’t. She wanted to move, but couldn’t. Her head felt like a vice was

wrapped around it. Yelling, she pounded her fist against the mattress when another wave of pain hit. Her fangs crested, filling her with the urge to bite something, or someone.

“Talk to me, ma. What’s going on?”

“Give me your wrist.”

He did without hesitation. She pierced the tight skin, swallowing the blood that squirted into her mouth. Turning from his wrist, she moaned, and then brushed her lips against his. Pushing him back on the bed, she straddled his hips.

“I thought you didn’t want me to touch you.”

“I don’t.”

She pinned his wrists above his head and smiled down at him. Cupping his cheek, she crushed his mouth with hers and slid her wet pussy over his shaft. This was what she needed. Him inside of her. His hard cock grazing her walls. Tossing her head back, she came hard. Just as quickly, the feeling subsided, and her heartbeat returned to normal. “I’m sorry.”

Grinning, he said, “I’m not.”

She caressed his hard shaft. “Do you want to?”

Shaking his head, he removed her hand. She curled into his side. Now she was embarrassed. Blushing, she buried her face in his chest. The nausea returned.

“You’re warm again,” he whispered.

“I’m never going to be all vamp or all human.”

“Don’t say that. You’ll get to keep the best parts from both lives.”

“Maybe. But who’s gonna take me seriously as a master vamp when I’m only half vampire?”

“Anyone who’s got a problem with it can talk to me.”

Smiling, she played with his nipple. “I love you. You don’t have to say it back. I just wanted you to know.”

“I do, ma.” He kissed the top of her head. “You have a big day tomorrow. You should rest.”

Inhaling, his scent filled her nose, as did the scent of someone else. She opened her eyes and lifted her head. It was the same smell she’d picked up at her old house. Her mom? Lazarus stirred and went on guard. At the same time, both bolted for the door. Only Nella could go into the hallway, though, as sunlight streamed in through the window. Lazarus told her that after a couple of the females he brought home tried to sneak upstairs to see Idris without the master’s permission, he had them uncovered. She looked around. Her nose told her she’d just missed her, again.

“She was here,” she whispered as he covered her with a robe.

“Your pop,” he snarled as a semi-automatic appeared in his hand.

She looked at him. “You can’t go upstairs. I can.”

She could tell by the expression on his face that he didn’t like it, but he had no choice. He nodded and handed her the firearm. It was heavier than the one she held in his office. With effort, she held it in both hands, careful to avoid the trigger.

“Just don’t shoot anything. If there’s trouble, call me.”

Nodding, she kissed him before she tore up the stairs to her father’s chambers.

Helen covered her mouth with her hand. Her eyes burned with the images she had just witnessed as she stumbled from Idris’ lair and made her way home. She didn’t know who her daughter was anymore. The woman she’d witnessed draining the blood from that man wasn’t her daughter. That was a vampire.

She found herself at her familiar thinking spot, the Harlem transit station and sat on her usual bench, her hands trembling. How could Idris allow her daughter to shack up with some vamp under his roof? He must have turned her. That was the only explanation she could find.

Resting her elbows on her knees, she covered her face with her hands. She was tired, but as soon as the sun went down, she was going back to talk to Idris. Despite all she'd done, in her heart, she was still a slayer. That maybe if she believed in it, forces both above and below might spare her.

The first thing she had to do was rescue her daughter. She'd kill that vamp who had her if she had to. She went home to gather the necessary supplies and prepare for her daughter's return.

Idris was sitting up, cupping a pile of ashes in his hand, when Nella entered. He looked up at her, then down at the remains. She knew from the scent that it was his wife. Her mother's scent was also present. She sat beside him and rested her head on his shoulder, laying the gun in her lap. Her father dropped the ashes and moved the weapon from her reach.

"I'm sorry."

"If your mother hadn't done it, I would have."

She flinched. "Why did she do it?"

"To protect me."

Silently, he mentally replayed the scene he had witnessed. She gaped at the images. This was all

Aponi's doing, just because she was jealous of her mother.

"And Mikeli's," he said. "This was his plan from the beginning."

She shook her head. Idris kissed her forehead. Tears slid down her cheeks. How could vamps be so twisted? He blood began to boil. If they had succeeded in killing her father, she would've...well, she didn't know what she would do. Her father had asked her to avenge his death, but did she really have it in her to do so? Lazarus, yes. But her?

"Let Lazarus know that I'm okay. We will talk about this at sundown with Javier."

"I don't want to leave you. Especially now."

"Your mother's gone. I'll be fine."

"Okay. I love you, Dad." She hugged him tight.

"I love you too."

CHAPTER FIFTY

Her hands shook as she brought her mug of coffee to her lips. She was scared and nervous. Today, she'd begin training for her new job as master. The brown liquid sloshed over the side of her yellow mug, and she set it down on the table. Her father had told her she'd be making a speech today. It sat in a folder beside her plate. Since she couldn't sleep, she spent much of the early afternoon trying to compose it. She hoped her father would have time to take a look at it before they left for the office. Right now, her father's attention was divided.

Lazarus squeezed her thigh beneath the table. They, along with President Javier, were gathered in the dining room discussing what happened last evening. The men nursed goblets of blood while she picked at her oatmeal and toast. She took small bites only because her father watched her like a hawk. At least her coffee had a dash of blood in it. Since she was a master now, she had to save face in front of the vampire president somehow.

"Mikeli needs to be immediately removed from his seat," Idris said. "He's a danger, not only to my family but to everyone."

"I agree," Javier said. "However, while the list of grievances is long, we still don't have enough proof to proceed."

"What more do you need?" Nella exclaimed as Lazarus reached for her hand. "He almost kidnapped me in my dad's house."

"That we can try him on," Javier said. "Everything else is circumstantial. And as horrible as his attempted kidnapping was, it's not enough to revoke his seat."

"So, we just sit around until he kills Idris or drags Nel to Hell?"

"No, Lazarus." Javier sighed. "We'll bring him in for questioning." He glanced at Nella. "Your mother is the one we really have to worry about. She can't continue to think she's a slayer."

"But last night was an accident."

"Perhaps, but there's a long list of charges she must answer to. Plus, she still must serve her sentence for Hell."

"She won't go willingly," Nella sniffed. "She already killed that hunter to prove that she won't go back without a fight."

"Maybe you and Idris can talk to her," Javier stressed. "Tell her we aren't asking that she cooperate, but demanding it."

The thought of her mother going back to Hell and being possibly sentenced to death caused her to sob. Lazarus wrapped his arm around her shoulder. It was all too much for her to deal with. As master, this would now fall on her to handle. She wasn't ready. The oatmeal curdled in her stomach. Excusing herself, she rushed into the hall bathroom and vomited. Within seconds, Lazarus was there, holding her hair.

"Just as I thought," he joked. "I'll be spending my whole life holding your hair back while you puke."

Laughing halfheartedly, she flushed and rinsed her mouth out in the sink. Her hands shook as she splashed her face with water. Raising her head, she looked into the mirror out of habit. Of course, her reflection wasn't there. Why did vamps put mirrors up if they don't have reflections?

"This is moving so fast," she whispered. "I mean, it is but it isn't. I want this, Laz, but I'm scared. I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

He handed her a towel. "That's why you'll have the interim period so your pop can train you."

"My powers haven't even come in." Her voice rose in hysteria. "What if they never do?"

"You need to calm down."

"Calm down? I can't! I don't have time to calm down! I know I said I wanted this, but I lied. Oh. God!"

They both cringed as the name slipped from her lips. He gripped her shoulders as blood rushed to her head. His touch brought her back down to reality and kept her from fainting.

“Nel. Take a deep breath, ma.” When she did, she inhaled his masculine scent. “You can do this. Idris will set you up with everything you need. Just relax, ma.”

She exhaled. “What if I have to do something—I don’t want to hurt my mom.”

“I know, babe. But look at all the innocent lives she’s taken.”

“Is she really that bad?”

“Who knows what people are capable of when they’re forced into a corner.”

“I want to talk to her, first. Maybe there’s a reason.”

Her words sounded desperate, even to her ears. Releasing her shoulders, he wiped her mouth with a hand towel before kissing her nose. She hugged him, needing his strength more now than ever, and he stroked her hair.

Finally she pulled away from him, deciding to try out some of her skills. Closing her eyes, she changed her outfit from a simple black sheath to a red wrap dress. She twirled in the small half bathroom.

“How do I look? Do I look like a master?”

He studied her with his finger on his chin.

“I think you’d look more like one with this.”

When she looked at him, a diamond and ruby locket hung from his fingertips. She squealed as he clasped the jewelry around her neck. Her eyes misting with tears, she kissed him.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t say I never gave you nothing, ma.”

She giggled and kissed him again.

“Come on,” he said. “You can’t be late for your first day on the job.”

They went down to the parking garage, where Javier and Idris were waiting. She was about to climb into the car when she stopped and turned to Lazarus.

“I forgot my speech.”

“Where is it?”

“On the table. I’ll run up and get it.”

“I can...”

“No. I’ll be right back.”

She scurried to the elevator and took it up to the living area. It felt like it was moving more slowly than normal, and she tapped her foot with impatience. When the door finally opened, she dashed to the dining room. Her speech was in the leather portfolio lying in front of her seat. With a sigh, she picked it up. Just as she turned to run back to the elevator,

something hit her on her head, and everything went black.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Lazarus pounded the hood of Nella's Range Rover with his fist. The steel caved in, leaving a perfect imprint of his fist. His fangs lengthened as he cursed. Idris' hand on his shoulder did nothing to calm him down, and he stalked away from his master. Her kidnapping had registered with him and Idris the second it happened. He should've been there to protect her.

"It's not your fault," Idris told him. "Mikeli would've done this with you standing next to her."

"I should've sensed the tracer on her," Lazarus said, punching the driver's side door.

"You wouldn't have been able to pick it up. It was planted on her by a council member. Just like you can't follow them to Hell without me or Idris," Javier reasoned.

"Then why the fuck are we standing here!" Lazarus bellowed. "Let's go after that motherfucker!"

"It's not that simple," Idris said gently. "We can't just roll into Hell with guns drawn like a couple of gangsters. We have to be smart about this."

While he knew that his master was right, pure rage coursed through his body and prevented him from listening to reason. He doubled over and rested

his hands on his knees to prevent himself from totaling the SUV with his bare hands. They just didn't understand.

Straightening, he looked at the men in front of him. They had power and could do shit he couldn't, like go into Hell after his woman. Even Idris' elevation bite still didn't come with the powers he'd need to take down the councilman. He wouldn't inherit his powers until Mikeli died. And the councilman would die tonight.

"We're wasting time," Lazarus said. His voice was calmer but still held a slight growl to it. "He could be doing anything to her right now!"

"Look, son." Idris put his hands on his protégé's stiff shoulders. "I'm just as worried as you are about my daughter. We will get her back. We just need to be smart about this."

He stared at his boss then glanced at Javier. "What's really going on, sir?"

The men shared a look. What were they keeping from him? Somehow he knew Nella going missing was a part of a bigger plan that one of the men had drawn up. When did this happen?

"You've been my protégé for a long time," Idris began quietly as Javier strolled a short distance away. "I love you like a son, and I couldn't think of a better person to leave my daughter in care of."

Lazarus raised his eyebrow. "Leave? What are you talking about?"

"Mikeli has been a pain in my ass since the beginning. I knew that if anyone on the council prevented my daughter from inheriting her due, it would be him. A plan was set into motion to legally remove the obstacle."

"You planned for me to kill him?"

"Yes, but it had to be done legally."

"You could've just asked me."

"Then," Javier interjected, "you wouldn't have gotten the council seat and you would've gone to prison for Mikeli's murder."

"So what do we do? How do I get down there to take him out and get Nel back?"

He stared at his boss. As Javier summoned a vortex, Lazarus couldn't help but think there was another piece of the puzzle that his boss was keeping from him. He saw it in the master's eyes. It felt like this was goodbye, but Lazarus closed himself off to that feeling.

"I will gather a search party," the president said. "This will be your cover to search for Nel and go after Mikeli."

"Fine," Lazarus spat as his fangs remained at battle length. "Just get me down there."

Lazarus ran for the vortex that Javier summoned to take himself to Hell, but both higher-ranking vampires stopped him. Still, he managed to thrust his hands into the black winds. A thousand volts of electricity flowed through his body, and with a yell, he dropped to his knees. He slammed his fists into the dirty concrete beneath him.

“Idris, I’ll go to Hell with Lazarus. You start damage control topside. Find Helen, now. If she gets wind of this, there’s no telling where her mind might lead her.”

“I agree. Ready, Laz?”

Lazarus straightened and nodded. He’d never been more ready for anything in his life. Idris stayed behind as Javier guided him into the portal and down to Hell.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Helen's eyes narrowed at Idris' dissolving image as she stepped out of the dark shadows of the parking garage. Had she really heard Idris' correctly? He had orchestrated her daughter's kidnapping for this vampire whom he considered a son? Frowning, she crossed her arms over her chest. That couldn't be true.

Or could it?

She'd felt her daughter's distress and couldn't get to her in time, so she'd come in search of Idris' assistance. Instead, she'd discovered he'd orchestrated his own daughter's kidnapping. His words still rang in her ears. As she leaned against the empty SUV, she tightly gripped the handle of her sword. In her heart, she was still a slayer. Neither Heaven nor Hell could take something that had been in her heart from the beginning. It was incomprehensible to her that a father would sell out his daughter for a chance to assassinate his rival.

After taking a deep breath, Helen followed Idris through the rip in his transport to the roof. What had the man she loved become? What would he turn her daughter into? She couldn't stay still. The guards could pick up on her scent at any time and return her to her cell or even to Mikeli. Bursting into the

councilman's chambers and killing him had its own set of risks. At least the young vampire would be useful in that regard. He'd keep the councilman occupied while she talked to Idris.

Her thoughts turned to Nella. Helen paused to silently pray for her daughter's safe return. She remembered the first time she'd held Nella in her arms. Her daughter was so tiny. For the first time, she'd understood what unconditional love was. She'd vowed that day that she would always protect her daughter from evil and would never put her in harm's way.

Apparently Idris never made the same promise.

It must be different for fathers, she thought. He'd never had to carry this precious life inside of him and guard her from harm. Would Idris really lay down his life for his daughter, as she would, or would he continue to use her to further his own political agenda?

Helen balled her hands into fists. No vampire could be trusted, not even one whom she loved. Despite the fact that her heart still loved Idris, if he was responsible for putting her daughter in harm's way, she would kill him. When she finally stepped from the shadows, Idris looked in her direction.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

The scent of blood stung Nella's nose as her eyes fluttered open. Her wrists were tied to the posts of a golden bed. She glanced around the pristine white and gold chambers. The vampire crest was painted on the ceiling above her head. The sound of screaming split her ears and caused her headache to worsen.

She knew instantly that she was in Hell.

As she tried to sit up, her bare foot brushed the warm limb of someone next to her. She turned to see a woman lying on the bed beside her. The woman was bound in the same fashion as she. The woman wore a white t-shirt and rainbow-hued skirt. Her feet were bare and her eyes were closed, but Nella was relieved to see the woman's chest rise and fall with each breath.

Suddenly the woman's eyes opened. Her dark pupils were filled with fear as she looked at Nella.

"Are you okay?" Nella asked her.

The woman nodded. "Where are we?"

"Hell."

"That's a joke, right?"

Nella shook her head. "I wish."

The woman trembled beside her as Nella examined her. They were about the same age. Nella's

gaze roamed over the woman's dark spiral curls and deep brown eyes. Her chocolate skin had a slight lavender sheen to it, and light radiated from her in all directions. Somehow, Nella knew immediately what the woman was—an angel.

“How did we get here?” the angel whispered.

Nella couldn't answer her. The last thing she remembered was going back into the lair for her speech. She must have been taken then. Focusing, she tried to place a mental call to Lazarus, but the signal was blocked.

“I'm Malaika.”

“Nella.”

“We have to get out of here.”

Nella tried to sit up, but the binding on her wrists was too tight. The mattress shifted beneath her as the angel tried to free herself from her own binding. Footsteps against the marble floor halted their progress.

“Ah, my sleeping beauties have awoken.”

Mikeli came into view. His tall frame was clothed in a velvet crimson smoking jacket and matching pajama pants. The florescent lights reflected off his lengthened fangs. He sat beside Nella and stroked her cheek with ice-cold fingertips. She quivered in response.

“No need to be afraid, darling. Soon you’ll be used to my touch.”

“My father will kill you.”

“Your father will already be dead.”

Her eyes widened in surprise, but she caught herself and raised her chin. Mikeli smiled. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against her neck.

“You are so beautiful. I’ve waited a lifetime for you.”

“What does that mean?”

She hoped the conversation would help to delay whatever sick plan he had in mind and tried to keep him talking. “Your birth, my dear.”

“I thought it was Aponi’s doing.”

He pulled his lips away from her neck and snarled.

“The bitch *thought* it was all her idea, but this”—he swept his hand across her hip—“was my creation. We’ll make history, darling.”

“What exactly is your plan besides murdering an angel and raping me?”

“You’ll carry my heir. When he’s old enough, you will breed with him and create a race of vampires that are immune to daylight.”

“Eww! Isn’t that like incest?”

“A technicality. Until we get more angel blood and more working vamp wombs, it will have to be this way.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way at all, Mikeli.”

His lips moved to her earlobe. He took it into his mouth and pierced it with his fang. She winced from the pain. Blood trickled down the side of her neck, and she fought the tears that sprang to her eyes. *Think*, she told herself. *There has to be a way out of this.* She caught a glimpse of Malaika. Tears fell from the angel’s eyes.

“I don’t do threesomes,” Nella said.

Mikeli pulled himself away from her throat. He glanced at the angel. Nella swallowed the lump in her throat as she spied the evil in the councilman’s eyes. If she could only get him to let the angel go, maybe she’d have a chance to save them both.

“Let her go and we can have some fun.”

Remembering the scene between Lazarus and Aponi, Nella allowed her fangs to lengthen for effect. Mikeli shivered as his eyes turned red.

“She’s a vital part of my plan,” he said, his lips again at her throat, his fang scoring the side.

“I can’t do this with her watching,” Nella whined.

“She won’t be watching for long.”

“But...”

Mikeli silenced her with a punishing kiss. He dissolved her dress with a thought, leaving her lean body covered in only a black lace bra and matching boy shorts. He groaned as he pressed his mouth against her temple. She suspected that he'd shot his load already.

"Please," Nella said, licking her lips. "At least take her to the other room."

He squeezed her left breast and kissed the exposed skin above her lace bra. Her skin flinched beneath his lips. Bile rose from the pit of her stomach. She tried to make her heart stop, tried to get her body to turn, but it wouldn't. Only her fangs cooperated, and that wouldn't be enough to stop a madman like Mikeli.

"Nice try," he said, his breath scorching her skin. "But we're actually waiting for one more person."

"Who?" Nella frowned.

"Your mother. She's the only one who's gotten the ritual to work. When she performs it on me, then we can get this party started."

Mikeli smiled as he rose from the bed. He snapped his head around and moved toward the door as if he heard someone on the other side of it. Nella closed her eyes, hoping it was Lazarus.

"I'll be right back. Don't move."

Malaika whimpered beside her. When he left, Nella quickly clothed herself in a pink tank top and a pair of jeans. She tried to bite through the rope, but her fangs wouldn't pierce the string. Sighing, she told herself that she'd get out of here. She had to.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

When Idris jettisoned to the roof, he felt Helen behind him and left the rip in his teleport so that she could follow him. Dark clouds moved against the indigo sky. He should be the one to kill Mikeli for kidnapping his daughter. But this was the plan he had set in motion months ago. Lazarus needed to perform the hit. His protégé needed to absorb Mikeli's power when the hit took place so he'd have the authority he'd need to assist Nella as a master vampire.

This too was part of his plan. It was the only way for his daughter to collect her rightful due as both female and vampire. To create the empire that he'd always dreamt of.

He straightened his posture. As he smoothed down the lapel on his tan jacket, he finally turned to face Helen. She stood a few feet away from him, wearing a red t-shirt and jeans. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders. He looked into her eyes; her expression was unreadable. In her hands, she gripped a black and red double-edged sword.

"You did this?" she whispered. "You did this to our daughter?"

For the first time in a long time, words failed him. Idris moved toward her. Helen took a step back.

He watched her as he tried to find the words to make her understand why he'd acted as he had. She seemed different to him. The spark in her eyes was gone, replaced by a look of anger.

"I would think you'd understand this lifestyle by now."

Helen took a small step toward him. Despite the anger that radiated from her aura, Idris wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and kiss her. She was beautiful. Desiring her still, he reached for her hand, but she snatched it away.

"For years I've prayed that you would change. I've prayed that by some miracle, the angel's blood would course through your dead veins and make you..."

"Human?" Idris finished for her. "We tried that, once. You know that was impossible. I'm a vampire. I will always be one of the vampiri."

Helen turned, studying the New York skyline. A light breeze lifted her hair from her shoulders. He stared at her for a long time, waiting for her to continue. How could he tell her that he had wished for the same thing? Wished that he could lie beside her with a heart pounding in his chest. That he didn't have to feast on blood for the rest of his life. But what's done is done.

"And you have turned our daughter into this."

"That couldn't be helped. That wasn't my decision."

She turned to look at him.

"But you will allow her to be a master? That *was* your decision."

Idris lifted his chin. "It's her birthright."

"She can still choose to be human, to be a slayer. That's also her birthright."

"You make it sound so simple," he said bitterly, "when you know it's not."

She stepped toward him. Her hard footsteps against the concrete caused him to turn and watch her. Her eyes were alight in anger. If she were the sun, he would be burning right now.

"It is simple," Helen stressed. "Fix this. Return my daughter to who she once was."

"Even I can't do that, Helen."

"I don't know her anymore."

He softened his stance as tears dotted her cheeks. When he reached out to touch her shoulder, he was surprised when she didn't yank away from him.

"Did you ever really know her?"

The expression of rage returned to her eyes as she shrugged off his hand. "I was with her twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Of course, I know *my* daughter."

“What I mean is you kept her locked in her room like a prisoner. You tried to force her to be something she’s not. Because of that, she hybridized. The little girl you thought you knew wasn’t who she actually was.”

She stepped back as if he’d struck her. “You have some nerve. You waltz into her life after all this time, and after four days and five nights you think you know her better than I?”

“Whose fault was that? You’re the one who pushed me out of her life. You came to me for help when the council sent you to Hell, remember?”

“I remember,” she spat as she moved an arm’s length away from him. “And I’ll be spending the rest of my life paying for that mistake.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. The conversation was giving him a headache, as well as heartache. Why couldn’t she accept him the way he was? Why did they have to have this same conversation every time they met? Why couldn’t they simply trust and love each other like they were meant to?

“Helen. We can’t keep rehashing the past. We need to accept what happened and move on. I love Nella. She’s given me reason to live. I can’t just turn her out into the street. I want her to learn my lifestyle, and if she chooses down the road to do something

else, then I will still love and accept her wishes because it's what *she* chose and nothing that I forced on her."

Helen's lips quivered. He wanted nothing more than to absorb the tremors by kissing her, but he dared not move. Her mind was still in a fragile state.

"The drinking of blood. The desecration of human bodies is an abomination to Esu and all that is holy."

"Helen..."

"I will not stand idly by while you mock all that is holy and good in the world. I will not watch you teach my daughter to do the same. My pledge is to humanity first."

"What are you saying?"

Helen stepped back and narrowed her eyes at her former soul-mate. He wasn't fearful. This was what he wanted, what he had designed from the beginning. She'd once asked if he was willing to give his life for Nella; that answer was yes. It always had been, always will.

"What I'm saying, vampire, is that if you continue to choose to murder the innocent, I will be forced to kill you. And if our daughter also continues in this way, I will be forced to kill her too."

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Lazarus ran through the dark tunnels toward Mikeli's chambers surprised that he still remembered the way. It was years ago that he'd last taken this trip, and he would rather forget the memory of it. He muttered Nella's name over and over, hoping she could hear him, but knowing his transmissions were blocked.

As he neared the entrance, he could only hope that he wasn't too late. His fangs lengthened and he clamped his hands into fists. He came to a halt outside the chambers. The guards weren't there. Though he sighed in relief, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on edge. Closing his eyes, he focused on Nella and felt her just inside the doors. He placed his palm on the door, hoping she could feel him too. They'd warned him not to go in until Javier gave him the signal. He wished the president would hurry with the command.

"Hello, son."

Opening his eyes, Lazarus turned toward the voice behind him. He snarled as he watched the African saunter toward him. It took everything in him not to kill him on the spot. It had to be during the

course of battle. It was the only way he wouldn't land in jail.

"I'm not your son."

"Not by blood." Mikeli smiled. "I hadn't figured out how to do that yet. But soul possession was easier to manage. And I am the one who bit you initially, remember?"

Lazarus turned away slightly. Yes, he knew Mikeli was the one who bit him. He'd figured it out after that inquisition from the council when he first turned. He could smell Mikeli's scent all over him but still refused to believe it. He had hoped that by siding with Idris, he could somehow erase the marker. Idris had even tried to override Mikeli's bite with one of his own, but it didn't take.

The councilman walked to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "I wanted to raise you in my way. To have an heir to take over this throne in my demise."

After shaking off the councilman's hand, Lazarus stalked away and leaned against the blood-covered wall. When he closed his eyes, he could see Nella just behind the gold doors, her hands bound to the bed post. There was another woman beside him. He stiffened. Who was the other woman? Did the council know about her?

"You were smart," Mikeli continued. "To hook up with my enemy. I learned much about the way he

operates. And to get his daughter to trust you was sheer brilliance.”

Lazarus growled.

“Besides, if you kill me, you’ll lose your life. Remember, when the person who bit you dies, so do you.”

Under normal circumstances, this would be true. But, after they’d touched down, Javier had overridden Mikeli’s bite. The president was the only one who had the authority to do so. Idris had arranged this for him, too. He tossed his dreads over his shoulder as he shrugged off his suit jacket and tossed it on the ground. Mikeli’s eyes widened in surprise as he spied Javier’s glowing red bite mark.

“How you like me now, motherfucker?”

Mikeli scoffed as he walked in a circle around Lazarus. When the councilman’s fangs crested, Lazarus spun to keep the councilman in his line of sight. He never did trust the vamp. He knew the dude fought dirty. That was fine. So did he.

“You care for her that much that you would kill your own father?”

“You’re not my father!”

“I created you. You were my first. But in any case, she no longer belongs to you. Her womb will help me create the super vampires I will need to take over this world. I allowed you to live.” Mikeli pounded

his chest. "I gave her to you to shape and teach in our ways. I had hoped that you would help me. However, since Idris Eyad has filled your head with so many lies, I will have no choice but to eliminate you, too."

Lazarus' eyes turned first a bright shade of gold, then crimson. His fangs grew so long that the razor-sharp tips nicked his chin. He stared at the man in front of him, seeing not his creator, but an enemy. Idris had always been a father and mentor to him. He would never turn his back on the man he owed his life to.

"I'd like to see you try," Lazarus said through his fangs.

The councilman returned his steely gaze with one of his own.

"Tell me, Lazarus. Does Nella like to be fucked from the front or from the back? I just want to know so that I can erase all trace of you from her soul."

Anger and rage collided like an atom bomb within Lazarus. His blood passed the boiling point as the muscles in his arms bulged. With a yell, Lazarus charged toward Mikeli.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

The door splintered upon impact. Both Nella and Malaika screamed as two bodies flew through the space where the door used to stand. With a thud, two men landed against the marble floor. The women watched in horror as the men engaged in immortal combat. As one pulled away to punch the other in the abdomen, Nella realized the combatants were Lazarus and Mikeli.

She smiled, but it soon faded as Lazarus flew across the room behind one of Mikeli's punches and slammed into the far wall. He couldn't lose to Mikeli, and she wouldn't allow that to happen. She'd help him just as he'd helped her.

"Lazarus," she yelled.

He glanced at her briefly before rolling to his left to avoid another of Mikeli's blows. She pulled against the ties on her wrists. They seem to be getting tighter instead of loosening.

"Fuck!" she cursed, then remembered the angel lying next to her. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I'd curse, too, if I could."

"We have to do something. Can you get yours loose?"

Malaika paused to test her bounds. She shook her head. "They ain't budging."

"Crap!"

"You and Idris are so much alike," Mikeli growled, his voice penetrating her thoughts and distracting her. "So ungrateful for what you have."

She watched in horror as he grabbed Lazarus' collar and backhanded him across his cheek. She gasped as blue blood spilled from Lazarus' lips. How was she going to save him? Lazarus fought as Mikeli gripped him around his throat. Nella closed her eyes but opened them when she heard the councilman speak.

"You could've been my greatest creation. If you had just sided with me, you could've been my Adam. Instead, you will die."

Mikeli lifted Lazarus above his head and flung him across the room as if he were a rag doll. He stomped his foot on Lazarus' abdomen. Nella smelled his blood curdling from the blow and closed her eyes. She couldn't continue to watch the man she loved die.

"Instead of killing you, maybe I should make you watch. That, I think, would be a fate worse than death."

Her eyes locked with those of Lazarus. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she turned her head away, and her heart broke as she listened to him dry heave

against the cold marble floor. She still didn't know a lot about this lifestyle, but she knew that Lazarus had to defeat Mikeli somehow, for some reason.

"We have to help him," Malaika whispered again.

Mikeli picked Lazarus up by his throat and dropped him to the ground. Nella cringed. She could hear bones break as he hit the floor. Mikeli turned to look at Nella and licked his lips. His eyes were completely red, and she shivered. Her hip brushed against Malaika's. Suddenly, she remembered something her mother told her long ago. Whenever she was in the face of something evil, she needed to pray and pray hard. God would always hear her. He always listened to his angels, and she was lying next to an angel.

"Pray," Nella whispered.

"What?"

"Pray. You're an angel. My mother was a slayer. We have to pray; it's our only hope."

"I...I can't remember any."

Mikeli was advancing on them. If they didn't hurry, who knew what fate lay in store for them. She inched as close to the angel as she could. If two people were in agreement when they prayed...

"The Lord's Prayer. You have to remember that one. Even I still remember it."

Together, they closed their eyes and recited the prayer. Nella's heart slammed against her ribcage. Despite the shards of electricity that coursed painfully through her body when she said the sacred words, she prayed to save her man. She opened her eyes just enough to peak around the room. Her eyes widened in amazement when Lazarus staggered to his feet behind Mikeli.

"Stop!" the councilman yelled at them. "Not in my chambers!"

The walls shook as he rushed toward them. The ropes began to loosen. She worked to free one wrist, then the other. Her lips moved more rapidly. When her wrists were free, she worked on the angel as Mikeli advanced on them.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

Lying in a heap on the cold marble floor, Lazarus could have sworn that he was dreaming. He couldn't have just heard the voice of an angel praying through his broken eardrum. Had he really seen brilliant gold and violet lights swirling around this dark place?

He struggled to open the eye that wasn't swollen shut and succeeded in time to see Mikeli cover his ears. Nella and the woman next to her had their foreheads pressed together. Their lips were moving in a fast and furious pace. They were, indeed, reciting a prayer. Yet instead of killing him, the electricity from the sacred words energized him.

With the last bit of strength he possessed, Lazarus climbed to his knees.

"Stop it!" Mikeli bellowed.

The councilman flung a chair at the two women. Lazarus watched in amazement as the chair hit an invisible shield that unexpectedly surrounded the women and shattered. He crawled on his belly, inching closer to where Mikeli sank to his knees.

He didn't care what that man claimed; he wasn't his father. Yes, Mikeli may have bitten him. Yes, he'd turned him into the mess that he was, but he'd never

acknowledge him as anything more than a fang donor. Mikeli turned in time to see Lazarus crawling toward him. When he thrust out his leg to kick him, Lazarus grabbed his shin and twisted it, slamming the councilman to the ground. At the same time, he finally received Javier's signal. It was on.

"I am proud to be like Idris," Lazarus said as he punched Mikeli in this abdomen.

He slammed his fist into the councilman's nose, breaking it, then, grabbed Mikeli's head and struck it repeatedly against the marble floor. The marble cracked as indigo blood spilled against the pristine white rock.

"He didn't leave me to fend for myself and die in the street like a stray dog. He took care of me. He loved me as though I were his. Yeah, you created me, motherfucker, but that's all you did."

When Mikeli went limp in his arms, he pulled the dagger Javier had given him from his back pocket and thrust it into Mikeli's chest. This was a special dagger. Specifically made to kill vampires and ensure that they'd never return from the dead. To be sure, Lazarus withdrew the blade and sliced through the councilman's neck to behead him. Dropping the severed head on the ground, Lazarus turned away as the body exploded into ashes. Exhausted, Lazarus

collapsed onto the ground. He was dying now. His breath was labored. Every bone in his body ached.

Then again, since he'd been turned, he was never really alive.

Lazarus sipped in slow puffs of air, knowing he was slowly slipping away. He was floating, dreamlike, toward that ring of fire in the ground. At least his soul didn't have to travel far to reach Hell as he was already there. He chuckled at the irony, realizing he was delirious from the loss of blood and the pain of his broken bones. Suddenly, he felt a soft hand on the center of his chest that caused him to wince. His body was lifted slightly. The scent of warm blood drifted into his nostrils, and his mouth filled with saliva.

"Do it," an angelic voice commanded him. "You'll die without my blood."

He nuzzled her neck as she lifted him higher toward the sweet skin. His eyes were now swollen completely shut, so he was unable to view his target, and his strike was clumsy as he slipped out of consciousness once more.

Her strong arms cradled him against her breast like a nursing baby. He heard her nails scrape against the tight skin around her neck, tearing it open so that her crimson blood dripped onto his lips. As he licked them, he blindly followed the scent to the open

wound. His lips clamped around it as the sweet elixir flowed over his tongue.

“I won’t lose you,” the angel whispered against his temple. “I love you.”

Slowly, his bones knitted back together. Her blood flowed to the bruises and healed them. The swelling shrunk from around his eyelids. He opened one, peering up at the angel who had saved his life yet again. Nella smiled down at him, rocking him while he nursed at her neck. Her amber eyes were ablaze with so much love that he wanted to weep. He’d come to Hell to save her, but she was the one who saved him.

Lazarus pulled away from her neck and took her mouth. He wanted to give her back the life she’d given him. Her ruby blood dripped down her neck, and he moved his lips from her mouth to lick the wound at her neck and seal it.

That done, he returned his attention to her soft pout. Then he pulled her tongue into his mouth, suckled on it as he had her neck, while his hands entwined in the soft ebony curls on her head. He loved this woman so much that he’d risked his life to kill a member of the Vampire Council for her honor. And he would do it again without even blinking.

The sound of someone clearing their throat from across the room drew his attention. The awareness and realization that they were still in Hell,

still in Mikeli's chambers, came back to him. Yet he couldn't tear himself away from this woman's lips.

"Um, I hate to bust y'all's groove and stuff, but we really need to get out of here."

Nella tilted away from him. Lazarus glanced over her shoulder at the woman standing behind her, and his eyes widened. The woman was an angel. A true angel. That was why the prayer worked in Hell. Reading his thoughts, Nella nodded. He kissed her again. She'd prayed for him. They'd prayed for him. A vampire and an angel had *prayed* for *him*. In *Hell*.

"I'm sorry," he stammered, his voice still gravelly from fatigue.

"It's cool," the angel said. "It's nice to see two people in love. That's rare nowadays. Gives me hope that my boo-boo's out there, ya know."

Lazarus rose to his feet, and then helped Nella to hers. His legs were still shaky from the ordeal. Nella put her arms around his waist and draped his left arm over her shoulder. The angel did the same thing on the right.

"Do you know how to get out of here?" Nella asked.

He kissed her. The sound of her melodic voice flowed through him like a rebirth.

"Yeah," he said. "I know the way."

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

The wind began to pick up as dark clouds covered the night sky, and salt-scented air drifted over the roof from the Atlantic. Helen stared at the man she's once loved. Did she mean it? Would she really kill the man she loved as though he were a common vampire? And her daughter as well.

It sounded ridiculous, even to her own ears. Yet, she knew it was the truth. She was already on the run from both Heaven and Hell. Her daughter was gone, but her goal was to protect humanity first. No matter how many rules were in place or human donors there were in the world, the fact remained that these creatures were drinking human blood in order to live. And that was a sin.

"It seems we're at an impasse."

"It doesn't have to be," she whispered.

"Only if I abide by your wishes. What about me? Don't I have a say? This is my life."

As she hugged herself, she walked away from him. Suddenly, every range of emotion bubbled up within her as she replayed the images of his fangs in her daughter's throat. The conversation between him and the other vampires. She couldn't let him live.

Couldn't let him continue to lead her daughter down this road.

"I loved you, Idris. I had hoped that things could be different this time."

"They can, but you have to let go of your old life."

"As do you."

"What do you propose?"

She stared at the city's skyline that stretched out in front of her and prayed for her daughter. Hoped the young vamp would get to her daughter and save her.

"I don't know."

"You have to go back."

She looked at him. "Go back where? To Hell?"

He nodded. "You're an escapee. I'm sorry. I have to place you under arrest."

"What?"

"You killed my wife."

"In order to save you. I had to."

"Nonetheless, you have a lot of blood on your hands, and you must be held accountable."

She took a step back. "You'd do that to me?"

"I don't want to, but it's the law. It's the only way to ensure that others won't be murdered by your hand."

She snarled as the anger returned and leveled her blade at him. "You have some nerve to speak to me about blood on one's hands."

He took a step toward her, closing the distance between them. Placing a gentle finger on her blade, he moved it to the side. She flinched, feeling both his wrath and his love. "I'm a vampire. What am I supposed to eat?"

"There are other things that contain blood."

"But nothing sustains like human blood."

"You can change," she pleaded. "You can choose to be different."

"No," Idris said, shaking his head. "I can't. This is the fate I was dealt. This is the life I must live."

"And our daughter? You expect her to walk this path as well?"

"There's no alternative. She has already chosen."

He mentally replayed for Helen the scene on this very roof when her daughter agreed to take over his seat. Helen placed her hand over her mouth and watched in horror as Idris took Nella's neck and made her a Master vampire. She'd already played the scene over and over in her mind, but to see it from the beginning, from her daughter's perspective, was even more unsettling.

"No," Helen whispered.

“Let’s continue this inside.” He looked up at the raindrops. “It’s cold out here. Even for me.”

Idris turned to walk toward the door. How dare he turn his back on her in the middle of a conversation? How dare he turn her daughter into a master without talking to her first? She remembered the fantasy Nella had in their home. Remembered how her daughter wanted to scoop out that baby—her *friend’s* baby—from the mother’s warm womb and drain it cold.

Helen stared at Idris’ back. Something inside her snapped. This was all his fault. She should’ve never fallen for his lies to begin with. He’d probably never loved her.

She continued to watch him walk away and knew that as long as both he and her daughter were alive, the carnage would continue. Not on her watch.

From a remote place in her mind, Helen screamed. As if the scene were playing in slow motion, Idris turned. His eyes widened in surprise as the tip of her sword plunged into his chest. He clutched the wound and fell to his knees as indigo blood gushed over his hands. She raised the sword once more. The steel blade sliced through his neck, severing his head from the rest of his body. As the carcass dropped to the ground, she turned away, sending her gaze toward the view of the skyline.

Her eyes filled with tears, but she quickly extinguished them. She'd known this would come to pass one day. A slayer could never truly love a vampire. She stepped over his ashes and headed for the door.

One down, one to go.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

“No!” Nella screamed as she sunk to her knees in the dark, slime-covered tunnel.

They were only a few yards from the portal next to Javier’s office. She could smell the rain as it poured from the sky. As she slammed her fists into the dirt. Lazarus knelt and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, but she couldn’t feel his embrace. Her body went numb.

She had lost her father. And her mother was the one who’d killed him.

Nella screamed again. Lazarus pulled her to his chest and stroked her back. No. This couldn’t be happening. What was her mother thinking? She sobbed against Lazarus’ strong shoulder. She’d promised her father that she would avenge his death. But how, when it was by her mother’s hand?

“It’s gonna be okay, ma,” Lazarus whispered into the crown of her head.

“No, it’s not,” Nella yelled, pushing away from him and standing up. “She killed him! My own mother fucking killed my father. What the hell am I supposed to do now!”

“Oh, Jesus,” Malaika whispered.

“I’ll handle it, ma,” he said gently.

“No. I will. She will *not* get away with this.”

“Nella,” Lazarus said as he went to her and put his hands on her shoulders. “Listen to me. Yeah, it’s bad, but you can’t do what I think you’re going to do.”

She kissed him to stop him from changing her mind. Of course his heart was also breaking, but she needed to prove to herself that she could handle her new position. That she could take whatever life, or death, threw at her.

“I promised my father,” she whispered against his lips. “I always honor my promises.”

“I’m going with you.”

“No. I have to do this myself. I can’t hide behind you all the time. There are times you’re not going to be there, and I need to know that I can handle it when that happens.”

“I know, ma, but maybe now’s not the time.”

She placed her hand on the center of his chest. “I love you, but she’s my mother. Besides, you need to heal. You’re in no condition to go with me.”

Indecision was etched on his face. Finally he nodded. “Call me if you need me, ma. I’ll be there before you blink.”

She kissed him one last time. Then she turned and ran in the opposite direction. With no idea where she was going, she let her instincts lead her. Dark beings clawed at her limbs as she dashed through the

dark tunnels. Her fangs ripped through her gums in anger.

Was it not enough that her mother kept her locked in her bedroom for most of her life? That she never allowed Nella to go out, to have fun and discover the world around her. Was it not enough that she kept her father from her? That she never told her daughter she would turn into a vampire at the age of twenty-one.

And now, on top of it all, she'd killed her father for no reason.

Nella picked up speed as she exited the portal in the alley across from her childhood home. Despite the rain, she smelled her mother in the house. She charged across the street, narrowly avoiding the paths of two cars. Her eyes turned a hot shade of crimson, bathing everything in shades of red as she reached for the doorknob.

She and the old woman needed to talk.

CHAPTER SIXTY

Helen knew her daughter would come, and she was waiting for her. She went home. If she was going to reunite with Nella, she wanted it to be on home turf. Idris' death would register within her daughter instantly and cause her to seek out his killer. Helen sat on the sofa with her eyes closed, and slowly inhaled and exhaled. The room smelled like sea salt and peaches. Her damp t-shirt clung to her torso, but she wouldn't move. She'd remain patient and let the enemy come to her.

The front door exploded, but Helen didn't flinch. She continued her deep breathing exercises, something that she was trained to do in her previous life. Nella's angry footsteps filled the hall, and she could feel her daughter hover over her, could sense the rage that roared inside Nella like the tide. Helen imagined that her daughter's crimson eyes were narrowed at her, almost burning a hole in her forehead.

"I've missed you," Helen spoke. Her voice was just above a whisper.

"You...bitch!"

At this, Helen opened her eyes. She stared at the female vampire in front of her. Her clothes were

covered in dirt and blood. Her long curls hung wild about her shoulders, while her fangs dripped with saliva. Her hands were curled into fists.

This wasn't her daughter, she reminded herself. The monster standing before her was made by Idris, not her. Her daughter would never agree to this lifestyle or allow another to feast at her neck like a common vampire. Her daughter would always heed her mother, no matter what the circumstances.

Maybe she wasn't giving her daughter enough credit. Maybe this female vampire had orchestrated all of this just so that boyfriend of hers could finally gain the throne. That made more sense.

"Is that any way to talk to your mother?"

"Why did you kill him?"

She really didn't have an answer. While she walked home from Idris' lair, she'd repeatedly asked herself this question. Now, her hands trembled. She was sorry, but she had to get her daughter away from him by any means necessary.

"It was an accident."

"You don't accidentally behead someone."

"I snapped," she admitted. "We were talking and then...I'm sorry."

"It's too late to apologize."

As tears streamed down her daughter's face, Helen's heart dropped. She was remorseful. Until

now, she hadn't considered how her actions would affect her daughter. Did she assume Nella would side with her simply because she was her mother?

"What am I supposed to do, Mom?"

"We can leave. We'll go to Jamaica. My family's homestead is still there. I'll train you to be a slayer. We will..."

The slight movement of her daughter's head caused her to stop talking. Her daughter crossed her arms over her chest as she stared at her.

"You don't get it. You killed my father. You killed four other vampires. You killed an angel and a hunter. The council was willing to work with you, but now..."

"I don't care what type of deal they offered. I am through making deals with vampires, and I will not go back."

Sighing, her daughter sat next to her and took her hand. Nella's heartfelt gesture caused Helen to weep. Idris was right. Nella was an amazing woman. Why hadn't she seen it before? If she could rewind the clock, bring him back, she would.

"Mom," Nella began softly. "You're going to make it worse by running. And I can't in good conscience pretend that I don't know where you are."

"I don't expect you to. That's not how I raised you." Helen used her free hand to wipe her eyes. "This is my burden to carry."

"I also can't let you go."

It was her daughter's turn to cry. Helen wrapped her arms around Nella and pulled her to her chest. Burying her curls in her daughter's hair, she inhaled Nella's sweet scent. Her fresh tears mixed with the strands of her daughter's hair.

"I was so scared," Nella whispered. "I was so worried about you."

"I will be fine."

"I know you will. But what about me? Dad was going to train me today..."

This news angered Helen. Releasing Nella, she abruptly stood and strode to the window. "He was an abomination. He feasted on blood. He killed innocent beings, and he was going to teach you to do the very same thing."

"He didn't force this on me. Technically, you did, Mom. And I didn't choose this. It's what I am."

"I didn't raise you to be this way."

"You didn't raise me at all," Nella said bitterly. "You kept me a prisoner in this house. I had a right to know what I could become."

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to pick him over me."

“It happened anyway.”

Helen pressed the palms of her hands together in prayer to stop herself from slapping her daughter. She opened her mouth to reply but closed it. How could one argue with the truth?

“I came here out of a promise to Dad,” Nella said softly as tears streamed down her cheeks. “But, I can’t bring myself to do it. Despite everything, I still love you.”

“I prayed, daily,” Nella continued. “That you’d be okay. That you’d survive Hell. I hate that I have to send you back there.”

Helen turned, her eyes narrowed at Nella.

“What?”

“It’s the law,” Nella said. “I have to turn you in so you can stand trial for assassinating my father. If I kill you, even though you’re a fugitive, my powers will be revoked and my territory will be rescinded.”

“You chose your vampire ways over your mother?”

Nella looked away. “I have to. It’s the law.”

Enraged, she stalked toward Nella. Her daughter rose from the sofa. Instead of backing down, she raised her chin and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I killed him to help you,” Helen began. “I killed Idris to prevent innocent beings from becoming food.

I did it so that you no longer had to be under his spell. I do not want my daughter feeding on blood for the rest of her life.”

“It’s too late.”

Helen shook her head. “It’s never too late.”

When Nella moved to the center of the floor, preparing to call the guards, Helen wheeled on her daughter. She called her sword to her hands and leveled the blade at her daughter’s throat. With her foot, she pressed a button in the floor that was hidden beneath the carpet. Bars dropped from the ceiling and clamped around her daughter to form a cage. She’d built the cell long ago, hoping she’d never have to use it, but keeping it just in case.

“Since you are intent on being a vampire and choosing this evil lifestyle, I have no choice but to kill you.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

“What the fuck?!” Nella exclaimed.

A cage? When did her mother have time to build this? She’d never heard her nor smelled the metal being fused together. She fumed as she stared at her mother. Something was seriously wrong with that woman.

This wasn’t the same woman who’d raised her. Nella had heard her mother’s thoughts as she entered the house. How dare she accuse her of using Lazarus to kill Mikeli in order to give him the council throne! Not even she had that kind of power. Yet. Her eyes misted over. This was all her mother’s fault. She hadn’t created this situation, nor would she allow her mother to pin all her sins on her just so she could feel justified in her crimes.

She paced the tiny iron cage that took up half of the living room. Her mother glared at her from the other side of the bars, her arms folded across her chest and her sword strapped to her hip. Nella gripped the bars.

“You can’t do this. Dad’s dead because of you, not me. I was appointed a master before you killed him—remember?”

"That matters not," her mother said coolly. "My job is to cleanse this world of vampires like you. Those who turn dark and stalk the night like an animal."

"I'm not an animal!" Nella yelled, pounding her fists on the bars. "I'm a vampire! And I'm also human. You created me. You should know what I am."

Her mother sighed and clasped her hands behind her back. Nella didn't like the look in her mother's eyes. It was the same look she'd had when Nella had come home from Club Reign. Nella gripped the bars and stood as close to them as she could.

"Let. Me. Out."

Calmly, Helen shook her head. Nella snarled. She could feel the rage toward her mother rising from the pit of her stomach. Instead of calming herself, Nella let the anger fester inside of her. She sensed the indigo molecules of her vampire blood mixing with her human plasma. Her mother took a small step away from the cage. Her mother had no concept of what she could become now.

"I'm not that scared little girl you used to keep locked up in her room," Nella stated, her voice dropping two dangerous octaves. "You can't keep me locked in this cage forever."

"I don't plan to," Helen said.

"Then what are you going to do with me?"

“You don’t think I’m just going to let you go back on the street and eat people—daughter or not. I have principles to uphold. I’m a slayer. What kind of person would I be if I did that? ”

“I don’t eat people. Where are you getting this shit from?”

“I know what a vampire is. What a vampire does. You can no longer deny what you are.”

Nella stared at her mother, unsure whether to laugh or cry. Inside, her heart was breaking. Part of her still loved her mother, despite everything. The woman did give birth to her, sacrificed her soul in order to have her. Yet she wondered what had happened to make her mother act like this. Who had told her these lies about the vampire species? It had to be a trick. But who would do such a thing?

“All vampires must die,” her mother stated flatly. “Not just you.”

“What nonsense are you talking about now?”

“After I eliminate the master, it will be easy to exterminate the vampires of this city. The world doesn’t need or want you. I will save humanity from falling victim to you.”

Nella’s heart stopped. Her father was wrong. He took out the wrong monster. Her mother was more of a threat than Mikeli. If she ever got out of this cell, it

was now on her shoulders as master to deal with this new threat to her race.

“I won’t let you do this.”

“You have no choice.”

Her mother moved toward the doorway. “First, a cleansing ritual will be performed. Tea with leaves from the tusli plant and holy water. If that doesn’t work to extinguish the vampire within you, prayers and a bath of holy water. If none of that works, I will kill you and burn your body.”

“The hunters will find you before you can do any of it.”

“And I will kill them, too.”

Nella believed that her mother would. Her mother’s footsteps crunched against the carpet as she left the room. Nella quickly glanced around the cage. There had to be a way out. She jiggled the bars, but they wouldn’t move. Closing her eyes, she leaned her forehead against the cold steel in defeat. Tears slid down her cheeks.

Suddenly, she heard the bars behind her groan as if they were being forced apart. Opening her eyes, she turned and saw her father standing in front of her. Nella wept as Idris pulled the bars apart wide enough for her to slip through. She flung her arms around his neck, breathing in his familiar scent of blood and sandalwood.

“Even death can’t hold me.” He chuckled.

“But how?”

He placed his finger over her lips. “I will explain later. Right now, let’s go.”

He didn’t have to tell her twice. Nella took her father’s hand as he transported her to safety.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

When Helen returned and found her daughter gone, she dropped the mug of tea and the cross that she's been carrying. How could this be? How had her daughter escaped? She inhaled. Idris. Enraged, she placed her hands on her hips. She'd forgotten to burn his body. Had forgotten that he was truly immortal.

She sunk down to the sofa and placed her head in her hands. Now what? She couldn't go after her daughter. The hunters would anticipate this and be there to capture her. They'll be here at any minute, she realized.

Rising from the sofa, she ran to the bedroom and gathered as much as she could carry. She'd do as she said and go to Jamaica to gather herself. Then she'd raise an army and return to New York do as she'd promised: Exterminate the vampire race.

Nella immediately hugged her father when they touched down on the roof of his lair. As she sobbed against his shoulder, he telepathically explained everything. The plan to get Lazarus his much deserved council seat while providing her with the inheritance

she deserved. He told her that he was indeed immortal and that only two things could kill him: a slayer's blade and fire. Since her mother was no longer a slayer, her blade couldn't harm him. He'd known that when he'd formed his plan.

Her body trembled in his arms. "I was so scared. I didn't know what I was going to do without you."

"I just found you. You can't get rid of me that easily."

Smiling, she allowed him to hold her briefly at arm's length, before she closed the gap and laid her head on his chest.

"You can't tell anyone," her father urged.

"Laz..."

"He knows. As does Javier, but no one else can."

She nodded. "What are you going to do?"

"Take a much needed vacation. Maybe head to the Caribbean for a while. If you need me, I'll be close."

"I love you."

"I love you, too. Now, dry those eyes. You're a master, now."

Grinning, she leaned away from him and blotted her eyes with the red handkerchief that he gave her. He pressed his lips against her forehead, and then dissolved into mist. Behind his fading form, she saw

Lazarus standing under the awning. He limped toward her.

The cuts on his face had healed, but his bones would take longer to knit back together. Still, she knew she wouldn't be able to keep her hands off him.

"I wish I could've told you, ma, but you got a big mouth."

She laughed as he enclosed his arms around her. He kissed her passionately. His hands flowed down her spine to curve around her ass and pull her even closer.

Councilman Cole, she telepathically said. I like the sound of that.

So do I, Master Jackson.

She giggled. We should celebrate.

Yeah, we should, ma. And I know just how to do it. Wanna see?

He teleported them to his chambers and slowly began to remove her clothes, but was moving way too slow for her liking. She dissolved his clothes the vamp way. With a low hiss, she pushed him back on the bed and straddled his hips as her fangs lengthened.

"Yeah, I do."

EPilogue

At three AM, Nella stood on the top of the Empire State Building, watching her territory beneath her. Who would have thought a girl from Harlem would be Queen of New York? The first female master vampire in existence. She closed her eyes as the wind whipped around her and chuckled. How ironic was it that the one person who'd tried to keep her from her destiny, her mother, was the one person who'd helped her obtain it? After her mother killed her father in a fit of rage, Nella, as his only heir, inherited his throne and all the power that went with it.

Nella should have been in bed, but she couldn't sleep. Tomorrow was a big day. The start of her new life as a master. She didn't want to worry Lazarus by sitting in his chair all night, so she came here to think. Plus, she wanted to try out her new powers.

Reaching up, she brushed her thick dark hair from her eyes. She looked south toward Harlem, her former home. As much as her heart longed for it, she could never go home again. That was also her mother's doing. Her mother had vanished. The hunters had quizzed her about her mother's whereabouts, and she'd lied. Nella hoped to visit her old home one day but wasn't sure if that would be

wise. There were too many memories, both good and bad, that she'd rather not revisit. Glancing above her head, she decided to climb up to the roof for a better view. She walked to a corner, past the security guard who was watching the football game on his phone with his back to the window. Climbing onto the steel railing, she used the chain-link fence as a ladder to scale the side of the building.

She landed fluidly on the roof but gripped an antenna for support. Immediately, she crouched down as the winds whipped around her, threatening to blow her off the roof. Her leather coat billowed behind her as her heartbeat slowed to a crawl, and then stopped. Would she fully turn now, or would she forever be a hybrid? She was relieved Councilman Mikeli was gone. He was one less thing she had to worry about. Nella had promised her father she would avenge his death, but that wasn't an easy task when her mother was the one who'd killed him.

Then there was her man, Lazarus. She knelt on the cold concrete and smiled. Because he'd killed Mikeli, Lazarus was now the councilman for the East Coast territories, just as her father had promised. She inhaled. That was when his musky scent filled her nostrils. Rolling his scent over her taste buds like a drop of fine wine, she wondered how long he'd been watching her.

"I knew I'd find you here," he said, so low she almost didn't hear it.

"You know I come here to think."

"You think too much, ma. And you ask too many damn questions."

Her heart fluttered as she listened to his low, sensual chuckle. She turned to look at him. He who had risen from the dead, indeed. Lazarus casually leaned against an antenna, arms folded across his massive chest. The wind blew his long blond dreads around his shoulders like snakes. Clad in a simple leather jacket, jeans and a black silk shirt, he was breathtaking. She inhaled sharply and exhaled slowly.

"There's so much I don't know yet about being a vamp," she said sadly. "I wish he were still here to teach me."

"You'll learn, ma. I'll help you the best I can."

"I know. You have always been there for me. Thank you."

"Just doing my job, ma."

As she stood up, he smiled. After all they'd been through, she was amazed they'd made it this far. Even though he was her first, she'd never thought she would fall in love with him.

"I love you, too," he said, walking toward her.

Before Nella could breathe, she was in his arms. She had been in this position a thousand times. Had

kissed him a thousand times, but was still never prepared for the moment when his lips softly touched hers. Melting, she held on to his broad shoulders as the wind gusted around them and moaned softly. His hands moved beneath her coat to gently cup her hips as he pulled her to him. The kiss deepened, his tongue finding hers as the cloud above them opened up and rain poured around them.

Especially alive, but even dead, it was too dangerous to be up this high under these conditions. But instead of transporting them off the building to her lair on the other side of town, she broke away and looked up at him. Her gums gave way as her fangs lengthened. She backed away from him, her heels teetering on the edge of the roof, her eyes baiting him. *Right here, right now...*

How could he argue, she wondered, as he seized the lapels of her coat and roughly stripped her of it. She was a master, after all. The rain, the wind, the night was making them both stupid. He found her mouth once more, kissing her hard as he ran his hands down the length of her rain-slicked upper arms.

She moaned as he licked her throat. With the tip of his fang, he drew a line from the base of her throat to her jaw, but didn't pierce her skin. Sighing, she ripped his shirt down the middle. The buttons mixed with the rain as they showered around them. She

caressed his supple skin before sending his soaked shirt and jacket over the edge of the building. She seized his firm, dark nipples between her fingers.

He cupped her breasts through her silk camisole, his thumbs drawing circles around her already rigid nipples. Releasing her mouth, he pulled the wet material of her shirt over her head and tossed it off the side of the building.

“Maybe we should stop, ma,” he panted. “Get off this roof and go to bed before it gets too dangerous.”

“I thought you liked to live on the edge,” she teased as she flicked her tongue against his smooth abs.

“I do, ma,” he breathed. “But I don’t want to mess around and send us both hurdling to our deaths, feel me?”

Nella stopped. She pretended to ponder this as she strode away from him, before returning to his side. When their eyes met, she hooked her fingertips into the waistband of his jeans and, with a mischievous glance, dissolved them beneath her fingertips.

“I can’t think of a better way to die,” she purred, caressing the silky skin of his bare waist. “Can you?”

Lazarus yanked her to him and nuzzled her neck as she leaned against his solid frame, the icy rain pelting her skin like tiny pinpricks. She sighed when

he unfastened her jeans, dipping his finger beneath the waistband to touch her. She read his thought about removing her boots and jeans, but she beat him to it by stripping the vamp way. Lightning flashed around them, followed by the rumbling of thunder. He licked the rain-soaked path from her clit, over her abs, between the valley of her breasts and up her throat.

She wrapped her palm around his stiff manhood, stroking him as his tongue traced circles around her left nipple. Sparks showered around them when a bolt of lightning struck a nearby antenna. Standing, he carefully spun her on the slippery concrete so that her back faced him, and then bent her at the waist.

He entered her with such force that Nella was sure she saw stars. Or maybe it was embers from the antenna that the lightning once again struck. The palms of her hand accidentally brushed against the steel, sending shockwaves of electricity through her body. Unfazed, she arched against him as he drove his cock deep inside her core. She didn't want him to stop. Ever.

His hands drifted up her warm, wet torso to cup her breasts. They bounced gently in his hands. She moaned as he softly pinched her nipples, and he pulled her upright to pierce her throat with his fangs.

Calling out his name, she writhed against him as blood dripped from the wound down her breasts.

Anyone listening to the slow jams on WZXT at that moment would have heard the soft whispers and moans accenting the Alicia Keys song that was playing. Listeners would've heard the faint rumblings of bodies colliding as the sound of Nella and Lazarus in harmony with each other was picked up over the antenna they made love against. They would have heard Lazarus' bass-voice chant of "I love you" reverberate through the speakers. So low were these echoes, however, that any listeners would have to strain their ears to understand just exactly what they were hearing.

Turning, she wrapped her legs around his waist and quickly guided him back inside her. She knew he had forgotten about her strength. When she knocked back his jaw and swiftly took his throat, it caught him by surprise. Lazarus shuddered as he exploded inside her. His knees buckled, spilling them both onto the concrete roof. He grabbed the antenna with his left hand to keep them from sliding off. Electricity coursed through both of their bodies. As she siphoned blood from his neck, he pinned her body beneath his.

She struggled for breath as he rolled them both over onto his back, still holding on to the antenna. He ran his hand down her slick back and looked up at the

black sky. It would be dawn in a matter of moments. If they didn't hurry, they would truly fry.

Nella heard his internal dialogue loud and clear. In the blink of his eye, they were lying in their soft bed. Candlelight crackled from the nightstand while the scent of their love filled the air. The black goose-down comforter was pulled up to their chins. She nestled in the crook of his arm. Her heart resumed beating. Sighing with content, he let go of the headboard and wrapped that arm around her waist.

"I'm not that crazy," she murmured against his chest, answering his unspoken thought.

"I know." He chuckled, his eyes no longer able to stay open. "But it would've been a hell of a way to die."

****RWS****

SNEAK PEEK AT BOOK TWO: *REQUIEM*

Nella's eyes snapped open. She had just enough time to roll to her right and kick the attacker's legs out from underneath them. The attacker fell to the mattress with a thud, while the wooden stake fell to the ground. Nella crawled onto the floor and scrambled under the bed, hoping the king-sized shelter would give her enough time to think. When a stake pierced the mattress and almost struck her in the back, Nella realized that she was wrong and rolled onto her back to avoid another strike. She then dematerialized only to reappear on top of the seven-foot-high canopy.

"Mom?" she whispered as she glanced down into the eyes of her mother.

Nella looked at the empty torn mattress. Where was Lazarus? It was forty-five minutes until sunset. Where could he be? She watched her mother stalk around the bed, looking for a way to get up to her. Was this crazy woman really going to climb up the ancient oak posts? She almost laughed until she saw the wild look in her mother's eyes. How did she get in here? Nella slapped her forehead. In the chaos, she had forgotten to ban her mother from her lair.

"Mom," Nella said. "What are you doing here?"

"I 'm here to correct my mistake," her mother answered forcefully, still looking for a way to get to her.

Nella jumped off of the canopy and stood at the opposite side of the room. Oh, so now her mother thought she was a mistake. Nella put her hands on her hips.

"What are you talking about?"

In a lithe move, Helen jumped from the platform bed onto the floor. Nella almost took a step back. She had never seen her mother look as confused, hurt and angry as she was now. But Nella also knew all of these emotions are misguided. Her mother's normally neat ponytail flew wildly around her shoulders. Her fitted white tank top and blue jeans framed her athletic body. Her mother reach for another stake from her belt but didn't back up.

"You are a disgrace," her mother said sadly. "You are immoral, unholy. I will not allow you to continue to walk this earth. I will send you to Hell where you belong."

Nella shuddered. Who was this person in front of her? This wasn't her mother.

"You can't kill me," Nella said, circling her mother.

Her mother smiled. "Yes, I can. I have a list of grievances."

Nella crossed her arms over her chest and cocked her head to the side. "From who?"

"That doesn't matter," Helen said, walking toward her.

"But...I'm your daughter," Nella said, fighting tears.

"No." Helen shook her head sadly. "You *were* my daughter."

Helen swung the stake. Nella jumped back, dissolving behind the wall into the crawlspace. She sprinted in the darkness toward the door. The drywall in front of her shattered behind one of her mother's blows, and the force knocked Nella backward. Smashing through the wall, she landed on her back in the living room. With a groan, she rolled to her knees and crawled toward the opposite side of the room, trying to keep the overstuffed leather sofa between them. She watched her mother walk through the space in the wall.

"So many lives lost because of you," her mother said as she straddled Nella's torso and raised the stake over her head.

Nella narrowed her eyes at the woman standing over her. What was her mother talking about? She placed another call to Lazarus but got no answer. Where was he?

"You're the liar, mother," Nella hissed.

Helen stopped lowering the stake and looked at her daughter with surprise. Nella scrambled away, crawling on her back, once again putting the sofa between them. She used the small break to cover her nude body with a black leather halter, a pair of matching pants and boots.

“I never took a life,” Nella stood, growling. “How dare you come into my home and accuse me of lies!”

Her mother backed up. Nella flung her arms to the side and held her head back, offering her throat for inspection.

“Smell me!” she bellowed. “You know I’m telling the truth!”

“The truth coming from a vampire.” Helen snickered. “That is not possible.”

She circled her. Nella straightened and stared at her mother. Her eyes burned from tears and rage. She was tired. Tired of twenty-one years of this bullshit. Tired of bargaining for her mother to spare her life. This would end tonight. Her eyes bathed her view in shades of crimson as she circled the couch, backing her mother toward the doorway.

“You want to talk lies,” Nella growled. “Then let’s chat.”

The calmness in her voice frightened even her as she watched her mother tremble. There was so much

she needed to get off her chest. If her mother wanted to go there, then it was on.

“You want to talk about taking a life? How about that angel you sacrificed to make my father human for one night?”

Helen’s eyes widened in horror, and she moved quickly behind the sofa. Nella’s rage exploded it, sending wood and foam to shower them like rain.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh?” Nella turned her back on her mother, sending her gaze out the window toward the setting sun. “I know you’re not a slayer.”

Helen backed away, covering her mouth with her hand.

“I know,” Nella hissed, turning quickly and walking toward her mother, “that you were stripped of that title when what you did was discovered by Heaven.”

“You are lying!”

“There’s more blood on your hands, Mother, than mine.”

She backed her mother into the foyer, past her staff that huddled next to the front doors. Flames shot from under Nella’s feet. Each step burned a path to the dining-room doors. She backed her mother inside and slammed the heavy iron doors behind her, sealing them and the ones on the opposite side of the

room. Her mother dashed to the end of the huge glass table.

“I’ve done no such thing,” Helen said.

“Really?” Nella placed her hands on her hips. “Then why is the council offering the DC territory for your head?”

Helen recoiled, and Nella smiled. She knew she had her. If there were orders for Nella’s death, she would have known about it. Her mother had forgotten that when she killed Nella’s father, he’d just been elected vice president. All the knowledge Idris gained from that brief seat was transferred to Nella.

Nella studied her nails. “The Potomac looks amazing in the moonlight. A lair would be perfect there.”

“You wouldn’t,” Helen whispered. “I’m your mother.”

“No.” Nella’s eyes glowed with rage. “You *were* my mother!”

She watched Helen tremble before she produced a sword from her side. Nella shook her head. The woman was playing the slayer role right until the end. A part of her almost felt sorry for her mother. Almost. When her mother closed her eyes, her lips moving, Nella frowned. She had the nerve to be praying in her lair. Nella chuckled, knowing those prayers would not be answered. God had turned his back on her, too.

“You are a monster,” her mother stated, taking a battle stance against her. “You prey on human blood. I will not listen to your lies any longer.”

With a scream, Nella slammed her hand against the glass dining room table. It shattered, the glass spilling against the marble floor, and a ring of fire surrounded the room. Through blood-red eyes, Nella looked up at her mother. She saw the tip of the sword her mother held waver.

“I am so sick of this bullshit!” Nella yelled.

The dining room windows exploded, letting the black silk curtains billow in the breeze. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about! You’re not a slayer. You’re not even fit to be my mother!”

Her mother relaxed her stance, and then caught herself. She circled Nella, avoiding the flames that now shot up toward the ceiling, as she narrowed her eyes at her daughter.

“I would rather sacrifice you than lose another soul to feed your hunger.”

By law, she couldn’t kill her mother, no matter how much wrong the woman had done. She could only arrest her and turn her over to the council for further action. But as her mother stood there, challenging her to battle, something in her snapped. If her mother died in battle, that would be self-defense, right?

Plus, there was the small matter of avenging her father's death.

Nella smiled and growled.

"Then bring it, Mother."

To Be Continued...

R.W. SHANNON

R.W. Shannon is a native of the East Coast but spent six years in the desert before returning to her place of birth. She became a librarian so that she can walk around with her nose in a book without ridicule and also for the free books. When she's not belly dancing or getting another tattoo, she can be found in the kitchen of her mother's house until she gets her own.

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