

## BETRAYED

(Book #3 in the Vampire Journals)

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Also by Morgan Rice

TURNED (Book #1 in the Vampire Journals)

LOVED (Book #2 in the Vampire Journals)

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### FACT:

60 miles north of Manhattan, there exists a small, obscure island in the Hudson River on which sits a crumbling Scottish castle. This island is known as Pollepel, and was named after a young girl, Polly, who hundreds of years ago, was stranded on the ice of the Hudson and ended up on its shores.

Legend has it she was romantically rescued by her sweetheart, who married her on the island.

"Threescore and ten I can remember well,

Within the volume of which time I have seen

Hours dreadful and things strange; but this sore night

Hath trifled former knowings."

--William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

## ONE

*Pollepel Island, Hudson River, New York*

*(Present Day)*

"Caitlin?" came the soft voice. "Caitlin?"

Caitlin Paine heard the voice, and struggled to open her eyes. They were so heavy, though; no matter how much she tried, she could barely lift them. Finally, she managed to pry them open, just for a brief second, to see where the voice was coming from.

Caleb.

He was kneeling by her side, holding her hand in both of his, concern etched across his face.

"Caitlin?" he asked again.

She tried to get her bearings, to lift the immense cobwebs from her head. Where was she? She could see enough to see that this room was bare, made of stone. It was nighttime, and a large window let in the light of a full moon. Stone floors, stone walls, an arched, stone ceiling. The stone looked smooth and ancient. Was she in a medieval cloister?

Aside from the moonlight, the room was lit only by a small torch, fixed to the far wall, and not giving off much light. It was too dark to see more.

She tried to focus on Caleb's face, so close, only a foot away, staring at her hopefully. His eyes seemed to light up, as he squeezed her hand tighter. His hands felt warm. Hers were so cold. She couldn't feel the life in them.

Despite her efforts, Caitlin couldn't hold her eyes open a second longer. They were just too heavy. She felt... *sick* was not the word. She felt... *heavy*. She felt free-floating, as if she were in limbo, stuck between two worlds. She didn't feel connected to her body, didn't feel like a part of the earth anymore. But she didn't feel dead, either. She felt as if she were trying to awaken from a very, very deep sleep.

She struggled to remember. Boston...the King's Chapel...the sword. And then...getting stabbed. Lying there, dying. And Caleb at her side. And then...his fangs. Approaching her.

Caitlin felt a dull, throbbing pain on the side of her throat. It must have been from where she'd been bit. She had asked for it—had *pleaded* for it.

But the way she felt now, she was not sure she should have. She didn't feel right. She felt an icy, cold blood racing through her veins. She felt as if she had died, but had not taken the next step. As if she were stuck.

More than anything, she felt pain. A dull, throbbing pain in her lower right side, and in her stomach. It must be from where she'd been stabbed.

"What you are going through is normal," Caleb said softly. "Don't be afraid. We all go through it when we are first turned. It will get better. I promise you. The pain will go away."

She wanted to smile, to reach up and caress his face. The sound of his voice made everything perfect in the world. It made all of this worth it. She would be with him forever, now, and that gave her hope.

But she was too tired. Her body was not responding to what her brain wanted. She couldn't get her lips to smile, and she couldn't summon the strength to lift her hand. She felt herself drifting back into sleep...

Suddenly, her thoughts shifted again, jolting her awake. The Sword...it was lying there, and then...stolen. Who had it now?

And then she remembered her brother, Sam. Unconscious. Then, taken away by that vampire. What had happened to him? Was he safe? And Caleb. Why was he here? He should be pursuing the Sword. Stopping them. Was he here only for her sake? Was he sacrificing it all to stay at her side? Question after question raced through her mind. She summoned every ounce of strength she had, and opened her lips just the slightest bit. "The Sword," she managed to say, her throat so dry it hurt to speak. "You must go..." she added. "You must save..."

"Shhh," Caleb said. "Just rest."

She wanted to say more. So much more. She wanted to tell him how much she loved him. How grateful she was. How she hoped that he would never leave her side.

But it would have to wait. A new wave of fuzziness washed over her, and her lips simply would not open again. Despite herself, she found herself sinking, sinking, reeling back into the blackness, back into her state of immortal sleep.

## TWO

As Kyle flew over northern Manhattan, he had never felt so elated. Behind him flew Sergei, his obedient soldier, and behind him, hundreds of vampires that had joined them along the way. Kyle now held the fabled Sword in his belt, and nothing more need be said. Malevolent vampires all along the East Coast had already heard the news, and as Kyle flew over, many covens were eager to join him. They knew war was coming, and Kyle's reputation preceded him. These mercenary vampires knew that, wherever he was going, he would be up to no good. And they wanted to be a part of it.

Kyle felt the thrill of the growing army behind him, and felt another surge of confidence as he flew over the city. Sergei had done well in grabbing the Sword and stabbing that girl, Caitlin. In fact, Kyle had been surprised. He'd never imagined Sergei had it in him. He had underestimated him, and as a reward, he'd decided to keep him alive, realizing that he'd make a good sidekick. He was especially impressed that Sergei had dutifully handed him the Sword immediately after leaving the King's Chapel. Yes, Sergei knew his place. If he kept this up, Kyle might even promote him, might even give him a small legion of his own. Kyle hated most things about most people, but the one thing he appreciated was loyalty.

Especially after what his people, the Blacktide Coven, had done to him. After thousands of years of loyalty, Rexius, their supreme leader, had cast Kyle out as if he were nothing, as if his thousands of years of service had meant nothing. All for one little mistake. It was unthinkable.

Kyle's plan had worked perfectly. Now he wielded the Sword, and nothing—absolutely nothing—would get in his way. War with the human race, and with the other vampire races, would soon be his to wage.

As Kyle continued downtown, now over Harlem, he dipped closer to the ground, using his vampire vision to zoom in on the details below. He grinned wider.

His spreading of the Bubonic Plague has really worked. Pandemonium and chaos ruled. Those pathetic little humans were scrambling every which way, racing their cars the wrong way down one-way streets, arguing with each other, looting stores. He could see that most humans were covered in the horrible sores indicative of the plague. He could also see the corpses, already piled high on nearly every street corner. It was Armageddon down there. And nothing made him happier.

It would only be a matter of days until every human in the city fell. At that point, Kyle and his men could easily wipe out the rest of them. They would feed as they had never fed before. And then would enslave the rest of the human race.

The only small obstacle that remained in his way was the White Coven, those pathetic vampires who fed only on animals, who thought they were better than everyone else. Yes, they would try. But they would be no match for the Sword. When he finished with the humans, he would wipe them out next.

First, and most importantly, he would take back his place in his own coven. And he would do it brutally. Rexius had made a grave mistake in punishing him, Kyle thought, as he reached up and felt the hardening scars all along the side of his face, his horrible fate, his punishment for letting Caitlin slip away. Rexius would pay for each and every one of Kyle's scars. Rexius was powerful, but now, with the Sword, Kyle's power was even greater. Kyle would not rest until Rexius lay dead, at his own hand, and until he himself was declared the new supreme leader.

Kyle smiled wide at the thought. Supreme leader. After all these thousands of years. It was what he deserved. It was his destiny.

Kyle and his men flew and flew, over Central Park, over Midtown, over Union Square, over Greenwich Village...and finally, they reached City Hall Park.

Kyle descended gracefully, landing on his feet, and the flock of now hundreds of vampires landed behind him. Kyle's army had grown beyond belief. What a way to return, he thought.

Kyle was about to head to the gates of City Hall, to crash down its door and begin his war, when he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. Something that bothered him.

Kyle used his vision to zoom in over several blocks, and to look closely at the pandemonium in front of the Brooklyn Bridge. Hundreds of cars were stuck in traffic, jammed up against each other, backlogged in front of the bridge. All wanting to get out.

But the bridge was cordoned off. Blocking the way were several military tanks and trucks, on top of which sat dozens of soldiers, machine guns aimed at the crowd. Clearly, no humans were being allowed off the island of Manhattan. The military must not have wanted the plague to spread. They had probably locked down all the bridges and tunnels.

On the one hand, that was exactly what Kyle had wanted: it made life easier, since all the humans would be trapped in Manhattan, and he could kill them all more easily.

But on the other hand, now that he actually saw it with his own eyes, it made his stomach turn.

He hated authority—of any kind. And that included the military. He almost sympathized with the masses of humans, clamoring to get off the island. They were being stopped by authority figures.

Kyle's veins burned at the thought.

At the same time, a new idea came to him. Why not let some humans off the island? In fact, that would only serve his purpose. They would spread the plague further. To Brooklyn, to start. Yes, that could be very convenient indeed.

Kyle suddenly lifted back into the air, flying towards the base of the Brooklyn Bridge. Immediately, the hundreds of vampires followed him, on his heels. Good, he thought. They were loyal and obedient, and they didn't ask questions. This would be a very convenient army indeed.

Kyle landed at the base of the Brooklyn Bridge, setting down on the hood of a car, and the hundreds of vampires landed on cars behind him, the sound of their boots click-clacking as they touched down. Car horns suddenly flared up. It seemed the humans didn't like people walking on their cars.

A new rage washed over Kyle, as he thought of the ingratitude of these pathetic humans, blaring their horns as he had come to help them.

Standing on the hood of a Saab SUV, blaring its horn at him, he stopped. He had been about to jump down, to deal with the military, but instead, he slowly turned and looked down through the windshield, at the family glaring up at him.

It was a typical preppy family. In the front seat sat the husband and wife, 40s, and behind them, their two kids. The husband rolled down his window, and reached out and shook his fist at Kyle.

"Get the fuck off of my hood!" the man screamed.

Kyle, standing on the hood, got down on one knee, reached back, and thrust his fist through the windshield. He grabbed the man by his Polo collar, and in one motion, yanked him towards him, right through the windshield. Glass shattered everywhere, as the screams of the man's wife and children lit up the night.

Kyle stood on the hood, grinning, lifting the man, holding him up high over his head.

The man was whimpering and crying, head covered in blood from the shattered glass.

Kyle reached back, and with a wide grin, tossed the man through the air like a paper airplane.

The man went flying, hundreds of feet, and landed somewhere back there in the traffic, on the hood of some other car. Dead, Kyle hoped.

Kyle got back to business. He jumped off the car, and trotted towards the huge tanks blocking the bridge. Behind him, he could feel his hundreds of soldiers following suit.

As Kyle approached, all of the soldiers tensed up. Several of them raised their machine guns and pointed them at him.

There was a perimeter of no cars or people a good hundred feet away from the tanks, one which no one seemed willing to cross.

But Kyle happily crossed the line, walking right into the open space, right towards the tank.

"Freeze!" a soldier yelled through a megaphone. "Do NOT come any further! We WILL shoot on sight!"

Kyle smiled wider as he kept marching, right towards the tank.

"I said FREEZE!" the soldier screamed again. "This is your LAST warning! There is a curfew in effect. We have orders to fire on anyone at night!"

Kyle grinned even wider.

"I own the night," he answered.

Kyle continued towards them, and suddenly, they opened fire. Dozens and dozens of soldiers fired their machine guns right at Kyle and his men.

Kyle felt the pain of all the bullets ricocheting off him. One after the other, they all bounced off his chest and arms and head and legs. They felt like raindrops, but stronger. He smiled at the thought of these pathetic human weapons.

Kyle saw the horrified expressions on the soldiers' faces, as they began to realize that he was unfazed. They clearly couldn't fathom how he was still walking. Or how any of his followers were, too.

But they didn't have time to react. Kyle walked right up to the closest tank, got under it, placed both hands under the treads, and with superhuman strength, lifted it way above his head. He walked several feet, carrying the tank above his head, and came to the railing of the bridge. Several soldiers, off balance, fell off the tank as he walked. But dozens of others clung to it, grabbing hold of the metal, trying to hold on at any cost.

Big mistake.

Kyle took three running steps, hoisted the tank back, and threw it for all he was worth.

The tank went flying through the air, dozens of feet, clearing the railing's edge.

It was airborne over the Brooklyn Bridge, plummeting down hundreds of feet towards the river.

The tank turned and turned, and soldiers screamed as they fell off of it, plummeting. It finally hit the water with a massive splash.

Suddenly, the traffic jam came to life. Without any hesitation, the anxious New Yorkers stepped on the gas, and their cars sped through the now-open lane onto the bridge. Within seconds, hundreds of cars were racing out of Manhattan. Kyle looked at their faces as they went, and could see that many were already infected with the plague.

Kyle grinned wide. This was going to be a beautiful night.

### THREE

Samantha watched the massive double doors open up before her, creaking as they went, and felt a pit in her stomach. She walked into her leader's chambers, accompanied by several vampire guards.

They were not restraining her—they would never dare—but they did accompany her closely, and the message was clear. She was still one of them, but she was under house arrest, at least until she'd had this meeting with Rexius. He summoned her as a soldier, but he was also summoning her as a prisoner.

The doors closed with a crash behind her, and she saw that the huge chamber was filled. She had not seen a turnout like this in years. There were hundreds of her fellow vampires in the room.

Clearly, they all wanted to watch, to know the news, what had happened with the Sword. How she had let it slip away.

Most of all, they likely wanted to see her punished. They knew that Rexius was an unforgiving leader, and that even the smallest mistake demanded punishment. A transgression of this magnitude would demand an extravagant punishment.

Samantha knew that. She was not trying to escape her fate. She had accepted a mission, and she had failed. She had found the Sword, yes, but she had also lost it. She had allowed Kyle and Sergei to steal it out from under her.

It all would have been perfect. She clearly remembered the Sword, sitting there, on the floor of the King's

Chapel, in the aisle, just feet from her grasp. She was only seconds away from having it, from fulfilling her mission, from being the hero of their covenant.

And then Kyle, and that awful sidekick of his, Sergei, had to come marching in, knocking her out, stealing it from her grasp. It was unfair. How could she have expected that?

And now, what was she? The villain. The one who let the Sword go. The one who failed the mission. Oh yes, there would be hell to pay. She was sure of that.

All she wanted now was for Sam to be safe. He had been knocked out, unconscious, and she had carried him away, had taken him all the way back here. She'd wanted him close. She wasn't ready to let him go, and she didn't know where else to bring him. She had snuck in, and had stored him safely, way underground, in an empty chamber in their covenant. No one had seen her, at least as far as she knew. He would be safe in there, away from the prying eyes of these vampires. She would report to Rexius, suffer her punishment, and afterwards, she would wait until daybreak, when everyone was asleep, and she would escape with Sam.

Of course, she couldn't just escape outright. She'd have to report back first, to suffer her punishment, or else her covenant would hunt her down, and she would be on the run for the rest of her life. Once she was punished, no one would pursue them. Then she could take Sam, and they could flee far from here, and settle down somewhere. Just the two of them.

She hadn't expected the boy, Sam, to grab hold of her feelings the way he had. When she thought of her priorities now, she thought of him first. She wanted to be with him. She *needed* to be with him. In fact, as crazy as it sounded, even to herself, she could no longer picture life without him. She was furious at herself. She did not know how she had let it reach this point. An infatuation with a teenage boy. Much less, a human. She hated herself for it. But it was what it was. There was no use trying to change the way she felt.

The thought of this gave her strength, as she slowly approached Rexius' throne, preparing for her sentence. She would undergo indescribable pain, she knew that, but the thought of Sam would keep her strong throughout it. She would have something to go back to. And Sam would be protected, spared from all of this. That was what made it all bearable.

But would he love her after she had undergone the punishment? If she knew Rexius, he would reserve the loric acid treatment for her, would scar her face as best as he possibly could. She may lose the best part of her looks afterwards. Would Sam still love her? She hoped that he would.

A hush descended over the chamber, as the hundreds of vampires edged in closer, eager to see the exchange. Samantha took several steps closer to Rexius, and got down on one knee, bowing her head.

Rexius, just feet away, stared down from his throne, his harsh, icy blue eyes piercing right through her. He stared at her for what felt like several minutes, although Samantha knew it was probably only seconds. She kept her head down. She knew better than to ever meet his gaze.

"So," Rexius began, his gravelly voice cutting through the air, "the chicken comes home to roost."

Several more minutes of silence followed, as he studied Samantha. She knew better than to try to explain herself in any way. She just kept her head bowed low.

"I sent you on a very simple mission," he continued. "After the failures of Kyle, I needed someone I could trust. My most valuable soldier. You had never let me down before, not in thousands of years," he said, staring. "But in this, this one simple mission, you have somehow managed to fail. And to fail miserably."

Samantha lowered her head again.

"So. Tell me exactly what happened to the Sword. Where is it?"

"My master," she began slowly, "I tracked down the girl. Caitlin. And Caleb. I found them both.

And I found the Sword. I even got Caitlin to release it. It was on the floor, just feet from my grasp.

In but a few seconds, it surely would have been in my grasp, for me to bring back to you."

Samantha swallowed.

"I could not have foreseen what happened next. I was surprised, attacked by Kyle—"

A loud murmur erupted throughout the room of vampires.

"Before I could grab the Sword," she continued, "Kyle had already taken it. He fled from the church, and there was nothing I could do. I tried to find him, but he was long gone. The Sword is now in his possession."

An even louder murmur spread throughout the room. The anxiety in the room was palpable.

"SILENCE!" screamed a voice.

Slowly, the murmur died down.

"So," Rexius began, "after all that, you let Kyle take the Sword. You practically handed it to him."

Samantha knew better, but she couldn't contain herself. She *had* to say something in her defense.

"My master, there was nothing I could do—"

Rexius interrupted her by simply shaking his head. She dreaded that gesture. It meant bad things were to follow.

"Thanks to you, I must now prepare for two wars. This pathetic war with the humans, and now a war with Kyle."

A heavy silence blanketed the room, and Samantha felt her punishment was imminent. She was ready to accept it. She held fast in her mind the image of Sam, and the fact that they could not absolutely kill her. They would never do that. There would be a life after this, some kind of a life, and Sam would be in it.

"I have a very special punishment reserved for you I," Rexius said slowly, breaking into a slow grin.

Samantha heard the wide double doors open behind her, and she turned to see.

Her heart dropped.

There, being dragged in by two vampires, chained by feet and hands, was Sam.

They had found him.

He was gagged, and as much as he squirmed and tried to make a noise, he couldn't. His eyes opened wide in shock and fear. They dragged him to the side of the room, chains rattling, and held him firmly, forcing him to watch.

"It seems you have not only lost the Sword, but have also developed an affection for a human, despite every rule of our race," Rexius said. "Your punishment, Samantha, will be to watch suffer that which you hold dearest to you. I can sense that that which is dearest to you is not yourself. It is this boy. This pathetic, little, human boy. Very well," he said, leaning closer, grinning. "Then that is how you will be punished. We will put this boy through horrific pain."

Samantha's heart pounded in her chest. This was something she had not foreseen, and something she

could not let happen. At any cost.

She sprang into action, leaping in the direction of Sam's attendants. She managed to reach one, kicking him hard in the chest. He went flying backwards.

But before she could attack the other, several vampires were on her, grabbing her, pinning her down. She struggled with all she had, but there were just too many of them, and she could not match the strength of all those vampires at once.

She watched helplessly as several vampires dragged Sam forward, towards the center of the room. They positioned him on the spot—the exact spot reserved for those undergoing the high loric acid treatment. On a vampire, the punishment was indescribably painful. It scarred for life.

On a human, though, the pain would be incalculable, and the punishment meant a certain, horrific death. They were leading Sam to his execution. And they were forcing her to watch.

Rexius grinned even wider, as Sam was chained down on the spot. As Rexius nodded, one of the attendants tore the tape from his mouth.

Sam immediately looked for Samantha, fear in his eyes.

"Samantha!" he yelled. "Please! Save me!"

Samantha, despite herself, burst into tears. There was nothing, absolutely nothing she could do.

Six vampires rolled forward a huge, iron cauldron, bubbling and hissing, mounted at the top of a ladder. They put it in position, right over Sam's head.

Sam looked up at it.

And the last thing he saw was the liquid leaving the cauldron, bubbling and hissing, and heading right for his face.

#### FOUR

*Caitlin was running. The field of flowers climbed as high as her waist, and as she ran, she cut a path right through it. The sun, blood-red, sat as a huge ball on the horizon.*

*Standing with his back to the sun, on the horizon, was her father. Or at least, his silhouette. His features were unrecognizable, but she knew that it was him.*

*As Caitlin ran and ran, desperate to finally see him, to embrace him, the sun sank quickly, too quickly.*

*Everything happened too fast, and within seconds, the sun had disappeared completely.*

*She found herself running through the field in the middle of the night. Her father was still there, waiting.*

*She felt that he wanted her to run faster, that he wanted to embrace her. But her legs would only run so fast, and no matter how hard she tried, he seemed to just get further away.*

*As she ran, the moon suddenly rose over the horizon—a huge, blood-red moon, filling the entire sky.*

*Caitlin could see all the details on it, the indents, the craters. It was crystal clear. Her father stood, a silhouette against it, and as she tried to run even faster, it seemed as if she were running towards the very moon itself.*

*But it wasn't working. Suddenly, her legs and feet were not moving at all. She looked down, and saw that the flowers had twisted themselves around her ankles and legs, and were morphing into vines. They were so thick, and strong, soon she could not move at all.*

*As she watched, a huge snake slithered towards her, through the field. She tried to struggle, to get away, but she was helpless. All she could do was watch as it approached. As it got closer, it leapt into the air, lunging right for her throat. She turned and screamed, and felt its long fangs pierce her throat. The pain was horrific.*

Caitlin woke with a start, sitting upright in bed and breathing hard. She reached for her throat, and felt the two hardening scars. For a moment, she confused her dream with reality, and looked about the room for a snake. There was none.

She rubbed her throat. The wound still hurt, but not as much as it had in the dream. She breathed deeply.

Caitlin was covered in a cold sweat, her heart still pounding. She wiped her face and the sides of her temples, and could feel her cold, wet hair sticking to her. How long had it been since she'd bathed? Washed her hair? She couldn't remember. How long had she been lying there? And where, exactly, was she?

Caitlin looked all about the room. It was the same place she remembered from some time ago—

was it from a dream, or was she awake here at some point before? The room was entirely made of stone, and had one tall, arched window, through which she could see the night sky, and the enormous full moon, its light pouring in.

She sat on the edge of her bed and rubbed her forehead, trying to remember. As she did, she was struck by a horrible pain in her side. She reached down, and felt the scab of a wound. She tried to remember what it was from. Had someone attacked her?

Caitlin thought hard, and slowly, but surely, the details flooded back. Boston. The Freedom Trail. The King's Chapel. The sword. Then...being attacked. Then...

Caleb. He had been there, looking down at her. She had felt her world slipping away, and she had asked him. *Turn me*, she had pleaded....

Caitlin raised her hands and felt the two marks on the side of her throat, and she knew that he had listened.

That explained everything. Caitlin stood with a start, with the realization. She had been turned.

She had been taken somewhere, probably for recovery, probably under Caleb's watchful gaze. She tested her arms and legs, twisted her neck, tested her body....

She felt different, that was for sure. She was not herself anymore. She felt unlimited strength coursing through her. A desire to run, to sprint, to break through walls, to leap into the air. She also felt something else: two slight bulges on her back, behind her shoulder blades. Very subtle, but she knew they were there. Wings. She knew, she felt, that if she wanted to fly, they would open up for her.

Caitlin felt intoxicated by her newfound strength. She wanted desperately to test it. She felt so cooped up—she had no idea how long she had been here—and she wanted to see what this new life could be like. She also felt something else that was new: a sense of recklessness. A sense that she could not die. That she could make stupid mistakes, that she had infinite lives to play with. She wanted to push things to the edge.

Caitlin turned and looked out the window, at the night sky. The window was shaped in a wide arch, with no glass, and was open to the elements. The sort of thing one might see in an old, medieval cloister.

In the past, the old, human Caitlin would have hesitated, would have thought about what she was about to do, would have second-guessed herself. But the re-born Caitlin felt no hesitation.

Practically the second after she thought it, she took off at a sprint, right for it.

With just a few short strides, Caitlin jumped up onto the window sill and dove out into the open air. Some part of her, some instinct, told her that once she was airborne, her wings would sprout. If she were wrong, it would mean a serious plummet, hundreds of feet down to the earth. But the re-born Caitlin didn't feel as if she could ever be wrong.

And she wasn't. As Caitlin leapt out into the night, her wings sprouted out from behind her shoulder blades, and she felt the exhilarating thrill of flying, of gliding through the air. She was delighted to feel how wide and long her wings were, thrilled to feel the fresh, night air washing over her face, hair, and body. It was nighttime, but the moon was so full and so big, it lit up the night almost as if it were day.

Caitlin looked down and was afforded a bird's-eye view. She had sensed water, and she had been right. She was on an island. All around her, in every direction, there stretched a huge, beautiful river, its waters very still and lit up by the moonlight. It was the widest river she had ever seen. And there, in the middle of it, was the tiny island on which she'd slept. A small island, hardly more than a few dozen acres, one end of it was dominated by a crumbling, Scottish castle, half in ruin. The rest of the island was completely consumed by a thick forest.

As Caitlin flew in the air, up and down on the wind currents, turning and swooping and diving, she circled the island again. The castle was huge, magnificent. Parts of it were crumbling, but other parts, those hidden from outside view, in the interior, were perfectly intact. There were inner courtyards and outer courtyards, ramparts, turrets, winding staircases, and acres and acres of gardens. It was large enough to hold a small army.

As she dove, she saw that the interior of the castle was lit with torches. And there were people milling about. Vampires? Her senses told her that they were. Her own kind. They were walking about, interacting with each other. Some were training, sword fighting, playing games. The island was abuzz with activity. Who were these people? Why was she here? Had they taken her in?

As Caitlin finished her circle, she saw the room she had leapt from. She had been staying at the top of the highest tower, opening up onto a huge rampart, a wide, open terrace. On it, there stood a single, lone vampire. Caitlin did not have to fly any closer to know who that vampire was. She knew it already, in her very heart and soul. His blood now ran through her, and she loved him with all her heart. And now that he'd turned her, she loved him with something even more than love. She knew, even from this far distance, that the loan figure pacing outside her room was Caleb.

Her heart soared at the sight of him. He was here. He was really here. Standing there, waiting, right outside her room. He must have been waiting for her to recover. All this time.

Who knew how much time had passed? He had never left her side. Even with all that had happened, all that was going on now. She loved him more than she could say. And now, they would be together for eternity. He stood there, leaning over the ramparts, looking down at the river, looking both concerned and sad.

Caitlin dove right towards him, hoping to surprise him, to impress him with her newfound skill.

Caleb looked up, shocked, and his face lit with joy.

But as Caitlin came in for a landing, something suddenly went wrong. She felt herself losing her balance, losing coordination. She felt as if she were coming in too fast, and she couldn't correct it in time. As she came in over the ramparts, she scraped her knee on the stone and landed too hard, taking a hard role on the stone.

"Caitlin!" Caleb exclaimed, running over to her.

Caitlin lay on the hard stone, feeling a new aching pain running up her leg. She was fine. If she had been the old Caitlin, merely a human, she would have broken several bones. But as this new Caitlin, she knew she would bounce back, recover from it quickly, within minutes probably.

But she was embarrassed. She had wanted to surprise and impress Caleb. Now she looked like an idiot.

"Caitlin?" he asked again, kneeling by her side, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

She looked at him, grinning sheepishly.

"Some way to impress you," she said, feeling like a fool.

He ran a hand along the side of her leg, checking her injury.

"I'm not human anymore," she snapped. "You don't have to worry about me."

She immediately regretted her words, and her tone. It had come out like an accusation, almost as if she regretted being turned. And she hadn't meant to take a harsh tone. On the contrary, she loved his touch, loved the fact that he was still so protective. She had wanted to thank him, to say all this and more, but as usual, she screwed it up, and said exactly the wrong thing at the wrong time.

What a terrible first impression as the new Caitlin. She still just couldn't keep her mouth shut.

Clearly, some things never changed, even with immortality.

She sat up, and was about to lay her hand on his shoulder and apologize, when suddenly, she heard a whining noise, and felt a furry cloud in her face. She leaned back, and realized what it was.

Rose. Her wolf pup, Rose leapt into Caitlin's arms. Rose was whining with excitement, and licking Caitlin all over her face. Caitlin couldn't help but break out laughing. She gave Rose a hug, and pulled her back and looked at her.

Still a pup, Rose had already grown, and was bigger than Caitlin remembered. Caitlin thought, and recalled when she last saw Rose, in the King's Chapel, lying on the floor, bleeding, shot by Samantha. She had been sure Rose was dead.

"She pulled through," Caleb said, reading her mind, as always. "She's tough. Like her mother," he added with a smile.

Caleb must have been watching over them both all this time.

"How long have I been out?" Caitlin asked.

"One week," Caleb said.

One week, Caitlin thought. *Incredible.*

She felt like she'd been out for years. She felt like she'd died and returned to life, but in a new form. She felt washed clean, as if she were starting life again with a blank slate.

But as she remembered all the events that were transpiring, she realized that the passing of one week was also an eternity. They had stolen the Sword. And her brother, Sam, kidnapped. An entire week had gone by. Why hadn't Caleb gone after them? Every minute counted.

Caleb got to his feet, and so did Caitlin. She stood opposite him, looking up into his eyes. Her heart started beating. She didn't know what to do. What was the protocol, the etiquette, now that they were both true

vampires? Now that he was the one who had turned her? Were they together?

Did he love her just as much now that she was of his race? Now that they'd be together forever?

She felt more nervous, like there was more at stake, than ever before.

She reached up and gently lay a hand on his cheek.

He looked down into her eyes, and his eyes shone in the moonlight.

"Thank you," she said, softly.

She had wanted to say, *I love you*, but it hadn't come out right. She had wanted to ask: *will you be with me forever? Do you still love me?*

But despite everything, despite all of her newfound powers, she didn't have the courage to say that. She could have at least said, *Thank you for saving me*, or, *Thank you for watching over me*, or *Thank you for being here*. She knew how much he had given up to be here, how much he had sacrificed. But all she could manage was, *Thank you*.

He slowly smiled, reached up with one hand, and gently pulled the hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. He then ran the back of his hand, so smooth, over her face, studying her.

She wondered what he was thinking. Was he about to express his love for her forever? Would he kiss her?

She felt that he was about to, and suddenly she got nervous. Nervous for what their new life would be like. Nervous for what would happen if it didn't work out. So instead of savoring the moment, she had to go ahead and ruin it, open her big fat mouth when all she wanted to do was keep it shut.

"What happened to the Sword?" she asked.

His facial expression changed completely. It transformed from a look of love, of passion, to troubling concern. She saw it happening instantly, like a dark cloud passing over a summer sky.

He turned and took several steps towards the edge of the stone ramparts, his back to her, and looked out at the river.

*You're such an idiot*, she thought to herself. *Why did you have to say anything? Why couldn't you just let him kiss you?*

She cared about the Sword, that was true, but not nearly as much as she cared about him. About *them*, as a couple. But she had ruined the moment.

"I'm afraid the Sword is gone," Caleb said softly, his back to her, looking out. "It was stolen from us. By Samantha, then Kyle. They caught us by surprise. I did not anticipate their being there. I should have."

Caitlin walked to him, standing by his side and gently reaching up and placing a hand on his shoulder. She hoped that maybe she could change the mood again.

"Are your people all right?" she asked.

He turned and looked at her, even more troubled than before.

"No," he said flatly. "My coven is in grave danger. And every minute I'm away, the danger grows."

Caitlin thought.

"Then why haven't you gone to them?" she asked.

But she already knew the answer, even before he said it.

"I could not leave you," he said. "I had to see that you were all right."

*Was that all?* Caitlin thought. Did he only care about seeing that she was all right? And as soon as she was, was he going to just leave?

On the one hand, Caitlin felt a surge of love for him, knowing what he'd sacrificed. But on the other hand, she wondered if he only cared about her physical well-being? Not about them as a couple?

"So..." Caitlin began, "now that you see that I'm all right...are you going to just leave?"

It had come out too harsh. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she be more kind, more gentle, as he had been? She certainly didn't mean it. It just came out all wrong. What she had wanted to say was, *Please, don't ever leave me*.

"Caitlin," he began softly, "I want you to understand. My family, my people, my coven—they are in grave danger. The Sword is out there, and it is in the wrong hands. I need to get back to them.

I need to save them. In truth, I should have left a week ago...and now that I see that you are recovered, well...it is not that I *want* to leave you. It is that I must save my family," he said softly.

"I could come with you," Caitlin responded, hopeful. "I could help."

"You are not fully recovered," he said. "That crash landing was not an accident. It takes any vampire some time to fully come into her own powers. And in your case, you also suffered a terrible injury from the Sword. That may take days, or weeks, to heal. If you came, you could injure yourself.

The battlefield is no place for you right now. They will train you here. That is why I brought you."

Caleb turned and crossed the terrace, leading her, and they looked down at the courtyard.

There, far below, were dozens of vampires, lit up under the torchlight, sparring, jousting and wrestling with each other.

"This small island holds one of the finest covens there is," Caleb said. "They have agreed to take you in. They will teach you. They will train you. They will make you stronger. And then, when your powers are fully developed, when you are fully healed, I would be honored to have you fight beside me. Until then, I'm afraid I cannot let you. The war I am heading into will be very dangerous. Even for a vampire."

Caitlin's brow furrowed. She'd been afraid he'd say something like that.

"But what if you don't come back?" she asked.

"If I am alive, I will return for you. I promise."

"But what if you don't live?" Caitlin asked, almost too afraid to utter the words.

Caleb turned and looked out at the horizon, and breathed deeply. He stared out at the clouds, and did not say a word.

Now was Caitlin's chance. She desperately wanted to change the subject. He was determined to leave, she could see that, and nothing was going to stop him. And it was clear that he could not bring her. She felt a wave of exhaustion, and she knew that he was right: she was not ready to fight.

She needed to heal.

She didn't want to waste any more time trying to stop him. And she didn't want to talk anymore about vampires, wars, or swords. She wanted to use their precious remaining time to talk about them. Caitlin and Caleb. Them as a couple. Their future. Their love for each other. Their commitment to each other. Where,

exactly, did they stand?

More importantly, she realized, throughout all their time together, since she'd first met him, she's always just taken him for granted. She had never stopped to take a moment, to look into his eyes and tell him exactly how deeply she felt for him. She was a woman now, and she felt it was time for her to step up and act mature, act like a woman. To tell him what she really felt for him. She needed him to know. Maybe he sensed it, sensed how much she loved him, but she had never uttered the words. *Caleb, I love you. I've loved you from the second I met you. I will always love you.*

Caitlin's heart was pounding, more terrified for this than she had been for anything thus far.

Trembling, she reached up a hand, and gently placed it on his cheek.

He slowly turned towards her.

She was ready, finally, to tell him what she thought.

But as she tried, the words got stuck in her throat.

At the same time, he suddenly looked at her with a flash of concern, and opened his mouth to speak.

"Caitlin, there is something I need to tell you—" he began.

But he never had a chance to finish his sentence.

There was suddenly the sound of a door opening, and Caitlin sensed immediately that the two of them were no longer alone.

They both spun towards the noise, and looked to see who it was.

It was a person. A vampire. A beautiful, incredible creature, taller, thinner, better built than Caitlin. With long, flowing red hair and bright green eyes.

As Caitlin realized who it was, her heart plummeted.

No. It couldn't be.

It was her. Sera. Caleb's ex-wife.

Caitlin had met her only once, briefly, at the Cloisters. But she had never forgotten her.

Sera walked towards them with the elegance of a creature who had been on this planet for thousands of years. Confident. Without slowing, her eyes on Caitlin all the while, she walked up beside Caleb.

She reached up a single, pale, beautiful hand, and slowly draped it around Caleb's shoulder. She looked down at Caitlin with utter contempt.

"Caleb?" she said softly, a sinister smile across her face. "Didn't you tell her about us?"

And with those few words, Caitlin felt as if a knife had been plunged into her heart.

## FIVE

Samantha watched in horror as the cauldron tilted toward Sam's face. She struggled for all she was worth, but there was nothing she could do to break free of her captors. She was helpless. She'd just have to stand there and watch it destroy the person she had come to love.

As the liquid doused Sam, Samantha braced herself, expecting to hear the horrible shrieks so often accompanied by a dousing of loric acid.

But as Sam became completely lost in the waterfall of acid, there was, strangely, not a single sound.

Had it killed him so quickly, so completely, that he didn't even have a chance to scream? As the liquid stopped, Sam came into view.

And Samantha was truly shocked. As was every other vampire in the room.

He was fine. He blinked and looked around, clearly not in pain. He even looked a bit defiant.

It was incredible. Samantha had never seen anything like it—never seen anyone, human or vampire, immune to the liquid. That is, anyone except for one person. Now she remembered.

Caitlin. His sister. She had been immune, too. What could that mean? Was it because they were genetically linked? She thought back to his watch, to the inscription. *The Rose and the Thorn*. Was the dynasty split between them? Could it be that she wasn't The One?

But that *he* was?

Caitlin was a few years older than Sam, and perhaps she'd showed signs of coming-of-age sooner than he. Perhaps, if they had waited a few years, Sam would also have shown signs of morphing into a half-breed.

Whatever the reason, he was clearly immune. Which made him very, very powerful. And very dangerous to her coven.

Samantha looked around, and in the room of several hundred vampires, there was not a sound.

They all just stared, in shock.

Sam looked pissed. He reached up, dragging his chains, and wiped the water from his face. He tugged at the chains, but could not get free.

"Can someone get me out of this fucking thing!?" he screamed.

And then, it happened.

Suddenly, there was a crash at the door.

Samantha spun around, and watched as the huge set of double doors came crashing down.

She couldn't believe it. There stood Kyle, half his face disfigured, Sergei at his side, and hundreds of mercenary vampires behind him.

And that wasn't all. Kyle had it. Was holding it high. The Sword.

Kyle let out a horrific scream and charged madly, headlong, into the room. His supporters followed close behind, shrieking, on a rampage. And the room broke into mayhem.

It was vampire against vampire, as Kyle and his men viciously attacked every being in sight. But the Blacktide Coven had been at war for thousands of years, and it was not about to give in easily.

Rexius' vampires fought back with equal determination.

It was an outright battle, hand to hand, vampire to vampire. Neither was giving an inch.

But Kyle himself made incredible headway. He held the Sword high, with both hands, and swung it widely in both directions. Wherever he went, vampires fell. Arms, legs, heads.... Kyle was a one-man army. He cut a path right through the crowd of thousands of vampires, murdering each one.

Samantha was shocked. In her thousands of years, she had never seen a vampire murdered, actually, ultimately, killed. She had never pictured a vampire as frail. This Sword was awe-inspiring.



And very, very deadly.

Samantha didn't wait any longer. As a vampire charged her, screaming, his bloody, sharpened teeth aimed right for her face, she quickly ducked, let him fly over her, and then took off at a sprint.

She charged across the room, heading right for Sam.

Just in time. A rogue vampire had the same idea, and was going right for the chained, petrified boy. The vampire leapt right for Sam, teeth extended, aiming for his throat. He was like a lamb chained in a room full of lions.

Samantha reached him just in time. She leapt, colliding with the vampire in midair and knocking him down to the ground. Before he could get up, Samantha backhanded him hard, knocking him out cold.

She jumped to her feet and tore at Sam's chains. As she set him free, he looked all around in utter disbelief, as if he were watching a fantastical nightmare come to life.

"Samantha," he said, "what the hell is going on—"

"Not now," Samantha said, as she tore the last of his chains, grabbed his arm, and jerked him, leading him through the mayhem. She was heading for the exit.

As they ran, another rogue vampire leapt right for them, teeth extended.

Samantha grabbed Sam and threw him to the ground, ducked herself, and the vampire leapt right over their heads.

She quickly regained her feet, dragging him up, and they sprinted through the room. They managed to duck and weave, she all the while leading them. She knew that if she could just make that door, there was a back corridor, a rear staircase that could take them to the street. Once outside, she could take them far, far from here.

In all the mayhem, no one noticed them sprinting. She was almost out the door, only feet away.

And then, just as she was about to make it, she felt the pressure on her back, felt herself tumbling, hitting the floor. She had been jumped from behind.

She spun around and looked up to see who it was. Sergei. That despicable little Russian sidekick to Kyle. The one who had stolen the Sword from her hand.

He grinned down at her, an evil, cruel grin, and she hated him more than she'd ever had.

Sam, to his credit, showed no fear. Still shackled, he jumped onto Sergei's back, using his chains, wrapping them around Sergei's throat. The boy was strong. He actually squeezed hard enough to get Sergei to loosen his grip on Samantha, and she used the opportunity to roll out from under him.

But Sam was no match for a vampire, nonetheless. Sergei stood, snarling, and threw Sam off of him like a ragdoll. Sam landed ten feet away, crashing into the wall.

As Samantha tried to scramble to her feet, she was pounced on by a dozen more vampires. She saw that Sam was surrounded, too. They were trapped.

The last thing she saw was Sergei's cruel smile, as he wound up and punched her in the face.

\*

As Kyle ripped through the huge chamber of the Blacktide Coven, wielding the Sword wildly, destroying vampire after vampire, he had never felt more alive. Blood splattered in every direction, covering him, and his hands felt wet with blood as he swung with more and more intensity. It was vengeance. Vengeance for his thousands of years of loyal service, for the way they'd treated him.

How dare they. Now they would know the meaning of the word revenge. They would all apologize, every last one of them, bow down to him, down to the ground, and admit that they had been profoundly wrong.

It was all going perfectly. After his little detour at the Brooklyn Bridge, he had led his loyal throng right through the doors of City Hall, killing the few vampires who dared stand in the way.

They had then filed through the secret passageway, lower and lower, into the bowels of City Hall, right into his coven's nest. No vampires dared stand in his way as his army stormed the chamber.

Many other vampires, upon seeing Kyle, and especially the Sword, immediately fell in with him. He was happy to see that so many of his old coven were still loyal. He knew that the day had arrived for him to claim rightful leadership.

Rexius was a weak leader. If he had been stronger, he would have found the Sword himself, years ago. He never would have sent others to do it. He liked to punish others for his own faults, when he was the one that needed to be punished. He had grown drunk with power. Banishing Kyle had been a last, desperate attempt to remove all those close to him. But it had backfired.

As Kyle tore through the room, he headed right for Rexius' throne. Rexius spotted him coming, and his eyes opened wide with panic.

Rexius jumped down from his throne and tried to slink away, away from the fighting. Their so-called leader, showing his true colors in a time of war.

But Kyle had other plans.

Kyle ran to the other side, to meet Rexius face-to-face. It would have been much easier to just plunge the Sword into his back, but he refused to allow Rexius to go down so easily. He wanted Rexius to see, up close, who killed them.

Rexius stopped, his path blocked by Kyle's massive shoulders, by the shining, gleaming Sword.

Rexius jaw trembled. He raised a shaking finger, pointing it at Kyle's face. At that moment, he just looked like an old man. A weak, old, terrified man. *How pathetic.*

"You are banished!" he yelled, lamely. "I ordered you banished!"

Now it was Kyle's turn to grin, a wide, malicious grin.

"You cannot win!" Rexius added. "You *will* not win!"

Kyle stepped up casually, reached back, and with one, smooth stroke, plunged the Sword right through Rexius' heart.

"I already have," Kyle said.

The entire room, even while busy in battle, turned and stared at the sound. It was a horrific screech, consuming the entire stone chamber. It seemed to go on forever, as Rexius screeched and screeched. As they all watched, his body dissolved before their eyes, disintegrating into a cloud of smoke, and then a wisp, rising up, into the air and towards the ceiling.

The whole room stopped and stared at Kyle.  
Kyle raised the Sword high, and roared. It was a roar of victory.  
Whatever vampire survived, on both sides of the battle, turned and faced Kyle. They all dropped to their knees, then lowered their heads, bowing all the way to the ground. The fighting was over.  
Kyle breathed deeply, taking it all in. He was their leader now.

## SIX

Caitlin, unable to speak, stormed away from Caleb and Sera.  
It was too much for her to process at once. Had she just seen what she thought she had? How was it possible?  
She had thought that she'd known Caleb so well, that they were closer now than ever. She was sure that they were *together*, a couple, and would be that way forever. She had seen their new life together clearly, and had been so sure that nothing would tear them apart.  
And then this. It never occurred to her that there could be another woman in Caleb's life. How could he have not told her?  
Of course, Caitlin remembered Sera from her brief visit to the Cloisters—but Caleb insisted he no longer had feelings for her, that whatever they had, it was years ago— *hundreds* of years ago.  
So then what was she doing here? Especially now, of all times? During Caleb and Caitlin's most private moment together, when Caitlin had just arisen, fully turned, a true vampire, by his own blood? How did she even know where they were? Had Caleb invited her? He must have. But why?  
Layers and layers of hurt washed over Caitlin. There was just no explaining this. She had always been afraid to make herself vulnerable, especially to guys, for this exact reason. But with Caleb, she had let go, had trusted him completely. She had made herself more vulnerable than she had with any guy she had ever been with. And he had managed to hurt her deeper, deeper than she could have ever imagined.  
She still couldn't fathom how she could have misjudged him so thoroughly, how she could be so dense, so wrong. She felt like her insides were breaking apart. What would immortality be like now, without him? It would be a sentence. An eternal sentence. She felt like she wanted to die. And worse than anything, she felt like such an idiot.  
"Caitlin!" Caleb yelled behind her, as she heard his footsteps chasing after her. "Please, allow me to explain."  
What could there possibly be to explain? Clearly, he had invited her here. Clearly, he still loved her. And clearly, his feelings for Caitlin weren't as strong as her feelings for him.  
Caleb's hand gripped her arm, tugging at her, pleading for her to turn and face him.  
But she jerked away. She couldn't stand the feel of his touch. She wanted nothing to do with him. Not ever again.  
"Caitlin!" he exclaimed. "Won't you just let me explain?"  
But Caitlin didn't slow. She was a different person, a different being now, and she felt it in more ways than one. Along with her newfound vampire strength, there also came a newfound vampire array of emotions. She could already feel that her emotions were stronger than they had been when human—much, much stronger. She felt everything much more deeply. She didn't just feel depressed—she felt as if she were literally dying. She didn't just feel betrayed—she felt as if she were literally being stabbed through the heart. She wanted to tear herself apart, to do anything to stop the hurt that tore her up inside.  
She marched across the terrace and right into her room, slamming the oak door behind her.  
"Caitlin, Caitlin please!" came the muffled voice outside her door.  
Caitlin turned and slammed the door.  
"Go away!" she yelled. "Go back to your wife!"  
After several seconds, she finally sensed him leave.  
Now it was just her. Just the silence. Caitlin sat on the edge of her bed in her small room, put her head in her hands, and cried. She sobbed and sobbed, heart-wrenching cries. She felt that all she had to live for was suddenly taken away.  
She heard a whining, and felt a soft brush against her face, and looked down to see Rose, rubbing her face against Caitlin's. Rose licked Caitlin's cheeks, trying to lick away her tears.  
It helped snap Caitlin out of it. She reached down and caressed Rose's face, stroking her hair.  
Rose jumped up onto Caitlin's lap, still small enough to do so, and Caitlin hugged her.  
"I still have you, Rose," Caitlin said. "You won't leave me, will you?"  
Rose leaned back and licked her face.  
But the pain was too much. Caitlin couldn't allow herself to sit in that room one second longer.  
She felt as if she were about to burst through the walls.  
She looked to the huge window, saw the inviting night sky, and without hesitating, put Rose down, jumped from the bed, took two long strides, and leapt out.  
She knew that her wings would sprout, and carry her away. But a part of her wished they wouldn't—wished that they would fail her, and let her plummet right to earth.

## SEVEN

Samantha stood in chains. She was held tight by several vampires who grabbed her arms roughly as they dragged her through the huge chamber. The room had become a slaughterhouse.  
Everywhere she looked, she saw thousands of vampire corpses, her former coven-members, their blood now pooling all over the floor, chopped into pieces by Kyle and his cursed Sword. That Sword held power beyond what she'd imagined.  
Yet amidst all the carnage, several hundred vampires remained alive. Kyle's people now. And with each passing moment, dozens more poured in through the open doors. In fact, there seemed to be no end to the stream of vampires eager to plead allegiance to Kyle. It was clearly *his* coven now.

With Rexius dead, there was no one else to plead allegiance to. And Kyle had earned it. He had managed to wipe out every vampire that had ever betrayed him.

There were hundreds of vampires who had assisted him in the battle against Rexius. Some were truly loyal to Kyle, while some were just opportunistic. Others just didn't like Rexius, and had been waiting for their chance. Vampires poured in from covens all over the city. News spread fast in the vampire world—and they all wanted to be a part of the upcoming war. Whatever their reasons, this was Kyle's army now.

Now that Kyle was leader, now that he had the Sword, it was clear that there would soon be a major war, a war unlike any the vampire race had ever waged. Kyle was ruthless, and lusted for blood, and even this carnage had not satisfied him. He had a chip on his shoulder he just could not remove. All of the vampires out there who had not already rushed to pledge allegiance to him would pay for that. Along with all of the innocent humans. His vendettas stretched endlessly, Samantha knew, and New York City would soon be his playing thing.

They dragged Samantha roughly through all the chaos, right to the center of the room.

Kyle now sat on Rexius throne, savoring his power, an evil grin spread across his face, as vampires bowed low to him in every direction.

Sergei, standing at Kyle side, banged his metal staff on the floor, three times.

The entire room, thousands of vampires, lined up in perfect order. They all raised their fists, and yelled: "Hail Kyle!"

Samantha was amazed. It was an incredible show of force and loyalty. She had never seen any obedience like this in her life. Kyle was magnetic. Already, he was a tyrant.

But Kyle didn't seem interested in his soldiers. Instead, his eyes fixed on Samantha. The entire room seemed to notice his interest in her, and the murmur quieted as they prepared to watch the exchange.

"So," Kyle said to her. "You beat me to the Sword. But as you can see, I am the one to wield it."

"For now," Samantha spat back.

*Let him think about that,* she thought. For truly, she believed, one day it would no longer belong to him. Whoever was meant to wield the Sword would, and she knew, deep down, that it wasn't him.

Kyle raised his eyebrows.

"Do you know why I've kept you alive this long?" he asked.

Samantha stared back, defiant. She had no interest in engaging in a dialogue with him. She didn't want any part of this new coven. She wanted to leave, to get as far away from this place as possible.

She wanted to just take Sam and go. If he'd let them.

But Sam was nowhere in sight. They had been captured by Kyle's soldiers, and she hadn't see him since. Samantha needed to keep her cool until she could find out where he was. She needed to buy her time, to plead allegiance to him if need be, until the moment when she and Sam could escape.

"I still don't know why Rexius sent you to retrieve the Sword instead of me. As we all know, I'm a better warrior. But I will admit, you have some skills," he said.

"But that is not entirely why I've kept you alive. Rexius had planned on punishing you. From this, I assume you have no reason to still be loyal to him. There is a war coming, and I can use strong warriors like yourself. If you are ready to pledge allegiance to me, I will consider keeping you alive."

Samantha thought. She had no issue with pledging allegiance, because she knew that very soon, she would leave all of this. But first she had to know about Sam.

"What of the boy?" she asked. "Where is he?"

Kyle smiled.

"Ah yes, the boy. Getting right to the heart of what I want to discuss. I'm not sure why you've taken such a fondness for this human, and you've already violated our rules in doing so. I could have you killed just for that, you know. But I do find this very interesting, and this, indeed, is one of the reasons I've let you live.

"You see, Samantha, you need to be punished. Any vampire who was at any time loyal to Rexius and not myself, needs to be punished. It is part of the initiation process of my new Army. You will learn to obey me, and to obey me only.

"In your case, I have found the perfect solution: an act that will both prove your loyalty to me and serve to punish you. My men will take you to the boy, you will bring him back here, and in front of everyone, you will kill him."

Samantha's heart dropped at the thought. That was something she could never, *ever* do. She would take her own life before taking his. Kyle, as usual, was delusional. And cruel. Yes, he was a fitting successor to Rexius.

"I will quite enjoy seeing you personally put him to death," Kyle said, smiling at the thought of it. "You see, I consider this boy a liability. He comes from the same strand as his sister, and for all I know, they bear an immunity that could hurt us all. I don't trust any of them. Not to mention, he is a human."

Kyle studied Samantha's face closely.

"If you do this thing, I will reward you with rank, honor and prestige. There will be a special place for you in my new coven. This will be a magnificent war, one of the most magnificent our race has ever seen. And you can be one of its chief architects.

"But if you refuse...you will be tortured, slowly, cast into eternal pain, and your name will be wiped out from our coven's history altogether."

The room was dead silent as Samantha thought. Her mind raced, trying desperately to think of a way out.

"Why don't you just kill him yourself?" she finally asked.

Kyle leaned back and grinned, slowly.

"Half the fun will be watching you do it," he said. "One of my favorite hobbies is watching people kill that which they hold dearly."

**EIGHT**

Caitlin flew and flew. She had no idea where she was going, but wherever the wind took her would be fine with her. She felt as if she had nowhere to go, anyway, and nothing left to live for.

Her beloved Caleb had betrayed her, and the only other person she cared for in the world, her brother, Sam, had probably betrayed her, too. After all, Sam had led Samantha, had led all of those evil vampires, right to her, right to the King's Chapel. Was there anyone left in the world she could trust? Was it her destiny that everyone who came into her life ended up betraying her?

Caitlin flew far over the Hudson River, and looked down as it gleamed in the moonlight. The night air felt good as it brushed her face and hair, wiping away her tears. She was far from the island now, just a dot on the horizon. She flew further and further away, desperate to clear her head.

She dove low, within feet of the water, and flew just over its surface, nearly touching it. It felt good to be so close to the water. A part of her wanted to just keep diving, to submerge herself. But another part of her, the new vampire part, knew that would be pointless. A vampire could not die.

Not even by drowning.

As she flew, groups of fish leapt out of the water all around her. They must have sensed her presence. Was it the vampire blood they sensed?

Caitlin climbed up high, high in the air, and as she ascended, her head started to clear again. She thought about everything that had happened. Already, the details felt fuzzy. Was it possible that she had blown things out of proportion? Now that she thought about it, what had Caleb actually done?

Yes, Sera was there, and on the one hand, her presence was inexcusable. But the more she thought about it, the more Caitlin realized that she didn't really know exactly why she was there, or how she got there. She didn't really know for certain that Caleb had invited her. She didn't really know for certain that the two of them were back together again. Was it possible, even remotely possible, that there was some other explanation?

Maybe she had reacted too quickly. She had always done that, could never control herself.

As Caitlin flew even higher, she made a wide turn, heading back in the direction of her island.

She found herself drawn to go back in that direction, and a part of her wondered if she might even return. After all, where else could she really go?

As she headed in that direction, she felt a newfound sense of purpose. Maybe she should at least give Caleb one chance to explain. He had saved her life so many times. He had watched over her all these days, had nursed her back to life. Maybe he did still love her. Maybe...

Caitlin wasn't so sure anymore. But the more she flew, the more she realized that she did owe Caleb at least one chance, one chance to explain himself.

Yes, she would give him that. And then she would decide.

\*

Caleb was furious. Once again, Sera had landed into his life, causing destruction everywhere she went. He couldn't recall, over the thousands of years, how many times he had asked her to keep away from him, how many times he had made it clear that he had no feelings for her, that he didn't want her in his life. But countless times, at all the wrong moments, she managed to show up again. It was as if she knew, as if she sensed whenever he was with someone new, whenever he was with someone he really cared about. And she always showed up at exactly the wrong moment. She was the most territorial and possessive creature he had ever met. And he had been plagued with her in his life for thousands of years.

This time, he could not accept it. He would not allow it. She had ruined his relationships too many times, and this was one time too many. He cared more for Caitlin than anyone—vampire or human—he had ever been with. And Sera, like a moth to a flame, must have sensed that. This must have been what brought her out of hiding, what prodded her to track him down.

She had an excuse—she always had an excuse. That was the problem with her: you could never really one hundred percent blame her, because she always showed up with some urgent message, and it always had some legitimacy. In this case, of course, their coven was on the verge of attack.

Kyle, she'd said, was back in New York City, with the Sword, and it would only be days until there was an all-out vampire war. She came bearing a message from his coven: they wanted him back.

They would forgive his earlier transgressions. They needed every soldier they had in this time of war, and Caleb was one of their best.

So on the one hand, he could not be as upset with her as he would have liked—which made the situation even more maddening. On the other, he suspected that she had been waiting for exactly a situation like this to have an excuse to worm her way back into his life. But regardless of the news, she'd had no right to give Caitlin the impression that they were still together.

He stormed over to her now, still on the castle's terrace, red-faced.

"Sera!" he snapped. "Why did you have to say that? Why did you have to use those words?"

There is no *us*! And, as you very well know, there is *nothing* that I have not told her. You came here to deliver a message from our coven. That is all. You gave the impression that there was some secret I was hiding, that you and I were still together."

She was not deterred by his anger. If anything, she seemed to enjoy it. She had managed to ruffle his feathers, and it appeared that that was exactly what she'd wanted.

She smiled slowly, taking a step towards him, and raised a hand and laid it on his shoulder.

"But aren't we?" she asked seductively. "You know, deep down, that we still are. That is precisely why this upset you so much. If you had no feelings for me, you would not care either way."

Caleb threw her hand off his shoulder.

"You know that is complete nonsense. We have not been together for hundreds of years. And we will *never* be together again. I don't know how many times I can say this," Caleb said, exasperated.

"I need you to stay out of my life. I need you to stay away from me. And most of all, from Caitlin. I am warning you to stay away from her."

Sera's face transformed with anger in the flash of an eye.

"That pathetic little girl," she snapped. "Just because she is one of us now, doesn't give her any more standing over me. She has *nothing* against me. I don't see how you can even *look* her way. Not to mention that our coven never sanctioned your turning her," Sera said, giving Caleb a dark look.

Caleb knew what that meant. It was a threat. She was warning him, his violation of the law. He could be punished severely for it—and she was threatening to let the others know.

"I'm not deterred by your threats," Caleb said darkly. "You can tell anyone anything you want. I will face whatever they want to throw at me myself."

"You disgust me," Sera snapped. "Here we are, at war, our entire coven, our family at risk. And what are

you doing? You are hiding out here, on some island, waiting for some pathetic little girl to get well. You should be home, defending your people, like the real man you used to be—”

“My coven cast me out,” Caleb snapped back, “after hundreds of years of loyal service. I owe them nothing. They are receiving now exactly what they deserve.”

Caleb exhaled.

“Nonetheless, I do care for them, and given that the situation is what it is, I will not let them down. I told you that I will return, when the time is right.”

“You said that you would return when she had recovered. Clearly, she has recovered. You’re out of excuses. You must return now!”

“I will honor my word, as I always do. But I want to be very clear on this point: I return only to help save our coven, the humans who might be slaughtered, and to help retrieve the Sword. Do not harbor any delusions that it is for any other reason. As soon as my mission is accomplished, I will depart again, for good this time, and it will be the last time you ever see my face. Do not harbor any fantasies that we are together again. Because we are not.”

“Oh, Caleb,” she said, with a dark little laugh, “you can believe whatever you like, but you know deep down that you and I have been together forever, and that we will always be together. The more you fight it, the closer you become to me. I know how much you love me. I can feel it, every day.”

“You are delusional,” Caleb said. “You are getting worse with time.”

Sera smiled wider. “That’s right,” she said, “tell yourself that. Fight your feelings. Fight what both of us already know.”

Sera suddenly took two bold steps to him, draped her hands around his throat, and with one quick motion, yanked him hard towards her.

Before he could react, she planted her lips firmly on his, kissing him with tremendous force.

Caleb recoiled, disgusted. He reached up and shoved her away. And as he did, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed someone landing on the parapet beside them.

Caitlin.

\*

As Caitlin approached the island, she felt hope rising within her again. Her head was clear now.

Caleb, she realized, had done nothing wrong after all. She had been stupid. She should have given him a chance to explain. For all she knew, Sera had come uninvited, and there was absolutely nothing between them. Why had she been so rash?

As she swooped lower and the island came into view, she saw the huge stone castle sprawled out below her, the scores of vampires down there on the ground, training in the torchlight. It was a beautiful place, and she was grateful that Caleb had taken her here. She started to feel that everything would be OK after all, as she took one final turn and rounded the bend, landing on the upper rampart.

But as she came in close, as she landed, her heart stopped within her.

There were Caleb and Sera. And this time, they were kissing.

Kissing. The thought of it pierced Caitlin’s insides worse than the Sword. She couldn’t move.

She couldn’t think. She couldn’t breathe. They were kissing. *Kissing*.

So, they *were* together. There was no misunderstanding this time. He was still in love with her.

He had tossed Caitlin out as if she were nothing. And he had done it all right in front of her eyes.

Caleb rushed over to her, and this time, Caitlin didn’t run. She stood where she was, frozen in shock, as she felt the rage well up within her. She felt herself becoming fierce, fiercer than she had ever been as a human.

“Caitlin,” Caleb began, “this is not what it seems. Please, let me explain—”

But as Caleb approached her, as he began speaking, Caitlin simply reached out a finger and pointed at the horizon.

“LEAVE!” she screamed, scowling.

It was an order. It was not a question, and it didn’t leave open any room for discussion.

Caleb stood there, frozen himself, apparently shocked at her ferocity. He must have seen how resigned she was.

“I SAID LEAVE!” Caitlin screamed again. “I never want to see you again. As long as I live!”

Caleb stood there, looking shocked and hurt himself, like a little boy who had just been scolded.

It looked like there was so much he wanted to say to her, but that he could also tell she would never hear a word of it.

He slowly lowered his head, despondent.

He turned and walked to the edge of the rampart, took two long strides, jumped onto the edge of the railing, and leapt off. He was soon flying, his giant wings flapping, and heading off into the night.

Caitlin could see Sera turn her head and look after him, watching him fly away, looking worried, like she wanted to fly after him. But she also looked torn, like there was something she wanted to say to Caitlin before she did.

Sera suddenly took several steps towards Caitlin, coming within feet of her.

“I hate you,” Sera said, slowly, her voice dripping with venom. “I will *always* hate you. You tried to take my man away from me. And it will *never* work. Caleb doesn’t want you. He wants me. Only me. And that’s the way it’s always been.”

Caitlin was in too much of a fury to bother responding, and she had nothing to say to her anyway.

Sera’s wings expanded behind her, as she got ready to depart. Before she turned, she leaned in close to Caitlin, and whispered one last thing: “I have something with Caleb that you will never have. Not as long as you live. I’m sure he never told you, and I’m sure he never will.”

Caitlin stared back at her with equal rage, wondering what else this vile creature could possibly tell her that could cause her any more upset than she already had. She didn’t think it was possible.

But as she heard her next words, she realized that there was, indeed, something that could make her feel even worse.

“Caleb and I have a child.”

## NINE

Samantha found herself escorted by two hulking vampire guards down the stone corridor. They stood close, but neither dared grab her arm. She was too senior of a warrior to them—they would never cross such a line of disrespect. Despite their size, despite the fact that they were male, she was a much more powerful warrior than both of them—and they knew it.

They led her down and down, deeper into the bowels of their coven, towards Sam's chamber.

They descended another flight of stone steps, the sound of their hard, leather boots echoing off the walls. It was getting darker and darker as they went, the vaulted corridors lit only by a sporadic torch.

Samantha was furious as she walked. She wanted to kill these two guards on the spot, but she couldn't just yet. She needed them to lead her to wherever it was they were hiding Sam. She needed to rescue him.

How stupid Kyle was. Did he really think that she cared so much about her own life, about her own honor, to bring Sam back, and to kill him in front of everyone? He must have thought her as much a pawn as the others. He had a lot to learn. She was different. Very different. She had not survived for thousands of years by deferring to other people. She did what she wanted, when she wanted. And sometimes, that required bold action.

They turned down yet another corridor, this one deeper and darker than the others. The chambers beneath their coven in City Hall were endless. One could get lost wandering them for years. It made a very convenient place to keep prisoners. In fact, there were some legendary vampires still rumored to be kept in captivity under here, some who had been here for thousands of years. Few really knew the depths, or the extent, of where these chambers went, or of the thousand-year vampire history stored amidst its walls.

Finally, they stopped before an arched wooden door. One guard grabbed her by the arm, while the other reached into his pocket and extracted a huge ring of skeleton keys. He inserted one and turned.

As soon as Samantha heard the click, as soon as she saw the door start to move, she knew the time had come.

In one swift, decisive move, she swung her arm, throwing the guard's hand off of her, and then spun and threw the heel of her hand right into his throat.

It was a perfect strike.

He dropped to his knees, eyes bulging wide, reaching for his throat with both hands. He was trying to open the air channel. But he wouldn't. 3,000 years had taught Samantha how to throw a perfect throat strike, with just the right force to bring the biggest man to his knees. Within seconds, as she predicted, the big man keeled off to his side, his head hitting the stone as he passed out. He was a vampire, so it wouldn't kill him completely. But it would immobilize him for a very, very long time.

Before she could turn, she felt two huge, muscular arms grab her in a choke hold. It was the other one. He was quicker than she would have guessed. He grabbed her tightly, squeezing.

But he was not as agile as she. She could feel that he was strong, but lacked finesse. A young vampire, without half her experience. Probably why he had been assigned to guard duty.

She dropped to her knees, stepped to the side, swung her leg around behind his, and when she stood, he went flying backwards, she using his huge weight as leverage against him. He flew back over her shoulder, landing on his back on the stone. She could see that she had knocked the wind out of him, and before he could get up, she had already stepped on his throat, crushing it with the heel of her boot. She held her foot in place, pushing and squeezing, harder and harder, until finally, he stopped struggling, and he, too, passed out.

Samantha turned for the door. She checked both ways down the corridor, saw that no one was coming, and quickly went inside, closing and bolting it behind her. More guards would follow soon, she knew. But for now, she had time.

There he was. Sam. Seeing his face made it all worth it. He was chained against the far wall. Poor kid: he had probably been chained more in the last few days than he had in his life. He looked very pale, even for a human, and it was clear that he was in bad shape.

More than anything, he looked scared. His eyes opened wide at the sight of her, and he struggled against his chains, trying to speak, but prevented by the gag in his mouth.

Samantha hurried to him and removed the gag. He immediately started talking.

"Samantha, what the hell is going on!?" he asked in a rush. "Is this for real? Were those people really vampires? Are *you* a vampire? Are you going to kill me? Tell me I'm dreaming."

Before she removed his chains, Samantha reached up, took hold of his cheeks with both her hands, leaned in and kissed him. It was a long kiss. At first, he resisted, scared, but then she felt him soften, and kiss her back.

The longer they kissed, the more she felt it. He still loved her.

That was all she needed to know. Her mind was made up.

"Samantha, please," Sam said. "Unchain me. Get me out of here. I want to be with you. I want to get out of here. Please—"

"Shhh," she prodded, holding up one finger. "There's no time to explain. I want to be with you, too. And we have little choice. There's no way out of here. All exits are blocked. There are thousands of new vampires in here now, and there's no way out. We have to go along, at least for now."

"Go along with what? What are you talking about?"

"Sam," she said, stroking his face, "I love you. I need to know if you feel the same."

Sam looked directly at her, with a mix of fear and surprise.

"I love you, too," he said. "I'll go anywhere with you. Just get me out of here. Please. I don't care if you're a vampire or whatever. I just want to be with you."

Samantha smiled. She felt her heart swell with an emotion she hadn't felt in thousands of years.

He felt the same way she did.

"OK," she said, "then you have to trust me. There's no other way. We can't escape. If I bring you up there, like this, he'll kill you. I want to save you. But there's only one way."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Who will kill me? Why?"

"Sam," she said urgently, "there's no time. You just have to trust me. Do you want to be with me forever? Really think about this. I'm not just asking. I really, *really* mean it."

She stared right into his eyes, his green eyes reflecting off of her blue eyes. He seemed speechless.

She asked one more time, slowly, with all the seriousness she could muster: "Do you want to be with me

forever?"

He finally calmed, slowed his breath, and looked right into her eyes. He must've felt how serious she was.

"Yes," he answered, confidently, with equal seriousness. "I want to be with you forever."

She smiled.

"You might be mad at me at first, but I want you to know that there was no other way. Without this, you wouldn't live. In any form. We would never see each other again. I'm doing this for you.

For us. I believe that you have a power that none of us have, and that that will save you."

Samantha leaned back, and let the desire flood through her. She flooded herself with the smell of his skin, breathing deep, and as she did, her fangs grew long—impossibly long.

She could see the boy's eyes opened wide with fear, as he suddenly realized what she was about to do.

He opened his mouth to speak, but it was too late. She couldn't let him ruin the moment.

She wanted him.

Forever.

And before Sam could cry out, Samantha was already leaning in, with all her force. She felt the delicious, exquisite, salty taste, as she plunged her fangs deep into the boy's throat, drinking like she never had before.

Yes. Now forever could be theirs.

## TEN

Caitlin lay curled up in a ball on her bed. She had been lying like that for hours. Caleb was long gone now, as was Sera. She didn't know how many hours had passed since she'd told him to leave.

Since then, she hadn't been able to move. She just lay there, frozen, wanting to die.

How could he do this to her? A child? How could he have not told her?

Then again, she wondered, did he really have an obligation to? They had only known each other for weeks—or was it days? Caitlin was surprised to think of it. It felt like they had been together for years already. Maybe their connection was more fleeting than she thought?

No. That wasn't right. It was definitely something more. She saw it in his eyes. She felt it in his heart. He had strong feelings for her, there was no question about it. So then why had he kept his past secret from her?

Maybe he had just been waiting for the right time. Technically, they weren't even officially dating. What were they exactly? Caitlin felt as if they were above labels, as if they had skipped all those steps. What they had was stronger. Deep down, she felt as if they were already together, forever. Crazy, she knew, but that was how she felt. And that was how she thought Caleb felt, too.

He should have told her. If he had truly expected to be with her forever, then he could have found an opportunity to give her the news. *Sera and I have a child together*. Why couldn't he have told her? Why was he hiding it from her? Didn't she have a right to know?

And what of their child? Was it a boy or girl? How old was he or she? She imagined it was a boy.

Were Caleb and he close? If not, why not?

And what else wasn't he telling her?

These questions swirled around and around in Caitlin's brain, as she tried to make sense of the whole thing. A part of her wanted to excuse him, to explain it all away, and lying here now, she kicked herself for not at least hearing him out, hearing his side of the story.

But another part, a stronger part, felt betrayed. After all, she had seen them kissing. There was no doubt about that. That could only mean one thing: Caleb was still in love with her. There was no other logical explanation.

Caitlin curled up, tighter, wanting to just disappear. Now, of all times, she was cursed with immortality. Going through this heartache was hard enough; now, she'd have to suffer with it not just for one lifetime—but forever. Maybe she shouldn't have asked to be turned. Maybe she should have just let herself die in that church. It certainly would have been less painful.

Caitlin felt something wet on her face, and looked up to see Rose, licking her, prodding her with her snout. Rose started to whine, as she licked Caitlin more aggressively. She must have sensed Caitlin's emotions.

Caitlin reached out and patted her, stroking her face. Thank God for Rose. Caitlin didn't know what she would do without her.

As Rose kept licking and prodding, Caitlin found herself sitting up in bed, slowly snapping out of it. She looked around the room, and wondered: *what now?* She knew that down below there was an entire community of vampires that had taken her in. They were probably waiting to meet her.

Should she go down there?

But Caitlin didn't really feel up to meeting anyone right now. The pain was too raw, too intense.

She needed to be alone, and to sort out her feelings.

She looked over, and saw, on the small, ancient desk in the corner, that it was still sitting there.

Her journal. Her old, trusted friend.

Yes, she thought, *that's it*. That was what she needed. Pen and paper. To sort it all out. As always, everything had happened so quickly. She could barely remember the events of the last few days, much less the last few weeks. She needed to remind herself.

Caitlin walked over to the desk and sat on the small, medieval chair. She lit a candle, and it illuminated the worn pages of her journal. She turned them back slowly, as the brittle pages made a soft, crackling noise. In the candlelight, she picked up the pen, rested her forehead in one hand, and began to write.

\*

*How did I get here? And where is here, exactly? I don't even know anymore. I'm in a room, at the top of a tower, on some remote island, on some huge river. I feel like a fairy princess. Except, my prince charming has just left me.*

*Where to begin? Caleb. Always with Caleb. Since we first met, there's been little else I've been able to think about. Days and weeks followed, but always, he dominates my thoughts. And my feelings.*

*When we first met, he was suddenly there at my side, saving me, racing me through the streets in a whirlwind. It seems like nothing has changed in our relationship. Again and again, it follows the same pattern:*

*we are in danger, he is saving me. And the sad thing is, I've never really had a chance to thank him, and to tell him how much I love him.*

*The last few weeks were magical...New York, Salem, Martha's Vineyard, Edgartown, the Aquinnah Cliffs, and finally, the Freedom Trail. Always on the hunt for the ancient Sword supposed to save mankind.*

*The deeper we got in our search, the more I started to believe it, the more I started to believe that maybe, after all, I was The One. Maybe it was all true. Maybe I did come from some special lineage that could help save mankind....*

*The clues lead to more clues, and finally, we found it.*

*But I'm getting ahead of myself.*

*First, Caleb and I found each other. On Martha's Vineyard, on the beach, under the Aquinnah Cliffs, we had a magical night together. We finally had a chance to express our love for each other. We became a couple, and things changed forever between us.*

*But after we found the Sword, the malevolent vampires stole it away. They also kidnapped my brother, Sam. And then they stabbed me. Caleb was forced to stay with me, instead of chasing after them.*

*I could have died. I should have died. I felt my life ebbing away. But I insisted that Caleb turn me. I didn't know if he would. But I hoped. And prayed.*

*And here I am. Still alive. But alive in immortality.*

*I woke here, on this remote island. I am different now. No longer a mere human. I feel stronger, more confident.*

*But also more emotional.*

*The worst blow, ironically, was reserved for the one closest to me, for Caleb himself. Just when I thought we'd be together forever, I discover he's still with his ex-wife. And I caught them kissing. Worse, she told me they have a child.*

*I have no idea what else Caleb is hiding from me.*

*I told him to leave. I couldn't bear talking to him after that. Maybe he would have explained it away, but I don't really see how. He left, and flew away, and with his flight, he took all my hopes and dreams with him.*

*I don't know what life will look like now. And I don't know if I want to...*

\*

"Going to sleep all day, are you?" came a quick, jovial voice, in a heavy Irish accent.

Caitlin looked up, trying to figure out where she was, who was talking to her.

As she slowly sat up, she felt the stiffness in her joints, and realized that she had fallen asleep in the chair, head resting on the desk. Before her lay her open Journal. She must have fallen asleep writing.

She could see the sunlight streaming in through the window. Had she slept like that all night?

Caitlin looked up and saw a pretty girl, maybe 17, standing over her, less than a foot away, looking down. She was struck by the girl's beauty, and her presence. Her skin was a very pale shade of translucent white, her hair was a light brown, and her eyes, large and shining, were a shade of blue. The girl was smiling wide, and her entire demeanor exuded a feeling of happiness and joy.

Caitlin had no idea who she was, or why she was speaking to her, but she could sense already that this girl was of her race—a vampire—and that she was a very kind and happy person.

"You've already missed the morning bell, you know," the girl said, still smiling. "Aiden won't be pleased. Not to mention there are scores and scores of people who want you to meet. They're all dying with excitement, you know. First of all, me," she said all in a rush, excitedly, and leaned back and reached out her hand. "Polly is my name. I'm your new best friend—if I may be so bold. That is, if you'll have me. There are not many girls like us. I was so thrilled when they dropped you off.

But you're always sleeping," Polly said, in a rush. "I've been waiting *forever* for you to wake up!"

Caitlin didn't know which part of her speech to respond to first. She immediately liked her, and she reached out and shook her icy cold hand, slowly waking, trying to process it all. Polly spoke so fast, and so excitedly, and with her Irish accent, it was hard to take it all in. But it certainly brought Caitlin out of herself, made her completely forget what she'd been thinking.

"And who is this?" Polly asked, as Rose ran over and jumped on her. Polly kneeled and gave Rose a hug. Rose was squealing like crazy as she leaned up and licked her face. "Wow! They hadn't told me about this! A new pet on the island, then!? Double the excitement! I had no idea. Is this a real wolf pup? And what is your name, darling?"

"Rose," Caitlin said.

"Rose! How delightful. Yes, perfect. You are quite the Rose, aren't you?"

Caitlin didn't quite know what to say. She still didn't really know who this person was, or how she should respond to any of it. It was all happening so fast.

"I'm sorry..." Caitlin began, "who are you again?"

"You're not the only one on this island, dear," Polly began with a smile, "there are scores of us you know. All down below. We're one big, happy family as they say. But no point sitting here and talking about it. Let's go see for ourselves. I've been assigned to give you the tour. To tell the truth, I volunteered. I was dying and dying to meet you, and I wanted to be first," Polly said, and without hesitating grabbed Caitlin's hand, and led her happily out the open door.

As they entered the open air, Caitlin felt stabs of pain and recoiled at the harsh sunlight; she immediately lowered her head and covered her eyes.

"Oh dear, you haven't been out in the sunlight yet, have you?" Polly asked.

The pain was so intense, it was unlike anything Caitlin had ever felt. It was her first experience as a true, full vampire in the sun, and it was oppressive. She tried, but couldn't open her eyes.

She felt a soft hand on her forehead. "Lean back, dear. This won't take but a minute."

Caitlin leaned back, and Polly reached over and put two drops from a small canister into each of Caitlin's eyes. Caitlin felt the burning sensation, as she clutched her eyes again. She waited several seconds, then she was able to open them.

She breathed deeply, the pain gone.

"You're one of us now," Polly said. "You can't get away with prancing about wherever you please, like a



human. The sunlight is a real thing for you now. No joke. You must take these drops every morning," she said, thrusting a canister into Caitlin's hand, "and use your skin wraps, too."

Polly inspected Caitlin's skin. "I see you've already been wrapped, so that will do for now. But you have to replace them, you know, at least every few days."

Polly took Caitlin's arm and led her across the terrace, and down a narrow, winding stone staircase.

"Come on Rose, we can't wait all day!" Polly said.

Rose hesitated at the top, looking down at the steep staircase, then suddenly bounded to life, following close behind.

Polly laughed. "Poor thing, she's probably famished. How long has it been since you fed her?"

Caitlin tried to think. She couldn't even remember.

"We'll take care of you, too," Polly said to Rose, petting her.

As they descended the steps, Caitlin began to feel better, more like herself. She took an instant liking to Polly, and already felt as if she knew her forever. She already had a new friend, someone who clearly cared about her, and she had Rose. She also realized that she hadn't seen daylight in days, and seeing the sun and sky lifted her spirits.

Not to mention, Polly was right. Rose needed to be fed. Things needed to happen in the real world. Life needed to go on. Yes, she would have to snap out of it, to function again. Life could indeed go on without Caleb, she realized, as painful as that felt.

As they descended the steps, Caitlin thought of all the new friends she was about to meet, and, if they were anything like Polly, she actually looked forward to it. Yes, she needed to meet new people.

Anything to get the thought of Caleb out of her mind.

As they descended the stairs, twisting again and again, Caitlin was afforded a bird's-eye view of the entire island, in every direction. It was beautiful. The stone castle and its ramparts spread out in every direction, some taller, some lower, most of it crumbling, but some of it, especially inside the courtyard, beautifully intact. There were plenty of open courtyards in every direction, planted with vibrant grass and gardens, and there were acres of land beyond the castle walls, all filled with a dense forest. The island seemed to be in a state of ruin, yet at the same time, it felt very comfortable, lived in. And everywhere, in every direction, she could see the river, sunlight glistening off the water.

Fresh breezes came from every direction, and cooled her as she descended.

"Where are we?" Caitlin asked. "I mean, this island. What country are we in?"

Polly laughed playfully.

"My dear, you are disoriented, aren't you? We are still in the good old US of A. In fact, we are still in New York. That water you see all around you, as big as it is, is not an ocean. It's just a river.

The Hudson, actually. You're right smack in the middle of it. And not even that far from Manhattan.

Just 70 miles. Or, in our mode of transportation, a twenty minute flight," she said with a wink.

A million questions raced through Caitlin's mind, but before she could ask, Polly began again, in her chipper tone, "This island is named Pollepel. The humans like to call it Bannerman's Island, just because they don't know what it's really called, but Pollepel is the name. It's been here since ancient times, and it's always been a sacred place for our kind. For thousands of years, we used this place exclusively, no humans allowed. Even the Indians were scared of it: it was practically the only place in America they wouldn't dare come. They knew that it was ours.

"Then the Dutch came along, in the 1600s, with their tall sailing ships. That's when it got its proper name. Pollepel is Dutch for "Polly." They named it after a young girl who got stuck on the ice and came ashore here, rescued by the man who married her. In case you're wondering," she said with a grin, "that's how I got my name, too. Polly. Hope you like it. I was dropped off here as an infant. Abandoned by my parents, you might say. This coven, they took me in. In fact, this island is the only place I've ever known. When they dropped me here, our fellow vampires didn't know what to name me. So they named me after this place. Some people say I *am* this place. Like I said, I've never known any place else. Not that I'd want to.

"But it's not all about *me*, as I often forget," Polly said in a rush. "There are dozens of us here, and I love them all—bratty and unruly as all of them are. We all belong to the same coven, the Pollepel Coven. One, big happy family, as they say—although we're not that big, and most of the times, we're not that happy with each other. That's what living on an island will do to you. Especially when you're all stuck in your teenage years for the rest of your lives."

Caitlin looked down, and could see all of the teenage vampires spread out below. They were in small groups, all over the courtyards. Most of them were engaged in some sort of training—some were fighting with mock, wooden swords, others were throwing spears, pole vaulting. It almost felt like a military camp, but more relaxed.

"We are a coven of misfits," Polly continued. "There are just 23 of us—actually, 24 now, with you here. We're a pretty select group, I'd say. We're all here because no one else will have us."

"What do you mean?" Caitlin asked, finally able to get a word in. The more she talked, the more Caitlin felt at home with Polly. But it was really hard to get a word in with her. She spoke so fast, and barely took a breath.

"We're all vampire misfits," Polly said, matter-of-factly. "You don't get dropped off here unless you've done something wrong, or are a huge pain in the ass. Unless someone, somewhere, doesn't want you. Unless you're on the run from something. Ours is the coven that takes you in when no one else will.

"I, for example, was dropped here as an orphan; others were dropped here because they're half-breeds, or products of a forbidden relationship. Still others were left here because they have special powers, powers that others in the vampire world don't understand, and won't accept. It makes for quite fun dinner conversation, I'd say," Rose said with another wink.

*So that's why Caleb dropped me here,* Caitlin thought. *No other coven would take me in. Certainly, his wouldn't. And he didn't know where else to bring me.*

It all made sense to Caitlin now. Once again, she was the outcast. But strangely enough, this time she felt as if she fit in, as if she weren't the only one who was odd. Maybe she could make friends here, find the community she never really had. The island was certainly beautiful enough, and she could already see herself feeling at home here. Maybe even, over time, she might stop thinking about Caleb. After all, what other choice did she have?

They entered the courtyard of the huge castle, and Polly led her through the training grounds, past several

vampires. Caitlin felt a familiar nervousness in her stomach, as if she were showing up at her first day at a new school. She realized she was nervous to meet these people; she hoped that they liked her.

"This is Tyler and Taylor," Polly said, gesturing. "Vampire twins. You don't see that often. Their coven didn't want them, so they ended up here. Good for us. They are some fighters. And while we always know what each other is thinking, those two *really* know what each other are thinking."

Caitlin watched them. The identical brother and sister were startlingly attractive, maybe 16, and the two of them sparred against each other with bamboo swords, going blow for blow, parrying each other's every move. They were each worked up in a sweat.

As Caitlin passed, Taylor, the girl, turned and smiled, and waved at her. Her brother, Tyler, used the opportunity to lunge in and whack his sister on the leg with his bamboo sword.

Taylor turned and screamed at him, indignant. "Not fair! That was cheap."

Tyler just laughed.

"Will you two quit it and come over here and give our new sister a proper hello?" Polly chided.

*Sister.* Caitlin liked the sound of that term. She'd always wanted a sister.

Taylor and Tyler came jogging over.

Rose ran up to greet them, and Taylor's eyes opened wide in delight. "Oh my God! She's beautiful!" she exclaimed, kneeling down and hugging the excited Rose.

Rose licked her face.

Tyler then stood and embraced Caitlin in a big hug.

Caitlin was taken aback, and tentatively hugged her back.

"I feel like I've known you forever," Taylor said, as she leaned back and studied Caitlin's face.

"My turn," Tyler said, prodding Taylor to the side, stepping in and hugging Caitlin, too.

Caitlin was once again surprised, and didn't quite know how to react. She was about to hug Tyler back, but suddenly, with her newfound vampire senses, she felt an electric chill run through her. She could actually, truly, feel what this vampire was feeling. And it scared her. She knew that he was attracted to her.

Caitlin quickly withdrew from his embrace, feeling as if she had somehow just been disloyal to Caleb.

Tyler stared at her, and she could feel his attraction as if it were a tangible thing.

"OW!" Tyler screamed.

He turned and saw that Taylor had whacked him hard in the back with her bamboo sword.

"That's what you get!" Taylor said. "Leave the new girl alone."

Caitlin smiled and waved, as Polly took her arm and continued to lead her through the battlements. Soon they were on another path, and in another courtyard.

"Most of us are sleeping now," Polly said. "We can come out in the light, of course, but most of us still don't want to. The only ones usually up at this time are the ones doing guard duty, or the ones training because Aiden forced them to."

"Aiden?" Caitlin asked.

"He's our coven leader. Like a trainer and mentor and school principal all rolled into one. He's ancient. He's been here forever, probably longer than the island itself. No one knows exactly when he came here, but he's thousands and thousands of years old. A real sweetheart, as long as you're on his good side. He's the one that will set your course. He keeps things in shape around here, keeps us all on track. We all answer to him—that is, if we want to stay here. But he's more like a father figure than anything else. And he's one of the best vampire trainers around."

"Anyway, as I said, most of us are sleeping. They'll be out in force tonight. See over there—that's where we sleep."

Caitlin looked, and as they walked through another stone archway, she saw, off to the side, several arched doorways leading into the castle.

"And over there, that's where we eat," Polly continued, gesturing.

Caitlin saw a huge, stone dining table, long enough to hold at least 30 people, placed to the side of the courtyard.

"We rotate. One of us is always on hunting duty. That one brings in the deer for everyone else."

This island—luckily, it's full of them. Acres and acres of forests, in case you haven't noticed.

Anyway, the person on duty brings in the meal for everyone else. One of Aiden's rules. He wants us all to eat together, to dine as civilized people. It's actually more drinking than eating, but at least we do it together."

Rose went running over to the table, jumped up on it, and started sniffing. As she did, she started to whine.

"I think she's hungry," Caitlin said. "Is there anything I can feed her?"

Polly smiled, "I think we can manage that."

Polly walked over to a stone cauldron, lifted its lid, reached in, and pulled out a slab of raw meat.

Rose's eyes lit up at the sight.

Polly threw it across the yard and Rose bounded after it, pounced, and ate in delight.

"Thanks," Caitlin said, so appreciative. She didn't know what she would have done without Polly.

"No shortage of raw meat around here," Polly said with a smile. "Rose will be in heaven."

Suddenly, Rose issued a low, guttural growl. It shocked Caitlin, as she had never heard Rose make any noise remotely like it. She assumed that maybe some other person or animal had approached Rose while she was eating, but she looked around, and saw nothing. She followed Rose's gaze, and then saw what she was looking at.

There, in the distance, a teenage vampire approached them. Dressed in all black, he wore a sullen expression, and his large, black eyes burned with a fierce hatred. Even from so far away, Caitlin could feel a dark energy coming off of him. She could also feel her new friend, Polly, tense up beside her.

"That's Cain," Polly said. "He's one of us. But he doesn't always act like it. He has real dominance issues. He can be the typical bully. I think that's why he was left here to begin with—

nobody else would deal with him. We've all asked Aiden to kick him off, but he refuses. Aiden still believes he can cure him, from whatever he has. I myself don't. I can't stand the sight of him."

Usually, though, there a lot of us around, and when there are others, it's not quite as bad. In fact, I rarely see him out and about. He must have sensed that you were here. A newcomer. That's him—

always wanting to assert his territory. Unfortunately, I'm not as strong as he is. We've gotten into our fights

before, but I always lose, and it's painful. And Aiden's never around to see it. He's been punished, but it hasn't done much good. I'm sorry, but the other 22 of us are great, I promise. Every family has its rotten apple."

As Polly talked, Cain slowly approached, now about 30 yards away.

Rose's growling grew louder as he walked in their direction. As he walked past Rose, her growl turned into a snarl, and Cain reached down and smacked Rose as hard as he could, right on the nose. Rose, still a puppy, just yelped and cowered.

Caitlin was outraged.

"Don't you touch my dog!" she screamed.

"Is that which you call it?" Cain answered in a dark, guttural voice.

Caitlin could feel the rage beginning to well inside of her. This was her first experience of true vampire anger, and it far exceeded anything she had ever felt as a human. She only hoped that she could control it.

Cain stopped just a few feet before them. He looked Caitlin up and down with something like a scowl.

Caitlin felt as if she were being violated.

"So what's this new riffraff that washed on shore?" Cain asked, glaring at her.

"Don't you talk to her that way," Polly said.

Cain looked at her maliciously. "I'll talk to her anyway I please," he said slowly. "And there's nothing you can do about it."

He turned back to Caitlin.

"I asked you a question."

Caitlin met his dark, raging eyes, and felt the hatred pouring through them.

"It wasn't a question," Caitlin shot back. "And even if it was, I wouldn't answer it," she added defiantly, through gritted teeth.

Cain slowly shook his head and smiled.

"You have a big learning curve ahead of you," he said. "You're going to need to learn who's boss around here."

"You're not boss of anyone," Polly said, "even if you like to think—"

Cain suddenly reached back and smacked Polly hard, right across the face. It had all happened so fast. Polly was shocked, and Caitlin could see that she was too scared to fight back.

But Caitlin wasn't. Caitlin couldn't control it any longer, and she let her rage overcome her. She heard a guttural growl rise up within her, as she leaned her head back and roared.

She charged right for Cain, her hands out, going right for his throat. She grabbed it with both hands, and kept charging, pushing him back further and further.

Cain, in shock, stared back, eyes wide, unable to breathe, clearly shocked that anyone would dare fight back.

He reached up and grabbed Caitlin's wrists, trying to shake loose her grip. He must've assumed he could, since he must have been stronger than anyone there.

But he was in for another shock. Caitlin carried a strength which Cain clearly could not understand. He was unable to pry loose her fingers.

Caitlin finally drove him right down to the ground, landing on top of him, both hands still on his throat, squeezing him to death.

Cain kicked and struggled, but there was nothing he could do. Caitlin was winning, and she was going to kill him.

Even in her haze, Caitlin wondered if one vampire could kill another, and the more that she choked Cain, the more she felt that she could. That she *would*. She had no intention of stopping.

Caitlin dimly heard a bell ringing again and again, and within seconds, the courtyard was filled with vampires, dozens of them, all crowding around, watching, shouting. The entire coven had gathered to watch.

Apparently, no one wanted to interfere. Maybe they all would be happy to see Cain killed.

And so would she. All of Caitlin's anger, all of her upset, all of her disappointment—towards Caleb, towards her brother—it all converged at once, found its subject in this bully. He had picked the wrong girl to bully at the wrong time.

If Caitlin was certain of anything, it was that she would indeed choke this boy to death.

## ELEVEN

Caleb flew over the Manhattan night sky, Sera trailing behind him, and as he dove lower, flying over the Bronx, he could see, with his vampire vision, the details of what was happening on the streets below. It was mayhem. Humans were fighting humans, stores were being looted, cars were piled up in the streets. It looked as if a war had broken out.

Worse, Caleb spotted vampires of the Blacktide Coven spread throughout the streets, attacking humans. Humans ran in every direction, from the vampires, from each other, from those infected with the Bubonic Plague, and from the occasional policeman. No one knew who was attacking who, it was clear. And it was also clear that the victors were the vampires. They were feeding everywhere, in a frenzy, on humans. Blood lined the streets.

Caleb's heart sank. He felt sorry for the humans, and angry that the other vampire covens would act with such impunity, especially right in his coven's neighborhood. Clearly, this was all being orchestrated. Surely Kyle must have returned to his coven with the Sword, and now, they must all feel invincible.

It would only be a matter of time until Caleb's coven was attacked itself. And by then, Caleb knew, it would be too late.

Caleb flew over the ramparts of the Cloisters and landed on its wide outer patio, Sera a few feet behind him. She was still there, always on his heels. He never seemed able to get rid of her. She had followed him in flight, all the way from Pollepel Island. He knew that she would. But that didn't mean he had to acknowledge her.

She had come to him on Pollepel on a mission to bring him back, and now here he was, and she must have imagined herself to be the returning victor. But he wouldn't let her claim that victory. He had decided to return on his own volition, for his own reasons. What she failed to see, what she always failed to see, is that it had absolutely nothing to do with her.

Caleb strode across the stone patio, past dozens of vampire guards, who all came to attention as he walked. Caleb had never seemed quite this display of strength before; his coven must truly be on guard. Usually, there were just two guards; now, with a quick glance, he noted at least 50. All soldiers, all armed, and all watching the night sky.

Caleb was sure that, if they hadn't had recognized him, they would have attacked him before he'd even reached the ground.

"Aren't you going to wait for me?" Sera asked, marching up beside him as the large, arched door was opened for them.

Caleb ignored her, continuing his march—until he felt her cold, icy grip on his arm, felt her fingers digging into his flesh. She stopped him, and turned him to face her.

"I will not be disrespected by you in front of our people," she snapped in a hushed tone. "We will enter together. We are still a couple."

"We are *not* a couple," Caleb shot back. "I don't know how many times I can tell you this."

"Just because you don't think we are, doesn't mean that we aren't," Sera shot back, equally determined. "You married me 600 years ago. There are no divorces in the vampire world. Our separation was never sanctioned."

"I don't need it to be sanctioned," Caleb said. "Our marriage was a mistake. It was 600 years ago. You really need to let this go. I don't need a governing body to tell me I'm allowed to separate."

"Oh, but you do," Sera said. "Without their sanction, you're violating our law. You're subject to punishment, and always will be."

Caleb laughed in derision. "You're really delusional, aren't you? Do you really think I fear punishment, whether from them or anyone else? I have never lived my life in fear of authority."

She stepped closer to him, out of earshot of all the soldiers now looking their way.

She whispered, "I can tell them more. I can tell them about you and that human. Caitlin. You violated our sacred law in sleeping with her. You know the punishment."

Caleb stared back, his eyes becoming cold with rage.

"And more than that," she said, "even more, I can tell them that you turned her. No one sanctioned you to do that, either. And that is something they would *never* accept. They would kill you for that, you know."

Caleb clenched his jaw.

"Then tell them," he said, calling her bluff.

She stared back at him, cold and hard. He knew that she would never tell. If they killed Caleb, that would leave her with no one to obsess over. She needed him alive. As much as she wanted to blackmail him, they were empty threats.

And even if she did tell them, he really, truly didn't care. He was done answering to vampire organizations. He would live his life now as he wished. The security of his coven no longer meant as much to him as it once did. He wasn't here to beg for their pardon. He was here to warn them, to save them. If they didn't want his help, he would be just as happy to leave this place for good.

He desperately missed Caitlin already. He could feel it, like a tangible thing, sitting in his chest.

He hated being away from her. And he hated even more that while he was away from her, he had to have Sera clinging to his side, this crazy woman who simply refused to accept reality.

Caleb turned and walked through the door, entering the inner stone courtyard of the cloisters, Sera right beside him. She just wouldn't quit. The two of them strutted down the arched, stone corridor, side by side, her pretending for all the world that they were a couple.

They walked down another corridor, turned through a small, stone archway, and found themselves on a wide landing, about to descend a staircase. There, waiting to greet them, was Samuel. Caleb's brother.

Samuel was flanked by a dozen vampire soldiers and his face was grim.

Caleb stopped before him, and their eyes met. They were as close as brothers could be, yet outwardly, they never showed it. They didn't embrace each other, didn't even shake hands. They just stood there, a few feet away, staring at each other, each nodding back to the other with a look of mutual recognition and respect.

"Caleb," Samuel said flatly.

"Samuel," Caleb answered.

"You have come back to us," Samuel said. "That is good. We need you now."

"I have much to report to the council," Caleb said. "I only hope that they are willing to hear it."

Samuel nodded back, ever so slightly. "As do I," he said.

Samuel's men parted ways for Caleb and Sera, and as the two of them walked down the winding staircase, Samuel's men fell in behind them. The entire entourage walked through the lower level of the cloisters, through a room of sarcophagi, through a room of artifacts, until they finally reached the roped off, circular staircase.

The two guards standing before it stepped aside, pulled back the rope, and opened the wooden door. Caleb entered, followed by the group, and soon they were all descending, lower and lower beneath the cloisters.

They entered a huge, subterranean chamber, hundreds of feet long, wide and high. Unlike other times he had been here, the room was completely filled with the vampires of his coven. Caleb had never seen it so crowded. Usually, there were but a few dozen vampires lounging about. Now there seemed to be at least 1000 of his coven members, vampires he hadn't seen in centuries, all filling the room, pacing and agitated, talking to each other in harsh tones.

As Caleb and his entourage entered, the chaos seem to slowly focus on them. The chamber parted ways for them, and it slowly quieted. A hushed silence of anticipation spread.

They knew where Caleb was headed. At the far end of the room was a raised dais, on which sat the Grand Council, a panel of seven judges. Their coven's leadership. Usually the Council met in a side chamber, but on nights like tonight, when there was unprecedented crisis, they met in the large chamber.

As Caleb suspected, there they were, sitting there, already glaring harshly down at him. Caleb could not remember a single time in thousands of years when their expression held anything but judgment. He suspected that tonight would be the worst of all.

These men were of the old guard, and over the centuries, Caleb had been feeling that they were no longer the right men to lead his coven. Their judgments were archaic, of another era. They were too rigid, too

uncompromising. Of course, they claimed their rigidity is precisely what had kept their coven alive for so many thousands of years. But Caleb was, of late, feeling just the opposite. Their rigid attitude, he felt, was actually endangering their coven in these quickly shifting times.

Caleb already suspected what they would say in response to his report. To take no action. To wait it out. To not get involved. Their standard method of action. Always conservative, safe, patient.

Always against change.

They would be especially angry with him this time, because he had proved them wrong. Weeks ago, Caleb had insisted that the Sword existed, and that Caitlin could lead them to it. They had shot him down, had insisted that such a Sword was just a fable, a child's tale. Now, clearly, he was right.

This is probably why these thousands of vampires hushed at the sight of him, afforded him such respect. And probably why these judges looked even more harsh than usual.

The room was now absolutely still as Caleb stopped before the panel, just ten feet away. They glared down in silence.

Caleb knew he should bow down in reverence. But something inside him just didn't feel like it anymore. He owed these people nothing. They had cast him out, and he was not there to ask for anything. He was there to save them. Whether they deserved it or not.

Their expressions hardened.

"Caleb of the White Coven," began the lead judge, in the center of the panel. "We summoned you to give us a report. But first you must answer for your past crimes. You violated the law in leaving us without permission. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Caleb stared back, insolent.

"I have returned here tonight to warn you, and to save you. Not to ask for your forgiveness," he snapped.

The crowd erupted in an astonished gasp. No one ever spoke to the judges like this.

"SILENCE!" yelled an administrator, banging the stone floor with his iron staff. Eventually, the room died down.

"Really?" said one of the judges. "And to save us from *what*, exactly?"

"Have you not seen what's going on outside your gates?" Caleb asked. "Have you not seen the war that is even now spreading across Manhattan?"

"We have seen it. You are not the only one with powers of observation. And of what concern is it to us?"

"Concern?" Caleb asked, dumbfounded. Had these people really become that complacent, that indifferent? Had they really hardened their hearts so much towards the human race?

"If you think this war will be limited to humans, you are gravely mistaken," Caleb continued.

"That war was begun by the Blacktide Coven. After they wipe out the humans, I assure you they will turn their full attention towards us, and towards all of our brother and sister covens throughout Manhattan—if not the country. It is the beginning of a full scale war."

"Or they are simply trying to goad us out," snapped back another judge. "Perhaps our reacting to this crisis is exactly what they want. They want us out of our stronghold. Outside, we will be more vulnerable to attack. Leaving these walls would be the most foolish thing we could do."

Caleb shook his head in amazement. He could not believe this vampire's ignorance. They had been sheltered under here for far too long.

"You are wrong," Caleb said.

Again, the room erupted in an astonished gasp, and the administrator had to bang his staff repeatedly.

"This is no pretend war," Caleb continued. "It is no trick. It is no ruse to goad you out. It is very real. When it is over, every human on this island will be dead. And the Blacktide Coven, and all of their brother and sister covens, will be gorged with blood, stronger than ever. I assure you, when they are ready, they will concentrate all of their forces on our coven. By waiting here, by letting them grow stronger, you make yourselves—all of us—a target. And if you wait too long, it will be too late.

"What's more, they have a secret weapon at their disposal," Caleb added, bracing himself for the reaction. "They now have the Sword."

The room erupted in a loud, chaotic murmur. No matter how much the administrators screamed for silence and banged their staffs, they simply could not get it to quiet down. It went on for minutes.

"I have seen it!" Caleb screamed over the crowd, and as he did, it slowly quieted. "I have seen it with my own eyes. It does exist. It is not a fable. You are wrong. It is very real. And it is now in the possession of the Blacktide Coven. It is a weapon beyond which we have ever seen, and it will surely wipe us out. It makes immortality a thing of the past."

"You say that you have seen it," said another judge. "If so, why do you not have it? Why did you not bring it back to us?"

It was a that question Caleb had been bracing himself for, one which he felt ashamed about.

"Because I failed," he said simply. "I was ambushed, and outnumbered, and I let it slip from my grasp. This is an action for which I take full responsibility.

"And that is why I've come here to warn you. They *do* have the sword. They have started this war. It will spread to us. And we must act now.

"I propose that we send our legions out now, to attack before they grow strong in numbers. If we concentrate all of our force on them, if we catch them by surprise, we might just be able to contain them downtown, and to get back the Sword. Speed and surprise are the key. I will gladly go first, and put myself on the front line."

Another murmur spread throughout the room, as the judges looked at each other, this time caught off guard, and exchanged words. This went on for quite some time.

Finally, the center judge cleared his throat, and the administrators banged their staffs, bringing the room to silence.

"You are right about one thing, Caleb," the judges began. "You have indeed failed. You have defied us at every turn, and if what you say about the Sword is true, you and you alone are to blame for letting it go. Far from coming here to rescue us, you have brought nothing but harm and danger upon your coven and your people. You should be ashamed.

"And how insolent of you to think that you could rescue us. You are just one vampire. We have all lived collectively for thousands of years. We don't need your help, whatever you may think. This is our stronghold,

and it always has been. Here we have all the defenses in the weaponry to protect ourselves from any attack. Here we are strong in numbers. Out there, we will be fragmented, and we will lose our force.

"No, the best course of action is for us to stay here, and to fight the war here, if there will even be one. And we don't even believe that there will. This will surely all blow over, as it always does."

"And then what of the humans?" Caleb asked. "Are you just going to let them all be slaughtered? Have we no responsibility to save them?"

"Our responsibility is to ourselves, to our coven. We rescue humans when it is convenient to us.

Now it is not. We can let them die. More of them will always be coming. But we—we are a special breed."

"How convenient," Caleb said. "Only protect the humans when it is convenient for you. That does not sound like the creed of a warrior to me."

The judge scowled back.

"This meeting is adjourned. Last we met, we sentenced you to 50 years confinement. This time, your punishment is banishment. You are no longer a member of this coven. Your face will not be recognized. You are never welcome on these grounds again, and if you come, you will be killed on sight. Gather your belongings, and be gone from here."

With that, the administrator banged his staff, and the room erupted into chaos.

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Caleb stormed away from the grand hall, and back into the corridor. He continued down the hall, and up the staircase, taking them two at a time. He had to get away from all of this, from all the internal politics which he despised. All of these judges' pronouncements, judgments, delays...it was also so old-school, so resistant to change. So predictable. He couldn't stand it.

He was glad they had formally banished him. At least now it was official. In his heart, he felt that this was not a place for him anymore. The only real attachment he had to it anymore was his brother. And memories.

Caleb burst out of the spiral staircase and into the lower level of the Cloisters, and as he did, he felt a strong hand on his shoulder. He turned.

Samuel looked back with concern etched across his brow, dozens of soldiers behind him.

"Where will you go?" Samuel asked.

Caleb wasn't quite sure of the answer himself. All he knew was that it would be away from here.

He knew that he couldn't stand by and let all those humans die. And he knew that he had to attack the Blacktide Coven, had to try to get the Sword. If he had to attack them alone, then so be it. He knew it was suicide, but he had to try.

"To get the Sword," Caleb answered.

"By yourself?"

"What choice do I have? It was stolen from my grasp. I feel obliged. Moreover, I can't let all of these humans die. Not on my watch."

Samuel nodded. "I see that some things never change. You are bold. And brave."

Caleb allowed himself a small smile. "It runs in the family, my brother."

"I, too, am dissatisfied with the Council," Samuel said. "I agree with you. War must be initiated now. We cannot wait. As you say, their numbers will grow stronger. Sitting here, we only grow weaker."

Caleb looked his brother over.

"I am with you," Samuel said. "As are my men."

Samuel reached out his arm and Caleb took it, clasping each other's forearms.

As they had for thousands of years, Caleb and Samuel would head into battle together. That was all Caleb needed to hear. Now, he felt as if he could war with the legions of the world, and that if he should die, at least he would die with his brother by his side.

"We must bring the weapons," Samuel said. "The sacred weapons."

Caleb looked at him for a second, and then remembered. Of course.

They turned and walked down the corridor, into the small treasure room of the Cloisters. They stopped before a vertical glass case, inside of which sat a four-foot ivory staff, intricately carved, with a round circular head and mysterious etchings all over it.

Samuel reached over and with two hands gently picked up the heavy glass case and removed it.

Now they could see it more clearly: the ivory staff, the crozier, one of the greatest weapons of their coven. It had been in their safekeeping for thousands of years, reserved for the time of greatest war.

"Can we take it?"

"It is yours," Samuel said. "You won it in battle. No member of this coven has as great a right to it as you. Go ahead."

Caleb reached in and slowly grasped the staff. A bolt of electricity coursed through his body as he squeezed it. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, remembering back thousands of years. This was a weapon of wonder. It was not on par with the magical Sword they had found in the King's Chapel, but it was still formidable. It could still maim most vampires, especially those of an evil inclination.

Caleb grabbed the staff with both hands, holding it close, examining it.

As he did, Samuel reached in and took out the large, blue cloak that hung beside it. The cloak of power had been a shield for their kind for thousands of years. With it, a vampire was nearly invincible. And it was always to be worn by the one who wielded the staff.

Samuel draped the cloak over Caleb's shoulders. Caleb felt an energy wash over his body as the cloth hugged him securely. With the cloak on and the staff in hand, Caleb felt invincible, ready for battle.

"And you?" Caleb asked his brother.

Caleb thought of all the incredible weapons they had hidden throughout the Cloisters. The swords, staffs, shields, cloaks—it was an arsenal. He wondered which weapon Samuel would choose.

Samuel took only a few steps, to the center of the room, and removed a small, glass case.

Of course. It had always been Samuel's favorite.

The reliquary hand. A large gauntlet, made entirely of gold, with two of its fingers outstretched, this was an incredible weapon. It acted both as a weapon and as a shield, and incredible power to the vampire who wore it.

Samuel reached in, extracted it, and put it on his right hand. Already, he seemed formidable.  
“And what of us?” suddenly shrieked a voice.  
Out of nowhere, Sera approached, marching in between them and scowling at Caleb.  
“Have you forgotten about us?” she yelled at Caleb, furious. “You’re not going anywhere. You will stay here, safe and sound with me. The council’s ruling means nothing in this time of war. You can stay here safely, and you and I shall be together. You’re not going to war, and neither are you,” she said, facing Samuel. “You are both foolish, reckless. You’ll both certainly be killed. Especially if the Sword exists. Your weapons are powerful, but nothing next to the Sword.”  
“That is a choice for Caleb to make,” Samuel said.  
“Wrong!” Sera shrieked. “Caleb is mine!”  
Samuel, helpless to argue with Sera, merely looked at Caleb.  
“Give us a minute,” Caleb said to Samuel, as he took Sera by the arm and led her out the room.  
“Be quick,” Samuel said. “Our time is short.”

\*

Before they had even entered the side chamber, Sera was already reeling towards Caleb, screaming.  
“You know that you cannot win!” Sera yelled. “You are being foolish. And you will drag your brother into it. The two of you, always so foolish. You will both certainly die this time.”  
“That is our choice to make,” Caleb said.  
“No it’s not!” Sera yelled. “You belong to me, too.”  
“I do *not* belong to you,” Caleb snapped. “I do not belong to anyone! Least of all you.”  
“We can leave this place,” Sera said. “Just you and I together. We can start our future together. Now is our time. We can go back to that castle in Europe. We can try to have another child—”  
“Sera!” Caleb snapped. He had no patience for this. “Listen to yourself. You’re not making any sense. I have told you countless times that I do not love you anymore—”  
“You loved me once. You can learn to love me again,” she said, equally determined. “We will be together. That is all that matters. Over time, your feelings may change—”  
Caleb had heard enough. He couldn’t take any more of this. Hundreds of years of being in this coven had made her crazy. She could not be reasoned with.  
He turned and walked out of the room.  
But she used her vampire speed to block his way. She stood there, blocking his exit. Her face looked distorted with rage and fear.  
“You *cannot* leave me!” Sera yelled.  
“I *am* leaving you,” Caleb said. “I am leaving this entire coven. For good.”  
“For what? For your little battle? And then to run off with your little whore?”  
Caleb could feel himself fuming at her words.  
“That’s it, isn’t it?” she yelled. “You are willing to give up everything, to sacrifice everything—even our love, for that stupid little girl. Well, I’ll tell you,” she said, suddenly smiling in a vicious way, “your girl won’t be waiting for you anymore. You can be sure of that.”  
“What do you mean?”  
Sera paused, smiling, reveling in the moment.  
“I told her.”  
Caleb’s mind spun as he tried to figure out what it was she might have told Caitlin. He knew that whatever it was, it could not be good.  
“What exactly did you tell her?” Caleb asked, slowly, enunciating each word.  
Sera’s smile grew wider, more vicious. “I told her everything about us. *Everything.*”  
Caleb thought. *Everything.* That could only mean one thing.  
“You told her about Jade, didn’t you?” Caleb asked, fearing that she had, and knowing already from the look in her eyes that she had, indeed, told Caitlin about their child.  
Sera’s smile was vindictive now. “Yes. She knows we have a child together. And she knows that you love me more. And that you always will.”  
“*Have?*” Caleb asked. “You told her that we *have* a child together? Or *had?*”  
Sera didn’t answer, but only smiled wider. Caleb grabbed her by the shoulders.  
“You misled her!” he yelled. “You misled her on purpose!”  
“Oh, Caleb,” Sera said, shaking her head, “you are so naïve. Who in this world has not misled someone else? Don’t you know by now that all of love is based on lies?”  
She was sicker than Caleb thought.  
He shook his head in disgust, and, before he could do anything rash, he took two steps past her and strutted out the door.  
“That’s right,” yelled the voice behind her. “Now you’ll listen! Now you won’t go anywhere!”

\*

Caleb strutted out of the room, his cloak over his shoulders, staff in hand, and met his brother.  
“I need but one more minute, my brother,” Caleb said.  
“What is it?” Samuel asked.  
“I need to set wrongs right,” Caleb answered.  
Samuel nodded, seeing his brother’s resolve. “Day breaks soon. Hurry at your task.”  
Caleb strutted down the hall, by himself, into a side chamber, slamming and locking the door behind him. This room had been his study. A small, stone room, with high arched ceilings and stained-glass.  
He had always come here to collect his thoughts.  
He sat at the simple, wooden, medieval desk, took out a piece of old parchment, and a feathered quill, dipped it in ink, and began to write.  
*My Dearest Caitlin,*  
*I fear for what Sera may have told you, but rest assured, whatever it was, it was but half the truth.*

*Yes, at one moment in time, Sera and I did have a child together. A boy. His name was Jade. I loved him dearly, so very much. Jade, like you, was a half-breed, for when I first married Sera, she was but a human. Jade, I tear to say, did not live long.*

*My heart is with Jade every day, but I fear it is only in spiritual form. He has not walked this Earth for hundreds of years.*

*I meant to tell you of him, in good time, but we had not the right moment to share this memory. I presume you assume I was withholding something sacred from you, and in some ways, I was, but only due to my own deepest sadness. And insecurity. You see, I was afraid of losing you. And apparently, I already have.*

*Please trust that there is nothing between myself and Sera, and there has not been for hundreds of years. I am deeply sorry if she gave another impression. I was not kissing her, despite appearances: she had thrust herself upon me, and I was merely pushing her off.*

*Know how much I love you, and how much I'm thinking of you even now. I eagerly anticipate the end of this war, and a new life somewhere far from here, that is, if you are in it.*

*Please know that you hold my heart in this letter.*

*My deepest affection,*

*Caleb*

Caleb gently folded the parchment, again and again, until it was a tiny square, barely bigger than his palm. Then he walked to the large, open window, raised a finger to his mouth, and whistled.

Within seconds, a huge falcon swooped in, and as Caleb held out his arm, landed perfectly on his wrist. Caleb reached up and stroked the Falcon's head.

"My old friend," Caleb said softly.

It jerked its head back to Caleb, in recognition.

"Deliver this to Caitlin. Pollepel Island. You know where it is."

Caleb stuffed the small piece of paper into a tiny locket around the Falcons neck, and closed it securely.

"Be off!" Caleb yelled, raising his arm.

With that, the falcon flew out the window, and into the night sky.

Suddenly, there was a banging at the door.

Caleb strutted across the room and opened it. There stood Samuel, with all his soldiers.

Caleb grabbed his staff, and walked right towards them.

"I'm ready," Caleb said.

## **TWELVE**

"Caitlin!"

Even in Caitlin's haze, even as she knelt there, choking Cain, there was something about that voice that snapped her out of it. Where had it come from?

A man stepped forward, cutting through the crowd, wearing a long robe and carrying a staff.

With his long, silver hair and long beard to match, he looked like a prophet. He stood there, scowling down at Caitlin, disappointment in his voice.

"Release him!" he said firmly.

As Caitlin looked into his eyes, even in her haze, she could feel that there was something special about this man. She felt as if it were a reunion, as if she had known him for lifetimes. And she respected him.

She was helpless to refuse. Caitlin slowly loosened her grip, and as she did, Caitlin quickly scurried out from under her, gasping and choking, and ran off towards the woods.

Caitlin stood, and faced this man.

Aiden. She was sure it was him.

"Yes, it is me," he said, answering her thoughts. "And you and I have a lot to discuss."

\*

Caitlin walked in silence behind Aiden, as they hiked on a narrow trail through the thick woods of the island. Pollepel, she was starting to realize, was deceptively big: while the huge castle was perched on one corner, once she headed into the interior, the rest of this island was consumed with woods.

They hiked this way and that, weaving left and right, up and down trails. Aiden kept a hard pace, several feet in front of her, and never once slowed or turned back to see if she were following. He must have just assumed she was. He had a magnetic personality; there was something about him that Caitlin couldn't quite place, something that made her follow him whether she wanted to or not. He was clearly a leader.

As they hiked, Caitlin could spot glimpses of the river in the distance, peeking its way through the still bare trees of April. Spring was happening all around them, and the thousands of trees were all starting to bud, giving a pale green shimmer to the forest. This place so beautiful, and with a pang, Caitlin suddenly realized that she didn't want to leave it. She was struck by a sudden fear, as it crossed her mind that he might kick her out already.

She hadn't meant to attack Cain like that. But she couldn't stand bullies, and he was one of the more repulsive bullies she had ever encountered, and she just couldn't control herself. It seemed to always keep coming back to that: controlling herself. When she was a human she couldn't do it, when she was a half-breed, she certainly couldn't do it—and now that she was a true vampire, it seemed like she was no better. When the rage built up inside her, she just couldn't keep it down. She didn't know Aiden, but she could already feel that he disapproved of her actions.

They hiked to the top of a ridge, then down the other side of it. Caitlin could see families of deer bounding in every direction, hurrying to get out of their way. This must be where the coven caught their nightly dinner.

As they rounded yet another hill, a structure finally came into view. Perched on the water's edge, in a sandy clearing, was a small stone structure. It was the size of a one-bedroom cottage, but built in the same ancient fashion of the Scottish castle on the other side of the island. This must be where Aiden stayed.

Aiden strutted forward and entered the structure without a word, opening its small arched, medieval door, and leaving it open for Caitlin to follow. Knots formed in her stomach, as she felt as if she were being called into the principal's office. She probably deserved it. She still felt that she was right to stick up for herself—and more



importantly for Polly—but she probably shouldn't have pushed as hard as she had. She should have just knocked Cain around and let him go. But that wasn't her. She just couldn't let things go. At least she was starting to realize that about herself. That was a start.

She entered the small, stone cottage. It was dimly lit, and she walked down a small hallway, into Aiden's office.

This room, too, was carved of a medieval stone, with an arched ceiling and two big, arched windows which looked out at the river. It was simple and austere, and the view was beautiful, the river seeming to fill the entire room.

Caitlin sat in the large chair opposite his desk, as Aiden sat behind it. Caitlin could feel the river breezes coming in through the open windows, and it refreshed her. She turned and focused on Aiden.

He sat behind his desk and stared at her. He was an unusual man—or vampire, that is. He was tall and broad, and his long silver hair, neatly combed, fell down past his shoulders, and blended into his beard. He had intense blue eyes which fixed on her, and didn't waiver. He looked to be in his 60s, but she knew he was far older than that. This was an intense man. Not the kind of man who seemed to joke around. Ever. Not that he seemed stern—he didn't. He just didn't seem frivolous.

He stared at Caitlin intently, looking into her eyes, and she sensed that he was finding out all that he needed just by staring. It made her uncomfortable. She wondered what he was discovering.

"I took you in here," he began, in an official sounding, deep voice which nonetheless relaxed her, "because Caleb asked me to. Consider it a favor to an old friend. He assured me that you would be harmonious, easy to get along with, a good fit with the rest of my coven. As you know, there are only 23 of us—24 now, with you here—and I accept new vampires very, very selectively. We must all live in harmony with one another if we are to get along here."

"I didn't start the fight," Caitlin said defensively. "Cain started it. Why don't you reprimand him? He's the jerk."

The second she said it, Caitlin knew that she was right, but she also knew that, as always, she'd spoken before thinking, and shouldn't have been quite so harsh.

"Cain has his issues, you are correct. I do not excuse his behavior. But I do not give up on my people, even if they have problems. That is what this coven is about. We must learn to work through our differences, to overcome our inner faults. Cain is working on it. Not as hard as he needs to be, I admit. But he will be held accountable for his actions today, I assure you."

Caitlin began to speak, but he held up his hand.

"Despite what you may think, I did not bring you here to reprimand you. On the contrary, I am quite proud of how you handled yourself today, and of how you stuck up for Polly."

Caitlin suddenly felt her whole body relax. She had never, in her life, heard anyone say that they were proud of her. She suddenly viewed Aiden in a different light. She liked him. He seemed like the father figure she'd never had.

"I already know your side of the story. And I know his. In truth, I saw it all happen before it did," he said cryptically.

That threw Caitlin for a loop. Could Aiden see the future? And if he could, why hadn't he stopped it? She was more and more intrigued by him.

"So then why am I here?" Caitlin asked.

Aiden looked at her for a moment, then suddenly turned and looked out the window, at the river, and exhaled deeply. As he spoke, he looked out at the water.

"It was time for me to meet you," he said. "To tell you about this place. I assume that Polly already filled you in," he said and broke into a smile. "She is not, how do we say, afraid of a good conversation."

"But there is more you must know. Pollepel Island is a very special place. I take in recruits selectively, and train them thoroughly. While everyone here is a misfit in their own way, is an outcast to the vampire community, everyone who leaves here is a force to be reckoned with. And we, collectively, are a force to be reckoned with. I do not like to think of myself as a leader. I prefer to think of myself as a mentor. I supervise all the training that takes place here, and I see to it that every vampire here becomes the best that he or she can be.

"When you leave here, I assure you, you will be the very best you can be in every skill of vampire warfare," he said. "The funny thing is, no one who comes here ever wants to leave, and never has.

We are a band apart.

"We are also a family, and I take family matters very seriously. We train together, we dine together, we share duties, and we watch each other's backs. Always. Which is exactly why behavior like Cain's was so unacceptable. He very rarely acts this way. I'm sure that the presence of a new coven member is what disturbed him. It will not happen again, I assure you."

He leaned back and collected his thoughts.

"If you want to stay here, if you want to be part of our family, there are certain rules that must be followed. You must be willing to share in our work duties. You must be willing to stand for guard duty. You must be willing to train your hardest, and to pledge an oath of loyalty to your fellow coven members. You are free to leave at any time, but if you leave without my permission, you may never return. We take this matter very seriously, so think strongly before you do anything rash."

He fixed his eyes on her.

Caitlin's mind reeled, as she thought it all through. She loved being here already, loved Polly, loved the island, and really liked Aiden. But she was also a bit nervous. To never leave without permission? The reality began to sink in that this might really be her new home. And more importantly, that she might not ever see Caleb again.

She was still furious at him, of course, and a strong part of her felt as if he'd abandoned her, that he loved someone else, that he didn't even care anymore. So she shouldn't even have cared, and shouldn't have thought twice.

But there was still a small, nagging part of her that wondered. Did he still care for her? Was there some misunderstanding? And if so, should she go to him?

There was also a part of her that still worried about Sam. After all, he was her brother, and he had been taken hostage. A part of her felt that Sam had betrayed her, too, had somehow led Samantha right to the King's Chapel to steal the Sword—and that even if she found him, he'd have no interest. But still, there was a small,

nagging part that wondered. Was Sam in danger? Did he need her help?

And what of her search for her Dad? She still really wanted to know who he was, where he was. She felt as if she had been so close. She wanted to get back out there, to look deeper. And if it was all true, if she really was the One, didn't she have some sort of special mission? Shouldn't she be out there saving the world, or something like that? Was it right for her to sit here, safe and protected on this island? Especially while war was breaking out in Manhattan?

She wanted to stay here, she really did, but a part of her worried that maybe she had a duty, an obligation, to be somewhere else.

"Wrong," Aiden said suddenly, startling her, as he read her mind. "This is exactly where you are meant to be right now."

The idea that he could reach into her mind and hear exactly what she was thinking freaked her out. Of course he could. She should have known better.

"But what of my brother?" she asked.

He slowly shook his head.

"Sam is under the influence of some very dark forces. I'm afraid there is nothing you can do for him now."

Caitlin sat up, alarmed. "What do you mean? That makes it sound like he needs my help."

"It's too late for him," Aiden answered firmly. "I know that is hard for you to accept, but you must. If you try to contact him, I assure you, you will only hurt yourself. And him. If you want to save yourself, and others, you must let him go."

"And what of Caleb?" Caitlin asked tentatively, almost afraid to ask. She wanted to know if Caleb needed her, and more importantly, if he still loved her. But she was afraid to ask it, so she just let the general question suffice.

Aiden breathed deeply. "He dropped you here for a reason. This is where he wants you to be right now."

What did that mean? Did that mean that he still loved her? That he wanted her safe and protected? Or that he wanted to get rid of her?

"You have to let Caleb go for now," Aiden said. "You must focus on your training. You cannot be distracted. I can already feel how distracted you are by him, and that is a very dangerous place to be. Your thoughts must be clear. Completely empty. Do you understand me?"

Caitlin looked down and felt her cheeks flushed, embarrassed. She slowly nodded.

"And what about my search for my father?" Caitlin asked. "Is it true that I'm the One? What does that mean exactly? Does it mean I'm supposed to save the vampire race or something? Isn't there something I'm supposed to be doing? Is it wrong for me to just sit here?" she asked, the questions all pouring out at once.

"You do, indeed, hail from a very special lineage," Aiden said slowly. "Your father is a remarkable man. I know that you want to find him, and I know that he wants to see you. More importantly, you will indeed be the key to finding the weapon that can save both mankind and the vampire race."

Caitlin looked at him intently.

"What do you mean? I thought that was the Sword? I thought we already found it?"

He smiled. "I see that you have not thought carefully of the riddle. I'm surprised at you."

Caitlin thought. *The riddle?* What had she overlooked?

"*The Rose and Thorn*," he continued. "Don't you see? There are two sides to every dynasty, to every lineage. Caitlin and Sam. And there are two weapons as well. A weapon to attack, and a weapon to protect. The Sword is the weapon to attack. But there is one other weapon. An even greater one: the weapon to protect. The Rose and Thorn. The Thorn is the Sword. And the Rose is the Shield."

"The Shield?" Caitlin asked, amazed.

"The Sword can wipe out the human race," he said, "and portions of the vampire race. But the Shield can save them both. And when you find your father—when you *truly* find your father—he will lead you to the Shield."

Caitlin's mind spun. It was so much to take in.

"So then...shouldn't I be out there? Shouldn't I be searching for him? For the Shield?"

Aiden shook his head again. "You still don't understand. You will never find your father in this lifetime."

Caitlin stared at him, shocked.

"What do you mean?"

"Your father lives in another time. Another century. The only way to find him would be to go back—backwards in time."

Caitlin's eyes opened wide. "Is that possible?" she asked.

"For a vampire it is. But it is not something to be done lightly. It comes with a great price.

Once you go backwards, there is no coming back to the present. Ever. Everything you know, anyone you know, any memory and experience—everything from this lifetime—will be completely wiped away. When you go back, you start all over again. It is irrevocable. Worse, not all vampires survive the trip. You could very well die by trying.

"And there is no guarantee that if you go back, you will find your father, or the Shield. You don't know exactly which time or place he is in right now."

Caitlin's mind reeled as she sat there, considering the implications. Wipe out everything she knew. To wipe out Sam, and Caleb. This place. She couldn't imagine doing that.

"As I said, you are exactly where you need to be right now," he said. "You must heal fully, and you must train. Wherever you go, you cannot go forth until you first become the very best you can be."

He got up from behind the desk and stood before her. She stood, too, sensing that their meeting was coming to a close.

"I would like to have you in our family," he said, "if it is something you choose to accept."

Caitlin didn't have to think hard about that. Not only was there no other alternative she could think of, but she really liked everything she already knew about this place.

"I would be honored," she answered.

He smiled. "Excellent. Your training begins today."

\*

Caitlin stood in a large ring of vampires, all in a wide circle, in the inner courtyard of the castle.

The ground they stood on must have been a training ground, because the grass was all worn down and the floor was comprised of a dusty dirt. Caitlin could feel the heat coming off it on this unusually warm April day. The sun seemed to be shining stronger than she ever felt, even with her skin wraps on.

Her entire coven was out, all standing quietly in the circle, 24 in all. She scanned their faces, and was amazed at how different they all looked. Some were shorter, some taller, some with cropped hair, others with long hair, some with serious expressions and others looking more relaxed. It was split evenly between boys and girls—12 of each. They all looked to be in their teenage years, although she knew they were all far older than that. She couldn't really see their faces clearly—it was hard to focus because she was too nervous. They all stood at attention, in perfect silence, waiting for Aiden to begin.

Aiden took several steps out to the center of the circle, and slowly looked around, surveying them all.

"My fellow beings," Aiden began formally, "it brings me great honor to introduce a new member of our coven. You will do your best to make her feel at home here. She is one of us now.

Everyone, meet Caitlin Paine."

Caitlin never did well in the spotlight, and she was embarrassed by all the attention. She was even more embarrassed to see all of the vampires slowly and formally bow their heads towards her.

Suddenly, Caitlin felt something brush up against her leg, and she looked down and was embarrassed to see Rose interrupting, stepping into the circle, and yelping.

Aiden smiled. "And, of course, how could we forget. Rose. It appears that she would like to be acknowledged, too."

Rose yelped, and the coven laughed.

"OK then," Aiden said, "it seems that we now have all 24 members present."

Rose exited the circle, lying down faithfully behind Caitlin's feet, watching and waiting.

"Before we begin," Aiden continued, "there is someone here who wants to apologize for his past actions."

Cain, standing on the opposite side of the circle, slowly walked into the center. He looked right at Caitlin, remorse and fear in his eyes as he stood there. He seemed very nervous.

"I'm sorry, Caitlin," he said. "My actions were inexcusable. I hope that you will forgive me."

"I do," Caitlin said, and meant it. As she looked at him now, from this distance, he just seemed like a pathetic figure, and seemed genuinely remorseful. She saw no point in harboring a grudge. The past was the past. Besides, he got the worst of it.

Cain retreated back to his place in the circle.

Aiden stepped forward, "All right, let's begin," he yelled, and everyone suddenly broke into action.

Caitlin was disoriented and felt out of place, as the other vampires all broke into perfect order and positions, each teaming up with a partner, and hurrying off to a different section of the courtyard. They each grabbed various weapons off of the racks, and without hesitating, began sparring. Caitlin stood there, watching the frenzy of activity, unsure what to do. She realized she didn't have a partner.

"I've been assigned to you," came a perky voice.

Caitlin turned, and standing there, just a few feet behind her, was a tall, thin, redheaded boy covered in freckles, with cropped hair, large ears and a huge smile. She had never seen anyone look so happy. He almost looked like a cartoon character.

"Assigned?" Caitlin asked.

"I'm your training partner," he said, and reached out a hand. "Patrick," he said.

Caitlin shook his hand—it was long and thin, and very cold. Caitlin couldn't understand how this person could be a fighter.

"Oh, but I can," he said, answering her thoughts, "I can fight very well indeed. But that's for you to find out," he said with a smile and a wink, as he turned and strode off towards a corner of the courtyard.

Caitlin's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. *Of course*, Caitlin thought. *Everyone here can read my thoughts. So stupid. I need to learn how to guard them.*

"Don't be embarrassed," he said, "you'll get used to it. Just follow me. You're wasting time.

Aiden hates it when people waste time," he said, bouncing off.

Caitlin hurried to catch up to him.

"We begin with swords," he said, as he reached the far wall, grabbed two long bamboo swords, and threw one to her. He threw it quick and hard, and Caitlin was surprised at her own reflexes, at how quickly she reacted, grabbing it midair effortlessly. She was a lot quicker now than even she realized.

"We always begin the day with swords," he added. "Later, we'll switch to spears."

Caitlin heard the click-clack all around her, and looked and saw the other vampires all sparring with the bamboo swords, fighting and parrying faster than she had ever seen. They were leaping over each other's heads, flying, rolling, jumping, landing, tackling....They were well-matched, going blow for blow in many cases. When the blows got through, there was the distinctive sound of the whack of bamboo on skin. It looked like it hurt.

Caitlin was about to find out for herself.

"OW!" she screamed, as she felt the sudden sting of bamboo on her hip.

She turned and saw Patrick standing there, smiling, having just whacked her hard in the side.

Her cheeks flushed with anger. "What was that?"

He didn't answer, but slashed at her again. At the last second, she raised her sword and blocked the blow, with a loud bamboo clack, right before it hit her shoulder. He was so fast. She realized he could fight after all.

"Time for talking is over," Patrick said. "Now we fight!"

Caitlin faced him, grabbing her hilt with both hands, and fully focused on the moment. She was filled with rage, and charged right at him, swinging as hard as she could, right for his shoulder.

He ably sidestepped it, and whacked her hard on the butt as he did.

Caitlin felt the pain. She spun, now was twice as mad.

Annoyingly, he only continued to smile back. Nothing seemed to faze this kid.

"You telegraph everything you do," he said. "I saw that strike coming a mile away."

Caitlin charged like a bull, slashing every which way. But he blocked her blow for blow, then leapt over

her with a somersault, and whacked her on her back.

That one really hurt, and Caitlin wheeled, furious.

"Just because you're angry, doesn't mean you're good," he said. "You need to learn to control your emotions. They won't serve you on the battlefield."

Caitlin had been about to attack again, but something about his words struck her. He was right.

She was cursing with rage, and she was not thinking clearly.

"Harness your anger. Make it work for you. Don't work for it. Don't let it go. Just control it.

Fight *with* it."

Caitlin came at him again, swinging blow for blow, he blocking each one. She was starting to feel what he meant. Her anger was still there, but it was not so out of control. She brought it down a notch. And she began to feel much more clearheaded, more focused.

She came in with one particular blow, and he blocked it and locked her sword, holding it there.

They stood there, deadlocked, only inches from each other's faces.

She looked at his face, and could see him still, maddeningly, smiling back.

"So," he grunted with a tremendous effort, as he struggled to hold back her sword, "are you single?"

This caught Caitlin so off guard that she lost her concentration, just long enough for him to crouch down and sweep her leg out from under her. She landed flat on her back on the ground, hard, a cloud of dust rising over. She looked up and saw the point of his sword fixed over her throat.

Of course, he was still smiling.

"You lose your focus too easily," he said and in one motion he reached down, grabbed her hand, and pulled her up to her feet. "Way too easily. Something is distracting you."

Caitlin thought about it, and realized he was right. Caleb. He was still hovering, at the periphery of her consciousness. This fighting was helping her forget, but still, she didn't quite feel herself. The intense fighting had, for a moment, pulled her out of her sadness. But still, it remained.

"Empty mind," he chided. "If anything's in there, you'll never be able to fight."

They both stood there, panting, exhausted, taking a break. She wiped the sweat from her forehead, and realized he was right. Her mind was full. Distracted.

"But I wasn't just saying that, you know," he added. "I really would like to take you out."

She looked at him, and he was still smiling, and she could see that he really meant it.

*Great.* Not even here an hour, and already there were boy troubles. They had just met. They had not even known each other an hour. How could he already want to take her out? Is this how all vampires acted? Did everything move so quickly in this world? It was mind-boggling. She didn't even know what vampire etiquette was.

She liked Patrick, she did, but not as anything more than a friend. How could she tell him that?

Talk about awkward. On this island, there was really nowhere to go.

"I'm sorry Patrick," she said softly, "I'm already taken."

"I see," he said, nodding, still smiling. "Well, maybe you'll change your mind."

"Maybe," Caitlin said, knowing she never would. But she couldn't let him down too harshly. It was a small island, after all.

Fortunately, her letdown didn't seem to interrupt their training. They fought for hours and hours more, as did all of their covenmates, parrying blow for blow. Occasionally, Patrick would throw out some guidance, some word of wisdom here or there. He clearly knew what he was doing. And he was good. Looking at him, she never would have expected he'd been able to fight at all. She was really surprised.

Finally, just as she reached a point of exhaustion, to wonder how much longer this training could possibly go on, she heard a bell ring.

Patrick, and all the vampires around them, suddenly dropped their weapons, and hurried off in a certain direction.

Caitlin was puzzled.

"Lunch!" Patrick called over his shoulder, as he headed off into the crowd.

*Thank goodness,* she thought. She needed a break.

As Caitlin followed the group towards the far end of the courtyard, Polly suddenly came up along beside her. As usual, Polly had a big smile on her face, and her eyes were shining.

"Lucky girl," Polly said.

Caitlin looked at her, not knowing what she was talking about.

"You got paired up with Patrick," she said.

Caitlin followed Polly's gaze towards Patrick, and she suddenly realized that Polly liked him.

"I've been trying to get his attention for years," Polly said, "but he doesn't seem to notice."

*Uh oh.* Caitlin suddenly worried that Polly might be jealous, might not want to be friends with her anymore—and all over some boy that Caitlin didn't even like.

"Really?" Caitlin asked, genuinely surprised. "But you're so pretty. And he's so—"

Luckily, Caitlin stopped herself before she could say anything else.

Polly looked at her, concerned. "He's so...what?" she asked.

Caitlin tried to think quick of a way to dig herself out of this one.

"He's just so...well...what I meant to say was that...he's so...well-matched for you. I'm surprised that the two of you aren't together."

Polly's concern disappeared and she went back to her usual joy.

"I know, right? It doesn't make any sense. It's not like he's with anyone else, either."

They reached the far end of the courtyard, and Caitlin saw a large, circular stone table, with stone benches all around it. All of her coven members were already sitting, and as Caitlin approached the table, Polly took her arm and led her to a seat right beside her. Caitlin was grateful to have a friend to sit with, since she was still somewhat intimidated by the large group, most of whom she hadn't met.

"This is Madeline," Polly said, "and that's Harrison."

Caitlin looked to her left, and saw a startlingly pretty girl, with straight black hair and black eyes, seated beside a boy with a short, blond beard, and curly blonde hair. They both broke into smiles, and reached out and shook Caitlin's hand. Everyone here seemed so friendly.

"And that's Derrick and Sasha," Polly said, gesturing to her right.

Caitlin looked over and saw them smiling back at her, nodding. She nodded back. They were both short and stocky, each with brown hair and green eyes, and they had huge grins. Their kindness and warmth were apparent even from here.

Caitlin began to wonder if everyone here was a couple. She started to feel a bit self-conscious.

Polly was about to introduce her to others, when suddenly Patrick slid in and sat down between them.

"And I'm Patrick," came the voice.

Caitlin turned to see that Patrick had slid into the seat beside her. He was sitting just inches away, grinning at her again. "But you knew that already," he added with a wink.

Uh oh, Caitlin thought. She was already uncomfortable. She really liked Polly, and didn't want Polly to think that she liked Patrick. She didn't want her to think that Patrick liked her, Caitlin, either, because that would surely make Polly jealous. She wanted to see Polly happy, and she didn't like Patrick. She had to try to figure out a way to get Patrick to like her. But for now, she just had to get through this lunch.

A bell rang, and they all got up from the table and headed off to the side, to a huge stone slab, on which sat, buffet style, raw meat. Caitlin followed Polly closely, who grabbed a large slab of meat, put it on a plate, and a pitcher of liquid. Caitlin did the same.

Caitlin followed Polly back to the table, holding her own plate and pitcher. Patrick followed them.

As they were all about to sit, at the last second, Caitlin switched spots with Polly, so that Polly was forced to sit in the middle, right beside Patrick, and Caitlin on the other side of Polly.

She looked over and saw that Patrick was disappointed, but that Polly, now beside him, was pleased.

Caitlin smiled inwardly. At least that would keep Patrick one more person away from her and make the entire situation less uncomfortable.

Caitlin looked around, and watched her fellow coven members lifting their meat with their hands, biting into it with their fangs, and sucking out the blood. They didn't chew—they just bit and sucked.

Caitlin tried it. At first, handling the raw meat felt gross, but as she bit and sucked, she felt the blood trickle down her throat, and she felt rejuvenated, refreshed. She felt her power returning.

She saw her coven members drinking from their pitchers, and she looked into hers. It was filled with a dark red liquid. Blood, she assumed. Probably the blood of deer.

Caitlin drank, and while at first she recoiled from the thick liquid, from the salty taste, she also loved the shot of power it gave her, and found herself gulping it down. As she did, she felt completely restored.

Caitlin heard whining, and looked over to see Rose sitting beside her. Caitlin handed her the scraps of the meat, and Rose happily ate them up.

Immediately, she whined for more. Madeline and Harrison each took their scraps and threw it towards Rose, as did Polly and Patrick. Soon everyone was throwing Rose their scraps, and Rose was having a field day, gorging on piece after piece of raw meat.

"It's all going to get better," Polly said, "Yes, there's a lot of training, but we vampires also know how to have fun. There'll be games later tonight."

Caitlin wasn't worried. She actually really enjoyed the training, and she just loved being here. She loved the exercise, being outdoors, seeing water everywhere. She liked all of her new covenmates, and for the first time in as long as she could remember, she felt as if she were home. Really home.

And that's when she saw him.

Out of the corner of her eye, Caitlin noticed a figure in the distance, walking along the sandy shore. At first, she was sure it was some kind of illusion. Who could be walking over there? She assumed that all of the coven was around the table, and she looked again closely. As she looked, she realized that one seat was empty. Only 23 of them were present.

Caitlin watched the lone figure, walking on the far shore, and found herself completely transfixed. Five foot ten, dressed in all black, he was paler than the others, with longish, wavy brown hair, and large, green eyes. Even from this distance, she could tell that there was something about him, something so striking, so unusual—so different from everyone else. He walked slowly, looking out at the water, his back towards all of them. Caitlin found that she could not look away.

Polly caught her staring. She leaned in close. "So, you've got your first glimpse of him, have you?" she asked. "He's the elusive 24th. At least, when he's around."

"When he's around?" Caitlin asked.

"He keeps apart from us most of the time. He hardly ever trains with us, and never eats with us.

He even sleeps in his own quarters. Most of the time, he just walks the shore, looking out. No one ever really even knows what he's thinking. He redefines 'loner'."

"But I'm confused," Caitlin said. "I thought we all had to train together, eat together—"

"Blake is the exception," Patrick said, with derision, "Aiden's always making exceptions for Blake. I don't know why. He should have to follow the same rules. It's not fair, when you think about it."

"Oh Patrick, you don't need to be so harsh about it," Polly said. "Blake is a perfectly nice fellow.

He just likes to be left alone."

"But why?" Caitlin asked.

But she already, herself, knew the answer. Even from this distance, with her vampire vision, she could see it in his eyes. This vampire was completely lost in the past. He had suffered greatly, she could see that, and whatever heartbreak he had encountered, he had never gotten over it. And probably never would.

It was strange, but even from this distance, Caitlin could feel everything he was feeling. And she felt consumed by overwhelming sadness. On the one hand, it scared her, but on the other hand, she appreciated it, because it took away her own sadness over Caleb.

At that moment, Blake, as if sensing her, suddenly turned, and stared right at her. Their eyes locked, and even from this distance, Caitlin was transfixed. Then, just as quickly, he turned and hurried away.

Caitlin felt a chill run up her spine. And she knew, that if she wanted to stay loyal to Caleb, she would have to stay very far away from this person.

### THIRTEEN

Sam's eyes flew open in a rage of fire. He looked all about the room, having no idea where he was. He

felt as if there were a film over his eyes, a filter. Something was very, very different.

He could tell that he was in a huge stone chamber. Although it was dimly, he could still see everything clearly. As if he had night vision.

But it was more than that. He didn't feel himself. He felt a new kind of power coursing through his veins, through every pore of his body. His sense of smell was heightened, as was his sense of hearing. He felt enraged. Caged. As if he felt like he needed to destroy something.

With his new, keen sense of touch, he sensed without looking down that his arms and legs were shackled. He felt the cold of the metal cutting into his skin. And he also knew, instinctively, that he had the strength to shatter them.

With the slightest jerk of his wrists, he tore the shackles from the wall. Cinderblock blocks came flying out with them. His strength was incredible.

He looked over, and for the first time saw, right in front of him, what he had failed to see before. Samantha. Standing there.

Some dim part of him still recognized her, but another part of him didn't. He knew in the back of his mind that she was familiar, but in the front of his mind, he sensed something else about her.

That she was his kind. Whatever that meant.

She took two steps towards him and placed her palms on his cheek, trying to get him to focus on her.

"Sam, can you hear me?" she asked. "I need you to look at me. Focus on me. I need you to listen."

He felt the touch of her palms on his cheeks, and he didn't like it—didn't want to be touched by anything or anyone.

In one swift motion, he reached up and roughly shoved her hands off of him.

She took two steps back and stared at him, wide-eyed, shocked. Hurt.

"Don't touch me," Sam growled back. He was shocked at the sound of his own voice. It was now so deep, so guttural. Like the voice of an animal.

"Sam, please, I have to explain to you what you're going through," she said. "Don't be afraid—"

"I fear nothing," he growled, taking a step towards her, feeling his rage rise. "I could crush you in an instant if I chose."

She took a step back, and he saw the fear in her face.

"Sam, please listen. I'm on your side. Trust me. You have to trust me. I turned you. Do you hear me? I *had* to turn you."

*Turned me*, Sam thought.

His brain, overloaded with emotion and hormone, tried to register what she was saying. *Turned me*. A part of him started to remember. Being chained. Samantha's entering the room. Her fangs....

Yes, he remembered now.

He stared at her with a newfound hatred.

She took another step back.

"Please Sam, you have to understand," she said. "I had to. I had no choice. They were going to kill you. Do you hear me? They were going to kill you."

*Kill me*, Sam thought, as he was approaching Samantha, ready to kill her. Something about her words, about her tone, made him pause. *Kill me. They were going to kill me.*

Now he remembered. The vampires. The coven. Being taken hostage.

"I saved you," Samantha said. "I saved you from being killed. I had to."

*Saved me*, he thought. And then it started to make sense. She had saved him. He could remember now. She was not the enemy.

Sam finally stopped approaching her, and felt his brows relax as his rage died down a bit.

She must have noticed, because she stopped stepping backwards.

"What you're going through, it's normal," she said. "It can happen when you are first turned."

With you, it's even more intense, because I had to do it so quickly. There just wasn't time."

Sam suddenly felt a terrible pain shooting through his head, through his muscles. He crouched down, grabbing his head in his hands and moaning in pain.

Samantha came running over and squatted beside him, placing her hand on his back.

"Sam, I'm so sorry," she said. "The pain, it will go away. Trust me. It will all be OK. But for now, we have to get out of here. We don't have much time."

Sam dimly heard her words, but the pain was overwhelming. It was just too hard to concentrate.

"Sam, do you hear me? We have to escape. We have to get out of here! Just the two of us. There isn't—"

Suddenly, there was a pounding on the huge, oak door.

Samantha looked over, while Sam ignored it, still clutching his head in pain.

The pounding grew louder and louder.

With every bang, Sam winced. The pain was ripping through his head. He couldn't stand the noise.

"Sam, they're here!" she said. "They're going to try to kill us. I need you to snap out of it. I need you to help me. We need to fight!"

The pounding came again, and the pain ricocheted through Sam's head. Sam could take it no more. He suddenly leapt to his feet, charged the door and, with his superhuman strength, tore it completely off its hinges.

Outside the open door stood a group of vampires, vicious enforcers who had clearly already seen the dead guards outside the door. They had come to kill Sam and Samantha, that was obvious.

But Sam never gave them the chance. As they all gaped, shocked that he had the strength to tear out the door, Sam raised the massive door over his head with both hands, and as they charged him, he swung it.

He smacked the door into them, sending them flying cleanly across the room.

They smashed into the far wall, hitting it hard, and slumped to the ground. Sam then reached back and threw the door on top of them, crushing them beneath it.

Sam felt the rage coursing through all of his muscles and he leaned back and roared. It was a horrible sound, filling the entire room, forcing even Samantha to cover her ears. He was in a fury.

Samantha stared at him from across the room, in shock at the monster she had created.

But Sam didn't even notice. He wanted to kill, and his newfound senses told him where he could go.

He bounded out into the hall and raced down the corridor, covering 20 feet in a single bound.

"Sam!" she cried out behind him.

He didn't turn.

"Sam, that's the wrong way! That's the way back to the coven! We need to get out of here. We need to escape! You have to turn around! You are running right into the hornet's nest!"

"Perfect!" Sam screeched, never turning back, as he kept running, up an entire flight of stairs in a single bound.

Because Sam didn't want to run from danger. He wanted to embrace it. With both hands. And tear it limb from limb.

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Sam tore through the narrow, stone corridors beneath City Hall, racing forward blindly. He could sense exactly where to go, could sense where the nest of vampires was. He wanted bloodshed.

He wanted battle. These people, they were responsible for his being here, were responsible for his captivity. He wanted to make them pay. All of them.

Sam bounded down another corridor, and up another flight of steps, and before him was a huge set of double doors. Without hesitating, he bounded right for it, tore each door off its hinges, threw his head back and roared.

It was a horrific sound, and it shook the entire ground of the chamber.

Every single one of the thousands of vampires turned. Even for these vicious, imperturbable creatures, Sam's display of strength shook them. This was not just another vampire. The power he had, the sound of his voice—clearly, there was something special about him.

Before any of them could react—even with their lightning-quick skills—Sam had already bounded into the crowd and tore off the heads of ten of them. He spun through the room, every which way, wreaking havoc everywhere he went. His bare hands became weapons. His fingernails extended to claws. His muscles hardened into iron steel—and anyone who tried to attack simply bounced off of him. He was like a rolling ball of destruction, creating panic and mayhem everywhere he went.

Soon the room of vampires was so flustered, they were running into each other, running every which way to try to escape.

Some of the coven made a concerted effort to strike back. Entire groups of them coordinated against Sam, pouncing on him. But he simply leaned back and threw up his arms, and the entire group went flying across the room. He was a one-man destruction machine.

Kyle took notice. He stood on his throne, up high in the center of the chamber, and watched.

This was a vampire unlike any he had ever contended with, and he soon realized that it was Sam.

That bitch. Samantha. She had turned him. And clearly this kid held powers that none of them anticipated. He was destroying half his army single-handedly. He could not allow it.

Kyle leapt off the throne, landing in the midst of the crowd, throwing his own vampires out of the way.

Pitiful army. They could not even handle themselves against a boy.

Kyle pushed and shoved his way, and was soon facing Sam.

Sam threw back his arm and raked at Kyle's face. Kyle, with his incredible speed and power, was able to block it—but not by much. Kyle was shocked at the amount of strength that coursed through Sam's arm. He had never encountered anything like it.

He tried to shove Sam back, and Kyle was even more shocked to see that Sam didn't give.

Instead, Sam shoved Kyle, and Kyle went flying backwards several feet.

Kyle, sitting on the floor, was truly stunned. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

What was this boy?

Kyle took a running start, leapt into the air, and kicked Sam, planting both feet on the chest.

That sent Sam flying backwards, and clearly shocked Sam, too.

Kyle drew the Sword and held it at the tip of Sam's throat, ready to kill him offer good.

But something suddenly stopped him. As he was about to stab, Sam disappeared before his eyes.

Instead, what he saw, in his place, was his ex-wife. Keira. He hadn't seen her for hundreds of years.

He had loved her, dearly, and the sight of her made him wince. How had she gotten here? Where had Sam gone?

Before those questions could be answered, Kyle felt two strong feet planted on his own chest, and felt himself being kicked, going flying backwards into the room. He hit his head hard against his own throne. He sat there on the floor, disoriented.

He saw Keira charging at him, then saw her shape-shift back into Sam. And he realized what had happened.

Shape shifting. Sam had the power.

Kyle was flabbergasted.

Sam dove for Kyle's face, and Kyle ducked just in time. Good thing he had, because Sam's blow tore out a chunk of the throne.

Kyle still couldn't get over the boy's power. He couldn't kill him now, that was for sure. Not with this kind of power. He needed to harness him; he needed him as a soldier.

Sam came charging again, and this time, Kyle quickly extracted a secret weapon from his belt: a silver net. As Sam charged, Kyle threw it at him, and got out of the way.

The net expanded instantly, enmeshing Sam in a silver vampire net, completely entangling him.

Sam, completely wrapped up in it, squirmed for his life, but was helpless to get out. Of course he was: the silver immobilized all vampires. It was Kyle's favorite way of capturing them alive.

As Sam lay there, squirming on the floor, one of his soldiers, bloody, came running up to Kyle.

"Kill him, my master!" he screamed.

"No," Kyle answered calmly, still breathing hard. "His powers are too rare. We need him."

Just then, there was another crash at the door, and Samantha raced into the room and grabbed Sergei from behind, holding a silver tipped dagger to his throat.

The room became tense, as all eyes turned to her.

"If you kill Sam, I'll kill Sergei!" she yelled to Kyle.

Kyle smiled inwardly at this. He did not care at all about Sergei's well-being, and the idea that she thought

he did amuse him. She didn't realize that he wanted Sam alive, too.

"I'm not going to kill him," Kyle said. "Let Sergei go, and I won't kill you, either."

"How do I know?" Samantha asked warily.

"Shape shifting is a skill I haven't seen in centuries. I don't want him dead. I want him as my soldier."

Samantha could tell that he was telling the truth. She let Sergei go, and he quickly scurried off into the crowd. Samantha took several steps towards Kyle.

"Free him," she ordered Kyle.

Kyle looked down warily.

"It's OK," she said, walking towards the net, standing only feet away from Sam. "Sam, do you hear me?" she asked. "It's OK. The killing is over. The revenge is over. It's okay now. They're going to let you go, but you must not kill. You're one of us now. You are a soldier. There are others to kill.

But not ours."

"How can I trust he won't kill?" Kyle asked.

"I vouch for him," she said.

After a long pause, Kyle nodded, and several of his men stepped forward and tore off the netting.

Sam jumped back to his feet, ready for more, but Samantha grabbed him from behind, and put a relaxing, cooling hand on his face. She turned his face forcibly, made him face her, look into her eyes.

"Sam, listen to me," she said. "They are not the enemy."

Sam looked at her, trying to think, trying to hear her.

"Patience," she said. "There will be plenty to kill later."

*Plenty more to kill.* Sam smiled at the thought. Yes, he could wait.

After all, this was just the beginning.

#### FOURTEEN

Caleb flew over the Manhattan night sky, his brother Samuel by his side, and dozens of their men close behind. Draped in the robe, Caleb gripped the staff tightly in one hand, while his brother wielded the gauntlet. They were armed with weapons that few vampires would be able to defend against. Still, Caleb knew, these were not nearly as powerful as the Sword, and if they met the Sword in battle, the odds would be stacked against them.

Not to mention that they had but a dozen soldiers, while Kyle had thousands at his disposal. If only Caleb's coven had not been so narrow-minded; if so, they would all be leading thousands of vampires into battle and could gain the momentum and even win this war. With this small fighting force, though, Caleb knew it would likely be a suicide mission.

Still, he had to try. What choice did he have? He couldn't simply sit back and wait for New York to be completely overrun, for all the humans to die die helplessly. And he couldn't allow Kyle to gain strength. The judges were just too closed-minded to see that now. That was their choice. But Caleb, as he'd done throughout the centuries, would not wait for anyone else's permission. He would fly headlong into battle, leaving all fear behind them, and embracing whatever happened.

Caleb looked over and realized how grateful he was to have a brother like Samuel by his side.

Throughout the years, Samuel had always been there, always ready to fly headlong into battle beside him. There had been some tough ones. But the two of them always seemed to come out of it.

Once again, Caleb's thoughts turned to Caitlin. He could never go long without thinking of her.

He felt so badly about their misunderstanding, and more than anything, it hurt him to think she believed he had feelings for Sera. He wanted, more than anything, to just clear things up. He thought of the letter he'd sent, and wondered if it would arrive safely, and if she would read it. When this war was over—if it was ever over, and if he survived it—he would go to her again and try to explain. He wanted nothing more than to just them away from all this, to live together somewhere in harmony.

If it wasn't too late.

Caleb looked down as he flew over the New York City skyline. It was complete mayhem down there. They flew down Central Park West, skirting the edge of the park, and he saw chaos both in and outside the park. Like everywhere else in the city, Central Park West, for dozens of blocks, was completely clogged with cars, smashed into each other. Passengers leaned on their horns, cursed at each other, jumped out and ran.

But before they could get far, they were pounced upon by mercenary vampires. Everywhere was bloodshed. For every human, there was at least one vampire. They were crawling all over the city, like ants. And they were tearing these humans apart.

Caleb and his men kept flying, further south, heading for City Hall. They flew past Columbus Circle and kept going, veering down Broadway. If there was at least one saving grace, it was that, thus far, all of Kyle's vampires had been so focused on the ground that they never bothered to look up. It seemed that Caleb, Samuel and their men had sole dominion of the skies.

But Caleb thought too soon. Suddenly, as he and his band of warriors flew into Times Square, he looked up to see dozens of Kyle's vampires flying right towards them. Caleb and his men had been so busy looking down, that they almost had no time to brace for impact.

At the last second, Caleb extracted the staff, while Samuel raised his gauntlet. They swung, and managed to strike down several vampires in midair. But there were too many of them. Before Caleb could swing again, several vampires were on him, grabbing him all over, dragging him down towards the ground. He swung the staff furiously, and managed to knock off a few, but dozens of them, like a swarm, came at him. He was too outnumbered. He found himself plummeting towards the ground, right for the center of Times Square.

Caleb hit the ground hard, ten vampires on top of him. He could see that Samuel and the others hit the ground, too.

But now that they were on the ground, Caleb had the advantage. He managed to jump to his feet and knock off five vampires in one motion, swinging the staff wildly. He then reached it back and used its tip as a spear, plunging it through another vampire's throat. He jabbed its circular head and bashed another vampire in the head. He then grabbed it by its tip and swung it as widely as he could, knocking down 10 vampires in a single motion, establishing a perimeter around him.

Samuel instinctively joined the perimeter, back to back with Caleb, swinging and jabbing with his gauntlet. The gauntlet was an incredible weapon, and as it impacted other vampires, making a hollow thud, it knocked them off their feet, flying through the air. Its protruding fingers also were put to use, as he jabbed several



vampires in the eyes and throats, dropping them to their knees.

Back to back, the two of them fought for all they had, and together, incapacitated dozens of vampires. Samuel's men, all brave warriors, finished off the rest.

Within minutes, all of Kyle's vampires were sprawled out. Caleb surveyed his men and saw that they lost one man in the battle. Several others were banged up, too. But they had survived.

Caleb looked around. They stood in the middle of Times Square, smack in the middle of humanity. It was utter chaos. The square was still lit, billboards flashing, but no other trace of normality remained. Humans screamed and fled in every direction, pursued by bands of vampires.

The cars were so jammed up, that no one even bothered to try to drive anymore, some people jumping out of their vehicles and running, while others slammed closed their doors and rolled up their windows—as if that might help them. Caleb watched as one woman slammed shut the door of her SUV and locked it, while a second later, a vampire tore it off its hinges, reached in, and yanked her out.

Caleb jumped into action. Before the vampire could sink his teeth into her throat, he jabbed him with the staff, sending him flying across a pile of cars. The woman, still screaming, looked at Caleb in shock.

Caleb looked around, and saw humans being chased by vampires everywhere. Without hesitation, he bounded after the vampires, and Samuel and his men did the same. They rescued human after human.

By the time they were done, dozens more of Kyle's vampires were either dead or unconscious.

They were no match for Caleb and Samuel's weapons, for Samuel's warriors—and they were caught by surprise, vulnerable, in the midst of feeding. Within minutes, the momentum of Times Square had changed, and Kyle's few remaining vampires began to flee.

Caleb and his men chased after them, until finally they took off in the air, flying away. Time Square was theirs.

The humans that remained realized what had happened, and they erupted into a huge cheer.

Caleb looked over, and saw several of them patting him appreciatively on his back.

"Who are you?" one of them asked.

Caleb looked down and saw a boy, maybe 10, looking up at him in awe. He realized that, from the child's perspective, with his robe of strength and ivory staff, he must've looked like some sort of superhero.

"Just your friendly neighborhood vampire," Caleb said with a smile.

"Can you save my daddy?" the boy asked.

The boy led Caleb to his car and opened the door.

Sitting in the driver seat was a man who was visibly sick, covered in sores.

Caleb shook his head. He recognized it immediately. The Bubonic Plague.

Caleb was overcome with disgust and grief. Kyle must have unleashed it, he realized. No one else could have been this evil.

Caleb felt a presence beside him, and saw Samuel staring with him.

"Kyle's work," Caleb said.

Samuel shook his head, too.

Caleb felt even more resolved, more sure of himself and his actions. Now, more than ever, he knew they had to stop Kyle. And that every moment counted.

He suddenly heard a commotion and looked over and saw, on the other side of Times Square, hundreds of vampires heading towards them. They were walking casually, confidently, right for Caleb and Samuel. Humans screamed and parted ways, and ran in every direction.

But Caleb and Samuel were not afraid. As Caleb look closely, he discerned that these were not Kyle's men. They were of a different coven, he could tell. And it was one, he sensed, that was benevolent. On their side. They streamed out of the Times Square Church.

The vampires came within a few feet of Caleb and stopped, their leader staring right at Caleb.

"We want to join you," the leader said simply.

Caleb nodded, looking over their numbers, hundreds of them, and felt encouraged.

"We're going to City Hall," Caleb said. "The Blacktide Coven. We're going to wipe them out for good."

The leader nodded back, and slowly grinned. "That's something I've been wanting to do for thousands of years," he said.

Samuel smiled. "Then follow us!"

Caleb, Samuel and his men turned and flew into the air, and as they did, Caleb heard a massive fluttering of wings, and sensed the presence, right behind him, of hundreds of additional vampires.

Now they had an army. And they would take it right to City Hall.

## FIFTEEN

As Samantha stood in the huge, chaotic chamber, thousands of vampires milling about, Kyle seated in his throne and Sam standing beside her, she thought of how quickly things had changed.

She had not anticipated any of this. She had imagined fleeing this place long ago, with Sam, and all of this being far behind them. But things had gone quite differently.

She knew that she took a risk by turning Sam that abruptly, and that anything could happen.

There just hadn't been enough time, and she'd had to take her chances. Still, she hadn't anticipated anything like this. Sam had arisen in such a fury, and with such power, it was beyond anything she had ever witnessed. He also seemed to carry some sort of blood in him, something she did not recognize. She had never—*ever*—seen such a young vampire so powerful. Maybe it was because he was of the same lineage as Caitlin. But in him, the blood seemed to run darker, more vicious.

She had not anticipated Sam's being so out of control, his insistence on bloodlust, on revenge. It had completely taken her by surprise. He was like a wild, untamed creature.

And for that, she loved him even more.

Nor had she anticipated his bursting into the chamber like that, his killing so many of her own coven. Or his incredible, incredible strength. She felt honored that he hadn't tried to kill her, too.

She also had not anticipated Kyle's capturing him, or Kyle's decision to let him live—and to make him one of his soldiers.

Her mind was reeling. Reports were streaming in from every corner of the city that the Blacktide Coven—

now Kyle's coven—was dominating the city. All sorts of vampires from neighboring covens were crawling out of the woodwork, streaming in to join the war. Everybody loved a winner, and Kyle's numbers grew stronger by the moment. The Blacktide Coven's time had come. There was no escaping it, or the ripple effect it would soon have throughout the world.

Samantha was starting to reconsider all of her plans. After all, where she was right now was the place to be, right in the seat of power. Sam was alive, safe and already turned, and Kyle wanted him as a soldier. He was no longer in danger, and neither was she. On the contrary, they were in a perfect position—in the right place at the right time, with an opportunity to rise to unimaginable heights of power.

Maybe she shouldn't try to flee with Sam after all. The more she thought about it, the more she realized they shouldn't. In the long run, she felt it would be best both for her and for Sam to ride the wave, to see where this went. There was no point in the two of them trying to fight off an entire army. And as long as they could be together, it didn't really make a difference either way. She was a survivalist, an opportunist. This is what had kept her alive for thousands of years. And for now, at least, it seemed that the path of least resistance was to join Kyle's war.

She and Sam stood together, close to Kyle's throne. She looked in Sam's eyes, and saw that they were still glazed, that he was still going through the transition. He didn't seem able to register things clearly, and he seemed to ignore the other vampires who tried to speak with him. But luckily, some part of him seemed to still listen to Samantha. In fact, she seemed to be the only one he acknowledged. Maybe it was because she had turned him. Or maybe, somewhere, he remembered her. Whatever it was, she was grateful for it. She reached over and took his hand, and held it tightly.

Whatever should happen, she would guide him, and stay by his side.

At that moment, the huge doors burst open, and in rushed a contingent of vampires, bruised and bloody, looking very agitated. They marched right to the center of the room. Everyone parted ways for them.

Kyle stood, and Samantha could see the worry on his face.

Whatever this was, it would not be good.

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Kyle looked down at the contingent of warriors rushing towards him. He did not like their expressions, and he could already feel the anger welling in him. He knew they would bear news of their first loss. Kyle had no tolerance for loss—no tolerance for losers—and if that was their news, they would pay for it dearly. If they thought that they would find sympathy in him, they were gravely mistaken.

The contingent of a dozen or so vampires reached Kyle's throne, and bowed low before him.

They stood and the one in the center spoke, fear on his face.

"Our supreme leader," he said, "we bear bad news. We have lost many of our brethren in battle.

Other covens have rallied and now stand in battle against us."

An astonished gasp spread throughout the room.

"SILENCE!" yelled Sergei. He banged his staff repeatedly, and the room quieted.

Kyle stared down, feeling the rage overwhelm him. Pathetic warriors. Why could they not fight as he did?

"And what coven would dare do battle against us?" he asked slowly.

"My leader, I recognized but two of the vampires. One was Caleb, and the other, Samuel, of the White coven."

Another gasp spread throughout the room.

"But that is not all," the soldier continued, yelling over the din, "they carried weapons we did not recognize. An ivory staff, and a golden gauntlet. Against these weapons, there was little we could do. We outnumbered them, yet they destroyed nearly all of us."

The room broke into a loud murmur.

"Worse still!" he yelled, "we saw other covens flocking to support them. Their numbers grow as we speak. And they are heading towards us!"

The room erupted into chaos.

"SILENCE!" yelled Sergei several times, banging his staff. After several minutes, the room finally quieted down.

Kyle stared down coldly at the soldier. He trembled, doing his very best to contain his rage. But it wasn't working.

"So," he began, icy cold, "you bring news of a loss. You bring news of your defeat. You bring news that you fled like cowards."

The soldiers' eyes all contorted in fear.

"My leader, we had to report what was happening. We had to warn you. We had to give you—"

Kyle held up his hand, and the soldier stopped mid-sentence.

"You know I have but one rule in my army," Kyle said. "Never retreat. Never."

And with that, Kyle suddenly grabbed the Sword off his throne, leapt down, and with one clean swing, chopped off the heads of the entire group of soldiers.

Their heads rolled to the ground, but the bodies stood in place for another second or two, before they all slowly leaned over and crashed to the floor.

The chamber became completely silent, save for the sound of the rolling heads.

Kyle was about to open his mouth and prepare his people for war, when the door burst open again.

In came dozens of humans, dressed in suits, strutting arrogantly down the center of the room, right towards Kyle. Kyle blinked twice, thinking he was imagining things. But he wasn't.

It was *them*. The politicians. The ones who inhabited upstairs, who imagined that they ran this building, this city. They strutted with the arrogance typical of their kind, but as they walked deeper into the room, as they saw themselves crowded by thousands of vampires, as they saw the blood on the floor, the freshly rolling heads, their confidence waned. Dramatically.

They looked up at Kyle, who was sneering back in rage, holding the Sword, dripping with blood, and now they didn't look so sure of themselves.

"You dare to enter our chamber?" Kyle asked.

"You live beneath *our* building," the lead politician responded. "We let you live under this chamber. Don't

forget that. At the snap of our fingers we could have the U.S. military blow you all out of existence.”

Kyle smiled widely. He liked the arrogance of this fellow. In fact, he liked him enough to kill him quickly.

“Really?” Kyle asked.

“We’ve tolerated you down here for all these years because you have always served our agenda,” the politician continued. “But now, with this plague you’ve unleashed, innocent people are dying in the streets. We were never given any warning of this, and we never gave you our approval.

“Your days are over. Pack up, and get out. If not, we’ll bring in the National Guard, and if you’re still here by tomorrow, we’ll wipe all of you out.”

Kyle smiled wider, taking a few steps closer to him, and the other vampires crowded in close, too. Kyle was actually starting to enjoy this. If this poor human was a vampire, Kyle might even be friends with him.

“I must ask you,” Kyle began slowly, as he stepped even closer, and as the human’s eyes started to widen in fear, “for your military to come here and ‘wipe us out,’ wouldn’t they need to be issued an order?”

The human took a small step back. “Yes, of course,” he said, now sounding not so sure of himself.

“And who would relay this order?” Kyle asked.

“I would,” the man answered confidently.

Kyle smiled more widely. “As I thought.”

Kyle nodded to Sergei, who in turn nodded to someone else, and a second later, the huge oak doors closed behind the politicians with a bang.

The politicians looked behind them, then at each other, then back to Kyle, then at the vampires all around them. They now looked outright afraid.

“Well then,” Kyle said slowly, “I guess that order will never arrive, will it?”

Before the human could respond, Kyle pounced and swung his sword, chopping his head cleanly off his body.

Within just a few seconds, hundreds of vampires were pouncing on the remaining politicians, and feeding to their delight.

Kyle turned and stormed right for Sam and Samantha. He stood before them, glaring, his rage barely abated.

He looked into Sam’s eyes, and discovered a familiar rage shining back at him. He felt inside this boy a kindred spirit, and he liked him already. More importantly, he was impressed by his shape-shifting power. Exactly the kind of power he could use to throw his enemies off guard. This was the soldier he wanted at his side.

“This Caleb continues to be a thorn in my side,” he said to Sam. “As does your sister. Where there is one, there is the other. And as long as they are both alive, we will never have any peace,” he said. “I see that if I want the job done, I’m going to have to go and kill these vampires myself. More importantly, I will need to capture Caleb. With him in hand, your sister will follow. And then nothing more can stand in our way.”

He took a step closer to Sam. “I want you at my side in the upcoming battle.”

Sam glared back, rage exuding off him like a tangible thing. Kyle, oddly enough, found himself unable to read his thoughts. Clearly this boy was in another dimension.

“I am ready to kill,” Sam said, slowly. “Just point the way.”

Kyle surveyed him. It was exactly the answer he wanted.

Yes, he thought, this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

## SIXTEEN

“Caitlin? Caitlin, wake up! You’re late!”

The voice came incessantly, again and again, accompanied by a pounding on her door.

Caitlin finally opened her eyes, yanked out of a deep sleep. Lying in bed, on her stomach, she looked around the room, still disoriented.

The island. She was still here. *Thank God.* In her small room, at the top of the tower, on this new island she had come to think of as home, she felt secure. She looked over and saw Rose was still lying there, by her feet, looking at her patiently. She must be hungry, waiting for her to wake up, too.

Caitlin sat up and winced at the bright sunlight streaming in through the open windows. She quickly reached over, grabbed her eyedrops, and put one in each eye.

“Caitlin, Caitlin. Let me in!” came the voice again.

*Polly.* What on earth was she doing here this early? Caitlin didn’t have a clock anywhere—there were no electronics anywhere on this island—but she didn’t need one to know that the sun had barely crept over the horizon. It was way too early.

“Just come in!” Caitlin finally yelled back, “It’s open!”

The door flew open, and in ran Polly, excited, out of breath, as always, with a big smile on her face. She looked ready and excited to face the day. Caitlin wondered where she got all the energy.

Caitlin sat there, on the edge of her bed, holding her head in her hands, rubbing her eyes and pulling her hair back. Her mind was full of cobwebs. It was not easy today. She had been up most of the night, hanging out with her covenmates.

Now it all came back to her. Today was her day. Guard duty. She yawned, exhausted. Well, at least she hadn’t had any more dreams of Caleb. Thank God for that.

Polly ran over to her, slipped an arm under hers, and yanked her to her feet.

“If you’re late, Aiden will kill you. You can *never* be late to guard duty. It starts in ten minutes.

And it’s a trek. This island is bigger than you think. Get dressed, let’s go,” she said, all in a rush.

Caitlin scanned the room and saw her clothes lying about the floor. Polly had been so generous, giving Caitlin several sets of clothes. Thankfully, they were the same size. Caitlin had expected all vampire clothes to be black—or maybe, different shades of black—and she was surprised to find that Polly’s wardrobe consisted mostly of purple and pink. Polly had smiled sheepishly, saying,

“Well, just because I’m a vampire, it doesn’t mean I have to be like all the others. There’s no rule, you know. I can wear any color I want.” It figured. If any vampire was to wear purple and pink, it would be Polly. She was the happiest person Caitlin had ever met, and she couldn’t envision her *ever* wearing black.

So, once again, Caitlin found herself decked out in a wardrobe that was not of her choosing. She got

dressed quickly, and checked herself in the tall, standing mirror.

No reflection. Of course. She had forgotten. That was one aspect of vampire life she could do without. Instead, she looked down at herself. All pink. She must have looked ridiculous.

"You look great," Polly said. "Can we go now?"

Caitlin and Polly hurried out the room, Rose following. Rose was jumping on Polly, as always, and Polly reciprocated, stroking her head. Rose loved Polly, and the feeling was mutual. Caitlin was not surprised. Rose seemed to love anyone who was nice to Caitlin, and to hate anyone that hated her. Rose was always at Caitlin's side. Always.

As they descended the circular, stone steps, twisting round and around, Caitlin looked out and took in the view of the sweeping blue waters of the Hudson River, lit up in the morning sun. It was beautiful. The cool water breezes struck her, and she felt like a princess in the sky, descending from her chamber. She felt so lucky to be here.

"I bet you don't even know where you're going, do you?" Polly said with a smile, shaking her head. "What would you do without me?"

Caitlin linked arms with Polly as they went. "Probably sleep," Caitlin said wryly.

They entered the thick forest, beginning to bud with April flowers, and Caitlin followed Polly through the trails, weaving left and right, up and down.

"Well, so you know, I *don't* have guard duty today," Polly said. "In fact, there's nothing I would have loved more than to sleep in. But something told me that you would, too, so I got up early and yanked myself out of bed just to save you on this."

Caitlin was touched by the gesture. "Thanks, Polly. I owe you one."

"I know you do," Polly said with a wink, "and I've been thinking about that Lily Pulitzer outfit you have up there. I never see you wear it, and I was wondering, well, if you wanted to do a girl a favor—"

"It's yours," Caitlin said, overjoyed. She wanted to get rid of those clothes anyway, which were all the wrong colors for her, and which so reminded her of Edgartown, of her time with Caleb. She was thrilled that Polly liked them.

Polly's eyes opened wide. "Really? Do you really mean it? I mean, I didn't mean to pressure you, I was just saying, like, I wasn't being serious, you don't really owe me anything—"

"Really. Please," Caitlin said. "You'd be doing me a favor."

"Why?" Polly asked, wide-eyed.

Caitlin didn't feel like explaining.

"Uh...they don't really fit me."

It actually fit Caitlin perfectly.

"But we're the same size," Polly said, puzzled. Polly was too smart to get anything past her.

Caitlin thought quick. "What I meant was...the material, the fabric...it just isn't...the type that I like to wear."

"Great!" Polly exclaimed, thrilled. "Now I owe *you*. Big time. I'm going to talk to some of our covenmates and see if someone has a nice black outfit for you. I know you love black, and besides, you're going to need something to wear to the concert tonight."

"Concert?" Caitlin asked.

"Oh God, don't you know?" Polly asked. "It's the springtime concert. We have it every year.

Everyone brings a date. It used to be a bit awkward, because before you came, there were 23 of us.

But now with you, there are an even 24. One girl for every guy. Everyone's so excited! It's going to be an even match this year. And the only two people who don't already have dates are you and Blake."

Blake, Caitlin thought. *Perfect. Barely here a week and already I'm pressed into an awkward romantic situation.*

"OMG, did I tell you?" Polly continued. "Patrick asked me! I'm SO excited!" she said, beaming.

*Great*, Caitlin thought. That not only got Patrick off of her back, but it also made Polly happy.

She was happy she'd deterred Patrick's advances, and happy that he actually pursued Polly.

The two of them walked arm in arm through the island, into the forest, up and down the winding trails. As they did, Caitlin began to more fully wake, and she started to think about where they were headed.

"Where are we going exactly?" Caitlin asked, starting to get winded from all the hiking and the fast pace.

"What is guard duty, again?"

"It's rotation," Polly said. "Each of us has to do it, once a week. We stand guard in the morning, while the others are sleeping. In case anyone approaches the island. Human or otherwise. Aiden also uses it as a training exercise. It keeps us on our toes, and makes us get up at times of day we're not used to. And it forges team spirit. Or something like that. You know, typical Aiden stuff. But I have to say, he does have a point. I bonded with people more on guard duty than I have with anything else."

"Bonded?" Caitlin asked, suddenly worried. "What do you mean? I thought it was a solo thing? I thought we each stood guard alone?"

Polly laughed lightly, shaking her head. "My, you do have a lot to learn. No, not at all. There are two of us in every rotation. Paired up. We stand together, watch each other's backs."

Caitlin thought. "So, if *you* don't have guard duty today, that means I'm paired up with someone else? Like, someone is going to be waiting for me?"

"And he'll probably be pissed," Polly added. "You're already 10 minutes late. The one rule we have is to never be late."

"He?" Caitlin asked. Her heart dropped. She prayed that she would not be stuck alone on guard duty with the one person she did not want to see.

"Blake," Polly said, confirming Caitlin's worst fears. "You're the lucky winner," she added sarcastically.

Caitlin's heart sank. *Blake*. He was the only one of the bunch that could send a shiver of terror up her spine. Not because she was afraid of him. No. She was afraid of what she *felt* for him. After she caught a glimpse of him yesterday, at lunch, it had been gnawing at the back of her mind. And the more it gnawed at her, the harder it was becoming to focus on Caleb. On the one hand, she wanted to forget about Caleb. But a part of her just could not let him go, despite his betrayal. So, with a supreme effort, she had finally forced Blake out of her mind the day before.

And now, this. Alone. Together. Just the two of them. On guard duty, for who knew how many hours. It was like a cruel joke. Why him, of all people? And why didn't anyone else seem to like him?

"Why do you say I'm the lucky winner?" Caitlin asked.  
"Well, if you haven't noticed, he's not exactly sociable," Polly said. "You saw him. He keeps apart. Doesn't like to talk."

"But why?" Caitlin asked, as they rounded another bend through the thick forest trail. "Why is he like that?"  
Polly shrugged. "I don't know. I don't even think about it. I don't like to think about unhappy people. It brings me down."

They rounded a small hilltop, and there, in the distance, sat a crumbling stone ruin, about twenty feet high, the remnant of a fortification from the castle, half-submerged in the river. It was separated from the island, out in the river about ten feet.

And there, standing on top of it, glaring down at them, stood Blake. He held a spear in one hand and, standing the way he was, his back to the river and the open sky, he looked like he was the last warrior left on earth.

"All yours," Polly said, and with a quick kiss on the cheek, she was off.

Caitlin felt a flutter in her chest, afraid to be left alone.

"Wait!" Caitlin called out.

Polly turned, but continued hiking, further and further away.

Caitlin didn't know what to say. She just wanted an excuse to keep her from leaving her alone.

"How long... how long does this last?"

Polly chuckled, seeing Caitlin's nervousness. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll be back for lunch!"

she said. "Come on Rose!" she added.

But Rose stayed there, tempted, but refusing to leave Caitlin's side.

Polly chuckled again, and with a few quick bounds, disappeared into the forest.

Caitlin turned and looked at the fortification. Blake had turned his back on her, so at least she wouldn't have to deal with his glare, or his watching her approach.

She walked tentatively down to the sandy beach, Rose at her side, and stood at the water's edge.

She looked up at the round, stone fort. It rose about 15 feet above the water, and there was a good ten feet of river between her and it. She wondered how she was supposed to get there. She knew that, with her vampire power, she could just take a running leap and clear it. But she didn't really feel up to it that early in the morning. And she didn't want to leave Rose high and dry.

She examined the water and saw, submerged beneath its surface, a wooden walkway leading to the fort. But water covered it for at least a foot or two; it looked like she'd have to wade in up to her thighs to walk it.

She put a toe in. The early morning water was cold.

"Hello?" Caitlin called out.

He stood there, his back still to her.

"Hello?" she called out more firmly, annoyed. How rude. He should have turned, should have acknowledged her, should've called out and greeted her with a warm smile. Instead, he just kept his back turned.

"You're late," he answered flatly, his back still to her.

"Well, I'm here now," Caitlin said, "and I need to know how to get up there. It looks like the walkway is all covered over in water."

"It is," he answered. "Tide came in. You should've got here sooner. That's what happens when you're late."

Caitlin felt her face turned red with annoyance. Clearly, this was not someone who let things go.

Caitlin had no choice. She rolled up her pants up above her knee, and waded into the freezing water. She grimaced as she went, the icy water feeling like a thousand small needles.

Rose, ever the trooper, waded in beside her, swimming in the water.

As Caitlin continued, the water went deeper and deeper, creeping above her knee, then to her upper thigh—just high enough to get her pants wet. *Great.*

She finally made it. She reached over and grabbed Rose and lifted her out of the water and over the stone railing. Then she reached up herself, grabbed hold of a peg, and pulled herself up and over the railing in a single bound.

She was now standing in the small, circular, stone parapet, Blake standing on the opposite side, his back still to her.

Rose shook herself roughly, the water going everywhere, and even splashing Blake. Caitlin saw him flinch, to her great delight. Served him right.

Sprayed with water from the freezing Hudson River, Blake finally had no choice but to turn and acknowledge her. He looked annoyed.

"No dogs," he said.

"Rose is not a dog," Caitlin snapped back coldly. "She's a wolf. Her name is Rose, in case you're wondering. And she stays with me," Caitlin concluded, defiant. She stared Blake down.

Their eyes locked, as they stared at each other from opposite sides of the circle. Caitlin could see his jaw clenched, could see that he was caught off guard, didn't quite know how to respond.

Finally, defeated, he turned his back again, and went back to staring out at the water.

Caitlin reveled in her minor victory. She unrolled her wet pants slowly, squeezing out the water as best she could. She hoped the morning sun would dry them out.

This stone fort wasn't very big—maybe ten feet wide, and there was really nowhere for her to go. She didn't even really see the point of this guard duty. How often, she wondered, did a human or vampire ever really try to attack, or even visit, this remote island? The whole thing seemed pointless, and boring. Worst of all, she would be stuck with Blake for the next several hours.

She couldn't believe that he didn't even try to make conversation. Well, if he wouldn't, she would have to take the high road; someone had to be civil.

"I'm Caitlin, by the way," she said, giving him one last chance.

"I know," he said, his back still to her.

Now she was pissed. That was it—his last chance. How dare he have the temerity to just keep standing there like that, to not even turn around?

"OK," she snapped. "Fine. Have it your way."

She walked as far as she could to the other side, and stood there, looking out the other direction. It was actually a relief. All of the romantic illusions she'd had based on the day before, based on her brief glimpse of him, were starting to drift away. He wasn't, as she had imagined, some great guy. He was just a jerk. It made it easier for her not to like him. Which is exactly what she needed right now.

But something about him still troubled her. She couldn't quite let it go. Why was he so cut off?

What had happened to this boy? The mystery of it gnawed away at her.

As time passed and she stood there, looking out, she started to wonder if maybe it was just that he didn't like *her*. Could that be it? If so, she wondered, what was it about her that he didn't like?

Was it the way she looked? How she was dressed? Because she'd been late? She didn't really see why that was such a huge deal.

No, she concluded, it must be something else. She had never encountered anyone in her life who seemed to dislike her so much on a first meeting. It bothered her. She had to know why.

"So," she finally said, turning and shattering the silence, "why do you hate me?"

He still kept his back turned, but this time she noticed an ever-so-slight turning of his neck in her direction.

"I don't hate you," he answered, after some time.

"Oh, I see," she said. "You just hate everyone?"

That got to him. Finally, he turned and faced her. He was scowling.

"I don't hate anyone," he said.

"Oh, that's obvious," Caitlin said.

He must've realized she had a point, because he softened his anger lines. But he still looked annoyed.

"Just because I don't want to get embroiled in a conversation with you," he said, "doesn't mean I don't like you."

"*Embroided*?" she asked. "I wasn't exactly looking to enter into a meaningful dialogue. Just simple courtesy. Like, 'Hello, nice to meet you. My name is blank. How are you this morning? I'm fine, thank you'.... That's enough for me."

"My name is Blake," he answered quickly. "Happy now?"

She had finally gotten to him, finally provoked a response and annoyed him back, and she smiled inwardly. Good. He deserved it. This arrogant boy needed to be thrown off guard a bit.

But as she looked at him, she could suddenly see that he was just a troubled soul, and her anger began to lift. She could see that, behind his brave facade, he was actually very fragile. Vulnerable.

This boy had some serious walls, there was no doubt about that. She wasn't sure what had happened to him, but she recognized a guarded person when she saw one. It reminded her of her brother, Sam. But even more intense.

"Blake," she echoed, as if she hadn't already known, and nodded back.

"Anything else?" he asked.

Now it was her chance to turn her back. She did it quickly, before he could turn his back on hers. It felt good. At least she'd had the last word.

"No," she said, her back to him. "That's enough."

She could feel him staring at her back, probably twice as angry to be provoked into conversation only to have her cut it short and turn her back on him. She smiled.

She heard his shuffling of feet, and realized he'd turned his back, too.

They both stood like that for minutes, the thick silence hanging over them like a cloud.

Minutes turned into hours, as the sun rose high in the sky and Caitlin looked out at the Hudson.

She looked at the sandy shores, and thought again of Caleb. Of the Aquinnah cliffs. Of their beautiful night together. She remembered the horses, the pounding of the waves, the sandy shore, the rocks, the cave.... She suddenly missed Caleb so badly, it actually hurt. It had not been that long ago. How could so much have changed so fast?

She felt the surreal, superhuman power coursing through her veins and looked down at her own body, gleaming in the sun, more muscular and toned than it had ever been when she was human.

Indeed, much had changed. But the strangest part of it was, she felt so comfortable in her new skin.

She felt natural being a full-blooded vampire, felt like this was always who she was meant to be. Her entire life, she had felt so confused as to what her identity was, as to who she really was, as to where she belonged. Now, she felt, she finally knew. She was a vampire. This was where she belonged.

Here, on this island, with this coven, with all of her new friends. If Caleb couldn't be a part of her new life, at least she felt confident in who *she* was now.

Caitlin stared out at the beautiful Hudson for hour after hour, watching the sun rise high in the sky. The silence had become so pervasive, that after a while she had completely forgotten that anyone else was on the fort with her. She loved the isolation of this place, the views, being completely immersed in nature. And she loved having Rose at her side. If this was all guard duty entailed, she'd gladly sign up for it every day.

The cool air blowing off the river cleared her head, and allowed her to clear her mind. She felt it was washing over her, cleansing her, allowing her to let go of her past, to let go of everything.

Just when Caitlin felt her first hunger pang, started to wonder when lunch might come, she suddenly heard a loud screeching overhead.

She leaned back, covered her eyes from the sun, and scanned the skies. It didn't sound like the usual bird.

Blake must have heard it, too, because he also leaned back and scanned the skies. As they both watched, a huge falcon circled over them, again and again, coming in lower and lower. To Caitlin's surprise, it finally dove right at them, setting down on the stone wall. It stared right at her and screeched, defiant.

Caitlin was taken aback. It was such a large, beautiful and primal bird.

"What is it?" Caitlin asked.

"A falcon," Blake said.

Caitlin stared.

"It's a vampire thing," he added. "We use them as couriers."

"Couriers?" Caitlin asked.

Blake set down his spear, took two steps forward, and pointed at the Falcon's neck.

Caitlin looked down and saw the small metal box, clamped to its claw.

"Open it," Blake said. "It's for you."

"For me?" Caitlin asked, stunned. "How do you know that?"

"It's looking at you, not at me," he said.

Caitlin took a few tentative steps forward, reached out, and removed the locket from the Falcon's neck. As soon as she did, it startled her by flapping its huge wings in her face and taking off. In seconds, it was high up in the sky, flying off into the horizon.

Caitlin examined the small metal box in her hand, in shock. Who would possibly be sending her a message?

She pushed the small latch, and the little metal box, barely bigger than a pillbox, popped open.

She extracted a small, folded up piece of paper. On the outside, it read: "For Caitlin."

As soon as Caitlin held the piece of paper, she could feel it, through every pore her body. It was from Caleb. He had written her a letter.

Caitlin looked off into the horizon, and sighed deeply. Receiving this note from him pained her more deeply than she could have imagined. She felt so torn, so conflicted, so caught up in a whirlwind of emotions. Why was he writing her? Why couldn't he just leave her alone? He obviously was with Sera. They obviously had a kid together. It was obvious that he didn't really care about Caitlin anymore. So why? Why keep bothering her? What could he possibly say in a letter to make things any different?

Caitlin was about to just tear it to pieces and throw it in the river, let it float away for good. But she didn't want to do it in front of Blake. He'd ask too many questions. And a part of her couldn't quite allow herself to, anyway.

At the same time, though, she couldn't bring herself to read it. She doubted that she'd ever be able to bring herself to. She would hang onto it for now, at least. But it would remain unopened.

She stuffed it in her pocket, turned, and headed back to her position.

She felt Blake watching her. She could feel his eyes on her back. The falcon and the letter must have peaked his curiosity.

"Well?" he asked. "Aren't you going to open it?"

"What do you care?" she answered, her back still to him. At least something caught his interest.

At least he was alive.

"A vampire doesn't send a message unless it's urgent. You should respect that. You should open the letter."

"Again," she said, turning and facing him, "what difference is it to you?"

"I just can't understand," he said. "Why wouldn't you open it? It makes no sense."

"Maybe because I don't want to read it," she said, defiant. "Maybe I'll *never* read it."

Blake stared at her. As he did, the light shifted, and lit up his pale blue eyes. She realized again how striking he was. She quickly forced herself to look away.

"Do you know who it's from?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

"Of course you do," he answered himself. "That would be the only reason why you wouldn't open it.... It must be from someone you don't want to hear from," he continued, reasoning aloud.

Suddenly, he figured it out. "It's from your boyfriend, isn't it?"

Caitlin let the question hang in the air for quite some time.

"I don't have a boyfriend," she finally said. And, even as she felt the parchment sitting in her pocket, she meant it. She didn't know what Caleb was to her anymore, but she knew that he was not her boyfriend.

"Can we just *not* talk anymore?" she said, annoyed herself now, wanting silence.

Caitlin felt the hesitation behind her, then, finally, after some time, she heard the shuffling of feet that indicated his turning his back. At least he let her be. That was more than she could say for Caleb.

At this moment, she hated all boys. She thought of the upcoming concert tonight, and remembered that she and Blake would be the only ones without dates. That suited her just fine. The last thing she wanted right now was another man in her life.

## SEVENTEEN

Caitlin was excited as she hurried through her room, laying out her clothes on her bed as she got dressed. The sunset light streamed into her window, and as she realized how late it was getting, she increased her pace. Polly would be here any second, and she couldn't be late to the concert. But she was frozen in indecision. She just didn't know what to wear.

Spread out on the bed before her were two outfits that Polly had found for her. They were both black, but both very different. One of them was a fitted dress made of some material that Caitlin didn't recognize—whatever it was, it had a sheen to it, and looked like leather. The other was more subdued. It consisted of black, fitted jeans and a light black turtleneck, with black flats to go along with it. Caitlin couldn't decide if she should be more subdued, or if she should go for the high-gloss, more dramatic look.

There was a knocking on the door. *Polly.*

Caitlin quickly sprang into action, deciding on the more subdued look. It was more her.

"Caitlin!" came the voice.

Before Caitlin could answer, Polly let herself. Caitlin finished pulling on the turtleneck, pulled out her hair from it, and was basically dressed.

Polly looked her up and down. "Wow," Polly said, "that fits you so much better than me. You look beautiful."

"Really?" Caitlin asked hopefully.

"I wish we had a working mirror to prove it," Polly said. "One of the hazards of being a vampire girl."

Caitlin had actually discovered, the day before, a piece of washed up metal on the island, and had brought it up to her room, rubbing it down and polishing it.

"Problem solved," Caitlin said.

It sat in the corner, and as she walked over to it, she could indeed catch a small glimpse of her reflection.

Polly's eyes opened wide in delight, and she came hurrying over, and stood beside it, too, looking at herself in the metal.

"OMG, this is awesome!" Polly exclaimed. "How did you figure that one? It's great to see myself!"

For the first time in as long as she could remember, Caitlin actually liked how she looked. It felt *her*, and

she felt as if she were starting to come into her own, to figure out what her look was.

"Your cheeks are shining, too," Polly said, "they're full of color. You look very healthy. Fleshed out."

As Caitlin looked, she realized that Polly was right. She had never quite seen herself looking like this before. Was it because she was a full vampire now? She looked more mature. Less like a girl, and more like a woman. She liked it.

Caitlin looked at Polly. She was wearing the Lily Pulitzer outfit, and it suited her. She looked radiant.

"You look beautiful, too," Caitlin said.

"Really?" Polly asked. She turned left and right, examining herself, "I hope Patrick likes it. He's never seen me in this before. I'm so excited. It's our first official date."

Caitlin felt another pang of anxiety, as she remembered that everyone would have a date but her.

And Blake. That would make them both stand out. It was a lot of pressure. And really not something Caitlin wanted to deal with right now.

But on the other hand, she liked all of her covenmates and was excited to see what their concert would be like. So she would just deal with it.

She marveled at how normal things felt. If it weren't for being on an island, and in a castle, she would right now totally feel as if she were back at home, in her bedroom, hanging out with her friends, getting ready to go out for the night. It really felt like life had finally settled down, come back to normal. She realized again how at home she felt here, and she was so grateful for it. She hoped things would never change.

Polly suddenly looked out the window, and worry flashed across her face.

"We're gonna be late!" she said. "We have to go," she said, hurrying out the room.

As Caitlin began to follow her, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Caleb's letter. It still sat there, unopened, on her desk. Why had she had to look at it now, of all times? She had been feeling so good, had been just getting him out of her mind. The sight of it brought her back, left a pit in her stomach. A part of her wanted to tear it open, and another part of her wanted to tear it to pieces.

"Caitlin!" Polly yelled. "What are you doing!?"

Caitlin exhaled. *Not now*, she thought. She tried hard to put it out of her mind.

And with that, she steeled herself and hurried out the door, Rose following at her heels.

\*

This was clearly a special night, because the pathway leading through the forest was lit up by torches. Caitlin, Polly and Rose had but a short walk to go until they entered the large clearing, which was lit by even more torches, and encased by small walls of crumbling ruins. There was a wide block of hewn stone in the center of the grass, which they seemed to use as a makeshift stage, and the whole scene reminded Caitlin of something out of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was a magical forest setting, and she felt as if she were in a mini, ancient theatre.

Although the setting was casual and everyone intermingled in a relaxed way, almost like a cocktail party, Caitlin nonetheless felt self-conscious as she entered. She was happy to have Polly at her side. But as soon as they entered, Patrick hurried over, Polly lit up with excitement, linked arms with him, and they headed off to the far side of the clearing. Caitlin was on her own.

She looked around, and saw that everyone was linked up in couples. She felt even more self-conscious, as if everyone were looking at her. She knew that they weren't, but she felt it anyway.

"Caitlin," came the voice.

Caitlin turned to see Cain standing there.

Ever since that first day, Cain had gone out of his way to be apologetic. At first, she had appreciated it, but now it was just getting annoying. She almost wished that he would just leave her alone. She had accepted his apology a million times, and it didn't seem like it would ever end.

"I want you to meet Barbara," he said.

Beside him stood Barbara, a very tall and thin vampire, much taller than Cain, with straight black hair, small black eyes, and a narrow, elongated face. Her eyes seemed half-closed, as if she were sleeping. She seemed either very relaxed, or very apathetic. She moved slowly, as she extended a long, pale hand to Caitlin.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Barbara said slowly, in a deep voice.

Caitlin shook it, and felt a chill run through. Her hand was supple and freezing.

"Pleased to meet you," Caitlin said.

As the two of them drifted off, Caitlin thought that they were an odd couple. But at least they were a couple. Here *she* was, standing conspicuously alone, feeling worse than ever. At that moment, she desperately missed Caleb. She would give anything to have him by her side now. It was the only thing missing in the picture, the only thing keeping her from complete happiness.

Caitlin spotted, off to the side, what looked like a makeshift bar, on top of a crumbling ruin. It was lined with all sorts of exotic goblets and chalices—silver, gold, encrusted with jewels—and between them sat several glass pitchers of a red liquid, fruit floating inside.

She drifted over to it, wondering what was in it. Was it alcohol? She wondered briefly if they were allowed to drink. *I guess so*, Caitlin thought. *Why not?* After all, most of these vampires, while they looked about 18, had been alive for thousands of years. If they weren't legal to drink, then who was?

"It's our special sangria," came a voice.

Caitlin looked over and saw the twins, Taylor and Tyler, standing behind her.

"I made it myself," Tyler said.

"And I added the flourish," Taylor said.

"It's your typical sangria," Tyler said. "A little wine, a little fruit—"

"And a little something special," Taylor interjected, "To add a kick. Just for vampires. Fresh venison blood."

He took the pitcher and poured some into a large, jewel-encrusted goblet.

Caitlin took it and drank. It was delicious, and it went right to her head.

"Wow!" Caitlin said.

They both beamed, and nodded in approval.

As they drifted away, Caitlin slowly, discreetly, looked around the clearing. She noticed Madeline and Harrison, sitting to the side on a large tree stump, and she noticed Eric and Sasha, holding hands, walking



slowly on the other side. She saw Polly and Patrick engrossed in conversation with Cain and Barbara. She wondered what on earth they could be talking about.

There were others, too, but she couldn't quite remember all of their names. It was so much at once.

But as she looked, she realized that she was looking for a particular person. Despite herself, she had to admit that she was looking for Blake.

And as usual, he was nowhere in sight.

He was maddening. Why did he get special privileges? Why didn't he have to be social, like everyone else? Didn't Aiden tell her that it was all for one, and one for all?

Suddenly, Caitlin heard a clinking of a glass, and as she watched, her covenmates slowly drifted to various seats in the clearing. They sat on makeshift logs, tree stumps, some on the grass, and some on huge, smooth boulders.

They were all sitting with their backs to her, looking expectantly at the large, makeshift stage.

Aiden stood beside it, clinking a glass with a knife.

"Tonight," he said loudly, enunciating each word, "we have a very special treat for you: Bach's cello suites."

There was light applause from her covenmates, as Aiden descended and a figure took the stage.

Caitlin's heart stopped. It was him. Blake.

He ascended to the stage, and to Caitlin's shock, he was carrying a cello.

She hurried over and took a seat on a large, smooth stone, and Rose jumped up and sat beside her. She watched, riveted, as Blake positioned himself on a small chair, beneath the torchlight. He looked very serious, even more serious than usual, as he stared down at the floor.

He closed his eyes, breathed deeply, pulled back the bow, and began.

The music was exquisite. Caitlin had never heard anything like it. It brought her back. She thought of Jonah, and his viola, and their concert in Carnegie Hall; she thought of Caleb, and the Whaling Church, and his incredible piano recital. But this instrument—it sounded different than the others. It was so smooth, mellow, relaxing.

She watched Blake as he played. In the torchlight, his features were even more impressive. He was lean, angular, striking. He played the instrument like a master, hitting every note perfectly, and the music was divine. It utterly relaxed Caitlin, in every pore of her body. As she listened, she was shocked that such beautiful music could come from such an anguished person. How was it possible?

As she watched him, she could see all sorts of emotions flow through his face, and she began to realize just how deep and complex Blake was. There was clearly so much that he was holding inside, so much that he was unable to vocalize. Why was he holding so much inside? What had happened to make him like this?

The hour flew by so quickly that when the playing ended, Caitlin could hardly believe it was finished. She felt as if it had just begun. The final, deep note hung in the forest air, mingling with the sound of the lapping waves of the Hudson. It was utterly silent, as her covenmates sat there, not stirring.

Finally, after several seconds of silence, they all slowly stood, and clapped loudly.

Caitlin was still in shock. It was hard for her to come back to yourself, to get over what she'd just experienced. As Blake stood there, staring right at her, she suddenly realized that she was the only one still seated, not clapping. It wasn't because the music hadn't affected her—it was because it *had* affected her. Too much. It had brought flooding back memories of Jonah, of Caleb. And now, a new memory: of Blake. She felt like she could hardly breathe, and she didn't know what to make of all her emotions.

She felt like she was about to burst, to cry, and she couldn't take it anymore. She couldn't lose it in front of these people. She jumped up and ran off into the woods, Rose following. As she did, she feared what they would all think of her. She was sure they would hate her now, being so rude. But she had no choice. It was just too much.

After a few minutes of running, Caitlin found herself on a small, sandy shore of the far side of the island, breathing deep and wiping away her tears. She missed Caleb so much. And now, worse, she was mesmerized by Blake. She felt some connection to him. She couldn't explain it. It was dark and tragic, and overwhelmingly powerful. The power of it scared her. And at this moment in her life, she didn't want to be feeling a connection with anyone but Caleb.

Caitlin walked along the shore, listening to the lapping of the waves, admiring the moonlight, and she slowly stopped crying. She forced herself to breathe deeply.

"Caitlin?" came a voice. It was so soft, she almost wondered if she'd heard it.

She spun around.

And there he was. Blake. Standing just a few feet away, and looking at her with concern.

No. Why had he had to come here? Why couldn't he just let her be?

She felt as if she were being caught up in a web of destiny, and that no matter what she did, she was helpless to escape. She saw their relationship already, saw it already happening as clearly as day, and it terrified her.

She quickly wiped away her tears, breathed deeply, and tried to sound confident.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

He took a step closer. She did not back away.

"I saw you run out," he said, seriously. "I want to see if you're OK?"

"Why?" she answered. "You didn't even want to talk to me earlier today."

"Is that why you ran off?" he asked. He had a maddening way of answering her questions with questions.

"Or was my playing that bad?"

Despite herself, she laughed. He was funny. She hadn't expected that.

"Your playing was beautiful," she said.

She saw his features soften. He clearly needed to hear that.

"So, what is it then?" he asked.

"I..." Caitlin began.

But she didn't really know what to say. What could she say? That she missed Caleb terribly? But that she was also starting to have feelings for him, Blake? That she felt that they had a connection?

And that she hated that as much as she loved it?

Instead, Caitlin stood there, speechless. She turned and looked out at the water.

Blake took several steps towards her, reached up, wiped a tear off her cheek with his thumb. Caitlin closed her eyes as he did. The touch of his hand—it was exquisite. And it electrified her. It was so soft, and smooth. She forced herself to look away, to look anywhere but into his eyes. Thankfully, he suddenly turned, took a step away, and looked out at the water himself. They stood there, side by side, staring out.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted today," he said. "I should have been more polite."

"Then why weren't you?" she asked, her voice too sharp. She immediately regretted it. There she went again, not only saying what she didn't mean, but always having too much of an edge whenever she felt nervous.

He breathed deeply. "I came to the island," he began, "I joined this coven, because I had to get away from the world. There was a girl. A human. I loved her very much. But my love for her brought her ruin." He paused. "It was because of me that she ended up dead."

Caitlin looked at him. "How?" she asked. "You turned her?"

He shook his head.

"I wish I had. She wouldn't allow it. And that was my deepest regret. But I could not go against her wishes. She wanted to die, to stay mortal. No, it was her fellow humans who killed her. Her village. They discovered our relationship, and they treated her like a witch. Before I could save her...she was dead."

*Her village*, Caitlin thought. She wondered.

"How long ago was this?" Caitlin asked.

"400 years ago," Blake answered.

Caitlin was stunned. Here he was, still reeling from it all these years later.

He must feel things very deeply, she thought.

"You see," he said, "I feel that I'm a danger to people. Whoever is around me, bad things happen to them. No matter how hard I try. So I...distance myself. I keep away from people I care for. Including vampires."

"But what if that's not really true?" she asked. "What if you just believe that? What if all the things that happened in your past were just bad luck?"

He shook his head. "No."

"But how do you *know*?" she asked. "I mean, you live here, and nothing bad has happened to your covenmates."

"But I keep my distance most of the time."

"I refuse to believe that," Caitlin said. "You're living with in a self-imposed exile. But you don't even know if it's true. What if you're getting close to someone would bring them *good* luck? And you, too? You can't just give up forever."

She could see him looking out at the water, brow furrowed, thinking. His eyes seemed to light up with some spark of hope.

"What about you?" he asked. "Why are you here?"

She had no idea how to answer that. It all seemed overwhelming. She had no idea where to even begin.

"I don't really know," she finally said, staring out into the river.

He nodded slowly, looked out at the water himself. A silence fell between them.

"Well, I'm glad you are," he said, and broke into a small smile, facing her.

She looked at him, looked right into his light-blue eyes, and felt as if she had looked into those eyes a thousand times before. The feeling of familiarity shocked her.

"So am I," she said, her voice trembling.

He looked down, and held something out. "This was hers," he said simply.

Caitlin looked down and saw him holding a small piece of worn sea-glass.

"I want you to have it," he said.

He reached out and put it in her palm. It was so smooth.

"I can't take this," she said.

But he didn't respond. Instead, he reached up and ran the back of his hand smoothly along her cheek. As they stared deeply into each other's eyes, she felt as if he were looking into her very soul.

She felt lost in space, time. And she felt completely out of control.

Was he going to kiss her?

She realized at that moment that if he did, she would be helpless to refuse.

**EIGHTEEN**

Caleb, Samuel, and their entourage of hundreds of vampires continued to fly over Manhattan, heading downtown. Since Times Square, no vampires dared stop them. As Caleb looked down, he saw mayhem sprawling all over the city, block to block, each neighborhood getting worse than the next. But they couldn't risk stopping again to help the humans. The Blacktide Coven was now alarmed to their presence and they had to race to City Hall to take out Kyle before it was too late—

and get back the Sword once and for all. So far, they had been lucky, with no other vampires up in the sky. But as they all flew at top speed, racing over Broadway, their good fortune came to an end.

There, in the distance, coming right at them were hundreds of Blacktide vampires. And leading them, right in the center, was Kyle, brandishing the Sword. At one side of him flew Sergei, and at the other, flew Samantha and—could it be? Yes, it was Caitlin's brother. Sam. Caleb was struck with a pang of worry—he would happily kill any of the others, but Sam? Killing him would create a rift between he and Caitlin that he could never mend. Caleb would have to tread carefully. This certainly complicated things.

"Warriors!" Caleb screamed over the roar, over the din of thousands of fluttering wings.

"Prepare for battle!"

Caleb extracted the staff and held it out high before him, while beside him, Samuel raised his gauntlet. The two groups of vampires were coming at each other fast—impossibly fast—and Caleb braced himself for impact. The last thing he saw, before the sickening noise of vampire smashing into vampire, was Kyle's face, distorted with rage.

And then came the impact. Hundreds of vampires collided right into each other with a roar, swinging their weapons, tearing at each other, clawing at each other's eyes, wrestling each other with superhuman force. Caleb chose one body, one vampire to focus on, as he always did in battle.

He saw Kyle raising the Sword high, and he knew that none of his other vampires, with the exception

possibly of Samuel, would be able to stand up to him. Even with the staff, Caleb was not so sure that he could stand up to him—at least not for long. But he had to try.

Kyle swung madly, and Caleb blocked the blow with the staff, which, miraculously, held without breaking. That sickening crack was the first noise of the battle, the first to initiate a cacophony of clanging.

Within seconds, the hundreds of vampires, entangled, all began to fall towards the ground together, wrestling in mid-air. The sound of their bodies all hitting the cement was deafening.

Caleb and Kyle were locked in a wrestler's embrace as they crashed together on the hard concrete. Caleb managed to get Kyle into a hold, squeezing him hard, restricting Kyle's arms and preventing him from swinging the Sword. As long as he kept him locked tight, he figured he'd stand a chance.

As they rolled on the concrete, wrestling, all around them, hundreds of vampires were locked in hand-to-hand combat. It was furious, loud, and bloody. Left and right, vampires attacked, lunged, ducked and fell. Their unearthly cries and shrieks filled the night. It was a vicious vampire battle.

But Kyle, too, was an age old-veteran of battle, and after several seconds, he managed to lean back and head-but Caleb hard, right in his nose. It was enough to sting Caleb, and just enough for Kyle to get the momentum he needed to roll and throw Caleb off.

Caleb hit the ground, and had the presence of mind to keep rolling and grab his staff. He spun and raised it just in time, as Kyle's sword came slashing down. Again, he managed to block it with the staff, with a loud, metallic clang.

Kyle was too fast, though. In one quick motion he kicked the staff, knocking it right from Caleb's hands. Caleb looked over, and realized he was defenseless, the staff several feet away.

Kyle raised the Sword and prepare to drive it down.

Caleb knew this was his last moment on Earth.

Suddenly, Samuel appeared. Before Kyle could bring the Sword down, Samuel was charging, striking Kyle hard in the throat with the gauntlet and driving him backwards. Samuel kept driving, landing on top of him. Caleb rolled several feet, grabbed the staff, and got to his feet to help his brother.

But it was too late. Kyle had thrown Samuel off of him, and before Samuel could strike again, Kyle sidestepped and stabbed him with the Sword.

Caleb watched as his brother sank to his knees, eyes opened wide in shock. Then he collapsed, the life force drawn out of him.

Caleb was overwhelmed with grief. Samuel. His brother. By his side for centuries.

And then, as he looked at Kyle, he was overcome with rage.

Kyle charged, raising the Sword. But this time, Caleb's rage outmatched Kyle's. Caleb sidestepped at the last second, forcing Kyle to miss, and then Caleb swept his staff around hard, cracking Kyle right behind the knee. Kyle's knees buckled, and he went down.

Caleb swung again, and cracked Kyle in the back of the head. It all happened so fast, and it was a perfect one-two combination. Kyle landed flat on his face, and for a second, the Sword actually fell from his hand, onto the concrete.

Caleb was startled at his own good luck. As he prepared to lunge for the Sword, to grab it for himself, something caught his eye. He looked up.

There she was. It couldn't be.

In the midst of the frenzy of battle, there stood Caitlin, standing all alone. With big sad eyes, she stared right at him.

Caleb's heart broke, and he froze. He couldn't fathom what she was doing here. Had Kyle taken her prisoner?

"Caitlin?" he asked.

She smiled, and took several steps towards him.

Caleb shut out all the battle around him, everything, as he watched her approach. She was here.

She was really here.

Caleb's vision was suddenly interrupted, as he felt something metal and wiry cover his entire body, and felt himself being grabbed from behind. He realized he had just been cast in a vampire net, and as he struggled, he realized it was silver, reinforced. Impossible to break out of. He squirmed as much as he could, but there was nowhere to go.

He felt the net close tight on him from behind, so snug he could hardly breathe, and he craned his neck just enough to see Kyle standing there behind them, grinning down.

He looked back to Caitlin, wondering how she could betray him like this, how she could allow for Kyle to sneak up and capture him.

But as he looked at Caitlin, he saw her change, right before his eyes. She transformed into her brother Sam.

Caleb was shocked. It had never been Caitlin. It was a trick. Sam. He must have the skill for shape shifting.

And that was the last lucid thought Caleb had, as dozens and dozens of vampires pounced on him, grabbing him every which way, hauling him off deep into the mob. The final thing he heard was the screams of his brethren, as Kyle, wielding the Sword again, butchered them all.

## **NINETEEN**

*Caitlin ran through a field of thorns. They tore at her left and right, and the pain was unbearable, as the field closed in. But some part of her told her that she had to keep running, that it was her only way out.*

*On the horizon sat a huge, blood-red sun, and she could see her father's silhouette outlined against it. She ran and ran, trying to reach him. But the sun suddenly set, so quickly, and the sky turned to black. In its place, a large, blood-red moon rose, filling the entire sky, and the thorns grew thicker, cutting Caitlin deeper. She knew that if she could reach her father, everything would be all right.*

*He was getting closer, much closer, and within seconds, she stood before him.*

*But when she looked up, at his face, it was no longer her father. It was Caleb. The thorns were closing in on him, too, wrapping around his legs, waist, arms, pulling at him. Then they crept up from behind and wrapped around his face, tearing and clawing at it. Blood streaked from his cheeks, from his forehead, and she could see his anguish. She reached out to try to save him, but she was held down by the thorns.*

*He reached a hand out, and screamed: "Caitlin, help!"*

*As he did, the earth suddenly opened beneath him, and the thorns dragged him down, like quicksand, into the earth.*

*She struggled for all she had, the thorns tearing at her, and managed to drop to her knees and extend a hand.*

*He grabbed it as he was sinking. Their hands met, the thorns pressing into each other, and the pain was unreal.*

*But Caitlin held on for all she had.*

*Still, it was not enough. Caleb screamed as the earth sucked him down. No matter how hard she tried, she could not pull him back.*

*"Caitlin!" he screamed.*

*A second later, he was completely sucked under the earth, the sound of his cries stifled by the dirt.*

*"Caleb!"*

Caitlin sat straight up in bed, face covered in sweat, screaming his name.

She looked all around, searching for him, but as she sat there, breathing hard, she began to realize it was just a dream.

It had seemed so vivid. So real. She'd never had any dream like it. It felt like a message.

Caitlin jumped to her feet and began pacing the stone floor of her room, the morning light streaking in through the window. She was damp with sweat, and she wiped her brow again. She felt so distressed, so anxious, she didn't know what to do. She felt, in every pore of her body, that Caleb was in trouble, that he needed her. On some level, she knew it was more than just a dream. And despite what he had done, despite his betrayal with Sera, a fire burned inside her to help him.

Rose must have sensed her agitation, because she paced the small room beside her.

Caitlin pulled the hair out of her face, took a deep breath, and collected her thoughts. Was Caleb really in danger? Did he really need her?

On the one hand, he was heading into a vampire war, but at the same time, he did have the support of this entire coven, she assumed. He would have thousands of soldiers at his side. What good could her presence do him?

Yet something still gnawed away at her. She just couldn't explain it, but she knew that somehow he was in danger. Or was she just imagining it? Was it just wishful thinking, just her own hopes that he somehow needed her, wanted her back?

Caitlin tried to clear her mind. The dream would not go away, and she felt that it wouldn't. She had to do something. But she didn't know what. Was there any way to find out how he was, she wondered? To send him a message?

Then she remembered. The falcon. His letter.

She looked over at her desk, and there it sat, neatly folded.

She hurried over to it and unfolded it with shaking hands. Now she absolutely had to read it.

She scanned it quickly.

*Dearest Caitlin...nothing at all between myself and Sera...deeply sorry if she gave another impression....know how much I love you...how much I'm thinking of you...cannot wait to return to you...a new life together somewhere far from here...you hold my heart in this letter.*

As Caitlin read the letter, again and again, pouring over it a first and then a second and third time, dissecting every word, she felt the tears stream down her cheeks.

She had been so stupid. Why hadn't she read it sooner? Why hadn't she given him the benefit of the doubt? Why couldn't she have just listened to him, heard him out?

She was such an idiot. After reading this, it was obvious that he and Sera had nothing between them. That they didn't have a child together—at least, not for hundreds of years. Sera had twisted it all around. Caleb was completely innocent.

Why couldn't she have just given him the time of day?

Caitlin was furious at Sera, but even more furious at herself. She had owed Caleb that much, to let him explain, and she hadn't even had given him that. After all he'd done for her. After he'd saved her life and nursed her back to health—for the third time.

She had been so narrow-minded, so proud, so impatient. She hated herself.

On top of that, she had betrayed *him*, ordering him to leave her after all he had done for her.

And she had also allowed herself to feel feelings for someone else. Blake. She thought back to last night, and realized that she had also betrayed him with Blake.

Or had she?

Caitlin sat on the edge of her bed, head in her hands, and tried desperately to remember. What had happened? She recalled their conversation. Their walking on the sand. And then? Had he kissed her?

She remembered his reaching up, his stroking her face, her feeling that he was about to kiss her....

But he hadn't. She remembered now. They had looked deeply into each other's eyes, then suddenly, mysteriously, he had turned and disappeared.

She reached into her pocket and felt the small piece of worn sea-glass he had given her. She rubbed it, and felt a bit relieved.

At least she had not betrayed Caleb with Blake. Still, thoughts of Blake swirled within her. Was that itself a betrayal?

As the emotions swirled within her, she hated herself, more than ever. Why couldn't she be stronger? More disciplined? More patient?

At that moment, Caitlin's emotions manifested into something physical, something swirling inside her gut. She felt literally sick, and suddenly found herself racing towards the open window.

She leaned out and threw up, again and again.

She stood there, wiping her mouth and gasping for breath. She couldn't remember ever throwing up like that, or for that long. And it had all been blood.

She did not feel herself, and for a moment she wondered if she was really sick. Her entire body's chemistry felt off, even for a vampire.

As she sat there, breathing, one thing started to become clear: it had not been merely a dream. It was a message. Caleb needed her, she felt sure of it.

And she would do whatever she had to to save him.

\*

Caitlin walked quickly through the woods, Rose at her side, and finally entered the little clearing where Aiden's home was. It seemed so quiet in the morning light, and she wondered if he was asleep.

She doubted that he was. He didn't seem to ever sleep. On the one hand, she barely saw him, but on the other hand, he seemed to be omnipresent on the island, the guiding hand that kept the place running smoothly.

He had said, when she'd first arrived, that if she ever needed anything, she shouldn't hesitate come to him, that his door was always open. She hoped that he meant it. She hadn't expected to ever come to him with anything, but now she really needed it. As she stood there before his door, hesitating, she worried about how their conversation might go.

Caitlin took a deep breath and finally reached up her hand to knock—and as soon as she did, it opened by itself. Standing there was Aiden, staring back with his resolved, steel-blue eyes, expressionless. He was a hard man to read. His eyes shone in the morning light, and once again, she felt as if he were a mountain, as if he'd been on this planet for thousands of years.

He silently turned and walked across the room, leaving the door open for her to follow. She did, Rose on her heels, and closed the door behind them.

Aiden was already seated behind his desk, hands folded across his chest, patiently watching her.

Caitlin, nervous, took a seat across from him.

Of course he was awake. Of course he had been expecting her. She had forgotten, as always, the psychic powers of vampires—and especially of this one. He probably already knew everything she was about to say. Nonetheless, she had to say it. If nothing else, she had to hear it for herself.

She cleared her throat, nervous.

"I assume you already know why I'm here?" she began cautiously.

He stared back, neutral. "Why don't you tell me," he said.

"I dreamt last night of Caleb," she said. "That he was in danger. But it felt like more than a dream to me. It felt... *real*."

"Vampires do not visit each other in sleep casually," Aiden replied. "Every dream is a visit. An intentional visit. And every dream bears a message. We are not like humans. We can control the dream world."

Her eyes opened wide in worry.

"Then...it's true?" she asked. "Caleb is in danger?"

Aiden nodded back gravely. "Yes," he answered flatly. "Very much so."

Caitlin felt her heart sink at his words, and she stood, too agitated to sit. How could he be so casual?

"Well—what—I—what do you mean? What do you know?" she asked.

"As much as you," was all he said.

"Then if it's true," she said, pacing the room, "I...I can't just sit here. I have to go to him. I have to help him."

"Why?"

"Why?" she asked, confused. "What do you mean, why?"

"What is he to you?" he asked calmly.

Caitlin glared back at Aiden, angry now. Why would he ask her that? He knew how much she cared for Caleb. And he knew how much Caleb cared for her. He couldn't possibly be asking that question literally.

No, she realized. As with everything Aiden said, it carried another message, a hint. He must be asking her rhetorically. He was trying to coax something out of her, like he always did. He wanted her to work it out on her own, to vocalize it. He wanted her to put a label on their relationship, to say it out loud. He was goading her towards something.

"Caleb is my..." Caitlin began, then trailed off. What could she say? *Boyfriend* was too weak of a term; *husband* wasn't accurate, though. What was he exactly? Caitlin didn't know the term to describe it.

"He's my beloved," she finally said.

Aiden nodded back, seemingly satisfied with the response. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Again, Caitlin stared at him, sensing that he was goading her towards some revelation. He wanted to know how sure she was, how sure of her own feelings. He must have sensed something else. Yes, that was it: he must have sensed some lingering feelings between her and Blake. Yes. It was a rebuke. He wanted her to get clear on her own feelings, wanted her to decide, to know for sure who she would commit to wholeheartedly.

He was right, she realized. She did have some lingering feelings for Blake. And if Caleb was truly her beloved, then she could not allow herself to have feelings for anyone else. It required an inner discipline, and this is what he what he was demanding of her.

"Yes," Caitlin said finally, confidently, definitively. "Caleb. And only Caleb."

Aiden nodded. "Good. Very good," he said. "Vampire love is a very sacred thing. It is not something to be given lightly."

"I have to help him," Caitlin said again, emphatically. "I feel that he needs me."

"He does," Aiden said. "But you won't be able to help him."

"What do you mean?"

"Caleb has chosen his own mission. His own fate. He's chosen to fight for his coven, his family.

He's chosen a very noble mission. "But he cannot win. The forces of darkness are just too strong, and he's outnumbered. He lacks the full support of his own people. He has headed into a trap.

There is no way out for him. And there is nothing—and no one—who can save him now."

Caitlin stared back, shocked, feeling as if the wind had been sucked out of her.

"It is a fight you cannot win," he continued. "You would only be enveloped in the darkness. If you were to try, you will surely die, too."

Caitlin, speechless, felt a hot tear stream down her cheek. Deep down, she sensed that everything Aiden was saying was true.

"I'm sorry to tell you all of this, but you have to know it all. Your mission is too important.

Caleb was right all along: you *are* the One. And that means you are the only one who can lead us to the shield. Without the shield, the sword will wreak destruction on an unimaginable scale. We need you. Our entire race needs you. The human race needs you. This coven—your new family—needs you. This is where you are

supposed to be, where you *must* be. Your mission is here. You must train, get stronger, and one day, you will lead us to it. It has already been written.”

“But I must go to Caleb,” she said.

“No. I cannot let you jeopardize yourself, or more importantly, our people. I forbid you to go.”

Caitlin stared back, and her sadness began to morph to resentment, to anger. She hated authority, and hated anyone forbidding her to do anything. It pushed her over the edge.

“You can’t forbid me,” she said. “I am free to stay and go as I please. You said that when I got here.”

“What I said was that you can go when you please, but if you go without my permission, you can never return. Ever. Is that a sacrifice you are willing to make?”

Caitlin stood there, stunned. She didn’t know what to think. To give all of this up? This island, her new home, her new coven? All of her new friends? To plunge into darkness, to try to save Caleb, when Aiden insists that he cannot be saved? When he insists that she would die, too?

She knew that, logically, he was right. She needed to stay here.

But emotionally, deep down, she just couldn’t let go her feelings for Caleb, her feeling of duty.

She had to make an effort to save him, even if it was hopeless. She couldn’t live with herself if she didn’t even try. And she just couldn’t accept that he would be gone forever.

Caitlin suddenly felt the sickness well up within her again, and without warning, she raced to Aiden’s window, opened the shutters, and threw up, again and again. Blood splattered his stone windowsill.

Finally, she caught her breath and wiped her cheek. The room was spinning. She did not feel like herself.

Aiden now stood a few feet behind her, and as she turned, he looked down at her. His eyes—

always so calm, so in control—suddenly widened in surprise. She had never seen him surprised before.

“Oh my,” he said, staring right at her. “I never saw this.”

He was staring deeply into Caitlin’s eyes, and it freaked her out.

“Your eyes...” he said, “...they are yellow.”

The thought of that scared Caitlin. She felt herself trembling inwardly. Was something really wrong with her?

“I don’t feel—well,” she said, feeling dizzy. She felt like she had been poisoned.

“Of course you don’t,” he said, as he slowly reached up and lay his palm on her forehead. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Finally, he looked down at her and nodded.

“As I suspected,” he said.

“What?” she asked, nervous.

“You’re pregnant.”

## TWENTY

If Kyle was capable of feeling anything like joy, this was the closest he’d come. Just a few short weeks ago, he had been, punished, acid poured on his face, cast out from his brethren—a freak, a pariah, never to set foot here again. Now here he was, back underneath City Hall, the new leader of the Blacktide Coven. He had managed to overthrow Rexius, to avenge himself on all of his old enemies, and to hold firm possession of the Sword. He even led an army of thousands, and all the local covens had shown deference to him. The world belonged to him.

And the war was just beginning. That battle had been glorious. Once he had killed Samuel and captured Caleb, it had turned into a rout, his men slaughtering them all. They had put up a good fight, but in the end, his men just outnumbered them. They had now gained tremendous ground, and even more neighboring covens had flocked to join him. His army already spread uptown, block to block, like a swarm of locusts, wiping out all the humans, and concentrating their force as they headed towards the Cloisters to wipe out the White coven. Soon the entire city would be his. And after that, his Master Plan could begin.

Kyle smiled wide. The apocalypse he’d always dreamed of was finally here.

There was only one tiny thorn in his side. It was the tiniest of thorns, but still, it lingered. Caitlin.

That girl. He hated prophecies, and he especially hated the prophecy swirling around her. He hated her lineage. She being the One. The only one who, according to Scripture, could put an end to this apocalypse. He knew it was all nonsense, but the problem was, the other vampires didn’t. They believed in it. And that amounted to psychological warfare.

He knew from the start that he would have to find her and kill her once and for all. After that, and only after that, he could rest easy, and total annihilation could begin.

Which is why he was especially pleased that they’d managed to capture Caleb. Caleb was a better warrior than he’d expected. Kyle had to admit there was a moment there when he feared he might be beaten by him. But then Sam came along. Sam had not only turned into one of his best soldiers, he had turned into his most loyal and trusted soldier. He had saved Kyle’s life. He had proven his loyalty. For that, Kyle would always be grateful.

More importantly, he had given Kyle the opportunity he needed to capture Caleb. And now, with Caleb in hand, he was certain that Caitlin would come. They only needed to bide their time, and he was sure she would show, like a moth to a flame.

He grinned again. Yes. His plan was working.

And if there was anything better than his killing her personally when she arrived, it would be to watch her own brother, Sam, kill her in front of his eyes. Oh, he thought, that would make for such a perfect day. The joy of it, the memory of it, would sustain him for years to come. Yes, what a perfect ending for her. Killed by her own brother’s hand.

Moreover, it would cement Sam’s loyalty to him forever. It would make him the loyal, trusted consigliere that he could rely on as he extended their war past New York. It would serve two purposes, and Kyle was delighted with himself that he’d even thought of it.

And what better weapon to finish her off with than the very weapon *she* had led him to? The Sword would kill her for good this time.

In the huge chamber of bustling vampires, Kyle leaned over and whispered into Sergei’s ear, and soon several guards were scrambling, cutting through the crowd, with orders to find Sam and Samantha.

Within seconds, the two of them stood before Kyle’s throne.

The room grew quiet, as the coven turned to watch. It was not often that Kyle summoned someone before

him.

"Sam of the Blacktide Coven," Kyle said slowly, authoritatively, "you have proven yourself in battle. For that, we are indebted to you."

There was a loud clamor in the room, as all the vampires roared approvingly.

Sam stared back, expressionless, just as he had been since being turned. He still looked as if he were lost in a haze.

"You have but one act left to cement your loyalty to our coven," Kyle continued.

Sergei came running over, holding the Sword.

Kyle leaned over and took it, holding it in both palms out in front of him. It gleamed in the torchlight.

"One day, your sister will come to us. It is inevitable. And when she does, we will kill her." Kyle leaned forward. "More specifically, *you* will kill her. With this Sword."

Sam stared back, expressionless.

"And with this act," Kyle continued, "you will prove your loyalty to me once and for all. And when you do, I shall award you the rank of General, and guarantee you power and riches beyond what you ever dreamed.

"Sam of the Blacktide Coven, do you accept this mission?"

Sam stood, staring back, unblinking. His expression did not change either way.

Kyle began to become annoyed. He felt his face start to flicker with rage.

Suddenly, Samantha stepped up between them and bowed low.

"My master," she said. "Sam is still in a state of shock from being turned, and from his first vampire battle. He is not fully comprehending. I ask that you grant me a private audience with him to explain. I promise I will not disappoint you," she said with another bow.

Kyle breathed deeply. "Very well. You have but a few minutes. Nothing more. And if the answer is not what I want, you and your boyfriend will both pay the price. I assure you."

\*

Samantha ushered Sam into a side chamber of the hall. She closed the door behind them, and as the two of them stood alone, she spoke to him in a quick, agitated whisper.

"Sam, I need you to focus, I need you to listen to me," she pleaded.

He was still staring, expressionless, and she wondered how badly the turning had affected him.

He barely seemed like he heard her at all.

She stepped up, grabbed his face with both of her palms, leaned in and kissed him hard. She held it for a long time.

She retreated, and looked into his eyes. There was the slightest flicker of recognition. Maybe she had broken a bit of the spell.

"Sam, we are in grave danger. You have to accept that Sword. You have to tell Kyle that you will kill your sister."

Sam stared at her, blinking. It seemed like he was starting to register.

"Sam, you *have* to do this. If not, they will kill us. And once the Sword is in our possession, there'll be nothing stopping us. After you kill your sister, we can take out Kyle. With the Sword, you will be stronger than he. You would become the new coven leader, and I will be at your side.

Together, we can climb to greater heights than ever.

"Sam, please listen to me!"

She shook his shoulders, trying to elicit a reaction.

"Repeat after me: I will accept the Sword," she said, looking right into his eyes. "I will kill my sister."

Sam looked at her, still in a trance. "I will accept the sword," he echoed, slowly. "I will kill my sister."

## **TWENTY ONE**

Caitlin sat on a wide stone parapet, Rose by her side, looking out at the water. She had found this small, crumbling ruin on a deserted part of the island, on the shore, almost at eye level with the water. She felt she could gather her thoughts here, alone, and she desperately needed to. The entire sky was lit with the pink hues of the sunset, and she felt as if she were sitting on the edge of the world.

Her mind spun. There was so much to think about, she didn't know where to begin.

Pregnant. That word had rocked her world. She had never imagined it could even be possible—

it had only been a week or two since she'd spent the night with Caleb. She had been shocked when Aiden revealed to her that vampire pregnancies happen much more quickly. It didn't take three months to find out. It only took three days. And while one vampire cannot get another vampire pregnant, he explained, that night that she and Caleb had been together, Caitlin had still been a half-breed.

Caitlin swallowed in fear. What kind of a baby would this be? Human? A Half-breed? A true vampire? And what kind of a mother would she be? She could barely take care of herself, she barely even knew who *she* was. And what kind of a father would Caleb be? Would he even be in the child's life? Would he even be alive to see the child? Would she?

These thoughts and more swirled throughout her mind. But even worse, overriding all of these thoughts was the pressing, gnawing feeling of Caleb's being in danger. Of Aiden's words. She could not get them out of her mind. *Caleb in danger...no way to help him...forbidden to go...she could never come back...*

Every bone in her body screamed for her to chase after Caleb, to go save him—especially after reading his letter, after knowing his deepest, truest feelings for her. How could she just let him down, especially after all that he'd done for her?

But on the other hand, she was overwhelmed by what a sacrifice it would demand. She would have to leave this place, her new home, her new family, forever. She could die in the process, according to Aiden. And that meant that she would kill her new baby with her.

Should she sacrifice all this to try to save him?

Then again, how could she *not*?

As Caitlin sat there, the sun setting, tears streaming down her cheeks, she cursed her bad luck.

This was always her fate. It seemed that every time she found something she loved in her life—

whether it was a new home, new school, a new friend—it always seemed to be taken away from her.

Life gave her great things only long enough for her to know how much she loved them. Then it pulled the

rug out from under her. Change seemed to be the only constant.

Logically, she knew what she had to do. She had to stay put. For herself. For the baby. For her covenmates. For her race. For her destiny.

But emotionally, she just could not let go of Caleb.

She sat there for hours, thinking and thinking.

And finally, her heart won the battle.

She would go to Caleb.

\*

Caitlin stood in her small room, looking over her possessions one last time as she finished dressing in her battle outfit. She had been given it during training, and she loved it. All-black, it was made of a material she couldn't pronounce and didn't recognize, but she knew that it was light as could be, and stronger than a bulletproof vest. The material wrapped snugly along her legs, torso, arms, and neck, covering her from feet to chin. It had black boots to match. She zipped it up, all the way to her chin, and patted down her arms. She felt invincible.

She surveyed her room one last time, grabbing her journal and her few possessions, and then left, heading out onto the wide, stone landing.

She looked out at the open sky, getting ready to take the leap, her final leap, when she suddenly heard a whining. She looked down and saw Rose sitting there, looking up at her with pleading eyes.

It seemed as if Rose was begging her not to go, as if she knew what lay in store for Caitlin.

Caitlin squatted before Rose, reached up, and stroked her face. Rose licked her, whining she did.

"It's OK, Rose," Caitlin said. "It will be OK."

"Weren't you going to say goodbye?" came a voice.

Caitlin looked up, startled, and there came Polly. She had tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Caitlin said. "I didn't really know what to say. And I didn't know how you'd take it."

Polly nodded back. "I found out from Aiden," she said.

Caitlin's eyes opened wide. "Aiden? But I didn't tell him yet. How did he know—"

"He knows everything," Polly reminded.

*So. He knew all along that I'd go,* Caitlin thought. She wondered how disappointed he was in her, and she felt badly, as if she'd let him down.

"He means what he says, you know," Polly said. "If you leave, you cannot come back."

Caitlin suddenly felt herself starting to cry. "I know," she said softly. "But I have to go. I hope you understand."

Polly nodded, and came in and gave Caitlin a hug. Caitlin hugged her back, and they both cried over each other's shoulders.

Finally, they pulled back. "Do the others know?" Caitlin asked.

Polly nodded. "It's hard not to. A vibration like this spreads quickly. They all love you. This is hard on all of them."

Caitlin thought of Blake. She wondered if it would be hard on him, too.

"Yes, even Blake," Polly answered, reading her mind. "He's retreated to the far end of the island, and no one has seen him since."

Caitlin felt the small piece of sea-glass in her pocket, and she felt badly. She wiped a tear from her eye.

"Will you take care of Rose?" she asked, barely able to suppress her tears.

Rose whined even more loudly.

"Of course I will," Polly answered.

Caitlin nodded. She breathed deeply, resolved.

She took a step forward and laid it on Polly's shoulder and looked into her eyes. "I love you,"

Caitlin said. "And I love this place. With all my heart."

And with that, she turned and with a sudden leap, she was over the edge, wings spreading, and lifting higher and higher into the night.

## **TWENTY TWO**

As Caitlin flew over the Bronx, she was horrified to see the extent of the devastation occurring on the streets beneath her. On block after block, there was bloodshed, vampires gorging on humans, openly in the night. There were also humans attacking humans, trying to flee in the chaos. It was anarchy. And she couldn't help but feel responsible. If she'd had just held onto the Sword, if she hadn't let it slip away, perhaps none of this would've happened.

She flew over the Cloisters, came in low, and circled it once more. She hesitated. She debated over whether she should land, whether Caleb would be there. On the one hand, she imagined that he would have long departed, that he was already off in the thick of battle somewhere. She guessed that if he were truly in danger, he would be elsewhere.

On the other hand, she had no idea where else in Manhattan to look for him. The Cloisters was the best lead she had. She felt certain that his fellow coven members would know exactly where he went and would point her in the right direction. It was the logical first place to stop.

Then again, she felt a pit in her stomach at the idea of seeing Sera again. She felt such anger towards her, she didn't know how she'd react when they met again—and she didn't trust herself to contain her feelings. Furthermore, Caitlin didn't exactly receive a warm welcome the last time she came to the Cloisters, and she suspected that Caleb's people would be even more furious at her presence this time. Maybe they'd even be outright hostile.

It was a chance she had to take, she decided, as she flew in, diving low, and landed on the huge outer terrace overlooking the Hudson.

She walked through the medieval garden and headed right for the doors, before which stood several dozen vampire soldiers, all at attention.

She hadn't remembered seeing so many vampires standing guard the last time she'd been here.

The coven must be on high alert.

One soldier stepped forward, holding a long spear, and stopped her, deadly serious.



"State your name, coven, and intention," he said.  
She could see how tense all the soldiers were behind him.  
"My name is Caitlin, I am of the Pollepel coven, and I'm here to see Caleb."  
The soldier stared her down for another second, then said firmly: "Wait here."  
He turned on his heel, hurried through the large door and slammed it behind him.  
Caitlin stood there, waiting in the tense silence. Soon, the door opened again, and two more soldiers walked out.  
"Follow us," one of them said, turning.  
Caitlin followed, through the door, and heard it slam behind her.  
Caitlin followed the two quickly-marching soldiers down the long, stone corridor, and through an inner courtyard. As they went, she saw dozens of vampires everywhere, openly roaming, all seeming to be in a state of agitation.  
They led her down another corridor, then to the base of a staircase, and Caitlin could hear someone wailing in the distance, her cries echoing off the ceilings. The guards stopped at the foot of the steps.  
"That way," one of them said, looking straight ahead.  
"Where am I going?" she asked.  
*Was Caleb down there?* she wondered. *Why hadn't he come out to greet me?*  
The two guards stared, ignoring her. Clearly they had told her all they were willing to.  
Caitlin walked down the ancient stone staircase, heading into the darkness, dimly lit by torches.  
As she did, the cries grew louder.  
Caitlin turned the corner and found herself in a large, stone chamber, deep and narrow, with high, arched ceilings. This somber room was filled with sarcophagi—large, intricately carved sarcophagi of all shapes and sizes, spread throughout the room. Otherwise, it was bare and empty.  
Save for one person. Rather, one vampire.  
Sera.  
She saw her kneeling on the hard stone floor, by herself, in the middle of the room, her cries filling the chamber.  
Before Caitlin could even enter, Sera wheeled, her long red hair flying in every direction, and her face distorted with tears and devastation.  
"It's *your* fault!" she screamed, jumping to her feet, pointing at Caitlin. "It's because of *you* this happened."  
So, it seemed that Caitlin would have to face her fear head-on. Sera. It was time for the two of them to have it out. Caitlin felt her own rage welling within her, barely tempered by Sera's tears.  
Before she could respond, Sera shrieked again.  
"They've captured my Caleb! And it's all because of you!"  
Caitlin's heart sank at her words. She felt her world spinning, and she was so caught off guard, she barely remembered what she'd been ready to say to Sera. She was at a loss for words.  
*Captured.* That could only mean one thing. They would certainly kill him.  
Sera took several steps towards her, now only feet away. She stared with an intense hatred, her sadness morphing into rage.  
"Why couldn't you have just left him alone?" Sera demanded. "You are the one that started all this mess. Because of you, now they have the Sword. Because of you, Caleb had to risk his life to try to get it back. Look where it got him. I hope you're happy."  
"It was *you* who came to our island to get him," Caitlin spat back. "It was *you* who dragged him into all this. Why couldn't *you* just let him be? You couldn't, could you? You couldn't stand to see him happy with anybody else. It's *your* fault as much as mine," Caitlin yelled, equally irate.  
Sera was trembling with rage.  
"I brought him back to be with *me*, his loyal wife. And to be with his child."  
"You are *not* his wife anymore," Caitlin said. "And I know about your child. He died hundreds of years ago. You are full of lies."  
"My son is alive!" Sera shrieked. "Don't you ever say that!"  
Caitlin suddenly realized that Sera was out of touch with reality, crushed by grief. It had molded her. She saw how pathetic she was, and suddenly, despite herself, she felt pity for her. Her anger softened.  
"I'm sorry for your loss," Caitlin said softly.  
She could see that Sera had not expected that. Her features suddenly softened. She sat down on the floor, Indian style, and lowered her head into her hands, sobbing.  
"Caleb, my Caleb," she sobbed, "how could they have taken you?"  
Caitlin could see how much Sera truly cared for Caleb. It was heartbreaking, in its own way. No matter how delusional was she was, at least her feelings for Caleb were genuine. That gave them something in common.  
Caitlin sat down beside her, reached out, and placed a hand on her shoulder.  
"Sera," Caitlin said, "we have to find Caleb before it's too late. There is no time to lose. Tell me, where is he?"  
"The Blacktide Coven," Sera said. "They've caught him. Their entire army. We'd never get him back. My entire coven is afraid to go. No one will even try. It's hopeless. We're too outmanned."  
The Blacktide Coven, Caitlin thought. That meant City Hall. She knew where to go. She stood.  
"Well, I don't need their help," Caitlin said, fearlessly. "I'll go myself."  
Sera looked at her, snapping out of it, eyes opened wide in surprise.  
"Are you joking? You'd be slaughtered," she said. "It would be a suicide mission."  
"Then so be it," Caitlin replied. "At least I wouldn't sit here like a coward."  
Caitlin turned and headed for the stairwell.  
She felt a hand on her shoulder, "Wait," Sera said.  
Caitlin turned, and Sera looked into her eyes for several seconds in the thick, tense silence.  
"You do care for him, don't you?" Sera asked.  
Caitlin just stared back.  
"Yes, I can see that you do."  
Sera continued to stare, then slowly nodded, coming to a decision.

"Very well, then," she said. "I'll go with you."

Caitlin was shocked. "What?"

"We'll go together," Sera said. "Two stand a better chance than one. Not that I care if you die.

But I don't want to see Caleb hurt."

Caitlin stared back. This was the last thing she had expected, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized that it would be wise to have backup. After all, this was about Caleb, not about her.

"Fine," she said.

Sera suddenly turned, and crossed the room. She stood before a small sarcophagus, just big enough to hold a child, and she crossed herself before it. She prayed, bowing her head until it touched it.

Caitlin watched her, and then she realized. That must be the tomb of her son. Caleb's son.

In all these hundreds of years, Caitlin realized, Sera had not been able to let him go. For her, he was still alive.

After a few moments, Sera turned and walked alongside Caitlin as they ascended the steps.

As they reached the top, Sera turned down a different corridor.

"Follow me," Sera said. "If we're going to die, we should at least have the right weaponry."

### **TWENTY THREE**

Caitlin and Sera flew over the west side of Manhattan, racing downtown. Getting out of the Cloisters had not been easy. Sera's fellow coven members had wanted to detain her, but she had absolutely refused to back down. Caitlin had to hand it to her: she was strong-willed.

Sera had taken them upstairs, to the main floor of the Cloisters, and had taken Caitlin to a massive, stone fireplace with intricate carvings. She'd reached in and pulled the heavy iron choker, and had revealed a secret compartment. She'd extracted two weapons for her: a short sword, covered in ancient carvings, and a short, silver spear. Caitlin had stared in awe. They were cruel, medieval weapons of destruction, yet beautiful in their simplicity.

Sera had then brought them to another room, where she'd opened a compartment in what appeared to be a six-foot candleholder, and extracted an immense battle ax. It was also silver, and gleamed in the light. The way Sera squeezed the handle, Caitlin had the feeling that she'd used it before. Many times.

Armed with these weapons, the two of them had flown off into the night, leaping off the parapets of the Cloisters to the protests of her coven members, and heading south, speeding through the night.

They flew over 150th street, then 140th, and as they went, Caitlin looked down and remembered.

Her old neighborhood. She shuddered at the thought of it. She actually flew right over her old high school, and realized that she wouldn't mind destroying it.

Suddenly, Caitlin remembered. Jonah. She hadn't thought of him in ages, and the idea of him sent a shock through her system. He must be down there, somewhere, she realized. As she looked down and saw the anarchy, saw the humans being overrun by waves of vampires, she knew that the humans didn't stand a chance. She remembered that he lived right there, on 131st Street, and she suddenly felt obliged to help them. She didn't have feelings for him anymore, but at the same time, she couldn't live with the idea of just allowing him to get killed.

"We have to descend," Caitlin suddenly said to Sera.

Sera looked over and stared. "Why?" she asked. "We're not even close. We have no time for distractions."

"An old friend," Caitlin said. "I have to help him."

Sera's frown intensified. "We don't have time. And we can't risk a battle down here. We must stay focused."

Caitlin knew that Sera was right. Still, she felt an obligation.

So without discussing it anymore, she took a dive, descending right for the street. She hoped that Sera would follow—she could use the backup—but if not, she would be content to be on her own, as she had always been.

Caitlin set down on 131st Street and Broadway, right in the middle of an intersection, and as she did, a car, racing in the mayhem, sped right towards her.

Caitlin turned and saw the car coming, but there just wasn't time to react. Wide-eyed, she braced herself for what would be an awful impact.

The car began to screech on its brakes, but not nearly in time. A split second later, it smashed into Caitlin, running into her at 40 miles an hour.

Caitlin slowly opened her eyes. She still stood where she'd been, not even bruised, not even knocked over. The car, though, was stopped short where it hit her, its entire fender dented in around Caitlin.

It had not hurt her in the least—but she had destroyed the car. She was stunned, amazed, and grateful she was no longer a human.

The owner of the car jumped out, and stared at Caitlin and then at his car, wide-eyed.

"I'm so sorry!" he exclaimed, looking all around, frantic. "I didn't see you! I swear! You seemed to just drop right out of the sky. I couldn't stop in time! Are you OK!?"

Caitlin surveyed herself, took a few steps away from the car, and realized that she was perfectly fine. She smiled inwardly. Immortality certainly came with its benefits.

"I'm fine, don't worry," she said.

"Wait," he said, bewildered, still trying to figure it all out. "It's not possible. I slammed into you, I was going so fast. How are you OK? How is my car so dented up?"

He looked back and forth between her and the car, wide-eyed.

Then he suddenly looked around, realizing how dangerous the streets were, ran back, jumped into his car, and, with the hood still smoking, took off. Luckily for him, it still ran.

Caitlin looked around, trying to get her bearings. It was mayhem down here. People were fleeing in every direction, looting stores, smashing windows; cars were piled high on the curb. Vampires chased people down every street, and other people ran from each other, infected with the plague. It looked like the apocalypse.

She spotted it. Jonah's building. Just as she got ready to run towards it, she heard a noise. Sera, landing beside her. Caitlin was relieved, but Sera was scowling.

"I've only landed because I could use you in finding Caleb. Not because I like you. And not because I care if you die," she said.

"You said that already," Caitlin said. "But thanks either way."

"This better be quick," Sera added.

The two of them sprinted towards Jonah's building.

As Caitlin reached the front door, ajar, she saw the lock had been broken. She let herself in, and as they entered the lobby, she saw several humans on the ground, dead, a small group of vampires feeding on them.

As they entered, the vampires were alerted to their presence. They suddenly turned from their feast, claws extended, eyes red, and hissed. These were evil creatures, vampires unlike any Caitlin had ever seen. She sensed that they were of a different vampire race. She assumed that they had come to join the mayhem, had come rushing in from some covens around the city, and maybe even from other cities.

Whatever they were, they sent a shudder up her spine. She hoped that she'd never look like that.

Before they could pounce, Caitlin and Sera, both finely trained soldiers, charged at the same time. Caitlin had her sword and spear extended, and Sera had her battle ax raised high.

The group of vampires charged them. Caitlin slashed left and right with her sword, ducking, rolling, and flipping over them. She was too fast. She chopped off their limbs left and right and severed their heads, and they never stood a chance. She killed three in the blink of an eye.

Sera was just as capable. In the same amount of time, she jabbed and lunged, using her battle ax to chop one vampire clean in half. She displayed even more rage than Caitlin. Within moments, they were both splattered in blood, and the six vampires lay dead on the ground.

Caitlin walked down the hall and looked at the elevator, but knew that would be a bad idea. They would be stuck if attacked, and the electricity might also give out.

She darted for the long, wide, marble staircase, and Sera followed.

The two of them bounded up the six flights to Jonah's in no time, and as they did, Caitlin kicked in the door, bounding into the hallway. Sera followed close.

Caitlin quickly looked both ways, braced for danger. The emergency lights in the hall flashed on off, and amidst the flashing, Caitlin could see several dead humans, sprawled on the floor. She turned to her right, following the apartment letters, and there, at the end of the hall, three vampires were clustered outside a metal apartment door, ramming it with their shoulders. It was a solid, metal door, and it was not giving. But it did start to bend, and clearly, it wouldn't hold for long.

Caitlin looked at the letters and realized that it was Jonah's door.

Caitlin charged the vampires, Sera by her side, and this time, Caitlin extracted her spear and threw it ahead of her. It pierced one vampire right through the throat, and then magically returned to her. The other two vampires turned and charged. One of them leapt in the air, right for Sera, but Sera was ready, crouching down, and raising her axe. It lodged right into the vampire's stomach.

Caitlin extracted her sword, as the other leapt at her, she leapt, too, meeting it midway, and jabbing her sword through its throat.

All three vampires dead, Caitlin and Sera rushed to the door.

"Jonah!" she yelled out.

There was no response.

"Jonah!" she screamed again. "It's Caitlin. Let me in!"

After a second, there was a rustling inside, followed by "Caitlin?"

It was his voice. He was still alive.

"It's me! Let me in, quick!"

She heard the keyhole slot move, then suddenly, several locks were unchained, and the door opened up. She and Sera quickly went inside, and he locked the door behind them.

Caitlin and Jonah stared at each other, both stunned. Jonah, though, was much more shocked to see Caitlin standing there, with Sera, each holding weapons, each covered in blood. He was speechless.

Caitlin quickly surveyed the apartment, and saw Jonah's father lying on the couch, barely conscious. She saw the sores on his face, the tell-tale signs of plague. Her heart went out to him, and to Jonah. At least they were alive.

"You're alive," Caitlin said, happily surprised.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "How did you get here? How are you alive?"

Caitlin shook her head. "There isn't time. We have to go. We need to get you out of here."

"Where are you—how are you surviving?" he asked, still shocked.

Caitlin thought quick. She had an idea.

"The armories," Caitlin said. "You'll be safe there. They're filled with U.S. soldiers and tanks."

"But...how can we make it there?" Jonah's father asked. "We'd never make it out of here alive!"

And even if we did, they're too far away."

Caitlin turned and looked Sera. Sera looked back, and she could see that the two of them had been thinking the same thing at the same moment.

"It would be on our way," Caitlin said to Sera. "It wouldn't take away any time."

Sera shook her head, annoyed. "I knew this would happen."

\*

Caitlin and Sera flew, heading south, Caitlin carrying Jonah on her back, and Sera carrying Jonah's father. Caitlin smiled as she recalled the look on Jonah's face as she had slung him over her shoulder, and as Sera had slung his father over her shoulder, and the two of them had suddenly jumped with them out the window. Jonah and his dad had both shrieked, assuming they were plunging towards instant death.

They had both been equally shocked to realize they were alive, and flying. They were wide-eyed, flabbergasted. There was simply no explaining it. But they were also clearly grateful to be in the air, to be heading away from their building, from certain death.

They flew quickly downtown, and when they hit 28th street, they turned East and headed over to the Lexington Avenue armory.

They descended and dropped the two of them near the entrance. Thousands of U.S. soldiers, and dozens of jeeps and tanks, were flooding in and out of the entrance, and Caitlin and Sera went unnoticed in the mayhem.

They all stood there for a quick moment, Jonah and her father staring, still shocked, not knowing what to

say.

"You'll be safe here," Caitlin said.

John opened his mouth to speak several times, but then closed it.

Finally, he opened it again, "I...don't know what to say..." he said. "I...never forgot you. And I never will."

With that, Caitlin felt a tug on her arm, and she and Sera were off, flying back to the air.

And heading for City Hall.

#### **TWENTY FOUR**

Caitlin and Sera flew nearly all the way downtown in unimpeded skies until finally, their luck ran out. At Houston Street, soldiers from the Blacktide Coven appeared, coming right at them. There were maybe two dozen of them, and there was no way around them.

"Prepare for battle," Sera said in the air, her face transforming with rage, as she lifted her battle ax.

Caitlin extracted both her sword and her spear, trying to remember all the principles that Aiden had taught her on the island. *Stay focused. Breathe deep. Center yourself. When you are outnumbered, focus on the center warrior. There are no room for emotions in battle.*

They were badly outnumbered, but Caitlin, clutching her weapons with sweaty palms, felt that they could win.

A second later, they crashed into the group at full speed. As they did, Caitlin slashed the sword expertly, decapitating one of them. She threw her spear in the same motion, piercing another one's throat. Sera swung her axe wide, chopping off the heads of two of them in a single blow.

But there remained plenty more behind them, and the second Caitlin and Sera finished their strikes, they were pounced upon by several more vampires—too many, moving too quickly, for them to react. They found themselves spiraling downward, towards Earth.

They hit the cement hard, covered by twenty vampires.

Caitlin, on the bottom of the pile, suffocating, thought of Caleb, of his being captured, of his needing her help. She thought of her unborn child, sitting in her stomach. And she felt the rage well within her. A blinding, uncontrollable rage. She felt her muscles grow, her veins pop out, and an incredible strength overcame her. She leapt to her feet, throwing them all off of her in a single bound, and leaned back and roared.

It was the primal roar of a mother protecting her child, of a wife, protecting her husband. The world turned red, and she lost every last ounce of control.

She charged the group of vampires, stunned, swinging her sword wildly, throwing the spear again and again, which came back to her every time. She was pounced upon to the left and to the right, but every time, she was faster, stronger, angrier. She felt herself being clawed, scarred, scratched up, even bitten, but nothing they had matched what she had. She decapitated one after the other, and within what felt like seconds, the entire group of vampires attacking her were dead.

Sera handed herself almost as well. She had incredible strength, and she swung her axe wildly and expertly, jabbing, slashing, even using its wooden shaft to block blows. When that wasn't enough, she also leaned back and kicked, head-butted, elbowed. She was a one-woman force. And she killed several of them.

But she was not as good as Caitlin. Several more pounced on her from behind, sending her crashing to the ground, and one vampire reached up with a sword, ready to bring it down on her.

Caitlin sprang into action, leaping and decapitating the vampire with a swing of her sword. She swung wildly, and killed several more, giving Sera enough time to regain her feet. Sera did, and went back to fighting herself.

Minutes later, all of the vampires were dead. Just Caitlin and Sera stood there, breathing heavily, covered in scratches and bruises and bites, splattered in blood. Caitlin slowly felt her rage calm.

She looked over, and noticed that Sera's expression had changed. She was no longer angry at Caitlin. On the contrary, she sensed gratitude. It look like the face of a friend.

"You saved my life," Sera said, surprised. "Why?"

Caitlin smiled. "Well, I guess I need you to find Caleb, too."

Sera smiled back. They both knew that wasn't the reason. Caitlin could clearly handle herself on her own. It was obvious, at that moment, that Caitlin had actually grown to like Sera, despite everything. And that Sera felt the same.

Suddenly, Caitlin felt dizzy. She staggered and bent over, clutching her stomach.

Sera came running over, putting a hand on her back. She grabbed her shoulder, steadying her.

"What is it?" Sera asked, concerned.

The pain in Caitlin's stomach had been horrific. She slowly raised herself, and started to breathe again. She took several deep breaths.

Caitlin could see Sera's expression change as she examined Caitlin's eyes. Sera reached up and placed her palm on Caitlin's forehead—and her expression changed to one of amazement.

"You're pregnant," Sera said in an astonished whisper. "With Caleb's child."

Caitlin nodded back.

Sera's eyes welled up.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would it have made a difference?" Caitlin asked.

"Yes. Of course. You're carrying Caleb's child. It is a piece of him. That means the world to me."

Sera wiped back a tear.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry for how I behaved. Please, forgive me."

"I don't harbor any grudges towards you," Caitlin said.

"I know," Sera answered. "You're a better person than I."

Caitlin smiled, her stomach feeling better, and reached up and put a hand on Sera's shoulder.

"You're not that bad yourself," Caitlin said.

Sera smiled back.

The two of them lifted back into the air, heading right for City Hall, determined to rescue Caleb, whatever the cost. But now, Caitlin felt, they were more than just fellow warriors on a shared mission. Now, they were truly friends.

Caitlin and Sera landed on the steps of City Hall. It was quiet here. Too quiet. They both looked at each other, wondering. They could feel a thick tension amidst the silence. It was eerie. Almost as if they were being set up for a trap.

They had expected to find the place guarded by scores of soldiers, to see tremendous activity, vampires rushing in and out. But then again, their vampires were already spread all throughout the city. Maybe they had all already left home base, and maybe they had, rightly, felt no need to be guarded. After all, who would dare attack them?

As they stood there, wondering, the front door opened. Out walked a single vampire. He took a few steps towards them, and stopped and stared at Caitlin.

Caitlin could not believe it. It was Caleb.

He stood there, smiling at her, holding the Sword. *The Sword*. It was a miracle. He had escaped. Caitlin felt herself overwhelmed with a huge wave of relief. She broke into tears as she ran towards him, running up the steps. She felt such a rush of love for him, felt so sorry that she'd ever left him. She was determined to never leave him again as she raced up the steps, ready to embrace him.

Suddenly, Caitlin heard a scream: "NO!"

It was Sera's voice.

Caitlin felt herself being shoved by Sera, right before she could embrace Caleb. Caitlin hit the ground hard, several feet away, and turned and looked. She could not believe her eyes.

Sera now stood where Caitlin had just been, right in front of Caleb.

But there was an expression of horrific pain on her face, and as Caitlin looked down, she could see that Caleb had stabbed Sera. Right through the heart. With the Sword.

It had been a stab meant for Caitlin. Sera had seen it coming, and had shoved Caitlin out of the way, had saved her, had taken the stab in her place. She had sacrificed herself for Caitlin.

Caitlin looked up, horrified, the entire world in slow motion, looking at Caleb's face. How could he do this? How could he want to kill her? How could he kill Sera?

But as she looked closely at his face, her own face fell in disbelief. Right in front of her eyes, his face changed. It was not Caleb after all. It had been a trick.

And the new face that came into view sent a chill through her spine.

Sam. Her brother.

He had tried to kill her.

Caitlin felt as if she herself had been stabbed, as she realized the depth of his betrayal. Her own brother. Masking himself as Caleb. Trying to kill her. And killing Sera.

Sam seemed to register the expression on Caitlin's face, and suddenly, he seemed to snap out of his trance. It seemed that he suddenly realized the depth of what he had just done. His expression became one of horror, of utter hatred with himself, as he looked down at the bloody Sword in his hand, at the act he had committed.

He dropped the Sword onto the cement, and it landed with a clang. As his face collapsed in an expression of grief and horror, he broke out into a shrill cry.

"Caitlin!" he shrieked. "Forgive me!"

And with that, he turned and ran, back inside City Hall, leaving Caitlin alone, the Sword lying on the steps, Sera beside it, dying.

Caitlin ran over to Sera and sat beside her, crying. She lifted her head onto her lap.

Sera looked up, smiling.

"I'm so sorry," Caitlin said. "I didn't know.."

Sera struggle to talk, blood pouring out of her mouth. Finally, she opened her lips, her voice faint: "It was a trick...shape shifting...remember...Caleb...is a prisoner...chained...remember...he is chained....if he is free...it is not Caleb...don't be tricked...."

"I know, I know," Caitlin repeated, crying, "I realize now. I'm so sorry."

Sera lifted her head one last time, struggling to get out her final words.

"Your child," she said, "raise him well."

And with that, she leaned back and died.

Caitlin leaned back and wailed in grief. It was too much. In just a short time, she had come to feel such a strong connection with Sera. She felt as if her sister had just been killed in front of her.

In her place.

And at the same time, she felt betrayed by her brother.

Caitlin looked over, at the Sword, sitting there, by itself, on the cement.

She gently lay Sera down, and went over and grabbed it. She held it with both hands and let out a primal roar.

At just that moment, the doors to City Hall banged open, and out charged dozens of Blacktides, right for Caitlin.

But she was ready. More than ready. An incredible rage flooded through her—a greater rage than she had ever experienced—and now she wielded the Sword. They had come across the wrong woman at the wrong time.

Seconds later, dozens of them lay dead, helpless to fight back against the Sword.

They kept pouring out the door, though, and Caitlin kept fighting.

Minutes later, hundreds of them lay dead. There were bodies piled on top of bodies, as Caitlin wreaked devastation beyond what she ever could have imagined. She was like a different person.

Finally, the vampires stopped streaming.

But Caitlin was not satisfied. She wanted more.

She would not stop until she entered the sanctuary, and killed Kyle himself.

But first, she'd find Caleb. Chained, like Sera had said. He was down there and chained. And she had to save him.

And now that she had the Sword, nothing would stop her.

## TWENTY FIVE

Sam ran through the corridors beneath City Hall, faster and faster, twisting and turning. He could not believe what he had just on. His own sister. He had tried to kill her. Why? Had he sank so far?

Up until that moment, ever since he had been turned, he'd felt out of control, like he'd been in a haze. It had just been so hard to think clearly, to get a hold of his new skin, his new life, as if he had just been swept up in a giant wave.

But now, finally, the effects of being turned were wearing off, and he was finally able to see clearly, to think for himself. He realized that he had slipped. He had never wanted any of this. He despised Kyle and the entire coven. Most of all, he realized that he had been played by Samantha.

She had wanted him to rise to power for her own sake, her own ambition. She had used him.

But he didn't care about power, or the Sword, or any of it. He just wanted to be left alone. And far away from her. But first, there was one thing he had to do.

At that moment, as he ran down yet another corridor, Samantha came running towards him, a frantic expression on her face.

"Where's the Sword?" she asked quickly. "Did you kill Caitlin?"

Sam backhanded her, hitting her hard across the face, sending her flying across the corridor. She slammed into a stone wall, hard, and slumped to the floor.

Sitting there, she looked up at him, hurt and shocked.

He turned to her.

"Never say my name again!" he screamed.

She tried to answer, to plead with him, but he didn't want to hear it. He never wanted to see her again.

"Sam!" she wailed through the halls, "let me explain!"

But it was too late. He ran and ran, and her cries faded, echoing off the chamber.

Sam wanted revenge. He wanted to destroy. He wanted to take down the Blacktide Coven, and he wanted to make it suffer.

He suddenly realized the best way to get revenge, the best way to make amends for what he had done— or almost done—to his sister. She would never forgive him. That much he knew. But he still had to try.

Sam turned down another corridor, sprinting down another set of steps, and soon he was down there. In the dungeon.

He raced past door after door, and finally came to the right one. He burst it open with his shoulder.

And there, in the small room, chained to the wall, was Caleb.

Without hesitating, Sam ran over to him and tore his chains off. Within seconds, Caleb was free.

Caleb looked back at him, suspicious.

"Why have you done this?" he asked, solemnly.

"For Caitlin," Sam said. "Please tell her I love her."

And with that, Sam bounded out of the room, down the corridor, down another corridor, up flight after flight. Within moments, he burst out the back of City Hall. He took a running start and soon he was flying, all by himself, deeper and deeper into the night.

\*

Caitlin, wielding the sword, ran through the corridors beneath City Hall. She was determined to kill as many of them as she could, and to kill Kyle himself. But first, she had to save Caleb. She was determined to never be tricked again. That shape-shifting was cruel and devious, and she would not fall for it a second time. Sera's words of caution rang in her ears with every step she took, as she sprinted deeper into the catacombs. *Caleb will be chained.*

As Caitlin turned down yet another corner, a lone figure appeared, running towards her.

Caitlin raised the Sword, ready for battle, and suddenly froze. She lowered the Sword.

There, standing just a few feet away, was Caleb again. He was free, roaming the halls.

A part of her felt that this was him, and felt such relief.

Another part, though, the logical part, remembered Sera's last words. This could not be him. It was another trick. It had to be. Caleb would not be free. Why would he? It would not make any sense.

*Be strong, she told herself. It cannot be him.*

"Caitlin," he said, overjoyed. "It's really you!"

His voice—it sounded so much like him. She wanted more than anything to embrace him, to bring him out of there.

But she remembered Sera's words, and her logic warned her to push it all out of her mind. It could *not* be him. It must be another trick. It was Sam again, or perhaps Kyle, or some other vampire. Shape-shifting. Preparing to kill her.

"Caitlin," Caleb said again, taking several steps towards her, preparing to embrace her.

And as he approached, she pulled back the Sword and struck.

It was a clean strike, right through his heart. She closed her eyes as she did it, unable to look, even at someone pretending to be Caleb.

And when she opened her eyes, she felt her world collapse.

She looked at his face as he slumped to the floor, as the life force began to leave him.

His face was supposed to shift back. To Sam. Or Kyle. Or whoever was shape-shifting.

But it did not. It was still Caleb.

He was dying, and it was really him.

Caitlin sunk to her knees beside him, and let out a long, horrific wail. It was the wail of a tortured animal. It had been Caleb along. Her one and only love.

And she had killed him.

Caleb lay there, looking up, and even though he was dying, even though she had killed him, he still smiled at her.

She wept and wept, "Caleb, please, I didn't know it was you....I thought it was—"

"I know," he gasped. "Don't blame yourself."

That was him. Strong to the end, holding everyone blameless. His heart was big enough for both of them.

And that struck Caitlin even deeper, made her cry uncontrollably.  
He reached up and lay a hand on her wrist. His voice was very faint now.  
"Caitlin," he said. "I want you to know...about Sera...I didn't love her..."  
"I know," Caitlin said between sobs.  
Caleb nodded as his eyes began to close.  
Caitlin couldn't believe he was leaving. The one person she loved in the world, loved enough for her heart to break, and he was dying. Forever. And by her hand.  
"Caleb!" she moaned, trying to get him to open his eyes.  
His eyes fluttered open, just a little bit.  
"I'm pregnant," she said. "You have to know...I'm pregnant."  
Caleb's eyes opened one last time, as he looked at her in recognition, and smiled. "Pregnant," he echoed softly.

And then, with his final burst of strength, he said: "We will always be together."  
And with that, she felt his body go limp in her arms.  
And with every pore of her body, she knew that he was dead.  
She looked over and saw the Sword, and her body filled with such hatred at this instrument that had caused so much ruin in her life. She reached over, grabbed its hilt with both hands, leaned back, and drove it with all her might, right into the stone floor, deeper and deeper, until it was driven all the way up to the hilt. As she did, the entire building shook on its foundation, its walls beginning to crumble.

She leaned back her head and roared, the cry of an animal who had lost every reason to live.

## TWENTY SIX

Caitlin flew over the Hudson River, Caleb's dead body in her arms, heading right for Pollepel Island. She dove in, coming lower, aiming for the castle courtyard. The cold river air brushed her face, her tears, but unlike other times, it didn't calm her. Nothing could calm her, ever again.

Caitlin could see her former covenmates below, training amid the torchlight. She knew that she was banished, and knew they might even have orders to kill her on-site, as Aiden had warned, but she had no choice. She had nowhere else to turn. And she had to see Aiden. She had to know if there was a way, any possible way, that he could revive Caleb. She refused to let him go. And if it turned out there was no way, she would take her own life with his.

She threw caution to the wind as she landed right in the courtyard, to the stunned expressions of her former covenmates. They all stopped training, and in frozen silence, looked at her with eyes wide open. They must have seen her pain, the grief etched across her face, as she held Caleb's dead body in her arms. She landed in the center of the dusty courtyard, crying, and within seconds, Aiden appeared, marching right for her.

"I warned you!" he said. "I told you that no good would come of your leaving. And I told you that Caleb would die," he said sternly. "I could have you killed for returning here. You have violated my law."

"So kill me!" Caitlin screamed back. "I don't care anymore. I don't care about your rules, or this island. I just care about him. Caleb. He's dead. You have to bring him back," she yelled, pleading.

"There must be a way. There must be a way to bring him back. You have to help me!" Caitlin screamed, sobbing.

All of the other coven members stared, in shock. Even Polly was in shock, too dumbfounded to say anything. Aiden nodded at them: "Leave us."

Within seconds, they all filtered out of the courtyard.

Now it was just Caitlin and Aiden alone, Caleb's body between them.

Aiden leaned down and lay a palm on Caleb's forehead. Caitlin stared at him, crying, hoping for any bit of hope.

Finally, after several seconds, Aiden shook his head.

"He is dead. The life force has left him. Stabbed with a very powerful weapon. The Sword, was it not?"

Caitlin nodded between tears.

"And what have you done with it?" he asked.

"I left it!" she yelled.

Aiden suddenly stood, scowling.

"Stupid girl. You have put us all at risk. Now my island will be attacked! You have brought war on all of us. Your actions were foolish. Selfish!"

"I know. I'm sorry. Please, just help," she said.

"There is nothing I can do," he said.

"PLEASE!" she pleaded. "There has to be something. There HAS to be!"

Several moments of silence followed, filled only by the sound of her crying.

"I am afraid there is not," he finally replied.

"But you told me, you once said that vampires can go back in time. Is that true? You told me that my father was back in time somewhere. That means that Caleb and I can go back, together, doesn't it? *Doesn't it!*?"

She was hysterical.

Aiden stared, thinking.

"The method you speak of, as I once told you, is very unsafe. Most vampires die by trying.

Caitlin looked up at him, hopefully.

"But there is a chance, isn't there?" she pleaded.

"Are you prepared to lose your life?" he asked.

"Yes," she said without hesitating.

"Are you certain of this?"

"Absolutely certain," she said.

"Very well," he said. "Follow me."

\*

Caitlin, carrying Caleb's dead body, followed Aiden through the forest, Rose at her heels, trailed by her former covenmates.

They all entered the forest clearing, and Caitlin followed Aiden into the center, as the others stood in a

loose, wide circle around her.

Aiden stood opposite her, as she lay Caleb's body down on the grass. A large, full moon hung over them, lighting the clearing.

"There is an ancient ritual among vampires, one seldom used," Aiden said. "Among humans, it is used as a way to kill a vampire forever. But among vampires, it is a way to resurrect them.

"You will lie here, at Caleb's side, and we will hold a funeral service for you both, and repeat it three times. If it works, on the third time, you will both be revived, together. Either that, or you will both die for good.

"If you are revived, you must know that it will not be in this time. You will both wake in a new life, a new place, a new time. You cannot move forward in time, so you will move backwards. We don't know what place, or what time era."

"But we will be together?" Caitlin asked.

"You will both be in that time and place, yes. But memories will be wiped clean. Maybe not yours, but definitely his. He has already died, so if you see him again in the new lifetime, he will not remember you. It will be like meeting him for the first time. You will be a complete stranger to him.

He may not even like you. Do you understand?"

"I don't care," Caitlin said.

"You will also never be able to return to the present time. So you will say goodbye to this life, this current life, forever. You must be prepared to sacrifice everything you know, to go back to a foreign time and place, and be with a Caleb who will not recognize you, and who may not like you.

It is also possible that you might survive the journey but that he may not. You may end up entirely alone in another lifetime. Are you prepared for all of this? And most of all, are you prepared for this to *not* work? Are you prepared to die, forever?"

Through her tears, Caitlin looked up again. "Please. I'll do anything."

Aiden looked at her gravely for several seconds, as the tense silence hung over all of them.

"Very well," he said finally, slowly. "Lay down beside him."

Caitlin lay on her back, on the grass, right beside Caleb. She looked up at the sky, at the huge full moon, and saw the clouds passing over it.

"Take his hand."

Caitlin reached over, and grasped Caleb's cold hand in hers, clasping it tightly.

Rose suddenly came running over, and lay down between them, looking at Caitlin and whining.

"Gather around," Aiden said to the other coven members.

The other members all closed the circle, now standing just a few feet from Caitlin and Caleb, all looking down.

"Caitlin, close your eyes. Imagine a time and a place. Imagine where you would like to be, what time you would like to live in. Hold it in your mind. Don't let it go. And everyone else, repeat after me."

As Caitlin lay there, looking up at the moon, she felt her heart pounding, and desperately tried to think. She had no idea where she wanted to be, what time period she wanted to live in. All she knew was that she wanted to be with Caleb. She wanted it so much, her heart almost burst.

"We hereby lay thee down to rest," came Aiden's soft voice.

"We hereby lay thee down to rest," echoed the chorus of vampires.

"Caitlin and Caleb, to resurrect another day."

"Caitlin and Caleb, to resurrect another day."

"In God's ultimate grace."

"In God's ultimate grace."

Caitlin heard the soft voices of her coven members, repeating the mantra a second time. As she did, she felt a tremendous heaviness overcome her, and felt her eyes begin to close.

And then, suddenly, she began to hear music. Beautiful, sweet music. It was the song that Caleb had played, back in the whaling Church, in Edgartown. Beethoven's Pathétique.

And as she heard the mantra being repeated a third and final time, heard the final expression, "in God's ultimate grace," she felt her world begin to spin. She felt Caleb's presence, more strongly than she ever had, and she knew, she just knew, that somewhere, somehow, they would be together again.

And then, her world was blackness.

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