

M.J. O'Shea



BLOOD MOON

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Dedication

For everyone who wants to believe in impossible things...

Never Again

Fuck.

I couldn't believe I'd been talked into going back to the lake. Every damn year since I started college I'd promised myself that I'd say no, and every damn year I'd end up in the back of my parents rickety station wagon 'one last time' watching civilization dissolve slowly into an endless sea of oppressive vegetation. The deciduous jungle seemed to encroach onto the highway further each season, slowly erasing the signs of humanity and most likely my sanity along with it.

I hated the fact that I was almost a senior in college and I still hadn't learned how to say no to my mother. I probably wouldn't have learned to say no to her by the time I was fifty. Mom was a master at getting her way as most mothers are. And in the summer, 'her way' was having the entire family together at the lake—no matter how much her stubborn mostly grown son didn't want to go.

I could barely contain the urge to scream obscenities out loud. I was suffocating, dying...okay I was being a little melodramatic, but Jesus it was hot in that damn car!

I wondered for the millionth time why my parents, who could easily afford a newer car, never got one. They told me that they used the car so rarely, leaving it in a parking garage for most of the year, that it just wasn't worth it to buy another. It so was. Even some nearly as crappy second-hand model would be fine as long as it had air-conditioning or a back window that actually rolled down.

After a few moments of struggling to dominate the previously mentioned back window that was perpetually stuck, I managed to create a small crack that I could stick my face out of. The air from outside was humid and hot, fetid with the smell of wet leaves and overgrown grass.

The breeze itself was barely a relief at all. If it weren't for the near-death heat inside the old beast, I wouldn't have even bothered.

I heaved a sigh and flopped theatrically against the vinyl seat (yeah you heard me right, I said vinyl). I tried to ignore my sister Maya's jubilant grin and the familiar old strains drifting from the push-button radio. My parents were singing "Puff the Magic Dragon" with Peter, Paul and Mary—a song meant for little kids which had taken on a whole new meaning after a few years of college. An ironic little smile tugged at the corner of my mouth but I stifled it. Not something I wanted to have to explain to my twelve-year-old sister. I saw my mother eyeing me sagely in the rearview mirror.

"You know, Zack, you don't have to act like we're dragging you to your execution. We're on vacation as a family. You can at least pretend to be happy."

I rolled my eyes. "I just had a bunch of things I needed to take care of in the city this summer." Total lie, of course, but I could have found something (anything) else to do.

"Like what?"

"Like for classes and stuff."

It was her turn to roll her eyes. "You didn't have anything to do except dye your hair again and write more morose poetry. It'll be good for you to get out of the city, get some fresh air and maybe a little sun. You're starting to look positively vampirish."

"Is that even a word?" I was tired of her harping on my newly blackened hair. It had seemed like such a good idea at the time. Besides it matched my almost permanent mood.

My mother tilted her head to the side. "I'm sure vampirish is a word somewhere. If not, than it should be." Even I had to crack a smile at that. My mother was constantly making up words. "I'm serious, Zack. You needed to get out of the city. I know it's not been as fun for you at the lake since No—"

"It's fine, Mom. New subject. I'm here, aren't I?" I smiled at her in the mirror. I could tell the subject wasn't really dropped, just postponed. She knew damn well my smile wasn't real but it was the best I could do.

My family had been going to the old lake house since I was a kid. I used to look forward to it the entire year. The lake summers of my past were filled with great memories of swimming, fort building, and the easy friendships of youth. That had all changed the summer I was eighteen. I'd hated it there ever since.

All I could see ahead were endless weeks of unhappiness. There was nothing there but trees and birds and memories of a boy who crept into my head when I was least prepared. I pushed my iPod's earbuds into my ears as far as they'd go and cranked the volume up. There had to be at least two hours to kill before we got to the cabin. I couldn't deal with any more grilling and I thought I might throw up if I had to listen to my family sing another folk song.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew I was being poked in the side by a very insistent finger.

"Zack! Wake up, snorty. We're here."

"Snorty? That's a new one."

Maya smothered a giggle. "Yeah, well you didn't hear the sounds you've been making for the past eighty miles. They could probably hear them in the Bronx, but you missed out."

"Shut up," I grumbled, but without any heat. I ruffled Maya's gingery curls so she would know I wasn't serious. She grinned at me and hopped out of the car, running towards the old cedar shake house that was perched on the side of Harper Lake. It had looked like it was about to keel over for as many summers as I'd been there but I supposed that was part of its charm. I heaved another huge sigh and peeled my sweaty back from the seat of the car, cringing at the wet

slurping noise it made. Mine were the only bags left so I struggled them out of the trunk and headed for the house and my usual bedroom, dragging my feet the entire way.

* * * *

It was close to midnight. The air was way too heavy and it was too quiet. Too everything, honestly. I sighed my millionth heavy sigh of the day and admitted to myself that I wasn't going to fall asleep; I decided I might as well do something rather than just lay there and look at the warped wooden ceiling. Only problem was all my usual distractions were missing: no internet, no video games, no phone or TV. It sucked the big one.

Maybe I need a big one. I smothered a naughty and slightly hysterical laugh.

I had to get out of there but I had nowhere to go. I guessed I could get out of my stifling hot and silent room at least.

I tiptoed to the bathroom and shut the door before turning on the bright fluorescent light. For long minutes I studied myself in the mirror, wondering if what I was feeling was visible. I looked a little paler than usual, the ink-black of my recent hair coloring adventure probably didn't do much for my skin tone. Other than that I looked disappointingly normal. None of the heartbreak of being there was showing in my face.

I might have looked the same as usual but I felt awful. The memories I'd spent the last three years running away from always seemed to catch up with me in the woods. They had caught up royally already: every tree trunk and rock, my bedroom, the lake; it all reminded me of him.

Damn it!

I couldn't stand to be inside a second longer, it felt like the walls were strangling me. I had to get out. Careful not to wake up my sister, who I loved to death but had a mouth the size of the Chrysler building, I slid out the door. My mother wouldn't be pleased with me wandering around in the woods in the dark. Like most born and bread city people she had a healthy fear of things

that went bump in the night...at least in the wilderness. Give her a nut job in Times Square any day, she usually said. I'd always liked chirping birds and occasional howl of a coyote. The forest didn't scare me. The months spent running through the trees were my happiest. At least they used to be.

The night enveloped me the second I stepped out into the trees. As much as I didn't want to be at the lake again, I had to admit there was something about the place that called me. A sort of magic was there, still lingering from the past.

I'd unconsciously been following the path to the dock where we used to swim and fish for hours until it was so dark we couldn't even see our hands. I stepped out onto the ancient pilings, comforted by their familiar groaning.

The dock ended about thirty feet out from the shore. I sank down on the end to sit in the same place I'd sat for hours at a time, year after year. Rolling up my jeans and pulling my shoes from my hot feet, I dangled my legs off the edge into the lake. The water was cool and refreshing, relief from the sweaty stillness of the night. It was overcast, but I could see the moon through the clouds in patches.

I lay back on the still warmed wood and wished I could see the stars. Maybe if I could they would be able to give me some answers. I'd sure never been able to figure out on my own why I couldn't get over him after three long-ass years. It had only been a few kisses after all...well a few kisses and a lifetime of friendship and longing.

I sighed and stared at the perfect blackness of the sky. I'd tried so hard to forget him, dated every guy that paid even the smallest amount of attention to me. I hadn't wanted any of them. Not even the ones I let into my bed. I'd done it hoping to purge his flavor from my tongue, his voice from my ears, his touch from the surface of my skin. It never worked. Not a single goddamned time.

I sat up and gazed out at the water and the hodgepodge of homes that surrounded it. It was too dark to see, but I knew them all so well I could recite the details from memory. There was a strange mixture of buildings at the lake; little tumbledown cabins mixed with huge well-kept lakeside retreats. And then there was the house I tried not to look at. The one I avoided with my eyes but couldn't avoid in my mind, the one that...wait a second.

It had a light on!

Could he be home?

I clenched my fists, angry with myself for getting excited over nothing and violently yanked my legs out of the water feeling like a pathetic moron. It wasn't a mystery why I came out to this damn dock night after night all summer.

Might as well be a stalker. You're such a loser.

Standing and shoving my wet feet into my Converse, I stomped back to the cabin and forced myself to lie down and go to sleep.

Didn't work, of course. Anger isn't exactly the best cure for insomnia. Neither is frustration or the irreparable pain of unrequited love.

I don't love him! It's hard to lie to yourself, though. Impossible really. I knew damn well that I did love him. I had for years and as far as I could tell I always would.

I squeezed my eyes shut and thought about calculus, Charles Dickens, ionic compounds, anything that had put me to sleep on a regular basis in class. It must have worked because the next thing I knew the sun was shining brightly through my open curtains and I had to cover my face with my blanket so I could fall back to sleep.

* * * *

Maya came in around nine that morning, bouncing and ready to go. I could tell she'd been waiting for a while and had finally reached the end of her patience. When my eyes opened to find

her face only inches from mine, I wanted to groan. I didn't. It would have hurt her feelings and I'd mainly come to the lake for her. At least I tried to rationalize that my reasons for being there had nothing to do with unrequited love and that big stone house at the end of the lake. Have I mentioned before that it's hard to lie to yourself? Well, it is.

"I'll be out in a minute, Maya. I just need to get changed. I didn't sleep very well last night."

"Okay. I'll get you some cereal. Bring a towel."

She bounded back out of the room, her endless energy radiating from every surface of her body. I flopped back down and closed my eyes for a second.

I swear this is the last time I'm coming here....

Noah

I wasn't sure if it had been four or five days since we'd arrived. Could've been a hundred for all I knew. Every day I played with Maya in the sun, endlessly applying sun block so my pale ass didn't get burnt. I tried to smile, dig in the sand and race her to the buoys out in the middle of the water. My heart was halfway in it, attempting to have fun for my sister's benefit, but I was distracted. I was constantly drawn to the huge stone house at the end of the lake—looking for movement, cars coming and going, familiar faces. The only thing I ever saw was the gardening crew and someone painting the deck railing. It was insanely frustrating.

I barely slept. The nights were too quiet and it was impossible to stop listening to my mind. The only place where I had any peace at all was the dock. In the middle of the night I'd go there and stare at the moon wishing I could be anywhere else.

It was on the fourth night that everything changed. I'd slipped out as usual to sit by the water and think about how lame my life was. I was seriously considering asking my mother to take me to the nearest bus depot so I could get a ticket back to Manhattan where the noise could drown out my thoughts.

I didn't know why it was worse that year than it had been the previous two. Maybe it was seeing that light go on the first night, a reminder that he was still out there and I couldn't have him, maybe I'd finally realized that he was gone from my life and every year that went by only made it that much more impossible that I was ever going to see him again. Maybe it was—

I stopped in my tracks. I'd just rounded the corner in the path and stepped out onto the dock. I was shocked to see I wasn't the only one out there. The moon glinted on a wild halo of silvery blond hair.

He was sitting on the edge of the dock where I'd seen him a million times.

I blinked and shook my head but he was still there.

Impossible.

Maybe I'd dreamed him back into existence so my life didn't feel so pathetic. He couldn't be real. My mouth went dry and the walls of my throat immediately stuck together. "N-Noah?"

The blond head turned and looked at me, still for a second. Then he jumped up in one smooth movement and I could hear quick running footsteps. Before I knew it my feet had been lifted off the ground and I was enveloped in a tight spinning hug.

"Zack! You have no idea how good it is to see you!"

* * * *

Noah Harper and I met when we were five years old. It was the first summer my family went to the lake, my first real trip out of New York City. You might notice that his name matches the name of the lake. It also matches the name of the huge stone mansion that crouched like a giant on the shore a few hundred feet from our cabin. I didn't even want to know how loaded his family was. All I knew is that they'd been there forever. Like part of the landscape.

That first year, he'd heard from his nanny that a boy his age was spending the summer at the lake and had been excited to make a new friend. His nanny, sweet Mrs. Clooney, had walked him over to meet me. He smiled but hung back, looking nervous and shy. She had to tell me his name since he spent most of the introduction hiding behind her legs. I didn't have much of a problem with shyness, so for the first hour or two I did enough talking for both of us. By the end of the day I not only had him talking, but laughing and shouting and chasing me around the dock with a garter snake he'd found in the bushes. It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship.

I don't remember a ton about that first vacation but I do remember every single one after. Vividly. Starting from the minute I'd get there, usually greeted by an impatient Noah waiting at the cabin's front door, and lasting until the car was packed and ready to head for home in August,

we were inseparable. All the fort building, hiking, swimming, and fishing, all the summer adventures I had were shared with him. He was my best friend in the world. All year we'd keep in touch, through childish letters at first and e-mail and Internet chat when we got older. We'd spend the long months planning our summer campouts and various adventures. I looked forward to his e-mails and our nightly chats more than any other part of my life.

If I'm being honest, I probably knew I was in love with him by the time I was about fourteen, but of course I didn't say anything. I was pretty sure he wasn't into boys and didn't want to lose his friendship by doing something stupid.

Happened anyway. I blamed myself.

The summer I was eighteen, the last summer that I was happy at the lake, had been the best by far. Noah and I had outgrown fort building and the other childish pursuits of years past but we found other ways to bond. We talked and wrote stories together, read comic books and dreamed about the future. We had both been accepted to NYU in the fall, and planned to share a dorm room. I was so desperately in love with him by then that I could barely wait to spend every single night with him only a few feet away. Every once in a while I'd get a twinge when I thought of him meeting a girl. I knew he would, with his gorgeous blond looks and easy smile, but I hoped he would wait at least a few months before he ditched me for a girlfriend.

It happened in August. He'd been acting a little strange for a few weeks; ever since the day we'd gotten back from our yearly campout for his birthday. I'd tried to pry it out of him, figure out what was wrong, but every day he seemed a little more distant. I got the feeling like he was trying to say goodbye.

"Noh, what's going on?" I'd asked him. "You gotta tell me what I did. I'm your best friend." The look he'd given me that night was so sad I nearly cried.

"Zack, it's not you. I promise." He tried to smile but it looked a little off. He leaned over and nudged me with his shoulder. "I'd tell you if I could but I can't talk about it. It's family stuff."

I'd reached over, intending to comfort him. I swear that was the only thing I wanted to do. Instead I found myself cupping his chin in my hand and leaning my forehead against his. Funny thing was, he didn't pull away.

"I get it," I whispered, our faces only inches apart. "I'm here if you need me. I'm not going to pressure you to tell me what happened."

And that's when I did it.

To this day, I don't know what got into me. Maybe it was too many years of pent up need. But *something* made me kiss him. Yeah, you heard right. I said I kissed him. Could I have been any more of an idiot? I kissed the guy I'd been friends with since we were five years old, sitting on the dock in the dark with our legs dangling in the lake. I was horrified by my actions but by the time I realized what I was doing it was too late to stop. Definitely too late to take it back.

The amazing thing, though, was that he kissed me too. Really, he did. I know I wasn't imagining the way he smiled against my lips, or the gentle fingers that tangled in my hair and touched the skin on my neck. There's no way I could have dreamed up the memory of his tongue sliding into my mouth and rubbing up against mine. *God*. I still get all shivery when I think about it. I know when we said goodbye that night it was with more kisses and shy smiles, looking back at each other over our shoulders a million times as we walked away. What I've never been able to figure out is what happened between that night and the next day.

I'd been up all night grinning at the ceiling and spinning fantasies in my head about loving Noah forever but when I met him on the dock the expression on his face made my stomach clench in a knot.

"What's wrong?" I knew I didn't want to hear his answer.

“I’m not going to NYU anymore. I talked it over with my parents this morning and we all think it’s best.”

“What? No! That was the plan. What about the plan? What about last night?” I was desperate and near tears. Noah looked distraught, like he couldn’t stand to be saying what he was saying.

“Look, Zack. I can’t do this. I think it’s probably just better if we weren’t friends anymore.”

He walked away then, ending a thirteen-year friendship and whatever had blossomed the night before with a few words that felt like shards of glass ripping into my insides. I collapsed on the dock and cried, not caring who saw or heard. My heart was broken and I knew it was somehow my own damn fault.

* * * *

“Noah, what on earth are you doing here?”

He pulled back and looked at me sadly. “I like the dock. I come out here when I need to think. It reminds me of better times, you know?”

He looked different. More than I did, I thought. The hints of roundness had melted out of his cheeks. If anything he looked even more aristocratic, and *damn* he was so gorgeous. I tried to stifle that thought before I could complete it but ended up sighing. It was useless.

“I don’t mean what are you doing on the dock, I mean here. At the lake.”

He gave me a confused look. “Why wouldn’t I be here? I live here.”

“But you weren’t here last summer or the year before.”

He looked at the ground. “Yes I was,” he mumbled quietly.

Pain sliced through me. I couldn’t believe he’d been so close and obviously still avoiding me. I would have done anything to see him. I turned to walk away but his hand on my arm stopped me.

"Please don't go," he whispered. I looked at him not even trying to hide the hurt in my eyes.

"Listen, I don't even know if I have the right to ask, but how've you been?" He cocked his head to the side like he'd always done when he asked a question.

I didn't know how to answer him. How do you tell someone you've spent the last three years keeping as frantically busy as possible so that you didn't have time to miss him?

"Okay, I guess."

He reached up and traced my cheek with his thumb. The gesture was so wonderful, so confusing that I couldn't even react.

"I've missed you, Zack."

The combination of the words and the touch made my pulse leap. "Then why?"

Noah sighed heavily and closed his eyes for a second. "Because I was stupid."

"What do you mean?"

"I let my family stuff take over. I wish I could explain it to you, but it would sound so crazy."

"Everyone's family is crazy, Noh."

He smiled at his old nickname. "I know but I let mine get in the way of the best thing that had ever happened to me." He touched my face again and rubbed the ends of my too-black hair between his fingers.

"Do you really mean that? I thought I'd scared you off by kissing you."

"No! It wasn't like that at all." He shuddered and wrapped me in his arms. "I hated what I did to you three years ago. It was what my parents wanted and I should have said no. Losing you nearly broke me."

I looked up at him and smiled hesitantly. Our faces were only inches apart.

Was this really happening? Ten minutes ago I was angry and lonely and now all of a sudden I had Noah back in my life holding me like he'd never let go? I guessed I could have decided to be

mad at him, to walk away and hurt him like he'd hurt me. I didn't. He was forgiven the second I felt his arms around me.

I was pretty sure he was going to kiss me. I wanted him to kiss me. My eyes drifted shut and suddenly I was engulfed in another tight hug. I could feel his body trembling. His mouth descended on mine, sweet and pliable, and I dragged my tongue across the lips I'd been desperately trying to forget. It had been such a waste of time. I trembled too and shimmied closer knowing in a second that I would have never forgotten such a feeling. He nibbled gently on my bottom lip and dipped his tongue into my mouth. I rubbed up against him with my body, my tongue, buried my hands in his hair. I did everything I could think of to touch him.

"*Noah*," I whispered against his mouth, never wanting the kiss to end. It was just like I remembered. Better even because I knew what else was out there and it was nothing like him. Tasting and touching for long minutes we held onto each other. When we finally broke apart, our foreheads were still connected.

"I'm sorry. It was probably way too soon for that," Noah said.

"I'm not sorry." I grinned and pulled his lips to mine for another small kiss. "Anyway, it's not too soon. It's forever practically! I've been waiting for that kiss for three years."

"Do you know how bad I wanted to kiss you on that awful morning?" he whispered.

"Probably. I know I sat up that whole night thinking about kissing you again." I threaded my hands through his hair, loving the softness against my fingers.

"I'm such an asshole," he muttered to himself.

I lifted his face with my hand so he had to look at me. Any residual hurt I may have had slid away. He looked so sad and alone.

"You're not an asshole, Noah. You were a scared kid who listened to his parents. I can't say for sure I wouldn't have done the same. Hey, it's not like I've ever brought any of the guys I've dated home to meet my family."

Noah looked horrified all of a sudden. "Wait, do you have a—"

I smiled, understanding. Even after three years the thought of him with a boyfriend other than me made me want to hit things.

"No, I don't have a boyfriend. Do you think I would have kissed you like that if I didn't mean it?"

"But I kissed *you*. I didn't even ask."

"You didn't have to."

I tugged on his hair, bringing his mouth to mine for another kiss. There was no point in playing coy. He had to already know how I felt about him. It only took me seconds to be back to a place with him where I had never even got close to with another guy.

* * * *

We were sitting on the dock, legs crisscrossed and facing each other. I had no idea what time it was. We'd been there for hours talking, kissing, staring at each other like love-drunk morons. I didn't ask Noah about his family drama. I was so happy just being there with him and I didn't want to ruin it by bringing up the past. Instead he asked me questions about college, New York, and the guys I'd dated. It was inevitable but painful to admit that I'd never wanted any of them. That I'd only dated to try to keep my mind off of him and it didn't even work.

I guessed I understood his eagerness. I wanted to know everything about him too. Even about other guys. To be honest, it hurt less to hear about the few guys he'd been with than when he mentioned his parents. I'd always felt they liked me and to hear that they had told him to push me away made my gut twist.

He told me he'd started working for his parents that first fall, taking college classes online and learning the ropes of their family business. I realized at that point that I had never known what they'd done all those years or how they'd come to live in that big stone mansion in the middle of nowhere. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask, but something stopped me.

There was one thing I had to hear him say, though.

"Before we go waltzing into the sunset, there's something I have to ask, Noh. Your parents didn't want you to be with me three years ago. I'm not sure what you think is going on here tonight but to me it seems like we're heading that way pretty quickly." He nodded and squeezed my hands. I let out a long shaky breath. "I want this, believe me I do, but how is it going to be different? I mean, are you ready to tell your family to go screw themselves?"

Noah let go of my hand to run his fingers through my hair and down along my jaw. His touch sent little happy skittering tingles across my skin. He put his hand back in mine and threaded our fingers together.

"It wasn't quite like that...I mean they didn't—well, it's hard to explain. Anyway, I really hope tonight is the start of something for us too and I'd be ready to tell my parents to screw themselves in a heartbeat."

My heart sped up and I grinned until I noticed the crestfallen look on his face. "Noh, you don't have to say anything right away. I mean, we don't want to start with the family drama before we've even had any fun together."

He shook his head. "That's not it. I mean, it doesn't matter what they think. It never will. They died, Zack. In a crash that first September we were apart. I'd have come to you sooner, but I didn't know what to say. I figured you hated me."

I was floored. I realized his hands were shaking in mine and I squeezed them reassuringly. "I had no idea. I'm so sorry."

“Me too. A big part of me almost hated them when it happened. I feel bad that things weren’t different. I never really had the chance to say goodbye.”

I leaned over and hugged him, kissing his cheek and running my hands through his hair. He pulled me into his lap and I wrapped my arms and legs around him as tightly as possible.

We stayed like that for a long time, comforting each other, wishing things could’ve worked out differently. I for one hoped that things were going to be a lot different, starting pretty much immediately. He’d basically told me he wanted to be with me and I wanted him more than anything in the world. It would be just fine with me if we pretended the past three years never happened.

I breathed in, closing my eyes and smiling. I had walked past guys at school every once in a while who smelled just a little bit like him and my body would catapult back to this place almost instantly, remembering what it felt like to have his arms around me. It always hurt so bad, the remembering. I smiled, happy that it didn’t have to hurt any longer.

After a while he leaned back and looked at me. He rubbed my hair between his fingertips again and smiled absentmindedly. “You know I like you like this.”

“Really, you like it? Maya keeps calling me emo-boy and wanting to put her eyeliner on me. My mother hates it of course. I just wanted to try something different.”

He chuckled and leaned in for a slow gentle kiss. “I think it’s sexy,” he whispered, smiling the sideways half grin that had always made my thighs quiver. “Kinda makes me want to pull on it.”

I just about passed out.

Noah gave me another long kiss, filled with sliding tongues and nibbling teeth, his hands slipping under my shirt to glide along the tiny hairs on the small of my back. I could feel him growing hard beneath me and I instinctively ground my hips into him shivering and threading my

fingers into his pale hair, tugging on it like he'd just said he wanted to do to mine. He moaned and pushed up into me, increasing the contact.

After a few minutes the kiss softened and we held onto each other, letting our breathing calm down. I didn't want to ever let go. He had me so turned on from that simple kiss that I would have stripped my clothes off and told him to take me right there on the dock, splinters be damned. I stopped the deviant thought in my head. We had plenty of time for that later. We'd just found each other again and the last thing I wanted to do was rush it.

I opened my heavy eyes and smiled sleepily at him. When I finally focused, I noticed that the sky was starting to get light, turning from midnight blue to pale lavender. I thought of how amazing it would be to sit with him on the dock holding each other and watching the sunrise.

"Look," I murmured quietly, pointing towards the horizon. "Isn't it pretty?"

He nodded. "I haven't seen a sunrise in a long time."

"Neither have I. Who the hell wants to get up that early?"

He smiled too, but I noticed the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "Zack, I don't want to go, but I've got a ton of work to do today and I need to get some sleep. Can I see you again later?"

I grinned at him. "Of course you can."

"Want to come over to my place and hang out for a while after you eat dinner?"

I nodded. I would have been happiest glued to him all day long, but I'd take what I could get.

He gently untangled our legs and stood before pulling me up next to him. I was stiff from sitting for so long, I stretched and yawned hugely. He reached over and rubbed his fingertips on my exposed stomach. "So cute," he teased with a smile before pulling me into one last warm hug. We walked down the dock together, hand in hand, unable to stop smiling.

"I'll see you later," I mumbled through another big yawn.

"Yeah, you need to go to bed, sleepy."

He gave me a sweet lingering kiss before heading his direction on the lake path.

“Night, Noah,” I called after him quietly.

He waved, smiling, then turned and I watched him walk until the path curved behind some trees and disappeared.

I nearly skipped home.

Impossible Things

That evening Noah seemed different. Not sad different with flashes of his old humor like the previous night, but weird different. Uncomfortable. Like there were things about himself that he didn't want to air in the light of the moon.

I'd been looking forward to seeing him all day. *Ha*. Looking forward doesn't even begin to cover it. I couldn't fucking wait to see him again. The night before had been such an amazing dream that I felt like I needed to be back in his arms before I would know for sure that it had even happened. I was tired as hell when my sister came bounding in to wake me after I'd been asleep for maybe four hours, but I couldn't even manage to be annoyed. All I wanted to do was smile, laugh, dance around in circles. Who cared if I was tired? Noah was back.

I knew there was no way I was getting out of the house after dinner without telling my mother what happened, so I confessed that I'd been out walking the night before and had run into Noah on the dock. I let her know I was going over there later that night to catch up with him. After she hugged me and told me she was glad I'd found my best friend again, she pinched me hard and told me not to go wandering around by myself at night. I hated when she did that. It hurt. She always told me when I was little that I'd remember how much it hurt before I did something stupid that might hurt worse. Mom logic, I tell ya.

The hours passed slowly. I couldn't keep busy enough to make the time speed up. I fidgeted and fussed with my clothes and my hair and broke into grins at the oddest of moments. I swear my family must have thought I was possessed or something, but I couldn't act normal. When I caught myself looking at the clock and realized it had only been two minutes since the last time, I laughed. How could I have it that bad already?

It seemed like my mom waited until it was practically midnight to start cooking dinner, but finally the food was eaten (by everyone but me) and the table was cleared. I rushed through helping Maya with the dishes then I scrambled to my room to change into jeans and a clean shirt. I tried not to be nervous but there was no escaping it. My stomach had been tied in a knot all day. Some of the nerves were good; the butterflies that always flew around in my belly whenever Noah was near. Some of the nerves were bad. I tried to convince myself otherwise but I was afraid that things were so perfect they couldn't last.

* * * *

When Noah opened the kitchen door to let me in I felt an instant jolt to my system. He was dressed simply, in low-slung jeans, flip-flops, and a button-down opened over a tank top, but his silvery blond hair was mussed from his fingers, his eyes looked a little sleepy, and the smile he gave me was intimate and sexy as hell.

"Hey," he greeted me and reached out to take my hand.

"Hi," I answered, grinning foolishly.

Kiss me please, before I pass out!

He didn't disappoint. The second the door clicked shut I was in his arms. He twined his fingers into my hair and he gave me a soft welcoming kiss.

"I missed you today," he murmured.

"Me too. I think this was the longest day of my life."

We both laughed, then he ran his fingers down the back of my arms and took both of my hands. "What do you want to do?"

"You know, I don't even care. I'm just happy to be here."

"I'm happy you're here too."

The night was fun, but like I said before, Noah was acting a little strange. He was still gorgeous and attentive, sweet and wonderful, but I could tell there was something wrong. He'd look at me oddly; like he thought I'd disappear, and whenever I asked him anything about his family he'd clam up and change the subject. It was a little unnerving.

The next night he was acting strange again, and the night after that. It threw me off so much after the warm perfect guy I thought I'd reconnected with the first night on the dock, the guy I remembered from when we were kids. I tried to ask him about a million times if I could help him with his work, hang around and read in the yard while he made his phone calls or whatever. Waiting all day to see him was driving me nuts but it seemed like he didn't want me there except at night when he wasn't doing anything family related.

When we were younger the weird family stuff had started before I ever kissed him and it seemed to still be hanging over him even though his parents were no longer around. What could possibly be going on to make him not want me to be there? Why, no matter how many times I hinted for clues, would he never tell me what he did during the day? What was he hiding? I was starting to spin crazy scenarios in my head. Were the Harpers drug lords, spies, secret royalty hiding in the U.S. from unknown assassins?

By the fourth night I was ready to tie him down and torture some explanations out of him. I guess I got a little carried away with the spy scenario. Turned out I didn't have to force the explanations out of him at all. Once he got started he was more than willing to tell me what was going on and because of that it may have ended up not only being the strangest night with Noah but the weirdest night, up to that point, in my life.

* * * *

When I showed up at his door on that fourth night, a half an hour late because I'd been outside pacing like a crazy person, the Noah that greeted me was the one I'd started to believe didn't

exist anymore. His face looked open and sweet and so beautiful. I saw no signs of the fidgeting, the shadows. At the same time he seemed tired, like some huge weight was bearing down on him with unbelievable force.

He hugged me tightly and pulled me inside. "I was starting to get scared that you weren't going to come."

"I thought about it honestly. You've been such a head case the past few nights. But now it seems kinda like—well like you're you again."

"I've been more than strange. I'm really sorry. It has nothing to do with you. Well...I mean, it's not about you."

I nodded in vehement agreement. *I know that! Just tell me what the hell is going on so this weirdness between us can go away!*

"Take a walk with me?" He held out his hand and I took it without hesitation.

Of course we ended up at the dock. We stood there quietly for a few minutes, his arms circling me from behind and my head resting on his shoulder. Finally, I decided it was time to get whatever it was over with.

"All right, Noah. This is getting ridiculous. There's something you're not telling me. It's Zack, remember? I know when you're hiding something. I barely see you except late at night and you've gotta know I want to be with you like every second of the day. You're supposedly running the family business but you haven't said a word about what it is you're even doing, you won't touch food, and you look like hell. Gorgeous, but like hell all the same."

"Listen, I've just been really stressed about my family stuff and I've been taking it out on you. I know that's not fair and I promise to stop."

"That's good, but it's not enough. You gotta tell me what's going on. I want to help!"

"I really can't tell you, Zack. I want to but..."

“But what? Don’t you trust me? I’ve never given you a reason not to. I mean we can’t be anything if you aren’t going to trust me with—”

He put a gentle finger over my lips. “Of course I trust you.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t want to tell you because you’re gonna think I’m nuts, okay?” He gave me an imploring look. “I told you my family was weird but you have no idea what the extent of it is. You don’t understand what we do. And it’s not over just because my parents are dead.”

“Is it illegal or something?”

“No, well, I don’t think so. I mean we even work for the government sometimes, so even if it’s...unusual it’s been above board.” Noah took a deep breath.

“What we do is part of the reason I pushed you away before. Well the whole reason truthfully. My parents didn’t actually mind at all about us being together, in theory at least. They loved you and they did want me to be happy. They thought they were trying to protect you. *I* was trying to protect you.”

“Protect me?” All my crazy spy-royalty-assassin theories came flooding into my mind. I sighed and slowly sank with jello legs onto the old familiar the dock, tugging on his arm so he would sit next to me. I reached over and held his hand, comfort for both of us. I figured that the explanation, whatever it ended up being, wasn’t going to be short. I was more than ready to hear it.

“You do realize after all of the cryptic hinting you’re going to have to tell me what you do and what the hell you were protecting me from.”

He sighed. “I know. If we’re really going to do this you and me thing, I can’t keep it from you forever.” He paused shaking his head and laughing softly. “God I don’t know how to even start explaining this. It sounds crazy to me and I already know it’s true.”

"Noah, I believe you. Whatever it is. I just need to know."

"You might want to hold off on that until you hear more. I guess I'll get the big thing out of the way." He looked at me with sad eyes and reached up to trace my jaw. His touch felt sad too, like he thought I would disappear.

"You remember all the stories about vampires and werewolves that my mom used to tell to scare us when we were kids?" I nodded. I'd always loved listening to his mother's stories. She'd have made a great author. "Well, they're not exactly stories. Not in the fictional sense anyway."

My eyebrows knitted together. "What do you mean?"

"I mean they're all true, Zack. Those stories of tracking down evil monsters were stories about us, my family. The Harpers are hunters. We've been doing it for hundreds of years."

"Noah." I gave him a 'you can't be serious' look and started to get up.

He pulled on my arm. "Please don't go. I've been trying to figure out a way to tell you all of this for three years. You started asking questions now just...hear me out. It's only fair."

"But, Noah, it's impossible. You want me to believe that you're like Van Helsing or something? C'mon! I'm from New York, not Transylvania!" He kept his hold on my arm, not letting me rise. *He'd gotten really strong in the last few years!*

"I told you you'd think I was crazy but I swear to God, I'm telling the truth. I can prove it and I will." He cupped my face in his hand and looked at me. His eyes were nervous and worried, but I could see the truth there. If nothing else, it seemed like *he* believed what he was telling me.

"Listen, if you still don't believe me at the end of this then you can walk away. I just need the chance to explain myself to you." He looked like he was close to tears.

Whether I believed him or not, I couldn't turn my back. I still felt way too much for him.

"Okay, let's operate under the assumption that I believe you. I want to believe you it's just...well, you know. So tell me what happened three years ago."

Noah put his forehead against mine for a second, then he drew back and continued, “I always knew there was something weird about my parents’ business trips, when I was left with Mrs. Clooney for weeks at a time, but until my eighteenth birthday even I didn’t know what they were doing.”

“Why then?”

“I guess because that’s when I technically became a man. That’s when I was supposed to join them.”

“You mean become a hunter?” I tried not to say it sarcastically. I almost succeeded.

“Yeah—the fucking Harper legacy. My parents sat me down that day and told me about our family. I would have had them carted off to an institution if they hadn’t shown me proof. Tons of it. They had photographs, contracts, research, journals back to the Middle Ages in Europe, letters, newspaper articles about ‘wild beasts.’ It was obvious they were telling the truth. When I asked why they were loading all this on me after so many years, they said it was time for me to join them.”

“But you didn’t want to,” I murmured.

“Of course not. I wanted to go to NYU with you. All I ever wanted was to be with you. I fought with them for weeks, Zack. I know you noticed there was something wrong. Then that night we kissed.” He paused smiling. “You have to already know that was the best night of my life. I’d wanted to tell you how I felt about you since we were kids. I thought you felt it too, but I could never tell for sure.”

I squeezed his hand in mine. “Obviously I did. I still do.” He brought my palm up to his mouth and rubbed his lips across it in a soft kiss. Any small part of me that hadn’t been melted by him already turned to liquid.

"You have no idea how happy that makes me, how happy it made me then too. I ran home that night ready to tell my parents to screw the Harpers and the stupid hunting legacy. I only wanted to be with you. I sat up all night practically floating off of my bed because I was so...euphoric. I spent hours trying to decide how I was going to tell you that I had been in love with you since, well, since practically forever." He turned and smiled at me then sandwiching my hand between both of his. "I went to breakfast the next morning and confronted my family. I told them how I felt about you, that I wanted to be with you and not follow the tradition." He stopped, looking out at the moon on the water.

"What did they say to you, Noah?" I needed to hear the rest of the story, all the way to the crazy end.

"They told me it didn't matter if I joined them. That by being a Harper alone I was already a target and anyone who was close to me would be a target too. I wanted to protect you, Zack. My parents convinced me that pushing you away was the only way I could. They said that they felt awful, but that you weren't equipped to deal with what we did. That it wasn't fair to ask you to be a part of it."

"So you pushed me away because you thought you had to protect me from...*movie monsters*?"

He sighed and tightened his grip on my hand, obviously not wanting me to bolt. "I told you, Zack. I can prove this is all true and I will. But there's more."

"More? How can there be?"

"I was a wreck after I said goodbye to you. I barely left my room for weeks. Finally my parents convinced me to go on a hunting trip with them. I guess they thought it would be good for me, get me involved with the family or whatever. Anyway, they were after some vampires in Boston, huge contract. You'd be amazed at what city officials will pay for something like that." I looked at him with my mouth wide open.

“Anyway, by that point I didn’t care if I lived or died so I finally said yes. I went with them, supposedly just to watch and learn, but I was reckless.”

I held up my hand. “Wait a second. You went out on some government sanctioned *vampire* hunt?” I felt dizzy.

“Yeah, but I didn’t follow my parents’ directions very well. I snuck out looking for the vampires one night when they were working on a lead. Unfortunately, I got a little too lucky. My parents traced my path and caught up to me just as I stumbled on the vampires’ nest.” He took a deep breath. “That’s how they really died, Zack. You know how I said it was in a car crash? It wasn’t. My parents died trying to protect me from the vampires.”

“But you, uh, got away.”

“Well, not exactly.”

I knew before he even opened his mouth that I didn’t want to hear it. There was only one place this was going and it wasn’t good.

“I didn’t die, but I didn’t get away free and clear either. One of the vampires bit me.”

I sat stock still on the dock. I could almost feel the shockwaves from that last statement.

“Noah, are you trying to tell me—”

“Yeah. I am.” He took a deep breath. “Zack, I’m a vampire.”

I was speechless for a second but then every little drop of incredulity that I had been feeling came pouring out at once in a huge wave. “Okay, you know what? I can’t do this. There’s just no way.”

It was just too crazy, too much, too impossible. There was no such thing as vampires, werewolves, or supernatural bounty hunters. My life had turned into Thursday night on the CW and I couldn’t handle it. I needed reality.

I jumped up, yanking my arm out of his and stomped down the dock towards the leafy trail.

Why couldn't he just say he was afraid of being gay or that his parents didn't want him seeing me anymore and he felt guilty because they died in some awful car crash before he could reconcile with them? Was it just so hard to admit that he'd been a chicken that he had to come up with some nuts-o story? I had to admit there was something weird going on with his family but monster hunting? Give me a fucking break.

I slapped angrily at the branches that seemed to be strangling me and tried not to picture the pain I saw on his face when I turned away.

It couldn't be true. It couldn't. There was no fucking way. Cause if it was then everything I knew to be reality was just some surface world that most of us existed in while supernatural forces battled beneath our noses constantly. If it was true, he'd been trying to protect me from everything that was beyond that thin film of reality. If it was true, than he really did love me and I had just walked away from him. The worst part, though, the part that was nearly unthinkable? If everything he'd said was true, than Noah Harper, the guy I always figured I'd love forever, was a vampire.

Summer Moon

If anything, it was even more impossible to fall asleep that night, than it had been the first night we'd gotten there. It had to be close to dawn before I started to feel my eyes get heavy.

I'd been so ready to forget the past. All it took was one look at his face and I just wanted to forgive him and move on. Why couldn't it have been that easy? Why couldn't he have hugged me and kissed me and said he made a huge mistake and he wanted us to be together? It was all I'd wanted since forever.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I needed to get some sleep. Maybe in the morning, which was coming awfully quickly, the whole thing would look different.

* * * *

It was nearly noon when I awoke to an impatient pounding on my door. I looked at my clock blearily. It took me a few seconds to remember why I had slept in so late, why I had been up most of the night thinking.

Noah.

Noah my almost-boyfriend who was a vampire and had to break up with me three years ago to protect me.

I groaned.

Who has shit like this to deal with? No one. That was the answer. No one did because it *wasn't real*.

"Zack, get up!" Maya's voice called from the other side of my door.

"I'll be out in a minute, Maya," I grumbled at her and headed for my still halfway packed bag to find my swimsuit. I wasn't sure if I could handle a day of lake games after the night I'd had.

"Go away for a little bit."

"But I have something for you," she taunted through the door. "It's a no-ote. I found it on the doormat this morning."

A note? Oh my god. Noah! She couldn't read that!

I scrambled to the door, opened it, and yanked the tightly folded note out of her hand. It was taped shut on one side. I breathed a sigh of relief. I cut the tape open with my keys and opened the note with trembling hands. Just seeing his handwriting made my stomach melt.

Zack,

I guess it was too much for you to believe me just because I asked you to. I probably wouldn't have believed any of it either, so I can't really blame you, but it hurt all the same to watch you walk away. It hurt a lot. It made me feel even worse about what happened three years ago because I know how it feels now. I'm so sorry.

Anyway, I told you last night that I can prove that all of this is true. I promise I can. Please give me a chance to try. I've missed you so much and I know that I don't deserve to have you back as a friend or anything more but...well I can only ask. So this is me asking.

Meet me at the dock tonight at ten. I'll prove to you that I'm telling the truth and maybe then you'll believe that I was only trying to protect you all along. If you don't come, I'll leave you alone from now on. At least I'll try to. Please come. I need you...well honestly I more than need you but I don't want to say it in a stupid note. Anyway please come. I know I said it already but I don't know what I'll do if you don't.

See you later (I hope).

—Noah

My heart leapt into my throat. That little piece of paper said nearly everything I'd been dreaming of hearing from him since the day he broke our friendship apart three years before. I wished it hadn't come after that insane night we'd just had. I flopped down on my bed holding the note to my chest like a pubescent girl.

I still loved him. There was no doubt about it. And the note seemed to imply that he felt the same. Even with all the weirdness, the thought of him telling me he loved me made me all giddy. But there still *was* the weirdness. The unavoidable insane story he'd spun while he was holding my hand and looking at me with sincere eyes. I could still picture his face when he looked at me and said, 'Zack, I'm a vampire.' How was I supposed to believe that?

I wrestled with myself all day.

The hours kept ticking by and I wasn't any closer to deciding what I believed. Every time I thought of Noah's face, I still got that warm melting happiness in my stomach that I'd gotten for years every time I was near him. I waited for my gut to tell me that it was all wrong, that he was crazy or lying, but the feeling never came. I could just see his face, looking so truthful and unhappy. So hurt when I walked away.

I was overwhelmed.

What the hell was I supposed to do? If I went to him, then I was basically saying I believed him and that I was ready to let him prove to me that he was a vampire and not the Noah I'd loved for so many years. The implications of that were enough to set my head spinning. If I stayed away, well just the thought made me sick. I hadn't even begun to get over him in the three years we'd been apart. What made me think another three years or ten or twenty would make any difference?

It was well before ten by the time I realized I had to give him a chance. For me as well as for him. I had to know once and for all if he was lying or crazy, or if the impossible had somehow happened. And I had to know for sure if he still loved me.

So when ten o'clock rolled around, I found myself approaching the old dock nervous and uncertain but hoping to see a familiar blond head glowing in the moonlight. I sighed in relief when I found him sitting on the end with his feet dangling in the water.

“Noah?”

He turned, and even in the dark I could see his face light up. “Zack! You came.” He vaulted up and jogged down the dock towards me. “Thank you so much. I said I’d leave you alone if you didn’t but—”

I held up my hand slowing him down. It was so hard not to jump into his arms. I could tell he wanted it too. “Yeah, I came, but I want you to know that I’m having a really hard time believing all of this. I mean how can you prove that...” I couldn’t even say it.

“Prove that I’m a vampire?” He took a deep breath. “You know that’s only the second time I’ve said it out loud? Anyway, I told you I could. Pretty easily in fact if you’ve read anything about vampires ever. It’s amazing how much they got right.” He leaned forward slightly and I immediately scooted back, reacting.

What the hell? Was he going to bite me or something?

Noah gave me a hurt look and held up the pocketknife he’d gotten from the back pocket of his shorts. “Zack, I’d never do anything to hurt you. I’d never intentionally hurt anyone. How could you think that?”

“Sorry. I know you wouldn’t.”

“It’s okay, just don’t do it again.” He grinned quickly and I smiled back, happy to see a glimpse of his old sense of humor. “You might want to be sitting for this. Here, watch.” He took my hand and pulled me down to the dock then pointed at his forearm with the knife. “Proof time. Ever heard the part about vampires healing really fast?”

Noah took the knife and ran it along his arm, making a deep angry looking gash. I drew in a sharp breath but held it when I saw his skin knitting itself back together before my eyes.

“Oh my god!” I’d always wanted to hope things like that were possible but I couldn’t believe I was actually seeing it. I reached out tentatively and stroked his forearm where the skin had been hanging open just moments before. He trembled slightly at the sensation of my touch.

“There’s more. Let me see your finger.” I was in so much shock I gave it to him without hesitation. “Just a prick,” he whispered and nicked my fingertip with his knife.

He squeezed my finger gently until a ruby red drop of blood welled up at the tip. Cautiously, he brought it to his mouth and licked. My skin exploded into hot shivers at the touch of his tongue and my breath felt erratic in my chest. Blood rushed to my cheeks, between my legs. I actually felt myself start to harden. *Impossible!*

At the taste of my blood, his eyes rolled back in ecstasy and a pair of glistening fangs slid into place. Even through my haze of desire, I heard a low growl of satisfaction coming from his throat. It was a little unnerving and just for a second I was scared of him before I remembered that it was Noah and he’d never hurt me. My eyes grew wide. *Well, there ya go.* That was all there was to it. You couldn’t get any more concrete proof than that.

My best friend and the guy I’d been in love for most of my life was a vampire. A vampire. Holy. Shit.

I saw it in his eyes when he drew away. He was expecting me to run. He figured I’d react like any sane person would. But the thing was, it wasn’t just any vampire sitting in front of me. It was Noah. He was looking scared and sad and a little hopeful. He looked like...like *him*. I didn’t have it in my heart to hurt the only guy I’d ever loved.

I pulled my hand out of his and immediately wrapped my arms around his shoulders hugging him close. Rubbing my face in his neck, I was relieved that it still felt warm and alive. I kissed his skin softly, unable to resist. Noah lifted my face with a gentle finger and looked at me for a

long silent moment. His face was filled with soul deep weariness, relief, and something that looked a lot like love.

“So now you know,” he murmured. “The vampire part is true and logically you have to realize the rest of it is as well.”

“And you really stayed away from me because you were trying to protect me.”

“I really was. It hurt so much to lose you but I couldn’t think of a better solution. I nearly caved and told you the truth that day instead of telling you we couldn’t be friends anymore. It was almost impossible for me to walk away. I shouldn’t have done it.” Noah sighed. “And because I did now I’m like this.”

I tugged on his shirt with my fist until he looked at me. “You know I don’t care, right? I’m here with you now. I’ll always be here. You’re not pushing me away again, remember?”

“Are you sure about this?”

He looked shaken, weary. I stood on my own shaky legs and held out my hand. He took it and I pulled him to standing.

“Yes, I’m sure. I don’t care what happened to you, you’re still Noah and I feel the same way about you that I always did.”

“But I’m a monster. Isn’t that the word you used?”

I hugged him as close as I could. “You’re not a monster. I’m sorry I said that. I would have never used that word about you. I know you won’t hurt me.”

“I never want to hurt you again in any way. Thank you for trusting me, Zack.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t at first.”

We held each other there for a long time. I wasn’t sure if we were swaying or if the old dock wasn’t as strong as it used to be. I needed to be quiet, to soak it all in. I’d told the truth. I didn’t care what he’d become. That didn’t mean it wasn’t a lot to get used to.

Eventually I pulled my head from his shoulder and for the first time noticed the moon, huge and glowing in the night sky.

“Look at the moon, Noh. It’s amazing.”

He turned and gazed in the sky. “It’s called a Strawberry Moon. Pretty, isn’t it?”

His smile was genuine, but that little bit of bitterness was still there. I wanted to make it go away.

“C’mon. You’re coming with me. I think the two of us have been alone long enough.” I stepped back and held out my hand. He took it silently.

I guided him along the path towards our cabin. Noah followed without protest, holding my hand trustingly, silently climbing the stairs behind me and pausing at the front door. I put my finger to his lips and we tiptoed again until we were safely behind my door and sitting side by side on the narrow twin bed. After a minute, he spoke.

“Thank you again for believing me, Zack. I didn’t mean to see you that first night but once I did I realized exactly how much I still need you. It would have killed me to lose you again.” His voice was tired but he sounded happier than I’d heard since I first saw him. I pushed him down onto my bed and covered him with the green afghan my mother had made when I was a baby. I was tempted to crawl under the covers and kiss him all over, but he looked so tired I contented myself with running my fingers through his hair soothingly and brushing my lips across his forehead. He was nearly asleep when I remembered something.

“Hey what’s the real deal with you and sunlight? I don’t want you incinerating on me or anything.”

“It’s fine as long as the curtains are closed. Direct sunlight is really uncomfortable but won’t kill me right away. It takes a while. Daylight’s fine for hours as long as it’s cloudy.”

“It’s been overcast but I’m going to close the curtains anyway.”

I got up and made sure my curtains were closed. To be even safer, I draped a thick blanket over the curtain rod and stuffed it against the ledge to block out any light. By the time I was done I could hear Noah breathing softly. I stripped off my t-shirt and shoes and climbed into the bed next to him, pulling the blanket around both of us. He turned over and wrapped his arms around me, tugging until I backed all the way into his chest. We had never slept together like that before but it felt good, comfortable and right. I smiled blissfully and closed my eyes, finally able to sleep.

Questions

We were holed up in my bedroom, cuddling in the darkness. It wasn't even sunset yet but I had the windows covered so well it seemed like it was the middle of the night. It was probably a little bit of overkill, but I wasn't taking any chances with Noah's safety.

We'd spent the day talking, reliving the past, getting to know each other again—for real this time. It was a relief that he was finally acting like himself: quick to laugh, witty, talkative. That huge weight that I'd sensed seemed to have lifted as soon as I'd told him that I didn't care what he'd become. He was the best friend who I'd been comfortable with for years combined with the flirtatious sexy new boyfriend that I couldn't keep my hands off of. Every conversation was filled with giggling, teasing, and touching, every silence filled with long, deep kisses.

It was easily the best day I'd had in years. Maybe ever. I knew my parents were confused and probably a little worried. I hadn't said much other than "Noah's here" and I'd barely emerged from my room since breakfast. They hadn't even seen him yet. I was sure I'd be getting some questions fairly soon but I had no idea how I was going to answer them so I stayed hidden and hoped they didn't come barging through the bedroom door.

It was nearing dinnertime. I decided to grab a quick snack so I could avoid the question of why Noah wasn't eating. He said that even the smell of food made him gag since he'd been turned. When I asked if he missed eating, he said it was hard to miss something that was repulsive. I felt the same about drinking blood, so I understood. I shoveled a bowl of cereal into my mouth as quickly as possible and ducked back into my room before anyone from my family could corner me.

Noah was lounging on my bed when I returned, awake but relaxed. His eyes were sleepy and partly covered by a curtain of silky blond hair and his t-shirt was hitched up a little, showing a

few inches of smoothly muscled abdomen. I wanted to lean over and run my tongue along the waist of his jeans. He looked a million times better than he had the night before, but was still a little pale and drawn—even by what I imagined vampire standards to be. It wouldn't have mattered if he looked half dead, honestly. He'd still be the most gorgeous thing in the world to me.

I jumped on him impulsively and covered his lips with my own, still marveling at the fact that I actually got to kiss him again. Noah purred a little in his throat and hooked his leg around my thighs, returning the kiss.

"I love kissing you," he whispered a few minutes later when we had to stop and catch our breath. I smiled and brushed my thumb across his bottom lip.

"I love kissing you too." I followed my thumb with another small kiss. I hadn't gotten a hundred percent used to the fact that he was really truly there with everything out in the open.

By silent mutual agreement, we'd avoided any serious topics all day but I decided it was time to start dealing with them. I needed to know what was going on. I knew our feelings for each other were the kind that lasted forever. While it normally might seem a little premature to start talking about the future after just a few days, what we had was definitely not a normal situation. Last night had changed everything.

"So what now, Noah? For you, for us?"

"Aren't you starting school again in September?"

"Yeah and I think you should come with me to the city. I've got a decent apartment and no roommates yet. I mean, it could be like we wanted before." The idea of him and me living together in my cozy little apartment made my pulse leap.

He smiled sadly. "But, Zack, it'll never be like we used to talk about. You have to remember that I'm dangerous for you. Even if I would never hurt you, having me around isn't a good idea."

“What do you mean?”

“Well the rest of my family still doesn’t know what happened to me. I’ve been hiding it. I think they’ll come after me when they eventually figure out I got turned. As far as they’re concerned, a vampire’s a vampire and no longer a human with emotions and a sense of right and wrong.”

“Wait, so you think your family is going to kill you?”

He nodded.

“And you’ve been hiding from them at your *parents’* house?”

“Well it’s not like grandpa and the others visit very often. We’re not close. I haven’t even seen them since my parents’ funeral and it was raining that day so I don’t think they had any idea. I keep up appearances; still go on hunts and stuff. Besides, I didn’t care all that much about them finding out about me before.”

I shoved at his chest. “You better care now!”

He laughed and pulled me into his arms toppling us both backwards on my bed. “Of course I care now.” He smothered my face with little kisses, causing me to squirm and laugh. I started tickling him in retaliation, which in retrospect was probably a mistake. In seconds he had me pinned and was tickling and pinching me until I was laughing so hard I could barely breathe.

“Truce!” I called.

When we finally calmed down I looked at him seriously.

“I still want you to come with me, you know. I don’t give a shit if it’s dangerous; I’m not losing you again.”

“Are you sure?” He looked hesitant. I guessed he wasn’t a hundred percent convinced we were real yet either.

“I’m totally sure. You do want to be with me, don’t you?”

"How can you ask that? You know I do. I've wanted to be with you since we were kids."

"Me too." I smirked at him then and snuggled up close. "Does that make you my *boyfriend*?" I fluttered my eyelashes.

He grinned back. "Yep. You're never getting rid of me." Then he attacked my neck with his teasing kisses.

* * * *

An hour or so later we were lying together quietly. He had his arms around me and I was leaning on his chest. I couldn't believe how comfortable and familiar it felt; like we'd never been away from each other, like we'd been a couple all along. I realized I had something I needed to say to him.

"You know, Noah. Your family's wrong. I'm not the only person who's safe around you. I don't care what you are; you'd never hurt a thing. I mean you're still totally you, a big softie at heart."

He chuckled a little and then sighed. "They'd never believe you. They think all vampires aren't to be trusted. I don't know if my parents would've even seen what you see. If they'd survived, I'm not sure if I would have been given a chance to be myself before they killed me."

"Is it awful to say that I'm glad they're dead then? I hated not seeing you, but just the idea of you being gone for good gives me heart palpitations."

He rubbed his nose against mine and gave me a slow kiss that had my heart pounding in a much more pleasant way. "Don't worry I'm not going anywhere for a long time. A very long time."

Oh yeah. I'd forgotten that part.

"So you're really immortal?"

“I’m not sure if it’s immortal or just extremely long lived. But yeah, for all intents and purposes I am. There are vampires around here that saw the revolutionary war.”

“Are any of them like you? You know...nice?”

Noah smiled. “Of course. Doesn’t it seem impossible that any sentient species would be all heartless killers?”

“True.”

“I wish I could help my family see that. They are judging every vampire based on the lawless few.”

“Hey, what do you guys do for food? The nice vampires, I mean. Animal blood?”

Noah made a disgusted face and gagged a little. “No, I tried it once out of curiosity. It was awful. We can still feed from humans without hurting them. There are places where you can find, uh, very willing snacks.”

“But wouldn’t you turn them? I mean isn’t that how you get turned?”

“I did get turned from a bite, but that hardly ever happens by accident. You know how some animals have venom that stuns their prey?” I nodded. “Well, we do too and it’s that venom that causes the turn to happen, like it did with me. I was lucky, though. Usually if a vampire chooses to shoot venom into someone, the person ends up dead before it would ever get a chance to work. But we *can* choose. The venom isn’t involuntary. If we don’t need it, like if the person is willing, then we don’t release it and no one is harmed.”

“But why would anyone be willing?”

Noah looked embarrassed. “I’m sure you’ve heard that vampire bites can be, um, pleasurable?”

I chuckled a little bit. “Yeah. So that part is true, obviously.”

“Very true. And the more the vampire likes the taste of a certain human, the better it is for the human. They can feel the vampire’s blood lust.”

“And there are places where these ‘willing’ people go to get bitten.”

Noah looked even more embarrassed. “Yeah. Want to know something weird though? All human blood is definitely not the same. It took me a while to figure out what I liked, but I finally noticed that the taste for blood seems to run where your attractions lie. At least mine does. Maybe it’s the pheromones or something. For example, I can tolerate the taste of female blood, but I don’t really like it. It’s kind of like what I remember diet pop tasting like; pretty bland with a weird aftertaste. But an attractive guy’s blood? That’s like the best meal I ever had mixed with the taste of sex and this wild high that takes hours to subside.”

A vivid picture of him biting the neck of some hot turned-on guy jumped into my head. I could see Noah’s fingers curling in the guy’s hair and his tongue licking a long line on the exposed neck before biting into it with those shiny fangs. It was sexy as hell but it made a violent curl of jealousy unravel in me.

“What was the best blood you’ve ever tasted?”

“Do I have to say it, Zack? The more attracted I am to someone, the better his blood tastes to me. Think about it and take a guess.”

My mouth dropped open. “Really?”

He could tell from one drop?

“Tell me you couldn’t feel it just a little, even through that tiny prick.”

I realized that I had felt it. Way more than a little. I’d assumed it was just me reacting to the attraction I’d always had towards Noah. But that wild sexual thrill when his tongue slicked the drop of blood from my finger had been like nothing I’d ever felt before. I shivered a little, remembering.

“Yeah I felt it.”

“And you probably wouldn’t mind feeling it again?”

I laughed. *Mind?* If it felt like that every time, I’d drag his mouth to my neck and impale myself on his teeth! “Okay, I get it. Willing snacks.”

“Very willing.”

The grin he gave me when he said that was so hot that I pounced. I wanted him. Badly. I wanted him to lick and suck and, yes, I wanted him to bite me all over. I wanted him inside of me most of all. I couldn’t wait to feel that with him. He growled a little like he had the night before, but instead of finding it scary I thought it was the hottest thing I’d ever heard. It made me want to rip his t-shirt in half. I kissed him hard, pulling on him and getting as close as I could. His hands roamed under my shirt, making my already overheated skin feel like it was about to combust. I wanted more of him.

“Will you feed from me?” I asked, my breath coming in short pants. “I want to know what it feels like.”

He moaned and licked my neck. It was the best sort of torture. “I want to,” he breathed in deeply and moaned again.

“But?” I ground my hips into his and pulled his hair.

“It would be so intense. I’m not sure if I could control myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s been a few weeks since I’ve fed and you taste so...good.” He shuddered. “I’m afraid I’d lose control.”

“You think you might accidentally kill me?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never tasted anything that amazing before. If I bit you when I was hungry, it would be so hard to stop. I’d like to say I could but I’d never want to take that chance.” He

shook his head slowly, then looked at me with an intense stare. "I've never felt like this about anyone else, either. I don't know how that affects things."

"You haven't?"

He lifted my chin so I had to look at him. "Of course not. Zack, you know I love you, right? I guess I never actually said it out loud, but I've felt it for a really long time."

"I love you too. I always have." I'd thought the words so many times, but they almost felt strange coming out of my mouth.

Noah squeezed me tightly against him and shuddered. "I want everything with you. I want to hold you and kiss you, fall asleep with you in my arms and tell you every day that I love you. But I also want to taste you, to feel every inch of your body against mine, inside of me, surrounding me. I've been dreaming of it for years. I just can't take any chances with you the first time."

I trembled at the mental picture Noah was painting. I wanted all of that too. As soon as I could have it. "So what do we do?"

"I need to, uh, eat before I can be with you. Before I can trust myself to lose control and keep you safe."

"Okay, so we're going out to get you dinner. When do we leave?"

"You want to come?"

Was he kidding? He was going to some vampire bar that I pictured being all dark and red and pulsating, kind of like an orgy without any actual sex. They'd shown approximations of those places in the movies, but who would miss an opportunity to see something like that in real life? Besides, there was no way I was letting Noah out of my sight.

"Uh, yeah I'm coming."

I couldn't wait.

This Time We Mean It

A few hours later, after the sun had finally set, I'd packed a backpack of clothes and was getting ready to sneak out with Noah in tow. Sure, I was in my twenties, but somehow I'd never quite gotten over the fear of my mother getting mad at me. I didn't have a good story to tell her about what had happened and the truth sure as hell wouldn't work.

Oh yeah, Mom, I'm going with Noah to this vampire bar to watch him feed then we're going back to his house where we're going to spend the night in bed naked making each other come over and over...oh and by the way, I'm gay.

The picture I got in my mind of that scene was horrifying but funny. Even without the vampire part I couldn't imagine their faces.

I listened at my door for sounds of movement in the living area. When I heard complete silence, I figured that my family was out for their evening walk. Perfect. I picked up the nonchalant little note that I had written earlier about spending the night at Noah's house for a bonfire or some other lame excuse and laced my free hand through his. I brushed our lips together one more time and with a wicked smile of anticipation, cracked open the door, ready to slip out.

I thought we were home free for about five whole seconds but when I went to drop the note on the coffee table I saw my very quiet parents sitting on the couch, waiting expectantly. There was no way they could have missed the fact that Noah and I were holding hands.

"Sit," my father ordered.

"Explain," my mother added. "Maya, honey. Please go to your room and read for a little while. We need to talk to Zack."

Maya looked annoyed. She could tell this was going to be good. I could already see the texts that were going to be flying back and forth between her and her friends the second she got within range of a decent cell tower.

Noah and I dropped each other's hands and sank slowly onto the second couch. I felt like wild game being cornered in the forest.

"All right, you two. What's going on?" My mother looked concerned, but not hostile.

I thought I should just get it out of the way. It was too late to lie and I didn't really want to anyway. I reached over and pulled Noah's hand into my lap, twining his fingers with mine once again. "Mom, Dad, Noah and I are together."

"But I don't understand. The last thing I knew is you two had some falling out three years ago and hadn't spoken since. You just saw each other for the first time a few days ago. When did this happen?" I noticed she didn't say anything about me being gay. Maybe Mom was more perceptive than I gave her credit for.

Noah looked over at me and smiled, squeezing my hand. "Let me explain. First of all, this isn't new. I've been in love with Zack for years. He was my best friend and my first crush and, well; I just never got over him. I never wanted to. Three summers ago I finally found out that he felt the same way about me. I was happier than I've ever been before but I was also weak. When I went home to tell my parents the news, they told me that their son couldn't be gay and they didn't want me talking to Zack anymore. They threatened to take my college money away, to send me to live with my grandfather in England. I was eighteen and an adult, but I'd never been away from my family. I didn't know what to do so I did the worst thing possible. I pushed Zack away just like they'd asked. I hurt him to keep my family happy; I've been half dead without him ever since." Noah took a deep breath, looking like he was close to tears.

Damn, he was good.

“Anyway, when Zack found me at the dock that first night I told him how sorry I was. I can’t even begin to explain how grateful I am that he decided to let me back into his life.”

My mother didn’t look quite convinced. “Why is it different now? Don’t you still live at your parents’ house? I don’t want my son getting hurt again. You have no idea how long it took him to get over losing you the first time.”

Noah shifted uncomfortably in his seat. This wasn’t his favorite topic and my mother was acting like a defensive mama bear at the moment. I didn’t envy him.

“Zack’s never going to lose me again. Not unless he wants me to go.” Mom opened her mouth to speak, but Noah held up his hand. “My parents are no longer with us, Mrs. Parker. They were in a car crash a few years ago when they were on a business trip. I live at the house with Mrs. Clooney. I told Zack that I would have found him as soon as it happened but I thought he hated me after what I’d done.”

That was enough to make my mother forget about the interrogation. After all, she’d loved Noah too. Her eyes got all wide and teary. I could see a huge gushy mom love fest coming on.

“Oh, honey, come here!” She stood and pulled him into a big hug. The hug lasted for a minute or two before she held Noah back with her arms. “I’m glad you two found each other again. I didn’t think Zack was ever going to meet anyone else that he could love as much as he loves you.”

“Mom?” I looked at her with my mouth open.

She rolled her eyes. “Zack, I’m not blind. You may not have actually said anything, but you two have been broadcasting your feelings about each other loud and clear for years if anyone took the time to pay attention. I thought it was adorable.” I was mortified but blindingly happy at the same time. “Now, unless I’m mistaken you two didn’t get any dinner, and, Noah sweetie, you’ve gotten so pale. You need something to eat.”

Uh oh.

“Actually, Mrs. Parker, I’d love to stay but there’s a movie in town Zack and I were hoping to see and you know how long the drive is. We were planning on grabbing something on the way.”

“And I was going to stay over at Noah’s so I don’t wake anyone up when I get in. It’ll be really late.” My mother gave me her best ‘I wasn’t born yesterday’ look. I sighed and rolled my eyes at her. “Mom, I’m twenty-one, I think I’m old enough to stay over with my boyfriend.”

Just saying the word out loud made happy little thrills race up my back. She raised her eyebrows at me but nodded reluctantly and told us to have fun. My father was still sitting in the same position he’d been in for the entire conversation. He looked a little shell-shocked.

Apparently his intuition wasn’t quite as good as my mother’s.

Noah and I finally escaped after another round of hugs and kisses and promises to call in the morning so she’d know we made it home safe. We dashed, laughing and holding hands, along the path that surrounded the lake. Our plan was to get changed as quickly as possible and head out by nine. The bar was a few counties over and we didn’t want to waste the entire night driving.

When we got to his place, I ducked into one of the guest bathrooms to get ready. I luckily had decided to pack a few nicer things at the last minute. I wasn’t sure what people would dress like where we were going, so I just went off of a barely educated guess.

I had a pair of dark jeans that were, in my opinion, the best pants I owned. Not too baggy, perfect on my ass. I paired them with a black button-up which I wore untucked and unbuttoned a little at the top so the Celtic pendant I always wore tied around my neck with a thin black cord would show. I rolled the sleeves up to my forearms, made sure my hair was swept perfectly off to the side, and even put on a little bit of the black eyeliner that I’d swiped from Maya. I figured that if there was ever a night to try something like that, this was it. I stepped back, looking in the

mirror. It was kind of startling. I didn't look like myself at all. I actually looked like a guy that belonged in a vampire bar with someone as beautiful as Noah.

I smiled quietly to myself, hoping he would agree, and shoved my other clothes back into the backpack.

Noah's reaction made my efforts more than worth it. I didn't even get a chance to see how amazing he looked before he dragged me up against him and kissed me senseless for several long minutes.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight tonight," he growled against my neck after he released my mouth. "You look so fucking hot."

"Yeah?" I grinned. I couldn't help but to milk the moment. I felt sexy and heated and was loving every second of it.

He reached up and brushed his finger on my lips. "Yeah. It's scary how much I want you right now. We need to get outta here before I cave."

I rubbed myself up against him. "What if I want you to cave? What if I've wanted it for years?" I licked his neck and gave it a little bite.

He gulped and pulled back. "Let's go."

I laughed a low chuckle, already feeling high, then followed him down the stairs and outside to his car.

* * * *

The club was everything that I expected. Maybe even a little wilder. I don't know if it was life imitating art or if some Hollywood people out there know a little more than we think, but the place fit the bill perfectly. It was thrilling and intimidating. I felt like some underage kid sneaking into his first club. Noah must have sensed my uneasiness because he put his arm around my shoulders after we paid our cover and walked in. There were more than a few interested stares

shot our way, both male and female. I felt a stab of jealousy but I got why they were looking at Noah. There wasn't anyone in the whole place that looked like him.

I was awestruck by the whole spectacle surrounding us: the swirling red and purple lights, the low sensual plushness of the couches and chairs, the skimpily clad crowd swaying to the uninhibited beat. The whole place was both wildly sexy and overwhelming at the same time.

When I looked over at the bar, I saw a male vampire biting a woman; I felt like I was watching an X-rated movie. The way the woman moaned and arched her back; it was obvious what she was feeling. It was unnerving to see that kind of intimate act on public display. Unnerving but very hot. I pushed up against Noah and was glad when he tightened his arm around my shoulders.

I had never liked feeling claimed with any of the guys I dated but with Noah I loved it. It wasn't just because we were somewhere new and a little scary. It was because I wanted everyone to know I was his. We could have been anywhere and I would have still felt that same satisfied warmth in the pit of my stomach when he pulled me close. I smiled up at him and hooked my fingers into the back pocket of his jeans.

Suddenly, I felt his back stiffen.

"Watch out for this one," he whispered to me. "She isn't one of the nice ones."

The woman who was approaching us was undeniably beautiful but totally repulsive at the same time. There was something reptilian in her movements. She was tall with pale skin, almond shaped eyes, and dark hair that reached her waist. She wore a short red dress with a Mandarin collar and black stiletto boots that seemed to crawl up her thighs.

"Noah, you brought us a pretty little snack." Her voice was smoky and rich. She reached out and scraped a red lacquered nail down the side of my cheek. I tried not to flinch. Noah leaned closer to me, noticeably staking claim.

"Get your hands off of him, Lin. He's not available. For anything."

“I know Mommy taught you that it was rude not to share your toys.”

Noah was outwardly calm but I could tell he was seething. “Zack’s not a toy and he’s with me. I’m serious. Back away.”

She raised her eyebrows and gave him an imperious little smile. Apparently Noah’s possessiveness was amusing to her. Either that or she wasn’t in the mood to play with us. I could tell he was right about her. Total viper. I let out a sigh of relief as she walked away.

“Let’s get this over with so we can get you out of here,” he growled. “I’m tired of watching vampires check my boyfriend out. I think there’s actually a line forming to see who gets to take the first bite.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. Did you get a good look at yourself tonight? You’re sexy as hell. Plus you’re with me and they all know how solitary I usually am. Even if you weren’t such fang bait that would be enough to spark curiosity.”

I giggled out loud and tried to cover it so I wouldn’t look like a total newbie. “Fang bait? Please tell me you just made that up.”

“Can you really see me making that up? It’s dumb but I’ve heard it a lot in here. Another way of saying fresh meat, I guess. Someone new who literally looks good enough to eat.”

I surprised myself by giving him a long, slow, hot kiss—in a public place with a very curious audience.

“You’re the only one who will get to do that,” I murmured, sliding my whole body up against him and rolling my hips until I heard his breath catch. “Why don’t we get you some dinner so we can go home and have dessert?”

Noah shuddered against me then nodded quickly.

He scanned the club, looking for someone appealing, or maybe a familiar face. I could see when he spotted someone he knew. I had to admit the guy was hot. Preppy clean cut frat boy type. He was wearing khaki cargo shorts and a polo, no dark clothes, no brooding looks. The last kind of guy I would've ever expected to see in a vampire bar.

"Hey, Noah," the guy slurred. He smiled slowly and walked closer.

Even from a few feet away I could tell he had a number of fresh little bite marks on his neck. I could also tell from the way he was looking at Noah that they hadn't exactly been on casual terms. It made me want to growl and snap at him.

Wow, maybe the vamp thing was more contagious than they thought...

"Hey, Brian. Looks like you've had a few bites already tonight. You mind?"

"Nah. Those were just appetizers. I waited cause I was hoping you'd come."

Noah must have sensed my hackles rising. "Brian, this is my boyfriend, Zack. He's never been here before."

Brian was friendly and shook my hand, but I could sense his disappointment.

"Do you still want to?" He pulled the collar of his polo down.

Noah nodded silently and kissed the palm of my hand before moving over to Brian.

I tried not to feel territorial but it was hard. Especially when I saw Noah run his thumb gently over the other guy's bite marks, as if to soothe them. I didn't want him touching someone else but logically I understood why it was necessary. I also understood the slight tremble in Brian's body when Noah touched him like that. I'd felt the same thing so many times in the past few days.

Noah leaned closer and licked a small area on the Brian's neck. Then with expert precision, he sank his teeth into a fresh spot. I could almost feel the instant reaction. Brian dipped his head back and groaned, his hand coming up automatically to cover Noah's where it rested on his collarbone. He panted and arched his lower back, just like the woman I'd seen a few minutes

before. Noah wasn't exactly unaffected either: his eyes were sexy and hooded and I could see his elegant fingers clutching into the fabric of Brian's shirt.

I gulped.

Oh, I was still jealous as hell, but I also knew I was seeing what had to be the hottest thing ever. Noah was turned on and ready for sex, the muscles in his throat swallowing, his arousal growing by the second. I wanted so badly to be the guy beneath him.

I reached out, unthinking, and held onto his free hand. Noah weaved his fingers with mine and pulled me closer, close enough that I could nearly feel the currents of lust that were passing between the other two. Close enough that I could hear Brian's heavy breathing and low moans. Even though some part of me wanted to kill him I still didn't want to stop watching. It was hypnotic.

After a minute or so, Noah finally drew away from Brian and licked the wound so it would stop bleeding. Then he slowly wiped any small drops from his lips with his fingers.

A split second later he hauled me up against him and kissed me harder than he'd ever kissed me before. I could taste desire, love, and the slightly exotic flavor of blood, which weirdly enough didn't bother me at all. I wanted to feast on him. I knew he felt the same. The kiss lasted for a long heart-pounding minute. When we finally pulled away from each other, Brian was staring lustfully at us.

"It's too bad you don't want to share, Noah. The three of us could have a lot of fun together."

Noah tore his gaze away from me before he smiled politely and shook his head. "Not going to happen, Brian, but thank you. You were delicious as always."

Brian nodded and began to walk away. After a few steps he turned. "Night, Noah. Zack. The offer still stands. You know where to find me."

Noah shook his head laughing under his breath and pulled me close again.

"C'mon. Let's go home."

* * * *

The ride back to Noah's was without a doubt the longest car ride of my life. The hours I'd spent in the backseat with Peter, Paul and Mary blasting had nothing on the torture I was feeling strapped into the passenger seat and wishing I was naked and in Noah's lap. He held my hand the whole time and tried to make small talk but we could both feel it. The air in the car was electric.

I couldn't stand it much longer. I was almost vibrating with the pure, raging...lust that was flowing through me. If we didn't get there soon, I was going to have to make him pull the car over and take me on the side of the road. I lifted my hand from his lap and fiddled with the radio, flipping through stations and trying to distract myself from the ever-growing need to reach over and rip his shirt off. He chuckled and took my hand from the dials bringing it to his lips.

"Almost home, baby." He nipped my finger gently with one of his teeth and sucked, just for a second. I nearly came on the spot.

"Oh my god." He slowly braked and began to tremble. He released my finger from his mouth but didn't let go of my hand. "Remind me never to do that again when I'm driving," he said with a shaky laugh.

"No kidding."

We sat there and breathed for a minute until Noah felt like he could pull back onto the road. After a few more frustrating minutes, I thought of a real question.

"Hey Noh, aren't you ever afraid you'll get something from one of the people you feed off of?" It had concerned me in the club, where everything seemed so...*loose*. Noah shook his head.

"No. I can smell it if something's wrong with the blood. Kind of like how you can smell if food is spoiled. Besides, even if anything ever got into my body it would get burned up quickly.

Vampires are a lot stronger than any weak little human disease out there."

I guess I wasn't surprised. If vampires were susceptible to all the gross stuff carried in people's blood, they'd have all died out a long time ago.

"Sorry, that's not a very romantic question."

"No, Zack, it's fine. I want you to be safe. Ask all the questions you need to ask."

"So, judging by the look you got from Brian, you've, uh, slept with guys before?" My face turned beet red.

Noah sighed. "Yeah. A couple. Believe me, right now I wish I hadn't. If I'd had any idea this night was going to happen, I'd have waited forever for you."

"I know. Me too."

I wished I'd lost my virginity to someone I loved rather than to a football player in the laundry room of my dorm freshman year.

"So maybe it can be the first time we really mean it, okay?"

I smiled at him in the dark. "Okay."

I sat quietly for a second, just breathing in the night. "I love you," I finally whispered. We hadn't said it since that afternoon when we first told each other.

"I love you too."

I scooted as close as I could in the bucket seat and leaned over, putting my head on his shoulder and kissing his neck. I could see his house looming in the distance.

Finally!

He grinned at me and pushed the gas pedal just a little harder. We were home.

I couldn't even make it through the front door before I had to kiss him. We collided under the huge stone portico and I pushed him up against one of the granite columns, yanking his shirt out of his pants and tracing the lines of his neck with my tongue. He tugged at my hair and ground his hips into mine, breathing hard when I sucked on his neck and bit down. My hand slipped

under his shirt again and I took the opportunity to reach down the front of his pants and curl my fingers around the hard arousal I found there.

“God,” he laughed quietly. “Can we please go upstairs before I end up begging you to ravage me on the front porch?”

I snickered a little but nodded. It was hard to laugh when I wasn't too far from asking him to do the same thing.

With trembling fingers he unlocked his front door and we slipped inside, still wrapped around each other. It took a lot of effort to make it up the stairs without ripping into our clothes, but we did. It felt like eternity, since we had to stop every two steps or so to kiss, but we finally made it into Noah's room.

His room, like mine, had so many memories; memories of rainy days playing cards on his ancient four-poster, hours sitting by him wishing so badly that I could tell him how I felt, wishing I could kiss him. I pulled him into the room, finally getting to do just that, and led him towards his bed. We collapsed onto it devouring each other's lips and rubbing desperately against each other. He finally broke the kiss, and leaning over me, started to unbutton my shirt slowly. Each new bare patch of skin got a trembly little kiss. I loved the feeling of his lips on my skin. I couldn't wait to feel them everywhere. My thighs quivered when he got to the sensitive skin of my belly.

“Noah...” I arched up into him. He gently pushed the shirt off my arms and I pulled his up and over his head. He lowered his bare chest to mine and hugged me close, pulling my leg up to wrap around his waist. We stayed like that for long minutes, kissing until we could barely breathe, touching and exploring. I loved the weight of him on top of me. It seemed like I'd been waiting to feel it my whole life. In a way, I kind of had.

I wanted more.

I reached between us for Noah's belt, fumbling with buckles and zippers. I needed him to be naked as fast as possible. He lifted himself off the bed for a minute to make my job easier. Finally, I could push his jeans down past his hips and free the thick erection I couldn't wait to taste and feel. He started tugging on my zipper too, obviously wanting me as naked as him. I couldn't help him quickly enough. We laughed when my jeans got caught on my feet and Noah had to get off the bed to yank them off. When we were finally free of our inconvenient clothes, he crawled back over me and sank down, pinning me to the bed with his body.

I moaned softly when our skin connected. I didn't think I'd ever felt anything so perfect. We ground our pelvises together, hard erections leaking all over the skin of our stomachs. Noah trembled and propped himself up on his elbows, cupping my face with his hands.

"I've loved you for so long," he murmured and kissed me with velvet soft lips. "It almost seems like this can't be real."

"I know what you mean. Part of me feels like if I close my eyes you'll disappear."

"Not going to disappear. I promise." He rubbed his nose against mine in a gesture so sweet and tender it made my breath catch in my throat.

I pulled him close and whispered, "I love you" in his ear before I wrapped my legs around him and arched up so he could feel just how much I wanted him.

Noah tilted my head back. "You ready?"

I gulped and nodded.

He leaned forward and licked my neck like he had earlier that day. But instead of pulling away, I felt a short sharp jab, then the most incredible ecstasy imaginable engulfed me.

Noah groaned against my skin and if anything the feelings intensified. Lust and love careened between us making both of our hearts pound violently in our chests. My toes curled into the

sheets and I arched off the bed, moaning wildly and clutching at any part of him that I could reach.

It only lasted ten seconds but by the end I was so close to coming that I was incoherent. Noah drew away, licking the small bite marks gently. He looked just as shaken as me.

I reached up with a trembling hand and pulled his mouth to mine. I felt primal and heated. It was hard to breathe with our lips suctioned together but I didn't care. His tongue claiming me made me groan. He touched me everywhere, his hands sliding up and down my arms, nails scraping lightly over the nerve-filled skin on my lower back. I shivered violently and ground my hips against him hard. He hitched my leg up over his hip and brushed his fingers against the soft skin of my entrance.

"I need you, Noh."

"Need you too." He slipped a hand between us and gripped my throbbing shaft. I was so turned on that I could barely stand to be touched.

"Inside. Please."

"Now?" His body quaked over mine.

I couldn't talk anymore so I just nodded.

He crawled on shaky legs to his nightstand, pulling out lube and a condom. I could see through my haze of need that he was nervous. I loved that this was so important to him. When he got back to me, he leaned over and brushed his lips against mine. I nipped at his lower lip gently and rubbed my cheek against him. His hands trembled slightly as he poured lube onto his fingers.

The relief I felt when his fingers slipped into me was immense but short lived. I sighed and arched my back, pushing against the pressure of his hand, wanting more. I reached blindly for him and spread my legs wider, needing his body.

"*Please*," I repeated. It was all I needed to say.

He sat back on his heels, reaching for the condom. I heard him fumbling with the package.

“Noah?”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever done it without one?”

“No. I never actually needed condoms, but it always felt like it would be too...intimate or something.”

“I haven’t either.” I reached up and took the condom from his trembling fingers. “Maybe we can be each other’s first after all.”

He nodded, smiling and I threw the unwanted package to the floor.

I reached for the lube myself wanting to touch Noah and get him ready like he’d done for me. His sharp intake of breath when I wrapped my slippery fingers around his shaft told me that he was just as insanely turned on as I was. To tease him, or maybe because I couldn’t stop touching him, I stroked the slippery lube up and down his thick length, taking way more time than necessary. I ran my fingers around his sensitive head loving the way I could see him lose control. I couldn’t wait to taste him, too, but that would have to come later. Neither one of us were in any condition to prolong the torture.

When I couldn’t stand it even a second longer, I slid my hand around to Noah’s hips and pulled him in between my open legs.

“Love you,” I said one more time as I guided him to my entrance and lifted my hips into his thrust. He came into me in one slow perfect slide, filling me and making me cry out.

“Oh, god, I love you too,” he breathed into my ear. “It feels so different!”

“Better?” I asked grinning.

He laughed hoarsely. “Uh, yeah. Just a little.”

I laughed with him, out of happiness and pure joy, then I wound my legs around his waist and lifted my hips again. With a low groan, he started to move.

I couldn't handle the pleasure. It was too much: the way Noah breathed against my neck, whispered in my ear telling me how amazing I felt; the touch of his hands all over me, threaded in my hair, cupping my face, hooking behind the back of my knee. He slid out slowly then slammed his hips back into me at the perfect angle to make me scream. He seemed to know exactly how I liked it. Funny, since I hadn't known exactly how I liked it best until Noah did it that way.

I swore and moaned, gripped his ass with my hands and pulled him as close to me as I could get. I was going insane. It felt so damn good.

Finally, when I thought I was going to blow into little pieces all over the room, he leaned close and delicately sank his teeth into a fresh spot on my neck. For just one second the whole world seemed to stand with its breath held, then all of a sudden my body exploded into an orgasm stronger than anything I'd felt before. Right before I blacked out completely, I heard Noah's stunned cry of completion.

* * * *

The first thing I noticed when I had recovered enough strength for rational thought was that Noah was licking at the two places he had bitten me. I wondered if it might help them heal, or maybe they still tasted like blood. I didn't care. Even after the intensity of the past hour, that little touch was enough to send shooters of wild pleasure rocketing down my spine. I moaned quietly and pulled on his hair.

"You're awake," he whispered and lifted his head to smile down on me. He went to disentangle us but I held on stubbornly with my legs. "Aren't I crushing you?"

“No. We’re practically the same size. And even if you were I wouldn’t care. You feel too good.”

He smiled softly then brushed his lips across mine. “So do you.”

“You know, it’s never felt anything like that before. Not just the biting part but the other...”

My face turned red. I needed him to know how important it was to me, what we’d just done. I unfortunately had to spit it out and talking about my emotions had never exactly been my strong suit. Luckily Noah knew what I was trying awkwardly to say.

“It hasn’t felt like that for me either. Like we said earlier it was the first time either of us really meant it. I had no idea what a difference that would make.”

“I felt like...”

“Like a virgin, touched for the very first time?” He started laughing before he’d even finished the sentence. I laughed too.

“Shut up,” I mumbled pushing on his chest and giggling.

“I know how you can shut me up.”

I rolled my eyes at him but kissed him anyway. It’s not like he needed to ask.

Trouble

I woke slowly and stretched in the dark. I had no idea what time it was. I didn't even know what day it was. Day and night, time in general had come to mean so little to me in the past few weeks. I didn't care about anything outside of our little warm cocoon. Only Noah's concern about my parents (and my annoying human stomach) had forced me from his bed at all. Who needed sunlight when there were endless hours spent loving the guy I'd dreamed about since forever? What importance did regular patterned days have when there was a whole new world opening to me that I would have never believed existed?

I shivered when I felt a soft wet tongue trailing between my shoulder blades to eventually end with a sweet kiss in the fine hairs on the back of my neck. I arched back and moaned and was rewarded by warm breath bathing the curve of my ear. The same soft tongue licked tenderly, soothingly, at the sensitive place where my shoulder met my neck. I felt a gentle suction and I trembled, reaching to pull on his head, encouraging him.

"I'm not going to bite, baby," Noah whispered. "You need to heal. We're already going to have a hard time explaining this one to your parents." He licked gently at the newest little bite mark, which had landed quite a bit higher than the others.

I chuckled and quaked at his touch, wiggling my butt against the warmth of his hardening flesh. "Maybe it's a hickey," I suggested laughingly.

"Apparently you've forgotten what a hickey looks like. I'll have to remind you."

He rolled me over and covered my body with his.

I laughed for a second until his hands stopped tickling and started stroking and touching. When his lips joined them, I moaned and held onto his head. He teased me forever: little nips and licks on my nipples, the insides of my thighs, my hipbones; just enough to make both of us

squirm. The sound of Noah breathing hard made my heart pound. The look on his face, love and desire mixed with a little bit of awe nearly made my eyes well up. I couldn't believe how lucky I was. He sucked forcefully on the crease between my thigh and my torso. I writhed on the sheets and laughed breathlessly because I was so turned on that I couldn't manage to do anything else.

When I thought I might just keel over and die from wanting him so badly he finally took my painful aching shaft into his mouth. A wild keening sound came from my throat that I'd never heard before. Noah moaned and took me deeper into his wet heat.

I hadn't learned to handle it yet; the incomparable pleasure that was Noah's touch. Even after days and days of practice it still drove me absolutely crazy. He used his mouth in ways that I would have said were impossible, bringing me to the point of oblivion and back over and over. When he slipped a finger inside of me, I started to moan and plead, begging him to take me, to end the exquisite torture.

"I need you. Shit! Oh...I can't stand it anymore. Fuck me now. Please, Noh..." I barely recognized my own voice.

"Not yet," he murmured and turned me onto my stomach. His sweet soft tongue licked down my spine, punctuating the journey with hot little biting kisses. The wetness combined with his breathy whispers made me arch my back. "I love the way you move when I kiss your back," he whispered against my skin. "It's so sexy."

I moaned in agreement. I could barely hear him, but as long as he kept doing what he was doing I'd agree with anything he said. He settled in between my thighs, licking and caressing the skin around my entrance. I groaned, clenching my fists in the sheets. I was panting and moaning and undulating my hips, sure that I'd lose it at any second. The moment before it was too late he turned me gently, brushing a soft kiss on my lips. I smiled and reached a shaking hand up to touch his face.

"I love you. I need you."

Noah nodded and reached for the lube, slicking himself up and pausing at my entrance.

"What's wrong?" I asked, rubbing my foot on the back of his leg and pulling insistently on him.

"Nothing. I just feel so lucky."

When he said what I'd been thinking just minutes before, my throat tightened and I had to fight back tears. "I know exactly what you mean." I lifted my head and kissed him softly.

He slipped his hand under me, and never breaking contact with my lips he pushed slowly inside, groaning. I shivered and wrapped my legs around his waist, gripping the bottom of the headboard with my hand.

"Oh god, Noh, right there!"

He moved his hips in small circles, rubbing against that perfect spot again and again and making the sexiest moaning sounds I'd ever heard. I couldn't talk, I could barely breathe. I never wanted him to stop.

Suddenly he froze.

I was spinning in bliss and didn't realize what had happened until I heard the distinct slamming of the front door echo through the empty house.

Noah growled, irritated, and pulled out of me gently, looking worried and insanely frustrated at the same time. "Shit!"

I looked at him with wide eyes.

"There's only one person besides me and Mrs. Clooney who has a key," he said slowly.

"And Mrs. Clooney always comes in the kitchen door," I added. We looked at each other in dawning horror. 'Shit' didn't even begin to cover it.

Grandfather was home.

“Noah, what do you want me to do? I’ll help however I can.”

“I don’t know what to do,” he answered. “I guess I’ll have to distract him. I don’t want him asking too many questions. At least it’s night and I don’t have to worry about the damn sun.”

“It is?”

“Yeah, it is. I’ve screwed you all up, huh?”

“I don’t mind. What the hell is he doing here, anyway?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. He never comes here. One thing we do need to do though.”

He leaned in towards my neck, brushing it softly.

I giggled instinctively. “What are you doing?” I pushed at him but panted a little when his lips attached themselves to my skin. “This isn’t the time for—”

His reply was muffled by my neck. He was sucking right in the spot where the new bite mark was. I was still so trembly and excited that the pleasure-pain sensation made me groan.

He surfaced.

“What did you say?”

“Grandfather can’t see those bite marks. I’m trying to cover them up.”

“With a hickey? I’m going to look like a seventh grader after a school dance!”

“What’s the matter?” He grinned quickly, humor flashing through. “It was your idea!” Then he sucked for a few more seconds and inspected his work. “There. You can’t even see them now.”

Noah gave me one more slow, sexy kiss then hopped out of bed and started dressing quickly. He pulled on a t-shirt and jeans and attempted to finger comb his hair, which was still messy from me pulling on it. I felt a hot tightening in the pit of my stomach when I looked at him. He was so beautiful...

Then I remembered that it was panic time. I slid off the bed too and started rummaging around for jeans and a shirt. Finally, I found the black button-up that had been draped across the chair in the corner since the first night we went to the bar. I put it on hastily and popped the collar up a little to hide the mark on my neck.

“NOAH!” The insistent shout rang through the house.

Noah cringed. “Be down in a second, Grandfather!” He turned to me. “Listen, Zack. I don’t know why he’s here, but this could get ugly. You’re not going to get hurt because of my stupid family stuff. You should probably stay in my room.”

“And listen to you get killed or something? No fucking way. If he’s here for you, he’s going to have to go through me.”

Noah smiled sadly and kissed me. “I love you. I’m not going to be able to change your mind am I?”

“Nope.” I gave him my most stubborn look. “Let’s go see Grandpa.”

“At least there will be one hell of a distraction,” he mumbled with an ironic smile.

I laughed quietly as we headed for the door. “The illustrious ancestor doesn’t know you’re gay?”

“Not until now.”

He reached out to hold my hand.

Noah’s grandfather was everything opposite of him. While Noah was gentle and quick to smile, his grandfather was granite hard and stern. The old man was dressed expensively and looked distinctly European. He watched as we made our way down the stairs, holding hands. I could see his face as he took in our mussed hair, rumpled clothes and well loved necks and lips. His face turned an angry purple red and I swear I could see his heart threatening to pulse right out of his chest.

“What is the meaning of...*this*?” He gestured at me like I was some kind of pond scum that the gardeners had forgotten to skim from the surface of the courtyard fountain.

“I’m Brian, Noah’s boyfriend.”

Some instinct told me to lie about my name. Noah squeezed my fingers, in agreement, I assumed, or maybe comfort. I held out my other hand, not expecting anything in return, but was surprised when grandfather reached his own hand out to shake mine. I supposed years of ingrained manners made him do it. His hand was cool and his skin felt a little bit like newspaper.

“He needs to go immediately. This beyond is unacceptable.” He spoke to Noah like I wasn’t even there.

Noah pulled me closer. “He’s not going anywhere, Grandfather. What do you need?”

Noah’s grandfather glanced at me disdainfully. “I won’t have you ruining the Harper name carrying on with some trashy boy you found lord knows where. Please tell me no one’s seen you in public like...this.”

Noah grew very still. “I think perhaps it’s you who needs to leave, Grandfather. What I do and with whom is none of your business.”

His grandfather sighed slowly, as if trying to regain composure. “You’ll remember that this is still my house, young man. I have things to discuss with you. It’s time to send your little twink upstairs to pack.”

Where the hell did Gramps learn that word?

Noah gripped my hand silently. He was getting angry, but trying not to show it. The object was to get his grandfather to leave. Starting a big argument wouldn’t be the way to do that.

When he saw that I hadn’t made a move to go, Grandfather spoke again, to me this time. “This is family business. Not to be discussed in front of outsiders. Please remove yourself.”

“Brian’s not an outsider. He knows everything about us. Just say it.” I could see the old man seething, but he tried to hold it in.

“I’ve heard some disturbing rumors about you, boy. That you’ve been seen at that *establishment* over in Lewis County.”

I panicked, wondering what anyone had seen. I knew no one had watched Noah drink from the real Brian three weeks before. He’d been very careful to lead us into the darkest corner of the bar. I assumed he was always that careful.

“I had a lead on Dad’s killer that led me there.”

His grandfather looked at him slowly, measuringly. “And did you find anything?” Aristocratic silver eyebrows raised slowly.

“No. It was a dead end. I’m going to find him, Grandfather. I promise.” That much was true. Noah had told me a few days ago that he’d never given up looking for the vampire that had killed his parents. The one who’d turned him had been dead before he even finished biting.

“Well, that’s not exactly the story that was relayed to me. In fact, I was told you were getting awfully friendly with one of the feeder whores. A young man by the name of Brian.”

The venom dripping from every word would have been enough to singe. He looked at me with scathing eyes. I didn’t know if I was imagining it, but I could’ve sworn every one of the hastily concealed bite marks on my neck started to burn.

Noah tried to hide his dismay. *Shit*. We were in trouble.

“Hey, Brian, I think I heard my phone go off. Can you go see who it was?” Noah looked at me beseechingly. *Please go upstairs*, his eyes pleaded.

I returned his look, then turned slowly and began padding silently up the stairs. I’d listen for now, but there was no way in hell I wasn’t going to try to save him.

As soon as I was out of sight I sprinted for Noah's bedroom. I was frantic. I knew whatever was going on downstairs was going to happen quickly and it wasn't going to be good. I rummaged through drawers and his huge closet.

A baseball bat, old tent stakes, anything, please!

I heard arguing from below and increased the speed of my search. I finally found a substantial hockey stick in the corner of his closet. Gripping the stick, I toed my flip-flops off, hoping the element of surprise and Gramps' age would be on my side. My boyfriend was strong but he wouldn't want to hurt the old man. I didn't have that problem. If that bastard wanted to kill Noah, I'd end him.

I snuck through the hallways to the old servants' staircase that ended up in the kitchen, glad that I knew his house as well as my own after years of hide and go seek. My hands were sweating where I gripped the hockey stick so I shifted it to the other hand and wiped my palm on my jeans. I tiptoed silently to the swinging door between the kitchen and the dining room. Sneaking through the ornately paneled dining room, I could hear the argument clearly. My heart started pounding in my chest but I waited. I was hoping that Noah could talk his way out of danger. I could hear him protesting.

"Grandfather, I don't want to hurt anyone! You've got to believe me."

"Tell that to the little feeder whore upstairs with the bites all over his neck. Did you think I hadn't noticed what you've done to him?"

"It wasn't me—"

"I may be old but I'm not stupid."

"Okay, it was, but he wanted me to bite him." I could almost hear Noah's blush in his voice. "I mean it was mutual, we both...oh lord. Listen, Grandfather. I love Za—Brian. I'd never hurt him."

“You look pretty convincing. I’ll give you that. But you’re not my grandson anymore. When were you planning on draining the boy and dumping him in the lake?”

“I wasn’t! Why can’t you believe me?”

“Because vampires lie, glamour, cheat. You can do any number of things to get a person to believe the lies you’re spewing. It’s not going to work on me and you’re not going to have the pleasure of killing the little vamp whore. I’ll have to get rid of him, though. I can’t have him running back to that place and stirring up trouble with the others.”

“You’re not going to touch him.”

That’s when I heard a sound that made my blood run cold, the cool metallic rasp of a knife being drawn from a sheath. I peeked around the corner and saw that Noah’s grandfather had his back to me. He also had a wicked looking knife in his hand that was somewhere between a big dagger and a machete. I didn’t want that damn thing going anywhere near Noah’s neck. I saw my opportunity and took it.

In a single motion I ran out from behind the dining room door and swung as hard as I could with the hockey stick, slamming it down on the back of the old man’s head. He crumpled to the floor, his big scary knife clattering across the shiny marble tiles.

I ran into Noah’s arms. He gave me a quick fierce hug and kissed me hard. I was trembling from the adrenalin that was still coursing through my veins.

“You okay, baby?”

“Me? What about you?”

“I’m fine. A little sad that my own family doesn’t believe in me. I mean, I didn’t expect them to but it would have been nice to be surprised. It’s not fun to fend off the man who used to hold you on his knee.”

“I wasn’t going to let him hurt you.”

“I know. It’d take a lot more than one old man to hurt me, at least physically, but thank you for coming to my rescue.”

“Did I kill him?” I asked shakily.

He knelt and felt for a pulse. “No, you just knocked him out pretty good. This is going to be more trouble than I can handle on my own. I’ve gotta get you the hell out of here.”

“What’s this ‘I’ and ‘you’ shit. It’s we. *We* have to get out of here. Together.”

“But, Zack, my family’s dangerous, and they’re going to be after me now. With help.”

“You still don’t get it do you?” I shook him gently by the shoulders. “I’m not walking away from you. Ever. I already said that I didn’t give a shit if it was dangerous. I meant it. Let’s go to my place in the city. Your family doesn’t know my name. They’ll never find you there.” I held out my hand.

He hesitated for a long moment then nodded and took the hand I was offering. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Okay. I know some people in the city that will be on our side. Let’s go.” He headed for the kitchen door.

“Aren’t we going to get any of your stuff?”

“No. I’m not taking the chance that he’ll wake up while I’m packing.”

* * * *

It took some fast-talking to convince my parents that I had to go back to the city for the last few weeks of vacation so I could help Noah with a ‘family emergency.’ My mother being, well, a mother, wasn’t going to be satisfied with generalities so he had to make up a story about some sick aunt who apparently lived in the Upper East Side. I had to hide my grin at how convincing his story was. Noah was damn good. His eyes were round and sincere as he described how much

it would help to have my support while he took care of his old auntie. By the time we stood to go to my room and pack, I nearly believed him.

“You know you’re amazing at that.”

“At what?” He looked up at me with the same big innocent eyes.

I laughed. “Making shit up. I almost believed you had some geriatric Park Avenue relative by end of that story.”

“Oh, I do have an aunt on the Upper East Side...but we do not want to run into her. She’s the best tracker in the family. Last I heard she was in Romania somewhere hunting, so I think we’re safe, but I’m glad you live downtown.”

“Any other blood thirsty relatives that I should know about?”

“Yeah, actually there are but let’s get you packed and hit the road. We’ll talk in the car.”

I nodded and started shoving all my stuff into the two large duffels I’d brought with me. I had a few things at Noah’s too but I figured I was going to have to live without them.

When everything was packed and shoved into the trunk of his car, Noah and I gave my mom a quick hug and kiss and waved goodbye to a very irritated looking Maya. I felt bad ditching her but I was in it for good with Noah. I probably couldn’t actually protect him but I’d always try. Even if the only thing I could do was make sure he knew that he wasn’t alone and that there was someone who loved him, I would do it with all my heart.

Passenger Seat

We were speeding along in the dark with his radio playing quietly. I'd taken his hand and pulled it to my lap, sandwiching it between both of mine. I loved how comfortable it was to be with him. Even when we were fully clothed and not attacking each other (although I couldn't say I didn't want to) there was an easy familiarity. We had all the spark and fire of a new relationship with none of the awkwardness.

I leaned my head back against the leather headrest and smiled. Somewhere along the highway I realized he'd been silent for close to an hour. It had me a little worried-silence from Noah had never been a good thing. I sat there waiting for him to say something, a comment about the music on the radio, a question about my neighborhood, anything at all. There was nothing but the faint sounds of a guitar coming from the speakers. I finally had to say something.

"You know I can hear you worrying from here, Noh. Just say it out loud and we'll deal with it."

He chuckled quietly. "Do I even have to? I'm worried about you, obviously. I've put you in so much danger and I shouldn't have. I mean, I hurt you before trying to protect you and I don't want you to end up as a casualty of this whole thing because I'm too weak and selfish to let you go."

I knew it. Typical Noah.

"Uh, remember that I didn't exactly ask if you wanted me to come with you. I told you it's 'we' now. If I'm in danger, it's because I made that choice, not because you put me there." I took a deep breath, trying not to sound frustrated. "I want to be with you. Always. No matter what. Okay?" I squeezed his hand hard.

"I just don't understand why I'm worth it."

"You're worth it because I love you!" I realized I was almost yelling. I took a deep calming breath. "I love you so much it scares me. I would do anything for you. Hasn't it always been like that between us? Wouldn't you do the same for me?"

"Of course I'd do anything for you. I wish I could be the one risking my life to be with you. I'd make that choice a million times over but at least I wouldn't have to worry about your safety. Every time we're around vampires, every time you're out alone, any time my family could be near, I'm going to be on edge waiting for something to happen to you. I'd die if it did."

So make me like you.

There it was. The thought was bound to come up eventually. I knew it wasn't time to say it out loud. Noah wasn't in the right mindset to even consider the idea. It was something to consider for later. Sure the idea of drinking blood grossed me out but it wouldn't after I was changed and I'd get to be with Noah forever, not just for one short lifetime.

I sat in the car quietly, holding Noah's hand and thinking. It was on the tip of my tongue to say something to him but I knew my original instinct was right. I felt his hand relax a little but I could tell he was still upset. I brought his palm to my lips and kissed it again, hoping in some small way to reassure him. I saw him smile in the darkness.

"Even with all the crazy stuff that's happening, I still get butterflies when I look over and see you sitting there. Is there something wrong with me that I can be so happy when we're hiding from people who are trying to kill us?"

I smiled back at him. "No. I'm really happy too. I keep getting all excited that you're going to be in the city, living in my apartment. I can't even tell you how many times I wished I could wake up with you next to me. I'll have to rearrange my classes so I can be up with you at night."

"Zack, I don't want you to have to change your life for me."

“Don’t even start. I already said I’d do anything for you. Taking a few night classes is nothing. I don’t like to be up in the morning anyway. You know that.”

“I do know that. You’ve always been nocturnal.” He smiled at me in the darkness and I grinned back.

“See? We’re perfect for each other,”

We were quiet again after that but the silence had changed. I could tell our last conversation had done some good. The air wasn’t filled with quite so much worry and guilt. We enjoyed each other’s company as much as we possibly could in the weird circumstances we happened to be in. I supposed that it was always going to be like that with him, wondering if someone was after Noah or both of us. It didn’t really matter. I’d meant it when I told him I didn’t care. I’d run from a whole army of Harpers if I got to be with him while I was running.

* * * *

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew I could see the lights of the city in the distance.

“We’re here already?” I asked.

“Yeah. You were asleep for a long time.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t better company. I guess I was pretty tired.”

“I haven’t exactly been letting you sleep much.”

I grinned and squeezed his hand, thinking of what we’d been doing instead of sleeping.

“Believe me. Not complaining.”

“Me neither,” Noah said, and lifted my hand to his mouth for a little kiss.

“Hey, you want me to drive? I know we’re almost there, but city traffic will be a bitch if you’re tired.”

“Nah. You don’t know where we’re headed so it’ll be easier if I drive.”

“What do you mean? Aren't we going to my place?”

“I gotta make a stop first. We're going to visit a friend of mine.”

* * * *

We pulled into the city around two in the morning. I didn't need to wonder about who Noah knew that would be up so late. It was New York after all and he probably had some pretty unusual friends. He wove through the streets like he'd driven them a thousand times. I could tell he was familiar with the city. I didn't want to think about how often he'd possibly been only a mile or so away from me. It was too frustrating. We were headed towards the East Village, a place where I'd spent many hours in the past three years.

“So, we're going to see my friend Pascal. He goes by PC.”

“PC? Like the computer?”

Noah rolled his eyes with a wry smile. “No, ‘PC’ like Pascal Charles.”

“Vampire?” I was hoping he was one of the nice ones.

“Um, no. Not exactly.”

“Just tell me. I think I've gotten past the freaking out stage. Are there any surprises left?”

Noah laughed sarcastically. “Oh, I'm sure there are a few. PC isn't a vampire, but he's not fully human either. He's a lycan.”

“Lycan. I've heard that before. Are we talking about a werewolf here?” *Of course we were. What was next, Frankenstein?* “Okay, I thought you guys were, like, mortal enemies or something.”

“You watch too many movies. I don't have any mortal enemies...well except anyone who tries to hurt you. PC is on our side. He's tired of having to hide, just like me.”

“Did he get...bitten too?”

“No. The gene is in his family from his mother’s side. They weren’t sure it was going to happen to him. He didn’t change for the first time until he was about eighteen. It tends to manifest with puberty but I guess he was a late bloomer.”

“Is it a full moon thing?”

“Not at all. Lycans aren’t werewolves. They can control the phasing. Well, PC still has trouble controlling it when he’s mad, but he’s working on it.”

“Oh, did he just start?”

“Nope. He’s twenty-three. His dad’s French and his mom’s Romanian. I’m not sure which of them has a more fiery temper but he’s got it coming from all sides. He’s pretty good at controlling it now.”

He seemed to know an awful lot about this non-werewolf. I felt a prick of jealousy. Another part about being with Noah, I was probably going to be jealous of every guy that looked at him sideways. That’s what happens when you’re with a pretty one. I was prepared to deal with it.

“How long have you known him?” I had to ask. I didn’t want to sound like I was digging for details...but I was.

“I met him not too long after I was changed. I got his number from an acquaintance at the bar in case I ever ‘needed anything.’ We’ve gotten to be friends over the past year or so.”

“Needed anything?” The jealousy surged.

“Yeah, like if I needed protection.”

“So that’s why we’re going to see the werewolf? He’s a bodyguard?”

“Uh, lycan. Don’t ever call him a werewolf to his face. That’s kind of an insult. And yes we’re going to see him because he can help us but he’s definitely not a bodyguard. He has some, uh, shady mafia connections that will be pretty useful right now. He can get us weapons you’re not

really supposed to have and can help us make this car disappear. Plus, it's always good to have the lycans on your side when things get bad."

I was still reeling from the idea of a werewolf friend with underworld connections when I registered the last sentence.

"Do you think they will?"

Noah gave me a slow look. "I really hope not but it's always better to be prepared. If there's one thing my family's good at, it's finding people who don't want to be found."

I couldn't help but agree.

* * * *

PC the lycan lived in an old brick building in the middle of the East Village. I'd always loved the Village, felt like I could almost hear the Beat poets of the past sitting around in coffee shops, effortlessly cooler than we could ever hope to become. It felt different than usual, though. Didn't take a genius to figure out why. After the fight with Grandfather Dearest and Noah's assurances that assorted vengeful Harpers were hot on our tail I had every reason to feel uneasy.

I gripped Noah's hand tightly when we got out of the car. I didn't like the fact that I felt uncomfortable in what was essentially my own neighborhood. It seemed like every dark corner held someone watching us, ready to report our whereabouts to good old Grandpa Harper. I was more nervous than I had been at any time that afternoon. I probably would have felt better if I had Noah's old hockey stick in my hand. I supposed that's why we were going to visit the lycan—to get protection. Didn't make me feel much better.

"Zack, baby, calm down. They can hear your heart beating from Chinatown."

"They?" Suddenly I was even more nervous.

He chuckled quietly. "I didn't mean anyone in particular. It was a figure of speech."

“I can’t help it. I’m a little freaked out. How do we know that none of these people work for your grandpa?”

He pulled me closer, wrapping his arm around my shoulder. “We don’t. I don’t recognize any of them but that doesn’t mean anything. I didn’t recognize any of his employees in the bar that night and there was obviously someone there watching me. There’s nothing much we can do about it anyway. As far as they know we’re going to visit a friend and then leave. Which is true.”

“Okay. My tough vampire boyfriend will protect me anyway, right?”

He grinned and then his smile softened. “I’d protect you with my life,”

It made shivers go up and down my spine. I rubbed my head against his shoulder then followed him into the building in front of us.

Of course Noah’s friend had to live on the top floor of a building with a broken elevator. By the time we got up there I was panting and starting to perspire in the un-air conditioned swelter of the stairwell. Next to the unruffled and cool Noah I felt like a sweaty pig. He grinned at me and brushed his lips across my damp forehead then took my hand to lead me down the hall. When we reached the fifth door on the right, Noah stopped and raised his hand to rap quietly on the antiqued wood.

I could hear footsteps on the other side and the door was cracked open cautiously before being thrown wide. I was very surprised by the guy on the other side. He didn’t look a day over seventeen. He was small and lithe and I couldn’t even imagine there was a big brawny wolf existing somewhere inside of him. I had to admit that when I heard ‘werewolf’ I was expecting someone more along the lines of Hugh Jackman and not the twerpy little kid in front of us. Goes to show what Hollywood does to our perceptions.

“Noah!” he exclaimed, coming out of the apartment and giving Noah a huge brotherly hug. Even I, who thought there wasn’t anyone in the world hotter than my boyfriend, had to admit there were no intentions in that hug. PC was just like a sweet little...puppy.

“PC, this is Zack. My boyfriend.”

“You mean *Zack-Zack*. This is—”

Noah nodded grinning. “This is him. Zack, PC.”

I smiled and shook his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.” I didn’t forget for a second that I was actually meeting a real live were—I mean lycan. I wondered if I’d ever get used to all of it.

“How did this happen, Noah?” PC asked gesturing at me.

I was surprised that he didn’t wait until I went to the bathroom or something to start talking about me but I loved the fact that Noah had obviously told him all about us.

“We ran into each other a few weeks ago,” he answered pulling me close and smiling down at me. “Turns out it’s exactly like I remembered. Better even.” I wanted to kiss him, audience or not. I contented myself with rubbing my hand on his back.

“And does he—”

“Yeah. He knows everything. And that’s why we’re here.”

* * * *

It was fun to watch Noah and PC together. I’d never seen him with a friend other than me and they obviously had a totally different relationship than we did. They joked and flipped each other shit but I could tell that underneath it they were close. Not romantic in any way. Just close. I was glad that Noah had someone that he could talk to.

PC pulled us into his apartment, checking both directions in the hallway before shutting the door.

“You think you guys were followed?”

“No. Zack knocked my grandfather out before we left. He wouldn’t know which way we headed. Even if he knows I’m in the city, it’ll be hard to find me.”

“You knocked his grandfather out?” PC grinned at me. “I gotta hear this one.”

I smiled back at the kid (who was actually older than us but seemed so young) and nodded.

“Yeah, he was after Noah with some wicked looking knife. I clocked him over the head with a hockey stick.”

“Niiiiiicccccc. Hey you want a soda or beer or anything? I got coffee too. I know blood sucker here isn’t interested.”

“Uh, sure. Are you okay with coffee, Noh, will the smell make you sick?” He shook his head so I told PC that I would actually love some coffee. I felt fairly certain that we had a long-ass night ahead of us.

While waiting for PC to return, I was surprised to learn that we weren’t the only visitors in his apartment. A few minutes after we got there, a loudly arguing couple burst from one of the back rooms. The girl was very pale underneath what would have been honey colored skin, with long black waves and a tiny but voluptuous body. She reminded me of a real life version of the princess from *Aladdin*. I could tell right away, though, that she was a vampire. I guess I was getting good at reading the signs. The guy, as far as I could tell, was human, like me. He was quite a bit taller than her and despite their arguing I could see that they totally adored each other.

“That’s Leila and Jason,” Noah whispered to me. “She’s a vampire, obviously, and he’s human but a witch.”

What the hell? Now there were witches too? I was starting to feel very ordinary.

“Aren’t there any other regular old boring humans like me?”

“You could never be boring. And, no, not really. Most humans tend not to react to us very well.” He smirked at me and raised his eyebrows. I felt a little guilty since I had been one of those who reacted pretty badly at first. I could see the other two were looking at me curiously.

Noah rose and gave the tiny little vampire girl a long hug. She kissed him on the cheek, her almond shaped eyes flashing merrily.

“Hey, Noah love. We’ve missed you. You been holed up with the cutie on the couch?” Noah flushed a little but smiled and nodded.

“Yeah. Leila, Jason, this is Zack.”

I saw another significant look pass between Noah and the pretty girl. She was quite a bit more subtle than PC, but I could tell she knew about me too. It made my heart warm in my chest. I stood up to shake her hand but was enveloped in a surprisingly strong hug.

“It’s about time you two found each other,” she whispered. “He’s missed you so much.”

I smiled at her. “I missed him too. He’s my best friend.”

She grinned at me, teeth shining in the night. I turned and shook hands with Jason as well. His greeting was more masculine and subdued but his smile was warm and friendly. I could tell Jason was happy for Noah as well. I was glad he’d had such good friends to help him through the last few years. They had to have been hard for him.

Noah took my hand and led me to the couch. Leila and Jason took the couch across from us and PC sprawled his lanky body into the overstuffed easy chair. I took my first good look around his apartment. It was very interesting, almost like an apartment you’d see in a movie. It seemed like PC had lived there for years. The floors were scuffed wood, covered with exquisite Persian rugs, the walls were antiques and adorned with posters of the New York City Ballet, Paris and Bordeaux, and replicated impressionist paintings. The shelves were full of lamps and books and

odd collected little objects like a sparkly Eiffel Tower and a little doll with an intricate flowered dress.

“This is a great place,” I told him, still taking in the details.

“It’s my parents’ apartment. They don’t usually live in the city anymore but they keep it for me.”

“It’s a big place for just one guy.”

“Oh, we live here too,” Leila answered, pointing down the hallway they’d come from. I was a little envious. It sounded fun—like a permanent summer camp for the paranormally gifted.

“So what do you need to get away from the Evil Gramps?” PC asked.

* * * *

It was nearly dawn when we stumbled our way into my apartment. PC had set us up with enough weapons to outfit an entire terrorist cell and he promised to not only make Noah’s car disappear but get him a decent amount of money from whatever off-the-book sale he managed to pull. PC and the others had my phone number and promised to keep in touch daily. We’d ditched Noah’s phone back at the lake figuring it was better to be safe than sorry.

After closing and dead-bolting every single place where someone could get in, I led Noah to my bedroom and helped him strip down to boxers before I tucked him into my bed with a kiss to his forehead. Just like when we were kids, he seemed to have energy for days but when he finally slept, nuclear war wouldn’t wake him. I tiptoed around the apartment closing curtains so if he woke during the day he wouldn’t be stuck in my room. Last, I closed the big blackout curtains in my bedroom I’d invested in the previous spring so I didn’t wake up every morning with the sun right in my face. Then I crawled under the light summer blankets and curled up next to my already slumbering boyfriend. He rolled over in his sleep and wound his arm around my waist. I smiled and closed my eyes thinking for the millionth time how happy I was to be with him.

"I love you," I whispered, not expecting a response.

"Love you too," was the sleepy reply, mumbled against my neck.

I curled up against Noah and closed my eyes. I fell asleep easily, feeling warm, comfortable, and safe.

Games

That evening I woke to the sound of my cell ringing insistently. At first, I thought it had to be an emergency so I bolted from the bed and picked up the phone immediately, without even checking the id. I realized after I'd done it that it wasn't good idea to blindly pick up phones or open doors anymore.

"Hey, yo. What are you two doing tonight?"

In my half asleep blur I didn't recognize the rough but friendly voice at first. "Hi, PC. You scared me. Is everything okay?"

"Of course. Just wanted to see if you and your man were busy or if you could come chill for a while."

"Oh..." The request seemed so normal in the midst of the strange world I had been dumped in. I was also surprised the invite had been extended to me: I didn't feel quite cool enough to be included in the Supernatural Squad; but apparently my attachment to Noah was a get-in-free card. "Uh, I don't know what we're doing. Nothing probably. Noah's still asleep."

PC made a loud snorting noise. "Dude, he'll sleep forever if you let him. Wake his ass up and come over. It's game night. The sun will be down in like twenty minutes."

Game night?

"Is it safe?" I asked. "You know, for us to be over there? I don't want to put you guys in danger."

He laughed, the sound echoing in the phone. "Don't worry about it. I'm already in danger just by existing. So is Leila. Jason chooses to hang out with us so he isn't in any better shape than you. I say fuck it. Come over. We're playing Texas Hold 'em. I promise Jason only cheats a little. Plus we don't play for money, just fun."

I smiled to myself and told him we'd be over as soon as I got Noah up and showered.

"Oh, Jesus, I didn't need to hear about that. I see the way he looks at you and that alone is already *way* too much info. Just don't stay in there all night, okay? We'll wait for you to start the game."

I laughed. "I'll try to get out the door quickly." I couldn't help messing with him a little. "It'll be awfully tempting to take a nice long romantic shower together, though."

He made a strangled noise and hung up the phone.

Still laughing, I went to the bed to wake Noah. He was sprawled out on his back, lips slightly open and one arm crooked behind his head. His bright silky hair was draped halfway over his eyes. He looked so peaceful and sweet lying there like that, I almost hated to wake him...almost. With a near silent snicker, I started kissing his stomach and his soft pink nipples. He moaned a little but didn't wake. Grinning openly, I gently tugged his boxers to his knees and then off the ends of his feet. I crawled back under the blanket and between his gracefully muscled thighs. He'd grown hard in his sleep and his erection seemed to be begging for my touch.

Gently and slowly, I licked him from base to quivering tip. I could tell that first long taste had finally woken him up.

He moaned and reached under the covers to tug at my hair. I took him into my mouth as far as I could, using my tongue and my hands to give him every sensation possible. He breathed hard, telling me how hot I was and how amazing my mouth felt. I increased the pressure of my tongue and cupped the globes of his amazing butt in my hands. When my fingers accidentally slipped to his entrance, I took the opportunity to test the waters. I pushed gently, wondering how he'd react.

Noah undulated his hips and cried out. The sound was enough to make me drool. I didn't think I'd ever get tired of touching him.

“Yes, baby,” he murmured, his voice catching. “I want you to—” He drew his breath in sharply.

I knew what he wanted. I wanted it too. Moistening my finger in my mouth, I massaged it against his muscles ready to delve into uncharted territory.

“You ready?” I asked, then took another long lick on his straining shaft.

“Yeah, just take it slow. I’ve never let anyone do this before.”

“Really?” It wasn’t that he screamed ‘top me, top me, top me’ but I would have thought he’d been more on the versatile side.

“I guess there was always a part of me I was saving for you subconsciously,” he murmured and kissed my nose.

I smiled softly then distracted him with a long deep kiss while I pushed one finger into him. He breathed in sharply against my lips, then let his back arch slightly. The way he moved was so beautiful it made my breath catch in my throat. His cheeks flushed a soft mottled pink and he pushed his head against the pillow.

“Zack...more.”

I stretched him for a little while with that one finger before adding another. He moaned again and I kissed him one more time then licked his nipples before going back to the place he wanted me the most.

I knew someday soon *I’d* be inside of him, not just my hand, but I wanted to start slow. Between my lips and tongue working their best magic and the two fingers I had slowly worked inside of him massaging his prostate, he didn’t last long. He came with a strangled wail, muscles clamping down and warm juices flooding my mouth. He panted loudly, groaning and laughing. I reveled in the sounds of him overwhelmed by the pleasure I’d caused.

After a few moments, I crawled my way back up him with a huge smile. "Wake up, babe," I whispered before claiming his lips in a sweet little kiss.

He let out a soft bark of laughter. "I think that may have been the best wake up call in the history of forever."

"Thank you," I answered with a satisfied purr. I gave him a light tap on the hip. "Now we gotta get up. I told PC we'd be over there for game night in like a half hour."

"We have to get out of bed?"

Noah's disappointed look made me giggle and melt all at the same time. "Yeah. I promised. But don't worry. We can start where we left off as soon as we get back."

He grinned at me and hopped out of bed, heading for my hallway bathroom.

"Hey, Noh?"

He turned and looked back at me.

I pointed to a white door in the corner. "My bathroom's in there. The shower is way better than that little thing in the hall. Definitely room for two." He stopped in his place and turned towards the right direction but not before making a seductive beckoning motion with his finger.

I was more than happy to follow.

* * * *

The night was beautiful. Soft and warm, but not sticky like summer nights so often get. Since PC's apartment was so close, we decided to walk instead of wasting the gorgeous evening sitting in a cab. I loved how it felt to walk down the street with Noah, holding his hand. It hammered in the fact that I really was with him, in my neighborhood and not just in the suspended reality of the lake house. We were together for real. I squeezed his hand and leaned over to brush my lips across his cheek as we walked.

"What was that for?"

“Nothing. Just happy that we’re here together. I’ve probably walked this street a hundred times, wishing you were walking next to me just like now.”

He brought my hand up to kiss it. “Believe me, wherever I was, I was wishing the same thing.”

We walked in companionable quiet for a few blocks. I couldn’t get over how different everything seemed. It was the same neighborhood I’d lived in for nearly a year but it looked like a new world. Everything was brighter, clearer; more interesting than it had been only weeks before when I’d been packing a bag full of dread and trying to prepare myself for the lake.

On one street, they had strung all the trees with white fairy lights: tiny and sparkling. In the winter the white lights had always reminded me of ice, but in the warmth they seemed more like tiny fireflies, dancing around in the soft night breeze. Maybe it was just my happiness, but I could’ve sworn that I felt magic in that street

Noah looked around in wonder, taking in the night, the lights, the brick buildings and the people. I knew he was feeling the same thing too. I caressed his wrist with my thumb and smiled at him, loving the warmth in his eyes.

A few blocks from PC’s place I had a nasty surprise. I’d been so wrapped up in Noah that I barely noticed any of the other people on the street. It took me a few seconds to realize that someone was calling my name. I looked up and saw a guy across the street waving both of his arms to get my attention.

“Who’s that?” Noah asked.

I focused on the figure across the street for a little while before I was certain.

Great.

“That’s Jared,” I whispered. “A huge mistake I made about a year and a half ago that won’t go away.”

Jared galloped towards us enthusiastically, somehow managing to grin at me and eye Noah suspiciously at the same time. "Hi, Zack, I didn't know you were in town." He eyed Noah again while he spoke, eyes moving from his toes up, slowly and scornfully. I could see the second he noticed we were holding hands.

I smiled and tried to look happy to see him. I'd been on the receiving end of a few of his tantrums before. I didn't want one to explode all over the street. "I just got back last night. I haven't had a chance to call anyone yet." It honestly hadn't even crossed my mind to call anyone.

"Well, I see you've been busy."

I didn't like the way he was looking at Noah at all. "Jared, this is my boyfriend Noah." Noah gave him a friendly smile. He didn't return it. A small petty part of me liked the pissy little look Jared had on his face. Served him right for pestering me all those months when I made it clear that nothing was going to come of that one night.

"Well, good luck, honey. It'll never last with this one. He's hung up on some guy from high school. Believe me, I should know. He strung me along for a year." He huffed loudly.

I rolled my eyes at him.

"It was good to see you, Jared." I pulled on Noah. "Babe, we gotta go. We're going to be late for the card game." I could feel Jared's eyes on my back, but I didn't dare turn.

We got around the corner before Noah lost it. He burst out laughing, nearly falling to the ground. "You had a thing with *him*?"

I shoved his shoulder. "Shut up!" I was having a hard time not laughing myself. "I told you— huge mistake. I was drunk; it was a weak moment. Believe me, I've been paying for it ever since."

Still laughing a little, he tugged my hand up around his neck until we were holding each other right there on the corner, under the twinkly fairy lights.

“So are you going to dump me over some guy from high school?”

“Maybe,” I pulled him close for a short kiss. “That guy was impossible to forget.” He kissed me again, and nipped gently at my lower lip. “Plus, he was the best kisser ever,” I whispered, threading my fingers through his hair and pulling on it.

“Yeah?”

“Yep,” I answered and kissed him one more time, just to prove my theory of course.

When he surfaced from our kiss, his lips were pink and wet and his cheeks were flushed. I wanted to turn around and go back to my apartment—no *our* apartment—right then. He was so fucking beautiful...

Noah must have been able to tell what I was thinking. He tugged on my hand, pulling me in the direction of PC’s apartment. “C’mon, baby. Let’s go before I decide I need you right here on this street corner.”

“I’m about half a heartbeat away from that myself.”

He snickered and pulled me a little faster.

* * * *

The Texas Hold’em tournament was in full swing by the time we got to PC’s apartment. We pulled up chairs and were dealt in. Everything I knew about the game I’d learned during poker night freshman year in our dorm...so basically I didn’t have a clue. I played a few hands, trying to pay attention to what was going on, but it was so confusing that I just started betting randomly, not knowing if I really had anything or not.

It probably wouldn’t have mattered anyway. From what I could pick up, there were two games going on anyway. The first was the card game, which was confusing enough. The second...well, let’s just say I wasn’t even equipped to be a participant. Finally, PC must have gotten a glimpse of my bewildered and slightly frustrated look because he called a halt.

“Okay, rules repeat!” he called out after we all had our cards. “No switching cards with your hands or any other part of your body, no glamouring (he looked at Noah and Leila), no mind reading (a glance at Jason). I’ll try not to scent as much as possible.”

“And no temper tantrums!” Leila chimed in pointing straight at PC.

“Hey, I haven’t done that tonight!”

“What’s glamouring?” I asked.

“Don’t you watch TV?” PC laughed.

“Apparently not the right TV,” I answered.

“Glamouring is Vampire 101,” Noah told me. “We can use our minds to convince people that they want the same thing we do.”

“You can?”

“To a point.”

Hmmm. I stored that one away for later.

“And scenting?” I was pretty sure I’d figured that out, but I wanted to check.

“I’m like a wolf, right?” PC said “So, I can use scents in ways you can’t even imagine. I know the smell of fear, or the way someone sweats when they’re lying, *Leila*.” We all grinned at that.

“It’s fairly instinctual, but I can attempt to turn it off for our purposes.”

“I feel like the dorky kid sitting at the popular table,” I complained.

They all laughed at me and Noah put his arm around my shoulder. I nuzzled his neck for a second before I laughed and pulled away. “Hey! You’re just trying to see my cards!”

“I’d love to see your cards,” he leered jokingly, giving me an exaggerated sexy smile.

Jason and PC made gagging noises and threw popcorn at him. Leila just raised her eyebrows and smiled serenely.

* * * *

The game went on for another hour or so, until it became obvious that, rules or no rules, everyone was using their gifts to cheat so outrageously that we weren't even playing poker anymore. The second game had completely taken over and I couldn't even try to compete.

I wandered into the kitchen to grab another soda from the fridge. Even though it was late, the night was still warm and a cold drink sounded really nice. I was reaching for the bottle when I felt a presence behind me. Suddenly on edge, I whipped around only to see the tiny little vampire Leila standing in the doorway watching me with a smile. Her impossibly small stature combined with the two long thick pigtails that trailed down the front of her shirt made her look like a schoolgirl. I let out my breath slowly.

"You scared me," I told her with a grin.

She giggled. "It's good to know that you're not too complacent. Get tired of the game?" She gestured with her head at the wildly betting group behind her.

"We all know I wasn't really playing. I can't compete with you guys."

She nodded ruefully. "You know, you fit in so well with us I keep forgetting that you're human."

She may have forgotten but I thought about it constantly. Since the idea of becoming a vampire had leapt into my mind it was all I could seem to concentrate on.

"What's it like to get turned?" I asked. I'd wanted to ask Noah but I was afraid he'd freak out if I even mentioned it.

Leila smiled. "It was so long ago. I can barely remember."

"How long ago?" I turned red. "I mean, I know you're not supposed to ask girls how old they are, but—"

"It's okay," she laughed softly. "I don't mind. It's not like I look my age. Let's just say the Greeks were still a major naval superpower when I was human."

“But that was—”

“Around the time when my people were fighting Leonidas and the Spartans at Thermopylae.”

“Wait, that really happened? Like in the movie?”

“More or less,” she answered with a wink.

“The things you must have seen,” I whispered, feeling like it was inappropriate to talk out loud somehow.

“I’m still the same person I was an hour ago, Zack. You’re looking at me like I’m the Virgin Mary.”

“More like Athena or something.” At that she laughed outright.

“I’d love to see you tell Jason you think I’m the goddess of wisdom. He might have something to say about that. But to answer your question, I was turned by choice, as I’m assuming you’re considering. It was painful, that much I remember. Definitely didn’t feel like the regular bites.” She winked at me. She had to have known what Noah and I were doing. I’d never thought to check Jason’s neck for bite marks, but I was sure he’d have a few as well.

“You said you were turned by choice. Who did it?”

“My husband. We were together for many years before he was killed.”

“By a hunter?”

She nodded.

“I’m so sorry,” I mumbled.

“Zack, it’s okay. It was nearly two hundred years ago. I still miss him, but I’ve found someone else who will put up with me.” She smiled. “It broke my heart, though. As far as I know, he’d never killed a single human, other than in war when he was a soldier. The hunters simply refuse to believe that we are capable of decency.”

“I don’t know how they look at you, or at Noah, and see a monster. You’re such amazing people. I’ve never met anyone with a bigger heart than him.”

She reached up and cupped my face with her cool hand. “He loves you so much. It makes me happy to see that you feel the same.”

I turned red but I smiled at her words. “I do,” I answered simply, unable to say much more. It had been such an emotional few weeks.

“You want to get back before they miss us?” She could probably tell I was feeling a bit overwhelmed. I nodded wordlessly and followed her back to the living room.

“Hey, baby,” Noah greeted me when I sat down. I laid my head on his shoulder for a second and kissed his cheek.

“Hey.”

“You wanna be dealt in?” PC asked.

I rolled my eyes and smiled. “Like I was really playing. I’ll just be happy to watch.”

“Suit yourself.” PC shuffled the deck expertly and began to deal.

* * * *

They were in the middle of their next hand when the front door suddenly creaked open. I could feel the tension immediately explode. PC reached under his chair, and I heard the metallic clink of a safety being removed. Little tiny Leila suddenly looked more than formidable, her fangs glistening and her eyes wild. Even Noah tensed, automatically putting his body in front of mine.

A woman, who actually looked like little more than a girl, floated through the door in a flurry of scarves and designer purses. In half a heartbeat, everyone but me relaxed. I finally breathed when I saw them smiling at the lovely creature.

"Mom!" PC called, standing to greet the diminutive woman with wildly curling chestnut hair and the golden eyes of a wolf. As soon as he said the word, I could see the resemblance in their faces. "What are you doing in town? I thought you and Dad were in France."

I leaned over to Noah. "Why does PC's mother look like a teenager?"

"I'll explain later," he whispered back, and rose. "It's good to see you, Sabina." He gave her a tight hug.

"Hello, my dear."

Her voice was faintly accented and sounded much more mature than her appearance would have led me to expect. They hugged for a long moment before pulling back. She looked around Noah's shoulder, regarding me curiously. I got the feeling that she was a kind of mother figure for him. I knew it was important for her to like me.

"Sabina, this is my boyfriend, Zack." I stood and shook her hand.

She sniffed at me delicately. "Human, no?" she asked, her nose puckering slightly. *You make it sound like it's a disease.*

"Mother, don't be a snob. You married a human, if I do recall."

She smiled. "Yes, I did. I apologize, Zack. We don't spend much time in the human community anymore. It was a bit startling."

"That's okay," I answered, thrown off by her regal nature. As young as she looked, I'd never met anyone who seemed so...sophisticated.

"You never said why you were here, Mom."

"Your father got a call from his cousin Andre. He said there was a new coven of vampires in the city, a bit nasty according to reports of their activity."

Noah's body went silent and still all of a sudden. I could feel the tension rolling off of him. Nobody had to ask what he was thinking.

“How many?” His voice was quietly intense.

“Two males and a female, from what most can tell. There may be more.”

“Does anyone know when they got here?”

Sabine shook her head. “Noah, darling, you have someone to protect now.” She gave me a significant look. “No more chasing ghosts.”

He took a deep calming breath and nodded. I decided right at that moment he and I needed to have a serious talk when we got back to the apartment.

“You’re right, Sabina. I don’t want to put Zack or myself in serious danger. Please let me know what you find out, though.”

I could sense his disappointment. He really did want to find the vampire who had killed his parents and nearly killed him as well. There was something else there other than disappointment, another vibe from Noah that worried me, but I couldn’t put my finger on the feeling so I tried to ignore it.

“So you guys hunt too?” I asked.

PC and Leila nodded.

“We try to deal with the problems before the human hunters catch wind of them. The bad seeds draw attention to us when we’d rather stay well under the radar. They don’t do much for our campaign to make the hunters believe that we’re decent either. The more violence caused by rogues, the worse it makes us look.”

PC’s explanation made perfect sense but it didn’t mean I wanted Noah out hunting. I wished there was some way I could tell him not to without sounding completely selfish. PC turned to my quietly frustrated boyfriend, who’d looped his arm around my shoulders.

“We’ll keep you in on what’s happening with this new group, Noah. You’ll know everything the second we find it out.”

"Thanks guys." He still seemed a little down, but it was understandable. I became even more resolved to talk to him later. I squeezed Noah gently, with my hand that was resting on the back of his hip. He looked down at me and gave me a small smile before returning his gaze to the others.

"Hey guys, I think Zack and I are going to head out. I need to make a snack run before we head home." I got a warm little feeling in my stomach when he called the apartment home. Leila gave Noah a searching look. I thought maybe she could also tell there was something up. Leila, and surprisingly Sabina gave both of us long hugs. Jason and PC both waved.

"Night everyone," I said as we headed for the door.

"Be careful, you two," Leila cautioned.

Okay, she was definitely reading it too. Underneath the resignation it was there. And I'd figured out what it was.

That was one thing about knowing my boyfriend so damn well. I could tell he was planning something and it scared the hell out of me. I'd seen that look on his face when we were kids and he'd told his mother he wouldn't climb the big oak in their yard. We'd ended up in the emergency room that night while he had his sprained wrist wrapped up. If I'd been there the night he slipped out on his parents, I'm sure I'd have seen it then too.

I knew damn well Noah wanted to go after those vampires. It would be better for him to be part of the group than to go off looking on his own. I knew he'd done it before, acted on a rash gut feeling. The result of that night was his parents' death and his transformation. I was afraid this time would be worse.

Make Me Like You

We were in a cab heading towards a neighborhood that I knew wasn't one you should be in during broad daylight, let alone in the middle of the night. I hadn't been paying much attention when he gave the driver an address, but I sure was now. All of my instincts were on overload. Noah may have been a vampire but neither one of us were the biggest of guys and there were large men with very large weapons in this part of town. "Noh, what the hell are we doing here? This is the kind of neighborhood where guys like us get our asses kicked. Or worse."

He grinned at me. "I can take them, baby. Don't worry. I have to make a stop. I wasn't kidding earlier about needing a snack."

I gestured at myself silently, not wanting the cab driver to hear anything. I was beyond paranoid about Noah's family. I had no idea who was working for them. Noah shook his head. I could see him trying to figure out how he was going to answer in generalities.

"You only have that nice gourmet stuff at your place. I wouldn't want to waste it when I'm hungry," he said. "It would be like gulping down my parents' reserve label wine because it was hot out."

I noticed that we were pulling over in front of a bar that made the one back in Lewis County look like the lobby of a Sheraton.

"Why this place?" I made a face.

"They have great appetizers. Plus, since it's such a hole in the wall, the foodies haven't found it yet."

Got it again: There wouldn't be any of the usual crowd there to recognize him.

We paid the driver his fare and climbed out of the taxi. I felt immediately uncomfortable.

“Do *not* leave my side in this place. I wouldn’t bring you in here but I don’t want to leave you alone.”

I shook my head, eyes going a little wide. “Don’t worry. There is no way I’ll be wandering off.”

“Good,” he answered, and held my hand tightly.

* * * *

The inside of the bar redefined the word dingy. If the other place was glamorous and wild and lush, than this place was well...it was disgusting. There really wasn’t a more descriptive word for it. I could imagine why the other vampires didn’t go there. It was the size of a closet and it looked like it could impart disease to any susceptible creature. I didn’t touch anything, simply kept close contact with Noah as we worked our way into the room. There were a few shifty looking characters sitting at the bar and a lady with half a mouthful of teeth swaying to whatever hit from the seventies was playing on the jukebox. I wanted to shudder, but held it in. I didn’t think this was the kind of place it would be a good idea to offend anyone.

It definitely was the kind of place where you wanted to get in quickly and get out. Noah found a willing guy to feed from over by the pool tables. He was the only halfway decent looking one of the lot. After Noah finished, we fended off a few annoying advances and got into a cab as quickly as possible. I was more than happy to get out of there—and looking forward to taking a shower the minute we got home.

The second cab had a plastic partition between driver and us so we could actually talk without worrying about being overheard. I finally let out the shudder I’d been holding onto for the past twenty minutes. Noah laughed.

“I’d never been to that place. Only heard about it. Pretty gross, huh?”

“Yeah. I don’t ever want to go there again. I feel like I contracted something just by breathing the air.”

He chuckled again. “Next time I think I’ll risk being seen and go to the regular place.”

“There’s a ‘regular’ place?”

“Uh huh. It’s up off of Park and 104th. You’d be amazed how many vampires live on Park Avenue.”

It was my turn to laugh, picturing the Chanel suited socialites whipping out their fangs to suck down blood. I sat quietly for a few moments watching the lights of the city creep by. It wasn’t long before I had to talk, though. I was bursting at the seams. There was so much I didn’t know.

“Okay, so I have a few questions.”

“More?” Noah teased. “Just kidding. I’m sure you’re going to have a million questions. There are things that I don’t even understand yet.”

“Why does PC’s mother look like a teenager?” I’d been collecting my list all night. I hoped that was an easy one to start with.

“Mainly the same reason why I’ll still look like one in twenty years. They’re maturing process freezes when they start phasing. If they stop phasing for a long time, they’ll start to age again, but none of them ever really do.”

“So they’re immortal too?”

“Basically. But lycans are on the endangered species list just like vampires are. Neither one of us tend to last long enough to prove the immortality theory.”

“But PC said she married a human. His father is human?”

“Was. She changed him. He’s not a full lycan. You have to be born one to be considered that. But he phases too and he doesn’t age anymore. Changed lycans can’t control it as well, I’ve heard. You know, I don’t know all the much about them. These lycans are a close knit group.”

"What about Jason? Is he getting older?"

"Really slowly. I think he's about seventy. Witches outlast regular humans by a lot, but they're not quite like us. They'll still get older."

I chuckled sarcastically. "This sucks. I'm the only one aging *and* I'm the only one without cool tricks. Speaking of tricks, what is the deal with glamouring anyway? Have you ever done it to me?"

"No. Of course not. I would never do that to you. How could I ask you to trust me if I did? Besides, you'd know. You can tell when you're being glamour'd. From what I've heard you know you're being convinced to do something you don't want to do but you can't bring yourself to care."

"So when have you done it?" I could see Noah's face turn red even in the darkness of the cab. I smiled and poked him in the side. "Tell me."

"Well, your mother didn't want to let you come to New York with me." He looked so ashamed that I had to laugh. I'd have given anything to be able to pull that kind of trick on my mom when I was younger.

"You know I would have come anyway. I'm old enough that I don't have to listen to her. You just made the whole situation more pleasant."

"You're not mad?"

"Of course not. Envious is more like it." He winked at me. "So how did you know she wasn't going to come around on her own?"

"I've gotten pretty good at reading people. From what I could tell, she doesn't have any problems with us being a couple; I just think she didn't like the idea of us living together in the city. She doesn't think it's...proper or something."

"Oh, Jesus. Is it the eighteen hundreds?"

Noah grinned. “Give your mom a break. She’s just watching out for you. She probably doesn’t want me to take you for granted. I wish I could show her how I feel about you. I don’t think she has a clue what you mean to me.”

I leaned over and kissed him, slow and soft. “I know how you feel. That’s enough for me.”

* * * *

“Noh? Are you awake?” We’d been lying down for about twenty minutes but the silence was making me itchy. It was probably close to dawn but I wasn’t tired at all. The night had given me so much to think about that the idea of sleep was impossible.

“Yeah, I’m awake.” He scooted closer to me and turned me so we were facing each other, faces only inches apart. “I can hear your brain spinning. What’s going on in there? More questions?” He ran his fingers through my hair, pushing it off my face.

I took a deep breath. *Here goes...*

“Listen, Noah. I don’t want you to have to protect me. I know you said you would, but wouldn’t it be better if you didn’t need to?”

He sighed then leaned his face in and nuzzled my lips softly. “How long have you been thinking about it?”

“Consciously? Since last night. After your grandpa.”

“I’ve thought about it too. Even before that,” he confessed.

I was shocked. I’d expected a huge argument out of him. “So you’d be willing to turn me?” I was quiet and hesitant, not wanting to push my apparent luck.

“You’d be willing to turn *for* me?”

I thought about it for about two seconds then I nodded. “It would be for both of us. I need to be with you and I don’t want you always to have to be watching over me. It’s not fair to either of us. I want you to be my boyfriend, not my bodyguard.”

“But if you become a vampire, you’re going to be hunted. Just like I am.”

“I’m already hunted. Wasn’t your grandfather going to kill me so I’d be quiet?”

“Yeah, but he’d forget about you. If I weren’t here, you could disappear and no hunter would ever come looking for you.”

I slugged him on the arm. “That’s the last time I want to hear about you taking off on me. We’re in this together, whether I’m a human or a vampire or a horny toad, got it?”

He made a little snorting noise and smiled. “And you really would be okay with becoming like me?”

“Yes. Then we could watch out for each other.”

“You know, it’s not the protecting thing at all, Zack; at least not for me. As far as I’m concerned, that has nothing to do with it. I’d defend you in a heartbeat, just like you did with my grandfather. Even if you become a vampire, I’ll still want to protect you because I love you.” He stopped and kissed me. “For me it’s more the idea of getting to have you by my side always. I can’t imagine ever finding someone else like you. Not in a hundred lifetimes.”

I wrapped my upper leg around his hips and pulled him as close as I could. “Me neither,” I whispered and gave him a soft kiss. “So when are we going to do this? Now?”

He chuckled softly. “Impatient, aren’t we? No, I don’t want to rush into it before I know what I’m doing. I’ve never even seen someone get turned. I want to talk to Leila and make sure I’m doing it the best way for you.”

“But you won’t back out.”

He closed his eyes and squeezed me close. “No. If you’re really sure that this is what you want too, then I won’t back out.” He kissed me slowly, his lips lingering. “I can’t wait to be with you forever, Zack Parker.” He trailed his lips down the side of my neck. If it was physically possible, I would’ve melted into a puddle all over my bed.

“I can’t wait either.” I was trying to stay rational. It was just hard with him licking and sucking and breathing on the tiny hairs of my nape. “I will miss the, uh, biting a little,” I confessed.

Noah growled softly and nicked my skin, licking the tiny drop of blood that came from it. I shivered violently and grabbed at him wanting more.

“It won’t be gone, just different,” he told me when we’d both gained a bit of equilibrium.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what it’s like from personal experience, but vampires can feed off of each other. It doesn’t sustain us at all but it’s supposed to feel amazing.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, kinda like being the vampire and the human all at once. Or so I’ve heard.”

I couldn’t even imagine.

“And you never tried it?”

He shook his head. “Didn’t really want to. I mean it’s incredibly intimate and vulnerable, way more than sex. It would have to be with the right vampire.”

“Like me?” I gave him a sly smile.

“Yes, like you,” he replied rubbing his nose against mine.

“So you’re going to talk to Leila?”

He nodded.

I wound my fingers into his hair and gave him a long kiss. “We should go to sleep. It’s nearly dawn.”

“Okay,” he mumbled against my lips. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I whispered and closed my eyes.

I still had a million more questions, (maybe two or three million) but I felt much better. I hadn't realized just how much that conversation needed to happen. It was such a relief to know that he actually wanted it too. I closed my eyes, my body finally feeling restful and quiet. I couldn't wait to be with Noah forever, just like he'd said. I smiled and finally let myself fall asleep.

* * * *

When I awoke, the faint glow from the afternoon sun was pushing in around the edges of my curtains and Noah's soft lips were brushing little kisses across my chest and my collarbone.

"Morning, baby." He said in that rough barely awake voice that I loved. "Or should I say good afternoon?"

I smiled sleepily at him. "Hi."

I reached up for a kiss. His lips were warm and sexy and familiar. I hummed happily and opened my mouth, wanting to feel his tongue. He obliged, sliding his tongue into my mouth and rubbing it against mine. I knew I'd never get sick of his flavor, or the feel of him so close to me. He crawled over me, slipping between my open legs. I lifted my knees to hug his hips and tugged at his briefs, wanting them gone.

"You know, I think we should just sleep naked all the time. These things get in the way," I murmured in his ear, pulling the briefs over the rounded curve of his ass.

"I totally agree," he purred, making the hairs on my neck stand on end. I trembled and arched my chest into him. "You know, you promised me something yesterday. I think I'm going to hold you to that promise."

"What did I promise?" It was so hard to remember anything at all with him licking the curve of my ear.

"That you'd finish what you started," he breathed and pulled my boxers over my hips.

Oh. That.

My heart started pounding in my throat. I wanted to be inside of him more than anything but I was afraid that I would hurt him, or not make it good enough. What if he didn't like it?

"So, I have a confession."

"What, baby?" He rolled his hips, pressing his hard erection up against my stomach.

I moaned and tugged on him, wanting more. It took a second for me to remember what I was trying to tell him. "Well..." It wasn't a big deal but I hated to admit it. "I've never exactly been on top before."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It seemed like too much responsibility—you know to make sure it was good for the other person. But I want to with you. I really do. I'm just afraid that I'll suck."

He chuckled and rolled us over so I was on top of him, straddling his thighs. "You won't suck, I promise." He reached between my legs to stroke me slowly. I couldn't help but to shudder when he ran one soft fingertip along the underside of my shaft.

"So you aren't worried that I don't know what I'm doing?"

He smiled and pulled me down so I was sprawled across him. "Do you love me?"

"You know I do."

"And you care about making me feel good?" I nodded. "Then it will be fine. I actually like the idea. I've been wishing that we'd waited for each other. Now in a way we have. We're both about to do something we've never done before. That's one way to look at it, right?"

I smiled and nodded, feeling dumb because there were tears pricking at the corner of my eyes.

"And you'll tell me what feels good?"

"Yeah, I'll tell you, just like you always tell me," he grinned.

My face turned red. "Shut up," I grumbled, mashing my face into his chest.

He threaded his fingers through my hair and kissed my forehead, chuckling. "You have to know how much I love when you tell me what you want. When your voice gets all out of control. It's the hottest thing in the world."

"Well in that case," I murmured kissing his lips, his cheeks, the tip of his nose. "What do *you* want?"

His eyes grew heated. "I want you inside of me. I want to feel every single one of your breaths, to taste the light on your skin." He breathed and arched his neck against my groan. "Make me yours, Zack."

I trailed a trembling finger down the contours of his chest. Slowly, hesitatingly, I leaned over and followed my hand with my lips. It felt like the first time again. Like we'd never touched at all. I couldn't believe how scared I was.

Get a grip. He loves you. It'll be fine.

I wanted it to be so perfect. He tugged on my hair when I sucked gently on his nipples. It was something I'd done so many times before but I felt awkward and shaky and new.

He moaned and lifted his hips, which gave me a little more confidence. "Touch me, baby, please. I need to feel your hands."

I lifted my head and grinned at him, circling his straining erection with my hand. He rolled his hips again and clutched at my shoulder. I covered his body with my hands and my kisses, making him squirm and moan. When I finally took him deep into my mouth, he arched off the bed and cried out. I knew he was nearly ready.

I reached over to my nightstand and pulled out my little bottle of lube. Coating my fingers, I gently started to work him open, get him ready for my body.

“God, that feels amazing,” Noah choked out. It probably didn’t hurt that I had fastened my lips to the side of his neck and was sucking as hard as I could in his favorite spot. “I’m ready,” he finally murmured. “I need you inside of me.”

“You sure?” I whispered.

He nodded and clutched at my arm when I rubbed against his prostate. My stomach jumped, but I nodded and gently pulled my fingers from his body, reaching for the lube and slicking myself up.

Trembling, I spread Noah’s legs as far as they could go and guided myself slowly, pushing at his tight entrance little by little until I was completely buried in him. He cried out and arched up into me, wrapping his legs around me. I couldn’t believe how good he felt. If he were any warmer or tighter, I would have passed out. It was nearly impossible, but I stayed still, letting him get used to the way I felt inside of him. Then slowly, ever so slowly, I started to move.

I could hear a loud groan as I pulled out and sank back into the tight grip of his body. It took me a second to realize that it was me. I tilted him up and tried to angle my hips the way he always did so I’d hit him in exactly the right spot. It took a few tries but finally I got it right. I knew the second that he convulsed and nearly screamed that I’d done something different.

“Did that feel good?”

“Yes! Please don’t stop...”

I was happy to oblige.

Over and over I stroked deep into him, kissing his face and threading our fingers together on the pillow. He kissed me back and moaned, telling me how much he loved having me inside of him. I could feel it when he started to come. His muscles clamped down on me so hard it almost hurt, but it was a pain I’d gladly feel a thousand times over. The squeezing was enough to set me off too. I cried out and spurted wetly, deep inside of him, before I collapsed on his chest.

It took me a few minutes to finally be able to draw in a complete breath. When I could, I rubbed Noah's flushed cheek with my thumb.

"Thank you," I whispered, a satisfied hum in my throat.

He laughed softly. "Thank *you*."

I slipped gently out of him and rolled us so we were facing side by side. I wrapped my arm around him and slipped my thigh between his.

"I adore you, Noah Harper," I murmured softly and brushed a small kiss on his lips.

His eyes went wide and sweet. "I'm not sure there's even a word for how I feel. Maybe someday there will be. For now 'I love you' will have to do." He snuggled as close as he could and pulled my arm tight around him before wrapping his own arm around me.

"Let's go to sleep for a little while longer. Than we'll get up and visit the others," I suggested.

"No complaints here," he answered and closed his eyes.

Perfect...Almost

The next few days were my version of paradise. We slept, made love, watched movies, talked about books. It was like those weeks at the lake, except we were really on our own like I'd always dreamed. Sometimes I felt like I had to shake my whole body just to keep it from floating off.

I realized those years apart, trying to find replacements and failing miserably, made us appreciate each other that much more. At least it did for me. Plus, we'd become our own people when we were alone. I think I loved the new Noah even more than I'd loved the kid he used to be. The complex adult who'd grown out of his experiences was just that much more interesting, that much sexier than the Noah I'd been in love with for so long.

There was one obvious thing that kept our lives from being perfect.

The vampires.

The damn fucking vampires. I could deal with the vengeful Harpers. All we had to do was stay out of their way but the vamps were different. Noah wanted to go looking for them. I knew that the others already were investigating but they'd been unsuccessful so far. And the body count was growing. The cops had kept it quiet so the city didn't start to panic, but the missing persons reports were starting to make their way to the papers. It was only a matter of time before the hunters caught wind of the rouge vamps...if they hadn't already.

It was obvious that Noah was dying to be part of the search, no matter what he'd promised Sabina. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to join the others. But what if he got hurt, or worse? I didn't want to be the one that told him to go out hunting on the night something happened. So I kept my mouth shut and watched him squirm. On the surface he was wonderful,

amazing and attentive, but I knew it was there, just centimeters under his skin. It was like part of him just knew that the vampire out there was the one he'd been looking for since his parents died.

I hated those rogue vampires with everything I had. It wasn't just the fear that Noah was going to go off and do something stupid; I was frustrated too. Noah had decided that as long as there was some known but unseen predator out there, he wouldn't change me. He said he didn't want the chance that something would happen while I was in the middle of changing and unable to run away. So I couldn't move on with the life I wanted to live and he couldn't find the closure he needed to deal with his parents' death once and for all. I wanted them gone.

* * * *

It was a rainy Thursday in the second week of August. The air was heavy and unpleasant and hot as hell. I felt like I'd changed shirts a million times and no matter what I was or wasn't wearing there didn't seem to be any relief. I was sorely tempted to fill our bathtub with ice and just lay there until my hot sweaty skin was cold and numb. It sounded fantastic.

Noah came out of his fourth cool shower of the night looking only slightly more comfortable than he'd been before.

"God, this is awful," he groaned and smiled wanly at me. He looked pale. It had been nearly a week since he'd fed and that last time was only for about half as long as usual.

"Baby, do we need to go out and get you some blood? You're getting really pale."

He smiled ruefully. "I do need to feed, but PC says there's been a few groups of unfamiliar vamps at the usual place where I go. I probably shouldn't be seen there."

I reached up and cupped his whiter than usual cheek. "How can I help?"

Fifteen minutes later I was in a cab on my way to Park Avenue. Alone. I didn't like it at all, but it was the best solution we could come up with. He couldn't go there, and he was fairly sure

there would be no one there who would notice me. I had instructions to find the bartender named Dan, who would supposedly have blood we could buy for Noah.

It felt so illicit, so black market. It was a bit of a thrill, but not enough to make it fun. I was terrified as fucking hell. I couldn't believe I was going to a vampire bar by myself. I'd argued with Noah that I should bring Leila, or at least PC, but he didn't want me to be associated with them. It was well known that they were hunting the rouge vamps. I just wanted to get the damn bag of blood or whatever I was picking up and get out of there and back to Noah.

The bar, my third vampire bar, was again completely different than the other two. The first was all sex and blood, the second just plain gross. This third one was strangely enough, exactly what you'd expect of an Upper East Side watering hole. The clientele looked snobby and designer-clad. My arty, rocker boy village look got more than a few disdainful stares.

Ugh. Stuck up vampires. I had no idea how Noah put up with them.

I made a quick beeline for the bar, wanting only to talk to this Dan guy, get the blood, and remove myself from the glacial atmosphere of the bar.

You better have called ahead, I grumbled silently at Noah. He'd promised that he would. I knew how humans were generally received in these kinds of places.

The man at the bar was handsome, in a manicured kind of way. His skin was pale as marble and his shiny dark hair fell artfully over a perfectly shaped brow. I could see how he'd be popular in the sort of crowd that hung at this bar. I was only interested in what he could give me.

"Are you Dan?" I asked, tentatively.

"You Noah's boy?" I wasn't sure if the tone was slightly insulting or if I was being overly sensitive.

"Yeah, I'm his boyfriend. Do you have..." I didn't want to say it out loud.

"I do. Come around to the side of the bar for a minute." The transaction was easy enough. I gave him the cash that Noah had slipped me right before I left, and he gave me a black messenger bag that I slipped over my head.

I was making my way to the door as quickly as I could without drawing notice when I bumped up against a wall of muscle.

"Sorry," I squeaked and tried to move around. A thick bicep reached across my chest to block my way.

"Watch where you're going, *human*." The voice was cold and slightly wild. I felt the hairs all up and down my back stand on end.

"I'm sorry." I looked up. Big mistake.

A sly grin spread across the face before me. I supposed, like the bartender, he could be considered handsome. All I saw was a snake. I tried again to move but again, he stopped me.

"I know you," he said, still smiling.

"N-No you don't."

"Tell your little cupcake boyfriend that I'm coming for him and his friends; you too, if you're dumb enough to get in my way. They're fools for thinking they're faster or smarter than me. While you're at it you can tell him to quit blaming me for his parents' death. It's his fault their dead, not mine. If he'd have minded his own business, they would have never found me in the first place."

My eyes grew wide. Suddenly I felt a hand on my elbow.

"C'mon. Curb service." Dan herded me quickly through the front door. I was more than grateful to follow. "Stay the hell away from him," he snapped as soon as we were outside.

"I was trying to get away. He wouldn't let me."

“Then get in this cab and run like hell for your door when you get home, okay? Tell Noah he’s got trouble.”

Trouble? There sure as hell was trouble and I had no idea what I was going to do about it.

I shook like a leaf the whole way home.

Laying in bed as the sun was starting to rise, I tried to sleep. I cuddled up to Noah’s peaceful form and hoped to absorb some of his quietness but I couldn’t. I decided right then that I needed to go to the others. I was going to call PC the second I awoke. I squeezed my eyes shut and concentrated on other things: Noah’s skin, how nice it was to lay next to him on the super soft bed. Eventually the adrenalin wore off and the stress of the night left me drained. My eyes closed naturally and when I finally fell asleep it was nearly noon.

* * * *

“PC?” I whispered into the phone, I peered into our room to make sure Noah was still asleep. I saw the lump of his body under the blankets and took a deep breath.

“What’s up, Zack?” He was his usual boisterous self.

“Listen, I need some advice. I’ve got a situation I don’t know how to handle.”

“What happened, dude?”

“The vampire. He knows who I am. I ran into him when I was getting blood for Noah. I don’t know how he knows I’m with Noah but he does. He said he was going to come for us. PC, I don’t want to hide things from Noah, but I don’t know what to do. How do I deal with this?”

“Wait, what vampire?”

“*The* vampire. The one that killed Noah’s parents. He knows you guys are after him and he wants to kill us before you get a chance to kill him. God, PC, I’m lucky I got out of there last night. If the bartender hadn’t had walked me out to the cab, I’m not a hundred percent sure I’d still be talking right now.”

“Listen, you need to tell Noah. He has the right to try to protect you. I’ll get Leila and we’ll come over and get him and we can all deal with this asshole together. Go wake him up right now. We’re on our way.”

I walked into the room to wake him, scared for him, but ready to let him defend us. My breath caught in my throat the second I turned the corner. The lump I’d seen in the bed was gone and the window to the fire escape was open, curtains flapping in the breeze of the late summer night.

Shit, shit, shit.

Noah was gone.

My hands shook and I sank to the floor clutching my phone. I did the first thing I could think of.

“Zack? Dude, keep your pants on. We’re leaving in a second,” PC told me when he picked up the phone.

“PC?” I could barely choke out the whisper. “He’s gone.”

I'll Follow You Into The Dark

I'd been pacing back and forth for nearly two hours. I would have been out sprinting up and down the streets of Manhattan screaming his name if I'd thought it would do any good.

Damn it, Noah!

Why did he run off on his own? Of all stupid fucking things to do! Did he think I was going to forbid him from trying to find his parents' murderer? I wouldn't have loved it, but if he'd just waited for the others than I wouldn't be wearing a hole to China on the floor of the apartment and he'd probably be safe in my arms. I should have known. Whenever the rogue vampires were mentioned he'd get that damn look in his eye—the one that always resulted in him doing something reckless. I wanted to scream and punch things.

If he's dead I'm going to find his body and kick his ass! Immediately, I felt guilty. I didn't know what I'd do if Noah didn't survive. *No, he's going to be fine. Don't even think it.*

The door slammed open suddenly, almost flying off of its hinges. I'd been so wound tight that I nearly screamed.

PC came rushing in with a mostly unconscious Noah draped over his shoulder. Noah was bleeding from several deep gashes on his torso and neck. I cried out and rushed to them, helping PC put Noah down on the dining room table. The cuts on his body continued to bleed in slippery red rivulets that dripped to the floor in growing puddles. I waited for the wounds to start knitting themselves together but they only gushed more.

“Why isn't he healing?”

“The wounds are from a vampire. There's venom in them. He needs blood to regenerate. He's too weak to do it on his own.”

I didn't hesitate. I stripped off my shirt and held my arm out, gently cupping Noah's head with my hand to bring it close.

"Drink, baby," I coaxed. "You need the strength."

He tried to pull away from my flesh. "Not you," he mumbled, shaking his head weakly.

I looked at PC.

"He can't drink my blood," he said. "It would probably kill him, not save him."

I turned back to Noah, determined. "You're drinking from me. There's no other choice. I fucking refuse to lose you! PC's here. If you can't stop, he'll pull me away, okay?"

Noah looked so bad, I wasn't even sure if he could get his fangs to come out let alone use them. Suddenly, his eyes rolled back in his head and his upper body collapsed against me.

"Get me a knife!" PC looked at me blankly for a second. "From the kitchen." I pointed with my free hand towards the chef's knife that was balanced on the edge of the dish rack.

As soon as PC realized what I was planning, he scrambled towards the counter. When he handed me the knife, I took it and made a deep slice on the inside of my arm. I opened Noah's mouth and let the first trickles of blood drip between his teeth. That's all it took.

Suddenly his teeth were clamping down on my arm and his eyes, white with blood lust were wide. I felt the usual thrill for the first few seconds and then a shock of incomparable agony flashed through me. I tried to ask what was happening but my mouth was frozen. I couldn't scream, I couldn't move, I couldn't tear Noah's teeth from my arm. Through my burning haze of pain, I could see little black spots blurring my vision.

I made a whimpering noise, the only thing that I could force out of my frozen lips.

It lasted for long minutes, or at least that's what it felt like. Every beat of my faltering heart echoed like a booming base drum in my ear. I wanted to scream so badly, to release some of the

burning pain. That had to be the worst part, the silence. It would be better if only I could do something other than lay there frozen and helpless.

After what seemed like a fiery eternity, Noah ripped himself away from my arm, and through my pain I could see the horror on his face.

“Oh god, baby. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for it to happen. Not like this.” I could see that he was stroking my face, crying, kissing my forehead.

But I couldn’t feel any of it. My world was fire.

I heard the last of his voice trail out; my senses were getting blurry, numbed by the constant pain that was coursing through my blood. I wanted to tell him that it was okay, that I would do anything to save him, that I loved him more than I ever thought possible, but I couldn’t say a word. The black spots in my eyes grew bigger and more frequent and the pain, the unbearable pain, crashed over me in boiling waves. Finally I could feel myself fading, my body unable to endure the shock, the ceiling spinning drunkenly above me.

I love you, Noh...

And then there was nothing.

Awake

I woke up a little bit before I remembered what had happened. I felt the heat of the room, but in a weird way. It was almost like the air was solid. I could sense it against my skin, more like a blanket than like regular air. I could feel every little change in the direction of the breeze. It was a distracting sensation. I floated for a few moments concentrating on the air and its changes. Then I shifted and realized I was lying in bed, covered only by a thin sheet. The cotton of my well-worn sheets rubbed against my skin, changing my focus. I could feel every fiber of the fabric, some soft and some irritatingly rough moving against me. I squirmed, trying to find a spot with only soft fabric and none of the itchiness.

Why did everything feel so weird?

As soon as my brain could process my surroundings enough to ask that question, I knew. I remembered pacing the floor of my apartment, Noah being carried in the door bleeding and unconscious, the bite...the pain.

Oh my god. Am I really a vampire?

I forced my eyes open. The sunlight peeking through the tiny cracks at the corners of my curtains was laser bright and nearly blinding. Was this how it'd always felt for Noah? He'd called it uncomfortable. It was nearly unbearable. I stumbled out of bed, feeling weak and a bit dizzy, to pull the curtains more flat so they'd block every last little stinging drop of sun. When I stood, it took me a second to get my balance. I sagged against the overstuffed chair that had been dragged to the side of my bed. It was then that I noticed Noah.

He was totally passed out, looking more exhausted than I'd seen him since we first found each other again.

He must have been so worried. I smiled and cupped his face with my hand.

Like the sheets and the air, his skin felt so different. It was unbelievably satiny and warm; the pulse underneath the surface was wetly seductive, irresistible.

I want his blood. Holy shit. The thought flashed in my head and for a second it nearly floored me. It was disconcerting; my new desire for the hot rush of blood in my throat. I'd always known academically that I'd want blood after I was changed, but to actually *feel* it was something different altogether. My gums started to tingle and then sting. I ran my tongue over them and felt little points sticking out where nothing had been before.

Even though he was a vampire, and not a tasty red-blooded human, I could feel the lust, the need to pierce that soft warm skin and taste the wetness beneath. It was more compelling than I could've ever imagined. I felt my little newborn fangs pulsing with pure want. How the hell was I ever going to control this? Would it be the same with every person I passed on the street, or was it just so strong because it was Noah?

I leaned over, still a bit woozy, and nuzzled my nose up to his neck. I took a long breath in, reveling in his familiar and somehow completely new scent.

God, he still smelled amazing.

Noah's eyes opened tiredly, I could tell he was still a bit asleep. It took him a second to realize that I was standing over him, awake and alive. When he did, he literally flew up out of the chair and wrapped his arms around me.

"Zack, baby. You're okay! I'm so sorry."

His hug took me by surprise and I faltered a little, but my legs were strong and I caught myself. I could tell he'd been holding that apology in for a while and it made me chuckle. I reached up with my thumb and trailed it along his jaw.

"It's okay, Noh. What happened, happened. At least the end result was what we wanted all along, right?"

Noah smiled exhaustedly and nodded. "How do you feel?"

"Different, but still the same, you know? I mean, my mind is still me—at least so far. But my body feels really different." I reached up to touch his skin, still in wonder over the out-of-this-world softness. "My senses are so out of whack."

"You'll get used to it. I was planning on telling you about that. I was planning on a lot of things. Didn't quite work out that way."

I threaded my fingers through his hair and pulled him close. I needed to kiss him, to let him know it was fine.

The sensation of his lips on mine was flat out incredible. If I thought my fingertips were sensitive, they felt nothing in comparison to the surface of my lips. I couldn't believe how amazing his kiss was. There were no words to describe the silkiness of his lips and tongue sliding and gliding over mine, no flavor to compare to the intoxicating taste of him. Thundering lust galloped through my body, stampeding over the questions, the uncomfortable sunlight, and the weird touch of the air. I wanted to ravage every part of him, to lick and bite (hell yeah I wanted to bite), and kiss and love. I yanked him as close as I could get him and...*devoured* every last drop.

"Holy fucking shit," I panted when we finally ripped our lips apart. "You definitely forgot to mention that part."

Noah grinned and stepped back a few inches. It was the only way we would be able to keep from tearing each other apart.

"What? How every tactile sensation is about a hundred times more intense? You probably wouldn't have understood anyway. Not until you felt it yourself."

"Probably not."

He pulled me close again. I wrapped my arms tightly around his waist and breathed him in. His scent was enough to make me tremble; the Noah smell I'd always loved mixed with the impossibly delicious aroma of his juicy, wet, fragrant blood...Mmmm.

Stop that! I had to force myself to look up before I opened my mouth and attached it to his neck.

He brushed his lips across mine with a smile. I bet he knew exactly what I was thinking. "I really am sorry, Zack. I had the whole thing all planned out. I was going to have candles, get you your favorite dinner one last time, make love to you; it was going to be so romantic—well as romantic as being turned into a vampire could possibly be."

I laughed and pinched him on the side, glad to be distracted by talking. "No more apologizing, okay? We have all the time in the world for romance now. Besides, it's not like you did it on purpose. What did happen anyway? I thought you guys, well *we*, could control it."

Noah smiled when I said 'we.' Then he sighed and shook his head. "I don't know what happened. I was drinking and then suddenly I could feel the venom shooting out and there was nothing I could do to stop it. My only explanation is that I was injured and weak and still in fight-or-flight mode. My instincts must have taken over. I pulled away from you as soon as I'd done it. I've been sitting here beating myself up for nearly two days."

I drew in a sharp breath. "I've been out for two days?"

"Yeah. It was a long time. Usually doesn't take that long to come out of the paralysis. I was only under for a few minutes. I must have given you one hell of an injection of venom. Good part is it seems like you've changed more than most would have by this point. It usually takes about two weeks for it to completely happen. You're almost there."

"How can you tell?"

“By the way your eyes react to the sunlight, the way you’re feeling every tactile sensation so intensely. Usually that builds gradually. It’s not so overwhelming that way.”

“I didn’t know that either.”

He cupped my chin gently and kissed my forehead. “I know. That’s why I was going to talk about all this with you, so you’d be more prepared. I really wish I’d had the chance. Now we’re going to be doing a lot of figuring things out together.”

“I know one thing I want to figure out together.” I slipped my hand under his shirt and into the waistband of his shorts.

He laughed and put his hand over mine, stilling it. “Don’t tempt me. We’ve got to get you fed before we try anything like that.”

I pouted, just a little of course.

He tugged on my hand. “C’mon, let’s get a shower. I haven’t left this chair for two days and you’ve been all feverish and sweaty. Besides, wait till you see how awesome water feels.”

The shower was filled with more intense sensations. Of course there was the water, Noah had been right about that. The feeling of all those little shooters of warm liquid on my newly sensitive skin had shivers of pleasure radiating all over my body. The steam was really cool too. It was like the air in the room had been only...*more*. The best part of course was Noah. His body all warm and wet and naked rubbing up against mine was nirvana. I tried to put my hand between his legs again but he laughed and swatted at me.

“Knock it off, horn dog. I told you, we have to get you some blood first.”

“But your skin feels so nice.” I ran my fingers over his back and shoulders lightly then drew back to look at his face and his chest. The marks from two nights ago had faded to near invisibility. “You look way better. It’s almost like the fight never happened.”

He laughed. “It seemed way worse than it was. I took a few huge chunks out of him before he ever got to me. I’m sorry I took off like that, by the way. It was stupid and impulsive.”

“Please don’t ever do that again. You scared the shit out of me. What did end up happening anyway?”

Noah made a face. “Leila got him. He’d managed a good swipe to my head by the time they got to me. I was losing blood quickly, so PC carted my dumb butt out of there and she went after him. He was so weak that it wasn’t much trouble for her.”

“But you wish it could have been you that did it.”

“In a way.” He shrugged. “But I’d far rather be here with you than dead with my parents avenged.”

“Yeah. Me too.” I squeezed him close in the warmth of the cascading water.

“C’mon, baby. Let’s get ready. The sooner we get blood for you, the sooner we can come home, right?”

I grinned and reached behind him to turn the water off.

* * * *

That night, he took me back to the Park Avenue club where I’d run into the nasty vampire three nights earlier. It seemed like it had been a month. I couldn’t believe how different I felt, walking in with Noah as an equal and not his little human sidekick. It was great.

The trip to the bar had been somewhat of an adventure for me. The street smelled like some all you can eat buffet, a variety intense aromas wafting by me with each new beating heart. Noah was right, though. There were some people who definitely smelled better than others. I wouldn’t have expected my taste to be much different than his. But it was. Opposite actually.

Even though I’d never been attracted to them sexually, the women smelled way better to me; like the most delicious of desserts compared to the men who were more like a rare steak. Every

time a pretty college girl or a sexy woman in a business suit walked by, I swear to god, my mouth started watering. Even the giggling group of high school punk girls who made no secret of checking Noah and me out were enticing in their raw energetic kind of way. It was so disconcerting to notice women for the first time instead of men that it freaked me out a little bit. I laughed silently under my breath, shaking my head.

I hate to break it to you, Noh, but at least when it comes to blood I'm straight as a board.

You're going to be so disappointed.

The only exception to my all-female rule so far seemed to be Noah himself. Nobody smelled as good as him. I couldn't even begin to imagine how amazing he would taste. He obviously wasn't human, and I remembered him telling me that his blood would never feed me, but I wanted it all the same. So bad. The smell was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. It couldn't be related to food, like the humans I'd smelled so far. It was different. I remembered him saying before that the blood of a hot guy kind of tasted a little bit like sex. That was probably the closest description for the way his scent hit me. It smelled like everything I'd ever desired, pulsing out into the air and making my mouth water. I knew I needed to feed on a human soon if for no other reason then so I didn't pounce on him in the middle of Manhattan's crowded streets.

I'd been concerned about the safety of coming out in public with Noah. I was afraid of who would be out there waiting for us as soon as we weren't paying attention. Even though he'd told me earlier that the other vampire was gone, it was almost second nature to look over my shoulder. It seemed a bit anticlimactic that the evil villain of a vampire was actually dead and I'd slept through the whole damn thing, but I'd rather have anticlimactic any day than have some rabid vampire still on the loose hunting us.

Weirdly enough, for the moment it seemed that everything was peaceful. I was still worried about the hunters and whoever his family had spying on him but Noah said it was fine, and that

he'd keep a look out. I supposed Noah had no intentions of letting me try to feed on my own for the first time, like he had to. Even though I was willing to do the same, it always made my heart melt when he insisted on taking care of me.

* * * *

When we walked into the vampire bar, I could feel the heads turning to look at us. I knew they were staring at Noah, in his fitted button up and butt hugging designer jeans. Sweet Mrs. Clooney had shipped a few boxes of his clothes to the apartment the week before and I could never get over how amazing they were. So I totally got why people stared at Noah. They always had and they always would.

The part that floored me was that I could feel a few eyes coming directly my way. I hadn't really spent a ton of time checking myself out in the mirror. Most of the early evening had been taken up with trying to get used to the barrage of new sensations that constantly came my way. I knew I looked different though. My skin was more like Noah's now, luminous and glowy instead of just pale; and my hair seemed to do exactly what I wanted it to do rather than constantly fighting me like it had for the past twenty-one years. Even the black was different, making me look mysterious instead of like some college kid with a stupid dye job.

I put my arm around Noah's waist and cuddled up to him grinning. I didn't feel the need to stick close to him because I was uncomfortable. I just wanted to be near him because it felt great. *I felt great.*

Why would anyone not want this?

"Noah," Dan the bartender nodded. It took him a long moment to realize who I was. "Oh my!" He grinned. "I wasn't sure if this one was even going to make it through the other night. I was obviously wrong."

Noah chuckled. "Yeah, he's tougher than you'd think. You're looking at New York's newest vampire." He leaned over and gave me a soft kiss on my forehead.

"Congrats. Welcome to the family."

I smiled at Dan, whose vibe towards me had changed a hundred and eighty degrees since our last encounter. "Thank you. I can't tell you how happy I am to be here."

Noah and Dan both chuckled at that.

Noah led me into the bar, arm around my shoulders, smiling at the socialite vampires with their designer bags and sharp fangs. Weirdly enough, I actually felt like I belonged. Apparently they'd been staring at me before because I was human, not because my clothes weren't up to par. It was a weird feeling for me, fitting in. I'd never felt like I really belonged anywhere, other than with Noah. I'd had friends in high school and college, but there was always this mental separation between me and them. At least that's how I always perceived it. For the first time, I finally felt like I wasn't an outsider.

I was so busy enjoying my newfound environment that I didn't notice the little dark tornado until she nearly bowled us over.

"Zack!" she exclaimed, leaping up and wrapping her miniature curves around me.

I laughed and gave her a long hug back. She smelled pleasant, but not really all that edible to me. Her aroma was warm and light. It reminded me of sunshine. "Hey, Leila."

She stepped back and looked me over carefully, fingering my hair and my cheekbones. "Very nice. You were adorable before, but now..." She nodded appreciatively.

I blushed and ducked my head into my chest.

"Leila, you're embarrassing my boyfriend."

I couldn't help but smile. It was one of those rare moments in life when everything felt like it had fallen into place. I was finally part of the group, an equal to Noah. I felt strong and new and in love. My world couldn't be better.

"C'mon, baby. We gotta find you a boy snack," Noah whispered.

I laughed under my breath. "Well, actually, I think I may not swing that way. At least where my taste for blood is concerned. On the street the women smelled way better to me than the men did."

Noah's eyes grew wide. "You going straight on me?"

"Maybe. But only until we get home."

He pulled me in for a lusty little kiss that left me breathless and wishing we could be naked already.

"Let's get this show on the road," I breathed and squeezed his hand.

Leila, who I'd completely forgotten about, fanned herself dramatically. "Ah, to be a fly on the wall of *casa* Zack and Noah tonight."

I burst into laughter and swatted her arm.

She held out her hand to me. "C'mon, gorgeous. Noah's clueless when it comes to girls. Let me find you a hot chick to sink your new little teeth into."

I took her hand with a smile. Noah gave me a mock hurt look, but then smiled and headed off to search for his own dinner.

* * * *

Prowling the bar as a vampire was a completely different experience than being looked at like an appetizer had been. This new side of the fence was much more comfortable. Leila had her arm looped loosely through my elbow and we were cruising the collection of girls looking for that perfect first bite.

"You like blondes?" she asked.

I shrugged. It had never occurred to me to think any girl was really attractive. I inhaled experimentally as we walked past a few of the girls. Finally, one of the smells made goose bumps go up my spine.

"I want that last one. The girl that just walked by," I whispered to Leila with an excited grin.

She turned and scanned the crowd. "The sexy one in the green shirt? Give me a sec. I'll be right back."

Leila returned with the tall curvy brunette in tow. I inhaled, loving her complex colorful aroma. My head spun and I couldn't help shuddering. I wanted to bite her so desperately bad. I decided that it was best to wait for Leila's instructions. I'd hate to hurt someone on my first night out.

"Trista," Leila began when they reached me. "This is Zack. He's new, so I'm going to help him out a little."

The brunette looked me over. "Cute," she murmured, her voice throaty.

I blushed a little. Obviously being turned into a vampire hadn't changed my ability to get embarrassed in a heartbeat.

"Zack, this is Trista. She's a regular so don't worry. Everything will be fine. Just take it slow."

I stepped up to Trista and wove my fingers into the warm hair at the base of her scalp. Little excited trills tingled all over my body.

"Okay, lick her skin where you're going to bite. Your saliva will make the skin tingly so she won't feel the bite as much." I knew that worked. I'd felt the tingles myself many times. I licked and could feel Trista tremble. Her back arched, her neck was exposed and open.

"All right, when you're about to bite, think of blood. Just the thought will make your fangs drop. Then pierce the skin gently and drink only until you feel slightly full. Any more will be too

much blood loss for her.” I opened my mouth, thinking of the juicy pulsing blood gushing through her veins, ready for my tongue to taste it. The tiny sting of fangs poking through my gums distracted me from my goal for a split second, then I was back, brushing her skin with my small newborn teeth, trying to prolong the anticipation.

The second I bit into her neck, my brain exploded. Her flavor was a heady mix of fruitiness and sultry heat. I saw hundreds of colors floating behind my eyelids, the colors I could sense in her scent; reds and purples and pinks, warmth and passion. I was instantly overcome by desire. Desire for more blood, of course. I would always want more blood. But I also wanted to touch her, a need that I’d never associated with a woman before.

I ran my hand up her torso lightly and traced her collarbone with my fingers, caressing. I could feel the blood gushing through her veins, headed for my mouth. She covered my hand with her own and squeezed, moaning and arching her head into me. Her moan seemed to vibrate in my head, causing the multitude of colors to burst and sparkle. My own blood rushed headlong between my legs and I moaned a little, swallowing the sweet hot liquid. The sexual heat combined with the lust for blood, making me want to increase the suction.

My stomach started to feel full and sloshy. I knew it was time to pull away, but I was so tempted to keep drinking. In my mind I knew I didn’t want to hurt the girl. My instincts were telling me to drain her dry.

It took a gentle throat clearing noise to break my trance. Leila was looking on, her face serene, eyebrows raised.

Shit! I had to watch myself. I understood why Noah didn’t want to drink from me when he was hungry. I licked Trista’s neck and gently released her. She shivered and gripped my elbow to right herself.

“You okay?” I asked.

She gave me a wobbly smile. "Yeah, that felt incredible. You're a natural."

"Really? I thought I might have taken it too far."

"No. Just the fact that you thought about not hurting me is more than so many out there would ever do."

"How'd you know I was thinking that?"

She winked but didn't answer. "I hope I see you around, Zack." She gave me a short kiss on the cheek and sashayed off towards the bar.

I felt a strong pair of arms encircle me from behind. Breathing in, I trembled slightly and laid my head back against his shoulder.

"You did great, baby."

"For a second there, I really didn't think I was going to be able to stop." I put my hands over his and entwined our fingers.

"You were fine," Leila assured me. "All it took was one tiny reminder from me and you let go. If you were really in danger of losing control, I would've had to haul you off of her."

"I agree. You weren't going to hurt her. It was pretty damn hot though."

I was glad Noah couldn't see my face. It had to be bright red. "You were watching?"

Leila rolled her eyes. "Of course he was watching. That was about a half step away from porn. Most the people in this bar were probably watching."

I shrugged, then squeezed Noah's hand and turned to brush a kiss across his lips. "I know how he feels. I love watching him too."

We stared at each other for long moments. I was all of a sudden tired of the vampire bar.

"Okaaay. So I'm going to leave you two alone and go find Jason." Leila laughed and turned to go. "Have a great night, boys. I imagine you won't be here much longer."

Noah barely glanced at her. "No, we won't."

Feel

It seemed like hours before we made it home. I decided that there needed to be a bar we could go to that wasn't clear on the other side of town. I felt bad for the cab driver, too. Noah and I must have treated him to quite a show. We couldn't keep our damn hands off each other. By the time we were halfway back to my apartment, I had his tank top untucked and my fingers were creeping under the waistband of his pants. He'd slipped his hands under my shirt too and was tracing soft fingertips in circles all over my lower back. I was still so turned on from the blood coursing through my system and the new tactile sensations that I wasn't quite used to, that his simple little touch had me ready to blow. I think I may have moaned out loud. I was beyond caring.

Noah's tongue slipped out and traced the line of my neck before breathing warm air all over it. I shivered violently and gripped at his back with my free hand. The other one struggled to touch him but kept getting hindered by his snug jeans. Looking up for a second, I tried to gauge how much the cab driver could really see. I'd just about decided that he couldn't really see anything and it would be okay if I unzipped Noah's pants with my teeth when he pulled in front of my building. With trembly hands, Noah pulled his wallet out and handed the driver a bill. It could have been just about anything. The cabbie didn't complain, so I guess it was good.

We jogged for the door of the building, clutching each other's hands and trying not to laugh. The elevator ride was another test of restraint. We barely passed. Finally we were standing in front of our apartment fumbling through our pockets to find the key. Noah was the first one to find his successfully.

"If we'd gotten another red light, I might have stripped you naked and taken you in the back of the cab," he mumbled as he tried to fit his key into the lock.

I laughed breathlessly at Noah's remark and shuffled on my feet. I couldn't wait to be on the other side of that door. I was going to get rid of his annoying jeans immediately. I needed to feel his skin rubbing up against mine.

As soon as the door closed and we were on the other side I grabbed a hold of the hem of his shirt and ripped. The sound of the material being wrenched apart kind of surprised me but I was too intent on getting to his skin to really be concerned.

"Hey I liked that shirt!"

"I'll buy you a new one." My lips were muffled against his neck. I breathed him in again before I licked his neck and bit at the soft part of his ear.

That was all it took. He lifted me, kissing me with desperate intensity and turned for our room. I wrapped my legs around his waist and pushed our bare chests against each other. It had always felt amazing to have my skin touching his. Now there were no words. It took my breath away. We collapsed onto the covers, legs and arms and hands tangling in the dark. It didn't seem dark, though. I could see Noah perfectly. His pale hair shone, his lips glistened from my kisses. His beauty was surreal.

I lifted my hand, slowing the intensity, and cupped his jaw, rubbing my thumb on his cheek.

"I want you all the time," I whispered, in awe of the strength of my feelings. "Do you think the need will ever go away?"

"I hope not." He smiled and nuzzled his cheek into my palm. Then with gentle hands he reached between us and started to unbutton my jeans. My hands went immediately to his waistband too. He beat me to it and tugged my jeans over my hips, which I lifted eagerly. Then with my help, he shimmied out of his pants and briefs, leaving him naked and beautiful, ready for me to touch.

I wanted to feel his him everywhere, to test all of his textures with my new senses. His chest was smooth warm velvet over springy muscles. I rubbed the bumpy satin of his nipples, loving the new type of skin. He breathed and curled his hand around my arm loosely moaning softly. My hands roamed further down, past his taut abdomen to the crisp hair and straining erection between his thighs. I wrapped my hand around it and made an appreciative humming noise in my throat.

“Zack.”

I delved deeply into the heat of his mouth and then pulled back, sucking on his lower lip. His hands reached for me too, touching the flesh that needed to be touched the most. I lifted my hips into his caress and scraped my teeth along the skin of his neck.

Kissing my way down his chest, my lips and tongue tested every inch that my fingers had just re-learned. His nipples pebbled against my tongue, and the intriguing landscape of his abdomen required long moments of exploration. When I got to the straining shaft that grew harder every second, I licked slowly, loving the hardness and the insistent pulse I felt beneath his skin. A few drops of liquid escaped him, and I tasted them too before I took as much of him as I could deep inside my mouth.

He cried out and arched his back, his knuckles white against the sheets. “Zack, you’re going to make me come.”

I grinned and went for it again, doubling my efforts. I’d never felt this unequivocal need to give pleasure before. I hadn’t exactly been selfish, but with Noah I got as much satisfaction from watching him moan and come as I did from coming myself. His breathing sped up and his hips started undulating wildly. Finally he reached down and pulled me off of him.

“Not yet.”

“But I want to taste you.”

“Me too. But not like that.”

Oh. I'd almost forgotten. Almost.

He pulled me down so that I was lying on top of him, anchored his heels on the mattress and arched up, rubbing against me with his entire body. My skin burst into waves of sensation.

“Can we both?”

He nodded. “It'll be easier if we turn-bite each other on the leg. Remember how I did it last week?”

I trembled at the memory of his teeth sinking into my thigh as he delved inside with his fingers, rubbing against my prostate. I shifted around quickly, eager to feel the new sensation.

Noah nuzzled up against me and wrapped his arm around my waist. “You ready?”

I nodded.

“You bite first, then I will.”

With a deep breath, I sank my teeth into the succulent flesh of his thigh. His flavor detonated in my mouth, a hundred times stronger than that of the girl. He tasted just like he'd smelled; like everything I had ever desired. I convulsed in pleasure and looped my arm around his waist, pulling him closer. In that moment, I felt the brief slice of pain caused by his teeth slipping into my skin. Then his taste and the rush of being bitten sang through me; a mind-blowing pleasure more intense than I could have ever imagined. It hit me with the strength of a tsunami.

I felt his love, his desire, the very essence of who he was blending with me and making us one. I wanted to scream and cry and I needed more than anything to come. All of a sudden, I was hanging on to the precipice with the tips of my fingers, the roaring blackness swirling below me. I couldn't hold on any longer.

In a blinding flash, I released my hold on his leg, felt my fangs slip out of his skin and cried out in ecstasy as my orgasm pounded me senseless. Noah shouted and his arms tightened around my waist. I could feel the wet heat of him pouring out between us.

We both lay there in shock, panting and silent. I couldn't form words to describe what had just happened between us. He'd been right before. What we'd done was so intimate, so vulnerable, that it would have been impossible to share it with anyone other than him.

Eventually I moved, turning and crawling tiredly up to collapse against Noah, my arm flung across his chest. I felt so connected to him, so attuned to every little part of him. It was almost like I could read his emotions, like what we'd done had bonded us to one another. Forever.

Finally he whispered in the dark, "Zack, you awake?"

I lifted my chin and rested it on his chest. Then I moved my hand, which had been resting against the sheet, to entwine my fingers with his.

"Yeah, I'm awake."

"I..."

I could tell he was still trying to fathom the hugeness of what had just happened.

"I know. It's impossible to even describe, isn't it?"

"I feel like we're not two people anymore. Like we're connected—god, you're right. It is impossible to describe."

"I wonder if the bond will fade."

"Maybe. But I think the closer we become, the more intense it will be."

I laughed shakily. "It gets *more* intense? I think that might kill me!"

He chuckled and wiggled his arm under my body to squeeze me close. "Death from pleasure. Is there a better way to go?"

We both smiled in the darkness of the room. The sun was starting to creep in through the miniscule cracks in the curtains. It wasn't unpleasant, just enough light to give the room a kind of ethereal glow.

I closed my eyes, not quite ready for sleep, but happy to bask in the flush of early morning and the warmth of Noah's embrace.

A Life Less Ordinary

It took me a week or so to get used to my new dizzying senses. Every time I touched something, felt a weird breeze, smelled the rancid stench of the hot dog vendors outside, I was thrown. It was hard to regain my equilibrium, even though I was getting better and better at it all the time. I knew that soon, I would feel normal and I wouldn't have any memory of my dull human senses.

The most challenging part of my new body remained the same. It was impossible for me to walk down the streets of Manhattan without running into some woman that I wanted to take a bite out of. There was just too many of them. Restraint was difficult, and I sometimes had to hold my breath if one of them smelled particularly delicious. Noah said I was doing really well but I hated even thinking about attacking some unsuspecting girl...well, hated and loved thinking about it.

Drinking blood was my guilty pleasure. Part of me wished it wasn't so pleasurable, but *god* it was. That first bite into the soft fragrant skin of a woman's neck was better than sex—well at least better than sex with anyone but Noah. Nothing compared to that.

He had been right about the sex too. It was getting more intense. The pleasure and the closeness kept getting stronger. It had gotten to the point where I could feel Noah's emotions most of the time as he could mine. We'd been close before, but now I didn't even have to ask what he was thinking. I couldn't hear his thoughts, but the blasts of emotion that he projected were so strong and clear that there was no doubt what was on his mind.

With anyone else the bond would have scared the hell out of me, even more than the intense feelings during the act. But with Noah I liked it. It was just one more way for me to feel like he was mine. I wanted to claim him in every way possible. Even the thought that we could

potentially be with each other for hundreds of years didn't make me feel anything but happy. He was my forever.

* * * *

"Hey, babe, guess what tomorrow is?"

We'd been lounging on the couch watching some afternoon TV and waiting for the sun to set so we could meet the others at Red (yeah, that was the name of the vampire bar. I know. I didn't name it.)

"I know what tomorrow is. We're not going to make a big deal out of it." He sounded wary.

I rolled my eyes at him. "Uh, yes we are. A guy only turns twenty-one once, even if he is going to live forever. You'll be able to get into a real bar now! We should all go dancing."

He gave me a pained look. "I can't dance. I refuse to dance."

"That's what they all say."

"Please don't tell Leila that tomorrow's my birthday. She'll make it into this huge thing."

I raised my eyebrows in a challenge and pulled my cell out of my pocket. He made a grab for it, I leapt off the couch, and we spent the next twenty minutes or so laughing and chasing each other—which turned into wrestling on the bed and the next thing I knew I was naked and moaning with my legs around Noah's hips as he plunged into me.

Needless to say we were a little late getting out the door.

When we finally did burst out of the building and into the soft summer night, freshly showered and dressed in Noah's designer clothes, I was so focused on him that it took me a minute to realize that something felt off. A small prickle danced along my spine.

"Hey, Noh, stop for a second." We both stood still, then looked around. There was nothing but the muted roar of the city. Neither one of us could see anything. But I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something out there.

Someone out there.

Were we being followed?

“There’s nobody there.” He looked like he wished he could believe it.

We walked a little faster than usual out to the corner to catch a cab. I noticed Noah looking back a few times. I was relieved when a cab finally pulled over and we could slip into the relative safety of its somewhat fragrant backseat.

“Do you really think there wasn’t anyone there?”

“I don’t know. I hope there wasn’t.”

We were quiet for the rest of the ride. I held his hand and tried to relax but I was scared. There was no doubt in my mind that there had been someone waiting for us outside my apartment and there was only one thing that could mean.

The hunters had found us.

* * * *

When we pulled up in front of Red, Noah leaned over and whispered, “Don’t be too obvious about it, but get inside quickly. If one of the Harpers, or any other hunter, is out there than they’ll know better than to start something in a room full of vampires.”

We paid the driver quickly and scooted into the front door of the bar as speedily as possible while still looking nonchalant about the whole thing. Leila, PC, and Jason were waiting for us there, with a very familiar looking brunette. In the midst of my semi-anxiety attack it took me a second to place her. When I did, I felt a wave of embarrassment...as usual.

“Hey boys!” Leila called, waving us to the table.

“Zack, Noah, this is my sister Trista,” Jason gestured.

I turned red (again) and looked at the floor. “We’ve, uh, met already,” I mumbled when I could finally talk. I shot Leila a murderous look. “I didn’t know you two were friends.”

They both laughed.

“She left out a pretty big detail about you too, Zack.” Trista gave Noah a significant look. “I was a little disappointed when she finally told me a few minutes ago, but now I get it.” She fanned herself with a napkin and her and Leila burst into laughter again.

Great. It was going to be one of those nights. I decided to take the focus off of me.

“Hey guess what tomorrow is, guys?” Noah pinched me in the side and I smirked at him. “It’s Noah’s twenty-first birthday!”

True to form, Leila screeched loudly. Jason had to cover his ears and PC just laughed. “Dude, I can’t even take you out and get you drunk. What are we going to do?”

“Nothing is fine with me.”

“Nonsense,” Leila scolded him with a swat.

I decided to go whole hog. “I was thinking dancing. It would be fun.” He pinched me again. I knew I was going to be in for it when we got home.

That announcement garnered another shriek from Leila and a moan from Trista. “I want to go dancing! I’m not even going to be twenty for two more months. It’s not fair.”

Leila rolled her eyes. “Like we can’t get you in. These are not the droids you’re looking for.” She made a little waving motion with her hand and we all laughed.

I was always taken aback how modern Leila sounded. It would be expected for someone who’d lived as long as her to seem all wise and seraphic, but she could have fit right in with the girls I’d lived in the dorms with.

“You’re in big trouble, mister,” Noah teased when the others drifted off to order drinks.

“Hey! You’re in trouble too. Why didn’t you tell me she was Jason’s sister? That would be like you biting Maya!”

Noah made a face. “Luckily that will never happen. Better keep her away from Leila here, though. Anyway, I didn’t know she was Jason’s sister. I’d never met her before.”

“Jason ‘s fine with it,” Leila assured me. “He obviously knows she comes here and she is a big girl after all.” I was about to reply when I heard Noah take in a sharp breath.

Shit.

“Who’s here?” I was afraid to even turn around.

Noah’s look changed from alarmed to confused. “It’s my cousin Colin. He’s a Fitzgerald. From my mother’s side. I haven’t seen him in at least five years.”

A million questions popped into my head, but I knew it wasn’t the time. It was tense for the long moments that it took Noah’s cousin to weave through the crowded room to our table. It was obvious that he was here specifically to talk to Noah. I expected a showdown of some sort.

Well, that wasn’t true. I honestly didn’t know what the hell to expect. What I know for sure I *wasn’t* expecting was that Colin would come right up and envelop Noah in a fierce hug.

After a few moments they pulled apart clapping each other on the back. Colin turned to look at me and Leila curiously.

“Uh, this is Leila, a friend of ours, and this is Zack. He’s my boyfriend.” Noah looked a little unsure, but it obviously didn’t matter.

Colin broke into a huge grin. “Must run in the family. Charlie’s dating guys too.”

Noah’s mouth dropped. “Charlie? Your brother? He’s just a little kid!”

“Sixteen. And more than willing to speak his mind. It gave Mom a heart attack for a day or so, but she’s had a year to get used to it. Anyway, it’s nice to meet you, Zack.” He stuck out his hand and I shook it. So far I was liking the Fitzgeralds a whole lot more than the Harpers.

“What on earth are you doing here, Col?” Noah gave him a long look. I could tell that he was trying to decide how much his cousin knew.

Colin laughed. "I know this is a vamp bar, cousin. And I know you belong in here if you get my drift...don't worry, not going to out you. Family comes before hunting business. That's why I'm here."

Noah sputtered for a second before he got it together in time to answer. "So you're not here to kill me?"

"Nah. We've been watching you for a long time. You're completely non-violent, not that you need me to tell you that. You're still the pansy ass little cousin that I loved to shrink wrap in blankets when we were little."

"You have no idea how good it is to hear you say that—even with the pansy ass remark. You may want to watch your mouth, though. I could totally take you now." He flashed his fangs and they both laughed. "So, I guess you're going to tell me why you are here if it's not to kill me?"

"Yeah. I am. But not in this place. It's too public. Can we go back to your apartment?"

* * * *

The cab ride back was like being stuck with two obnoxious puppies in a box. They punched each other and made dumb jokes. Colin would put Noah in a headlock every minute or two and Noah would have to fight his way out, accidentally elbowing me the whole time. It was slightly annoying and a little bit embarrassing to have the driver stare in the back window, but seeing Noah act so goofy and happy had to make me smile.

I still had a ton of questions but I was hoping to get at least a few of them answered when we got home.

We piled out of the cab, the two cousins barely able to contain themselves long enough to walk to the building like adults. I laughed to myself, glad that Noah had found somebody else who still saw him as the same person he'd always been. We climbed the stairs to my third floor

apartment, both of them continuing to poke and punch at each other the whole time. It wasn't until we were all sitting in the quiet of our apartment that things got serious.

We sat there awkwardly for about thirty seconds in complete silence. I could tell Colin was hesitant to deliver his news and Noah had never been the type to start attacking someone with questions. I decided I was going to have to be the one who started it.

"So what's the deal, Colin?" My voice seemed overly loud in the heavy stillness. Noah was sitting at the kitchen table with me next to him. Colin was at the chair across from us with one of the few remaining sodas clutched in his hands.

"Noah, what do you remember about the night you were turned?"

Noah looked at his cousin in surprise. "I snuck out to follow that group of rouge vampires. I found them and they obviously had no problem taking me down. My parents got there right before the vampires killed me. There was a fight, I got bitten, my parents were both on the ground dead. As soon as the paralysis wore off, I ran for help. My dad's family came and took care of the bodies, and I've been hiding the fact that I'd been bitten ever since. Well, until my grandfather found out a few weeks ago."

"That sounds about right." Colin took a long drink of his Dr. Pepper. "Our family thought that's what happened too. For over two years we assumed the Harpers were telling the truth."

Noah sat up straight. The room was suddenly filled with tension. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't know how else to say it. Your mom's alive, Noah. The Harpers have her in captivity."

Noah's eyes grew wide. The questions exploded silently in the thick night air.

"Why do the Harpers have Mom, Colin?"

"Isn't it obvious? Your mother's a vampire."

Across The Atlantic

I hadn't been on an airplane in years. Not since I was five and we went to Fort Lauderdale to visit my grandma Mimi during spring break. It wasn't my favorite pastime. I have to admit that I wasn't too keen on the thought of all that water either, stretched around us for hundreds of miles in every direction. I was having catastrophic visions of Tom Hanks and a volleyball named Wilson and being stuck in the middle of the ocean while the sun incinerated me into nothing. Flying sucked.

The previous summer I'd been all set to go on a trip to Italy with my art class to study sculpture, but, true to form, I'd chickened out the night before the final payment was due and ended up at the lake with my family against my will. At least I'd gone as far as getting a passport or my ass would be sitting in New York worrying about Noah and not being able to help at all.

"Baby, calm down. It's fine. The pilots have made this same trip hundreds of times." Noah's hand crept into mine and he twined our fingers together. He'd put the armrest up hours before.

I scooted as close to him as I could and pulled our blanket tight. "Not a huge fan of flying."

He chuckled softly and nuzzled his face up to my hair. "I can tell. Only a few more hours."

"Really? How many?"

"Four, I think."

I groaned then realized I was about to start complaining and shut my mouth immediately. I had to remember how Noah was probably feeling. After three horrible years of thinking he was responsible for his mother's death, he got the news that she was alive only to be told that she was a vampire and being held by his father's family in England. I couldn't even imagine what he was going through.

"Is Colin still asleep?"

I looked across the aisle at Noah's cousin who was leaned back in his seat with his mouth hanging open. I laughed quietly and nodded.

Noah drew my hand up to his mouth and kissed my palm softly. "Thank you for coming with us. I don't know if I could have handled this without you."

"Yes you could have but you would never have to. It's you and me till the end, Noah Harper. Someday you'll believe me when I say that, but I'll keep saying it until you do." I poked him in the belly button. "Besides I could never leave you alone on your birthday."

He groaned, laughingly. "At least I'm not at a dance club right now."

"True. I guess flying across the Atlantic to save your vampire mother from your deranged hunter grandfather is way better than being subjected to a night of Madonna and Lady Gaga." I had to make a joke of the situation. It was really the only thing to do when something was so horrible.

Colin had told us that he didn't know exactly what the Harpers were doing with Noah's mother but they thought it had something to do with a serum that they'd been hearing rumors about. The rumored serum was supposed to reverse vampire venom and essentially turn the vamps human again. The Fitzgerald's were afraid that Noah's mother was being used like a lab rat, being injected with dangerous, and possibly fatal concoctions. They knew she was still alive, but that was all. The state of her physical and mental health was a complete mystery.

"I still can't believe what they're doing, to you, to her. I mean isn't it like Colin said? Isn't family more important than hunting?"

Noah shook his head. "The Fitzgeralds have always been different than my dad's family. They've been in the hunting world for nearly as long but it's not so black and white for them. They've dealt with other supernaturals before, ones that the Harpers would kill on sight. I was

surprised by how well Colin reacted to me though. Vampires are typically hated, even by the most liberal of hunters. Maybe this will be the start of a change.”

“Maybe we should focus on saving your mom first, then we can start the vampire social revolution.”

He gave me a sad half-smile and laid his head on my shoulder.

I reached over under the blanket with my free hand and pulled his tank out of the waist of his jeans. I sighed when I felt the velvety smoothness of his skin and let my fingers slip a little bit into his jeans and the warmth within. The gesture wasn't meant to be sexual, just comforting to both of us. He must have been able to tell I was still upset.

“I love you baby. Everything's going to be fine. I promise.”

“You can't promise that. Just don't leave me alone, okay? I don't want to live without you.”

He covered my mouth with his fingers and shook his head. His lips descended on mine in a long fierce kiss. I could feel him trembling. “Never say that again,” he whispered. “I refuse to even consider it. Close your eyes and try to get some sleep. We've got a long couple of days ahead of us.”

“Okay.” I snuggled up to him, holding on tight to the warm skin of his belly. “Love you,” I whispered. Then I closed my eyes and tried to fall asleep.

* * * *

It was raining when we landed in London, which was good since we'd hopped on the first plane out the night before with baseball hats and sunglasses in hand. We'd decided we'd deal with the logistics of a daytime landing when we got there. We kind of figured we were going to have to hide in the airport bathroom or some other windowless room until sunset. As it was, that would be unnecessary, thank goodness. It seemed like luck was on our side, or at least it seemed that England liked us. Maybe it would stay that way.

It took us a while to deal with customs and renting transportation. I'd never dealt with all of the hassles of travel and I was glad to just shuffle along behind the other two and let them make all of the arrangements. We drove to a decent hotel on the outskirts of town. It was tempting to drive straight through and go barging in on the Harper's ancestral home. I'm sure that was what Noah wanted to do, but Colin talked us into resting and making sure we were strong and fed before we attempted any wild heroics.

During the short ride to the hotel I did my best to see a bit of the city I'd been dying to visit since we studied it back in elementary school. For the first time, I felt a little resentment towards the situation. Not towards Noah, never towards Noah. Only towards the stupid bloodthirsty Harpers and whatever evil Dr. Frankenstein plan they were hatching on Noah's mother. *They* were ruining my first ever trip out of the country and to a place I'd always been hoping to go. Of course they were the reason I was there in the first place but I wasn't feeling quite reasonable enough at the moment to consider that.

After a quick check in and an even briefer jet-lagged goodnight from Colin we flopped down on the hotel bed and slowly stripped our clothes off. I had no idea what time it was in New York. If I even tried to start calculating it, my head started to ache. I needed sleep. The few hours of uneasy half napping on the plane hadn't really done it for me. It probably was nowhere near my bedtime at home but the frantic preparations and the long night on the plane had left me exhausted.

I lay on the unfamiliar hotel bed trying to picture the scene that would meet us. We didn't have much in the line of strategy. The Fitzgeralds were operating on rumors and a few fleeting glances of Noah's mother, Bianca Harper. The only thing they were sure of was that she'd been changed to a vampire and she was in England at the Harpers' estate.

No one had even seen her in the weeks it took the Fitzgeralds to locate us after our late night escape to New York. I hoped for Noah's sake that she was okay or he would never forgive himself for leaving her that night, even if he had assumed she was dead.

Noah was squirming next to me, tossing and turning restlessly. I rolled over and pulled him as close as I could, wrapping him tightly in my arms and warming his body with mine. I kissed the back of his neck over and over, whispering about nothing at all and hoping the sounds would soothe him. He needed to be ready.

* * * *

A few hours later, when darkness finally fell I woke to a soft tapping on our door. I jumped out of the bed, ready to move. It took me a few moments to register in my not yet awake brain that I didn't want to throw the door open trustingly before I checked who it was.

"Colin?"

"Yeah, Zack, it's me. Let me in."

I opened the door, but motioned for him to be quiet. Noah was finally sleeping peacefully and I wanted to give him the last few minutes of rest that he could possibly get.

"We gotta get going soon. The Harper's estate is down on the coast and Cornwall is a long way from London. At least four hours. If we're going to make it there, rescue Aunt Bianca and get to safety by sunrise we don't have a second to spare."

I nodded and went to wake Noah. He'd made it sound so easy. I still wasn't convinced of the likelihood that we'd all make it out alive.

Sitting on the bed, I looked at him for a moment, hating to ruin the perfect peaceful image. I reached out and brushed his hair off of his face and ran my fingertips along his jaw.

"Wake up, babe. It's time to get ready." Noah's cornflower blue eyes fluttered open slowly. His hand covered mine and he brought my palm to his mouth for a tired kiss.

“Hey, Colin,” he grumbled softly at his cousin.

I shivered a little. That sexy just-woke-up voice of his had to be my favorite sound in the world.

“We have to get out of here as soon as possible, little man,” Colin said. “Get up and let’s go.”

“I’m moving, geesh—and what’s with the ‘little man’ shit? It’s not my fault that you ended up being like nine feet tall.”

“I’m six three and you’re smaller, which officially makes you the ‘little man.’”

Noah snorted and tossed a pillow at Colin.

Colin laughed and turned to leave. “I’ll have the car ready in fifteen minutes. See you out front.”

* * * *

The drive to Cornwall was long and frustrating. We all wanted to get the coming night over with and having to drive for hours getting more worried and nervous by the mile was painful to say the least. I spent a lot of time looking out the window while the two cousins murmured in the front seat.

Most of the time there wasn’t a whole lot to see. I would have preferred a rainy day to the complete blackness. Unfortunately darkness was pretty much the only part of England I was going to get to see.

“Zack, are you awake?”

It took a minute for me to realize they were talking to me. “Yeah. I don’t think I could sleep if I had to.”

Noah turned and looked at me over the front seat. “We have to talk plans. Try to use what little information we have to come up with a way to save my mom.”

“What do we know?”

"Not much," Colin answered. "We know she's kept in the basement. We can only assume that there is a lab of some sort down there. There've been rumors for years that crazy old Harper was concocting some sort of vampire venom antibody, to change vampires back to humans. No one took it all that seriously, since it's impossible as far as we know, but he seemed to be pretty sure he was on to something."

"And you think Noah's mom is being used as some glorified lab rat?"

"Yeah, that's the basic theory."

Noah put his head in his hand. I reached up and squeezed his shoulder. "We'll get her, Noh."

"From the few sightings we've had, it seems like they've kept her relatively healthy. I'm assuming she'll be in good shape at least physically. She'd be no good to them dead and catching another vampire would be close to impossible. No vampire would be stupid enough to come within a hundred miles of a Harper."

Except us.

"So we need to find this lab where they're holding her and spring the locks to get her out?" It sounded nearly impossible, but at least it wasn't very complicated.

Noah laughed humorlessly. "You forgot the part about us three vampires getting somewhere covered by the time the sun rises."

Okay, it wasn't nearly impossible. It was completely impossible but it had to work. There was no other way.

"What is going to happen to her after we rescue her?"

"I don't know," Noah said. "I mean, my family did want to rescue her but actually harboring a vampire may be too much even for them." He looked at Colin who shrugged.

"We haven't gotten that far. Let's see how she's doing when we get her the hell out of the Harper house."

Rescue

It was a little after midnight when we pulled up to the manor. It made the one back in New York look like a tree house. I couldn't help my mouth from dropping open. Even as far back as we were, the place was overwhelming. It had four floors that I could count and wings shooting off both sides of the massive center structure that seemed to have been carved from a mountain. The drive that stretched in front of us was long and wide and lined with lamps that bobbed in the breeze like Victorian oil lanterns. The whole place gave me a *Sherlock Holmes* kind of vibe. I found myself thinking again that I wished I could have visited under different circumstances.

We pulled the rental car off to the side into the bushes. It would be bad if anybody saw the car and alerted someone to our presence. We were hoping against hope that we could get in and rescue Noah's mom without anyone even knowing we were there. The likelihood of all of us surviving a close quarters' fight with trained hunters was slim to none, so it would be best if there wasn't a fight at all.

Walking low to the ground, the wet grass soaking our pants, we circled around to the back entrance. Noah hadn't been to the house in years, but he remembered there was a staircase to the basement from inside of the kitchen where he used to hide from his cousins who wanted to play dress up with him. The night was pitch black, the clouds covering the moon. It was perfect for our purposes but made the night just that much scarier. We were almost to the kitchen door when there was a shuffling noise and a light flickered on inside. Noah grabbed my shirt and pulled me down, with him and Colin crouching right next to me.

In the window I could see an older woman filling a teakettle and shuffling through the cabinets for a late night snack.

"I remember her," Noah whispered. "She's the head housekeeper. Her bedroom's right next to the kitchen and she'll scream bloody murder if she hears us. When we go in, it has to be totally silent."

Colin and I nodded.

When we finally heard the muffled thump of a door closing, Noah signaled us to go. Noah and Colin got to work trying to pry open a window that was at chest height. I walked quietly around to the other side of the small kitchen courtyard. I didn't want to suggest the obvious to them but decided to try myself and see if the kitchen door was open. I put my hand on the cold brass knob and turned. With a tiny squeak, the door opened.

"Hey guys!" I whispered it as loud as I could. When they turned, I beckoned to the slightly open door. They both grinned and rolled their eyes.

"I'm glad someone's smart," Colin muttered when they got to the doorway. Noah simply kissed my forehead and silently ducked into the room.

Noah pointed to a heavy white door in the corner and we crept through the cavernous old kitchen towards it. The stairs to the basement were dark and felt slightly damp, but we couldn't use any lights at all. I ran my hand along the wall, my sensitive eyes acclimating to the darkness quickly. I thought I had to be imagining the bad feeling that seemed to be seeping out of the walls.

Just because the Harpers saw things in black and white didn't mean they were evil, did it? I couldn't help to think of them that way, though. Anyone who would hurt Noah was a mortal enemy of mine. I didn't give a shit what their reasoning was.

The stairs ended in a dark hallway that seemed to stretch forever into the darkness. Colin gestured for us to stop.

“Okay, if there is a lab, or some sort of holding area, it will be near the east wing. We’ve seen Bianca in the back courtyard by a set of stairs that seem to come from that area over there.” He pointed diagonally to the right.

We both looked at Noah.

“I’ve never been down here before,” he protested. “Don’t look at me. Let’s just head down this hall and hope to hell that there’s a turnoff somewhere.”

We crept down the hallway, listening intently for movement. If nothing else, we had to get to his mother before anyone found us. The closer we got to the area under the east wing, the weirder it started to smell.

“God, what is that stench?” Noah finally whispered.

“Probably some recent incarnation of whatever it is your grandfather’s working on. God, if they’re injecting that shit into Bianca...”

We all knew the implications.

Unconsciously, we all picked up the pace, heading for the disgusting smell. If there was anywhere in the house she’d be, than that was probably it. I reached for Noah’s hand in the darkness to give him comfort. Who knew what we’d find at the end of the hallway?

Eventually, we got to a right turn. We took it walking faster still but trying to remain silent. The hallway was short and by the end of it, we all had our shirts covering our faces except for our eyes. Mine were burning and watery, aching to get to fresh air. I knew we had to continue.

There was a room at the end of the hall, filled with lab tables and beakers, vials of chemicals and test tubes filled with a red liquid that I could only assume was blood. I hated the way the air felt against my skin. Whatever chemical was in those tubes reacted badly making my pores feel like they were tightening and melting together. It was starting to get painful.

How on earth had Noah’s mother been able to stay in here?

“Over there!” Noah exclaimed through his shirt, pointing at what looked like an old-fashioned zoo cage. There was a figure huddled in the corner in faded gray hospital scrubs. She was shivering and her once thick and shiny hair was a corn colored mop sticking in all directions from her head.

“Mom!”

He ran towards her enclosure and shook at the bars, trying to wake her. She lifted her head and stared unseeing for a few seconds before she seemed to understand what was happening.

“Noah, baby? How are you here?” Her voice was so lost and quiet; it made my heart break.

“I doesn’t matter, Mom. Do you know where they keep the keys to this thing?”

“On the hook over by the refrigerator.” She pointed with an emaciated looking hand.

I ran over, grabbed the keys and tossed them to Noah. He unlocked her and rushed in pulling her into his arms. Then he put her arm over his shoulder and helped her out of the cage. It was the first time she noticed there were other people in the room.

“Zachary? Colin? What are you doing here?”

“We’re here to get you, Aunt Bianca.”

“But Colin, I’m a—” She looked humiliated.

“Mom, it’s okay. He already knows. Look at me. Closely.”

She leaned back and took a long look at Noah. Reaching up she cupped his face with tears slipping down her cheeks.

“My little boy? How?”

“The same night as you. They turned us both and killed dad. I thought you were dead until two days ago. That’s when Colin came and told me the Fitzgeralds found you.”

“And Zack?”

“Can we save that for the ride home? It’s a long story.” Noah flashed a grin at me as he spoke and I smiled back.

“Oh,” she whispered. Even in her weak state, Bianca Harper didn’t miss much. “I’m glad. I felt so bad for you boys before.” She took a long breath. “Let’s get the hell out of here. If I never see this place again, it’ll be too soon.”

“We came down from the kitchen. Is there a faster way out?”

Bianca nodded and pointed to a darkened corner.

“That stairwell leads out to a courtyard. It’s not all the way walled in. I tried to run a year ago, but I didn’t get far enough to see how it leads to the road.”

“I guess we figure it out tonight. C’mon, Mom, follow me. Zack and Colin will take the back.”

We filed up the stairs, still trying to be careful and silent. The door at the top of the stairs was old and heavy and creaked so loud it sounded like one of those doors in an old *Darkwing Duck* cartoon. I half expected bats to come flying towards us at any second. We stood, stock still, waiting for barking dogs, lights to turn on.

Nothing. It seemed like we were home free.

“See that dark archway. Go through there.”

We followed Bianca’s lead running through the courtyard which seemed ridiculously large. Noah’s mother was slow, weak from three long years of mistreatment and little blood. We pushed and pulled her along as much as possible but it was frustrating. We’d have been through the gate already on our own.

Suddenly the bricks in front of us shattered as a shotgun slug hit them.

“You’re surrounded! Halt!”

The voice rang out across the night sky. Cold and unfortunately familiar. The reckoning had begun.

"I don't want to hurt anyone, I just want my mother!" Noah called out. "Let us leave and you'll never hear from us again."

Shoes clicked forcefully on the paved yard, echoing across the brick walls.

Grandfather Harper emerged from the darkness, shotgun in hand and an aristocratic sneer on his face. He looked at me and recognition dawned quickly.

"Poor choice bringing that...thing. He'll only slow you down. Two vamps and a hunter may have escaped, but a slutty little human? Not a chance."

That's fucking it. What's with all the slut shit anyway?

I growled and went to lunge but Noah held me back.

"Baby, stop. He's not worth it."

Then he made his voice louder. "Let us go, Grandfather. We're nothing to you. I just want my mom to be safe and to live my life. I'm even hunting rogues still. I'm on your side. Why can you not see that?"

"Because it's against everything that you creatures are." He snapped his fingers and two more figures appeared, walking silently from the darkness.

Noah squinted. "Aunt Sophie? Amanda?"

A beautiful young blonde girl with Noah's coloring looked at her grandfather with accusing eyes. "You didn't tell us it was Noah. You said that vampires were here to rescue her."

"He is a vampire now. Look at him. That's what your precious Noah has become."

Bravely, Noah walked towards his cousin, his hands held out, palm up. "Amanda, look, I'm still me. Exactly the same. Remember when we used to play in the kitchen? Ask Colin. He's a hunter and they've been watching me. I've never killed anyone. I just want to save my mother. Do you know Grandfather's been killing her? Injecting her with chemicals that make my skin burn just being in a room with them? Ask yourself—who's the bad guy here?"

There was only a moment of hesitation then Amanda's exquisite face crumpled in agony. She rushed forward wrapping her arms around her favorite cousin's shoulders. The moment was sweet, trusting. They drew back and grinned at each other.

In a split second Grandfather raised his gun and a shot rang out in the night sky.

After that things seemed to move in slow motion, just like in the movies. I screamed and ran for Noah, every step feeling like a hundred years, watching as he fell to the ground on top of the girl. At the same time, Colin rushed old Harper, wrenching the rifle out of his hands and swinging as hard as he could for his head. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the old man fall lifeless to the ground. At Noah's side, I dropped to my knees, frantically feeling his body for wetness. I felt something sticky and warm on his side and panicked.

"Noah, baby, no! You can't!"

He reached up and covered my hand. "I'm okay. It's just a scratch. He didn't shoot me." Noah raised his hand from his cousin's back. It was covered in blood that gleamed purplish in the dark night.

For a moment I felt the blood lust rushing in, but I controlled it.

"She's dying," he whispered, his eyes huge.

Noah was right. I could hear the girl's heart grinding to a stop. Each beat was getting weaker. "Aunt Sophie!" He looked up at his aunt who had crumbled to the ground crying. "Aunt Sophie!" he called again. She finally looked up. "Amanda's dying. There's only one way I can save her."

Sophie froze, tears coursing down her face, but then she nodded once and looked away, closing her eyes. "Do it."

Noah moved quickly, giving one of her arms to me and taking one for himself.

"We have to turn her fast, before she bleeds too much. It's going to take two of us. You think you can do this?"

I nodded.

“Okay, on my count. One, two, three.”

We both bit in and I concentrated, releasing a stream of venom through my fangs. It was a strange feeling, kind of like Novocain in my mouth. Noah’s cousin let out a blood-curdling scream and then she froze in place. I felt Noah’s hand on my arm, signaling me to stop. I withdrew and she fell, twitching, onto Noah’s lap.

“Darling, it’s okay. You’ll be okay,” Sophie murmured to her daughter and stroked her on the forehead.

Finally, whether from shock or from the venom, Amanda’s eyes rolled back and she passed out.

A New Day

I couldn't believe it was all over.

Grandfather was dead. Noah's cousin, Amanda, was a vampire.

We were in England speeding for London.

There were sheep grazing in the early morning gray. The house on the hill had a red roof. The only way that things made any sense was if I kept repeating facts. Little facts, huge revelations. Everything was okay as long as I just went over them again and again in my mind.

The car was warm; heat blasting to combat the shock that every single one of us had to be feeling. Noah and I were in the front and Colin shared the back seat with Noah's mother and an unconscious but alive Amanda. Noah's aunt had asked us to take her. She couldn't stand to watch her daughter die, but couldn't live with her being a vampire either. I hoped she acted out of protection when she asked us to make Amanda disappear. I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

When we reached the hotel where we'd stayed the night before, Colin went to check back in while the rest of us huddled behind the tinted windows of the sedan we'd rented. After he returned, we pulled around to the back entrance and made a run for it, carrying Amanda between Noah and I.

The few moments in the sun hurt my skin and made my eyes burn, but soon we were in the comfortably artificial light of the elevator. I looked over at Noah, at his mother, his hunter cousin and the poor girl slumped between us who had no idea what she was going to wake up to. I didn't know quite what to say. Noah reached behind his cousin and rubbed my back for a brief moment.

How could he be so selfless that he still worried about me when his family was in such turmoil? I loved him for it.

When we got to the room, Noah's mother curled up with Amanda on one of the beds and Colin took the cushioned recliner. I made sure the door was bolted and the curtains were stretched all the way over the windows before I lay down on the empty bed and reached my hand out for Noah to join me.

He looked a little lost, like he didn't know what to do either. I pulled on his hand until he crawled in the bed next to me. I wrapped my entire body around his and squeezed tight, hoping that I could do something to make the night even a little bit okay.

"I love you. You are so amazing," I whispered against his neck. He covered my hand with his.

"I love you too, baby. Thank you for being everything you are."

* * * *

I woke to the sound of quiet conversation. Somehow I'd been shifted so I was lying horizontally across the bed with my head in Noah's lap. His hand was sifting through my hair absentmindedly. Noah's mother was sitting cross-legged right in front of me. She'd showered and was wearing a pair of Noah's sweats and one of my t-shirts. Already, she looked a million times better. She smiled at me when she noticed I was awake.

"Hey," I mumbled, sitting up and rubbing my eyes. Noah cupped my chin and gave me a soft kiss.

It was slightly embarrassing at first to kiss right in front of his mother but as soon as his lips touched mine I forgot there was anyone else in the room. When our mouths drifted apart it took me a few seconds to realize I was looking at him with a lovesick smile on my face. It took way less time for me to realize I didn't care.

"You two are so beautiful together." She said it quietly, still looking apologetic. "Noah told me you just found each other again. I can't tell you how sorry I am for what happened."

I blushed a little and leaned against him. “It’s okay, Mrs. Harper, really. We may have had an awful three years, but now we get to be together for so much longer than we would have before. I can’t really be sorry for that.”

“Call me Bianca, Zack. I think we’ve probably gotten past the formalities.” She looked at Noah. “Besides, that was something I wanted to talk to you about.” There was a silence as she formulated her words. I could tell it wasn’t easy. “I loved your father—you know that. But I think I’m going to go back to being a Fitzgerald. After what they did to me I can’t stand being connected to that family any longer. Is that okay with you?”

“Of course it is, Mom. No one’s going to judge you for wanting to forget what happened. Anything you can do that will help, I’m all for it.”

She smiled and reached out to caress his cheek. “Thank you, darling. I can’t believe how much you’ve grown up.”

“Where are you going to go?” he asked. “To the apartment in the city? The lake house?”

“No. Colin and I were talking while you were still asleep. I think I’m going to stay with your grandparents for a little while, get my feet back under me so to speak. I do need to find somewhere for Amanda to go, though.”

“She can stay with us,” I said. “I’ll move the computer stuff out to the living room.”

Noah twined his fingers with mine and squeezed. “We can do that, or I was also thinking of giving PC a call. He has another empty room and it might be nice for Amanda to have a woman around. Things may be different for her than they were for us.”

I noticed all of a sudden that the room was missing one extra-large hunter. “Where did Colin go?”

“To get food, and some clothes for my mom. He should be back soon. We’re just waiting for Amanda to wake up, then we’ll take it from there.”

“How much longer till she wakes up?”

Noah shrugged. “A few hours, maybe a little more. I don’t think we put as much venom in her as I did when I bit you.”

The door opened and Colin staggered in under a mound of shopping bags. “These are for you, Auntie.” He piled bags at her feet from a number of different clothing stores. “And these are for everyone—well except for me. It may not be your favorite kind, but it’s going to have to do. Can’t have you guys passing out on me.”

The bags were filled with little pouches of blood. Immediately, I felt a sharp pang of thirst.

“Where did you get these?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Hunters always know where all the good vampire bars are.”

* * * *

We stayed in that night, waiting for Amanda to wake. I got a kick out of watching British TV on the hotel set, and Noah beat Colin at about twenty different card games before Colin realized Noah was cheating and gave up. Bianca was happy to take another long shower and trim and blow-dry her hair before she put on new jeans and a sweater from the pile that Colin had bought her.

It was close to dawn when Amanda finally started to mumble in her sleep and move. Noah and I had been lounging next to each other on the bed, Colin was napping on the big cushy chair again. Bianca had gone down to the hotel gift shop for a few minutes. I got the feeling that it was going to be hard for her to stay in an enclosed room for a long time. Those kinds of things took years to get over.

Amanda went from barely stirring to sitting up in about two seconds. She looked confused. I vividly remembered how different everything felt the first time I woke up as a vampire.

“What the hell?” The first words out of her mouth clashed with her angelic face. It made me laugh for a second before I smothered it.

Noah leaped up and went to sit next to her on the bed. “Hey there, how are you feeling?”

“What happened, Noah?”

“Um, Grandfather—”

Memory dawned on her beautiful face. “Oh, yeah. That bastard shot me. Why am I not still hurt and why do I feel so weird?”

“Because I turned you. It was the only way, Amanda. You would have died.”

“Turned me? You mean, I’m a vampire now?”

Noah nodded.

I waited for her to freak out. She hadn’t wanted it like I did. I expected tears, anger, fear. What I didn’t expect was for a huge smile to break out across her face.

“This is perfect!” She jumped up and pumped her fist in the air once before she swayed a little and sat. “I was so tired of Grandfather and all of his shit. Now they’ll stay as far away from me as they have from you. Oh, I’ve missed you so much, Noah!” She dove forward and gave him a huge hug.

I could feel the relief emanating from his skin. “I missed you too, munchkin. I can’t believe how tall you’ve gotten.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not twelve anymore. I turned eighteen last month, you know.”

Noah laughed. “So physically, we’re the same age, now.”

I groaned. “Please, don’t remind me that I’m with a teenager!”

Noah turned to me with a grin. “I can’t believe I forgot. Amanda, this is my boyfriend, Zack. I think you met him once a long time ago.”

“Isn’t he the one who helped you fill all my shoes with dirt?”

We both laughed out loud. That had been one of my favorite afternoons ever.

“That’s me. I promise it won’t happen again.”

“Listen, Amanda. You obviously can’t go back to Grandfather’s house, and it sounds like you don’t want to anyway. Zack and I were thinking you could come stay with us in New York.”

She gave us a long look. “Is there another choice? No offense cousin, but I don’t really want to be intruding on the love nest, even if you two were nice enough to invite me.”

Noah smiled. “I think so. Let me make a phone call.”

Over For Now

We were home. It felt like we'd been gone for months but it hadn't even been four days since we were sitting in the bar with our friends and teasing Noah about going dancing on his birthday. The whole world looked different through eyes that had seen all of the insanity we'd experienced in the past few days.

As soon as the front door closed, we dropped our backpacks and Noah pulled me into a loose comfortable embrace. We'd dropped Amanda off with PC and Leila and stayed for an hour or so until we were sure that she was going to be fine. From what we saw, she fit in perfectly already.

"Is it really over?" I whispered.

"For now. As far as permanently, I doubt it. There will always be some lunatic hunter with a vampire death wish to deal with. And there will always be rouges to get rid of."

"But that's just normal stuff for us. Every day life, right?"

"Yeah. Back to the daily grind."

"What are we going to do?" It felt weird not to have a huge threat hanging over our heads.

"You've got classes starting in a few weeks, right? And I've still got hunting work."

"You're going to keep doing that?"

"I'm good at it." He shrugged. "And it pays well. Helps with the designer jeans addiction for sure."

I rolled my eyes at him. Designer jeans? That was a bunch of crap. His real addiction was the danger. He loved being a hunter.

"What about now that the others know you're a vampire?"

"I have a feeling things are going to be a little different with the Fitzgeralds on our side and Amanda. I have a feeling the Harpers are going to be singing a different song pretty soon. Sophie knows we're on the right side."

"Even so, you're not going out alone. I'd never get a second's sleep with you god-knows-where and in danger."

He winked at me. "Every good hunter needs a partner, right?"

I smiled and laid my head on his shoulder. We swayed silently for a few minutes slow dancing to nothing and not caring at all that there wasn't any music.

"Hey, you're dancing," I finally whispered, leaning back to smile at him again.

"I like this kind."

"I'm going to get you to a dance club before the summer's over." I swatted him gently on the butt and he laughed.

"You better work quickly. I think I can feel a chill in the air."

"Don't worry. I'll have help." I thought of something I'd been meaning to ask since we left England. "Are you sure you're okay with your mom changing her last name back to Fitzgerald? I mean, does it feel weird for you because of your father?"

"No, I 'm okay. I know she loved Dad and I understand why she's doing it. I honestly don't want anything to do with those bastards either but I've always been Noah Harper and I don't know what other name I would use."

"I do." It was out before I'd even thought it completely. Damn mouth got me in trouble all the time. My stomach flipped violently. "Noh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

I was cut off by his lips crushing down on mine.

"Are you really ready for that?" he whispered when we pulled apart.

I laughed softly and cupped his face between my hands shaking it a little. “I wanted to become a vampire because one lifetime would never be enough with you. You’re my love, my life, my family. Of course I’m ready. But if you’re not, then we can just pretend I never brought it up.”

He gave me a sweet lingering kiss and withdrew, smiling. “I am. I have been for a long time. By the time I was old enough to realize what love was I knew I loved you. I want to be yours forever.”

“Hold on.”

He probably thought I was nuts, but I suddenly remembered something I’d been holding on to for a long time. I dashed to my dresser, where I’d hidden a small blue velvet pouch. When I got back, Noah was standing in the same position, looking at me curiously.

“I got this for you a long time ago. It seems like the right time for you to finally have it.” I shook the little pouch and a braided silver ring fell out, gleaming on my palm. “See, it matches my necklace.”

“It’s beautiful, Zack.” He held out his hand and I slipped the ring onto his finger. Then I brought his hand up and put it against the charm on my necklace. I couldn’t believe how serious, how real, the moment felt.

“Noah *Parker*, I will love you until the very last breath I take.”

He shuddered and wrapped his arms around me as tight as he could. “Longer than that.”

Then he took my hand and led me to our bedroom and the bed where we first tasted each other’s dreams and desires. He undressed me and I him, our clothes falling to the floor, our bodies colliding dreamily, languorous and slow.

We didn’t feel any urgency at first, just relief that we were both alive and together and safe for the foreseeable future. I loved his hands on me, and the small chill of the ring that hadn’t quite warmed to his body yet. Every time it brushed against me I smiled at the reminder of the

promises we'd just made. It felt different being with him after what had just happened in the hall. Every touch, every kiss, was saying *mine forever*, like I was branding him in a thousand invisible ways.

When he rolled us over and hugged my hips with his thighs, I moaned.

"Make love to me." He whispered it in my ear before he bit down on my earlobe hard.

I couldn't help it. My fingers clutched in his hair and I pulled, arching his neck for my lips and my teeth. "How do you want it? Here?" I bit gently at the skin, barely drawing blood. Just a drop of the violently delicious liquid on my tongue made me shudder.

"Yes," he groaned.

"How 'bout here?" I slithered down his body and took his straining shaft deep into my mouth.

"*God*, yes."

"What about here? Do you want this?" I pushed into him with one wet finger. He arched his back and cried out.

"Quit teasing, I want you."

He pulled at my shoulders, head back and eyes half lidded and hazy. I still couldn't believe that this gorgeous man wanted me forever. I crawled up him and felt his legs surround me again. I hooked my elbows under his knees and leaned forward to tangle our tongues in a kiss. Rolling my hips against him, I teased both of us for long breathless seconds. I loved the feeling of us sliding against each other hard and damp and turned on to the point of incoherency. He grabbed on to the wrought iron headboard and cried out.

"Fuck, Zack. Now. I need you in me!"

I plunged my tongue into his mouth and fumbled blindly for the lube resting on our night table. Finally Noah stretched out impatiently and grabbed it himself. He poured some in his hand

and reached between us to massage the slickness all over me. I could feel the rush of my orgasm careening towards the surface.

“Oh, god, Noh. Stop. I’m going to come before I’m even inside.”

He gave me a sexy smile then lifted his hips and guided me to the place we both wanted me to be. I moaned one long continuous moan for the entire descent into him. He was so warm, so velvety soft and tight that I could barely take a whole breath.

“You feel like heaven,” I whispered into his ear as I pulled him closer and shifted us so I would hit his sensitive prostate with every stroke. He couldn’t even reply. He breathed and moaned and tossed his head, lifting his hips every time I withdrew and pushed back into his warmth. I trembled violently, unable to hold it in.

I brought his palm to my lips and bit down on the flesh beneath his thumb until his warm blood flowed, juicy on my tongue. The combination of his flavor and the incredible heat of his body had me teetering on the edge of oblivion. I leaned closer and offered my neck to him. One little taste was all it took. With the bond complete, our pleasure exploded. Noah’s muscles clamped down on me and he moaned against my skin. His hips started to buck violently and a few seconds later I felt the warmth of his release on my stomach. I couldn’t hold it back. I squeezed my eyes shut and arched my back as my own release rolled through me like a summer storm.

We collapsed against each other grinning and slick, trying to catch our breath. Finally he spoke.

“That was one hell of a wedding night.”

We both laughed and I nuzzled his neck with my lips.

“I can’t wait for more just like it.”

He slid his hand up my chest until his ring was touching my necklace again. I swear for a second I could feel a little jolt, like some part of the universe was telling me we were meant to be. Maybe it was in my head. I'll probably never know for sure. I pulled him close for a long kiss, then settled against the pillows holding him in my arms.

We lay together silently just happy to exist. He traced the patterns in my necklace with his fingertips. I memorized his face with mine. Every once in a while we would kiss, slow and soft, rubbing noses and cheeks together. Finally, when we couldn't move at all, our tired but happy bodies twined together and we fell asleep smiling and whispering, "I love you," as the first pale rays of sun painted the eastern sky.