

THE IMMORTAL'S KISS  
BOOK 1 OF THE DAWN OF VAMPIRES



MARTHA WOODS

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(Book 1 of Dawn Of The Vampires)

Martha Woods

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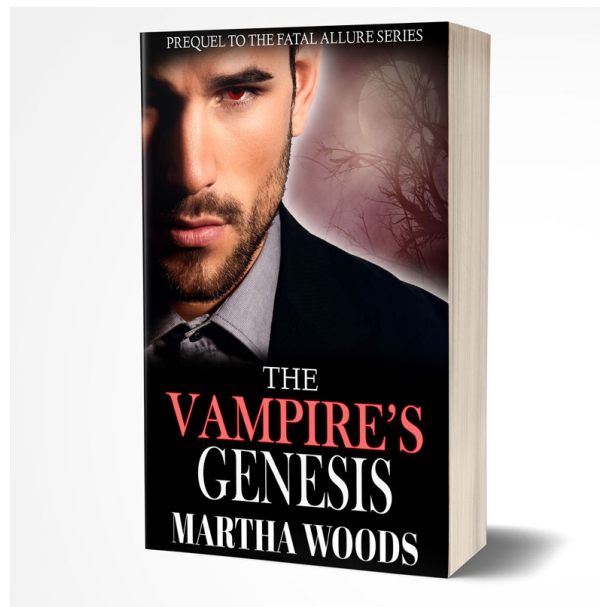
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## CHAPTER 1



The street fair continued to buzz with the energy of people drunk on craft beer and artists making more cash than they would all year. Plastic white booths lined the entire lawn of Pack Square Park, filled with handmade crafts such as woodwork, jewelry, quilts, and anything else you could sell for an exorbitant amount of money. Tessa's table, a round stool with a purple, velvet cloth and a glass paperweight that mimicked a crystal ball, was tucked well away from the main thoroughfare, but she'd had a steady amount of clients since arriving that morning. They knew she would come every October as the leaves changed and the air grew crisp. They came, nervous and full of questions about the future. She had no real answers for them, but she could sound convincing with the tumble of thoughts always pouring from their minds, a relentless current that pummeled her if she wasn't careful.

Her lower back ached from sitting so long, and her flask of bourbon had long run dry. It was about time to call it a day. She'd told at least ten widows their husbands loved them and wanted them to be happy. All she had to do was listen for the lament that played like a scratched record in their thoughts. Once a widow heard her husband's name pass Tessa's lips, they tended not to question her anymore. She overcharged several drunk jackasses and claimed to see a vision of their adultery. Their insecurity lay just beneath the surface, and she could usually string together two convincing names from their anxious thoughts. She'd also had a handful of giggling teenagers, an old man who'd simply hit on her, and a little boy who wanted to know if his dog would come back. She'd made several hundred dollars. The festival ran three Saturdays in a row. She'd stay one more before moving on. She hadn't quite

settled on where she wanted to go next. She was leaning towards Texas. She didn't like snow much, and winter was already making an appearance in the early morning as frost clung to the grass and trees.

Tessa moved to take down her small sign, which simply read *Psychic*. She did not display her name, her contact information, or her fee. She preferred anonymity and flexibility. For the old widows, she only charged twenty dollars. For the drunkards, forty. For the fervent believers of the occult, a hundred bucks or more. They were crazy. Tessa might be able to read minds, but these assholes believed in witchcraft and shapeshifting and vampires.

When she turned back to the table, a man sat across from her. She jumped, startled.

“Shit, you scared me,” she said.

The man now sitting across from her smirked. “You don't sound much like a psychic,” he said. His voice was low, and there was the tiniest bit of grit to it that she liked. He had chestnut brown hair that was cut short to accent a sexy widow's peak. His skin was ghostly pale and his eyes were a piercing emerald green that sent a tingling sensation across her skin as they raked over her. Even in the dim light, she could see the flecks of gold near his pupils. He looked delicious. Tessa sized him up and decided it had been a while since she'd indulged in a passing tryst.

“You think you know all about psychics?” she countered, and sat down, offering a mischievous smile that was borderline flirtatious.

His thin pink lips curved slightly in amusement. His thoughts flirted with attraction, but she felt the weight of his condescension. He thought she was silly. She was going to overcharge his handsome ass.

“Enough,” he said. He reached for his wallet, pulled out a hundred-dollar bill, and put it on the table in front of her, raising an eyebrow as if in challenge. That challenge echoed in his thoughts.

“Two hundred,” she countered, sitting back and crossing her arms. Another hundred-dollar bill appeared.

“Thank you,” she said with a sly smile as she palmed the bills. “What's

your name?"

"Kristian," he said.

"Alright, Kris," she said. He flinched at the informal nickname. Tessa bit back a smile at ruffling his posh feathers. "Let's do this."

She put both of her palms down on the table on either side of her fake crystal ball and closed her eyes. She waited for his thoughts to unravel, loosening like a knot in a cord. When she first met someone, she was often slapped with a barrage of thoughts, visions, and feelings all at once, no form to be had. The more she got to know someone the more she could read until eventually, she could hear every tiny thought that passed between their ears. She hadn't been close enough to someone for years for that to be the case. And as far as her business went, if she let people sit in silence long enough, their thoughts would align themselves into some semblance of readable order.

"You don't need to ask me any questions first?" he said, surprise creeping into his gravelly voice.

"Shh." She hushed him and continued to listen, suppressing a smile when she could feel his mild confusion. Most psychics would play mind games, asking leading questions in order to cold read. She combed through vague feelings and a few random thoughts she couldn't pull enough context from to be of use. She waited. He grew impatient. He crossed his arms over his chest in the peripherals of her vision. Then, like finding the missing puzzle piece, she put together something that could be useful.

"I'm getting something," she said. His arms loosened. "I'm picking up on a...Veronica. You're close to her. You feel protective of her. You're worried about her. You fear they are coming."

Before a breath had passed, he'd grabbed her wrist so violently she cried out.

"The hell!" she cursed.

He yanked her towards him, toppling the stool between them. The fake crystal ball toppled to the floor with a crack. "Who are you?" he hissed.

"Jesus," she said, breathless with pain. It felt like he might snap her wrist.



“Let go of me, asshole.”

He didn't. His eyes bored into her with such vicious, unveiled hatred she almost withered. But *fuck* this guy. She took a deep breath through the pain and brought the heel of her other hand up, intent on breaking his nose. She'd lived on the streets long enough to learn self-defense. He caught her other wrist easily, and suddenly her back was against the brick wall. His enormous hand closed around her throat, and her feet dangled an inch above the ground. Her vision blurred, ears ringing.

“Who are you?” he repeated, the grit in his voice no longer sexy. It sent a terrifying chill through her.

She couldn't breathe, much less answer him. Fear gripped her, and she could not tell if it was her own or his. He glared at her. The golden flecks burned like a flame. It was the last thing she saw.

\* \* \*

TESSA OPENED her eyes and groaned as a sharp throbbing reached her temples. She blinked a few times, her vision tilting. She sat up slowly. She found herself on a leather sectional in front of a blazing fire. Tessa peered around the penthouse studio, taking in the windows hidden behind heavy drapes and the wood door that looked as though it had been taken straight off a castle. She could see the end of a claw foot tub peeking out from behind a silk screen that could have been an ancient Chinese artifact. Artwork warmed otherwise white walls and cold, hard lines created by concrete and granite.

She could get out of here. She had escaped before. The door would be easiest, but she'd settle for crawling out a window if she could.

Her attacker sat on the other side of the couch, watching her with an intense gaze. His tall, lean physique looked at ease.

“You fucking kidnapped me?” she said, flinching as her head responded to her own raised voice with a piercing pain. “Dick move, man.”

“You didn't answer my question,” he said casually, apparently unimpressed with her vulgarity.

“What's it to you?” she asked, glaring at her assailant

“Why didn’t you fight back?” he asked, standing and approaching her with a graceful, controlled movement that surprised her. He was tall. Tall men often appeared gangly, but there was a grace to him despite his size.

“I tried,” she said. “And I will again if you get any closer.”

“You’re just human, aren’t you?” he said, eyes suddenly thoughtful.

She gaped at him. Shit.

“Jesus Christ,” she said. “I didn’t take you for one of the crazies. My mistake. Look, I’m not a real psychic.”

“If you aren’t a psychic,” he leaned forward, “then how can you explain what you told me?”

Tessa chewed her lip. He was one of them, one of the damned crazies that believed in the impossible. What would he do to her if she told him what she could do? He’d already gone through the trouble of kidnapping her for fuck all reason.

Finally, Tessa shrugged. “It was a shot in the dark, man.”

Kristian’s eyes narrowed, green eyes going dark. He wasn’t having it.

“You mean to tell me you plucked the name Veronica out nowhere? That it wasn’t already whispered in your ear?”

Tessa threw her hands up in the air. Frustration boiled inside of her. “Sure, man. Just...just let me go.”

He ignored her request to stay away from her. Suddenly, he was sitting next to her and reaching a gentle hand out to brush the bruise quickly forming on her neck.

“Don’t touch me,” she growled and moved away.

Her wrist was in his hand before she could register that he moved at all. He yanked her close to him, his green eyes boring into hers. She could catch words racing through his mind.

Witches.

Calder.

“Dude, I didn’t sign up to deal with witches.”

“Excuse me?” Kristian jerked back. Realization dawned on his face, eyes opening wide. “I’ve never met a human who could...” He trailed off, his thoughts revealing more than he probably intended. Like the fact, he didn’t believe he was human.

“You aren’t...human? If you’re not human, what are you?” she asked, skeptical. This guy could believe whatever he wanted. He just needed to leave her the hell alone. Tessa eyed the door on the other side of Kristian. If she ran to it, would it be locked?

He cocked his head as if considering whether or not to indulge her request. This annoyed her. She needed to distract him. If she could feed his fantasy, maybe it would give her enough time to run for it.

“The undead,” he said, that smug smirk she’d seen before replaying across his features.

“Zombie?” she scoffed. Tessa prayed this guy didn’t have a collection of brains in his fridge.

“Vampire,” he corrected.

“Right,” she said, and gingerly stood up. She didn’t feel dizzy anymore. It was time to get the hell out of here. Tessa stepped on the coffee table, launching herself toward the door. It was almost within reach. Elation filled her.

*Later, crazy.*

She reached for the door knob. She didn’t even blink and suddenly, he was in front of her.

“I cannot let you leave,” he said, almost apologetically, but not quite. He was curious. He was eager. He was attracted. He was still condescending. But of all things, he wasn’t sorry.

Fear rose in her chest again. “What do you want?” she asked, wary of tipping the crazy too far.

“You don’t believe in vampires?” he asked, chuckling. She expected his

laugh to be deranged, but it was a pleasant sound. “You literally read minds, but you don’t believe in vampires?”

“I consider my...ability...an evolution of the human brain. It was bound to happen at some point. We can only access, what, four percent of our brains? But vampires are...vampires,” she said. She backed away from him slowly. She wondered if the best tactic was to feed into his delusion or call him on it.

“If you’re a vampire, prove it,” she said. If this went poorly, she had a knife tucked into her boot at least.

He met her fierce gaze with an un-suppressed amusement.

“Move in front of the fire. Back to the flames, please,” he instructed.

“Are you going to push me in?” she asked, not moving.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Indulge me.”

She huffed, annoyed, but did as he asked.

“Observe,” he said, pointing to her shadow as it danced and flickered over the area rug.

“So? What’s your point, Peter Pan?” she said, crossing her arms. He came to stand next to her. She edged away as he approached. He took her place in front of the fire. No shadow appeared. She sucked in a breath. “Jesus Christ.”

“Not exactly,” he said, smug and satisfied. “I would show you my fangs, but it would put me in a hunting mood, and you are a temptation I do not wish to indulge in.”

She eyed him suspiciously as she digested the information. He was right. She could read minds, and although she’d assigned this ability to a freak glitch in DNA, something inside of her easily accepted the supernatural alternative. It strangely made her feel better, less isolated.

“Right,” she said, sitting back down on the couch. “Well, are you going to kill me?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head and offering a seductive smile. “It has been years since I killed. With financial means...anything can be bought on

the black market. It has a bitter taste, but it is preferable to living in the shadows to avoid persecution and death. Humans are quite upset when their own get killed. Besides, humans aren't the only ones who have evolved. Killing is a pointless, animalistic pastime. We have long outgrown its necessity."

His thoughts reflected his words as truth.

"Fine," she said. "So can I leave?"

"Afraid not," he shook his head. "You are either a gift or a threat, one that I have yet to figure out. If the Calder sent you to read our minds, to report to them on our intended movements, then I cannot let you run back to them. If you aren't...then you are too rare for me to release back into the world, yet."

Tessa swallowed hard. She'd been running for a long time. It had finally caught up with her, even if this wasn't what she expected.

"You have no more questions?" he asked. He still stood in front of the fire, regarding her as if he were truly seeing her for the first time. His eyes lingered on her short, muscular legs and her narrow torso. She was wearing skinny jeans, a tank top, and a gypsy-esque pashmina. His assessment continued, traveling over her breasts and finally landing on her olive face, dark coffee eyes, and thick black hair, braided intricately and hanging nearly to her waist. She let him look. She couldn't help but like the hunger in his eyes. She often had men stare, but never quite like that.

*He's a... what? A vampire?* She reminded herself. She glanced back to where his shadow could be, barely believing it. It could be a trick of the light, mirrors placed somewhere within the studio. Or, he could be telling the truth. She didn't particularly want to stay to find out.

"While I demand that you stay here, I promise that I will treat you as a guest until you decide to cross me. Consider yourself warned, if you do in fact work for the Calder."

She considered it. She normally camped just outside the city. She had an old hatchback that carried the teardrop trailer she'd purchased a few years ago. But she hadn't had a proper shower in weeks, and she couldn't even

remember the last time she'd slept in a real bed.

"Why do you want me to stay?" she asked.

"You fascinate me," he said and took a step closer to her. His eyes devoured her. His thoughts did too. She felt drawn to him in a strangely kinetic way. And he felt it too, even if he thought that she was the enemy. His thoughts tickled her skin each time he lost track of his accusations.

"Here's what's going to happen, Dracula," she said, jabbing her pointer finger into his chest to push him back. "I need a place to stay, and you kidnapped me. So, I'm going to stay the night. I'm going to start by taking a bath." She pointed to the claw foot tub. "And you are either going to order or cook dinner. Then...we can get to know each other a little better."

He grinned, and she thought her chest might crack from the pressure of her heart's increasing rhythm. Damn him for being so beautiful.

\* \* \*

SHE LINGERED in the bath longer than she intended, but the salts she'd found sitting on the edge of the tub created a tingling on her skin that felt glorious and being so immersed in hot water tempted the soul to drown. But when her stomach growled loudly, she finally relented and stepped out of the tub. She dressed again, leaving the pashmina draped over the screen, and stepped out barefoot in her jeans and tank top.

She had a moment to peer at the door longingly again. What had happened to her booth? Had her trailer been towed yet? He appeared by her side immediately and offered her a glass of red wine.

"Thank you," she said and made her way to the table. He'd cooked for her while she bathed. He'd barely made a noise in the kitchen as he did so, but she smelled the bacon and her stomach rumbled in response. She sat down in front of a beautiful display of eggs benedict, asparagus, and fresh fruit.

"Do you eat human food?" she asked, picking up a fork.

"I do not," he replied, watching her intently as she took her first bite. She refrained from moaning in pleasure. The thick cut bacon was sweet and peppery all at once. She did not want to offer him the satisfaction. "It has no

taste for me.”

“And yet you cook?” she said, taking another large bite. She hadn’t eaten all day.

“I do. I like finding ways to occupy my time.” He moved to sit down next to her.

She nodded and took a sip of her wine.

“You still have not told me your name,” he reminded her.

She chewed on her lip. It might have been the wine. Or it could have been the long soak in the bath salts that addled her brain, but she found herself speaking. “Tessa Burch.”

She could have sworn she saw him mouth her name, his lips parting for a split second.

“Where, may I ask, are you from?” he asked. Even sitting next to her, his body was aimed at her as if he could not pull away. His knee touched the outside of her thigh and sent a different tingling sensation over her skin.

“California originally,” she said. “But I left when I was sixteen. Been traveling ever since.”

“Sixteen? That is young these days. How old are you now?”

“Twenty-five,” she said, observing his reaction in her peripheral vision. But he did not react, he just continued to stare at her intently.

“When did your powers manifest?” he asked. She noticed how still his hands were, resting in his lap. He did not fidget. He was like a statue, a very chiseled, beautiful statue.

“As a girl. I didn’t know what was happening,” she explained, weighing how much she wanted to share. “I told my parents and they had me committed.”

He frowned sympathetically. She hated sympathy. It had been written across her parents faces every time they visited her. It had been in the eyes of the nurses that escorted her to therapy.

“How old are you?” she countered, shifting the focus away from her. She was done talking about herself.

“Almost two hundred,” he said. Tessa wasn’t prepared for the thoughts that came spilling from his mind. Images of a world she didn’t recognize assaulted her. Women wore long dresses, horse drawn carts fought for space on the road amongst the bulky cars.

She gave a low whistle. *What the hell was that?*

“And what happened after you were committed?” he asked, returning the focus to her.

She shifted uncomfortably. “My parents were in a car accident somewhere out of state. I became a ward of the state. I knew that I was fucked if I didn’t get my shit together so I pretended to get better. They released me into the foster system. I ran away at sixteen,” she said, her words matter of fact so that he couldn’t hear the bitter loneliness that filled her. “And that wraps up my tragic little story.”

He caught her hand. Without adrenaline coursing through her, she noticed that his hands felt as if they were formed from marble, very cold marble. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it softly, not on the top of her hand but on her palm. She felt the slightest prick of pain, but it vanished before she could think more of it.

“I’m very sorry,” he said.

Pity, she could not handle, but seduction was familiar territory. He let go of her hand. She cleared her throat, attempting to regain control of her rapid heart. He smiled, smug as ever.

“Are you finished?” he asked.

She nodded and finished the last of her wine. “It was delicious, thank you,” she said and attempted to take her plate to the kitchen. He put a hand out to stop her.

“It’s fine,” he said. “Leave it. Would you like more wine?”

She accepted a second glass and without asking permission, made her way



to the couch. She could throw the glass and run to the door. But he'd been faster last time.

“How does one become a vampire?” she asked, tucking herself into the corner of the sectional. He sat on the opposite end of the couch, but his body still pointed toward her like he was a compass and she was due north.

He cocked his head in amusement. Beneath the surface, his thoughts bled pain and regret. His feelings were becoming more distinct to her, his mind unravelling for her more and more with each passing moment. Normally that would take months. And she did not plan on knowing this man, this vampire, for months, a fact she strangely regretted. This would be one hell of a night, and then she would be gone. That was what she did. That was who she was. It was too hard to know everything. Too painful.

“I met a woman. I was easily seduced. She kept me in her bed as a human for several months. She grew attached to me, like a pet. There were others. When she grew tired of them, she killed them. Knowing this would be my own fate, I fashioned a rudimentary stake with plans to kill her in her sleep. She grew tired of me more quickly than I anticipated and bit me after a hunt that proved unsatisfactory. I killed her before she could kill me, but it was too late,” he said. His face grew darker for a moment, but then he shook his head and added, “It is a rather painful transformation.”

She could feel in his thoughts, despite his detached presentation of the story, that he had loved this woman.

“Have you turned others?” she asked.

His green eyes flashed tumultuously. “My sister.”

“Veronica?” Tessa guessed.

He gave a curt nod.

“Who is after her?” she asked, sipping her wine. She was almost finished with her second glass. She felt contentedly warm, and the desire for the creature before grew as her inhibitions lowered.

His perfect lips pressed together. She'd reached her twenty questions limit. She put her wine glass down and stood up. He watched her warily. She

produced a sly smile and snaked her way towards him until she stood above him.

“I won’t tell anyone your secrets if you won’t tell anyone mine,” she said, sincerity sneaking into her words.

She caught glimpses of images, his lips upon hers, his hands ripping away her clothing. Her face warmed and not just from the wine. Her nipples hardened when she caught an image of his mouth upon them, sucking gently. She could no longer tell if what she felt was by her own choice. There was a sudden urge in her to run her fingers through his earth-toned hair.

She stood abruptly, wine sloshing from her glass.

The images stopped hailing her and Kristian had the decency to look ashamed. Well, as ashamed as a vampire could look. Tessa needed to put space between them. He had kidnapped her, for Christ’s sake. The wetness that she felt, the weakness in her knees, was absurd. Most of all, she hated how readily her body had reacted to him. She moved around the couch.

“I... apologize,” Kristian said, suddenly stiff. “I forget what kind of company I am in. Please, take the bed for tonight.”

\* \* \*

TESSA WOKE IN THE NIGHT. No thoughts hummed in the air. Kristian was asleep or gone. She gently pushed back the blankets and lowered her feet to the ground. This was her moment if ever there were one. She could be free of him once and for all.

Once she slipped her boots onto her feet, she crept toward the door. The lock would not budge beneath her hands, no matter how she pressed. Frustrated, she ground her teeth and moved on to a nearby window. Pushing back the heavy curtain, Tessa could see the shingle covered roof outside. They were still somewhere in the city, she decided as she looked out at a familiar skyline.

She reached over her head, turning the lock. It clicked into place, echoing softly in the studio. She cringed, waiting for Kristian to wake. When no angry vampire came storming in her direction, she turned back to the window. With

some effort, it slid up and she was greeted by a breeze.

Freedom was only a step away.

She hoisted herself out the window with minimal effort. Peering over the edge of the roof, she found that it was only a story's drop to the ground. Bile rose in the back of her throat. She could jump, right? Tessa glanced back through the window and a tinge of regret sparked through her.

She shook her head.

*What am I thinking?* She cringed. She wouldn't be a part of whatever messed up plot he was stuck in. No. Thank. You.

She jumped. She'd done it before, sneaking out of her foster parent's home. It wasn't like riding a bicycle. Tessa landed hard on her feet and tumbled forward into an awkward roll. Pain jolted up her spine. Her ankle throbbled. She tried to put her weight on it, but it barked in protest.

\* \* \*

TESSA MADE her way through the city streets, hobbling on her swollen ankle. It had been worth it, she thought. The pain was a low price to pay for freedom. She stopped at the nearest glowing gas station and begged to use their phone. The man behind the counter couldn't comprehend why she didn't have her own cell phone. Tessa cursed the day they did away with pay-phones.

Still, after much bickering, the man gave in, dialed the number for a cab service, and handed her the phone. The cabbie spoke with a voice that said she'd probably had a cigarette hanging between her lips at that moment. She did not disappoint when she arrived outside the gas station, the cigarette bobbing as she called out Tessa's name.

It was a quiet ride over, but Tessa was grateful for the bills that Kristian had laid on her table before he kidnapped her. Oh, her table. She thought of the wrecked booth that had been left behind. It didn't mean as much as her car, as her trailer. Even as she regretted leaving it, she knew that she could find another in a thrift store somewhere else.

Tessa paid the woman with one of Kristian's crisp bills before the car

turned around and left her alone in the dark. Tessa resisted the urge to reach down for the knife in her boot. Her nerves must still be on edge from earlier. It had been a long, confusing day.

The crackle of a fire caught Tessa's attention. She slowly stepped forward, listening for thoughts in the air. Everything was quiet. As she rounded a large SUV, she could see the dancing light casting shadows around the parking lot. Her stomach plummeted.

Fire licked up the sides of her teardrop trailer. It burst through the tiny windows and climbed toward the roof. A scream of anguish was caught in her throat. She slapped her hand over her mouth. Black circles covered dents in her car as if someone had thrown explosives at it. The windows were completely smashed, glass on the pavement glittering in the firelight. The seats of her car were charred, parts of them still burning.

Hands grabbed her arms. She jerked back into a hard wall. Panic flooded her and she struggled against the immovable grasp until familiar thoughts floated to her. Guilt and sorrow greeted her in Kristian's voice.

"We should be leaving now," he said, his hand sliding down her arm to tangle with her fingers.

Numb, Tessa followed him.

Her trailer, her freedom. It was gone. Someone had burnt set it ablaze and left it to burn down to nothing. Anger sparked somewhere inside her. It set fire to the numbness, chasing it into the shadows. Had it been a group of rowdy boys? Or had someone tracked her and destroyed her only means of travel?

\* \* \*

WHEN SHE WOKE, she did not open her eyes immediately. Her ear was pressed against his chest, but she realized she could not hear a heartbeat. It sent a shiver down her spine but not of fear. She knew that she lay on a powerful creature, and it made her feel safe after what happened.

When she was a girl, she'd felt a similar sense of power in herself. But the more her powers grew and the more she learned of the thoughts of those

around her, the more that power had been warped into something ugly. She'd become jaded, distrustful, and bitter. People, as it turned out, were terrible beings. But she'd stumbled upon an entire world of other powerful entities. Kristian and his sister certainly couldn't be the only ones. She now saw the potential for more than a cursed life, running away from the iniquities of people. She could seek answers she hadn't even known to seek.

"You're awake," Kristian observed. He fiddled with her hair as he stared at the ceiling. The feeling was bliss.

"What time is it?" she asked. The sun dappled the foot of the bed, and she could hear the faintest sounds of the street below.

"Later than I would like," he said. "But I wanted to see to it that you to get sleep."

She didn't move to get up. She felt strangely content in the arms of a vampire.

Tessa's brows furrowed. "How did you find me last night?"

A thought mixed with guilt and a dash of righteousness greeted her. Kristian ran a hand through his rumpled hair and Tessa was surprised with how much it made her want to reach up to touch him.

"I may have...tasted a touch of your blood after dinner yesterday."

"That prick I felt!" Tessa leaned away from Kristian's body. She had shrugged it off. Nothing more than an angry nerve after the day she'd had.

"I wanted to create a bond in case you tried doing what you did last night. It helped me track you down and I'm grateful that I did consider what happened to your trailer. I'm afraid that was not the act of delinquents."

Tessa's indignation flared and died.

Suddenly, the front door of his apartment burst open as a woman entered, her expression intense and urgent. She had long, woody colored hair similar to Kristian, free save for two small braids that pulled the hair back from her long face. Defined cheekbones sat beneath the same emerald-colored eyes framed by long eyelashes and sculpted brows. She wore an immaculate white

jacket, leather boots, and dark jeans that accentuated her long legs and slender form. She had a bag swung over her shoulder and her phone in hand.

“Kristian, they are coming,” she said. “We need to leave. Now.”

Kristian reluctantly moved out from under Tessa with gentle control, but once free of her, he packed so quickly her human eyes could not follow his progress, only the disappearing of clothes off the floor. They knew that this time was coming, but shut in the solitude of his apartment, they had been able to ignore it.

“When?” he asked, voice tight. Tessa could discern the only panic in his thoughts, memories of her trailer the night before.

“Veronica, I presume?” Tessa pulled herself from the bed, stretching aching limbs.

Veronica’s eyes locked onto Tessa for a moment. She had the feeling of being an ant beneath a magnifying glass before Veronica pulled her glare away.

“We have less than a day,” she said. “Ally has been trailing them. She said they boarded a plane from Paris to Asheville. She believes their flight arrives tomorrow.”

Veronica’s eyes flickered to Tessa again, who now felt pulled in whatever direction Kristian might be going. Kristian had already moved on to packing a duffle bag. She made no comment.

“Have you—” he started, but she raised a hand to cut him off.

“I have booked two tickets for New York,” she said. “We can figure out where to go from there.”

Kristian finally paused. He looked at Tessa. Tessa looked back.

“There’s someone after you. They intend to kill you,” Tessa read as his thoughts unraveled for her. “Was that who trashed my trailer?”

“You told her?” Veronica seethed. “What if she was working for the witches? Do you care nothing for your safety? For mine?”

“I do not believe Tessa to be the enemy. Even so, we cannot risk losing

such a tool. She can read minds,” Kristian said.

“Hello? I’m sitting right here,” Tessa snapped.

Veronica’s eyes went wide. “We have not seen those powers since…” She stopped herself and gave Kristian a meaningful look. Tessa felt the tiniest flicker of jealousy from Veronica’s thoughts before she said, “Then we must take her with us.”

Tessa looked at Kristian. He looked relieved with his sister’s assessment of the situation.

“Look, I—” Tessa started, but Kristian interrupted. He was suddenly standing before her, her hand in his. He lifted it to his lips, but at the last moment he pulled her into him and their lips met. She returned the kiss despite her confusion.

“Come with us,” he said. “We need your ability, but more than that, I want you to.”

She produced a choked, nervous laugh. “Why?”

“Our kind used to have such powers available to them, but we lost all those with abilities in the slaughter. If you become one of us, you can create more like you,” Veronica said, navigating her phone. “I’m booking you a ticket.”

“Whoah, become one of you?” Tessa said, panic edging her voice.

“Listen,” Kristian said, gripping her arms earnestly. “I will explain everything in time. And no matter what, you will have a choice. But we are in danger here, and we must leave immediately. Please come with us.”

Tessa hesitated only a moment. She didn’t want to feel cursed anymore. She wanted answers, and these two could give them to her. The feeling of his lips still lingered on hers.

What had she gotten herself into? Become a vampire? Kristian said that it was her choice, but Veronica clearly wanted Tessa’s ability to be passed on. Could it even pass on to another vampire? Or was she one freak in a million?

“I already booked your ticket,” Veronica said. “Now, let’s go.”

\* \* \*

KRISTIAN AND VERONICA were quiet for most of the trip to the airport. The sleek black sedan that had pulled up outside the apartment was some luxury European make that Tessa couldn't name. The butter colored leather was cool and smooth beneath her touch as she slid into the passenger seat. It occurred to her she was surrounded, and that in this small space there would have been little chance of her getting away. Kristian kept his eyes on the road, his face completely void of any expression. She caught the wave of his thoughts and followed them easily. Every now and then one of Veronica's loud thoughts would jar her from the wave. Irritated, Tessa turned and stared at her.

"Really, if you have so many questions, why don't you ask me?" Tessa snapped.

Veronica crossed her arms. She was really a lovely woman, but the hardness of her expression made her cold. She was not, however, totally unfeeling. The worry Veronica had for her brother proved it.

"I just keep thinking that this timing is damned convenient," Veronica replied. "I usually agree with my brother's sense of intuition, but I can't help but wonder. It seems more than serendipitous you should run into us now."

"Veronica," Kristian growled. "Don't start."

"No, let her ask whatever she wants," Tessa said. "Once she's got an answer, I don't have to hear the same thing circling around in her head. Kristian happened upon me by accident. I was minding my own business. I don't live in this town. I was only passing through so I could work at the street faire. It was him interfering in my life that got my car and trailer trashed. I can assure you I'm not involved with these people who are hunting you. I assume that's who the Calder are?"

Veronica sat straighter in her seat.

"I told you, sister," Kristian said quietly.

"The Calder are a very ancient group of witches. I'm not talking fluffy pagans. These are a different race, even if they look human. For centuries, they've hunted us. I suppose you could call them our apex predator. They are



to us what we once were to humans.”

“Why did your kind stop killing humans?” Tessa asked, her train of thought derailing.

“I wouldn’t say our kind has stopped completely,” Veronica said with a grin. “Other than it being barbaric, it’s not as easy as it used to be to cover up multiple murders. Not with everyone carrying a portable camera in their cell phone. I won’t say we don’t enjoy a small taste now and then. Just a bite and a few drops of blood from a human can create a somewhat strong bond. And it’s pleasurable to both parties. But ripping someone’s throat out and just drinking them whole? Not very likely. It can be a dangerous pursuit these days. Certain diseases can be passed from humans to vampires, which is another reason most of us depend upon clean blood banks.”

“Vampires can catch diseases?”

“Blood diseases, yes,” she replied. “They won’t kill us, but they could make immortality unpleasant.”

Tessa glanced at Kristian. “You didn’t even have me checked before you nipped me.”

If he were human, Tessa was sure he would have blushed. Instead, his brows knitted together. He pursed his lips. “Most humans would not have remembered,” he said quietly.

“Well, since we have already established I am a freak among humans...” Tessa said.

“You really are, aren’t you?” Veronica laughed. It was almost musical the way she laughed, a cold trill too perfect to be human.

“So, you thought the Calder sent me?” Tessa asked.

“They have been known to plant their people in places one wouldn’t expect them,” Kristian said. Veronica nodded in agreement. “An attractive woman with the power to read minds could be a powerful tool for tracking us across the country.”

“I guess that explains why you kidnapped me and all.”

“I again apologize for that,” Kristian said.

\* \* \*

THE FLIGHT itself took three hours, but they spent another couple of hours in the airport changing flights to throw the witches off their trail. By the time, they touched down in Los Angeles, Tessa was exhausted. She’d only slept a handful of hours after her escape attempt, and not much the night before that. Tessa suffered from insomnia on a regular basis. You could imagine how difficult it might be to sleep while bombarded by the thoughts of a city. Even though she learned to reduce the stream of transient thoughts into a sort of white noise buzz when she needed to, there were always her dreams. Dark memories were transformed into monstrous images at night, haunting her each time she lay her head down at night.

In those few hours after Kristian had found her in the parking lot, she had slept well. She couldn’t figure out what it was that set her at ease. She should have ignored the feeling, knowing that he was a dangerous creature that had kidnapped her, but she didn’t want to. Was it the way he touched her? Or was it his mere presence? She was looking forward to testing her theory further.

After the flight, the drive out to Kristian’s home was another long slog—two hours in heavy traffic. They arrived at the beach house just before sunrise.

“Can you travel in the daylight?” Tessa asked nervously as they entered the house.

“We can, with the help of some very expensive drugs,” he replied coolly. “Otherwise, no.”

“We made sure to take our dosages before we left,” Veronica replied sarcastically. “Couldn’t risk blowing up in balls of flame in case the plane was delayed.”

Tessa stared at Veronica. It wasn’t often she found someone nearly as sarcastic as she was. Of course, when she did it would have to be the baby sister of her undead kidnapper. This was going to be fucking interesting.

Kristian took Tessa’s hand, pulling her across the threshold and into the

house. He wanted to separate the two of them. He didn't know if his sister trusted Tess, yet. Veronica disappeared somewhere—literally—she was gone before Tessa could even see which direction he went.

“There are six bedrooms in this house,” Kristian said quietly. “I keep my private suite in the basement, while Veronica keeps her rooms on the main floor. The second floor holds the guest rooms.”

“Do you have many guests?” Tessa asked.

“Occasionally. We have friends who are scattered about, and sometimes we're lucky enough to have a few of them visit. No one else is here right now.”

“And where will I sleep?” Tessa asked.

“Where would you like to sleep,” he asked. Images of her laying in his bed crept into her mind. She frowned and pushed them away, sure that they were his thoughts.

“I'd like to see the guest rooms.”

Tessa had seen houses like this in magazines but never been inside of one. The ceilings were twenty feet high, with fans whirring softly above. The living room held a brick fireplace which took up an entire wall. The furniture was simple; a plush L-shaped corner group in dark red and chunky, matching leather chairs in black. The mahogany wood floors shined. She noticed an Oriental rug but only caught a glimpse of the colors in it.

“Let me guess,” Tessa said. “Veronica decorated this room.”

Kristian made a small, dismissive sound. Tessa realized with some amusement he'd sucked his teeth. “She has no idea about such things. I designed this house myself.”

Tessa thought about saying something snarky. The first thought that came to her mind was a vision of him watching HGTV and Food Network after the sun set. She pressed her lips together in a smile at her own joke. “It's lovely,” she said.

Tessa smiled. She registered his pleasure from her small compliment. It

made her happy to know this. With some horror, she wondered why his pleasure should mean so much. She usually didn't care what anybody thought.

*What's happening to me?*

Kristian led her up the staircase, opening into a landing framed by a floor to ceiling window that looked out over the crashing waves of the ocean. He walked up to pull the heavy drapes across the glass, his face apologetic as he turned. Down the hall, he opened the door to a room that was...so much more.

It was nearly a suite. The room itself was done up in shades of cream and gold, from the floor to the drapes, but the bed stood amidst it all, dark and heavy. The wrought iron frame was shaped into delicate swirls and whorls. Atop the mattress were soft, black and gold blankets.

Tessa wondered, for a split second, what Kristian would look like sprawled out atop those blankets. She shook her head, trying to get the image out. That was surely her own thought and she felt ashamed. She didn't understand what was happening between them and was suddenly grateful that there would be an entire story between them as they slept.

\* \* \*

"I HAVE A QUESTION," Tessa said.

She was wearing Kristian's white dress shirt, with nothing beneath it. Her clothes were getting beyond wearable. Odd how she could feel so lady-like wearing a man's clothes. She sat on a stool in his basement kitchen space, legs crossed. Neither of them had woken until late afternoon. According to her cell phone, it was just past two. The rooms in this space did not have windows. It gave her the feeling of time passing differently, or stranger yet, not existing at all.

She had wandered the house alone for a short while after she woke. For the first time in a long while, she suddenly found that she was lonely. Her heart lifted when Kristian came looking for her.

Once they were awake, the first thing he'd wanted to know was if she was

hungry. He made her a grilled cheese sandwich and a bowl of tomato soup. She watched as he poured liquid from a black decanter into a black travel mug. He kept his back turned but she caught the smell of copper. Blood.

He sat down across from her and watched as she took a bite of the sandwich. He apparently understood the idea of comfort food. Sharp Swiss was greeted by crisp, sweet apple slices. Experimentally, she dipped a triangle of sandwich into the soup and took a bite. The fresh basil bloomed through her mouth and she moaned in pleasure.

“What would you like to know?”

Tessa paused. What she really wanted to know was more about this woman, Serena. His maker. She asked something else instead.

“Is there some reason the Calder are after you and Veronica in particular? I mean, there have to be other vampires for them to occupy their time with, right?”

Kristian took a long sip from his mug and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. She didn't see any blood but the idea of him drinking it like coffee made her slightly queasy.

“The Calder do have more interest in some than in others. My coven was once known to cause them trouble in the past, so they have a... vendetta against us.”

“Coven?”

“It's what we call our families—the line of the vampires who sired us. My maker was part of a long line.”

Tessa nodded. He was still avoiding her name.

“Not just anyone goes up against them?”

“No, they don't,” he agreed. “Most of my family is scattered. Some have fled to South America or parts of Africa. When we heard, the Calder was on the move, we decided it was best not to take chances.”

I stirred my soup. “So. My safety with you is doubtful, but these predators who are after you...I am pretty sure they wouldn't leave me alive either.”

“It’s in your best interest to help us,” Kristian replied. “And as far as your safety with me is concerned, it’s obvious I don’t want to hurt you.”

“And why is that? I mean, don’t get me wrong. I am enjoying...whatever it is going on between us. It’s good to not be the strangest person in the room for once. But I don’t know about laying down my life for something which has nothing to do with me.”

“You’re not exactly an ordinary human. Whatever you are, the Calder would see you as a threat as well. I can provide you protection. And you can provide us your ability to read them. Think about it this way, if you please. I found you by accident, and the odds of one of them finding you, out on the road alone, is just as great. How many people do you think you meet in a year while you roam the country telling fortunes? The energy you give off...I could see it long before I ever saw you. It was a miracle that they didn’t find you sooner, a miracle that I found you before they found your trailer. Had you been in it when they did, you would have perished in that fire, no one the wiser.”

“You can see my aura?” Tessa asked.

“Yes. And I am sure one of the Calder could too.”

“What’s it like?”

“The same as the auras of other humans,” he said carefully. “Only larger, enough to fill a room, where others have only enough to extend an inch or so from their bodies. Pale, and shimmery gray. I can protect you. And provide for you. Don’t you think you should be afforded a better life than living out of the back of a trailer?”

Tessa blushed. “I like living off the grid. Nothing is wrong with my life! I don’t have to answer to anyone and I like it that way.”

“I would understand what it is to be a nomad better than you know,” Kristian replied. “And I am not judging by any means. I just think you deserve more in life than that.”

“Would you mind coming out with me today? I’d like to show you something,” Tessa said.

\* \* \*

TESSA REMEMBERED IT WELL: 1224 Willmont Avenue. The house hadn't changed in all these years, and she wasn't sure if that pleased or unnerved her. The lawn was still neatly cut, with rosebushes out front in full bloom. Not only had Melissa Forrester loved those damned roses, but she loved being better than her neighbors, too. Both the cars were in the driveway, newer models, but still, the midsize Japanese make that Tessa remembered.

Tessa and Kristian were parked across the street in his sleek European sedan. He listened as she spoke. It was a difficult story to tell. She was aware of his feelings. Sadness. Grief. The overwhelming desire to console.

“My parents died when I was eleven, shortly before my twelfth birthday. I had been in the institution for about a year, and I had these hopes that my parents would come to get me out. Life would magically go back to normal when they signed me out of that hell hole. Up until then, they visited me once a month. Whenever they came there was this hope in their eyes. As soon as I said anything about mind reading, or knowing how they really felt about me, it was like something inside them shut off. Their eyes went dark. I wasn't really their daughter anymore. They'd tell me I was sick and needed to work on getting better, and when that happened, then they'd take me home and we'd have a big party. It was their nice little way of saying they didn't intend to take me in until I stopped saying crazy shit to them about what was going on inside their heads. Even though they knew the things I told them were true. Just got the things they didn't want to talk about, the things they both wanted to sweep under the rug. I knew all about Dad's affair and Mom's Jack Daniel's habit. If I had lied, I would have never ended up there. But I was a kid, and it wrecked me to think that I was insane. That place was destroying the kid that I was.” She sighed.

“Well, you might be a touch crazy, but in a good way,” Kristian replied with a wink and a small grin.

“Touché,” Tessa said. “Anyway. I kept hoping they would see what the place was doing to me and change their minds. That never happened. When they told me my parents were gone, I realized I had to do better. Toe the line.

Kiss up to the doctor and tell him anything he wanted to hear because no one was left to care whether I died in that place or not.”

“You said they died in a car accident?”

“Yes,” Tessa said. “Went off a bridge and into a lake. They were up in Seattle for some reason. I never found out why. Anyway. I convinced the doctor I was a good little girl and was never going to believe in such rubbish as mind reading again. It took a couple of months of lying through my teeth for him to believe it. They put me into the system. I was at a girl’s home for a couple of months, and that was lovely. Pretty much had to fight some chick every day. I wasn’t a fighter before, but I learned. And then I got placed with the Forresters,” she said, making a gesture towards the house. “And I won’t even go into the wonderful experience it was for me.”

Kristian tapped his fingers against the steering wheel. It seemed an oddly human motion. Most of the time, he was so controlled that if she hadn’t been able to read minds, she’d have no clue he felt anything. “When we were alone. I noticed some scars on your back. Is that how...”

“Yes,” Tessa said, closing the door in her mind just as she saw the flash of the belt.

“How long did you stay with these people?” he demanded. She felt a wave of his barely controlled anger.

“Until I was sixteen. I knew I needed to be able to work, and old enough to learn how to drive. With the right makeup, I could make myself look eighteen. Sometimes I would take waitress gigs. I was working the tables when I realized that I would make a lot more as a fortune teller.”

Kristian looked out the window at the perfect house. “Why are we here?”

“I haven’t been back here since the day I left. I always wanted to come back. Just to let them see they didn’t destroy me.”

\* \* \*

AS THEY APPROACHED THE DOOR, Tessa smiled. She didn’t tell Kristian that she wanted him to come along as insurance, just in case either of the Forresters thought they might not take seeing her very well. Feeling the waves



of anger flowing off him like heat off an oven, she wasn't so sure it was a good idea. She could imagine him throwing punches and snapping necks. Or maybe just drinking his fill from their throats. It was a morbid thought but she couldn't help taking some small joy from it. She walked up to the porch with Kristian at her heels.

She rang the doorbell and waited. There were no sounds coming from within. The neighborhood was oddly quiet.

"Tessa," he whispered. "Let me."

The door opened beneath his hand.

"Breaking and entering?" she asked, taking a look around. "I don't want to get arrested."

"The door was open," he replied frostily.

The television in the front was on, but the volume was very low. A heavy lump formed in Tessa's stomach. Mrs. Forrester was one of those people who never allowed anything electric to run unattended, much less the television set. A lump lodged in Tessa's throat as Kristian went directly for the kitchen.

Tessa could see past him to a pair of shoes and the rumpled hem of a house dress.

She tried to push past him, but he stood firm. Pushing against him was like walking into a brick wall.

"You don't want to see it."

"I have the right to see," Tessa demanded, pounding his back.

"Very well," Kristian said, stepping aside. "I warned you."

Melissa Forrester's head had a blackened hole in her temple. The wall was sprayed with blood and pieces of Mrs. Forrester. Something had blown through the woman's skull, charring everything on its way through. Tessa held a hand over her mouth as she felt her stomach churn.

Jim Forrester must have died coming to her aid. He lay crumpled a few feet away from her, his face gone entirely. There was blood and gore and some gray-white substance that she didn't want to contemplate.

Kristian pushed her gently backwards so that they were back in the living room.

The front door opened, and a woman stepped inside. She brushed back her short, burgundy streaked hair and looked at them with wide, dark eyes. Her black combat boots stomped towards them, the leather of her jacket completely silent. She looked completely at odds with the quaint kitchen.

“Well,” she said, addressing Kristian, throwing her hands in the air. “You beat me here. So much for needing my services.”

“Who are you?” Tessa spat.

“I could ask you the same thing, honey,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

“Tessa, this is Allison Harding. An old... friend of mine.”

“Call me Ally,” she replied caustically as she approached, flicking Tessa’s nose with the tip of her finger. “And let me guess, you must be the plaything of the month.”

## CHAPTER 2



No one had to explain to Tessa just what Ally was—another vampire, for one thing, and Kristian’s ex-lover for another. How many of them did he have, she wondered. He was two hundred years old, she reminded herself. She listened to the pool of outright hateful things the woman thought of her. The woman was as jealous as they came. If not for the situation—the scene so near that made her stomach turn—she’d have given the bitch a piece of her mind.

“Tell me why you’re here again?” Tessa asked.

Ally turned her attention to Kristian, her voice clearly incredulous. “Do you really want me to explain to this human?”

“She is my friend. This was the home of her foster parents and considering that they have been murdered, anything you could tell us right now would be helpful.”

“I was tracking one of the Calder, and this is where the scent led me. I thought maybe she was just coming here to throw me off. I mean, why else would one of them come to a place like this? And speaking of you, missy, what are you? Are you one of the Calder’s contracts? Is there a demon somewhere under your skin?”

Tessa wasn’t aware that she had moved forward until she felt Kristian’s hands on her waist, pulling her backwards. Tessa had never wanted to punch someone so badly before. She didn’t know if it was the death around her or if it was the territorial feeling that made her clench her teeth.

“We should all regroup at the Beach House. You can debrief all of us

there, Allison,” Kristian laid down his commands.

\* \* \*

TESSA SPENT the drive back to the house in stunned silence. Finding her foster parents dead was the last thing she had expected. While no one particularly loved the Forresters, Tessa couldn't imagine anyone doing something like that. The rest of the house was still undisturbed. It wasn't a robbery. The vampires believed it had something to do with the Calder, and she was inclined to agree with them. Why the Calder would have hunted down her foster-parents was another question altogether. She kept looking out the window at the ocean, clasping her hands together so they wouldn't shake. The Forresters had never been kind to her. She counted her years with them as the most difficult in her life, beating out her years at the institution, but she was still horrified that someone had killed them. In some ways, they were the only family she had left.

Veronica was at the door when they arrived at the beach house. She looked at her brother, sensing trouble. Her eyes fell on Tessa, and she felt the vampire's worry. Shrugging away from them both, Tessa went to sit down in the living room. Ally trailed behind. Tessa only half listened as Kristian explained to his sister what they stumbled into.

Kristian stood behind the couch, not touching her but close enough that she could feel him. His presence calmed Tessa, despite the inner turmoil she sensed. Even though he didn't say much it was good to know he was concerned. Veronica sat on the edge of one of the leather chairs. Tessa could feel how perplexed she was about the entire situation, but it was her anger that surprised Tessa. Who was she to care about Tessa's foster parents?

Ally stood at the fireplace. She had everyone's attention. After filling Veronica in on what happened, she gave them the information she had about the Calder.

“I wish I had more to tell you,” she began, opening her hands as if to show the nothing that she had. “I followed a group of three witches to Paris. After they landed there, they split up. One remained in France but traveled to the south. The second one is currently in London. A third came to the States.

She was back east as late as yesterday. There are two within the country that I know of. But she hasn't gone to her sisters. This one has been crisscrossing the country for some months now. There isn't any rhyme or reason to her movements as far as I can tell. I backed off her because it didn't seem her movements had anything at all to do with any vampires we know of. Caution is good, but I don't get in their way if it seems like they're prepared to kill us."

"You're saying you lost the one who just came from Europe?" Veronica asked.

"If you want to put it that way, yes," Ally replied with a sickening smirk.

It's nice to see she can be just as much of a bitch to other people as she is to me, Tessa thought.

"I have two of my associates on the others."

Tessa sat forward, fixing Ally with a serious look. "You say one had been all over the country. Do you know the last three states she was in?"

Ally rolled them off the tip of her tongue. Tessa felt her skin grow cold as her temples started to throb.

"What is it?" Ally asked. Her face took on a semblance of concern. Or perhaps it was curiosity. With the roaring in Tessa's head, she suddenly couldn't read the vampires clearly. The voices of others' thoughts melted into a roar and she could only hear her own thoughts over the din. And barely those.

"Wyoming, Utah, Colorado," Tessa repeated, looking to Kristian. "The last three states I've passed through."

Ally crossed her arms. "Well, I'll be damned. Who did you piss off?"

"What are you talking about?" Kristian demanded.

"We have a Calder traveling behind *her*. And yet nothing happens until you brought her here. It simply can't be a coincidence. I don't know why they killed her parents. Maybe to send a message, or to shake her up. One way or another, they want something from Miss Not So Normal. Who knows, maybe

they want to harness that aura of hers. Either way, you've brought trouble into your own house—”

“Enough!” Kristian barked. “I won't have you accusing her.”

Ally took a step forward. “Why are you so blind to this ruse? The girl could be a trap and you won't consider it for even a moment.”

Tessa was about to shoot up from her seat when a pair of hands clamped down on her shoulders. Kristian's thumb rubbed her collar bone. She was surprised how comforting the small touch was to her. Still, it couldn't calm the storm that was brewing inside of her. Trouble really was hot on her heels. Despite the rough start, Kristian and his sister had been good to her. Was she inadvertently leading them to their demise?

“What's our next plan, then?” Veronica asked. “To protect *all* of us?”

Tessa was caught off guard by Veronica's declaration.

“I'm working on it.” Ally took out her cell phone, texted someone briefly, and slipped the phone back into her pocket. “I'll send reinforcements for you. Meanwhile, I ask that you stay put until my people get here. You could try running again, but I am not convinced it would do anything other than put you in more danger.”

\* \* \*

KRISTIAN ASKED to speak with Ally alone before she left, casting a worried glance at Tessa. Tessa went to wash her face and have a moment alone to collect her thoughts. She checked out her reflection in the bathroom mirror. There had been a few tears on the way home, despite the fact she tried not to. Her eyes were red. She looked just as shocked and angry as she felt. The image of her foster parents' dead bodies were still in her head, snapshots of the gore haunting her each time she closed her eyes. They weren't good people by any measure, but what the Calder did to them, no one deserved. She was still trying to absorb the possibility that *she* was the target of the Calder. Being a freak was nothing new. Being one that anyone cared to pursue was another thing.

Tessa went into the kitchen for a bottle of cold water. She opened the

fridge and when she closed it, found Veronica standing beside her in a space unoccupied only a moment before.

Tessa jumped. "I'm aware you can do that, there's no need to show off," she sniped.

"I'll take that into consideration next time," Veronica said. "Come with me. We should have a talk."

Tessa raised an eyebrow in question but followed Veronica to the patio in the back yard. A sweeping view of the ocean was visible from there. Once they were seated, Veronica pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "You don't smoke, do you?" she asked.

"No," Tessa replied. "I could never afford the habit."

"It's probably better that way," Veronica said as she lit up. "They kill you eventually. One of the benefits of being a vampire is you can abuse your body in all sorts of ways and it doesn't matter. Kristian hates it, but a girl has got to have her vices. As immaculate as he likes his house kept, I wouldn't dare risk the upholstery smelling like tobacco smoke."

Tessa raised an eyebrow. "Good to know. But I'm sure that's not what you brought me here to talk about."

Veronica nodded. She tilted her head back and blew out smoke. She tapped a bit of ash off the tip. Tessa watched the ashes swirl away on the wind before she continued. Her emerald green eyes were wide and clear. She brushed back her light brown hair. She wondered if Veronica and her brother were blondes when they were children.

"I want you to know I like you, Tessa. You say what you think. And I can tell my brother cares about you. He hasn't looked at anyone the way he does at you for many years. To be honest, not since Serena. How much did he tell you about her?"

"Not much," Tessa admitted. "I could tell he didn't want to get into it, so I didn't push."

"Good call," Veronica said. "He doesn't speak of her but his mourning for that woman has never fully ended."

“Why is that?” Tessa asked. She was curious. Not to mention she was happy to discuss anything which didn’t reference the Calder and the new threat to her own life.

“The tie between a vampire and his maker is a complicated thing,” Veronica said carefully. “You know how you love your parents? Not when you’re a teenager, or even, say, an eight-year-old child who is old enough to be truly aware of the world and have a life separate from their families. Do you remember that pure, sort of unbridled adoration you had for your parents when you were maybe three or four years old? How they were your entire world?”

“I don’t know if I have solid memories of events from that time, but I do remember the feeling.”

“Okay. Add to that the feeling you had for the first person you ever fell in love with. The way you were fiercely devoted to them and would die to protect them. Once you have the strength of those feelings combined, you have something resembling a shadow of the love one has for their maker.”

Tessa didn’t know what to say. “Okay.”

“Our parents died young, as many people did in those days. There was a bad strain of pneumonia going around and one winter and they both caught it,” Veronica continued. “I was thirteen years old, and Kristian was twenty. We were probably what was considered middle class by the standards of those times, but there were bills owed to everyone in town. My father ran a small restaurant, and Kristian was already working as an apprentice there. He took over. He worked day and night to keep the place open. He started selling baked goods in the morning and closing up until evening for the dinner crowd. Very enterprising. It’s something my father would never have allowed, but it saved our business. We were able to keep a roof over our heads.

“When I was sixteen, I got married. Kristian had his dalliances I’m sure, but no one he was serious about. He was still working so much that he wouldn’t have had time or inclination for much else. I worried for him because my new husband wanted us to move to Boston, where his family owned land and a business. In those days, a woman had no say in such



matters. By leaving town I was leaving him with no immediate family. Without a wife to care for him, my concern was he would work himself into an early grave.

“Communication between us was sparse, as you could imagine. I’d write letters and he would write me back but wouldn’t tell me everything. I could feel there was something wrong. I guess the same could be said on my end of things. My husband wanted a baby, which I seemed unable to give him. And when he got upset about it, he commonly used his fists to vent his frustration. It was okay for men to do that in those days.”

“I’m sorry,” Tessa breathed.

“Yes. Well, it was more than one lifetime ago. Anyway. I asked my husband if we could see Kristian for the holidays. We were always so close, but by that time we’d been apart for a handful of years and I needed to see him. I needed to know what was wrong.

“When I came home, what I found was not the Kristian I knew,” she said, her voice dropping deeper. Tessa could feel the sadness in her, along with anger and grief, other emotions which overlapped and blended together.

“My brother was in the house, alone, shutters drawn in the middle of the day. I thought he was dying, he looked so sick: sallow skin, puffy eyes with bags beneath them. He was thinner than I’d ever seen him. He refused to let me open the windows. He wouldn’t even look me in the eye. I tried to feed him, but he couldn’t keep anything down. My husband said Kristian was probably not long for this world and we should go back home and leave him be. I was never more appalled by my husband.

“I told him he could go home, and when the crisis passed I would join him. He didn’t like it, but for once I made a demand he listened to. I don’t know what I intended to do, Tessa, but I knew I was never going back to that man, even if it meant peddling on the streets or becoming a whore.”

Veronica paused, ground her cigarette into the ground with the tip of her black, red bottomed heel, and continued.

“My first order of business was finding out what was really wrong with

my brother. Since he wouldn't tell me, I followed him out at night. He was going to see this woman, Serena Faye. He would spend the entire night with her and hurry home in the hour before dawn. There were all kinds of rumors about her, and none of them good. Most said she practiced voodoo. Others claimed she was something far worse, though no one dared to say what. Well," she said with an ironic chuckle, "who is to say rumors aren't right sometimes?"

"How long had he been going to Serena by the time you came back to town?" Tessa asked.

"Almost a year," Veronica said. "One night he staggered through the door, covered in blood. Finally, he confessed everything to me—that he had basically been a slave to Serena over the past months, letting her feed from him. She used it to keep her under his control, made him beg for sex. He'd finally gotten wise to the fact that he was going to go the way of her other lovers, and he...he did what he had to do to live. But by then, Serena had pushed him to the edge of the abyss with her blood. All that was needed for him to complete the change was to feed."

Veronica lit her second cigarette and brushed an errant strand of hair behind her ear. She seemed calmer. Her thoughts were running like a cool spring, creek. Tessa licked her lips, waiting for her to continue.

"Kristian wanted to die. The two of us spent seven days and nights in the house. He was in bed most of the time, in terrible pain. I told him I would go find a man, someone that no one would come looking for, someone no good to the world. He didn't want that. I offered him a rabbit I caught in the forest. He gladly took the rabbit, but it was not human blood. It helped to sate him for a short time but after that, the pain returned with a vengeance. He'd shake, sweat, scream. It got so bad I gagged him so the neighbors wouldn't hear. So many times, he begged me to go away. I refused. I promised I'd be with him to the bitter end, just as we were when our parents were on their death beds.

"That last night was a full moon. I remember because we were sitting on the floor of his bedroom, and there was nothing but the glow of the moon illuminating it. He had laid his head on my shoulder and I told him of my

awful marriage. And I told him then he should drink from me and be done with it. I had nothing to return home to. We would have each other if nothing else. Eventually, I got up and got a knife, and made a cut on my neck. Once he smelled the blood, starved as he was, he was not able to resist.”

“Thank you for telling me.” Tessa wasn’t sure what else she should say to a story like that. Her mouth felt dry.

Veronica gave her a small smile. “I want you to realize what he’s been through. This business with the Calder is a mess. I don’t know if you’re really the one they’re looking for. It could be they just figured you’re close to him, and hurting people in your life will get a rise out of him. I really don’t know. If I were you, I would consider doing the smart thing and get out of here. Before you get in any deeper with my brother or these people decide to really make you into their target.”

“Veronica!” Kristian called.

He was only a foot away from them. This time Tessa managed not to jump. Being around these vampires was certainly a test of her ability to keep a poker face and look calm at all times. She pushed back from the table and made an excuse about wanting a nap after the trying day she had. Tessa could see the truth of her statement in Veronica’s weary eyes. No one had to tell her Kristian wanted to talk to his sister alone. He was fuming, eyes wide and hands trembling. It was not a conversation she wanted to partake in.

\* \* \*

TESSA SEARCHED in her purse and found a half empty bottle of pain relievers. She thanked God she had a few left. She didn’t get headaches often, but when she did they could get bad quickly. A quick shower helped dispel the tenseness in her muscles. A t-shirt from Kristian’s dresser would have to do. She lay down on the bed, luxuriating in the softness of the mattress, running her fingers over the lines of gold embroidery.

She tried her best to block out thoughts of her foster parents’ violent end. There had been many times over the years she wished them both dead for what they did to her. Now that they were gone, she realized that was never true. She only wanted them to care for her. But like her real parents, it was

beyond their ability.

Sleep didn't come easily, but once she slipped into unconsciousness, the dream came quickly.

Tessa was back at the street faire, but she wasn't sitting in a booth. Instead, she was walking around, browsing the wares of other merchants.

This faire was larger, brighter, and louder than ones she had been to lately. There were jugglers and musicians, all dressed in vibrant, jarring colors. An artist drew sketches in coal, charging five bucks a drawing. A man played the steel drums, a cheerful song that nagged at the edges of Tessa's memory. He smiled at her as she passed, pearly white teeth gleaming. The closer she came, the more the world seemed to tilt beneath her. It wasn't until she got close to him that she realized he didn't have any eyes. The skin beneath his eyebrows was perfectly smooth.

Tessa clapped a hand over her mouth to keep from screaming, her steps fumbling as she turned away.

Drawn like a magnet, Tessa found her feet leading her to a booth heaped with rare books. The woman behind the table smiled demurely.

"Do you know what you're looking for?" the woman asked her. She was a lady in her mid to late sixties with smooth ivory skin and a blush to her cheeks. Her long, silver hair was plaited into a single French braid that reached her waist.

"No, just looking," Tessa replied as her hand hovered over the fabric covers.

"I think this may be helpful," the woman replied, placing a red book in her hands. Tessa traced the pretty script across the cover until she realized that it was her own name.

She opened it, flipping through the pages from back to front. They were blank. Then, the pages began to bleed with black ink. She watched in amazement as she saw the pages being filled with writing, the same loopy writing that covered the front. She dropped the thing to the ground as if it burned her.

“Get this shit away from me!” Tessa screamed.

“Oh, but I think that you might find that you need it, darling,” the woman replied. “Look at your hands.”

Tessa had not picked it up, and it had not been passed back to her, but somehow, she was holding the book again.

“You need every word,” the woman said. Her eyes turned black. “Go now.”

Tessa ran. She flung the book into a trash can as she did. The thud echoing in her ears made her panic cede if only a little. Eventually, she looked around, pausing to catch her breath.

She was back at the entrance of the faire.

A backpack hung from her left shoulder. When she opened the bag, the only thing inside was the book.

An empty table awaited her, with her fake crystal ball sitting in the middle. A crack ran down the center of it. Tessa found herself studying the crack as she took her seat at the booth. No sooner had she sat, she was approached by a potential customer.

“Good morning,” she said. “I wonder if you can help me. You can hear me, of course, can’t you?”

“Yes,” Tessa said, “of course.”

The woman nodded. It was only then that Tessa realized the woman was not speaking aloud. Not once had she ever moved her lips. She had blonde hair and eyes which had turned black, just like those of the book dealer. Reaching forward to touch her with long, thin fingers, she squeezed Tessa’s wrist. “Who are you?” she questioned. “Is it that you don’t know, or you just don’t want to?”

She jolted awake in bed.

Kristian was standing a few feet away, giving her a look of concern. “Are you okay? I heard you screaming.”

“Yeah,” she said, putting her palm over her heart as if she could calm the

frantic beating that pounding in her chest.

“Nightmare?” he asked. He sat down on the bed and rubbed her back, moving his hand in slow circles. Something about his cool touch was calming.

“I don’t have them often, but this one was... wrong.”

“What was it about?”

“Nothing...craziness,” Tessa said. She tried to smile but Kristian seemed unconvinced. “Do vampires have nightmares?” she asked, averting the subject.

“I know some who claim they do. I, personally, haven’t experienced any since my human life ended.”

“Do you ever miss it? The old life?”

“Some things about it perhaps, but not really. I do miss some of the people I left behind, I suppose.” His voice trailed off, then he worked his lips into a smile. “I think that I may miss food quite a lot, actually.”

Tessa nodded. It was sad, but her experience bore out his words. She decided it was best to change the conversation “What happened with Veronica?” she asked.

“I had a talk with her about her need to respect you. It’s been a long while since I have had anyone in my life and living here in the house. She needed reminding.”

“How much of our conversation did you hear?”

“Enough to know she told you it was a good idea for you to leave.”

“What if it is?” Tessa countered.

“All we know for sure is the Calder will destroy any vampires they come in contact with, and my family has been hunted for many years. They hurt your family. My bet is you’ll be safer with us than on your own. If you wanted to leave, it would be your choice, but I wouldn’t want you to feel pushed into it. For my part? I want you to stay.”

“I don’t think I have much of a choice,” Tessa said. “Because I want to stay with you.”

She hadn’t meant to say it but the words slipped from her lips effortlessly. And now that she had spoken them, it made everything real.

Kristian’s eyes sparkled.

Tessa found herself leaning into him. Her own worries crowded her mind, but she pushed them back. All she wanted was this one moment. Her hand rose, fingers grazing the cool skin of his cheek. Cradling the back of her neck with his hand, he brought her to him. Their lips met and, at first, he was gentle. It was the kiss he’d promised her when he first asked her to come with them. Tessa pressed into him, nibbling at his lower lip. She ran her fingers through his hair. He growled into her mouth, jerking her into his body.

And his phone rang.

With a guttural growl, he parted from Tessa and answered his phone.

“We’ve got company,” he told her.

\* \* \*

“WELL, you didn’t think I’d leave town without my reinforcements being in place, did you?” Ally said. “That would be highly unprofessional of me.”

Veronica and Ally were in the living room when Tessa and Kristian came downstairs. The unease between the two women was obvious from their body language. Ally stood with her arms crossed over her chest, while Veronica used her height to lean over the other vampire, hands on hips, trying to look intimidating. Tessa had to hold back her laughter when she caught each woman’s thoughts towards each other. And at the moment their thoughts were almost entirely grumbling profanity.

Ally was not moving and she was not at all intimidated. There were four men standing behind her—vampires—and they were obviously awaiting her orders.

Tessa couldn’t help but stare. They were all fine specimens of men: tall, lean, and hard bodied. There was a long-haired blond, a brunette with short,

wavy hair, a black man with a shaved head and goatee, and a pale skinned redhead with a buzz cut.

“I just got a lead on a witch that I’m going to follow up on myself. I am leaving you with some of my best, so I am certain there won’t be any problems. This is Jared and Trevor,” she said, indicating the man with the goatee and the redhead respectively. “This is Ryan.” She pointed to the long-haired blond. “And of course, everyone except Tessa remembers Morgan.”

Morgan was the dark-haired man. He had full, kissable lips and long lashes covering shockingly blue eyes that locked onto Veronica. Tessa was flooded with a flash of memories between Morgan and Veronica, all passionate and erotic in nature. Tessa was used to hearing other people’s intimate thoughts and seeing the images associated with them. Rarely were the thoughts from one couple so passionate at the same time. Tessa cleared her throat, trying to dispel the sexual tension, and immediately regretted it.

Ally smirked, shifting from one foot to the other. “Boys, meet Tessa. She is Kristian’s human plaything of the week. She’s got this nifty gift that allows her to crawl into your heads and hear what you’re thinking. Be careful not to embarrass yourself in front of the human.”

Morgan’s eyes snapped to Ally and then to Tessa. His full lips twisted into a hard scowl.

“Way to make everyone comfortable, Ally,” Tessa snapped. “First of all, I’m no one’s fucking *plaything*. Got it? Second of all, I’m not reading anyone on purpose.”

“I somehow doubt that,” Morgan said.

“Well if you didn’t think with your cock first then you wouldn’t be so defensive,” Tessa replied, turning her glare up to him.

A house with six vampires, two of them with unresolved romantic issues, one that she could turn into a fiery romance, and everyone scrambling to protect the household against vicious witches. This should be great, Tessa thought.



## CHAPTER 3



Tessa went to bed alone that night. Her mind reeled with thoughts of the Calder, her foster parent's death, and the impending doom she could see on the horizon. Was she safe here? Or would the Calder find her here, killing her newfound family?

Family...

Kristian and Veronica had grown on her, their lives easily blending until Tessa could no longer see the seams. She thought of her life before, ever moving from place to place. She loved the open road, loved seeing the sun rise over mountains and forests. But, the Calder had been right behind her. Kristian had been right, she'd only been a few steps away from death on her own.

Tessa bit down on her lip, trying to chase away the thoughts that plagued her. Instead, she turned her mind to the kiss they'd shared on this very bed. She'd wanted so much more and the realization startled her. It hadn't been his thought. That was her own.

Her feet moved of their own accord, pulling her from the guest suite bed. Despite being full of male vampires, the house was surprisingly quiet. She could hear their murmuring thoughts, but they were nowhere to be seen. Tessa padded through the kitchen, wearing nothing more than one of Kristian's oversized t-shirts. She crept into the pantry, closing the door gently behind her before turning to find the secret latch. It popped beneath her finger and the shelf swung open to reveal a dark stairwell.

She hesitated on the precipice, Veronica's warning echoing through her.

Was this a road that she was prepared to walk? Would it lead her on the path to becoming like him? She could feel the memory of his lips against hers, the press of his hands on her hips.

Finally, she swallowed hard and pushed the secret door closed. Maybe she wanted him physically, but she wasn't ready to give more than that. Tessa turned around, letting herself out of the pantry, and came face to face with Veronica.

She froze to the spot.

The vampire sat on a stool at the granite counter, hunched over a coffee mug. Tessa knew that it wasn't coffee. Veronica spared her a look before throwing back the contents of her mug. She pushed off the stool and sauntered over to where Tessa stood.

“Don't drag him behind you. His heart has been put through the shredder enough times. If you break his heart and he... greets the sun, then I swear I will not stop until you're dead. That said, I like you, Tessa. If you have the balls take Ally head on as a human, I think you fit right in.

“You need to make a decision. Either get out of here before he becomes too attached or give it your all.” With her piece said, Veronica pushed past Tessa, quickly disappearing into the house.

IN THE EARLY hours of the morning, Tessa rose from bed to get a glass of water. Her sleep had been fitful after her trek downstairs. Veronica's words were at war with the desire she couldn't hold back. She imagined laying him back against the black comforter, his ivory skin cool beneath her hands. In her mind, she imagined running her hands down his muscled thighs as her head dipped to kiss the skin above his groin. Would he groan at her touch? As she gulped down the water, she wasn't sure when the last time was that water was this pleasing to her parched throat.

As she set her glass down in the sink, she saw that the secret door to Kristian's apartment was open. Chewing her lip, she decided that she was lonely. Downstairs, Kristian sat on the leather couch, oversized mug in hand.

For a moment, Tessa wondered if they drank from the opaque mugs so that she didn't have to see their contents.

She moved to sit beside him on the plush couch, her bare thigh grazing his. A soft smile touched his lips as she leaned into him. She felt Kristian's hand on her lower back, gently tracing her scars with his fingertips.

"A little of my blood would heal that if you would allow me," he said.

She looked at him over her shoulder, brushing back her hair.

"That wouldn't...um...make me a vampire? Since you have drunk from me already?"

"No, darling," he said. "You would need to drink some of my blood for that to happen."

"Well. I guess the movies got something right," Tessa replied.

"Indeed," Kristian said softly. "You haven't answered my question."

His fingertips still played against her skin, distracting her. "I don't know. I have had them so long, I've sort of learned to live with them. I just don't wear anything backless. Or bikinis, for that matter."

"There are many things I will never understand. Cruelty to children in one of them. I abhorred it in my lifetime and I'm ashamed to see that it has not abated in the long years since I turned. Whatever could you have done to make them act in such a way means little. I can't say that I am too worried about your foster parents being gone from the planet."

"Part of me feels that way," Tessa admitted. "Another part of me doesn't. It's a mixed bag of emotions. I mean, shouldn't life be sacred?"

"What was your life like before, with your birth parents? Before they sent you away?" he asked.

Tessa sighed. She never talked about these things with anyone. Instinctively, she'd always known that one day, a man would want to be close enough to her to know about all the dark parts of her life. Perhaps she would even feel the need to tell him. But she'd only half believed it would ever happen. It was easier to imagine her life would always be on the road, no

explanations required and no one to answer to. She should have known the safety of her nomadic existence couldn't last forever. At least she knew Kristian would not judge her.

"I don't have a lot of memories of my early childhood. I remember being small and feeling secure with my family. But those years between five and thirteen? Almost nothing."

"But they were good to you?" Kristian asked. "Before they sent you away, they didn't hurt you?"

"No, they never hit me or...punished me."

Kristian paused for a moment, and Tessa felt the need to fill the uneasy silence. "I know it's strange," she said. "I really can't explain to you why."

"Will you let me heal you?" he asked again.

She nodded in agreement. Putting her glass down, she laid down on her stomach. He opened the drawer of his bedside table and took out a knife. She heard him sigh as he drew the blade against his own skin. In a few moments, she was aware of blood dripping onto her back. It felt oddly cool, but grew warm against her skin; there was a moment of discomfort as she felt her flesh tighten and shift.

"Come have a look," he said.

They got up and went into the bathroom. Kristian wiped away the remainder of the blood from Tessa's skin with a towel. She stared at her reflection. Something shifted inside of her.

"Thank you," she said, tears threatening to fall.

He lifted her chin with the tip of his finger. "It's nothing," he said.

Tessa was the one to move first. She wrapped an arm around the back of his neck, rising on tiptoes to meet his lips. His kiss was ravenous, his fingers digging into her hips as he pulled her closer. This close, she could feel the length of his manhood as it grew in excitement. It pressed against her lower stomach, starting a fire in her core.

Kristian lifted her from the floor and she wrapped her legs around his

waist. As he walked them toward the bed, his teeth nipped at the skin of her neck, never quite hard enough to break the skin. Unable to contain himself any longer, he dropped Tessa onto his bed. His eyes devoured her from head to toe, her skin tingling beneath her gaze.

He crawled atop her, his mouth devouring hers. She returned his kiss greedily, a clashing of teeth and tongue. Rolling over, she straddled his lap. He ripped through her tank top and bra as if they were made of paper. His cold, hard hands grasped her breasts, and she sucked in a sharp breath at the sensation, but then his warm mouth closed over her nipple, and she melted into the pleasure of his expert sucking and nibbling. She let her fingers grip his earth-toned hair, and she arched her back so she could rock against the erection beneath his jeans. He growled in response to tearing away the last bit of her clothing. Tessa reveled in the feel of his cold fingers across her skin, traveling south.

Kristian flipped them over, straddling her naked form. She reached for his belt, but he growled and pinned her hands above her head.

“Don’t move,” he instructed with a tone she had to obey.

She bit her lip, struggling against her desire to undress him and see him and feel him. He watched her, clearly enjoying the control. He pulled back and stood for a delicious moment, admiring her petite body. Then he unbuttoned his shirt, revealing his pale torso, toned and lean and narrow. Tessa wanted to push it off his shoulders, to run her hands down his chest. He unzipped his pants but did not remove them. Instead, he knelt in front of the bed and pulled her toward his parted lips. She felt anticipation tighten her.

“Oh god,” she said.

“No gods here. Now stop talking,” he ordered, then silenced her with his tongue.

Her back arched immediately, rising from the pleasure. He flicked and sucked and then, to her great pleasure, slipped two cold fingers inside of her. This sent her crashing into an orgasm so fierce, she failed to remain quiet. She cried out in pleasure, and he let her.

Damn anyone who overheard their lovemaking.

Then he was on top of her, completely and suddenly nude, and she could not help but break the rules and move her hands over him, exploring and pulling him closer. He very deliberately stilled her hands and forcibly moved them to their place above her head once again. Then, ever so slowly, he bent his head to her neck. Fear rippled through her body, teasing her pleasure immeasurably. But she heard very clearly in his mind, Trust me.

He kissed the flesh above her collarbone and then moved to the peak of her shoulder. She felt the tiniest sharp pain as if he had pricked her with a needle. He drew back and watched the blood from his small bite pool and dribble toward her breast. Before it could hit the white comforter, he used his tongue to follow the trail back up her shoulder. He closed his lips around the tiny opening in her flesh. He sucked, but with the utmost control. She let him taste, barely allowing herself to breathe.

And then she felt just the tip of him. She groaned. He slowly entered her, but not all the way. She shuddered.

“Beg me,” he said.

“Please,” she whispered. And that was enough. He thrust hard into her. She moved to touch him, and when he did not instruct her to stop, she let her nails claw greedily over his back, pulling him closer still. He thrust into her again, and again, and again. His rhythm was so precise that she could feel herself build immediately. She shuddered and curled further around him. She came so hard, she could not even draw breath. He withdrew himself and forcibly turned her over so that her belly rested on the bed and her ass was in the air. He entered her from behind with no respite, but she did not want one. She would let this creature love her for eternity.

Once behind her, he thrust into her once, twice, three times before coming, producing a guttural growl of pleasure that reminded her of an animal. But he had claimed to be no such thing.

Tessa curled into his lean body, happiness filling her for the first time in a long while as she drifted back to sleep. She dreamed of a silver-haired woman with a red book, with pages that filled themselves with lines of familiar

curving script.

\* \* \*

“WHAT’S THE PLAN? I understand you already worked around improving house security, but are we expected to stay inside for the time being?” Kristian asked.

Tessa was gathered with Kristian, his sister, and the four guards in the kitchen. The ocean could be seen from this vantage point. Bright sunlight drifted into the windows, making the atmosphere seem light and peaceful, despite the dark reasons their gathering. It was easy for Tessa to forget they were under such careful watch when she and Kristian were downstairs in the basement apartment. Seeing all of these powerful vampires together brought home to her the seriousness of the threat they were under. The Calder was literally the thing that monsters feared.

Morgan was the first to speak up.

“No, we’re not suggesting you stay home all day. In fact, you are probably less of a target on the street because the witches won’t want to be seen in public, much less do anything to hurt you. We’re not taking any chances though. If you want to leave the house, one of us will shadow you. One guard will remain here at the house at all times, watching in shifts.”

“How long are we supposed to keep this up?” Veronica asked. “All of you living here?”

All the eyes in the room turned to her. It was obvious to Tessa her real problem was how long she was going to have to subsist under the same roof with her ex-lover. Veronica’s mind churned between thoughts of anger and lust, all of which was directed at Morgan.

“As long as it takes,” Morgan replied. “Until Ally gives us the call saying the threat has been averted.”

“Great,” Veronica hissed.

“If it helps, ma’am, we’ll be as nonintrusive as possible,” Ryan said. It was the first-time Tessa heard him speak in more than monosyllables. She was surprised by his lilting southern accent. “The goal is not to disrupt your

life. Just make sure you continue to have one.”

“You guys are going to have to forgive me for asking, but I am new to all this. Exactly what kind of powers do these witches have?” Tessa asked.

Jared, the vampire with cocoa brown skin, brushed his goatee thoughtfully. “They can do many things. They can produce controlled bursts of fire through their palms. It’s how they killed the older couple you find yesterday.”

“They did that with their...?” Tessa couldn’t imagine. She had assumed Melissa and Jim were killed with some sort of magical implement. An image of a black-eyed woman popped into her mind—one of Jared’s memories. In the vision, the head rolled across the floor with a thump that made bile rise in his throat.

“You beheaded one?” Tessa asked. The face seemed oddly familiar to her.

“It’s the fastest and most effective way to kill them,” Jared replied. “Bloodletting will do the trick, as well as drowning, but both of those methods require greater risk because it means getting close to them. They practice all kinds of blood magic. We have the house warded against it, but with the Calder, one can’t make assumptions about what they are able to do. They’re constantly studying higher realms and different forms of magic, and so are we. Bullets won’t kill them, but it will slow them down. Anything which can make them hurt is good because their magic requires a certain amount of concentration. Break that, and you can buy yourself some time in a confrontation.”

“Good to know,” Tessa said, crossing her arms.

“I have things to do,” Veronica said. “I’m not staying home today.”

“Trevor will accompany you,” Morgan said quickly. He turned to Kristian. “You and Tessa are going out?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll drive you,” Morgan said. “I won’t let you out of my line of sight.”



\* \* \*

FOR THE PAST, several days, Tessa felt like a refugee—a well-cared for refugee in an immaculate beach house, but she felt odd because she still didn't have any of her own things. She fled the city with Kristian and Veronica without getting a chance to pack a bag. All of her things had been destroyed. Tessa had gotten by with washing her jeans and wearing Kristian's shirts.

"I'm sorry that we did not think to do this for you earlier. Things have been quite crazy with the Calder closing in upon us," Kristian said.

They were walking together in the local mall. Kristian's neatly tailored suit, probably high-end designer, looked out of place. He draped an arm around her as they walked. Morgan was somewhere close by, but never within view.

"I might have been okay with borrowing some of Veronica's old clothes," Tessa rolled her eyes. "I could if she actually liked me."

"She likes you. She's overly protective of her big brother."

"Maybe," Tessa replied softly. "What if I am really the cause of the problem here, or they are just using me to get to you?"

"If that's so, we face the threat together, as we're doing now. Speaking of your things. I could hire someone to bring your car and trailer up if you'd like. Once this is all over we may be able to salvage what was left of it."

Tessa wasn't sure. There hadn't been very much in the trailer—a single place setting of dishes, a blanket, a few old books, and her clothes. She was wearing her favorite pashmina and sneakers on the day she left. The really precious things: her "crystal" ball, tarot cards, and old photographs of her parents were in her purse.

"It sounds like a big cost to have someone drive it across the state for the sake of a few possessions."

"Think about it," Kristian said. "And let me know what you decide. The money is not an issue, and if you're worried about me hiring anyone, think of it as giving someone a job for the day. I also want you to remember you can get whatever you like."

They stopped at a lingerie store first. At first, Tessa felt strange with him hovering behind her, but slowly she relaxed. She led him over to a particularly scandalous bra. It was made of a soft, sheer material, with opaque hearts over where the nipple would be.

She could feel Kristian's thoughts behind her. His attraction was overwhelming, a warmth suddenly blooming at her core. She smiled, and in an act of daring, added it to her basket. Of course, she had to find the matching panties, bending to search the rack so that her ass was in the air.

Images so clear she could almost feel them greeted her. He thought of grabbing onto her hips and pushing himself deep inside her. She wiggled her hips as she pulled out the right size panties. As she straightened, she turned to find his gaze devouring her. He smiled, knowing full well that she could see what was going through his mind.

Her face warmed. Was she doing this? Was she openly flirting with a vampire?

Yes.

And she was enjoying it.

"Do you plan on trying those on?" Kristian asked.

"Maybe later," Tessa threw over her shoulder as she moved on. "When we're back at the beach house."

This time he fed her an image of...herself, wearing nothing more than the lingerie she had just picked out. She laid across the black, velvet blanket that lay across his bed. Words like *want* and *need* filled her.

It was hard to catch her breath. Her own desire was stronger than she'd ever felt before. Tessa looked over her shoulder at the vampire man she'd spent so much time with. She would disintegrate beneath the fire of his emerald gaze. Would sex be as fiery?

Was she brave enough to find out? Tessa added a floral bra and panty set to her basket before adding the harness style bra. It was edgy and reminded her of something Ally might wear.

From there they went to two different clothes stores; the first one was to supply her with basics—jeans, tanks, sweaters and the like. The second store was more trendy, specializing in dresses, jackets, and blouses with flowing, romantic lines. She even found a handmade poncho similar to her favorite pashmina. Tessa looked at the prices and raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. She couldn't remember ever spending so much money on clothes.

Tessa was ready to take her new prized possessions and go home. As they passed one of the last few stores, she looked up and spotted a beautiful dress in a shop window; it was white with a red rose print, a V-neckline, and a hem just above the knee. It was backless.

“Do you like that?” Kristian asked.

“I'm good, I don't need anything else.”

“Nonsense,” he said with a grin and walked into the store. Tessa trailed behind him. He'd already reached the saleswoman, who was smiling at him and literally clutching her pearls. The store was empty of customers and she was obviously happy to assist a handsome, wealthy customer and his lady friend. Kristian could charm anyone with minimal effort. She wouldn't be surprised if he didn't even bother to use his vampire mojo.

“Would you like to try the dress on?” the saleswoman asked Tessa.

“Might as well.”

Tessa went back into the dressing room. There were four stalls. Choosing the stall nearest the outside door, she locked herself in and stripped down to her bra and panties. She took a moment to look at her back in the mirror. Her skin was smooth and unmarred by the thick scars she'd had at the small of her back since she was a teenager. Kristian might think to heal her was a small gesture of affection but she doubted he understood how much it meant to her.

She pulled the dress over her head. She twirled, looking at herself in the mirror, front and back. Smoothing the fabric over her hips, she turned her back to the mirror, reaching for her handbag.

A woman was standing behind her.

Tessa had no time to scream as a hand was clapped down over her mouth.

With her other hand, the woman held a firm grip on her neck.

A dark clad form took shape, the assailant's face hidden beneath a dark hood. Tessa hit the woman's arms with her fists, but she would not let go. The vice grip of her hand on Tessa's throat only tightened. All she could see were the map of red veins in her attacker's eyes.

"Your little vampires can't save you from us. Say night night, vamp slut."

"Why?" Tessa tried to say, but all that was expelled from her throat was a low hiss. Tessa eyed the boot sitting on the dressing room bench. If only she could reach it. Her tiny knife was in there. The edges of her vision were starting to darken. She let herself become a dead weight in her attacker's arms, dropping a few inches. Tessa's fingers brushed the edge of the boot. Finally, she had a grasp on the knife hilt.

THE WOMAN LAUGHED, a soft little sound that pushed puffs of cold breath into Tessa's face. "You'll see soon."

Vision turning dark, she brought the knife up. It slashed across the attacker's arms. Rearing back, her attacker barked in pain.

The door of the dressing room was pulled open, and the pressure on Tessa's neck was suddenly released.

"Oh, you think you're funny," Kristian said, pinning the hooded woman to the wall. Her feet dangled above the floor. "How about you play with someone your own size?" he growled.

Tessa sank to the floor of the dressing room. There was dark blood on the blade of the small knife in her hand. Startled, she threw it to the floor. Mustering what strength, she had, she ran out of the dressing room. The store's inside lights were turned off, but she barely noticed. She ran for the front door, only to find it locked.

"Tessa," Morgan said, pulling her behind him. "Are you okay?"

Tears sprang to her eyes. She wanted to scream that nothing was okay and that she wanted no more to do with vampires ever again. She needed to run.

She needed to escape. Instead, she swallowed despite the burning pain in her throat. “Yeah.”

From where they stood, she could see behind the sales counter. The young employees sat on a stool behind the register, eyes fixed and body still except for the gentle rise and fall of her chest.

“Is she okay?”

“Yes.” Morgan grinned. “Just a small bit of magic. She won’t even remember we were here.”

Kristian came out of the dressing room, hauling the woman with him. He’d pulled back her hoodie. She strained against him but she was no match for Kristian’s strength. Tessa’s mouth dropped. What she saw didn’t match up with what she expected. Her attacker was a tall, blue-eyed blonde, her greasy hair hanging limply at the sides of her pimpled face. She didn’t look like much older than a kid.

“Charley,” Morgan groaned. “We have to stop meeting like this, kid. Still working for the Calder these days?”

“Whoever pays my fee,” she snarled.

“That’s your problem?” Morgan said. “Your generation of demons has absolutely no scruples. Whatever happened to the days of fire and brimstone with you guys?”

“I’m part of the new generation. Capitalism is where it’s at... So, what are you going to do to me?”

\* \* \*

TESSA HAD NEVER THOUGHT to ask about the attic in Kristian’s house. She knew that it had one, but it never occurred to her that there would be anything of interest there. It should have been filled with the kind of crap one would collect in two hundred years of life.

Of course, vampires had to find different uses for what would be an ordinary space inside anyone else’s home. It figures Tessa thought.

The entire room held only two items: an intricately carved mahogany

cabinet, and an antique electrocution chair.

The demon, Charley, was strapped into the chair. Fortunately for her, it was only being used to keep her bound. Tessa couldn't see any wires connected to it, but the buzz of thoughts in the air around her was more than hostile enough. She didn't want to see what was about to happen.

Morgan moved to open the cabinet doors, revealing a dangerous collection of knives, swords, and other gleaming implements. The tools of torture were within the demon's line of vision.

All the vampires were gathered around. Tessa stood between Kristian and Veronica. The guards flanked the execution chair, all except for Morgan, who faced the demon.

"We have an interesting problem here," Morgan said. "We send you back to the Calder, they'll kill you. We keep you here, and eventually, we'll have to do the same thing."

"Eventually?" she spat. "Or, I could snap these bindings and start snapping necks. I could begin with the humans. It's easiest."

Morgan leveled a glare at her that said he wasn't scared in the least. It was hard to be afraid of something that looked like a teen that listened to too much My Chemical Romance. Tessa, on the other hand, reached to touch the bruises forming on her neck.

"Your life span depends on how forthcoming you are."

"I'm not down for this torture shit. But there's not an awful lot I can tell you."

"Why did you come after Tessa?" Kristian asked. "How about we start there?"

"Look. You don't like the witches, they don't like you. I get that. And really, I couldn't care less what the lot of you do to each other. I was told to scare some sense into her."

"Your instructions weren't to kill me?" Tessa asked. "Because it seemed like that's what you wanted."

“Okay, so I was a little rough, but you did cut me,” the demon pouted.

“Bitch, really?” Tessa yelled. Kristian grabbed her waist to keep her from pouncing.

A soft murmur of laughter moved among the guards. It only made Tessa angrier when she realized the vampires were amused. Kristian had the good sense not to show any reaction.

“I could have told you,” Veronica said drily. “She doesn’t lack spunk.”

“Alright, Charley,” Morgan said. “How’d they know where to find her?”

The demon sucked her teeth. “They’re using a seer.”

“Since when do they have one?” Kristian asked.

“Recently, I guess. But, I mean, I don’t really know. It’s not like these people are my friends. It’s a job. I’m like a pizza delivery man. I get orders and I get paid to deliver, only with murder instead of pizza.”

Kristian let go of Tessa’s waist, taking a few steps towards Charley. “They had a seer and nobody bothered to tell you that you’d get captured on this little mission of yours?”

“Well, she is low level,” Morgan grumbled. “Maybe they were just trying to do away with a loose end. Can’t have a demon knowing too much about their dealings. Why not throw her at the vampires?”

“I know what you’re trying to do,” Charley said, her voice already faltering. “I won’t believe a Satan Damned lie coming from your fanged mouths.

“Uh-huh. I’ll get back with you on that,” Morgan said.

\* \* \*

“TESSA,” Kristian called.

She was in the basement apartment, sitting inside the kitchen. She looked up but didn’t respond when he spoke.

“We need to talk about what happened today,” he said.

“Really? Because I don’t think you want to hear what I have to say.”

“Maybe not, but things won’t get any better by pretending you were not shaken.”

Tessa laughed. She put her face in her hands.

“What’s funny?” Kristian asked.

“You!” Tessa laughed. “Shaken? How do you think that even approaches how I feel right now?”

“I’m doing the best I can,” Kristian said. “What more can I do?”

“That’s just the problem. I know you think you’re trying to protect me. I just got attacked by a demon. Something I didn’t know really existed a few hours ago. I led you right to my foster parent’s home when freaking witches were hunting you. This is...it’s not what I signed up for. I’m sorry, but I think I should go back to my life as it was.”

Something changed in Kristian’s eyes. “You’ve thought about this? You’re quite sure?”

“I have,” Tessa stood up. “I’m sorry. My life was simple before. It wasn’t perfect, but I was... well, it wasn’t like this. It’s all too much.”

“After...whatever is about to happen, once the current threat is over, I won’t stop you if you still want to go. But if you’re willing to walk away from me, and what we could have together, you owe me an explanation.”

“Of what?” Tessa demanded, feeling the fire burning in her eyes.

“The Calder is always after vampires. But you seem to be a priority for them right now. Why is that?”

“Do you think I have any fucking idea? They weren’t behind me before I met you.”

Tessa moved towards the bedroom and Kristian followed her.

“I don’t believe that’s exactly true. Why is it that you live the way you do, Tessa? I understand why you did when you were a teen. There was always the possibility you could have been found by the authorities and returned to your



family. Once you turned eighteen that was no longer a consideration.”

“Suddenly you don’t believe me anymore? You’re the one who found me, remember?”

“Of course,” he replied. “But maybe you haven’t been honest with me about all the reasons you live like a nomad,” he said, crossing his arms.

Tessa pretended not to pay attention. She reached into the dresser and pulled out another of his t-shirts and pulled a hairbrush from her purse.

He touched her arm. His grip was gentle, but she felt rooted to the spot. The intensity of his eyes would not allow her to look away from him.

“Have you ever been honest with yourself about what’s been going on in your life?” he asked.

There was a loud knock on the door. It was Veronica.

“Ally’s here,” she said. “You two might want to come upstairs.”

\* \* \*

TESSA WAS ONLY MOMENTARILY RELIEVED to get out of finishing the conversation with Kristian. She knew he was angry, and she was too. I’ve made my decision, she told herself. Despite her sadness, there was also a sense of relief. At least he knew she didn’t intend on sticking around. It wouldn’t be fair to let him think that she was going to be anything to him but a pleasant memory.

Provided they survived the next few hours.

When she and Kristian came upstairs to the living room, it was clear to her that the war party had been gathered. The grim faces of the guards and Ally’s presence let her know that the threat was close.

“I will be staying tonight,” Ally said. “Right now, we need to talk strategy.”

\* \* \*

THE HOURS TICKED BY SLOWLY.

Tessa had to fight the urge to flee every second she stood in the open.

Every now and again she pressed her fingernails into her palms, reminding herself this had to be done.

With the house, so still, she imagined she could hear every sound. The quiet ticking of the clock in the dining room, the sound of the ocean outside, her own trembling heart. Too many thoughts crowded her mind. The life she left behind on the road. The disillusionment she saw in Kristian's eyes when she told him that she wanted to leave. The feelings she had for him were so clear. She only feared that being with him would cost her everything.

Tessa licked her lips. She took a deep breath.

The moment she first heard them, she was very aware of what they were.

The thoughts of vampires were the same as humans. Even the demon, Charley, had much the same rhythm of in her thoughts.

The witches were different. It wasn't just the rhythm or speed of their thoughts. It was a cacophony of noise. Yet somehow, she was able to follow it.

She took her cell phone out and texted two words: Game on.

Tessa shoved the phone back into her pocket and waited. Somewhere in the house, Kristian's phone would vibrate in response. She closed her eyes and started to count. In her left hand, she grasped her weapon, a long, curved machete.

Five...four...three...two...

The crash of glass made Tessa jump. She was on her feet and running within seconds. The windows shattered in every direction as she ran. The window at the top of the landing shattered, a figure with pale hair streaming around it appearing.

It was only when she reached the dining room that she turned and looked behind her.

Tessa could see the witches from where she stood. There were three. They hovered, floated in the air. With their black eyes and paper-thin skin, she found them indistinguishable from each other. They were all at one beautiful

and horrible with their sharp, dark features. She ducked just in time to avoid a flash of fire from one of them. A chair ignited in flame.

Kristian came down the hallway towards her, sword in hand.

“Go!” he yelled.

She ran past him, up to the second floor.

Tessa took a left and dodged into a bedroom. She slammed the door behind her. She heard scraping on the other side of the door, so loud it hurt her ears. Was the witch using her fingernails? The sound was like a bone being drawn against a chalkboard. The rooms on this floor had connecting doors, and she ran through several before finally stumbling through the last one.

Just as she reached it, she heard a blood curdling scream from the floor below.

She was met in the last room by Jared. “One down,” he muttered as he passed her. Tessa looked over her shoulder to see him swinging his own sword at a snarling witch.

When Tessa reached the third floor, she paused. There was an unnerving quiet. She pressed her back against the wall, raising her blade. She could do this, she could do this, the words repeating over and over in her head like a mantra.

And then she heard glass breaking again.

The witch came in through a bedroom window. Tessa kicked the door closed as the thing came at her. There was a sound like wind rushing forward and then heat. Tessa watched in horror as the door disintegrated into flames. The witch emerged from the fire, black eyes fixed on her prey. Tessa fell to the floor, lifting an arm to protect herself from the flame.

“Incoming!” Ally screamed.

The witch bent close to her, only inches away. Tessa flattened herself against the wall just as Ally’s blade separated the creature’s head from her shoulders. Tessa felt the air of the blade’s movement. A lock of her hair fell to

the floor.

“That was close!” Tessa screamed.

“You’re welcome,” Ally spat. “Get your ass up.”

Only one more, Tessa thought.

Veronica and Ryan waited in the attic, along with Charley. She had been freed from the chair and was waiting with her sword like the rest having been convinced that the witches were well and truly trying to kill her via vampires. The four of them were the last holdouts. The rest were all on the lower floors, fighting. The hope was that there were enough vampires to hold the witches off. The numbers were clearly stacked against the witches, but when fireballs were added the numbers got a bit hazy.

“I know you’re supposed to be on our side at the moment, but stay away from me,” Tessa hissed.

“Gladly,” Charley’s eyes narrowed.

Screaming and fighting were still audible from the floors below. Tessa closed her eyes and reached out to hear thoughts.

“How many of the Calder did you see?” Veronica asked.

“Four in all. I think two are dead.”

“They sent four?” Charley sighed. “Shit.”

“How is Kristian?” Veronica asked breathlessly.

There was a loud knock on the door. A masculine voice called Veronica’s name. She ran to the door, opened it, and launched herself into Morgan’s arms.

Kristian was still nowhere to be found. The sounds of fighting and scraping came from the first floor. Tessa darted forward without thinking. She flew down the stairs, following the cacophony of thoughts.

Kristian was staggering, the witches staying just out of the reach of his blade as they threw balls of fire at him. He was slowing down. The last ball nearly caught him in the leg. Tessa surged into the fray before anyone realized

she was there, swinging her machete.

The witch's head rolled to the floor with a wet thump. The other witch turned to Tessa, hissing from between her sharp teeth. Tessa's breath caught in her throat. She froze to the spot.

The barely registered the flash of Kristian's sword arching through the air before the second head met the floor.

As the witch's body followed suit, Kristian stared at her with wide eyes.

"You saved me," he whispered.

Tessa didn't know what to say. It had all been gut instinct driving her. She didn't know where Kristian was. She didn't wait for anyone to tell her. She simply had to act. And, for that, she was grateful. Without words, she dropped her machete and flung herself into his arms.

\* \* \*

"It's a good damn thing our kind heal quickly," Ally said. "How are you?"

Tessa and Ally stood on the back deck of the house, watching the grim bonfire on the beach below. The remains of the Calders were being piled up along with wood and bits of destroyed furniture. The sun was starting to come up, coloring the horizon in blue and red.

"I'm okay," Tessa said. She was still shivering, but she told herself it was only because of the sea breeze. She had gone inside and retrieved her pashmina, a bit of comfort. Her fingers tugged at the edges of it.

"Are you going to be sticking around?" Ally asked.

"I don't know yet," Tessa lied.

Ally shrugged. "It would be a shame if you didn't. We could use a gifted witch killer like yourself."

Ally smirked and winked at her. She freaking winked.

Just that quickly, she was gone. Vampire speed was still something Tessa had not gotten used to. She turned her attention back to the beach. Morgan and Veronica were holding hands. Everyone had made it through the fight

alive, if not unharmed. Even Charley was among them. The demon stood apart from the others, unsure of herself. Ally had admitted that she was a problem she had not figured out how to deal with, but it seemed that for the time being the demon was angry enough with the witches to fight on their side. Hopefully, in time she would loosen up and share what she knew on the Calder.

Kristian must have felt Tessa's gaze on him. He looked up. Their eyes met and locked. Feeling a warmth spread through her, she turned away and went back into the house.

\* \* \*

THE FIRST FLOOR sustained the worst of the damage—singed furniture, busted windows, blood splattered on the living room walls. The basement apartment was untouched. No one would have ever guessed at the carnage which took place one floor above by looking around the suite of rooms.

She would miss it. This was the first real home she had lived in since she was a teen. It was the place where she experienced the first real love she had known since long before that.

Love. She bit her lip. She didn't like to even think that word. It had been something which she had almost given up on completely.

She went to the bathroom. Her hair was a mess. She needed a good, hot bath. But she was so exhausted that it took all her energy just to brush her hair and wipe a cool cloth across her face. All through the fight, she had held herself together despite the fact that she was terrified. She held onto the counter to keep from falling when her knees buckled.

Tessa couldn't be sure how long she stood there, half bent over the sink, head down, crying.

Until a pair of strong arms slipped around her.

Kristian didn't say a word. Instead, he pulled her against his chest and held her. He let her cry against his shoulder, leaving a damp spot on his shirt. He held her and rocked her gently. He rained kisses on her face—her forehead, her eyelids, her flushed cheeks—and ran his hands up and down her

back, soothing her.

“Tell me you won’t leave,” his whisper begged. “Darling, please.”

Tessa looked into his emerald green eyes and saw a depth of pain that shouldn’t be possible for a man whose heart no longer beat. This beautiful, complicated man was prepared to sacrifice his life to protect her. How could she turn away from the pleading in his eyes? He didn’t wait for her answer. Instead, he kissed her mouth.

He tasted like fire and soot, the ashes of their enemies. His cool lips parted against her own, drawing her tongue against his. He was bitter and sweet, his touch demanding her response. He stepped back from her, looking her in the eye.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I won’t go.”

Kristian took her in his arms again, steering her back towards the bedroom. She felt her knees touch the back of the mattress, and then he was on top of her. His hands were everywhere, exploring every part of her that almost left his life. He pulled off her top, discarded her bra. His mouth sought the comfort of her neck and her breasts, where he kissed and sucked her. Tessa sighed, reaching to pull him closer to that sweet spot.

He got off the bed, quickly shedding his clothing. She sat looking up at him, and he smiled, running his cool, smooth hand over her cheek. The flecks of gold in his green eyes shined.

And then he was on her again. This time, she straddled him, bracing herself against his strong shoulders as she rode him. He sat up with her in his arms, one hand against the side of her neck, and bit her.

He had bitten her before. Usually, it was one gentle bite, and then he licked the blood away with his tongue, like drops of ice cream from a cone. This time, he drank from her as though she were the fountain of youth and he was a dying man. For a moment, she felt her head spin, and there was nothing but mindless animal pleasure, his fangs piercing her neck as his manhood moved inside her.

Kristian let go of her neck, licking her wound to heal the place where he penetrated her. He put her back down on the bed and he laid her on her side. She enjoyed every bit of his body, which he gave her again and again...

\* \* \*

WHEN TESSA WOKE, she was aware of the emptiness of the bed. Smiling, she stretched and got up. The scent of food called to her from the kitchen.

“You didn’t have to cook,” she feigned surprise. “But thank you.”

“You’ve had nothing since yesterday,” Kristian said, pushing a plate towards her. “Eat.”

He’d made her a full breakfast: cheese omelet, toast, and sausage. She took a bite of the meal and groaned. “Damn. That’s good.”

Kristian shrugged. “You need to keep your strength up.”

He took his travel mug from the refrigerator and took a long sip. They took their meal together in companionable silence. When she was done, he looked up at her with a serious expression. “We never finished our talk from before,” he said.

“If you want me to tell you this story,” she said, “you should probably get comfortable. Is it too early for wine?”

“Never,” he said, and grabbed a bottle from the cabinet.

Tessa sat down on the couch with her legs folded beneath her. Kristian sat across from her. As she began to speak, she felt his attention on her, his eyes on hers.

“There’s a lot to my own life I don’t understand. I don’t know why there are so many years of my childhood which I can’t remember. And it’s not like I had the money or the inclination to get therapy to find out. It occurred to me that maybe something traumatic happened before my parents died, but it doesn’t really make sense. I went through a lot of awful things when I lived with the Forresters, and I remember every moment of it. I have read that people react differently to bad things. And that sometimes people who forget large chunks of their memory never remember all of it.



“When I finally got old enough to leave, I was happy. I didn’t need much to live on. And you’re right, I did keep moving because I was a minor and I didn’t want anyone to know. I was a truant, after all. That alone was enough to get my ass busted. I didn’t think the Forresters cared enough to make a big deal about me being gone, but I knew child services would find out at some point, and then the authorities would do whatever they were supposed to when it came to a runaway teen.

“The plan was to get a part-time job that would give me money on paper as soon as I was eighteen and save up for an apartment. A cheap studio would have been fine. And of course, I would continue to tell fortunes. It was a scam, but it was money, and I wasn’t ashamed of it. I figured it was their loss for being stupid enough to fall for the game.”

Tessa paused, trying to gauge his reaction. He nodded to urge her to continue.

“Here’s the thing. I know it’s not exactly normal that I can read minds, but until recently, I never believed in the occult. To me, mind reading was just a fucked-up glitch. Maybe I use some portion of my brain other people don’t. But whatever.

“My eighteenth birthday came and went. I had a waitress job, and I was living in Florida at the time. It was a little backwater town not many people came through, and I found an apartment easily enough. It was small enough that people also knew I told fortunes. At that time, I would invite people into my home for the readings as long as they didn’t look questionable. A lot of the people there were older, and I didn’t feel weird about inviting them up. You find the ones who have some pain behind them, a dead spouse, an argument with a child, something, and you reinforce what it is they want to hear. Give them some comfort, and they shell out the cash. I know it sounds horribly callous, but you wanted honesty.”

“THERE’S nothing you’ve done that would shock me,” Kristian replied. “Or make me not want to be with you.”

Tessa licked her lips.

“There was a woman. She had this long, silver hair, and I think on the day I met her, she had it in a ponytail down her back. She came up to the apartment for a reading. I noticed there was a presence about her, something different. She sat down across from me, and I remember a chill passed through me. For the first time, I heard nothing. I’ve never come across anyone who could block me from reading them.

“She smiled at me, and her eyes turned black. And then I heard a stream of thoughts. She was asking me about my life. And she told me that I didn’t know who I really was because I didn’t want to, but there was a way for me to know who I was. She called me a traitor. I got up and told that bitch she had to leave. She laughed at me, and she said we would meet again.”

“Did you?” Kristian asked.

“Not exactly. I still have nightmares about her every now and again. And she’s usually carrying a red book with my name on it. Once she gives sit to me, I can’t be rid of it. I shouldn’t be terrified of a book, but I am. Freaky, right?”

“I’ve heard stranger things,” he replied. “Though not anything this strange from a human.”

Tessa smiled. “You know how to make a girl feel better,” she teased. “Anyway, I packed up and I left town that night. I got on the road and never looked back. I made a practice of never staying in any one town for more than a few weeks. I frequented street fairs and any other local gatherings. I’d show up once or twice and be on my way again. Every once in a while, if I stayed in one place long enough, I would hear locals telling stories about vampires and shapeshifters, and other supernatural things. It scared me. So, I just kept moving.”

“Do you think the woman with the silver hair has been behind you all of this time?”

“I don’t know,” Tessa said. “Do you think she’s a Calder?”

“Possibly. There are many things that have black eyes, not only witches,” Kristian said. “All sorts of demons and other creatures do. She could be a shapeshifter. Either way, she might be in league with the Calder. Or maybe she enlisted them to kill you. I’m curious that she didn’t harm you when she was alone in your apartment. Relieved she didn’t,” Kristian said, reaching out to touch her if only to reassure himself she was still there. “You may not have had a belief in the occult at that time but you did exactly the right thing—run and not look back.”

“Would the Calder do that? Take a job from someone else?”

“The Calder don’t do anything that doesn’t directly serve their purposes. They were on the move maybe a week or so before you and me met. Veronica and I had already been in contact with Ally about them. They’d happily take on a contract from someone else if they believed it would help them kill a few vampires in the process.”

“Shit,” Tessa sighed.

“It’s something we’ll have to find out.”

Tessa shrugged. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

\* \* \*

THE NEXT FEW days were spent handling the massive repairs needed for the house. Kristian cleaned the blood spatter from the walls himself before allowing anyone to come out to complete the other work. They didn’t need to raise more alarm than needed. Every window on the bottom floor was gone. The vampires had done a good job of putting out several fires before they spread, but there were still spots of charred flooring or walls. One bedroom was missing its door, which had been reduced to ashes. Tessa noticed some strange stares and whispers between the workmen. She laughed. Did they think the house was occupied by a bunch of rowdy partiers? That was the tamest reasoning she could think up to explain the widespread damage.

Though all of the other guards left the morning after the four witches were killed, Morgan remained. He claimed he was sticking around for a bit to make

sure there was no other threat. Morgan and Kristian were both in daily contact with Ally by phone. She informed them that the track had gone cold for her and the other trackers under her employ. It was like nothing she'd seen before. Usually, there were some rumblings in the underworld about the movement of the Calder, but so far, there was nothing. Charley had been working with her to turn over other demons, but so far, no luck.

One week after the attack, everything in the house had been repaired. New security systems were installed, and the house was protected with new warding spells. Tessa and Kristian sat together with Veronica and Morgan. The fire was roaring. The vampires drank their evening blood, while Tessa had a glass of red wine. She smiled to herself. It reminded her of being at the dinner table as a kid, drinking apple cider on New Year's while the adults had champagne.

A memory, she thought. *A childhood memory I didn't have before.*

"We can expect the Calder will want comeuppance for their four sisters who were killed. It might not be today or tomorrow. They are known for striking when one least expects it," Morgan said. "This was an embarrassing defeat for them. I can't remember the last time anyone killed four Calder during an attack. I'm sure they are off licking their wounds and plotting their revenge."

"Great," Tessa said. "We've been successful in pissing them off."

"In a way, it's a good thing," Kristian said. "It will keep them away for a while. If we had been less successful in fending off an attack, they would have been back already to finish the job."

"My guess is if they were working with a seer before, they're still under the Calder's employ. Maybe they've received some advice."

"Where does one find a seer?" Tessa asked. "I could use one."

All eyes turned to her.

"Isn't that ironic, given your profession?" Veronica said.

"My former profession. I don't tell fortunes anymore," she said haughtily. "I mean, really, if they're trying to get the jump on us, I don't see why we

shouldn't use their same tactics.”

“They're not the easiest people to procure,” Kristian said. “But given enough time it could be done.”

“Ally won't like that,” Morgan said.

“Baby, she doesn't have to know everything,” Veronica said.

Morgan grinned despite himself. “Yeah. That's true.”

Tessa and Kristian took that as their cue to give the newly reconciled couple some time alone. They went out to the back deck and watched the waves lap over the beach, the glow of moonlight on the ocean. They kissed. His mouth was salty sweet against hers.

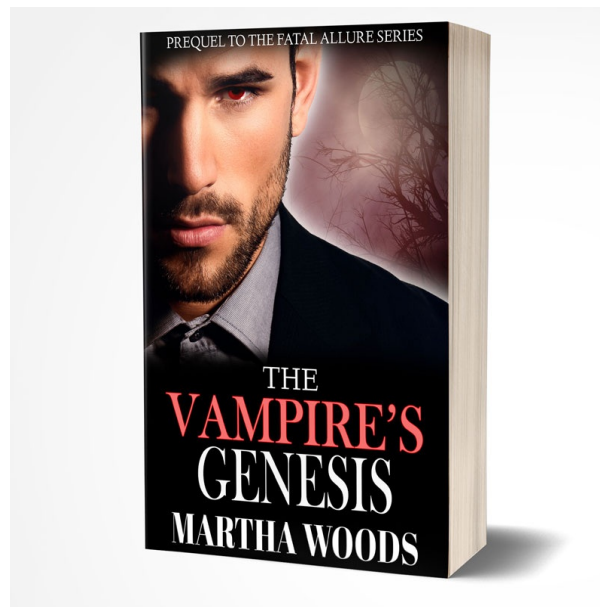
Kristian's arms went around her. “I don't know exactly what comes next,” he whispered against her ear.

“It's okay,” Tessa said, staring into his eyes. “We'll handle it together.”

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