

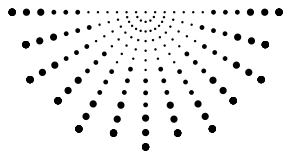


BLACK SUNSHINE



KARINA HALLÉ
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLACK SUNSHINE



KARINA HALLE

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For Scott, mine for the ages

“On display you taunt the beast again. ‘Cause when you move and shake, that thing inside you comes awake” – Bitches Brew, +++ (Crosses)

“Do you believe in destiny? That even the powers of time can be altered for a single purpose? That the luckiest man who walks on this earth is the one who finds... true love?” – Bram Stoker, Dracula

“We will never die, beside you in time.” – Beside You in Time, Nine Inch Nails

PLAYLIST

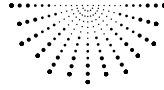
Music is a huge part of my life (and my past life as a music-journalist), and a major component of my writing process. Here is a list of songs that were either featured in the book or what I was listening to while I wrote. Some are eerily on point with this book (such as “Bitches Brew” by my man Chino Moreno), others were inspiring.

You can also find the playlist on my Spotify [here](#), though it may shuffle them out of order.

“Bitches Brew” - +++ (Crosses)
“Nothing Matters” - Tricky feat. Nneka
“Black Sunshine” - White Zombie
“All the Good Girls Go to Hell” - Billie Eilish
“Dead of Night” - Depeche Mode
“Telepathy” - +++ (Crosses)
“Corrupt” - Depeche Mode
“Parenthesis” - Tricky
“Change (In the House of Flies)” - Deftones
“Waiting for the Night” - Depeche Mode
“Red Right Hand” - Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds
“World in My Eyes” - Depeche Mode
“Vampyre of Time & Memory” - Queens of the Stone Age
“The Space in Between” - How to Destroy Angels
“A Girl Like Me” - PJ Harvey, Desert Sessions
“My Strange Addiction” - Billie Eilish
“Closer” - Nine Inch Nails

“Hand of God” - Nick Cave & Warren Ellis
“The Poet Acts” - Philip Glass
“Lovely Creature” - Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds
“Tear You Apart” - She Wants Revenge
“Your Skull is Red” - Team Sleep
“The Perfect Drug” - Nine Inch Nails
“Blood in the Cut” - K.Flay
“Red-Headed Devil” - Moderator
“Loverman” - Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds
“The Becoming” - Nine Inch Nails
“This is a Trick” - +++ (Crosses)
“The Hand That Feeds” - Nine Inch Nails
“Tomb of Liegia” - Team Sleep
“My Witch” - Moderator
“Red Riding Hood” - Elysian Fields
“Bury a Friend” - Billie Eilish
“The Blood is Love” - Queens of the Stone Age
“Imagine the Fire” - Hans Zimmer
“Blood, Milk and Sky” - White Zombie
“Total Falsch” - Bohren & Der Club of Gore
“Beside You in Time” - Nine Inch Nails
“Let Love In” - Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds
“The Epilogue” - +++ (Crosses)
“We Don’t Die” - Tricky
“Dream a Life” - Slowly Rolling Camera

PROLOGUE



Orcas Island, Washington State
Nineteen Years Ago

IT'S THE SNAPPING OF A BRANCH THAT GIVES THEM AWAY.

Elaine Warwick immediately winces as the sound ricochets through the forest—a mix of cedar, Douglas fir, and alders that should have muffled the noise, in theory. But Elaine knows better.

Up ahead, Jim stops running, shooting his wife a harried look over his shoulder. He knows better too. The expression of pure disappointment mixed with fear threads through his eyes, but Elaine can only nod at him to keep going.

They're so close.

And now they've lost their advantage.

The Virtanens will hear them coming.

Even isolating yourself on an island in the Pacific Northwest, withdrawing from society in some sort of penance for your many sins, doesn't take the amplified senses out of the vampire. Once a vampire, always a vampire, until you die.

Which is why Jim and Elaine are here tonight.

To find Alice and Hakan, the famed Virtanen vampires, who inflicted centuries of pain upon people before they decided to have a change of heart — “retirement” as some in the guild called it — and put them to death.

It's going to be nasty work, and there's a chance that neither Jim nor Elaine will survive this, but it's personal. It's been personal for years, since Alice killed Elaine's sister. The guild doesn't even know that the Warwicks are here on a vengeance trip. They long ago said it was best to concentrate on vampires that were still doing damage, but Elaine hasn't forgotten, and the damage is never going away. She knows that since the guild didn't sanction this kill, there's a chance they could get in trouble for it.

Executed, even.

Then again, what the guild doesn't know, can't hurt them.

Besides, they might die here anyway.

That snapping branch didn't help.

They continue running, as soundless as possible. They've trained most of their lives for moments like this. How to be quiet and quick, especially against predators who are faster than they are. Predators who must know they are quickly approaching the property.

Elaine feels her knife burning at her calf, the energy coming off it seeping into her own skin, her own skin feeding back into the knife. The vampires won't know that knife is there, protected under a cloak of spells, buried by the sigils and fire agate threaded into her black pants. Slayers have evolved to try and trick their prey, just as their prey have evolved to try and trick them.

Jim's silhouette in front of her gets clearer, the trees tapering off, night sky peeking through. There are so many stars that it steals Elaine's breath for a moment. The moon is full, shining so brightly that her eyes burn, but even though she worships the moon, lets it influence everything she does, tonight she has the sinking, damning feeling that the glowing orb isn't on her side.

Focus, Jim's words come into her head. *We need to pull this off.*

Elaine swallows hard and nods, coming to a stop beside him, the two of them crouching down as they survey the scene.

There's a field of high grass between them and the house, the ocean behind it, the moon gleaming on it like light on a steel blade. The house is small, modest, looking like it would belong in Scandinavia rather than here in the Pacific Northwest. Moss completely covers the roof, the paint red and peeling. Elaine was never an empath like her husband, but even she can feel that there's no malice in this house, only warmth and love.

It makes her hesitate, enough that her husband puts his hand on her shoulder and gives it a squeeze. *We don't have to do this*, he says in her head.

She knows this. But she also knows it has to be done. She will find no peace until Alice pays for what she did. They say revenge is poison, but she'll gladly take it if it helps her sleep easier at night.

They must move fast. Though the house seems silent and the lights give off a warm glow, the smoke from the chimney puffing, she knows they are waiting for them. Although, something about the scene does seem odd.

It's the fire, Jim says soundlessly. *Why have a fire if they never get cold?*

Elaine nods. That's what it is. But vampires can be strangely sentimental about old ways, hanging on to their past. It's possible that either Alice or Hakan was raised around a hearth, back in the days when a fire was a house's only source of heat. While their parents wouldn't have a need for it, a child won't turn until they're older. Perhaps they keep the fire out of habit, remembering the good old days.

Elaine shakes the images of vampire families out of her head. It does her no good to view them as anything but monsters. She was born to kill them and that's what she'd do.

Suddenly, the door to the house opens and a woman steps out. They're too far to see her clearly, but there's no doubt that the vampire can see—and smell—them, like the apex predators they are.

This must be Alice.

The knife burns against Elaine's leg, coming to life, and she knows they have seconds to act before Alice attacks them. Vampires move fast, faster than the human eye can see. Luckily, being a witch, and a slayer in particular, they can track her, even when Alice uses the Veil.

But she doesn't move, not even when Elaine and Jim take their knives into their hands, the metal glinting with electric blue currents. The knives aren't as big as one would think, but they can be thrown with startling accuracy. One shot to the heart is all it takes. Of course, Jim has a machete back at home, but decapitation is a messy ordeal.

The husband and wife look at each other and, in that moment, they know they're committed.

They both run forward toward Alice, the element of surprise gone, and the risks of them dying at the hands of a vampire increasing with each and every step.

They cross the field quickly, moving soundlessly through the grass, but still Alice doesn't move. Her arms are out to her sides, but she is unarmed.

She's protecting something.

"Stop," Alice calls out, her voice melodic, but the pitch is off. Like she's uncertain, perhaps afraid.

Elaine and Jim stop. It is not by choice. The vampire is compelling them, even at this range. It won't last, it rarely does with witches, but it's enough to give Alice yet another advantage.

"Leave this place," Alice says. "Now."

Elaine breaks free from the bonds, feels them snap. "I can't," she says. "You know what you did, you know what you must pay for."

Suddenly, Hakan appears behind Alice, a tall lanky creature built for precision, and puts his big hands on Alice's shoulders. "I didn't think revenge killings were allowed by your *guild*," Hakan says in a light Finnish accent.

"I don't have to do everything the guild tells me," Elaine says.

"Turning against your own?" asks Hakan, his eyes deep gray and hypnotic. Elaine needs to keep watching them, but she's finding it more difficult by the second. "You'll be punished."

"So long as you're dead, I don't care what they do to me," Elaine says. "Besides, they won't find out. We'll make this quick and easy. Not a trace of you to be found."

Her words are strong and clear and they don't show the wildness in Elaine's heart, the fear that this could go either way. Witches have magic and the blade that can kill vampires. Vampires are predators that would love nothing more than to kill a witch, and with their strength, speed, and penchant for violence and blood, they make an equal match.

But there's something different here. Elaine knows it. There's a vulnerability to this couple that shouldn't be here. They asked them to leave. Vampires never ask to do anything. And even now, they still aren't making a move.

Which means Elaine has to make hers before it's too late.

In the back of her mind she conjures up the image of the blade leaving her fingers and going right through Alice's heart. Her intention will set the fate, unless something else intervenes.

She throws the blade, quick as a wink, the power shooting out of her fingers, guiding the knife forward. Before it can hit Alice, she's pushed

aside at lightning speed as Hakan steps forward.

Taking the knife to the heart.

Saving his wife's life, but ending his own.

Hakan immediately falls to the ground, his body seized by the blue currents as it spreads out from the knife, overtaking his limbs, making them shake.

Alice cries out in horror, dropping to her knees beside Hakan.

"Why?" she sobs to him, trying to take the blade out. "Why did you do that?"

Hakan stares at her, pain engulfing him as the last vestiges of life are leaving him. It must be quite the feeling of being *almost* immortal.

While Elaine stares at the scene, transfixed, Jim points to the house, closing his eyes, and draws the fire out of the fireplace inside. Flames spread immediately, as if the place was doused in gasoline.

Alice screams. "Lenore!"

Elaine and Jim exchange a sharp look. *Lenore?*

"Go to her," Hakan says to Alice, spitting out blood. "Save her and maybe they will spare your life."

Elaine's heart clenches. *Who is Lenore?*

Suddenly a child's cry fills the air, rising above the roar of the flames, and Elaine's mouth drops in horror.

A child.

Alice and Hakan have a child.

This they didn't know.

Alice gets to her feet and runs into the house.

But Jim is fast, throws the blade so it gets her in the back, knowing the knife's power will penetrate to her heart that way, slipping past her ribs.

Alice stumbles but keeps running, right into the flames, fueled by a mother's love and protection.

Elaine looks at Jim in horror. *What do we do?*

We wait for them all to die, Jim says. And we leave.

But from the fraught expression on her husband's face, he feels as torn about the situation as she is.

And there's something more than that.

There's something that is calling Elaine to the house, the child's cry that doesn't stop is reverberating around her heart, tugging at her, making her feel. How can it not, they both know that a child is only a vampire in

waiting. At the moment, the child doesn't drink blood, lives with innocence in the soul.

The child is burning to death, burning alive.

Elaine stares down at Hakan, his lifeless body, and knows the flames will reach him too.

"We have to go," Jim says. "People will see the fire, they'll be here soon."

Elaine just blinks, numb, and he puts his arm around her, leading them away from the house, the fire hot at their backs. The child has stopped crying, which means it's dead. And it's their fault.

"Please," a tiny shaking voice says from behind them, stopping them in their tracks.

The Warwicks whirl around to see a child standing beside her father, staring down at his body. She can't be more than two, her clothes burned off of her, but the rest of her untouched. Her hair is long and dark blonde, like amber honey. "Daddy."

Elaine's heart breaks and she feels a calling to the child, like a haunting siren song that rises from the moonlit well in her gut.

The child raises her chin and looks at Elaine, right in the eyes. They're large and hazel, all the colors of nature in them.

"Please," she says again. She can't be more than two, but she's so soft-spoken.

Elaine knows she's asking for them to save her.

The fire leaps forward, licking the child's back, causing the remains of her burned dress to catch on fire and fall away, but the child isn't even hurt. She doesn't seem to notice.

This is no ordinary vampire child. Fire kills them. It kills witches too.

But it's not killing her.

Elaine looks at Jim and he nods. He knows what she's decided to do. Perhaps he can feel the child calling inside him as well.

Letting them both know that she's not just a vampire.

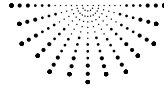
But one of their own.

Something that should never be.

Elaine runs forward, into the fire, scoops up the girl, the fire burning her bare arms. Elaine doesn't scream, though the pain is unbearable. She just takes the girl in her arms—Lenore—and brings her toward Jim.

Being the bigger and stronger of the two, Jim holds on to the child, and they both start running off into the woods, letting the fire burn all evidence to the ground.

CHAPTER ONE



SAN FRANCISCO - PRESENT DAY

I THINK I'M BEING FOLLOWED.

My friends have called me paranoid once or twice before, so there's a chance they might be right. But I still can't shake the feeling that someone's been following me, all the way from my apartment down in Hayes Valley, to here in Upper Haight. Doesn't help that the further up the hill I go, the thicker the fog gets, making every shadow extra ominous. That's what I get for taking the shortcut past Buena Vista Park.

I pause, coming to a standstill, and listen.

I'm a couple of blocks away from the speakeasy, in the residential area close to Haight Street, which is busy on a Friday night, and yet everything seems eerily calm. Hushed. Like the houses around me are holding their breath.

Slowly I turn around and stare back down the street.

There's a lone streetlamp on the corner, showcasing the mist rushing past it.

A shadowy figure, a man, suddenly appears out of the gray, stopping right beside the streetlamp.

Staring right at me.

Into me.

And it's like all the air is knocked from my lungs.

I'm literally gasping, my body stiffens, going ice cold.

And then the streetlamp goes *out*.

Plunging the man into darkness.

Oh fuck this.

Feeling strength returning to my limbs, I take in a sharp breath and spin on my feet, running like hell up the street. I've always been athletic and fast, despite what some extra pounds might say, and I run like I've never run before, not stopping, narrowly colliding with a couple as I sprint down Frederick until I hit Ashbury.

Only then do I stop, taking stock of the situation as I look around.

Everything seems blissfully normal here. Some people walking about, the sound of traffic filling the air. The street is brightly lit, showcasing the colorful Victorian homes on either side of the road. The entrance to The Cloister, one of my favorite bars, has only a few people in line, nowhere near as busy as it will be later. For a somewhat underground speakeasy, it's awfully popular, probably because word has gotten out that they don't scrutinize IDs.

I wonder if my mystery stalker was a cop. I turn twenty-one in two weeks, so I'm almost legal to drink, but I've been using the same fake ID for years now. Carol Ann Black, from Edmonton, Alberta instead of Lenore Warwick from San Francisco, California. The picture looks *nothing* like me either, but every person I've given the ID to has just accepted it at face value. My friend Elle jokes that every bouncer just happens to want to sleep with me, so they let it go, but either way it works.

But maybe my time is up. Perhaps the cop will show up at the bar, a total shakedown, arrest everyone. I'll have to keep my wits about me if I see the guy again.

Not that I really saw what he looked like. He was just a hazy silhouette. Tall, at least six feet, broad-shouldered, wearing a long coat. Could be anyone, really.

I try to shake the unsettled feeling from my limbs.

It was just a cop, I tell myself as I rifle through my black studded handbag, getting out my wallet. He didn't even do anything, just stared at me. If he wasn't a cop, then it was probably just someone else out and about, nothing more than a stranger, and the light just happened to blow out above him. I'm making something out of nothing.

Cuz you're paranoid, the voice inside my head pipes up.

I shake that away, too.

I stride up to the behemoth of a bouncer and hand him my ID, doing that thing where you're trying to look bored and put-out by having to give

your ID, like you do this all the time, like there's no way you could get in trouble because *of course* that's really you in the photo.

The bouncer scrutinizes the photo, then looks at me.

Looks at the photo.

Then back at me.

"Carol Ann Black?" he asks.

"That's me," I say, flashing him a smile as I stare deep into his eyes. No one with a fake ID would dare be this confident.

"Okay. Have fun," he says, handing it back to me, staring off down the street like I don't exist.

"Thanks," I tell him, and squeeze past him through the gate at the side of the building, my nerves fluttering with adrenaline. I'm so looking forward to finally being legal so I don't have to get so worked up every time I want to go out and have fun.

Not that I've been doing a lot of that lately. With my final *final* exam next week, I've been doing nothing but studying. I'm doing my BA of Arts with a major in Ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern Art and Archeology, hoping to one day get my PhD and perhaps become a museum curator. I'm supposed to go to Egypt in August for two weeks as an internship (unpaid, of course, but at least they take care of the flight), on a dig, so there's a chance that my dream of working for a museum might change to becoming a hands-on archeologist. Only time will tell.

The Cloister is actually in the basement of an old church, so it's not just a clever name. Though the bouncer is stationed out front, you have to go through a side gate between the church and a blue Victorian house, then round the back and down the outside stairs to the basement. Tonight of all nights I'm still a little spooked out, and the path is extremely dark.

I stop suddenly, just before I round the corner to the stairs.

The space at the back of the church is an overgrown garden, though in the night it's just an ominous black mess. Once, I stayed at the bar until the sun was coming up and only then was I able to actually get a good look at the concrete cracked with weeds, a rotting bench overtaken by ivy, a crumbling fountain slippery with mildew.

Right now, I swear there's someone standing right in front of me, between me and the back wall of the garden. I sense them, but I don't see them—it's just black space, looking somehow denser than normal, like it doesn't stop, like it goes on and on forever, a black hole.

I suppress a shiver running through me, my scalp prickling at the thought of standing on the edge of infinity with no escape, only darkness.

"Hello?" I call out, my voice sounding small and stupid.

A sharp inhale of breath comes from in front of me.

Then the door to the basement opens, illuminating the space.

I swear for a split second I see a moving shadow, red eyes, and then there's nothing at all except the fountain, the angels looking particularly warped with moss splashed across them like green blood.

A guy and a girl come stumbling out of the bar, giggling, lighting up cigarettes, hands tangled with each other. They don't really seem to notice me, disappearing into the dark of the garden, only the lit ends of their cigarettes giving them away.

The moment clears the cobwebs from my head, making me realize I need a fucking drink, and I quickly walk down the stairs, opening the heavy door into the club.

Once inside, I let out a breath of relief, Billie Eilish's "All the Good Girls Go to Hell" playing over the speakers, and start looking for Elle.

The Cloister is a cavernous space that manages to feel small, really leaning into the whole church thing. The carpet is red, the walls are dark wood, there are makeshift altars all over the place with crosses and skulls and rosaries, and the space has been divided up into seating areas by having a bunch of iron four-poster bed frames scattered around, tables and booths in the middle, surrounded by retractable red velvet curtains. Even though it's haphazardly put together, it's a little *Twin Peaks*, a lot of goth, and very, very cool. Plus, the drinks are amazing, even if they'll suck a student's budget back quickly.

I walk around, looking for Elle, and spot her at a booth in the corner. It's our favorite spot because it looks out onto the whole bar, which means the both of us get to rate every guy that walks in through the door.

I give her a quick smile and slip past the curtain, taking a seat on the hard bench across from her, a former pew chopped into sections.

"You got here fast," she says to me, sliding my drink over to me. We always have an agreement, whoever gets here first has to order the other person a drink, and the other person has to drink it, no matter what. Tonight it looks like some kind of fruity martini which is fine with me.

"I was in a hurry to get drunk," I tell her, grasping the thin stem of the glass. "Cheers."

We both raise our glasses, delicately clinking the rims without spilling.

"Well then, here's to getting drunk," she says. "And to our last exams."

I take a sip of the drink, cranberry and something, strong enough to make me cough. "Yeah," I say, trying to clear my throat. "Perhaps we should have waited to come here until *after* we're officially done."

"Oh whatever," she says, waving me away and downing the rest of her drink in one go. The girl could drink turpentine and not flinch. "You're going to pass with flying colors like you always do. You could show up to your exams drunk if you wanted and you'd still ace it."

"Right, well, I'm not about to experiment and find out."

Elle and I met the first day during our Elementary Akkadian class when she asked who my tattoo artist was, and after that we were fast friends, liking the same music, going to the same concerts, and sometimes going after the same guys (I always yield to her because it's not worth the fight... she can be a little headstrong). I never had a lot of close friends growing up. There was always something that kept me at a distance from everyone else, whether it was something on their behalf or mine, but I'm as close to Elle as I'll ever be with anyone, aside from my parents.

She brushes her short, bleached blonde hair behind her ears, the rows of earrings catching the dim light, and gives me a funny look. "You okay?"

I give her a brief smile. "Yeah. Why? My lipstick smudged?"

She shakes her head. "No. You seem a little out of breath and shaky."

She reaches out and places her fingers along the tattoo on my right forearm, the words *dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before*. I know it's cliché to have an Edgar Allen Poe quote as a tattoo, but when your name is Lenore, well, I'm like *this* place. I lean into what was given to me.

"You're cold," she says to me, snatching her hand back.

"I'm always cold," I remind her, even though right now I feel kind of flushed on the inside, like my heart is too hot. "And I'm fine. I just had a scare earlier."

"What scare?" she says loudly, her eyes going wide with excitement. Elle gets so worked up over everything.

"You're going to say I'm paranoid again."

"So let me be the judge of that. What happened?"

"Nothing happened," I tell her, tugging down the sleeve of my yellow plaid shirt so that it covers my arms. "I thought I was being followed."

“You probably were.”

“Thanks.”

“I don’t know why you insist on walking everywhere,” she says. “Just take an Uber.”

“Elle, I walked all the way up Haight.” Pretty much. “It was busy as anything. I was safe. Besides, Ubers are expensive.”

She rolls her eyes, her green shimmering eyeshadow sparkling. “As if you can’t afford it. Your parents have told you time and time again, they’ll pay for your Ubers until you get a car.”

“Doesn’t mean I feel good about it.”

“Fine. You’re getting the next round.” She taps her black nails against the table, giving me an expectant look. “Since you saved some money by walking.”

Now it’s my turn to roll my eyes. “Fine.”

“Better do it before Matt shows up.”

Matt is a friend of ours. If you want to get more specific, he’s my ex-boyfriend. I dated him for a few weeks last summer, totally casual. The sex was okay, and to be honest, the only reason I dated him is because he’s the drummer in a White Zombie cover band, and I thought he was sexy as hell.

But, as is often the case with me, even though I’m attracted to a guy, the sexual experience ended up being lackluster. There was just no...spark. No physical connection. I know I’m probably asking for too much—Elle tells me that as long as I’m getting off I should be satisfied, but it is what it is. For a while there I thought maybe I was a lesbian, but Elle, who’s bisexual, put that to rest pretty quickly. Turns out I exclusively want dick, I’m just picky about said dick, expecting my world to be blown wide open, for the earth to quake every time I have an orgasm.

I blame the monster erotica on my Kindle.

But despite the somewhat awkward hook-ups, it turned out Matt was okay with just being friends and we’re so much more compatible this way. Sometimes I think it’s a shame that we didn’t have the chemistry I needed, but the fact that I got a good friend out of it makes it worthwhile.

“I hope he isn’t bringing his girlfriend,” Elle adds under her breath.

Okay, so maybe there’s a teeny tiny bit of jealousy on my behalf when it comes to his new girlfriend, Beth. I know I’m the one who broke up with him, but I don’t make the rules. She seems nice enough and I definitely don’t want him back, but I guess deep down, the closer he gets to her, the

more he might pull away as a friend. See, she doesn't like me very much. She acts like she's afraid of me for some reason, and because of that, Elle doesn't like her either, which makes our hang-outs a lot less fun.

As if on cue, Matt walks in through the door.

Thankfully alone.

I stick my hand out of the curtain and wave him over to us.

"Now you have to buy three drinks," Elle reminds me. "Should have moved faster."

Matt stops in front of our table, grinning at us both. "Okay, what are you having?"

I give Elle a triumphant smile. Matt almost always takes care of the bill when he's here. Though he's a musician on the side, he's got a start-up going in Palo Alto with him and some of his friends, an app that tells you what TV show you should stream tonight. It's only in beta mode at the moment, but he's rolling in investor money.

"I'll have a Paloma," I tell him, looking him up and down. He's wearing a black hoodie and jeans, but his black leather high-tops catch my eye. "New shoes? They look expensive."

A flush appears across his tanned face. "Yeah," he says, running his hand through his brown hair. "New Jordans."

"Jesus, Matt," Elle says. "Your band know your shoes cost half a grand?"

He laughs, giving her a look like she has no idea. "What do you want to drink, Elle?"

"Surprise me," she says, flashing him a smile and wiggling in her seat. "I'm feeling risky tonight. Frisky, too."

Matt looks to me, brows raised, in a way that says *are we sure we should be getting her drunk?*

I shrug. There's no stopping Elle when she's in a mood.

He walks off to the bar, a line already forming, the place getting busier, half the people in here looking like they're underage. I have to wonder how long this place has until it gets shut down.

"Hey, I was thinking maybe the guy following me was a cop," I tell Elle.

"Oh yeah? A hot cop?"

I make a face. "Ew. No. I never saw his face."

“Then how do you know he’s not a hot cop?” She pops the cherry from her drink in her mouth, wagging her brows at me. “Hey, want to see me tie a knot with my tongue?”

I watch her struggle with it in her mouth, waiting to be wowed. Elle is gorgeous in this tiny little pixie way, but the kind of pixie that will bite you. Just like Tinkerbell, fueled by spite.

She pulls out the stem, perfectly tied, smiling at me triumphantly.

“How do you not have a girlfriend right now?” I ask her.

“I’d say the same to you,” she says. “You know it’s been a while since you went out with Matt. Maybe it’s about time you put yourself back out there.”

“I’ve been busy,” I tell her.

“I know. As have I. But after this exam, you’re free.”

“Let’s just stick to rating the guys that walk in the door.”

She gives me a wry look. “You need to take chances, Lenore. I mean, look at you. You’re going to waste.”

I laugh. “I am not. If you’re trying to make me feel old, it’s not working.”

“You’re not old, you’re hot as fuck, in the middle of your degree, at Berkeley of all places. You should be using this time to your advantage. You should be getting laid every weekend if you’re not looking for a relationship.”

I’m about to tell her that I’m fine, when movement by the door steals my attention.

A couple walks in, a girl and a guy, maybe the ones who were smoking cigarettes earlier, but my focus goes straight to the man standing behind them.

The man staring right at me, gaze burning deep into mine, even from across the room.

That feeling of breathlessness returns.

My skin feels too tight, too hot.

The blood pounds dangerously hard in my veins.

But instead of feeling fear, I feel complete fascination.

This is the most gorgeous human being I’ve ever seen.

Creature, the voice in my head pipes up. *Gorgeous creature.*

Yeah, somehow that seems more fitting, because there’s something definitely otherworldly about this guy.

He's tall, broad-shouldered, big. Naturally built like a truck.
But his face is pure masculine elegance.

Square jaw, full lips, straight nose, facial hair that's artfully groomed yet scruffy. Arched low-set black brows that keep his penetrating blue eyes in the shadows. His hair is black, wavy and long, almost to his chin. He's like if Aragon from *Lord of the Rings* just walked in here wearing a three-piece black suit and red tie. His clothes scream *money*.

"Wow, I'd definitely rate her a ten," I hear Elle say.

This can't be the man who was following me, can it?

"Her?" I repeat absently, unable to look away from the man's gaze. I'm completely captive in it.

I want him to know my name.

"Yeah," she says. "What are *you* staring at?"

It takes all my effort to blink and look at Elle, and the moment I do, my blood runs cold, the connection severed.

"You don't see that man?" I whisper, finding it hard to talk.

I look back to the door, but he's gone.

"Who, the scrawny dude who just walked in with the inexplicably hot girlfriend?" she asks.

I get to my feet and step out of the booth, looking around. Where the hell did he go? "There was a guy here. By himself. I was...we were looking at each other."

"Okaaaay," Elle says. "What did he look like? He must have been Oscar Isaac-worthy to get you out of your seat like that."

I shake my head, not understanding it. Not only where he went, but what came over me. That wasn't normal. I've never had my body react like that to anyone before. Maybe that's what I've been missing. It's not enough to just find someone hot or attractive, but to find yourself attracted on some other realm.

Realm? Okay, calm down, I tell myself, forcing myself to sit back down. *You're getting a bit woo-woo here.*

"Lenore?" Elle prods me. "How old was he?"

"I...I don't know. Maybe thirty-five? Forty?"

She scoffs. "You and your older men. No wonder you're so picky. And no wonder he didn't stick around. Probably stepped in here and realized we're all a bunch of youngins. The man can't party."

She's right. The mystery man probably figured out pretty fast that this wasn't his scene. I mean, yeah, it looks cool, but if you look closely you'll see how cheap and rough around the edges this place is. It's all for show.

Still, the disappointment in my chest is palpable.

"Do you think it was the guy following you?" she asks.

I glance at her. Her interest is piqued again. "I don't know. This man was wearing a suit. The other one was wearing a long coat. I think."

"A suit?" she exclaims, pressing her fingers into the table. "Since when do you go after men in suits?"

"Since never," I say. It's true. I have a very specific type. Black leather jackets, boots, white t-shirts, tattoos, maybe a bit of eyeliner. Matt fits the description to a T. This man did not.

But maybe my type's been wrong this whole time.

"I think you dodged a bullet there, Lenore," she says. "Men in suits don't usually go for girls with tattoos. Believe me, I know."

She's probably right. It's not like I'm covered head-to-toe, but I have a lot for someone my age. My parents have tattoos and they've always been strangely encouraging toward me getting them. And as long as I ruminate on what I want and what they mean to me, making sure it's something special, they've even given me the money to do it. I know it's pretty rare to have that kind of support, so I've definitely run with it. Tattoos and jewelry, those are my trademarks.

Matt comes back with our drinks, pulling me out of my head for a moment. We make a toast to the semester almost being done. Matt went to Stanford for one year, met his start-up buddies, and dropped out (which seems to be the popular thing to do around here), but he still sympathizes. Then Elle tells him all about my supposed stalker and the hot guy in the suit, and I swear I see his jaw tighten a little, like the fact that I showed an interest in another guy bothers him.

But I don't dwell on that too much. The more I think about our relationship, the weirder it gets. Better to just take it at face value.

We end up staying at The Cloister for a couple of hours, until I'm pretty buzzed. But I know I need to do some studying tomorrow, so I don't want to be totally hungover.

"I'm going to go," I say, grabbing my purse and sliding out of the bench.

Matt reaches out and grabs my wrist. "Wait," he says. "I'll walk you."

I give him a quick smile, taking my wrist back. "I'm fine. I'm going to get an Uber. Don't worry."

I wave goodbye to Elle and head toward the door, but Matt is hot on my trail.

"Don't fuck him, Lenore!" Elle yells after us. "You can do better."

Matt gives her an incredulous look over his shoulder. "Hey, thanks."

I can't help but laugh, waving her away. Way to make things awkward, Elle.

"I'll be fine," I tell him as we step out into the night. The fog seems to have thickened, the air damp, but all the spookiness is gone thanks to the crowds of people in the back garden and heading down the path.

I stop at the side of the road and take out my phone, opening the app. Matt stands beside me, hovering.

I steal a glance at him. "I'm fine. Really. No need to babysit me."

"I'm not babysitting you," he says. "I'm looking out for you. If you really do have a stalker..."

"I don't. The more I think about it, the more I think I'm being paranoid. As you always used to say." I nod at the church. "Go back inside. Don't leave Elle by herself."

"You know she's fine," he says. "But you're not."

Then, before I can move, he reaches out, cupping my face in his hands and kissing me.

Ah, fuck. Elle was on to something, wasn't she? She picks up on shit that I don't. I figured Matt was drunk, but I didn't think he was this kind of drunk.

I press my fingers into his chest and push him back. "Stop," I say quietly, licking my lips. My red lipstick is on his face.

"Sorry I..." He shakes his head, running his hand through his hair. "I just think we could start over."

I manage a sympathetic smile, not liking where this is going. "You have a girlfriend, Matt."

"I don't have to have a girlfriend."

My expression turns withering. "If you're hoping that sounds romantic, it doesn't. Come on, man. You're drunk. You don't know what you're talking about."

"And I don't know what you want," he says sharply. "Do you even know?"

I blink at him, taken aback. Matt is always so mild-mannered and chill, this is the first time I've seen him get cross with me.

"What are you getting at?"

He takes a step toward me, dark eyes glinting in the streetlight.

"I'm getting at you," he says. "I don't know you at all. You never let anyone in. You don't even know yourself."

I feel my cheeks burn, hating how his words are making me feel. "Go back inside, Matt," I manage to say. "Before you say something even more stupid."

He stares at me for a moment before he lets out a huff of air and turns around, heading past the bouncer until he disappears into the dark.

Shit, what the hell has gotten into him?

With trembling fingers, I manage to get an Uber, only a minute away. It pulls up, and I slide into the back, trying to get some sense into my head. It was such a strange night anyway, but to have Matt get all weird at the end really pushed it over the edge.

But I'm not so concerned with what he wants from me. He was drunk.

I'm toiling over what he said.

That no one can get close to me.

That I don't even know myself.

Because he's right.

And I hate that he sees that in me, and that he used it against me.

I sigh and lean back against the seat. It sucks, but I think it's probably for the best if I don't see Matt for a while. Let him get his head on straight.

The ride to my apartment is only ten minutes and I get the Uber to drop me off on Laguna Street. Though the shops and bars of Hayes Street are just blocks away, the neighborhood is dark and quiet as usual. But I'm so lost in my head, I can't be bothered to be spooked.

I cross the road and go to my door, my parents' door right next to it. My parents actually live above me. They own the whole row house, and had it split into two residences when I graduated high school. I had the choice to live on campus, and they'd rent this out, or stay here. As much as I wanted to experience the college lifestyle, this apartment is so much cooler than a dorm, and my parents totally leave me alone. For the most part.

I fumble for my keys in my purse, glancing up at their place above. It's nearly midnight and the lights are all off, my parents fast asleep. They tend

to get up at four in the morning, for reasons I've never understood. As for me, I never sleep much. My brain won't turn off.

I take my keys out when I feel a presence behind me.

I gasp, my eyes going wide, the hair at the back of my neck standing on end.

I wrap my fingers around the keys, making a fist, prepared to whirl around and stab the attacker in the eye.

"Lenore Warwick?" a man's smooth voice says from behind me.

I pause, then turn around.

There's a man standing on the curb. Tall, long dark coat, the shadows too deep to make out his face.

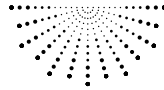
For a moment I think it's the man from the bar, but I already know it's not.

My stalker, however, that's another story.

"Who's asking?" I say, my voice shaking a little, my fist tight around the keys.

"Forgive me," he says, stepping forward until he's in the dim light of my front window, his face emerging from the shadows. "But I've been looking for you for quite some time."

CHAPTER TWO



I STARE AT THE MAN ACROSS FROM ME, TRYING NOT TO FEEL DISAPPOINTED that he's not the sexy suit man I saw at the bar. That said, he's still pretty handsome. Aquiline nose, black mussed up hair, light eyes that bounce between blue and green. He's probably in his early thirties, dressed head to toe in black.

Handsome, and a little creepy.

Can't explain why.

It might be the fact that he just propositioned me at midnight outside my house, and is most likely the guy who's been following me.

He gives me a quick smile that doesn't reach his eyes and reaches into his trench coat, swiftly bringing out a business card, sticking it out for me.

I have to take a step closer to him to take it and I don't let go of my keys. I quickly snatch the card from him and go back to where I was standing, holding it up to the light.

"Atlas Poe," I read the card. I glance up at him. "That your real name?"

Another quick smile. "I get asked that a lot."

All the card says is "Atlas Poe" and "The Guild" and a local phone number.

"What do you want?" I ask. "You some Poe fan obsessed with hunting down women named Lenore?"

He shakes his head slightly, eyes looking dark. "Not a fan of Poe, to be honest." He clears his throat, gaze narrowing as he looks me over, focusing on the tattoos on my legs below my cut-off denim shorts, the ravens that wrap around my calf, the ram on my thigh. "I tried to stop by earlier to speak to your parents."

Uneasiness prickles my skin. "It's midnight. You're lucky you even caught me." I pause, feeling brave. "Was that you following me earlier? In Upper Haight?"

He frowns. "Someone was following you?"

I study him for a moment. I don't think he's pretending.

"Yeah. Or maybe not," I tell him. I sigh. The guy is still creeping me out, but I feel a smidge better knowing it wasn't him. His shoulders are broad but not quite broad enough to match what I saw. "So, what do you want with us?"

He stares at me for a moment, then glances up at my parents' house. "I'm an associate of your parents."

"What kind of associate?" My parents work for the California and San Francisco Historical Societies. All their co-workers are hella boring.

He brings his gaze back to mine. "I represent a section of the guild that they belong to."

"There's a guild of historians?"

"Something like that."

"So just call them like a normal person. Send an email. Don't accost their daughter outside her place at midnight."

"My apologies," he says. "I just..." He peers at my chest, and for a moment I think he's checking out my boobs, but then I remember I buttoned my plaid shirt all the way up. He's staring at the black skull pendant on the end of one of my many necklaces.

"Black tourmaline," he says softly, glancing up to meet my eyes.

I frown. "What?"

"Your necklace. It's black tourmaline."

I glance down at it, letting the black skull dangle from my fingers. I always assumed it was onyx or something.

"Did your mother give that to you?" he asks.

I make a fist around the skull. "Yeah..."

"Interesting," he says. Then he offers me a quick smile. "Well, I'm sorry to disturb you so late at night, Lenore. I'll be sure to drop your parents an email. Again."

And at that, he turns and walks down the street, his black trench coat flapping behind him until they both merge into the darkness.

I watch the empty space, the street seeming to turn into a black hole, and then I quickly turn, shoving my keys into the door and stepping inside

my apartment.

Sanctuary.

I lock the door, checking several times to make sure it's secure, then go around to the windows in the living room, the kitchen, the bedroom, and bathroom and make sure they're locked too. Even though I don't normally go to sleep until 2 a.m., I quickly get into my nightgown, then go into the bathroom to take off my makeup. I look in the mirror.

Ugh.

I forgot that Matt had kissed me, so I was talking to Atlas that whole time with red lipstick smeared over my lips. Combine that with the fact that my hair is looking unruly and my mascara is smudged under my eyes, it's no wonder Atlas seemed a little apprehensive about me.

Then again, I'm the one who had every reason to be apprehensive.

I quickly wash my face and crawl into bed, hoping sleep will come for me earlier than usual.

Thankfully, it does.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up tangled in my necklaces. I guess I forgot to take them off last night.

I delicately wrap my fingers around them, careful not to break the thin chains as I pull them away from my neck, briskly rubbing my fingers over the indents left in my neck.

And then everything about last night comes flooding back to me.

The man under the streetlamp.

The man in the suit.

Matt kissing me.

A man named Atlas Poe at the door.

I pull back the skull, staring at the stone. Black tourmaline? I'll have to ask my mom. I have a lot of questions for her now.

I roll out of bed and blink at the light streaming in through my bedroom window, my eyes straining. They're especially sensitive this morning, probably from all the drinks I had. I'm glad I don't have a hangover though. I must have fallen asleep right away, so that helped.

I stagger to the bathroom, filling a glass with water and downing it, repeating the motions a few times, before I get into the shower, trying to wash away the night before.

When I feel clean enough, my head a little brighter, I get dressed in my studying clothes, leggings and a long burgundy sweater, putting my rings, bracelets, and necklaces back on, wrapping my hair into a towel. I have long light-brown hair, but I get blonde highlights done every so often, so I should probably take better care of them and do hair masks and the like, but my beauty practices always fall to the wayside when it comes to school.

I put on my slippers and pad over to the kitchen, searching for coffee for my French press. I should have got more Blue Bottle last night, but I know my parents have a ton of Peets upstairs, so I send my mom a quick text: *COMING UP FOR COFFEE* and then I grab my keys and head out the door. It doesn't matter that I have a towel on my head, I'm only outside for a second, using the key to their house and unlocking their door.

I lock it behind me and go up the narrow stairs, letting myself through the top door. My mother is in the kitchen, already pouring coffee into the French press.

"Morning sweetie," she says to me, smiling. "Run out of coffee or just wanted to see your mom?"

"Both," I tell her, coming into the kitchen and kissing her on the cheek before sitting down at the kitchen island, elbows on the live wood counter. "Where's Dad?"

"He already went to the farmer's market to see what vegetables they had," she says, pouring hot water into the press. "I'm hoping they still have Romanesco."

So, my parents are kind of hippies. I grew up surrounded by organic produce, plants in every corner of the house, crystals, tarot cards, my mother using moon cycles for everything, a super clean diet. Really, like a lot of families in the Bay Area.

"If they do," she continues, "will you come over tonight for dinner? I'll make your favorite pasta."

"Can't say no to that." It's not the best dish when I need to study, as it makes me rather comatose, but hopefully I'll need the break by then.

She steps away from the press and peers at me, hand on her hip. My mother looks exceptionally young for her age. Granted, she's only forty-five, but we often get mistaken for sisters when we're out and about. Okay,

so no one has ever said *sisters* per se, but they definitely think we're friends, especially with our tattoos.

Our faces don't look much alike, but her skin is even better than mine is. She's got all the glow while I still get acne from time to time and I hate my pores. Her hair is long and blonde, though she always wears it back in a braid. She's also super slim, and while I'm athletic (years of playing field hockey, basketball, and volleyball helped with that), I have boobs and hips and a butt that can't be contained. I spent a lot of time trying to get the flat stomach that never came, but I've decided there's better things to do with my time. Her arms are covered in tattoos, hiding scars that she got when she fell into a fire when I was very young.

All I know is that I hope I look like that when I'm her age. My dad looks awesome too, though he's in the middle of competing with his co-workers at the historical society at trying to grow the longest beard, and my mother and I are so tired of it. He looks more and more like Hagrid every day. My mom says she tries to convince him to give it up, but the man has a lot of pride. He's in it to win it.

"You look a little tired," my mom says after a long moment. "How was last night?"

I shrug lightly. "It was fine. The usual."

"Have a lot to drink?"

Another shrug. "Not really. I kept a good head. Went home early. Do I look hungover?"

"You're a bit squinty."

"Oh. Yeah. Light's bothering me today." I eye the sun coming in through the east window.

"Is that all that's bothering you?"

I'm pretty close with my parents. There are no secrets between us, even though I wish there were sometimes. Both my mom and dad are incredibly intuitive, so there's no point trying to hide everything about last night. I decide to parcel it out.

"I saw Matt last night," I tell her.

"Oh? And how is he? He still with that girl who doesn't like you?"

I manage a smile. "I think so. She wasn't there, though."

"Well, good. You don't need to waste your time with people who don't like you, sweetie."

“Uh huh,” I say, sliding the skull pendant back and forth on the chain. “Unfortunately, I think I have to add Matt to that pile of people.”

“What happened?” she asks, pushing the plunger down into the French press, the coffee swirling in the glass like a mahogany nebula.

“I don’t really know,” I admit. “He got drunk and kissed me.”

“Uh oh,” she says, pouring the coffee into a mug and placing it in front of me before pouring herself a cup. She sits down across from me. “I take it that didn’t go over well.”

“He still has a girlfriend, first of all,” I say, giving her a steady look. “So, no. And even if he didn’t, I’m just not ... interested. We’re much better off as friends.”

“So I guess he didn’t take the rejection very well,” she says as she lifts the mug to her mouth.

I shake my head. “No. He got angry.”

“Angry? Matt?”

Matt’s been over to my place a bunch of times, and she’s met him and liked him. He’s always been his usual chill self.

“I was surprised too.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, giving me a sympathetic smile. “You don’t deserve that. But try not to take it personally. He might be having a stressful week. You know those start-ups aren’t known for being an easy job. I’m sure there’s a lot of money at stake.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, and it makes me feel a bit better.

“Hey,” my mom says, putting down her mug and looking at me with hopeful eyes. “Since you’re having problems with Matt at the moment, maybe you’ll rethink your birthday plans.”

I sigh. My parents have been very weird and emotional about my birthday. When I turned sixteen and eighteen it was all good, but now that I’m turning twenty-one, suddenly they think it’s the end of the world, like I’ve officially grown up and won’t be their daughter anymore.

Anyway, a couple weeks ago they asked me what I wanted to do for my birthday and I said I wanted to have a party with friends, and then they suggested maybe I could spend my birthday with them.

Like, alone.

Like, on a family trip.

And, as much as I love my parents, that doesn’t spell a good time to me.

I told them no, of course, but I've been feeling hella guilty about it ever since, and now after the whole thing with Matt, maybe it's not the worst idea.

"I don't know," I tell her carefully.

"Oh, it will be fun. I promise you. We've been looking at one of those cool houses to rent in the middle of the desert, like Joshua Tree. You love that place."

It's true. I've been to Coachella a few times, and once after the festival, Elle and I rented a glamping spot in the middle of Joshua Tree National Park. I totally fell in love with the place. Something about the remoteness, the sparseness of the land, the stars, and that ever-reaching night sky, like you're plugged right into the universe. I swear I could feel my blood singing to the moon.

"Are you sure you want to take me to the middle of the desert?"

"Of course!" she exclaims. "We can light a bonfire, dance around it, get drunk."

"Yeah, right," I tell her. Oh, they'll totally dance around the bonfire and yell blessings up to the moon goddess or some nonsense, but my parents very rarely drink. They don't like to lose control. They don't even smoke pot, although that's something I do regularly. Helps dull the world a little, and definitely helps me sleep.

"Come on, it'll be fun. It will probably be our last trip as a family."

I finish the dregs of my coffee and give her a sharp look. She's smiling, but behind her eyes she's absolutely gutted for reasons I don't understand.

"Mom. Don't be so dramatic. I'm still going to be living downstairs. I've still got two more years of school, and even then I'll end up doing my Masters and PhD here. I'm not going anywhere."

She sniffs and gently runs her fingers under her eyes. "I know. I can't help but hate that you're getting older."

Ugh. Talk about pulling at the heartstrings here.

"Stop. Look. If I say yes to the desert birthday, will you stop acting so sad about it all?"

She smiles. Still looks sad though. "Yes. I promise." She clears her throat. "Do you still want that Alexander McQueen bag for your birthday?"

I'm not really a designer goods kind of gal, most of my clothes I get through AllSaints and Free People when I can afford it, and Poshmark when I can't. But a couple of weeks ago I saw this black Alexander McQueen

purse with this skull and stone design and I can't stop thinking about it. It's expensive as hell, so when I mentioned it to my parents I really didn't think anything would come of it. I'll be working most of the summer at the Palace of the Legion of Honor, so I figured I would just save up.

"Yeah, but you don't have to bother with that," I tell her. "I know it's stupid expensive."

"You only turn twenty-one once," my mother says. "Stay right here."

She walks off down the hall to the bedroom and I'm left wondering what's going on. It's not long before she's back and holding an Alexander McQueen box. "I did a thing."

My mouth drops open. "What?!" I immediately reach for it. "You got me the bag?"

She holds the box away from me. "I did. We both did. But we should probably wait until your father is home before we open it."

"But...but it's not my birthday for another two weeks."

"I know." She rotates the box around and around in her hands. "But why wait? Why not enjoy it now? You can wear it to class when you do your final exam. For good luck."

"I don't know what to say." My parents have always spoiled me throughout my life, I know that much. I work extra hard because of it, because I'm always trying to be deserving of it. They have money, too, my father coming into a huge inheritance from his father, someone I never got a chance to meet before he died, but even so, the guilt is real.

"The bag is gorgeous," my mother says. "You have good taste. Plus, the skulls and the black stone on the front are so very you."

And she just gave me the perfect segue.

"What kind of stone do you think it is?" I ask innocently.

She shrugs. "I'll have to take another look. Might just be costume jewelry."

"Or it could be black tourmaline," I say.

She pauses for a moment, frowning, then nods. "Could be."

"Is my necklace black tourmaline?" I ask, lifting up the skull.

"And my ring?" I nod at the black stone between two rams' heads on my right hand.

"That's pietersite. The Tempest Stone."

"Where did you get these again?"

"I can't remember. They were for your sixteenth birthday though."

"I know that. I remember my English teacher Mrs. Price saying they were practically demonic. She couldn't believe it when I said you gave them to me."

"Some people aren't very open-minded, are they?" She reaches for my mug. "Want more coffee?"

I nod. "Yes, please." I pause as she brings my mug over to the French press. "So, what does black tourmaline mean?"

"It means protection," she says, her back turned to me.

"Why do I need protection?"

She gives me a soft smile over her shoulder. "All girls need protection, Lenore." She turns her head back to concentrating on the coffee.

I jump right into the big question, watching her body language carefully. "Mom, who is Atlas Poe?"

She stiffens for a moment, her hand shaking, coffee spilling. "Who?" she asks, but her voice is a register higher than normal. "Shit. I spilled."

She keeps her back to me, reaches over for a dishcloth to mop it up.

"Atlas Poe," I repeat. "I saw him last night. He said he's been trying to contact you for some time. Maybe he's sent you an email."

She clears her throat loudly and finally turns around, putting the coffee in front of me. There's a tremor in her hand and she quickly hides it. "What did this man want, do you know?"

I shake my head. I hate that she's lying. Well, not lying...yet. But she definitely knows him, that much I can tell. "He just wanted to talk to you. But I'm going to guess it's important since it was midnight when I saw him. Right outside my door."

Her eyes go wide. "Last night?"

"Yeah. I thought he was...I don't know, a creep." I'm not about to mention the stalker thing. "But he said he belongs to some guild and that he's an associate of yours. Of course I told him to just call you like a normal person, but I got the impression that he's done that already."

She presses her lips together, nodding. "Ah. Yes, I do remember some emails from him, but I don't remember what they said. We get so many about this and that."

Okay, so *now* she's lying. Her eyes go squinty. "Did he...did he say anything else to you? Did he do anything?"

"No. He gave me his card and left. I have it downstairs. It's just his name and a phone number. Want me to get it?"

“That’s okay. Just...tell me if you see him again. Okay? He shouldn’t be approaching you so late at night. Especially not here.”

“Is he dangerous? Should I be worried?”

She stares at me for a moment, and from the angle of the light, her eyes look like they’re reflecting crescent moons. Then it’s gone. She smiles. “He’s just a weirdo. I’m sure it’s all fine.”

Weirdo, huh? Very comforting.

The sound of footsteps up the stairs breaks the strange vibe in the room, and then the door swings open, my father laden down with several reusable canvas bags from a range of retailers, gorgeous crimson roses peeking out the top.

“Lenore!” he cries out happily. My father is never not happy to see me. I don’t think he’s ever been mad at me, not even when I broke a priceless Egyptian artifact when I was five. Now that it’s my line of study, I know I would personally be furious.

“How’s my girl?” he says, plunking all the bags on the counter, zucchini and asparagus spilling out. He grabs the roses and hands one bunch to me. “These are for you.” Then he notices the Alexander McQueen box and shoots my mother a scandalous look. “What’s been going on here, Elaine?”

My mother shrugs, smiling brightly. “I figured we could give it to her early. Why not?”

He looks at me, a wry grin on his face nearly buried by his beard. “You working your magic on your mother?”

I protest. “It was her idea.” But now I’m watching my mother. When my father’s back is to her, her smile abruptly fades. I can tell she’s still stuck on the Poe thing. So am I.

“Sure, sure,” my father says with a sigh. “Okay then, let’s do this. Do you want to open it now?”

“Yes, please,” I tell him. I’ve never had much patience, and the purse would be a good distraction.

He hands me the box. “We should have at least wrapped it,” he says, glancing over at my mother who is staring off into nothing, biting her lip. “Are you okay?”

“What?” she says absently, then runs a hand over her head. “Yes. Just drifted off there.”

I contemplate bringing up Atlas Poe to my father to see if he recognizes the name at all, to see if their stories differ, but I don’t want to ruin a good

moment.

So I open the box and see the gorgeous purse, all silver hardware and quilted black lambskin leather with the skulls and stone over a metal knuckle. I slip my hand through the knuckle and admire it, like I'm wearing extra rings. I'm pretty sure the stone isn't a *protection* stone, but it's still nice.

All girls need protection, Lenore.

My mother's words flit through my head for a moment. Then I bring my focus back to the bag, hug the both of them, gush over it appropriately. I don't want that to steal this moment, especially when this purse means a lot to my parents, I can tell that much.

I then help my father put his groceries away, have another coffee, and chat for a bit with him about his morning before I head down to my apartment with the box under my arm, roses in my hand.

I take out my favorite vase (a knock off of a find from the 18th Egyptian Dynasty), fill it with fresh water, then cut off the ends of the roses before sticking them in. They look gorgeous on the kitchen table, the petals like velvet. I always try to have fresh flowers in the apartment as it really brightens the place up.

Then I go into my bedroom and take the purse back out of the box, displaying it on the dresser beside my metal figurine of Pazuzu, a demon god from the first millennium B.C., who matches a tattoo I have on my hip. Pazuzu was a feared demon, but he had the power of repelling other worse demons, so in a way he's about protection too. I admire them together for a moment, then slide the box under my bed (it will be a great place to stick mementos), grab a banana from the kitchen, and go to my desk in the living room, the pile of books beside it ready to go.

I fire up my laptop and start studying.

* * *

LENORE.

Someone whispers my name.

I wake up slowly, like I've been drugged. Lift my head up off the textbook, the paper sticking to my cheek.

What the hell?

I must have fallen asleep.

I carefully look around, my head feeling heavy.

What time is it?

It's pitch black inside the apartment, except for the light coming down the hall from the kitchen. I could have sworn I had my reading lamp on before, but it's off now.

I grab my phone from beside me and tap it on, the light illuminating the space around me. It's one in the morning. I have no idea how long I've been asleep for. I'd pretty much been studying all day, taking a couple breaks before having dinner upstairs with my parents. After that, I took a glass of wine from them and went right back to studying. Maybe the pasta coma had delayed onset or something, because the last thing I remember was reading my notes on the Austrian archaeologist Manfred Bietak and that was it.

Well, I guess there's always tomorrow. Normally I'd push through and pull an all-nighter, but I'm still tired enough to go right back to sleep. Might as well take advantage of it.

I'm just about to get out of my chair when I hear a creak in the kitchen, then the sound of a door closing.

I fucking *freeze*.

My skin prickles in fear.

That sounded like my bedroom door.

And there's no breeze in here at all, no reason for a door to close by itself.

Shit, shit, shit.

My heart is crammed in my throat, blood pounding in my head, my limbs ice-cold, like the temperature in the room is dropping, dropping, dropping.

Am I freaking out for no reason? I *heard* that door close, and now I have the terrible feeling that I'm not alone in my apartment. I pick up my phone and contemplate texting my mom. She won't be up though. They sleep with their 'do not disturb' on. And the keys to their place are in the kitchen.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath.

I hope I'm freaking out over nothing.

Though honestly the room does feel like an icebox, goosebumps erupting all over my skin, fear spreading through my veins like ink.

Okay, just get up and go into the kitchen, get the keys, and run out.

I manage to get out of the chair. Shaking. With one foot in front of the other, moving like the carpet turned to quicksand, I somehow convince my legs to move until I'm crossing the living room and stepping out into the hallway. The light in the kitchen illuminates the keys hanging below it.

They're right there.

Just get them and go.

Moving fast now, I head over to the keys, looking over at my bedroom door as I do so.

Only to see it wide open.

I stop, stare.

Okay, now I'm really confused. Did I imagine hearing it close? I try and think back. Maybe I was still half asleep and the sound came from my dream. That's happened to me before.

That must have been it.

I'm being paranoid again.

I walk over to the bedroom and cautiously poke my head in.

It's dark in here too.

Pitch black.

Unnaturally so.

And yet...I have the same feeling I had behind The Cloister. Like the room is no longer a room, but a long, cavernous void where nothing can escape, and standing between me and that eternal darkness is someone.

Or something.

I swear I hear it...*breathing*.

In. And out.

Coming...closer.

Closer.

Oh god.

I quickly fumble for the light switch, turning it on, filling the room with light, expecting to see someone standing inches in front of me.

But there's nothing.

It's just my room. Everything in its right place. My purse on the dresser.

I collapse against the doorframe, pressing my hand into my chest. Jesus, I need to stop giving myself a heart attack. I can't even blame it on the weed since I didn't have any today.

I exhale loudly, pushing all the air out. It's starting to feel warmer in here too.

All in my fucking head.

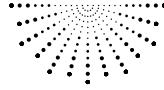
Maybe I'm a little more stressed about this last exam than I realized.

I sigh and turn around, heading back into the kitchen to get a glass of water before I go back to sleep.

I stop suddenly, staring blankly at the red roses in the vase on the table.

Every single one of them is dead.

CHAPTER THREE



“HERE WE ARE,” THE DRIVER SAYS TO ME, COMING TO A CRAWL ALONG THE curb.

“Can you drop me off in the parking lot?” I ask, gesturing to the row of cars to the right. “It’s less distance to walk.”

“Of course,” she says. “Pretty spooky out tonight. Gotta be safe, right?”

She says this all in a very apathetic voice, so I’m not sure how much she really cares, but she pulls into the parking lot and I get out by the path that will lead me to the last building in the Foothill Student Housing, where Elle lives.

It *is* spooky. The fog is thick tonight and the air is cold enough that I wish I wore tights under my skirt. After a warm and sunny February and March, April seems to be giving us one last blast of winter.

I gather my jean jacket closer around me, adjusting my new purse on my hip, the crossbody chain tangling with my necklaces. The parking lot is fairly well lit, but even so, the mist is heavy around the lights, obscuring the path in front of me. Feels like I’m walking into a dream, which puts my senses on high alert.

I haven’t seen my stalker recently, but that’s because I’ve been home doing nothing but studying. I finally had my exam yesterday, and I’d like to think I aced it. Every question that came up I was able to answer with confidence, so now that it’s all over, I’m able to let my hair down and relax, hence why I’m meeting Elle at her dorm, having a few drinks, then going to a house party nearby.

But even though thoughts of the stalker—and Atlas Poe—have been moved to the back of my mind, my exam taking all precedence, I know that

the area around the campus and student housing can be a bit dicey sometimes. It's considered a safe area, but you can never be too careful. There are always stories of girls getting attacked.

I walk down the path, my pace quickening. Through the fog I can barely make out the lights coming from Elle's building, everything else disappearing into the trees.

A twig snaps behind me.

I stop and spin around.

There's nothing there but mist, swirling around me like a cloak.

But I'm done with taking chances.

I start jogging down the path, the feeling of something dark and menacing right at my tail, until I reach the door, breathless, throwing myself inside the building.

I look back out.

Nothing there.

Just fog moving the trees.

I exhale loudly.

Even though I haven't sensed the stalker, if I ever even had one, I can't say things have been one hundred percent normal lately. Yes, I've been studying, which means I've been running on low sleep, eating a lot of junk, smoking a lot of weed to help me sleep, and drinking the occasional glass of wine. Sunshine is giving me migraines now, probably because I've been holed up in the dark, staring at a screen for hours on end.

But there've been some things I can't explain.

Like the red roses dying.

Not just wilting on the stem but literally drying up, like they'd been pressed between pages of a book, like the life was sucked out of them long ago.

Then there's the fact that I've been hearing strange noises in my apartment. Like my name whispered just as I'm falling asleep or waking up. Plus, out of the corner of my eye I keep seeing dark shadows or things moving, like the wall is...breathing. But when I look at things dead-on, there's nothing at all.

I haven't told my parents because they'd only worry and I know what they'd tell me, that I'm working too hard, that I'm not taking care of myself—and they're probably right. In fact, they didn't want me to come out here tonight at all, which was totally unreasonable. I mean, I'm officially done

with my second year at Berkeley, been working my ass off, and I know I deserve to have a little bit of fun.

Then go and have fun, I remind myself, heading up the staircase to Elle's floor. *Quit worrying about everything*.

Most of the housing at Berkeley is bright and somewhat modern and always busy with people. Elle's door is just a few down from the staircase, but further down the hall a party has already started, people spilling out into the hall, drinking out of red plastic cups, music pumping.

I'm about to knock on Elle's door when suddenly it opens and Meiko peers up at me. "I knew it was you," she says, opening the door wider, showcasing the can of cider in her hand. "Come on in."

Meiko is Elle's roommate. She's this gorgeous, adorable, soft-spoken girl with a sharp tongue, who keeps Elle on her toes. She's also a ton of fun, in a more manageable way than Elle (AKA she won't try to convince us to do a dine-n-dash at Denny's at 3AM), and I'm glad she's coming out with us tonight. She's studying Landscape Architecture and she's a big hit on Instagram and Tik Tok for combining it with makeup (don't ask, it works).

Elle is sitting at her desk putting on liquid eyeliner that she expertly flicks on. She then twirls around in her chair and squeals at me, hands in the air. "We did it, baby!"

She springs up from the chair and runs over to me, pulling me into a hug, jumping up and down. "We did it, we did it, we did it!" she chants, and then lets go of me, pirouetting off to take Meiko in her arms and doing the same to her.

I laugh. "Okay, well how about we get me drunk so I can be in the same dimension as you."

"Anything for you, *Avril*," Elle says to me with a wink, eyeing my outfit as she goes to their mini fridge, opening it.

I look down. I'm wearing my trusty black combat boots with lug soles, a voluptuous red plaid skirt, and my denim jacket over a strappy black bodysuit. "Avril Lavigne?" I ask.

"You're giving me those vibes," she says, pulling out a pear and strawberry cider, handing it to me. "Don't worry. It's so nineties. I love it."

I roll my eyes. I do *not* look like Avril Lavigne. "I was actually going for gothic Lana Del Rey."

"Well, your tits look incredible. But I don't know how you can wear a bodysuit," Elle says, cracking open her can. "Wedgies galore. Ooooh!"

Meiko! Turn it up!” she suddenly yells at Meiko, who has climbed onto her bed and is looking on her laptop. Meiko dutifully reaches over and turns up the volume on the portable speaker beside her. “Telepathy” by +++ (Crosses) comes on, getting louder. I prefer Chino Moreno in the Deftones, but this band is still hella good.

Elle starts dancing around me, bumping and grinding, cider spilling. “Hurry up and drink, baby.”

“All right, all right, stop humping me,” I tell her, cracking open the can, even though I chip off half my metallic red nail polish on my forefinger doing so. “And this bodysuit is comfortable, believe it or not.”

“I love them. Makes going to the bathroom a bitch,” Meiko says. “But it looks *hot*,” she adds appreciatively.

Honestly, I’m not a bodysuit kind of person, but this sucks me in in all the right places, and I don’t have to wear a bra with it—it’s got built-in underwire which really lifts the girls up.

“It’s got a snap closure crotch,” I tell her. “Better than a bathing suit.”

“Easy access.” Elle laughs. “That’s even hotter. You know we’re going to get you laid tonight, Lenore.”

I look at Meiko. “You’re in on this?”

Meiko shrugs. “Elle says you need dick. I’m telling you, women are so much easier to manage.”

“Hey, I like what I like,” I tell her, taking a sip of my cider. “But you shouldn’t put all your stock into me getting a guy tonight. I just wanna get drunk.”

Meiko laughs, getting off the bed, joining the dance around me with Elle. “Maybe we’ll all get lucky.”

“Whatever,” Elle says, rolling her eyes. “I saw the hot blonde you were with last week.”

“Exchange student,” Meiko says with a devious smile. “She already went back to Germany. I’m a free agent.”

“Then here’s to all of us,” I say, raising my can in the air. We all clink our cans against each other, Elle going in extra hard so that our cider spills over.

We have a couple of drinks in the room, Meiko doing the glittery finishing touches on Elle’s makeup, and then we head on out when we’re good and buzzed. It’s a busy night on campus, lots of the housing around the area overflowing with drunk students done with their exams and

partying it up. The fog still hangs on the street like moving curtains, people drinking in the shadows.

The party is at a house that ten students share up on Grizzly Peak Boulevard, just above the campus, probably dangerous for us to walk tonight (not to mention all uphill), so we end up getting an Uber to split, which shows up right away.

We slide into the car, the driver looking tired of handling people like us all night.

“So, how are you?” Elle says, nudging me with her shoulder. She smells like cider. I’m sure I do too. “I mean, really.”

“Good. Great,” I say, flashing her a smile. “Awesome.”

She squints at me through her false lashes. “You sure? Because you still seem a bit stressed.”

“Maybe it takes a few days for my stress levels to go down. We can’t all be like you.”

“You see that stalker again?”

“What stalker?” Meiko cries out, leaning over Elle, her expertly curled hair falling forward. “You have a stalker?”

“No,” I say quickly. “I just felt like I did ... but it was nothing.” I pause, the cider making the truth tickle on my tongue. “But I’ve been easily spooked lately.”

“Oh yeah? Spooked how?” Elle asks.

“Well, I know what you’re going to say, so before you say it, let me just tell you it’s chalked up to too little sleep, too little food, too much studying and then smoking up before bed.”

“Okay, so like, I’ve been doing the same and I haven’t been spooked. What happened?”

I sigh, looking out the window at the dark mist as the car climbs up the ridge. I tell them about the voices I’ve been hearing, the closing door, the dead roses, the shadows, and Atlas Poe.

By the time I’m done, the car is pulling up beside the party house. Cars are parked in all directions, but it really is the middle of nowhere up here, with the lights of Berkeley, Emeryville, and Oakland glittering below.

“Shit, Lenore,” Elle says to me as we scramble out of the car. “You know what your problem really is?”

“What?”

“You need to get laid.”

Then she slaps me hard on the back and starts laughing maniacally, and I have a feeling I'm going to spend the rest of the evening fending off a bunch of douchebags she's picked out for me. She doesn't have the best taste in men, especially when it comes to who I should be with, like she's trying to undo my high standards.

The house is absolutely bumping and we head up the stairs to the porch, people everywhere, drinking, making out, laughing.

Inside, a remix of "Method Man" by Wu-Tang Clan is playing, the speakers making the house vibrate. I see some people I know from my classes, some of Elle's friends, and pretty soon the three of us are drinking mystery beers and punch passed to us in an assortment of mugs and glasses, floating from room to room in the house.

I push all my worries to the back of my head and find myself in someone's bedroom with Meiko and some girl with dreads who hands me a joint. This will help me get in the mood, turn off this stupid brain of mine. I've been cursed with not only the ability to intensely focus on things, but have my thoughts rattle inside my noggin at a hundred miles an hour. Weed keeps the focus at bay and the thoughts at a minimum.

A quiet mind is bliss.

It takes a few hits for it to work, to feel my brain slow down, to start feeling the good vibes of my friends, the party, the music. Everything feels like it's going to be okay now, no matter what happens.

And that's when my eyes are drawn to the doorway, just in time to see a man stride past the room, a man that makes my knees shake, my blood burn.

Oh my god.

It's *him*!

The sexy suit guy!

What is he doing here?

"Lenore?" Meiko asks, but I'm shoving the joint back into her hands and striding over to the doorway, hoping to catch him.

I look frantically down the hall, see the back of his head above the crowd in the living room, the thick wavy dark hair, until he's swallowed up, disappearing.

"No," I mutter under my breath, running down the hall. It's like I'm not even controlling my body, like every cell inside me has been magnetized, pulling me toward him, toward some sort of doom.

Because how can this be good?

How can I keep seeing this man, this stranger, and feeling the way I am?

I'm running to him, not running away.

I look around, trying to see over people's heads. I'm about five foot four, so not terribly tall, even with the thick soles on my boots.

Then I see a flash of him, black suit, the only suit in this place, heading to the back door through the kitchen.

I'm practically pushing people out of the way, spilling drinks, leaving a trail of "Hey!" and "Watch it" as I move through the crowd until I'm at the back door, throwing open the door and stepping out into the night.

There's nothing here except for garbage and recycling cans and a couple hard-core making out beside them, dark mist-laden trees surrounding us. I'm about to ask the couple if they saw the man leave, but I have a feeling they haven't seen anything but each other.

And then I do something really weird.

I watch them for a bit, well past the *I should look away and give them privacy* stage. His hands are up her shirt, pulling down her bra, nipple hard and exposed. Her neck is arched back, hair flowing down, her fingers grasping his hard-on through his jeans. Moans fill the air as they grind into each other.

I stare and I watch and they don't even notice.

Stop being a perv.

I blink and quickly head back inside the house, my body flushed from head to toe, my cheeks burning. Jesus, what's gotten into me?

Nothing, except you really do need to get fucked.

I head straight to the bathroom, relieved to find it open. I lock the door and stare at myself in the mirror. My cheeks are burning red, my eyes totally dilated so that there's only a thin hazel ring around the black. I look nuts.

I pour cold water onto my hands and then press my fingers into my cheeks and forehead, hoping to cool down. It's not just that my skin is hot, everything inside me feels like I'm burning, and the ache between my legs is increasing. Watching that couple turned me on like nothing else.

The thought crosses my mind that since I'm in here alone, I could just get off and be done with the feeling, it would take no time at all. Picture the man in the suit who disappeared into the night, a man I think is just a manifestation of pent-up desire. Imagine him touching me, licking me,

fucking me right in here. I mean that would push me into the horniest, perviest version of myself, but...

"Lenore."

I whirl around at the sound of my name, expecting to find someone behind me, someone that wasn't in the mirror. But there's nothing but the bathtub with a blood red shower curtain pulled tight around it, the music from outside thumping.

"Lenore."

I blink, stiffening. Now it sounds like it's coming from behind the shower curtain. But is it really here or is it in my head?

I'm going crazy.

Even crazier is that I'm walking toward the shower curtain, hand outstretched, ready to pull it back, even though I'm not ready to face what might be on the other side.

I don't even think I'm breathing.

My blood is running hot in my veins.

I curl my fingers around the curtain, rings gleaming, and then...

The lights go out.

I'm plunged into darkness.

I scream and then I'm fumbling through the black, feeling for the door, my hand catching on the rough edge of the towel rack. I cry out in pain, still moving forward until I find the doorknob, trying desperately to unlock it in time because it feels like I'm running out of time and now I hear the shower curtain *moving*, the scrape of the rings along the metal, the sound filling the room, filling my soul with the deepest darkest dread.

Finally the lock turns, the door flies open, and I stumble out into the party, into people, into lights and music.

"Oh, dude, I'm so sorry," some guy says to me, coming off the wall, having leaned against the light switch, which is stupidly on the outside of the bathroom.

I stare at him but I'm not taking him in at all, my heart is doing a drumline against my ribs, my hand at my chest.

He frowns at me and hits the lights, illuminating the bathroom. "Nothing to be scared of," he says, having a sip of his PBR.

I give him an odd look and then poke my head back into the bathroom.

The shower curtain is still closed.

Part of me wants to rip it open to put my mind at rest, but then some drunk chick bangs into me. “I gotta piss!” she yells, shutting the door in my face. I step back, trying to get my head on straight.

“Hey, you’re bleeding,” the guy says to me.

I look down at my hand that I scraped along the rough edge of the towel rack, a line of blood beading along the heel of my palm.

Ugh. Blood. I immediately close my eyes, my stomach turning. I always get squeamish around blood, even my own.

“Are you okay?” the guy asks, putting his hand on my shoulder.

I flinch at the contact, ripping away from him. “I’m fine.”

I start off toward the kitchen to rinse it off. I could go for one of the other bathrooms in the house, but I’m not about to be alone in there again. I am a horny, paranoid mess.

I pass by the hall, noticing Elle holding some guy’s hand, giggling and leading him into one of the bedrooms, closing the door. Great. With her in there, and Meiko probably with the girl with dreads, it’s just another reminder of how alone I am.

Sighing, I run my hand under the tap in the kitchen, watching the blood rinse away. It seems like a surface scratch, hopefully nothing that will require a tetanus shot because I know how dirty these student houses can get.

“Lenore.”

Okay, this time I really am hearing a voice.

A familiar one at that.

I turn around to see Beth, Matt’s girlfriend, staring at me, arms crossed.

Oh shit.

I turn off the tap and shake out my wet hand, giving her a fake smile.

“Hey, Beth. What are you doing here? Is Matt with you?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

My smile falters. “Sorry?”

She takes a step toward me until I’m backed up against the sink. “Matt. He told me what you did.”

My eyes go wide. “What *I* did?”

“Don’t play stupid. He wouldn’t lie to me.”

“Beth, honestly, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I don’t want to throw Matt under the bus if I don’t have to.

“You kissed him,” she says with a sneer, loud enough that the people in the kitchen all look over.

“Fight, fight, fight!” someone starts chanting.

“Take off your tops and settle it like women!” a dude yells.

I give him the dirtiest look. “Go fuck yourself.” I look back at Beth. “And I didn’t kiss your boyfriend. He kissed me.”

I push past her, not wanting to get into this here, or anywhere really. I knew Beth went to school here, but I honestly didn’t expect to see her at a house party. This isn’t Matt’s scene.

She reaches out and grabs me roughly by the elbow.

“I don’t want you seeing him.”

I rip myself out of her grasp. I am *not* a violent person, but my blood is already boiling at the fact that Matt lied to her about me, and with all that’s been happening tonight and the last week, I don’t trust myself. I’m certainly not in the mood to be pushed around.

“Won’t be a problem, *Beth*,” I tell her, moving through the party now, needing to get out of here before I do something stupid. I know I should find Elle and Meiko first, but honestly I can’t stick around here any longer.

I pull up the Uber app and secure a car, then step outside into the fresh air. I walk down the steps, down the path to the curb, and then raise my face to the mist, taking a moment to breathe in deep, clear the cobwebs.

What a fucking bullshit night.

I wait a few minutes for the Uber, texting Elle, telling her I’m leaving, wishing I had Meiko’s number to do the same. I know I should go back in there, but I don’t know how long they’re going to be, and after that confrontation with Beth, I just want to go home and go to bed where I feel safe. Something about it all makes me feel so undone and unraveled, and I hate myself for being so sensitive.

A black car pulls up, a guy rolling down the window. It’s the first car I’ve seen on the road in the last couple of minutes.

Please let this be my ride.

“Lenore Warwick?” he asks.

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Yeah, that’s me.”

I open the back door and slide on in. It’s nice, leather seats, and smells like cologne, though I’m disappointed to not find any bottled water or mints.

“To the city?” the driver asks me.

I look up and meet his eyes in the rearview mirror. He's actually pretty cute, dark hair that curls over his forehead and intense dark brown eyes that don't seem to blink.

"Yup," I tell him, doing my seatbelt.

He does a U-turn on the road and starts driving up the hill.

"Wha..." I say, looking behind me for a moment. "Isn't it easier to go down into Berkeley?"

"There's an accident down below," he says. And then he reaches over and turns up the volume on the radio. Nick Cave's "Red Right Hand" is playing from the speakers.

"Oh," I say, sitting back.

A wave of uneasiness slinks through my gut.

The driver gestures to his Waze app that he has running on his iPad mounted to the dash, but I can't make heads or tails of it.

The music seems to keep repeating over and over again from the stereo, making me feel like I'm in a hypnotic time loop. I start nodding off.

Stay awake, a voice says in my head. *Stay alert*.

I open my eyes, focusing on the scene. I'm still in the back of the Uber, still climbing up the road, from the glances down below it looks like civilization is dropping away behind us.

I glance up at the rearview mirror and catch the eyes of the driver.

He's looking right at me.

Eyes so dark they're almost black.

I quickly look away, pull out my phone, going to text Elle.

I have zero bars. No reception.

Fuck.

You're being paranoid again, I tell myself. *He's taking you to the highway. You can loop into the city that way.*

Still, I have to be sure. "You're taking me to the city, right?"

He keeps staring at me. No expression on his face. Eventually he says, "San Francisco? I have you at 280 Lily Street."

I nod. "Yeah, that's it."

He watches me for a moment, face impassive, then looks back to the road. His hand goes to the radio and switches the channel. Over and over again. Snippets of music coming out and then changing ad nauseum.

Honestly, it's driving me crazy, but I don't want to tell him to stop. I'm scared. I probably shouldn't be, but I am. It's disorienting to say the least.

I pull up the Uber app, even though I know I don't have reception, wanting to make a note of whose car I'm in.

But when I see the picture, my heart sinks.

This isn't fifty-year old Daniel Lee with his silver Ford Focus and five-star rating.

I'm in the wrong car.

My heart sinks, panic starting to spark along my limbs like Roman candles, my hand going to my mouth.

He knew my name. This man knew my *name*.

Think, Lenore, think, I tell myself. *What do you do? What do you do?*

I need to play it cool. He's not my Uber, but there's still a small chance that he'll drop me off where I need to be. Maybe there's a glitch in the system, maybe Daniel cancelled the ride and then this guy picked it up and the lack of reception is showing the lag. I mean, how else did he know my address?

And that's when it hits me.

I know who this is.

I look back into the rearview mirror and his eyes are *right there*.

Watching me.

Yet this guy is different from my stalker. I've only seen him from this angle, but he's not as tall, not as broad shouldered. His vibe is different too...though not any less dangerous.

What the fuck is going on?

And then the road opens up a bit. The rugged terrain and wilderness dissipate for a moment. The lights of Highway 24 sparkling gloriously to my left, cars whizzing underneath us going into the tunnel that will pop them out into north Oakland.

I hold my breath, waiting, praying, for him to take the car to the left, to do a U-turn, to do anything to connect us onto that highway that will take us over the Bay Bridge and into San Francisco.

Please, please, please.

I'm almost in tears, my heart clenched in my chest.

But when he should turn left, he turns right.

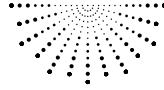
Onto Old Tunnel Road.

A narrow one-lane that disappears into the foggy oak trees.

Into the narrow ridges of the hills.

Away from...*everything*.

CHAPTER FOUR



I SUCK IN MY BREATH, TRYING NOT TO PANIC BUT IT'S TOO LATE. I'M panicking.

What do I do, what do I do?

Oh my god! Fuck, someone please help me.

I can't pretend anymore that I haven't noticed, can't pretend I don't know what's happening. I have to say something, I have to do something.

"Excuse me," I tell him, my voice sounding so terribly scared and small. "The highway was right there. We need to turn around."

The man doesn't say anything for a moment, just stares at me in the mirror, his dark eyes seeming to take over my vision.

"Shortcut," he says roughly.

"No," I say, surprised by my bravery. "This isn't a shortcut. This is the wrong way. You need to turn around now. *Please.*"

Please. Please listen to me, please, please.

He cocks his brow.

Looks back to the road.

Keeps driving down the deserted road.

I'm fucked. I'm so fucked.

I'm this close to crying, to screaming, to losing it.

My phone still has no reception, but it doesn't stop me from dialing 911, holding it up to my ear, hoping someone will hear me.

"Yeah, hi, Elle," I say into the phone, my voice shaking, even though there's no sound coming from it at all. "That Uber I'm in, he's refusing to take me the right way. That's right. Oh, you're not far? Yeah, we went up Grizzly Peak Road. We're on Old Tunnel Road."

I'm saying all this, trembling inside and out, the dread clawing up my throat like an animal. He's not going to believe me, believe this. He knows there's no reception, he knows it's just a desperate act.

Tears spring to my eyes.

"Okay," I say into the phone, talking to no one, trying so hard to sound confident and real but god, how I'm nothing at all. Hopeless. Helpless. "Call me back."

I glance at the door handle.

I could open it, jump out of the car. We're not going that fast. I know I could roll onto the ground and then get up, run into the trees. It'd hurt, but I could do it. He might have a gun, he might find me, but it's the best chance I have. Now I know that the worst-case scenario is upon me, the thing that every woman dreads when they step into an Uber. The nightmare is happening.

It's happening.

Oh god, please help me.

I was so stupid. How could I not have checked the car before I got in? I guess because I was so happy to leave, he was the only car on the road, and he knew my name. That's how.

I take in a deep breath, trying to prepare myself for what I'm about to do.

I need to just open the door.

Roll onto my shoulder.

And run.

Run.

I slowly place my hand on the door handle just as I meet his eyes.

He smirks at me.

Touches a button.

And then the doors all lock with a loud, coordinated *click*.

NO!

I gasp sharply, trying the door handle, but it's too late.

I'm locked in here.

"No use fighting it, Lenore," the man says to me.

And the car keeps disappearing into the night.

I don't know what to do.

Because of my ability to focus and think clearly, I always thought I'd be good in a crisis situation. I've imagined being attacked by someone at night,

working out how I'd fight them. I've imagined a plane crashing, how I'd get out, who I'd try to save. I've imagined another huge earthquake hitting the Bay Area, what I'd do, the steps that I'd take to survive.

But now that I'm in an actual crisis, kidnapped in the back of an Uber, being driven toward what I think is a quarry in the middle of nowhere, I can't think at all.

I have no plan of escape, nothing.

What are you supposed to do? I keep checking my phone, keep hitting the emergency call button, but nothing is happening. Am I supposed to negotiate? Plead for my life? Make him see me as human so he's less likely to rape and murder me?

All I know is when I get the chance to fight back, I'm going to fight back.

In fact...

I eye the back of his head.

If I could get him in a chokehold or stick my fingers in his eye sockets or something, pull his hair, anything to make him lose control of the car, I could get it to crash. Maybe the door would unlock, maybe he'd be hurt enough for me to get free.

I have to do something.

I take in a deep breath, carefully reaching over to unbuckle my seatbelt as silently as possible, wincing when I hear the *click*.

I look up to the rearview, see the man look at me, alert.

There's no time.

I spring forward, jamming my body in between the two front seats, trying desperately to rip out his hair, claw at his eyes, screaming and screaming, panic tearing out of my lungs, filling the car.

He yelps, my fingers close to his eyes, feeling skin under my nails.

Then he takes his elbow, throws it back at my face until it collides with my cheek in an explosion of stars and pain.

I'm thrown in the back of the seat, slumped over, unable to...unable to...

Everything goes fuzzy, the pain spreading from my cheek, seeping into my veins until the agony is all I feel. Blood trickles from my nose and onto the seat.

"Fucking crazy," the driver mutters under his breath. "Just crazy."

I almost laugh but it hurts. I'm crazy?

God, but maybe I am.

Maybe none of this is really happening, just a figment of my imagination.

But as much as I wish that were true, I know it's real, just as the pain is real.

I'm going to die here.

I don't know how long I lie like this in the backseat, hair over my face, feeling like the leather is going to swallow me whole.

But eventually the car slows, then stops, like I knew it eventually would.

Every ride must come to an end.

Even mine.

"Wait here," the man says as he turns off the car, as if I have a choice.

I almost laugh again, getting just enough power to push myself up and look. He leaves the car, locking the door, and then strides off toward the mist. I'm not sure where we are, the quarry maybe. I can barely make out the forest on either side of the car, but in front of us is a wide-open space covered with fast-moving fog.

The man keeps walking forward into the mist and stops, back to me.

Then out of the fog comes a shadow, a tall man in a long coat.

The two of them have a conversation, lit by the fog lights from the car.

The tall man keeps looking my way, and it's then that I know for sure it's the man I saw under the streetlight in Upper Haight.

My stalker.

But when he starts striding toward me, his coat flowing behind him, followed by my driver, that's when I realize the truth.

And the truth feels like horror.

In the wavering headlights his face comes into focus.

The face that once took my breath away, that compelled me to follow him like a hound after a scent.

My stalker is the sexy-suit man.

They are one and the same.

How could I have been so stupid?

How could one person give me such separate feelings, fear and terror in one version of him, and desire and lust in the other?

It doesn't really matter now though.

The lust and desire are gone.

All I feel is fear.

He walks toward the car, eyes on me the whole time as if he can clearly see me, his strides elegant and powerful, like a panther. The graceful walk before they pounce.

I'm trapped in the back of the car, beaten, the driver offering me to him like freshly caught prey.

Is there a point where I'll chew my own leg off to escape?

He stops outside the back window, crouching forward, hands on his thighs, peering in at me.

His gaze meets mine and I don't think I can move, even if I wanted to, even if I had a plan. His expression is darkening by the moment, his bright blue eyes turning cold, dark arched brows furrowing together in a hard line.

Suddenly he opens the door, as if it's been unlocked this whole time, and every part of me wants to jump back but I can't move, my limbs frozen in place like the nerves aren't communicating with my brain.

He comes halfway inside to look at me, and the closer he comes, annoyance flitting over his brow, the less I can breathe, like my lungs have stopped working too.

He frowns at my face, meets my eyes for a moment with an expression I can't read, then ducks out of the car.

"Disgraceful," he says to the driver, eyes cutting into him. "I specifically said not to touch her."

His voice makes my body erupt in goosebumps—a low, rich baritone with an elegant edge and a slight British tinge that sinks into me like a shot of strong alcohol. Completely at odds with the rest of me that's high on adrenaline, trying to battle through the constant fear.

"I had to," the driver mumbles. "She tried to attack me, crash the car. Look." He points to his eye.

"There's nothing there," the stalker says calmly. "Anything else go wrong?"

"No, sir."

"No, sir? Oh, Ezra, you're finding your manners again. Why did I think I could send a boy to do a man's job?"

Ezra. Okay, so the driver has a name. That's helpful.

Although what's not helpful is the fact that they're using names, no masks, nothing to disguise themselves. Which means no matter what they

have planned for me, whether beating me up is on the menu or not, they definitely don't intend to let me live.

"Sorry," Ezra says, even though he doesn't sound like he means it.

My heart sinks, down, down, down.

They're going to kill me here, aren't they?

The stalker turns his attention back to me.

Stares at me.

Eyes so hypnotic that I can't look away.

What do you want with me? I ask in my head.

A corner of his mouth curls up, as if he heard my thought.

"Are you sure it's her?" Ezra asks.

He nods slowly, the abbreviated smile staying. "I do now."

Then he leans into the car, large hands reaching for my bare thighs, his skin cold as it makes contact with mine, then quickly heating up. "I just don't know what we're dealing with yet."

I try to yelp, to scream, to make some kind of sound, but it's caught in my throat, and as he grips my thighs, his fingers powerful and bruising my tender flesh, I'm still completely powerless.

He moves me so that I'm twisted around, facing him, though without the full backrest, I'm slumped forward.

He reaches out and puts his hand at the back of my neck, holding tight, cold and hot, my skin feeling like I'm jumping from ice water into a fire. He makes me keep my head up, makes me look at him.

"*Lenore*," he says, staring deep into my eyes, and my name sounds like silk on his lips, and I hate that it makes me feel that way. I hate this man, hate what he's going to do to me, hate that he's going to take me away from everything I know and love, hate that he's going to ruin me first before he deprives me of life.

He's frowning again, eyes rapidly searching mine. He doesn't ever seem to blink. "Curious girl, aren't you? You hate me. I know that much."

Good, I think. I'm glad he can feel it.

His grip on the back of my neck tightens, making my body stiffen. I feel like he could crush my vertebrae with a simple twitch of his hands.

He leans in closer, his eyes inches away until they're all I see, and I see myself reflected in them, so helpless and small. "And yet, I don't know how you do. You should love me, Lenore. So many people do. Stupid, weak-

minded people, but still. Your body has given up, but your mind hasn't. Your soul hasn't. That's some resolve. That's...rare."

Then he gives me another half-smile, pulling back a few inches, looking me over, gaze pausing at my chest. He reaches out and takes hold of the necklaces in his palm. "These don't help."

Swiftly, he yanks at the necklaces until they all *snap*, even the thickest chains. I watch in horror as he tosses them, including my black skull, to the floor of the car.

All girls need protection, Lenore.

Then he grabs my hands, pulling my rings off my fingers, wincing as he does so, as if the rings are causing him pain more than me, and throws them on the floor as well.

"There," he says, peering at me intently. "How about now? Do you still hate me?"

I'll hate you until my last breath, I tell him in my head.

His lip curls up and he looks over his shoulder and out of the car at Ezra. "She's...a little more than we bargained for."

That surprises me. I haven't done anything, just sat here like a fucking puppet as he's positioned me, ripped my beloved jewelry from me.

"What about her tattoos?" Ezra asks.

OH MY GOD.

Please don't tell me he's going to cut them out of me.

"We'll see what happens," the stalker says. He looks back to me, reading the expression of horror on my face. "I'd tell you not to worry, but we both know that would be a lie."

He comes back in the car, prowling toward me, and whatever mild amusement I saw in his eyes earlier has now been replaced by something dark and dangerous. Hunter and the prey.

All the small talk is over.

I close my eyes, trying to find strength.

I wish I could borrow it from the moon, hidden somewhere above the fog.

I wish I could be above the fog, rise right through this car, float through the mist, going up and up and up, leaving all the terror and horror and fear behind until I find peace. I can almost see it like it's happening, like I'm really up there, staring down at the treetops piercing the blanket of mist, the

way it stretches all the way across the water, the tips of the Bay Bridge and the Transamerica Pyramid poking through.

I raise my head back to that sky, to those stars, to that moon, a nearly full moon, and I feel my blood singing to it, the moonlight singing back.

Then I'm dropping, fast, falling through the air, down, down, down, until I'm back in the car.

Back in my reality.

I open my eyes and look at the man who wants to kill me.

He flinches when he meets my gaze, like he's not even seeing me anymore.

Words of surprise dance on his pretty lips but I give him no time to say them.

Without thinking, I lean back, able to move again, and get just enough momentum to kick out.

I smash my boot right into his face, feeling his nose crunch underneath my sole, and then he's crying out, stumbling backward, blood spilling.

And then I'm scrambling out of the car, Ezra lunging for me, and I dodge him at the last minute and then I'm running, running, running.

I'm free.

I head straight into the forest, a downward slope, hoping the momentum will carry me as I jump over logs and break through the underbrush, branches ripping at my skirt, tearing at my skin, but I feel no pain. I feel nothing but the wind in my hair, see nothing but the mist as it flows past my eyes, kissing my skin.

I keep my legs pumping, my feet hitting the ground in a satisfying rhythm, and I have the craziest feeling that I might be able to run forever like this, fueled by pure adrenaline and the desire to live. I'll keep running and running and eventually I'll hit a house and find safety. I have to.

And I don't hear anything behind me, I don't hear them crashing through the forest, or any hurrying footfalls or shouts. It's like they aren't even bothering. All I hear is the blood in my head, my breath as it works overtime, in and out of my lungs. All I know is to just let my body work and to not think and just keep going, no matter what.

I'll make it.

I'll make it, I'll make it.

There's a large fallen log ahead and I jump up on it, leaping off without a second thought, until I'm falling and falling, the drop so much steeper

than I thought it would be.

But I land on my feet and I keep going, trying to make sense of how I could have jumped down the length of a two-story building and have it not even break my stride. Something tells me I'll be sore tomorrow.

As long as I'm alive, I don't fucking care how I feel.

And then up ahead I see a light through the trees, maybe a house, maybe a road, but it's something and my heart is singing. I'm grinning like an idiot, feeling like the girl at the end of the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* when she gets picked up by the truck, pure relief that I'm going to make it after all.

"Lenore."

My name.

Coming from in front of me.

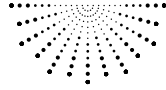
I scream, coming to a halt, dirt flying around me and then he appears, stepping out from behind the trees, his silhouette backlit by the far-off light.

How can it be him? How can he be here so fast?

"You have no idea, do you?" he asks me, that voice so smooth and low that I feel it coil around my heart like a snake. "But you will."

Then he reaches for me, and before I can feel his touch, I crumple to my knees and the whole world goes black.

CHAPTER FIVE



A FULL MOON RISING OVER THE OCEAN.

Rustling branches.

A dark forest of cedar and fir.

I'm safe inside a house, a fire burning on the hearth.

Sitting on the floor, on a woolen rug.

I hear hushed voices, panicked voices.

A woman crouches down to my level. A beautiful woman, porcelain skinned, with a sweet smile, eyes filled with tears.

"My baby," she says to me, her smile shaking. "Remember what we practiced? I need you to hide now."

I stare at her, not wanting to hide, not wanting her to cry.

I love this woman like I love my own mother.

I try to grab onto her, to hug her, but then she disappears through my fingers like blackened sand.

The last thing I see are flames, a growing fire that consumes me alive.

I open my eyes, awake.

It takes me a minute to realize what I'm looking at.

A ceiling of dark wood, edged with gold filigree, the paint flaking.

I stare up at it, trying to gather my thoughts, but they're scattering about in my mind like leaves in the wind. I don't know where I am, all I know is that I'm alive.

And not alone.

I know that without even having to look.

I can feel him.

I close my eyes, taking in a deep breath before turning my head to the side.

The room comes into focus.

I'm lying on my back on a thin mattress on a floor made of splintering wood. The room has no windows and is empty except for a wooden chair beside me, and a red velvet armchair by the door.

In the armchair, leaning back, ankle casually resting on his knee, is my stalker, who is now officially my kidnapper.

Dressed in a tuxedo.

Reading an old paperback of *Watership Down*, the cover ripped in half.

The fuck?

He's not even looking at me, eyes on the page. Actually reading.

I take a moment, trying to make sense of it all, trying to learn as much about my surroundings as possible. But there's not much to learn. He's by a door. There's another door on the other wall, a small crate beside it.

And cold air at my back.

I slowly, carefully, sit up, my head swimming, my vision blurry. Look behind me.

What I assumed was a solid wall is actually a row of wooden slats, darkness behind them. There's a single door leading into it, a lock on it. There's something about the darkness that makes me want to run to the other side of the room.

But that's where he is.

And he's the real danger here.

I lick my lips, my mouth painfully dry. "Where am I?"

What I really want to ask for is water.

The man flips a page of the book, meeting my eyes for a moment, holding me steady in his gaze. For that moment I can't breathe. His eyes are so blue, so cold.

Then he looks back down at the book. "You're in my basement," he says idly.

I look around again, my head still heavy. There's nothing here to defend myself with, but at least I'm not restrained. I'm free to move.

I look down at my clothes. My jean jacket is gone, as are my socks and boots. I'm just in the body suit and the skirt.

My stomach turns.

“Where are my socks and shoes?” I ask, my voice coming out in a hush. Then I run my hands back over my hair, realizing now it’s pulled back into a braid.

A fucking *braid*.

I never wear my hair in a braid.

“Hmm?” the man asks, flipping the page.

“My hair,” I gasp. “Who ... who braided my hair?”

“I did,” he says simply, closing the book and fixing his eyes on me. “You don’t remember?”

My gut continues to twist and turn, my breath hitching in my lungs. “I don’t remember. I don’t...”

I try to think. I remember running. Running through the forest. That’s why there are so many scratches on my chest and arms and legs.

And yet they don’t seem as fresh as they should.

“How long have I been down here?” I ask, though I’m terrified of the answer.

“A couple of days,” he says.

“A couple of days!?” I shriek. How is this possible?

“You really don’t remember?” he asks, placing the book down on the floor beside him, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. His tuxedo looks damn expensive. Why the hell is he in a tux, keeping me in a basement?

Don’t even let your mind go there...

“No, I...” I think. It hurts. I remember the Uber, I remember the guy... what was his name? Ezra? He hit me. Then this asshole showed up. I managed to kick him in the face and then I ran through the forest, faster than I’ve ever run, all downhill, it was like I was flying and then...

I ran right back into him.

And that’s the last thing I remember.

“Hmmm,” he says, after watching me for a moment, looking down at his cufflinks as he adjusts them, gleaming in the dim overhead light. “Seems you don’t remember much. Perhaps that’s for the best.”

“Tell me what happened,” I tell him. “Please.”

Did he touch me? Hurt me? Rape me?

I gingerly run my hands over my arms, over my thighs, feeling sick and dirty, shaking from the fear slowly building inside me.

With a tired sigh, he gets to his feet and slowly walks over to me, hands casually in his pockets. He stops a meter away, cocks his head as he peers down at me curiously. "I brought you to my house. I brought you down here, where no one can find you. Does that answer your question?"

I shake my head, my heart shattering over his words.

Where no one can find you.

No one will find me.

"What am I not remembering? Did you..." I break off, unable to say the words.

He frowns, looking annoyed. "I see. You want a play-by-play, Ms. Warwick? I brought you down here, then I had my friend bring you into the washroom, run you a bath, and you got in it, willingly, I might add. We gave you privacy, that is until you attempted to drown yourself in the tub. We brought you out. Brought you fresh clothes. You insisted on wearing your own. You got changed." He pauses. "If you think we turned our backs like gentlemen, you're only half right."

I try to swallow the brick in my throat. "Then you braided my hair."

"You asked me to," he says with a sniff. "Just be glad I didn't chop it all off. Would have been much easier that way."

It doesn't make any sense. Why would I ask him to braid my hair? My subconscious attempt at trying to appeal to his weak side, his good side?

I glance up at him. He's staring down at me with those intensely cold eyes, that permanent line between his dark brows. I'm not sure this man has a good side.

"Then," he goes on, "you went to sleep. You've been doing nothing but sleeping ever since. We've brought in food, water, but you didn't want it. You did attempt to stab me in the eye with a fork though. That would have hurt, had you not been so terribly stupid and slow."

I think about that for a moment. I'm proud that I attempted to fight back and escape, but it saddens me to the core to know how easily I failed, and how I'll fail again. How the fuck do I get out of this situation?

"What do you plan on doing with me?" I ask softly, trying to bury the fear. "You let me bathe, you let me sleep, you brought me food, water. Why are you doing this to me? Why are you keeping me alive?"

He scoffs, his mouth crooking up into a half-smile. "You're worth nothing if you're dead. You do realize that, don't you?"

I give my head a shake, my brain exploding with stars. I press my fingers into my cheek. It's swollen and sore. I stare into nothing, feeling nothing but pain.

"Can I ask you something?" he says after a moment, and I'm so surprised by the polite, tentative tone of his voice that I glance up at him sharply. "It's about your parents."

My heart seizes. "What about them?" I whisper. "Please, please don't do anything to them."

He lifts a single brow. "I wasn't planning on it. Your parents are Elaine and James Warwick, are they not?"

I feel like I should lie but what would be the point?

"Yes."

"And where were you born?"

"Here. Well, in Daly City."

His eyes narrow as he studies me for a long moment. I can almost feel his gaze penetrating my brain, as if he's able to look inside me and sift around.

"Are you sure about that?" he asks quietly.

Now I'm confused. "Of course I'm sure."

"Why, because you have a birth certificate?"

I blink. "Yeah...and that's what I've been told. It says so on my birth certificate, on my passport. What are you implying?" I pause, realization dawning on me. "Wait. You're with *him*, aren't you?"

"With him?"

"Atlas Poe."

His brows go up in surprise. "*Atlas Poe*?" he repeats harshly.

Not the reaction I was expecting.

He comes closer, stares me down, his cold eyes turning fiery. "What do you know of Atlas Poe?"

"Nothing..." I say, wishing I had some clever lie but all I have is the truth. "He was...he was outside my house one night. Late. Wanting to talk to my parents. Said he was an associate of theirs, a member of some guild."

"And then what did you do?" He's staring at me so intently I feel my skin burn.

"I told him to call, send an email. He walked off. I never saw him again." I hesitate, not sure how much I should tell this man. "I asked my

mom about him, but she pretended she never knew him. But I could tell she did. She was lying to me.”

Oh god, why am I telling him that? What the fuck is making me talk?

He keeps staring at me, slowly running his hand over his strong jaw, the scratchy sound of his facial hair loud in the room. “You really have no idea...” he muses.

“Idea about what?”

He crouches down so he’s at my level, a foot away, wrists draped over each other. “The world. Your world, that is.”

I stare at him, at his perfectly put-together face. The man looks like an angel and a devil combined, the best of both worlds. I recall kicking him right in the nose, wishing I had my boots on so I could do it again.

But he doesn’t look like he’s been kicked in the face.

I remember blood.

He should be black and blue.

He doesn’t have a scratch on him.

“I hurt you,” I say hoarsely. “I broke your nose.”

“You did,” he says with a tired sigh. “But my nose has been broken countless times. Try not to feel too proud.”

I stare back at him, feeling all the anger seething through me, hot and rabid.

“Ah,” he says quickly, eyeing me. “There she is again. Do you know what you’re doing, Lenore?” I clench my teeth together, breathing hard, that anger building. “You’re becoming something you wouldn’t believe. In fact, I don’t know if I quite believe it myself. You’re full of surprises.”

“You don’t fucking know me enough to be surprised,” I sneer at him.

And before I can stop myself, I’m bringing saliva up into my mouth and I *spit* on him.

My spit lands right on his cheek.

He flinches, nostrils flaring, but his eyes don’t leave mine. He calmly reaches up and wipes the spit off with his long forefinger.

Then he sticks his finger in front of his mouth, lips parting, pink tongue sliding out, licking it off. His teeth show in a snarl, the sharpest canines I’ve ever seen.

What the fuck is wrong with him?

“You’re right,” he says. “But I will. Maybe it will be too late, but I will.”

He exhales, wiping his finger against his tailored pants.

And with him distracted, I take my chance.

Fueled by adrenaline, the need to escape, to live, I suddenly get to my feet and start running for the door, screaming.

I make it halfway across the room.

Then he comes at me from the side somehow, just a blur, his hand wrapped around my throat. He pushes me back, back, like he's just gliding over the floor until I'm pressed up against the wall, my head smashing against it.

His grip tightens, almost all the way around my neck, and he's holding me up high, several feet off the floor, my toes dangling, and I can't breathe, can't speak.

"Believe it or not, I'm a very violent creature," he hisses as he leans into me, eyes burning. "I will not hesitate to tear your throat out with my own teeth, despite what I promised myself I wouldn't do. If you want to test me, you will be tested, and you'll fail with your life."

My fingers go to his hand, trying to pry them off me, trying in vain.

"I know what I want," he continues, breathing hard. "But frankly, you might not be worth it."

But he doesn't let go of me, doesn't let up the pressure. I think he means to kill me right here, just like this, strangling me with one bare hand. He could break my neck with a little more pressure, and he's staring at me like he wants me to die. I know he'll enjoy it.

And yet there's a small part of me that doesn't want to give up.

That wants to fight back, even though I know it's pointless.

There's a fight coming from deep within me, from some dark well.

"Just as I thought," he says to me, a smirk spreading across his lips. "You want to see what I see?"

He pulls me off the wall, walking across the room with his arm straight out, holding me by the throat at the end of it. My fingers are trying to pry his off, my feet are kicking out, and yet he keeps walking and holding me by the neck, like he's the fucking Terminator.

He flings open the bathroom door and then brings me inside, letting go of my throat. It's just for a moment, enough for me to suck in a breath, and then his hand moves up to my jaw, the other hand grabbing hold of my braid.

He positions my face so that I'm facing the mirror, fingers digging into my skin.

I'm staring at the reflection of us in horror.

My cheek is red and purple and yellow, an ugly mess that spreads across my face, to my eye and nose, the rest of me looks pale and haggard and weak.

"Do you see?" he whispers harshly into my ear.

With a grunt he brings me closer to the mirror so I'm all I see.

And I see my eyes.

My pupils taking over the hazel until they're black.

Golden crescent moons glinting in the both of them, like I'm staring at a moonrise.

I don't understand.

I'm on drugs.

He's drugged me.

That would explain everything.

"And you still don't see," he says, and I eye him in the mirror. He leans in, keeping my face in place, lips at my ear, gaze holding mine. "Then again, why would you? You're just a simple girl, all on your own now."

A knock sounds at the door and he yanks at my braid. I cry out in pain and he wraps the braid around his hand, pulling me out into the room and over to the main door.

He opens it.

A wall of man stands on the other side, at least six-five, also dressed in a tux, though his tie is missing. He's got light brown hair, a strong jawline, high cheekbones—all the makings of a Nordic warrior.

"How is it going?" the man asks, a light unplaceable accent. He eyes me, his eyes light green and gold. "She conscious yet?"

The Nordic man strides into the room, closing the door behind him.

"You could tell she wasn't conscious before?" the man holding me asks, not letting go of my braid. I'm still trying to take in the air I lost before.

The Nordic man grins, folding his arms. "Maybe I know what to look for. I didn't think she was all there earlier. She seems clearer now. It's her eyes."

"Exactly, her eyes," he says. "What do you make of them?"

He laughs. "The great Absolon is asking me what he thinks? Oh, I never thought this day would come."

Absolon? My stalker's name is Absolon?

"Look, are you going to be helpful, or just be a waste of space as usual?" Absolon says tiredly, yanking my hair back again until I cry out. "See?" he says to the Nordic guy, gesturing to my face. "The more I hurt her, the more that happens."

"Perhaps you have the wrong girl, Solon. Wouldn't be the first time."

Absolon shakes his head. "No. She's the right girl. She even..." He pauses, looking at me, thinking.

Just then the ceiling above starts to shake with the sound of footsteps.

"Party is starting," the Nordic guy says. "I wouldn't count on Ezra to be too hospitable."

Party?

There's a party upstairs?

With *people*?

People that can help me?

I open my mouth and suddenly start screaming my head off, hoping they'll hear me. "SOMEONE PLEASE HELP ME!"

But before I can scream anymore, Absolon grabs the back of my head, places his hand over my mouth, pressing both together until I'm caught in place, aware now that he could crush my head between his hands like a melon.

"Shhh shhh shhh," he says to me, eyes glinting, hand smothering me. "You don't want to let them know you're here. They aren't good...*people*."

I don't believe him.

I open my mouth, biting down on his fingers until I taste blood.

He grimaces but he doesn't let go, keeps his gaze burning into mine.

"I don't think you want to do that, moonshine. It might turn me on."

"He's right," the Nordic guy says to me. "He gets off on freaky shit."

Absolon closes his eyes in annoyance, shaking his head. "Wolf, please." Then he looks at him over his shoulder. "Grab the rope and the gag. It's time."

I blink at Absolon, horror rushing through me.

Time for what?

Wolf goes over to the wooden crate and lifts open the lid. Brings out rope and a long piece of fabric. "Sorry to have to do this," he says to me as he approaches.

“You’ve never apologized before,” Absolon scoffs, lifting his hand away. “Don’t tell me you’re getting sentimental.”

“Never,” Wolf says as he comes at me with the rope. “It’s always hard when it’s a pretty girl.”

I glance at Absolon, who is sucking the blood from where I bit him, blood on his lips, the same that I still taste on mine. Blood that tastes sweet. He nods at me, brow raised delicately. “My blood looks good on you.”

Then Wolf is grabbing me from behind and I’m trying to run and scream and Absolon is slipping the fabric over my mouth, wrapping it again and again, as Wolf holds my hands behind my back, binding my wrists, then my ankles.

I’m tossed onto the mattress, landing on my side, and then Wolf extends the rope into the wooden slat wall of the storage area behind me, anchoring me in place.

I lie there, staring up at these two men in their tuxedos, the footsteps getting louder above, the floor shaking.

“Time for a drink?” Absolon says to Wolf.

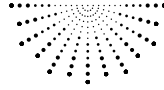
Wolf dusts off his hands and grins at him. “Is the Pope Catholic?”

Absolon gives him a withering look and the two of them walk toward the door, Absolon stepping out first.

He also closes the door.

His face is the last thing I see before he turns out the lights.

CHAPTER SIX



A RED CRESCENT MOON.

I'm a child, standing below it in the middle of a clearing.

The forest in front of me is black in the night, the treetops visible against the star-speckled sky. There's rustling in the forest, the feeling of something coming out of it, wanting to hurt me.

Monsters.

I stand, feeling the moon seep into my veins, filling the well inside me with pale gold.

Two figures burst out of the trees, running fast.

I watch them, silent, knowing they're here to do harm.

But they run past me, on either side, a man and a woman, cloaked and too blurry to see clearly.

I whirl around, watching as the two figures head for the house by the sea.

My house.

Where my parents live.

Suddenly the fear is real.

I'm screaming, running after them, my little legs too slow, and then I'm falling, crawling, watching as the figures disappear into the house and the house goes up in flames.

I scream and I crawl and I keep going.

The moon switches position in the sky, rising in front of me.

Red tears spilling from the crescent.

Raining blood.

And I keep crawling, until I'm right at the flames, until I am the flames.

I am the flames.
Drowning in the moon's blood.
Sinking into the red.
Down, down, down.
And then...
I'm awake.
The dream fading away like fog.

I'm lying on my side in total darkness, bound at the wrists and ankles, my skin aching against the rough rope, the gag cutting into the corners of my mouth.

I'm alone.
And yet not alone.
Because there's something...else.
Something crawling over my legs.
Over my back.
In my hair.
Across my face.

I scream, my cries muffled, and try to sit up, spinning around, rolling on the floor, pure horror tearing me apart. I fight against the ropes, still feeling tiny rough things brushing over my legs, skittering over my skin.

The door to the room suddenly opens, a column of flickering light with Absolon's broad-shouldered silhouette.

He flicks on the lights overhead, my eyes burning from it.

I manage to turn away, just in time to see spiders running away in wafts of black smoke, disappearing into the wooden slats behind me.

I scream again, trying to get away, except I'm still attached to the wall by the rope, and then Absolon is grabbing me by the waist and hauling me up, carrying me until he places me on the wooden chair within reach.

He eyes me with amusement, as if the whole fucking thing is funny, but I can still feel them on me, and I cry out, muffled by the gag, squirming in the chair, my heart pounding.

"Oh, please. Calm down," he says to me, pressing a shockingly cold hand on my shoulder, but it does nothing to calm me. "Or do you need to be tied to the chair too?"

I growl at him, trying to kick him in the balls.

He captures my calf in his hand, nails digging in, growling right back.

"Fine," he says gruffly. "Your choice."

He takes the ropes and makes quick work of it, tying my hands behind the chair, spreading my legs, tying each ankle to the legs of the chair.

Then he steps back, giving me a look of marked disapproval.

"You could make things so much easier on yourself, Lenore," he says. "You know I'm the one who might save you in the end."

"Fuck you," I try to say through the gag.

"What was that?" he asks. Then he leans over and I catch his scent, like roses and tobacco and cedar, a smell that floods every part of me. Something about it makes my heart pump harder, my skin growing hot.

He unties the gag and I gasp for air, moving my jaw, everything sore.

Then I look at him dead in the eyes.

"I said *fuck you*," I say, my voice raw and broken.

The corner of his mouth curls. "Such brave words for someone so afraid of spiders."

I turn my head and look at the back wall, at the wooden slats and the darkness behind it. "I think you have an infestation back there."

"You should let me worry about that," he says, and I meet his eyes again. "You should stay focused on worrying about your own life." He pauses. "Though I must say, it's a good sign that they like you. It means you're already changing. Creatures of the night will always seek out creatures of the night. One day you might want to look at the world through their eyes."

I can't make heads or tails of this man. I close my eyes, trying to cut off his hypnotic gaze, but I still smell him, and it makes my blood run hot.

"What do you mean, I'm changing?" I ask him, keeping my eyes shut. "Changing how?"

I don't know why I'm even asking. To indulge him? What's the point? What's the point of any of this?

He doesn't answer. Silence fills the space.

Except it's not silence at all.

I swear I can hear things scurrying behind the wall, hear the blood pumping in my veins, the electrical buzz of the overhead lights, footsteps in some place far away, cars on a street. The more I concentrate on the sounds, the louder they get, until they start taking over my brain.

"There you go," he says after a moment. "Deep breaths, Lenore. Focus on me, not on the noise, or it will drive you mad."

I open my eyes to find him peering at me with that permanent frown.

“See,” he says. “It will fade.”

And he’s right. The noise is fading, and the longer I stare into his unblinking gaze, sheltered by his elegant brows, the more my world fades too.

What drugs does he have me on?

“Tell me more about your parents,” he says to me.

My parents. Why does he keep bringing up my parents?

He stares at me for a moment, then crosses the room with elegant strides, dragging over the velvet armchair until it’s right across from me. He sits down in it, leaning forward on his elbows, stainless steel watch gleaming. He’s not in tux today, but he’s still wearing what looks to be a very expensive suit, judging by the sharp lines and the fine gleam of the grey material. No tie, just a white shirt with a couple of buttons undone. There’s something about his throat that I’m finding strangely alluring, like I can almost sense the blood rushing underneath.

“Where am I?” I ask him.

“I’m asking the questions,” he says calmly. “You’re the one tied to the chair. And I’d like to talk about your parents.”

“Why? Are you doing this because of them?” My voice is rising. “Because you want a ransom? They’ll pay your ransom. They have the money.”

“I also have money, moonshine,” he says. “More money than I know what to do with. It isn’t about that.”

“Then what is it about?”

The corner of his full mouth twitches. “It’s about *you*, of course.”

“Okay. Fine. Why me? Why am I here? Why do you want me to talk about my parents if it’s not about them?”

“Because it’s about where you came from, Lenore. I know you have no idea, but you might have answers even if you don’t know it yet.” He leans forward and reaches out and sticks a long, svelte finger underneath my chin, his fingernail pointed, and I swear it’s getting shaper by the second.

I don’t move an inch, afraid he’ll puncture my skin if I do.

“I’m a patient man,” he says carefully, words like silk, “but it was something I learned. It isn’t my nature. My true nature is something you don’t ever want to see, though you will if you keep testing me.” He pauses, pushing his fingernail up until I feel a sharp pinch as he breaks the skin. I wince, unable to look away from his pupils, which are getting larger and

larger, almost swallowing me whole. “You’re not scared enough. I can fix that.”

He removes his finger and I stare in horror at the droplets of blood running down it.

He admires it for a moment, nostrils flaring delicately, then brings his finger in front of my eyes.

“Do you see this?” he says, brow cocked. “This is what they want from you, one way or another.”

“My blood?” I ask, mesmerized. And to think the sight of my own blood used to turn my stomach. Now it’s both beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

“Your true nature,” he informs me. “The one that you know is true, deep inside. That’s what they want.”

I have no fucking clue what he’s talking about.

“Who are *they*?”

He stares at me in silence. I can’t tell if it’s a trick of the light or what, but I swear his pupils are turning red.

“And so, what do you want?” I add, managing to look away from the blood.

He brings his finger toward him, rotating it, watching the red trickle down the back of his pale hand. He studies it like he’s staring at a rare painting in a museum, trying to gauge the artist’s meaning.

Then he slowly extends his long tongue and licks the blood off, his eyes locked on mine as he does so, pupils turning the blue to black.

Prey.

You’re his prey.

“You’re a fucking psychopath,” I cry out, my whole body instinctively flinching, straining against the ropes.

Another abbreviated smile. “So they all say.”

Then his eyes flutter closed and he breathes in deeply through his nose, his muscles stiffening.

I watch him, my heart tripping with fear, the rest of me succumbing to torrid fascination. If he wanted me to be afraid, well, I am afraid. Because I don’t think I’m coming out of this alive. And yet the mystery of why he wants me, of what he’s going to do with me next, has me curious as a cat. A cat with only one life.

He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing in his neck, and then he opens his eyes, staring at me even deeper than he was before. My nerves go on high alert again, that feeling of being watched, stalked, seconds before the pounce.

"You've tasted my blood," he says softly. "I've tasted yours. I suppose we're even for now."

"What is your sick fascination with blood?" I nearly spit the words.

His forehead creases, mouth making an elegant O in surprise, remnants of my blood sitting on his soft lips. "Oh, Lenore," he says imploringly. "Surely you've figured it all out by now." He licks his lips. "I heard you're a smart girl. Very smart. Have to say I've been a bit disappointed by you in that department. Not even any guesses?"

I do have guesses, but they're batshit crazy and I'm not about to egg this man on or give him ideas.

"There is so much you don't say," he comments after a moment. "Has your brain always been like that?"

I press my lips together, refusing to speak.

"That's fine if you don't want to talk," he goes on. "I'm used to being the one doing all the talking. Most of the time, people can only stare at me, their brains being reduced to a lump of grey matter. You, on the other hand, aren't like that. And I know why."

Don't ask him why, don't ask him why.

"You don't have to ask," he goes on, leaning back in his chair. "I'll tell you. Why am I so interested in your parents? Because they aren't actually your parents. They stole you when you were two years old. You remember it, don't you? You remember them taking you. You remember your original mother, your father."

My mouth parts, his words colliding in my brain with mini explosions. "No," I tell him, my breath catching. "No. That's insane. That's not...my parents are my parents."

"You were born on Orcas Island, in Washington State. The middle of nowhere. Beautiful place, right on the ocean, surrounded by trees."

I swallow, shaking my head, but the lies are hitting me like the truth because I'm remembering my dreams. "You're a liar," I whisper.

He bites his lip for a moment. "Am I? I can still feel your blood inside me, singing your truth. There were rumors about you, from the moment you

were born. Rumors, but no one really knew, no one had the evidence. I knew though. I felt you across time. You're a myth to everyone but me."

My eyes pinch shut. I don't want to listen to this. I don't want to even indulge this madman in his weird fantasy. He doesn't know me, doesn't know where I came from. I was born in San Francisco to my parents, that's it, that's it...

"I knew your real parents," he says, his voice going quiet and soft, enough so that I have to look at him. There's something gentle about his expression, apologetic, even. It's unnerving after all of this. "Alice and Hakan Virtanen. I knew that they wanted you so badly. A child was all that Alice could talk about. I lost touch with them before you were born. We had our...differences. I wish we could have worked through them, because sometimes I think I could have stopped what happened." He looks away, eyes grappling with something heavy. "Then again, I'm used to causing death, not stopping it."

He brings his gaze back to mine and exhales sharply, straightening up. "Twenty-one years ago, when there was talk that Alice and Hakan had a child, I was happy for them. Then the three of them were killed. Burned alive in their house. Murdered. By Elaine and Jim Warwick."

I can't help but laugh, though it feels like I have acid inside me. "My parents? Murdered people? What the fuck are you talking about? You're even more messed up than I thought."

"They were murdered," he goes on simply. "And then the rumors started. That the little girl they called Lenore wasn't fully theirs. That she had another father, not Hakan. That there was a reason they lived on such a remote island, cloaked in secrecy. Because she, the girl, *you*, was... forbidden."

"You're insane," I manage to say.

His eyes narrow, sharp enough to take my breath away, make my skin prickle with fear. "I was insane, for a very, very long time. Be grateful that I got better."

My god.

Who the hell am I dealing with here?

"And then the other rumors started," he says, eyes still boring into mine. "And those rumors were about the Warwicks. That they didn't kill the child. That they stole the child, recognized something of themselves in it, and took her into the city to raise as their own. They made sure that no one

knew the truth, did all they could to cover all their tracks. They knew if others found out the child would be taken and killed. She was forbidden, remember.”

I can only stare at him. He’s not making any sense, and even though there is something deep inside me that’s finding truth, it’s a side of me that shouldn’t exist. Because there can’t be truth here. I know who I am. I know who my parents are. That’s all there is.

“And this is where I come in,” he says, leaning forward. “Because there are two sides that want you, and I’m the one that deals with both sides.”

I blink hard, nothing even close to making sense. “What, like a bounty hunter?” It sounds ridiculous the moment I say it, but then again, everything has so far.

He inspects his fingernails for a moment. “I prefer the term mercenary. Misleading word though, isn’t it? It almost implies that I have mercy.” He gets to his feet. “And I don’t.”

He walks over to the wooden crate in the corner and pulls out my Alexander McQueen purse. I can’t help but gasp, the mere bag reminding me of my life, my real life, the one I had before I came to this place where time doesn’t seem to exist.

“I’m going to show you something,” he says to me. He opens the bag, pulls out my iPhone. He displays it and taps on it, the phone turning on to show my wallpaper of blackened roses. Fully charged.

Hope leaps inside my chest, though I know this is too easy, that this isn’t going to go the way I want it to.

He puts the phone close to my face until it recognizes me and unlocks the screen. Then he walks around the chair so he’s behind me, his arms held out in front of me, holding the phone so I can see. He rests his chin on my shoulder, the side of his face pressed against my jaw and my neck, and his skin is so cold at first that it’s like being hit with a blast of nitro. Then it quickly warms up and it’s like all the blood inside me is drawn to his skin, while the scent of roses and tobacco and cedar fill my nose.

I’m drowning in him. I have to fight to keep my eyes open.

“Tell me what you want to see,” he murmurs, turning his mouth to my ear, his warm breath making me shiver. My nipples immediately go hard, heat pooling between my legs. This isn’t fair. My body is betraying me for no reason at all, jumping right from fear and straight into lust.

It’s the adrenaline, it has to be.

“Focus, Lenore,” he says. His voice is like whisky on the rocks, the way it sinks in, warm, smooth, intoxicating. “I know how you’re feeling. This is part of the change. But I need you to look at the screen right now and tell me what you want to see.”

Back to that *change*. What change?

But he quickly swipes through to my Facebook app, goes on my page.

“What do you want to see? Anything here? Maybe there are private messages from your friends wondering where you are?” He goes through my messages, but there’s nothing new since I last saw it. Then he goes to my wall. “Perhaps people have written there, talking about how you went missing.”

Nothing on my wall.

“How about we google your name? Surely you must be all over the news right now. A pretty white academic abducted in Berkeley? You’ll be every headline.”

He googles my name. There are a bunch of Lenore Warwicks, including me, but there’s nothing in the news at all.

Oh my god. What the fuck is going on?

Why aren’t people looking for me?

“Okay, we’ll go to your texts then,” he says, bringing up my messages. “That should explain it. Oh, here’s your mother.”

He pulls up the last texts from my mother.

Lenore, I had a dream. Where are you? Tell me you’re safe?

Sweetie, where are you? Pick up your phone.

Lenore, please, if you can ... just somehow let us know you’re alive.

We’re sorry.

And that’s that. The last text is “we’re sorry.”

My stomach turns sour.

“And your friend, Elle,” Absolon says, bringing up her texts now. “Lovely girl. Let’s see what she has to say.”

I stare at the screen.

Where did you go, are you OK?

Wow, I feel like horseshit. Dude, I hope you got lucky tonight because otherwise I’m going to be so mad you didn’t text me back.

Lenore? Hello? Okay your phone might be dead, I’m calling your mom cuz I’m worrying.

Then one more text.

K, I talked to your mom. Sucks about you needing a new phone! She told me you're on your way to Joshua Tree. Totally get that this is a fun trip with your parents, so I'll try not to be pissed that you're not spending your 21st with me. I know you won't get this until you get your new phone but just call me back when you get home, we have lots to talk about. And drink. Make sure you howl at that desert moon for me! Ow ow ow!

What the fuck?

What the absolute *fuck*?

"Do you see now?" Absolon whispers in my ear. "Do you see that no one knows you're here? And no one is coming to look for you?"

I shake my head, tears welling up, my throat clenching.

All this time I was able to remain calm, only because I had this weird, unflinching belief that someone would save me. That the worst couldn't happen to me because I would be found. Someone like me couldn't go missing in a city like this. My parents would turn over every last stone looking for me. I relied on that naïve feeling of being special and exceptional, the kind of person to whom nothing bad can happen. I was above that.

But the truth is, I am below it.

"You're not below it," Absolon says to me, lips brushing against my ear. "You have everyone fighting over you, to have the privilege of being the first ones to tear you apart. Because you are exceptional. Too exceptional to exist."

"You're reading my thoughts," I say absently, my voice faint, small, far away.

"Yes," he practically hisses. "And you offer them up so easily to me when you're upset. Almost makes me feel bad. But not quite."

He straightens up, taking the phone away.

"What are you going to do with me?" I manage to ask. The defeat inside me is dragging me inward, like I'm collapsing in on myself, like a dark star. I don't know how much of what he said is true, but that seed of truth that had glowed inside me, the one that believed him, that my parents truly weren't my parents, that seed is growing. Not only did they not tell anyone that I went missing, they went a step further and lied to Elle about it. They have an alibi for me.

They don't even care.

Absolon sighs, running his hand through his thick hair as he walks past the chair. "I don't know." He stops and eyes me, hands clasped behind his back. One moment he's absolutely menacing, the next he's as refined as royalty. "What I do know is that this feeling sorry for yourself stage won't last very long."

I stare at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're changing. I've told you as much."

"Changing into *what*?" I cry out angrily, sick of these fucking games.

He grins at me, flashing those sharp incisors which seem longer, sharper somehow. The sight makes my blood run ice cold with instinctual fear, the kind you feel when a snake shows its fangs.

I can't breathe.

"You're changing into something like me," he says. "Before I brought you here, I thought it would be straightforward. Now that I've tasted you, *know* you, I don't know what to expect. What side might take over. Until then, you're going to be in that chair."

"And what are you?"

One moment I'm looking at him halfway across the room, the next he's in front of my face, and I didn't even see him move. All I see now are his pupils, so black and infinite that I might tumble inside and drown in them.

You know what I am, he says, but he says it inside my head, and his lips aren't moving. *You just don't want to say it because you think it means you're going insane. But you'll know for yourself soon enough.*

"I'll be back later," he says after a moment. "For your first stage."

I try to move my tongue. It feels thick and heavy. "First stage?"

"Of The Becoming," he says. "The first stage is lust. The second stage is bloodlust."

"Lust? What does that even mean?"

"You'll see. You might even enjoy it...if I'm feeling charitable. If I'm not, you'll be in pure agony, begging me to end it." Then he flashes me a smile and tips his chin to me. "Take care, Lenore."

He leaves the room, keeping the lights on this time.

I take a moment to try and take stock of the situation, to try and make sense of everything that just happened.

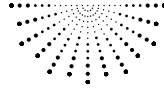
But I can't.

It's too much, too unbelievable, too fantastical.

The only thing that does make sense is that my parents have left me here to die.

And they might not even be my parents.

CHAPTER SEVEN



RED MOON RISING OVER THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE.

Me, in the back of a car, staring out the window, feeling so much wonder. Not at the moon, which is singing me a song, but at the bridge, at the cars, at seeing the ocean from this height, moonlight gleaming on the water.

I turn forward in my child seat and look at the people in the front seat. There's a man with kind eyes and a funny laugh, he's driving. Then there's a woman with long blonde hair pulled back into a braid, her arms wrapped in bandages.

They are not my parents.

But I know they will be.

"What's your birthday, Lenore?" the woman asks me.

I'm too young to speak, too young to know.

But I say, *April 17th* inside my head and the woman nods.

"Then we have nineteen birthdays together before you must die," she says, turning in her seat to smile at me. "You know you have to die, right? A girl like you shouldn't exist."

A girl like me.

"Until then, we will love you," she adds. "And you will love us. And we will pretend that we are happy, even though deep inside, we know the clock is ticking."

"Okay," I say in a small voice.

I glance up at the rearview mirror.

And now Absolon is driving the car.

He grins, with fangs that glint in the moonlight, and with one smooth movement, he brings the car over the lanes, accelerating, and then the car is bursting through the guardrails, and we plunge down, down, down.

Falling.

Dropping.

Into icy water.

The last thing I see are the lights of San Francisco.

* * *

“SHOULD WE WAKE HER UP?”

A calm, elegant voice answers. “She’s awake. She just doesn’t know it yet.”

I am awake, but barely. My mind keeps drifting off into darkness.

Except it’s not total darkness. There are images there.

Of blood splattering on walls.

Of cells fluttering within veins.

Of a pumping heart.

There are images of orgies, cocks hard and erect, plunging inside people, the cries of pleasure and agony, the writhing bodies beneath bodies on bloodstained satin sheets.

There is a feeling of something inside me, a beast, that wants to break free of my skin and run and fuck.

There’s another being too, one born of moonlight and darkness, who wants to hide myself, to shrink, to sink inward.

I don’t know what I am anymore.

I don’t think I ever did.

I am changing.

“Lenore.”

It’s Absolon’s voice. To my detriment, it’s now a familiar one.

I open my eyes, expecting to see the basement ceiling.

But it’s not.

It’s lace.

A canopy of lace high above me.

I blink and try to move.

I can’t.

Story of my life.

I lift my head.

I'm on a four-poster bed, on top of black satin sheets.

I'm in only my bodysuit now, my skirt gone.

My wrists and ankles are wrapped in ropes that connect to each corner of the bed, spread eagle.

At the foot of the bed stand Absolon and Wolf, both staring at me with interest. Absolon is in a tailored navy shirt that shows off his shoulders, arms, slim V tapering to black pants, his skin luminous. Wolf is in a leather jacket, Henley shirt, jeans. The dark one and the light one.

I should be *terrified*.

I should be screaming.

But I'm not.

It's not that I know these men don't mean me harm. I know Absolon means me harm. He's warned me plenty of times. I've felt his harm bleed from my throat to his finger and down through his lips.

But I don't think this is what it looks like.

What it feels like is a different story.

I've seen *The Exorcist*.

This is what they do to someone who might become uncontrollable.

I'm changing.

Into what?

How can I be changing into anything except the shadow of the person I once was?

"Good morning, Lenore," Absolon says in a clipped voice, hands behind his back as he walks over to the side of the bed, staring at me like a doctor would a patient. "And how are we feeling today?"

I stare at him, trying to ignore the rising anger that's making my blood seethe. How the hell does he think I feel? Not only do I have no idea how I got from the basement to here, this strange room, but he let me know how much my parents don't want to find me. Worse than that, they're covering for my disappearance, like they had something to do with it.

"Wolf, I'd like some time alone with her," he says, keeping his eyes on me. Fuck, is he reading my mind again? Or was that something I dreamed?

"Of course, sir," Wolf says, heading for the door. "I'll be just outside." It shuts behind him.

The room itself is large but old, wallpapered walls the color of faded indigo, dark wood furniture, a window with blackout shades pulled down. The only lights are from an antique lamp on the bedside table and from a candelabra flickering on the fireplace mantle, which gives everything an *extra* eerie appearance, and that's saying a lot since it already feels like the mansion from *Dark Shadows*.

Absolon sits on the edge of the bed, twisting his body in an elegant way to face me. He takes his finger and runs it over my arm until I'm shaking from his touch, unable to control the shivers. Whether it's from revulsion, anger, or something else, I don't know.

"Tell me about your tattoos," he says, letting his fingernails trace the ink of Poe's words, his cold seeping into me, making my skin prickle.

"Tell me what's happening to me," I say. "Then we can talk."

His fingers pause and he smirks at me. "Full of surprises. I really thought you'd be more devastated than you are."

"Who says I'm not devastated?" I say point blank.

He clamps his mouth shut, watching me closely for a moment, then shrugs lightly with one shoulder. "You're taking things in stride. So far."

"You said I'm becoming you," I tell him. "What am I becoming? What are these stages? What's happening to me?"

He frowns. "So you know something is happening? Do you feel it?"

I shut my eyes, unable to take his penetrating eyes right now.

Because I do feel it.

I feel like I'm becoming something else, and I don't know what it is, but it's something linked to the deepest parts of me, that dark well that I know exists, the one I'm afraid to drink from.

But at the same time, how can I not be changing?

I was kidnapped.

I've been held captive in a stranger's house.

My parents are pretending like it never happened.

And I'm feeling things, hearing things, seeing things, dreaming things that defy explanation.

Other than the fact that he's had me drugged for days.

That has to be it.

It has to be the explanation for everything.

It's in whatever he's been feeding me (when was the last time I ate?).

It's in whatever I've been drinking (when was the last time I had water?).

"We've been giving you food and water," he says, leaning in closer, running his nails down my thigh, over the tattoo of the ram's head, my legs aching to clench together. "You've been refusing. It's good, I suppose. Soon you'll never look at food the same way again. It won't be what fuels you." He presses his nails into my skin until it hurts. He looks up at me through his long dark lashes. "I like this one. The ram's head. Aries. Power to overcome and achieve. Very curious though, are the eyes. Was this the artist's idea or yours?"

The more he touches me, the more my skin feels like it's on fire. My breath thickens, feeling heavy. "It was mine."

"The Eye of Ra on one side, The Eye of Horus on the other." He takes his hand away and only then do my lungs clear. "I understand tattoos. I was covered in them once. Nordic runes. Head to toe."

I glance at his forearms, showcased by his rolled-up sleeves. They're muscular and strong, the kind of forearms that would make any woman salivate. But there's no sign of any tattoos on him. His skin is pale, unblemished, flawless.

"Head to toe?" I question.

He nods. "Yes," he muses, eyes now captured by the ravens at my calf. "It was customary at the time."

"And you had them all removed?"

His eyes flit up to mine, glittering darkly. "Not quite."

I swallow. "Are you going to let me go?"

He stares at me for a moment, one black brow raising like a question mark on his handsome face, unblinking. I hate that I still find him attractive after everything he's done.

He moves up on the bed, his giant frame making the mattress sink to one side, and places a cold palm at my cheek, my eyes closing involuntarily at the contact, his hand spanning the whole side of my face.

"I can't," he whispers to me, his voice making my skin dance with pleasure. "I don't know how much you're worth."

My eyes snap open to find his eyes just inches away. "You said this wasn't about money!"

"It isn't," he says. "Money isn't the only currency. You're studying history. You should know that."

“You’re trading people. People for what? Other people? Slavery?”

He gives me a dry look. “Give me some credit.”

“Credit? You have me tied to a fucking bed, in some fucking haunted mansion. You’ve kidnapped me, you don’t know what you’re doing with me but you’re a mercenary so...”

“So, I need to make sure I get what I want in return before I hand you over to the people who’ll most likely kill you.”

Dread sinks my heart.

“What?” I whisper, the panic clawing through me.

“Oh,” he says, looking mildly surprised, hand at his chest. “You’re making me feel as if I’ve betrayed you already.” He leans in. “Remember what I said before, that you weren’t scared enough? Seems like now you finally are.”

I stare at him, feeling rage run through me, gasoline chucked on a fire, flames igniting along every single limb. “You’re a monster,” I practically growl.

“I never said I wasn’t,” he snaps. Then he leans over to the bedside table and brings out an antique hand mirror, showing me my face. “But do you see now what your anger, what your drive to stay alive, is doing to you?”

I stare at my face.

At the crescent moons in my eyes.

Not just a crescent moon, a *waning* moon.

I remember what my mother would always say about them.

The time of change, to cut cords, to banish that which doesn’t suit us.

Why are they in my eyes?

“It’s not drugs, moonshine,” Absolon says, knowing what I’m about to think at this point. “But I can’t explain it either. Unless the rumors are true. And if they are true, then the next stages might be interesting. As such, I’m not cutting you loose, I’m not letting you go, and I’m not handing you over to the highest bidder...yet.”

Then, while he’s holding onto the mirror with one hand, he leans in and runs his finger over my top lip. I’m tempted to bite him, but from the heated, almost playful look in his eyes, I know he knows that. He probably wants that to happen.

He places his finger on my upper lip and pushes up along my canines so they’re exposed in the mirror.

I gasp.

Not only do my teeth as a whole seem brighter and whiter than they've ever been, but my canines are sharp. Very sharp. They don't even feel that sharp to my tongue, but looking at them in the mirror...I look like a fucking vampire.

Something deep inside me, buried in that well, churns.

It's a dark, sickly feeling.

Just hearing the word in my head makes me feel ill.

Vampire.

I glance up at Absolon and he's slowly nodding his head behind the mirror. "Perhaps you should listen to the word you don't want to hear."

I stare at him for a moment, the ridiculousness sinking into me, then I look into the mirror, running the tip of my tongue over the tooth.

Vampire.

And now when I look at Absolon again, I know what he is.

He's a vampire.

Which is stupid.

So stupid.

There's no such thing as vampires. Just another thing people make up to explain the unexplainable.

But...he is a *vampire*.

I'm split in two, wrestling with myself, because on one hand I want to believe it, I want to indulge myself in this fantasy, because it would explain so much. The fact that he can hear my thoughts, his strength, his speed, and it would also explain other things for which I have no proof: his pale skin, his dark house, his hypnotizing stare, his penchant for blood, the fact that he once had tattoos and now doesn't.

On the other hand, no.

No.

No such thing.

Oh, I believe in the supernatural. I do. I believe in ghosts. I believe in spirits and demons and sometimes I believe in witches, at least in the very grounded ways. But vampires? No. They are not a thing. If Absolon *believes* he's a vampire, then that's a very different story altogether. A lot of people want to be vampires so badly that they believe they are one, when really they just have a couple of screws loose.

"While you have that argument with yourself," he says to me, putting the mirror away, "let's try a little experiment to see if we can speed up the

process. The sooner you believe it, the better chance you have to survive all of this.” He pauses. “Besides, I’m curious. It’s been hundreds of years since something captured my attention like you have.”

I stare at him. Hundreds of years?

And then he grins, showing me canines that match mine, and holds out his arm. I stare at the soft underside of his forearm, admiring the strength and purity of his skin for a moment before I notice the dark vein running down the middle of it, full of blood. I swear I even hear the blood whooshing, feel the tremors through the bed.

He reaches back and pulls out a pair of car keys, but they’re old keys, the type that belong to a vintage car, a Ford, and on the keychain is a black Swiss Army Knife. He opens it deftly, showcasing a blade that captures the candlelight.

With one swift movement he slices the blade along the vein, and I’m so horrified that a scream is strangled in my throat, because blood is spilling everywhere on the black sheets, and he just hit a major artery, is he trying to kill himself?

“Why did you do that?” I whisper, panicking. “Why did you do that?”

And why do I care if he dies?

I should want him to die.

What the fuck is that about?

“Trying to show you something,” he says, his voice light, not a care in the fucking world. “The first part is this.”

He brings his arm up to my mouth and I jerk my head back, trying to move away, but the blood is pouring out of his vein, onto my face, until I’m drenched in it, choking on it. I try to breathe, but it’s in my nose, in my mouth, hitting my tongue.

The effect is immediate, like I did a line of coke.

Goes straight to my brain.

Unhooks a few wires, screws them in other places.

A total rewiring of the mind.

All those heightened senses I was experiencing earlier come at me tenfold. I can hear more, feel more, smell more, taste more, see more. I’m overwhelmed in it, just as I’m drowning in his blood, and I might die this way, and for once I really don’t care what happens. Every pleasure part of my body is coming alive, like I’ve been dead all of my life, dead until right this moment when I’m finally *awake*.

He takes his arm away, pressing his other hand on my shoulder to hold me down, and then I realize what I was doing. The blood wasn't just pouring onto my mouth; I was sucking at his skin, tasting him, drinking him, consuming him, reduced to nothing more than a fucking junkie.

I gasp for air, trying to come to terms with what I've become, while my body starts to move, restless, agitated, straining against the ropes.

I glance up at Absolon, and he's watching me, pensive, wary, alert, like he doesn't quite know what to expect either.

"And how do you feel?" he asks carefully.

I open my mouth, but my throat feels so parched. I need his blood again. I need that liquid to quench my thirst. I want to tell him even water will do, but I know that probably won't be the case.

"How else do you feel?" he adds, reading my mind.

I close my eyes, his voice feeling like nails scraping along my scalp, making me sink into the bed. Heat rushes to my cheeks, throbbing builds between my spread legs, a feeling of emptiness, of needing something to fill me. My skin feels too hot and tight for my body and I want to claw it off but I can't. I writhe on the sheets, trying to dissipate the urges.

"That's what I thought," he says thickly. Clears his throat. "You know, back in ye olden days, mothers used to do that to their kids when they were impatient and wanted the process over with. Then they'd lock their daughters in a dark room with the stable boy, and, well...sometimes he came out a happy man, and sometimes he came out dead." He gives me a wry look. "I have no doubt you'd try and kill me if I let you loose. You'd fail, of course, but the drama would tire me."

I glance down at his forearm. The blood has dried to a trickle now, and I can practically see the skin healing, sealing the cut. "You should be dead by now," I say softly, my voice caught in the depths of my disbelief.

"I've heard that a few times, moonshine."

"What's happening to me?" I ask, just as my body starts to jerk. A frustrated moan escapes my lips, my head going from side to side.

I need to get off.

I need to fuck.

To come.

I need something, everything.

To be touched.

"I told you," he says patiently. "You're in the first stage now. Lust. It sounds good, but without the proper...outlet, it could destroy you."

"Then let me go," I growl.

He leans in, his brows putting his eyes in shadows. "And then what will you do? Try and fuck me? Kill me? You'd wouldn't succeed at either of those."

I would never fuck you, I want to say.

I want to tell him I don't find him attractive.

That I don't want him.

But the truth is, whatever is happening to me has rattled my brain, turned me inside out until I'm just an animal in human skin.

"I'm the one in control here." He flashes me a dark smile. "Be a good girl and maybe I'll let you come."

"You bastard," I manage to say, gasping. "You're sick."

He pretends to be admonished. "I'm sick? You're the one tied to the bed because you'd probably hurt yourself if I let you loose. I didn't make you into a vampire, Lenore, so don't put your blame on me."

Vampire.

I'm a vampire.

I can't be a vampire.

He gives me a patient look. "This is what happens to everyone who turns naturally, at any rate. It's The Becoming. First is the lust, because lust of the body depends on blood of the body. Your blood is going wild right now. Arousal is all linked to blood flow. That's the simple truth of it. You're going to be driven mad with desire for the next while and there's no getting around it. So mad, that if you don't get off, if you don't make the pressure, the pain, the agony, go away, for even a moment or two, you might never recover. I've seen...things you don't want to see, when people were finally let loose when they shouldn't have been. Not taking that chance with you."

I cry out, groaning, wanting so badly to just touch myself, to come, to make it stop, so unbearable, so relentless. "Then you're torturing me," I say through a gasp, the ropes starting to slice into my skin. "If you won't touch me."

I hate myself for saying those words.

Hate that I want him to touch me.

But I would die for him to touch me.

“Please,” I whisper, staring up at him, ignoring the humiliation in my heart. “Touch me. Please.”

My back arches, my nipples practically breaking through the fabric of my bodysuit.

“I can be a cruel man,” he says to me, tone somber, eyes on my breasts for a moment. Then he puts his hand on my head, runs his fingers through my hair until that touch alone almost make me come. “But I am not that cruel.”

Then he gets off the bed, and with his presence ripped from me, I cry out, all of me bleeding for him.

He’s a monster. He kidnapped you, he’s made you drink his blood.

He’s a vampire.

He’s a vampire.

But all the logic, the things I’m repeating in my head, don’t stop what I’m feeling, like I’m so close to ripping through my skin and finding relief, if only I can be an animal for a bit.

My eyes are opening and closing, rolling back in my head, and so it takes me a moment to realize he didn’t leave the room.

He’s still here.

And not alone.

Wolf is standing at the foot of the bed, looking down at me, brow raised.

“Think you waited long enough, Solon?” Wolf asks him dryly.

“We were having a conversation,” Absolon says. “And then I gave things a little...nudge.”

Wolf’s golden gaze focuses on my mouth, which I’m sure is caked in blood. “I can see that.”

“Lenore,” Absolon says to me, putting a hand on Wolf’s meaty shoulder. “This is Wolf Eriksen. He’s the best of the best. And he’s here to do what you require of him.”

Wolf meets my eyes. His gaze is calm at first, friendly, but the more I stare at him, the more his gaze turns carnal. He’s a big man, a handsome Scandinavian beast, and though I normally would never even entertain these thoughts, these thoughts are being entertained.

I don’t care who fucking touches me.

As long as someone does.

Now.

Absolon moves onto the bed, reaching between my legs, and I gasp as his fingers press against the snap button closure of the bodysuit. "You need to tell me if this is what you want," he says, licking his lips.

I want you, I think, writhing against his fingers, trying to increase the pressure, but he's elusive. *I hate you but I want you*.

He gazes up at me, a lazy smile with heat in his eyes.

"You can't have me, Lenore," he says.

"Please," I beg. "Touch me."

He shakes his head. "I don't do what I'm told. If I touch you, it's not because you're begging me to. It's because I want to." He runs his fingers over my inner thighs, making me gasp. "Besides, in a few days, this part will be over. And you'll be glad I never gave you what you begged me for."

He gets off the bed and nods at Wolf.

Wolf grins at me, salacious, dripping with lust, and he bares his teeth at me.

Fangs.

Because of course he's a vampire too.

And I really don't care.

My breath hitches, my body stiffening in anticipation as he prowls between my legs, big hands gripping my thighs. He brings his fingers up to me, and with a few pops, undoes the buttons on the crotch of my bodysuit, until I'm bare and on display for him.

I swallow hard, never feeling so vulnerable, so caught as I do right now, and yet never needing this more.

Wolf stares up at me, raising his brow, and I realize he might be waiting for a signal from me to continue.

My lips part, trying to tell him.

Please.

Then he attacks me.

Tongue on pussy, finding me drenched, head buried between my legs.

I scream, the sound bouncing off the walls. My orgasm is intense and immediate, my body shaking uncontrollably.

"Keep going," Absolon says, his voice rich, and I look at him as Wolf continues to lick me up and down, my body coming and coming, cries spilling from my lips.

Absolon's eyes are full of fire, his gaze locked on Wolf's head between my thighs, watching him eat me out. "Make her come again."

Then Absolon brings his eyes to mine, gives me a languid smile, comes over to me so that his mouth is at my ear. He nips my earlobe between his teeth. "You can always pretend it's me," he murmurs.

The feel of his teeth, his hot breath, the lust in his voice, it all pools into my veins, making me come again, regardless of what Wolf is doing.

"I hate you," I whisper, voice breaking on another wave of orgasm, just as Absolon pulls back, gazes down at me, expression dark and carnal. All the while Wolf's tongue plunges inside me, relentless.

"No you don't," Absolon says. "You want to. And you should. But you don't."

He straightens up, watches as Wolf digs his fingers into my hips, his tongue continuing to work at a frenzied pace. I'm coming again and again and it's still not enough. It's not enough.

"You want him to properly fuck you with his cock, or is this good for now?" Absolon asks, his voice tepid, as if he's bored.

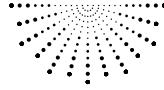
I cry out through another wave, back arching, limbs shaking. "I thought vampires were territorial," I manage to say.

He gives me a quick grin that doesn't reach his eyes. "Only when we're planning to keep you." He starts toward the door. "Give her whatever she wants, Wolf."

The candles go out as he passes by them, smoke filling the air.

I'm coming again.

CHAPTER EIGHT



I'M LOST IN THE DARKNESS.

Turning inward, trying to understand, trying to hold on to any innocence I have left. I'm drowning in it, torn apart, until I'm nothing but a shadow.

Who am I now?

What will I become?

Was I ever really me?

The darkness begins to fade, dreams turning into curls of black smoke, growing brighter and brighter until...

I'm awake.

I open my eyes.

I'm underwater.

Staring up at the wavering image of Absolon, who is holding me down.

Trying to drown me.

My mouth opens in horror, water entering my lungs, and I start thrashing against him, his hands holding my head and chest below the water and I'm going to die like this, he's going to drown me.

I keep fighting and fighting, water splashing over the sides of the tub, and Absolon doesn't falter. His force remains as strong as ever. Poised and determined.

To kill me.

But I won't let him.

I fight for moments, then *minutes*.

I'm not getting tired.

I'm not...dying.

Finally, he lets go of me and I sit straight up out of the water, gasping for air and choking, realizing I'm naked in a bathtub filled with ice cubes. I start to cough, water rushing out of my lungs, trying so hard to breathe, breathe, breathe.

I steal a horrified glance at Absolon, his black clothing wet, crouched beside the tub like a gargoyle, staring intently at me.

"Hello," he says politely, a hint of a smile.

A growl roars from my throat, and without thinking, I suddenly lunge for him, propelling myself out of the tub, hands around his neck, trying to knock him to the ground.

But it's futile.

My new strength surprises me, but it's nowhere near enough to match his. He catches hold of my wrists with ease and deftly flips me over until I'm smashed against the tile floor. He pins me down, hands above my head, the weight of his massive body crushing me. I'm acutely aware that I'm completely naked, while he's completely dressed in black pants and a dress shirt.

"Easy now, moonshine," he says to me, his face close. "Your impulsiveness won't do you any favors."

I writhe beneath him, trying to move, and to my surprise I realize he's turned on; big, thick, long, and hard as steel.

He gives a delicate sniff, eyes closing briefly. When he opens them, his pupils are massive. "Still in a bit of lust, aren't you?"

"You're the one who's hard," I snipe, though my hips involuntarily buck up against him, wanting more.

God, I hate myself.

His eyes close again at that, his lips parting, and now I'm fighting the stupid, ridiculous urge to kiss him. I want nothing more than to reach down and unzip his pants, make him fuck me right here on the floor. I didn't even think he was attracted to me, but I can feel the evidence *very* clearly.

"Hard not to be when you've got a gorgeous creature naked beneath you," he says, peering at me. "You women are funny, aren't you? You think if a man isn't throwing himself at you, he mustn't find you attractive. Assume they must be gay."

"Are you?"

"Gay?" he asks, a brow cocked. "Not particularly." He grins at me. "Aren't you at all interested in why I had you in that bathtub, or is the lust

still ravaging your brain?”

“You were trying to kill me,” I manage to say.

“You’re partly right,” he says, adjusting his grip on my wrists. It still feels like he could crush all the bones with a simple twitch. “I wanted to see if you would die. Luckily, you didn’t. You were under there for ten minutes before you came out of it. Didn’t need a single breath.”

“Came out of what?”

“I can compel you, on occasion. I get you to do exactly what I say,” he says, voice rich with pride. “You often fight back, prevent it from happening, something other people, even vampires, can’t easily do with me. But sometimes, you’re just so ... vulnerable. And so I take advantage.”

The idea of him controlling me makes me shiver with unease. “What did you make me do?”

“I got you to take off your clothes. Figured you needed a bath. You were fucked by Wolf for a good two days there. The whole house smelled like sex.”

I blink at him.

Two days?

I was fucked for *two days*?

“Then I decided to test you,” he goes on, adjusting his weight on me. He’s still hard. Formidable. Making me ache. “Filled the bathtub with ice, made you get in it. You didn’t even notice. Means your body temperature is adjusting with the change. Then I got you to put your head under the water and hold your breath.”

I shake my head, feeling the anger roll through me. “You were getting me to kill myself, controlling my mind!”

“Oh, spare me your theatrics. Soon you’ll be doing the exact same.”

“I am not like you,” I grit out.

He cocks his head as he studies me, his pupils getting narrower, the blue returning. The color of periwinkle under frost. “No, I suppose you’re not entirely like me. But that’s why you’re here, isn’t it? Because we’re getting to the bottom of it all. The bottom of your buried truth.”

Suddenly, he lets go of me and straightens up, leaning back on his large thighs as they straddle me. “Did you not even notice your body? I sure did.”

I raise my head, propping myself up on my elbows.

And nearly scream.

My tattoos.

My tattoos are all *gone*.

I gasp, my hands running over breasts, my stomach, my arms, my thighs. Gone. All gone. The moon cycle, the sparrows, the ravens, Poe's words, the ram, Pazuzu, all gone.

"Oh my god," I cry out, hands to my mouth, not recognizing my body anymore. The fact that I am buck naked underneath Absolon doesn't even matter.

"Come on," he says tiredly. He gets to his feet, reaches down and grabs me by the forearms, lifting me up like I'm made of dust.

I stand unsteadily on my feet, and he lets go of me, reaching for a white nightgown hanging from the hook. "Put this on," he says, slipping it over me. He's not compelling me this time, it's just that I don't care anymore.

I stare numbly at my arms, horrified, in shock.

What other part of me is next to go?

My soul?

"Gone," I whisper, tears in my ears. "All gone."

"Any scars you have picked up during your life are gone, and that includes tattoos," he says mildly. "Just the way it is."

"Just the way it is?" I exclaim. "Those tattoos meant something to me!"

He gives me a dry look. "Yes, I'm sure that Nine Inch Nails tramp stamp on your lower back was filled with profound meaning."

"Fuck you," I snarl.

"Swearing at me isn't going to make them come back. This is part of the change," he says, sliding his hands in his pockets as he eyes me. "I told you I was once covered in them too. They probably had the same purpose as yours did."

"Purpose?"

"I think it's time I give you a tour of the house. We're in the middle of *the pause* right now. Between the lust and the bloodlust. This is when you can start to learn."

I put my face in my hands, shaking my head. "Nothing makes sense anymore."

"I can see how it feels that way. Most vampires are aware of what they are from birth. They spend their first twenty-one years waiting for that special day. You, however, were lied to from day one. And not just by anyone. But by witches."

Oh my god.

My hands drop away. “Witches?” I cry out.

I can’t deal with this now.

He puts his hand at my elbow and guides me toward the bathroom door, opening it. We step out into the bedroom, lit with scented candles. The curtain is still down, but the window behind it is open, making the flames dance with the breeze. The bed is made, though there are still coils of rope at each corner of the bed. Waiting for me, I guess.

He leads me over to the curtain, light glinting through the ends as it dances with the breeze, shooting up the room with beams of sunlight. It’s daytime. There’s a world outside. I hear cars and people and life, and it contrasts so savagely with the world that I’ve been living in for who knows how long.

“Your, shall we say, *adoptive* parents are witches,” Absolon explains, standing behind me and placing both hands on my shoulders. His hands are warm now, no longer cold, and they immediately make me relax, despite what he’s telling me. “And they recognized something in you, something that made them steal you away. If you were all vampire, they would have let you burn. If you were a half-breed with a regular human, I still think they’d do the same. But the mystery is, why *didn’t* they kill you? What was it about you that made them keep you around?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

“You do,” he says. “And please note that I just called your parents witches, and you didn’t even try to protest. You don’t even seem shocked. That says a lot. That says you knew about them deep down. And maybe now you’re realizing how they’ve kept you hidden from others this whole time. Others like me. Others like Atlas Poe.”

“How?”

“Your tattoos. I’m guessing they encouraged you?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“And all the jewelry you were wearing, how much of that was given to you? The black tourmaline? Tempest Stone?”

I swallow hard. “Most of it.”

“And your apartment, did you know that the walls are covered in runes too? To hide you?”

“How do you know that?” I ask sharply.

“I’ve been in your apartment,” he says, his stare turning darker, never blinking. “You know I have.”

The uneasiness makes me want to curl over. It's too much.

"Your parents," he goes on, fingers digging into my shoulders, as if to keep me upright, "used spells and protection stones and all the energy they had to hide you from others like me."

"But it didn't work," I say dully. It feels like I'm still underwater.

"No. Because they underestimated my resources. Who I am. What I have to work with. You think they would have known, since they've met me more than a few times."

Now I'm awake. "What?" I say, whirling out of his grasp. "They know you?"

Absolon nods. "Yes. We aren't friends. But I have given them some vampires on occasion."

I run my hand through my wet hair, my mind exploding again. I walk over to the end of the bed, sit down on it, trying to make it all make sense. "You've...given my parents, who are witches, other vampires? Why? For what purpose?"

"Ah," he says, gracefully striding over, standing in front of me. "How little you know. You believe in witches, yes?"

I nod. "I believe they work with energy."

"That's correct, though a basic explanation. Did you know that not all witches are the same? Some deal with earth magic, moon magic, even black magic...others are slayers."

"Slayers?" I repeat.

"Vampire slayers." He folds his arms across his wide chest, muscles straining against the black material of his shirt. "Surely you've seen Buffy."

I almost laugh. "Are you kidding me?"

The corner of his mouth lifts in a quick smile. "I am. On the other hand, that is their job. There's a whole guild devoted to it. They are born to do what they do, and that's exclusively to kill us. Creatures like me. Creatures like you."

"My parents are vampire slayers..."

Even though I'm still coming to terms with what a vampire is, that I am one, this still feels a bit...much.

"In the past we used to call them the *mordernes*. The killers. But pop culture is so easily intertwined with reality. Started with Bram Stoker and Van Helsing and went from there. But it was always based on something. A

group of people with powers whose purpose is to hunt us down and kill us because they decided our kind didn't deserve to live."

"Wait, you said something about a guild," I mention.

"Yes. They have an organization. A tribunal. It controls and sanctions who they can kill and when. Your witchy parents, when they killed your vampire ones, weren't sanctioned to do so. Another reason to keep it all hidden."

"Atlas Poe said he was part of a guild."

"Yes. That's the guild. He knew that if the rumors were true, that it would fast be approaching your twenty-first birthday. Probably set out to investigate dozens of couples with children who were turning twenty-one to see if any of them were hidden with magic."

"But he found me..." I trail off, remember the darkness in his eyes when he realized I was wearing black tourmaline. Did that tip him off that I was under protection?

"Perhaps," Absolon says.

I glare up at him. "Can you stop reading my mind?"

He shakes his head. "Would if I could, but when you're upset, it's like you want me to."

"Well, I don't." I sigh, staring down at my bare arms.

Gone. All gone.

I'm getting choked up all over again. I have to take in a deep breath to calm my heart.

"So why didn't Atlas kill me?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I'm going to assume he wasn't sanctioned. He's an investigator. And he probably has his suspicions but no proof that you are the mythical child."

I nearly snort. Mythical child. Give me a break. "That's the second time you've called me a myth. What am I really?"

He runs his slender fingers over his jaw, eyes skirting my body, leaving goosebumps in their wake. For a moment I'm struck by how deeply, impossibly beautiful this man is. It's dazzling me.

Focus, I remind myself. I definitely don't need him to hear that. Would only add to what I'm sure is a massive ego.

I glance at his eyes, expecting him to be smirking at me. But his gaze is thoughtful instead.

"You're part witch, part vampire," he says after a moment.

Okay. Actually, that sits comfortably in me. It might even make sense.

"Surely that doesn't make me a myth?" I ask.

"Vampires and witches are mortal enemies," he explains. "To have them coupled is very rare."

"But not impossible."

"No. It's happened before. Love is love."

That almost sounded sentimental coming from him.

He clears his throat. "But you're wondering what makes you so special? Other than the fact that every girl your age thinks they're so damn unique."

I can't help but smile. "I should have drowned in that bathtub and I didn't. I think that makes me pretty unique."

"Careful," he says, a gleam in his eyes. "Wouldn't want to add to your massive ego."

Oh shit. So he did hear me.

My cheeks flush and I avert my eyes.

"What makes you unique," he goes on, "isn't that you're part witch, part vampire. It's your bloodline. Or what it's rumored to be."

A feeling of uneasiness slinks through me. "What bloodline?"

"Obviously Hakan wasn't your real biological father. Alice maybe had an affair with a witch."

"You say *maybe* had an affair."

"I don't think you need to contemplate the alternative."

Meaning, that my biological father raped my biological mother.

"I thought witches were good," I tell him quietly, a sour taste in my mouth.

Absolon bursts out laughing, a strong, almost musical laugh that makes the blood in me rush to the surface. "Witches? Good? Lenore, haven't the fairy tales taught you anything?"

"But...modern witches. The ones on, like, Instagram, they're all about healing and light and crystals and happiness..." I want to add that my parents are witches and my parents are good people, but I'm not sure that's the truth anymore.

"A phase," he says with a dismissive wave of his hand. "That's all. A new age. It's trendy."

"So, if witches are bad..."

"They aren't all bad," he says. "They're morally gray. And, you know, vampires are too."

“Vampires kill people.”

“We have to in order to survive,” he corrects me haughtily. “And we don’t make a habit of it. Witches kill vampires, and sometimes they kill people too. Oh, and humans? Let me tell you about fucking human beings. They throw each other under the bus every single day, then have the nerve to say we’re the soulless ones.”

He’s getting a little worked up, his eyes turning dark, shadowed by those arched brows, his jaw tense. This is the first time I’ve seen him less than icy cool. Obviously humans are a sore spot for him.

My god. What if he had kidnapped me and I wasn’t a vampire or a witch?

“I would have killed you,” he says, his voice going deeper, darker. All the hair on my body stands on end, my fight or flight instincts firing up. “There was a moment when I saw you in the car, before I realized I couldn’t compel you, where I thought perhaps I had made a mistake. I would have killed you. Would have bitten you, sucked you dry, and left you in the woods for someone else to find.”

Jesus. A ball of fear unfurls in my stomach, my hand instinctively pressing over it. I immediately look away, hating that he just caught me off-guard. All of this conversation, he had tricked me into thinking he was... well, not a friend, but an acquaintance. Something like that. Making me forget that he’s a full-fledged vampire, and, more than that, a remorseless killer, every single part of him forged to be as cunning and lethal as possible.

“You think less of me now,” he says quietly. “You’re right to.”

I press my lips together for a moment, then say, “I can’t do this. I can’t be...like you.”

“No one said you have to be like me,” he says. “Most vampires aren’t like me. They fear me. I’m the one who turns them over to people like Atlas and your parents to be executed. I’m the mercenary here, flitting between both worlds. Occasionally I’ll capture a witch and deliver them to the vampires, because there’s nothing quite like witch’s blood. I am loyal to no person, no group, except the one here in my house.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “You’ve had my blood,” I whisper.

“I know,” he says. He holds out his hand to me. “And that’s why I know your potential. Why you’re worth so damn much. Give me your hand.”

I stare at it, the smooth lines of his palm, his luminous white skin. “You would have killed me without any remorse.”

“Listen, moonshine. You don’t get to live as long as I have if you carry any remorse with you. You learn to let that go.”

“But the remorse keeps you human.”

He gives me a stiff smile, showing his fangs. “Who says that’s something to aspire to?”

And that’s when I realize that I’m not safe. I never was, I know that much. This man, no, *vampire*, will sell me to the highest bidder, someone who will kill me. He’s pretending to help me through this process, *The Becoming*, but he’s a killer without remorse. Proud of it, even.

“Give me your hand,” he says again, and as he stares at me, I can feel myself falling deeper into his eyes, hypnotized. I put my hand in his and he pulls me to my feet.

He’s trying to compel me.

His eyes narrow.

And before I know what’s happening, I’m running over to the curtain, tugging down on it hard until it rolls up, and I drop to my knees and out of the way as the direct sunlight hits him dead on.

My own eyes pinch closed, the light hurting them, giving me a headache, and I stare up at Absolon, expecting him to start dissolving in a cloud of dust, or at least running away screaming.

But he’s still standing in the sunlight, though he’s wincing. He glances down at me, shaking his head.

“Was that your sad attempt at killing me?” he asks, scoffing. Suddenly he’s crouched down at my level, holding out three fingers. “Three ways to kill a vampire, Lenore. With a blade of the *mordernes*. With fire. Or with decapitation. Sunlight does nothing to us, except bother our very sensitive eyes. I suggest making friends with sunglasses.”

Then, quick as a lightning strike, he reaches out and grabs me by the throat, pulling me up as he gets to his feet, and tossing me on the bed. I nearly bounce off, my instincts to fight back at an all-time high. I quickly eye the antique lamp, but before I can make a move for it, he’s already in front of it. I didn’t even see him move.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he sneers at me. “I got that lamp from Queen Victoria.” He then goes for the rope. “You going to make this easy for me, or hard?”

I shake my head.

No.

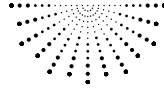
I am not being tied up again.

“Seems your bloodlust is coming through,” he says, wrapping the rope around both his hands. “You’ll be hungry pretty soon. But I have things to do, a party to prepare for, and I can’t have you fucking things up. You had your chance today, you should have taken it.”

Then he’s at me, working fast, until I’m tied spread eagle again, this time on my stomach.

“Sweet dreams, Lenore,” he says. I can sense him moving over to the window, pulling the curtain back down. He turns off the lamp, blows out the candles, and leaves me in the dark.

CHAPTER NINE



THIRSTY.

So fucking thirsty.

I'm dreaming about rivers of blood, about oceans, about all the things I cannot have. This thirst is deep inside me, turning my insides into a desert, a painful ache and longing for something I'm not sure how to get.

I am lost to my cravings.

Reduced to nothing more than a junkie looking for their next fix.

I hate what I've become.

No control.

No life.

No love.

If I wasn't feeling so hollowed out from my thirst and hunger, I'd be in tears over all that I've lost. My parents, my friends, my school, a future that once seemed so boring and predictable but sunny and promising at the same time.

I can't be what I am.

This...thing.

This creature.

But I am, because in the depths of me I feel an urge that will run me into the ground, an urge that will end up destroying me.

My truest nature.

And yet there's another part of me too.

One that's also deep and dark, sitting inside me as it always has.

The well.

And if I look inward, I can see it there, crescent moon gleaming on the water.

Inviting me to drink from that place.

A place of power and energy that was cut off from me my whole life, through runes and hexes and spells, or whatever the hell my parents did to me without me knowing.

It's all accessible again.

There for the taking.

So take it.

"Lenore?"

I blink, lift my face from the sheets in time to see the lamp switch on (Queen Victoria's lamp, I guess), then Wolf step into frame. "Am I disturbing you?" he asks.

I stare at him for a moment, my cheeks going red over the memories of him between my legs. Two days...maybe it's good I don't remember it all.

"You think I want another round?" I ask him, my voice thick with sleep. "Because I don't."

He smiles at me, an easy grin that reaches his golden eyes. "I would if you were game, but otherwise, no." He looks flustered for a moment. "Not that I didn't enjoy it..."

"It's fine," I say.

God, please don't say another word about it.

He stares at me, questioningly.

"Are you reading my thoughts?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "I don't have that ability."

"Ability," I muse. "So it's not a vampire thing?"

"It's a Solon thing," he says. He gestures to my arms. "Would you like me to untie you?"

I nod.

"Solon isn't your average vampire," Wolf goes on, undoing my right wrist first. He smells like dill and mint.

"Great," I mutter. "Just my luck to be kidnapped by an *extraordinary* vampire." I pause. "What makes him so special?"

Other than the fact that I can tell he just *is*.

Wolf eyes me for a moment before he reaches over and undoes my other wrist, my skin aching as the pressure is released. "Maybe the same thing that makes you so special."

“He’s part witch?”

He shakes his head, suppressing a smile. “No. And it would kill him to hear you say that...so maybe save that as ammo for another day. He’s sure to piss you off again.”

With the rope off my wrists, I push myself up, my back aching. I thought vampires didn’t get aches and pains. Shitty deal.

Wolf moves down to my ankles, his light brown hair gleaming blonde in the candlelight.

“Why are you untying me?” I ask. “Are you helping me escape?”

“Escape?” he says, looking up at me, brow creasing slightly. “No. There’s no escape.”

He says it so simply that it detonates in my heart.

He gives me a quick smile. “Sorry. That didn’t come out right.”

“But it’s the truth, right?”

“It’s the truth.” He sighs and goes over to my other ankle. “I’m untying you because Solon told me to do so.”

“And you do everything he says. Did he...*make* you?”

Another suppressed grin. “No. I am a lot like you. A natural born. My thirty-fifth birthday was very similar to this.”

“Wait,” I say, leaning forward, rubbing at the indents in my wrists, trying to ignore the lack of tattoos. “Not your twenty-first?”

“Males turn at thirty-five. Gives the women a bit of an upper hand, doesn’t it? They get more experience. Though I guess when you’re living for centuries, those fourteen years don’t make much difference. And if you don’t identify as male or female, then it could happen at any period in-between.”

“So then, what is Solon if he’s not half witch? Half...werewolf?”

He starts laughing, face going red.

“What?” I ask. “Are you a werewolf? Your name is Wolf.”

He calms down, but he’s still smiling. “I’m Norwegian. My parents named me Wolf. I’ve held on to the name ever since. Simple as that. And if you’re asking about werewolves, then I’m guessing you probably think Santa Claus is real too.”

I frown. “Uh...is he?”

He rolls his eyes. “No,” he says dryly. “There’s no Santa Claus, sorry to disappoint you. And there’s no such thing as werewolves. They were us all

along. Back in the old days, vampires were more likely to shapeshift. Doesn't happen much anymore."

"Shapeshifters!" I exclaim. "I have shapeshifter erotica on my Kindle."

"Yeah, I bet you do," he says. "Okay, come on." He gestures for me to get off the bed.

Suddenly I'm filled with fear, unable to move.

"Not until you tell me what's happening." I feel like the lamb being led to slaughter.

"Solon told me to give you a tour of the house," he says patiently. "Says he didn't get a chance the other day. That is if you're feeling okay."

The other day. Where is time going? I haven't even felt the need to go to the bathroom. Though I guess if I'm not consuming anything, that might happen. I don't know what to expect with my body anymore.

"Where is he?" I ask, still suspicious.

"He's running some errands. For the party tonight," Wolf says.

I have too many questions, but I'm not going to pass up the chance to get out of this damn bedroom.

I get to my feet, feeling unsteady for a moment, leaning against the bedpost.

"Are you okay?" he asks, eyeing me with concern.

I nod. "Just dizzy."

"We weren't sure if you'd be in the throes of bloodlust right now," he says. "But you seem...normal." He studies me carefully. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm thirsty, if that's what you mean. In fact, I've been dreaming about..."

"Blood?"

I make a face even though my body grows warm at the thought. "Yeah."

"Hmmm. Maybe it's being tempered by your, uh, other side. I know when I turned, I was insatiable for days. I hope it's not like that for you. It was a fucking trip."

"When did this happen?" I ask him, following him as he heads to the door. Part of me thinks that maybe on the tour of the house I can still escape. I mean, I don't know where I'd go given what I know about my parents, but it has to be better than in here. I don't trust Wolf any more than I trust Absolon, and my fate is still up for grabs.

"Long time ago."

“So, can you shapeshift?” I ask as he opens the door. We step out into a dark hall, lit candles on gilded wall sconces, the carpet worn and red.

“Unfortunately not.”

“But Solon can,” I guess.

“Maybe.” He smiles, shrugs. “I haven’t seen it, but I wouldn’t be surprised. Told you, he’s not like most of us.”

“And he’s not part witch or werewolf or...demon?”

He tilts his head from side to side, as if considering it. “No. Demons are...something we don’t deal with. That’s a human problem.”

“Lucky them,” I mutter. “Then what is he? Or is this some kind of big secret?”

Wolf stops walking and I nearly run right into him. “There are no secrets in this house.” He looks damn serious, sinister even.

I shrink back. “Okay.”

The darkness on his face fades and he gives me apologetic look. “We’re mercenaries,” he says to me. “Solon, me, Ezra. We’ve been in this house for a long time. Maybe not long in the sense of our lives, but to be in one spot for so long, it’s nothing short of a miracle. People don’t like vampires. They may not believe in them, but they instinctively don’t like them either way. And other vampires, well, we’re not all that popular with a lot of them either. Solon is able to keep us hidden in this house, safe, because of what he’s able to do. As a result, we owe him.”

“So what can he do?”

“We don’t keep secrets, but we also don’t overstep our bounds. That’s for him to tell you.” He starts walking again. I follow him down the hall.

When we pass by the candles, they automatically get snuffed out.

When we pass by bouquets of roses, they automatically shrivel up dead, right before my fucking eyes.

“Wait a minute,” I say, coming to a stop by the roses. “This happened in my apartment. My father bought me fresh roses. Later that night, they looked like this.”

“Solon told you he was in your apartment,” Wolf says. “Can you bring them back to life?”

I blink at him. “Me?”

Wolf points at the candles and suddenly the flames are lit again. “That’s the extent of what I can do. What can you do?”

“What do you mean what can I do? I’m not a...I can’t. I don’t have *magic*.”

“Sure you do,” he says. “You’re part witch.” He nods at the roses. “Give it your best shot.”

I shake my head. “That’s ridiculous.”

“You’re not even curious?” He pauses. “Then again, Solon wouldn’t be able to do it either. Drives our housekeeper nuts, but she keeps bringing in the flowers anyway.”

He’s said the right thing if he’s egging me on.

“Fine, let me try,” I say. I look at the dried roses and wave my hands in front of them. What the hell am I supposed to say? *Abracadabra? Accio?*

“*Excelsior!*” I say with a flourish of my fingers, trying to imagine them filling with water, no, *blood*, and then growing flush again.

But nothing happens.

They remain dry and dead.

Then I look at Wolf over my shoulder, who is, once again, trying in vain not to laugh. “You were pulling my leg this whole time, weren’t you?”

“I prefer the British saying, taking the piss.”

I shake my head. “Fucking hell.”

“Come on,” he says. “There’s a lot of house to see.”

I leave the dead roses, feeling foolish, though it’s the lightest I’ve felt since I woke up in this house of horrors.

Though, as we walk down the hall of this floor, the more I realize it’s not as creepy as I first thought. It’s just old. Okay, and there’s a weird feeling in the air, but it’s probably the fact that it’s a vampire lair.

“It is a little creepy,” Wolf says as we pass old paintings of people on the indigo papered walls, their eyes seeming to follow us.

“You said you couldn’t read my thoughts.”

“I pick up on energies, feelings,” he says.

“You’re an empath.”

He laughs. “No. That would mean I take on your feelings as if they were my own. I would be a piss poor vampire if I let myself feel sorry for everyone.”

I swallow hard. “Because you kill them.”

He glances at me. “Sometimes. I don’t go out of my way to do that.”

I hold my arms close to my chest. I’m not cold, I actually feel hot, but I feel weak and vulnerable and small. “Yeah, well *Solon* told me had I not

turned out to be what I am, he would have sucked me dry and left me for dead.”

Wolf nods. “That sounds like something he’d say.”

“What, so he wouldn’t have killed me?”

“Solon likes to think the worst of himself. Defense mechanism.”

That wasn’t really answering my question. But I let it go.

We go down the staircase to another floor that looks like the one above, only the wallpaper is dark green. From the way I can tell, the house is narrow and Victorian. Very San Francisco.

“Where in the city are we?” I ask him, not expecting him to tell me.

“Western Addition.”

I stop dead in my tracks. “*What?* I live in Hayes Valley. You mean I’m that close to home?”

Home. It sounds weird now.

But no, it has to still be my home.

“You’d be surprised at how close we are to your apartment,” he says. “Mind you, we’ve been in this house a lot longer than your parents have been in theirs.”

He opens a door at the end of the hall, and we step on in.

“This is my room,” he says.

I stop and look around as he heads over to the shut curtains, candles everywhere. It’s roughly the same shape as my room, but the design is different. Sparse, mid-century furniture, lots of greys and browns, a thick woollen rug on the hardwood. Very Scandinavian. Makes sense.

Then he opens the curtains, sunlight flooding through. Actually, when my eyes adjust, I realize it’s overcast, but the light feels like I’m standing on the surface of the sun.

“Take a look,” he says, staring out the window.

I walk over to him, wincing, until I’m right beside him.

I gasp.

We’re right across the street from Alamo Square, the famous Painted Ladies just to the left. Which would make this house...

“Oh my god,” I cry out. “We’re in the Charles Manson house.”

The Westerfeld House is a San Francisco institution, steeped in lore. I always loved walking past it, imagining the spooky-looking Victorian belonged to a modern-day Addams Family. Guess I was right. Though it

has a storied past, one man is supposed to own it, fixing it up slowly to eventually turn it into a museum.

“Just rumors,” Wolf says good-naturedly. “Manson never actually lived here.”

“But he came here, didn’t he?”

“He did.”

“And you lived here.”

Wolf glances at me, but doesn’t say a word.

“So you knew Charles Manson.” If I had pearls to be clutched, I would be clutching them. “My god. Is...he a vampire?” I mean, he compelled those people to do his bidding, didn’t he?

“A vampire would never allow themselves to be caught,” Wolf says. “So, no. Manson was just a human sociopath. And I didn’t go out of my way to hang out with him, either. He could be funny at times, but there was something about him that made me uneasy. Obviously we all know why now. We’ve had a lot of people passing in and out of this house over the years, not all of them good.”

I lean against the window, staring at the world that’s moving on without me. Then I notice the window is open just a crack, and that there’s an older couple walking beneath the window, two stories down. Tourists.

It’s a long shot but...

I quickly reach down and push the window up, sticking my head outside, the fresh air a shock to my system.

“Help!” I scream, waving my hands out, knowing that Wolf is going to grab me at any moment, possibly hurt me, but I can’t be passive anymore. “Help me, please, I’m being held hostage!”

But the people pass by without looking up at me. In fact, no one in Alamo Square has looked in my direction, even though it’s chock full of tourists checking out the Painted Ladies and re-enacting the opening to *Full House*.

“Help, please!” I scream louder, panic raging through me. Why is no one looking?

“Hey,” Wolf says, grabbing me by the waist as I attempt to crawl out the window, preventing me from jumping. I’d probably survive the fall; it would be better than being in here.

He pulls me back in and then grabs my wrists, holding me in place. Like Absolon, his strength is formidable, and trying to escape now would mean

some broken bones. “You might want to keep your voice down,” he says gruffly. “You’ll wake up Ezra, and you don’t want to be around that fucker when he’s sleep-deprived. He turns into such a whiny bitch.”

“Everything okay?” A woman’s voice breaks through us, making me jump.

Wolf lets go of one wrist, but keeps a stronghold on the other as we turn to face the door.

There’s a woman standing in the doorframe, though she can’t be much older than me. Late twenties maybe?

Either way, she’s absolutely gorgeous. Wearing stilettos, black leather leggings, an oversized blue velvet blazer with a white silk blouse underneath, unbuttoned enough to showcase a black lacey bra, her breasts full and pushed to the high heavens. Her skin is honey-colored, her hair black, wavy, and shiny enough to be in a Pantene Pro-V commercial. Eyes tinged violet. She looks like a modern, young Elizabeth Taylor.

Wolf’s grip on my wrist tightens. I can’t tell if he’s trying to protect me from her or the other way around.

She’s definitely a vampire, isn’t she?

“Amethyst,” Wolf says, clearing his throat, his body tensing slightly, which makes me tense in return. Also, Amethyst? Of course she’d have that name. “I guess you haven’t met Lenore yet.”

“No, I haven’t,” she says, eyeing Wolf’s grip on my wrist. Then she looks to me. “I’d shake your hand, but I have a feeling that’s not a good idea.”

I frown. Wait. Is she afraid of...me?

And that’s when it hits me.

Her smell.

Like candied ginger and vanilla and something very sweet and real and raw.

Blood.

Her blood.

I can smell her goddamn blood.

My teeth feel like they’re growing, my body coiling like a snake ready to strike, the thirst inside me bursting through the dark well I kept it buried under.

I make a move for her, feeling only the need to slash and bite and feed.

But Wolf's grip is strong and he wraps an arm around my waist, holding me against him. "There's the bloodlust," he says. "I was wondering when it might show up."

"I see," Amethyst says, raising a perfectly micro-bladed brow. "I trust you have her under control then, because I haven't been bitten by one of your trophies yet, and I'm not about to start."

Her words knock some sense into me.

They temper the frenzy in my gut, the ravenous hunger.

I don't like being referred to as a trophy.

And if she hasn't been bitten...does that mean she's not a vampire?

"If you're wondering, Amethyst is just a human. One we're very lucky to have in the house," Wolf explains. "Unfortunately, it means you'll have to get through your bloodlust first before you can properly get acquainted."

"You look like a vampire," I manage to say, my heart calming, and I relax into Wolf's hold on me.

"So I've been told," she says with a light laugh. "But my skin is a touch too dark. Sun damage, you know. Probably should wear SPF more often but..." She shrugs. Then eyes me up and down. "I can't believe they have you wearing a nightgown. Let me guess, it's from the 1800s or some bullshit?"

Wolf's turn to shrug. "You know how archaic Solon is. He's actually out right now..."

He trails off so I have no idea what he's about to say, but Amethyst does. Her eyes widen briefly. "Oh. Is that so?" She glances at a flashy watch on her wrist. "I'm going to go help him. I don't trust his taste sometimes. I mean, look at her. When's the last time we had someone that looked like *that* in this place?"

"You better hurry," Wolf says. "Lots to do tonight."

"You don't have to tell me twice," she says, heading for the door. She looks at me over her shoulder. "Nice to meet you, Lenore. I'll see you later."

Then she's gone.

It's only after a few seconds have passed that Wolf lets go of me.

"Well, that could have been a disaster," he muses.

"Why, because you thought I'd eat her?" I ask as I turn to face him, shuddering at the words leaving my mouth.

"You said it, not me," he says, running a hand through his hair.

“And you’re the full-fledged vampire here,” I tell him. “How come you had so much restraint?”

“Because Amethyst lives here. You get used to her ... it’s not so hard to stop viewing some people as prey.”

“She lives here,” I repeat. “Absolon hates humans. This must drive him...”

“Batty?”

“I was going to say mad.”

He laughs. “Not all humans. Amethyst is pretty special, and they get along very well.”

Something like jealousy pokes hot and cold in my gut. Ugh. Why the hell am I feeling jealous over their relationship, of which I know nothing about. Oh god, am I getting possessive over him? Isn’t that a vampire thing?

I shake the feeling away. “So how is it that she lives here? She obviously knows you’re all vampires.”

And that I’m a trophy.

“She runs Dark Eyes.”

I stare at him. “Dark Eyes?”

“Oh, I thought you would have heard about that, since you heard about all the Manson stuff. Come, I’ll show you.”

Wolf grabs my hand and leads me out of his bedroom. His grip is still strong, as if I’m about to throw myself at another human on the tour. Which begs the question...

“How many people are in this house?” I ask him. “Any other humans?”

He nods. “Yvonne. She’s the housekeeper. She’s Amethyst’s mother.”

“Okay, there’s obviously some big story about how all this happened.”

“Not as big as you might think,” he says as we go down another set of stairs to what feels like the main level. There are rooms in all directions, and quick glances as we pass by show decadent furniture in velvet, satin, and leather, gilded lamps, priceless artwork, shelves of old books.

“Where’s Solon’s bedroom?” I ask, reverting to his shortened name.

Wolf gives me a curious look. “Upstairs. At the very top.”

I bring up the image of the house from the outside in my mind’s eye. The top is like a tower, very pointed. It’s rumored that the previous occupants removed all the rafters so that the top could be opened and you’d

have a view of the night sky. Given what I know now of the owners, I think the rumors are probably true.

We pass by the front door, and I eye it briefly, wondering if I can get out of Wolf's grip and make a run for it.

"You can try," Wolf says, picking up on my emotion. "But the outcome would be the same. Futile."

I give him a furtive glance. "Why? How come when I leaned out the window, no one outside saw me or heard me?" I pause. "Oh god. Am I...a ghost?"

The thought terrorizes me for a moment.

He snorts. "No. You're not a ghost. Solon has this place under, uh, well, what you might call a cloaking spell."

I slow, pulling him to a stop. "A cloaking *spell*? You said he wasn't a witch."

"He's not a witch. But he deals with witches and they do him favors in exchange for the vampires he brings them. I don't know who did this one, it was so long ago," he says, gesturing to the house around us, "but we're able to hide in here. Humans can't find us here, can't see us. Neither can vampires or even witches. Unless they're invited inside, it's like none of us exist."

"Well, shit."

"And if *you*, specifically, try to leave, the house won't let you. The door won't open for you, and if it opens for someone else and you try to sneak through, you won't be able to pass through."

I stare dumbly at the door. It's so close and yet I have no doubt he's telling me the truth. There really is no escaping this place, and I don't know much longer I have before that really sinks in. The whole turning into a vampire and discovering you're half witch, along with all the other shit, is a lot for my brain to compute these days, almost fooling me into thinking that I'll be okay. Distracting me from the devastating truth.

"No point getting sad about it," he says to me, grabbing my wrist. "I'll get you a drink." I perk up a little at that and he gives me one of his easy grins. "Not blood. Solon is in charge of that. But I can mix a pretty good cocktail."

I follow him down another set of stairs, then another, until it feels like we're in a basement, although there is another stairwell off to the right, perhaps leading down to the same level where I was kept before.

Then Wolf opens a set of doors in front of us and we step into another world.

“Holy shit,” I say breathlessly.

“Welcome to Dark Eyes,” he says with a grin.

Wow.

Dark Eyes is a large opulent lounge, the kind you’d see in a vintage film noir from the 40s, in some exotic city. It’s all curved plush leather chairs around circular glass-topped tables, priceless vases full of five-foot-high pampas grass, dark wood walls interspersed with frescoes painted right onto the walls and ceilings, tons of giant Turkish rugs draped across the floor, all the dim mood lighting you could want. At one end there’s a gorgeous teak bar with rows and rows of the most high-class and expensive alcohol you could imagine, at the other there’s a small stage with a microphone, framed with velvet curtains.

“Great, isn’t it?” he says, letting go of me and heading behind the bar. “Now, what do you want to drink?”

I’m still stunned, running my hands over the luxurious leather of the chairs, marveling at how decadent and cool this place is, eyes drawn to every corner. There’s always something new to notice. “Anything is fine,” I tell him.

“That’s easy,” he says, and I hear him pop a cork. “I’ll make you what I’m good at.”

There are three other doors in the room, two on either side of the stage, and a glass door near me. I crane my neck and spot another smaller room inside, with books.

“Is that a library?” I ask.

“Cigar lounge,” Wolf says, pouring alcohol into a martini shaker. “Solon can’t live without his cigars.”

“And where do those other doors lead?”

He glances at them briefly. “One is to the backyard. That’s the official entrance.”

“And the other.”

He pauses, catching my eye for a moment. “For private events.”

Uh-huh. See, with these guys that could either mean something to do with sex or something to do with blood.

Or both.

Wolf finishes making me a dark-colored martini, then brings it over with a beer. We take the nearest table, my back to the doors we just walked through.

“For the lady,” Wolf says, and it’s such a gentlemanly gesture that I almost forget that he had his tongue shoved inside me for days.

I try not to blush at the thought as I take the drink from him, then busy myself by admiring it. It’s the color of caramel and smells sweet, garnished with a cherry and orange.

I take a tepid sip. It’s good. Like whisky and cinnamon and something else.

“It’s not blood, but hopefully it will do,” he says, cracking open his beer with ease.

“It’s much-needed,” I tell him, looking around. “So, tell me about this place.”

“Well, this is the infamous Dark Eyes nightclub. You may have heard that in the 1920s, Russian Czarists bought the house. This was originally the ballroom, which they then turned into Dark Eyes, and used the upper floors as meeting rooms. Everyone started calling it the Russian Embassy.”

“Were you here then?” I ask.

He nods. “We were. Living upstairs. The Russians were vampires, too. Stayed here for many years, then went back to their homeland.”

“Their homeland? So you’re not all from the same parts of the world?”

“Vampires?” he says. “We all come from the same place originally.”

“Oh really? Down to like a certain area or...?”

“Yes. There’s an area just above Sweden, land that’s Finland on one side and Norway on the other. That’s where it all started.”

“When was the first vampire created? I mean, do you know? Or is it impossible to tell?” I want all the history.

He gives me a somewhat sad smile. “Oh, we know. It was all Skarde.”

“Skarde?” That’s a hardcore name. “He like the vampire king or something?”

I was joking but he says, “Pretty much.”

“So...what happened there?”

Wolf exhales, looking slightly uncomfortable. “Skarde was a warrior, fighting for the Norwegian monarchy, when the plague hit, around 1350. He fled into northern Norway, I’m talking the Arctic Circle, hoping to escape the death. But the plague followed, killing large numbers of the population

along the coast. The Sami people, from Finnmark, weren't as affected by the plague because of isolation and diet. They didn't eat the grains in which the plague was often found. They ate reindeer and fish instead, kept to themselves, far away from the populations of the other countries."

I listen, enraptured. I've studied a bit about the Sami people, fascinated with Lapland as a child, but even so, this is all new to me.

Wolf goes on. "While most Finns and Swedes were Lutherans at that point, a lot of the Sami were still committed to Paganism. Skarde lived with a certain sect of the Sami, adapting to their ways, taking on Paganism, Shamanism, but still the death followed..." He trails off.

"And?"

"And it's never quite clear what happened," he says carefully. "We don't have any texts, you see, it's all passed down verbally. Skarde struck a bargain with someone dark and powerful. The bargain was for eternal life, so he wouldn't die from the plague. What he got instead was, well..." He gestures to himself. "Some might say he was screwed over. Others say he was cursed. Same difference."

"That means you and I are cursed," I tell him.

"Some days it does feel that way," he says. Then he gives me a quick smile. "Other days, it's fucking awesome."

I let out a caustic laugh. "Yeah, been a real hoot so far." I pop the cherry from my drink into my mouth and immediately think of Elle.

Elle.

Elle, who probably thinks I'm still in Joshua Tree with my parents.

Elle, from another life.

I hadn't even thought of her until this moment and, fuck, it *hurts* me.

Is the rest of my life just going to fade from my memories?

I close my eyes briefly, trying to squash the feeling. There's already too much to be worried about. I'm just a few thoughts away from truly unravelling.

"So where does Absolon come from then? Same as you?" I ask him, trying to move past the pain.

Wolf nods. "More or less."

"And what's his story? When was he born?"

"Solon is guarded about his past. I've learned not to open my mouth," he says. "You're better off asking him."

“Like hell he’s going to tell me,” I mutter, taking another sip of the drink, feeling the booze go straight to my brain.

“You never know,” he says, turning the beer around in his hands. “He doesn’t indulge many people, but he might indulge you.” He pauses, takes a gulp. “He’s fascinated by you, you know.”

Absolon? Fascinated by *me*? I’m the one who is fascinated by him. I mean, how can I not be? Ignoring the fact that he’d kill me in another life, that he’ll probably send me off to some terrible doom I refuse to think about, he’s...well, mind-blowing.

“I guess he did call me mythical,” I say under my breath.

“Mythical?” Wolf raises a brow. “He said that? Oh, he’s definitely enamored then.”

I nearly laugh. Enamored is a totally different word from fascinated. Enamored implies having affection for someone, and Absolon views me as nothing more than fucking cold currency. But still, the word gives me hope.

“Enamored enough to let me go?” I ask, hating how hopeful I sound.

“We’ll see tonight,” Wolf says, taking another swig of his beer.

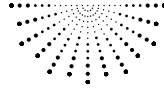
“Tonight? At the party?”

He eyes me thoughtfully. “I thought you knew. The party tonight is for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes.” He gives me a grim smile. “We’re auctioning you off to the highest bidder.”

CHAPTER TEN



I STARE AT WOLF ACROSS FROM ME, ABSOLUTELY DUMBFOUNDED, TOO shocked to even feel the fear that's slowly seeping through my veins. "An... auction?"

The party tonight is an auction?

"Mmhm," he says. "Tonight it's the vampires. Tomorrow it's the witches."

I grip the arms of the chair so hard my nails are piercing through the wood.

"I'm sorry," he says, eyeing my fingers briefly. "I thought Solon had told you."

"He doesn't tell me anything!" I exclaim, the fear turning into fury.

Suddenly, I feel ice run down my spine, making me shiver, and I don't even have to turn my head to know that Absolon has just stepped into the bar.

Speak of the Devil.

"And what do we have here?" Absolon says, voice low and rich, tinged with amusement.

I finally turn to see him standing by the main doors with Amethyst by his side, both of them carrying shopping totes. The expensive looking kind.

I meet his eyes, shadowed and cold as they stare at me. His mouth shows a faint smile. He knows what I just said. And even if he doesn't, I'm mad enough for him to pick up on my thoughts.

Well then, fuck you, I think.

His brow lifts for a moment, then he looks past me at Wolf. "How has she been? Amethyst told me she tried to take a bite out of her."

“I didn’t try and *bite* her,” I say indignantly. I know I was trying to get at her, but who is to say what I was going to do?

Absolon doesn’t look amused. “Normally, I would suggest Amethyst help you get ready for the night, but I can’t trust you around her. Without her, we wouldn’t get by.” He gives Amethyst a somewhat affectionate look, affectionate coming from him anyway, and once again I feel that ridiculous flare of jealousy.

And she stares back at him, all googly-eyed, almost blushing.

My god, does he have this effect on everyone? Guess so. Should make me feel a little better, but it doesn’t. I loathe the man—vampire—with everything I have, and I have every reason to, and yet there’s something deep inside me that is drawn to him, despite how awful he is.

Anyway, there’s no way that he wouldn’t get by without *her*. He’s survived for how many centuries?

Okay, now I really sound petty. I tear my eyes away from them and turn back around in my seat. I pick up my glass with a shaky hand and finish the rest of my drink in one gulp. When I look up, Wolf is eyeing me with surprise. “Guess you need another one,” he says, getting to his feet.

“Amethyst, take the bags to her room,” Absolon commands her, and I feel his presence get closer. He stops and stands right beside my chair, the scent of roses and tobacco filling my nose, wanting to unravel me. I keep my eyes on Wolf as he walks over to the bar with the beer and my empty glass, and I hold my breath, not wanting to breathe him in anymore. I can’t drown, so this should be a piece of cake.

And then Absolon puts his hand on my shoulder, sending a jolt of electricity through me, causing my mouth to drop open, my lungs to inhale sharply. He keeps his hand there and I feel his eyes on the top of my head, turning my scalp to ice.

I raise my chin and look up at him through my lashes.

He’s peering down at me, an inquisitive expression, that ever-present frown and arched black brows.

What? I snap inside my head.

His mouth curls into a cool smile. But he doesn’t say anything. He breaks our staring contest and looks over at Wolf. “I’ll have two fingers of the Bowmore. Two of my fingers, not yours.”

Wolf smirks. Giant man, giant hands, not that Absolon’s are any different.

“Care to have a cigar with me?” he asks, and it takes me a moment to realize he’s talking to me.

“With me?” I ask.

He steps behind me and pulls out my chair. “Yes, you.”

Then he comes around and holds out his hand, looking like every inch the vampire with his wavy black hair, cold, hypnotizing eyes, his long black coat over charcoal wool pants, crisp white dress shirt, steel watch gleaming.

And I get up.

Without his help.

Because I’m seconds away from hitting his hand away but I know I should probably play nice. Absolon is not enamored with me, but he *is* fascinated, and I need to hold on to whatever little foothold I have. The more I can get him to like me, the better it is. My life depends on it.

“Making a point?” he says under his breath, taking off his coat and folding it on the back of the chair.

I ignore him, walk over to the bar and lean against it, waiting for my drink. “You smoke cigars too?” I ask Wolf, hoping he does.

“Not today,” Absolon answers for him. “He’s got a party to prepare for.”

“You mean an *auction*,” I practically spit out as I twist to face Absolon, my nails digging into the bar in a rush of anger.

Absolon’s expression turns threatening as he looks at Wolf. “Giving her the details already?” he asks tightly.

“I thought she knew.”

Absolon reaches over and grabs my hand, prying my fingernails from the bar. He glances at the scratches in the wood underneath and then gives me the most ferocious look that makes me want to turn, run, and hide.

“Solon,” Wolf says sharply, enough that Absolon meets his eyes. “I’m sorry. Wasn’t her fault.”

The ferocity in Absolon’s stare tempers only a little, turning cooler, calculated. “I know what you’re doing, Wolf. Don’t bother. Just make the drinks.”

Then he grabs my arm and pulls me away from the bar and toward the glass door into the cigar lounge. He opens the door with a skeleton key and practically throws me inside. I stumble a few feet before catching myself on the back of a leather armchair, making sure I give him the same wicked look he gave me earlier.

Of course, nothing bothers him.

“Sit,” he says to me, nodding at the chair.

“I feel more comfortable standing,” I tell him.

“Oh, really?” He shakes his head and walks past me to the walk-in humidor in the corner. Other than the humidor and the rows of old books along the walls, the décor is the same as in the main lounge, dark and lush. “You want to smoke a cigar standing up?” he says, before going into the humidor.

“Who said I’m smoking a cigar?” I yell after him.

He comes out holding two cigars and a cigar cutter, gesturing to the chair once more. “Sit,” he says, fishing a packet of matches out of his pocket. “Don’t make me ask again. The more obedient you are, the better it will be for you in the end.”

“Why?” I ask, but I plop down in the chair. I don’t know why I didn’t get the graceful end of the vampire bargain. Absolon and Wolf seem to glide with their movements.

“Why do you think?” he asks, sitting down across from me with all the elegance I lack. He cuts off the end of his cigar with an intimidating *snap* of the cutter’s sharp blades and sticks the end in his mouth, concentrating on lighting it. The flames put half his face in shadows, the furrow between his brows like a crevasse.

“Can’t you just snap your fingers to light things?” I ask him. “Wolf can.”

He glares up at me, cheeks going in and out as he draws the smoke from the cigar. Finally, he pulls it away, smoke falling from his lips. “I can,” he says. “But I consider that showing off.”

Then he holds the cigar between his teeth, the fangs nearly puncturing it, and reaches over and cuts the end off the other cigar, handing it to me. “Take it.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Oh, is that why your apartment smelled like several pounds of weed?” he says dryly.

The mention of my apartment, of weed, brings me into another state. I stare at Absolon for a moment and realize that I can’t afford to be stubborn anymore if I want to return to my old life. Obviously, there’s probably no chance I’ll get it back, but being alive brings chances, and being dead doesn’t.

“Fine,” I say, taking the cigar from him. I stick it in my mouth and wait while he lights another match. The flame dances at the end, but he’s watching me, so close.

“Inhale,” he says. “All the way into your lungs.”

I nearly choke on it. “That’s not how you smoke a cigar!” I tell him.

“Why not?”

I pull the cigar from my lips, feeling my skin buzz from it. “You’ll hurt your lungs. You’ll damage them. That’s how you get lung cancer. It’s not a cigarette. You hold it in your mouth and let it go and...”

I don’t like the little smile on his lips. “Lung damage?” he repeats. “We’re fucking vampires, Lenore. We’re immune. Breathe it all the way in.”

It feels so fucking wrong, but I do what he says because I’m curious. I inhale, the smoke thick and black, and I know I should be coughing like hell right now, and yet...it feels good. Smooth. It immediately relaxes me, hitting a bunch of pleasure spots at the back of my head, and I sink deeper into the chair, barely noticing when Wolf comes in and places the drinks on the table.

“She’s a quick learner,” Wolf comments, looking me over, impressed.

“She’s a lot of things,” Absolon muses. Then he gives Wolf a pointed look and Wolf leaves the room, closing the door behind us.

“What the hell is in that cigar?” I ask dreamily, admiring the look of it in my hand. So far, it’s better than any weed.

“Nothing particularly special,” he says. “It’s Cuban. But it affects us differently, especially when you smoke it the way that we do.”

Jeeze. The room starts to fill with clouds of our smoke and I feel like I’m sinking deeper and deeper, lost in the haze.

But however loose I feel, Absolon stays sharp, watching me with intention.

“Are you hungry?” he asks.

At the mention of hunger, I clench my jaw. “For what?”

“You haven’t eaten food for a week.”

“I’ve been here a week?”

My god.

“Do you even eat food?” I ask him. Will I ever want to eat food again?

He gives a slight nod. “I do. Our taste is heightened. Good food is amazing. Bad food will turn off your appetite for weeks. You learn to be

very particular about what you consume, but one of the finest things in life is enjoying a good meal, accompanied by good alcohol, and then maybe a cigar.”

“And then blood.”

He tilts his head as he studies me through the smoke, eyes drifting over my nose, my mouth. “Food is for enjoyment. But it doesn’t keep us alive. Blood does.”

“But you enjoy...*it*.”

“That’s an understatement. And you enjoy it, too.” He takes the cigar from his mouth and places it in the ashtray. “Amethyst was scared of you today, and she doesn’t get that easily spooked. Guess there’s something about you that made her want to run the other way.”

“I was nice,” I say softly.

“*Nice*,” he says with a dry laugh, fishing his keys out of his pocket. “None of this is about being nice. You smelled her. I know you did because I used to smell her too. Candied ginger, sweet things, like her blood. Correct?”

I don’t say anything, all the pleasant buzz from the cigar disappearing like the wavering smoke.

“You didn’t just want a taste of her, you wanted to feed. It’s your bloodlust, the final stage, it’s just a lot more tempered than I thought it would be. Guess that’s what happens when you’re only half a monster.”

He flips the blade open on his Swiss Army knife, and I watch with wide eyes as he brings it up to his neck, making a swift and vicious cut along his skin. Blood rushes to the surface, filling the air with his scent that hits me so hard it nearly knocks me off-balance, then it spills over, soaking the collar of his white shirt in red.

I’m horrified.

Not only at the fact he just did that, but at the ropes inside me that were holding me back, they’re all snapping one by one.

“Normally, the blood of other vampires won’t do much for you unless... well, perhaps you’ll find out one day,” he says, and a heated look comes across him for a moment. “But right now, you’ll take anything.”

I’m breathless, speechless, trying to hold myself together, to look away, to go inward to where I’m strong, where I’m not some bloodthirsty beast.

But that part of me doesn’t exist right now.

The cigar falls from my hands to the carpet and in a second I'm jumping across the table, drinks knocking over, glass smashing, climbing on top of him in his chair.

I grab his head, my mouth going right for his neck, and the minute his blood hits my tongue, I know I could easily kill him. I'm that starved, that mad with hunger.

And so I let myself go. I suck at his skin, drinking down the blood, feeling it hit every one of my cells, making them come alive, filling the empty parts of me with the lifeblood of him.

I barely notice anything else. Just his smell, the taste of his blood, sweeter and better than anything I've ever tasted, the taste of life itself.

Beneath me, Absolon moans, a low throaty sound that turns me inside out, and his hand goes into my hair, holding my head against his neck, the other hand at my back, pressing me to him.

Fuck. I want to consume him, all of him.

I dig my nails into his shoulders, grinding myself down on him, my lips sucking, tasting, feasting, his blood making my soul sing. It's like a constant orgasm without a release.

I don't know how long it goes on for, time seems to stop, and finally, finally I feel like I've had enough.

He puts his hands against my shoulders, pushing me back.

I'm breathing hard, my mouth a mess, and he's staring at me with dilated eyes, big, black, and round, and I'm looking at his lips, wanting the energy to continue, to shift, to become something even bigger.

He reaches out with his hand and gently pushes the hair off my face, eyes roaming over my features, a hint of tenderness in them. And I feel that, just for a second, because what could be more intimate than drinking someone's blood when that blood is what keeps you alive?

Fuck, I want him.

I lean in, going to kiss him, to taste his beautiful lips, but his hands remain firm, preventing me from getting closer.

"Feel better?" he asks, his voice quiet and hoarse.

I swallow down the last of his blood in my mouth and realize just what happened. The gash on his neck seems to be healing already, but his white shirt is soaked red, and the front of my nightgown is the same. His skin seems even paler than before, if that's possible.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm so sorry."

I quickly scramble to get off of him, but he holds me in place. “Don’t be sorry. I wanted you to do that.” He licks his lips, which are almost white. “I may have underestimated you, but you obviously needed it. There’s a part of you that either doesn’t want you to give into your vampire tendencies, or it’s a part that doesn’t need to. But I think, going forward, you shouldn’t deny it for too long. I can handle it...others won’t be able to.”

I look away, feeling shame, but everywhere I look I see blood. “Would I have killed you? If you didn’t stop me?”

“Only three ways to kill a vampire,” he reminds me, adjusting his grip, loosening a little. “You can’t bleed one dry. But you can take a lot of their life force. You can make them weak.”

“Have I made you weak?”

“You would like that, wouldn’t you?”

I nod. No use lying. “If I make you weak, maybe you’ll let me go.”

“It’s too late, Lenore,” he says gravely. “You’re mine now. You just cemented it.”

I gulp, my stomach flipping. “You’re auctioning me off tonight.”

“And that’s of my choosing. But, until I consciously let you go, you’re mine. That’s what happens when you feast on the blood of another vampire when you’re still *becoming*.”

Realization dawns on me, kicking me in the head.

“You tricked me,” I say, my voice a hush. “You weren’t trying to feed me—”

“I was trying to *keep* you,” he finishes, observing my face with little flicks of his eyes. “You belong to me now, until I decide to let you go.”

“But...I already fed from you before. In bed.”

“You were in The Pause. It has to happen now, just as it did. I knew that I couldn’t get you to attack me on your own accord, but if I let you see the blood, smell it, it would have pushed you over the edge. I was right.”

I shake my head, fighting to get off him. “You don’t own me. You never will. No one will.”

“You can keep saying that, but it doesn’t make it true.”

“You sicken me,” I seethe.

“I know I do,” he says. “But this a whole new world, Lenore. And it’s your world now. You’re going to be sickened by a lot of things.”

He finally loosens his grip and I scramble to get off of him. I step down on the carpet and turn my back to him, face in my hands, feeling so lost and

unscrambled that I don't know what way is up anymore. I certainly don't know who I am. I mean, look at me. I'm covered in blood, I must look like a monster.

"You're standing on glass," Absolon comments calmly.

I look down at my bare feet, at the shattered martini glass around it. I can feel the shards poking up through my soles, but I don't feel any pain. Not physically, anyway. Emotionally is another story.

He gets up from his chair and I hear him stride over to the door to the lounge, opening it. "Wolf," he barks. "Come in here, please."

I stare down at my feet, feeling blank inside, then turn to see Wolf stepping in the room, staring at the both of us, brow raised. "Things get out of hand?"

I look at Absolon. His white shirt is completely splattered in blood, and I must look like a fright.

"She was hungry," he says, eyeing me admiringly. Then he looks back to Wolf. "I need you to get Yvonne to clean up this mess, and wake up Ezra while you're at it. I'll be taking Lenore to her room."

He gives me a commanding look to come over and I'm half-expecting him to snap his fingers.

I raise my chin, faking calmness, coolness, all those vampire things I should be but aren't, and walk out of the cigar lounge. Behind me Absolon gives a grunt of disapproval, then appears by my side, taking me by the elbow, his fingers digging into my skin.

"You know you don't have to hold me so hard," I tell him as he leads me out of Dark Eyes.

"I believe I do," he says. "You might take on some of my characteristics for a while."

This is news to me. "What kind of characteristics?" I ask as we head up the stairs, holding up my nightgown with my hand so I don't trip.

"Not sure yet," he says, his tone tinged with curiosity. "I hope for my sake it's none of the bad ones."

"You mean you have *good* characteristics?"

He shoots me a wry look. "They're few and far between."

He brushes against me as we round the corner to the main floor, his scent flooding through me again, but it's not just of roses and tobacco anymore. I smell his blood too. The scent is indescribable, but it turns me

warm from the inside out, not just stirring up my hunger, but desire, too. It feels like something very basic and raw and primal.

I swallow the feelings down.

He takes me up all the stairs until we get to my floor, but when we walk down past the roses and candles from earlier, he stops, his grip tightening on me.

“What do we have here?” he asks.

I stare. The roses are no longer dead, dried and shriveled. Instead, they’re alive again, the red petals so lush and voluminous...and dripping with blood.

“Did you do this?” he asks me in a quiet voice, a brow arched as he eyes me.

I blink. “I don’t know. Wolf was joking around, said the flowers always die when you’re around. Said I could use magic to make them come alive again.” He continues to stare at me, forehead creased. “So, I just thought about them coming alive again, but nothing happened.”

“That’s all you did? You just thought about them?”

“Well, I said excelsior,” I say quietly, feeling silly.

He chokes back a laugh. “Excelsior?”

“I told you, I don’t know what I’m doing. Is that a magic word?”

“Any word can be a magic word if you’re the one that wields the magic,” he says carefully. His grip tightens. “But you brought these roses back to life. Maybe it didn’t happen right away, but clearly it happened. Not only that, but they’re filled with blood. Is that what you imagined too?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

He observes me for a moment, the intensity in his gaze making me squirm. Finally, he says, “You shouldn’t have this ability, moonshine. Not so soon. You’re supposed to be taught how to use it, and you haven’t been.” He pauses, eyes narrowing. “Have you?”

I shake my head. “No, of course not.”

“Very curious indeed,” he says, leading me down the hall to my door.

We step inside, and only then does he release me. He gestures to the shopping bags piled on the bed. “I did my best, but Amethyst helped as well. Find something you want to wear. Just remember you want to look as good as possible.”

I stare at the bags for a moment, a couple of them from Alexander McQueen. What on earth?

I whirl around to face him. "I'm sorry, did you just say you want me to look as good as possible? How about I don't fucking wear any of it and just show up in this?" I raise my arms out, gesturing to my bloodied nightgown. "What are you going to do, force me into the clothes?"

"I could," he says, a smoky look coming over his eyes. "You know I could."

"I thought you couldn't always compel me."

His expression darkens and he takes a step toward me. I move back instinctively, the back of my legs hitting the bed. "There are other means of force." He keeps coming, stopping inches away, and I suck in a breath. "Be a good girl. Wear the clothes. Make yourself beautiful. You're not doing it for me. You're doing it for yourself. Make me want to keep you around."

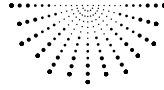
I swallow thickly, trying to avert my eyes from his, but I can't. I don't know if he's compelling me again or not, but once again I can't move, and the more he stares at me, the more I lose control.

Then he breaks the spell and leans in, the headiness of his scent making my eyes fall closed.

"Play my game, Lenore," he says into my ear, his voice so low and quiet it feels like it's originating inside my skull. "I'll let you win."

And then he pulls back, the air around me growing cold, and when I open my eyes, he's gone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



I'M DREAMING AGAIN.

About people in dark cloaks. They're standing in a circle, surrounded by snow, the land barren and frozen, going on forever. Long curtains of red thread hang from the tops of their hoods, obscuring their faces. The effect is disconcerting.

They're chanting in a language I don't understand. Suddenly, one of them holds out their hand, as pale as the snow, a skeleton-thin finger pointing toward the center of the circle. Red blood drips from the fingertip and onto the snow.

One by one, all the fingers point toward the middle, blood dripping, crimson splatters in the white.

In the sky above, the sun is eclipsed by the moon, turning the world dark, and when the sun reappears, I'm standing in the middle of the circle.

I'm frozen in place, unable to move, the fear building inside me.

The chanting gets louder.

The blood starts trickling through the snow, slithering toward me like red snakes, climbing up my legs, all the way to my throat where it wraps around me, again and again, choking me.

I collapse to the ground.

The last thing I see are the cloaked figures scrambling toward me on all fours, like animals, the veils in front of their faces moving just in time for me to see a flash of teeth.

A flash of my death.

When I wake up, I'm in the bathtub, hit with a woozy sense of déjà vu. But this time I'm not being drowned under ice water by Absolon. I'm alone,

in lukewarm water, the bubbles from earlier having faded. In the corner, black candles flicker, casting shadows around the room.

I sigh and close my eyes, trying to regain the strength I had earlier.

The moment Absolon left me, I collapsed to my knees.

I had no idea how much energy it took for me to just keep myself in control when I was around him, but the moment his presence was gone, my body finally gave up.

The release came in the form of tears.

I cried for what felt like hours.

Over everything.

The loss of all I knew.

My parents' lies and betrayal.

But most of all, I cried because I no longer understand what I was. I thought as I got older I would experience that kind of wisdom that people get with time when they understand who they truly are, that confidence in your skin, that assurance in yourself. I was working toward that, I was counting on it, to one day not be such a lost mess inside, constantly hiding that turmoil, my inner scared self from the world.

Now, that day will never come. Because I will never be normal again. I knew I never was quite right, I knew, especially from the way others were always so wary around me, that I would never really fit in, never be normal. But I wanted to pretend forever.

And now I can't.

Eventually though, I had no more tears left to cry. I sat there on the floor, trying to make sense of the warring sides inside me, the good and the bad, then I realized there was no point trying to understand. It was too soon. Even I knew that, and besides ... I might not have a future at all.

So I got up, ignoring the bags of clothes, and went into the washroom where I discovered Amethyst had left me a present sitting in the tub. A soaking kit filled with aromatic bubbles, salts, and dried flowers.

There was a note with it.

Sometimes a hot bath makes our troubles seem trite.

Amethyst.

Had I been in any other state, I would have thrown the jars in a fit of rage over such obnoxious, ignorant words.

But I was weak.

I lit some candles, drew a bath, and got in, and pretty soon the smells of dried lavender, roses, chamomile, carnations, mint, and other fragrant herbs sunk deep into my soul, grounding me in that well, and I floated away into sleep.

Now, I'm staring at my naked body in the water, feeling like it belongs to someone else, the lack of tattoos making me wonder what else about me has been wiped clean. My morals? My personality?

I'm even thinner now. I'd blame it on not having anything to eat for a week, but that's not it. Maybe thin is the wrong word. Strong would be better. I still have my curves, it's just that I suddenly have all this lean muscle that wasn't visible before.

I sigh and get out of the bath, wrapping myself in a fluffy towel before looking at myself in the mirror.

At least my face looks the same. I don't have those weird moons in my eyes. I don't even look as tired as I should. But I do look afraid.

It's no wonder, you're going to be auctioned off to vampires tonight.

I shudder at the thought. Even if I am a vampire now, it's only part of me, not all of me, and these creatures seem more than happy to attack their own. I mean, Absolon himself must be seen as a traitor of the highest order to do what he does.

And that's why you have to look good, I remind myself. Make him want to keep you around. Keep him fascinated.

I put my hair into a towel and go into the bedroom to get started.

I start going through all the shopping bags, one by one, bringing out the clothes from the more casual stores, like Anthropologie and Nordstrom. I have to admit, I'm impressed. Most are just normal clothes, a pair of black jeans, sweaters, leggings, and a bunch of dresses, but not only do they all seem to fit me, they all have the same vibe and style. It's not quite mine per se I don't wear dresses often and these seem to be ripped from a cottage core Pinterest page—but they're still pretty and deeply romantic. I have to wonder if this was Absolon's influence or Amethyst's. I then find a Sephora bag with about a grand worth of makeup—I know Amethyst had everything to do with that.

Then I move on to the designer goods.

I'm speechless. So much so that I totally forget why I have these clothes in the first place. At least it's a distraction from the ugly truth.

There are two dresses from Alexander McQueen.

One is black, calf-length, made entirely of leather, with a bustier top that will barely fit my breasts, and red leather overlay over one shoulder. It reminds me of the Queen of Hearts from Alice in Wonderland, if she were into BDSM.

The other is a strapless sweetheart neckline, vibrant red, draped with layers and layers of gauzy fabric to the floor. Gorgeous.

Obviously, he wants me to wear one of them tonight.

I gravitate to the one that might make me feel stronger. Looking pretty is not my objective—I want to look like a badass. Plus, the duality of the red and black is calling to the duality that’s waking up inside me.

I put it on, and it fits like it was made for me, even when I struggle with the zipper for the bit. Then I take a look at the price tag. Over seven thousand dollars. I feel sick to my stomach, the amount of money Absolon must have had to be beyond obscene. I briefly wonder what that would be like, to accumulate so much wealth over so many centuries.

With the dress on, I put on my new makeup, going for the smoky eye look that I’ve tried to duplicate many times from YouTube and TikTok makeup artists but never had an excuse to wear. While I work, I trick myself into believing this is a normal party I’m going to, surrounded by rich people. But instead of getting excited, I just feel nauseous.

I decide it’s better to just go through the motions. So I blow dry my hair and pull it up into the fanciest updo I can manage with a set of bobby pins that Amethyst must have picked out for me. I think about putting on some perfume, but there’s none to be found, and with my sense of smell heightened now, perhaps all perfume will give me a headache.

When I think I’m finally ready, I slip on a pair of slingbacks, a modest stiletto heel but with a deep cut in the front, spikes at the tip. Handy if I need to kick someone and maim them.

All that’s missing is jewelry, but of course mine was all taken from me.

I glance down at where the ram and Tempest Stone used to be on my hand, feeling the absence. It really had been protecting me—along with the rest—this whole time, and now it’s gone.

All girls need protection, Lenore.

I think about what my mother said. How scared she got when I mentioned Atlas Poe. She thought he was going to take me away, arrest them for treason, or something like that. I don’t know anything about the

guild, but I'm going to guess if they like killing vampires, they're not opposed to spilling a little blood.

And yet, Atlas never got his hands on me.

Instead, it was the other ones my mother feared. Absolon said he knew my parents, had dealt with them before. Did they know he would be the one to find me? Did they fear him like I do? Why didn't they kill him when they had the chance? Why deal with vampires at all if your job is to slay them?

I would give anything to see my parents right now. To get the real truth, the answers. I know they lied, I know now in the deepest parts of me that they killed my parents and stole me. But part of me believes their love was real.

Then why do you think they were taking you to Joshua Tree for your transformation? The middle of nowhere. Think about it.

I don't want to think about it.

I want answers, and not the ones from Absolon, because I know that vampire lies. I need to see them again.

I have to find a way.

A knock at my door brings me out of my thoughts, and I can smell the roses and tobacco already, knowing exactly who is on the other side of the door. Something tingles at the back of my head, another way of sensing him. Or maybe it's the way my blood moves when he's around, my veins now full of blood that used to belong to him.

I clear my throat, wondering if I really picked up on any of his characteristics, good or bad. "Come in."

The door opens and Absolon strides inside, dressed in a sharp black suit, black dress shirt, collar open. For some reason I thought he would be in a tux, but of course he looks impeccable in this. Stealthy and deadly, like a walking weapon. Gorgeous beyond words.

I instinctively inhale, my heart thudding.

He stops in his tracks and looks at me for a moment, his eyes flicking over every inch of skin, leaving sparks of electricity in their wake. His gaze is intense, smoldering, something that makes me feel restless and unsettled.

He quickly breaks the spell, closing the door behind him, and it's only then that I notice he has a jewelry box in his hands.

"What is that, a corsage?" I comment.

He stops right in front of me, his smell washing over me, and holds out the box, the dark blue velvet shining. "Funny," he says dryly. "Take a look

for yourself.”

Curiosity gets the best of me and I reach out and flip open the lid.

Inside are a pair of drop earrings and a matching necklace on a delicate chain. Blood red rubies sit amongst burnished silver. The beauty of the stones takes my breath away. For a moment, it feels like I’m being wooed by some wealthy gentleman, instead of what this all really is.

“I thought vampires couldn’t wear silver,” I say after a moment, not wanting to fawn over them.

“Don’t believe everything you read,” he says. Then he hands me the box, leaving the earrings to me while he takes out the necklace.

“Burma rubies,” he says in a low voice that makes me shiver as he comes behind me. With his presence at my back, my neck exposed, I’m on high alert. “Very, very rare. Pigeon blood is the color.”

“That’s disturbing.”

“I’d say macabre. And beautiful. Now you realize how some things in this world can be both.”

I swallow as he gently places the necklace around my neck, the ruby sitting below my collarbone. There’s a feeling of warmth from the back of the jewel, like it’s connecting to my skin and fusing with it. I have to wonder at the magic of stones and where he got this, if it means anything, if it’s doing anything.

His hands go to the back of my neck, and I feel his unblinking eyes burn into me, more of those sparks alighting my skin, alternating between flames and ice. He fastens the necklace and I hear a low sigh from his mouth, as if there’s some sort of relief.

Then he runs his palms over my shoulders, smooth skin skimming over mine, until he grips my upper arms.

I hold my breath, feeling his face come closer, his nose brushing over the back of my head. He inhales sharply, a sensation that causes goosebumps to prickle down my entire body, his nose moving behind my ear.

He’s *smelling* me.

I can hardly stay still, but his grip is strong, and my pulse is going wild, and I’m not sure if I want to flee, or fight...or fuck.

“So much fear,” he breathes into my neck, and my eyes roll back into my head. “Alongside so much desire.”

“You’re compelling me,” I say, but the tremor in my voice betrays me.

He slowly breathes out, causing my knees to buckle.

"I'm not," he murmurs. "This is just you, reacting to me." His mouth brushes against the back of my ear, unravelling me further. "This is how it will always be."

I swallow hard. "Then perhaps it's for the best that you're selling me."

He stiffens, nails digging into my skin, just for a moment. "Perhaps," he says, the word falling cold and clear.

Then he places his lips below the necklace clasp, kissing me right on top of my spine.

I gasp, my heart thumping deeply against my ribs, my eyes opening wide as a jolt of pleasure throttles me. The jewelry box slides out of my hands and onto the carpet.

Fuck.

A gentle kiss on the back of my neck, and it's ripping me apart like an orgasm would, making me come alive against my will.

I feel his lips part against my skin, and for a horrifying moment I think he's going to sink his teeth in, but then I realize he's smiling. "I didn't tell you how beautiful you look, did I?" He pulls back and my skin goes numb from where his lips just were.

I don't even have the words to speak, my blood is throbbing hard, in my head, in my chest, everywhere. Heat blooms, erasing any cold.

He lets go of me and swiftly crouches down to pick up the jewelry box, standing up again in such a way that screams supernatural. Sometimes there's a liquidness to his movements, like he's made entirely of silk.

He opens the box and takes out the earrings, appraising me, eyes checking my chin, my nose, my brows. Finally they settle on my eyes, staring at me in that intense unblinking way of his. "Do you feel beautiful?" he asks.

I shake my head, licking my lips, tasting the nude lipstick I'm wearing. "Does the lamb feel beautiful before it's led to slaughter?"

That brings a crooked smile out of him as he takes one of the earrings and comes at my ear with it.

I inhale sharply, my skin going tight. I don't think I've ever had someone else put earrings in my ears for me, but here he is, eyeing me calmly, doing this like he's done it a million times.

"Regardless of how you feel," he says, his voice low as he holds the post against my earlobe. "These rubies are worth millions. So don't lose

them, whatever you do.”

I open my mouth in shock seconds before he adds, “This might hurt.”

Then he stabs the post in through my earlobe and I’m crying out in pain.

“There,” he says, quickly fastening the back of the post in. I feel wetness, smell my own blood as it drips from my ear onto my shoulder.

“What the fuck,” I cry out harshly, my ear throbbing, and he concentrates on the other ear now, brows knitting together in determination. His eyes meet mine for a moment and his pupils have now gone completely red.

Oh, that can’t be good.

“Your piercings disappeared when you turned,” he says to me, nose flaring for a moment before he looks at my other ear. “Have to start anew.”

He quickly stabs the second post through my other earlobe, though this time the pain has dulled considerably. The blood still flows, dripping onto the top of my dress.

He brings out a black pocket square from his suit jacket and wipes it over my leather dress, cleaning up the blood with ease. “Leather was a smart choice for tonight.”

Then he brings the fabric up to my ears, wiping away the rest of the blood with surprisingly gentle fingers, considering he just punched holes into my skin, and I watch as the red in his pupils fades back to black.

“How do you do it?” I whisper to him.

He pauses, looking at me. “Do what?”

“The blood,” I tell him. “Doesn’t that make you...don’t you want *that*?” I mean, the sight and smell of his blood, and I’m the one who turned into the ravenous beast. And I’m only half of what he is.

He observes me closely for a moment before he says, “Patience and restraint. I’ve had a long time to work on those attributes.” He clears his throat, taking a step back. “Besides, it would do me no good tonight. I need to stay sharp. I’ve only sampled but a bit of your blood, and it intoxicated me. Had a hard time staying sober after that.”

Could have fooled me. He’s never been anything but one hundred percent in control.

“Are you ready?” he asks me, holding out his hand.

But I’m not fooled by how this all looks.

I know what this all is.

“I’ll never be ready,” I tell him, forgetting to fake bravery.

I put my hand in his.

“You’re braver than you think,” he says to me, gripping my hand, close to crushing it. Then he leads me out of the room.

We walk down the hall past the roses, which are dead again.

Bloom, I think in my head, staring at them with so much intensity that my vision starts to thin. *Bloom alive with blood.*

Nothing happens.

It isn’t until we turn to go down the stairs that I catch the roses moving. We’re out of sight before I can see the rest, but something hot and golden swims inside me, and I suppress a smile. Maybe I can do some things.

We walk down the flights of stairs, the house quiet and faintly lit, creepy shadows dancing on the walls, but as we get closer to the ballroom, the noise gets louder. There’s thumping bass and music and laughter and all the things that a good party promises.

And I’m scared as hell.

I stop just outside the doors, noticing for the first time the symbols on them, flowers that remind me of eyes. “Solon,” I say quietly.

He stops beside me, his grip moving from my hand to my wrist, growing tighter. “Solon? I have a nickname already?” he muses.

I stare at him. I don’t need to tell him I’m this scared, he *wants* me to be this scared. But I also know this might be the last time I get to say anything to him in private.

My jaw hurts from clenching it. I wiggle it first before I tell him, “I know you’re not a man who makes promises. Or vampire, for that matter. But no matter what happens to me, just...please don’t hurt my parents. I think they were only trying to help me.”

He stares at me, a twitch near his eye. “Do you know why your parents wanted to take you away for your birthday?”

There’s no use asking him how he knows about that. “So I wouldn’t change in the city, so I wouldn’t harm other people.”

“So they could kill you if things got out of hand,” he says. “These are the people you want me to abstain from hurting?”

I don’t want to believe that. But I nod. “Please.”

He seems to consider that for a moment, sighing softly. “Fine. You have my word. Believe it or not, it is worth something.” He adds under his breath, “Sometimes.”

Then his hand lets go of my wrist and slides up to my elbow as he pulls open the door with the other.

We step into a party.

There are about thirty people here, all dressed in tuxedos and gowns, men, women, and nonbinary individuals. If you've never had thirty vampires all looking at you at once with their fixed, unblinking stare, be grateful. I'm so scared, I think I might piss myself.

"Breathe," Absolon whispers to me as we glide through the crowd, his hand firm on my elbow. "Let them get used to you."

Sure enough, a few seconds pass and the vampires go back to talking with each other and the music seems louder still. It takes me a moment to realize it's Depeche Mode playing and I shake my head. Of course they'd be music for vampires.

Wolf's head appears above the others and he walks over to us, dressed in his tux. I can't help but smile with relief when I see him, something that makes Absolon's grip on my elbow become vise-like.

"Wolf," I say to him as he eyes me appreciatively.

"This is quite the look," Wolf says. "Very dramatic. You look beautiful."

I'd blush if I wasn't so scared.

"Thank you."

Absolon makes a noise of irritation and leads me away from Wolf, straight over to a pair of vampires nearby. One has grey hair, which surprises me because everyone else seems permanently suspended between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five, and his skin is tanned. His eyes are dark red, brows black and sharp in contrast to his hair and beard, and he's wearing a black collarless jacket, which makes him look even more sinister. He smells like an old church.

The woman he's with looks my age, with dark black hair to her waist, and she's wearing a lacey black gown with velvet gloves. Her lipstick is the darkest red, playing off her light skin.

"This must be the girl," the man says with an untraceable accent. He reaches out and takes my hand, and even though I want to snatch it back, I can't. I'm stuck in his eyes, the red pools glinting, and I know he's compelling me. "Enchanted," he says, and he runs his nose up from the back of my hand to my wrist, deftly flipping my hand over and running his lips over my veins.

Everything in me recoils in revulsion, but still I'm frozen and unable to stop him.

A low rumble emits from Absolon, a threatening sound that makes my hairs stand on end.

"Enough," Absolon snaps at the man. "You've already gotten her smell." He reaches out and grabs my arm, pulling it out of the man's grip. "And you can stop compelling her, too."

The man smiles at Absolon, his fangs sharp on the top and bottom, giving the appearance of a canine's mouth. "Just making sure she is what you say she is." He eyes me. "Has Solon not told you about me? I'm Yanik. I've been quite interested in your history, little girl. I knew who your parents were, your real ones. They were good creatures, too good. Their mistake was thinking they could run away from the lives they led. None of us can."

Though the man is talking with a conversational tone, there's a sinister edge to all of this, aside from the obvious.

"I knew who your real father was too," he continues, eyeing Absolon briefly. "Jeremias."

"That is just hearsay," Absolon says with a scoff, but even so, his hand goes to my lower back, holding me against him. "It's not been proven."

I take the bait. "Who is Jeremias?"

"Ah," the old vampire says, flashing those teeth again. "How little you know. Absolon hasn't been truthful with you."

"She knows no more than me," Absolon says, lying.

"Surely you've tasted her blood, Solon. You can find out the truth that way."

"Just a drop," he admits begrudgingly. His fingers press into the side of my waist, either a protective or possessive measure.

"I see," Yanick says, looking to me now. "You know that we can discover truth through blood. Your history. A drop won't tell all your secrets, Solon would have to have more. But he hasn't. Strange, don't you think? How can we know exactly what we're buying?"

"You'll have to trust that this is the girl. This is the one who was taken from Alice and Hakan."

"But that alone doesn't make her interesting to *us*, old boy, and you know it."

The fact that the aging Yanik called Solon *old boy* makes my brow raise.

“We should bleed her,” the girl says, her first words. “See for ourselves.”

Oh my god.

For some reason I expect Solon to get territorial and tell them to forget it, but he doesn’t. “Okay,” he says, and my heart sinks. “But then if you have some, everyone else will want to also. The price for her will go up.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Yanik says, his voice radiating evil.

Solon stares at him for a moment, then nods. “Fine. Let me get her ready. I’ll come back out and make an announcement. We have to do this fairly.”

“What?” I cry out, and then Solon is grabbing me by the elbow and hauling me across the room, the sea of vampires parting for us, their eyes hungry as they follow my every move.

Solon takes out his keys, bringing out another skeleton one, and yanks me toward the door to the side of the stage, the one Wolf had darkly referred to as one for “private events.”

“What are you doing?” I cry out as he unlocks the door, looking over my shoulder at the crowd, every eye still on me, fangs bared.

Holy fuck.

The door unlocks and then he’s shoving me into a dark room. The lights flick on and I gasp. It’s about the size of the cigar room, but that’s where the similarities end. The walls are painted black, the floor is steel with black leather mats every couple feet, right below two pairs of metal chains that hook into the wall. There’s a steel table at the end, the type you’d find in a morgue, with a fridge beside it, and in the corners there are two matching red leather chaises.

“What the fuck is this place?” I say, staring at it all in horror.

He doesn’t answer me, just leads me over to the chaise and sits me down on it.

“Solon, please,” I tell him, grabbing his jacket as he turns around, ready to leave. “Tell me what’s happening. They’re going to...bleed me? How? By biting me? Is everyone in there getting a turn? Am I being chained to the wall?”

With each question I ask, my fist gets stronger, my words trembling, on the edge of panic-fueled tears.

He reaches down and pries my hand off his jacket. "I thought it might come to this," he says, voice flat. "Just stay here."

Then he turns, and before I can grab him again, there's a strange shimmer in the air, and then he's gone.

Literally, gone.

Vanished into thin air.

Not even appearing by the door, something like I've seen earlier when he moves fast. He just disappeared.

And I'm all alone.

But I won't be for long.

I don't know who Jeremias is, but if he's my father, apparently that's a literal selling point for me. If they can find out my history by drinking my blood, taste my bloodlines, then who knows what will happen to me. As much as I do want to know the truth, it's not at the expense of bleeding for all these vampires, and especially if I'm being held in chains.

How could Absolon do this to me?

You fucking idiot. He told you what he was going to do from day one.

I sigh, my breath fluttery. I need to get out of here. I can't be in here.

How did he disappear like that?

I have some of his blood in me still, I don't know for how long, but I can feel it, the traces of him.

If he can do that, can I do that?

But how?

I stand up and walk to the middle of the room, my heels clicking loudly on the steel floor. I stop and look around. There was a shimmer when he disappeared, like the air moved and enveloped him. Is it an invisible door?

I move my hands around in the air but feel nothing.

Think, think, think.

I know I'm running out of time.

I eye the door, the fear hitching in my throat. At any minute he's going to come back in with Yanik in tow, and then who knows how many others. Who wouldn't want to sample the goods before they purchase?

Think, think, think.

But I can't think.

I can't focus.

I'm doing that thing I did in the Uber when I was kidnapped. Too panicked to make sense of anything to make a plan. Hopeless, helpless.

But there was something you did and you can do it again.

I close my eyes and stop thinking.

I start imagining.

I see those roses, dead, and then the blood rising in them, bringing them back to bloody life.

I see the moon deep within me, reflecting on a quiet well, an unlimited source of power I need to tap in to.

I feel blue electricity running inside my veins.

I feel everything, all of it, every emotion I've tried to grapple with in the last two weeks. It builds and builds in the core of me, glowing white, rising through me until it feels like all my hairs are standing on end.

I need an outlet, I need to escape, I need to survive.

I need to disappear.

Help me disappear.

A sizzling sound fills the room, a slight breeze blowing against my face.

My eyes open to see flames in the air in the shape of a doorway.

On the other side of the doorway is the rest of the room, except it's in black and white, like an old noir movie.

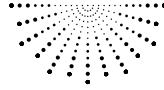
I look over my shoulder at the real door.

Then I make my choice.

I walk through the one I just conjured in the air.

Into a world of black and white.

CHAPTER TWELVE



I WATCH AS THE FLAMES FIZZLE OUT, THE SHAPE OF THE DOORWAY FADING until it's gone and I'm still in the room.

Only everything is in black and white. I take a tentative step forward, afraid that the air might feel different or hold me back. I'm not even sure there is air. I try to breathe but nothing happens. When I walk, my shoes make a muted sound.

Fuck. Am I...dead?

Okay, don't panic. Don't panic.

I'm tempted to try again and create another door and step back into the normal room, the one with air and sound and color.

But then the real door leading to the ballroom opens.

And what comes in are shapes, white shimmery illusions of people. I make out Absolon's striking figure, plus the old vampire and the woman, and Wolf too. They're like ghosts, moving slow as if through quicksand.

But the door is open.

And every cell inside me is telling me to go.

I slip past the ghosts as they stop in the middle of the room, probably wondering where the hell I went. I might not have much time before someone finds me here, wherever the fuck I am.

So I move through Dark Eyes, fast, past the ghostly shapes of the guests, right through the back door, which doesn't hold me back.

The house doesn't hold me back.

I stumble out into the black and white night.

I'm free.

I look around, staring up at the Westerfeld house in awe. I stumble across the road to get a better view, shaking my head.

I'm free.

I start running up the rest of the hill, then start heading across Alamo Square.

The world is weird.

It looks like San Francisco, but only things with permanence are clear and solid and real, like buildings and trees. All the cars and people, the moving things, are pale ghosts, most too thin and transparent to really see properly.

And out of the corner of my eyes, there are sickly shadows moving along the side of a building.

I keep running, moving past the ghosts of people, *through* them sometimes, hit with a wave of nausea each time.

I hit Hayes Street, turn right down Laguna, and then I'm outside my apartment.

Ten blocks.

Ten fucking blocks away this whole time.

It's not far enough either.

I just have to be quick.

I stare up at my parents' apartment, but I don't want to ambush them yet. I put my hand on my door, knowing it should be locked, but it turns with ease. Something tells me all the doors in this world are unlocked.

A slithering sound behind me makes me whirl around.

Shadows move along the sidewalk across the street. They're human-sized shadows, black and grey, more solid than they should be. They sound like snakes and spider legs skittering.

I quickly jump into my apartment, shutting the door, locking it and then I close my eyes, trying to concentrate on bringing up that door again, dipping into the inner well.

When I open my eyes, the flames have formed, flickering with red and yellow, showcasing my dark apartment on the other side.

I quickly step through the door, back into the world of air and color and sound, and then the flames die out and the door to the otherworld fades.

What the hell was that?

I look down at my body, expecting it to be different, maybe for my tattoos to be back, maybe for my skin to be falling off or something scary.

But I look exactly the same as I did at the party. I press my fingers against the necklace, the earrings, look down at my pointy, spiky shoes. I don't have my tattoos back.

Fuck.

Still a fucking vampire.

I look around me.

Absolon was right. My place does stink like weed. I guess I had to be away from it long enough to notice.

I laugh, a small pathetic laugh, looking around at everything, marveling at having this place back.

You don't have it back. You can't stay here.

But my heart doesn't know that yet.

I collapse into the chair at the kitchen table, head buried in my arms, bursting into tears.

I have it all back, but I have nothing at all.

Parents who aren't my parents.

Friends that don't know my truth.

A future that doesn't seem so promising anymore when there's someone like Absolon out there who I know will hunt me down. It won't even take him long before he's dragging me back to the house.

They're coming, a voice says inside my head. *You can smell them.*

I lift my head, breathing in deeply.

The rosemary, fennel, and palo santo of my mother, my father's sandalwood cologne.

I turn in my seat to see them through the glass, standing outside the door, peering inside.

"She's in there!" my mother cries out softly, my keen ears picking it up.

"Careful, Elaine. We don't know what state she's in," my father warns.

Careful? Of me? Do they think...I'm going to attack them?

Suddenly I get a huge push of negative energy off of them, coming right through the door, putting images of a blade in my head, six inches long, curved and sparkling with blue electricity.

Fuck, is that the knife they kill vampires with? What did Solon call it, blade of the *mordernes*?

I get to my feet with such force, the chair scatters across the kitchen floor, hitting the stove.

The front door opens and they step inside.

“Stay right there!” I yell at them. “Don’t come any closer!”

They stay where they are, but my father closes the door behind him.

“We don’t mean any harm, Lenore,” my father says, showing both his hands in a show of peace.

“You’re vampire slayers,” I say, feeling the anger rolling through me. “How can you not harm me?!”

“Lenore, sweetie,” my mother says in her patient voice, but it’s cracking, and the more that I stare at them and see the fear, smell their adrenaline, I realize the strain they’re under. They’re as scared as I am.

“Don’t,” I tell her, shaking my head. “Don’t try...I can’t...”

“I know you’re upset. I know this is a lot to take in,” my father says, his voice booming. He takes a step closer and I shrink back, hitting the kitchen table. So much for standing my ground.

“I know that you probably have a lot of questions for us, and we have questions for you,” he goes on.

“We need to know where you’ve been,” my mother says. “Who took you. We know someone did, but we don’t...we need to take action on the person who did this to you.”

She gestures to me and I look down at my dress.

I’m about to tell her that I think I look okay, when my necklace grows hot against my skin, and my nose floods with the smell of roses and tobacco. I look to the bedroom to see Absolon in his black suit walk out of the darkness, his eyes fixed on my parents.

My heart skips a beat.

“It was me,” he says to them, as cool and calm as ever.

My mother’s mouth drops open. “Absolon?” she asks as my father takes the blade out of his pocket, glowing blue in his hand.

Absolon eyes the blade, lip curling. “Really? How quickly you stab others in the back. Or the front, as it is. This wouldn’t be a sanctioned kill, James.”

“You took our daughter,” my mother spits out.

“You took a vampire’s daughter,” he counters evenly. “And killed them. Unsanctioned. I know what the guild would do to you.”

My mother makes a move for him. But she must know it’s pointless.

He’s just a blur and then he’s pulling me aside, stepping behind me, one arm around my waist, the other gripping my throat. I cry out but the sound dies inside me.

“Don’t be foolish,” he says to them, his voice low and scathing and rumbling in my ear. “You kill me, you have to kill her.” He pauses. My pulse beats against his palm. “Unless you were planning to do that anyway. Why else would you have that blade with you?”

“To defend her from vampires like you,” my mother says, and the moon is starting to appear in her eyes. This isn’t good, for anyone, but especially me.

Solon, I say inside my head, his grip on my throat too strong for words. *Leave me.*

Why would I do that? he answers in surprise. *You’re mine, Lenore. You know this. And more than that, you need me now. You need me to survive.*

“Tell me,” he says to my parents, voice deep in the room. “When you were planning to take Lenore to the desert, were you planning on helping her? Or killing her?”

“We were going to help her,” my father says.

“How? You have no idea what it’s like to become a vampire. You only know how to kill us. You’ve never spent a single second trying to understand us, not even when your so-called daughter is one of us.”

“You don’t know that,” my mother says to him. Then she looks at me. “Don’t listen to him. You don’t know who he is, the things he does.”

Solon releases my throat to let me speak. “Believe me,” I say, coughing briefly. “I know exactly what he does.”

“Then let us kill him,” my father pleads, taking another step forward, that blade shimmering. “Let us kill him, then you won’t be bound to him anymore. He won’t be able to hurt you.”

Solon grumbles into my neck. “Think they’ll take the shot if it means hitting you in the process?”

My father has the blade at the ready.

Solon might be right.

“Listen to me, Lenore,” Solon says tightly, his hushed voice making my skin grow hot. “I’m going to leave you now, because this isn’t worth the risk.”

“Coward,” my father says.

Absolon growls at him, his grip growing tighter around my waist. “I’m leaving you,” he says to me gruffly, “because the risk of you getting killed isn’t worth it.”

I flinch, going inside my head. *Liar*, I tell him. *You were about to let a bunch of vampires sample my blood and bleed me before taking me away to do who knows what with me.*

No, he says sharply, the sound like knives in my skull. *I never had any intention of selling you. You're worth more to me than anything they could give me in exchange.*

I have a hard time believing him. *Then...then why did you do all of that?*

So they know what I have. You.

I swallow hard. *I thought you didn't show off.*

He laughs, a puff of cold air at my neck. *I'm always adapting.*

"Whatever he's telling you is a lie, Lenore!" my mother yells at us, and I'm somewhat relieved to know that she can't drop in on our internal conversation.

You know where to find me, he says to me. *And now you know how to get there too. Through the Black Sunshine.*

The what?

But then he's letting go of me, moving fast, and my father throws the blade, trying to track him.

It's too late.

Absolon has disappeared and the blue-tinged blade goes right into the wall.

I stare at it, mouth open.

Why did my parents really bring it downstairs? Did they know someone like Solon would show up? Or was it for me all along?

"Lenore," my mother says in a small voice. "Please. We don't mean you any harm. We never did. We saved you."

"You killed my parents," I whisper, the walls in the apartment feeling like they're closing in on me.

"You never knew your parents," she says.

"But they were still my parents!" I scream. "That woman gave birth to me. You never did!"

"She wasn't a woman, Lenore."

"Fuck you! Just fuck you. Then what am I? Huh, what am I? Not human? Just some creature now?"

She's shaking her head, tears spilling down. "You're part human, it's enough humanity to take over."

“I’m part witch,” I tell them. “Aren’t I?”

My parents exchange a glance.

“We have so much to tell you,” my father says to me gently.

I stare at them, feeling the betrayal start to hit.

“Why,” I cry out. “Why did you keep this from me?”

“We had to,” my mother says, pressing her palms together. “We didn’t know what was going to happen. How much vampire blood was in you. We didn’t know what side would have won out.” She closes her eyes. “Vampires don’t turn until they’re older, but they still know what they are innately. You didn’t have that.”

“Because we prevented it,” my father says quietly.

“James,” my mother hisses at him. “You make it sound so simple.”

“You stopped me from being who I really am!” I yell, the words ripping out of me. “I spent my whole life feeling like I was different, and not in a good way. People have always been afraid to get close to me and now I know why. They couldn’t. You stopped them. You stopped me from getting to know myself too!”

A low rumble spreads throughout the apartment, like a truck rolling past us on the street, but I ignore it. “Who is my real father? He’s a witch. Not a vampire. Who is he?”

The rumbling increases, now the ground is starting to move underneath my feet.

An earthquake.

I remain where I am, the anger and fear and frustration coursing through me until it’s hard to think straight.

“Lenore, calm down,” my mother says, her voice shaking along with the apartment.

“I will not calm down!” The cupboards open and dishes start to slide out with the shaking room, crashing to the floor.

At some point I should get under the table, right?

But an earthquake is the least of my worries.

My father pitches to the right, the counter holding him up as he moves toward me. “Lenore, please.”

I shake my head, tears welling up. “Stay away from me. You’re not my father. You’re a liar.”

The earthquake increases, the vase toppling off the kitchen table and onto the floor, smashing to pieces.

“Lenore, you’re doing this,” my father says, reaching for me. “You’ll hurt the whole damn city.”

I stare at him numbly. “What?” I whisper.

Then before I can move, my father is beside me, grabbing me and pulling me into him, holding me against his chest until I can hear his heartbeat. He lays a hand on my head and immediately I feel my blood slow, my breaths growing even. He’s doing something to me, calming me, a golden warmth spreading from the top of my head down to my toes.

The shaking subsides.

The earthquake stops.

Outside, car alarms fill the neighborhood.

“Just breathe, my daughter,” he says to me, voice deep and soothing.

I’m still so angry. The rage inside me flares like fire coming alive again.

But the energy he’s putting into me is tempering it, a warm breeze that puts the fire out.

“Come over here,” he says gently, putting his arm around me and leading me into the living room, sitting me down on the couch.

I’m in a daze, and I’m hurting so badly, so deeply, scars that will never show on the outside, but I’m no longer afraid. The pain is a dull throb in my heart.

My mother disappears and then comes out with a blanket, placing it over my shoulders, and I’m surprised to discover how cold I am. I thought I wasn’t supposed to get cold anymore?

“I don’t understand any of this,” I whisper as I sink back into the couch.

“I know,” my mother says, her hand at my forehead, the touch comforting despite the turmoil of my emotions churning darkly inside me. “We’ve been trying to, for so long.”

“We’ll all have to figure it out together,” my father says, sitting on the coffee table across from me, his hand around my wrist, keeping the sedative effect flowing through me. “But please, you must believe us when we say we mean you no harm. We brought the blade because we sensed you were down here and didn’t know if you were alone.”

“You have to trust us, Lenore,” my mother says. “We’re the only ones who can protect you now.”

I don’t know how much of that is true.

My eyes begin to close, tiredness seeping into my bones, but regardless of how badly I want to sleep, I need to stay awake.

“Happy belated birthday,” my mother whispers to me.

I open my eyes and blink. “When was it?”

“Yesterday.”

The concept of days seems to have no meaning anymore. I guess that’s what happens when you can live forever.

If I even can.

I clear my throat. “I guess the worst is over then.”

They exchange a look over my head.

“What?” I ask.

My mother pushes loose strands of hair back from my face. “There have been stories of people who are both witch and vampire. As you can imagine, the instances are rare. Vampires have impregnated witches before, but the children don’t usually survive very long. But never has a witch done this to a vampire.”

“Why not?”

Another harried glance.

“To put it simply, vampires are seductive. Driven by both blood and sex. Witches aren’t like that. Despite the hate and natural revulsion between the species, vampires are good at getting what they want, and sometimes even the most powerful spells can’t ward them off.”

“A male witch being attracted to a vampire doesn’t happen,” my father adds.

“What if the female vampire compels him?” I ask, not appreciating this double standard, as if men are so noble.

“Maybe,” my mother says. “But why would Alice do that? Why not just leave Hakan then?”

“Pretty sure you can’t just leave a vampire for a witch,” I tell them.

“Then why carry a witch’s child? It makes no sense,” she says with a shake of her head.

“It’s something we’ve been trying to figure out,” my father says. “We’ve gotten nowhere. It’s not easy when you’ve been kept a secret from the only people who might know.”

“People like Atlas Poe?”

“Poe doesn’t know what he knows. He’s new to all of this. Unfortunately, that means he has something to prove.”

I lick my lips. “So then how do you both know Absolon?” I pause. “Does he even have a last name?”

“Vampire last names are always changing,” my mother says in a stiff voice. “But we’ve always known him as Absolon Stavig.”

“And he’s a monster,” my father interjects, a vein bulging in his forehead. To my relief, I feel no bloodlust on my behalf, just a father’s protectiveness. “I can’t even...I can’t let myself imagine what he put you through.” His voice goes quiet, eyes on fire. “What he made you do.”

“He didn’t make me do anything,” I tell him, feeling defensive even though I shouldn’t. The things I had done to me I *wanted* done to me. I think about Wolf between my legs, Absolon watching me, enraptured.

“That’s what he wants you to think,” my mother says. “They compel people.”

“He didn’t compel me,” I tell him, though I know that wasn’t true on a few occasions, like when I got into the ice bath. “It puzzled him that he couldn’t. I think it kept me alive, to be honest.”

“So he was trying to kill you.”

I shake my head, avoiding their eyes. “No. He wasn’t.”

I thought he was. But if he’s being truthful about never intending to sell me, then that changes things. Why didn’t he just tell me that instead of keeping me in fear?

Because fear is his upper hand.

“He would have fed off you, drunk your blood,” my father says.

I shake my head again. “No. He never did.”

“Oh, come on,” my mother says with a huff of irritation. “He’s a fucking vampire. That’s what they do.”

My mother rarely swears. It raises my brow. “I’m a fucking vampire too now. I don’t see myself drinking your blood. Maybe he’s just really good at controlling himself.”

“Why would he even want to control himself around you?” my father mutters gruffly. “The whole reason a vampire would take someone like you is to benefit from your magic.”

“Maybe that was part of the plan,” my mother says to him. “Saving her for later.”

I swallow. Could that have been true?

“I...I don’t really have any magic,” I say softly. “He knows it too.”

“You do,” my mother says. “You just created a damn earthquake. We can only pray it didn’t hurt anyone. Thank god this city is made for them.”

I think about that for a moment, then eye my father. “Then if he’s such a monster, why do you know him? Why does he know you? Surely if you’re such good witches, you wouldn’t be hanging around a monster like him?”

He looks at my mother and then gives her a grim nod. He exhales softly, looking me square in the eye. “Absolon helped us once.”

A cold feeling spreads through me, all my knowledge of what he is and what he does.

A mercenary.

“Helped you with what?” I whisper.

“He gave us the location of your parents,” my mother says tightly. “I’m sorry, sweetie.”

He lied to me. Didn’t he?

No. He just didn’t reveal the truth.

Why not?

I already hated him. It wouldn’t have hurt to hate him more.

“You’re sorry,” I say. “For what? For killing them? You went behind the backs of the people who are supposed to keep you organized, the guild, and you flat out murdered them. For what? For me?”

“We didn’t know about you,” my father says quietly.

“But Absolon did.” My voice comes out in a hush.

“If he did, he didn’t tell us,” my mother says. “We didn’t know, Lenore, until we heard you crying, and by then it was already too late. Your parents were dead.”

“We knew you were one of us, though,” he says. “We could tell. We took you with us and never looked back.”

Why didn’t Absolon tell my parents that I existed? Was it because I was just a rumor to him? Or did he think I was better off dead too?

A sense of doom settles in my chest, a dull pain.

I shake my head, unable to grapple with any of it. Exhaustion is pulling me under.

“Why did you do it?” I say through a yawn, sinking deeper into the couch.

“Kill them?” my father asks, getting to his feet. “Sometimes the simplest answer is the best for now.”

“Revenge,” my mother adds.

I raise my head and look at her, at the flashing moons in her eyes.

Revenge?

“Elaine,” my father says. “Keep it cool. We need to get Lenore out of here.”

I glance up at him. “What? Why? I just want to go to sleep.”

“You’re not safe here,” he says, reaching down and pulling me up to my feet.

“If you’re worried about Solon, I’m pretty sure he can find me no matter where I go,” I tell them, my chest squeezing.

“*Solon?*” my father asks. “Don’t pretend you know him. You know nothing about him. Nobody does.”

“Regardless, he’ll find me.”

After all, I’m his. His blood is in my veins.

But I keep that information to myself. No use making them worry even more, or worse, fear me again.

“We’re not just hiding you from him,” my mother says. “We’re hiding you from other vampires, ones that don’t have an agenda, ones that just want the pleasure of killing you and using your blood. Heaven forbid you attract the attention of someone like Skarde.”

“Skarde?” I cry out. “I heard about him. He’s like the vampire king. I assumed he was dead.”

My mother’s lips go white as she eyes me. “I wish he were.”

“And aside from vampires, there’s always Poe and others like him,” my father says, pulling me along to my bedroom. “Poe might be in over his head, but there are those at the head of the guild that will not only punish us, but punish you.”

“Why me? It’s not my fault I am what I am,” I tell them.

My mother takes a duffel bag out of my closet while my father grabs my shoulders, eyeing me.

“Can you imagine a vampire with the power of a witch? Or a witch with the power of a vampire?” he asks. “That’s what you are, Lenore. And even the best ones can’t cause an earthquake.”

“So they’d kill me?”

He looks ashen. “I don’t know, sweetie. But I can guarantee that’s what they have planned for us.”

“I won’t let that happen,” I tell him, my loyalty to my family rising up with ferocity. “No one is going to hurt you.”

“And no one is going to hurt you,” my mother says, throwing my shit in the bag. “But we have to start by getting you out of here. You’ve been gone,

but I sensed Poe about the last few days. He'll be back. Maybe others too. And though vampires wouldn't dare cross these doors, we can't risk it."

"Absolon crossed these doors," I tell him.

"Yeah, well apparently he can do a lot of things, like appear out of thin air," my father comments bitterly.

And so can I, I think, keeping the secret to myself. *Black Sunshine*.

"So where am I going?" I ask. "I don't have my purse. No ID, no credit card, no phone." I don't bother adding that they're at the haunted mansion.

"We'll put you up in a hotel across town," he says. "A nice one with lots of security. You choose. Maybe the Fairmont would be good."

Wow. I look down at my party clothes. "I guess I'm dressed for it already."

My mother eyes me sharply. "Did he give you that jewelry?"

"Burma rubies," I tell her with a slow nod, my fingers pressing against the jewel on my chest.

She looks at my father. "What do you think? Is it bewitched?"

My father peers at my necklace for a moment and then gently brushes my fingers off the stone, pressing his finger on it. His eyes fall closed for a moment.

"It's bewitched," he says after a moment. He looks at me. "But it's not to harm you. It's to protect you. I just don't know what it is exactly."

"Then I'm keeping it on," I tell them.

Both of them study me closely, thinking. Then my mother nods. "Okay."

It isn't until I'm packed and in their car, heading through the darkened city streets toward Nob Hill, that I ask them a question that has been burning at the back of my head. News about the earthquake is all over the radio, but driving through it looks like nothing major was damaged.

"If Absolon is a mercenary, that means you did an exchange. Something in return for my ... for Alice and Hakan's whereabouts. What did you end up giving him? What did he get out of it?" I pause. "Oh my god, please don't tell me you promised him my hand in marriage."

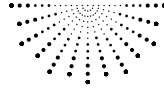
My mother turns from the passenger seat and gives me a severe look. "Are you kidding me? You think we would do that?"

"Then what did you promise him?"

My father kneads the steering wheel for a moment. Clears his throat. "We promised him that no slayers would ever kill him."

My mouth drops open. “But you just tried to kill him back there!”
Silence fills the car. My mother shrugs. “Terms and conditions change.”
I sit back against the seat, surprised once again at who my parents really are. Deep down, I don’t think they’re any better than Absolon is.
And so, what does that make me?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



THEY SAY VAMPIRES DON'T SLEEP THAT MUCH. I'M STARTING TO THINK that's one of the myths that holds true.

No matter how tired I am, I can't drift off to sleep. My eyes keep opening, looking around the hotel room, afraid that there's someone in here with me.

But it's not Solon. I imagine him appearing in the room, using the Black Sunshine to get me, or perhaps just knocking at my door. But he doesn't appear. And he's not who I fear anymore at any rate. Oh, I'm enraged at him, for lying to me this whole time, for being involved in my real parents' death when he pretended to be all sentimental about it. But I want to see him face-to-face so I can yell at him.

No, I'm afraid of the things my parents told me. Not so much Atlas, but other witches who mean me and my parents harm.

And then there's Skarde. Vampire king. I know nothing about him, and yet he already terrifies me. Every time I try to picture what he looks like in my head, I keep seeing people in dark cloaks, red curtains of thread hanging from hoods and obscuring their faces. I keep thinking I'll see them in the room, along with the slithering shadows I saw outside my apartment, in the black and white world.

Eventually I get out of bed and draw up the curtains, lean against the glass and stare at the city of lights below, the line of the coming dawn appearing on the east horizon like a golden slash against deep indigo.

I feel like I'm on top of the world here. My parents got me a room on one of the top floors, and with the hotel's location on the hill, plus the large

windows, I feel like I can reach out and touch the tip of the Transamerica Pyramid, the city breathing and living and humming below.

I stare out the windows, watching the sun come up, watching the bay come alive. My eyesight is startlingly good now, so from my perch I feel like I'm seeing things no one else gets to see.

Eventually though, I bring out my laptop. My parents told me to stay here in the hotel and to not leave, that one of them would come by this evening and that they would call throughout the day when they could.

But I'm twenty-one now. Since when do I listen to my parents?

I pull up my Facebook and send a quick message to Elle, telling her I still don't have a phone but I'm back in town and ask if she wanted to meet for day drinking at the Top of the Mark. Drinks are my treat.

It doesn't take long for her to get back to me. She calls me a bitch a bunch of times, so I know she's still a bit pissed at me just ghosting her, plus is probably a bit taken aback by my choice of location. But she agrees.

The Top of the Mark is the restaurant bar across the street from me at the Continental hotel. We went there once for my father's birthday brunch and it was all sorts of swanky. I figured it would be a good place to go. Not only is it close by but I feel safer in an expensive place. I'm aware that people—vampires—like Solon would hang out at these establishments with ease, probably more so than a dingy dive bar, but it's also for myself.

See, I don't know how I'll act around Elle. Will I want to bite her? Will she pick up on what I am, be afraid of me? I feel like if I'm in a fancy establishment full of white linen, champagne bubbles and crisp words, I'll be able to control myself.

Time passes slowly. Maybe it always will now, when it feels like you have an eternity at your fingertips. As I often have been lately, I wonder about my own mortality, what it means, and if I'll ever truly know if I can live forever. Do vampires die of natural causes at some point in time? Do they ever age? Because I'm only half, what does that mean for me? Will I age slowly or stay forever twenty-one?

Then I catch myself thinking of the clothing store. Damn. Hope it's not run by vampires.

Eventually I take a shower and get ready, then I'm heading across the street, taking in the fresh air. It's sunny, the sky that impossible blue that SF gets sometimes, and I slip on my oversized sunglasses, wincing at the light. After being indoors for most of the last two weeks, including when I was

studying, it feels like a knife in my brain and I'm kicking myself for not suggesting a dark bar somewhere.

I take my sunglasses off in the elevator, then step out of the doors and into the restaurant.

Elle already has a seat by the window, sun streaming in.

Great.

"Hey!" She waves at me and gets to her feet, running across the restaurant to me. A few heads turn and follow the girl with the piercings and the tattoos, but they're just snooty diners having a late lunch and there's not many people in this place.

Elle pulls me into a hug and I immediately stiffen, trying to hold my breath so I don't do something weird like smell her or something. Elle is into some weird shit but that would really be pushing it.

"You look amazing," she coos at me, holding me by the shoulders and looking me up and down. I thought ahead and wore a long-sleeved tunic and leggings that hide my lack of tattoos. But still, she frowns. "Did you get taller?"

Shit. I had a feeling I did. All my pants are feeling shorter on the inseam, maybe by two inches.

I muster a laugh. "No. Maybe you got shorter."

She ponders that for a moment. "Huh."

It's then that I realize I'm breathing, and smelling her. Not in a purposeful way but I note the baby powder smell of her deodorant, her Sol de Janeiro shampoo, her natural scent which is something like lilac and musk, and the traces of champagne on her breath. She's started drinking without me.

But luckily, all those smells aren't making me want to bite her neck and drain her of blood, so there's that.

"You okay?" Elle asks. "You seem so..."

"I need a drink," I say abruptly, slipping on my sunglasses.

"Well, I already started without you," she says, walking back to the table. She gives me a funny look over her shoulder. "You're wearing sunglasses inside?"

"It's bright out," I tell her, sitting by the window, thankful that she's the one sitting in sunlight.

"Are you hungover?"

I nod. "Yeah. Totally."

“Your birthday was like two days ago,” she says.

“It was a big birthday.” I’m glad she can’t see my eyes under these sunglasses, because I have a feeling she’d see all through my lies.

“So, then tell me about it,” she says, pouring me a glass of champagne and handing it to me. “Wait, no first, we toast to you turning twenty-one, baby. Welcome to the club.”

I raise my glass and clink it against hers, keeping my movements gentle. I nearly broke my toothbrush in half this morning, so I need to be aware that I have more strength than I used to.

“Thank you,” I tell her, and my nose starts to sting from the feeling of tears building up at the back of my throat, emotions suddenly running through me. All those nights in the house and I thought I would never be in this situation again, thought I’d never see my only friend, be free in this world, pretending to be normal.

But I know I’m not really free.

That this is a pause in my life, just like *the pause* between the lust and the bloodlust. Soon I’ll have to make decisions about how much of my old life I can have back without endangering myself and my parents.

My guess is not much.

“Lenore,” Elle says after she has a sip. “Cut the shit. What’s happening?”

I shake my head, wishing I could tell her everything. She’d never believe me.

“I had a fight with my parents,” I tell her, which isn’t a lie.

“Oh,” she says, making a face. “I’m sorry. On your birthday? That sucks. And you were stuck out in the desert with them.”

Just then the waiter approaches our table, an old reed-thin man with a thick mustache. He eyes the two of us with quiet disdain. Probably isn’t used to girls like us as his normal clientele.

“Hello,” I tell the waiter.

“Can I see some ID?” he asks me in a clipped voice.

I glance over at Elle, brows raised.

“Well, it’s your lucky day, sir,” she says to him. “Because she just turned twenty-one.”

He gives me a bland look, expecting me to get my ID out.

“I forgot my ID at home,” I tell him. Not my home, but Solon’s home.

“Well, then I’m afraid you’re not allowed to drink,” he says to me as I push the sunglasses up on my head. The light is still bright but I ignore it, keeping my eyes locked with the waiter’s.

“How about you just believe me when I say I’m twenty-one,” I say to him, continuing to stare at him with the most intense gaze I can muster. *Believe me, believe me.*

He hesitates.

Or I’ll kill you, I add for good measure.

The waiter flinches. Blinks. “Okay. Forgive me for asking.”

Then he turns and walks away, shooting me a frightened glance over his shoulder.

Elle barks out a laugh. “What the hell was *that*?”

“I’m not sure,” I say, slipping my sunglasses back on. I shrug and take an elegant sip of my champagne. I’m not lying either. I don’t know if I just compelled him like a vampire, or persuaded him with magic. All I know is that it worked.

I have to admit, it felt kind of good.

“You know, you’ve always had that way about you,” Elle muses, picking up the menu. “Men *and* women always fall for it.”

I hesitate before asking. “What way?”

She glances up at me and wiggles her fingertips around, making circles. “You. Just being you.”

I take another sip of my drink, swallowing the bubbles down. “And you? Do you fall for it?”

Elle snorts. “You wish.” Her eyes go back to the menu. “Man, I want to order everything on this menu, but this shit is expensive.”

“I told you, it’s my treat.”

“And this is your birthday.”

“Get me drinks at the bar later,” I tell her. “Another, *cheaper* bar.”

My necklace starts to feel hot against my skin, so I absently curl my fingers around it, feeling it warm between my fingers.

“New necklace?”

I glance at her as she’s eyeing my necklace.

“Yeah, birthday present,” I tell her warily.

“Well, let me see, move your hand.”

I let my hand fall away and she gasps. I took my earrings out last night—the holes already closed over by morning—but I kept the necklace on.

“Holy shit. That looks hella expensive. Is that a ruby? And diamonds?”

I nod. “Probably fake.”

“Who gave it to you?”

I have to lie. “My parents.”

Her forehead creases. “Your parents? Gave you a ruby necklace? That does not look like something parents would give their daughter, that looks like something a high-rolling sugar daddy would give his lover.” I nearly snort over her description of Solon. “And your parents would never give you anything so classy. You? In diamonds?”

She then frowns at my neck, at my hands. “Where are all your other necklaces and rings?”

“I took them off,” I say, hiding my hands beneath the table for some reason, while the ruby continues to burn against my skin. “Wasn’t sure if it would be appropriate for this place.”

“Oh and you covered up all your tattoos, too,” she notes. “Makes me look like the unkept wild child here. That’s okay. I am who I am.”

Never change, I think. I give her a quick smile. So far she hasn’t noticed that my canine teeth are pointier than normal. It’s actually not that noticeable, I feel like they must grow when needed.

I pick up the menu, hoping she drops the subject about my jewelry. If she asks to see my tattoos for some reason, I’m doomed.

We lapse into silence while I decide on what to eat. I’m not hungry at all, not for food or blood, but it will look weird if I don’t order anything. I think the lobster bisque seems like a good bet. I take my sunglasses off and put them on the table, my eyes finally adjusting to the light.

“Oh, my god,” Elle says in a hush, while the back of my necklace suddenly flares up, hot against my chest.

“What?” I ask, peering down at the ruby as I hold it away from my skin.

“I just saw the most gorgeous man in the whole world walk in here. He’s by the bar.”

I couldn’t be less interested. “Uh huh,” I tell her, trying to figure out what the necklace is doing to me.

“He’s not either of our types, but fucking hell, I want to jump over all the tables and maul him. He is *beautiful*.” She pauses. “Lenore. You’re not even looking.”

I give an exasperated sigh and tear my eyes away from the menu.

Look across to the bar.

Where they lock with Absolon's gaze.

My eyes widen, air caught in my throat.

"Oh my god, he's staring at you," Elle whispers harshly. "He's walking over here!"

She's right. Solon, his gaze still holding mine captive, strides gracefully through the restaurant toward us. For a moment I'm outside my body, ignoring the way the ruby burns at my throat, the way my heart is doing summersaults, how my thighs are clenching together as they try to calm the lust that's suddenly flaring inside me.

I'm able to look at Absolon through Elle's eyes.

And he really is the most gorgeous creature in the world.

Today he's wearing just a dark-teal dress shirt, no tie, but a pair of sunglasses hanging from his collar, black pants, expensive-looking shoes. His black hair is slicked off his face, showing off his perfect hairline, his dark brows putting his eyes in shadow, the blue playing off the color of his shirt. His body is tall, lean, but packed with muscle, and he moves with such stealthy confidence that every head in this place is turning and watching him come towards me.

My vampire.

I try to swallow, try to move, to do something, because I know this isn't a good thing, to have that world and this world collide like this, have Elle and Absolon together, but I can barely even think.

"Lenore," Solon says to me, stopping in front of the table, his accent sounding more British today, that voice smooth and rich as cream. "Sorry I'm late."

My eyes go even wider, and he leans over and kisses me on the cheek and I feel like my heart just went off like a bomb, my body shivering on the outside, a burst of heat and ice.

I'm speechless. I look down at the menu, trying to breathe, while Solon takes the seat beside me.

Why is he here?

"My apologies," Solon says, and when I look up, he's talking to Elle, holding his hand out across the table. "You seem surprised. I was sure that Lenore would have told you I was coming. I'm Solon."

Elle's mouth drops open and then she quickly snaps it shut. She shakes his hand, and I notice she winces just a little from what must be a strong, cold grip. "Uh, hi. I'm Elle." She takes her hand back, shaking it slightly as

she looks at me expectantly. “And no, Lenore didn’t tell me we were having company.”

“It slipped my mind,” I manage to say. My cheek burns from where his lips met my skin, though at least the ruby necklace has cooled down.

“Lenore has told me so much about you,” Solon goes on, and now I’m frowning, feeling a strange sense of panic, because I never told him anything about Elle. Either he’s lying or he figured some shit out on his own, and with him being a predator that sucks people’s blood to live, the latter is concerning.

“Good things I hope,” Elle says, and I notice her body language has totally changed. She’s leaning forward in her chair, elbow on the table, hand in her chin, and staring at him with heart eyes.

Stop it, I warn him in my head.

He only flashes Elle a smile that seems to make her melt on the spot, his teeth doing nothing to scare her. *Just charming your friend here.*

You’re compelling her. I pause. And you’re not wanted here.

You know I am. By you.

That’s what you think.

It’s what I know.

“All good things,” Solon assures her, still smiling.

Elle nods, then finally breaks away from his gaze, looking to me. “You have so much to tell me. When did you meet?” She’s looking back at him, examining his shirt, his hair, his face. Something like realization dawns on her. She stares at me. “Oh my god. Is this the hot guy from The Cloister? Your mystery man?”

Oh god, shut up Elle, I think.

Mystery man? Solon’s thoughts cut right into me. *Hot guy?*

I dare to look at him. He’s grinning with extreme self-satisfaction.

Great.

I clear my throat, both of them staring at me expectantly. “Yes,” I finally say.

“But how? Where did you see him again?” She leans forward, fingers pressed against the table. “Oh my god, don’t tell me he’s your stalker.”

“Stalker?” Solon asks in mock horror. He puts his elbows on the table, large hands clasped up by his face, and tilts his head as he looks at me, a cunning smile curving his lips. “Tell me more about this stalker.”

I shake my head and look at Elle. “That was nothing.”

"I ran into Lenore at the Ferry Building, getting my morning coffee," he says to her, the lie coming so easily to him. "Thought she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Took my bloody breath away."

My cheeks immediately go hot while Elle looks like she's melting again.

That has to be a lie too.

And it shouldn't matter if is, I remind myself.

Then I catch my thoughts, hoping he didn't hear them.

I eye him and he's still smiling at me, but his eyes have grown serious, and I feel the weight of them deep inside me, catching me off-guard.

"Is he the one who gave you the necklace?" Elle asks, breaking the moment. "Be honest. Because if so, then you know those gems are real."

I blink and give her a quick smile, reaching for my champagne. I need more. Much more.

"Yes, I did," Solon says, reaching over and grabbing the bottle for me, refiling my glass and Elle's. "I got it at auction and thought it would be worthy of her."

Elle's mouth drops open for the second time in ten minutes.

Just then the waiter comes by and gives Absolon a look of admiration.

"Mr. Stavig," the waiter says, straightening his shoulders. "It's been a long time since you've graced us with your presence. Why, you don't seem to age, do you?"

Solon grins at him. "Hector, you're too kind. I've been quite busy these days."

Meanwhile Elle and I are both watching the exchange, maybe impressed for different reasons. Hector is treating Solon like he's royalty, and Solon is so damn comfortable in his role, I have to wonder how much power and influence this man has in the city of San Francisco.

"Well, I'm delighted you're here. I'll tell Andre that you're back, your bill will be taken care of. Please give Ezra my regards," he says, giving us a nod before walking off.

"Don't tell me you own this place," I mutter under my breath.

"This place? No. I just used to come here a lot. Back in the day it was a lot better." He grins at Elle. "Don't tell Hector I said that, okay?" Then he winks and her eyes go round, like he just blew her mind with his handsomeness.

She blinks and gives me a sloppy smile that I know isn't from the champagne.

"I need to use the restroom," she says, getting to her feet, and gives me the kind of pointed glance that signals she wants me to go with her.

I'm about to get up, but Solon is quick and places his hand on my thigh, holding me down. "Sit," he hisses at me under his breath.

I watch as Elle walks off, then I reach down and attempt to pry his hand off of me, but it's like trying to move cement. "Don't tell me to sit, I'm not a dog," I hiss right back at him.

"Then why are you panting like one in heat?" he says, leaning in close, the scent of him overwhelming me.

"I am not..." I snipe at him, trailing off because I don't even want to repeat it.

He slides his hand down to my inner thigh, wedging his fingers between my legs, and I automatically clamp them together, but I'm not really sure if I'm trying to keep him in or keep him out.

His nose brushes against my ear, inhaling deeply as he slides his hand further up my thigh. "Your smell when you're aroused is the most intoxicating scent in the world," he murmurs, his voice sinking right into me, pooling in the heat between my legs, the growing ache.

"Get your hand off me," I tell him, my voice quiet and shaking, my eyes darting around the restaurant to see if anyone is watching. They aren't.

"Are you telling me to stop?" he says, now pressing his fingers right up against me, the thin material of my leggings and underwear providing no barrier, the strong breadth of his finger pushing right up against my clit.

I gasp, my breath catching, my eyes fluttering closed as I clench around his hand, wanting more, needing more.

"I'm..."

"Coming?" he whispers harshly in my ear, and I can't even answer him because he moves his hand harder against me, his fingers rubbing over me once, twice, and...

Oh my god.

How can this already be happening?

I try hard to hold my orgasm back, the cries softly strangling in my throat, and I'm biting down on my lip hard enough to draw blood while my body shakes and jerks in my chair, Solon keeping his hand where it is, pressing into me.

“Fuck,” I exclaim quietly, the word trembling on my lips. My heart is racing in my chest, stars falling in front of my eyes, like they’re landing on the table. Golden warmth flows over me, the deep, sated feeling of a mind-blowing orgasm.

How the fuck did he just do that so fast?

He barely even touched me.

I really am an animal around him, aren’t I?

And then reality fights through the haze.

I’m in a restaurant.

And he just made me come in public.

I carefully look around, afraid that others would have seen it all, but it seems I’m of no interest to anyone.

To anyone but Solon that is.

“You bastard,” I growl at him, grabbing his wrist and pulling his hand away from me. Now it comes off me easy and he takes it back. He breathes in deeply, closing his eyes for a moment, and I don’t have to guess what he’s smelling.

“I’ve been called worse things,” he says, suppressing a smile as he looks at me. He reaches out and quickly rubs his thumb across my lips, the blood glistening on it, then rubs it across his own lips, licking them delicately.

I swallow uneasily as I watch him, wondering if my blood will do anything to him. He’s shown so much restraint before.

“I seem to recall a time you were begging me to make you come,” he adds, after a thoughtful moment.

“You know you have no right being here,” I tell him, getting angry all over again. What I went through in bloodlust has no bearing on the way I am now around him. Does it?

This is how your body will always react, he’d once told me.

“Need to keep an eye on you, moonshine,” he says, reaching for my glass of champagne and having a gulp before setting it back down. “You’re on fragile ground. It’s a dangerous world now.”

“Dangerous?” I snap. “You’re the one who put me in danger by parading me in a room full of vampires.”

He gives me a steady look. “I told you why I did that.”

“And how am I supposed to trust you? You already lied to me.”

“When?”

“When I found out that you’re the one who sold out my parents, my real ones. You made a trade. You helped kill them. And you wanted me dead too, didn’t you?”

He jerks his head back like I just slapped him, his brows knitted together, eyes on fire. “*What?*”

“Should we order food?”

Elle’s voice makes me pull away from him and I see her approaching the table. From the wary look on her face I can tell she stayed as long as she did in there to give us some alone time.

I give her a reassuring smile, even though I’m beyond pissed off at Solon for even being here. He needs to leave, now.

Elle sits down, glancing between the two of us. “Everything okay?” she asks, still giving Solon the dreamy eyes.

“Solon was just leaving,” I tell her. “He’s a vampire, you know. Shouldn’t be in the daylight for so long.”

Solon goes stiff beside me, all his muscles tensing, and I swear I hear his heartbeat increase.

He angles his head and gives me a hard, cold stare. *Careful. Humans aren’t so easily compelled when they’re faced with the truth.*

I frown, knowing Elle obviously knew I was joking.

But when I look at Elle now, she’s sitting up straight in her chair, and I can smell a sharp tang in the air, her blood. It must be adrenaline making it more potent. Her eyes are watching Solon closely, her face contorting. She’s no longer compelled. She’s completely afraid of him. Revulsed, even.

I attempt to smile, open my mouth, about to joke that I’m a vampire too when Solon suddenly grabs my wrist.

Don’t! he yells in my head, his word a dagger. I meet his eyes and they’re impossibly blue, his pupils pin pricks. *Don’t tell her the truth unless you want her to believe it. Unless you want her to look at you like she’s looking at me. Unless you want to lose her as a friend.*

I suck in my breath, fear running through me now, the fear of losing Elle, my only friend. Then I look at her and try to smile but she’s still staring at Solon, like she really believes he is what he is, and that she’s his next meal.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to be going,” Solon says, letting go of my wrist and swiftly getting to his feet, towering over the table. “It was nice to

meet you Elle,” he says, but she doesn’t say anything back, just presses her lips together.

He leans in close to me, his mouth going behind my ear, the feel of his breath making my lids flutter. “Keep your truth between the two of us,” he whispers, creating goosebumps. “Come find me when you’re ready.”

Then he kisses the skin behind my ear and I feel like I’m totally coming undone. My eyes close, and they don’t open for a few moments. When I finally do look, he’s gone.

And Elle is staring at me with a grim expression, rubbing her hands up and down her arms like she’s cold.

“Who the fuck was that?” she asks.

“Absolon Stavig,” I tell her absently, knowing full well she’ll probably Google him later, but I also know that there’s nothing about him on the internet, because I did the same this morning.

“Well, I don’t like him,” she says, crossing her arms. “Gives me the fucking creeps.”

I sigh, finishing the rest of my champagne. “Yeah, he’s not for everyone.”

“I mean it, Lenore. Where did you find him? He is much too old for you, too.”

I can’t help but narrow my eyes. “I love a good age-gap.”

After the first century, it probably doesn’t matter much.

“Do your parents know about him?”

I nod. “Yes. They do. Actually, they introduced us.”

A version of the truth.

She shakes her head. “Let me guess, he owns a few museums. The man is obviously made of money.”

I pour the rest of the champagne into my glass. “I’m just glad you got to meet him. You seemed to like him at first.”

“Yeah,” she says, slowly thinking it over. Then she shrugs. “I don’t know what changed. But I still don’t like him.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about him?”

Because we’re not really together. Because I’m not even sure if I like him.

Because he really is a vampire and so am I and I hope you never believe it.

“It all happened so fast,” I say after a moment.

She frowns at me. “As long as you’re happy, I guess.”

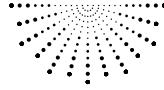
I almost choke on my champagne. Happy? If only I could tell her the truth. How far from happy I am.

But if she asked me if I feel alive, well...

That’s another story.

I’ve never felt so alive.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



I HAVE A RESTLESS FEW DAYS AT THE HOTEL, WHICH IS SUPPOSED TO BE MY indefinite home until we figure out what to do. I know it must be costing my parents a fortune, and even though they have money, I hate being this kind of strain on them. They don't have Solon's wealth, that's for sure. But I have no choice.

My parents have come by a couple of times, never together. We sit in my hotel room and order room service and talk. Sometimes it feels like old times, but more often than not there's this tension between us, one made from fear. I know my parents aren't sure if I'm suddenly going to spring up and bite them, and I'm afraid of doing the exact same thing.

But I can't keep living like this, hiding, waiting.

I need to get out.

I don't even have an ID or my wallet, just cash they give me, and I miss my phone. I talk to Elle on Facebook on the computer, but it's not the same. It's keeping me tethered to the room.

And there's a hunger and thirst that's building inside me, that doesn't go away no matter how many bottles of wine and bloody steaks I get delivered to my room.

I need to feed.

I hate myself for it.

But I can't ignore it anymore.

So, on a foggy-day, I leave the Fairmont, catching the California Line cable car with the tourists, heading over the hill, dropping me off on Van Ness where I walk across Koreatown until I'm at Alamo Square.

The walk would have been nice, the fact that I'm getting fresh air, that I'm out of the hotel, but with every person I pass, I grow increasingly paranoid that I'm going to attack them. I'm starting to smell them, the unique scent of each person's blood, and it makes my veins feel like they're shriveling up inside me.

I probably should have come here by way of the black and white world, but honestly that place gives me the creeps. I keep thinking I see those shadows in my room at night.

I come to a stop in front of the house, staring up at all the stories, the tower, marveling at how I know exactly who lives inside the walls. The urban legends about this place only scratched the surface.

There's movement at one of the windows, and I stare up, wondering who is watching me. I can feel the frosted gaze of a vampire, I'm just not sure who it belongs to.

Then the front door opens. There's a middle-aged woman, short, but with a long, elegant neck and straight posture. From the cut of her jaw and the dark grey-streaked hair piled on her head, I can tell this is Amethyst's mother, Yvonne, the human housekeeper I never got a chance to meet.

She gives me a quick smile and motions with her hand for me to come forward.

I go up the steps.

"Yvonne?" I ask quietly.

She nods and then steps back, gesturing for me to come inside.

I step through, expecting to either be bounced back by an invisible force field or feel some sort of charge, but I walk on through without anything unusual happening. The only thing I feel is an intense sense of calm come over me, like a weight lifted off my shoulders.

"Ms. Warwick?" Yvonne asks, and I realize that I've been standing in the middle of the hall with my eyes closed.

"Is Absolon here?" I turn to face her.

"He's coming," a raspy voice says from behind me.

I look to see Ezra on the staircase, though he wasn't there a second ago.

I haven't seen Ezra since he abducted me, and there's something about him that still makes me stand up straighter, the calm dissipating. In the daytime, in this house, he seems taller than I remembered, wiry and lean, but full of power. His style is much more relaxed than Solons, a black denim jacket, a navy graphic t-shirt, grey jeans. His dark hair falls softly

across his forehead, his skin tone tanned, not pale like Wolf or Solon. He has the look of Italian nobility in a casual, yet deadly, package.

"Hi," I say in a meek voice. "I came to get my bag."

Ezra purses his lips in disbelief, his brown eyes raking over me. I'm wearing jeans, and a thin, off-the-shoulder sweater, and the bare skin it exposes is where his gaze finally rests.

Ice burns my shoulder as his eyes slowly roam up to my neck, making me feel unsteady and unsettled.

Yvonne clears her throat loudly, snapping Ezra out of it. I don't have to turn around to know she just gave him a cutting look, because even he looks mildly afraid.

"Solon will be with you in a moment dear," Yvonne says to me, briefly touching my elbow. "Would you like me to stay with you?"

I blink at her. How brave this woman is, standing with two vampires, one of whom desperately needs to feed. "That won't be necessary."

She nods, a wash of relief coming across her, and then she disappears down the hall.

Ezra watches me for a moment, then slowly walks down the stairs, his gaze unnerving.

I look away, finding my focus drawn to the staircase bannister. There are numerous deep gauges in the wood, like something had clawed at it. Someone has tried to cover it up with a few coats of shiny paint, but they still remain.

I had done some more reading about the Westerfeld house the last few days, trying to meld together what was fiction and what was reality. Apparently, Anton LaVey, founder of the Church of Satan, used to frequent here, and prior to his conversion into Satanism, he was a lion tamer and kept a cub inside the house. He also used to hold satanic rituals in the ballroom, which I'm guessing was Dark Eyes.

The whole thing makes me shiver, even more than the fact that this is a full-blown vampire's lair.

"Is that from the lion?" I ask him, gesturing to the bottom of the bannister.

Ezra eyes me in surprise. "Lion? No. That was Solon."

My mouth opens. How the hell did Solon do that? He's got sharp fingernails, but they aren't claws.

“Do you want something to drink?” Ezra asks me, gesturing to a large set of doors.

Yes. Blood.

But I don’t feel comfortable telling him that. I don’t want to mention blood around other vampires, and the last thing I want is for him to offer himself, despite how hungry am.

“I’m good,” I tell him, walking toward the room, Ezra right at my back. I can feel his frozen stare on my shoulder, practically smell the lust and desire rolling off him in waves.

We enter the large library, a gorgeous place filled with books from floor-to-ceiling, all teak wood shelving, old chandeliers hanging from a gilded ceiling, but it’s hard to focus on that when all I can feel is Ezra’s hunger.

He places a hand on my shoulder, and I gasp at the contact, freezing in place. Fear floods all my senses, setting off panic, while the ruby in my necklace starts to burn on my chest.

“Please remove your hand,” Absolon’s quiet but deadly voice comes from behind us.

Ezra hesitates, then takes it away. I breathe a sigh of relief, turning around to see Solon leaning against the doorway, black pants, a burgundy dress shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

But despite the casual pose, his eyes possess the lethal self-assurance of a cold-blooded killer.

Ezra raises his palms as he saunters past him. “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t dream of hurting your beloved protégé.”

I know Ezra was being sarcastic, but the word *beloved* hits me deep. For a moment, I wonder what it would be like to have this man’s love, if he’s even capable of it. Surely vampires fall in love, don’t they?

Not for you to find out, I scold myself, willing the butterflies inside my stomach to settle.

Ezra goes back up the stairs and Solon watches his every move. Finally, he comes away from the door, walking toward me.

“You came,” Solon notes, gesturing to the blue velvet couch behind me. “Have a seat.”

I don’t move. “I came to get my purse.”

A smoky look takes over his eyes. “That’s not why you’re here.”

“You think I’m propositioning you?”

His brows go up. "I didn't think that." Then he smiles. "Now I do."

I scowl at him as he takes a few steps toward me, his eyes coasting over every inch of me. "You really should sit down," he says. "You look tired. Vampires rarely look tired."

Then he turns and takes a seat in the leather armchair across from me. Reluctantly, I sit down on the couch, both relieved and disappointed that there's some distance between us, unlike the last time I saw him.

"You shouldn't have shown up at our lunch like that," I tell him, still pissed.

"I told you," he says calmly. "Had to keep an eye on you. You'd be foolish to think I haven't been watching you these past few days."

I swallow, averting my eyes to the indigo carpet, trying to focus on the designs on it. "You must have better things to do with your time."

"How I spend my time is up to me, moonshine. When you've got an eternity waiting for you, time tends to lose all meaning."

I glance at him, once again stricken by his carnal beauty. "You're not immortal."

"You're right. I'm not immortal. But I do excel at living."

I think that over for a moment. "Still, you put me in danger by showing up."

"You're the one who put herself in danger by leaving the hotel," he replies simply. "You also put the both of us in danger by trying to reveal who we really are."

"Well, how am I supposed to know you aren't even supposed to joke about it? There's no rule book."

"But there is *me*." He gives me a pointed look. "Perhaps you should be staying here instead of all alone and unprotected, with only your helpless witchy parents as company."

"Maybe staying here sounds just as dangerous as staying anywhere else."

But it's a lie the moment it leaves my lips. Because, despite Ezra giving me the heebie-jeebies, I feel calm here. Safe. Even sitting on this couch I feel like my body is melding into it, letting go of so much tension and anxiety. I have to force myself to stay alert.

"You don't worry about Ezra," Solon says, his face darkening for a moment. "He knows I'll kill him if he touches you again."

My heart thumps loudly at that.

“Don’t romanticise my words,” he adds. “I’m merely possessive over what’s mine.”

“I’m not yours,” I remind him stiffly. “Though clearly you treat me like I am, think you can just touch me any time you want.”

He gives me a twisted smile, his eyes glittering. “I’m sorry, am I not supposed to get you off in the span of ten seconds?”

My whole body burns from the memory and I take in a deep, shaky breath to steady my nerves—and my hormones. “No.”

But also, yes. My body wants it, my heart does too, but my brain says otherwise; my brain says he needs to keep his distance at all times.

He makes a sound of irritation. “Don’t think about it too deeply. I’m just exerting my power over you.”

I give him a sharp look. “Yeah, well maybe one day I’ll get to exert *my* power over *you*.”

That brings a small smile to his face. He gets to his feet, comes over to the couch and peers down at me. “I’m counting on it,” he says steadily.

Then he turns and walks off to a bar cart in the corner. “Want a drink?” he asks, taking the top off a crystal decanter with a satisfying pop. “And I don’t mean blood. You’ll get that later.”

I’m getting emotional—and physical—whiplash from our interactions. I take in another deep breath, then decide a stiff drink is probably what I need. Stiff something, that’s for sure. “Okay.”

He glances at me over his shoulder, as if he heard that last thought, and then pours the drinks, coming over with two crystal highball glasses in his hands. “Here,” he says, handing me one. He brings his glass to mine, tapping it against the rim with a musical chime. “And here’s to new beginnings.”

I stare up at him, immediately locked in his gaze, his pupils growing larger, blacker, until they’re all I see. He raises his glass to his lips, never breaking eye contact, and I do the same, swallowing down the delicious burn of Scotch.

Then he sits back down in the armchair, one leg crossed, ankle on the knee, taking an elegant pose. He reminds me of a big cat, and I think back to the claw marks on the stairs, wondering what happened there. But I have so many questions for him at this point, that will have to wait.

“You’re still wearing the necklace,” he says appreciatively.

I automatically press my fingers against the ruby, a habit now. "I've been too afraid to take it off."

His forehead creases. "Really? And why is that?"

"My parents said it's bewitched."

"And they were fine with you wearing it?"

"They said," I pause, licking my lips, "that it was for my own good."

"They're right," he says after a moment, taking a sip of his drink.

"What is it? A way to track me?"

He scoffs. "I can track you without that, moonshine."

I stare at him to go on.

"It lets you know when I'm near," he explains. He has another sip of his drink.

"A warning?"

He gives me a cold look. "Sure. If you like to think of it that way."

I decide to switch the subject. "So, what happened to me the other night? What is the...Black Sunshine?"

He observes me for a moment before he relaxes slightly. "Some call it the Veil, but it depends on who you are and where you go. It's a world between worlds."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that there are more dimensions to this world than what we exist on," he says with added patience. "And by we, I mean humanity. The Black Sunshine is used primarily by vampires, but sometimes you'll find people in there too, those with special abilities. Not quite witchcraft, but something else."

"So normal people can't go there?"

He lifts a shoulder. "Normal people might, but it's getting into the Veils that poses the problem. You have to create your own door and not many people can do that. You also have to be careful as to where you're going." He notes the puzzled expression on my face. "Think of it like...back in the day, when you paid with your credit card, they'd put it in an imprinter and make several copies on carbon. Think of the top layer as this world, the next as Black Sunshine, and the rest as the layers under that."

"So, there's another layer underneath the one I was in?"

He nods.

"Can we go there?"

"Yes," he says cautiously. "But you don't want to."

“Why not?”

“Because the levels go *down*, Lenore, not up. You understand what I’m saying? Even those as damned and soulless as we are don’t want to flirt with Hell.”

“Soulless? Speak for yourself.”

“I am,” he replies curtly, staring at me until I look down at my drink.

“So, do all vampires go in there? I didn’t see anyone there at all. Just... shadows. Creeped me out.”

“Those are shadow souls. You have a right to be *creeped out*.”

“Shadow souls?”

“Souls trapped in purgatory until they burnout, just the darkness remaining. They’re hungry for anything with a heartbeat. Spirit-hijackers. Best to stay away from them if you can.”

My eyes go wide. “Spirit-hijackers? I’m never going back in there again.”

“It’s not a pleasant place,” he says with a sigh, twirling his glass around, watching the caramel liquid swirl. “But sometimes it’s necessary. Not only because time moves differently in there, but because it allows us to hide for long periods of time.”

“Wait, time moves differently?”

“The time it took for you to escape from Dark Eyes and run to your apartment took less than a minute.”

I shake my head. “No. I was running full-stop, but it was at least ten.”

“Not to this world. It’s the closest thing we have to teleporting. You still have to do the work, time feels normal down there. But up here, it gives the illusion of being gone for just a moment.” He pauses, sucking in his lower lip in thought. “Long ago, when we weren’t used to the real sunshine yet, we’d have to escape into the Black Sunshine for six months at a time.”

“Why?”

“We come from the land of the midnight sun,” he says. “Half the year we live in darkness, the other half the sun never sets. That world was our salvation.”

This is a segue, and I’m taking it.

“Tell me about Skarde,” I say.

His mouth tightens. “Who told you about him? Your parents?”

“Wolf, actually. My parents too, but I still don’t know much.”

“Hmmm.” He swallows down more of his drink, his jaw tense. “Well, what do you want to know?” he finally says.

“He’s still alive, right?”

His eyes bore into me. “Yes.”

“Do you know him?”

A subtle nod, his mouth firm.

“And...where is he? In San Francisco?”

“God, no,” he says in a hush. “He’s far away. Norway. A tiny village no one can find. No human, that is.”

I’m so intrigued, despite the fact that the couch feels like it’s swallowing me whole. “Have you been there?”

“Of course,” he says, like I’m an idiot for asking.

“How old are you?”

“Old.”

“Why don’t you tell me? When were you born? Or reborn, I should say.”

“What makes you think vampires are reborn?”

I open my mouth, then close it. “So, you can’t make a vampire? I thought that was the whole point of creating a vampire, being a vampire?”

“What’s the need to do that if we can create them the other way?” he asks pointedly. “By fucking.”

The way he says *fucking* sounds extra crude, but of course it sets my skin on fire, brings a fierce ache out of me.

He totally said that on purpose.

I clear my throat. “So you can’t make a vampire, then.”

“We can,” he says slowly. “But it’s not allowed anymore.”

“Who says?”

“Who do you think?”

“Skarde?” He nods. “Why not anymore?”

“Because it was done for a while, to get vampires established, and then it was outlawed. It rarely goes the way you want it to. Humans that become vampires are...mentally and physically unstable, to put it mildly. It’s an awful life, if you’re unlucky enough to even survive it. Most kill themselves, one way or another, on purpose or not. You want to know how vampires became such feared and condemned creatures? That’s how. They’re the true monsters in this world.”

I shiver despite myself. “Have you turned anyone into one?”

His eyes narrow sharply. "I would never do that. I'm cruel, remember, but not that cruel." He pauses, his fingers tensing around the glass, enough that I worry about it shattering. "The less blood-hungry savage creatures there are on this earth, the better."

I decide I shouldn't ask any more about that. Not from him, anyway. Then again, Wolf seemed pretty cagey and uncomfortable talking about Skarde too. I have to wonder if this house is on the vampire king's shitlist. How can it not be, when Solon and his crew have been handing over vampires to witches for who knows how long?

Solon straightens up in his chair, looking toward a bookshelf. "Perhaps we should...*play some music.*"

Classical music immediately fills the room.

I'm impressed.

"Let me guess, that's some kind of magic you got from witches?" I ask.

"No," he says evenly. "That's *Alexa.*"

"Oh," I say, feeling my face flush.

"I do have a small repertoire of magic that I've bartered for, but technology wins out most of the time."

"The music is lovely," I tell him, letting the somber, elegant tones wash over me, bringing back that feeling of calm of when I first stepped into the house. "What is it?"

"*"The Poet Acts"* by Philip Glass. Not bad for a modern composer."

The term "modern composer" makes me think of how many composers he must have heard in his lifetime.

"Did you ever meet Beethoven?" I ask.

"Beethoven?" he repeats incredulously, giving me a funny look. "No. Just because I was alive when Beethoven was, doesn't mean I met him." He pauses, giving me a small smile. "I did see Mozart in concert though."

I stare at him in awe. "No way."

His smile widens, reaching his eyes until they're absolutely dazzling. Butterflies twirl through my stomach.

"Yes, way," he says. "It was in Paris." He closes his eyes, a wistful crease in his brow. "1763, I believe. It was a cold night in November. In those days, it snowed that early, and the snow was coming down hard. Nearly missed the concert because of it. Mozart was so young, just a boy. Eight years old maybe. Never seen anything like it before, and haven't since then."

He opens his eyes and fixes them on me and for a moment I think I can see the past in them. I can feel what it was like to have been there, and tears automatically spring to my eyes, goosebumps spreading along my arms. I can feel the cold outside the concert hall doors, hear the hushed murmurs of the crowd, then footsteps walking across a wooden stage. The first notes of a piano, so clear, so beautiful, my heart is almost breaking.

The corner of his mouth lifts as he tilts his head, studying me. "That's curious. Feels like you're there, doesn't it?"

I nod slowly, afraid to break the spell, though I can't tell what belongs to Philip Glass, and what is Mozart swirling around in my head.

"You know," he says thoughtfully, his voice low as he continues to observe me, "it's been ages since someone has had my blood. It doesn't happen often, and it never happens by accident."

"What does it all mean?" I ask, hushed.

He gets to his feet and comes over, crouching down in front of me, his presence so close, making my skin go from hot to cold and back again.

Utterly alive.

"It means you share parts of my memories now. Of what I've felt. What I've seen. And what I've done." He reaches out and with startling tenderness, brushes his thumb under my eye. I'm surprised to see it wet with an errant tear. "I better be careful of what I tell you of my past," he says quietly.

I stare at him, numb and amazed at once.

He gets to his feet and I immediately close my eyes, trying to conjure up the memory of Mozart again, but it's faded away like a dream does in the morning.

I'm starting to fade too, like the emotions of his past are exhausting me, pulling me under.

"You look tired," he says again. "You should relax."

At his words, I sink deeper into the couch, the glass of Scotch dangling from my fingers. He reaches down and takes it from me before I drop it, placing it on the side table.

"You drugged me," I manage to say, my words slow, feeling so relaxed that I'm melting on the spot.

"I did no such thing," he says. "This is your body finally feeling safe. You haven't slept for days."

I thought vampires didn't need sleep, I think, too tired to move my mouth now.

We do, he says, deep inside my head. *Just like any other creature.*

The next thing I feel is him coming closer, his scent washing over my body, then his strong, firm arms are going around me and he's lifting me up, carrying me. I'm as limp as a ragdoll in his arms.

"Put your hands around my neck," he murmurs to me. "Please try not to bite me. I don't want another shirt ruined."

I do as he says, opening my eyes for a moment to see him staring down at me with a wary expression. I have enough energy to bury my head in the crook of his neck, pressing my nose against his skin, breathing him in until my eyes flutter. He told me not to bite him, and even though I can hear his heartbeat, it only soothes me even further.

He carries me up the many flights of stairs and I feel myself drifting in and out of sleep. We go down the hall and into my bedroom.

My bedroom. That's what it feels like now.

Like it's mine.

Like it always was.

He carries me to the bed, throwing back the covers, and then lays me down on it, gently putting my head on the pillow. He takes off my boots, then puts my legs under the covers.

I feel fear for a moment, the feeling of losing consciousness, of losing control.

"Solon," I cry out in a ragged hush, reaching for him, my eyes too heavy to open.

He grabs my hand, giving it a squeeze that sends warmth through my body. "You need to sleep, Lenore. You're safe now. Sleep."

Stop compelling me, I think.

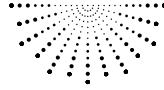
"You'd know it if I was," he says in a low voice. "When you wake up, you'll be hungry. Come find me."

He gives my hand another strong, comforting squeeze.

Then he's gone.

Sleep comes for me, pulls me into the black.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I DREAM OF BLOOD.

Rivers of it.

Elusive.

Endless red that I can't reach, can't touch, like I'm in my own personal desert, throat drying up, body aching for something I can't have.

The more I want it, the more I need it.

And the more the rivers recede.

Telling me that if I get it, I'll drown myself, that I won't be able to stop myself. That I'll destroy the whole damn world with my thirst.

When I finally wake up, I'm ravaged with a hunger I've never felt before.

It's dark in the room and it takes me a moment to realize where I am.

In my bedroom.

In Solon's house.

A room that was once my prison.

A place I willingly returned.

I remember Solon carrying me up the stairs, bringing me here, handling me with such gentleness that it's hard to reconcile that version with the one of him who tied me to the bed however long ago that was. Not to mention, you know, the stalking, kidnapping. Vampire traits, I suppose.

But I don't dwell on it too much.

I'm hungry.

Starving.

And if I don't get what I need, I think I'm actually going to die.

I get out of bed and walk out of the bedroom, into the house, candles lit along the walls, dead roses gone stiff in vases. I'll deal with them later.

I start going up the stairs, to the level I've never been before.

Come find me, he had said before I fell asleep, *you'll be hungry*.

Absolon is up here.

The closer I get to the floor, the more my necklace burns against me, until I'm standing outside what has to be his door, painted black with gold edging.

I raise my hand to knock but I hear his voice in my head.

Come in.

I swallow, my palms itching, and turn the knob.

I step inside a large room. Black wallpaper with gold designs. Black king-sized four-poster bed with black sheets. Black curtains on the windows, black candles for lighting.

This must be where the Prince of Darkness sleeps, I think. The smell of him is overwhelming, churning that hunger inside me. I don't even know how much of it is the urge to fuck him or how much is the urge feed from him, but I have a feeling I'm about to find out.

He's not in this room, though. There's a ladder at one end that leads up to another floor, to what I'm guessing is the house's infamous tower. I'm about to head up there when I hear a splash of water from another room, the door half open.

I walk over and push the door open, staring into a large en suite bathroom. Compared to the bedroom, it's fairly modern with slick tiles and mood lighting.

In the middle is a claw-foot bathtub.

Solon is in it, facing away from me, arms resting on the sides of the tub.

I stare at the back of his head for a moment, hesitating.

But that thirst inside me won't let me be cautious.

I walk around the bathtub to face him.

He's staring up at me, intensity glittering in his eyes, his pupils large and hypnotic.

He's completely naked, and this isn't a bubble bath. He's on display.

It would be rude to look, but he's already seen me naked plenty of times.

So I glance.

No, I *gawk*.

He's magnificent.

All six-foot-two of him, every muscle hard and sculpted to perfection.

And he's erect. Thick, long, perfect.

Yet another intimidating thing about him.

I expect him to have some dry remark about me staring at his cock for so long, but silence envelopes the bathroom, the kind of silence that already speaks volumes.

It's the silence before the storm.

He sits up a little straighter, eyes still on me, and I take off my sweater, my bra, slip out of my jeans and underwear, throwing them to the side. Then I take off my necklace, tossing it on top of my clothes. I should feel self-conscious stripping in front of him like this, but I don't.

My mind is too preoccupied to care.

He angles his head to the right, exposing his neck, highlighting the dark vein that flashes against his luminous skin.

My teeth lengthen in my mouth, the hunger taking over completely. I thought he was going to cut himself like he did for me last time, but I guess this time it's different.

This time I have to bite him.

A current of fear runs through me, not sure if I'll like what I'll become when I do this. But the urge to feed is too strong, and now it's so confused with my desire for him that I don't know what way is up.

All I know is that he's offering himself to me.

And I would only hurt myself if I didn't take it.

I step in the bathtub carefully, his eyes raking over my naked body, leaving icy hot trails in their wake, then I lower myself in the water until I'm straddling him, my thighs on either side of his hips.

My gaze drifts up from the soft flesh of his neck over to his eyes, his expression both savage and wary. Almost like...he's afraid of me.

I lick my lips, trying to restrain myself from devouring him like an animal, then reach back and grab his cock under the water, trying to position him under me, wanting the fullness of him inside.

He immediately reaches into the water and grabs me by the wrist, ripping it away, his eyes blazing.

"No," he says gruffly. "I can't."

I frown. "You can't?" I whisper, my voice raw with desire.

“You wouldn’t like what happens to me,” he growls, swallowing hard, grip still tight on my wrist. “You’re hungry for something else, Lenore. Take it.”

He moves his head an inch, drawing my attention back to his neck.

“Are you sure?” I ask, though the itch inside me is getting painful now. I can hear his blood, smell it, and it’s whipping my nerves up into a frenzy that I don’t think I’ll be able to control. “What if you don’t like what happens to *me*?”

“I’ll handle it,” he says firmly. “You need to feed. I don’t want you having anyone else’s blood but mine.” He grabs the back of my head and pushes my face down onto his neck. “Do it. Bite me.”

My lips are pushed against his skin, energy already flowing from him to me, and I quickly open my mouth, exposing my teeth before sinking them into his skin, biting down *hard*.

He lets out a ragged whimper from the pain, but I barely hear him, and I don’t even care. All I care about is the sweet blood that’s flowing from the wound, into my mouth, hitting my tongue with sparks, filling me up with life and energy and everything I need, down to my very soul.

Solon groans and I bite him even harder, my fangs sinking deeper into his flesh, my body writhing on top of his. He’s still hard as hell and suddenly I’m hit with the uncontrollable urge to fuck and feed at the same time.

But he keeps himself just out of reach, holding my head to his neck while I suck and bite, lick and drink. His other hand slides around my waist, holding me in place.

Eventually that hand glides up over my wet skin to my breasts, thumb brushing over my nipple that’s already pebble-hard, fingers pinching, shockwaves being sent through my body.

I moan into his neck, one need being satisfied while the other being teased.

I lift my head and look at him, our faces close.

He stares at my lips, at his blood all over my mouth, but it doesn’t scare him. The heat in his eyes burns even hotter, nostrils flaring, and I can tell he’s doing everything to hold himself back.

He swallows hard, his throat bobbing. “You done?” he asks in a rough voice.

I shake my head. “No.”

Then I move in, inch-by-inch, slowly placing my lips on top of his.

His eyes are still open, still staring at me, turning black, his whole body growing tense.

Then his mouth yields and my eyes close, sinking into the kiss.

Our tongues meet, tentative and soft at first, a dance with me trying to lead, to get more from him, to free him from whatever is restraining him.

He moans into my mouth, a sound that nearly makes me come, and his hand glides down my back and then back up, through my hair, making a tight fist.

I gasp against his lips.

Jesus.

I didn't know I could kiss and be kissed like this. Our mouths fit against each other like we were never meant to be separated, a slow decadent dream that I'm slipping further and further into. All my senses, from the way he tastes, to the way he smells, to the way those hands feel as they pull my hair and hold my waist, are beyond heightened, in their elements. His lips are soft and hard and everything I want.

Then it starts to build.

His mouth takes the lead, his movements rougher, more violent, his hold on me tighter now, his other hand slipping between my legs, fingers sliding through the water, over my clit.

I lift my head up, arching my spine, throwing my head back while he drives his fingers inside me. Music builds deep within my bones, a low, dizzying bass-driven rumble that moves my body into his hand, wanting more, so much more.

"Fuck," I cry out, coming on his fingers, the orgasm blindsiding me, stealing the air from my lungs.

I fall forward, my hair hanging over me, and now his lips are at my breast, sucking my nipple into his mouth. The orgasm doesn't stop, it just intensifies and keeps going, and he's still fucking me with his fingers, driving it home again and again.

"Oh my god," I breathe, unable to take it, my body endlessly writhing and convulsing, feeling like I'm turning into gold confetti.

He drives his fingers deeper still, then brings my mouth back to his neck, where a little bit of blood remains, his wounds nearly healed. I feed again as he makes me come, sucking up the blood as the orgasm tears me apart.

He's breathing hard, his own desire changing the taste of the blood, making it hit differently, like I've just done several lines of coke and some molly. I dig my fingers into his shoulder, my other hand reaching for his cock again, wanting it inside me more than anything.

He lets out a growl that turns into a groan, and I think he might be too turned on to make me stop, or maybe too weak. I keep my grip tight around him, his cock growing larger, impossible to make a proper fist as I slide it up and down before positioning it against me.

Stop, he says in my head, his voice barely audible.

But I can't stop, not now, not when I'm like this.

I want him so badly, I'm not even myself.

"Stop!" he suddenly roars. His hand shoots out with a splash, grabbing me by the throat and holding me back from him. "You don't know what you're asking for. But I do."

I gasp, trying to breathe, my fingers going to his hand, trying to pry myself free.

His grip is too strong, fueled by the madness in his eyes.

I see pain in their depths remorse, rage and fear.

All the things he tries so hard to hide, tucked away behind that cold fortress.

This I know now.

Then he blinks.

Releases my throat so that I drop into the water, hunched over, coughing and gasping for breath. I know he can't choke me to death, but it still doesn't feel good.

He slips out from under me, gets out of the tub, walking naked across the bathroom and into his bedroom. I hear footsteps on the ladder, a creak of the floorboards.

He's in the tower.

I sit there on my knees in the bloody water, my hands shaking. I press my fingers against my teeth, willing them to go back to normal, to stop being a monster.

Because I am a monster.

I got so carried away with feeding from him, I wanted to take all of him, every last bit. There are different types of vampires, and here it wasn't only about feeding. Him offering up something sacred like his blood wasn't enough for me.

I just wanted Solon, in every way I could get him.

Even if it's not what he wanted.

I sit for a few minutes more, trying to calm my heart and breath, washing the blood off my face.

Then I get out, quickly towel off, and slip on my clothes.

I put my necklace in the pocket of my jeans, unsure if I should be wearing it right now, unsure what's going to happen with us next. He'll probably never let me feed from him again, and if that's the case, then who do I go to? What do I do? Do I have to start killing people?

It's all too much for me to even think about.

I leave the bathroom, slip through his bedroom, and then go out into the hall.

Quick as a wink and I'm back in my room, closing the door.

I sit on the edge of the bed and try to think about what to do next. Do I go back to the hotel? That seems like the best course of action. I need to get away from here. It felt safe earlier, but now I've ruined it.

I get up and I'm about open the door when suddenly there's a knock at it.

My heart jumps around, thinking it might be Solon, even if it doesn't feel like it is. I sniff, catching a whiff of ginger, and when I open the door I see Amethyst on the other side.

"I have your purse," she says brightly, lifting it up. "Mind if I come in?"

"Uh, sure," I say, opening the door wider.

She walks in, her hair leaving a scent trail of vanilla and coconut.

She places it on the dresser, then turns around to face me.

"Were you going somewhere?"

I close the door. "I was going back to my hotel."

"Oh," she says, looking around the room.

"Aren't you afraid to be with me?" I ask her bluntly. I must look a fright too, with my hair all messy and wet, my makeup smudged, and there's probably some blood on me somewhere.

She gives me a small smile and sits on the edge of the bed. "No. I know you just fed."

I swallow uneasily, hating how that word sounds now. Especially when a normal human says it.

"You must think I'm such a monster," I tell her, suddenly hit with shame. I feel my knees buckle and then I'm sinking to the floor.

She's at my side in a second, crouching beside me.

"Hey, you're okay," she says. "It's Solon's blood. I've seen this happen before."

She pushes my hair off my forehead, forcing me to look at her. "And you're not a monster. You're just a vampire. For you it must be even tougher, you have to balance the witch in you too."

She pulls me up to my feet and then leads me over to the armchair in the corner. "Here, sit," she says. "Want me to get you some tea?"

"I don't want to be a bother," I tell her, attempting to get back up.

She pushes me back down. "It's not a bother. Lemon balm okay? It calms the nerves." I nod and she takes out her phone and sends a text, probably to her mother. "It will be right up."

"What do you mean you've seen this before with Solon's blood?" I ask her.

"Oh. Well not with his blood specifically, just vampires in general. We've had a lot of them in this house, and I've had to walk into the Dark Room plenty of times. It's ugly stuff but..." she thinks it over, her pretty lavender eyes looking at the ceiling. She shrugs. "It is what it is."

I have to say, I feel a bit of relief to know that it wasn't Solon's blood. He had said earlier that it's something he doesn't let happen by accident. Made me feel special in a stupid way, like I was worthy of him.

"What's the Dark Room?" I ask.

"It's the, uh, *private events* room in the lounge. You can't miss it."

"The one with the metal floors and the chains?"

"That's the one."

"And what's that for?"

"Sometimes it's for vampires that turn. Families will bring them here, knowing they're safe and taken care of. You went through it, you know you have to be restrained. You also have to feed."

I shake my head, wondering how she can deal with all of this.

"You said sometimes," I comment. "What else is it used for?"

"The volunteers," she says, frowning. "They didn't tell you about them?"

"No," I say, wondering what else there is I don't know. A ton, probably.

"The volunteers are humans," she says. "It's how I started. Well, I brought a friend here about six years ago. She was obsessed with vampires, she heard stories about this place. Rumors. She made friends with Ezra, and

the next thing I knew I was accompanying her to the house.” She pauses. “I had to wait outside. But my friend went in.”

A chill runs through me. Other humans know about this place and willingly come here? Then again, given the history of this place, I shouldn’t be surprised. I’m certain now that’s what Anton LeVey and Manson were probably doing here too.

“What do they do in there?”

“They give their blood. The vampires are the ones that go in the chains, though. It gives the humans control, keeps the vamps from going mental with bloodlust. A lot of people have fetishes when it comes to blood play or getting bitten. They get to indulge those fetishes and the vampires get to feed.” She tilts her head as she looks at me. “If you didn’t have Solon, that’s where you’d go. Better than killing people on the street, am I right?”

I nod, and then sigh loudly. “Well, I’m sure I’ll be down there soon.” Even though the idea of feeding off a stranger, a human no less, gives me the creeps.

There’s a knock at the door and Amethyst answers it, smiling at her mom as she takes a tray of tea.

The door closes and she brings the tray over to me, putting it on the coffee table. It smells heavenly, in a porcelain pot, with shortbread cookies beside it. I didn’t think I’d ever be hungry for food again, but my stomach growls. It also reminds me of drinking tea and eating cookies in my parent’s kitchen, and my heart pangs for the innocence of the years past, innocence I’ll never get back.

Amethyst pulls up a velvet ottoman and sits across from me. “My mom made the cookies herself. You better eat them since the vampires don’t eat as much food as they should, and I eat too many sweets as it is.”

I reach for a cookie and nibble on the end of it, unsure how my stomach will react after all that blood. Like I’ve discovered with all the food I’ve had lately, I can pick up on every single ingredient, down to the specific type. It’s pretty amazing, though it can make food overwhelming. Thankfully, these cookies are simple and delicious.

“I’m sure with you being half witch, you won’t have to drink blood that often anyway,” Amethyst says. “And that’s what Solon’s there for. You won’t be in the Dark Room.”

“I don’t think so,” I say, trying to catch the crumbs from my mouth. “We had a fight.”

She raises a perfectly groomed brow. "A fight? With Solon?"

I frown. "That doesn't happen?"

Her lips curl with amusement. "No. I mean, it happens. But everyone basically does what he tells them to do."

"Alpha of the house, huh."

"Yeah. And they're all alphas, so it's a handful. But he rules the roost. He rules most of the city, to be honest."

"I got that impression earlier," I say, thinking of the waiter at the restaurant.

"So why do you think you're fighting with him?"

I look down at the tea, avoiding her eyes. "Oh. Uh. I got...carried away."

"With feeding?"

"Yeah..."

"That's what he wants from you. He's fine."

"Well, that, and uh...he was naked and I was naked and..."

She stares at me, waiting for me to spell it out.

I exhale. "This has never happened to me before, but I guess I was a little handsy and out-of-control and he told me to stop and when I didn't..."

I close my eyes, feeling gross and ashamed and I probably shouldn't be telling Amethyst, a girl I don't even know, the intimate, personal details of what happened.

"He got mad," she fills in.

"Yeah," I say, looking at her. "I've never seen him mad before. It scared the shit out of me. But at least I stopped."

She nods, rubbing her pink lipstick together. "Hmmm. It is rare that Solon gets mad. I've seen it, and you're right, it's, uh, intense. Especially when he's always keeping his emotions so perfectly in-check. But he won't stay mad. He understands more than anyone else what it's like to lose control..."

The way she trails off there sounds like she just said something she shouldn't have.

"What is it?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Nothing. I think your tea is ready." She leans over and pours my tea for me, the fragrance of the lemon balm filling the room. Not the best smell, but right now I find it comforting.

She gives me another quick smile. "Solon has a complicated past and I don't know the half of it," she explains. "All I got from him are the things he sometimes tells me when he's drunk."

"He gets drunk?" I ask, eager to see him lose his decorum.

"Rarely. It takes a lot for a vampire to get super drunk, but I have seen it. The perks of running a bar for them."

"So, what did he tell you?"

I half expect her to tell me what Wolf told me, that his past is his to share or some bro-code excuse like that.

"I just know he has issues with getting close to women," she says carefully.

"Surely a man like that has every woman in the city throwing themselves at him," I say.

"Oh, he does. He attracts them like crazy. It's not just him compelling them either, it's just the way he is. Normal humans, they know something is amiss with him, something beautiful and dark and dangerous. They want to be a part of it. Equally scared and fascinated. *That's* what compels them."

"So, he doesn't bring any of them home?"

"No," she says. "I mean, he sleeps with them, but usually at a hotel or their place."

And at that, I'm suddenly hit with a wave of nausea, feeling physically ill, my heart seeming to collapse on itself.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she says emphatically. "I didn't...I didn't realize you were in love with him."

Now I'm nearly choking on part of the cookie I thought I'd swallowed. "What? I'm not in love with him!"

"Well, you looked like you were just kicked in the stomach," she points out, eying me. I look down. I am in fact holding onto my stomach in pain.

"I'm not in love with him," I say, trying to straighten up. "I don't even *like* him. This is just a territorial thing. A possessive thing. I'm a vampire, remember?"

"Right," she says slowly, her brow flicking up. "Anyway, regardless of what brought that reaction on, I shouldn't have been so callous."

Despite what I just told her, I still can't shake the sinking feeling. "I don't understand though. He acted earlier like he couldn't have sex with me. I thought he maybe meant in general, like he took some celibate vampire oath or something."

Amethyst snorts at that.

I give her a dirty look, to which she recoils slightly. “But,” I continue, “if he’s sleeping with a ton of other women, then why didn’t he...”

I don’t finish my sentence. It’s because he simply doesn’t want to. Each time he’s been hard as cement and aroused around me, I’ve been naked and pressed against him. Most men would react that way, and I’m sure vampires too.

“I didn’t say he’s sleeping with a *ton* of women,” she says, composing herself. “I don’t ask questions, but he’s almost always here and I’ve never met any of them. He’s a secretive guy by nature, not just his vampire nature, so I don’t think he shares too much of himself with others, even if it is just physical.” She pauses, weighing something in her head. “I only know he was in love once.”

“Once?” My heart pangs again. So he *can* love.

“A very, very long time ago,” she says gravely, and from the tone of her voice, I know this isn’t going to have a very happy ending. “She died.”

Oh, no.

I don’t want to ask the question.

But I do. “How did she die?”

She swallows. “He killed her.”

My eyes go round, mouth drops. “Accidentally?” I whisper.

“He says no. It wasn’t an accident. They weren’t married, she had a little boy with someone else. He died too.”

“Oh my god,” I breathe, my chest feeling heavy. I can’t tell if I need to be sorry for Solon, or if I need to be scared of him. He *loved* her and he *killed* her? And her child?

I need to be scared of him.

“As a result,” she goes on, “I don’t think he lets himself get too close to women. Whether that’s on a physical or emotional level, I don’t know, maybe it’s all the same to him. So please, don’t take it personally. It’s just the way he is, and the sooner you accept it, the better. For everyone.”

I nod, taking a long sip of my tea, trying to soothe my feelings with the hot liquid. It’s not really working.

“You’ll patch things up though,” she adds. “He’s really fond of you.”

“Fond of me?” I repeat dryly. “Like some kind of pet.”

“Hey, I’ll take being his pet over being the woman who runs his nightclub,” she says with a sad smile. Something tells me those googly-eyes

I saw her making at him are tied to her having been in love with him at some point.

Sucks to be her.

I feel the change in energy in the air and finish the rest of my tea, getting to my feet. "I should get going," I tell her. "Thank you for the tea."

I go over to the dresser and get my purse, relishing the weight of the chains as I put it crossbody. It anchors me to my past life somehow, my normal life.

"You're welcome. Are you coming back?" she asks as she gets to her feet.

I shrug, heading to the door. "I don't know. I'm sure there's no escaping this place when you're a vampire."

"There really isn't," she says. "But if you ever want to get coffee or a drink, you know, out of this place, let me know. I already programmed my number into your phone. And if you ever need anything at all, and you don't feel comfortable talking to Solon, you can always ask me."

"Okay," I tell her, feeling grateful. "Thank you." I frown. "How did you get into my phone without the Face ID?"

She grins. "Magic tricks. Don't worry, I'm still human. Someone has to keep all you vamps in line."

"You have quite the job," I tell her, opening the door. "And I thought my gig at Hot Topic when I was sixteen was hard."

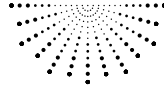
Amethyst laughs, a musical sound, and she walks me down to the front door, saying our goodbyes.

Once I'm outside the house, stepping into the foggy night, I feel eyes on top of my head.

I crane my neck back to look up at the house.

Of course, I see no one there.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



A FEW DAYS PASS AND I'M NOT SLEEPING AGAIN.

My mind won't shut off, my eyes just won't close, and I can hear every single noise in this goddamn hotel, no matter how many earplugs I shove in my ears.

I can't stop thinking about Solon.

The feeling of my teeth sinking into his neck, how completely wrong it felt to pierce his skin, to hurt him. I know he feels pain just as I do, just as we both feel pleasure.

But as wrong as it felt to do that to him, the taste of his blood, the way it filled me with vitality, is something I can never ignore. Problem is, I don't know how it really works. Do vampires have preferred others to drink from? It seems vampires usually feed from humans, not other vampires, so why does Solon insist I drink from him?

And what happens next?

Amethyst had said that Solon will get over it, but I saw that rage in his eyes. I'm not sure he will. I don't think he'll want anything to do with me anymore.

The thought of never seeing him again *hurts*.

I know what I told Amethyst, that I wasn't in love with him, and that still stands. But when I told her I didn't even like him, well, that was a bit of a lie. I do like him, a lot, despite the fact that I shouldn't. He doesn't really have many good attributes, he's a liar and a killer. He's duplicitous, and disloyal to his own species. He's a wicked beast with wicked ways, and I don't know that I can trust him.

But despite all that, I'm drawn to him in ways I can't explain. Oh, I'm sure if I really wanted to, I could blame it on the blood, that I'm literally addicted to him now. I could blame it on the fact that he's more vampire than I am and extremely adept at compelling others, and as much as he says I'm immune to it, perhaps he's wrong.

The truth is, I need and crave him on some deep, molecular level. Like the levels in the Veils, this comes from the very bottom, near a hellish dark place inside me made of flames and blood. It's deeper than the moonlit well that's always guided me. It's in the very core of who I am.

Whoever that may be.

And if lose Solon, I don't know what I'll do with myself, how I'll navigate this new world. Like my purse is the anchor to my old life, he's the anchor to my new one. He's the one guiding me through it, he said so himself, and sometimes, only sometimes, I catch him looking at me in a way that seems more than just teacher and protégé. Beloved isn't the right word, despite what Ezra said, but it's something raw and tender and I'm sure he'd hate it if I ever attributed such soft words to such a hard man.

But you just fucked it all up, I tell myself. Wouldn't be the first time.

I sigh and finish putting on the rest of my makeup. I'm meeting Elle at my apartment in an hour, and I need to hurry. She doesn't know I've been living in a hotel, so I can't invite her here, and when I suggested we go somewhere like a bar or café, she was adamant about my place. I think she's afraid that Solon will show up again if we are elsewhere.

My parents are at work, but even so, I'm not telling them I'm going over. I know they'd have problems with it. But it is the middle of the day, the sun is shining, and they said was that my apartment was lined with protective ruins. It didn't keep out Solon, of course, but today I wouldn't mind if he actually showed himself.

I'm being cautious, of course. I figure nothing bad can happen with Elle there, and maybe we can just stay for a few minutes before I convince her to do some day drinking down on the Embarcadero. White wine and oysters are already calling my name.

It takes me a bit with my makeup, really going overboard with the bronzer to combat my skin tone, which seems to be growing more pale by the day, then I put on leggings and another long-sleeved tunic and denim jacket, making sure my lack of tattoos are fully covered again. I hope she doesn't notice I'm hiding them.

I glance at the ruby necklace on the desk, leaving it where it is.

I haven't worn it since I took it off. I'm almost afraid to put it back on, in case it never grows warm again.

With time running out, I decide the quickest, though certainly not the best, way to get to my apartment is to head through the Black Sunshine again. I need some extra time anyway to open the windows and make my place look lived in.

I take in a deep breath and concentrate on the space in front of me until the air starts to warp and shimmer. Flames appear out of nowhere, marking the outline of a door. Through the door, the green-blue of San Francisco Bay turns to grey.

I step right through.

Still in the room, only there's no air, no color, no life.

"Hello?" I say, and I'm surprised to hear my voice, albeit dull. It's not that there's no sound in this place, it's that there's no echo.

I stare out the window, at the city that had stopped in time, and then I turn around and go out the door.

I remember there's no need to hurry in here, so though I'm quick by nature now, I don't panic as I make my way out of the hotel. Or at least, I try not to.

It's so fucking eerie here. The place is usually bustling with people; now, there's not a soul to be found. No smell, except a faint burning, perhaps the updraft from Hell. It reminds me of an old movie I saw once on TV late one night, *The Langoliers*, based on the story by Stephen King. Yup, this definitely feels like a Stephen King novel.

I walk through the empty lobby, the lack of echoes unnerving me, then head out on to the street. I don't have to run today, but even so the longer I spend in here, the more out of sorts I feel, like my sanity is slowly unspooling. I don't know how the hell the first vampires spent six months in here, it must have felt like an eternity to them. They probably all went mad.

So I start to run through the black and white world.

Running through the nighttime was one thing, but now that I'm heading down Powell Street, past all the empty cable cars, all the vacant stores, it feels like I'm in the actual apocalypse. It's so painfully empty.

Of course, I see shadows. Lurking in the spaces between the buildings, along the streetcar lines on Market Street. Spirit-hijackers. They make me run faster.

Finally I get to my apartment, creating a portal right inside my kitchen until I see the blue linoleum tiles on the floor. I step right through. The flames dissolve.

I'm back inside.

I take in a deep breath and look around. It's stuffy as hell, so I open all the windows to get in some fresh air, then I go to the front door, checking that it's locked. It is. I was able to open it when I was in the Black Sunshine, so it's good to know it remains locked in the real world.

I putter about the place, trying to make it look a little more lived in, otherwise Elle's going to really think something is off. Then I go into the kitchen and pull out an Anchor Steam that's been sitting in the fridge for ages.

I close the fridge door when suddenly I hear the front door close behind me.

I whirl around, and gasp, the beer slipping out of my fingers and shattering to the floor.

Atlas Poe just unlocked the door, no key needed.

I open my mouth to scream but the sound dies in my lungs.

Atlas walks toward me, his dark coat flowing behind him, and with a flick of his fingers, my arms slam to my sides, my legs doing the same, cementing me to the ground.

I can't move. It feels like I've been wrapped in electric metal chains, squeezing me tight, making my hair stand on end.

Atlas slowly approaches, his finger still pointed my way, blue sparks in his eyes. Like before, he's wearing all black, and in the daylight of the kitchen, he looks like an ink blot, a horrible stain.

"There you are, Lenore," he says to me, a sinister edge to his voice. "I've been looking all over for you."

I try to move again, try to focus on breaking the chains, but my mind is going wild, competing for speed with my racing heart. I can't think, can barely breathe.

"You won't be able to break these binds," he says to me, coming closer, stopping just a foot away. He reaches down into his trench coat and pulls out a glowing knife, the blade of the *mordernes*. I stare at it in horror, intense fear prickling my skin from head to toe.

I manage to tear my eyes off the blade, the blue electricity wrapping around it, matching the blue sparks in Atlas' eyes as I stare at him, trying to

talk, my mouth moving but nothing coming out.

“Ah,” he says. “Perhaps I should allow you to speak a little. Don’t bother screaming, it won’t work.”

I feel a jolt through my throat. “The fuck are you doing?” I manage to say, but the words come out in a low whisper. I’m unable to raise my voice even if I tried.

I should still try, though.

I close my eyes and scream, except nothing comes out but a hoarse whisper.

“I told you,” he says, slowly walking around me. His eyes burn, and he feels more predator than witch. He stands behind me and reaches out in front of me with the blade, pointing it at my heart, pressing the tip against my skin. I inhale sharply, trying to move the metal away from my breastplate, the blue energy already singing the fabric of my top.

“What do you want?” I whisper, trying not to lose my nerve. Kind of hard when one of the few things that can kill me is poised to stab my heart at any moment. “You’re not a slayer.”

“How do you know what I am and what I’m not?” His breath is hot on my neck, setting the rest of me on edge. “You know nothing about me.”

“And you know nothing about me.”

He lets out a bitter laugh that ruffles my hair. “I know more than you do, more than your parents do. Why else do you think I’m here?”

“I don’t know why you’re here,” I tell him. “If you want my parents, they’re at work.”

Atlas places a hand at my throat, his palm burning my skin.

What the fuck is this guy?

“You know I’m not here for your parents,” he grumbles into my ear. “I’m here for you. Your parents are of little consequence to me. The guild will discover what they did and punish them soon enough.”

“If you hurt them...,” I say, breaking off as rage takes hold of me.

“As I said, they are of little matter to me. I won’t hurt them. The guild will.”

“What will they do to them?”

“Does it matter? They aren’t your real parents. I’m surprised that you even care.” His palm presses harder into my throat, the heat continuing. I can smell my flesh burn.

I gasp out in pain. "I'm not like you, then. They're the ones who love me, the ones who raised me, the ones who kept me safe."

"Must be fucking nice," he says coldly. "Do you know what my parents did for me? My father abused me, my mother looked the other way. Until one day, she decided to kill him. Cut him up into a million pieces, displayed on the kitchen table like an offering to the gods. See, she was a witch, and it turns out, not a very nice one. Black magic runs in my veins, the same black magic that runs in yours."

My breath catches in my throat. "Black magic?"

His grip tightens and I cry out from the pain.

"Black magic can keep you going through eternity," he goes on. "She's dead now, but that doesn't really mean anything. I've seen you go into the Veil. Did Absolon tell you not to go to the other levels? If you do, you might just run into her."

"Do you know who my father is?" I ask him. "Is it...is it..."

Suddenly I don't remember the name anymore, like it's been wiped clean from my head.

He presses the blade into me, harder now, enough to break skin.

I scream silently, shuddering from the pain.

"You can't even say his name," he muses, his voice like acid. "That's interesting."

"Please," I manage to say, trying to focus, to stay strong, but I feel like my life force is being sucked up into the blade. "What do you want with me? If you're going to kill me, just kill me then and get it over with. You want to kidnap me? Well, I've already been kidnapped. You want me for yourself?" I pause. "I already belong to someone else."

At that, the air fills with the smell of roses and cigars, with a touch of snuffed out flames, which I now associate with the doorway into the Black Sunshine. My heart does a summersault.

"Want you?" Atlas scoffs. "I'm already destined for someone."

"Then I pity that girl," I tell him, buying time since I know that Absolon is somewhere in the apartment. Only a matter of time before Atlas notices.

"She's a witch," he informs me darkly. "And you should pity her. She doesn't even know it yet."

Suddenly Atlas snaps his head up, keeping the blade pressed against me.

"Come any closer and she dies," Atlas warns, his hand shaking a little.

Solon steps into the bedroom doorway and I nearly cry at the sight of him. But he doesn't move any further.

Though he's not exhibiting the same kind of mad rage I saw in his eyes last time I was with him, he's staring at Atlas with all the cold, calculating hate in the world, his nose flaring, vein bulging on his forehead. It's a look that would make anyone run, and I can tell Atlas is feeling it.

Stay calm, Solon says in my head, though his eyes never leave Atlas. He might be trying to compel him, but I don't think it's going to work.

"You can't glamor me," Atlas tells him, picking up on it. "And you can't break this."

"I know I can't," Solon says evenly. "Only a witch could break through this magic. And I'm not a witch."

But you are, my dear, Solon says inside my head. *Close your eyes and concentrate.*

I can't, I tell him. *I can't concentrate, I can't think. The pain...*

Solon's eyes spark with rage and he roars, trying to come forward.

An invisible wall pins him in place.

"Why do you even bother?" Atlas says. "You know, I really didn't think you'd come here, *vampire*. Meddling in our affairs isn't really your thing."

"She's my affair now," he grinds out, fangs flashing. "She always will be."

"I'm not used to you caring about others," Atlas says. "It doesn't look good on you."

Do it, Lenore, Solon's words appear in my head again. *Free yourself.*

I can't.

You can. I know you can. You caused a fucking earthquake in this fair city.

I blink at him, his eyes meeting mine for a moment, giving me strength. *You knew about that?*

His lips twitch in a fleeting smile before he looks back to Atlas, gaze hardening. *It had your markings all over it, moonshine. The air filled with the scent of your blood. Do you know what your blood smells like to me? Bergamot, cardamom, frozen snow. The charged air before a lightning storm. Sweet, beautiful, powerful things.*

Atlas lets out a sound of impatience, adjusting his grip on the blade. His hand is shaking more now, and I can definitely smell his adrenaline.

“If the two of you could stop having private conversations in your heads, that would be great,” Atlas sneers.

“Jealous?” Solon asks.

Atlas tenses, about to fire back some retort, when suddenly I hear the front door open, the smell of baby powder filling my nose.

My heart cries out.

No!

It all happens in slow motion.

Atlas panics, takes the blade off of me and automatically whips it toward the door. It goes flying through the air in a straight line, hitting the target straight in the chest.

Elle.

Elle just walked in my apartment.

Atlas stabbed Elle right in the heart.

He lets go of me, realizing what he’s done, and I fall to my knees, drained of everything but filling up with horror.

Elle stares at us with large eyes, trying to understand, then looks down at the knife lodged in her heart, no longer glowing blue, now disintegrating into thin air.

Then she falls to the floor, dead.

I scream, my voice ripping out of me, the binds broken, and Atlas runs to the door, stepping over Elle’s body and disappearing outside.

There’s just a flash of Absolon as he moves at warp speed, leaving me alone on my knees, trying to crawl toward my dead friend, a pool of blood spilling out around her like red satin sheets.

Seconds later Solon is back, crouched down by Elle, his fingers at her throat, trying to feel for a pulse. “He disappeared, I couldn’t trace him.” He swallows hard, leans in to smell her. “She’s barely alive.”

“We have to call an ambulance,” I cry, crawling to her, grabbing a hold of her hand. “We have to save her, we can save her.”

“No,” Solon says quietly. “We can’t.”

“We can!” I scream at him, tears spilling down my face. “She’s still alive, you said she’s still alive!” I put my hand at her face. “Elle, Elle wake up. It’s Lenore. Elle, please. I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.” I glance up at Solon who is watching me with a pained expression. “Why aren’t you doing anything?” I cry out. “Get out your phone, call for help!”

He shakes his head, his jaw tight. "She won't make it. She's lost too much blood."

"Blood," I repeat, my hands sinking into the red stain around her. "We can save her still. I can save her."

"No, Lenore," he says adamantly. "You can't. I told you why."

"I can save her," I say to myself, hope rising in my chest. "I can save her!" I hold out my wrist and with a savage tear, sink my teeth into my veins, ripping open the skin. Pain shoots through me, but I'm half numb to it already.

The blood flows freely from the wound, dripping onto the floor, and I raise my hand to bring it to her mouth, wanting her to drink, to be reborn.

But Solon is quick.

Suddenly he's behind me, hauling me to my feet, arms wrapping around me as he holds me back. "You're not doing this," he says gruffly into my ear.

"Let go of me!" I scream, trying to kick out. "Please let go, let go!"

I can save her, I know I can.

She'll become a vampire like us, she'll live forever, I'll never have to lose my best and only friend.

Tears keep flowing, savage growls torn from my throat as I keep trying to fight Absolon with everything I've got, but he's too strong, too unyielding. He holds me tighter, his mouth pressed at my ear.

"You can't save her," he says roughly. "Okay? You can't. I can't either. We would condemn her to a life of hell. She'd hate you for it, if she even knew who you were. This wouldn't be your friend you'd bring back to life, it would be someone else, just a shadow of the person she used to be. She'd be a monster."

"Please," I sob, my voice drowning in my tears. I stare at her lifeless body, my vision still sharp despite the tears that never stop flowing.

"Lenore," he says fiercely, shaking me. "No. I can't let you do this. You would regret it for the rest of your very long life."

I try and fight him some more, but the energy is running out of me, tempered by the grief that is building and building in waves.

"I can't lose her," I cry out pitifully. "I can't lose her." I gasp for air, my lungs choking from the sobs ripping through me. "This is my fault. It's my fault she's dead."

"Lenore," Solon says, his voice dropping to a whisper.

Then he turns me around so I'm facing him and I bury my head into his chest. One arm wraps around me, fastening me to him tightly, the other palm cupping my head.

My fingers grip his shirt like I'll never be able to let go, holding onto him as he holds onto me. I cry and I cry, for the loss of my friend, for the loss of everything. The tears never seem to stop flowing.

But Solon never stops holding onto me, cradling my head against his chest, his heartbeat slow and steady, the rock-solid feel of his body giving me the stability I lack.

He presses his lips against the top of my head. "I've got you, you can let go. I've got you."

His words only make me cry more.

"Don't leave me," I whimper, my real, true fear.

"I'm never leaving you," he says, his lips brushing against my hair.

I don't know how long we stay like that, standing in my kitchen, holding onto each other, gripped in turmoil, and tsunamis of grief, waves of horror.

It could be an eternity for all I know.

Eventually though, we break apart.

Because Elle is dead.

And in the real world, this could be a big problem.

"What do we do?" I whisper to him, pulling back from his chest. It's soaked in my snot and tears.

He places his hand at my cheek, peering down at me, determination on his low brow. "You leave that to me."

He lets go of me and walks over to her body, creating a door of flames in the air with just a snap of his fingers.

"What are you doing?" I whisper harshly.

"What we normally do with the dead," he says, reaching down and grabbing Elle under her arms.

"You can't do that!" I walk over to him, my heart breaking at the sight of her pale and bloodied in his hands.

"It's what's done, Lenore," he says, trying to be patient with me. "We put them in the Black Sunshine."

"But that's the way to Hell!"

"Only if you're going there. She's not. Don't worry."

“I worry!” I yell. “This is...she needs to be buried. She needs a funeral.”

“She won’t be buried,” he tells me solemnly. “There will be no funeral. Otherwise there would be questions, questions we can’t answer. Like who stabbed her. You can blame Poe, but it won’t look that way to them. Besides, this is just her body. Not her soul. Her soul is already at peace. I can tell.”

“How do you know?” I sniff.

“I know. Now please, let me do this.”

I exhale, holding my arms tightly, body still trembling. “Okay.”

I watch as he steps into the black and white world, pulling Elle along with him. Then he steps out and the flames disappear.

The hall goes back to normal.

And Elle is gone.

All that’s left is the blood.

“She’ll be reported missing soon,” Solon tells me. “We need to get into the messages you’ve sent with her and erase them. Ezra can do that. That’s why we keep him around.”

“What about the blood?” I ask numbly.

He eyes the crimson pool on the floor and then looks to me, brow raised. “We get rid of it,” he says simply.

My teeth grind against each other, a sick feeling in my stomach. “No,” I say shaking my head.

“You can do it,” he suggests.

I shake my head in quiet revulsion. “It should be me. But I can’t. I can’t.”

“Then you might not want to watch this,” he says, getting down on all fours in front of the pool of blood.

“Solon,” I gasp. “You can’t possibly...”

“I’m a fucking vampire!” he roars at me, his eyes going a shade of crimson. “Turn around!”

Shaking, I do as he says, pinching my eyes shut, placing my hands over my ears so I don’t hear anything I don’t want to.

A few moments later I feel a gentle touch on my shoulder.

I turn, looking up at Solon. He looks the same, except his eyes are much brighter. There’s not a drop of blood on him, nor anywhere else in the apartment.

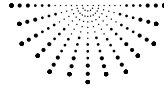
“We need to leave,” he says to me, reaching down and taking my hand.
“We could go through the—”

“No,” I say abruptly. “I’m not going in there if she’s in there. We go back like normal people.”

He gives me a stiff smile. “Okay.”

We leave my apartment, stepping out into the sunshine, both of us putting our sunglasses on, wincing at the light, and start the walk back to the house, a couple of vampires.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I AM NUMB WITH GRIEF.

I don't know how long I've been sitting in Dark Eyes for, but it feels like forever. After we walked back from my apartment, Solon took me straight down here and gave me a glass and a carafe of bourbon.

I appreciated the alcohol, but asked him to leave me alone.

He did, hesitating only slightly.

So I'm drunk. And I'm alone.

I've been this way for hours.

And I keep replaying everything over and over again in my head. Down here, there's nothing to distract me from what just happened, I'm trapped in my own mind, drowning in my own guilt.

Elle is dead because of me.

That's the truth of it.

It was my fault that Atlas found me, my fault that he killed her. I could tell he didn't even mean to, that he acted out of panic, thinking perhaps it was a vampire walking through that door. But he was there because I was.

I shake my head, expecting the tears to keep falling, but I'm all cried out. All that's left is my heart, waterlogged, weighing me down until I feel like I'll never be able to move again.

My only friend.

Gone.

The last tie to normality I had.

A girl that had such a bright future ahead of her, friends and lovers and family, she had it all...she should have had it all. She should have been able to have all the things I'll never have.

Instead, she's dead. Gone. Her body rotting in the Black Sunshine.

I feel like the wrong girl got killed.

Eventually, I get to my feet, swaying slightly, needing to run away from this, but knowing I can't. I can't run away from myself, can't run away from what's done.

I can escape though.

Just for a bit.

And the alcohol isn't cutting it.

I walk out of Dark Eyes, the doors closing behind me, and head up the stairs.

I don't stop until I get to the very top floor, and knock on Solon's door.

He opens it, eyes raking over me.

He doesn't say anything at first, just opens the door wider, and I step inside, enveloped by the darkness of his room, then turn to face him.

He's got on dark grey jeans, is in the midst of buttoning up a black shirt that fits him like a glove, his chest beneath so hard and powerful. With his hair in perfect black waves by his face, plus the darkness of the room, his eyes seem extra blue and mesmerizing.

"Where are you going?" I whisper.

He continues to button his shirt. "I thought I would go out and get you something to eat. Real food. You must be starving."

"No," I say quietly, a slight shake of my head. "I can't eat." I swallow, my throat raw from screaming and crying. "I can't think. I can't escape."

I walk to him and place my hand over his, curl my fingers around his palm to stop him from buttoning his shirt. I stare up at him, searching his eyes as his shadowed eyes search mine.

"Fuck me," I whisper.

He inhales sharply through his nose, a line etched between his brows, his pupils widening. "I *can't*," he eventually says, though his expression says otherwise.

"Tell me why."

"Lenore..."

"Tell me," I demand.

He closes his eyes, breathing in deeply. He slowly shakes his head, licks his lips. "I—"

"Don't tell me you can't again. Amethyst told me that you've slept with plenty of woman here in the city."

“Amethyst,” he growls, looking away.

“Hey,” I say, reaching up and placing my fingers on his chin, making him look at me. This brings another flare to his nose, a curl to his lips. He doesn’t like to be directed, but I don’t fucking care. “If it’s me, then just tell me the truth. I can handle it.”

He swallows thickly, his eyes dropping to my lips. “It is you.”

“Oh.” My heart feels like Atlas stuck the blade all the way in.

I look down at my hands, curled possessively at his shirt. I don’t want to be this person, especially if I’m not what he wants.

I bring my hands away from him, feeling numb, turn to the door, needing yet another escape. Always running away.

He reaches out and grabs my elbow. “Wait,” he says sharply, his fingers digging into my skin. “Wait,” he says again, voice softer now.

He pulls me back to him, stares down at me with wild eyes, his jaw tight, breathing heavily. His grip tightens. “Not that it’s anyone’s business, especially not Amethyst’s, but the woman I sleep with don’t mean anything to me.” He inhales, forehead furrowed. “You mean something to me, Lenore. And that’s a problem.”

My heart has skipped a few beats already. “How is that a problem? You sleep with women you don’t respect, but you respect me and—”

“This isn’t about respect,” he says gruffly, pulling me to him until I’m pressed up against his chest, his other hand going to the small of my back. He fastens my body to his, until I feel every inch of how hard he is. “I respected those women too, believe it or not.”

“Then what is it about?” I ask in a hush, so confused.

He presses his lips together, frowning, his eyes looking haunted. “There’s more to me than you know, Lenore. There’s a part of me that could hurt you.”

“I know that. You’re a vampire.”

He closes his eyes and exhales heavily, his breath smelling like sweet wine.

“It’s not just *that*. There’s...a darkness that lives inside me. That’s been there for my whole life as I know it. A darkness that has led to madness and back again. A darkness that feeds a beast. I can’t risk unleashing that beast with you.”

When his eyes open again, I see more than just pain in their blue depths. I see a dark figure with claws, and big, wide black wings that blot out the

sun. Something beautiful and horrifying. But I feel no fear.

I take my free hand and reach up, placing it against his cheek. "Then I will tame the beast."

He stares at me, and from the intensity of his gaze, I can't tell if he thinks I'm stupid or if he's impressed. Then he takes my hand and brings it to his mouth, placing a long, soft kiss on the palm of my hand, eyes never breaking contact. It feels like a fuse being lit, igniting my blood, rushing up my veins to my heart.

"You don't know what you're asking of me," he whispers against my hand.

"I know I want you. There's nothing else."

He lets out a low rumble from his chest, his eyes flashing with desire.

"Oh, *Christ*," he swears.

Then he's grabbing my face with both hands, kissing me with such ferocity, such passion, that I nearly fall backward, my knees buckling.

He keeps me upright, one arm going around my lower back, the other gripping my face as his lips move against mine, mouth open, licking my tongue with his.

Fuck. *Me*.

Fireworks explode down my spine, spurring on my hunger for him, a tangle of tongues that feels as close to fucking as possible, something deep and raw. His mouth ravages mine, a hot, hard messy whirl of lips, tongue, teeth. It's unraveling me more and more by the second, the way he so expertly owns me already, our kiss deepening into parts of me I didn't even know existed.

I gasp against his lips, my hands traveling up the hard, wide expanse of his back, trying to claw the shirt off him, feeling feral, an animal on the loose.

He pulls away and for a moment I think he's going to change his mind or chastise me for trying to ruin another shirt. Fingers press into my cheekbones, his mouth open and wet, and when I stare into his eyes, I see a man on the verge of losing all control.

Please, please, come over the edge with me.

The corner of his mouth lifts for a second, showing that he heard my thoughts.

"I'm not going to be gentle," he says hoarsely, breathing hard. The sharp, intoxicating tang of his adrenaline and desire fills my nose.

“I don’t want you to be gentle,” I say, digging my nails into his back. “I want to feel everything you have for me.”

“Fuck,” he says gruffly, grabbing my chin with hard fingers, searching my eyes with something like amazement. “You’re going to be my ruin, aren’t you?”

Then he’s kissing me again, moving me backward until the back of my thighs hit the bed and I sit down.

He steps back, taking off his shirt, unbuttoning his jeans, shoving them down along with his boxer briefs and socks. He’s completely naked in front of me, his cock jutting straight up, hard as stone and impressive, enough that I’m almost salivating, my body hit with a sharp pang of need.

He truly is the most perfect-looking man.

Vampire.

Whatever he is, he’s mine for the moment.

I reach down to take off my sweater, but he gives a shake of his head.

“You’ve been doing that enough. Lie back on the bed,” he commands.

I do as I’m told, heart in my throat as he prowls over me, his fingers curling around the hem of my sweater as he slowly pulls it up over my skin, goosebumps forming as he plants kisses on each section he exposes.

My heart flutters, skips. Heat builds between my legs, waiting for him.

He brings the sweater up over my head and arms, his head between my breasts as he reaches behind my back to unhook my bra. A vein running across the fullness of my breasts catches his attention, nostrils flaring as he breathes me, running the tip of his nose over my sensitive skin.

I gasp, my breasts swelling under his touch, his lips gently brushing over me as he pulls the bra away. My nipples are already in hardened peaks and he eyes them with a throaty growl before he starts licking up the side of my breast, his tongue flat and wide, his gaze locked with mine as he moves. Then he covers my nipple with his mouth, sucking me in.

Biting me.

Just for a second.

Just a pinch.

I gasp, my body stiffening from the pain as it quickly dissipates, his lips and tongue now soothing the spot, swirling around my nipple until I’m squirming underneath him.

“Sorry,” he murmurs against my skin.

I lift my head to glance down at him, and he doesn't seem very sorry at all. A wicked look gleams in his eyes, a hint of my blood on his lips, my chest rising and falling against him.

"Do it again," I tell him.

His brows raise in surprise, but there's no hesitation after that. He attacks my other breast with his mouth, biting down, sucking at my skin.

"Fuck," I cry out, my head going back. His teeth pierce the skin, but it's a surface scratch more than anything and, like before, he's licking the pain away with his broad, rough tongue. I make a fist in his black satin sheets, lost to the pleasure and pain, an intricate dance that only makes me want more.

Then he brings his mouth up to mine. I taste the tang of my own blood, just a bit of it, then he's sinking his tongue deep inside until I'm melting further and further into the bed, succumbing to his kiss, body and soul.

I had no idea it would be like this. That it could be like this.

He pulls away, my lips open, tingling and yearning for him to return, my hand running through his thick, silky hair, marveling at it, that I can touch him this way, every way.

Slowly, with deliberation, he starts moving back over my collarbones, over my breasts, over my abdomen, placing wet, languid kisses as he moves down, a path that sets my skin on fire.

He stares up at me as he goes and I look into his eyes and in them I see a man caught between angel and beast, and maybe that's what a vampire is. All I know is that right now, perhaps in this moment only, he adores me, reveres me.

I am his.

And I am safe.

Then his gaze burns hot as he grips the waistband of my leggings and underwear, peeling them off me with smooth precision, down over my hips, my thighs, my knees, discarding them to the floor, my feet already bare.

The sight of his face, that gorgeous, dangerous, perfect face between my legs makes my whole body start to tremble, waiting for him, wanting him, needing him. Bursts of hunger lash through me, and I'm not sure how patient I can be.

Meanwhile, for all his talk of not being gentle, he's acting like he has all the time in the world. Maybe because he does.

He comes up between me, my legs parting for him, his large hands spanning the width of my thighs, showcasing how large they are. I'm not a delicate flower, but in his grip I feel like I am.

Long, slow kisses are placed inside my knees, up my inner thighs, his stubble scratching me, and I'm gasping again, the blood rushing too fast through my veins.

"I need you inside of me." I'm practically whimpering, trapping him between my legs.

"This isn't for you," he says as he slides up, eyes never leaving mine, even with his face between my thighs. "This is for me."

I close my eyes and inhale sharply, my nerves on high alert. He brings his mouth up to my pussy, pausing there. I can feel the cold of his presence, his breath, but he's not touching me.

Holy fuck, what are you doing? I think.

Taking my time, he says inside my head, his voice so low and rich it settles into the base of my skull and unravels me a little more. *Don't forget who's in charge here.*

I grin at that, almost laughing, my heart leaping in my chest, my thighs gripping the sides of his head, as my hands make fists in his hair.

But he's still taking his fucking time. He's just breathing on me, blowing on me, and fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

I'm close to coming already.

This isn't fair.

He isn't even touching me this time.

Then he angles his head so his cold breath spans the length of me, sending waves through my skin, making me shudder, making that ache reach the breaking point.

Holy god.

Swiftly, he covers my clit with his mouth and I yelp, unintelligible sounds falling from my gaping mouth and he's licking me, sucking me and fucking *hell*, I'm coming already.

"Shit!" I cry out, yanking at his hair. I'm bucking my hips against his mouth while the rest of me is blown glass, shattering. A million jeweled pieces thrown into the universe.

He devours me, literally, as my body quakes, shaking the bed, his hands gripping my thighs, keeping them spread until I'm spent.

Boneless.

Breathless.

Speechless.

“Well,” he says, lifting his head. “You didn’t give me a lot of time to enjoy myself. Sensitive little thing, aren’t you?”

I can’t even respond, I’m still chasing my breath, my hands dropping away from his hair and making fists in the sheets again.

In a flash, he’s on top of me, the quick movement taking me off-guard, like a mouse caught when the cat pounces.

A breath of surprise is caught in my throat while he pins my wrists above my head with one hand and straddles me, big strong muscular thighs on either side of mine.

He leans down, kissing me, wet and messy, but still soft. A sense of teasing that deepens as I open my mouth to him, letting him in, letting him consume me, because that’s all I want, to be consumed.

Take me, take all of me.

With one hand on my wrists, binding them together, he brings the other to his cock, rubbing it against my clit, so slick and wet and I’m crying out again, dying from my need for him. Fingertips reach down, stroking over me until I’m seconds from coming.

You’re going to be a handful, he says in a low, rough voice in my head, taking his hand away.

But I don’t have a reply to that. My brain has been wiped clean of all thought.

I arch my back, wanting, needing, aching.

“Fuck,” he grumbles.

And then he pushes himself inside me with one sharp thrust.

“God,” I cry out, the feeling of air being pushed from my lungs, my body expanding around the size of him. My eyes are open wide, and my gaze catches his as he hovers over me. He watches me closely, his pupils turning his eyes black, his mouth open as he lets out a shuddering breath, trying to remain in control.

The length of him slides into me for what feels like eternity, until I have to close my eyes and give myself to him completely.

“Lenore,” he murmurs, the word choking in this throat. He puts his face to my neck, taking my earlobe in his teeth, tugging on it until his cock is pressed into the hilt. He’s filling me up more than I could have ever

thought, making me realize how many carved out spaces there were inside of me, just waiting for him.

It's good.

So good.

"Solon," I whisper, my voice ragged as I run my fingers down his back, relishing the feel of his strength, loving the look of his body over mine. Fuck.

He moves his mouth away from my ear, his lips going to mine as he pulls his cock out before driving it back in again. I gasp into his mouth, the movement tearing a savage growl from the depths of him.

So, this is the animal, I think.

"You don't even know the half of it," Solon says against my lips, his voice breaking a little, and when I move my head back to look at him, I see different versions of him coming across his feverish eyes.

Obsessed, savage, adoring.

I'd take any one of them.

Another low groan comes from the depths of him, his hand clasp tighter around my wrists, the other skimming over my breasts, and he's pumping himself back inside of me with each thrust of his powerful hips. Over and over again, our cool, smooth skin brushing against each other until it's like there's nothing between us at all.

I cry out, my body a slave to every touch, thrust, lick, moan, and he's working me, his pace building, stronger, faster, and then I realize that things are getting rough because he lets go of my wrists, starts pulling at my hair until I'm gasping.

Then he somehow moves us further back into the bed, until my upper back is propped up by the pillows and the headboard behind it. This is when I have a fleeting realization that perhaps sex with someone with immeasurable strength might be asking for trouble.

But there's no turning back now, not when his cock drives in deeper, wringing all the pleasure out of me, not when I feel our bodies meld with each and every tight pump of his hips.

We're just movements now.

My hands down at his ass, nails digging in, wanting more.

His hands in my hair, down over my breast, between my legs.

Our mouths meeting in violent kisses before breaking apart to breathe, to wreak havoc elsewhere.

The bed slams back against the wall, over and over again, a dizzying bass-driven beat at the bottom of my skull rising, taking over my world, his cock reaching parts of me I never thought possible.

“Fuck,” I cry out again, and this is intense, this is so intense, and I’m staring up at him, the way his brows are knitted together, the pleasure and the wildness in his eyes, lost, utterly lost to me, and I’m utterly lost to him.

My back arches, wanting him to take me completely, I want him so much more that it’s driving me wild, and I feel restless, aching, begging to be put out of my misery.

Fuck, I need to hold back, and that’s Solon’s voice in my head, thoughts he maybe doesn’t mean for me to hear.

“You’re not holding anything back,” I rasp, pulling him into the hilt, until I can’t breathe at all. “Fuck me, come inside me.”

His mouth drops open an inch as he stares at me.

Then his eyes go wide, go wild, go...*lost*.

He lets out a low growl I feel in the base of my spine and then he’s pounding into me like he’s trying to impale me right into the bed. The back of my head hits the headboard, and he’s bracing himself on the wall, fingers splayed above me, the muscles in his arms popping, straining.

“Fuck!” he bellows, the sound torn from his throat, his hair falling on his forehead. His neck is corded and I can see every vein and I’m aware of so much at once. His hips keep slamming into me at a punishing rate, bruising my skin.

Then deft fingers slip over my clit again, stealing my thoughts, my orgasm licking my skin, threatening to burn me alive.

I let go.

“Oh god, god!” I cry out, my body seizing so hard that I’m almost levitating off the bed, my chest rising, body shaking like an earthquake, and then it’s like I’m barely in the world at all. I’m in some other place, that’s black and gold, hot and cold, and stars are falling all around us.

Us.

Because Solon is here with me.

And he’s still fucking me with every ounce he has. Savagely shoving deeper inside me, until I start to feel him unravel, sense that he’s about to come.

Suddenly he lets out a desperate cry, so raw and primal that I swear it came from an animal, and then he’s biting my neck.

Hard.

Fangs sinking in.

I gasp in pain and he doesn't let go, his bite deep in my skin, lockjaw, drinking my blood as he comes. His body shudders against mine, his hips driving himself in deep, deeper, and then they slow and he's pouring himself inside me at the same time that he's draining me of blood.

It's an exchange.

That's what he does best.

Then he's trembling, muscles shaking, half-collapsing against my body, and only then does he pry his fangs off my neck. I feel the blood flow down into the bed, feel my heartbeat racing, and somehow his heartbeat too, like it's living in mine. Maybe it always was.

He pulls his head back enough to look at me, rubbing his thumb over my lips, gazing at me with the kind of tenderness that pulls the rug out from under me.

"I'm sorry," he says, voice raw. "I...shouldn't have bitten you."

I almost laugh. I reach up and place my hand against the cool skin of his face. "You're a vampire, Solon. I expected nothing less."

He puts his hand over mine, holding it against his cheek. "I don't know what I expected but...that..." He clears his throat.

He doesn't finish his sentence.

He doesn't have to.

I know how he feels. At the very least, I know how I feel.

Like my ever-changing world changed once more.

I know now why Solon was so reluctant to sleep with me.

It wasn't the beast, though I don't doubt its existence.

It's because it changes things.

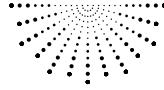
Because right now he's still inside me, still hard as steel, and I know everything between us has twisted. I'm not sure if it's for good, but I think it might be forever.

If I wasn't bound to Absolon before by blood, I am now, with every inch of my body and soul.

I swallow thickly, staring up at him.

"What have we done?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I'M DREAMING ABOUT MEN WITH NO FACES.

They circle me, curtains hanging from their hoods, but I feel like even if the curtains weren't there, there would be no face at all.

Just teeth.

And there's a man standing behind them.

At least, I think it's a man, he's in shadow so it's hard to see.

He's very tall, bone-thin, limbs unnaturally long, with claws for hands and what's either shields at his back or giant folded wings.

"I know what he's going to try and make you do, child," says a slithering, insidious voice. "It won't work."

I stare at the creature, a sick sense of dread pulling down on my heart.

"He'll use you, and then you'll die," he adds.

Then you'll die.

Then you'll die.

I roll over, tangled in sheets, gasping.

Awake.

I reach over, expecting Solon to be beside me, the last memories I have are of the two of us together in his bed. At the memory, my heart leaps in my chest, legs squeezing together, bringing me fully out of my slumber.

But when I open my eyes, I'm not in his bed, I'm in mine. Still in the haunted mansion.

I move onto my back, staring up at the lacey canopy. All the lights in the room are off, but there's a slice of daylight cutting through the curtain, dust motes dancing in the air.

How did I get here?

I run my hands over my face, trying to rub some sense into me.

And that's when it hits me.

Like a truck packed with ice and sorrow.

Elle.

Elle is dead.

That brief, beautiful moment between waking and now is forever erased, that moment where I thought everything was okay.

It is not okay.

Elle is dead.

I gasp, a sob ripping out of my throat, fingers clawing at the sheets. Tears automatically rush down my face, the rage and grief carving me out, leaving me hollow and empty, so much darkness spreading inside me.

What I had with Solon was just a brief respite, finding comfort in his arms, unleashing my lust and desire on him in order to feel something, to have him sweep me away in a wave of hands and lips and our bodies melding together.

It was savage and beautiful and now that it's over, all the feelings I tried to escape from have come back ten-fold.

The tears never seem to stop.

I think I must pass out for a moment, because I hear a knocking at the door, and when I lift my head, I'm curled in the fetal position on top of the covers. My eyes are so puffy I can barely see through them.

"Come in?" I whisper, my throat hoarse.

I sit up just as Amethyst pokes her head in.

"Hi," she says softly. "How are you feeling?"

She walks inside the room, carrying a tray. A cup of coffee, just the way I like it, with more of her mother's cookies.

"I..." I begin, but I don't have the words.

She places the tray down on the bedside table and gives me a sympathetic smile. "It's okay. You've been sleeping for two days."

"Two days!" I exclaim. "What happened to me?"

She suppresses a smile. "You'll have to discuss that with Solon. I don't know the details."

Ah, crap. Does everyone in the house know we slept together? I suppose we weren't exactly quiet, and you don't have to have a vampire's hearing to know the walls here are thin.

“Anyway,” she says, clearing her throat, “whenever you’re ready, Solon would like to speak with you. He’ll be waiting in Dark Eyes.”

“Okay,” I say quietly. “Thanks.”

She gives me a quick smile and leaves the room.

My stomach twists on itself. *Solon would like to speak with you.* Why does it sound so formal, like I’m in trouble?

I drink back the coffee, but I ignore the cookies. Even if my nerves weren’t dancing too much to have an appetite, it’s stunted by my grief.

I get out of bed and decide to waste no time dwelling. I go to the closet, filled with the clothes that Amethyst and Solon bought for me. Since I don’t get as cold easily, I select a black sundress with red roses on it, smocked waist with poofy sleeves. Then I go to the drawers, finding the underwear. They’re all black satin, trimmed with lace, and honestly I can’t tell if which of them picked them out. They’re comfortable though, and I slip them on under my dress.

Then I head out into the hall, pausing by the dead roses on the high side table.

Bloom, I say in my head, concentrate the little energy I have toward the roses. *Bloom alive with blood! Excelsior!*

But the roses don’t move, even when I flick my fingers at them the way that Atlas Poe did when he came into my apartment with such ease.

At the thought of Atlas, I leave the roses alone and head down the many flights of stairs until I reach Dark Eyes.

I push open the doors and walk in.

The club is empty, but my nose tells me that Solon’s in the cigar lounge, lighting up. I take in a deep breath and walk over to it, peering through the glass door.

There you are, his voice says in my head, and my body is already coming alive from just the sound of him in my skull.

I open the door to the lounge and walk inside, the smoke in the room feeling familiar and calming now. Solon is sitting in a leather armchair, cigar between his svelte fingers, same fingers that brought me to ecstasy more than a few times by now. As usual, he looks impeccable, a dusky blue shirt slightly unbuttoned, black pants, a casual pose.

But his eyes are anything but casual.

They’re deep and dark, following my every move with cold precision.

“Nice dress,” he comments as I walk over to him.

“Thank you. A vampire bought it for me.”

“How do you know it wasn’t a human?”

“The roses,” I say, glancing down at them. “And the fact that I don’t have to wear a bra with it.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “I see.”

I clear my throat and sit down on the small sofa across from him, not quite getting the “come over here and kiss me” vibes from him. I fold my hands in my lap and glance at him warily. “I’m missing time again.”

He puffs on his cigar for a moment, eyes never leaving mine. Then he leans forward. “So am I,” he admits to my surprise. “I slept like the dead.”

“What happened?”

“Well, for you, you’ve been under so much emotional duress, that it’s no surprise you’ve been reluctant to wake up. Easier to stay in your dreams, I suppose.” He gives me a hint of a smile. “As for me, well, you tucked me out, moonshine.”

“I thought vampires could go all night long?” I ask, not quite teasing.

“We can,” he says through another puff, the smoke falling seductively from his mouth. “And we did...you don’t remember?”

I frown. It’s a blur now of our bodies writhing on his bed, the feeling of his immense power, of total surrender to him, body and soul. There are flashes of him fucking me up against the wall, taking me from behind on the floor, the feel of his cock in my mouth. Good lord, why would my mind block the rest of our night out? My skin flushes from head to toe in response.

“I suppose I should feel insulted that I didn’t leave a lasting impression on you,” he adds ruefully. “But I think it’s to be expected.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, squeezing my thighs together as I adjust myself in the chair.

He inhales sharply, and I have no doubt he can detect what my body is doing.

“Let’s just say that...I can be a bit much.”

I raise my brow. “You? A bit much?” is my dry response.

“Our senses are naturally, or preternaturally, heightened. What happens when they get overloaded? We...short circuit, for lack of a better term. Takes a bit for our minds and bodies to adjust. That’s all.”

I blink down at my hands. So mind-blowing sex *can* actually blow your mind? Good to know.

I can feel him smiling at me. I glance up and he's grinning like the cat that's got the canary. In this case, the canary is me.

But then his smile fades, his jaw set.

"I'm truly sorry about Elle," he says to me, his voice low and grave. "That never should have happened."

My throat feels thick. "But it did."

"You shouldn't have gone home..."

"Because she'd still be alive," I snap, the guilt smothering me. "I know! Don't think that I don't know that!"

"Easy, Lenore," he says, gesturing with his cigar for me to calm down. "That's not what I meant. At all. I meant that you put yourself at risk. You shouldn't be going anywhere, you shouldn't even be in that hotel. I told your parents as much, but they're stubborn just like you."

His words bring me out of my guilt, and I snap to attention. "What? You've talked to my *parents*?"

"I had to," he says grimly.

I blink at him, incredulous. The idea of him talking to my parents is insane. They are not friends, they are not on talking terms. "They tried to kill you."

"I'm aware," he says. "But they were protecting you. Regardless, when you were sleeping, I had to let them know you were okay. Wouldn't have been very nice otherwise. I called your father. He's a little easier to handle than your mother."

"What did you say?"

"I told them what happened. The truth. About Atlas, about Elle. And I told them you'd be staying here with me."

My eyes widen, imagining how they would have reacted to that. "That could not have gone down well."

He sighs tiredly, tapping his cigar into the ashtray. "Not at first. They want to be there for you while you grieve." My heart sinks, needing my mother's arms around me in this moment. "But in the end, they know you're safest with me. I know they hate the idea, and your father will keep the hotel room for you, to give you options, but they can't help you anymore."

"But you can?" I give him a pointed look.

"You *know* I can." He sticks the cigar back in his mouth, fangs showing.

"So...what about Elle? Surely people wonder where she is?"

He nods. "She was reported missing by her roommate later that night. The whole city is looking for her. Ezra hacked both your Facebook accounts to erase any recent correspondence, including anything since you turned."

I frown. "But that includes our lunch."

"I'm sorry. Couldn't let it stand. They'd then ask around at the restaurant and Hector would say we were there. Better to erase it then to have them sniffing around me as a murder suspect."

"Well, I'm sure you could compel whoever investigated you."

He gives me a wry look. "I could. But why invite complication into your life?"

"I don't know. Seems like the moment I met you, my life's been nothing but a complication."

He gives me a brief smile. "They probably will contact you at some point though, I'm sure they're going through all her friends. Be much easier if they already had a suspect."

"We know who killed her."

"We do. But Atlas has a dark history. He's not sticking around here. His mother killed his father, she later killed herself, and his stepfather was found drowned in a lake in Seattle. Regardless of if what happened to Elle was an accident or not, he's not stupid. At least we can rest a bit easier knowing he won't step back into this city."

"You really think I'll rest easier?"

He shakes his head. "No." He gets up. "Do you want a drink?"

"What time is it?"

"Time is a construct," he says, going over to a table with a bottle of Scotch on it, along with two glasses.

I sigh. "I guess."

I watch him as he pours the drinks, admiring the size of his biceps in that shirt, his ass in those pants. Marveling at how I had him naked, all to myself, deep inside me. There is so much I want to talk to him about, so much I want to do with him. But there's a little bit of distance between us today, like we've taken a step backward, and I'm not sure how to navigate it. I guess I can just pretend we never had sex, but that's not going to be easy. Not even a little.

He comes over to me and hands me my drink.

"Thank you," I say, my voice coming out small.

But instead of sitting down beside me, like I hoped he would, he goes back to his chair and settles in, cool, calm, collected as ever.

I have a taste of my drink, enjoying the burn. I lick my lips and look at him. "Do you feel any different?"

"Hmm?" he asks, mid-sip. "What?"

"From my blood. You drank quite a bit of it, from what I remember."

If it's possible for him to look chagrined, he does. "Sorry about that."

"I don't want you to apologize," I tell him adamantly. "I'm just curious. Did it affect you in anyway?"

He rubs his lips together, looking down into his glass. "A little."

"In what way?"

He keeps his eyes averted. "I have...cravings." He clears his throat, finally meets my eyes. "But I can keep them in check."

"What kind of cravings?" I ask, taking another gulp of my drink before setting it down beside me. "Do you want my blood? Or do you want me?"

He stares at me steadily, his gaze growing hot. "Both."

I get up and cross over to him. His eyes don't leave mine as I climb onto his chair, straddling him, putting my hands around his neck, his skin cool against my palms.

"You can have both," I tell him, meaning it.

His gaze grows smokier.

"Lenore..."

"Solon." I adjust myself on him, feeling his cock harden beneath me.

"You're certainly a wicked little creature, aren't you?" he murmurs, placing his hand on the back of my bare thigh, sliding it up until it reaches my ass.

"I have a good teacher," I reply, leaning in to kiss his neck. The feel of his skin against my lips makes my eyelids shutter closed.

Solon lets out a low groan, his grip tight on my ass. "You're not going to bite me, are you?" he asks, breath heavy. "Because I rather like this shirt."

I smile against his skin, breathing him in, letting it wash over me. I bring my mouth up below his ear, lick the edge of his lobe.

"*Christ*," he swears, stiffening beneath me, inhaling sharply.

I pull back and then run my thumb over his lip for a moment, taking in his beautiful face before I lower my face and kiss him.

He moans against my mouth, lips opening to mine, soft, sweet, seductive.

Jesus, this is good.

My tongue slides in, meeting his, seeking intimacy between us. It's kindling the heat that's already rushing through my veins, that feeling of needing to connect to him in every way possible.

He bites my bottom lip, giving it a little tug, followed by a throaty growl that makes my body feel like a fireworks display.

Then he takes his hand and wraps my hair around it, pulling my face away from his neck, making me meet his eyes. "We got lucky last time. No one got hurt."

"What are you so afraid of?" I ask, trying to calm a racing heart that feels too big for my chest. "I told you, I can handle you."

"You won't be able to handle me, moonshine," he says, brows knitting together. "I can't even handle myself."

"Tell me what happened," I say, leaning in to kiss him, but he keeps his hand around my hair, holding me back.

"You'll not look at me the same way again," he says gruffly, a muscle in his jaw twitching. "More than that, you might see it for yourself."

I'm puzzled for a moment until I remember what he said about drinking his blood and sharing his memories. Also makes me wonder if he has *my* memories since he drank from me. I hope not, though none are very exciting.

"Amethyst told me already," I admit.

His nostrils flare with anger, pupils turning to black pin pricks. "What the fuck did she tell you?" The darkness coming off of him is palpable.

I try to sit up straighter, placing my hands on his shoulders, determined to not let his rage scare me off. "She told me that you were in love once. And that you killed her. And her boy." His eyes close, forehead furrowed. "But I want to hear it from you. I want to know what happened."

He shakes his head, swallowing audibly. "No."

"Why did you kill her?"

He remains silent, breathing in and out through his nose, his chest rising and falling. I can feel his heartbeat through his skin, it's climbing.

I put my hand at his cool cheek. "Solon. Why did you kill her? If I'm going to be living in this house with you, I need to know." I pause. "Did she deserve it?" I ask quietly.

“No,” he blurts out. “She didn’t deserve it.”

I run my fingers under his chin, tipping it up until he meets my eyes. Just like when I did the same the other day, I’m met with a snarl, but I don’t back down, I don’t look away. “Please, tell me what happened.”

His eyes blaze, fighting it, searching my face for a way out.

I don’t give him a way.

“Tell me,” I say, staring at him so deeply that I feel like the room fades to black. A blankness comes across his face for a moment, a sense of surrender.

Holy shit. Am I compelling him?

“Was it an accident?” I ask, prompting him, trying to see.

He sets his teeth together, taking in a deep breath.

Then closes his eyes.

“Her name was Esmerelda,” he says, his voice quiet, heavy. “And I was in love with her before I was ready to be in love with anyone.”

I’m about to ask what that means, but I decide to wait and hope he continues. The fact that he just told me he was in love with someone else already makes my heart feel heavy, no matter how long ago it was and that it ended in death.

He exhales loudly, liquor on his breath. Still, his eyes are closed.

“She didn’t belong to me. She was married to another man, they had a little boy, Thomas. The man she married...was a bastard. Abusive. Beat her. The son too. She fell for me and I for her and we both thought I could take her away from all of it, as if I wasn’t just as bad as he was. But we were wrong.”

And just like that, I can see the images in my head, coming alive like a movie. A man with a long mustache, coal black eyes, a collar with exaggerated frills, and a woman, dark hair parted tightly in the middle, a dark green dress with a wide square neckline, voluminous half-sleeves. They stand on the side of a city street, cobblestone, people passing, centuries ago.

A little boy runs to them, throwing his arms around the woman’s legs, and she smiles at him, her whole face lighting up.

“Where were you?” I ask in a hush, afraid to break the spell of what I’m seeing.

“London,” he says, his voice monotone. “Just outside the city.”

“What happened?”

He lets out a soft exhale. "I...I was with her. In the stable. I had avoided temptation with her so far, and I knew, I knew that there was a chance I wouldn't be able to control myself. That I would become something else. I wasn't ready. Wasn't...strong enough. But I had loved her so much, nothing else seemed to matter."

My own heart starts to break, feeling the love he had for her, feeling the pain he knows is coming.

He doesn't even have to tell me what happens.

I smell the stable, hear the snuffle of the horses restless in their stalls. There's Solon, I can't see him, but I feel him, feel his confusion, his lust, desire and madness. Because there's madness here, darkness. Something evil and awful lurking beneath his surface, trying to break through his skin.

And then it happens. I see the two of them together, the back of him fucking her up against the wall, their muffled cries which then turn to screams. Blackness blots out my view, like clouds over the sun, and then what I see is blood spilled across the straw floor, and the woman's body torn into many pieces.

I close my eyes, trying to make the image go away, all that blood and gore, the violence.

But the images don't go away. They change.

I'm looking through Solon's eyes now.

Look down at bloodied hands in disbelief.

And when he throws his head back and roars with so much pain and rage, that same power feels caught in my chest, like he's screaming through me.

"I killed her," he whispers to me. "On purpose."

But the image changes again and suddenly he's running into the woods, screaming at the moon, fighting against a monster deep inside him, claws reaching up through his chest and trying to pull him under into his own madness and insanity, looping around and around and I feel it all, I feel it all.

"Lenore," he says sharply, grabbing my face between his hands.

It's enough to make the images dissolve, but the feelings remain.

I open my eyes and stare deep into his. I see his remorse and shame and guilt and pain in his blue depths. But I also feel what it was like to be him, the memories clinging to my soul.

"You felt so alone," I say in a hush. "You felt so damn alone."

Alone, empty, mad. His life was a horror show, and he was the horror.
It breaks me in two.

He swallows, his jaw tightening, eyes surveying mine in a frantic, wild way.

“If only you were there, my dear,” he says to me, his voice ragged. “You are the balm to my monstrous heart.”

I press my hand against his chest, to feel his heartbeat, to know that this man isn’t the same one I saw, and yet I know they are one and the same. “Please tell me what it all means. Tell me what I saw, what I felt.”

“It means I was the monster under your bed, the villain from your nightmares, the darkness at your back. I was everything the fairy tales warned young girls about. And now I’m here. With you.” He reaches out, tucking my hair behind my ear, eyes pinning me in place. “I bet you’re having second thoughts about everything now. You should be.”

I shake my head. “I’m not going anywhere, Solon. I just want to understand.”

He exhales, pressing his lips together. “I loved Esmerelda, but I wasn’t ready to love anything or anyone. I had just spent three hundred years running around mad. A monster. No conscious. No guide. No hope. I was bloodthirsty, I was full of rage over what I was. Killing for fun, out of anger. Just...darkness.”

Three hundred years? I can’t even imagine. I had only a taste of it.

“But over time, things change,” he goes on. “Over time, you evolve. I started to evolve into my madness. I made peace with the beast. The monster inside me. I started to find a moral compass, I did what I could to be a good...person. I hated that I was a vampire, but it was impossible to separate that from myself because it is who I am. And I was the monster too, but I could get it to behave. I had been doing so well until I met her. My desire, my feelings for her, unleashed the darkness inside me. I killed her because I couldn’t control myself.”

“And the boy?”

“The father went mad himself. With grief, I suppose. He killed his own son. I had a feeling she was the only thing that kept him alive.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say softly, running my fingers over his brow, brushing his hair to the side. “I can’t imagine...”

“You don’t have to imagine,” he says tightly. “You saw it. You know what I am. And that’s why I can’t...I just can’t risk that with you.”

“Solon,” I say, my tone firm. “I already slept with you. You bit me and you stopped. You are not the monster you were. That was hundreds and hundreds of years ago. You said you were evolving, well, you’ve evolved.”

“You don’t understand. I will always be that monster. It’s the way I was made.”

“Made?” I ask, stumbling over the word.

He gives me a sad smile. “I’m not like the rest of them, Lenore.”

I blink at him, straightening up. “You said vampires weren’t made anymore.”

“They aren’t,” he says with a sigh. “Because of what happened to me. And others. I was considered a lucky one. There are very few of us left. The rest of them, they all died from their own inner demons, their own monsters and madness. We are a scourge on this earth.”

Oh my god. No wonder he was so adamant about me not turning Elle into a vampire.

“So you were a human once?” I ask incredulously.

He nods. “Yes. I was.”

“Oh my god. Do you...do you remember anything about that life?”

He sucks his lower lip in for a moment, looking away in thought. “Just bits and pieces. Sometimes I dream about it, but I can’t really fit it all together. All those centuries of madness drove my past life away, buried it in the tar.”

“So you were a human once. That means there is human still in you.”

“The human in me died when I was thirty-eight years old. There is nothing of him left.”

“Then that means there’s nothing of the human in me left.”

“Moonshine,” he says to me, placing his hands around my waist. “You were born to a human father. A witch is still a human. And even if you were full vampire, being a human doesn’t make you better. It’s not something to aspire to. What you want, what you’re really after, is humanity.” He tilts his head as his eyes coast over me. “And that, my dear, is something you have in spades. Yet another reason that you shouldn’t be so close to someone like me.”

I shake my head. “You’re the only one who understands me.”

I’m meant for you.

“There are others,” he says. “Wolf, even Amethyst understands a little, when she’s not spilling your secrets. There are other vampires out there,

ones newly turned just like you. They come to this place. You'll find them. And you'll be happy."

"I don't want others," I tell him, pressing my fingers on his cheekbone. "I only want you."

"Even after you've seen what I've done?" His brow raises.

"Even then. You've seen me become a monster for a moment," I tell him, thinking of how I was in the bathtub. "I know what it's like to lose control. I know the shame."

He observes me for a moment, frowning. Then he shakes his head. Strong hands around my waist lift me out of the chair, and then he's getting to his feet.

"Come, I want to show you something," he says, taking my hand in his. His palm against mine creates a flutter up my arm, straight to my heart.

He leads me out of the cigar lounge and through the doors of the club, then down another flight of stairs, leading to another underground level. He opens the door with a skeleton key, and we walk inside.

It's the room where I was held hostage, though it's completely empty now, no mattress, no chairs. It's weird to be back here, knowing it wasn't that long ago but so much has changed since then. I'm a different person altogether...half a person, really.

He takes me toward the section at the back, with the long floor to ceiling wood slats, the darkness behind it, a cold breeze creeping out through the narrow slits. The smell is strong, something I wouldn't have noticed before. It smells like old paper and brimstone and...the dead. I don't even know how to describe the smell, because it's not the rotting dead, but the ancient dead. Dust and bones.

My stomach twists with unease.

He flicks another skeleton key out and opens the door into the room. There are no lights on in here, just the light from the other room coming in through the slats, but since both of us can see well in the dark, there is no need.

What I'm staring at is a bunch of old chests piled high, crates of jewels and gemstones and priceless treasures, stacks of folded fabric or clothes, and...

Skulls.

Lots and lots of skulls.

Human skulls, completely surrounding us. There must be hundreds in here.

“What is this place?” I whisper, afraid to breathe in. “Catacombs?”

“It’s where I keep those I’ve killed,” he says simply.

I can’t help but gasp, staring around me. “You...killed all these people? Why?”

He makes a sucking sound at his teeth. “I’m a vampire, Lenore. It’s what we do. It’s what we had to do until we found another way. This isn’t even the half of it.”

“No,” I tell him, putting my hand on his arm. “I mean, why keep them?”

He gives me a ghost of a smile. “Because I too am looking for humanity.” He gestures to the skulls with his keys. “This lets me remember what I am, what I’ve done. It reminds me to never do it again. Ball and chain. I kill, I take their skull because I deserve to remember what I did. We all have to pay a penance here.”

I let his words sink over me. He keeps their skulls to remind him of his sins.

“I didn’t think vampires were religious,” I say, thinking of how priests use crosses and holy water to keep them at bay.

“We can be,” he says. “I was one of God’s creatures once, but not anymore. He looks the other way when it comes to me.” He exhales, looking around. “Sometimes I think maybe I was a clergyman when I was a human. I have flashes of being in a church, praying, being at peace. I remember the Nordic runes tattooed on my skin. But it never lingers long enough to capture.”

I close my eyes for a moment, wondering if I can bring up that memory too. It seems that when he talks about his past is when I see it. But I only see skulls, even behind my eyes. Better to keep them open.

He turns to face me, studying me in the dark. “And so now, am I still the one you’re meant for?”

“You’re trying to scare me.” I fold my arms across my chest. “It’s not going to work. I know you have darkness in you, but guess what? I have darkness in me too.” I think back to what Atlas said, how I have black magic in my veins.

A wary look comes across his brow. “I know you do.”

Then he coughs. “We should go. I love my cigars, but inhaling bone dust is where I draw the line.”

He takes me by the elbow and leads me out of the skull room, a storage area for the things he's accumulated in his very long and complicated life.

"I thought you should know, I'm having a party tomorrow," he says as we climb the stairs.

"Again?"

"I always have parties," he says smoothly. "Do you need another dress?"

I freeze mid-step. "Please tell me this isn't an auction."

He gives me a sharp look. "Really? Is that what you think I'd do?"

Well, I did just see the room where you keep the skulls of the hundreds of people you've killed.

His eyes narrow even more, glinting like ice. "Don't even think like that. If you want to be with me, despite all the horrors I just told you, *showed* you, then you have to trust me. Fully. Can you do that?"

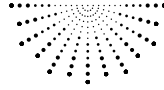
I swallow, nodding. "Yes."

"Good," he says, hand slipping down to hold mine as he pulls me up the steps. "And don't worry about the party. You won't leave my side. I just want to show you off. It's important that they see who you are again, and that you're with me. It's a display of power, you understand that?"

"Not really," I tell him. "What's so powerful about me?"

He laughs. "Oh, my earthquake-causing witch. You don't even know."

CHAPTER NINETEEN



AFTER SOLON BROUGHT ME TO HIS SKULL STORAGE SPACE, WE WENT OUR separate ways. He said he had some work to do—whatever the hell that is, perhaps finding another vampire to kidnap—and I decided to spend time in the library, going through the books. It reminded me of being young and my parents plunking me at the San Francisco Public Library where I would spend hours and hours, except this time I was actively looking for books on witchcraft that might help me. Solon seems to think I have a large amount of power in me, so it only makes sense to try and figure out how to use it, even though I find it hard to believe.

It was a good distraction at first. Kept me from thinking about Elle, kept me from thinking about Solon and his past. But after a while those thoughts crept up and overwhelmed me. I cried for a bit, then moved on.

Yvonne made a dinner for me, with Amethyst and Wolf joining us in the dining room. Solon and Ezra were elsewhere. Wolf didn't even touch his food, a chicken Caesar salad, which made me wonder why he was having dinner to begin with. Perhaps to keep an eye on me, with Solon not there—always the babysitter. Though if he were keeping an eye on anyone it would be Amethyst. I swear that vampire was staring at her every other moment, and she seemed completely oblivious. I guess you have to be impervious to a vampire's gaze in this house, or you'd never get anything done.

After dinner, I brought a bottle of wine up to my room and drank the whole thing alone. I thought about calling my parents, but decided there was no way I could emotionally deal with them at the moment. Their emotions would be flying high, and I know I'm not stable. One thing at a time.

So I went to sleep in a drunken fit of tears and confusion, hoping that at some point I'd feel Solon's presence in the room. But that never happened.

This morning I woke up with puffy eyes and a bit of a hangover, but thankfully a long hot shower took care of that. I slowly get dressed into my leggings and a long t-shirt, toweling off my hair, wondering what I'm going to do today before the party starts. The fact that I didn't see Solon at all after our talk bothers me a little, makes me feel untethered. I don't mind being in this house, and I do feel safe, but it's starting to feel a little bit like the hotel in a way. I'm safe, as long as I'm inside. But most of the things I want to do are *outside*.

I slide on a pair of slippers I found in the closet and head out into the hall.

To my surprise, the roses are alive again, blooming and bleeding. It's both beautiful and disturbing. I walk over to them, studying them closely.

It's an incredible feeling to know I brought these back to life.

And the fact that they're still alive means that Solon hasn't been on my floor, let alone any other vampire.

I stop on the staircase and look up to where his room is. But as persistent as I have been with him, I've been telling myself I need to back off. I've been in pursuit of him recently, and I think I need to leave the ball in his court now. He knows how I feel about him. He knows that very well.

Instead, I head down to the kitchen to see Yvonne puttering about. She pours me a cup of coffee and then opens the blinds, making me flinch as the sunlight streams in.

"Sorry," she says. "You don't mind, do you?"

I stare at her through pinched eyes. "Not at all," I say dryly.

"You know, Mr. Stavig told me that since you're only half-vampire, you'll adjust to things much quicker," she says, sitting down across from me with her own cup of coffee, a plate of cookies between us. She flicks the plate with her finger, moving it closer to me. "Eat," she demands. "I suppose since your mother isn't here, I have to be on you to make sure you're taking care of yourself."

I hesitantly reach for a cookie, my stomach growling a little. "I think I have a steeper learning curve than the others. At least with a full-on vampire you know exactly what to expect. I have no idea. I don't think anyone else does, either."

“Well,” she says after a moment, swallowing her coffee, “that may be true, but there are half-human, half-vampire hybrids. Maybe there will be some at the party you can talk to.”

The mention of the party brings a wave of nausea over me, but I swallow it down.

I stare at Yvonne over my mug. “So, you have to tell me. How did you and Amethyst get roped into all this business?”

Yvonne gives me a quick smile. “It’s a long story.”

“I have all the time in the world.”

“Yes, but I don’t,” she says. “This house, these boys, it takes up more time than I’ll ever have.” Then she sighs, sitting back in her chair, tapping her nails on the oak table. “I’ll keep it short. Perhaps if you find me with some gin some evening, I’ll tell you more.”

She takes a cookie and nibbles on the end thoughtfully. “I’ve always been very open-minded. My mother practiced witchcraft, but she wasn’t a hereditary witch. Just a normal person who had success with herbal remedies and the like. A kitchen and garden witch, if you will. Such a common thing these days. So when Amethyst told me that there were vampires, not just in the Bay Area, but in the world, it didn’t feel impossible to me. If anything, I was worried. I forbade her from going to Dark Eyes, no matter how safe she said it was. She was so fascinated, you see. She didn’t let them feed on her, but she just wanted to be a part of... this life. Your life.”

She goes quiet for a moment, her grey-blue eyes growing cold. “She was walking home late one night from here, we lived just up on Laurel Heights, and she was...attacked.” I gasp. She notes my expression and quickly adds, “Not by a vampire. But by a human predator. She was... assaulted, almost killed, but then...Mr. Stavig showed up. He has a sense, you see, for those in danger. He saved her. He saved my daughter. And for that, I am forever in his debt.”

Whoa. That is a lot to take in. Poor Amethyst. No wonder they’re both so devoted to him.

“That’s awful,” I say. “What happened to the attacker?”

Yvonne gives me a measured look, as if to say, what do you think happened?

I nod. I have a feeling that asshole’s skull *won’t* be in Solon’s locker.

After that, Yvonne gets back to work, and with my curiosity about her and Amethyst somewhat satisfied, I go into the library for a bit, looking for more books, and secretly hoping that Absolon will find me.

When he doesn't though, I take the books to my room and decide to try some magic up there. I have zero idea what I'm doing, and the texts are all so old that a lot of it isn't legible. There are pictures, but they don't help, and you'd think a book about magic would have some magic in it, at least sense that I'm a witch and try to help me out a little. Aren't they supposed to dance around by themselves and come to life?

Eventually though, Yvonne comes by with some gazpacho for a late lunch, telling me that Solon will be by my room at eight p.m., so I should be ready by then. To my surprise, Amethyst shows up a few hours later to help.

"Shouldn't you be running the show?" I ask Amethyst as she comes in the room, armed with a curling iron.

"Everything is in place," she says. "Don't worry, these parties usually happen twice a month, it's like clockwork by now. So, I was thinking we could curl your hair. I can do your makeup too, if you want."

"Go nuts," I tell her. I know I could do it but, it's nice to be doted on. I sit in the chair by the desk and she opens the blinds enough to let some light in, then attacks me with the makeup she bought for me.

"You don't seem to worry if I'm hungry or not," I tell her, keeping my eyes closed as she rubs eye shadow primer on my lids.

"I know you're not," she says. "I've gotten pretty good at detecting when a vampire needs to feed. I know all the signs, and even more than that, I can sense it. With you, because you're only half, food seems to go a long way. It satisfies you in a way that it doesn't the others. Convenient if you ask me."

I want to tell her what her mother told me, but decide it's best to keep it to myself. Besides, spilling secrets seems to be an issue in this house.

"Did Solon, uh, talk to you?" I ask.

She pauses and I briefly open my eyes to see her droll expression. "You mean did he get mad at me because I told you all his secrets? Yes."

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to put you in a tough spot."

She shakes her head and starts sweeping on eyeshadow. "Don't worry about it. I knew you'd tell him. I was just surprised at how angry he got. I've never seen him like that before, at least not with me."

My cheeks flame, feeling horrible.

She pauses, switching brushes before dabbing highlighter on my brow bone. "The way you bring out his anger is almost frightening."

I swallow uneasily. "Great."

"It's not all a bad thing," she muses, taking a step back before doing my other eye, my lids closing. "I don't think."

"So much for being fond of me," I mumble.

"Well, I was wrong. It's much more than that. Deeper. Stronger. Intense." She pauses. "And I know you love him."

I open my eyes, and she almost stabs me with the eye shadow brush. "I do not—"

"Don't talk," she says abruptly, cutting me off. "You're messing up the makeup." She comes at me with the brush, forcing me to close my eyes again.

"I don't love him," I whisper harshly.

"I said you were *in* love with him," she corrects me. "And there's no use fighting it, babe."

I practically growl. "What I feel for Solon is...complicated."

She chuckles, her breath smelling like lavender. "Don't tell me you believe the simplicity of fairy-tale romances. Love *is* complicated. Loving a vampire, even more so."

"I don't want to talk about this," I tell her, pressing my lips firmly together.

She pauses and then does a pitch perfect impression of Cary Elwes from *The Princess Bride*. "As you wish."

Luckily she honors my wishes, and we talk about more neutral subjects, my school, her traveling, things normal people talk about. I have to say, it feels really good to forget what I am for just a bit. Then, when she finishes my makeup and hair, she brings out a silver flask from the pocket of her oversized blazer and we both do a few shots of vodka.

"It calms my nerves," she explains as she swallows it down, handing me my dress I'd decided on, the long red strapless one. "I still get a bit worked up on party nights. A house full of vampires can be a bit much."

She could have fooled me. She's cool as a cucumber. I guess vodka has been her secret weapon.

I go into the bathroom to get changed into the dress, wanting some privacy, and take a quick look in the mirror.

I nearly gasp.

I look stunning, and that is not a word I use to describe myself. Pretty, yes, ethereal, sure, but stunning? It's like looking at someone else.

Because you've become someone else, I tell myself. *This is who you are now. The power. Don't you feel it yet?*

I feel something, I just don't know what it is.

I slip the dress on, forgoing bra and underwear, and it fits me perfectly, the blue-toned red setting off my pale skin, except I can't zip up the back all the way, so I step back into the room.

"Can you help zip me up?" I ask Amethyst.

She's texting on her phone and glances up at me, her jaw dropping.

"Holy shit you look hot," she says, coming over to me as I turn my back to her. With ease she zips me up. "Don't know how Solon is going to resist this," she says, taking me by the shoulder and turning me around, her skin warm.

"Oh, he'll find a way," I mutter.

"Being stubborn, is he?" she asks.

I nod. "The sex blew my mind, but I'm not sure it did the same to him." I pause, something coming into my mind. "He can't...get me pregnant, can he?"

She blinks at me. "You're not on the pill?"

"I was. Until I was kidnapped."

She gives me a quick smile. "I see. Well, if it were any other vampire I would say that yeah, you should be on birth control, even though your cycle is probably going to slow down to like once every four months. But Solon..."

"Is it because he wasn't born one, that he was made a vampire?"

Her brows raise. "He told you about that?"

I nod. "I don't know all that happened, but I know he used to be human."

Her eyes search mine for a moment. "Yes. Vampires that are made can't procreate. Thank god, really. They don't all turn out like Solon."

Then she reaches out and cups my boobs, adjusting them in the top, and I have to laugh at how handsy she is.

"Sorry," she says, flashing me a sly smile. "They needed some adjusting. You have nice boobs, even luckier they'll look like that for the rest of your life."

I look down at my chest, the cleavage a focal point in this dress, the soft gauzy red layers falling away from it. I hadn't even thought of that. Then again, thinking about my mortality now makes my head spin.

Just then, the scent of Absolon fills my nose and he appears in the doorway, eying the both of us with a flash of carnality.

"I was just leaving," Amethyst says, taking her hands away from me and then quickly walking past Solon and into the hall. He watches her go, then closes the door behind him, and walks over to me, one black brow cocked up as if to ask, what was that about?

And while he's looking me over, the tension between us growing thicker by the minute, I do the same to him. And fuck, he looks good. No suit today, he's back in a tuxedo, the ends of his bowtie undone, his hair slicked back from his face, facial hair neatly trimmed.

We stare at each other for a moment, that air growing electric, then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out my necklace, the diamonds and ruby glinting in the slices of sunlight.

"Where did you get that?" I ask him.

He saunters over to me, and I'm suddenly so aware of how big he is, his presence powerful and commanding.

And mine.

God, I want him to be mine. It's not enough to be his.

"I went to your hotel," he says, stopping right in front of me, but there's still too much distance between us. "Brought it back with a few other things you probably want."

"Are you officially moving me in here?" I ask.

He lifts a shoulder, eyes burning into mine. "Thought it would be a nice thing to do."

"Thank you," I say quietly.

He then holds out the necklace for me.

I shake my head. "Put it on me, please."

I watch him swallow, a tightness to his jaw.

Then he nods, pressing his lips together.

Comes around behind me.

Runs his fingers delicately along my shoulder, gathering my hair before sweeping it off to the side, his touch causing me to shiver. I take in a deep breath, breathing in his scent, which is now mixed with his adrenaline, hoping to calm my heart but it only makes it thud against my ribs.

“You’re scared,” I tell him, making him pause for a weighty moment as he reaches over and places the necklace around my neck. “What is it?”

I can hear his heartbeat.

“It’s you,” he murmurs, his cool fingers at the base of my neck. “I thought I was doing so well handling my cravings for you, but you’re out to test me.”

I can’t help but smile at that.

“I know you’re smiling,” he goes on, fastening the clasp. “But I wouldn’t if I were you.”

Then he leans in, his nose at the back of my head, breathing in deeply as he runs it down through my hair. He places his hands on my shoulders, squeezing hard between strong fingers, my skin tender underneath his palms.

I suck in my breath and his hands slide down, one hand brushing over my left breast, the other coasting over my stomach. Hot bursts of pleasure ignite in my core, making me squirm, this insatiable need for him kicking into high gear again.

“These sounds you make,” he says with a groan, his mouth kissing the top of my spine, “you can’t hear them, but I do. They aim to unravel me.”

“And what do you think your touch is doing?” I say breathlessly as his hand reaches down, down, starts gathering up the ends of my dress until his fingers make contact with my bare inner thigh.

“I know exactly what my touch is doing,” he says, voice simmering, and he brings his hand further up until it meets my wetness. “My dear, how fucking drenched you are.”

I brace, and then he’s wrapping his hand around my throat, pulling me back as his fingers plunge deep inside me, the air escaping my lungs. I gasp, the sound caught in my throat as his palm presses against my pulse.

It doesn’t take long for me to come. Either I’m permanently a hair-trigger around him, or his using some sort of magic, but I’m shuddering on his fingers, rocking into his hand, my body jerking violently. I’d fall to the ground, my legs turned to jelly, but his grip around my throat and pussy keep me upright.

“Solon,” I try to cry out, but the sound is smothered by his grip, my eyes rolling back in my head as the orgasm filets me from the middle. His breath is hot and labored at my neck, and even as I’m coming, I can tell it’s taking everything in him to keep himself restrained.

Finally he releases me, pulls his hand away, but not before I hear him run his fingers under his nose, inhaling sharply.

Sweet Jesus.

“There,” he whispers behind my ear, his teeth razing against my neck. “That should placate you for now.”

The heady grip of the orgasm finally shakes loose at his words. I whirl around, a little dizzy on my feet.

“Placate me?” I repeat. The phrase makes me feel dirty.

He gives me a quick, crooked smile. “Perhaps you’re not the only beast that needs to be tamed. Come along now, we have company.”

He takes me by the elbow and leads me out of the room. Despite just getting off, it’s only made my sexual frustration double. What he did didn’t placate me—it just made me want more. The more he makes me come, the more I want to keep coming, and though his fingers are skilled, I’m even more desperate for the feel of his cock deep inside me. That connection.

But those urges and thoughts pause when we walk past the roses on the table in the hall.

They aren’t dead.

Even though Solon would have passed by them to come in my room, and even though he’s passing by them now, they’re still alive, blooming with blood.

“Well, well, well,” he says, coming to a stop and eyeing them curiously. “How about that, Lenore.”

I blink at them. “They won’t die anymore.”

He eyes me, looking impressed, then he snaps his fingers together.

The roses automatically wilt.

“That’s a dickhead move,” I grumble at him, though I’m secretly impressed by him now. A snap of his fingers was all it took. He’s not even a witch, why can’t I learn how to do something like that?

He grins at me, his teeth sharp. “I’m known for my magic fingers.”

I roll my eyes at that, even though my body burns in response, knowing all too well. We head down the rest of the stairs until we finally reach Dark Eyes.

Like before, the music is audible, there’s loud chatter, and through the doors I can smell all the vampires in there, their spicy, acidic melting pot of scents overwhelming my senses. I put my hand on his arm, halting him.

“Tell me again why you throw parties for vampires who hate you?”

“Who says they hate me?” he asks, quickly doing up his bowtie with expert precision.

“You’re a bounty hunter. You turn over your own kind to witches.”

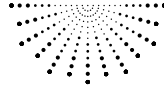
“This is true,” he says, a slight smile on his lips, as if he finds this conversation amusing. “But I give them something in return, other than the occasional witch. I give them a place to be themselves, where they are safe. A place to feed. And I have a rule that I never take or harm a vampire inside this house...unless they bring it on themselves.”

“How noble,” I say dryly.

“Noble, I am not,” he says, linking his arm around mine. “But fair is something I aspire to be.”

And at that, he pushes open the doors and we walk in.

CHAPTER TWENTY



AS HAPPENED THE LAST TIME I WENT TO A VAMPIRE PARTY, EVERY SINGLE head in Dark Eyes swivels toward us, but this time they look a little more wary than they did before. Perhaps because I'm still here and that I belong to the man of the house, the vampire boss of the city of San Francisco.

At first, Solon keeps to his word, to never let me leave his side, always keeping his arm tightly around my waist. We go from vampire to vampire, saying hello and exchanging pleasantries. No hands are shaken though, and he keeps me just out of everyone's reach. They're all interested in me, but I don't fear them per se, it's more that they may fear me, and that's something I can deal with.

But eventually, Solon turns into a social butterfly in this place, and soon he's going around, having deep conversations with people, leaving me on my own.

Okay, well I'm not on my own.

I smile up at Wolf, who is sticking by my side.

"You don't have to babysit me," I tell him. "I know that's your job when Solon isn't around."

Wolf gives me a charming smile, looking devilishly handsome in his white tux. "Perhaps I like your company, Lenore, did you ever think of that?"

"Phhff," I wave him away. "I'm not the company you crave."

He frowns at me, sparks in his golden eyes. "What does that mean?"

"It means," I say, leaning in close, knowing how good everyone's hearing is, "I've seen the way you look at Amethyst."

He gazes at me steadily. "You don't know what you're talking about, half-witch."

I can't help but smile at my new nickname. If he's trying to be insulting, it isn't working. "Me think you doth protest too much," I tease.

"Whatever," he says, folding his arms across his chest and looking elsewhere. Hey, if Amethyst can tell me how I feel about Solon, I can tell Wolf how he feels about Amethyst.

"Is that a band?" I ask, looking at the stage where five musicians have gathered. I hadn't even noticed they'd set up, with a drum set and everything.

"The live music is one of the biggest draws," Wolf tells me as he faces the stage. "Well, that and the blood. And the band is the best you'll ever hear. Probably because they've had centuries of practice." He gives me a wink.

They start up, jumping into "Fly me to the Moon," by Frank Sinatra. The singer looks nothing like Frank with his longish blonde hair, but he sure does sound like him.

"Care to dance?" Wolf asks me.

I stare at him, then look at all the vampires taking to the dance floor, all of them moving in perfect synchronicity. They've also had centuries of practice.

"I've never danced like that before," I admit sheepishly. "Even at prom, I was getting high in the back of my date's truck most of the time."

Wolf laughs and holds out his hand for me. "It's just a waltz. Very simple. Plus, the vampires who have just turned are as lost as you are."

I shake my head, not willing to be a fool.

"You chicken?" he asks.

I give him a dirty look. "I am not chicken."

"I mean, Solon is already dancing with Sade," he says.

"What?" I look around him and see Solon waltzing with a gorgeous ebony-skinned vampire in a beautiful white satin dress. "Sade the singer? That's not Sade."

"She calls herself Sade because she sings at a local jazz club, doing Sade cover songs. She'll do one soon, you'll see."

Well, I can't fault Solon for dancing with her, especially as they seem to be in deep conversation as they effortlessly glide across the dance floor. They're truly mesmerizing to watch, and my heart pangs with jealousy,

admiration, and longing. He truly is the most beautiful being on the face of this earth, his masculinity and grace combining to make a spellbinding package that makes the whole room watch.

“Think you’ve picked it up enough?” Wolf asks in a wry tone.

I sigh loudly, and as he puts his hand out for me again, I plunk mine in his. “I’m warning you, I’ve got no rhythm.”

He gives me a cheeky grin as he grasps my hand, pulling me to him. “As I recall, the two of us found a rhythm quite easily.”

I don’t have to think long to know what he’s talking about.

“For your information,” I tell him as he puts his hand at my lower back, my cheeks on fire, “I don’t remember much of *that*.”

Another grin. “That’s okay. I remember enough for the both of us.”

I roll my eyes, feeling mortified. I know I wasn’t myself at all during the “lust” stage (although, to be fair, I was just as desperate for Solon’s touch then as I am now), but even so, what I do remember is a doozy. Wolf has skills, and if he ends up using them on Amethyst one day—if he hasn’t already—then she’s a lucky girl.

But despite whatever rhythm Wolf and I had in the bedroom, it’s not translating to the dance floor. I know he’s supposed to lead and I’m supposed to go backward, but I keep tripping over my own feet and bumping into vampires, trails of “excuse me” and “sorry” following in our wake.

It feels like forever before the song ends and everyone comes to a stop. I look up at Wolf, feeling embarrassed, hoping he doesn’t ask me to dance again. He’s not letting go of me, so that’s not a good sign.

Then a familiar bassline and staccato drumbeat starts up, still a waltz, but more languid and sensual in tempo, accompanied by gritty guitar. Wolf starts to move with me again just as a gorgeous voice rings out across the night club.

It’s the faux Sade up on stage, hands delicately clasped around the microphone, singing the real Sade’s “No Ordinary Love.”

Damn, she’s *good*.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Solon’s icy voice cuts between us.

Wolf tightens his grip on me. “Dancing with Lenore. Trying to find that rhythm we once had.”

I stiffen, staring up at Wolf. Does the man have a death wish?

Solon practically bristles, his face glowering. “Let go of her.”

"I'm not sure that's what Lenore wants," Wolf says, and when he turns to me, he winks. What the hell is he doing? Trying to make Solon jealous?

And that's when it hits me. That is what he's doing. And it's not of his own accord, this is because of Amethyst.

"I'm fine dancing with Wolf," I say, feeling petty. "We're good at this."

Solon gives me the coldest look. "Oh, please. You have two left feet." He reaches out and grabs my elbow, yanking me out of Wolf's grasp. "And whatever rhythm you shared was only because you were picturing me the whole time."

I tear my eyes away from Solon's burning gaze and look to Wolf with a raised brow. I think it worked.

"Perhaps," Wolf says, giving us a smile that suits his name, then he turns and walks off through the club.

"Amateur," Solon mutters under his breath.

Then he puts his arm at my lower back, pressing me close to him, taking my other hand in his. "You want to dance?" he says gruffly, his gaze still burning. "I'll show you what it's really like to dance."

I'm about to remind Solon that I have two left feet, when suddenly we're gliding backward through the crowd. My feet aren't even moving on my own power, it's like they're doing it naturally.

I stare up at Solon, his eyes so close to mine, I see the blue becoming less cold, though his brow is more determined. "What are you doing to me?" I whisper. "This isn't me dancing."

"This is you dancing," he says, now with a hint of a smile. "You're a natural."

"No," I tell him, looking around us as he spins me around the dance floor, other vampires watching, parting for us. "You're doing something. Magic? Compelling?"

"Neither," he says. "It's just you responding to me. That's all."

He says it so simply.

"Sometimes you just need to find the right partner," he says, his eyes resting on my lips.

"Well, damn," I tell him, and around and around we go, like I've been dancing my whole life, with him at my side. "You should get jealous more often."

"Jealous?" he repeats, eyes flashing again, his grip at my back strong, fastening me to him so we're connected at our hips. "Who said anything

about being jealous?”

“You didn’t seem to like Wolf touching me,” I point out, enjoying this. “You especially didn’t like the mention of Wolf *fucking* me.”

He lets out a low growl, brows lowered until his eyes are in shadow. “Don’t you dare say those words again unless you want to face the consequences.”

Oh, I got him. I got him good.

“Does it bother you that he got to taste and touch me before you did?”

His nose flares, mouth twisted grimly. “Lenore, don’t,” he warns.

He’s so close to going over the edge. I shouldn’t poke the bear—or provoke the beast in this instance—but I can’t help myself. Perhaps I really am a wicked creature at heart.

“So far I think he’s made me come more times than you have.”

It’s like watching a bomb go off.

A low, guttural rumble sounds from the depths of him, sending chills down my spine, and his eyes fasten to mine with an intensity that takes my breath away.

Before I know what’s happening, he whisks me off the dance floor and drags me to the cigar lounge, throwing open the door.

The lounge is filled with smoke and vampires, four of whom are gathered around the billiards table at the end, and fear shoots through me because I have no idea what he’s about to do and why we’re here.

He brings me to the table, the vampires muttering in surprise, pulling their cues away, and then snaps his fingers.

Just like that a doorway licked by flames appears in front of us, the table grey and empty on the other side, and he picks me up by my waist.

Before I can protest, he’s pushing me through into the Black Sunshine and placing me on the edge of the billiards table, everything going gray and quiet, the vampires turning into glowing figures, seeming frozen on the spot, staring in our direction. The flames disappear, locking us in this world.

“What are you—”

But my words are cut off by his mouth, a hard, searing kiss that makes my toes curl. I grasp his head, his shoulders, immediately finding another rhythm with him, this one more passionate and wilder than the one on the dance floor.

A ragged groan tears from his throat, our tongues fucking each other, deeper and deeper, and this is messy and violent and rough and—oh god—I

don't want him to ever stop.

But he does. He gasps for breath, chest heaving, mouth open and wet and wanting. His eyes search mine quickly, feverish and raw, as if trying to control himself and failing. Then he pushes me back on the billiard table, grabs the end of my dress and hikes it up to my waist, leaving me bare.

The glowing figures of the vampires barely move, and I know it's because time is different here, and I know that they can't really see me, but in some ways I wonder if they can, because their heads are all glued to Solon's between my thighs.

"Can they—" I start.

But I'm cut off again by his wicked mouth, this time his tongue sliding up my pussy until I'm gasping. My head rolls back against the table, and I'm staring up at the black and white cigar lounge ceiling, with those ghostly figures of the vampires staring at me. I can feel their eyes, but as Solon thrusts his tongue deep inside me, my eyes fall closed and I'm lost to him again.

His tongue makes quick work of me, lapping me up with broad strokes, and then I'm coming hard, crying out, trying to catch my breath.

My body is still shaking and he's grabbing me with strong hands, flipping me over so I'm on my stomach. I hear the sharp zip of his fly coming down, a sound that sends shockwaves through me, and then I feel the weight of him behind me as he gets on the table.

"Can they see us?" I ask, my voice catching in my chest, my heart fluttering like hummingbird wings.

"In a way," he says gruffly, his hands wrapping around my waist again and pulling me up so I'm on all fours, my ass pressed against him. I feel the shocking heat of his long, thick cock against my bare hip.

"In a way?" I repeat.

He inhales audibly and, before I can prod him again, his cock slams inside me to the hilt.

"Fuck!" I scream, my nails digging into the gray felt of the table, leaving scratches. My lungs are emptied of air, my eyes wide, and all I feel is him inside me, like he's taking up all viable space, his hips pressed squarely against my ass.

A low throaty groan falls from his lips, powerful fingers pressing into my skin, and that sound alone seems to unleash the frenzy from deep within the both of us. He starts pumping into me, long hard thrusts that make my

breasts fall out of my dress, that shakes the whole damn table, the whole fucking room. The ghostly figures seem to watch our every move, and it's no longer disconcerting, instead it's turning me on.

"Lenore," he growls. "Look at what you're doing to me."

I cry out sharply in response as he pistons his hips sharply, my knees sliding against the felt of the table, friction everywhere. "You have an obsession with making me come in public," I manage to say, just before he smacks my ass with a flat palm, enough force to make my teeth knock together.

"Fuck, Solon!" I yelp.

He grunts in response, continuing to fuck me with so much ferocity that I'm getting whiplash, my ass getting a few more powerful slaps of his hand until the pain and the pleasure intertwine again, building and building.

I keep my eyes open, feeling the orgasm coming for me, watching the glowing shapes of the vampires, knowing that if they can't see us, then they can definitely feel what we're doing, maybe even hear it. I want them to know, I want everyone to know how good Solon fucks me.

"That's it," he rasps from behind me. "Everyone knows. Everyone knows you belong to me, that it's my big cock that keeps you coming over and over again."

My eyes go round and heat flares over my body, head-to-toe, his dirty talk spurring me on.

I'm so close, so close.

"Oh god," I cry out, greedy sounds escaping my mouth, and then with another brutal thrust from his hips, I'm coming, sideswiped by it all. It feels like my mind is obliterated, my limbs boneless and wild, shaking like I'm possessed by a ravaged demon.

Above me stars explode, falling down on us, gold against the grey world, sizzling against my skin, and then...

"Fuck!" Solon bellows, his nails carving into my skin, another guttural animalistic roar torn from his chest, and I'm squeezing him as I come, my body holding him tight until his hips begin to slow.

Holy *hell*.

I collapse against the table, cheek pressed against it, trying to breathe, staring blankly at the grey world. The remains of the stars still glitter with gold, then they slowly fade. I don't know if that was magic or a result of fucking in the Black Sunshine, but it definitely felt appropriate.

Solon exhales, breath shaking, and runs a trembling hand over my ass, soothing the skin where I'm sure his handprints still remain. "I don't know my own strength sometimes," he murmurs by way of apology.

I don't even have anything to say. I'm so blissed out that it feels like someone took my head off and screwed it on backward. My body doesn't even feel like mine, it feels like it belongs to the universe, made of stardust and space.

Eventually he pulls out of me, leaving me hollow. I hear the zip of his pants, feel the table shift as he gets off it. He comes around the table and over to me, appearing in front. His lids are heavy, his smile lazy as he gazes down at me. Strands of hair have fallen on his forehead, giving him a mussed-up look that he rarely has.

"I have to say, I've never done that before," he says, reaching for me. He grabs me by the waist and hoists me off the table like I weigh the same as a feather.

My feet wobble in my heels, so I lean back against the edge of the table, looking up at him in surprise. "You've never done it doggy style before?"

He rolls his eyes to the ceiling, lip curled, probably in distaste at my phrasing. "I've never fucked in the Black Sunshine before."

"Oh. Did you see the stars?"

"I did. That was...peculiar."

"Well, you proved your point," I tell him, giving him a sloppy smile. "We definitely have rhythm." Then I reach out on my tippie toes and brush his hair behind his ears. "Are you okay? Did you...feel like I was in any danger?"

He shakes his head, staring down at me. "No. Not this time."

"Perhaps everyone watching us kept you on your best behaviour."

He eyes the ghostly vampires who have barely moved. "I would hardly call that my best behaviour, my dear. Your ass might be pink for days."

"I heal fast, remember," I remind him, straightening his tie before I make sure my boobs are back in my dress. "Shall we rejoin the real world?"

He nods, and with a snap of his fingers, the flaming doorway appears behind us.

"Okay," I tell him. "You have to teach me how to do that."

"I bet you already know how."

Then a look of gravity comes over his face. He reaches down and grabs my hand, giving it a comforting squeeze before he lifts it up to his mouth,

placing a soft kiss on the back of it, his eyes never leaving mine. “You’re my weakness, Lenore,” he says quietly against my skin. “I never had one until now. Until you.”

My heart skips a beat at his words and I’m melting like gold.

Lord, this man owns me.

I can’t even respond.

But I don’t have to.

He brings my hand away from his mouth and then leads me through the burning door, back into the other world.

The flames fall away and disappear and we’re back in color.

Color and noise and smells and about ten vampires staring at us with wide eyes.

“Impressive, Absolon,” a female vampire with long blonde hair says, looking at both of us with a sly smile.

I try not to blush. We must have only been gone for a minute, and they must have seen or felt the shapes of us fucking like animals at high speed.

He says nothing to the woman, just holds my hand tighter and leads us out of the cigar lounge. I’m still totally out of it, overwhelmed by what happened, trying to recall each moment because I don’t want my brain to short-circuit like it did the last time he fucked me good.

I can tell Solon isn’t his usual collected self either. His step is more of a saunter than a stride, he looks relaxed and loose, his eyes bright and shining.

We walk back out into the party and Wolf is there to greet us.

Solon drops my hand and goes to slap Wolf on the back.

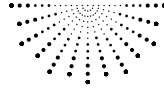
“Nice try,” he says with a hearty laugh, and Wolf gives him an innocent look in return. “I know what you were trying to do, golden boy.”

I’m smiling at them, feeling this warm and protective instinct toward them both, when a sulfurous smell fills my nose.

You’re the one, a sinister voice says inside my head.

I whirl around just in time to see a flash of teeth as they clamp down on my neck, my blood spilling to the floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



IT TAKES HALF A SECOND BEFORE THE PAIN SETS IN, THE AGONY OF SHARP foreign fangs tearing into my skin, realizing that someone, not Solon, is biting me, drinking my blood.

I scream.

The band stops playing.

The vampire sucks back my blood and then unhooks his jaw from my neck, and he's stumbling backward a few feet with a look of awe and anger and my blood on his face, staring at me.

"It is her!" the vampire announces to the crowd. "It is the daughter of Jeremias! I have tasted her blood, I know!"

I stare at him numbly, my hand at my neck, trying to stop the bleeding. Wolf is already at my side, holding onto me, and Solon goes straight for the rogue vampire, slower than normal because of the dreamy state we're both in, but he gets there all the same.

Solon reaches out and grabs the vampire by the throat, lifting him off the ground, squeezing so hard that I think he might decapitate him that way. It takes everything in him to regain control of himself, his rage indescribable. Everyone in the nightclub has stopped, panic on their faces, unsure what Solon's rage might unleash.

"Who. Are. You?" Solon ekes out his words, each of them landing like the sharpest knives. "*Who are you?*"

I guess the vampire is as unfamiliar to Solon as he is to me. He's got a buzzcut and black eyes, skin deathly pale, my blood running down his chin. Solon is breathing in deep and I know the smell of my blood on someone else is making him crazy.

I think back to what I saw, the monster inside Solon, the beast who ran wild with madness for hundreds of years, and suddenly I'm afraid. Not for myself, but that this might put Solon back, tip him over an edge he can't come back from.

Wolf's arm goes around me, holding me to his chest, trying to comfort me, perhaps picking up on my thoughts, but I can't stop watching the scene unfold.

"Who are you?" Solon repeats again, his voice echoing through the room.

The vampire smiles in response, bloody teeth. "Yanik sent me," he whispers raggedly, his voice ruined by Solon's grip. "He told me we'd find the truth. The truth you've kept hidden from all of us. Surely you've had her blood, Absolon. Even you don't have that much restraint."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Solon says. "But if she's the daughter of Jeremias, then that's what she is."

But he's lying. Solon's lying!

He did drink my blood. A lot of it.

Far more than this guy had.

He knows the truth about me too, he knows I'm the daughter of Jeremias, whatever the fuck that even means.

Why didn't he tell me?

"And now you must die for what you've done," Solon says, his voice turning to steel, his eyes flashing with vengeance. "You took the blood of another vampire. That's not allowed in this club, in this house, in this city. You will pay for this with your life."

A hush goes over the crowd, everyone taking a step back. I grab hold of the lapels on Wolf's tuxedo, holding tight.

Solon lowers the vampire to the floor, taking his hand off his throat, black and blue fingerprints left behind.

The vampire stiffens, makes a move to run, but Solon snaps his fingers, freezing the vampire on the spot. The vampire's eyes go wide with horror.

Solon lets out a low, raspy growl, the kind you'd hear from a wolf about to strike, and sticks out his finger, running it down the middle of the vampire's dress shirt, then going slightly to the left, poised right in front of his heart.

Oh, fuck.

With his eyes fixed on the vampire's wild ones, he holds his hand against his chest, fingers curved slightly like claws. Then it happens almost too fast to see.

Solon brings his arm back and then jabs his hand forward at lightning speed, driving his fingers straight into the vampire's chest, the sound of tearing flesh and breaking bones filling the room, followed by the slick, sloppy sound of organs cased in blood.

The vampire can't even scream, he's held in place in much the same way I was with Atlas Poe, but the terror and indescribable pain is clearly visible.

Then Solon retrieves his hand.

With the vampire's still beating heart gripped between his bloody fingers.

I gasp.

Someone in the room screams, possibly faints.

"Holy *shit*," Wolf utters under his breath, and the fact that this is a shock to him isn't a good sign.

Solon holds up the bloody beating heart so everyone in Dark Eyes can see.

"This is what happens if any of you ever lays a hand on her!" he booms, his voice never sounding so confident, clear, and deadly. "Let this be your only warning."

Then he snaps his fingers as he stares up at the heart in his hand.

The heart immediately goes up in flames.

More gasps fill the room, cries, whimpers.

Solon then lowers the flaming heart and shoves it back inside the vampire's chest. Then he steps away and the flames start to spread from the heart outward, quickly incinerating the vampire as if he were doused in gasoline.

The vampire can move again, his wild, desperate screams filling the air as he stumbles forward, hands waving wildly. He's now just walking flames, his skin turning to charcoal as he falls to his knees in front of Solon, trying to reach for him.

Solon steps back and then brings his foot forward, kicking the burning vampire in the head.

The vampire immediately turns to ash, spilling across the rug, smothering the flames until a vague ashen shape is left behind.

Silence fills the room, peppered by a few sniffs.

Solon takes a moment, staring at the ash, breathing hard, before he looks at everyone. "Party is over," he announces.

Then he brings his gaze to meet mine.

Is this what you want? he asks me in my head, a pained expression in his eyes. *Because if you want me, this is what you're going to get.*

I shake my head. Not because he just Temple of Doomed this vampire in revenge, but because he lied to me. He knew about Jeremias and he kept that all to himself.

"I have to go," I tell Wolf, my voice in a hush. "I need to get out of here."

He doesn't let go of me. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Wolf, please," I tell him. "I can't...I can't be here right now."

Wolf looks back at Solon, who is watching us warily but keeping his distance, just as everyone else is keeping their distance from Solon, hurrying toward the exit.

"Go to your room," Wolf says to me, relaxing his grip. "Go straight there. One of us will be up there soon."

I wrangle myself out of his grasp, gathering the ends of my dress.

Don't turn around and look at Solon, I tell myself. *Just get out of here.*

I go through the doors into the house, then up the stairs, passing by Amethyst on the landing.

"What the hell just happened in there?" she says to me, noting the horrid expression on my face, my bloody neck and chest.

"Kalima," I tell her. "I'm leaving."

"What?" she asks, confused by my *Temple of Doom* reference. "Where?"

But I don't answer her.

I open the door and step out into the night, running down the street toward the Bay. I can't think, I can only run, the vestiges of my vampire grace enabling me to do so in my heels, my dress flowing behind me.

It isn't until I get closer to the hotel that I realize I don't have the room key on me, or anything at all, not even my phone.

So I have no choice.

I stop just at the base of the hill on California Street and make sure no one is looking before I make the air shimmer and warp, the flames appearing, taking on the shape of a door.

I step through the Veil for the second time tonight, but this time I'm alone.

Kinda.

Immediately I see shadows coming for me out of the darkness.

Fuck.

I start running again, up the hill, going faster and faster, the adrenaline flooding my system. I don't look back, don't want to see the spirit-hijackers slithering towards me, don't want to do anything but be back in my hotel room, safe and sound.

I reach the Fairmont quickly, thanking both my natural athleticism and my now active vampire genes, and go to my room. The empty lobby creeps me out, but by the time I climb one million stairs to get to my floor, I'm too tired to care.

The door unlocks as all the doors in the Black Sunshine do, and I step inside my room, closing it beside me. I create a flaming door again and step through, the flames fading. The world is colorful, normal again, the city lights bright.

And then, only then, do I exhale.

Put my head in my hands.

Wonder if the tears are going to come, how I'm going to handle this because there's so much happening right now and I'm teetering between horror and rage and frustration and—

My ruby burns against my chest.

"Fuck!" I yell, head back. No escape.

Turn around in time to see Solon appear from the Veil, still in his tux, looking incensed.

"Why did you leave?" he cries out, coming to me, grabbing me by my forearms. "Do you know how dangerous that was?"

He's breathing hard, grinding his jaw, eyes wild and unhinged. His grip on my arms is close to hurting me.

"Let go of me," I tell him, trying to keep my voice firm. "Now."

He hates being told what to do. He bares his teeth at me, a rumble coming from his chest, but he lets go.

"I told you, I warned you," he says to me, running his hand through his hair in frustration, turning around so his back is to me. "I showed you who I was, and that wasn't even the half of it."

"I'm not upset about what you did to that vampire," I tell him, anger sneaking up in my voice. "He fucking attacked me, bit me, drank my blood. Violated me, Solon. He got what was coming to him."

He looks at me over his shoulder, frowning. "Then—"

"You lied to me!" I yell. "You fucking lied!"

He shakes his head, turning back to face me. "No, Lenore. I didn't lie..."

"You knew! You knew I was the daughter of Jeremias. I don't even know what that means, but apparently it's a big enough deal that some vampire risked his life to find out, at the behest of another vampire! You knew because you drank my blood and you didn't tell me."

"That's not lying," he says. "That's just pushing a fact to the side for now."

"Oh my god!" I exclaim, throwing my arms out. "Is that how you're justifying this? What the fuck, Solon, you should have told me!"

"I was waiting for the right time," he says gruffly, avoiding my gaze. "I needed to figure it out for myself."

"Well, that fucking vampire you just ripped the heart out of and set on fire figured it out a lot faster than you did!"

He wiggles his jaw, growing silent.

"You're not even going to apologize?" I go on.

His eyes flick up to mine, his gaze hard. "I'm sorry."

I shake my head, pressing the heel of my palm against my forehead. "You asked me to trust you and I did. I did. And you just...shit all over it."

I close my eyes, trying to calm my heart, the adrenaline in the room is palpable. We're both worked up and on the edge and it's not helping, but fuck, does it hurt to have him betray me like this.

"I didn't betray you," he says quietly.

I put my face in my hands, letting out a growl of frustration. "Please stop reading my thoughts. I deserve some privacy."

"I can't help it," he says. He comes closer, his scent flowing over me. He grabs my hands, gently this time, and takes them off my face. "I can't help myself around you, Lenore."

I don't want to look at him, don't want to break my resolve.

"I know you're upset, I know you're hurt, and I didn't mean to hurt you," he says, squeezing my hands. I hate at how grounding the gesture is,

hate how it causes butterflies to travel up my arms. "I should have told you."

I swallow hard, my heart aching. "What else aren't you telling me?" I whisper.

"There are so many things," he says after a moment, his voice raw. "So many things that I will tell you, that I want to tell you. But for now, we can start with this one. I'll tell you everything I know. Just..."

He lets go of one hand and puts his fingers under my chin, raising it up so I meet his eyes. His pupils are black, his eyes shadowed, and in their depths I feel something radiating off of him that I'd never felt before. An intensity.

Devotion.

"I told you that you would ruin me," he says. "Because I would ruin myself for you. You bring me to my knees, Lenore. Right to my god damn knees."

Oh god.

My heart feels like it's about to detonate.

"Solon," I say, breath catching in my throat. "I—"

He grips my chin, pulls my mouth to his, kissing me.

Soft, full of life, lips and tongue moving in sweet synchronicity.

The kiss causes birds take flight in my chest, spreading through the rest of me, until they become something hot and wild and free, and then he's moving me backward, our hands roaming over each other, grabbing, holding, pulling, trying to get closer and closer until my back slams against the floor-to-ceiling window.

With a grunt he reaches down and grabs my ass, lifting me up and pressing me against the glass while I wrap my legs around his waist. He quickly unzips his pants and shoves my dress up to the waist, then braces himself on the window as he pushes himself inside me.

I cry out softly, already wet as sin, and expand around him, feeling the heat between us begin to build, the connection fusing us together in bands of gold.

His lowers his head, his mouth about to go to my neck, but he pauses, staring at me. "Does it hurt?" he whispers. "Your neck..."

I almost forgot about the chunk the vampire took out of me. I can't even tell if it's healing or not, but it doesn't hurt anymore.

I shake my head, running my hand through his hair. "No. I'm okay."

His mouth goes tight, eyes glimmering. “No one will ever hurt you again. I won’t let that happen. I won’t.”

“I know now what happens if they do,” I tell him.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” he says softly.

“I’m not,” I tell him. “I saw what you would do for me.”

“I will do so much more for you.” He swallows, eyes shooting sparks. “You’re mine, Lenore. You always have been. Mine and only mine. Forever mine.”

The possessiveness of a vampire is truly something, but with Solon it’s on another level. And I love it.

Then he bites my ear, thrusting back inside me, with fevered urgency this time.

I moan, gripping him tight, making a fist in his hair, and he slams his cock up into me, binding us together, his teeth razing over my jaw, my chin, then up to my mouth, sucking in my lower lip, fucking me with his tongue.

Devotion. I feel his devotion in every ounce of his touch, every thrust of his hips. I feel like he might just belong to me after all.

As if hearing my thoughts, he lets out another rough growl and pushes me back against the glass even harder, his speed picking up, fucking me like a tireless machine. His breath is raspy at my ear, shaking with exertion. I feel the strength in his muscles beneath my hands, know how powerful of a creature he is, and soon a cracking sound is filling the air.

I turn my head to the side in time to see the glass behind me starting to crack, long spidery lengths spreading along the window.

We’re twenty-two floors up.

“Jesus,” I swear, grabbing his neck as he keeps pumping up into me, the window splintering more each time. “Solon. You’re going to shatter the window.”

He pulls his head back to look at me, eyes glazed. “You’d survive the fall.” He gives me a twisted smile. “Probably.”

Before I can say anything to that, he’s whisking me off the window and turning me around, pulling out of me right before he throws me on the bed where I bounce, landing on my knees.

Then his hands grip my hips positioning me on the mattress, and I hear a tearing sound as he rips my dress right in half. Seven thousand dollar’s worth of red silk falls around me like a pool of blood.

He's on me again, kneeling from behind, then there's a moment of silence, a pause where I can hear both our hearts racing, the sharp exhales of our breath, and then he dips his head, running his tongue from my pussy to my ass.

"Oh god," I cry out, my head in the mattress, fingers curling around the duvet. He eats me out like a man starved, face buried, licking, sucking, flicking his tongue over every wet inch of me, the sound obscene, turning me on even more.

Then, as I'm coming, shaking, crying out, he positions himself and pushes his cock inside me, a low hiss emanating from him. "Fuck, moonshine," he says, his voice strangled, and then he slowly pulls out, dragging over every fevered nerve, because I'm still coming, my body still pulsing.

Everything becomes a blur and my mind turns off, perhaps short-circuiting, and I just hear and smell and feel.

The loud slap of his hips against my ass.

The feel of his hand on my waist, gripping me so tight, his palm so large and warm and strong.

The smell of our sex in the air, spicy, heady, fully intoxicating.

He picks up the pace and the intensity and it's all I can do to hold on, afraid that if I let go of the bed, I'll go right through the headboard.

But then something changes.

Solon keeps saying, "I need you, I need you." His voice raw and desperate.

And while my heart is tumbling over itself at hearing those words, knowing this powerful creature needs me, maybe as much as I need him, something else is happening. I can smell it, sense it.

The darkness.

Oh god.

"Fuck!" Solon cries out, fucking me harder now, wild, savage thrusts, his nails now scraping down my back, getting sharper and sharper. "Fuck, Lenore, I'm sorry."

His words break off into a low, rough groan that then builds into a growl, a roar, something inhuman, a sound I've never heard come from him before.

His cry shakes the room, shakes my bones, and I'm still being fucked, and now I'm scared because I can feel him changing *inside* me, growing

longer, thicker, and I can feel him changing behind me, the darkness taking over.

The beast is here.

I lift my head to look behind me, getting a sense of something tall and large and dark, something beautiful and terrifying, but he places his hand on my head and pushes it down on the bed.

“Don’t look at me, don’t look at me!” he growls, his voice no longer his.

And his hand is no longer his, because it’s longer now, bigger than my head and I feel claws stretching out over my scalp. It holds me in place while he continues to drive himself into me and I’m nearly split in two.

Then he reaches forward with his other hand, bracing himself on the bed in front of me and I see it now, what it really is.

His hand is larger, completely black, with long claws at the ends. It’s still his flesh, but the blackness is heading up his arm and taking over his pale skin, flames licking the edges. It reminds me of when they purposely burn the fields before fire season, the flames low and smoldering, moving across the land and leaving blackened ash behind.

All this time when he was talking about the beast inside him, I really thought he was being metaphorical.

He wasn’t.

Oh god.

But I don’t have any time to dwell on the monster, because his cock hits me at just the right spot and I scream, unable to stop it from happening.

I’m coming again, my orgasm a tidal wave, sweeping the world out from under me. I’m lost to the undertow, drowning in desire and fear and a building sense of awe, while my body feels like it’s breaking into a million shining stars and I’ve been strewn across the night sky, flirting with the moon, and, and...

And it’s when this beast is inside me, his own guttural cries filling the room as he pours himself inside, still fucking hard like the savage animal that he is, that I realize the truth.

My truth.

Amethyst was right.

I’m in love with him.

Hell of a time to realize it.

“Lenore,” he pants, voice rumbling, still not quite his, but at least he knows my name. “Lenore.”

I close my eyes and rest my forehead on the bed as his pumping slows, knowing that something otherworldly just happened here, that I just felt Solon in the most real and raw way possible. I was exposed to the side of him he never wanted me to see.

He’s a monster at his core.

A beast.

And perhaps I didn’t tame him, but I’m also not afraid of him.

Finally, he stops thrusting and he lifts his hand off my head, and I raise my chin in time to see the blackened ash reverse flow, quickly traveling down his arm, leaving only his luminous pale skin behind, until his hand is the familiar one I know so well.

He straightens up and then pulls out of me and there’s a moment when I feel him just kneeling behind me, trying to catch his breath, wrangle his thoughts. I know he doesn’t know what to do, what to say to me. He didn’t mean for any of that to happen, it was his worst fear come to life.

But I’m still here.

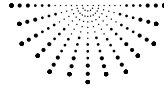
I’m still here, I tell him.

I hear his shaking exhale and then I finally flip over, turning around to look at him.

He’s back to his now naked, yet still formidable self, though his expression is as fragile as I’ve ever seen it, wary and close to unraveling.

“What are you?” I whisper.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



THERE'S A CIRCLE OF BLOOD IN THE SNOW ALL AROUND ME.

I stand there in the middle, naked, frozen to the ground, ice spreading up my legs.

It's quiet and empty all around, not a soul to be found, just the rolling hills of frosted white. The sky is a pale grey, light enough in parts that it's hard to tell where the horizon is, and the sun is a faint glowing orb in the sky, close to breaking through the clouds.

A shadow passes over the land and I look back up to the sky in time to see black wings. They blot out the sun, blot out the world, enveloping me, like a giant leathery bird of prey.

But I don't feel fear.

I feel safe.

I feel powerful, like I could fly up into the sky on these very black wings.

But then...then...

Everything changes.

The wings fade to smoke, just a faint shape hanging in the air before being carried away by the wind.

There's an insidious hiss at my back and I turn around to see the cloaked figures creeping closer to me, white bony arms outstretched, pointing at me with nails that are far too long and curved.

"He can't save you, Lenore," a low, inhuman voice says from behind me, but I know if I turn around these creatures will attack me, the ones without faces behind those hooded red curtains. The ones that are all teeth. "No one can save you now. You'll see, soon enough."

I feel the presence come closer to me, then claws running down my spine, making me cry out.

“You won’t survive the Dark Order, and you certainly won’t survive me.”

With a violent thrust, his claws stab me in the back, breaking through my ribs, reaching right through to my heart.

I scream.

And then I wake up, tangled in sheets, the scream choking in my throat, panic seizing my body.

Then big, strong arms wrap around me.

I smell flowers and smoke and I know it’s Solon, holding me to his chest, his heartbeat trying to soothe me.

“Shhh,” he says to me, kissing the top of my head. “It’s alright. You’re having a nightmare.”

My eyes open to darkness and then the real nightmare of last night comes back.

Monster.

Solon turned into a monster.

I lift my chin to look up at him, his gaze going straight into my soul, a sad smile on his lips. “Unless you were dreaming about me,” he says quietly.

I stare, trying to recall everything about last night, even the things that I don’t want to. I remember it all, except I asked him what he was and he said he’d explain in the morning. I said there was no way I’d be able to fall asleep, but I guess I did. I’m still exhausted, every part of my body aching, but I’m ready for him to talk.

He nods slowly, hearing me, the tip of his tongue wetting his lips, causing an automatic ache inside me. I ignore it.

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know,” he says to me, running his fingers through my hair. I close my eyes at his touch, marveling at how gentle he’s being after being so rough, grateful that he’s still in bed with me.

“What time is it?” I ask softly, burying my head into his bare chest.

“Almost five. Sun should be coming up soon. Should I get you a coffee?” He makes a move to leave but I grip him hard.

“You’re not leaving this bed.”

“I don’t particularly want to,” he murmurs, placing another kiss on the top of my head. “I’m afraid if I did, I might not ever see you again.” He

pauses. "I wouldn't blame you for leaving me."

"I'm not leaving you," I assure him.

"Even though you should? Even though you will?" His hold tightens around me. "You strive to see the good in me, Lenore. Even when faced by the very monstrous thing that I am. You want to see the good so badly. But I am what I am. I'm the opposite of good. And you're going to break your own heart by believing in me."

I lift my chin, his eyes meeting mine, looking like glass close to breaking. "Let me make that choice then. It doesn't belong to you." I exhale through my nose, gathering strength. "Now, tell me. What happened last night?"

His black lashes flutter as he closes his eyes. "That was the beast."

"It was a literal beast, Solon."

"I know," he whispers, pain ravaging his voice. "I thought you could see that when I told you about Esmerelda."

"I didn't, I just...saw flashes of what it was like to be you. And the feelings. That feeling of darkness, madness, being all alone." It's breaking me all over again. God, to have been him back then, constantly changing from something bad to something worse, afraid of your own body, your own self, your own soul. To fear you don't even *have* a soul.

"Tell me what you are," I plead softly.

"I don't even know," he admits. "I just know that, at the beginning, this was what happened to us when we were made into vampires. I was...the first one."

I blink at him. "The first vampire?"

"The first one made."

My mouth drops. "You...you mean, Skarde is the one who turned you?"

He nods, his teeth set. "Yes. I am his first son. The original monster."

I can't believe this. All these questions I've had about the vampire king, and it turns out that Solon was the vampire prince. "You really are the Prince of Darkness then."

His smile is grim. "My father, he didn't know what he was doing when he made the pact with The Devil."

My stomach twists, eyes going wider. "Wait, what? That's how vampires were made, Skarde made a deal with the actual Devil? Satan himself?"

"I don't have all the details," he says after a moment. "Part of me doesn't want them. But when my father called upon the darkness that night, wanting eternal life, this is how it was given. He was turned into a vampire, but it was the Devil's creation now, and as a result, he had the Devil's influence in him. When he created me, it was passed down. Both of us were forged in darkness."

This is blowing my mind and it's been blown so many times lately, I'm surprised there's any part of it left. "So the beast is just, what, the Devil's doing? The Devil himself?"

"Could be. You saw what happened, the flames. I'm just glad it stopped when it did. I still had control. I shudder to think what would happen if I didn't."

I reach up with my hand, placing my fingers on his jaw, feeling his stubble and cool skin. "I survived. More than that...I think I might have enjoyed it."

A muscle near his eye twitches. "This is nothing to joke about, Lenore."

"I'm not joking. I'm being honest. And I know you, Solon. I saw what you'll do for me. I know you'll always be in control, no matter what happens."

His dark brows come together. "How can you be so sure?" he whispers.

"I just know," I tell him. And deep in the heart of me, beneath that moonlit well, I know it's true.

He gives a small shake of his head, staring at me in awe. "You..." he says in a hush, "you saw me, felt me, for what I really am, and you're still so determined to be with me. To want me. You have to know what my love would do you to, Lenore. It wouldn't save you. It would destroy you."

I feel like I'm freefalling.

Love.

Does he love me?

Is that even possible?

"I know you think you can handle me, tame me, and you're the bravest creature I know," he goes on, eyes searching mine. "But this could be a mistake that you'll pay for with your life. Are you willing to do that?" He closes his eyes. "The better question is, am I willing to let you?"

"You're not letting me do anything," I say firmly, reaching up to kiss him on the lips. "As I told you before, this is my choice to make, and I've made it. I'm here with you, and this is where I'll stay."

“Stubborn little creature,” he murmurs in amusement, kissing the corner of my mouth.

“Takes one to know one,” I reply. “Though you aren’t so little.” I nestle my head back into his neck, feeling a strange sense of contentment despite all the revelations. “Tell me more about your father.”

“How about I tell you about yours,” he counters.

He’s got me there. I hold strong. “After. You first. Do you still speak to your father? You told me Skarde was still alive.”

He exhales loudly through his nose, his chest falling beneath me. “He is alive, and I do not speak to him. We are...estranged, to put it mildly. Enemies, if you want to be more accurate.”

“What happened?”

“So much over the years,” he says in a weary tone. “Of course, I don’t remember a lot of the first bit because I was driven mad and he let me run loose. He couldn’t control me, and he stopped trying. He was a fan of the mayhem. But he always kept tabs on me, and after what happened with Esmerelda, I ran back to his side, where I stayed until the 1700s. By then I was starting to come out of the madness again. And then I started to grow a conscious. That became a problem.”

“Why?”

“Because my father is more the Devil’s son than not. He loved creating vampires. He loved the destruction. Hated humans, humanity, the whole world. Still does. I was the first made, but thousands were made after me. A lot of them didn’t survive, but some did. Yanik, for instance, he was made, that’s why he’s so old. He was that age when he was bitten.”

The mention of Yanik makes me shudder. “Yanik has an interest in my blood. Is he still aligned with your father?”

“Yanik?” he asks, brows raised. “I would have never let him in my house if I knew that he was. The mad vampires created more mad vampires, so not everything is traced back to my father necessarily. He just wanted to create an army, he wanted the power. He saw how I turned, hoped that the next time would be easier, but it wasn’t. He then started breeding, though I’d consider it raping, producing natural born heirs, like my half-brother Kaleid. He’s my father’s righthand man now. The favorite,” he adds bitterly. “He never had to go through what I did.”

“So when was the last time you saw your father? Or brother?”

“Probably 1850,” he says. “In Lapland. It didn’t go well.”

“What happened?”

“Well, they tried to have me killed.”

“What?” I straighten up. “Why?”

He gives me a crooked smile. “Because I tried to have them killed. That’s been my goal all these years.”

“To kill your father?”

He nods. “He rules over all the vampires in one way or another, keeping them in line. It was him who outlawed creating other vampires, with good reason of course, but the hypocrisy is what gets me. You see, he’s still creating them. Making them. They’re evolving now, and he’s somehow figured out a way to control them. Not enough to do his bidding, I suppose, but that’s what he’s working towards. And god help the world if he’s ever able to do that. The Dark Order will be unstoppable.”

My heart goes ice cold.

“The Dark Order?” I repeat, remembering my dream.

He eyes me curiously. “Yes. Bit of a dramatic name, but we vampires are known for our drama. After all, Dracula’s nickname was Dramacula.”

I ignore the mention of Dracula for now, because wow there’s a lot to unpack there. “The Dark Order. Do they wear cloaks, their faces obscured by like hanging beads or curtains of red thread?”

He stares at me, growing stiff. “Yes. How do you know that? Did you see it just now, in a memory?”

I shake my head. “No. In my dream. That’s what I was dreaming about when I woke up, my nightmare.” I explain to him all the details I remember, plus the dreams I’d had before.

When I finish, Solon looks haunted, skin paler than ever. “That was Skarde,” he says in astonishment. “Why on earth are you dreaming about him?”

I shake my head, swallowing. “I don’t know.”

He adjusts his arm around me, holding me closer to him. “I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all.”

“Maybe I tapped into your subconscious somehow,” I tell him. “Saw what you saw.”

“Yes, but the Dark Order is new. They formed after I last saw them. I’ve only heard about what they look like now from Ezra and the others.”

“Ezra?” I repeat.

“He’s a spy,” he explains. “That’s why he’s not often here.”

“So, all this time you’ve been keeping tabs on your father.”

“Someone has to. It’s the reason why I’ve been accumulating magic all this time. Trying to create a stockpile.”

“Wow,” I say, mulling it all over. “I guess the both of us have daddy issues.”

He snorts at that. “I guess we do.”

“Tell me about Jeremias.”

He brushes his lips over the top of my head. “Of course.” He inhales, running his fingers through my hair. “Jeremias is a lot like Skarde, though I have less information about him. But what I do know is that Jeremias is a witch who has lived for hundreds of years.”

“Witches can do that?” I gasp.

“Not that I know of,” he informs me. “But Jeremias can. I don’t know if he made the same kind of bargain with the Devil as my father did, but sometimes I do wonder. Wouldn’t that be a thing for the Devil to do? To create two different sons in different creatures, and make them war against each other, eternal enemies?”

“So I’m guessing Jeremias is a bad witch,” I muse. “Atlas told me I had black magic running through my veins, just as he does.”

“I wouldn’t listen to a word Atlas Poe says,” he says stiffly.

“But I do have darkness in me,” I tell him, propping myself up on my elbows. “You know this as well as I do.”

“Everyone does, Lenore,” he says, eyes skimming over my face as he brushes my hair behind my ear. “It’s what you do with it that counts. Just because your father is Jeremias, doesn’t mean you will be like him. Just like I do what I can to not be like my own father.”

“Tell me what Jeremias does.”

“As far as I know, it’s all rumors and hearsay. Black magic is powerful, more powerful than I can handle. They say Jeremias wants to destroy all vampires once and for all, but I don’t think it’s true. After all, if he has that power, he would have done it already. Those are just rumors and fears that vampires spread, to make us hate all witches, to justify feeding on and killing them. I move in the space in between because I know neither side is truly right or just. That is why I do what I do.”

It’s all starting to make sense now. Handing over vampires to witches is a strike at his father. Handing over witches to vampires is a strike at Jeremias. This is Solon’s way of staying in the grey area.

“And me,” I say to him, finally putting out the question that has bugged me for far too long. “Why did you really take me? Did you really plan to sell me to the highest bidder from the start? Would it have mattered if it was a vampire or a witch?”

His expression softens, fingers trailing lightly along my cheek, holding his palm against the side of my face. “I told you the truth, my dear. I never planned on letting you go.” He bites his lip for a moment, gazing at me with a look of adoration. “I’d been watching over you your entire life. From the moment your parents first brought you into San Francisco, I was there.”

My eyes go round, heart skipping in my chest. “What?”

How can that be?

He gives me a small smile. “I feared the rumors about Alice and Hakan’s child were true. So when your parents left, I had a feeling that the child I saw them raise wasn’t theirs. More than that, I could sense the vampire in you. The guilt was starting to eat me alive, knowing that I was the reason you were in the witches’ care. So I watched over you. I watched you grow up. I looked out for you, and I waited, waited until you were twenty-one, to see if what I guessed was true.” He takes in a deep, shaking breath, fingers pressing against my cheekbone. “I was counting the years as they passed by, and for the first time in my life, I was painfully aware of time.”

Tears spring to my eyes, a crushing feeling in my chest. “You were watching me? You watched me...my whole life? All those years?”

“All those years.”

I try to swallow the lump in my throat, but I can’t. “So I was never really alone?”

“You were never alone, moonshine. I was always there.”

I close my eyes, a tear rolling down my cheek. He reaches out and brushes it away, and my heart is close to bursting. All those years I thought I was alone, that no one understood me, and yet he was there, watching over me, making sure I was safe, waiting until I could be his. Fuck. Explains why I’ve always been so paranoid. If I’d only known.

When I open my eyes, I swear I see a glimmer in his, emotion on his brow, his cool façade almost crumbling. Then he inhales through his nose and I feel the restraint roll back into him.

“You were so hard on me,” I tell him. “You took me from everything I knew and you just...you could have told me right away.”

“You wouldn’t have believed me. Do you want me to apologize for kidnapping you?”

I think about it, then shake my head. “No. Because I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“And I was a little hard on you,” he admits, a sheepish turn of his lips. “But I had to be. Blow hard on a candle’s flame and you’ll snuff it right out. Blow on it just enough, and the fire will rise, stronger and brighter.” He leans forward and places his lips on mine. “You’re going to burn so bright, Lenore. I can’t wait for you to see it.”

* * *

I MUST HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP AGAIN, because when I open my eyes, the bed is empty next to me and sunlight seeps in through the edges of the hotel room’s blackout curtains.

“Solon?” I cry out softly, feeling the empty space.

“In here,” he says from the bathroom. “Just shaving.”

I slowly sit up and swing my legs over the side of the bed, feeling the weight of the last twenty-four hours on my shoulders. So much has happened physically and emotionally, so much information, that I truly don’t know how my brain is going to sort it all out.

Coffee will help, I tell myself.

I get up, totally naked, and look around. My duffel bag had been here, along with my computer, but Solon did say he brought them back to the house. So other than my dress, which is ripped clean in half, there’s nothing for me to wear.

“Uh, can you toss me a towel?” I ask him, peering around the corner of the open bathroom door.

Solon is standing in front of the mirror in just his navy boxer briefs, remnants of shaving cream on his face, still leaving facial hair on his upper lip, his chin. Such a vampire look. He eyes me and holds out the razor blade. “When’s the last time you had something to drink?”

I stare at the blade, my eyes skipping back up to his. “When’s the last time *you* had something to drink?”

He grins at me. “If you’re suggesting the vampire equivalent of a sixty-nine...”

“Does that work?” I ask, totally intrigued, and he’s reaching over to the towel rack, handing me a towel. I wrap it around me.

“In theory,” he says, going back to shaving. “But really, you should feed.”

Hunger flares through me, but there’s this part of me that wills it to calm down, that still finds the blood business as something I don’t want to do until I absolutely have to. “I can wait.”

“You can’t,” he says, finishing up and washing his face. “You’ll be much stronger, think much clearer.” He faces me and takes the blade, slicing the skin across his neck, barely even flinching. “There. You don’t even have to bite me if you don’t want to. Though I rather enjoy when you do.”

I don’t even hear him anymore. All I see is the crimson blood running down his neck, smell the gorgeous scent in the air, and then I’m across the bathroom floor in half a second, wrapping my arms around him, my mouth at his skin.

He moves back until he’s pressed up against the wall and stays still while I drink him down, his arms around me in a light embrace, the occasional moan coming from deep inside him, his breath heavy. In the first few minutes, I am lost to the hunger and thirst, needing so badly to feel sated. But then, when my clarity returns a little, there’s a sense of peace between us, something so strangely pure and whole about his blood giving me life. There is intimacy during sex, but the intimacy when he lets me feed from him is something else entirely.

Finally, I pull away, careful not to take too much from him.

He gives me a weak smile, running his thumb over my chin to rub away the blood.

“Now your turn,” I tell him.

A brow lifts. “Are you sure?”

“I am very sure,” I tell him. “The fact that I have your blood in me, is that going to mess things up?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“Then it’s settled,” I say, reaching over to the sink and taking the razor blade. I stare at it for a moment; it takes a lot of courage to just willingly cut your own flesh, no matter who you are.

I take in a deep breath.

“So if I feed on you, and you feed on me,” I ask him as I slash at my forearm, ignoring the pain of the cut, “does that mean all we need is each other to survive?”

He gives me a weighted look. “That’s exactly what it means,” he says, his tone grave.

Then his pupils glow red and he’s at me, holding my arm to his mouth, ravenously sucking and biting. Being a full vampire, he doesn’t have the same restraint as I do in this situation, and when I look at his eyes sometimes, they seem lost to the blood, the crimson glow eerie.

But then, as it happened with me, he comes back into control, and the red fades, and the way he drinks from me turns tender and beautiful.

I love you, I think. The blood is love.

After he finishes, we wipe ourselves off and the both of us look at each other, our eyes bright and shining, and he’s taking me in his arms, kissing me so deeply that it pulls at the strings around my heart.

My hands skim over his hard chest, his carved abs, reaching down between the waistband of his boxer briefs, and—

A knock at the door.

I gasp and we pull apart and I’m trying to smell the air to get a sense of who it is. Room service?

“Who is that?” I ask.

He gives me a wary look. “It’s your mother. I told her to bring you some clothes.”

“My *mother!*” I squeak. Oh, this won’t be good, not with Solon here.

I hurry over to the door, holding my towel tight around me and open it.

My mother looks at me, tears in her eyes, her face contorting, then she glances down at my chest, and my arm. The white towel is speckled with blood and the cut on my arm is still healing itself.

“I am never going to get used to this,” she says with a shake of her head.

I open the door and she comes in, just in time to see Solon emerge from the bathroom. At least he’s put on his pants.

“Absolon,” she says to him, giving him a frosty look.

“Elaine,” is his clipped response.

They stare at each other for a long minute, both of them tense, hackles raised, moons glowing in my mother’s eyes, a deadly look of contempt in Solon’s.

Then my mother sighs and hands me a garbage bag full of my clothes.

"Here," she says. Suddenly she throws her arms around me and hugs me so tight I can barely breathe. I glance at Solon over her shoulder and he looks away.

"I'll get some coffee, give you two your privacy," he says, throwing on his white shirt and slipping out of the room so fast that neither of us can say anything.

"Oh my baby," she says to me, still holding tight. I feel her tears on my neck. "How are you? Has he hurt you?"

"Mom," I tell her, pulling back, stronger than she's used to. Her arms drop away. I hold her by the shoulders. "I'm fine. I really am. He hasn't hurt me, he never would."

She shakes her head. "I don't even know how you can stand to be in the same room as that thing."

"He is not a *thing*," I say sharply. "He is mine."

Even if he doesn't know it yet.

She stares at me, eyes glistening as she looks me over. "You've changed so much, sweetie. You're...you were always so beautiful, but now you're... you're one of them."

"What does that mean?" I ask, narrowing my eyes.

"It means you're beyond beautiful, sweetie. Out of this world." She takes in a deep, shaky breath, putting her hand to my cheek for a moment, then quickly taking it away when she feels how cold I am. "It suits you."

"You didn't bring your slayer blade, did you?" I ask, suddenly struck with the thought.

"No. Solon told me not to."

"He was right. You'd probably try to kill him again."

She sighs, placing her hands in her face for a moment. "No. I don't want to kill him, I swore I wouldn't."

"That's what you said last time when you had your little arrangement. Remember? You killed my parents and he gave you their whereabouts."

She swallows audibly. "I know...I don't like it, I hate it, and I hate him, but I know you need him. You need him more than you need us. We can't protect you anymore. We heard about what happened with Atlas."

Then my mother starts talking about Elle and how she's still listed as missing and I start crying all over again because the pain is still so fresh and real, as is the guilt, this big dark anvil inside me.

Eventually I dry off my tears and then slip into some of the clothes she brought, a pair of striped wide-leg pants with an elastic waist and a crop top, not exactly my style anymore, but it's better than a towel.

Then Solon is knocking at the door and he comes in holding two coffees. He hands one to my mother first. "For you," he says.

She gives him the once-over, her skin visibly prickling at being so close to him. She snatches it from him and takes a few steps back. "Thank you," she says coldly.

Then he hands me my coffee, giving me a smile that makes my heart sing. "And for you, my dear."

My mother lets out a snort of contempt and I give her a dirty look.

She just shrugs. "Look at the two of you," she says disdainfully.

Solon clears his throat and faces her. "I didn't just invite you here because you had her clothes—"

My mom raises her hand, cutting him off. "Excuse me? Invite me here? We're paying for this hotel room."

"Mom," I warn.

"It's fine," Solon says to me. Then he gives her a placating smile. "I asked you here because there's something I wanted to tell you."

"Oh god." She nearly drops the coffee and stares at me in horror. "Please don't tell me you're pregnant. Or you're getting married."

"No," I snap. "Let him finish." Even though I don't know what he's going to say.

"I know who Lenore's father is," he goes on, voice deep and grave. "Her real father. I tasted her blood, I know this for a fact. It's Jeremias."

My mother's face goes slack, hand at her chest. "Are you sure?"

He nods. "Jeremias and Alice had a child. Witch and vampire. Lenore is their daughter."

She shakes her head, mulling it over, then plops down on the chair by the desk. "I can't believe it. And yet I can believe it. Oh, this makes so much sense." She looks at me with a sense of awe. "You know your father and I often wondered. We knew you were part witch, of course. But there were so many peculiar things about you."

"Like what?" I ask, wanting to know everything.

"Like," she says slowly, eyes going between the two of us. "When we... when we killed your parents," I can't help but flinch as she says that, "we didn't know you were there. We set the house on fire, you should have

burned in the flames. But you didn't. We heard you crying and thought it was too late to save you. But then you...you walked right through the fire. All of it. Didn't stop. The flames didn't hurt you, didn't leave a single mark or burn. You're impervious to the element, Lenore."

"What about now?" I ask quietly. "With my vampire blood. Fire kills vampires."

My mother looks at Solon. "Do you know?"

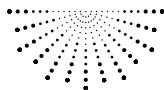
Solon rubs his lips together. "Regardless of the time they turn, they still have vampire blood in them, it's just dormant. But I don't think the vampire in her negates the witch. I think they both work together seamlessly. Yin and yang."

My mother nods slowly and then gets to her feet, taking a step toward Solon but not getting too close. "And so that's why you want her, isn't it? For your plan."

I frown. "What plan?" I ask. I stare at her, stare at Solon, and both are silent. "What plan?"

My mother tears her eyes away from Solon. "The plan he has. To use you to destroy his father."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



IT'S BEEN A WEEK SINCE I LEARNED THAT ABSOLON NEEDS MY HELP TO take down his father, Skarde. It wasn't exactly a plan, per se, not the way that my mother came out with it. But once it was out in the open and we got to talking, we realized that perhaps, one day, it's something I'd be willing to do. *Able* to do.

Of course, Solon and I discussed that without my mother there. In the hotel, he was adamant that he had no plan and that he would not be using me for anything, especially something that puts me in harm's way, and I believe him.

Afterward though, it kept coming up.

Because the thing is, my nightmares aren't stopping.

Every night since then I've dreamed about the Dark Order and Skarde, always in the ice and snow, always with circles of blood, always ending in my death. It scares me, to be honest, like Skarde is aware of my existence and has found a way to get into my dreams. Could that be right? He is a creation of the Devil himself, so why not have that ability?

All I know is that, as ludicrous as it seems to help Solon take his father down, in whatever way he means, I'm far from ready for that. I mean, this would be a war, wouldn't it? I'm not a soldier, I'm only a half-witch, and at the moment, totally helpless against anything so dark and formidable. I might be the daughter of Jeremias, but it means absolutely nothing.

Solon hasn't been going into any details about it either. When I bring it up, like "So, if I were to take down the Dark Order, how would that work exactly?" he just placates me with kiss or a noncommittal response.

"Solon?" I ask.

He looks up from the book he's reading, forehead creased. "Hmm?"

We're in the library, going through the stacks of books on witchcraft and magic. I brought down the ones I had been keeping in my room, but it turns out he has way more, from ones in Latin, to how-tos, to grimoires passed down through families. Every time I ask him how he got his hands on them, he mumbles something about a trade.

We've been in the library most days this week...and in his bedroom the rest of the time. When we returned from the hotel, after a tearful goodbye to my mother, telling her I'd see her soon, we got started in earnest about schooling me in witchcraft.

But like before, there's been no text yet that strikes a chord with me. A lot of them have to do with saying certain words over and over again, intention being the focus, intention shaping the energy around us.

Yet, no matter how many times I repeat the words and truly believe it, drawing on that infinite dark well inside me, nothing happens. I can't even feel it building inside me, there's nothing to even create from.

I take a big gulp of my whisky, Solon still staring at me with learned patience, waiting for me to go on. "I need to get out of the house," I tell him. "I've been in here for far too long and I can't read another page. This isn't helping me."

His brows raise further. "Okay," he says, carefully closing the book he was reading and putting it on the coffee table. "Where do you want to go?"

"Out," I say emphatically.

"Alright. Well, you know wherever you go, I'm going with you."

"What, like you're my bodyguard?"

His face remains impassive. "Yes. Like I always have been."

I'm about to mention the time Atlas Poe got me, but that was all my fault, and he still found me in the end.

"Well, you're not going to like where we're going," I tell him, though secretly it warms my heart and sets me at ease to know that no matter where I go, I'll have him at my side.

He stares at me steadily before having a sip of his drink, his long fingers running over the rim of the glass. "I'm sure I can handle it."

"I want to go to a bar," I tell him. "With people my own age. No one over thirty. No vampires."

He sighs. "Fine," he says, picking his book back up.

"That means not dressing like you're James Bond."

He looks down at himself. He looks damn good, as usual, in a charcoal grey dress shirt, sleeves rolled up showing off his ropey forearms, black pants, but he'll stick out wherever we go. "I hardly call this something James Bond would wear," he scoffs.

"What I mean is, you need to dress down. People already stare at you as it is."

"And that's a problem?" he asks, a hint of a smile.

"You're not the only one who's possessive," I remind him.

I decide we should leave at eight p.m., better to go a little earlier than later. Solon continues looking through the books though, forever searching for something that might give him a clue of what to do with me. Jeremias' black magic might come to me naturally, but even that doesn't want to come out. The earthquake I caused was one created accidentally under extreme duress, but I'd been in situations like that since and nothing strange or magical happened.

I put on a light dusting of makeup, pull my hair back into a ponytail, slip on the black dress with the roses that Solon bought for me, and my combat boots and purse, and I go down to meet him by the front door, feeling giddy at the idea of getting out and pretending to be normal, no matter what that might be for me now.

"Ready?" he asks from behind me, and I turn to see him walking up the stairs from Dark Eyes.

"Hot damn," I tell him, drinking him in. He's wearing black boots, black jeans, and a V-neck black t-shirt that shows off every impeccable muscle on him. Combined with his black wavy hair, curling up at the ends, and the shadowy brooding look of his eyes, he looks deadly sexy. "This isn't going to stop people from staring."

"This is me dressing down," he says dryly. "Take it or leave it."

I grin at him and walk over, standing on my tip toes to kiss his cheek. "Oh, I'm taking it."

He manages a smile at that and puts his arms around me, reaching down to grab my ass, pulling me close to him.

"Where are you going?" Wolf asks, appearing from the kitchen with a glass of red wine in his hand, looking us both over. "Solon, you trying out for the role of Bad Boy number two in a high school musical?"

"We're going out to have fun," I tell him, though Solon is less than impressed, shooting him daggers. "Want to come?"

Wolf shakes his head. "Can't. I have a few Netflix shows to catch up on before the Internet spoils them for me. You kids have fun though."

He goes up the stairs, snickering all the way.

"This was a mistake," Solon grumbles.

"No, it'll be fine," I tell him, grabbing his arm and dragging him out the door.

At first, I thought we'd maybe travel via the Black Sunshine, but I'd rather not step in that place if I don't have to, but then Solon tells me we're taking his car.

We walk down the side of the house and through the sliding metal gates with gothic spires at the top, to the back where there's a small garden that Yvonne tends to, plus four shiny black cars, a vintage Mustang, an Audi, a Tesla model S, and a Porsche Cayenne.

"Which one are we taking?" I ask, marveling at all of them.

"It depends, where are we going?"

"The Cloister," I tell him.

"The god-awful bar you go to?" he asks with a slight groan.

"Yes. It's been too long. It will make me feel normal."

"My dear," he says, running his hand down my arm and grasping my fingers at the end. "You are not normal."

"Let me pretend, okay?"

"Fine," he says with a sigh, "We'll take the Mustang. It'll blend in better up there."

"Everyone in the city has a Tesla," I point out as we walk over to the Mustang.

"Yes, but that one is special. It was one of the original ones they gave to the first investors."

"You invested in Tesla?" I ask incredulously.

He grins at me. "Of course I did. Vampires are the biggest investors in electric cars. We're the ones inheriting the planet, after all." He points his keys at the other cars. "The Audi RS e-tron GT is fully electric too, and the Porsche is a plug-in hybrid. But I don't trust them in Upper Haight. Bunch of hooligans up there."

I laugh and he walks over to my door, unlocking it and holding it open for me.

I slide inside and he shuts me in.

The car is sexy as hell, all black leather, every vintage detail polished and looking like new.

He gets in on his side and he looks so fucking good in the driver's seat, large hand on the gear shift, biceps popping, that it's taking everything in me to not crawl over the console and straddle him right now.

But then he's turning on the car, the engine roaring to life, then we're reversing and pulling out of the gates that close automatically behind us.

I obviously haven't been in a car with Solon before, but he drives like he's a fucking pro. I can't tell how much is a century of practice, or if he's using some sort of supernatural force to part the traffic and turn all the lights green.

"God this is sexy," I tell him as we burn it up Fulton. "Makes me want a cigarette for some reason."

He eyes me for a moment, eyes glinting in the streetlights. "Check the glove compartment."

Intrigued I pull it open and find a packet of Marlboros.

"Are they always here?" I ask in wonder as I bring them out.

He nods. "Suits the car, don't you think? I think I'll partake." He holds out two long fingers.

I pull out the cigarettes and stick the pack back in the glove compartment, the scent of them overwhelming in a chemical sense. No wonder cigars are so preferable.

Still, I give one to Solon and stick mine in my mouth. "Matches?" I ask, my lips moving around the filter.

He raises his hand and snaps his fingers twice. Both our ends light up with flames.

"Okay *Thanos*," I tell him, coughing on the smoke. "I'm serious now. You have to tell me how you're able to do that."

"A witch gave it to me," he says, puffing back on the cigarette, the smoke falling from his mouth. "I can light anything on fire. What you saw me do with the vampire's heart, that's the most I can do. It's the most I've tried, anyway. I stick to small things, they don't seem to drain me."

"I saw Wolf light a candle the same way," I say to him. "Did you teach him? Can you teach me?"

He shakes his head. "He was there when we bartered with the witch. He got that in exchange as well. It's handy," he adds, smiling at me.

"I'll say. So, what did you give the witch that resulted in that payment?"

His smile slips, knuckles going white on the steering wheel. “Gave them a vampire they’d been looking for. He was responsible for a bunch of murders in Los Angeles. Witches, some normal humans too.”

“What’s the difference between murdering someone and killing them for your survival?”

“There’s a difference,” he says, glancing at me, his tone serious. “If you can be in a place like Dark Eyes, or if you can find a human to feed off, with consent, then there’s no need to kill. And if you do kill, well, you better cover it up. We all make mistakes and get carried away.” He shrugs, as if it’s no big deal, but judging by all the skulls in his storage locker, I’d say otherwise. “But to do it for fun, wasting blood, being sloppy, that’s murder.”

“Why can’t vampires feed off each other? We can.”

“They can, they just won’t be fulfilled in the same way. It’s like a bad diet versus a healthy one. As for us, you’re not full vampire, Lenore. I feed off your human side. And your human side feeds off me.”

“Yin and yang,” I say, rolling down the window to ash. Despite the cigarettes in the car, I’m certain Solon keeps this car as clean-smelling as possible. Old cigarette smell is gross for normal people, for us it’s probably unbearable.

“Or the Ouroboros,” he says in a low voice.

I ponder that for a moment, picturing a snake eating its own tail, a symbol very common in my studies.

Studies.

Fuck.

I hadn’t even thought about school since I finished that last exam and... well became a vampire witch.

“What happened?” he asks me, taking the car onto Masonic Ave. “Your energy just changed.”

I appreciate him not reading my thoughts for once. “Was just reminded of school, that’s all,” I tell him, giving him a somewhat melancholy smile. “It all feels like a dream.” And my future is so murky.

“The Ouroboros started in Egypt, correct?” he asks. “When we get to the bar you’ll have to tell me all about it. Pretend I’m some handsome fraternity boy you’re propositioning.”

I burst out laughing. “Solon, are you role-playing with me already?”

He just grins and guns it down the street.

We park a block away from The Cloister and start walking, and I'm getting both nervous and sad. Nervous because I haven't been out in public around people in a while and it's been a week since I last had any blood. I'm not craving it and I feel totally in control, having ate food earlier. But still.

And sad because I'm thinking about Elle. Last time I was here, I was with her. She was alive and my world was completely different.

But I didn't have Solon. So there's that. I just wish I could have kept both him and her in my life. I'm certain she would have warmed up to him eventually.

The bouncer at The Cloister is the same as always, giving us both peculiar looks until Solon starts compelling him and he lets us in. At thirty-eight in human years, Solon is by far the oldest in this place, and when we enter the bar, every head turns to look at us.

"Not as inconspicuous as I had hoped," I say under my breath.

Solon gives the air a distasteful sniff. "God, it smells awful in here."

I roll my eyes even though I have to agree with him. It smells like stale booze, B.O., and blood with too much alcohol in it.

Thankfully, because it's early we're able to snag a two-person bench, both seats beside each other, and Solon orders us dirty martinis since I told him that'd be the only drink in here that he'll find acceptable.

"This is kind of nice, isn't it?" I tell him, putting my hand on his thigh. "Our first date."

He glances down at me, eyes dancing. "This is our first date?"

Suddenly I feel my cheeks go pink and I look down at my drink. "I guess."

Oh shit, why did I assume we were dating? With all the sex and the blood-sucking and the living in the same house and the fact that I'm in love with him, I don't really know what our relationship is. It's undefinable. Is dating too much or is it not enough?

"Lenore," he says softly. "Look at me."

I glance up at him through my lashes.

"We're whatever you want us to be," he says to me, staring deep into my eyes for emphasis. "No matter what, you are mine for the ages."

I gulp, my heart bouncing against my ribs.

Mine for the ages.

He smiles. "Now, tell me about the Ouroboros, because when I was around, it was known as a symbol for alchemy."

I clear my throat, feeling a little giddy at the idea of teaching him something he doesn't know much about, and grateful that he took the "dating" thing in stride.

"Well, one of the first known representations of the Ouroboros was discovered on one of the shrines enclosing the sarcophagus of Tutankhamun," I tell him. "That's way before your time, the eighteenth Dynasty. You know, Before Christ. Some say it represents the cyclical nature of the year. Others say it represents Ra-Osiris, Osiris born again as Ra."

"Reminds me of vampires a little," he comments.

"Yeah. The ones like you. Re-born."

"But I assume with a better outcome," he says, taking a sip of his drink. He shudders a little.

"Not the right vodka?" I ask.

"I'll get it down," he says with a grimace. "I'm getting the drinks next, though. And then we're leaving after that."

"What? Two drinks and we're gone?"

He gives me a steady look. "Do you really want to be here all night? Besides, when's the last time you fed yourself? It was a week ago. You're pushing your luck a little being around these people." He looks around the room, his lip curled. "Although none of them look particularly appetizing."

I smack his chest. "You are such a predator."

"So are you now, my dear. Better respect it." He gives me a quick smile. "So, Lenore Warwick. This was your usual hang-out. What other bars did you go to? Who did you see and what did you do? What was college like for you?"

I give him a funny look. "Why the third degree? You were there, weren't you? Watching me?"

"Just because I was watching you doesn't mean I experienced anything. I want to hear about it from you."

He looks serious, watching me expectantly.

I shrug. "Okay."

So I tell him about some of the other bars in the Bay Area. Parties in Berkeley. School events. Then I start going backward into high school, prompted by his constant questions, covering everything from prom to what

I normally did on a Saturday night, to horseback riding lessons when I was younger in Livermore, to road trips my parents and I would take to Tahoe to our cabin, every winter and summer.

By the time I'm done talking, both our drinks are gone and he's staring at me with a faraway dreamy look in his eyes, elbow on the table, the side of his face in his hand.

"What? Did you drift off?" I ask him, struck dumb once again by how gorgeous he is. There's deadly Solon, and then there's this soft version of him that's just as mesmerising.

"I did drift off," he says slowly. "It's just that I saw it all."

"Because you were watching me?"

He shakes his head, awe in his voice. "Because I saw it through your eyes. Felt it, smelled it. I experienced your memories, what it was like to be you."

I gulp, a fluttery feeling in my stomach. I know he's had my blood, but I didn't think that would happen. The last thing I want is for him to feel as I do.

"You were so much like me," he goes on quietly, reaching for my hand. "You were surrounded by people, but everyone was at a distance because they didn't understand you. Because they knew, deep down, you were different, not like them. It scared them. And you felt...so alone. A loneliness I know too well."

He squeezes my hand then brings it to his lips, kissing my palm in a soft, gentle manner, eyes never leaving mine.

Good lord, what is he doing to me? I am tumbling down, down, down, further into my feelings for him, growing too intense to bear.

"I'm going to get us the drinks," he says. "You stay here."

I nod, still a bit dazed by my emotions, the ever-expanding heart in my chest. I watch as he walks off to the bar, his ass looking incredible in those jeans, the rest of him a perfect V of broad strong shoulders, tapering to trim hips. To think he's mine...well, at least to know that I'm his.

He gets in line and glances at me over his shoulder and I give him a shy smile, feeling like I really am on my first date and a little over my head.

Then I get this strange smell of cologne and beer in my nose, something really familiar but I can't quite place it because it smells like so many people in here.

I turn my head and see Matt standing just a few feet away, staring at me in concern.

I stare back him, the sight of him doing something to my brain, like two worlds colliding that I never thought would collide.

I don't know if I should say something to him or not, but he just frowns at me, looking mildly horrified and confused, and I can't tell if it's the way I look now or maybe him not seeing me since Elle went missing or...

I glance down at my arms. At all my missing tattoos.

Oh, fuck. I totally fucking forgot.

He gives me another odd, harried look, and then leaves.

I get up and go after him, going to Solon first at the bar.

"I see an old friend," I tell Solon, my voice low. "I'll be right back, don't come after me, it will only make things worse."

"Lenore," he growls, but it's too late and I'm already leaving, heading out the door just in time to see Matt at the top of the stairs.

"Matt!" I call out to him and he keeps going.

In a flash I'm by his side, grabbing his arm, pulling him off into the darkened garden at the back of the church.

"What the fuck Lenore?" Matt cries out, and I realize I'm too strong for my own good. "What is wrong with you?"

Though we're in the far corner of the garden, I feel a presence at my back, smell Solon's scent. He's keeping his distance, disappearing into the shadows I'm sure, but he's here and he's watching me.

"You didn't say hello," I say to him, trying to sound breezy and not desperately trying to prove that I'm normal. "I saw you in the bar."

"I know," he says, looking me up and down. "I didn't even recognize you. What the fuck happened to your tattoos? Why are you so pale? You trying to change your appearance or something?"

I blink at him. "No? Why?"

"Of all people, I thought I'd see you on the news, out there looking for Elle," he says bitterly. "A post on your Facebook, something. But it's like you don't even care that she's gone."

I shake my head, feeling panic flood through me. "I don't have anything to do with Elle's disappearance. I didn't kill her."

He stares at me for a moment. "I never said anything about her being killed..."

Fuck.

“Well that’s what you’re implying,” I say hurriedly. “That’s what everyone is thinking. That she’s dead.”

He looks down at my arms and legs, though I know he can’t see as well in the shadows like I can. “All your tattoos are gone,” he says in a whisper. “All of them.”

I swallow uneasily, my heart starting to race, my adrenaline picking up. Something awful and dark is starting to spread inside my gut.

“I got tired of them,” I lie. “They were easy to remove. I wanted a fresh start.”

“A fresh start for *what*?”

“I don’t know, I thought maybe I wouldn’t be taken seriously as a museum curator,” I say, lying through my teeth, starting to panic. That darkness is spreading up me now, turning into a form of hunger.

The thing is, I’m not the only here with adrenaline running high. His is too and I can smell it, smell his fear, smell it coming out of his pores, smell it in his blood. The scent is flipping a switch on inside me, a thirst that wasn’t there before.

Oh no.

I should go.

I really, really should.

“You’re full of shit,” he sneers at me. “You know Beth told me you were a total bitch to her last time you saw her.”

My mouth drops open in shock. “Excuse me?” I cry out. “Beth told you that? She came up to me, understandably angry because you told her that I kissed you when it was you that kissed me!”

He shakes his head, looking away. “However you choose to remember it, that’s not how it happened.”

I blink with wide eyes, anger rushing through my veins. I shove him hard and he falls onto the ground. “You kissed me,” I hiss at him, stepping over him. “Don’t twist the facts because your sorry little tech bro ego can’t handle the rejection.”

“What the fuck, you bitch,” Matt spits out, scrambling to his feet. “I can’t believe I ever went out with you, you’re fucking weird and fucking crazy.”

None of this is computing. Matt, who was always so nice and easy-going and chill, doesn’t seem to be any of those things anymore. Now I’m starting to realize it was some sort of act, the nice guy persona a dude will

put up in order to win someone over, often lamenting that “nice guys finish last” when things don’t go their way.

“And you’re a manipulative asshole,” I growl at him, the anger now lashing through me in a way I can’t control, swiftly turning to insatiable hunger. As lust and blood intertwine, I’m discovering it’s the same for blood and rage.

“Lenore,” I hear Solon’s voice warn from the background.

But he’s too late.

I lunge at Matt, grabbing his head with my hand and yanking it to the side, sinking my teeth right into his neck.

He tries to yelp but I already have my hand at his mouth, smothering his cries, the noise buried by the music thumping out from the club. His blood flows freely from his neck into my mouth and I’m draining him as quickly as I can, fueled by hunger and revenge and—

Suddenly Solon’s hands are wrapping around me, pulling me back, my fangs unhooking, and it’s then that I realize what I’ve done.

It’s also then that Matt realizes it too.

He stares at me in horror, hand at his neck to stop the bleeding, staggering on his feet. I didn’t take enough, he won’t die, but he’s looking at me like he wishes he were dead. He at least wishes I were dead.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, trying to spit up the rest of the blood in my mouth, the taste suddenly disagreeing with me. It’s not Solon’s blood, it doesn’t bring me life in the same way. This belongs to a shallow, manipulative, ingenuine boy with whom I never had any chemistry to begin with.

And with blood, chemistry is everything.

“You psychopath,” Matt says, his voice ragged, wincing from the pain. “You killed Elle, didn’t you? You did the same to her, didn’t you?”

I shake my head, tears rushing to my eyes. “No, I didn’t kill her, I didn’t kill her, I loved her, I swear to you.”

“Lenore,” Solon says, his voice a command.

Both Matt and I look at him. He’s never looked more like a warrior—or a mob boss, chin raised high, eyes dark and focused on Matt, steady as a rock.

“You killed her,” Matt says, pointing at him with his free hand. “You killed her. Both of you did.” He looks to me, shaking his head. “What do you think you are, vampires? You’re a fucking sick freak!”

I look around in a panic, praying that no one is lurking nearby. It's empty back here, but I know people aren't far away. All he has to do is raise his voice, and if no one in the club hears us, then the bouncer definitely will.

"Lenore," Solon says again, and this time his voice is a warning.

Warning me of something I'm not going to like.

He moves so fast behind Matt that Matt is still blinking at the spot that Solon once was, wondering where he went.

But Solon is right behind Matt now.

Both strong hands pressed on either side of Matt's head.

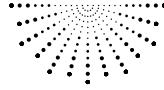
I open my mouth to cry out, but Solon is too fast.

He moves his hands with lightning speed and breaks Matt's neck with a loud *snap* that fills the courtyard.

The scream dies in my throat.

Matt slumps to the ground, dead, eyes staring up at nothing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



IT FEELS LIKE I SLEEP FOR DAYS, BUT WHEN I FINALLY OPEN MY EYES, I'M still in the same clothes as the night before. Still in the black dress with the red roses, the chest covered in dried blood.

Matt's blood.

I close my eyes, horror rolling through me.

I attacked him. I bit him, drank his blood. I put me and Solon at risk. I lost control of what makes me human, my morals, my guiding compass. I lost everything by sinking my teeth into his neck, all to satisfy my thirst and to let loose my rage at him.

Now I understand the murders that vampires commit. I understand how easy it is to lose control and give yourself over to the power. You think you're a god, think you're unstoppable. Think you can drink blood and make the rules because you can live forever.

Last night, that darkness I carry inside me, the darkness that's only come out to play a few times, flirting with chaos, it made its presence fully known. It became the chaos, out for blood, disregarding everything I thought I was.

A good person.

I am not a good person.

I attacked Matt for more than one reason, and none of them were right.

And now he's dead.

Another person gone. Sure, he wasn't a friend like Elle was, though he pretended to be, but he was someone I knew. He was a human being with his own promising life, and my actions took that away from him.

I did this.

People are starting to *die* around me because of what I am, who I am.
And I have no idea what I can do to stop it.

Then there's Solon.

After he finished Matt off, he quickly dragged him into the Black Sunshine and then we left. Neither of us said a word to each other on the drive back to the house. I think we were both too shocked and numb and mad.

I know I'm mad at Solon for killing him. I understand why he did it, that he didn't really have much choice, that reasoning with Matt would have been impossible after I already attacked him. Perhaps Solon could have compelled him, but maybe he's not perfect either, acting on instinct.

And I know Solon is mad at me. For losing control like I did, for going after Matt in the first place, putting us at risk, and definitely for drinking his blood. Time and time again Solon told me that I was to only feed from him, and here I was caught up in the bloodlust and thirst, drinking Matt's blood when all I should have done is wait until I was at home to do that with Solon.

In fact, up there with the fact that I got Matt killed, is the fact that I completely betrayed Solon. To him, it's the same as if I slept with someone else, the fact that we feed off each other, an Ouroboros, is an extremely intimate act for us, and then I went and drank the blood of someone else... he's pissed beyond pissed.

So much so that when we got back to the house, he went straight up to his room, wouldn't even let me apologize.

And now? Now what? What the hell do I do?

Solon might have an actual monster inside him, but so do I. It just comes out in different ways.

I have no idea how to make peace with it, or if I even want to. I don't want to be this person who causes death and destruction in her wake. That's not what I wanted with my life. I wanted my life to be about discovery and preservation. I wanted to travel the world and unearth mysteries of the past and bring some meaning to our lives. I wanted to give meaning to the dead, to the civilizations before us, and hope we could learn from them.

I wanted so much, and yet that's not what my life is turning out to be at all. I'm so fucking lost and scared, scared of myself most of all. Sure, I'm having nightmares about Solon's father and his army of creatures, I'm

surrounded by beings that may be hunting me, and there are so many disturbing things to come to terms with in my new life.

But the thing I'm most scared of, more than any of that, is me.

Solon said he was the monster under everyone's bed, the reason why the fairy tales got told. But it's me who is the true monster. At least Solon knows what he is and owns it and fights it, lives with it.

I don't know how to live with the darkness in me. I don't know how to come to terms with the fact that I can be so vehemently awful.

I don't know if I can keep this up.

I get out of bed slowly and take a long shower, enjoying none of it, going through the motions, then wonder if I should try and talk to Solon. He's a passionate man underneath the cool exterior, and a possessive one, and he probably won't give me the time of day. I've been on the receiving end of his anger before and it's a hard pill to swallow, especially when I'm so fucking in love with him. Adds an extra complication and dimension of pain to the whole scenario.

What I need, what I really need, is to see my parents.

I know my relationship with them is complicated too, but they're all I have. If I don't have Solon, then that's it. Sure, there are others in the house, Amethyst and her mother, Wolf, but they are all at Solon's command in the long run. I need to be with the people who are free from that. My real family.

So I get dressed into my leggings and a short-sleeved tunic, all black, and then create a doorway into the Black Sunshine in my room. I make sure to take my purse too, and I almost leave the ruby necklace behind but decide I should keep it on. I know it only tells me if Solon is near, but it does bring me comfort and if it's the most I have of him going forward, then I can use all the comfort I can get.

I step inside the gray, seal it up, and then quickly make my way down the stairs and out of the house, not passing by anyone. Not that they would be able to see me per se, but I do think if I were to brush past Wolf in his ghostly form, he'd be able to tell and would probably alert Solon.

That said, I wouldn't mind if Solon came after me. It would at least show that he still cares. He gave me a look last night when we got back that was so icy cold it made my blood freeze in my veins. I never want him to look at me like that again. I'll take any other version of him but this one that doesn't feel anything.

Oh crap. Think I'm going to start crying all over again.

I hurry through the Veil, wasting no time, and luckily I don't see any of the shadow souls. I get to the apartment, go through the front door and up the stairs to my parent's level, until I'm in the kitchen.

Both of them are sitting around the island, drinking something, their glowing shapes frozen in place.

This is going to scare the hell out of them.

I create the flaming door in the air and then step through, into the world of color and life.

"Oh my goddess!" my mother exclaims, hand at her chest, as my father drops his cup, golden tea spilling across the wood. "Lenore!"

I look at the both of them, the door closing up behind me, and then burst into tears.

My mom comes over to me, pulling me into a hug, while my dad quickly cleans up the mess. Together, both with their hands on me, giving me a sense of peace I haven't felt in a while, they bring me over to the couch in the living room. I'm reminded of how they took care of me after the incident in my kitchen, piling blankets on top of me, bringing me tea. This time though I'm not filled with rage at them, I'm just so fucking sad, and all my rage is directed at myself.

I cry for a long time, parents on either side of me, handing me tissues, keeping their arms around me. Eventually, the tears subside but the awful, black feelings in me remain.

"What happened?" my mother asks softly. "Please tell us, sweetie."

I take in a deep, shaking breath. "You're going to look at me differently after I tell you. You're not going to love me anymore."

Now it's my dad's time to get emotional, tears glistening in his eyes. "Lenore, baby," he says emphatically, "of course we'll still love you. No matter what. We promise."

I can't be sure. I'm not sure I'd love me.

Then again, I love Solon despite all that he's done.

"I killed someone," I say through a choked sob. "I killed Matt."

They both stare at me for a long moment, my mother's face slowly crumbling. "Oh, sweetie," she says, putting her arm around me and holding me close. "I'm sure it was an accident."

"But it wasn't," I tell her. "It wasn't. I was so angry and mad at him for the way he had treated me, and I was so scared too, that he thought I

murdered Elle, that he was going to blame me, turn me in, and I hadn't fed in a week and I...I..."

My dad lets out a shaky breath and takes my hand in his. "It was an accident, Lenore. Did you want to kill him?"

I shake my head. "No. No I just wanted to feed and I was so wrapped up in my anger and my fear and I was so confused. I stopped, I didn't..."

I didn't actually kill him.

"What happened?" my mother prods gently.

"I drank his blood. It didn't kill him but...he knew. He knew what I was. And Solon was there."

"So Absolon killed him," my dad says coldly.

"Yes. He did. He broke his neck." I close my eyes at the awful image, at the horrible sound. "I know why he did it but..."

"You didn't kill Matt, Lenore," my mother says firmly. "Absolon did."

"He wouldn't have had I not done what I did, had I been able to control myself, if I wasn't such a fucking monster!"

"Lenore," my father says, squeezing my hand tight enough so that I look at him. "You aren't a monster. You're figuring it all out as you go. You don't know yet how to balance both sides, but you will figure that out in time. Until then, you're going to make a lot of mistakes. Some of these mistakes...may feel too heavy and large to bear. But please know, you didn't kill Matt. Absolon did. That was his choice. He could have found another way, but in the end, he is who he is. I think we both know who the real monster is."

I shake my head. "He's not a monster. He's...someone trying to deal with his dark side on a daily basis."

"Then isn't that what you are?" my mother says. "Isn't that what we all are? Lenore, we're no angels. We kill vampires. That's what we do. Now, vampires are alive? aren't they? Just as you're alive? They breathe and they eat and they sleep and they feel and they love. Just as you love." I swallow and she gives me a sympathetic smile. "I know you're in love with him. I wish to the Goddess that you weren't, because this is going to be a long and complicated road for you, but I know you are and I know you can't fight it, no matter what we might say."

"Look," my father goes on, glancing at my mother for a moment, giving her a sad smile, "we do what we have to do. We kill vampires that pose a threat to us and humanity. We don't take pleasure in it, and it doesn't make

us feel good either. This is a tough world you're born into, and born into yet again. We all do things that hurt at the time, even if they're right, and sometimes they aren't right at all. Sometimes it's just this endless gray area we have to muddle through. So please, don't hate yourself for this."

He gives my hand another squeeze. "And it's unfortunate that Matt is dead, it really is, and you're going to grieve and grapple with this the same way you did with Elle. But please don't dwell on the darkness within you. It will only invite it out to play, it will only drag you down to its depths. You don't want that, not when you know you have black magic in you. To invite it into your life would...would be a mistake. A big mistake. You might be seduced by the power it provides and that means you might never come back to the light that you are."

"Sweetie," my mother says, kissing me on the cheek, "we are both just so relieved that you came to us, that you are grappling with your morality and humanity, because that's what being human is. To not feel anything at all...that's when we'd truly have to worry."

"I wish I didn't feel," I mumble, my heart still sinking under all the excess weight. "I wish I could just...be free from it."

"No, you don't," my father says firmly. "Because that's what separates those with a soul from those who don't have one. The remorse is good. The pain is good. Accept it, deal with it, but don't revel in it and don't push it away."

I close my eyes and think about Solon. I think about all the skulls he keeps, the reminders of what he is. How he needs to feel that remorse and guilt and shame in order to keep himself in check, no matter how awful it makes him feel. It would be so much easier for him to not feel anything at all. And yet he chooses that pain, because it keeps him human—even though he's not.

"Solon hates me," I blurt out suddenly, another tear rolling down my cheek.

"Hates you?" my mother repeats. "What makes you say that?"

"Because," I tell her, wiping the tear away angrily, "I did what I did. He warned me. He told me I shouldn't be out in public, that I might need to feed, and I thought I was fine. I didn't listen. And then I did something so stupid, putting us both at risk, and I made him make the choice to kill him. I know he didn't want to. He has a conscious and a heart, I know it. And then I drank Matt's blood and..."

They both fall silent for a beat.

"I see," my mother eventually says. "I'm guessing he's your typical vampire then, as territorial as they come."

"And yet he's not typical at all. He's..."

He's unlike the rest of them, unlike any other creature on this planet.

He's everything to me.

"Does he love you?" my father asks me.

I nearly gasp at the idea.

I press my lips together, my chest growing tight. "I don't know. I don't think so. I know he was in love once and...I think he's doing everything he can to not go down that path again. Like he's turned that part of him off. His heart...I think he prefers it cold."

"That doesn't mean he doesn't love you," my mother says softly, brushing my hair off my face. "Listen, I hate the idea of him having feelings for you, Lenore, but he does. I may not know him well enough to know what feelings those are exactly, but they are there. I saw them. And they go farther than just being an obsessive and controlling vampire. It's deeper than that. If it's not love, maybe it will be. Maybe he's capable—and willing—of that."

I give her a wry look. "Almost sounds like you want that to happen."

She makes a face. "I know what it sounds like, believe me. But at the same time, it would be better if he loved you. I'd sleep easier at night."

I would too.

"Did you know Solon had been watching me my whole life?" I ask quietly.

My parents exchange a glance. My mother nods. "Yes. We did."

"We didn't know for sure at first," my father adds, clasping his hands together. "We thought perhaps he was watching the two of us. He knew what we did was unsanctioned, and even though we granted him clemency, we didn't trust him not to report us. Or kill us. Hand us over to the vampires. He's so duplicitous, you can't predict what he's going to do."

"But then, after a while," my mother goes on, "we realized he wasn't watching us in order to harm us or turn us in. He was watching over you. He was curious, that much we could tell. We figured he knew you were Alice and Hakan's, so we thought maybe he'd try and take you from us, but he never did. He kept his distance, though we knew he was just biding his time."

“You know he was human once,” I tell them.

“Yes,” my father says. “Son of Skarde. There are many legends about him.”

Legends about Solon? How I would love to hear them all.

I glance at my mother. “Why did you think he’d use me to try and take down his father?”

She shrugs. “Just a theory. We knew he was Skarde’s first made, we knew that there’d been a falling out, that they became enemies. When he took you, I figured he took you because he saw the power you had inside you, that you were half-witch. Then when I learned you were the daughter of Jeremias, then I thought it might be true.”

“So you think he had been watching over me because he wanted me for some underground army?”

“I don’t know anymore,” she says with a sigh, “I really don’t. He seemed adamant that wasn’t the case, and now I’m inclined to believe him. What do you believe?”

I reach for my necklace, feeling the ruby between my fingers, disappointed at how cold the stone is. “I think it’s crossed his mind. I think that’s probably why he took me. But I also know he won’t ever put me in harm’s way. He does want me to develop my magic, I know that much. But it’s been tough going.” I glance at my mom, then my dad. “Though you could teach me.”

“You’re right,” my father says, patting my leg and getting to his feet. “We could. And we should. There’s no point in you only leaning into your vampire side. Absolon only knows parlor tricks, magic that was given to him. He can’t create it or shape it.”

“Can you teach me how to snap my fingers and create fire?” I ask hopefully. “Because it makes me really jealous that he’s able to.”

He laughs. “Yes, daughter. In time. This won’t happen overnight. You’re unskilled. You saw what happened with the earthquake.”

“I still don’t know what I did.”

“You accessed the well on instinct alone,” my mother tells me. “The moonlit one inside you. It’s the same well in all of us.”

“So then how do I do that again? I know the well, I see it. I may have even used it before, but lately when I try it...nothing happens.”

“Because it scares you,” my father says, holding out his hand and helping me to my feet. “It’s a good thing, in a way. It’ll make you respect it.

And now, with what you know about Jeremias, and the black magic, it probably scares you even more. Because the black magic is in the well too. You just have to figure out how to separate the two. Remember, just because you're predisposed to black magic, doesn't mean that's all you have. It's still magic in the end. You can use it for good. You can call upon it to help you with light instead of dark."

He glances at my mother and they exchange a wordless conversation. Then my mother gets to her feet.

"I think it's time you go, sweetie," she says putting her hands on my shoulders.

"Why? I just got here." I feel a pang of rejection.

"We've been talking a lot," she says. "And as much as you think Absolon hates you, you still belong to him now. That doesn't change. He'll get over it, you'll see, and I don't want that vampire showing up in this house unannounced and uninvited, okay?"

I nod, hoping my mother is right about that. I still belong to him, don't I? Or will I return to the house to find his heart frozen over even more so, never to thaw?

For the ages, he had told me. I was his for the ages.

What if he changed his mind?

"I'm going to drive you," my dad says, snatching up his car keys.

"Dad," I protest. "No. It's like ten blocks. I'll walk. Or I'll take the Black Sunshine."

"No," my mother says abruptly. "You stay out of the Veil. Bad things happen in there. Perhaps it's not the same for you, but for a normal person, or a witch, the more you go in there, the more it changes you."

"It's quick and easy." And creepy.

"I'm driving you," my father says again. "End of story. You're safest in my car, there are runes all around it. Don't worry. If you walk alone, you don't know what will happen. A vampire might bite you again, yes even in broad daylight, and you won't have Absolon to put them in their place."

I snort. "Putting them in their place? That's a mild way of saying he ripped the heart out of someone and set it on fire."

They both stare at me blankly. "He did what now?" my father asks.

I give them a quick smile. "We should go."

I give my mother a hug goodbye and then we go down the stairs and out the front door. I slip on my sunglasses, the sun bright, and we head across

the street to my father's Volvo, getting inside.

I buckle up out of habit and relax in the seat, breathing in the familiar smell of the leather, the gauzy packet of dried lavender, rose, and sandalwood stuffed in the console, noting the crystals hanging from the rearview mirror. Now that I know what my parents truly are, it's hard not to notice all the signs of witchcraft they've strewn amongst themselves.

My father pulls out and we head up Lily Street, the traffic quiet today. I don't even know what day it is, time is losing all meaning again.

But my inner thoughts about the lack of traffic quickly come to a stop because the car comes to a stop just past Steiner, two blocks from where we're supposed to turn right onto Scott Street, which will take us right to the house.

"What on Hecate's aura is going on?" my father grumbles, trying to see around the traffic that has piled up in front of us.

"Why did you want revenge against Alice and Hakan?" I suddenly ask my father. "Why did you go through all the trouble to kill them?"

He eyes me, brow raised in surprise. Then he looks back to the road, inching forward a couple of feet with the traffic.

"Elaine had a sister, Tabitha," he says uneasily. "Alice killed her."

"Why?"

He gives me a look like, why do you think?

"Vampires aren't supposed to kill without reason," I go on. "Did Alice kill her for her blood?"

He rubs his lips together and looks back to the road. "I'm sure that was part of it."

"You're not telling me something," I say. "Why did Alice kill Tabitha?"

He exhales, kneading the steering wheel. "It's a long story, Lenore," he says and then honks the horn, sticking his head out the window. "Come on, what's the hold up?!"

I sigh, staring at the side mirror, watching the traffic line up behind us. I don't know why the hell he's being so cagey about my real vampire mother, but I have a feeling it isn't good. Maybe he doesn't want to tell me anything more without my mother around, since it was her sister after all.

"Oh, here comes someone, maybe they'll tell us what's happening," my father says, but I pay him no attention, hoping that Alice was just an ordinary morally gray vampire and not someone horrible, because I'm not sure I could take it.

“Excuse me, sir, do you happen to know what’s happening up ahead?” my father says, and I turn my head to look at who he’s talking to.

A man lowers his head, peering in through my father’s window, staring straight at me. Grey hair, black brows, black eyes.

Brimstone fills my nose.

I open my mouth to scream but he’s fast.

Because he’s a vampire.

Yanik.

“Hello Lenore,” he says, smiling with fangs, which he then promptly places in my father’s neck, biting down with a splash of blood.

My scream finally comes through and I thrash, trying to free myself from the seatbelt, trying to fight him off, protect my father, whose only screams are drowning in his throat.

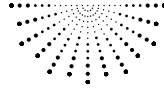
Then Yanik unhooks his jaw and rips open the door, dragging my father out of the car and dumping him in the middle of the street.

Yanik gets in the car in a flash, and then he’s driving up the street on the other side of the road, into incoming traffic, narrowly taking out pedestrians and the people who have come out to see what’s happened.

I’m still screaming, twisting in my seat to see my father lying in the road, people rushing to his side, and then I’m finally free of my seatbelt and putting my hands on the door, trying to escape.

“Sleep,” Yanik says in a deep voice, brushing his thumb over my forehead, and then suddenly the world goes black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



I'M DREAMING AGAIN.

Except the dream has changed.

Instead of the frozen wasteland of rolling hills and snow, I'm in a barn surrounded by fog. It's dusty, smells of old forgotten hay, and spider webs, and mice. It also smells like blood, if blood had been infused with tar and poison.

I'm sitting in a chair in the middle of this barn, a red circle of blood drawn around me. On the other side of the blood are members of the Dark Order. Wearing their cloaks, the strands of red hanging from their hoods like waterfalls of blood, right to the floor.

They stare at me and I can feel their teeth sharpening behind the veils. There must be a dozen of them, all of them in a prayer pose, palms pressed together, and yet I can tell they're ready to pounce.

And it's quiet.

Too quiet.

Not a single breath.

Then the scent of brimstone fills my nose, an awful, malevolent smell, and suddenly the fear flooding through my veins becomes real. Very real.

Because I'm starting to think that this isn't a dream at all.

I'm starting to think this is real, just as everything comes crashing back to me.

Being in my father's car, stuck in traffic in the city, a vampire at the window.

Biting my father's neck.

The blood.

My screams.

And that's when I see him.

Walking around the circle, behind the creatures in their cloaks, prowling like a predator, is Yanik. His face keeps disappearing as he paces behind their hoods, but I still feel his cold eyes on me, piercing through.

"Lenore Warwick," Yanik says to me, continuing to pace, his hands behind his back. "I can't begin to tell you how long I've waited for you. You're so young that you don't understand the concept of time yet, but let me tell you, it feels like eternity."

I stiffen in my chair, adrenaline spiking through my system as I'm finally realizing that I'm here, really here, and this is happening. I'm not just sitting here politely, I'm tied to the chair, much like Solon had tied me so long ago. But even though I've changed since then, as I test my strength against the ropes, straining, I realize I'm just as helpless as before.

Back then, I didn't know if Solon was going to kill me or not.

Now I know Yanik means to.

"I know what you're thinking," Yanik surmises, continuing to prowl. "You're wondering, why *you*? What makes you so special? The thing is, darling, that's something I aim to find out. You see, I was entrusted with testing you, to see how much of a threat you are."

I try to swallow but it hurts. "A threat to who?"

"To *whom* and to what," he says snidely, and he comes to a stop beside the last member of the circle. I'm noting he still hasn't crossed over the line of blood. Whose blood even is that?

Then I feel the throbbing sting in my arm, tied behind the chair, and I know that the blood belongs to me. He must have cut me up while I was unconscious.

"You are a threat to the *Makt*. To the Dark Order, as many of you call it," he says, glowering. "You have to know that Absolon took you because he saw you had the potential to undo us. Now we have a choice of what to do with you. Either I decide your witchcraft isn't anything special and I kill you right here. Or I discover that it is something worth using and I bring you to Skarde." He pauses. "He so wishes he could be here himself to see, but the old Lord hates to fly."

"What does he want with me?" I ask, trying to buy myself some time and keep him talking, hoping he's like the villains I've seen in the movies,

the ones that won't shut up. I wriggle my wrists against the rope, but to no avail. I then look down at my chest and realize my necklace is gone.

"Ah, you noticed," he says. "I saw your necklace and threw it away. A waste of millions I am sure, but I can't be too careful with someone like Stavig. He is very possessive, even for a vampire. But I don't have to tell you that."

"What does Skarde want with me?" I repeat. "If he thinks I'm a threat, then just kill me here."

"Careful, girl," Yanik snaps. "You might want to rescind that thought." He bares his teeth at me, breathing deeply through his nose. "Your adrenaline is just kicking in. This is good. I was starting to think you couldn't do anything unless you were in a heightened state of shock. Thankfully, I know how to shock you."

He crosses over the line of blood and I guess I was expecting something weird to happen, but nothing does. The hooded creatures all remain where they are, poised in prayer pose, and Yanik stops right in front of me, smiling down like the Devil himself. I remember what Solon told me about him, that he was a made vampire just like him, and I have to wonder how often he gives into his madness.

I might just find out.

"Good," he says, closing his eyes and breathing in deeper as the fear spikes through me, making my pulse race wildly. "Good, you're there. You're in your fear."

He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a knife, what looks to be the blade of *mordernes*, except it isn't glowing blue.

"You know what this is, don't you Lenore?" he says, holding it out. "A witch's blade. A slayer's blade. I figured that since you have witch in you, a supposedly powerful one, that maybe your energy would activate the blade."

He brings it right up to my face, waving it left and right, back and forth. My eyes are glued to its every move.

"Nothing yet?" he asks after a moment. "Well, here's what's going to happen. I'm going to need you to ignite this blade."

"No," I say through grinding teeth.

"You can't? Or you won't?"

"If I activate the blade, then you're just going to stab me in the chest and kill me."

He gives me an acidic smile. "Ah, but if you activate the blade, that means you have power, power that Skarde wants from you. So really, it's in your best interest to light it up. Otherwise...."

I swallow the fear rising in my throat, tasting like bile. "Otherwise what?"

"Well," he says, sliding the blade between his fingers, "even though this blade might not be able to kill you as it is, I can find other ways to get your adrenaline rolling."

In a flash, he brings the knife across my neck, causing my blood to spray in an arc toward, him, covering him in red, pain ripped from my throat.

"See," he says wickedly, and I'm screaming, gasping for breath. "There it goes." He leans in, his face close to mine, as if he's confiding in me. "Everyone always talks about how to kill us vampires, but did you know that there are worse things than death?"

He brings the blade up to my ear and I try to jerk my head away, the blood continuing to pour down my neck and chest. "Take your earlobe for example." I feel the sharp cold of the blade flick my ear. "Soft little thing. I could cut it off and it would hurt, but it wouldn't kill you. But what if I took off your fingers instead?"

He walks around the back of the chair and I'm trying to breathe through the pain, willing the wound on my throat to close up and heal. Terror is everywhere inside me, a living, growing thing.

I feel the poke of the blade on my fingertips behind my back, then the sharp edge trail over my open palm. Yanik breathes in deeply.

"I could take off your fingers first, then your hands," he rasps. "Then your toes, your feet. Start chopping you up into tiny little pieces. Just hack away at your skin and bones. And you'd still be alive. You'd be in a pain like no other, begging for death, but I wouldn't give it to you."

He comes around in front of me again, his wing-tipped shoes sticking to my blood on the floor, and he presses the blade at my crotch. "I could cut you from here," he digs it in, almost breaking the skin, then drags it up over my belly, my stomach, up between my breasts, cutting into my shirt, "to here. Take a look at your insides. And still you'd be alive, wishing I'd cut off your head and be done with it. Yes, that seems like something I just might do, since you're so useless after all."

He grins at me, pure evil, pure madness.

For a moment I have to wonder how mad the rest of the Dark Order are, or the *Makt*, as he called them. They seem almost trained, ready to do his bidding, and if that's the case, then Solon has a lot more to worry about when it comes to his father.

And then, as Yanik starts to press the blade into my chest, drawing blood, Solon feels like more than a thought.

He feels like he's here.

And when I smell roses and tobacco and that undeniable essence of all that he is, I know I'm no longer alone in this.

But Yanik knows it too.

He takes a break from cutting me, breathing in sharply then whirling around.

I can't see behind the cloaks of the creatures, but I can sense that Solon just walked in the barn, and he's not alone either. I can smell that Wolf and Ezra are with him too.

Oh thank god, I think.

Lenore? I hear Solon's rich, deep voice in my head.

I'm over here. He has me tied to a chair! I yell, my heart pounding with relief, though the fear is still palpable.

"So you found her after all," Yanik says loudly, holding the knife behind his back as he faces the outer circle. "*Medlemmer*, let them through."

Suddenly the cloaked creatures part to the sides.

Solon, Wolf, and Ezra appear, like a motley crew of well-dressed vampires. Each of them possesses the cold, deadly quality of a snake about to strike, calmly taking in the situation, fully confident in their abilities to kill.

I just don't know if it will be enough.

Solon's blue eyes meet mine and they burn right through me, into my soul, into that dark well, and I feel the pain in them, the guilt, the rage. *I'm so sorry*, he whispers in my skull, his gaze dropping to my neck and chest, the muscles in his neck cording in anger at what Yanik has done to me.

Stay cool, I tell him.

"Come," Yanik says, motioning with his hand.

Solon takes the bait. Walks up to the red line of blood, his nostrils flaring once he realizes the blood belongs to me. But he can't step any further. It's like he's hit an invisible wall.

“Ah, I forgot,” Yanik says smoothly. “You can’t. You know, you’re not the only one who has traded a few souls for a little bit of magic, Solon.”

Yanik then walks toward him, sliding the blade of the knife over his tongue, tasting my blood. He makes a disgusting licking, slithering sound that makes me cringe. “She’s unique, Stavig, I’ll give you that much. Tastes amazing. I can see why you wanted her to yourself. Unfortunately, your father has the same taste that you do.”

Solon raises his chin. “Let her go.”

“Or what? What are you going to do when you’re there and she’s here? You don’t have any of your paltry magic to save her. You’re just a fucking vampire right now. You don’t even have the monster inside you anymore, believe me, I can sniff it out, just as I sniff out my own.”

Yanik then nods at the cloaked figures. “*Medlemmer*,” he says again in what sounds like Norwegian. “Take them.”

Suddenly the Dark Order spring into action, seeming to disappear in the air, they’re moving so fast. Two of each grasp Solon, Ezra, and Wolf, holding them in place. None of the vampires can even struggle, not when the creatures dig their bony claws into their skin.

They’re trapped.

“I told you,” Yanik says, pacing now. “You’re nothing but boring, ordinary vampires now. The *Makt* makes sure of that. Your father spent a lot of time and made a lot of deals to ensure they’re like this. Oh, everyone said that the monsters couldn’t be tamed, and to be honest with you, Solon, I didn’t believe it myself. After all, we both know what it was like to be one. We still are one. But your father did it. His greatest creations, he said. Of course, it’s a slow process but, rest assured, soon there will be others like these ones.”

“Skarde’s issues are with me. Not with Lenore,” Solon says tightly, still trying to struggle against their boney grasp. “Let her go. Do what you will with me, but your fight is not with her.”

Yanik lets out a sour laugh. “Your father doesn’t want you, Stavig, sorry to disappoint. He has Kaleid, he’s all he’ll ever need. I know it must hurt you to be cast aside the way you were, in favor of his natural-born son, and he’s just half a vampire! But you’re nothing to him. Not even a threat. That’s what pisses you off most of all, isn’t it? That your father isn’t even a little bit afraid of you. Oh, your ego must be shattering with the blows.”

But I can tell Solon isn’t even listening to Yanik anymore.

He's listening to me.

Even with his eyes on Yanik, I can feel him reach for me in my mind.

Lenore, he says, and he says my name like an apology.

I refuse to let him be sorry about anything, not yet.

Snap your fingers, I tell him. *Do it.*

I feel his confusion, his hesitation.

I can't, he says. *Yanik is too big, too much. I don't have that kind of power. I can't set him on fire.*

He's right. Almost.

But I do have that power, I tell him determinedly. *With your help, I can do this.*

*Lenore...*He swallows as Yanik prattles on about something or other, really trying to drive home the whole "daddy issues" thing.

I stare at him hard, trying to compel him if he won't listen. *Do it, Solon. Light me on fire.*

He steals a quick glance at me when Yanik is occupied by the others, shaking his head ever so slightly. *It won't be enough.*

I'll make it enough, I say, and there's something deep within that's nodding its head, like my body is suddenly being shared by some other force, someone I don't know. I don't think they mean me harm, but they're here. *I can make it enough, I can take your fire and let it fuel me, you just have to light me up.*

He swallows hard, lips pressed together in a thin white line. *What if you don't survive it?*

I'll survive it.

Another sad shake of his head. *I can't lose you, moonshine.*

You will if you don't do this. So do it. I'm ready.

He looks away, trying to come to terms with what I'm asking him. Silence fills the space between us, even with Yanik still talking.

Do it, Solon. For me. For us. Please. It's all we've got.

Pain washes over his face, his cool façade crumbling. *You are mine for the ages, Lenore. I won't ever forget it.*

From the anguish in his blue eyes, I realize what's at stake here. Despite what I feel inside, despite what I survived as a child, there's a chance that I won't survive this now. I mean, I'm asking him to light me on fire like I'm made of gasoline. I might burn myself alive.

I might die.

Oh fuck.

Solon adjusts his stance and my eyes go down to his fingers, held in the snap position.

Wait, I cry out, every emotion suddenly flooding through me at the prospect of my death. *I love you*.

His jaw goes tight, his lips in a twisted smile. *I know*.

Oh god, he just Hans Soloed me.

“Do it!” I yell out loud, giving him no choice now.

Yanik snaps to attention, turning to look at me with wide eyes, then he’s moving fast in my direction.

Solon’s voice sinks into my head, *Imagine the fire*.

Then he brings his fingers together.

SNAP.

I close my eyes, imagining the fire, trying to become the fire, and I feel his spark hit my skin, and I pull up, up and up, from the dark well inside me, calling on the magic, black or light, any kind to save me in this moment, to take his spark and light me ablaze.

Something inside me churns with immense power, and a deep, unfamiliar voice inside my head asks, *Are you sure, child?*

I think of what Solon told me, how the candle flame needs just enough force to make it burn bright, and I answer the call.

Yes, I’m sure.

Then the well inside me ignites, catching Solon’s spark and suddenly my entire body goes up in flames.

I’m on fire.

I am the fire.

The fire rises.

With a growl I reach out and lunge for Yanik, the ropes already disintegrating, burning away with the chair. I grab hold of him, sinking my teeth into his old flesh, tearing at his throat, spitting out the skin and blood, and it’s enough to let the flames leap onto him.

Yanik screams, and then I’m pushing him to the ground, holding him there, smothering him. The fire that grows from my skin, that surrounds me from head to toe, is now spreading on him until he’s as much on fire as I am.

But the difference is, the fire is killing him.

It’s not killing me.

It's giving me more power than I could have ever imagined. The dark well inside me is burning up, obscuring the waning moon with smoke.

I get to my feet, kicking Yanik's burning, screaming body over to the side and swivel my head towards Solon, Wolf, and Ezra, held in place by the dark order.

All three vampires are staring at me with utter fear in their eyes, even Solon, though he manages to combine it with awe, his jaw slack. I must look quite the sight, a walking fireball.

There's a screeching cry from the creatures as they hiss and roar, sounding like a zoo gone wild, and I know it's just a hint of the true madness underneath those hoods. Without their master, who knows what they will do.

But I know what I will do.

A few of them start running for me on all fours, their red veils moving as they go, showing flashes of teeth, claws out, leaving gauges in the old wood floorboards.

I know what I'm capable of now, the confidence seeping through me.

I don't even have to snap my fingers.

I just point at them as they run for me.

One, I think.

And a creature goes up in flames with a tortured cry.

Two.

I point at another one, just steps away, and it too bursts into flames, falling to the floor, thrashing helplessly.

Three.

I flick my finger at the third one on the loose, watching as its cloak explodes in fire, the screams filling the barn.

I grin to myself.

My god. This is almost fun.

I keep that smile on my face as I look at the rest of them, and now the vampires are really scared, even Solon doesn't seem to know what I'm going to do.

Silly vampire, I say to him. *Don't you trust me?*

He blinks at me, swallowing hard.

Then I look at Ezra and Wolf, giving them a warning look, before I throw my arms out into the air, displaying three fingers on each hand.

Six of Skarde's creatures go up in flames at the same time, with Solon, Ezra and Wolf quickly pivoting away and out of their grasp.

I watch as the rest of the Dark Order falls to the ground, screaming.

Then the flames suddenly leave my body as quickly as they came on, draining the well inside me until it's empty, snuffing out every living cell in my body, my blood shrinking in my veins.

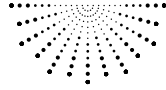
I collapse to the floor among the creatures on fire.

And everything goes cold.

The flame inside me blown out.

For good.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



I'M STARING AT A DOG.

A black pit bull with big warm eyes and a wet nose.

The dog whimpers and then licks my face and I'm overwhelmed with the scent of raw meat and dog breath.

What on earth?

"Odin," Solon's commanding voice rings out. "Get over here."

I blink and then Solon walks into my frame, crouching down to be at my level. I stare at his face as it comes into focus, and my god, sometimes I don't know if he's an angel or a devil, but right now, I'm afraid I might be in heaven. He's so beautiful that it's something close to dying, his black arched brows furrowed in concern, a soft smile on his lips, those glacial blue eyes flickering with affection, pupils large and dark.

"Solon," I say softly, trying to move, but my limbs feel like they've been filled with lead.

"Shhh," he says to me, placing his hand on my cheek, his large palm soothing against my skin. "Take it easy. You're alright. You're safe."

I try to swallow, my throat and mouth painfully dry. "Where am I?"

I can't move my head much, but the room is completely unfamiliar. Sunlight streams through in the background and the walls look like they're made of shiplap.

"Shelter Cove," he says. "Northern California."

The name sounds familiar. "Is this...your house?"

He nods, stroking my cheek gently. "Yes. One of them."

"And the dog?"

“That’s Odin. He’s also mine. I brought him up here a while ago, knowing you’d be with us in San Francisco. He can be territorial, but I had nothing to worry about. He likes you. Barely listens to me though.” He sighs in amusement. “So much for being the alpha.”

I frown at him, learning new things. “You had a dog all this time?”

“Most vampires do. We are predators after all. Who better to understand us?” He brushes the hair back from my face. “Don’t you witches have cats?”

I manage a smile. “I’m allergic.” I pause. “And I’m only a half-witch.”

He studies me admiringly. “Don’t sell yourself short. What you did back there...”

It all comes rushing back.

“What happened?” I whisper.

“What happened was you shook me to my very foundation, Lenore. You were...” he licks his lips in thought and then smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling, “you were *remarkable*. And if you don’t remember, I’ll tell you all over again, because you need to know what you’re capable of.”

I nod and Solon fills me in with what happened, from his point of view. I remember it all as he says it, his voice filling in the details, conjuring up my own memories this time, as well as his.

Yanik kidnapped me.

Solon lit me on fire.

I used the fire to burn everything else.

“When was that?” I ask.

“A week ago.”

I blink at him, my heart stuttering. “I’ve been out for a week? Is this a case of me missing time or—”

“You’ve been out, my dear,” he says, leaning forward to place a lingering kiss on my forehead, the feel of his lips against my skin making my toes curl, my chest grow impossibly warm. “This is the first time I’ve seen you open your eyes. To say it’s a relief is...an understatement.”

I stare at him for a moment, trying to fit everything together.

“How did you find me?”

A hint of a smile tugs at his lips. “Your necklace. Yanik threw it out of the car, but it was close enough that when I got there, I was able to track you to the barn. The old-fashioned way.” He taps the side of his nose.

“So the necklace was to keep tabs on me. I knew there was more magic to it than it just growing warm whenever you were around.”

“Magic?” he says with a quirk of his brow. “Not quite. Ezra put a microscopic GPS chip in it. I always knew where you were with a few taps of an app.”

My eyes go wide, a flare of indignation inside me. “You literally were tracking my every move?”

“It was never a matter of trust, moonshine. I had to keep you safe.”

“Still,” I tell him. I mean, I’m glad that the necklace had it or maybe he never would have found me. But he doesn’t have to know that. “Then you must have seen me go to my parent’s place.”

He nods, eyes skimming over my face. “I did. But I knew you had things to sort out and I knew I couldn’t help you with it. So I let you go.”

“Because you were mad at me,” I say softly.

The corner of his mouth lifts and he places a quick and gentle kiss on my lips. God, he’s being so soft with me, it’s killing me in the best way.

“I was never mad at you. I was...upset. Confused. You definitely have a knack for bringing out my jealous side, and that’s an ugly side. But no, I wasn’t mad. I know you couldn’t help yourself, I know what you did was weighing heavily on you. And I too had some things to deal with. You may not believe it, but I took no pleasure in killing your friend.”

I’m about to correct him, tell him Matt wasn’t my friend, but such a small detail doesn’t matter after death. He was someone I knew and that was enough.

“Then,” he goes on, “I saw what happened.”

Panic suddenly runs through me. “My father!” I cry out, sitting up in bed, my head reeling from the movement.

“He’s okay,” he says quickly, putting his hands on my shoulders and gently pushing me back into the bed. “Your father is fine. He’s alive, he’s at home.”

Relief floods my heart and I close my eyes. “Thank god.”

“It did make the news, though,” he explains carefully. “A high-jacking by someone high on meth is what they’re calling it. Some bystanders reported seeing a girl in the car, you. But I got there right away, with your mother, and we were able to coerce the story. When your dad was conscious in the hospital, he already knew what to say to protect you. That he was

alone in the car, that you were elsewhere, that some junkie took the car after attacking him and that was that.”

“Jesus, what a complicated web we weave,” I say, sinking back into the bed.

“That we do,” he says. “But you’re safe. Your parents are safe. They know you’re here. And Yanik and the Dark Order are dead. I think you deserve to get some good rest now. You deserve it.”

I stare up at him. “A week of sleep wasn’t rest enough?”

“Just because you were sleeping, doesn’t mean your heart wasn’t dealing with everything. You needed time to refill the well inside you. You need time to work on the rest of you.” He brings his hand down over mine and raises it to his mouth, kissing the back of it, my knuckles, my fingertips, his eyelids fluttering closed.

Heavy silence fills the room for a few moments.

I hear his heartbeat.

“I was so afraid I’d lose you,” he whispers against my hand, eyes shut. “I’ve lived for so long, so long, and yet I feel like I never really lived. That time was something that didn’t matter anymore, that there was no consequence to my life, no more beginnings, no fresh starts. No more chapters. But you...you brought a new chapter to my life. A chapter where my life has purpose.” His eyes open and he peers right into me, stealing my breath. “You’re my purpose.”

I hear the deep, classical strains of “The Poet Acts” start to swirl in my head, sinking into my heart, which is blooming bigger by the moment. My eyes grow wet, my chest expanding, my jaw sore from holding back sudden tears.

He reaches out with his other hand, cupping it against my cheek, and he’s gazing at me with wonderment and adoration, like he can’t believe it, that I’m here, and he’s here, and we’re together.

“I love you,” he whispers, his voice breaking. “I truly do. And I always have.”

A smile cracks my face, spilling the tears, and I’m crying.

“I love you,” I manage to say but it comes out like a sob.

I’m a fucking mess.

But he knows I’m a mess, and somehow he loves me anyway.

God, he loves me.

Solon *loves* me.

He leans forward, kissing me on the forehead, and I'm grabbing his shirt, clawing at him, needing him, and then he's fully on the bed now. He lies beside me and gently pulls me up into his arms. Cradles me. Holds me.

And I cry because I love him and he loves me, and I cry because I almost died and I almost lost him, and I cry for all that I did lose.

He just holds me and keeps me safe until I'm falling asleep again, my heart finally feeling free.

* * *

"LENORE?"

I move my head to the side, blinking.

Solon is sitting in an armchair right next to the bed, a steaming cup of coffee on the side table.

I automatically smile at the sight of him, my grin from ear-to-ear. "Hi," I say softly.

"Good morning," he says, the tone of his voice matching mine. He nods at the table. "I brought you some coffee. We have a brand-new espresso machine and Angelo is still getting the hang of it, so my apologies if it's not up to snuff."

I slowly sit up, noticing for the first time that I'm in a white nightgown, similar to the one that Solon first put me in. "How long was I asleep this time?" I ask, voice groggy.

"Just a day," he says. "You're looking much better, but you're still weak."

I reach over for the coffee and have a sip, but the hot bitter liquid in my mouth feels wrong. "Well, you can tell Angelo the coffee isn't weak," I tell him, swallowing. "Whoever that is. But I don't think it will help me." I put it back on the table with a shaking hand.

"Angelo is the groundskeeper here," Solon says, getting up and sitting on the edge of the bed beside me. "He's been taking care of Odin. He's like Yvonne, minus the warm personality. But he's also a vampire, so that's probably why." He runs his fingers through my hair. "And you don't want coffee because you don't need coffee. You need me. You need blood, Lenore. It's been too long."

I glance at him. “What about you? Were you able to feed on me while I was asleep?”

His jaw clenches together as he shakes his head, eyes sharp. “I would never do that without your consent.”

“You could have. I wouldn’t have minded. I would have understood.”

“No.”

“Then you’re even more weak than I am,” I tell him. I think back to him at the barn, when he was in the grasp of the Dark Order. I felt like something was holding him back in his struggle. If he was weak then, how is he now?

“You need your strength first,” I tell him, sitting up straighter, and before he can do or say anything, I raise my arm to my mouth and bite into the soft flesh of my mid-forearm. Blood immediately pools at the wound and spills over.

“Lenore,” he says gruffly, trying to move back, but then I can see the smell of my blood has already taken hold of him, his pupils turning red.

I raise my arm out to him and he grabs it, his fingers sinking in, his mouth latching on. Sometimes I forget that he’s a vampire—sometimes I forget I am too—but here I’m reminded of exactly what he is.

And I love him anyway.

So he drinks, and drinks, and when I feel myself growing weaker, I pull my arm away, and fall back into the bed, and he stops.

Next thing I know he’s pressing his arm against my mouth, his blood spilling on my open lips, a few drops, enough to make me fully open my eyes, and then that hunger roars inside me and I let it go. Because with him I can be a monster, but one on a leash. He holds me back, keeps me in check, as I do for him.

I drink and let it fill the well, fill my veins, fill my heart until it’s pumping with him, pushing his life source through my circulation.

The world returns to me, a littler clearer, a little brighter. My muscles come to life, my brain switches back on, I feel like I’m glowing, floating.

I’ve never felt more alive.

Solon pulls his arm away and wipes my chin with his thumbs, his eyes positively luminous as he studies me. “There you are, my moonshine.”

I reach up with my hands, grabbing the sides of his face, my fingers pressed into his temples, and I pull him toward me.

“Kiss me,” I whisper to him, a new hunger running through me.

Heat flickers in his eyes.

He moves up on the bed, his weight over me, and covers my mouth with his and I'm lost in the way he tastes, the way he feels, the way his tongue and lips both soothe and spur me on, alternating, yin and yang.

It all comes down to feeling now.

To being.

The two of us together, somehow separated by time and then brought together.

He'd been waiting for me for so long.

"I did what I could not to fall in love you," he murmurs, running his fingers over my lip before taking it between his teeth for a moment. "I tried. I really did. But it was already too late. It was already in the making. You were already meant for me."

"Thank you for giving in," I say softly against his lips.

He gives me the most breathtaking smile. "You're welcome."

Then he kisses me again, deeper this time, searing and sweet, the kind of kiss that your body never lets you forget, a kiss to compare all past and future ones to.

It does me in, opens up my heart to his, my heart that's already pumping with his beautiful blood, beneath skin that feels like just a veil between us. We're already so connected, flesh is just a formality now.

And it fades between us as he pulls my nightgown over my head, as my fingers fumble and tear at his shirt, as we strip each other naked, his body pressed against mine, hovering in my view.

I stare up at him, marveling at the way he was made, how every single inch of him is so perfectly put together. Even supposed flaws like a nose slightly too wide, the lines at the corners of his deep-set eyes, his permanent frown, every single part melds together to create a walking, breathing work of art. One that happens to have walked through history, through time itself.

All the way to me.

He smiles, the lines at his eyes growing deeper. "All the way to you," he repeats, and for once I'm not mad that he read my thoughts. He deserves to hear it all.

He kisses me again, harder this time, a hunger that he's kept at bay is now sneaking through, and I respond in kind, feeding off of it. My hands roam over his rock-hard shoulders, nails scraping lightly over his chest until

he moans, his lips now at my neck, gently biting, sucking, nibbling, bringing my body to new heights, my back arching off the bed.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers in awe, his mouth working its way down between my breasts, over my stomach. “Most beautiful being that I’ve ever seen. You really do bring me to my knees, Lenore.”

My name on his lips sounds like a prayer.

I close my eyes, leaning back into the bed as he goes between my thighs.

Kisses me gently at first, then his tongue and mouth are lost to a feverish intensity that has me coming, the bedroom ringing with my cries.

I expect him to be rushing after that, but he’s taking his time now, because we have all the time in the world. His kisses turn to words of adoration, devotion, worship, and he places them all over my body, from the delicate bones of my ankle, to my stomach, to the soft skin under my breast. He kisses me with such reverence that I’m practically shaking from it, the same as any orgasm, but this time it’s my heart that’s being rendered.

I don’t know how it is with vampires, I barely know how it is with people. But this, right now, this feels so much more than what is happening. This feels like the two of us are being bonded beyond blood now, bonded by love, bonded by something that’s greater than us both.

And when he brings his face up to mine, gazing down at me in such a way that my heart does cartwheels in my chest, and kissing me like a dying man on his last breath, I know he feels it too.

His hands slip down over my sides, skin skimming skin, then he’s parting my thighs and pushing himself inside me.

I gasp, taken aback, having forgotten his size, how commanding he is, even when he’s not being rough. He slides inside me, my body seizing around him, my chest out, hands fisted in the sheets.

His breath is shaky as he pushes in to the hilt, sliding over every raw nerve, making my heart dance again and again. And he stares at me, in me, and I’m meeting his eyes, lost in how dark they are, both warm and cold. Like a fire made of ice.

Then he lowers his head with a low, shuddering groan, and presses his chest against mine, our skin leaping at the contact, and he buries his mouth in my neck. Biting but not drawing blood. Just holding on.

I am so in love with him I never realized how wonderfully terrifying that is until now. To know that I have him, that I could lose him, lose us.

But his movements steal my fears, bring me back around and then he's moving faster, knees planting on either side of me, his large, strong body looming over mine.

I feel safe.

Loved.

Wanted.

Not alone.

And then he's moving faster and I'm holding back, wanting to come with him at the same time. I'm whispering to him in my head, *Please. Now.*

And he's responding with another groan, this one sounding from the depths of him, and then his fist is in my hair and he's holding tight, breath trembling, mouth open as he stares at me, thrusting in and out, shaking the bed.

What he means is not now, but soon.

So I dig my nails into his back, holding on, holding back as he fucks me slowly, and then fast, and everything in between, and I'm feeling everything at once, all my sense overwhelmed, drowning in him.

"I'm coming," he rasps, staring at me with so much intensity I think I might come just from his eye contact alone, but it's too much for him, and he's throwing his head back, neck arched, letting out a rumbling cry as he comes, his muscles straining as he holds himself together above me.

And I, I let myself go, the crescendo at the peak, the music inside me coming to a pitch, and then I'm shaking, screaming, crying, feeling it all, moving with it all, in synchronicity, like we once did across a dance floor, but this time it's different, this time it seals us to each other in ways maybe we'll never really understand.

I open my eyes, gasping, seeing the golden stars falling from the ceiling, landing on our skin, melting before they disappear.

I let out a giddy laugh, half-drunk with my love for him, half dazed because of the orgasm, and I wonder if I'm hallucinating.

But I realize it doesn't matter.

Because what this is between us, that's what's real.

I feel it in my blood.

* * *

I SPEND a few more days at Solon's house high above Shelter Cove as we get me settled, which means a lot of daily phone calls with my parents letting them know I'm okay. My dad has healed fast, probably because my mother smothered him in herbal poultices as soon as he got home. He was lucky.

I'm lucky too. I'm trying not to dwell on that too much.

I'm trying to live in the present.

It's beautiful here.

Solon's estate is large, many acres, spread across the undulating cliffs, part of it reaching all the way down to a private beach you can only reach by a creaky staircase. We go down there each evening to watch the sunset, sit on the beach as the strong waves pound the shore, his dog Odin running up and down through the sand. Solon throws him a stick constantly and the dog never tires out, happy to be with him again.

We're here right now, sitting on a plaid blanket, a couple of bottles of red wine between us. Odin is finally tuckered out, lying in the sand, his tongue hanging out, watching his master with a loyal gaze.

The beach itself is only accessible via Solon's property, giving us complete privacy, the short stretch bracketed by cliffs dropping down into the waves. Anyone else would be cold, the mist rolling in off the Pacific, but luckily we're vampires.

I sigh and lean back into Solon's arms, never wanting to leave this place.

"I don't even know how you live in the city," I tell him in a dreamy voice. "I would spend all my time here."

"I do come here often," Solon says, running his thumb over my bare arm in light circles. "But then I miss the city. You'd think after so many centuries I'd be over people, but I'm not. I like the hustle and bustle. The smells. The sounds. If it's too quiet for too long, then I start looking for problems, usually within myself."

"I'm going to guess that you have properties all over the world," I tell him.

"I do."

"Are you planning on taking me to all of them?" I ask, tilting my head back to look at him.

"If you wish," he says with a soft smile, kissing the top of my head. "I'll take you wherever you want to go."

I think that over. I've traveled quite a bit already, but right now, with eternity stretched out in front of us, I feel like the world is our oyster.

"I know this sounds silly after everything that's happened," I begin. "But I still want to finish my degree. I still want to do the things I had planned."

His face grows serious. "That doesn't sound silly, Lenore. That sounds like the right thing to do. Most vampires go to school, over and over again, in as many different areas of expertise that they can."

"But, you see, I have this internship in August, on a dig in Egypt..."

"And so we'll go. Together."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. If it's important to you, it's important to me. Besides, it's been a century since I've been to Egypt."

I think about that for a bit. "Do you travel by private plane?" I ask.

He gives me a smug look. "The one thing my money is really good for."

"I don't know," I muse, staring at the orange sun as it starts to disappear under the horizon. "I think this place is more than good. In fact, I insist we use this at least once a month."

"Oh really?"

"We live in a vampire frat house, Solon."

"What did you just say?" he growls sharply, and then starts to tickle my sides.

I squeal, trying to get out of the way, but he holds me down, and Odin gets up, licking my arms, trying to figure out what's happening. "Not fair that I'm still ticklish," I cry out.

"Your senses are permanently heightened," he says, gripping me hard and pulling me back into him. "We're the most ticklish creatures on the planet."

"Good to know," I tell him, shooting him a wicked grin.

I relax against him again, Odin sitting dutifully beside us, as the sun sinks and sinks. There's the green flash and then it's gone, leaving the sky a beautiful shade of orange, red and pink. We're in a living painting.

It makes my heart pinch, fear rising up from under me. So much beauty makes me worry that it might be taken away again.

"What next?" I whisper to him, my words almost lost to the pounding waves, thinking about Elle, about Matt, about what other darkness lurks

around the corner. “What happens the next time I can’t control myself and I fuck up?”

“We take it as it comes,” he tells me.

“You say it so simply.”

“Because it is simple,” he says, rubbing his thumb over my shoulder. “We will never escape who we are, moonshine. The best we can do is to just do the best we can. That’s all.”

That’s all.

“And your father?” I ask, swallowing hard. “I killed Yanik. That won’t go over well.”

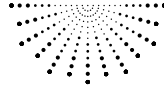
He presses his lips together, looking grim. “We take that as it comes too.”

We go back to watching the waves.

Darkness descending.

A waning moon ascending.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“WELCOME HOME,” YVONNE SAYS TO ME, COMING OVER AND ENVELOPING me in a strong hug.

I drop my luggage in the hall, and let her hug me, spying Wolf over her shoulder, leaning against the doorway to the kitchen. I give him a quick smile, grateful to be here.

“*Mom,*” Amethyst chastises her. “Give her room to breathe.”

“It’s okay, I can hold my breath for a long time,” I manage to say as Yvonne pulls away, holding me by the shoulders as she looks at me. “It’s nice to see you too, Yvonne.”

She pats me on the back and passes me along to her daughter, while Yvonne turns to Solon behind me and affectionately coos, “Mr. Stavig.”

“Hey,” Amethyst says, giving me a quick embrace. “How was Shelter Cove? You know I’ve always wanted to go up there, but *someone* says it’s his private escape away from people like me.”

She’s giving mock daggers at Solon now, who has his arm around Yvonne, the housekeeper so tiny underneath Solon’s hold.

“We all need a break sometimes,” Solon says, coming over to Amethyst, appraising her with a sly grin on his face. “Isn’t there a reason why you disappear to Palm Springs every month with your latest boy toy?”

Amethyst’s violet eyes go wide, and my gaze goes right to Wolf. As I expected, he’s practically bristling like his namesake.

“*Boy toys?*” Amethyst repeats, giving Solon a dirty look. “You’re mistaking me for an employee who actually gets time off.”

While the two of them are sparring, I go over to Wolf and give him a quick hug. I haven’t seen him since I was tied to the chair in the barn.

“Hey,” I say, staring up at him. “Thanks for coming to get me, golden boy.”

He tears his eyes away from Amethyst and smiles down at me, putting his arm around me and giving me a tight squeeze. “You know I wouldn’t let Solon do that alone. When one of us is at risk, all of us are.”

“So you’re pretty much The Three Musketeers,” I tell him.

He rolls his eyes. “Don’t even say the words,” he says under his breath. “Ezra brings it up all the time. That, or we’re the guys from The Hangover.”

“Where is Ezra, by the way?” I say, looking around. “I wanted to thank him too.”

I mean, we never really hit it off, considering Ezra kidnapped me, elbowed me in the face, and then was all weird and predatory with me. But still, I trust Solon, and so I think I have to trust there’s a reason Ezra is around. After all, they wouldn’t have found me without him.

“He’s out,” Wolf says. “But he’ll be back for the dinner.”

“The dinner?”

“The dinner!” Yvonne exclaims, clapping her hands together. “We’re all having dinner together tonight.” She notes the concerned expression on my face. “And by dinner, I mean actual food. I’ve got some rare steaks and everything you could want with them.”

At the mention of steak my stomach growls. The two weeks I spent in Shelter Cove I barely ate anything. But I did feast on Solon every other day, so that’s been more than enough to keep me going.

“Odin!” Wolf suddenly cries out, dropping to his knees as Odin comes barrelling inside the house after us. Odin goes straight to Wolf, jumping up on him, licking him all over. Of course, with Odin giving Solon his stamp of approval about me, we brought him back into the city. It was the right thing to do, with Odin acting like he owns the place more than Solon does, and the groundskeeper Angelo looked relieved to not have to dog-sit anymore.

“Come on,” Solon says, grabbing my hand. “Let’s get you settled.”

We go up the stairs and I glance down over my shoulder at Yvonne, Amethyst and Wolf, the three of them now doting over the dog, feeling a rush of protectiveness over them all.

Several flights later, Solon brings me up to my level, but we don’t stop there, going straight up the stairs to his bedroom.

“What are you doing?” I ask him as he lets go of my hand and opens the door. He then quickly scoops me up in his arms and carries me in through the door, all the way over to the bed before he places me back on the floor.

“What was that?” I ask, though I have to say it did tick off a few romantic bucket list items.

“I thought we should do this properly,” he says to me, grabbing my hands. “It means something to carry someone in over the threshold. You know how the myths speak of inviting vampires into your house? Well, those myths are more or less true. But for us, if I carry you in through the door...you’re living here now.”

“I already live in the house,” I tell him. “You mean...in your room?”

“That’s exactly what I mean, Lenore,” he says with tried patience, but he still kisses the back of my hand.

“Do I get a say in this?” I tease.

“No.”

I’m smiling. Honestly, this feels right. My bedroom on the lower floors was nice and all, but it made no sense after a while, when I was spending every night in his bed anyway.

“Fine,” I tell him, placing my hand at his chest. “I’ll move in with you. But I do think I should choose what side of the bed I get.”

His jaw almost drops, nose flaring. “I have spent eight hundred years on the left side of the bed, and I am *not* switching now.”

I laugh. “Okay, fine. You win. But you will have to owe me something for this sacrifice.”

He rolls his eyes to the ceiling.

It was just a quick action, but my eyes are drawn up there.

To the ladder that leads to the trap door in the ceiling.

“And what you owe me is taking me up there for once,” I say, pointing up.

He looks at me for a moment, thinking, then shrugs. “Alright.”

He turns and then heads to the ladder, his long, large body climbing up with ease.

I follow, placing hands and feet on the rungs and going up until he’s reaching through and pulling me up by my arms.

I’m finally up here.

I look around. “Wow.”

The tower is nothing like I expected. It's a smaller space than I thought, just a small square room, the wallpaper dark blue and peppered with stars. There's a couple of black beanbag chairs in the corner, an overflowing stack of vinyl records and a record player.

"What is this place?" I ask.

"This is where I come to think," he says, settling down on one of the beanbag chairs. The sight of his big, well-dressed frame in it tickles me. He pats the space next to him. "Come here."

I go over to him and sit down. The bean bag chair moves under me, tipping me on my back, and I'm laughing, helpless, looking up at him and the top of the tower behind his head. The boards in the tower have been removed, so all you see are the rafters going up and up and up. Except on the left side, there looks to be a mummified animal staring at us from over the edge.

I squint my eyes. "Uh, is that a *bat*?" I ask. I look back at Solon and he's grinning at me. "Well, is it?"

"I didn't put it there," he protests. "Let's just say the people who used to live here with us were into a *lot* of acid."

"I would say so," I muse. But the mention of bat reminds me of something else. "Hey, not long ago you mentioned something about Dracula being Dramacula, which is a great pun by the way. But...Dracula isn't real, is he?"

Solon's smile turns secretive, his eyes gleaming. "I'm not sure I should tell you the truth. You'd probably go and fall in love with him."

My eyes go wide. "You mean he's real and he's alive?"

Another sly smile. "Let's just say that Bram Stoker got a lot of things wrong about Vlad. And, by chance, he got a lot of things right."

I ponder that, thinking back to all the Dracula movies I've seen, wondering what parts were real and what weren't.

Then I flip over on my side and look at Solon. "Okay. So on the subject of Dracula, who is your favorite vampire?"

His dark brows shoot up. "My favorite vampire?"

"Besides yourself," I quickly add.

"Oh. Well, then I'd have to say The Count."

"...Count Dracula?"

He grins at me. "No. Count Von Count," he says. "From Sesame Street." He twitches a finger at me. "One, ah-ha-ha," he says in his best

impression as he brings his hand to my neck, tickling me. “Two, ah-ha-ha.”

I yelp, trying to move, but the damn bean bag chair is sucking me in and then he’s kissing me.

We spend quite a bit of time up there in the tower room. Putting on music, getting naked, you know, the things you would do after a long drive back from the north coast.

Eventually, we come back down the ladder, to his bedroom, to my new room.

And that’s when it all hits me.

The changes my life has suddenly made in the last couple of months.

Being in Shelter Cove *was* sheltering. It made me forget what was really happening in my life, what had happened to me, my family, what had happened to Elle, to Matt, letting me push them to side in the incoming fog.

Now that I’m back in the city, it’s hitting me hard.

“What’s wrong?” Solon asks me, putting his hand on my arm, eyes peering at me inquisitively.

I swallow hard, trying to wrestle with the feelings.

“I still don’t know my place in this world,” I whisper to him.

“What do you mean?” he asks, coming closer.

I glance up at him. “I feel...like I don’t know what to expect from myself anymore. I saw what I did to Yanik back in that barn, I felt the fire, felt the power, but I don’t know what it means. I’m half a vampire. Half a witch. But I’m not a whole of anything.”

“But you are, Lenore,” he whispers fiercely. He grabs my hands, pressing my knuckles to his lips. “You are my *whole heart*.”

If he wasn’t holding onto me, I think I’d fall to my knees.

Dear lord.

I shake my head at him, willing myself to not cry for once. I can’t cry every time he says something so incredibly heartfelt and romantic, or I’d be a puddle of tears for eternity.

“Come on, let’s have dinner,” he says, holding onto my hand and leading me out of the bedroom.

I follow him, going down the stairs, passing by dead roses and making them bloom before my eyes.

We’re right on time, because the table in the dining room is all set and as we step inside, I realize this is the first time I’ve been around all five people in this house (and now a dog) at the same time, in the same room.

And at the table there are only two empty seats.

At both ends of the table.

Solon goes to one, and I go to the other, taking our place as the heads.

I look down at Solon and give him a shy smile. It feels so lofty to be sitting here across from him, but at the same it feels...right.

Meant to be.

“Well this looks wonderful, Yvonne,” Solon says to her.

I look over the food. There are nearly raw steaks, seared just so for us vampires, and then medium steaks for the normal folk. There’s salads of sliced fennel and oranges, there’s potato, cucumber, even a seafood salad. There’re also huge carafes of red wine, and it seems everyone has already poured themselves a large glass. Perhaps they’ve had several already, given the happy and glazed expressions on everyone’s faces. Even the snarly Ezra looks relaxed.

Solon and I quickly catch up, filling our glasses, and then Solon gets to his feet, raising his wine glass.

“Here’s to us, here’s to this house,” he says, looking everyone in the eye. “I never really get a chance to be with you all like this, and I have to say, it makes me realize that despite how different a lot of us are, I do consider you all my family. Vampires know all too well that family can be only blood and yet sometimes more than blood, and with you all, I feel... that we’re all in this together, as terribly maudlin as that might seem.”

Everyone nods, and Yvonne is tearing up, dabbing her eyes with a napkin. I’m not used to everyone in this house being so sentimental.

Solon flashes her a charming smile, then looks at the rest of us. “As a very old proverb says, we are all visitors to this time, to this place. We are just passing through. Our purpose here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to *love*...” he looks at me at that, “and then we return home.” He pauses, raising his glass higher. “May we all not return home for a long, long time.”

I look around the table at my new family, my found family, joy leaping up inside of my chest. It doesn’t negate the family I already have, my parents at home, just like my vampire side doesn’t negate the witch side and vice versa. I am an Ouroboros, one side feeding the other, and I have other beings in my life who care for me and look out for me, too.

And then there’s the one at the head of the table, raising his glass of wine.

Staring at me with all the devotion and intensity in the world.

Because he knows that the world belongs to us now.
And some day, together
...we're going to change it.

THE END

SPECIAL NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR: Thank you so much for reading Black Sunshine. I tried to keep this book as a standalone, but as I wrote, and fell deeply in love with these characters, I realized there is so much more to Solon and Lenore's world. While I do think this stands alone for readers who do not wish to read any more about this couple and can be satisfied with their "happy for now," I'm also dying to keep writing. If this book has bewitched you like it has bewitched me, please let me know by leaving a review, or messaging me on Instagram, or commenting on my posts. I would love to bring you more of everything.

IN THE MEANTIME you can reach out to me and keep up with what I'm working on by:

Following me on [Instagram](#)

-> joining my [Facebook Group](#) (we're a fun bunch and would love to have you)

-> Otherwise, feel free to signup for my [mailing list](#) (it comes once a month) and [Bookbub alerts](#)!

AN EXCERPT FROM DARKHOUSE

Darkhouse is book #1 in the slow-burn horror romance Experiment in Terror Series, [FREE at all retailers](#). If you liked Black Sunshine, this series has all the sexual-tension, steam, chills and thrills you can handle.

The walk there ended up being a lot more difficult than I thought. Because the lighthouse was situated on the top of a small cliff, it meant a near vertical climb on my hands and knees. I tried holding my iPhone in my mouth for a while until I decided I was better off letting my eyes adjust to the dark and have my night vision kick in.

With my hands soaking up the sea-sprayed grass and coarse dirt, I slowly found my way to the crest. On the other side, the cliff tapered off gently back into rolling dunes, and behind the lighthouse weedy ground led into a dark forest. It was windier up here and noisier as the waves crashed against the large rocks and boulders. Every once in a while the wind would catch the spray and shower it in my face.

The dark outline of the lighthouse building loomed in front of me. It was enough to make me pause and think for a second.

I knew I could be very impulsive in certain situations, even to the point where I would find myself acting while my brain was screaming for me not to. This was one of those situations. I was cold, the weather was turning for the worse, I had a few glasses of wine in me, it was late, no one knew where I was, and yet my main concern was trying to get into a creepy old lighthouse. As much as the reckless side of me felt compelled to explore it, the rational side knew it was probably the stupidest idea imaginable, even more so because I had this overall feeling of dread about the place.

I know I said earlier that it felt like it was waiting for me and that still held true. Whether it was destiny disguised as dread I didn't know, but I truly wished that the small, responsible (dare I say "adult"), part of my brain would overpower me and steer me back to Uncle Al's house.

But instead I decided to take out my camera. I put the strap around my neck and then switched on the video mode. A jarring, blue-white light lit up the ground in front of me. I took a deep breath and aimed the camera at the lighthouse. I flicked the recording switch on; might as well have something to show for my little exploration.

The lighthouse was only a few yards in front of me, bathed in the eerie electronic glow. The windows, for the most part, were all boarded up, though occasionally there was an unobstructed pane, broken or cracked from the corner. The building was impossibly immense up close, evoking a feeling of density. The white paint was peeling, with black glistening patches plaguing its pebbly form. It was probably mildew; in the dark it reminded me of bloodstains. I shivered at that thought and steadied the camera.

I raised it to the second story and scanned alongside it to the tower. The tip was concealed as the camera light was now only catching the fat strands of thick, incoming fog.

I started toward the front of the lighthouse where a few hardy windblown shrubs converged from the cliff's flanks. I inspected the building. I wanted to get inside but had no clue how. The rusty door was locked shut with a lock I surely couldn't pick.

"This is stupid," I said out loud to myself. The sound of my own voice was comforting. It *was* stupid. I should have turned back.

Instead, I kept walking around. I walked as close to the building as possible, not trusting the surrounding ground, and then came around front. It looked like the cliff's edge was a safe enough distance from the foundation, maybe fifteen feet. There were a few shrubs planted at the base of the tower and above them was a large round window. A single board had been placed across it. Above the ground floor window was another window, then another, and then another, until they reached the watchtower top.

I walked up to the window and saw that the board had been fastened from the inside. I knew what I had to do and was really excited I could do it.

I felt the board, testing its strength. It felt like it would fall off without much effort, which suited me perfectly.

“We have come to our first obstacle, a boarded window,” I said to the camera, turning it around so that it was filming my face, probably on extreme close-up. “However, this proves to be no challenge to Perry Palomino.”

I put the camera down on the ground, stacking it up against a rock so that it was filming me and stepped back. Feeling strength in my leg’s position and my body’s stance, I sprung forward, my body tilting at the exact angle, my arm extending until my palm met the board with precision. With a satisfying give, it flew off its anchors and into the back of the building, landing on the floor inside with an echoing clatter.

I turned and looked at the camera and mouthed my best out-of-synch Bruce Lee impression, “Movement number four: Dragon seeks path.”

Then, feeling like an idiot, I ran over to and scooped it up. I knew right then I would be showing this video to no one. Even though the objective was reached, my hand was stinging because I didn’t do everything correctly (it had been a year since my last lesson) and I was conscious of how big of a dork I was.

I put the camera back around my neck and poked my head inside. A wall of musty odor hit me, tickling my lungs into a coughing fit. I aimed the light into the darkness and saw the broken boards on the ground in an empty, circular room. A dripping noise came from the corner and there was an overall feeling of dampness. Near the back of the room there was a doorway but no door hung from its bare hinges. I could barely make out what was beyond that; it looked like it was the staircase that would lead to the top of the tower.

There was something strange about this place, something vaguely familiar. I racked my brain for any concrete recognition but came up short.

There was a heavy stillness to the air inside despite the wind that was now freely entering from the coast. It was strangely compelling and very otherworldly.

I put my hands on the windowsill and pulled myself up, my under-used pecs aching from my own weight. I swung my legs around clumsily and hopped down. My feet landed in a small puddle, spraying cold water onto my leggings. I immediately regretted coming inside.

The air here was thick. My breaths were coming in slower and sluggish, like fluid was entering my lungs. The pressure inside was different too, causing my ears to throb.

I shone the camera around me in a circle but the air swallowed up the light as if it was hungry. That analogy made me shiver. It was cold, too, and I hated the way the blackness felt behind my back, like a net waiting to drop. At that thought I spun around. No one was there, of course.

My chest thumped wildly. I breathed out slowly, deeply, and tried to steady my heart. I felt like I just *had* to come to this place, and now that I was here, reality was sinking in. This really was not the best idea, was it?

I pointed the camera around the room one more time, trying to take in the morbid scenery. I was about to say something witty about my soon-to-be cowardly exit when I heard a THUMP from above me.

My heart literally froze. My breath stopped with it.

I listened hard, as if I strained enough I would sprout super ears.

Another THUMP from upstairs. It came from the room right above my head. The urge to vomit traveled up my body, from my toes to my lips. It increased as the *thumps* followed a footstep pattern, as if someone was walking across the room and to the hallway.

My first thought wasn't that it was a ghost or anything creepy like that, but something worse, something that could actually hurt you like a meth-addicted hobo or a rapist who used this lighthouse as his hideout. Or his rape palace.

I looked behind me at the window I came in through. No doubt the person, or thing, must have heard me break in, must have heard my lame ramblings to the camera. They knew I was here. The only choice I had was to go. But could I get to the window before I was caught?

With the footsteps continuing quietly above me, as if they knew I was listening, I carefully slinked my way back to the window.

I reached for the edge of it with my hand when an ominous shadow passed outside. It happened so quickly that I didn't see what it was but it was human enough that I ducked and flattened myself against the wall.

I was fucked and I knew it. I had stupidly wandered into some epic rape palace run by meth-addicted hobos and bald men with beards who recently escaped nearby jails and had taken over this place for their torture sessions with hapless young women they found exploring the coast. Even worse, I

was going to be the hapless woman who decided to infiltrate their headquarters.

In most movies, the heroine would poke her head over the windowsill to get a better glimpse of what was going on outside, but I knew if I did that, I'd be spotted right away.

So, despite the fact that the window represented freedom and a way out of this hell hole, I slowly moved away from it and scooted along the wall. The light from the camera danced around the room and I immediately knew that I was begging to be found. I switched it off with a click and was quickly engulfed in total darkness.

Of course, I knew that by turning off the light I was still letting people know where I was, but at least in the dark I could hide if I needed to. I started fishing around in my pockets to see if I had any weapons. I didn't. I didn't even have sharp nails. I hoped my karate "skills" worked well on adrenaline.

While trying to keep the urge to pass out at bay, I decided the best thing for me to do was to go out into the hallway. I was trapped in the dank room anyway, and I wasn't brave enough to go through the only exit. The footsteps from up above had stopped, although I wasn't sure when, and the hallway probably had another door or more windows to escape out of.

I inched as silently as possible to the doorframe and poked my head out into the hall. Naturally I couldn't see anything except murky blackness, but after a while my eyes adjusted.

The air in the hallway felt even heavier than it had in the room and smelled like rotten kelp. I squinted at the staircase at the end of the short hall. Lo and behold, there were inky trails of seaweed in the hallway, leading up the stairs. It was like some kelp monster had gone up there, leaving its entrails behind.

Stop it! I yelled inside my head. I was freaking myself out even more and it needed to cease before my brain spiraled out of control. Only bad things could come of that. My main objective had to be getting out of there swiftly and safely and without losing my mind.

I took my eyes off the kelp and looked around the hallway. Dots of green and black danced before my eyes, making it hard for me to focus, but I eventually spotted what seemed to be a door into another part of the lighthouse.

I crept across the hallway, which was thankfully only a foot or two, and reached the door. My hands fumbled and hit the handle loudly. I winced and froze, keeping my breath quiet. When I didn't hear anything after a few terrifying seconds, I carefully turned it and pulled. It barely moved.

I brought my hands up along the frame and came across a lock. I jiggled it silently but to no avail. Unless I magically had a lockcutter in my leggings, this door was not the way out tonight.

I felt tears of frustration rushing to my eyes and blinked quickly to keep them contained. I took my hand off the lock and took in a very deep breath, the type I was taught to use to ward off panic attacks. All my previous panic attacks seemed pretty frivolous compared to this. Impending death (or worse) was an honest-to-God real reason to panic.

I had only one option left: Go back into the room and climb out of the window as quickly as possible. Maybe if I did it fast enough, I could leap out into the night without being noticed, and even if I was noticed maybe my stubby little legs and screaming skills would be enough to keep any potential murderers at bay.

I steadied myself and closed my eyes. Pins and needles were literally flowing along my veins, revving my engines.

I turned on a dime and sprinted towards the room across from me.

BAM!

I ran right into someone.

Or something.

"Auuuggh!" I screamed.

I had hit them hard, my jaw clattering against my teeth as I flew backwards. There was a rattle, a metallic smashing sound. My head rocked against the cold ground. I didn't even give myself time to register the pain.

I leaped to my feet and tried to run again, only to have my foot slip on a slimy patch and send my leg flying forward so that I was airborne once more.

This time I hit the ground even harder and immediately felt my body go limp. The blackness behind my eyes started spinning and my lids closed briefly. Thoughts of danger and harm seemed very far away and the room started to vibrate and hum, almost lulling me to sleep. Sleep seemed like a nice idea.

But sleep was not to be had. A bright light flashed in my face, interrupting the comforting haze behind my eyelids. I squinted

uncomfortably and felt a pair of hands on my head. One felt gingerly along my neck, another brushed against my forehead.

Rapists are gentle these days, I thought absently, and raised my arm up against the light that bore down on me so relentlessly.

“Don’t move,” a gruff voice said from out of the darkness. It sounded vaguely panicked and a million miles away.

I obeyed and dropped my hand. Thankfully, the light moved off of my face and I was aware of something being placed on the ground beside me.

I felt hands on my face again. They were shaking slightly. I tried to open my eyes wider as more coherent thoughts entered my flustered head. The panic began to rise instinctively throughout my body. It intensified when I saw the outline of a man’s face above me. I tried to jerk away, but the man had one hand down on my shoulder pressing me down.

“Seriously, you might be really hurt. Please don’t move.”

I couldn’t see the guy’s face save for the outline, so I leaned back and closed my eyes and did an internal once over of my body. The back of my head throbbed with a dull ache, but other than that, the rest of me felt OK. From my fingers to my toes, my muscles were awake and primed and ready to be used.

“I’m OK,” I managed to say. I opened my eyes and tried to make eye contact with the faceless figure, aiming to where his eyes ought to be.

He took his hands off of me and backed off slightly. I slowly eased myself up and leaned forward. My head was definitely aching and the room was still spinning in the murky dark, but I didn’t feel like I had done any major damage.

Of course, that meant I didn’t have to worry about *that* and could instead focus on this potential rapist in the lighthouse.

I could see a lot better once my night vision kicked in. The man was crouched a foot or two away from me. I could only make out his outline, which was backlit by the moon coming through the window and from a light source on the floor. Upon further inspection it seemed to be coming from a video camera. Not like mine but like the ones filmmakers use. That tiny bit of information calmed my heart down by a few beats. Most lustful meth addicts didn’t have high-quality digital cameras.

“I’m so sorry,” the man said. I tried to read his voice but other than its deep, rough quality like his throat was lined with gravel, I had nothing. It was strangely comforting, though.

“I was upstairs,” he continued, “and I heard this crazy clatter from down here, and I thought maybe it was the cops or something. I didn’t know what the fuck to do. I thought I could get out the way I came in, but I saw you there, and then I saw the window probably at the same time you saw the window, and I’m...I’m so sorry if...well, you’re obviously OK.”

I knew there were many things wrong with that incredibly long sentence but I didn’t have the brains to dissect it. The best I could do was:

“Who are you?”

The man didn’t say anything. His silhouette started to rock back and forth slightly.

“That depends on who you are,” he said simply.

Hell, even I didn’t know who I was right now. I shook my head.

“I asked you first.”

He sighed and reached back into his pocket. He fished out a business card and handed it to me. He picked up his camera and shone it on the black paper.

“Dex Foray,” I read the shiny white print aloud. “Producer, cameraman, cinematographer. Shownet.”

I flicked the card over. There was nothing but a Seattle address. I looked up at him, at his face that I couldn’t see.

“Are you from *West Coast Living* or something?”

He laughed. “Fuck no.”

I stuck the card in my pocket and felt strength returning into my bones and into my tongue. I was glad all my courage hadn’t deserted me.

“Well, Dex Foray, I have a feeling that whatever you guys are doing here tonight, you’re doing so without the permission of my uncle, who owns the lighthouse.”

“There’s no one else here. It’s just me.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Look, I don’t care. I’m not going to report you. I shouldn’t even be here myself. Just get your crew together or whatever and get out of here before you do get in trouble.”

The man, Dex, stopped rocking.

“It’s just me,” he repeated. “Did you see someone else here?”

His voice became pitchy. Something about his change of tone alarmed me.

“Yes,” I said slowly. “I heard you upstairs, and I was going to go out the window, but I saw the shadow of someone pass by. Outside.”

There was silence. He shuffled in the dark and moved closer to me. I wished I could see his face properly.

“Are you sure you saw something?” he asked.

I was starting to doubt myself a bit with the questions but I stuck to my guns. “Yes, I saw someone. Someone walked past the window, swear to God.”

“Where did you come from? Did anyone come with you?”

I shook my head. He raised the light so it was on my face. I winced.

“Sorry,” he said, not sounding very sorry at all. “I...well, nevermind.”

“Nevermind?” I couldn’t help but sneer. “You just broke into my uncle’s lighthouse. Don’t you tell me to nevermind.”

I realized it wasn’t probably the best idea to start provoking a complete stranger, especially when you actually hadn’t seen his face yet and you were in a dark, possibly abandoned lighthouse together, but...

He straightened up, his figure blocking the moonlight and reached down with his hand to help me up. He wasn’t very tall at all, maybe 5’9”.

I took it hesitantly and he brought me up to my feet. I wavered a bit at the change in height and gravity and within seconds he had his arms around both sides of me. He smelled like Old Spice aftershave. I felt like I was in some bad drama on the *Lifetime* network.

“You OK?” he asked. His face wasn’t too far away from mine. I turned around on the spot so that my back was to the window and the moonlight was coming in on his face, illuminating it.

He was a surprisingly handsome guy. Maybe I was expecting a bald man with a beard, but he wasn’t like that at all.

His jaw was wide and round, totally acceptable. A dusting of an Errol Flynn moustache traced his upper lip and his chin was shaded by scruffy beard. He had fathomless, dark eyes framed by brows that were devilishly arched and set low on his forehead. A simple eyebrow ring graced his right eyebrow. It was a very ‘90s look. A man after my own heart, apparently. He reminded me of Robert Downey Jr. in his strung-out drug days.

He watched me, his eyes glittering darkly in the moonlight, full of intensity. I felt relieved that he looked like a normal person and almost tickled that he was quite a looker as well.

“Just a bit dizzy,” I managed to say. He kept his gaze with mine. It was a bit unnerving after awhile. It must have shown on my face because he smiled very slowly, showing perfect white teeth.

“Good,” he said. “Promise not to sue?”

I eyed him warily. “I won’t. Can’t speak for my uncle, though.”

He pursed his lips and seemed to think about it, though his eyes remained motionless.

“Why are you here?” he finally asked.

“We’re having a bonfire on the beach. I got sick of hanging around teenagers and wanted to come here. My uncle never let me come here when I was younger. I didn’t tell anyone, I just left. I was hoping to film some stuff.”

At my own mention of filming I panicked. My camera! I reached down and pulled it up in front of my face. I turned it on and the lights flared and then steadied. I couldn’t see the lens but Dex grabbed it and held it in front of the light. He peered at it, brows furrowing, and gently put it back around my neck.

“It’s fine. I thought you wrecked the shit out of mine when you ran into me.”

He lifted his camera up and patted it. I immediately felt guilty, even though it was his own damn fault for trespassing.

“You’re right,” he continued, reading my face. “Who cares? I probably deserve to have this camera smashed.”

I was about to say something else; what, exactly, I don’t know, but I have a feeling I would have tried to make him feel better, when there was another loud *thump* from up above.

I froze. I could feel him freeze too. I slowly looked over at him. He was watching me intently.

“You sure you came alone?” he whispered. The fact that he had to ask again chilled me.

“Are you?” I answered. He nodded gravely.

I swallowed hard. We both listened hard, still as death.

Another thump followed. My mind started to reel wildly. Was this Dex guy really alone? Maybe this was still the rape palace and he was trapping me down here while the bigger guys did all the work. There was an air of uncertain danger about him, though that could have just been the situation or his floppy, messy dark hair and Byronic mannerisms.

I eyed the window. Dex caught my stare and shook his head as if to warn me. I gave him an incredulous look.

He leaned into my ear, his lips brushing my lobe. At contact it felt like mini lightning bolts were traveling along my skin in a heated fury and burrowing into my head. That feeling alone was distracting. I closed my eyes and enjoyed it.

“Are you one hundred per cent sure that no one else came with you here?” he whispered, his low voice joining the static and traveling in waves down my spine.

I shook my head and tried to focus. Even if someone did follow me, there was no way they could get inside the lighthouse before me. Hell, I didn’t even know how Dex got in the place if he didn’t come through the window. I put that question aside for now. The thumps continued.

I eyed the window again and started to automatically move towards it. With him right beside me, he didn’t yield.

“We have to go upstairs,” he whispered.

I almost laughed loudly but caught myself. Was he fucking crazy? I wasn’t going upstairs, I was going out the window and back to Uncle Al’s where I could call the cops. If that got Dex in trouble, so be it.

He put his hand under my chin and tilted it up so that I was looking at him. It was OK. I liked looking at him.

“You’d be best to stay with me,” he said.

I couldn’t believe it. Part of me wanted to stay with him for some reason but the rational part knew that “some reason” wasn’t good enough. I shook my head violently.

“You? I don’t even know who the fuck you are. You give me a business card? I’m not going to be part of your rapist tower.” I said that last part a little too loudly.

He raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips. I guess he was a bit taken aback.

“Go then,” he said slowly. “But once you are out that window, run all the way back to your uncle’s place. Don’t stop to look at anything. Even if you run into something, just keep running. It would be better if you just kept your eyes closed the whole way.”

My body was covered in chills as he said that. I was suddenly afraid to leave his side. He seemed to know a lot of things that I didn’t.

“What’s upstairs?” I asked. “Do you know?”

He shrugged, rather nonchalantly considering the circumstances.

“I have an idea. That’s why I’m here.”

“Why are *you* here?”

“I’ll show you,” he said. He reached down and grabbed my hand. With his other he hoisted his camera on his shoulder. He eyed my own camera around my neck.

“You may want to turn that on. It’s better if we get as many ways of recording this as possible.”

Well, shit, son. If there was a moment that determined the course of my future, I’m pretty sure this was it. I had two somewhat simple choices. I could make a run for it and go back to Uncle Al’s. Back to the bonfire where my cousins and dear sister would still be drinking and revel in the normalcy of a Saturday night and forget I ever went to this horrid place and ran into this weirdo.

Or I could go with said weirdo up the stairs in this decrepit old lighthouse, which was most likely condemned and unsafe, towards some unknown person (or *thing*) that was walking around, potentially waiting to murder us in horrific ways.

It didn’t seem like a very hard decision to make. In fact, I think 99.7% of people in the right frame of mind would have picked from column A and gone on with their merry lives. But for some freaking crazy reason, I thought that maybe, just maybe I should go with this stranger up those kelp-ridden stairs and toward the lair of unimaginable horror. You know, because it was the more interesting alternative.

I turned on my camera with my other hand and let Dex lead me away from the fresh air and freedom, toward the monstrous uncertainty that was waiting for us further inside.

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This book was a labor of pure love. I wish I could go back in time and do it all again. I was racing out of bed first thing in the morning to write, and I was burning the midnight oil, utterly captivated by Lenore and Solon and their world. In a way, books are like vampires: they compel and bewitch the reader, and they're immortal, words living forever, and I love the idea of Solon and Lenore actually going on for eternity, at least in this form.

This book made me realize that I am SO lucky to be able to do this for a living, that feeling when you're so plugged into your art that you know you are MEANT to do this...after sixty books, it's not often that a novel comes to me in such a solid, real, soulful form, as if the whole story already existed and was channeling through me.

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Karina Halle, a former screenwriter, travel writer and music journalist, is the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Pact*, *A Nordic King*, and *Sins & Needles*, as well as over fifty other wild and romantic reads. She, her husband, and their adopted pit bull live in a rain forest on an island off British Columbia, where they operate a B&B that's perfect for writers' retreats. In the winter, you can often find them in California or on their beloved island of Kauai, soaking up as much sun (and getting as much inspiration) as possible. For more information, visit www.authorkarinahalle.com

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