



CRYMSYN HART

She captured his image only once,
and it's haunted her ever since.

Portrait
OF A
Vampire

— PURPLE SWORD PUBLICATIONS —

Crymsyn Hart

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PORTRAIT OF A VAMPIRE

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Portrait of a Vampire

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By

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PROLOGUE

The heat was almost unbearable while I sat in the semi-shade of the trees lining the boulevard. Most of them were half-dead. Hell, most of *us* were half-dead. We were the forgotten, the cast outs, the runaways, hanging onto the fringes by only a fingernail while we tried to endure. I was one of the lost, and I hoped to keep it that way.

I'd been on the streets for two years. I had watched friends get stabbed, others turn into whores, and some just disappear into the early morning fog, until I was the only one on the block at the tender age of seventeen. Now I was the veteran in this group of homeless children who survived on the streets.

Everyone had a story. The girl sitting next to me had been fucked repeatedly by her grandfather and when she told, her grandmother had kicked her out of the house. The boy lying on the other side of the tree, a newbie, had only been here a week. He was a little older than the rest, sixteen. Thinking he was indestructible, he decided to set out on his own and hitchhike across the country. A few token smears of dirt etched his face, and his cheeks weren't hollow yet from hunger. Under the diehard attitude he was just a rich kid who wanted to try and rough it for a few weeks. I had seen a few of them come and go. The chica next to him was trying to get out of the life. Her pimp had beaten her so bad a couple of weeks

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ago that her face was still puffy from a broken cheekbone, and her wrist was in a sling. The ER had kicked her out when they needed the bed. Now they all hung around me. I was a legend among the vagabonds.

Legend. It was my nickname, what the old timers called me; the diehard hippies who had taken me in under their wing, and the crazy, itinerant drunks who offered to let me share their cardboard shacks. What was my story? I could tell you I was hiding from a pimp, or home life was perfect and I decided to run away for the fun of it, to live on the dangerous side of life. None of those yarns would be true. Mine is a little scarier, a little more tabloidy, a little more supernatural than most. It was the reason for my nickname. At least part of it.

Staring up at the sky, I saw the sun was breaking through the smog. It was going to be a scorcher, and the measly shade we had was fast dwindling away. My body craved air-conditioning. Hell, it desired a hot shower and something cold to drink, a nice warm bed, and not looking over my shoulder anymore. Most of all, I yearned for a night's rest where my nightmares wouldn't get the best of me and scare the newbies who nested around me.

I pulled a smoke from my crumpled pack. I had to shake my plastic lighter a few times to get enough fuel to even spark it with. Hey, I wasn't complaining. It was a cast off I found on the street. When I lit the cigarette, a flash of my nightmare raced through my

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mind. In truth, it really wasn't a nightmare; it was just an old memory replayed over and over again in my dreams.

My father was strewn across the white carpet. Red stained the rug where his throat had been slit. A look of terror remained frozen on his face. An outstretched arm reached out to my mother, who was screaming on an altar. Between her thighs was the reverend—suave, poised, crazy, and pumping away at her under the upside down cross. I was forced to watch while I cried for my mother. Her pale skin was accentuated against the black cloth she lay on. At the peak of his orgasm, he slipped a knife out from underneath my mother and stabbed her in the stomach. Once I heard her scream, I lost it. My power, my gift, exploded and rattled the pews of the church. One of them slid forward and hit my captor. I didn't want to see my mother bleed to death. My feet took me out of the made-over church.

“Stop her!” the reverend yelled, but I slammed the doors shut behind me.

The cherry of the cigarette had burned almost down to the filter. The reverend's face was scorched into my soul. Sometimes I thought I saw him following me, but it was only my imagination. Flicking the cigarette away, I dusted myself off, deciding to find more shade for the day. The sky was blue with no imperfections, and nothing was going to destroy my mood.

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Ignoring the stares of the newbies next to me, I began my journey down Main Street. About a mile into my walk, I noticed a car slowing down. I dared a look and thought the driver seemed familiar.

It's just my imagination. Taking in my surroundings, I noticed I had missed my turn and was heading into a section of town I normally avoided. The town was buying up mills and turning them into posh and expensive condos, with an art gallery on every corner. My feet moved a little quicker when I detected the car keeping pace with me. Slinging my worn backpack over my shoulder, I glanced at the driver again. My mind went numb when I stared into his eyes. Dead, cold, calculating eyes I remembered from my nightmares.

It can't be!

"It's you!"

Brakes screeched. Burnt rubber filled my nose. *He's here!* He was supposed to be in jail. In slow motion, I saw the good reverend open the car door. Terror gripped me, and I couldn't call upon my power to use it against him. By the time my mind realized he was coming after me, my feet were racing ahead of me. I ran a couple of blocks. His footsteps were pounding the pavement behind me.

It couldn't be him! He was put away. I saw him! How can he have gotten out? How did he find me? I ducked inside an open door, hoping it would provide me some shelter. Inside smelled of fresh

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paint. The windows were covered in brown paper. I spun around, searching for a niche to squeeze behind, but there was nothing but an open space with drop cloths on the floor. Panic seized me. He was not going to get me the way he got my parents. I spun around and hit someone.

Arms grabbed me and held me. I stared into electric blue eyes. Alabaster skin and ice blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Fear sparked my gift. I tried to catch my breath. The paper flew from the windows in shreds, falling down around us.

“What are you doing in here?” the gallery owner asked.

“Please—” was all I managed.

“Thief! Thank God you caught her. She stole my backpack. Probably looking for drugs. Little wench!” The reverend was in better shape than I thought. He hardly pulled in a second breath.

My whole body shook. My gaze darted between the crazy reverend and the gallery owner. My fate rested on him. A paint can shivered next to me. My would-be savior noticed it too. His gaze slid from it to me, and then back to my accuser. “Is this true? Did you steal from him?”

“No. Please,” I whispered.

“Let me take her off your hands. It appears you’ve a lot to get done here.”

The gallery owner released me. The drop cloths flapped in a nonexistent breeze. I closed my eyes in defeat. I couldn’t run

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forever, but I'd be damned if I was going to become the sex slave the reverend wanted me for. He wanted my power. It was the only reason he killed my parents—so he could possess me. I didn't know why, but I remembered it from the nightmare of my past.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you take her. Would you please leave? Like you said, I do have a lot of work to do."

A sigh moved through me. My body relaxed. The drop cloths stopped fluttering, and the paint can settled down. The reverend's face turned beat red.

"You're going to let this little bitch get away with robbery?"

The gallery owner stepped forward. "I asked you nicely. If you want, I'll call the police, and they can settle it."

The cult leader clenched his fists and then pointed at me. "This is not over. You're harboring the devil's spawn. I will find you again, and you will be tamed!" With that, he turned and left.

I watched in awe. "Thank you."

"No problem. You didn't steal anything from him, did you?"

I shook my head.

"I thought not." He turned, and I noticed he squinted against the weak light just starting to filter in through the exposed windows. He waited a few moments and then looked over his shoulder before he ducked under another drop cloth that hid a door.

"Come on."

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I waited a moment, chewed my lip, and stared at him and the open doorway. It was my choice to leave. I was sure the crazy reverend was prowling outside, hoping I would come out into his clutches again. The gallery owner seemed nice. I closed my eyes and swallowed. The image of my mother's lifeless eyes peered at me from behind my own. I clenched my fists. My power threatened to spill out onto the newly painted gallery.

I had to get control. If I went postal, I could do severe damage to the place. Besides, I wasn't about to spook the guy who had helped me. I heard the paint can shaking again. I took another breath, wiped the picture from my mind, and tried to calm my nerves. This was why they called me Legend. I could do some serious shit if I desired. See, not everything was straightforward with my story.

Opening my eyes, I followed the gallery owner out back. Little did I know how it would change my life.

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CHAPTER ONE

Ten years later...

I surveyed the crowd, searching for familiar faces, yet none rang any bells. People brushed past, stopping to say a few words of praise on how far I had come. I smiled, told them my thanks, but the fame and success left a hollow echo where my heart used to be.

Photos of famous models, foreign landscapes, and forlorn faces adorned the walls of the gallery. All of these were works I had compiled in the five short years since I had exploded on the scene. My fame had lifted me into a world of recognition and stardom with just a couple of photos. Before I knew it, I was at shoots with some of the most celebrated people on the globe. I traveled to countries I had never heard of before. Everyone here shared in my success, hoping a little bit would rub off on them.

Annoyed at the lemmings, I raked my hand through my dark hair and closed my eyes. My head hit the wall. It hurt some, but it made me remember the night was almost over. I had to keep it together for just a little longer. None of the people here really knew me. They thought they did, spinning some fantasy of their lives to intertwine with mine because I was famous now. Not even my partners, in the relationships I'd had, truly knew me.

They didn't know my parents were duped into joining a church they thought was legit, and then suddenly they were held

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hostage because the group leader saw what I could do. It was the reason he had gone to my parents and heavily recruited them. He thought I was going to be the prodigal daughter who took their unhinged coven to the next level.

I shivered when I thought about my parents, and the odd ability I had inherited. None of the posers in the gallery knew I could lift one of the heavy sculptures in here and toss it across the room with my mind. Telekinesis. It was a gift. It was a curse. After my parents were murdered, I had nightmares for ages; I still did. In the middle of the night, I would be so afraid I used to levitate objects in my room while unconscious. Sometimes even my bed. I lived with relatives for a while until I freaked them out enough they thought their house was haunted. When they would walk into my room, my toys, lamps, books, or my bed hovered in the air. Upon shaking me awake, everything would fall to the floor. A priest exorcised the house, but it didn't work. How could it? It wasn't haunted. I was. My nightmares got worse when the cult leader found me again and tried to kidnap me.

When I saw him, I threw a shovel at him that my uncle had dug out a stump with. The reverend was jailed, and my aunt gave up her rights, placing me in foster care. Shuffled from house to house, I became a piece of used furniture. My nightmares never got better. It was bad enough I was abused because of the things I could do, until I learned to fight back, but that wasn't until later.

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I didn't know who to believe in, and old habits died hard. I wasn't too trustworthy of anyone back then. I still looked twice at people now. I escaped to the streets and learned a different kind of education.

"That look can only mean one thing. I think it's time for a girl's night out with chocolate and martinis. What do you say?"

I opened my eyes and focused on the woman before me. Red ringlets framed an oval face. Piercing blue eyes were set in skin the color of moonstone. Pale, cupid lips were pursed; a figure any model would die for, with small pert breasts, was accentuated by the black dress she wore. Black, knee-high boots gave her an extra three inches, so she came up to my chin.

Once I saw her, I forgot everything and everyone around me. The ten years I had known her melted away. Tears formed in my eyes. It had been three years since I saw her last, and she hadn't changed one bit. No laugh lines accented her eyes, or the corners of her mouth. She didn't look a day over twenty-five, but she was far older than anyone in this room. I and maybe one other person in the gallery might have known her secret.

"Simone!"

The woman smiled. Without thinking, I threw my arms around her. I didn't care what people thought about the display. It seemed like forever she was away from my life, and she had been such a huge part of remolding me into the person I was today. If it

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wasn't for her, I never would've picked up a camera. Simone was my big sister.

She stiffened for an instant, and then returned the gesture. After all this time, she hesitated about close contact, but I didn't blame her. She had suffered years of abuse worse than me, but it was in a different era. A wave of exhaustion washed over me. My feet hurt, and I was glad the show was almost over. I glanced at my watch, seeing it was near two in the morning. Another half an hour and I could think about going home.

The crowd was thinning. A headache throbbed dully in my temples. My fingers ached to hold a cigarette, feel the sweet nicotine swirling around my lungs. I shook my head. I hadn't had a smoke in years. Not since I had moved in with Simone. She had made me go cold turkey because she didn't want me to ruin my life on a disgusting habit. I was mildly surprised the craving was this bad. Maybe I dredged it up because my mind had drifted back in time. A cold shiver wracked my body when I gazed at my old friend. Why she was here?

"This show is amazing. I knew you were good, but damn, girl!"

I couldn't help but smile, feeling the burn in my cheeks. "Thanks. It's good to see you, too. Besides, I had a great teacher."

"Hmm. Well, I can't argue with that." She giggled. Her gaze swept the room, taking in the stragglers. She chewed on her lip. I

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could tell she was getting hungry. I slipped out of my shoes and slid down the wall, sitting cross-legged on the hardwood floor. I didn't care how I looked. My ass was worn out. Simone stood over me, still keeping an eye on the dwindling crowd.

"Earth to Simone! Are you going to tell me why you're here? In your last letter, you said you were going to be taking in the Orient for the next few years and I'd meet you on the flip side next time I had a shoot there. I'm happy to see you, don't think I'm not, but is everything okay?" My thoughts turned to the gallery owner who had rescued me a decade ago, Simone's partner in crime, Elijah. I tried not to think about him because it was one of the only ways I knew how to stay sane. My voice fell to a whisper. "Is he okay? I mean he's not —"

"Plans change, Lynn. I saw the ad for this in the local paper, and there was a big buzz about it on the web. Besides, I happened to be passing through town. I missed you. It's not every day I get to support my girl now she's a famous photographer. Never thought you'd be here when you ran into the gallery way back when, did you? You still having nightmares?" Her hand was cool on my skin when she traced my cheek.

I shivered and then nodded. No matter how much I might have felt safe because the creep who massacred my family was dead, it didn't stop the fact that the reverend haunted my dreams. At least these days, when I wake up, only a few small things were

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not in their places. Simone and Elijah had taught me to control my gift, which was one reason I cared so much about them.

“Yes. I have them on occasion. Probably will until the day I die. You never answered my question. Is there something wrong with him?”

Simone’s gaze shifted to her Prada boots. It was unlike her to evade my questions. My friend was always more forthcoming than this. Silence and avoidance were traits Elijah was wonderful at. At least, that was my take on the situation.

It had been years since I had seen him. Actually, I hadn’t seen Elijah since I left the house. My heart twanged when I thought about our final confrontation. One of our only confrontations, really, since he was such a pain in the ass about admitting any kind of emotion, even to himself. The memory washed over me. The impression had burned itself into my brain, and it was one moment I would’ve done over again if I could re-shoot it. Maybe things would have been different if I had.

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CHAPTER TWO

Five years earlier...

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Simone asked again, inspecting my half-packed bags. I had one whole suitcase filled with cameras she and Elijah had bought me over the past couple of years. Hell, they had bought me everything imaginable since rescuing me from the crazy reverend who wanted to kill me. They had provided me with a home, and they had become my family. It didn’t matter what kind of creatures they were. They had furthered my education beyond anything I would have gotten in college.

Simone ran her hand over a small silver frame on top of my bureau. The photo inside was one of us at my eighteenth birthday party. I had only been with them for a few months, and had almost forgotten about my old life. Simone had become my big sister and, contrary to popular belief, her kind had reflections and could have their pictures taken. She hated to be photographed, however, and Elijah—I wasn’t sure he knew how to smile. I glanced at the magnificent creature who had taken me under her wing. She would never change. Lines of wisdom would never mar her perfection.

“Of course I want to do this. It *was* partially your idea. You were the one who said I should live alone and not with such old lame creatures as yourselves.” I glanced at her with a smile playing

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on my lips. She burst out laughing while I packed more of my clothes.

I took in the bedroom that had become my home. The walls were warm, a dusky rose color, the reflection of a sunset. The floors were dark maple and warped from years of use. Simone liked things that were alive, and Elijah liked things ancient, so the mansion was a mixture of both. My heart leapt when I thought of my other guardian. He had been distant ever since I mentioned I was leaving. He hadn't even slammed a door; he just walked away, leaving me staring after him, alone. Not even a batted eyelash.

"You're right about that. I couldn't help bring up your name when the editor was ogling your pictures more than mine. Shows you who is up and coming. Besides, I've had my years of success. It's your turn."

"Well, Miss know-it-all, what happens if I get all nervous and things start to go whacky?"

"What do you mean?"

I focused on my hairbrush and willed it into my bag. I didn't have to look at it because I felt my mind wrap around it. The small amount of power was barely a distraction. I had gotten accustomed to using it in the years I had been with the both of them. I continued packing, not bothering to answer Simone's question.

"My, my, showing off again with your parlor tricks?" a deep voice said from the doorway. Glancing up, I noticed Desiree. She

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had only come to the house a few months ago. Instantly, we didn't get along. She thought I was a plaything for the two other vampires.

Simone growled at the intrusion. She wasn't too fond of the new arrival either. I wasn't sure why they let her stay, but it was not my place to ask, and from the hushed conversations I got, it was an obligational thing Elijah had to deal with.

"Desiree, get the hell out of here! Why do you have to be here?"

The other woman sashayed into the room. I gritted my teeth while the African beauty looked over my bags. An unnatural sheen glowed about her ebony skin. Somewhere in her heritage was royalty. She was a caged lioness prowling my room with her dark eyes scrutinizing my belongings. Tall and lithe, she could have been a model. I figured when she first came here she was, but knew I was wrong when I saw her ivory fangs bared at me when I walked in on her having an argument with Elijah. Since then, we hadn't gotten along.

"I wanted to wish our beloved Kaylynn a fond farewell. I *am* entitled to that now, aren't I?"

I forced a smile, trying to sound sincere. "Well, golly. Thanks, Desi. I'll sure miss you. You've been a pleasure to get to know. Why don't you come over here and give me a hug?"

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Desiree had perfected the essence of fake. She wrapped her arms around me, giving me a squeeze that was a little too tight. My power pressed on my brain to reach out and do something to the bitch, but I held it in check. It was no use getting into a pissing match with her, not when I was leaving. She air kissed both my cheeks and lingered a moment too long near my neck.

“He’s mine now,” she whispered for only me to hear, and then pulled back. Rage built in me, and I couldn’t hold my power in. I shoved her with my mind hard enough that she sailed across the room and hit the side of the bureau. When she looked at me, a trickle of blood dribbled down her forehead. Her fingers felt the wetness, and she lapped at the blood. The look she gave me would have meant my death if I had been anyone else. Since I was under protection from Simone and Elijah, she wouldn’t dare lift a finger against me. It also seemed I was protected from other vampires. I had noticed that when I went out by myself and encountered others of their kind, many of them seemed to know me. I figured the community was small, or Elijah and Simone had powerful influence.

Desiree got up and sauntered out of the room without saying another word. My head was beginning to pound from the effort of dealing with her. “Why is she such a bitch?”

“She’s jealous of the attention Elijah and I give you. Desiree is a finicky creature. Her upbringing wasn’t the best. Her master

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was sadistic and did unspeakable things to her. You could compare him to the man who killed your parents.”

I nodded, feeling an unnatural cold chill.

Zippering up my suitcase, I glanced at the worn book on my nightstand. It was the complete works of Poe. Elijah would read it to me at night to ease my nightmares. Every once and a while I still found him by my bedside when I awoke. The book he read had seen years of use. Elijah had found it in some bookstore ages ago. Looking at the text made me realize I had to try to talk to him again. Maybe this time he would react.

“He’s in the den.” Simone saw my eyes settle on the volume, and didn’t have to know what I was thinking to know where my mind was. She could read my mind if she wanted to, but she always respected my privacy.

“Thanks.” My packing was done. I had to say my final good-byes. I gave her a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek and went off in search of Elijah.

Walking down the hall, a photo caught my eye. It normally did. It was an 8x10 of an old vine covered cemetery. The stones were old, worn thin by the passage of time and weather. In the foreground was a figure, head bent and hands tented in prayer. Pale hair covered most of his face, but the little visible slice held so much pain and sorrow it broke my heart, yet there was a strength there I couldn’t put my finger on. It was a beautiful pose. An angel

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praying over a lost comrade. It was one of the rare occasions Elijah had let himself be photographed by anyone, including Simone. This one was taken unawares, when she had surprised him.

In the doorway of the den, I noticed Elijah bent over his writing desk. Papers were scattered all over it. It was the one place he was messy, when everything else must be pristine. The desk was old, with a rolling top and enough drawers to hide anything in. Books lined the walls, and above the mantle was a gilded mirror, which reflected the sunlight. However, for Elijah and Simone, it reflected the cool moonlight. His white blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

“Come in,” he said without looking up.

The boards creaked when I walked forward. His adept hands moved rapidly over the image he sketched. Elijah was an accomplished artist who could paint, draw, sculpt, and take photographs. When it came to the written word, he relied on others, and was a lover of Poe because the author was so morbid. I had once asked him if he had ever met the writer, and he just laughed and told me he was more interested in other things in that era than a drunken man who was composing poetry.

My eyes scanned the shelves. There were certain ones dedicated to books, but mostly the shelves all had different themes for different art types. There was a Native American pottery shelf, another with nothing but old tintypes. One of my favorites was of

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Simone dressed as a saloon girl. She always laughed when she told me stories; unlike Elijah, she was never hesitant to talk about the past and what she had done.

“Elijah.” He continued sketching. I hoped he would stop and acknowledge me, but he kept on going. I sighed and bit my lip. Nervous tension built in the air. Swallowing a few times, I noticed my hands were shaking, and so was the tin of pencils he had on his desk.

“What is it?” he asked. His fingers held the can. I took in a deep breath and tried to steady myself. It worked some, and I got a handle on my power.

“I’m leaving.”

“What do you want me to say?”

My heart fell. What did I want him to say? I wanted him to rant, rave, and beg me to stay. I wanted him to take me in his arms and tell me anything to convince me he couldn’t live his life without me. “I was hoping for goodbye,” I whispered.

A tickle traveled down my cheek. I brushed a tear away. I watched for movement from the ice blonde head and saw nothing. At that moment, I knew he didn’t care. If he’d never wanted me in the first place, then I was never going to come back. If Elijah wanted me, then he would ask me to stay. He would have to beg me to come back.

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“Goodbye, Kaylynn.” His voice was flat. The pencil moved rapidly over the paper, and he never lifted his head. I turned on my heel and walked out of the room.

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CHAPTER THREE

If she hadn't set me up on the interviews in the first place, I wouldn't be where I was. The show was over and my mind was reeling over memories I hadn't dredged up in years. I hated to admit the memory of my leaving the way I did still haunted me. It troubled me how Elijah never reacted. I always hoped he would've pitched a fit. To this day, when I sent him letters and photos, he never wrote me back. It was almost as if I'd never existed to him. I wondered if he thought it was a mistake to take me under his wing and show me their lifestyle.

"He is the same. Every word written about you and everything you send him he cherishes. I collect them in an album so he can look at them when he wishes. Desiree does it now that I'm not there."

I gritted my teeth against the idea of Desiree being there all alone with Elijah. She always said they should have eaten me a long time ago instead of coddling me and catering to my every whim. She had tried to suck up to Elijah, but he dismissed her the same way he had dismissed me when I left. The bitch must be eating it up, now that she had all the alone time with Elijah. Just thinking about it pained my heart. When I heard the picture frame rattling next to me, I choked back my emotions, closed my eyes,

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and took a deep breath. After a moment, the picture stopped clanging, and I opened my eyes.

My gaze fell on all my pieces. Almost all of the glass frames had small red stickers on them, showing they had sold. A wave of pride flushed through me. I was a sought after photographer who took pictures of celebrities and their children, runway models, anything with money behind it. My reputation was set. Not that it wasn't before, but tonight had made it even better. I could sell out a complete show.

"I thought you would've gotten rid of her by now." I picked up my shoes.

"Still jealous of Desi? You should know better. She is just there for – well, she stays and has every right to call it home, just as you do."

"Yes. I know. I'm sorry. I'm tired and have a headache. Sometimes it's hard remembering what you and Elijah are. Not that I would forget, but you know... I shrugged and let the sentence trail off. Nothing else needed to be said. They were both vampires. So was Desiree. And I wasn't.

Still, I *was* considered one of their special family, and had a status I assumed most mortals did not have in their society. I was declared off limits to the vampire community. Simone had joked, saying some of the others called me their pet human. Others chided that I should've been put down instead of living with them. Even

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ones I had come across throughout my travels knew who I was. I was surprised I hadn't seen any of them tonight at the show. The norm was at least one other vampire would appear when I was working, or happen to bump into me. I think some of them always wondered if I would out them to the world, but I would never do anything to hurt the ones who had taken me in and shown me a way of life I had never thought possible. Dark secrets always lurked in the shadows, and some of them never seemed to leave my life. Just like my nightmares.

"Is everything all right?" I noticed a man with dark hair and a slightly wrinkled suit hovering in the background; the gallery owner was wearily starting to clean up the mess everyone had made at the show. I assumed the straggler was Simone's latest fling.

The vampire noticed my gaze. "Not now, Alex. I'm talking to my sister. You don't want to hang around? Then go home." Her eyes never left mine. She smiled slyly.

Her date grumbled on the way out. I couldn't help the laugh which escaped me, and gave my friend another hug. Even her unresponsiveness to the affection told me there was still something. "Simone, what gives? I know you. You didn't just happen here by accident."

"Can you get out of here?"

"Yeah. Sure. Let me get my stuff. It's out back."

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Grabbing my coat from the back room, I noticed a print had been set aside. It was a self-portrait I had done six months before. It had been close to Halloween, so I had dressed up as a sexy vixen and threw in the fangs I kept on hand. I had them made for a joke when I lived with Elijah and Simone. Elijah had been furious, but Simone thought it was hilarious. For the picture, I had bathed myself in a mixture of cherry juice and chocolate syrup to give it some texture and had snapped a few shots. There were two I was most happy with. One hung on my wall, and the other I decided to put in the show for a last minute thing.

The image showed me bare breasted, with much of my hair covering my face. The curve of my breast showed, and the shadows from the light obscured my face still more. The picture itself was in black and white, but the blood on my lips and trailing down my front was red accentuated by computer. You could even see the puncture marks on my neck. The print had sold.

It was one of the rare occasions I had let myself be photographed. Part of me was still paranoid the cult would find me. It wasn't possible since the cult was disbanded and the reverend was in his grave, but part of me could not get it out of my system.

I sighed and shook my head, telling myself I would never have to worry about the cult leader again. I ran my hand over the heavy silver frame, almost sad to part with such a great piece.

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Maybe I was a little selfish. My gaze traveled the lines of the glass, and I noticed a hand written note wedged into the corner of the frame. *It won't hurt to know where I'm going, will it? I hope someone can enjoy the vampire me. Maybe I'll scare them. I'm sure they would be surprised to know real fanged monsters exist.* I only once thought Elijah was a monster, and that was when first I had discovered what my caretakers truly were. I wonder now if they'd ever meant to tell me.

My fingers closed on the note. I saw the name and destination of my alter ego. The blood froze in my heart, and I bit my lip. Simone and I were certainly going to have a talk.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ten years earlier...

For the first six months, my new family gave me free reign of the house, save for whatever doors were locked. They were eccentric but kind. Elijah was never mean, but I was still leery of him and Simone. Hell, it sure beat life on the streets. During the day, Elijah and Simone were gone most of the time, working on the gallery or doing whatever it was they did. Simone bought me anything I desired, and became my big sister.

The night I arrived, I'd started having horrible nightmares. I dreamed I was being sacrificed on the altar, but it was in the gallery. The reverend was above me, fucking me – and I enjoyed it. The blade was at my throat, but he kept asking me if I liked it and if I would accept him. Then the reverend's face took on Elijah's features.

My eyes snapped open. Elijah was shaking me. I panicked when I looked around. All of the heavy furniture, including the bed, floated a few inches off the ground. Elijah screamed my name, and I came back to reality. Once I did, everything fell to the floor with an enormous bang.

He wasn't afraid of my strange ability. He tried to calm my nerves. Other nights when my nightmares were so bad, Elijah sat on my bed and read to me. It was always out of the same book. The

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copy of it was so worn out that the spine was cracked and the pages brittle. He loved to read to me the complete works of Poe. Simone said he was crazy to have loved the old coot so, but Elijah would never hear anything against it. He would read to me repeatedly to calm me down, reminding me monsters weren't going to come and get me. The sound of his voice lulled me to sleep and warmed my adolescent heart. He would sit with me on the bed or the couch, and I would lie in the crook of his arm while he read.

I was finally starting to feel comfortable in a stranger's house. They were not going to attack me or try to rape me. My ways of living on the streets were a little dulled, but I was always on edge. Sometimes, I wondered what my friends would think of me. Would they still call me Legend? Or would they wonder if I was tricking it up with the gallery owners? I could see their miserable faces in my mind's eye, and smiled. I wiped the night sweat from my face. I might still be having nightmares, but waking up in a soft bed beat the hard sidewalk, or an underpass that smelled of piss and dead rats.

One night I awoke from my nightmares in a cold sweat. My heart slowed a few paces when I realized I was back in my room. My eyes took in the surroundings, and I noticed Elijah's book still on my nightstand.

That's odd. He always takes it with him. Maybe I should bring it back, just in case. I shook off the terror from my dream and grabbed

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the book. They had said I had freedom to roam the house whenever I wanted to go, wherever the doors were open. I had been curious to do it before, but found myself always entertained by Gretchen, one of the servants in the house. She had become a grandmother to me in the six months. She loved to make me cinnamon rolls and said I had to eat them to fatten me up. I knew she was probably fast asleep now.

I stretched and poked my head out of the doorway. There was no one around. I listened and heard something drop. I followed the sound and walked down the hall until I saw one of the doors I had tried earlier in my wanderings. When my hand touched the knob, it swung open, and my heart stopped. Elijah and Simone were both bent over a woman. She was at her wrist and Elijah at her throat. In the instant the door creaked open, both of them lifted their heads at the same time and stared at me. The looks on their faces were alien. Elijah scared me more, with the strings of blood dribbling down his chin.

The woman's face was locked in ecstasy. Her color was pale, and she didn't seem to be breathing. I dropped the book. My heart hiccupped. My power flared to life. The door opened all the way and slammed shut on its own momentum. The pictures around me crashed to the floor. The blast left me breathless. The scene left me too freaked out to speak. It was worse than seeing the reverend in my dreams.

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I got back to my room somehow, not really noticing what I had done, just knowing that I had to get out of there. My nightmares had been right. They were monsters. Images of the reverend returned with Elijah's face on the reverend's body. I threw what things I could into a bag, with Elijah's face burned into my psyche. Fear of the past, fear of what they were, kick-started my old instinct to run. No one was going to get me. They wanted to fatten me up and then kill me for their own perverse desires.

"Kaylynn."

My name was no more than a whisper on Elijah's lips. It stopped me in my tracks and made my heart ache. The sound made me want to put everything away and trust him. Terror held my body taut, but an unknown desire I only now discovered made me look up. Elijah stood in the door with no shirt and a small smear of blood still on his pale cheek. I'd never seen him without a shirt on. He was chiseled, defined. Just right. His hair was disheveled and hung mostly down his back. It was hard to see where his flesh ended and where his hair began. His nipples were small, pink and erect. I licked my dry lips, making myself remember what I had just seen. He was going to hurt me. My hormones must not take over.

He held the book I had dropped. The look on his face was full of concern. Even with the red smudge on his cheek, he seemed vulnerable. Part of me wanted to comfort him. I clutched my bag

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and backed up against the wall. The lamp on the nightstand began to shake.

“What do you want? What were you doing in there? Did you take me in just to do the same thing with me? You’re just like the reverend, right? You want me for some sick fantasy of yours.” The lamp now hovered a few inches off the table, and I was trembling. Elijah took a slow step forward, his eyes going between the lamp and me.

“Kaylynn, you know neither I nor Simone would ever hurt you. You’re part of our family. Family is very important to us. You weren’t supposed to see us. I’m sorry you did. We were careless, leaving the door unlocked, but eventually I assumed you would figure out what we were. Relax. Sit on the bed so we can talk, and I’ll explain a few things. Have I ever threatened you in the short time you’ve stayed with us? Has Simone ever been less than kind to you? She thinks of you as a little sister.”

He sat on the edge of the bed, waiting patiently for me to come over. I searched for possible ways to escape. My room was on the second floor, and if I jumped out the window, I would land on hard snow. He guarded the door. I was trapped if he decided to do anything to me. But he was right; Simone and Elijah had never once threatened me. On the flip side, they thought I was fragile. It was getting on my nerves.

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I took in a breath and nodded, feeling a little more secure in my decision. The lamp slammed back onto the nightstand. I sat on the bed, with the bedpost digging into my back. I needed to be sure this was all real, and the discomfort reminded me it was. Pain was always good because it meant I was alive.

“Your gift is getting stronger. I’m impressed. If you want, we can teach you how to control it or suppress it.”

“What do you want? What were you doing with her? What do you want with me?”

Elijah sighed and ran his hand through his hair. Neon blue eyes stared at me with regret for his actions. “Kaylynn, why do you think we’re not around during the day? Do you really see us eat more than a few bites when we eat with you? Think about what you saw in the other room. The woman is not dead. We want nothing to happen to you. We only desire to keep you safe and away from that damnable reverend. You must know by now we would never hurt you. All you have to do is ask for something and we will get it.”

I thought about everything he said. All the pieces fell into place. There was only one word that came to mind. Vampire. Did I really believe in the supernatural? Were they any more unnatural than a man who had coerced my parents into thinking he ran a God fearing church that was all holier than thou, and then find out he had only wanted me? Were they any more monstrous than the man

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who had fucked my mother while I watched, and then killed her right in front of me? I shook my head. My mother flashed into my thoughts. "Run." The last whisper on her lips while tears kept her sane as he pounded into her was, "She loved me to the end."

"We're not monsters, and I'm not the reverend. I won't hurt you the way he hurt your mother. Simone and I want to be sure you live a full life. That is all we want. I saw and felt your fear the day you bumped into me in the gallery. You reminded me a lot of Simone when I first met her. Much the same way I met you. I wanted to help her out, too. That was why we took you in. And yes, we are vampires."

"You can read my mind?" Intrigue and a sliver of horror ran through my thoughts. The intrigue won out. Knowing they could read my mind was not so bad. They had not used it against me. "What else can you do? Do you have real fangs too?"

Elijah smiled. Two needle teeth descended from his gums. The same ones he had buried in the girl. The transformation captivated me. Before I could catch myself, I leaned over and touched the tip of his tooth, firm enough that it pierced my finger and a drop of blood welled up.

Before I could pull my finger away, Elijah grabbed my wrist lightly. His blue eyes turned the color of fire lit amber. He was captivated by the drop. His nostrils flared. A small growl rumbled in his throat. My gaze never left his hand. He pulled my finger to

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his mouth gently. His eyes closed in rapture at the blood scent. He cleaned the wound with his tongue. I had to bite my lip to keep from crying out. God, it made me hot. In that one instant I was so entranced with the sensation that I was his.

His power pressed on my thoughts, not to ensnare me, but to show me he could do other things. The weight of his mind was so light it felt like I had my face pressed against a cobweb, but I imagined it could be a lot worse if he was pissed. I leaned in a little. I noticed my breathing had picked up. His gaze never left mine. He was focused on me and nothing else but me. I wondered if he heard the thundering of my heartbeat. The energy between us sparked. His breath was even with mine, synching up so I wouldn't hear him, a predatory instinct.

Elijah moved a millimeter closer. I saw him fighting his nature. Here was willing prey all but begging him to take advantage of it. His dark pupils expanded. I leaned in a little bit more. I wanted to experience the softness of his lips and know the coolness of his body. It didn't matter now what he was. Desire washed over me, and his power edged a little more into my mind and shared my thoughts. He knew how I felt, and I couldn't stop myself. I was getting wet just thinking about what might happen. I was not a virgin. I'd had to sell my body a few times on the street to make a quick buck. It helped keep me warm on a cold night. But I had never experienced anything so intense with anyone.

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“Elijah, are you scaring the child?”

I jumped. The spell was broken. Simone leaned in the doorway to see what had happened between the two of us. Maybe she'd been wondering why I had not run screaming from the house. Elijah blinked a few times, coming out of his daze. He cleared his throat and got off the bed. I went back to my corner.

“Elijah, I thought we agreed: no eating the guests.” The amusement in her voice made me smile and relax some. I went from having a crazy cult leader on my ass to living with two vampires. I guess that nothing was ever going to be simple. Hell, I had a supernatural ability; why not join the monster squad?

“I wasn't going to eat her. I was showing her what I—we are.”

“Kaylynn.” Simone drew my attention away from my wondering what I would look like being the next bride of Dracula. The look on her porcelain pale face was so full of concern it broke my heart. She would never hurt me. “I suppose you want to leave, now that you know what we are? Arrangements can be made in the morning.”

Turning my gaze to Elijah, I saw the hurt in his eyes. He didn't want me to leave, and everything he had said was true.

So, they were vampires. It was the supernatural Brady Bunch, and I was part of it. “Naw. I think I'm good. The only way you're going to get rid of me is if you all of a sudden sprout white,

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fluffy, feathery wings and golden halos. That would freak me out too much. I've never been one for happy fairy angel shit."

The two vampires looked at each other and laughed. "Deal!" Simone came over and gave me a hug. In that instance, my old street name was behind me. I didn't have to run anymore. They would take care of me. I could breathe easy again because— who was I kidding?—no one was fucked enough to piss off a vampire.

CHAPTER FIVE

After we'd left the gallery, my stomach rumbled a few times, so Simone made me stop and eat. We sat at an all night pizza place a half a block from my apartment. I devoured a couple of slices of pepperoni. Even when I swallowed the pizza, my mind drifted back to the portrait.

"So how does it feel to be famous?"

I shrugged and slurped a piece of cheese. My friend stole a pepperoni, chewing on it slowly. As a rule, vampires could eat if they wanted. Many of them chose not to, but Simone had always been the adventurous type. I saw her gaze drifting to the menu sign behind me. I figured she was sizing up the guys behind the counter. A particularly cute one was working tonight. Even I wanted to sink my teeth into him.

Under the fluorescent light, my companion's skin looked a little glossy and pale. She hadn't had enough to eat. I glanced behind me and saw the pizza guy drooling over Simone. I shook my head. It was time for both of us to stop thinking about our stomachs.

"You can beat around the bush all you want, or stare at the cute boy behind the counter until the sun rises, but that still won't get us to the reason why you are here. Now what gives? I know I'm only human, but it doesn't make me an idiot. I saw the portrait

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with Elijah's name and address on it. It wasn't a coincidence you appeared at the gallery. I know some of the pictures went up on their website for sale. I approved them. If Elijah really wanted a photo of me that badly, all he had to do was ask. Not that I'm not happy to see you, but what gives? This is the quietest I've seen you in ages. You're starting to scare me."

I noticed the parmesan cheese shaker was rattling slightly on the table. Simone's eyes caught it too. Her palm rested on the top of it. Her fingers vibrated while she tried to keep it still. Her eyes locked with mine, daring me. I pushed a little with my mind against it and watched it jump under the pressure of her hand. Her fingers clamped down around it. I focused until it was levitating an inch off the table and she couldn't force it down. Suddenly the glass broke and grated cheese was stuck in my hair. Simone began plucking glass splinters from her palm.

"Okay. You win. I came to pick up the photo, but Elijah didn't buy it. I did. I wanted to surprise him. It's a wonderful picture. It's disturbing, really, seeing you that way. Kaylynn, look—there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about. This isn't the right place. There are too many distractions, and I could have so much fun with them."

"Fine. My place is not too far."

It took her a moment to get up, and then we left the restaurant. The night had quieted. The only things awake in the

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neighborhood were rats looking for food and the lost souls of the city hoping to be safe until the welcoming arms of dawn came over the horizon. The windows were dark, and my loft was three stories up, with Christmas lights around the open window. I loved the lights. They reminded me of a time of year when I was the happiest with my parents. My mother loved lights, but I barely remembered her cheerful face.

Fifteen minutes later, we were walking up the three flights to my place, since the elevator was out for the umpteenth time. I'd rented it years ago, and remodeled it from time to time. Simone took the place in, noticing all the prints on the walls; many of them were hers. Some were dark in theme, gargoyles and vampires I had collected over the years from different sources. I saw her lips curl into a smile. Years of being with them had changed my perspective on a few things, and the darker side of life grabbed me. Something about capturing life invoked a sense of power. That was why I liked snapping pictures so much. I could create my own universe – which was why Simone had taken me under her wing when she saw my interest in her lifestyle and taking pictures. She had been my mentor, and now sat on the protégée's couch.

I grabbed a drink from the fridge and then sat across from her. I pulled my hair down out of the chopsticks and let it fall around my shoulders in waves until it was clear to my waist. It was the longest it had been in years.

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Then I got to it.

“What the hell is going on?”

“I was online and saw the photo. I do keep tabs on your career. So does Elijah. The picture was very uncanny and also very scary. For a moment I thought maybe you had turned, but you wouldn’t without telling us, or at least me, and oh God, if you did I know Elijah would be devastated.”

“Would it be so bad if I did become a vampire?”

“Do you really want that? Do you want forever?”

“That’s not the point. If you had called and told me you wanted it, I would have brought it to you. I would have brought it to him. Why don’t I? Besides, I—” The breath caught in my throat while I thought about what I was going to say.

What would happen if I went there? The night with Elijah so many years ago when he showed me what he was had ruined my heart for other men. I was in love. I think Simone knew it then too, but never said it. I ignored it the best I could. That was one reason I left—because I wanted him to understand what it was like without me. I closed my eyes and heard my glass shaking. I tried to rein in my emotions.

“Lynn, you don’t have to keep your feelings hidden from me. I knew the moment you walked in on us when you caught us feeding. Elijah should never have tasted your blood. It wasn’t supposed to happen that way. You’ve locked up your emotions,

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and it has made you so powerful. Legend. Wasn't that what they used to call you on the street? Well, you have turned into one again from your fame, from your abilities. No matter how much you hide behind your camera, you're still vulnerable. You've cut yourself off from the world. You could do so much more with your gifts if you ever wanted to explore them. Your power has grown. I was surprised. Do you know why the cult really wanted you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your gift is rare among humans, even among my kind; especially at your level. You can lift close to a hundred pounds with your mind, and I bet more than that now. The cult wanted you because they wanted to cultivate a strain. The reverend wanted to use you to birth children with. You were going to be the dawn of a new race. He had others who were empathic, mediums. He was going to take over the world. You were going to be his crown jewel."

"You knew this and never told me? Why?"

Simone looked away. "There's something we hoped we would never have to tell you, which was one reason you are under our protection, not that you wouldn't be, but our family can offer you more help than most other vampires."

"What aren't you telling me? Your visit isn't just about Elijah, is it?"

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“No. I only wish it was. We found something that could mean your life is in danger once again. Over the years, Elijah and I found others from the cult and took care of them. We wanted to give you a happy life. The children we left, because they were innocent. A couple of years ago, someone showed up looking for you. I don’t know how it happened, or who would have done it, but he’s alive.” There were red tinged tears in her eyes.

I’d never seen Simone cry before.

“Who’s alive?”

“I don’t know what to say. It’s one reason Elijah hasn’t contacted you. Not the main one, though. He’s been trying to protect you.”

“He can’t be! How is that possible?” Terror surrounded my soul. My worst nightmares had come true. The reverend was alive? Elijah and Simone told me he was dead. Now I wasn’t safe. All the pictures on my walls shuddered and shook against the plaster. I was shaking too. Simone pulled me into her arms.

“Why haven’t I seen him? Why hasn’t Elijah contacted me? If he knew I was in danger then why pawn the duty off on you?” My own tears blurred my vision. Tears of shock from the news. Tears of loss from my mother’s death played over again in my mind. The nightmare of the life I thought had been put to bed ages ago, but I guess it wasn’t. And Elijah. Why hadn’t he told me himself? Did he just not care about me?

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"No, honey. Shh...Elijah cares for you."

"If he's so concerned then why – does Elijah know how I feel about him? Was that why he brushed me off when I left? Some part of him grew so distant after that night I could never help feeling it was my fault. Simone, doesn't he love me? God, it hurts so much. I pushed my feelings behind my heart and never let anyone get to me," I wailed.

Simone smiled. "He always thought you had a teenage crush on him, but he never knew the true depths of your feelings. How could he? He's only a man. Women know how other women feel, right? When you told him you were leaving, it broke your heart, but you had to do it. If not, you would've remained under us for most of your life until it got too painful for us to watch you grow old, and then we would've sent you away. You have protection from us, but some of the others don't follow the rules."

She had known all along about everything. Part of me felt betrayed by her keeping such a big secret from me. I was terrified about the reverend being alive, but I was more hurt over Elijah. Funny how the human heart worked.

I knew she was telling me the truth about the protection she had offered. I was not going to run and hide again. My life had come too far. I had come too far to go back out onto the street and become a vagabond, living out of my car or a backpack. I was not

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the street chick anymore, and even if I was, Legend was dead, and so were all her old friends.

“So what am I going to do now?”

Simone got up. When she did, the photos stopped shaking. “You live your life the way you were supposed to, without any more contact from us.”

Her statement hung in the air like a final testament. Silence severed my soul in half from what she just uttered. They didn’t want me anymore. She was throwing me to the wolves. “You don’t want anything to do with me either? Was I just a plaything? All the others say I was to both of you. Was it some kind of test? Rescue the street urchin and make her into a success, then cut your losses? Was I your version of Eliza Doolittle? Do you know —”

A sharp stinging slap went across my cheek. Surprise and anger brought me back from my tirade. Simone’s upper lip quivered from fighting back tears. They were cresting in her eyes to flow red over the dam. “Don’t you know how difficult this is for me too? You’re my sister. I mean that in every sense of the word. Do you think I want to walk away from you? How many times did I tell Elijah I was going to bring you over into our lifestyle, make you one of us so I didn’t have to lose you? But he refused, and said it wasn’t what he wanted for you.”

“Why didn’t you? Make me one of you, I mean. Why not defy him?” I whispered. There was no more fight left in me. The

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show, her news about the reverend, and my feelings for Elijah washed over me, and sleep was threatening to drag me under into its dark arms, but I held on.

My friend sat down next to me and kissed me on the cheek. "Because I can't go against my maker. It was the one rule Elijah bound me to when he turned me. I could do whatever I wanted except to go against him. And he never wanted darkness for you."

"But that's my choice to make."

"I know, and that was what I told him. That was the reason I got him the picture. I wanted him to have something where he could see your face every day. We have very few pictures of you. I wanted to pick it up myself and tell you good-bye. Elijah's making plans to close the mansion and disappear. He doesn't want to take the chance the reverend will try and look for you. I've argued against it many times, but he feels it's necessary. He's waiting for me to come back, but he has no idea about the picture."

For some unknown reason, I started laughing. I couldn't help it. It was nerves. Simone managed a fake smile, but I saw the hurt behind it. "I'm sorry. I didn't do that on purpose, but God, he can be so serious. Look, I don't care what he says. We're not going our separate ways, no matter what his reasoning. I don't know what I would do if I never saw or heard from you again. Let me bring the picture back to him. It'll be a surprise."

"He's not going to like it."

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"Oh, I'm sure of that, but is there something else you're not telling me? Something about him?"

"You go, bring the photo to him, and figure out what's been in your heart for over ten years." She stopped her artificial smiling. "Lately, I talk to him and he's distant. Desiree can't even rouse him. He feeds only when he has to and doesn't take any enjoyment out of it. Those I have seen that way normally decide to face the sun, or worse. We've been companions for ages and we have loved, but his heart has never been captured. Go to him and find out what's between you two. Break him out of his shell. If you can't, then I don't know who else can. Maybe you can bring him out of it. It's more than the thought of leaving you behind. I don't know what it is."

"You're afraid he's going to die?"

"I'm not sure. He could take his own life or go crazy and bring down the wrath of the community. If that happens, he'd be tortured."

"I didn't realize you had enforcers."

"Only in certain circumstances. The Elders have a loose Council watching over everyone. Elijah's sire is on it. I've already gone to her. She suggested I come to you even with the threat of the reverend. I didn't want to. I tried to get her counsel on what we could do for you and she said it was your fate to deal with the reverend, and only you could choose which horizon to walk in."

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“How old is she? Or Elijah, or you for that matter? I always figured you were old, but not ancients. I bet it has something to do with why the other vampires leave me alone. Your lineage and Elijah’s.”

Simone smiled. “God, you make me sound like an old hag. I assure you I am not. With this body, please... Elijah was turned during the Black Plague. He rescued me from the Inquisition. I was being tortured, and he saved me. He had been feeding on the prisoners. We thought he was an angel, and he took me from that place. Catrina is from Asia. I am not sure of her true age, but she has seen many things. I know she’s among the eldest of our kind. And yes, that’s why there is a big no touching sign on you. Catrina’s rumored to be one of the original vampires, but no one knows now. The past has been lost. Elijah is also well respected in the community. He was offered a seat on the Council, but didn’t take it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this sooner? Why come now when everything is falling apart and tell me Elijah is so bad off? When I thought I had almost forgotten my feelings for him.”

“Because I wanted to be sure. And you could never forget your feelings for him. I’ve never intruded in your personal decisions. Sure, I’ve pushed a little here and there to make sure that you were successful. Over the years, I have watched you fall in and out of relationships, but you’ve never really loved any of them. The

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secret, even from yourself, was how much you have denied you've loved him. I've seen your dreams and your desires. You fight the ache in you. You're afraid I would be angry that you were trying to take him away from me. On the contrary, if I ever thought that, I would've never let you stay with us when Elijah first proposed the idea.

"Now look at you. You are the sister I never had. I didn't want to be the bearer of bad news about the reverend, or any of this, but you had to know. I wanted to give you a chance to go to Elijah and tell him how you felt. If nothing comes of it, then you can part ways, and I know he will be all right because he has made his peace with you."

I reached over and gave my sister the vampire a hug. Her words echoed in my mind. She'd answered the very things I had wondered about for years. "I'll go to him, but I don't know if I can do any good. I don't want to lose him any more than you do. I'll try to talk him out of his crazy ideas and remind him I am a big girl who can take care of myself against crazy cult leader vampires."

"Thank you." A quiver of relief went through her when she released me.

CHAPTER SIX

Two weeks later, I had the portrait in the back of my car, and I was staring at the house that had changed my life. It had been five years to the day I had left without a reaction from Elijah. My fingers ran over the grooves in the key still on my ring. I wondered if anyone was home. The staff had been notified of my coming, but were told not to tell the master of the house. Besides, I wanted to see his reaction when I walked in and he saw the print sitting in his study.

Simone had said none of the doors were locked anymore. Curiosity tugged at my brain because I knew I could go anywhere, but there was plenty of time for that.

Simone had tried to talk me out of coming to the house, in case the reverend had it under surveillance. I reminded her that if he wanted to come after me all he had to do was look in most magazines and my work was laid out before him. She hadn't answered that one, and I knew I couldn't be afraid of the dark anymore. I had to face what was out there. I had to face my past, and if I did run into the crazy reverend, then I did know how to protect myself. Elijah and Simone had taught me to hone my ability, and also, I knew more fighting skills than the average chick.

It would be a lie to say that somewhere deep inside of me the little girl who had lost her parents was not afraid to be

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kidnapped and tortured, but I had emerged from the cocoon of my past, and made something of my life. I was not going to let a monster destroy me. Fear for Elijah's wellbeing wound into my thoughts, along with my pent up feelings for him. If he was truly going to go into seclusion, then I was going to tell him how I felt, before he disappeared into eternity.

I stared at the sun. It would be setting in a couple of hours. I was leaving it to chance whether he was sleeping or if he was up by now. Sometimes my vampire guardian stayed up during the day, other times he did not. I hoped he was asleep. I slid the key into the front door.

Besides the portrait, I had a new copy of the book Elijah used to read to me. All of Edgar Allen Poe's works. Simone had said that he had stopped reading it after I left. Little did he know, I had tracked down a story written by Poe none had ever seen. I had done it through Simone ages ago with help from another vampire. She knew full well I was going to give it to Elijah, but I never had. How could I when I had left? *Maybe if I wasn't so stubborn, or if he wasn't. Damn him.* I bit my lip. The dam had burst on my heart, and now when I thought of him, my emotions were free flowing. After so many years of keeping it quiet and ignoring them, I had hurt myself doing it. I had very few friends and the relationships I had—if you called them that—were never more than months long, a year at the most, and I never let them grow into fruition. Maybe

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they could sense my heart was never in the relationship. I had felt the hollow echoes of love, but nothing similar to the smack-me-over-the-head-burning-love I had for Elijah. God, I was obsessed. If I didn't tell him before he disappeared, I'd never realize what could happen between us. Hopefully, I'd jar him back into reality. Part of me hoped one kiss would wake him up to the fact I'd been waiting for him.

I opened the door with the portrait, my purse, and the bag that contained the book and the story under my arm. When I crossed the threshold, memories of the time I lived here hit me. There were so many memories—like the time I had brought one of my boyfriends here and the next day had found him dead. I was devastated, but Simone had explained he was thinking about raping me. She wouldn't let him live, of course.

I cringed when the door swung shut behind me and echoed through the silent halls, reminding me of a mausoleum. It felt that way too, everything silent. Once the sound stopped echoing, I heard footsteps coming from the kitchen. One of the servants appeared—Gretchen. She looked older, and she was the one out of all of them that I had liked most.

“By the stars. When Simone said you were coming to stay for a while, I couldn't believe it. Look at you. All grown up.” I put my gifts down and fell into her motherly embrace. She had grown a

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little broader in the last few years. Her hair was shot with a little more grey, but she still smelled of cinnamon.

“It’s good to see you, too. Is he up?”

“No. He sleeps later and later these days. Sometimes he stays in his room all night. I’ve been worried about him. Simone says you’re here to try and cheer him up. He’ll be happy to see you. He talks about you a lot. Remembers when you were still here. We see your photos and ads on television and in the magazines. Plus the ones you send. Simone has some of them hung up in the hall; some she bought without you knowing it.”

I shook my head and sighed. *Figures*. I had a website where I put a few things up for sale. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

“You still enjoy my cooking or are you on some crazy diet of lettuce and rice these days?”

I smiled. She always knew I loved how she cooked. “Well, I was hoping you could make some of your famous cinnamon rolls and maybe some beef stew.”

She chuckled. “Those were always your favorites. I got them cooking already. Should be done in a couple of hours. Or if you are hungry now I can whip something up.”

I kissed her cheek. “Whenever it’s ready will be fine.”

“Good. Come on, then. Your old room is just the way you left it. I’ll get Steven to bring your things up.” She bent down to take the photo, and I stopped her.

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“Thanks, Gretchen, but I want to take that myself.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Fine. I’ll leave you to them, then. Everything is in order and Simone said you had the run of the house. I hope you can do some good with him. I’ve never seen him so grumpy lately. If I had it in me I’d knock him upside the head, but it’s not my place. I’m going to check on dinner. I’ll let you know when it’s ready.”

“Thanks. It’s good to see you again.”

She nodded and headed back to the kitchen. I grabbed what I had and climbed the stairs to my old room. Nothing had changed in the house. The polished wood floors were still perfect, the pictures and paintings were still dustless and ancient. The only additions were some of my prints, and a few Simone had taken. When I got into my old room, I noticed the bedding had been changed, the floorboards still creaked, and the stuffed animals the vampires had bought me were still in their places. I ran my hands over the bureau. I had left in a hurry, and I hadn’t gotten half of the things I wanted. Now, five years later, the old memories were coming back, and yet the things left behind seemed to be from another life.

I put my things down and picked up the only photo I had of my parents. It was folded and creased in the frame, but it showed happy times. I stared at my small face in it and realized I resembled my mother. I was on my father’s shoulders. My mother was

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sticking her tongue out at the camera, and giving me rabbit ears. If they only could see me, would they be happy? Would they approve that vampires had rescued me? Would they approve of me now, a cold-hearted person who couldn't find love because she was stuck on a man who might not even return the same emotions?

I had left the picture here on purpose because it would be safe. Staring at it, I was reminded that the reverend was out there and still had me on his mind. A sliver of fear worked its way into my consciousness. I wiped a tear away when my mother's twisted, screaming face burned in my mind again. I would live with that image until the day I died. I so wanted it to be the one I held in my hands, but the happy times were blurred and faded instead.

A wave of exhaustion washed over me. I flopped on the bed. I had been working tirelessly to meet all the deadlines I had once I had made up my mind to come back here. Simone was not too happy, but I didn't care. Her phone conversation with Elijah about her not returning soon enough was done in hushed tones. She wouldn't share any of it with me. I didn't pry. Elijah wanted her away from me, from what she had told me.

After the conversation, I'd had my agent cancel everything for the next six months. He had questioned me, since I had some television show asking me to do their next season of modeling shoots for them, about how their aspiring girls were going to compete against one another to see who was going to be the next

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star. They had been after me for two seasons, but I'd been booked solid. Oh well. If they wanted me bad enough, they would wait until after I had taken a vacation.

Damn it, I had earned it. I had worked nonstop without more than a day or two off. I had told my agent it might be longer; I had family business I had to attend to, and then I was taking a vacation. I was always doing something; I had cameras with me in the car, along with my laptop and a few other things I could not seem to be without these days: a couple of books I was reading, my I-pod.

Nothing had changed in here even though I was older—maybe not wiser, but I was older. Like Gretchen, I would soon get grey hair and grow frail. At least I was covered for my old age. Simone and Elijah were good about showing me how to invest and put money away.

I stared at the picture again. Somewhere in my heart I knew my parents would be happy for me. They would tell me I couldn't live my life behind a camera. They would not want me to be afraid of what was to come. My mother had great courage in the end. I realized that now because she let me get away, she had warned me, when she could have fought for her own life, but instead she had sacrificed her own for me.

I closed my eyes. It was about time. I had to face my own fears. I wasn't sure if rejection was something I could handle from

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Elijah. I locked my power to the picture I'd brought. My gift wrapped around it and pulled it to me. It floated through the air suspended by nothing except the power of my mind. The weight of the heavy frame was nothing. I set the present down, ran my hands over the photo of my parents and curled up. Yes, they would have been happy that I was happy, and nothing was after me here. With that thought, my head hit the pillow, and I drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

My eyes snapped open. I stared out the window, noticing the twilight purple sky. It was now well past sunset, and Elijah would be up. *Shit. I wanted to surprise him.* I sighed and rubbed my neck, cramped from the position I had slept in. I inhaled the scent of beef stew, which made my mouth water. Gretchen had left it for me. I grabbed the tray and wolfed it down. Halfway through I heard creaking in the hall.

“My my, the prodigal child has finally come home.” The voice was deep, like rich chocolate, but only mildly sweet, not quite hiding the bitchy personality underneath. I didn’t have to look up to know it was Desiree and that her appearance would be stunning.

“It’s nice to see you, too, Desiree.”

I took another bite of the stew. She leaned against the door. Dark, curly hair was caught up off her shoulders, framing her face. Her eyes were almond in shape, and her skin was still the color of polished onyx. Her cheekbones were high, showing her lineage from some great African queen. She half smiled at me, exposing a curved white fang. If she meant to intimidate me, it wasn’t working. I had seen more than my share of vampires since living with her. Still, she thought she was the shit for living here. I wondered if she was going to hang around when Elijah packed up the house. Knowing her, she probably would.

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“What finally made you come back? Let me guess – Simone started whining about Elijah. He’s fine. You shouldn’t have taken the trouble to come back with your busy lifestyle and all. Besides, in just a couple of months we would’ve been nothing more than a whisper. It’s too bad you caught us before then.”

I got up off the bed. It was shaking. *How dare she!* She knew how much I cared for Elijah. I don’t know what it was about me that annoyed her so. I assumed she had always been used to being the center of attention and resented me in some way, because I had gotten more attention than she did from the vampires we lived with.

I focused my gaze on the vampire in the doorway. My power built in the back of my mind. I don’t know if I had ever used the full scope of my power on purpose. I had tested it with Simone ages ago, but it had just gotten stronger since then. The more I used it, the more powerful it got. Now the ability burned me up from the inside out. It left me and encompassed the vampire. Desiree tried to fight me.

I had never used my power against her before. My mind enfolded hers so she was trapped in a mental vortex. The anger made me stronger. The smug look on her face faded. Her hands grabbed the doorframe, but I pulled with all my might. The nails creaked in the frame. My power battled against her will. I won and began pulling her the short distance across the room to me.

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We were nose to nose, and she was seething. "I choose when I come and go. What I'm doing here is none of your business. So I suggest you leave me alone and stay out of my way. Is that clear?"

"As crystal." She hissed. Her fangs grew longer.

"Good." My power evaporated when I walked past her. A sudden ache started in my head, and a slight dizzy spell made me stagger. From the exertion, I would soon have a full blown throbbing headache. I'm surprised my nose wasn't bleeding from the power I had used. I realized how strong I had become and that I could control it, when years ago it was mostly an unconscious thing controlled by my emotions. Much of it still was, but I was getting better at that, too.

I marched down the hall, feeling the slightest pounding of a migraine from my encounter with the none too friendly vampire. My feet traveled down the path they had years ago, leading me into the bowels of the house where I first found Elijah and Simone feeding. I stopped at the door, flashing back quickly to that time, a time I had walked out, too, because it was in the library Elijah had been sketching that day. Internally, I cringed at what I might find when I got to the door. Fear engulfed me.

What would he say? Was he even in there? I listened and heard nothing. *Maybe he's gone for the night. Maybe Simone told Elijah and he went into seclusion already.* I shook my head. There was no way she would betray me.

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I pushed open the door and found Elijah sitting with his head bowed and his fingers tented, lost deep in thought. Most of his loose pale hair obscured his face.

“Desiree, how many times have I told you, I’m not interested in your childish games or hunting with you? I’m too old for torturing prey. Go away and leave me be.”

He was definitely in for a surprise. I made my tone serious. “If you really want me to leave, Elijah, then I will. The drive was a bitch, though. Eighteen hours in my car was enough to make my ass go numb.”

It took a moment, but his head came up, and his fingers slowly parted. I met the eyes I hadn’t seen in years—except in my dreams. My heart stopped a moment and a zing of pure exhilaration nearly drowned me. His cool demeanor didn’t change, but that was a given. I did see something akin to happiness light up his eyes.

“Kaylynn.” He breathed my name. I imagined his fingers touching my cheek and swore I felt them running down the line of my jaw. “What are you doing here?” His mind moved over mine to see if I was real, or maybe something he had dreamed up. A small heat passed over my thoughts. I had forgotten his power. Maybe it had been an echo of his mind on my flesh.

I walked into the room and fidgeted when he got up from the chair. Elijah wrapped his arms around me in a stiff hug. My lips

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brushed his cheek, and I felt how cold he was. He pushed me away after my display of affection. I tried not to be offended, but it was hard, since I realized I was wearing my heart on my sleeve. Hopefully, he would get past the thorn in the ass syndrome and come around, but it was not going to happen that quickly.

“Why are you here?”

“Aren’t you happy to see me? How long has it been? I know – since I left!” I couldn’t help the disappointment and anger eking into my voice.

He sighed, and his nails punctured the leather of the chair. “I didn’t say that. I’m just surprised. It’s been a long time. The way that you left—I was never sure. Excuse me, Kaylynn. I’m sorry. I have other business to attend to.”

He walked past me, not even brushing me when he went. The floorboards creaked, and he left me. Flabbergasted, I sank down into the chair he’d just occupied. I laid my cheek against the wing back and inhaled the subtle hint of his cologne that still clung to the leather.

This was not how I expected him to act. I wasn’t expecting a party. I just wanted a little more feeling from his reception. Was that too much to ask for? But he was unpredictable. My temples were pounding now, from using my ability on Desiree, and I needed some painkillers. Sighing, I got up. Sitting here was doing nothing to help.

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Back in my room, the stew was gone, but Gretchen had left cinnamon rolls on the bureau to nibble on later. They were something I had definitely missed. I don't care where I traveled; I had never found any other pastries like hers. I decided to change, and then my eyes fell on the portrait. The least I could do was put it in Elijah's room, along with the book. The vampire might have been gruff, but he wasn't going to run me off. I grabbed the picture and the other bag and walked out of the room with the gifts.

A few doors down I heard classic rock coming out of Elijah's room. I knocked. After a moment the door opened. He didn't say anything, but just stepped back so I could enter. He turned the music down, which I was grateful for because my head still throbbed. I laid my gifts on this bed.

"What are these?" he asked.

"Has it been so long you don't remember what a gift is? They're presents I thought you would appreciate. I didn't come here to fuck anything up. I know about the reverend and how you want to leave me high and dry. I didn't come here for that. I came here to see how you were. I came—well, it doesn't matter what or why I came here. These are for you. At this point, I don't care. I'm here. I can't lie to you. Never have been able to." I handed them to him and sat on the edge of the bed. I felt defeated. I think in that moment I was sure he didn't reciprocate my feelings.

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Elijah just stared at me, thinking. He sighed and tore the brown paper from the frame first, stripping it so he could see the photo. His fingers gripped the edge of the silver frame, and the metal bent slightly.

“Why would you do this? Did you do this hoping the reverend would find you?”

“Elijah, I can take care of myself when it comes to him. If you want to blame anyone, blame Simone. She was the one who bought it and told me what you were planning on doing. Didn’t you ever think of me when you were suddenly going to disappear?”

The vein in his forehead throbbed more with every word. “I do what I choose, and it doesn’t matter what your opinion is. It is my life, ‘Lynn. Simone has no business meddling in what she was told to let be.”

He threw the picture on the bed.

“So what, are you going to punish Simone now for her doing what she thinks is right? God forbid she goes against her almighty master just to warn a friend and tell me she was worried about you. Did you ever think I came here because she was troubled about you? Or I would be concerned about you? Damn it, Elijah, I—” Tears threatened to pour from my eyes. My ever tough façade was thoroughly broken down now.

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He whirled back around. His face was locked in a feral snarl. His fangs slipped from his gums. "Why would you even think of portraying yourself as one of us? Is that why you came here, to beg me to do this to you? To give you eternity? I should have known all humans end up asking for the same thing." He grabbed my shoulders. His power slammed into my thoughts. On instinct, my own flared up to meet his. It didn't block him, but it made his descent into my mind slower. The full force of his power met my brain, and I felt him rake over my soul. It magnified the headache to a full-blown migraine. I tried to fight him, but his gaze was too compelling. Something inside of me was dying. I didn't want this. He'd never acted this way towards me. Simone was right; he was losing his mind.

"Elijah, stop." I struggled in his grip, but he was too strong. He held my shoulders with a force so powerful the bones were creaking and could have easily broken if he applied a little more. The more his influence engulfed me, the more it seemed he tried to consume me. I could sense his desperate need; the hunger rose in him. He needed to feed, and the display of power was making it even worse. Terror gave me a boost of adrenaline. I tore my gaze away from his and spied the bag on the bed. With everything in me, I reached out and pulled it toward me, hitting him in the head. The shock was enough to make him lose his concentration and let me go.

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I fell to the floor. I lost my breath and felt something wet on my face. I put my hand up to my nose and it came away with blood. He was still dazed. I couldn't believe he treated me like I was his food, like I meant nothing to him. I got up and ran out of the room. I didn't stop running until I got to my car and popped into the seat and pealed out.

It was a mistake to come back here. I should have listened to Simone when she warned me and stayed away. I should have let him go into seclusion. But then if I did, I would never see him or Simone again. I shook. Tears blurred my vision. I drove down the road, not caring where I went. Trees whizzed by me along the verges into the oncoming night.

It was nearly midnight when I realized I had stopped the car. I had no idea how long I had been driving. I just knew instincts kicked in and I was parked in the lot of an abandoned church I used to take photos of. The building had decayed more than I remembered. Now hardly more than a skeletal shell remained with vines and trees poking through the broken out windows.

I looked at myself in the mirror. Blood had dried on my upper lip, and my eyes were puffy and red. I wiped my nose with a cast off napkin and decided to take a walk around the old place.

A shiver ran through me, but I knew this place like the back of my hand. The moon was half full, but it still provided enough light. There were animals in the trees, an owl hooting above me. I

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entered the rickety structure, wondering if the ancient dead out back were as restless as I felt. I stared at the cross that was half torn from the wall. I didn't believe in God, but this place had a presence beyond the earthbound. There was a time when I first had found this ruin that I wasn't sure if I would be able to come into the place, considering my past with churches and cult leaders. But, in daylight, there had been solace and beauty to capture.

I shivered at the thought of the reverend, knowing now that he was a vampire and still alive. *How is that possible? Simone said she saw him die, had watched when Elijah had killed him.* I didn't know what to do. I wasn't hiding from him, but the fear of what he wanted from me shot through my soul. *What could a vampire do with me now?* They couldn't have kids. The only way vampires procreated was through bite, so the cult leader had no way of creating the perfect human race. Unless, now that he was a vampire, he was still obsessed with me.

My head fell forward and rested on the pew in front of me. It was damp and smelled of rot, but I didn't care. I had come back to a home where I figured I would be welcomed. My archenemy was still alive and now immortal. My migraine throbbed full force, and I was tired. Everything I knew had turned upside down. Now even my career was on hold. My agent had cautioned me not to go on vacation. Simone had advised me about not coming back. She'd wanted me to come back and check on Elijah to make sure he was

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still sane. She feared for my safety in case somehow the reverend found out I was going back home. Then there was Elijah.

My heart splintered at the thought of what had happened. All these years I had been harboring feelings for a man who now saw me as nothing more than food. I had accepted what he was ages ago. He had been right, though. I had played with the idea of becoming a vampire; part of me still did, but it wasn't something I was actively searching out. Elijah should have known that, and now I felt violated. I had trusted him. He had always been kind to me. Always made sure I was safe. Maybe he was acting this way to scare me off so I would leave the house and keep on running, without looking back and questioning his motives. Maybe somewhere he did care about me, and this was his way of making sure I was safe.

It's the only reason, the only explanation. It has to be. I know he's not completely off his rocker. Maybe there is some ulterior motive for his overall behavior. He would never hurt me intentionally. That had to be it. I was going to get to the bottom of it. Besides, I had vowed a long time ago I would never let anyone violate me the way they had when I was young. Elijah knew this. We had talked about it when he first took me in.

Anger made my will strong. I was not going to show him I was afraid. I was not going to run away just because he wanted to scare me. I was going to stand my ground and get to the heart of

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what was making him be such an ass. He was starting to piss me off and damn it, he was going to crack even if it meant I would crack in the process. I loved him.

I heard a snap and saw the cross fall from its bolts. It landed with a thud, sending a shower of dust and debris into the air. It was my will that had done that. I was strong. I had to remember that. I could face whatever was put in my way, crazy cult leader or Elijah, undead monster, creature of the night, or blood-sucking fiend. I was not going to be driven away. He was going to feel my wrath. Nothing was going to stop that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“You have grown powerful and even more beautiful than your mother.”

I spun around. Leaning against the doorway was a blast from my past. My throat grew dry. Simone had been right.

“Leave my mother out of this. What you did to her was bad enough. You don’t deserve to utter one word about her.”

The reverend uncrossed his arms and laughed. He wore tight, black leather pants, a leather vest, and motorcycle boots. In the pale moonlight, his skin looked waxy. On the left side of his neck was a shiny scar. I bet it was Elijah’s handiwork. Simone had never said how brutal Elijah had been with the reverend when he killed him.

“I can say or do whatever I want. At the wondrous moment of my death, God sent an angel down to me in the form of an African Queen, who offered me the greatest gift of all. How could I refuse?”

I was speechless. There was only one person who the reverend could be talking about. Once I saw Desiree again it was on. *Oh, God, no!*

I scanned the church for a weapon. There were none. My butt collided with a pew. Terror grabbed me, and I didn’t know

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what to do. My head was still throbbing from all the energy I had exerted earlier.

“So you became a vampire to con more people into believing your spiel about creating the perfect race?”

He smiled, and I saw his ivory fangs. “I don’t have to con them anymore. One look deep into my eyes and they know I’m the real thing. I am Jesus reborn. I *am* the miracle worker, and you are going to be my queen. With your gifts, we could rule the world. Did you really think I was going to let you get away from me? Kaylynn, didn’t your mother ever tell you her little secret?”

He was coming toward me. “What are you talking about?” I moved in between the pews and felt my foot slip through the rotten wood, slicing into my leg. I tried to pull it out, but the pain was too intense, and I was lodged there.

The reverend chuckled and met my eyes; with a slight wave of his hand, the pews pinned me even further, bruising my other leg. I leaned on one, hunched over. I tried to pull my injured leg out of the hole.

“Your dear, departed mother was my little sister. When she came to me at the church, I could hardly believe it. And there you were; no more than a wee thing, and even then you could move things. Just like your uncle. I knew Fate had blessed me.”

His statement stunned me. He and my mother were kin? How was that possible? And he had the same ability? There had to

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be some kind of punch line sooner or later to the twisted joke being played on me.

“This is no joke. Vampires don’t possess the gift of telekinesis. If they do, it never gets very strong. Your mother was not a planned baby, sad to say, and I was out of the house by the time she was three because dear old dad couldn’t deal with my miraculous gift.”

“So you set up your own church and duped people into joining just to kill them? And fathered children just to create a superhuman race of psychics? What the hell kind of thinking is that?”

He moved the benches closer into my knees, causing me to cry out. The vampire hopped up on a pew and walked along the top. When he came to me he jumped down, landing catlike, inches from my face. We stared at one other for a long moment. I tried to focus through the migraine and the pain in my legs, but it wasn’t working. Being so close to him, I did see some resemblance to my mother in his eyes and nose, but that was about it.

“When I was human, my points were valid. Only those of upper intelligence and other strengths would rule the world. It was the message that God gave me. I fathered fifteen children, but to have a matriarch I needed pure blood to keep my line going, and you were going to be that. Your mother was already married. I

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would never ask her to betray her wedding vows. You were almost ripe the day I had your mother.”

“You’re lying. You raped her and murdered her. I saw you.”

He reached out and stroked my cheek. I noticed his eyes had flecks of blue rimming his irises. I tried to pull away from him, but I couldn’t. I turned my head when he ran the back of his palm along my neck and over the top of my breasts. I tried to hold in a shiver. He grabbed my chin and forced me to stare at him. When I did, I noticed the blue specks in his eyes were glowing.

“Oh, Kaylynn. What a wondrous creature you will make! My mistress will be so proud you have decided to join us to remake the world. Come, you want to join us, don’t you?”

I tried to look away, but was caught inside the spider web of his mind, and his eyes. I was drowning in the cold fire surrounding my thoughts. I wanted to tell him to fuck off, but I didn’t have the strength.

CHAPTER NINE

When I opened my eyes, I wasn't able to move. My whole body felt stiff. I could move my head a little and smell incense all around me. Everything about me hurt. I could tell from the position of my hands that they were above me and bound. I was still in the church, and the way the air moved over my body, I knew I was naked. The church roof had caved in over this spot and all I saw was the stars above me.

God, Elijah, where are you when I truly need you? I focused my will on the cuffs binding my hands above me, but my power was no good. It seemed a switch had been thrown in my brain and I could not use it. Maybe I was burnt out from using so much energy.

"She's awake. My little Kaylynn—see how far you have come."

The voice I heard above me was one I was not expecting.

"What?"

"Come on, Kaylynn. I'm surprised at you."

"How could you? You set me up! You turned him and sent me back here?"

"Of course, dear child. Why wouldn't I? Did you really think I was going to listen to Elijah and let us drift away into nothingness and have you mourn us? Please."

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“How could you turn him?”

Simone leaned over, kissed my forehead, and smoothed the hair on my face. “Because. He’s right. We can create a super race who will rule over all the humans. Don’t you see? It’ll be wondrous. I turned all of his children when they came of age, and all of them have retained their gifts. Now let us show you the wondrous gift that immortality can be. You will rule the Council with your power.”

“Simone, please. I thought we were sisters.”

She ran her hand over my breast and erect nipple. “Oh, we are. Where do you think the ability came from in the first place? When I first saw the reverend and you, I knew you were blood. I felt it the first day you both ran into the gallery. With all my descendents, I’ve known when they were near. Call it a sixth sense. Why do you think I was put on trial for witchcraft during the burning times. My power of moving objects is nothing compared to yours. I knew at the gallery when I saw you that you were ready. You were at your peak, and I could preserve the gift once and for all. Dante, come. It is time for her to take her place with us.”

I struggled in the chains. My brain was working overtime. It had all been a set up. I just had never seen it coming. One of the people I trusted the most had betrayed me all along. And she was related to me? How in the hell? “Simone. Please. He has you under a spell. Just like he had my mother. You can’t listen to him. Please

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untie me. We'll get Elijah, and he'll take care of him once and for all."

But she didn't say anything. The reverend, my uncle, hovered over me. He seemed younger somehow, and if I hadn't known the atrocities he had committed I would have gone after him, since he was the kind of guy I would go for. Tall, dark, kinda dangerous. I shuddered when the realization came over me that somewhere in my subconscious I was attracted to this guy, but my heart was with Elijah.

The reverend was in a black robe tied around the middle, dragging on the floor. His hair was down. The smile on his face was deranged. It was the same one he had when he had killed my mother. His fangs gleamed in the moonlight. "You're going to enjoy this, sweetie."

I watched helplessly, still caught under some unseen power. He came forward. He was about to climb on top of me when he stopped. He leaned forward and fell to the floor. In his back, I saw a stake. Elijah stood behind him.

A sigh racked my body, and relief came over me. I was going to be saved. At the moment the reverend died, my body came back to my own command. All my energy, all my own power, and all the pain from before came rushing back. At least my headache wasn't so bad anymore, but the pain in my leg was staggering. *Damn it.*

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“Elijah. How nice of you to show up for the ceremony. Are you going to join us? It’s too bad you had to kill Dante, but I suppose you will have to do. Come to me, love. Take her. I know you want to.”

Elijah stepped forward as if he was in a daze. Simone’s lips curled into a cruel smile.

“Simone, I had hoped it would never come to this. I love you, and you betrayed that.”

“Darling. What are you talking about? She’s my blood. That supersedes anything. She will be the dawn of a new race. Let us feast on her and remake her in our own image.”

While they were talking I concentrated on the chains that bound me. I was still tired or something, because my ability wasn’t stretching the metal or letting me out. I closed my eyes and focused. I felt something in my mind, a leash dampening my powers. It wasn’t just the reverend who was controlling me. It was Simone. Internally, I yanked on the power she held me with. I felt it falter and heard her gasp in pain. I tugged again with my mind until I felt it snap.

She screamed. The sound split my ears. Without thinking why, I wanted out of my chains and an end to this. At the same time, I sat up, breaking the chains, I heard the church around me shuddering. I heard it creaking. I opened my eyes. Elijah and Simone were both staring at me.

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“The little pigeon has earned her wings and broken away. Come on, Kaylynn, let me bring you into eternity. You won’t regret it. Then you and Elijah can be together. It’s what you wanted. I know. You told me. I can read your mind. It’s what you still want. He knows it, too. He gets a hard on from looking at you. He’s had one since the first day you came to live with us. He’s just too afraid he’ll corrupt you.”

“Shut up!” I cried.

Elijah winced. I didn’t care. My power and strength were returning. It reached out and wrapped around Simone and Elijah. I could do this. I was strong and she was not going to ruin my life.

My hands gripped the rotten altar and purple cloth I had been laid upon. I felt my brain pressing against my skull, and my nose was bleeding. I tasted the blood on my lips. It slipped onto my tongue. Simone’s expression changed, and I saw panic. With all my might, I pulled her towards me. She began struggling, flailing around as she tried to hold onto something. There was nothing in her grasp. She lifted off a few inches from the ground, and her shoes left splintered trails along the floor. My eyes met Elijah’s. He nodded slightly.

“Simone, I loved and trusted you. You changed my life and made it so much better. I’ll never be what you want me to be. How could you?” Tears welled over in my eyes. I thought of all the times

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we had together, and now the one woman I'd looked up to had gone mad.

She tried to reach out to me, but I saw a flash of pain move across her face and then nothing. Her heart exploded under the pressure of my power. Peace smoothed her features, and she crumpled to the floor.

Before I could do or say anything, Elijah scooped me up in his arms and wrapped the altar cloth around me. I didn't say anything. I buried my face in the crook of his neck and let the tears flow.

I heard the church shaking, could feel the vibrations of it through Elijah's body. When we walked through the door, I heard the building crumbling and felt my head pounding from the effort. With one final shudder, the building groaned and buckled for the final time, and with it, I let the darkness of exhaustion take me, for at last I knew I was safe.

CHAPTER TEN

I don't know how long I slept, but when I woke up I was a little dopey. The pain in my head and legs were hardly more than an ache. Either I wasn't hurt that bad or I had been unconscious for a while. I bet I was out long enough to heal. The only person who could have done that was Elijah, unless my body and mind had shut down automatically in order for me to heal. Either way, I was whole now.

I got up slowly and tested the weight on my injured leg. I was in a nightgown I didn't own, which was a little too long for me and cut low enough it barely covered my nipples. I pulled up the material to see a nasty, dark scab on my leg that had already begun to scar. It was at least four inches long, and it looked deep. I doubt it was something that was going to ever completely go away. *Yeah, another battle scar. At least this one was physical and not mental.*

I shook my head, remembering what had happened. My fingers curled around a photo of Simone and me. I never would have known. She was sticking out her tongue at the photographer, and I was giving her bunny ears. It had been her birthday – which one, I don't remember. I just know it was fun, and she had been a great friend to me, but I guess that was her plan. Befriend me and then go psycho.

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"It's a shame what happened to Simone." I looked up and Gretchen was in the doorway.

"I'm glad to see you're better."

"Thanks." I crossed my arms over my chest. Gretchen smiled and pointed to the chair behind me. I looked and there was a robe of black silk to go with the nightgown. I wrapped it around me and felt a little more secure.

"Thank Desiree. She's been the one watching out for you since Elijah left."

"Desiree?" *That's interesting.* "Where did Elijah go?" A sense of panic left me a little faint. Had he abandoned me to stay here without him? Was that part of what Simone told me true?

Gretchen must have sensed my distress, and put a hand on my shoulder. "He went away to make sure Simone and the other were truly dead, and buried them in a secret place. He just returned last night. You've been asleep for five days. I treated your wound and Desiree's watched out for you while I was asleep."

I chuckled at the thought of the other vampire watching over me, but knowing Elijah was back, I had to talk to him. "Is he...?"

"He's here, but I don't know if he wants to see you. He's been rather dodgy since last night. I would be careful. Sometimes, he can be a pain in the behind. Just tread lightly." I gave her a quick hug. She smiled, and I took in a deep breath.

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I slipped down the hall and let my feet carry me along old paths. I checked the library, but he was nowhere to be found. I checked the study alongside where I had found him in the past with Simone, and he wasn't there either. Once I pushed my head into the room, I flashed back to both of them looking up at me with alien expressions on their faces. The place was empty. He did hide when he wanted to, but I had a hunch and walked down to the last wing of the house where he kept another study and his bedroom.

I used to fall asleep on his couch there, reading once in a while, and knew it was where he went for sculpting and drawing, when he wanted time to think and time to be alone. I stared at the heavy oak doors and then knocked. The sound echoed through the room, and I wondered if he was even there. After a few moments, I heard movement and the doorknob turned.

There he was, in nothing more than black silk pajama bottoms that could have been the male pair to my robe. His hair was down and longer than I remembered. His eyes were dark, and he seemed paler than normal. I swallowed my heart back into my throat. I don't think he was expecting me.

"You're awake."

"Don't sound so happy." I pushed past him and walked into the room. It was filled with many of my pictures, including the latest one, even with the bent frame. I stared at myself, wondering why I was hiding in the picture. Was it because I hated to face the

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world or was it because I hated to face what was in my heart? "I'm surprised you put it up. I didn't think you liked it."

"I accept who you are and what you do, 'Lynn."

"Is that why you rescued me? Or why you were going to go away and leave me without telling me where the hell you were going?"

I heard Elijah sigh. "I wasn't going to just disappear. I only told Simone that because I had to know if what I suspected was true. When you showed up here, I knew it was. I wanted to tell you. I tried to make you go away. The other night I never meant to hurt you. I..." He looked down.

"The other night you were trying to scare me. Degrade me. Make me hate you, since you were the only one I trusted – Yeah, I kinda figured that once I got to the church. And right when I was going to come back here and kick your ass, I was ambushed."

"How are you feeling?"

"Elijah..." I bit my lip. "God, I can't do this anymore." I took a step forward and crossed the empty space between us. I heard him pull in a breath. He waited. Tentatively, I brought my fingers up and traced the line of his jaw. It was smooth as if he had just shaved. He caught my wrist gently and tried to move it away, but I placed my hand on his chest right above his heart.

"You can't push me away anymore. I need to know if –"

"If what?"

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“Do you even care for me?”

“You’re dear to me. You know that.” He let go of my hand, but didn’t move away. I stared into his eyes, trying to read his mind and face, but neither was readable. Silence stretched out. I waited a few beats and then leaned in and pressed my lips to his. They were softer than silk. He didn’t offer any resistance, but he didn’t react either. I pulled away and looked up with tears in my eyes. Maybe it was really true; he didn’t care about me at all – that way. Maybe it had all been a farce.

“I’m sorry for coming back here and for all the trouble. I’ll go, and you can go on and do whatever, almost like I never came back.” I began to turn and walk away when I felt him grab my arm. He spun me around until I was inches from him again. He bared his fangs and breathed heavily. He pulled me in to him so our bodies pressed together.

“Kaylynn,” he whispered against me. His hard cock pressed against my thigh through his pajama bottoms. Our bodies fit together like pieces of a puzzle. His fingers wiped the tears from my cheeks. He kissed my lips lightly, sucking on the bottom lip. I felt the indentations of his fangs against my mouth. He was fighting his nature and his desire for me.

“I’m here,” I said. “I’m yours if you want me. Stop fighting –”

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His moan turned into a growl. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me in the last few spaces between us. Then it was skin on skin. He pulled the belt from my robe with a tug and let it fall to the floor. His mouth was on mine, on my cheeks, on my neck, all at a hurried pace. I couldn't keep up with him. His hands were also in a frenzy to take all of me in. One second his lips were on my throat, tracing the line of my neck with his tongue, and the next he was smashing against my mouth slipping his tongue into mine, only giving me a taste of him, until I put a hand on his chest and stepped away.

His hands dropped. He seemed stunned. He was breathing heavily, and so was I. My mind was reeling. His desire was evident.

"I'm sorry. Maybe you're right, you should leave." He began to turn around.

"Elijah," I shook my head. He was taking my pushing him away for rejection.

"Just go." His hand gripped the bedpost, and I saw the wood bend under his grip. He was fighting everything in him to keep himself in check and not take me by force and betray the one trust we had left between one another.

I shook my head, but I was not going to let him get away from me that easily, not after everything that had happened between us and Simone. "Why, Elijah?" The words caught in my

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throat. "Why?" I asked. The bed began trembling under his hand. I tried to calm myself, but I could barely catch my breath.

It took him a moment, but he turned around. I saw wetness rimming his eyes.

"You left. Never once did you reach out and—"

"You let me go. You never once asked for me, called me. Anything."

"How did I know you wanted me? I might look like I'm carved from stone, but I'm not made from it. I wanted you to have your own life. I wanted to protect you from what happened, but even that doesn't seem to matter."

"Damn it. This isn't about you. What happened happened. It was fated or whatever. I don't care. I loved you. Don't you know that? After all these years? Didn't you suspect?"

"Stop. You—"

"No. You have to hear me out. The night I walked in on you and Simone feeding, and then you came in here to tell me what you were—I knew then that I loved you. Not because of what you were. I don't care about that. I never have. I'm grateful you saved me."

"You come in here—what I am supposed to think the way you are dressed? Are you trying to seduce me?" He growled and spun around, showing me his fangs.

The pictures were shaking. *Why are we doing this dance? Why didn't he just take me?* The tension between us was mounting. I

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wanted to push the past years and events under the rug, under the bed, in a black hole and cross the space between us and make it up to him. Why didn't he see that I loved him? Why was he so stubborn? Why was I? Why were these words coming out of my mouth when I wanted to stop and go to him to comfort the beast he was fighting?

"Don't you want me here? I'll pack up and leave if that is what you want. If you want that then I'll never come back here. I couldn't handle that. Tell me. Ten years I've waited for you to make up your mind. I've been a nun, basically. My work has been my habit. Don't you see it in the pictures I've taken? Can't you see the loneliness?" I begged for him to understand, to see how much I cared for him. It wasn't lust, or pity, or some fucked up emotion that had driven me here to be with him.

He sighed and went to the window, staring out into the night. Outside the moon was almost swollen. Was it waiting for the precious words that needed to be said between us, too? I didn't bother to pick up my robe, but instead sought warmth from the man who I desperately needed to know cared for me. I wrapped my arms around Elijah's waist and rested my forehead against his back because I wasn't tall enough to reach his shoulders. My face was buried in his hair. It smelled of peppermint. I never realized he actually cared for it, or how silky he kept his hair. There was so much I never knew about him. So much I had never thought to ask.

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Amazing how time can make you wonder and do things you never thought possible before.

He tensed up, but his yearning was evident in his taut muscles. I bit my lip and decided to try something I had never thought of before. If I could use my ability to move objects even when I was asleep, why not use my power to touch others? It was just an extension of my gift. Just a little less power and more concentration. Closing my eyes, I pictured his face in my mind, and with a little push of my gift, I saw myself caressing his cheek. A shudder took him when I used my power to see myself kissing him, trailing caresses down his neck.

I pictured my hands all over him, touching his flesh. I went one step further and saw my mouth on his shaft, slowly going down on him. He uttered a moan and tensed even further; whatever I was doing was working.

“Stop. Please. Before we both regret what will happen.” He tried to shrug me off. A barrier surrounded his thoughts. He shut my power down, and I felt alone. The wall was cold and dark.

“No. Turn around and face how you feel. For over a decade I’ve barely lived. Part of me has been frozen. You said you weren’t made from stone. Well, neither am I, and for years, I’ve felt that way, but when I’m with you I can be alive and I don’t have to deny my feelings. I don’t have to hide. Can you say the same?”

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He turned around slowly and met my gaze. His were tinged red. "If you stay, I'll do things to you. I can't guarantee your safety or your life."

I touched his cheek and brushed my lips to his. I would not be denied this time.

Wrapping me in his arms, he crushed me to him. His lips and tongue worked against my throat where he bit and suckled, but never broke the skin. His palms enclosed my breasts over the satin of my nightgown. I moaned against him. My nails dug into the flesh of his back. His lips found my nipple; it was already hard in his mouth. I was wet, and I had dreamed of this for years. He suckled for a moment before tearing at the cloth of my nightgown. He had me bare and before I knew it, he had two fingers inside my wet pussy while his thumb rubbed over my clit. The sudden movement made me jump. I heard the bed echo my surprise, but God, it felt good. And I wanted more of him.

I pressed my lips to his, feeling the bone hardness of his fangs under his lips and with my tongue. His fingers moved deeper inside of me and his thumb and other finger moved lightning quick. I found my knees wobbling and Elijah was holding me up. His eyes studied my face. I was coming close to the edge.

"You have to stop teasing me," I said in between moans.

"I told you I didn't know what I would do to you." He leaned in and crushed his lips to me, but it was too late. I could

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barely hold in my groans, and I gave in to his manipulations and came.

I wanted him inside of me. Elijah must have read my thoughts because he scooped me up and laid me back on the bed, settling himself on top of me. My hands found his ass. My tongue snaked into his mouth, caressing his fang. On purpose, I nicked it on the point. The vampire growled and raised his head. His eyes were dilated red. His face was thinner, and his cheeks showed his bones. I felt his hard length against my belly. His eyes bored into mine, and he waited to see what I would do. Waiting to see if I was afraid of him, or if I would push him away again? Instead, I grabbed his hand, kissing the inside of his wrist, nipping at the spot over his vein. Elijah's eyes fluttered shut. My teeth dug a little deeper, and then he came back to himself.

This was what I had wanted. Heat soared through me. I felt my power move out of me and slam the door shut and lock it.

"Do I scare you?"

"No," I leaned up and pulled him down to me. "I need you inside of me. Please."

"God, Kaylynn. I could crush you. I could kill you. I could —"

"No. You're nothing like that."

He ran his hands over my breasts, and then his lips. His fangs caressed my hard nipples. He was careful not to draw blood.

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His tongue flicked over the hard nodules and the other hand ran along my inner thigh, tickling the sensitive flesh. Each butterfly kiss made it harder to resist, and I began pushing myself against him. He chuckled softly and for a quick moment, he left me cold while he slipped out of his pants. Once he did, he straddled me.

My hand gripped his cock, and I was amazed to feel it warm and not cold. It was hard and silky. I stroked him gently. He threw his head back. I lifted myself up and let my lips devour the length. My tongue suckled his shaft. I moved slowly, taking in what I could until he hit the back of my throat. With my free hand, I cupped his balls and squeezed them gently. Elijah uttered a moan while I encircled his sensitive head, flicking over the tip to taste the salty essence of him. He was fighting it. His fingers absently ran along the line of my throat. I looked up at him, keeping my rhythm slow. He pushed his hips forward for me to take more of him in. The desire in his hard eyes burned away his blood hunger. I knew in that instant, he had wanted me just as much as I had wanted him.

I lifted my lips from his cock and met his. My legs wrapped around his waist. He slid deep into my wet and waiting depths. A gasp escaped my lips. "Oh yes. I'm yours. Fuck me."

He didn't wait to oblige me because in one thrust, he buried all of himself into me. The tip of his cock impacted with the end of my womb. It hurt, but the pleasure and realization of our joining

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was what I had wanted for so long it went beyond any physical pain. As he moved into me slowly, letting me feel his length with each stroke, I threw my head back and felt the bed wrapped in my power, not surprised that it was levitating. Elijah's mind hovered on the edge of my thoughts. I focused beyond the physical sensation and met his power with mine. The instant change between us contracted me, and I almost came. It brought our lovemaking to another level.

His hands cupped and squeezed my breasts, and his mouth nibbled at my lips. I moved his head down to my throat. I felt the resistance in him. "It's okay," I whispered, with my lips and with my mind.

He was on the edge, both bodily and mentally. Part of him was fighting his nature, and it was holding him back. I needed all of him. I needed to know all of him.

"Kill you...don't want—"

I took the first move and nipped at his throat. His nails dug into my back. He bucked against me. If I was in a teasing mood, I would certainly have prolonged the experience for him, but I needed him. I bit harder, showing him I wasn't afraid. I didn't realize until the instant Elijah sank his fangs into my throat that I also tasted blood on my own lips.

"Yes." I writhed under him. His lips worked at my throat. I felt him pulling the warmth of my life from me, and it didn't hurt.

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His mind had wrapped around mine so tightly all I knew was him. My fingers curled into the flesh of his back. He slid himself into me one more time, and I came. His rhythm faltered and he came as well.

Once I did, I heard the bed bang to the floor. Slowly, he pulled himself away from my throat and untangled our web of legs so my head rested against his chest, and I was able to look into his eyes. His lips were painted with my blood. I studied his features, seeing they had returned to a human appearance. He ran the back of his hand along the ridge of my cheek and brought me up to his lips.

I tasted my own blood there, and when we pulled away, his hand ran along his own throat and came back with a red smear. He looked at me, questioning. I smiled and batted my eyes at him innocently. He chuckled and then grew serious for a moment. Elijah closed his eyes. It seemed he was thinking. His mind receded from mine. It was lonely to be all by myself once again, knowing we had been so close. When he opened his eyes, he brought his wrist to his lips and bit down. Without question he held it over my lips.

“Drink, Kaylynn.”

I kept my eyes locked to his. My tongue curled to get the first drop. I wrapped my hand around his wrist and his blood slithered down my throat. My heart soared. This was what I had

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been wanting for ages. I had dreamed of this. I didn't care about drinking his blood. I wanted him more than I wanted that, but while I drank, I realized this was his way of showing me he cared. I hadn't even pondered the thought of an eternity with him. I drank down what he offered me, then lifted my lips to his, and let my tongue caress his fangs. Elijah pulled away from me. Our tongues stopped dancing, and he buried his fangs in my neck. He pulled in a few more swallows and bit into his wrist again. I grazed my tongue over the wound, savoring the coppery flavor. For the first time, my heart was complete, and I was protected. With that wondrous feeling, I drifted off to sleep in Elijah's arms.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

When I awoke in the morning, my head felt like I had been whacked with a frying pan, and the light was blinding. I inhaled, and the smell of cinnamon and mint made my stomach turn over. Without thinking, I ran into the bathroom and lost the food I had last night. The aftertaste of blood tainted my throat, and the feel of the cool porcelain felt good like it did if I had a hangover. Finally, I dragged my head off the porcelain and went back into the bedroom.

“Drink the tea. It will make you feel better.” I noticed Gretchen sitting in the chair in the shadows.

I curled my nose at it. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She waited while I drank the tea. It tasted awful, but it did settle my stomach and made my head feel better. Once that happened, I was overwhelmed with chills. “You drank a lot from Elijah, did you not?”

I swallowed more tea and wrapped myself in the blankets. I had come down with a fever, probably my body fighting whatever happened to it the night before, from the blood I had taken in. “I’m not sure. Why?”

“I may be human, but it doesn’t mean that I don’t understand what Elijah is. Desiree, I could put her out into the sun

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and watch her fry. I've never really cared for her. You were a surprise when they brought you home. I grew to love you like a daughter. I just don't want to see you hurt. The other night with Simone was a shame. That was why Elijah was getting ready to cut all his ties with you. He had an idea of what she was planning and didn't want to see you hurt. However, you had to face your destiny. Besides, my family has been in the service of Elijah for centuries. He saved us, and we always seem to come back. I did when I was older, after I had my children. I don't think he is going to make you a servant, though. I have seen him with others, and he has never cared for anyone the way he cares for you, including Simone. He loved her for a long time, even in the end when she started to go crazy. He put her out and gave her instructions never to contact you. When he saw the reverend, he knew something was up. Don't hold that against him. He only did it because he cares for you."

"Why are you telling me all of this? If you know what they are, why have you stayed? And no, I don't blame him. I know he was only trying to protect me."

Gretchen laughed. "I stay because this is the only home I have left. I get paid for doing very little. Desiree is forbidden to bother me. Besides, I am telling you all of this because I wanted to say good-bye."

I stopped shivering. "Good-bye?"

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“If you take more of his blood, which I assume that you will and become one of them, you won’t be able to see me anymore. I’ll be around of course, but you and I won’t be able to communicate this way.”

“What are you talking about?”

Gretchen walked over to the bed and sat down. “I thought you knew. I died three years ago”

“So, you’re a ghost? How can you make things? Carry things? I thought ghosts can’t do things like that!”

“I’m special. I have a little vampire blood running through me. Diluted over generations, but it’s one reason my family keeps coming back. We are bound to Elijah. Just as Simone was bound to him. We can come and go, but I chose to stay with them after I died. The other servants don’t know I’m dead. We will keep it a secret between us. If Elijah wants something then I just do what he asks. I can hear his thoughts, but I was hoping that I would see you again. I figured that this would happen to you. And I am proud. So proud with what you have done with your life.” She leaned in for a hug and I gave it to her, not being able to tell she was a ghost. She still felt warm and alive.

“Get some sleep. You’ll feel better once the sun sets.”

I nodded and sank back into the pillow and didn’t think of anything else but exhaustion.

* * * *

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I woke to find the shadows clinging to the room. "How do you feel?"

"Awful. What's the matter with me?"

I heard Elijah chuckle. "Nothing. My blood acts as a virus to your system if you take too much of it in. It will pass." He stepped out of the shadows, and his white blonde hair shone in the moonlight tumbling through the curtains. "About last night."

"I have no regrets. It's what I have wanted for so long. To be in your arms. I had hoped you wanted it, too."

"But it's not what I wanted. I want you to be human. When you're feeling better, it would be best if you leave. I never wanted harm to come to you, and by knowing me, I have brought harm to you, with Simone, with the reverend returning. I'm so sorry for that."

My heart sank at his words, and disbelief ran rampant in my mind. He wasn't saying what I thought he was saying. He didn't want me after everything that had happened? How was that possible? "What are you saying? Why?"

He sat on the edge of the bed. I fought tears.

"You have your life ahead of you. I don't want it to be clouded with adolescent fantasies about you and me. You should grow old and have children. Your home is here, but not while I'm here. You don't have to worry about the threat of anyone ever coming to harm you again. I promise you that. I have taken care to

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see you are always protected in case I missed one of Simone's and the reverend's other children. Even if another one of us sees you, the blood in your system will be a marker, and they will know to leave you be."

"Was that all last night was? Something to mark me? Like some kind of dog?"

"No. Last night will stay with me forever. I care for you. More than you know. Please, believe that. I must keep you safe. I'm sorry, but I'm leaving tonight. The servants will remain. I have transferred the estate to your name."

"You can't do this," I cried. "You can't tell me how to live the rest of my life when I want to spend it with you. I know what I want. Last night was not part of an adolescent fantasy about fucking Dracula. I haven't been carrying a torch for you all these years. Okay, I have, but it isn't some mere idea of what I want. Last night was—you can't..." I reached out and touched his face.

"Last night was nothing more than a dream." I saw the hurt in his eyes when he spoke. "Just like the rest of your memories of us. The art gallery owner who took you in years ago died, and you inherited his estate. You came back here to take care of the final arrangements, and you went to the funeral. Know that the reverend is dead once and for all. Simone was nothing more than a bad dream. Last night will be a fond memory of a magnificent one-night stand you can think of all you want, but you won't remember

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his face. Everything else is a dream. You're not afraid to use your power, and you'll have no more nightmares."

"Please," I whispered. His thoughts pushed against my mind. My vision was going dark at the edges. "Love—" My gaze turned to the door, and I saw Gretchen shaking her head. Before I could reach out and stroke Elijah's face, darkness took me.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Waking up the next morning, the scent of cinnamon rolls greeted me. Gretchen had left some of them by my bed. I shivered and came wide awake; it felt oddly like I was recovering from a horrible virus, but that was probably to be expected since the sudden death of my foster father. The funeral was still hazy, but it had gone well. All of his friends had shown up, and it had passed in a blur. When I got out of bed and munched on a roll, something felt missing. Walking down the hall, I stopped at a portrait of a man standing at a gravestone covered in ivy. He was in the distance, with long, pale hair, and he seemed to be praying. I couldn't see more than the side of his face, but something about him seemed oddly familiar. I tried to think of where I had seen him before because I knew I hadn't taken this picture, but the more I thought about it, the less I could grasp onto it.

I shook my head and went down into the library. My father's favorite book of Poe was on the end table by the chair. I picked it up and remembered the timbre of his voice. He used to read to me to scare away my nightmares. I hadn't had any of those in years. For some reason it seemed I'd had one recently, and it was violent. In the past, they had been horrible—about watching my real parents being killed in a black mass.

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"I thought you might be in here. I brought you some tea."

Gretchen came in and she seemed sad, too. She had been working here for years. Somehow, she seemed something of a ghost of herself. I assumed she had taken the death hard.

"What's up?" I looked up from the book, and with my mind, kept turning the pages.

"I assume you're going to close up the house?"

"I had thought about it. I figured I might go on vacation. I need a break. Need to get a better perspective on things."

"I'll start packing things away." I noticed she hesitated a moment.

"Gretchen, was there something else you wanted to tell me?"

She stopped in the doorway and was about to say something, but she just shook her head. I shrugged and went back to the book. Something about it struck a chord. I let my power settle down, and the book returned to the table. I got up and decided to pack. I went back upstairs and pulled the photo I had looked at earlier from the wall, and the one of my parents. I had the pictures shipped to my apartment.

The next morning, I booked a flight to London. I had my camera and an inspiration. When I landed, the weather was dreary and raining. I rented a car and drove up north, following my

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instincts. I didn't know where I was going. Near twilight, I stopped in a small town and found a room for rent.

The next morning, I went out and explored the back roads and finally found myself at an ivy covered cemetery. I wandered around and looked at the stones. One in particular drew my attention. I stood before it for a long moment, feeling the most intense stab of loss I ever had. Even more so than when I was at the funeral.

I tried to remember the exact details of the casket my father had been buried in, but it was blurry. Something seemed missing about the whole ordeal, like my grief was fake. I shook my head, telling myself it was the heartache. A tear slipped down my cheek, but I wiped it away. There was no point in me mourning any more. He was dead and buried.

Reining in my emotions, my eyes swept the ancient bone yard. The graves here were older than the entire country I was from. These sentinels had watched the world change while they remained the same. Yet out of the whole cemetery, this grave was the one which intrigued me the most. Something inside me knew it. The weight of my camera hung around my neck and thumped against my chest when I moved the ivy aside. Once I did, a jolt of recognition burned through my mind.

It was the stone in the picture I had sent back to the apartment. Who was buried in the grave? Why was I drawn to this

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place? Why did my feet know the path to this very spot? I read the name. It was old, and the etching was only visible for the first name. Elijah.

Who are you, Elijah? Why have you drawn me here? Something eerie moved over my soul. It was a sense of *deja vu*, but deeper. Someone had walked on my grave, and I felt such a connection to the man in my picture, it seemed I was his mirror image.

I shook my head. This was ridiculous. I had gone halfway around the world to end up in a cemetery, standing in front of a grave, and now I was feeling like someone had walked across mine. No matter what, staring at the single name there stirred something. I couldn't put my finger on it. The more I tried to grasp it, the further away it got. Frustrated, I gave up trying and marveled in the odd surprise that I had actually found the gravestone in my photo. It was rather a strange coincidence.

For the rest of the afternoon, I took pictures around the small cemetery, until I found myself staring at the sentinel stone once more. A feeling of longing washed over me, but I brushed it away. There was nothing else left for me here. My film was all used up. It was time for me to move into another frame of my life. My fingers brushed the cool stone in a gesture of farewell and I left, to wander the small town.

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From there, I started hopping all around the countryside. Over the next few months, I traveled Europe, until my agent called and asked if I was ready to get back to work. I replied that I was.

I broke out the cameras and started back to work with the models. I took pictures and finally hooked up with the reality model show for a few episodes. Something was lacking from the work I usually loved. I noticed the pictures were lackluster. The photos from when I was back in the graveyard seemed more real to me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Three years later...

“What is wrong with you?”

I looked up from my glass of wine. Seamus, my agent and my friend, was looking at me. “You seem lost. Thinking about something else. Where did you go? Did you hear me ask you about taking another job or doing another show?”

“Sorry. I was just thinking about something. Fine, book the shoot. Book me for the next nine months. I don’t care.”

“Girl! All you’ve been doing is working. You haven’t stopped to take a break in the past three years.”

“Well, the funeral was hard on me. He was the only family I had.”

Seamus shook his head. “That was three years ago. Why don’t you do another show? Everyone has been asking me since your last one. Why not go out and get a boyfriend while you’re at it? Shit, you live your life as if you were in a nunnery. I thought I was bad. You’ve told me about this hot one night stand you had ages ago. Girl, that’s the thing you should be thinking about. Starting a family, or at least getting another good piece of ass. Come on, girl, you don’t want to end up like me. Old, gay, and regretting some fine young thing.”

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I sighed. Every relationship I had tried since I had returned from Europe after the funeral had gone to shit. They lasted about two months, never making it into bed. I tried, I really did, but it didn't feel right. My heart was lost to something I couldn't put my finger on.

Seamus was right. The one night stand I'd had back then was the best sex I ever had. I didn't remember the guy's face, and no matter how much I tried to remember, I got nothing. My whole body reacted to the memory as if it had been etched into my muscles. My soul was hardwired to that night, and the echoes of his caresses played on my skin even now. In the darkest night, they had kept me company while I wept myself to sleep, because my heart was hollow for a ghost.

In a couple of months, I would be thirty. I was one of the most sought after photographers in the fashion world. "Seamus, you're a good friend, but I think I'm destined to be an old maid. You know, it's funny. I guess it's better for me to be a born-again virgin or something. Things like that can really fuck up a woman. Is that strange?"

"Lynn, the only thing strange is the way you've been acting. No offense, but ever since your last show, you're a different person. It's been three years and your work is stunning, don't get me wrong, but—"

"There's something missing. I agree."

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"Then what is it?"

"If I knew, don't you think I'd find it?"

I ran my hand through my hair and thought about chopping it off. It was long again, after my cutting it off when I was in Europe. I closed my eyes and knew I would regret it again if I did. When I opened my eyes, my gaze caught a woman staring at me. She could have been a model. Her hair was done in tiny braids and hung straight down her back. Her cheekbones were chiseled, and she could have been descended from African queens. It appeared she was studying me. Something about her seemed familiar, and yet I couldn't place her. "I'll be right back."

I got up and walked across the room to the bar. She was ordering a drink. "Excuse me."

She turned, and her eyes met mine. My power flared to life. "Can I help you?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, but have we met?"

She chuckled. "Look. I'm flattered, but I'm not into chicks." She started to brush past me.

"What? No. No. I'm not trying to pick you up. I'm serious. You seem familiar. I know this sounds crazy, but I've seen you before. Please, do we know each other?"

A look of regret passed over her face. It took a moment, but she spoke. "Oh, Kaylynn."

"You know me? Did I photograph you in the past?"

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"I'll come over later, and we can talk. Expect me around midnight." With that she walked away, leaving me wondering.

"Who was that?" Seamus asked me.

I shrugged. "I'll find out."

I went home, straightened up, and couldn't keep myself still to try and pass the time. I kept staring at the photo of the strange man I had taken from my father's place. It now hung beside some of the photos I had done when I visited the same graveyard.

"I'm surprised you found the cemetery. I'm surprised you remembered me, or at least thought I seemed familiar. It would seem he's losing his touch."

I spun around and the woman I had met was there, looking at the photos I had taken. My power lashed out, sealing all the doors and windows in the place on instinct. The pictures rattled on the walls.

"I won't hurt you. You know that. Or at least part of you does. We've had our misunderstandings in the past."

Strangely enough, I did know that, but I didn't feel any animosity towards her now. "Who are you?"

She came over to me and touched the side of my cheek. Her touch was so familiar, and it brought half-dredged images to the surface of my mind "Love can cut the heart out of a person and make them do terrible things. It can turn the soul to ice or rival the fire of a dragon. It's a funny emotion, no matter what creature you

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are. Love can make you do these strange things. He should never have altered your memory. Look at you. More beautiful than ever.”

I looked at her quizzically; what was she talking about? “Who? What?”

She led me by the hand and sat me on the couch. “What do you remember? Do you know me? Do you remember Gretchen?”

“Of course I know Gretchen. She’s the housekeeper at my estate. You. I...” I tried to remember until a headache formed between my eyes and I felt tears line my lashes. I should have known her. Her name was on the tip of my tongue. A wave of intense hatred moved through me. I certainly had no idea why I felt it. I saw myself inches from her face, anger seething through my being. “I have a feeling we didn’t get along”

She chuckled. “Yeah, we had our differences. What else?”

I took in a breath and cleared my mind. If I had pulled that feeling from my brain, there had to be more. There was one thing I kept seeing, and it was the name on the gravestone from the picture. “Elijah.” I whispered.

“Yes. The man from your picture. He’s not just a name. I’m Desiree. And there used to be Simone. Do you remember her?”

With her saying those names, tumblers fell into place in my mind. We were in the same house together, but we hated one another. There was a man, and she was jealous when I would spend time with him. But Simone—the name conjured images of

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me taking pictures. Then there was an image of me in bed with the man from the picture, and the more I followed the thread of the memory I realized it was my one night stand. There were other images brewing beneath the surface I needed to explore, but the emotions overwhelmed me; love and loss all but choked me.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“He doesn’t want to see you.”

“But why? I loved him. Still do. He haunts me. Desiree, what happened to me? I can’t remember everything. It’s like I have two lives.”

“Oh, honey. He’s ashamed of what he did to you. He realizes it was a mistake.”

“Take me to him. Please! I need to know why I only remember half a life. Why every relationship I have tried doesn’t work. We might have been enemies, or friends, but I don’t remember why. I’m sure it doesn’t matter. Please, where is he?”

She hung her head and waited a moment. “He doesn’t know I came out to see you. He tried to forbid it, but Elijah has no jurisdiction over me. I am his sister, not his child. He’s been watching you. Checking in on you when you sleep. I told him this would happen, but he never listens. Stubborn men.”

“Is that why the shadows seem crowded? Then take me to him. Please. If he’s staying away because he wants me to live a better life without him, tell him it hasn’t happened. Since the day I

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left the estate, my life has been missing a piece." I realized now why sometimes I felt like something was in my bedroom with me, or the darkroom.

"I can't."

"Please."

She searched my eyes, and I felt her mind press on mine. I got the sense she was not normal, but it didn't bother me.

"You mean that. You love him even though you can't remember everything. Even now, it's still blocked from you. Your soul is restless. I can see it. That was why I came here. I had to be sure, and now I am. You have the right to make the choice of what you do with your life. You're not a child. Come on."

I smiled. "Thank you."

"No problem. Maybe when you remember everything, this will bury the hatchet between us. When you do, know I was only there to protect you, and I failed at that."

I didn't really know what to say because I didn't really remember what had happened between us. All I knew was half an hour later, we were standing outside of a converted mill that had been made into apartments. "He's on the top floor."

"You're not coming?"

Desiree shook her head. "I'll be close. He won't hurt you again. I promise."

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I gave her a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thank you for everything, and if I do remember it all, I promise we'll be friends."

She nodded. "I'd like that. I always hated being your enemy."

I looked behind me and saw the night was empty, and that I was faced with remembering a past I wasn't sure about. Blurry images lingered in my mind. I wasn't sure they were real. It seemed so right if they were. And if it was true and my soul recognized the man from the photo then I knew part of me would be healed, and maybe I could get on with my life. Still underneath all of it, there seemed to be something missing. I took in a large breath and entered the building.

Once on the top floor, I found a metal door at the end of the hall and instead of knocking, I slid the handle back; to my surprise, it was unlocked. *This guy must not care anything for his own safety. Or else he can take care of himself.* Upon entering, the first thing I saw was a picture of me I had a vague memory of doing. I had come across the negative of it a few months ago, but it was of me looking vampy. I remembered carrying the picture to the mansion. I shook off the image and focused on the here and now. I heard jazz coming from the other room.

I walked in slowly, taking in all the photos, and realized that a lot of them were mine. Other sculptures, paintings, and etchings

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hung on the walls. These all looked familiar. Following the music into the other room I found the man from my dreams bent over the neck of a woman. His ice blond hair was in the way, but I saw her face, and it was thrown back in ecstasy. For a moment, the same feeling seized my body. I knew exactly how she felt. It seemed I had been in the same position with him a long time ago. I stood by the doorway and took in the scene. When I did it, images flew into my mind and the same scene played out before me, but it was years earlier.

The surprise of discovering what he was, and Simone was, had overwhelmed me, but I wasn't afraid now. And I remembered Desiree. I had hated her. Now it was an echo, and due to her helping me, I owed her a debt of gratitude. I listened, heard the woman's final shudder, and knew she was dead. However it didn't alarm me. Elijah swung his hair out of his way and met my gaze.

My heart nearly stopped when I saw his eyes. His mind slammed into mine, but my power met his, and I pushed him back a few steps. He was not going to influence me again. He had been the one to make me forget, but also the one who had told me it was okay for me to use my power and not be afraid of it. Now it was natural for me, and I was comfortable with it. Maybe that was the only thing that had been good about him pushing me away. A slice of resentment overtook me, but I pushed it down. The love I had for him overwhelmed my soul. I tried not to let tears take me away.

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“Elijah.”

He stared at me, and realized the blocks in my mind were blowing away. With every second, I was remembering more. Visions of the reverend and Simone holding me for sacrifice. Remembered fear swallowed me, but I fought it back. It did explain the scar on my leg. But that was the past and it couldn't hurt me, because I had killed Simone.

“What are you doing here?” He closed his eyes. His face went blank for a second, and then he opened them again, resigned. “Desiree. I should have known. I told her to leave you be.”

“It wasn't her fault. I asked her to bring me here. I wanted to remember. I needed to remember.” I stepped closer to him. He remained impassive. I kept getting closer until I was inches from him. The smear of red on his lips made me remember the feel of him inside of me. I bit back a moan. The full memory of my one night stand took shape. My fingers traced his jaw line. He didn't blink. I leaned in and kissed him. He didn't return it. Maybe all of it had been for naught. Maybe I had been deluding myself, and he didn't feel anything at all. I pulled away and wiped the tears from my eyes.

“Do you feel anything for me at all?”

“That's not fair.”

“Isn't it?”

“You know it's not.”

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He backed away. I wrapped my power around him and forced him to turn around. He fought against me, but didn't break my hold, when he could have. "Then tell me you don't love me. I'll go this time, then, and be the happy mortal housewife you want me to be."

"You mean you haven't?"

I laughed. "You know I haven't. My soul died the day you went away. Enough games. I'm tired. I'm not getting younger. I just want an answer from you to heal my heart or try and piece it back together."

"So, that is what this is about."

"What? No. Damn you. I don't care about that. Will you listen? For the past three years, I have lived my life in some kind of waking dream. Once I close my eyes, I remember a magnificent night, not because the sex was great, but because my heart and my body were in sync with the man I loved. My bed has been empty since you. I've tried. Trust me I've tried, but it never seemed right. I never stopped loving you even though you tried to erase it from my heart. Please, don't send me away again."

He brushed the hair from my face. "Oh, 'Lynn."

My power dropped. He crossed the room in a flash. His mouth was on mine, kissing me deeply. Our tongues entwined, and his hands ran along the line of my body. I felt his fangs and made it a point to drag my tongue across one of them. His lips left mine

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and trailed down my neck. Before I could say anything, his fangs were buried in my throat. I had no fear, and he knew my mind. The pain was magnificent. I remembered it from my dreams all those years ago. My fingers clenched his shirt. The cold encompassed my heart. I didn't care if he drained me dry. I just wanted to die in his arms at that moment.

Elijah lifted his head and pulled away, leaving me a little lightheaded. "You are amazing. I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter anymore. Please don't leave me again. I couldn't bear it."

He leaned in and kissed me. "Do you really want me? Forever, this time?"

"Do you have to ask me that?"

He smiled. "No."

I cupped his face in my hands, not believing this was really happening. My heart was overwhelmed with ecstasy. His hands stripped off my shirt and bra, seeking my breasts underneath which strained to be touched. My nipples hardened instantly. His mouth found one, and his fingers tweaked the other. The ridge of his fangs pressed into the sensitive flesh of my nipple, and he bit down. His fingers pinched the other one to distract me.

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"It's been so long," I murmured. I unbuttoned his jeans. He was hard. I wanted him. I didn't want to wait for him any longer. "Please."

He looked up from my breast. His eyes had a faraway look to them. I lifted his face to my mouth and kissed him, tasting my own blood. His fingers slipped off my skirt and tugged at my panties. Then he buried his fingers inside of me. He smiled devilishly, but I dragged my tongue over his neck. I might not have had fangs, but I knew what he liked. I bit down through his skin and felt his blood well in my mouth. I locked my lips to the wound and drank deeply. The hot liquid scorched my throat.

Elijah groaned. He lifted me up and slid his cock into my wet depths. My legs wrapped around his waist. He backed me up against the wall. My lips never left his throat while he pounded into me. His lips locked to the untouched side of my throat. His wound stopped bleeding so I bit down again, harder this time. More blood poured into my mouth. I pulled harder, and felt Elijah gnaw into my throat again. I drank what I could. My heart struggled to keep up with his frenzied pace. I lifted my lips from his skin and fell into the ecstasy of Elijah. I moved my power around him and felt his mind hover on the edge of mine and wrap around my thoughts.

"I want you, Kaylynn. I want all of you. Do you want me?" he whispered.

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"Yes." I cried.

He didn't wait and lifted me up to carry me to the bed. Once on the pillows, he bit into his wrist and held it above my lips. I let my tongue caress the drops and wind around the wound.

He brushed some of the hair from my face. "Drink."

As I drank, he took my wrist and sliced one of the thin veins with his fang. I didn't feel the pain.

We did this exchange until the night was ready for us to sleep. When my lover lifted his head from my wrist, it was near dawn. By that point, my whole body ached. I remembered how I felt when I had drunk from him before. My systems were shutting down. I was cold. I shivered and everything in the apartment did with me.

"So cold," I whispered.

Elijah settled in next to me and wrapped me in his arms. "I know, love, but only for a little bit. Sleep." His hand pressed against my forehead, and then the world ceased to exist.

When I awoke the next night, everything had changed. I felt different, lighter if that were possible. Elijah still slept when I woke up, and I decided to take a shower. The events of my past were crystal clear. Everything Elijah had hidden from me was back. Even my mother's face was clear, and that was a miracle.

When I looked in the mirror, I was amazed to see the reflection staring back at me. I looked ten years younger. My hair

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was fuller and darker. My eyes were bright green. When I concentrated on my power, I noticed it was stronger. I closed my eyes and let my mind move over the apartment. I could sense things in a way I never had before. I saw them in my mind. I saw Elijah sleeping and moved my hands over him, pictured myself kissing him, stroking him until he opened his eyes and smiled, but was confused when no one was there.

“Impressive. I guess your powers have grown,” Elijah said.

He got into the shower with me. After fooling around a little and getting out to dry ourselves, I stared out into the night, marveling at the sights.

“Am I really like you?”

“Forever.”

I turned. “Thank you.”

He kissed and nibbled my neck. “You should feed.”

“Promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“Don’t run away from me again.”

Elijah smiled. “Never again. I’ve learned my lesson. These past few years have been hell. Besides, you would hunt me down again and torture me.”

I leaned in, kissed him, and showed him my newly acquired fangs. “You got that right.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Crymsyn Hart is a bestselling author of Erotic Romance. Her worlds are filled with luscious vampires, gorgeous gods, quirky witches, and everything else that goes bump in the night. Crymsyn worked as a psychic for many years in Boston while attending Emerson College. She graduated with a BFA in Writing, Literature, & Publishing. When she gets bored, she sneaks away to local cemeteries and coffee shops to find peace and quiet. Crymsyn shares her life with a small zoo, two playful puppies and her hubby Mark. If you come after dark, you're more than likely to find her snuggled up with a gory horror movie, or a bloody vampire movie. Crymsyn has a collection of Living Dead Dolls and five bookshelves overflowing with books. Of course, there's always room for more.

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